

Matrimonial Adventures

Birth Stones

BY George Kibbe Turner

Author of "The Taskmasters," "Memories of a Doctor," "The Last Christian," "Hagar's Hoard," "White Shoulders," etc.

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GEORGE KIBBE TURNER

George Kibbe Turner started his literary career when he first came out of college. He joined the staff of the Springfield Republican at a very modest salary. His next step was to the Black Cat, in that day a thin little magazine which printed surprisingly interesting stories.

Then one day, as the phrase is, but quite different in fact, Mr. Turner wrote a novel for McClure's Magazine. It had a New England setting, and a political angle, and it received wide and important comment.

Thereafter for nine years Mr. Turner was one of the literary staff of McClure's Magazine and he wrote both articles and fiction on a great variety of subjects.

Mr. Turner is the author of many books, short stories and articles, but "Hagar's Hoard," a story of the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Tenn., filled with fact and dramatic incident, and "White Shoulders" are guaranteed to keep Mr. Turner conspicuously to the front in our literature.

In the story that follows, written for the Star Author Series of Matrimonial Adventures, the husband is drawn as only a man keen in understanding of men could picture him. The side of marriage that Mr. Turner presents in "Birth Stones" is novel and at the same time universally appealing.

MARY STEWART CUTTING, JR.

These jewel brokers are all over the city—in Maiden Lane, on the Bowery, up around Fifth avenue—all kinds, for all kinds of business—buying or selling. They're a wise crowd. They have to be. They get some dangerous propositions put up to them—and some wild ones, particularly in hard times.

They had some extra wild ones in that financial cave-in after the war—especially the Fifth avenue ones. Half the upper West side was fighting to drive the wolf from the new limousine door.

It was a year ago last March—at the worst of it—when this one I'm telling you of drifted into Harry Volpe's place on Fifth avenue—in the late afternoon. Volpe was alone in the office, staring down out of his second-story window on the two streams of automobile tops on the avenue.

"You the proprietor?" asked this stranger back of him at the entrance—a big, red-faced husky, with big shoulders and a small nose and a red necktie. Volpe figured him right away then as some sort of a contractor.

"Sure," he said, coming over, dusting his hands. "What'll you have?" "My name's Coogan—Dan Coogan," said the big man, introducing himself. "Glad to know you," said Harry Volpe, sizing him up. "What can I do for you?"

"What would you say this was worth?" said the stranger, reaching in and dragging out a big diamond necklace that seemed to be lying loose, without any case, in the right-hand lower pocket of his coat.

"What you paid for it—or what you could realize?" Volpe asked him, still sizing him up—the way you have to in that business. And went over it with his glass and told him what he might probably get—if he got a buyer.

"But you'd have hard work finding one just now for anything as big as that. I know I wouldn't buy it—not now!"

"You couldn't—not if you wanted to!" said the other man. "I wouldn't sell it for all the money in Wall street."

And he looked as if he meant it. "But here's the thing I want to know," he said. "Could you pull out enough stones from this to stand for a pledge for a ten thousand-dollar loan?"

"Why yes—probably," said Volpe. "Though we don't generally want to handle unset stones. Because—you know!"

"They're apt to be stolen, huh? Is that it?" said the big man. "Yeah. They break them up out of their settings, so they can't be identified."

"But you've got your setting here." "I wasn't talking about this," said Volpe. "I was just telling you."

"Well, about how many would you say?" the customer asked him. "And he told him about a third of them."

"Now the next thing," said the man, satisfied apparently. "Is—could you take this; could you take that amount of stones out of their settings, and put back substitutes in their place—good ones, so they wouldn't be noticed?"

"Why yes—probably. If I had the time."

"Now then another thing," he said, fixing his little blue-gray eyes on him—as if this was important. "How long would be the shortest time you could do it in—if you had everything all ready and waiting to do it with? Take these out of their settings and put

the phoney ones in? Could you do it in a day?"

"I might," said Volpe, looking them over, seeing they were a good standard cut.

"What'll it cost—the whole thing? Ten thousand for three months?" asked the man, his eyes boring in still.

And Volpe figured out a good thing on it—and told him what he'd do. "But now it's understood," said the man—"you'll have to have it all done in a day—when I bring it in!"

"Why—what's the great hurry?" asked Volpe, looking at him, starting wondering a little then.

"It's my wife. She'll want to wear them. You know how women are!" Volpe nodded. He knew some things about the women—and their freaks and whims. You do, handling jewelry.

"And don't call me up at the apartment, either. I'll bring them in some day soon—I can't be sure just when. But I don't want you calling up my wife. You know how women are—about such things!" he said again, looking nervous—Volpe noticed at the time.

He noticed that. You keep your eyes open in that business and the deal was queer on the face of it. But it was no queerer than others he'd had.

And of course, if anything suspicious came up when he came in again, that next week, Volpe would be right there watching—before any money passed.

But next week when the big man showed up again with his big necklace in his pocket, to get his money and have the substitution made, Volpe was surer than ever of the thing—for one reason from the way he acted about the stones that were coming out to lie there as a pledge for the ten thousand.

"You'll have them all here—the identical same ones—when I come after them?" he asked—looking red and anxious. "There's no danger they'll get mixed up any way?"

"Not a danger," Volpe told him. "For it would mean something to me—if there was a mix-up on this—" he said. "They're our luck."

"Lucky stones, huh?" said Volpe, and smiled to himself when he had gone—surer than ever about the thing—though curious naturally on what it was all about.

About two weeks afterward the man showed up again and wanted another ten thousand on another third of the stones.

That was different. "I thought you said ten thousand was all you'd need," said Volpe studying him, thinking fast.

"I thought it was myself. And it will be this time. But you know how the contracting business is—especially now. Up and down. Mostly down! But it will be all right this time—I can promise you that."

"I guess you can when you get it!" said Volpe to himself—getting under way behind that soft, sweet jewelry salesman's smile.

"Have you got them with you?" he asked him, smiling.

"No," said the other man getting red—and bringing in a new idea now. "And I've got to get you to do something else this time. I've got to have you make that next substitution of stones for me—some night."

"Some night?" said Volpe after him. "Yes," he said, getting redder still. "You know how women are—when they get an idea in their head."

"What's this?" said Volpe to himself, with a sudden sinking spell—wondering what it was he had run into.

"All right," he said aloud—smiling more sweetly than ever. "Bring them in."

"What night?" asked Volpe, more and more polite.

"I'll call you up—this evening—just before six o'clock, and tell you," he said. "I might be able to get in tonight. I hope so."

"How'd he strike you?" Volpe asked his stenographer. She was about as wise as he was, seeing them coming in and going out.

"He's like the rest of them—all over the lot like the dandelions. He's got something on his mind all right. But he's straight enough, I'll say. He's too thick to be anything else."

"Will he be back again?" Volpe asked her.

"He sure will. The battle fleet couldn't chase him away. He's got to have that money. Right now?"

Volpe thought the same. And the man still looked honest to him, somehow.

"But why at night?" he said to himself, when the girl was gone. "And why this stall about the woman—wanting to have them? Does she wear them at breakfast?"

He sat and flipped away a lot of cigarettes out the front window into the avenue—looking down, thinking, as the lights came on—waiting for six o'clock.

made him give up where it had come from—get some reward in advance for turning up a sixty or seventy thousand-dollar gem robbery.

He was all up in the air on the thing—and it was getting every minute nearer six o'clock. He was just about to take up the telephone and call the detective bureau when the bell rang—just before six—and this Coogan's voice came, saying he'd be down around nine o'clock—as nearly as he could—and to have everything ready.

"I'll have everything ready, don't fret!" said Volpe—which he did—down to the detective from police headquarters that he planted in the next room.

"You'll find probably he's a bad one," said the detective, "most likely."

"He don't look so," said Volpe, "at that. And we can't afford to force things—not till we know."

"I know."

"And he's a big husky brute, you want to take that into consideration."

"Well, he don't want to get too gay," said this McConnell—this detective from the headquarter's squad, who was quite heavy around the shoulders himself.

And just then the elevator door clacked and their man's step came echoing down the hallway to the door.

He came in a hurry—still looking anxious and excited, wiping off his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Well, I'm here," he said to Volpe, as if he'd had a hard time getting there.

Volpe looked at him again—anxious about him, always, when he was out of sight; and puzzled more, when he showed up again. He didn't look like a jewelry thief—anything but! And yet you can't tell—some of the best of them are that way. Innocence is their stock in trade.

"Got it with you?" asked Volpe—and got the thing in his hands again. It was all the same as he had left it—the same fake stones among the real—the same odd setting—everything!

"Now, I tell you," said Volpe, starting after it. "I haven't had time to get that ten thousand yet. It was too late when I got around to the bank."

"You can give me your check for it," said the man gazing at him, "can't you?"

"I might, yes," he answered, working along. "Only my balance won't let me—not just now. I'll have to go and get the money myself—tomorrow, maybe."

"Tomorrow! Maybe!" said Coogan after him, his voice rising.

"And besides," said Volpe, "there's another thing come up. My workman didn't show up that I counted on coming to do the resetting for me."

"Didn't show up?" said the big man, looking ugly now.

"So I can't pull the thing off for you tonight."

"Not tonight!" said the man. "I've got to have it tonight! That's all!"

"Say, listen," said Volpe next. "What's the hurry in this thing?"

"I've got to have the money, right off—that's what—in my business! Or I go broke. Right now. Tomorrow?"

"I understand," said Volpe. "That's all right. That's easy on that necklace, if everything is the way it looks on the surface. But what I mean is—what's the hurry about this work of mine on the necklace? Why must I have it back always on the minute?"

And he got no answer.

"In other words," said Volpe, coming stronger, "what's the idea of your sliding in here by night with this thing, and having it to take away with you in the morning?"

"It's my wife," said the big man finally.

"Your wife?"

"I wouldn't have her know about this—now—not for the world!"

"What is it—hers, and not yours?" said Volpe.

"No. It's mine. That is, I paid for it, and gave it to her!"

explanation you beat him over the head and start taking it away from him—to run off with. What's the idea?"

The big man looked up at him, with his little eyes red like a cornered bull's, and said nothing in answer.

"Now listen," said McConnell, the detective. "You can do one of two things. It's up to you. You can show us—take us around to your wife now, at home. Or you can come with me, and have her give her explanation—to headquarters!"

And the big fellow gave a groan, too loud, almost, to be natural.

"I won't. I can't," he said. "It might kill her. She don't know anything about this. She thinks we're on the top of the world yet—instead of just scraping bankruptcy!"

"There's others," said the detective, watching him, "that have had to hear it before!"

"Not the way she is," said the man, who had introduced himself as Coogan, and went on and told them how it was with her.

"I can't have her know," he said. "I won't. Not till she's—over it!"

"At that," said McConnell, giving Volpe a look again, "there's other women have gone through with it without being millionaires!"

"I know," he came back, "but it's the sudden bump, coming just now—when she's been thinking up to date everything is going wonderful for us. And then all at once a fall from the top of the world! I can't have it—not now. You know yourself how women are—on luxury, and all that! How much more it means to them—and all that."

"And then you've got to remember—another thing," he said, going on when nobody answered—arguing, with the sweat pouring down his face. "You know how it is with the first one! They're scared to death, afraid they'll die!"

"What does the doctor say?" asked McConnell, the detective.

"He don't see it—quite so bad as she does. But he admits himself we've got to be careful. Help all we can! You see—you see how I'm fixed," he said, arguing. "I wouldn't take a chance with that little girl—for the world!"

And then he stopped for a minute.

"But where do the diamonds come in?" McConnell, the detective, asked him. "The necklace?"

"That's our luck, she claims."

"Your luck?"

"Our lucky stones! You know how women are—about things like that! Superstitious—all of them. I never knew one that wasn't yet. And especially now—now—at times like this. And then her father was a sporting man—too. A kind of a high-class sporting man."

"I see," said McConnell, keeping his face still. "And so?"

"So you see, don't you? You know how women are—over anniversaries and all that. Diamonds were her birthstone. So naturally I gave her diamonds. When I was way up! I gave her this—this necklace. Just to show her—and the rest of the world—how she stood with me. You know how women are—how they're got to show the neighbors—the other women—if things are going right—if you're prosperous. And what their husbands think of them!"

"And there is another turn to it—that she worked out in her head, besides—what it meant to her—good luck—and all that!"

"And that was?" said McConnell.

"That was that I was born in April, too."

"April?"

"You know. Diamonds are the birthstone for April."

"No," said McConnell, the detective. "I guess they forgot to tell me about that."

"And then again," he was going along. "You know. Next month! That'll be April, too."

"I get you," said the detective, giving Volpe another look.

"So there's three times it's said to be our lucky stone. You know the way they figure—the women—on things like that!"

And the detective and Volpe swapped looks again.

"So that's how it is about the necklace. It's her mascot. She's got to have it with her all the time now. From now on especially! That's why I've had to come sneaking in here, when I saw the chance."

"You'll kill her," he hollers

"That's all."

"Probably I will," said McConnell, the detective, looking at Volpe. "I there's anybody there to kill!"

But the big man took no notice of that crack.

"And if you do—if you hurt her any way," he went on, "if you harm her any way, I'll get you—I'll smash you some day, if I spend my life at it!"

"Come on," said McConnell, the detective. "Don't start getting careless again. You're not fixed right to get rough. It's up to you. You can start a war, or we can all stroll over like friends."

"But she's in bed, with a headache."

"She'll have to get up then," said McConnell, the detective.

And finally he gave up, and the three went over—on the bus to River-side—and up into the apartment—all parties watching their step, not knowing just what was coming.

It was all right so far. It was his place all right—and he had it fixed up in style, too—servants and all that!

"Tell your mistress I've got to have her come out. Dress and come out—and see a couple of friends," he said to the maid—almost choking over the last word.

For McConnell, the detective, wouldn't listen, naturally, to his going in to seeing her alone—to frame up any story between them.

And finally, after some talk, she came out—all silk and ribbons—one of those light-hearted, henna-haired ones, that roll their own. But her eyes kind of scared at that.

"Oh Dan," she said, "what is it? Is anything wrong?"

"No, Hon," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "No. Just some friends," he said, choking on the word again. "All it is, I want you to just tell them about your necklace."

"But what—what—" she said, chasing her big brown eyes from one to the other.

"It's all right, Hon," said the big fellow, enjoining her—and looking over at the other two with red murder in his eyes. "You go ahead—and I'll explain to you later."

So she told them finally about the necklace—and showed them the bill of sale, and the check she'd paid for it. Her check—he'd given her the money!

And they saw finally—they were in wrong.

She stood facing them—looking like a frightened kid.

"But who are you?" she wanted to know.

And her husband told her—looking first-degree murder at them while he talked, for she acted now as if she was going to pieces. And they were afraid they'd got in a mess—especially McConnell, the detective.

And suddenly she broke down—seemed to—throwing her arms around the big man's neck.

"Don't, Honey," said the big contractor, patting her with his big fingers. "We'll be all right. We'll make it all back again."

"Sure," said Volpe, stepping forward, with the necklace in his hand—trying to fix it up with them. "And if he wants the money—the extra ten thousand—it will be all right!"

And she didn't say anything, but just buried her head deeper in the big boy's shoulders—and murder burning redder and redder in his eyes as he looked at them and patted her.

"And if you want it—the necklace—to use—to wear any time!" said Volpe, holding it toward her, like candy to a kid, "you can have it! We can fix it up—all right—if you want to wear it as your mascot!"

He held it up to her—and touched her and she pushed it away.

"I don't want it!" she said. "Take it away! I wouldn't wear the darn thing on a bet!"

And all the three stood waiting for her.

"Don't cry," said the big man, like somebody talking to some young kid. "Don't cry. It's all right."

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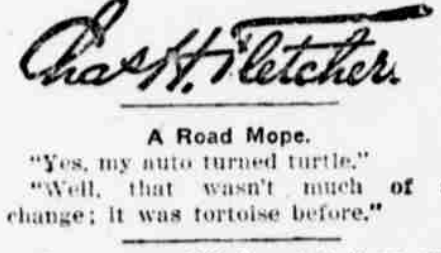
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