

THE BEST MAN

By Grace Livingston Hill Lutz

Author of "Marcia Schuyler," "Dawn of the Morning," "Lo, Michael," etc.

Philadelphia & London.

J. B. Lippincott Company.

1914.

CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued).

The girl could not solve the problem, but the thought was most startling and brought with it many suggestive possibilities that were most disturbing. Yet gradually out of the darkness she drew a sort of comfort in her dawning enlightenment. Two things she had seen in her strange premises, and he had not written the letters, and his hair was not the same. Who then was he? Her husband now undoubtedly, but who? And if indeed and hair could change so materially, why not spirits? At least he was not the same as she had feared and dreaded. There was so much comfort.

And at last she lay down and slept.

CHAPTER XIV.

They were late coming into Washington, for the special had been sidetracked in the night for several express trains, and the noisy crowd who had kept one another awake till after midnight made up by sleeping far into the morning.

Three times did Gordon make the journey three cars front to see if his companion of yesterday were awake and needed anything, but each time found the curtains drawn and still, and each time he went slowly back again to his seat in the crowded day-coach.

It was not until the white dome of the Capitol, and the tall needle of the monument, were plainly visible against the sky, reminding one of the pictures of the heavenly city in the story of Pilgrim's Progress, and faintly suggesting a new and visionary world, that he sought her again, and found her fully ready, standing in the aisle while the porter put up his servant's trunk and bag. Beneath the great brim of her purple hat, where the soft fronds of her plumes trembled with the motion of the train, she lifted sweet eyes to him, as if she were both glad and frightened to see him. And then that ecstasy shot through her again, as he realized suddenly that it would be to have her for his life-companion, to feel her looks of gladness were all for him, and have the right to take all fright away from her.

They could only smile at each other for good morning, for everything was standing up and being brushed, and pushing here and there for suit cases and lost umbrellas; and everybody talked loudly, and laughed a great deal, and told how late the train was. Then at last they were there, and could get out and walk as they wished in the noisy procession through the station to the sidewalk.

What little things sometimes change a lifetime, and make for our safety or our destruction! That very morning three keen watchers were set to guard that station at Washington to hunt out the government spy who had stolen the stolen message, and take him, message and all, dead or alive, back to New York; for the man who could testify against the Holman Combination was not to be let live if there was such a thing as getting him out of the way. But they never thought to watch the Special which was supposed to carry only delegates to the great convention. He could not possibly be on that! They knew he was coming from Pittsburgh, for they had been so advised by telegram the evening before by one of their company who had seen him buying a sleeper ticket for Washington, but they felt safe about the Special, for they had made inquiries and been told no one but delegates could possibly come on it. They had done their work thoroughly, and were on hand with every possible plan perfected for bagging their game, but they took the time when the Pittsburgh Special was expected to arrive for eating a hearty breakfast in the restaurant across the street from the station. Two of them emerged from the restaurant in plenty of time to meet the next Pittsburgh train, just as Gordon, having placed the lady in a closed carriage, was getting in himself.

If the carriage had stood in any other spot along the pavement in front of the station, they never would have seen him, but, as it was, they had a full view of him; and because they were Washington men, and experts in their line, they recognized him at once, and knew their plans had failed, and that only by extreme measures could they hope to prevent the delivery of the message which would mean downfall and disaster to them and their schemes.

As Gordon slammed shut the door of the carriage, he caught a vision of his two enemies pointing excitedly toward him, and he knew that the blood hounds were on the scent. His heart beat wildly. His anxiety was divided between the message and the lady. What should he do? Drive at once to the home of his chief and deliver the message, or leave it at his room, and phone for a faster conveyance and trust to getting to his chief ahead of his pursuers?

"Don't let anything hinder you! Don't let anything hinder you! Make it a matter of life and death!" rang the little ditty in his ears, and now it seemed as if he must go straight ahead with the message. And yet—a matter of life and death! He could not, must not, might not, take the lady with him into danger. If he must be in danger of death he did not want to die having exposed an innocent stranger to the same.

Then there was another point to be thought of. He had already told the driver to take him to his apartments, and to drive as rapidly as possible. It would not do to stop him now and change his directions, for a pistol-shot could easily reach him yet; and, coming from a crowd, who would be suspected? His enemies were standing on the threshold of a place where there were many of their kind to protect them, and none of his friends knew of his coming. It would be a race for life from now on to the finish.

Celia was looking out with interest at the streets, recognizing landmarks with wonder, and did not notice Gordon's white, set face and burning eyes as he strained his vision to note the driver who was turning. Oh, if the driver would only turn off at the next corner into the side street they could not watch the carriage so far, but it was not likely, for this was the most direct road, and yet—yes, he had recognized the driver who had sought the narrow, crooked way that he might

go the faster. It seemed an age to him before they stopped at his apartments. To Celia, it had been but a short ride, in which familiar scenes had brought her pleasure, for she recognized that she was not in strange Chicago, but in Washington, a city often visited. Somehow she felt it was an omen of a better future than she had feared.

"Oh, why didn't you tell me?" she smiled to Gordon. "It is Washington, dear old Washington."

Somehow he controlled the tumult in his heart and smiled back, saying in a voice quite natural:

"I am so glad you like it." She seemed to understand that they could not talk until they reached a quiet place somewhere, and she did not trouble him with questions. Instead—she looked from the window, or watched him furtively, comparing him with her memory of George Hayne, and wondering in her own thoughts. She was glad to have them to herself for just this little bit, for now that the morning had come she was almost afraid of revelation, what it might bring forth.

And it came about that they took the swift ride in more or less silence, and neither thought it strange, as the carriage stopped, he spoke with low, hurried voice, tense with excitement, but her own nerves were on a strain also, and she did not notice.

"We get out here." He had the fare ready for the driver, and, stepping out, hurried Celia into the shelter of the hallway. It happened that an elevator had just come down, so it was but a second more before they were up safe in the hall before his own apartment.

He had the latch key from his pocket, he applied it to the door, flung it open, and ushered Celia to a large leather chair in the middle of the room. Then, stepping quickly to the side of the room, he touched a bell, and from it went to the telephone, with an "Excuse me, please, this is Mr. Osborne," to the girl, who sat astonished, wondering at the homeliness of the room and at the "at-homeness" of the man. She had expected to be taken to a hotel. This seemed to be a private apartment with which he was perfectly acquainted.

Perhaps it belongs to some friend. But how, after an absence of years, could he remember just where to get which door and which elevator to take, and how to fit the key with so accustomed a hand? Then her attention was arrested by his voice:

"Give me 254 L please," he said. "This 254 L? Is Mr. Osborne in?" "You say he has not gone to the office yet?" "May I speak with him?" "Is this Mr. Osborne?" "I did not expect you to know my voice. . . . Yes, sir; just arrived, and all safe so far. Shall I bring it to the house or the office?" "The house? . . . All right, sir. Immediately. . . . By the way, I am sure Hale and Burke are on my track. They saw me at the station. . . . To your house? . . . You will wait until I come? . . . All right, sir. Yes, immediately. . . . Sure, I'll take precaution. . . . Good-by."

With the closing words came a tap at the door.

"Come, Henry," he answered, as the astonished girl turned toward the door. "Henry, will you go down, please, to the restaurant, and bring up a menu card. This lady will select what she would like to have, and you will serve breakfast for her in this room as soon as possible. I shall be out for perhaps an hour, and, meantime, you will obey any orders she may give you."

He introduced her as his wife, but she did not notice the omission. She had suddenly become aware of a strange, distraught haste in his manner, and when he said he was going out alarm seized her, she could not tell why.

The man bowed deferentially to his master, looked his admiration and devotion to the lady, waited long enough to say:

"I'm mighty glad to see you safe back, sah—"

and disappeared to obey orders. He turned toward Gordon for an explanation, but he was already at the telephone again:

"46! . . . Is this the Garage? . . . This the Harris Apartments. . . . Can you send Thomas with a closed car to the rear door immediately? . . . Yes. . . . No, I want Thomas, and a car that can speed. . . . Yes, the rear door, rear, and at once. . . . What? . . . What's that? . . . But I must. . . . It's official business. . . . Well, I thought so. Hurry them up. Goodby."

He turned and saw her troubled gaze following him with growing fear in her eyes.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Has something happened?" "Just one moment he paused, and, coming toward her, laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Nothing, the matter at all," he said soothingly. "At least nothing that need worry you. It is just a matter of pressing business. I'm sorry to have to go from you for a little while, but it is necessary. I cannot explain to you until I return. You will trust me? You will not worry?"

"I will try!" Her lips were quivering, and her eyes were filled with tears. Again he felt that intense longing to lay his lips upon hers and comfort her, but he put it from him.

his pocket, as if he had just hidden something there.

She was not familiar with firearms. Her mother had been afraid of them and her brother had never flourished any around the house, yet she knew by instinct the danger of a revolver and was Gordon's possession; and a nameless horror rose in her heart and shone from her blue eyes, but she would not speak a word to let him know it. If he had not been in such haste, he would have seen. Her horror would have been still greater should she have known that already carried one loaded revolver and was taking a second in case of an emergency.

"Don't worry," he called as he hurried out the door. "Henry will get anything you need, and I shall soon be back."

The door closed and he was gone. She heard his quick step down the hall, heard the elevator door slide and slam again, and then she knew he was gone down. Outside an automobile sounded and she seemed to hear again his words at the phone. "The rear door." Why had he said that to the driver? Was he in hiding? Was he flying from someone? What, oh what, did it mean?

Without stopping to reason it out, she flew across the room and opened the door of the bedroom he had just left, then through it passed swiftly to a bathroom beyond. Yes, there was a window. Would it be the one? Could she see him? And what good would it do her if she could?

She crowded close to the window. There was a heavy sash with stained glass, but she selected a clear bit of yellow and put her eye close. Yes, there was a closed automobile just below the building. He had gone, then. Where?

Her mind was a blank for a few minutes. She went slowly, mechanically back to the other room without noticing anything about her, sat down in the chair, putting her hands to her forehead as if to try to think. Back to the moment in the church where he had appeared at her side and the service had begun. Something had told her that he was different, and yet there had been those letters, and how could it possibly be that he had not written them? He was gone on some dangerous business, she felt sure. There had been some cause given him by the man to whom he first phoned. He had promised to take precaution—that meant the little, wicked, gleaming thing in his pocket. Perhaps some harm would come to him, and she would never know. And then she started to get up, and with wonder filled eyes. Well, and suppose she did? Why did she care? Was he not the man whose power over her and two short days ago would have made her welcome death as her deliverer? Why was all changed now? Just because he had given her a few wild flowers and said her eyes were like them? Had hair that waved instead of being straight and thin? And where was all her loyalty to her dear dead father's memory? How could she mind that danger to the man to whom she had threatened to tell terrible lies? Who should blacken him in the thoughts of people who had loved him? Had she forgotten the letters? Was she willing to forgive all just because he had declared that he did not write them? He had said he could prove that he did not write them, and he had written them. He must have written them. And yet there was the wave in his hair, and the kindness in his eyes. And he had looked—oh, he had looked terrible things when he had looked at her as if he would like to wreak vengeance on the man who had written it. Could a man masquerade that way?

And then a new solution to the problem came to her. Suppose this—whoever he was—this man who had married her, had gone out to find and shoot the man who had written the letter. But then she covered her eyes with her hands and shuddered. Yet why should she care? But she did. Suppose he should be killed, himself! Who was he if not George Hayne and how did he come to take his place? Was it a trick of some of George's terrible tricks upon her?

A quick vision came of their bringing him back to her. He would lie, perhaps, on that great crimson leather couch over there, just as he had lain in the dawning of the morning in the station, with his hands hanging limp, and one of his feet, his breast, as if he were guarding something, and his bright waves of brown hair lying heavy about his forehead—only, his forehead would be white, so white and cold, with a little blue mark in his temple, perhaps.

The footsteps of the man who brought her back to the present again. She smiled at him pleasantly as he entered, and answered his questions about what she would have for breakfast; but it was he who selected the menu, not she, and after she had gone it could not have told her what she had ordered. She could not get away from the vision on the couch. She closed her eyes and pressed her cold fingers against her eyeballs to drive it away, but still her bridegroom seemed to lie there before her.

The colored man came back presently with a loaded tray, and set it down on a little table which he wheeled before her, as though he had done it many times before. She thanked him, and said there was nothing else she needed, so he went away.

She toyed with the cup of delicious coffee which he had poured for her, and the few swallows she took gave her new heart. She broke a bit from a hot roll, and ate a little of the delicious cake, but still her mind was at work at the problem which her heart was full of nameless anxiety.

He had gone away without any breakfast himself, and he had had no supper the night before, she was sure. He probably had given to her everything he could get on the train. She was haunted with regret, because she had not shared them with him. She got up and walked about the room, trying to shake off the horror that was upon her, and the dread of what the morning might bring forth. Ordinarily she would have thought of sending a message to her mother and brother, but her mind was so troubled now that it never occurred to her.

The walls of the room were tinted a soft greenish gray, and above the picture molding they blended into a woody landscape with a hint of water, greenward, and blue sky through interlacing branches. It reminded her of the little village they had seen as they started from the train in the early morning light. What a beautiful day they had spent together and how it had changed her whole attitude of heart toward the man she had married!

Two or three fine pictures were hung in good lights. She studied them, and knew that the one which she selected and hung there was a judge of true art; but they did not hold her attention long, for as yet she had not connected the room with the man for whom she waited.

A handsome mahogany desk stood against a broad wall, and by the window she was attracted by a little painted miniature of a woman. She took it up and studied the face. It was fine and sweet, with brown hair dressed low, and eyes that reminded her of the man who had just gone from her. Was this, then, the home of some relative with whom he had come to stop

for a day or two, and, if so, where was the relative? The dress in the miniature was of a quarter of a century past, yet the face was young and sweet, as young, perhaps, as herself. She wondered who it was. She put the miniature back in place with care, and held it in her hand, as she would like to know this woman with the tender eyes. She wished her here now, that she might tell her all her anxiety.

Her eye wandered to the pile of letters, some of them official looking ones, one or two in square, perfumed envelopes with high, angular writing. They were all addressed to Mr. Cyril Gordon. That was strange! Who was Mr. Cyril Gordon? What had they—what had she—to do with him? Was he a friend whom George—whom they were visiting for a few days? It was all bewildering.

Then the telephone rang. Her heart beat wildly and she looked toward it as if it had been a human voice speaking and she had no power to answer. What should she do now? Should she answer? Or should she wait for the man to come? Could the man hear the telephone bell or was she perhaps expected to answer? And yet if Mr. Cyril Gordon—well, somebody ought to answer. The phone rang insistently once more, and still a third time. Who if he should be calling her? Perhaps he was in distress. This thought sent her flying to the phone. She took down the receiver and called:

"Hello!" and her voice sounded far away to herself.

"Is this Mr. Gordon's apartment?" "Yes," she answered, for her eyes were resting on the pile of letters close at hand.

"Is Mr. Gordon there?" "No, he is not," she answered, growing more confident now and almost wishing she had not presumed to answer a stranger's phone.

"Why I just phoned to the office and they told me he had returned," said a voice that had an imperious note in it. "Are you sure he isn't there?" "Quite sure," she replied.

"Who is this, please?" "I beg your pardon," said Celia trying to make the time known to her by reply. She was not any longer Miss Hathaway. Who was she? Mrs. Hayne? She shrank from her. "Who is this, I said," snapped the other voice now. "Is this the chambermaid?" Because she had not been told to look around and inquire and be quite sure that Mr. Gordon isn't there. I wish to speak with him about something very important."

Celia smiled.

"No, this is not the chambermaid," she said, sweetly, and I am quite sure Mr. Gordon is not here, is all about it.

"How long before he will be there?" "I don't know really, for I have but just come myself."

"Who is this to whom I am talking?" "Why—just a friend," she answered, wondering if that were the best thing to say.

"Oh!" there was a long contemplative pause at the other end.

"Well, could you give Mr. Gordon a message when he comes in?" "Why certainly, I think so. Who is this?"

"Miss Bentley, Julia Bentley. He'll know," replied the imperious one eagerly now. "And tell him please that he is expected here to dinner tonight. We need him to complete the number, and he simply mustn't fail me. I'll excuse him for going off in such a rush if he can't get here all about it. Now you won't forget, will you? You got the name, Bentley, did you? B. E. N. T. L. E. Y. you know. And you'll tell him the minute he comes in."

"Thank you! What did you say your name was?"

But Celia had hung up. Somehow the message annoyed her, she could not tell why. She wished she had not answered the phone. Whoever Mr. Cyril Gordon was what should she do about the message? And as for the imperious lady, and her message she hoped she would never have to deliver it. On second thought why not write it and leave it on his desk with the pile of letters? She would do it. It would serve to pass away a few dreary minutes that lagged so distressfully.

She sat down and wrote: "Miss Bentley wishes Mr. Gordon to dine with her this evening. She will pardon his running away the other day if he will come early." She laid it beside the high angular writing on the square perfume box, and went back to her leather chair, too restless to rest yet too weary to stand up.

She went presently to the back windows to look out, and then to the side ones. Across the housetops she could catch a glimpse of domes and buildings. There was the Congress building, which usually delighted her with its exquisite tones of gold and brown and white. But she had no eyes for it now. Beyond were more buildings, all set in the lovely foliage which was much farther developed than it had been in New York state. From another window she could get a glimpse of the Potomac shining in the morning sun.

She wandered to the front windows and looked out. There were people passing and repassing. It was a busy street, but she could not make out whether it was one she knew or not. There were two men walking back and forth on the opposite side. They did not go further than the corner of the street either way. They looked across at the windows sometimes and pointed up, when they met, and once one of them took something out of his pocket and flashed it under his coat at his side, as if to have it ready for use. It reminded her of the thing her husband had held in his hand in the bedroom and she shuddered. She watched them, fascinated, not able to draw herself away from the window.

Now and then she would go to the rear window, to see if there was any sign of the automobile returning, and then hurry back to the front, to see if the men were still there. Once she returned to the chair, and, lying back, she tried to let the memory of yesterday sweep over her in all its sweet details, up to the time when they had got into the way train and she had seemed to feel her disloyalty to her father. But now her heart was all on the other side, and she began to feel that there had been some dreadful mistake, somewhere, and he was surely all right. He could not, could not have written those terrible letters. Then again the details of their wild carriage ride in Pittsburgh and miraculous escape haunted her. There was something strange and unexplained about that which she must understand.

(Continued next week.)

There Was a Reason.

From the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Grubbs—I'm told Jinks' cook has left him, but he seems perfectly cheerful. I can understand it.

Stubbs—That's because you never dined with Jinks while the late cook was on the job.

Heard Across the Styx.

From the Birmingham Age-Herald. "Cleopatra seems cross this morning," remarked the first shade.

"You can't blame her for that," answered the second shade.

"What's the matter?"

"As one of the most famous exponents of the vampire business the world has ever known, it vexes her to see how the movies are cheapening her art."



THE GREATEST KINDNESS.

Mrs. Pryor Gives Some Practical Suggestions for Seasonable Charities.

I consider the highest and most charitable of acts that kindness which reinstates and places in a position of usefulness the man of genius and refinement, who may have, through sudden and unforeseen misfortune, been deprived of means and opportunity to serve his fellow man. My reasons for this are these: The capabilities of such persons to be eminently useful is great. The ignorant and vulgar demand, and should receive our help when they suffer, but their possibilities of usefulness are small by comparison with those of educated and refined men and women. To educate them and raise the lower to the higher place is a grand charity; but its results must be more or less doubtful. The torch put by charity into their hands may become a beacon of light and may become an engine of destruction. But the great soul that has been smitten by undesired misfortune will, if reinstated, never fail of its highest duty. The charity that inspires anew such a spirit has an additional claim to be considered the highest, because the help must be attained, with infinite delicacy and secrecy. There can be no counsel between the left and right hand; no reward can come from the applause of the world. It requires greatness of soul to perform a grand act of charity in secret, and greatness of soul for a noble man or woman to receive it.

Robert Hall says: "I reckon the highest benevolence to be that extended to the unfortunate gentleman, for, in addition to the pangs of poverty, he feels the stings of an outraged sensibility."

SARA A. PRYOR.

DESIGN FOR CALENDAR.



An Unexpected Salute.

A curious incident of the closing scenes of the American Civil War is related by a correspondent of a St. Louis newspaper. After General Grant had received General Lee's terms of surrender at Appomattox and accepted them, some one—not General Grant—ordered the firing of a salute of one hundred guns in token of victory. The salute General Grant quickly stopped, as he wished that every man should be taken to spare the sensibilities of the brave men who had surrendered. The proceedings went on quietly, and the surrender was completed. All was over, and peace had succeeded war, when a strange and irregular fusillade of musketry was heard from the field of battle. More than that, the air about the field was filled with whistling bullets. What had caused a re-opening of hostilities? Simply this—the muskets of the Confederate soldiers had been allowed to remain stacked on the field. So suddenly had the fighting ceased on the morning of the 9th of April that thousands of pieces were left loaded. In some way the dry spring grass on the field caught fire, and the blaze ran amongst the stacked guns. They were heated to the point of explosion, and soon the fusillade began. Most of the pieces were pointed upwards, and the bullets rose until their force was spent, and then fell upon the ground. Others were pointed at an angle, and sent their bullets far. On that spot the ground is to this day strewn with bullets, and any one may pick them up who will. This was the only salute which celebrated the surrender of Lee.

A Pretty Book Cover.

The covering of books with chamoin, silk, or fine linen has come to be a positive art. By means of it, a paper-bound volume may be transformed into something rich and dainty by a pair of clever hands at home. A volume copy of "Old Love Letters" was seen not long ago which had been charmingly decorated by the outer slip which was made of what is called "sad-colored" silk. On it the title had been embroidered in subdued tints. A true lover's knot encircled the words, and from it a few scattered forget-me-nots were drooping. The effect was exquisite, and yet it was done by no experienced embroiderer.

BEGINNING THE YEAR BADLY.



"Say, Moss, nice coat yo's got on. What'd de price ob one like dat?" "Moss—I dunno. De shop keep wa' out at de time I got it."

A Remarkable Cat.

This city can boast of many wonderful things, but one of the most wonderful and inconceivable stories reached the ear of a reporter recently. The author of the story is a direct descendant of George Washington and his veracity is beyond question. A few days ago his daughter lost a valuable earring. When the loss was announced the entire family and even the neighbors scoured the grounds about the house and even the streets for blocks beyond, but the search proved fruitless, and the earring had seemingly disappeared forever.

The family wherein the loss occurred are possessors of a large and handsome tabby cat. The animal is a great pet of the family and it has the run of the entire house. One of its habits is to crawl into bed with the children at early morning. Yesterday morning, pussy, as was her usual wont, came to the children's chamber on her morning rounds, but she seemed to be in great distress. At times she would try to dislodge from her throat something that troubled her greatly. Suddenly she gave a convulsive gasp and from her mouth dropped the diamond earring.

When the discovery was heralded throughout the house, pussy was the heroine of the hour—Derby Transcript.

McFingle—"Mrs. Gophast is a grass widow, isn't she?"

McFingle—"I never knew it. Why?"

McFingle—"Her husband died of lay fever."—Lawrence American.

JUST THE SEASON.



"Where are you going, my 'turkey maid'?" "I am going a-walking, sir," she said. "You had better be careful, my 'turkey maid,' or someone will axe you, miss," he said.