

The Girl and the Bill

By **Bannister Merwin**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **RAY WALTERS**



The car was skimming along over the turnpike like some flying bird of the night. Orme glanced back over the way they had come. A soft electric glow in the sky told where Evanston lay, several miles to the east. Far to the south a greater glow showed the position of Chicago.

Pulling himself erect, Orme leaned forward. It seemed as though Arima must hear him breathe. Slowly he advanced his arm. Then, darting swiftly, he threw it around Arima's neck and drew backwards with a jerk.

The Japanese was taken completely unawares. Uttering a strangled cry, he let go of the steering wheel and clutched at the choking arm that held him; he could not break the grip.

Meanwhile Orme reached for the steering wheel with his free arm. But Arima, kicking frantically, struck the wheel with his foot, just as Orme was about to seize it. The car turned sharply to one side. Into the ditch it plunged.

As the fore wheels dropped into the depression, the body of the car rose in the air. Orme, still clinging to Arima, shot forward. He was conscious, in that fraction of a second, that he must release his hold, or Arima's neck would be broken; so he unbent his arm.

The earth arose and something struck him heavily. He saw a firmament of brilliant stars. Then all was black.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Chance of the Game.

The first impression that came to Orme with returning consciousness was one of impending disaster. His mind was renewing its last thought before it had ceased to work.

Then he realized that the disaster had already occurred, and he moved his arms and legs, to see if they had been injured. They gave him no pain, and he raised himself to a sitting position.

The soft night hovered about him. He heard confusedly the droning of insects, and the distant mournful call of a whip-poor-will. The roar of the car was strangely missing. What had become of it? And where was Arima? These were the first questions he asked himself as he became able to think without confusion.

He now became aware that his head hurt, and raising his hand, he found a large bump under the hair above his right temple. Turning, he discovered that he had been thrown over the fence into a field of thick-standing grain, which had broken his fall. His head must have struck the fence in passing.

He got to his feet. At first he was bothered by dizziness, but that soon disappeared.

Climbing the fence, he saw that the car had turned over on one side. At a glance there were no evidences of superficial damage, but it would take a team of horses and some time to right it and get it back into the road. The lamps had been extinguished.

In the ditch near the car lay Arima. One of his legs was bent under him horribly. Orme hurried over to him.

The Japanese was conscious. His beady eyes glittered wetly in the starlight, but he said no word, gave no groan, made no show of pain. Whatever he may have suffered, he endured with the stoicism that is traditional in his race.

"Much hurt?" asked Orme, bending over him.

"My leg is broke," Arima spoke unemotionally.

Orme considered. "I'll send you help," he said, at last. "Lie quiet for a little while, and you will be looked after."

He rose, smoothed out his clothing, and pulled himself together. It was not part of his program to let whomsoever he might meet know that he himself had been concerned in the wreck.

In a moment he returned to Arima. "I'll have to have those papers," he said.

Silently the Japanese reached within his coat and drew out the papers. He held them for Orme to take.

"You have me beat," he said. "Spirit told me I must fail."

A picture of the scene in Madam Alia's rooms came to Orme; the darkness broken only by a pinpoint of gaslight; the floating, ghostly forms; the circle of awed believers, with the two Japanese, intent as children.

The medium's work for him had not ended when she helped him to escape. Mentally he redoubled his thanks to her, for she had so impressed the fatalistic mind of Arima that he gave the papers over without making necessary a final struggle.

By the size and shape of the papers Orme recognized them. Nevertheless, to make sure that he was not being deceived, he slid his hands over Ar-

ma's coat, and felt in the pockets. He found nothing that resembled the papers he had, so he thrust them into his own pocket.

He now took out his watch. There was not enough light to see what time it was, and he ran his fingers over the dial, as he had done during that time of imprisonment, earlier in the evening. As nearly as he could tell it was ten minutes past nine. He could hardly believe that it was so early.

With a final, "Take it easy," to Arima, Orme now started down the road toward the lights of a house, a quarter of a mile ahead.

He had it in mind to examine the papers, to find a clue to the name of the girl's father. The sentiment which had led him to refuse her offer to tell him everything must now be neglected. There might still be time to deliver the papers before midnight, but he did not dare delay.

For one thing, he had only the haziest notion as to his whereabouts. Obviously he was somewhere west of Evanston, but that meant little in an unfamiliar country. He would have to find some conveyance.

Not altogether without sympathy for his fallen enemy, he nevertheless felt that Arima had received no more than he deserved. There had been no hesitation about the different attacks made upon himself. He had provoked no assault unless by the fact that he had the marked bill in his possession. But the calmness with which Arima had endured his final defeat aroused admiration. After all, the Japanese had merely acted under orders. And now Orme's first thought was to get help for him.

He came to the lights he had seen. They shone through the windows of a small farmhouse a few rods back from the road. A short avenue of poplars led to the door.

In response to Orme's knock, the man of the house appeared—a German with sleepy eyes and tousled yellow hair.

"There is an injured man down the road a way," said Orme. "Motor car smash."

"So?"

"His leg is broken, I think. I made him as comfortable as I could. Can you get a doctor? The man will rest quiet till a doctor comes. He can't be moved very well."

"Ein doctor? Ja. Es ist one bei Niles Center. Mein son vill go for him. Too bad! Too bad! Come in."

"No, thank you," said Orme carelessly.

"Was you in der accident?"

"Do I look it?" Orme laughed.

"Nein, you do not look it. Ach! Dese autyobiles! Dey make much harm."

"It is too bad," admitted Orme.

"He was a millionaire, maybe. Dey comes by here so fast, going to Arradale. Hans! Komm heil! Ein man is gesmashed. Du must for der doctor go. He turned back to Orme.

"Mein son, he will go."

But Orme had no ears for what the sympathetic German said. One word had made his heart leap.

"Arradale!"

There he was to have dined with Tom and Bessie Wallingham! He had forgotten them utterly. Were they still at the golf club? Possibly, and, in any event, if he could reach the club, he would be near a railroad.

"How far is Arradale?" he asked.

"Hab-mile. Und vere did you say der hurt man was?"

"A few hundred feet back there." Orme indicated the direction. "Can I reach Arradale by this road?"

"Next turn—rechts. I will take de man some schnapps."

"That will be good. His friends will make it right with you."

"Ach! Do not say so!"

The German shook his head in deprecation of the idea that he wished any return for his services. Meantime his long-legged, tow-headed son had come from within and stood gaping behind his father.

"Vill you go back to der man mit me?" asked the German.

"No," said Orme.

"So? Vell, all right."

"I'm sorry I can't wait," said Orme.

"I've done what I could, and I have a long way to go."

"Sure! Dat's all right!"

"Then thank you very much. Good-night."

Orme walked briskly to the road and turned west. He felt assured that Arima would be looked after.

Following the road to the first crossing, he turned to the right. In a few minutes he saw the lights of the clubhouse, and a little later he stepped upon the veranda.

Many people were seated in the comfortable porch chairs. The charms of the summer evening had held them after their afternoon of play. And from one of the groups came the



"His Friends Will Make it Right With You."

sound of a voice—a man's voice—which Orme found vaguely familiar. He could not place it, however, and he quickly forgot it in his general impression of the scene.

In this atmosphere of gaiety he felt strangely out of place. Here all was chatter and froth—the activity of the surface-joy of living; but he had stepped into it fresh from a series of events that had uncovered the inner verities.

Here the ice tinkled in cool glasses, and women laughed happily, and every one was under the spell of the velvety summer evening; but he had looked into the face of Love and the face of Death—and both were still near his heart.

He found a servant and asked for the Wallinghams.

"Mr. Wallingham has left, sir," said the man, "but Mrs. Wallingham is here."

"Ask her if Mr. Orme may speak to her."

He smiled rather grimly as the servant departed, for he anticipated Bessie's laughing accusations.

And presently she came, an admonishing finger upheld.

"Robert—Orme," she exclaimed, "how dare you show your face now?"

"I couldn't help it, Bessie. Honest, I couldn't. I must ask you to forgive and forget."

"That's a hard request, Bob. You have broken two engagements in one day—and one of them for dinner. But never mind. I have a weakness that I acquired from Tom—I mean the weakness of believing in you. Go ahead and explain yourself."

"It would take too long, Bessie. Please let me put it off."

"Until you can manage a good excuse? You want all the trumps."

"My explanation is all tangled up with other people's affairs. Where's Tom?"

"He went back to the city early—awfully sorry that he couldn't stay to have dinner with you. There is a committee or something this evening."

"Bessie, you know what I asked you over the telephone? Can you—can you help me?"

"What—Now?"

"Yes."

"Why, Bob, what's the matter with you? This is no time of day to make a call."

"It's very important, Bessie. It doesn't concern the young lady alone. I simply must be at her house within the next two hours."

She eyed him earnestly. "If you say that, Bob, I must believe you. And, of course, I'll help all I can."

Orme sighed his relief. "Thanks," he said.

She flashed a speculative glance at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I can't tell you what it's all about. You'll just have to take my word for it."

"Have I asked you to tell me?"

"No, you marvel of womanhood. You are dying of curiosity, I don't doubt, but your restraint is superhuman."

Again she looked at him keenly. "Bob, you are dying of curiosity yourself. Don't you suppose I can see?"

"It's something harder than curiosity," said Orme simply.

"How eager are you!" She laughed.

"Now, there is plenty of time. The trip won't take us more than half an hour; so come along and meet some friends of mine."

"Bessie—if you could hurry—"

"We can't start until the car comes. I'm expecting it any moment. So be good, and come along. There's such an interesting man—and very distinguished. We don't try to pronounce his name. Just think, he was engaged for dinner here, also, and came too late. And ever since he arrived he's been called to the telephone at five-minute intervals. So exciting! Nobody can guess what he's so busy about."

She threaded her way through the lively groups on the veranda, and reluctantly he followed. The voice which he had so nearly recognized sounded closer, then stopped with a curious little laugh that was loudly echoed by others.

Bessie broke in upon the lull that followed. "Excellency, may I present another man who missed his dinner?" she said saucily. "Mr. Orme."

The man addressed was sitting comfortably in a wicker chair that was several sizes too large for him. At the mention of Orme's name he got to his feet with startling alacrity.

"Mr.—Orme?" His surprise was unmistakable.

"Mr. Robert Orme," said Bessie. Some one struck a match to light a cigar, and in the sudden light Orme found himself looking into the face of the Japanese minister.

"I think I have never met you before," said the minister slowly.

"I think not," replied Orme.

He was much disquieted by the encounter. Now he understood that Arima had been bound for this very place.

If only he had refused to let Bessie drag him into her circle! The minister would not have known his face, but the mention of his name gave full enlightenment.

The minister resumed his seat, and a chair was brought for Orme. There were other introductions.

A woman's voice renewed the conversation. "Excellency, won't you tell us another of your very interesting stories?"

The minister turned to her. "I will tell you one," he said, "that you will not find in the literature of my country. It is a story of the secret service, and it came to me through my personal acquaintance with some of the participants."

"Oh, that will be splendid!" exclaimed the woman.

The minister waited for a moment. He turned his face toward Orme, and asked politely: "You will not mind listening to what I have to say, Mr. Orme?"

"Why, to be sure not," replied Orme, wondering.

"My stories are not always short," continued the minister, "as the others already know. But they sometimes hold meanings which, in my country, at least, would be perfectly plain."

After this odd bit of by-play, he began his narrative:

"There was a man who lived in the city of Takamatsu, on the island of Shikoku. His name was Kimaga, and he was much respected by all who knew him, for he was painstakingly devoted to his aged and most honorable parents. By trade he was a maker of vases—a what you call him—a potter.

"One day while Kimaga was walking upon the road, he saw before him on the ground a letter. He picked it up. It was sealed, but he discovered upon the outside a curious writing which he could not make out. In fact, Kimaga could not read at all. He was very poorly educated.

"But Kimaga was charm by the grace and beauty of the writing. Though he could not read it, it fascinated his eyes. He decided to keep it, making no attempt to find the rightful owner. You must know that in Nippon beauty is worship by the humblest workman.

"It happened that the letter had been written by a Chinese spy, and it contained a report concerning our fortifications. Now there is in Nippon a very secret service. It is not responsible to the government. It is a compose of nobles who for many and many a generation have bound themselves by a strong oath to do patriotic service which the government itself might be too embarrassed to undertake. If they are obliged to use extreme measures, and are arrested because of what they have done, they calmly accept the punishment of the law without explaining their actions. Sons of noble houses have been executed for assassinating secret enemies of Nippon, and they have met this fate as their oath demanded.

"Members of this secret service knew about this letter of the Chinese spy. They knew, also, that it had been lost, and before long they learned that Kimaga had picked it up. How they learned all this does not matter. But they also knew that the relations between Nippon and China at the time were of such a strain that their government, not wishing to give cause of war, would hesitate to punish the Chinese spy.

"In the meantime Kimaga had become so enamored of the letter that he could not bear to let it go out of his possession. When he was alone he would feast his eyes upon the beautiful writing. But it was not long before he discovered that men were watching him, and he became filled with fear. Why should he be watched? Had he done a guilty thing?"

"So greatly did the fear swell in him that he decided to take the letter back to the place where he had found it, and drop it again in the road. But when he got to the place and looked for a last time at the writing, it gave him such longing to keep it that he thrust it into his breast again and hurried back to his shop.

"That night a man came to see Kimaga.

"Are you Kimaga, the maker of vases?" he said.

"Kimaga, all trembling, replied that he was.

"Then," said the man, "I have come to you with high purpose. You have a letter which does not belong to you. Give it to me."

"Does it belong to you?" asked Kimaga, his desire putting armor on his fear.

"That is not to be asked," replied the man. "I am samurai. For the glory of Nippon you must give me the letter."

"But Kimaga did not wish to let the letter go. 'How do you know that I have it?' he said. 'You have not seen it.'"

"It is enough that I know," said the man. "Three days I allow you. If by then the letter has not been placed on the altar of the war-god, in the shrine of Samiya, then you will be assassinated."

"With that the man went away.

"Kimaga was now almost dead with fright. For the first day he did nothing but weep. The second day he put on mourning and set his affairs in order. The third day he held the letter in his hand for many hours and filled his mind with the beauty of the writing. He could not give it up. Rather would he die. And at last he placed it in a lacquer box and buried it deep at the foot of the largest cherry tree in his garden.

"He arose to go back into his house, and his head was bowed over with terror. You see, he felt that many eyes were watching him from the near-by walls, and he thought he heard breathings and the whispers of strangers. What should he do now? He dare not advance; he dare not stay where he was. So exceeding affrighted was he that he groaned aloud. From all about him came groans that answered his. Once more he groaned, and once more his ears were filled with the answers.

"Then he took one step toward his house. Nothing happened. He took another step, and his knees they shook like the palsy. The breathings and whisperings seem, oh, so much nearer now. But he muster all his strength and put out his foot for the third step. It did not reach the ground before the vengeance struck him.

"The next morning his wife found him dead. His head had been severed from his body."

The minister stopped and sat back in his chair.

"How awful!" exclaimed the woman who had asked for a story.

"Not so," said the minister affably. "In serving my country, such things must be done. Kimaga should have given the letter. Don't you think so, Mr. Orme?"

The parable was quite clear to Orme. He understood the threat.

"In America," he said, drily, "we do not worship penmanship."

"But an American might for other reasons keep a letter that did not belong to him."

"Not if he was honorable. His natural course would be to see that it was delivered to the person for whom it was intended. Certainly he would not give it to any man who could not prove his right to it."

"Would he not? But if he were told that he must die—?"

"In that case he would inform his friends of the threats against him, and they would see that his murderers were hanged. Assassination is not popular in America, excellency."

Orme did not attempt to conceal the contempt in his words, and several of the listeners moved in their chairs, betraying their embarrassment.

"Perhaps, then, Mr. Orme," said the minister, "you could favor us with a story which would show the attitude of an American in such a affair."

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DEPARTED WITH A BIG SORE SPOT ON HIS BROW

Mr. Broughton of Herman, Nebraska, who has been in the city for a few days introducing the "Ideal gas cover," departed for his home at Herman this morning. Mr. Broughton is a member of the Broughton Manufacturing Co. of Herman, where the gas cover is manufactured, and he departed from the city with a large sore spot on him, possibly brought on by lack of interest manifested by the Plattsmouth dealers in his little invention. He promised to write when he got home and we are looking for a hot communication right soon.

Mortgage Record.

The following is the number of mortgages filed and released during the month of February: Farm mortgages filed, 28, amounting to \$95,486; released, 19, amounting to \$35,340. City mortgages filed, 8, amounting to \$6,156; released, 11, amounting to \$5,400. In farm mortgages the number filed is almost double the number released.

Mr. Harry Wiles of Wabash was a visitor in the city today and was a pleasant caller at this office. Mr. Wiles has been residing on a farm near Mynard and has but recently removed to a farm near Wabash, where he expects to reside the coming year. Mr. Wiles came to this vicinity for the purpose of getting his household furniture. He was accompanied by his brother.

Mr. W. G. Meisinger and wife of Eight Mile Grove precinct were in the city today looking after some items of business at the stores.

Hears From Former Townsman. Charles Martin is in receipt of a postal picture from Tom Beveridge, a former Plattsmouth boy, who had the misfortune to lose an arm about a year ago by having same run over by a train while Tom was in Montana. He is now located at Hot Springs, Arkansas, doing well selling papers. Tom has a large number of friends in this vicinity who will be pleased to note that he is succeeding in his new business.

Mr. W. G. Meisinger and wife of Eight Mile Grove precinct were in the city today looking after some items of business at the stores.

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