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The \$10,000 Beauty



By Henry Kitchell Webster

*She Built Her House Upon the Sands,
And Lo, the Freakish Winds of
Fortune Blew It Over Onto
The Solid Rock!*

WHEN Zachary Taylor is in his stride, as he was the other evening, he makes me suspect that I've missed my vocation. Why should a man to whom stories come as hard as they do to me make a profession of writing them when there are large persons like Zachary out of whom they exude as easily as perspiration on a warm night?

Enviously I wondered at him as he sat cross-legged upon his feet in the biggest leather chair the club possessed, the light from a reading lamp reflecting brightly from the extension of his forehead that goes right on over the top of his head, his humorous eyes gleaming up at me every little while and then, when he had seen what he wanted, glancing down along his straight thin nose; one plump but finely educated hand resting upon each of his plump but surprisingly limber knees. Have I conveyed to you the picture? Imagine an amiable little Buddha off duty and feeling gossipy and you'll have it—while he told me the tale of the \$10,000 prize beauty.

That cross-legged attitude of his always strikes strangers as rather incredible for one of his build, but it must be easy for him. He had adopted it professionally long before I knew him, and it is as invariable with him, when he is at work taking pictures, as it is with a tailor. He sits on the floor in front of the camera, his head cutting off the lens, and looks at you, one eye dropped shut, as a rule, as if he were too lazy to hold it open.

Meanwhile he talks, amusingly, seriously, personally, remotely—effortlessly, anyhow, and with no more than a quarter of his mind, for the rest of it is alert all the while as a cat getting ready to jump. Whenever he sees about you a look he likes he wags his head a little to one side and presses a bulb. A Chinese assistant sits behind the camera—behind a screen, too, if it's portrait work—and as often as he hears the shutter click, whips out the old plate and slides a new one in. Zachary's a prince of photographers, quite the top of his profession out in these parts—I don't believe he has more than three peers in the whole country—and what with his card index memory and the double life he leads professionally, he knows an amazing number of people of an astonishingly wide variety of sorts.

There's nothing furtive, I pause to say, about the duplicity of his professional character. He glories in it rather than otherwise, but since the secret keeps itself so well he grins and lets it ride.

It's like this: If you are a debutante or a dowager or a visiting celebrity or a man whose wife insists on your getting a really good picture taken before you grow any baldier, you go up to one of the top floors of the Boulevard building and ring a bell at a door which has Zachary done on it in imitation of his signature (it's a marvel of decorative and insolent illegibility, that signature; I wish I could reproduce it for you) and are ushered in (ceremoniously by a smart little page boy—I think he's a boy—in bell buttons) to the presence of Queen Guenevere, who receives you graciously nevertheless, rising from a Louis XV fauteuil and coming to meet you as if you were a caller. As soon as she has learned why you have come she sets about trying, in a very feminine way, to ascertain, from a little morocco-bound book on a boudoir desk, at what hour and on what day it will be possible for Zachary to take you on. He never makes any appointments, you learn, earlier than 11:30 nor later than 3.

But if, at 9 in the morning of the day after your portrait had been made you were to visit the atelier on the north side where the sign reads: Taylor, Commercial Photography, to see about getting a picture made of a girl with the most beautiful teeth imaginable brushing them—or about to brush them—in the interest of telling the world that the new tooth paste you were manufacturing was the best of all possible tooth pastes, and Zachary himself, smockless, sleeveless, and 100 per cent United States, came in from the studio to talk with you about it, he wouldn't betray, nor would he feel, the least embarrassment.

He'd be, on the contrary, delighted to show you over the plant; he'd let you, if you liked, sit down and watch him make a picture of a smart young man and a beautiful young lady in earnest conversation about the perfection of their respective hose—not a hole nor a darn in sight—and unless he were already committed to some other tooth paste he'd enthusiastically agree to devote himself to yours.

And you can see, can't you—this is what I started getting at a while ago—what an extraordinary number of kinds of people he rubs up against in the course of a day's work. Not just casually and momentarily, yet not too purposefully, either. That is to say, they haven't come to him to borrow money nor to talk with him about a divorce they want him to get them, nor to tell him about their indigestion or their nerves. There's nothing much on their minds that he's supposed to be involved in, and yet they have to stick around for an hour, perhaps, at a time. At least this was how he had it doped out.

"O, it's a good strategic position," I conceded. "But opportunity only half accounts for anything. You must have some sort of tactics for anything. You must have some sort of tactics to get them going about their lovers and their livers and all the rest of it. You must do something to them. It's the strange power of the human eye."

"Like mad it is!" he retorted. "No, it's just as Shaw said somewhere. If people have anything on their chests they have to be kept from telling it. Take the pressure off and they'll boil just the way water does on top of Mount McKinley before it's got warm enough to cook eggs. Glory! Don't I know. Why, a fellow confessed a murder

to me once while I was doing a portrait of him. Total stranger. Paid in advance. No address. Going to call for the proofs the next day. Told me all the gory details. Well, of course, you can say that he was a nut and nuts don't count. But take Rosemary Brown. She was a perfectly nice little regular girl. She never told her story to the reporters, who tried their damndest to get out of her. But she told it to me, just because I didn't. Got me mixed up in it, too."

"Wait a minute," I pleaded. "What did you do about the murderer?"

"What could I do? If I were one of your infernal heroes I suppose I'd have knocked him down and sat on him and telephoned for the police. But since he was twice as big as I am and most likely carried a gun, I told him to come back the next afternoon at 4 o'clock for his proofs. Luckily, he confessed again that same night to a man who happened to be sitting beside him in the lobby of his hotel. He told the house detective and they went and got him

o'-War." Having thus reduced me to speechlessness, he added the revolting details. "I'd made some pictures of him last summer when he was racing at Sheephead bay. I thought she'd look well on him, so I had them buy her a habit on State street, mounted a saddle on a sawhorse, stuck her up on it, and shot her. Grafted her on to him and the pair of them into a woodland scene out in Lincoln park. She'd never had a horse to ride in her life except some broken down farm scrub."

"I take it then," I said, forbearing to rebuke this shameless example of professional malpractice, since I perceived he was hoping to get a rise out of me, "I take it then that her story as the paper printed it was just about as phony as that photograph."

"O, I wouldn't call it phony exactly," he remonstrated. "Neither was the photograph, for that matter. It was a real picture of her and Man-o'-War and of Lincoln park, only the three of them never happened to get together. And it was the same way more or less with the story. She's an orphan, all right, and a ward in chancery. There's a lawsuit and a real family feud. She's got two guardians, brother and sister. They're her uncle and her aunt and they hate each other like poison. Never speak to each other. She used to live half a year with one and half with the other. But the fortune that made such an impression on you runs to about \$400 a year."

"The uncle has a small farm—80 acres or so—a few miles out of town, but he doesn't do much with it. He gets a few hundred a year out of the estate and he thinks when the litigation is settled up, if it ever is, that he'll get several thousand. He's got a wife and two or three sons, and they are all poor as poverty, of course, a down-at-the-heels, shiftless lot."

"The aunt lives all by herself in a four-room cottage in town. She's a ferociously pious old maid, tight as the bark on a tree, clean and saving and respectable. Both of them liked to board and clothe the girl because they made money out of it on the court allowance. It couldn't have meant a hundred a year to either of them, but even that was worth fighting for, and they liked to fight anyway."

"Rosemary said she never cared which of the two she lived with. The uncle was kind and easy going most of the time, and he only got drunk four times a year, when he got the money from the estate. The aunt was cross all the time. But she lived in town and could be evaded more or less. And then no matter how mad she was she never took a trunk strap to Rosemary, as the uncle, it seems, did once in a while. Well, that's the romantic Kentucky blue grass background to the tale."

"The girl, whichever relative she lived with, was a wretched little drudge, in faded calico and darned cotton and run-over shoes; starved of everything but food. But about 12 or so she began to grow pretty, and it wasn't long before she knew it."

"She made friends with a girl who lived not far from her aunt's in town. Amy Belle she calls her. She's never told me her last name. Must be quite a person. Homely, Rosemary says, as a cow's hock, and has always adored Rosemary for her looks. Full of romances, with Rosemary for heroine. Brought up on the movies which Rosemary wasn't allowed by her pious aunt to go."

"Well, according to Amy Belle, Rosemary had a star, a destiny. The lawsuit was going to take a turn that would make her an heiress. They have struck oil down there, you know, so there was a faint color of possibility about that. Or a rich young man was going to fall in love with her. Something luscious of that sort. And what Rosemary must do was be ready for the opportunity when it came."

"That's about all the ingredients down to last April, when Amy Belle one day happened upon a Chicago newspaper with the announcement of this \$10,000 prize beauty contest. If it had been \$10,000,000 it wouldn't have looked any bigger to Amy Belle. She thought of Rosemary and she said to herself that this was it—Cinderella's invitation to the prince's ball, don't you see?"

"Rosemary was four miles out in the country. Her spell with her uncle had a couple of weeks more to run. But Amy Belle couldn't wait—not even a day. She started out afoot for the farm with that torn out page of the newspaper tucked inside her blouse. She didn't have much luck on the road getting lifts and she ran part of the way, and she simply stampeded Rosemary coming down on her like that, with hardly any breath left in her body over the urgency of the thing. It was like that runner coming in from Marathon—only he dropped dead, didn't he? And Amy Belle didn't quite do that."

"But there was this much to pile it up; to make it seem, I mean, like a special interposition of fate or Providence, or whatever you like. Amy Belle without knowing it had picked the right day—one of the four days in the year when Rosemary's uncle went to town to get his interest and acquire a skinful of liquor."

"I want to be sure," here Zachary interrupted his tale to say earnestly, "that you really understand the situation. I didn't, at first, when the girl told it to me. All that entering Rosemary in that beauty contest involved, or seemed to involve. It involved a powerful interposition on somebody's part. Somebody, voluntarily or involuntarily must step up for the role of Cinderella's fairy godmother. She'd never in her life had her picture taken. Never would, in the natural course of things. The \$8 or \$10 that it would cost was as far out of the reach of either of those girls as the moon."

"And even if a photographer could have been persuaded to do it on spec that would have been only the beginning of it. The notion that Rosemary would have had as good a chance for the prize if she were photographed in a pinafore or a chemise as in a ball dress would have struck both the girls as simply grotesque. You couldn't have your picture taken at all, let alone for a metropolitan competition of this sort, unless you were dressed up to within an inch of your life. Rosemary had literally nothing that was



She counted out \$40 and put the rest back.

after he'd gone to bed. Thousand dollars reward that fellow got. Well, I didn't want it."

I wanted to be told about the crime, gory details and all. But Zachary wouldn't accommodate me. It was just an ordinary murder, he said. "But this story of Rosemary Brown's—"

I acquiesced. "All right, since she's on your mind. Tell me about her. What is she? A movie actress, or a commercial model? She sounds like one or the other."

"You don't mean to say you've forgotten all about her?" he exclaimed.

I admitted that there was something faintly familiar about her name. "That's probably why I guessed that she might have been a movie actress."

"So passes the glory of the world!" he commented solemnly. "She was quite some little celebrity six months ago. She's the girl who won the \$10,000 prize in that beauty contest."

At that I recalled her easily enough. "The blue grass belle!" I cried. "Came from Bowling Green or thereabouts, didn't she? But my impression was that she did tell her story to the reporters. Anyhow, I read a lot about it in the papers. She was a ward in chancery; fortune all tied up in some prehistoric lawsuit. Real Kentucky color—a feud and so on. I know it struck me as another illustration of the possibility of turning up a romance, by pure accident, in real life."

I broke off at this point to ask Zachary whether he had just said anything.

"Not a word!" he told me sardonically. "Rave on!"

"Well," I maintained, looking as dashed as possible to encourage him, "she was a raving beauty, anyhow. I suppose those portraits you took of her may have been faked all up till her own guardian wouldn't have known her, but there was one honest-to-God picture—an enlarged snapshot most likely—of her on horseback that was lovely. Mounted on her favorite thoroughbred, the caption was, and you could see that she was a horsewoman. The horse was a beauty, too."

"He ought to be," Zachary observed. "That was Man-