

A MAKER OF HISTORY

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM,

Author of "The Master Mummer," "A Prince of Sinners," "Mysterious Mr. Sabin," "Anna the Adventuress," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XIII.

YOU have heard now," Duncombe said finally, "the whole history of my wanderings. I feel like a man who has been beating the air, who has been at war with unseen and irresistible forces. I never seemed to have a chance. In plain words, I have failed utterly!"

The two men were sitting in a room impossible of classification. It might have been a study, smoking room or gun room. The walls were adorned with stags' heads and various trophies of the chase. There were guns and rifles in plenty in a rack by the chimney-piece, a row of bookcases along the north wall, golf clubs, cricket bats and foils everywhere. A pile of logs ready for burning stood in the open grate, and magnificent rugs were spread about the floor. Nowhere was there the slightest trace of a woman's presence, for Duncombe had no sisters, and his was entirely a bachelor household.

Duncombe himself and Andrew Pelham were seated in great easy chairs in front of the open window. It was his first fine evening at home, and he was drinking in great drafts of the fresh, pure air, fragrant with the perfume of roses and great clusters of wallflowers. Paris had seemed to him like a great oven. All the time he had been half stifled, and yet he knew very well that at a word from Spencer he would have returned there at an hour's notice. He knew, too, that the home which he had loved all his days could never be quite the same place to him again.

Andrew roused himself from rather a prolonged silence. "You were a brick to go, George," he said. "It is more than any one else in the world would have done for me."

Duncombe laughed a little uneasily. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and refilled it slowly.

"Andrew," he said, "I don't want to seem a fraud. I daresay that I might have gone for you alone, but I didn't."

His friend smiled faintly. "Ah!" he remarked, "I had forgotten your little infatuation. It hasn't worn off yet, then?"

"No, nor any signs of it," Duncombe answered bluntly. "It's an odd position for a matter of fact person like myself, isn't it? I tell you, Andrew, I've really tried to care for some of the girls about here. The place wants a mistress, and I'm the tenth baronet in the direct line. One's got to think about these things, you know. I've tried hard, and I've never even come near it."

"It will wear off," Andrew said. "It is a very charming little fancy, a most delightful bit of sentiment, George, but with nothing behind it it can't last."

"Perhaps not," Duncombe answered quietly. "All that I know is that it has shown no signs of wearing off up to now. It was in Paris exactly as it is here. And I know very well that if I thought it would do her the least bit of good I would start back to Paris or to the end of the world tonight."

"I must readjust my views of you, George," his friend said, with mild satire. "I always looked upon you as fair game for the Norfolk dowagers with their broods of daughters, but I never contemplated your fixing your affections upon a little piece of paste-board."

"Rot! It is the girl herself," Duncombe declared.

"But you have never seen her." Duncombe shrugged his shoulders. He said nothing. What was the use? Never seen her! Had she not found her way into every beautiful place his life had knowledge of?

"If you had," Andrew murmured. "Ah, well, the picture is like her! I remember when she was a child. She was always fascinating, always delightful to watch."

Duncombe looked out upon the gardens which he loved and sighed.

"If only Spencer would send for me to go back to Paris," he said, with a sigh.

Andrew turned his head.

"You can imagine now," he said, "what I have been suffering. The desire for action sometimes is almost maddening. I think that the man who sits and waits has the hardest task."

They were silent for some time, smoking steadily. Then Duncombe reverted once more to his wanderings.

"You remember the story they told me at the cafe, Andrew," he said. "It was a lie, of course, but was Miss Poynton anything of an artist?"

"To the best of my belief," Andrew answered, "she has never touched a brush or pencil since she left school."

Duncombe looked out into the gathering twilight.

"It is a devil's riddle, this!" he said slowly. "Why did she go to that place at all?"

"God only knows!" Andrew murmured.

Duncombe's teeth were hard set. A paper knife which he had caught up from the table snapped in his fingers. There was something in his throat which nearly choked him.

"Phyllis Poynton," Andrew continued, "was as sweet and pure a woman as ever breathed. She must have loathed that place. She could only have gone there to seek for her brother or—"

"Or for whom?"

"For those who knew where he was," Duncombe turned his head.

"Andrew?"

"Yes, old chap!"

"Let me look at her photograph again."

Andrew drew it from his pocket and passed it over. Duncombe studied it for several moments under the lamp-light.

"You are right, Andrew," he said slowly. "For her the other things would not be possible. I wonder—"

His fingers clung to the photograph. He looked across at his friend. There was a slight flush in his face. He spoke nervously.

"Andrew," he said, "I'm afraid it sounds a bit brutal, but—this photograph is no use to you just now, is it, until your eyes get better. Will you lend it to me?"

"I couldn't," Andrew answered quietly. "I can't see it now, of course, but I like to feel it in my pocket, and it will be the first thing I shall look at when the doctor lets me take off these beastly glasses—if ever he does. Until then—well, I like to feel I've got it. That's all!"

They both smoked furiously for several moments without looking at one another. Duncombe spoke first.

"Andrew?"

"Well."

"If she comes back, shall you ever ask her to marry you?"

"I don't know, George. I'm poor, and I'm twelve years older than she is. I don't know."

There was another silence. Then the conversation drifted back once more to the one subject which was monopolizing the thoughts of both of them.

"I tell you what seems to me to be the most extraordinary part of the whole business," Duncombe said. "First, the brother disappears. Then, without a word to any one, the sister also rushes off to Paris and vanishes from the face of the earth after a series of extraordinary proceedings. One supposes naturally that if they have come to harm anywhere—if there has been a crime—there must have been a motive. What is it? You say that their banking account has been undisturbed?"

"It was last week. I should hear if any checks were presented."

"And the boy's letter of credit even has never been drawn upon?"

"No; not since he left Vienna."

"Then the motive cannot be robbery. Thank heaven," Duncombe added, with a little shudder, "that it was the boy who went first."

"Don't!"

A great winged insect came buzzing into the room. Duncombe struck viciously at it with the palm of his hand.

"Lord," he muttered, "what a fool I am! I've never been away from home before, Andrew, without longing to get back, and here I am just back from Paris in August, from turning night into day, from living just the sort of life I hate, and I'd give anything to be going back there tomorrow. I'm a haunted man, Andrew. I got up last night simply because I couldn't sleep and walked down as far as the paddock. I seemed to see her face in all the shadowy corners, to see her moving toward me from among the trees. And I'm not an imaginative person, Andrew, and I've got no nerves. Look!"

He held out his hand, strong and firm and brown. It was as steady as a rock.

"I can't sleep," he continued. "I can't rest. Is there witchcraft in this thing, Andrew?"

Andrew Pelham laughed shortly. It was a laugh which had no kinship to mirth.

"And I," he said, "have seen her grow up. We were boy and girl together. I stole apples for her. I have watched her grow from girlhood into womanhood. I have known flesh and blood, and you a cardboard image. I,

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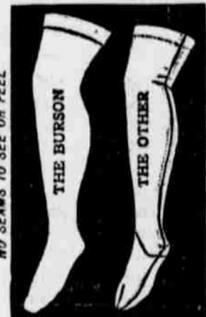
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