

Follies of the Passing Show

Not Like George Washington

By Hanlon

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Nailed to the Ground

PROF. FRANCIS CABOT CALE, Ph. D., D. L., slushed his way resignedly along the waterlogged gravel walk which led to his unpretentious bungalow. For the dozenth time since leaving the office of the registrar that evening he congratulated himself that he had asked the Rev. Dr. Sebastian Lodge out to spend the night and that the reverend doctor had refused to come.

"It is certainly no night to try to sell a man suburban real estate," he said to himself, shifting the five pounds of tea and the 10 of lard, which he had purchased during a hurried noon hour, to his other arm.

"No, I would never persuade Sebastian to buy that bungalow tonight," he added conclusively, catching himself in the nick of time to prevent a plucked headforemost in the ditch. His small hands clutched determinedly at his tea and lard. The January thaw which had followed a zero spell of snow and ice had made walking a precarious pastime. Already it was threatening to inundate the whole of Garden Bloom, having so far unsettled three chicken houses, one garage, and flooded three-fourths of the cellars of Garden Bloom's worried but dauntless dwellers.

No, it was not a night for prospective buyers of suburban real estate. Francis Cable, accustomed to looking faces in the face as a classical student and a natural horn footballer, realized that everything was wrong from a selling standpoint. Such a conjunctive combination of circumstances, he groaned, could happen to no one in the world but an unfortunate commuter whose star was not in the ascendant.

In the first place, the train had taken 59 minutes to make the trip instead of the usual 27 the time cards boasted. It had poked interminably with that provoking disregard of passing time which every commuter knows never happens unless some city dwelling friend is sitting in the same seat with that "I'm mighty glad I don't make this trip every night" expression.

Then, too, all of the lights in the small suburb were out. The streets and walks and country were immersed in Cimmerian gloom. According to the almanac this was a moonlight night, and the general electric company of Du Robey county was pledged to furnish no light on these occasions. That nature had chosen to hide her moon behind impenetrable clouds of Stygian blackness was admittedly no fault of the electric concern in question.

"I think I will telephone Sebastian the first thing in the morning and have him postpone his visit till the week-end. The weather may have cleared up by then and some of the water dried out of the cellars."

It was not so much that Francis Cable craved Sebastian for steady that year round or desired him to live in the neighboring bungalow for purposes of companionship and sociability. Sebastian was too slow of movement mentally and physically to please Francis. But Francis Cable needed the commission he could get for selling Sebastian that bungalow. Ten percent of the purchase price. He needed the money as desperately as any man on small salaries with rapidly increasing families and a fondness for possessions of their own can need an extra few hundred at the beginning of a new year.

To be sure, Francis would much have preferred Sebastian's brother, Trevor. But then Trevor would never settle down. Trevor had the wanderlust in his soul. He'd be spent most of the afternoon in Francis Cable's office describing the glories and delights of the orient, at times he was striking out shortly. It was the same thing which he and Trevor had taken together five years before.

Francis Cable pulled himself up straight, shunning Trevor from his mind. He had come to sight of his own bungalow now and a frigid shiver between his toes reached across. It would seem from the glare of illumination that some sort of a creature was being held in his hands, and that every house of Sebastian's town gazed to enter had been consumed by the same fire.

"Lola must have been having one of her nervous spells and thought she lost a hand," he thought with a sinking heart.

He could assume that all these lights had been burning as cheerily and as recklessly for several hours. Lola's fear of the country was an emotion she never let die from lack of proper cultivation. She treasured the conviction that like the ill-fated three hundred of immortal fame, she ought to lay to the right of her, to the left of her. Nor could any number of concise homilies on the part of Francis to the effect that in most instances robbers choose their points of attack with a view to possible treasures they might obtain averse her viewpoint. His words fell on arid stretches of intention.

"Francis Cable, you make me tired with your foolishness," she would drawl. "Haven't I awakened up all alone in the night at home and seen a man climb right in the window?"

It was conclusive, this fact, and brought out freshly each time served its purpose excellently. It stopped the flow of Francis' ordered speech and established anew Lola's prerogative to be afraid.

On reaching the house Francis Cable deliberated whether he had better attempt jumping the pools of water, their actual depths undetermined, which lay in front of the house, or whether he should not try wading around to the rear. If it had been his mother's house back in Massachusetts there would not have been a minute's hesitation. The waters of the Atlantic would hardly have proved sufficient reason for coming in the front way on such a night as this and exposing the revered front parlor to such remnants of the elements outside as inevitably cling to shoes and overcoats and trouser legs. But the easily disturbed soul of no such immoderate housekeeper surged in Lola. He might have climbed in the window and dragged all of Garden Bloom in his wake for all that Lola would have been perturbed.

Francis finally chose the front entrance, leaping over first one pool and then another with an agility seldom brought into practice since college days. The porch light, which had been burning a hospitable welcome up to the moment he appeared and really needed it, chose to blink out suddenly in the midst of one of its vaults in midair. After this it was with an utter disregard for consequences and an abandonment to sheer luck that he crept his uncertain way to his doorstep.

Stamping about on the porch with enough noise to bring three Lolas to the door if so inclined, he succeeded at last in removing his water-soaked overcoats and pushing open the door. A small crack through which the living room light shined revealed the fact that the door had not even been latched. Was it possible that Lola's fears of the bungalow and the intangible were tightening their grip on her sufficiently to permit her to leave a door unlatched after dark?

A resounding crash assailed him, a sound which the 7-months twins caught up hungrily from the bedroom beyond.

"Now, Francis, just look what you've done and done. Why didn't you ring the bell?" Lola appeared from the dining room. She was a tall, generously proportioned creature with a white throat and arms and red brown hair which would have been beautiful if any attention was ever paid to it. A pink blouse dress brought out the such in her cheeks. It also hid in its straight lines her increasing corpulence. There was wild distress in her large brown eyes.

"Your precious samovar—you've gone and smashed it all to smithereens!"

Lola had that mental dexterity which can switch the blame of a situation to the other person's shoulder in an amazingly short time. This is a little trick and gives one a tremendous advantage, like getting away first in a quarrel.

Francis Cable put down his five pounds of tea and 10 of lard on the tea chest which was convenient. In the stress of his suddenly raised emotion he failed to gaze the thick smoke which filled the air. His clear blue eyes fixed the pink and white face indignantly.

"And what was my precious samovar against the door?" he asked quietly. "Wouldn't a chair have done exactly as well?" His voice, he felt, did not sound in the least natural, either this

and cold. This samovar was his most cherished possession. The articles of a material nature which he owned and cared for were pitifully few. Trevor had given the samovar to him that year in Constantinople, that unforgettable year. How far he had come since then!

"Well, you see, the old door wouldn't close all day long," explained Lola easily. "Something's wrong with the lock, I reckon, and I was afraid Ellen would catch her death of cold if I didn't keep the wind out." She was stooping over picking up the shattered fragments. "Everything was wrong today," she went on, changing the subject. "The furnace wouldn't draw at all—smoked all day. Every time I came up from the cellar I looked as though I had been working in a mine."

"I don't see the point of using my samovar as a barricade," reiterated Francis.

Lola's face clouded. "I took the first thing handy." Her soft, drawling voice sharpened a trifle. "I don't have time to sit down and think over each thing before I do it. With the million and one things I have to do, I would be under the sod if I tried." A shrill wail from one of the twins changed her course. "Francis, don't you care nothing at all about your family any more? You haven't asked about the children since you came in!"

"Well, I have been a bit absorbed," Francis gave a grim little laugh. He mentioned to the packages he had thrown on the chair. "Some staples I brought home for you. I got them at a sale."

"I wonder if we'd manage to live at all if the sales stopped?" There was a flicker of malice in her tone. Naturally she was extremely good natured, being both too amiable and too indolent to nurture in temper, but this last year there had been a difference. She had been growing edgy. She did not bear criticism easily, and she caught the unspoken reproach in the man's voice. "We would more than likely stop eating, don't you think so?"

The man flushed faintly under his sallow skin. He looked at her so quickly. He wondered if she thought that he liked it, this pinching which he had to do at every corner, this frantic pursuit of sales, this constant weighing of a dollar, spending it in a dozen ways before he risked parting with it at all. Of course, she could not know that he hated it the more because it had always been done in his father's family and his father's before him. But he only said quietly:

"I'll own it would be hard on us. Sales help to make the ends meet and the edges lap." He was fond of well worn phrases.

"Not much lapping as far as I can see. There were three collectors here today, and the baby's had another spell."

"Who was here?"

Lola hedged. "Well, they weren't all exactly collectors. The plumber came to leave his bill. We had two freeze ups in December, and they cost us 117 apiece. We ought to hire him by the year and maybe we would get it done cheaper. Then the gas man read his meter and left the statement, and—O, yes—the carpenter came and wanted to know if we would send him a check, as business was bad and he was not so anxious to work Saturday. But you haven't asked about the baby's spell."

Francis Cable had picked up the last bit of tea and was gathering the remaining pieces of his beloved samovar. He started for the kitchen and made no answer to this last. It had the effect, however, of deadening the hot he had felt at his broken samovar, which was, after all, something to have achieved.

Lola followed him into the kitchen. She walked with an ease-awakening movement which had shown signs of degenerating into a waddle since the time when she was a girl and her husband looking around the kitchen for some place to deposit his parcels. Every available space on chairs and tables and sink was strewn with dishes, pans, silver and tin, as well as various paraphernalia of children's apparel.

"I can't keep things in order with a crying baby doing me plenty distracted all day. You haven't any idea, Francis, how sick that child is. The more I think about things when

I'm alone here, the more I feel like giving up my job to some one else and starting straight home with the children."

Francis Cable smiled. This was not the first time that Lola had made this threat. It was becoming a regular reaction which followed any kind of casual remark he might make.

"I am sure I don't know of anyone who wishes your position, do you?" he could not refrain from asking. The truth back of his question struck him as amusing. Lola was the first girl who had ever wanted to marry him and the only one, as far as he had ever known. And that, too, was when he was younger and the edges of his trousers weren't frayed and his overcoat was not a spring weight which he was desperately trying to make answer January purposes.

"O, I reckon some of your stenographers might not object to trying the job, though I'll own they wouldn't stick long."

"No, I suppose not," said Francis, the smile fading from his face. He was cold and hungry and beginning to be disagreeably conscious of his water soaked feet.

"How soon will dinner be ready?" There were numerous tasks he should be turning his attention to. It was plain that the furnace needed some sort of radical treatment. Probably the entire chimney needed cleaning out.

"Not for a long time," retorted Lola. "You're home earlier than usual tonight. This coming home at all kinds of crazy times makes it awfully hard for me. I never know what time to plan dinner for." She stopped. She intended to suggest that the ceremony of eating might be accelerated if Francis would clear the table himself, but she found that her words were dissolving in thin air. Francis had vanished. She heard sounds of shoveling in the basement, and little gusts of smoke had already commenced to rush out of the registers.

Lola reached the door to the cellar in a remarkably short time.

"Francis, don't you know you're making that old furnace smoke something terrible? I thought you went downstairs to stop it."

This last was intended as an excellent example of wifely sarcasm, but it fell on deaf ears. At least there was no answer. Only the sound of redoubled poking and shoveling. She waited a minute, then slammed the door which led to her task. The volume of smoke which issued from the registers had become noticeably less.

Lola worked faster now. She began to wish that she had started supper a trifle earlier. Of course, Francis was hungry. She knew how he economized on luncheons and seldom permitted himself anything but a sandwich and a cup of tea.

"Poor Francis, he certainly does have a hard time of it," she sighed in a sudden burst of pitying contrition.

Francis Cable lingered in the living room long enough to choose a couple of volumes of travel in Turkey and life in Constantinople from the neatly arranged rows of books. But his thoughts still clung to the dusty basement environs.

"We need more coal and mighty soon, too," he reflected. He had taken careful survey of the furnace amount. It was looking rather better than he anticipated. That was one line about which Lola was very prudent. She would much prefer going to bed in the afternoon than exerting herself to fire up. He dreaded contemplating what the coal bill would be if Lola's recklessness included a passion for warmth. Still, financially, the situation couldn't be much worse if Lola should suddenly develop a dozen steam-heating plants.

Another moment and he knew it was as he feared. The door opening leading out on a small side porch was standing wide open. What he had not anticipated was Ellen's bed, supper in front of him, the clothes tossed back as if she had been put to bed there the earlier part of the night.

Something like a demon of terror took possession of Francis Cable. It clanked at his throat, it snarled him physically. It struck his heart, it thrust it to sharp pain. He plunged out of the door and down the deserted street.

The children would be better cared for and she would be happier. She had said so innumerable times. As far as he was concerned, he would have a chance of making more money. Trevor was a lucky devil and he could follow in his wake.

As he started up the stairs leading to the attic he recalled that he had not even seen baby Ellen. He hesitated. Her afternoon nap was lasting late. That meant that she would be up half the night.

"Francis Cable, I'd surely like to have you come and help me with these dishes. You better come if you want any supper."

Francis' mouth set in the determined lines only a small mouth can assume.

"I am going up to the attic to read. I don't want anything to eat."

"I reckon you'll come when it's ready," she threw after him.

He did not answer this. Only closed the door and went on up the stairs.

The attic was cold, but he did not notice it. He had forgotten that his feet were wet. After some little trouble he managed to locate two smoky lamps and place them on an old rickety table near an even more dilapidated couch.

He picked up the first volume, "Days and Nights in Old Constantinople," and commenced to read it at random, somewhere along the middle of the book his feet propped high on the back of a discarded kitchen chair, a ragged pillow at his back.

Francis Cable never knew at just what precise point in his "Days and Nights in Old Constantinople" that he suddenly came to the conviction that he was to use a slang expression, "through."

It was as if something in his brain had snapped and another person, infinitely removed from his steady, dependable self, had read the amazing message his brain had flashed before him.

"You are going to get out. You are going on that trip with Trevor. You will be better off, your family will be better off. You can sell your little house and give the money to Lola as a starter. She can go home with the kids, and the money you earn in your research work will be more than you are making now and go a lot further."

Francis Cable rose from the dilapidated couch on which he had been lying. It was odd how, as he had come up the stairs a few hours back, Turkey and Constantinople had seemed very far away, a detached part of him that he could not recall except inadequately and with a great effort. Now they seemed very near, an intimate part.

The clock was striking 12 as he pushed open the door into the living room. He gave a start of mild surprise. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate.

He drew out a time card, bending close over the fire to read its schedule. His near-sighted eyes blinked feebly. Twelve-thirty was the last train into town. He would catch that. He got on his hat and coat. The note he scribbled to Lola was characteristically brief. He merely said that he had been called to town and that he would be back tomorrow night as usual. He smiled a bit grimly to himself. Yes, he would be back all right, but with what plans to his head. He could picture to himself he and Trevor up all night, deciding on routes and steamer and schedules of every kind.

He swept unconsciously to the door of Lola's room to pin the note where she would see it the first thing on waking. A draft of cold air struck him in the face. It must come from the end of the hall. Some door had blown open.

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She had not been gone long, he felt sure of that. If she had he would have felt that gust of wintry air as soon as he had come down from the attic. It must be only a matter of minutes at the most that she had been out alone in the night.

He saw the lights of a car coming toward him, a big, monstrous car, it seemed, as if it were blowing its way through the mud ridden street, hurling ahead of it a volume of light.

He moved toward it in a sudden desire to stop it and ask the people, whoever they might be, to help him hunt for Ellen.

But he did not reach it. A tiny figure, a mite of a figure in white against the black of the night, toddling out from the curbing half a hundred feet away. It went slowly, hesitating in doubt which way to go. It gurgled and cooed and clapped its hands with delight at its freedom, its new unfettered liberty. Then, its little arms waving high, in friendly greeting of the oncoming car, it quickened its steps, hurrying on toward the bright lights as if they were the friendly lights of her own warm home.

A scream escaped Francis. Inhuman, the cry of an animal. It broke from a parched throat which cracked under the strain of articulation.

"Ellen—Ellen—Ellen!"

Then he was after her, running and stumbling for what seemed an eternity of time, his short legs covering unheard of distances. After that he knew no more except that he had caught up with the wisp of white and was rolling over and over with it in his arms. He did not even feel the impact of the skidding car when it struck him gratingly.

When Francis Cable opened his eyes he saw Lola in front of him. She was throwing fresh wood in the fireplace. He saw her pale face half turned away, her red brown hair piled high. He heard a familiar voice at his side, a voice he could not quite place.

"Well, old boy, how goes it? Mighty glad to see you. You've been a long time. He saw Trevor, hale, vigorous. He began to remember many things."

"Hah Ellen? Where is she?"

"Fine as a fiddle. Been asleep these two hours."

Lola had come close.

"Poor Francis. You sure did have some tumbles!"

Her cool hands rested soothingly on his face. He closed his eyes listening to what she was saying. She was telling him how that was Trevor's car which had come down the road and how baby Ellen had escaped from her bed and gone to "dad papa." How he had saved her, of course, and himself, too, a miracle it seemed to them now.

His eyes opened inquiringly.

"What you doing, Trevor, in this part of the country?" he asked faintly.

"Come to see you," he grinned. "Wanted to tell you the news. Remember Patricia, the girl I went to school with, the only girl I ever really cared about? Well, I can assure her quite by chance this afternoon after I left you. She came back from the coast three months earlier than she expected and came up to surprise me. We had supper together. You've got the right idea, old man. Travel, excitement, and all that—it's pleasant enough, but it pulls after a time. It doesn't get you anything, either, you know."

"Yes?"

"I'm settled now, planted nailed to the ground. Patricia and I—we decided a lot of things at dinner."

"We have made up our minds on the coast house, the big one, across from you. As soon as you're able you can lead me to the agent and see that my name gets on the dotted line. I've been to sink, and Sebastian, too. It's back in the land for both of us. You're whisking the line I am going to dance to from now on. I've some good live lines that will bring me money if you'll only see that I keep my nose to the grindstone. Do you get me, Francis, boy?"

"Yes," said Francis, with a slow, laggard smile.