

was always welcomed back by the management as the repentant prodigal is welcomed by his dotting sire. It must be said to his credit, however, that since the advent of "The Little Gray Girl" he had been as regular as clockwork in his attention to his duties.

As I have said, the gift of the dog seemed to win a good deal for the office Hercules; as for myself, I marked certain things, hitherto doubtful in mind, as certainties, when I came in at dusk one evening and found "The Little Gray Girl" trimming Mr. Billy Bradshaw's fingernails. The two were alone, and the tall youth, quite irreproachably dressed now, was leaning languidly back in his swivel chair, with his handsome feet on his desk, his left hand lying in that of the young woman, who was operating on it busily with a file. He did not alter his posture at my entrance—nobody cared what the spectacled old exchange editor might think of any subject—and there was a complacent, exasperating grin on his face that made me yearn to kick him. She, for her part, kept on at her task until it was finished, though I noticed that she kept her little gray back turned to me, and that there was a charming pink flush in her usually pale cheeks when she finally rose and returned to her own desk.

No one in the office, so far as I am aware, knew anything whatever of little Miss Croisac's affairs. She came and went regularly from her work, and she might have lived in a house full of people or alone in a hovel in Jersey for aught that anybody knew to the contrary. It was shortly after Bradshaw had fallen into the way of knocking off work at about the same time she did, and leaving the office with her—a practice that reawakened the storms of envy that had swept over the others at the first evidences of the mutual attachment—that she astonished every one by remaining away for a full week. On the fourth or fifth day there came a black bordered note addressed to the managing editor. Every one knew the handwriting was hers, but no questions were asked, and the Old Man himself (who I can confidently assert was quite as sorely smitten as little Perry, the police reporter, the youngest cub on the staff) of course volunteered no explanation. On the following Monday morning "The Little Gray Girl" came into the office, but a little gray girl no longer. She was clad in deepest black, and about the big soft eyes there were lines and discolorations of the sort created by incessant weeping. We soon learned that she had lost her mother in the interval.

Of course we were more attentive and considerate than ever after that. There was no more loud talking, no laughter, no chaff. The atmosphere became one of gloom and solemnity, and one hardly knew whether to cry, to sing songs of praise at the sight of the heroic manner in which she stuck to her work. I used to watch her as she sat there some times late at night, her white, nervous fingers flying over the paper, and my old heart ached at the sight. How much longer, I wondered, would it be till the strain should become too great and the plucky little creature collapse utterly?

At about this time Bradshaw began to drink heavily. He was never really drunk in the daytime, but managed to keep "on edge," as Jorkins expressed it, until nightfall, when his potations began in earnest. He never failed, however, no matter what his condition, to make his appearance toward 11 o'clock, prepared to escort his patient and hard-working divinity home. The miracle by which he retained his hold on the paper remained unsolved. As for Miss Croisac, she never appeared to notice anything unusual in her escort's conduct. Her evident admiration for the giant was pitiful—and, oh, Lord! how we hated him for it. One night while waiting for her he fell fast asleep, with his long limbs stretched out and his great head thrown back, and snored like a thunder-storm. When she was quite ready to go she touched him on the shoulder, saying softly, "Come along, Brownie," and they went out together.

"Good Lord!" snorted Jorkins, before the door had fairly closed behind him, "she calls him 'Brownie.'"

"That's because of the tas' he has in his mouth every morning," chirped Edwards, as he deftly rolled a cigarette.

"Shut up, you young idiots," I snarled, for to tell the truth the use of this pet name had exasperated me somewhat. "Haven't you any more decency than to laugh at a tragedy like that?"

Within a very few weeks a certain change began to creep over little Miss Croisac. Her attire, which had always been the picture of neatness, grew gradually careless and shabby. The seams of her dresses looked worn, and the quality of her gloves and boots could have

been improved upon. Her dear little face was as pretty as ever, but there was always a tired look in the patient eyes now. I sighed as I noted it all, though, truth to tell, it was none of my business.

Then there came one night—it was bitterly cold, and snowing, I remember—when the news reached the office that Bradshaw had performed his first graceful act in years, and got himself run over and nearly killed by a cable car. We hoped, of course, that the injuries would be fatal, but none of us was so deeply moved by the news as the Old Man—I mean the managing editor. He was a really handsome old chap, by the way, with crisp, curly, iron-gray locks, and eyes whose kindness was not concealed by the heavy gold eyeglasses that he perpetually wore. He asked me as a special favor to follow the injured man to the hospital—whether he had been taken—and see that proper provision was made for his comfort. I found him badly hurt, but conscious and quite talkative.

"I say, Saunders," he began, "this is pretty damned tough, don't you think? I hope I shan't lose a leg or two. It would spoil my good looks, eh? And Saunders?"

"Well," I said, as sympathetically as I could.

"It's about that kid—that girl, I mean," he went on uneasily; "you've probably observed that she's stuck out me."

I resisted an inclination to choke him and nodded.

"Well, don't let her come up here bothering. I don't want her, and—well, if you must know, I owe her some money, which makes it awkward, and"—

"Do you mean to say," I demanded, wholly without sympathy, "that you've been robbing that girl of her earnings?"

"O, it's not as bad as that," he answered, squirming slightly in his bed. "I've occasionally borrowed a little, that's all—poker, and all that, you know. But I say, Saunders, don't imagine that there's anything wrong."

"If you were to insinuate that there were," I answered, as calmly as I could, "I'd wring your arm out by the roots and smite you over the jaw with it."

The speech was not elegant, but as I left the building I was glad I had made it. You see, although an old bachelor, I can feel very strongly on some subjects.

In spite of all that this maimed Hercules had said to me, he permitted Miss Croisac to visit him in her spare hours. I myself fancy that she spent half her nights nursing him. Of course I hoped he would die, as did, no doubt, more than one other man in the office. As for the girl herself, she went about her duties in a dull, mechanical sort of way, and I soon regarded it as a certainty that if Bradshaw should ever show himself in our midst again he would stand a good chance of being mobbed. All this time, I may add, the comfortable bachelor's quarters that I had occupied so contentedly all these years looked particularly empty and forbidding to me.

It was on Friday morning that a great surprise was sprung. There was an article in one of the papers that told us about Bradshaw. It was a tale of a cracky and millionaire western father becoming reconciled with a wayward son. The same article told of our former associate's recovery and of his departure for Europe with his dotting parent, who, as we afterward learned, had had an arrangement with the publisher of the paper to pay him a certain amount of money each week so long as he refrained from going quite to the devil. This accounted for the young man's pull.

I entered the office at about 5 that afternoon. Miss Croisac was usually alone, or nearly so, at that hour. For once, however, it was otherwise. The young lady was sitting by the Old Man's desk, apparently taking something from dictation, but at the very moment that I entered she leaned forward slightly and began to sob. "I don't think either one of them saw or heard me—placed one hand gently on the bowed bronzed head, saying, with great compassion, 'don't cry, my child; he's really not worth it.'"

I stole away guiltily, but with a certain selfish joy at my heart. Time is a great healer. I was glad Bradshaw had gone.

"The Little Gray Girl," as we called her, did not appear at the office on the following day. At 6 o'clock in the evening, as its custom was, the staff held its usual weekly conclave in a neighboring resort kept by the most honest of honest Dutchmen, and the conversation, of course, confined itself to one subject.

"It's a d—d shame," said Jorkins, finally.

"He's broken her heart," said Edwards. "Just think of it—the beast!—to win her love like that and then run away from her the minute he got money. What do you think of it, Saunders?"

I smiled and said nothing. Outside

the weather was black and forbidding, but my heart had a private sun of its own shining within it.

At that moment Perry, the police reporter, entered. His step was elastic and his eye bright. He was obviously charged with a sense of his own importance.

"You haven't heard—I can see you haven't," he remarked, triumphantly, as he sat down, after a lightning-like glance at our faces; "well, 'The Little Gray Girl' has turned up a winner after all."

"How? Why?" hallooed the rest in chorus. I alone remained silent.

"She was married this afternoon," replied Perry placidly, as he buried his nose in his stein—"to The Old Man."

Was it any wonder that I choked over my beer?

—The Scribbler in Town Topics.

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