

The Girl and the Bill

By Bannister Merwin
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CHAPTER VI.

A Chance Lead.

To follow the girl's suggestion and return at once to Chicago was Orme's intention when he said good-night to her. The hour was close to midnight, and the evening had been crowded so full with bewildering adventure that he was tired. Moreover, he looked forward to a morning that might well test his endurance even more strenuously.

He had now committed himself definitely to continue in the field against the Japanese. Except for his desire to serve this wonderful girl who had come so suddenly into his life, he doubtless would have permitted the mystery of the marked bill to remain unsolved. But since the recovery of the stolen papers was so important to her, he was prepared to run any risk in the struggle.

Who was she? But no, that was a question she did not wish him to ask. She was simply "Giri"—beautiful, tender, comprehending—his ideal incarnate. As he stood there, hesitant, before the house into which she had disappeared, he pictured her again—even to the strand of rebellious hair which had blown across her cheek. He could discover no fault in her perfection.

A man came into view on the drive at the side of the house; a servant to care for the car, of course; and Orme, with the uneasy feeling of one who has been trespassing, moved away toward the corner of the block. He looked back, however, and saw the newcomer clamber into the car and send it slowly up the drive.

At the same time a light illumined one of the upper windows of the house. A shadow was thrown on the curtain. Perhaps it was the girl herself. What explanation had she given her friends for appearing so late at their door? Probably she had told them no more than that she was tired and belated. She was not the kind of girl from whom an elaborate explanation would be asked or expected.

Then a thought startled him. Was this, perhaps, her home? No, she had spoken of the people who lived here as her friends, and she would not have tried to keep the truth from him by subterfuge. If she were her home and she had not wished him to know it, she would have requested him to leave her before they had come so far.

It dawned upon him that it would not be hard for him to learn who lived in this house, and possibly through that knowledge to get a clue to her identity. His heart warmed as he realized how completely she had trusted him. His assurance that he would not try to find out who she was had satisfied her. And Orme knew that, if she had been so readily assured, it was because she had recognized the truth and devotion in him.

With a happy sigh, he turned his back once and for all and walked rapidly away. But he did not go toward the electric-car line, which he knew must lie a few blocks to the west. Instead, he retraced the course they had come, for he had decided to visit the university campus once more and try to discover what had become of Maku, and more especially of the other Japanese, who had secured the papers. That he would be recognized and connected with the attack on Maku, was unlikely.

When he came to the corner of Sheridan road and Chicago avenue, he hesitated for a moment. Should he go north through the campus and seek a trace of the Japanese who had escaped? Nearly half an hour had gone since the adventure among the trees, and the man must have got completely away by this time. Having the papers, he surely would not linger to learn the fate of Maku.

Orme found himself wondering how the Japanese had got to Evanston. Granting that it had not taken them long to solve the abbreviated directions on the five-dollar bill, they could hardly have come by motor-car, for they had had a good half-hour start, and Orme had discovered them before their work was completed. Only on the assumption that their car had broken down on the way could Orme admit that they had used a motor-car. Moreover, how were two Japanese, whose appearance did not indicate the possession of much ready money—how were they likely to have a car, or even to rent one? And had they believed that they might be pursued? Would they not have come to Evanston by an obvious route of train or trolley?

These considerations led Orme to think that the car which he and the girl had heard in the distance could not have been occupied by the escaping Japanese.



"There's a Rule Against Going in There After Dark."

event he would be well on his way to Chicago by this time. The car he had caught must have gone southward from Evanston about 10:45. The conductor would be likely to remember having had a Japanese on board; perhaps he would even remember where the Oriental had got off. The natural course for Orme, therefore, was to take a car himself and, if he did not meet the other car returning, to get off at the car-barns and make inquiries. The possibility that the Japanese had changed to the elevated road on the North side was great, but the conductor might remember if the change had been made.

But Orme did not turn at once toward the car-line. Though his logic pointed in that direction, he was irresistibly influenced by a desire to walk eastward along the drive where it skirted the southern end of the campus. A half-hour might go by, and still he would be too late to meet, on its return, the car which the Japanese would have taken. He started, therefore, eastward, toward the lake, throwing frequent glances through the iron fence at his left and into the dark shadows of the oaks.

He came to the lake without encountering anyone. The road here swept to the southward, and on the beach near the turn squatted the low brick building which the girl had told him was the life-saving station. A man was standing on the little veranda. His suit of duck was dimly white in the light from the near-by street-lamps.

"One of the crew," Orme surmised, and he sauntered slowly down the little path.

The beach sloped grayly to the edge of the lake, where a breakwater thrust its blunt nose out like a stranded hulk. The water was calm, lapping the sand so gently that it was hard to believe that so gentle a murmur could ever swell into the roar of a northeaster. A launch that was moored at the outer end of the breakwater lay quiet on the tideless surface.

"Good-evening," said Orme, as the man turned his head. "Are you on watch?"

The life-saver slowly stretched. "Till 12," he answered.

"Not much longer, then?"

"No, thank heaven!"

Orme laughed. "I suppose you do get more than you want of it," he said. "But on a fine night like this I should think it would be mighty pleasant."

"Not if you have to put in several hours of study after you get through."

"Study?"

"Yes. You see, I have a special examination tomorrow."

"A service examination?"

"Oh, no—college."

"Are you a student?"

"All the crew are students. It helps a good deal, if you are working your way through college."

"Oh, I see. But surely the university hasn't opened for the fall?"

"No, but there are preliminary exams, for those who have conditions to work off."

Orme nodded. "It's a fine campus you have—with the groves of oaks."

"Yes."

"Just the place for a quiet evening stroll. I thought I'd walk up the shore."

"There's a rule against going in there after dark."

"Is there? That's too bad."

"Something funny happened there just a little while ago."

"So? What was it?" Orme was getting close to the subject he most desired to hear explained.

"Why, one of the cops was walking along the shore and he found a Japanese, stunned."

"A Japanese!"

"He evidently had wandered in there and somebody had hit him over the head with a club."

"After money?"

"Probably. There've been a good many hold-ups lately. But the slugs didn't have a chance to get anything this time."

"How so?"

"He was bending over the Jap when the cop came up. He got away."

"Didn't the cop chase him?"

"No, the fellow had a good start, so the cop stayed by the Jap."

"And what became of the Jap?"

The life-saver jerked his head toward the door beside him. "He's in there, getting over his headache."

"Is he?" This was a contingency which Orme had not foreseen. Nor had he any desire to come face to face with Maku. But if he betrayed his surprise, the life-saver did not notice it.

"The cop is taking another look through the campus," he continued.

"What does the Jap say about it?" asked Orme.

"He doesn't say anything. It looks as though he couldn't speak English. The cop is going to get Asuki."

"Asuki?"

"A Jap student who lives in the dormitory."

"Oh," said Orme.

The fact that Maku would not talk was in a measure reassuring. His apparent inability to understand English was, of course, assumed, unless, indeed, he was still too completely dazed by the blow which Orme had given him, to use a tongue which was more or less strange to him. But what would he say if he saw Orme? Would he not accuse his assailant, hoping thus to delay the pursuit of his companion?

The danger was by no means slight. Orme decided quickly to get away from this neighborhood. But just as he was about to bid the life-saver a casual good-night, two men came around the corner of the building. One was a policeman, the other a young Japanese. Orme unobtrusively seated himself on the edge of the little veranda.

"How is he?" asked the policeman.

"All right, I guess," replied the life-saver. "I looked in a few minutes ago, and he was sitting up. Hello, Asuki."

"Hello, there," responded the little Japanese.

"Come," said the policeman, after an unsuspicious glance at Orme, and, mounting the steps, he led his interpreter into the station.

Now, indeed, it was time for Orme to slip away. Maku might be brought out at any moment. But Orme lingered. He was nearer to the solution of the secret if he kept close to Maku, and he realized, for that matter, that by watching Maku closely and, perhaps, following him home, he might be led straight to the other man. If Maku accused him, it should not, after all, be hard to laugh the charge away.

A murmur of voices came from within the station, the policeman's words alone being distinguishable.

"Ask him," the policeman said, "if he knows who hit him."

The undertones of a foreign jargon followed.

"Well, then," continued the policeman, "find out where he came from and what he was doing on the campus."

Again the undertones, and afterward an interval of silence. Then the policeman spoke in an undecided voice.

"If he don't know anything, I can't do anything. But we might as well get a few more facts. Something might turn up. Ask him whether he saw anybody following him when he went into the campus."

Orme had been straining his ears in a vain endeavor to catch the words of Asuki. But suddenly his attention was diverted by a sound from the lake. It was the "puh-puh-puh" of a motor-boat, apparently a little distance to the northward. The explosions followed one another in rapid succession.

He turned to the life-saver.

"What boat is that?" he asked.

"I don't know. Some party from Chicago, probably. She came up an hour or so ago—at least, I suppose she's the same one."

The explosions were now so rapid as to make almost one continuous roar.

"She's a fast one, all right," commented the life-saver. "Hear her go!"

"Are there many fast boats on the lake?"

"Quite a number. They run out from Chicago harbor now and then."

Orme was meditating.

"Exactly how long ago did this boat pass?"

"Oh, an hour or more. Why?"

"She seems to have been beached up north here a little way."

"She may have been. Or they've been lying to you there."

In Orme's mind arose a surmise that in this motor-boat Maku and his companion had come from Chicago.

The surmise was so strong as to develop quickly into a certainty. And if the Japanese had come by this boat, it stood to reason that the one who had the papers was escaping in it. He must have waited some time for Maku and, at last, had pushed off to return alone.

Were those Japanese acting for themselves? That did not seem possible. Then who was their employer?

Orme did not puzzle long over these questions, for he had determined on a course of action. He spoke to the life-saver, who appeared to be listening to the droning conversation which contained within the station.

"The hold-up men may be in that boat," remarked Orme.

"Hardly." A laugh accompanied the answer.

"Well, why not? She came north an hour or so ago and either was beached or lay to until just now."

"You may be right." Then, before Orme knew what was happening, the young man opened the door and called into the station: "Hey, there! Your robber is escaping on that motor-boat out there."

"What's that?" The policeman strode to the door.

"Don't you hear that boat out there?" asked the life-saver.

"Sure, I hear it."

"Well, she came up from the south an hour or more ago and stopped a little north of here. Now she's going back. Mr. Holmes, he—" he grinned as he said it—"Mr. Holmes suggests that the hold-up man is aboard."

The reference to the famous detective of fiction was lost upon the policeman. "I guess that's about it, Mr. Holmes," he said excitedly; and Orme was much relieved to note that the life-saver's humorous reference had passed for an introduction. The policeman would have no suspicion of him now—unless Maku—

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The voice of Asuki replied: "He says the robber came in a bicycle—not in a boat."

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