

RICH MENS CHILDREN

By GERALDINE BONNER
Author of "THE PIONEER"
"TOMORROW'S TANGLE," etc.

Illustrations by DOM J. LAVIN

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SYNOPSIS.

Bill Cannon, the bonanza king, and his daughter, Rose, who had passed up Mrs. Cornelius Ryan's ball at San Francisco to accompany her father, arrive at Antelope. Dominick Ryan calls on his mother to beg a ball invitation for his wife, and is refused. The determined old lady refuses to recognize her daughter-in-law. Dominick had been trapped into a marriage with Bernice Iverson, a stenographer, several years before. She squandered his money, they have frequent quarrels, and he slips away. Cannon and his daughter are shown in at Antelope. Dominick Ryan is rescued from storm in unbecoming condition and brought to Antelope hotel. Antelope is out off by storm. Rose Cannon nurses Dominick back to life. Two weeks later Bernice dies in a paper where husband is and writes letter trying to smooth over difficulties between them. Dominick at last is able to join fellow snowbound prisoners in hotel parlor. He loses temper over talk of Buford, an actor. After three weeks, end of imprisonment is seen. Telegrams and mail arrive. Dominick gets letter from wife. Tells Rose he doesn't love wife, and never did. Stormbound people begin to depart. Rose and Dominick embrace, father sees them and demands an explanation. Rose's brother Gene is made manager of ranch, and he to get it if he stays sober a year. Cannon expresses sympathy for Dominick's position in talk with Rose. Dominick returns home. Bernice exerts herself to please him, but he is indifferent. Cannon calls on Mrs. Ryan. They discuss Dominick's marriage difficulties, and Cannon suggests that Bernice should go to leave her husband and permit divorce. She refuses. Dominick sees Rose. Cornelia Ryan says to Jack Duffy. Cannon offers Bernice \$100,000 and is turned down. Bernie tells stories of offer. Buford, the actor, makes a hit in vaudeville. Rose tells Dominick that he must settle to wife, and first time acknowledges that she loves him. Cannon offers Bernie \$200,000 which she declines. Bernie wants Dominick for Rose. Gene wins the ranch. Bernie accuses Rose of trying to steal her husband and tells her of the offered bribe. Rose tells father she has learned about the attempt to bribe Bernie and declares that she would never marry Dominick, should he ever be divorced. Expects promise from father to let Bernie alone. Stranger sees Bernie in restaurant, apparently recognizes her, and follows her home. The stranger, who is Buford, the actor, calls on Dominick.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

A moment later, Buford entered, smiling, almost patronizingly urbane and benign. He was dressed with a rich and careful elegance which gave him a somewhat dandified air. After bestowing upon Dominick greetings that sounded as unctuous as a benediction he took his seat at the end of the cozy corner facing the door which led into the hall. From here he looked at the young man with a close, attentive scrutiny, very friendly and yet holding, under its enfolding blandness, something of absence, of inattention, as though his mind were not in the intimate customary connection with the words that issued from his lips. This suggestion of absence deepened, showed more plainly in an eye that wandered to the door, or, as Dominick spoke, fell to the carpet and remained there, hidden by a down-drawn bush of eyebrow. Dominick was in the middle of a query as to the continued success of the "Klondike Monologue" when the actor raised his head and said politely, but with a politeness that contained a note of haste and eagerness beneath it:

"Is Madame at home?"

"No, she's not at home," said Madame's husband. "But she may be in any moment now. She generally goes out for the afternoon and gets back about this time."

"Perhaps you can tell me," said Buford, looking aside at his gloves and cane as they lay on the end of the divan, "who—you'll pardon my seeming curiosity, but I'll explain it presently—who was the lady that came in here last night at about half-past seven?"

He looked up and Dominick was suddenly aware that his face was charged with the tensest, the most vital interest. Thrust forward, it showed a hungriness of anticipation that was almost passionate. The young man was not only surprised at the expression but at the question.

"I haven't an idea," he said. "I wasn't at home to dinner last night, and didn't get in till late. Why do you want to know?"

"For many reasons, or for one, perhaps—for one exceedingly important reason."

He paused, his eyes again turned slantingly on the stick and gloves, his lips tight-pressed, one against the other.

"How did you know any woman came in here last night at that hour? Did you come up to call?" asked Dominick.

"No—no—" the other spoke with quick impatience evidently from the surface of his mind. "No, it was—at first, anyway—purely accidental. I saw the woman—and—afterward I saw her enter here. Mr. Ryan," he said suddenly, looking at his vis-a-vis with piercing directness and speaking with an intensity of urgency that was almost a command, "can you give me half an hour of your time and your full attention? I want to speak to you of a matter, that to me, at least, is of great—the greatest—importance. You can help me; at least you can, I hope, throw some light on what is a dark subject. Have I your permission to talk freely to you, freely and at length?"

Dominick, who was beginning to feel as if he were in a play, and was exceedingly surprised and intrigued, nodded, remarking:

"Why, certainly, go on. If I can be of any help to you or explain anything for you, nothing would give me greater pleasure. Let me hear what it is."

The actor dropped his glance to the floor for what seemed an anxiously-considering moment, then he raised his head and, looking directly at his host, said:

"You may remember that, while at Antelope, I once spoke to you of having been married—of having, in fact, been unfortunate enough to lose my wife."

Dominick remembered, but it seemed imperfectly, for he said in a doubtful tone, which had more than a suggestion of questioning:

"She—er—she died?"

"No," said the other, "she did not die. I lost her in a way that I think was more painful than death. She left me, voluntarily, of her own free will."

"Oh, of course," said the young man hastily. "I remember perfectly, one day by the sitting-room fire. I remember it all as clearly as possible now."

"That was the time—the only time I mentioned the subject to you. On another occasion I spoke to that lovely and agreeable young lady, Miss Cannon, on the matter, and told her more fully of my domestic sorrows. But to you I made but that one allusion. May I now, more at length, tell you of the misfortunes—I may say tragedy—of my married life?"

Dominick, mystified, nodded his head. He could not imagine why Buford should come to him at this particular moment and in this particularly theatrical manner with the history of his domestic troubles. But he was undeniably interested, and feeling himself more than ever like a character in a play, said:

"Go on, tell me anything you like. And if in any way I can be of use to you, I'll be only too happy to do it."

Looking at the carpet, a heat of inward excitement showing through the professional pomposity of his manner, Buford began slowly and solemnly:

"I'll go back to seven years ago, when I was in Chicago. Previous to that, Mr. Ryan, I will tell you in confidence I had been a preacher, a Methodist, of good reputation, though, I am fain to confess, of small standing in the church. I left that esteemed body as I felt there were certain tenets of the faith I could not hold to. I am nothing if not honest, and I was too honest to preach doctrines with all of which I could not agree. I left the church as a pastor though I have never deserted it as a disciple, and have striven to live up to its standards."

He paused, and Dominick, feeling that he spoke sincerely, said:

"That was the only thing to do."

"So it seemed to me. I left the town where I was living and moved to Chicago where, through the influence of a friend, I obtained a position in a school of acting and elocution. I instructed the pupils in voice production. You may have noticed that I have an unusually deep and resonant voice. Through that, I obtained this work and received the stipend of thirty-five dollars a week. It was fairly good pay, the hours were not too

long, there was no demand made of a sacrifice of conscience, and I confess that I felt much freer and more contented than I had in the church."

"It was at this stage of my career that I met the lady who became my wife. We lived at the same boarding-house—Mrs. Heene's, a most elegant, well-kept place, and Mrs. Heene a lovely woman of one of the best southern families. It was at her table that I met the girl who was destined to have such a fatal influence on my life. She was a stenographer and typewriter in one of the largest firms in the city, earning her twenty dollars a week, as she was an expert and not to be beaten in the state. She was very pretty, the brunette type of beauty, black-eyed, and as smart as a steel trap. She was as dainty as a pink, always well-dressed and up-to-



"Then the Woman You Saw Here Last Night Was Your Wife?"

date, and never anything sloppy or slovenly about her. Ask her to go to the theater and there wouldn't be a woman in the house who could beat her for looks and style. Besides that, she was a fine conversationalist, could talk as easily as a book on any subject. If I brought her a novel, she'd read it and have the whole plot at her finger-ends, and be able to talk it all over, have her own opinions about every character. Oh, she was an accomplished, fascinating woman, if I say it myself! Any man might have taken to her. She was for ever telling me about California, and how she wanted to get back there—"

"California?" interrupted Dominick. "Did she come from California?"

"From here—from San Francisco. She was a native daughter of the state and the town. I was interested in California myself at that time, though I'd never seen it, and we'd talk of that and other things till, bit by bit, we drifted nearer and nearer together and the day came when we were engaged. I thought that was the happiest day of my life, and it would have been if she'd stayed true to her promises."

The clock struck the single silvery note of the half-hour and Dominick heard it. He was interested in the story, but he had only another half-hour to give, and said as Buford paused:

"Go on. It's very interesting. Don't stop."

"The first step in our married life that seemed to me strange, that cast, not what you'd call a cloud, but a shadow, over my happiness, was that she insisted on keeping the marriage secret. She had several reasons, all of which seemed good and sufficient to her. She said her people would not like her marrying a stranger far away from home, and that they'd cut up very ugly when they heard it. Her principal reason, and the only one that seemed to me to have any force, was that she feared she'd lose her job. She had it on good authority that the firm where she worked wouldn't employ married women, and if they knew she'd got a husband who was making a fair salary, they'd give her the sack. Whether it was for all the reasons together, or for just this one I don't know, but she'd only marry me if I solemnly promise to keep the matter secret. I'd have promised her anything. She'd out and out bewitched me."

so well as Mrs. Heene's. We were both just about used up, thin as fiddle-strings, and like fiddle-strings ready to snap at a touch. Seems queer to think that thirty-five dollars a week could make such a difference! With it we were in Paradise; without it we were as near the other place as people can get, I guess."

"Well, it was too much for her. She was one of those women who can't stand hardships and she couldn't make out in the position she was in. Love wasn't enough for her, there had to be luxury and comfort, too. One day I came home and she was gone. No," in answer to a look of inquiry on Dominick's face, "there was no other man. She wasn't that kind, always as straight as a string. No, she just couldn't stand the grind any longer. She left a letter in which she said some pretty hard things to me, but I've tried to forget and not bear malice. It was a woman half crazy with heat and nerves and overwork that wrote them. The gist of it was that she'd gone back to California, to her sisters who lived there, and she was not coming back. She didn't like it—marriage, or me, or Chicago. She was just going to throw the whole business overboard. She told me if I followed her, or tried to hold her, she'd disappear, hinted that she'd kill herself. That was enough for me. God knows if she didn't want me I wasn't going to force myself upon her. And, anyway, she knew fast enough I couldn't follow her. I hadn't money to have my shoes patched, much less buy a ticket to California."

"After that there were some dark days for me. Deserted, with no money, with no work, and no prospects—I tell you that's the time the iron goes down into a man's soul. I didn't know what was going to become of me, and I didn't care. One day on the street I met an old chum of mine, a fellow called Defax, that I hadn't seen for years. He was going to the Klondike, and when he heard my hard-luck story, he proposed to me to join forces and go along with him. I jumped at it, anything to get away from that town and state that was hunted with memories of her."

"It was just the beginning of the gold rush and we went up there and stayed for two years. Defax was one of the finest men I ever knew. Life's all extremes and contrasts; there's a sort of balance to it if you come to look close into it. I'd had an experience with the kind of a woman that breaks a man's heart as you might a pipe-stem, then I ran up against the kind of man that gives you back your belief in human nature. He died of typhoid a year and a half after we got there. I had it first and nearly died; in fact, the rumor went out that it was I that was dead and not Defax. As I changed my name and went on the stage soon afterward it was natural enough for people to say Junius Carter was dead."

"I was pretty near starving when I drifted on the stage. I had learned some conjuring tricks, and that and my voice took me there. I just about made a living for a year, and then I floated back down here. I never played in San Francisco till now. I acted on the western circuits, used to go as far East as Denver and Kansas City, and then swing round and the circle through the northwestern cities and Salt Lake. I managed to make a living and no more. I was cast in parts that didn't suit me. The Klondike Monologue was the first thing I did that was in my line."

"Did you never see or hear of your wife?"

"Not a word. I didn't know whether she was dead or living till last night."

Buford raised his eyes and looked piercingly into the young man's face. Dominick forgot the time, his engagement, Bernie's anticipated entrance. He drew himself up in his chair and said in a loud, astonished voice:

"Last night? Then the woman you saw here last night was your wife?"

The actor gravely inclined his head.

"I saw my wife," he said solemnly. "Last night at Deledda's restaurant. It was entirely by accident. I liked the Mexican cooking and had been more than once to that place. Last night I was about to enter the back part of the restaurant when I saw her sitting there alone in the corner. For a moment I could not believe my eyes. I got behind a lace curtain and watched her. She was changed, but it was she. I heard her speak to the waiter and if I'd never seen her face I'd have known the voice among a thousand. She'd grown stouter and I think even prettier, and she looked as if she were prosperous. She was well dressed and her hands were covered with rings. When she went out I followed her and she came straight here from the restaurant and rang the bell and came in."

"Are you sure she didn't go into one of the other flats? There are four in the building."

"No, she came in here. I compared the number on the transom with the address you'd given me on the card!"

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Dominick. "It's evidently some one my wife knows who came to see her that evening, probably to keep her company while I was out. But I can't think who it could be."

He tried to run over in his mind which one of Bernie's acquaintances the description might fit and could think of no one. Probably it was some friend of her working-girl days, who had dropped out of her life and now, guided by Fate, had unexpectedly reappeared.

"It's certainly a remarkable coincidence," he went on, "that she should have come to this flat, one of the few places in the city where you know the people. If she'd gone to any of the others—"

A ring at the bell stopped him.

"There!" he said, "that's Mrs. Ryan. Now we'll hear who it was."

For a moment they both sat silent, listening, the actor with his face looking sharp and pale in the suspense of the moment, the muscles of his lean cheeks working. The rustle of Bernie's dress sounded from the stairway and grew in volume as she slowly ascended. The two men rose to their feet.

"Come in the den for a moment, Bernie," Dominick called. "There's a gentleman here who wants to see you."

The rustle advanced up the hall, and the portiere was drawn back. Bernie, brilliantly dressed, a mauve orchid pinned on her bosom, stood in the aperture, smiling.

Buford's back was against the light, and for the first moment she only saw him as a tall masculine outline and her smile was frank and natural. But he saw her plain as a picture and before Dominick could frame the words of introduction, started forward, crying:

"Bernie Iverson!"

She drew back as if struck and made a movement to drag the portiere over her. Her face went white to the lips, the patches of rouge standing out on her cheeks like rose-leaves pasted on the sickly skin.

"Who—who's that?" she stammered, turning a wild eye on Dominick.

"Mr. Ryan," the actor cried, beside himself with excitement, "this is my wife! This is the woman I've been talking of! Bernie, don't you know me? Junius Carter?"

"He's crazy," she faltered, her lips so loose and tremulous they could hardly form the words. "I never saw him before. I don't know what he's talking about. Who's Junius Carter?"

"This is my wife, Mr. Buford," said Dominick, who had been staring from one to the other in blank astonishment. "We've been married nearly three years. I don't understand—"

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He approached her and she shrank back.

"Keep away from me," she cried

soarsely, stretching out a trembling hand. "I don't know what you're talking about. You're crazy. Junius Carter's dead—then suddenly turning on Dominick with a blazing look of fury—"It's you that have done this! It's you, you snake! I'll be even with you yet!"

She tore herself out of the folds of the portiere which she had clutched to her and rushed into the hall and into her own room. The banging of the door behind her shook the house.

The two men stood as she had left them, staring at each other, not knowing what to say, speechless and agast.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Last Interview.

The night was falling when Buford left. He and Dominick had sat on in the den, talking together in low voices, going over past events in the concatenation of circumstances that had led up to the extraordinary situation in which they now found themselves. Both listened with strained ears for the opening of Bernie's door, but not a sound came from her room. Each silently, without expressing his thoughts to the other, wondered what she would do, what sensational move she would be expected of her. While they talked, it was evident she intended to make no sign of life.

After Buford had left, Dominick called up his friend on the telephone telling him that he would be unable to meet him at dinner. He knew that

he would hear every word he uttered, and with indescribable dread he expected that she would open her door and accost him. But again she preserved an inviolate invisibility, though beneath her portal he could see a crack of light and could hear her moving about in the room.

He went into his own room, lit the gas, and began packing his trunks. He was dazed and stupefied by what had occurred, and almost the only clearly-defined idea he had was to leave the house and get far from the presence of the woman who had so ruthlessly poisoned his life. He was in the midst of his packing when the Chinaman summoned him to dinner, but he told the man he cared for nothing and would want no breakfast on the following morning. The servant, who by this time was well aware that the household was a strange one, shrugged his shoulders without comment and passed on to the door of his mistress's room, upon which he knocked with the low, deferential rap of the Chinese domestic. Bernie's voice sounded shrilly, through the silence of the flat:

"Go away! Let me alone! If that's dinner I don't want any."

The sound of her voice pierced Dominick with a sense of loathing and horror. He stopped in his packing, suddenly deciding to leave everything and go, from the house and from her as soon as he could get away. He thrust into a valise such articles as he would want for the night and set the bag by the stair-head while he went into the parlor to find some bills and letters of his that he remembered to have left in the desk. As he passed Bernie's door, it flew open and she appeared in the aperture. The room behind her was a blaze of light, and every gas-jet lit and pouring a flood of radiance over the clothes outspread on the bed, the chairs, and the floor. She, herself, in a lace-trimmed petticoat and loose silk dressing-sack, stood in the doorway staring at Dominick, her face pinched, white, and fierce.

"What are you doing?" she said abruptly. "Going away?"

"Yes," he answered, stopping at the sight of the dreaded apparition. "That's my intention."

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

He gave her a cold look and made no answer.

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