

The Girl and the Bill

By
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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CHAPTER I.

The Threshold of Adventure.
The roar of State street filled the ears of Robert Orme not unpleasantly. He liked Chicago, felt towards the western city something more than the tolerant, patronizing interest which so often characterizes the eastern man. To him it was the hub of genuine Americanism—young, aggressive, perhaps a bit too cocksure, but ever bounding along with eyes toward the future. Here was the city of great beginnings, the city of experiment—experiment with life; hence its incompleteness—an incompleteness not dissimilar to that of life itself. Chicago lived; it was the pulse of the great middle west.

Orme watched the procession with clear eyes. He had been strolling southward from the Masonic Temple, into the shopping district. The clangor, the smoke and dust, the hurrying crowds, all worked into his mood. The expectation of adventure was far from him. Nor was he a man who sought impressions for amusement; whatever came to him he weighed, and accepted or rejected according as it was valueless or useful. Whole-some he was; any one might infer that from his face. Doubtless, his fault lay in his overemphasis on the purely practical; but that, after all, was a lawyer's fault, and it was counterbalanced by a sweet kindness toward all the world—a loveableness which made for him a friend of every chance acquaintance.

It was well along in the afternoon, and shoppers were hurrying homeward. Orme noted the fresh beauty of the women and girls—Chicago has reason to be proud of her daughters—and his heart beat a little faster. Not that he was a man to be caught by every pretty stranger; but scarcely recognized by himself, there was a hidden spring of romance in his practical nature. Heart-free, he never met a woman without wondering whether she was the one. He had never found her; he did not know that he was looking for her; yet always there was the unconscious question.

A distant whistle, the clanging of gongs, the rapid beat of galloping hoofs—fire engines were racing down the street. Cars stopped, vehicles of all kinds crowded in toward the curbs.

Orme paused and watched the fire horses go thundering by, their smoking chariots swaying behind them and dropping long trails of sparks. Small boys were running, men and women were stopping to gaze after the passing engines, but Orme's attention was taken by something that was happening near by, and as the gongs and the hoof-beats grew fainter he looked with interest to the street beside him.

He had got as far as the corner of Madison street. The scramble to get out of the way of the engines had here resulted in a traffic jam. Two policemen were moving about, shouting orders for the disengagement of the street cars and vehicles which seemed to be inextricably wedged together.

A burly Irish teamster was bellowing at his horse. The hind wheel of a smart barouche was caught in the fore wheel of a delivery wagon, and the driver of the delivery wagon was expressing his opinion of the situation in terms which seemed to embarrass the elderly gentleman who sat in the barouche. Orme's eye traveled through the outer edge of the disturbance, and sought its center.

There in the midst of the tangle was a big black touring car. Its one occupant was a girl—and such a girl! Her fawn-colored cloak was thrown open; her face was unveiled. Orme was thrilled when he caught the glory of her face—the clear skin, browned by outdoor living; the demure but regular features; the eyes that seemed to transmute and reflect softly all impressions from without. Orme had never seen any one like her—so nobly unconscious of self, so appealing and yet so calm.

She was waiting patiently, interested in the clamor about her, but seemingly undisturbed by her own part in it. Orme's eyes did not leave her face. He was merely one of a crowd at the curb, unnoted by her, but when after a time, he became aware that he was staring, he felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and he muttered: "What a boor I am!" And then, "But who can she be? Who can she be?"

A policeman made his way to the black car. Orme saw him speak to the girl; saw her brows knit; and he quickly threaded his way into the street. His action was barely conscious, but nothing could have stopped him at that moment.

"You'll have to come to the station, miss," the policeman was saying.



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"But what have I done?" Her voice was broken music.

"You've violated the traffic regulations, and made all this trouble, that's what you've done."

"I'm on a very important errand," she began, "and—"

"I can't help that, miss, you ought to have had some one with you that knew the rules."

Her eyes were perplexed, and she looked about her as if for help. For a moment her gaze fell on Orme, who was close to the policeman's elbow.

Now, Orme had a winning andarming smile. Without hesitation, he touched the policeman on the shoulder, beamed pleasantly, and said: "Pardon me, officer, but this car was forced over by that dray."

"She was on the wrong side," returned the policeman, after a glance which modified his first intention to take offence. "She had no business over here."

"It was either that or a collision. My wheel was scraped, as it was."

She, too, was smiling now.

The policeman pondered. He liked to be called "officer"; he liked to be smiled upon; and the girl, to judge from her manner and appearance, might well be the daughter of a man of position. "Well," he said after a moment, "be more careful another time." He turned and went back to his work among the other vehicles, covering the weakness of his surrender by a fresh display of angry authority.

The girl gave a little sigh of relief and looked at Orme. "Thank you," she said.

Then he remembered that he did not know this girl. "Can I be of further service?" he asked.

"No," she answered, "I think not. But thank you just the same."

She gave him a friendly little nod and turned to the steering gear.

There was nothing for it but to go, and Orme returned to the curb. A moment later he saw the black car move slowly away, and he felt as though something sweet and fine were going out of his life. If only there had been some way to prolong the incident! He knew intuitively that this girl belonged to his own class. Any insignificant acquaintance might introduce them to each other. And yet convention now thrust them apart.

Sometimes he might meet her. Indeed, he determined to find out who she was and make that sometime a certainty. He would prolong his stay in Chicago and search society until he found her. No one had ever before sent such a thrill through his heart. He must find her, become her friend, perhaps—but again he laughed to himself, "What a boor I am!"

After all she was but a passing stranger, and the pleasant reverie into which his glimpse of her had led him was only a reverie. The memory of her beauty and elusive charm would disappear; his vivid impression of her would be effaced. But even while he thought this he found himself again wondering who she was and how he could find her. He could not drive her from his mind.

Meantime he had proceeded slowly on his way. Suddenly a benevolent, white-bearded man halted him, with a deprecating gesture. "Excuse me, sir," he began, "but your hat—"

Orme lifted his straw hat from his head. A glance showed him that it was disfigured by a great blotch of black grease. He had held his hat in his hand while talking to the girl, and it must have touched her car at a point where the axle of the dray had rubbed. So this was his one mistake of the incident.

He thanked the stranger, and walked to near-by hatter's, where a ready clerk set before him hats of all styles.

He selected one quickly and left his soiled hat to be cleaned and sent home later.

Offering a ten-dollar bill in payment, he received in change a five-dollar bill and a silver dollar. He gave the coin a second glance. It was the first silver dollar that he had handled for some time, for he seldom visited the west.

"There's no charge for the cleaning," said the clerk, noting down Orme's name and address, and handing the soiled hat to the cash boy.

Orme, meantime, was on the point of folding the five-dollar bill to put it into his pocket book. Suddenly he looked at it intently. Written in ink across the face of it, were the words: "Remember Person You Pay This To."

The writing was apparently a hurried scrawl, but the letters were large and quite legible. They appeared to have been written on an uneven surface, for there were several jogs and breaks in the writing, as if the pen had slipped.

"They might," she vouchsafed, "if they happened to see us both at the same time."

"This is curious," remarked Orme. The clerk blinked his watery eyes

and looked at the bill in Orme's hand. "Oh, yes, sir," he explained. "I remember that. The gentleman who paid it in this morning called our attention to it."

"It's the man who wrote this, he probably doesn't know that there's a law against defacing money."

"But it's perfectly good, isn't it?" inquired the clerk. "If you want another instead—"

"Oh, no," laughed Orme. "The banks would take it."

"But, sir—" began the clerk.

"I should like to keep it. If I can't get rid of it, I'll bring it back. It's a hoax or an endless chain device or something of the sort. I'd like to find out."

He looked again at the writing. Puzzles and problems always interested him, especially if they seemed to involve some human story.

"Very well," said the clerk. "I'll remember that you have it, Mr. —" he peered at the name he had set down "Mr. Orme."

Leaving the hatters, Orme turned back on State street, retracing his steps. It was close to the dinner hour, and the character of the street crowds had changed. The shoppers had disappeared. Suburbanites were by this time aboard their trains and homeward bound. The street was thronged with hurrying clerks and shop girls, and the cars were jammed with thousands more, all of them thinking, no doubt, of the same two things—something to eat and relaxation.

What a hive it was, this great street! And how scant the lives of the great majority! Working, eating, sleeping, marrying and given in marriage, bearing children and dying—was that all? "But growing, too," said Orme to himself. "Growing, too." Would this be the sum of his own life—that of a worker in the hive? It came to him with something of an inner pang that thus far his scheme of things had included little more. He wondered why he was now recognizing this scantiness, this lack in his life.

He came out of his reverie to find himself again at the Madison street corner. Again he seemed to see that beautiful girl in the car, and to hear the music of her voice.

How could he best set about to find her? She might be, like himself, a visitor in the city. But there was the touring car. Well, she might have run in from one of the suburbs. He could think of no better plan than to call that evening on the Wallinghams and describe the unknown to Bessie and try to get her assistance. Bessie would divine the situation, and she would guy him unmercifully, he knew; but he would face even that for another glimpse of the girl of the car.

And at that moment he was started by a sharp explosion. He looked to the street. There was the black car, bumping along with one flat tire. The girl threw on the brakes and came to a stop.

In an instant Orme was in the street. If he thought that she would not remember him, her first glance al-

tered the assumption, for she looked down at him with a ready smile and said: "You see, I do need you again, after all."

As for Orme, he could think of nothing better to say than simply: "I am glad." With that he began to unfasten the spare tire.

"I shall watch you with interest," she went on. "I know how to run a car—though you might not think it—but I don't know how to repair one."

"That's a man's job, anyway," said Orme, busy now with the jack, which was slowly raising the wheel from the pavement.

"Shall I get out?" she asked. "Does my weight make any difference?"

"Not at all," said Orme; but, nevertheless, she descended to the street and stood beside him while he worked.

"I didn't know there were all those funny things inside," she mused.

Orme laughed. Her comment was vague, but to him it was enough just to hear her voice. He had got the wheel clear of the street and was taking off the burst tire.

"We seem fated to meet," she said.

Orme looked up at her. "I hope you won't think me a cad," he said, "if I say that I hope we may meet many times."

Her little frown warned him that she had misunderstood.

"Do you happen to know the Tom Wallinghams?" he asked.

Her smile returned. "I know a Tom Wallinghams and a Bessie Wallinghams."

"They're good friends of mine. Don't you think that they might introduce us?"

"They might," she vouchsafed, "if they happened to see us both at the same time."

"This is curious," remarked Orme. The clerk blinked his watery eyes

Orme returned to his task. The crowd that always gathers was now close about them, and there was little opportunity for talk. He finished his job neatly, and stowed away the old tire.

She was in the car before he could offer to help her. "Thank you again," she said.

"If only you will let me arrange it with the Wallinghams," he faltered.

"I will think about it." She smiled. He felt that she was slipping away. "Give me some clue," he begged.

"Where is your spirit of romance?" she railed at him; then apparently relenting: "Perhaps the next time we meet—"

Orme groaned. With a little nod like that which had dismissed him at the time of his first service to her, she pulled the lever and the car moved away.

Tumult in his breast, Orme walked on. He watched the black car thread its way down the street and disappear around a corner. Then he gave himself over to his own bewildering reflections, and he was still busy with them when he found himself at the entrance of the Pere Marquette. He had crossed the Rush street bridge and found his way up to the Lake Shore drive almost without realizing whether he was going.

Orme had come to Chicago at the request of eastern clients to meet half way the owners of a western mining property. When he registered at the Annex he found awaiting him a telegram saying that they had been detained at Denver and must necessarily be two days late. Besides the telegram, there had been a letter for him—a letter from his friend, Jack Baxter, to whom he had written of his coming. Jack had left the city on business, it appeared, but he urged Orme to make free of his North side apartment. So Orme left the Annex and went to the rather too gorgeous, but very luxurious, Pere Marquette, where he found that the staff had been instructed to keep a close eye on his comfort. All this had happened but three short hours ago.

After getting back to the apartment, Orme's first thought was to telephone to Bessie Wallingham. He decided, however, to wait till after dinner. He did not like to appear too eager. So he went down to the public dining room and ate what was placed before him, and returned to his apartment just at dusk.

In a few moments he got Bessie Wallingham on the wire.

"Why, Robert Orme!" she exclaimed. "Wherever did you come from?"

"The usual place. Are you and Tom at home this evening?"

"I'm so sorry. We're going out with some new friends. Wish I knew them well enough to ask you along. Can you have some golf with us at Arradale tomorrow afternoon?"

"Delighted! Say, Bessie, do you know a girl who runs a black touring car?"

"What?"

"Do you know a tall, dark girl who has a black touring car?"

"I know lots of tall, dark girls, and several of them have black touring cars. Why?"

"Who are they?"

There was a pause. Orme heard a few scattering words which indicated that the clerk was questioning the stranger. Then came the information: "He says he wishes to see you about a five-dollar bill."

"Oh!" Orme realized that he had no reason to be surprised. "Well, send him up."

He hung up the receiver and, returning to the table, put the marked bill back into his pocketbook and slipped into a drawer the paper on which he had copied the inscription.

"A" might be the place to which "S. R. Evans" was directed, or at which he was to be found—a place sufficiently indicated by the letter. Now as to the "T"—was it "treasure"? Or was it "time"? Or "true"? Orme had no way of telling. It might even be the initial of the person who had penned the instructions.

Without knowing where "A" was, Orme could make nothing of the cryptogram. For that matter, he realized that unless the secret were criminal it was not his affair. But he knew that legitimate business information is seldom transmitted by such mysterious means.

Again and again he went over the abbreviations, but the more closely he studied them, the more baffling he found them. The real meaning appeared to hinge on the "A" and the "T." Eventually he was driven to the conclusion that those two letters could not be understood by anyone who was not already partly in the

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