



At the Turn of the Staircase She Paused.

The BRASS BOWL

PICTURES BY A. WEIL BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

"Mad" Dan Maitland, on reaching his New York hotel club, met an attractive young woman at the door. Junior O'Hagan assured him in one had been within that day. Dan discovered a woman's finger print in dust on his desk, along with a letter from his attorney, Maitland dined with Bannerman, his attorney. Dan set out for Greenfield to get his family jewels. During his walk to the country seat, he met the young woman in gray, whom he had seen leaving his bachelor's club. His auto had broken down. He fixed it. By a ruse she "lost" him Maitland, on reaching home, surprised lady in gray, cracking the safe containing his gems. She apparently took him for a well-known crook, Daniel Anstey. Half-frenzied, Maitland opened his safe, took therefrom the jewels, and gave them to her, first forming a partnership in crime. The real Dan Anstey, sought by police of the world, appeared on the same mission. Maitland overcame him. He met the girl outside the house, and they sped on to New York in her auto. He had the jewels and she promised to meet him that day. Maitland received a "Mr. Smith," introducing himself as a detective. To shield the girl in gray, Maitland, about to show him the jewels, supposedly lost, was followed by a blow from "Smith's" cane. The latter proved to be Anstey himself, and he secured the gems. Anstey, who was Maitland's double, conquered the latter. The criminal kept Maitland's engagement with the girl in gray. He gave her the gems, after falling in love with her. They were to meet and divide the loot. Maitland revived and regretted missing his engagement. He realized himself tricked by Anstey, narrowly avoided capture through mysterious tip. The girl in gray stated Maitland's absence during his absence and returned gems, being discovered on return. Maitland, without cash, called up his home and heard a woman's voice expostulating. Anstey, disguised as Maitland, told her the real identity and realizing himself tricked, tried to wriggle from her the location of the gems. Then he proposed marriage. A crash was heard at the front door. Maitland started for home. He found Anstey and the girl in his room. Again he over-estimated the crook, allowing him to escape to shield the young woman. Dan himself narrowly avoided arrest. Junior O'Hagan warned and directed the officers of the law. Hickey, a detective, duped by Anstey, refused to partake and missed on his ill-fate.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

That tilted over his eyes, one elbow on the chairback, another on the table, flabby jaws quivering as he mumbled the indispensable cigar, puffy hands clasped across his ample chest, he sat for many minutes by the side of his unheeded child, pondering, turning over and over in his mind the one idea it was capable of harboring at a time.

"He c'd've wrote that letter to himself. . . . He's wise enough. . . . Yeh can't fool Hickey all the time. . . . I'll get him yet. Gotta make good 'r it's the sidewalk 'r mine. . . . Me, tryin' hard to make an 'onest livin' . . . 'Nd him with all kinds of money!"

The fat mottled fingers sought a waistcoat pocket and fumbling therein, touched carelessly a little pellet of soft paper. Its possessor did not require to examine it to reassure himself as to its legitimacy as a work of art, nor as to the prominence of the Roman C in its embellishment of engraved arabesques.

"A century," he reflected sullenly, "one lonely little century for mine. 'Nd he had a wad like a ham . . . on him. . . . 'Nd I might've had it all for my very own if . . . His brow clouded blackly.

"Stent!" Hickey ground the epithet vindictively between his teeth. And spat. "Stent! Ah hell!"

Recalled to himself by the very vehemence of his emotion, he turned hastily, drained to its dregs the tall glass of lukewarm and rapid bear which had stood at his elbow, placed a nickel on the table, and rising, waddled hastily out into the night.

It was being borne in upon him with much force that if he wished to save his name and fame—something had got to be done about it.

"I hadn't oughtah left him so long, I guess," he told himself. "but I'll get him all right."

And turning, hummed gloomily eastward, rapt with vain imaginings, squat, swollen figure blending into the deep, meaner shadows of the Tenderloin; and so on toward Maitland's rooms—morose, misunderstood, malignant, coddling his fictitious wrongs, somehow pathetically typical of the force he represented.

On the corner of Fifth avenue he paused, startled fairly out of his dour mood by the loud echo of a name already become too hatefully familiar to his ears, and by the sight of what, at first glance, he took to be the beginning of a street brawl.

CHAPTER XIII. Fight.

In the alcove the girl waited, torn in the throes of incipient hysteria, at first too weak from reaction and revulsion of feeling to do anything other than lean heavily against the wall and fight with all her strength and will against this crawling, squalid, creeping horror of nerves, that threatened alike her self-control, her consciousness, and her reason.

But insensibly the tremor wore itself away, leaving her weary and worn but mistress of her thoughts and actions. And she dropped with gratitude into a chair, bending an ear attentive to the war of words being waged in the room beyond the portieres.

At first, however, she failed to grasp the import of the altercation. And when in time she understood its trend, it was with incredulity, resentment, and a dawning dread lest a worse thing might yet befall her, worse by far than that had gone before. But to be deprived of his protection, to feel herself forcibly restrained from the shelter of his generous care!

A moment gone she had been so sure that all would now be well with her, once Maitland succeeded in hiding himself from the police. He would shut the door—and then she would come forth and tell him, tell him everything, and, withholding naught that damned her in her own esteem, throw herself upon his mercy, bruised with penitence but serene in the assurance that he would prove kind.

She had such faith in his tender and gentle kindness now. . . . She had divined so clearly the motive that had permitted Anstey's escape in order that she might be saved, not alone from Anstey, not alone from the shame of imprisonment, but from herself as well—from herself as Maitland knew her. The burglar out of the way, by ruse, evasion, or subterfuge she would be secreted from the prying of the police, smuggled out of the house and taken to a place of safety, given a new chance to redeem herself, to clean her hands of the mire of theft, to become worthy of the womanhood that was hers.

But now—she thrust fingers-nailed cruelly into her soft palms, striving to contain herself and keep her tongue from crying aloud to those three brutal, blind men the truth; that she was guilty of the robbery, she with Anstey; that Maitland was—Maitland, a word synonymous with "man of honor."

In the beginning, indeed, all that restrained her from doing so was her knowledge that Maitland would be more pained by her sacrifice than gladdened or relieved. He was so sure of clearing himself. . . . It was inconceivable to her that there could be men so stupid and crassly unobser-

ing as to be able to compass the identity of the two men for a single instant. What though they did resemble each other in form and feature? The likeness went no deeper; below the surface, and rising through it with every word and look and gesture, lay a world-wide gulf of difference in every shade of thought, feeling, and instinct.

She herself could never again be deceived—no, never! Not for a second could she mistake the one for the other. . . . What were they saying?

The turmoil of her indignation subsided as she listened, breathlessly, to Maitland's story of his adventures; and the joy that leaped in her for his frank mendacity in suppressing every incident that involved her, was all but overpowering. She could have wept for sheer happiness; and at a later time she would; but not now, when everything depended on her maintaining the very silence of death. . . .

How dared they doubt him? The insolents! The crude brutish inaction of them! Her anger raged high again . . . and as swiftly was quenched, extinguished in a twinkling by a terror born of her excitement and a bare suggestion thrown out by Hickey.

From a distance, tomorrow morning—tonight, even—by telegraph, she could communicate with him. . . .

At this juncture O'Hagan entered with his parcel. The rustle of the paper as he brushed against the door-jamb was in itself a hint to a mind keyed to the highest pitch of excitement and seeking a way of escape from a position conceived to be perilous. In a trice the girl had turned and sped, light-footed, to the door opening on the private hall.

Here, halting for a brief reconnaissance, she determined that her plan was feasible, if hazardous. She ran the risk of encountering some one ascending the stairs from the ground floor; but if she were cautious and quick she could turn back in time. On the other hand, the men whom she most feared were thoroughly occupied with their differences, dead to all save that which was happening within the room's four walls. A certain lungy study door, tempering the light in the hall; and the broad shoulders of the caddy obstructed the remainder of the opening.

It was a chance. She poised herself on tiptoe, half undecided, and—the rustling of paper as O'Hagan opened the parcel afforded her an opportunity to escape, by drowning the noise of her movements.

For two eternal seconds she was edging stealthily down toward the outer door; then, in no time at all, found herself on the landing and confronted by a fresh complication, one unforeseen: how to leave the house without being observed, stopped, and perhaps detained until "too late?" There would be men at the door, beyond doubt; possibly police, stationed there to arrest all persons attempting to leave.

No time for weighing chances. The choice of two alternatives lay before her: either to return to the alcove or to seek safety in the darkness of the upper floor—unattended, as she had been at pains to determine. The latter seemed by far the better, the less dangerous, course to pursue. And at once she took it.

There was no light on the first-floor landing—it having presumably been extinguished by the janitor early in the evening. Only a feeble twilight obtained there, in part a reflected glow from the entrance-hall, partly thin and diffused rays escaping from Maitland's study. So it was that the first few steps upward took the girl into darkness so close and unrelieved as to seem almost palpable.

At the turn of the staircase she paused, holding the rail and resting for an instant, the while she listened, ere ascending at a more sedate pace to a haven of safety more complete in that it would be more remote from the battle-ground below.

And, resting so, was suddenly chilled through and through with fear, sheer childish dread of the intangible and unknown terrors that lurked in the blackness above her. It was as if, rendered supersensitive by strain and excitement, the quivering filaments of her subconsciousness, like spiritual tentacles feeling and feeling, had encountered and recoiled from a shape of evil, a specter of horror obscene and

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If only she dared scream! If only she dared turn and fly, back to the comfort of light and human company! . . .

There arose a tramping of feet in the hallway; and she heard Maitland's voice like a far echo, as he bade the police good night. And distant and unreachably as he seemed, the sound of his words brought her strength and some reassurance, and she grew slightly more composed. Yet, the instant that he had turned away to talk to the cabman, her fright of that unspeakable and incorporeal menace flooded her consciousness like a great wave, sweeping her—metaphorically—off her feet. And indeed, for the time, she felt as if drowning, overwhelmed in vast waters, sinking, sinking into the black abyss of syncope.

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"You will wait outside, please, until I come out or send somebody, whom you will take wherever directed. . . ."

—Speaking to the cabman, thinking of her, providing for her escape! Considerate and foresighted as always! How she could have thanked him! The warmth of gratitude that enveloped her almost unnerved her; she was put to it to restrain her impulse to rush down the stairs and . . .

But no; she must not risk the chance of relief. How could she foretell what was in his mind and heart, how probe the depths of his feeling toward her? Perhaps he would receive her protestations in skeptical spirit. Heaven knew he had cause to! Dared she . . . To be repulsed! . . .

But no. He had provided this means for flight; she would advantage herself of it, and . . . and thank him by letter. Best so; he must ever think the worst of her; she could never undo her—pride restraining and upholding her. . . .

Better so; she would go, so quickly, before he discovered her absence from the flat. . . .

And incontinently she swung about and flew down the stairs, silently, treading as lightly on the heavily-padded steps as though she had been disintegrated whirled about by the wind, altogether heedless of the creeping terror she had sensed on the upper flight, careless of all save her immediate need to reach that cab before Maitland should discover that she had escaped.

The door was just closing behind the caddy as she reached the bottom step; and she paused, considering that it were best to wait a moment, at least, lest he should be surprised at the quickness with which his employer found work for him; paused and on some mysterious impulse half turned, glancing back up the stairs.

Not a thought too soon; another instant's hesitation and she had been caught. Some one—a man—was descending; and rapidly. Maitland? Even in her brief glance she saw the white shield of a shirt bosom gleam dim against the shadows. Maitland was in evening dress. Could it be possible . . . ?

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"Changed my mind—I'm coming along, caddy," he said cheerfully. "Drive us to the St. Luke building, please and—hurry!"

"Yes!"

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"Yes!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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And her breath was smothered in her throat and her heart smote so madly against the frail walls of its cage that they seemed like to burst, while she stood transfixed, frozen in inaction, limbs stiffening, roots of her hair stirring, fingers gripping the banister rail until they pained her; and with eyes that stared wide into the black heart of nothingness, until the night seemed prickled with evanescent periods of dim fire, peopled with monstrous and terrible shadows closing about her. . . .

Yet—it was absurd! She must not yield to such puerile superstitions. There was nothing there. . . .

There was something there. . . . something that like an incarnation of hatred was stalking her. . . .

If only she dared scream! If only she dared turn and fly, back to the comfort of light and human company! . . .

There arose a tramping of feet in the hallway; and she heard Maitland's voice like a far echo, as he bade the police good night. And distant and unreachably as he seemed, the sound of his words brought her strength and some reassurance, and she grew slightly more composed. Yet, the instant that he had turned away to talk to the cabman, her fright of that unspeakable and incorporeal menace flooded her consciousness like a great wave, sweeping her—metaphorically—off her feet. And indeed, for the time, she felt as if drowning, overwhelmed in vast waters, sinking, sinking into the black abyss of syncope.

Then, as a drowning person—we're told—clutches at straws, she grasped again at the vibrations of his voice. . . .

What was he saying?

"You will wait outside, please, until I come out or send somebody, whom you will take wherever directed. . . ."

—Speaking to the cabman, thinking of her, providing for her escape! Considerate and foresighted as always! How she could have thanked him! The warmth of gratitude that enveloped her almost unnerved her; she was put to it to restrain her impulse to rush down the stairs and . . .

But no; she must not risk the chance of relief. How could she foretell what was in his mind and heart, how probe the depths of his feeling toward her? Perhaps he would receive her protestations in skeptical spirit. Heaven knew he had cause to! Dared she . . . To be repulsed! . . .

But no. He had provided this means for flight; she would advantage herself of it, and . . . and thank him by letter. Best so; he must ever think the worst of her; she could never undo her—pride restraining and upholding her. . . .

Better so; she would go, so quickly, before he discovered her absence from the flat. . . .

And incontinently she swung about and flew down the stairs, silently, treading as lightly on the heavily-padded steps as though she had been disintegrated whirled about by the wind, altogether heedless of the creeping terror she had sensed on the upper flight, careless of all save her immediate need to reach that cab before Maitland should discover that she had escaped.

The door was just closing behind the caddy as she reached the bottom step; and she paused, considering that it were best to wait a moment, at least, lest he should be surprised at the quickness with which his employer found work for him; paused and on some mysterious impulse half turned, glancing back up the stairs.

Not a thought too soon; another instant's hesitation and she had been caught. Some one—a man—was descending; and rapidly. Maitland? Even in her brief glance she saw the white shield of a shirt bosom gleam dim against the shadows. Maitland was in evening dress. Could it be possible . . . ?

No time now for conjecture, time now only for action. She sprang for the door, had it open in a trice, and before the caddy was really enthroned upon his lofty box, the girl was on the step, fair troubled face upturned to him in wild entreaty.

"Hurry! he cried, distracted. "Drive off, at once! Please—oh, please!"

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