

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

CRUCIBLE

By
BEN AMES WILLIAMS

© Ben Ames Williams.

CHAPTER XIII—Continued

—27—

"Phil," Linda said, "I shan't see you today or tomorrow. You will be with your mother. You won't want me."

He assented: "Yes, Barbara and I will be with her."

She said, "But you'll feel me with you?"

"Yes, Lin."

She did not kiss him, nor touch his hand; only their eyes met firmly, met and held and clung.

Then Phil went down by those back stairs up which his father had come on that October night months ago; and he took the car and drove home. Barbara was there with his mother. Mrs. Sentry was sitting quietly in the living-room, her hands limp in her lap, a curious deep peace in her eyes. Barbara and Phil stayed with her, talking in low tone, till lunch was announced. But afterwards Barbara caught Phil's eye; and Phil moved with her through the hall toward the door.

"I've got to get out of doors for a while, Phil," she said desperately. "I can't stand it. She's so—still. Almost as though she were happy, were—waiting for someone. It scares me."

He hid his own fears. "Sure, run along!"

"I'll be back," she promised; and he returned into the living-room and Mrs. Sentry asked, "Has Barbara gone somewhere?"

"Just for a walk," he said, and she nodded silently, thinking: Mary is gone, and Barbara is gone, and soon Arthur too will go, and there will be only Phil and me. Phil and me. Just two. There were five of us, but now there are two. Phil seems tired. I am tired, dreadfully; tired and old. . . . They will shave Arthur's head. . . . I mustn't think of it, of that; not concretely. I mustn't scream. I must help Phil. . . .

And she began to talk to her son, almost happily. Somehow the afternoon passed. Barbara returned, but she stayed upstairs, writing to Dan, till dinner-time.

At dinner, Mrs. Sentry tried to eat, but the first mouthful choked her. She could not swallow it; the utmost compulsion of her will would not make the muscles of her throat do their task. Phil, she saw, ate readily, easily, rather more rapidly than his usual habit was. He urged her to drink a cup of tea.

"I'm afraid it would keep me awake," she said, and then smiled at the absurdity of that. Awake? Would she ever sleep again? After tomorrow night, Arthur would sleep with a shaved spot, on his head. She resented that shaved spot, as though it were a desecration of the dead. His hair was still so plentiful and thick; no hint of baldness anywhere. Where was the spot they would shave? On his brow? The top of his head? Phil saw her shudder, and rose and took her arm.

"Let's walk in the garden, mother," he said.

She went with him submissively. Barbara watched them go, but made no move to follow them. They strolled around the house arm in arm, past the garage and the tennis court to the pergola, and sat down there; stayed there talking quietly together, careful now to avoid silences, since into silence, just as dreams come in sleep, hideous thoughts come crowding.

Presently it was dark, and she asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost ten."

"I suppose," she decided, "we had better go in."

When they came in, Barbara was gone. Gone to bed, perhaps, Phil thought; and he turned on all the lights in the living-room, till he banished every shadow.

She asked, "Is it cold, Phil?"

"Would you like a fire?"

"I'm—sort of shivering."

He set logs burning on the hearth; and it was hot and he perspired. He

thought tomorrow would be long; and he thought he would have to be early at the office Monday morning. Monday was apt to be a busy day.

"Warmer now?" he asked.

She sat down on the low bench in front of the fire, hugging her knees, watching the flickering flames. She had heard or read that when during an electrocution the current was thrown into the body of the doomed man, all the lights flickered—as these flames were flickering—and were for a moment dimmed, and she thought of this now, but she said calmly:

"Will you be busy next week, Phil?"

"I thought we'd go up to York for a few days," he replied.

She was thinking: When the lights in the prison are dimmed, the other prisoners know what is happening and they scream and rattle the bars in their cell doors. I mustn't scream.

She said: "That might be very pleasant, son. Barbara will be gone, of course. There will be just you and me. I can take cook and Nellie."

"We'll lie in the sun and rest," he said.

She thought of all those men in the prison yammering and howling and screaming, and then she remembered reading somewhere that nowadays there was a special wire to carry the electricity to the chair, not connected with the prison circuit at all, so that the prisoners did not see the lights dim; and she wondered about the lights in the room where the chair was, and whether they would go dim, and whether any of the witnesses ever screamed when that dimness came to shadow what was happening.

"I should like that," she agreed. "The hot, bright sun."

Phil said: "And we'll go fishing for flounders, or maybe off shore, for cod. That's always fun."

Men sitting in straight chairs, she thought, around a small brick-walled room, all side by side, except that one chair was set by itself, facing the others. . . .

She said: "Sit here by me, Phil."

He sat down on the bench close to her. "And we'll take long drives," he said. "Back through the woods, the pines. There are some beautiful drives toward Agamenticus."

She clung to his hand, so that he felt her tremble; and suddenly she was weak. "Stay with me, Phil," she whispered. "Oh Phil, Phil, be always with me!"

"I will, mother."

"Mary's gone, and Barbara. I've only you."

"You'll always have me," he promised.

"I don't mean to be selfish, Phil. But I need you so."

"I'm here," he said again. "And I will always be—"

The logs burned bright, burned low, were embers cooling to gray ashes, before at last they went slowly up the stairs. Mrs. Sentry went to Barbara's room.

"Just to be sure she's tucked in, Phil," she said. "I've always done that, since you were babies."

"I know, mother."

But—Barbara was not in her room. Phil felt a surge of anger mixed with fear. Mrs. Sentry half-smiled.

"Perhaps she's gone to Dan," she said submissively.

Phil made his mother go to bed; but he did not. He thought Barbara might be at Linda's home, thought of going to see. Then, grimly, refrained. He at least would stand by his mother here.

After a while he heard a car turn into the drive in haste. He went downstairs.

He saw Linda and Barbara in the hall. Barbara was weeping terribly; but Linda's eyes were like stars. He stared at her, bewildered, and as though he were a baby to be comforted, Linda took him in her arms.

Hours before, that morning at the office, Linda's typewriter had been clattering as she typed the letters Phil had dictated, when she became conscious that someone stood beside her. She looked up and saw a shambling little man with absurdly long legs that made him look like a stork, and a small body and a smaller head perched atop them. Linda had not attended Mr. Sentry's trial; did not recognize this man.

She rose and asked, "Whom did you wish to see?"

The man, confused and ill at ease,



She Caught His Arm. "No," She Said Eagerly. "Don't Go, Please! Wait."

said doubtfully: "Why, Mr. Sentry, if I could. Dunno as he'll want to."

"And who shall I say?"

"I'm Zeke Wines." He looked at the other three stenographers, busy at their desks beyond Linda, and said apologetically, in a lower tone, as though the confession were a shameful one: "You know. My girl used to work here."

Linda heard the others quiet behind her, listening. She tried to find some word, and then the little man volunteered, "Mr. Hare told me I'd better come see Mr. Sentry."

"Mr. Hare?" She spoke like a parrot, without inflection.

"Y'see," the old man explained, "I got this here from Mr. Hare, the first of June." He fumbled in his pocket, produced a shabby, soft, worn old leather wallet, searched among its contents, found what he sought at last and extended it to Linda. It was a check for \$250, signed by Mr. Hare, as Trustee. Linda looked at it without touching it, and the old man said:

"I might have wrote a letter, but I ain't much hand at writing, and I knowed likely I'd git up t' the city before long; so I kep' it and cal'lated to see Mr. Hare when I come."

Linda said hurriedly, "Wait a minute, please." She went into Phil's office, closing the door behind her. The old man stood turning his hat in his hands, looking wistfully around. The other girls began a pretense of work again.

Then Linda came back and said in a low tone, "Come in, please." She held the door open, closed it behind him. He looked around Phil's office, saw no one.

"He ain't here?" he said.

"Mr. Sentry has gone home," she explained. "But I am his secretary, so I can handle—whatever it is you want."

"Well, it's this," the old man told her after a moment, and extended the check again. "Mr. Hare sent it to me, and he said it was from Mr. Sentry, the other one. Said there'd be another check every month right along."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't want it," Zeke Wines told Linda gently.

"Mr. Sentry wanted you to have it."

"I know. Mr. Hare told me all about that in the letter. But I never lived off my gal long as she was alive, and I don't aim to now."

And he said apologetically: "Not that I hold anything ag'in the young man here. Nor ag'in anybuddy, for that matter. Folks git twisted into a net sometimes, and they thrash around any way to git out. I've see fish do the same. Never blamed 'em."

"It would make Mr. Sentry—young Mr. Sentry—happy to think he was helping you."

He said gravely: "Like as not. But I dunno why I should go out of my way, do something I don't want to do, account of him."

"I see," she assented. "You're

voice steady. "But—"

outside in the hall."

He came slowly though to step through the doorway, but on the threshold he turned, set his shoulder against the jamb to which the door was fastened, and said in a low tone, "Dunno as I need to head a little lower straight ahead, not spilling silence seemed to Linda was numb with surprise scarce heard him when of thunder. "Guess he's bullet hit, ain't it?" he pointed, and looked at Linda.

Yet what he said was

of thunder. "Guess he's bullet hit, ain't it?" he pointed, and looked at Linda.

Linda after a paralytic

said hoarsely, "What?"

"Right here," he repeated, bullet hole."

"And he extended his

touched, she saw, the

plate set on the door

signed to receive the

lock. Her knees wavered

mustered enough strength

ward him, almost stag

look where he pointed

down, the better to see

The latch plate had

it, rectangular, perhaps

a quarter from top to

thing over half an inch

side this opening there

cess where before the

the wood had been

make a slot into which

home. But there was

was a round hole in the

not very deep, some

ored; and Linda, lea

that the edge of the

was marred as though

had been inserted there

a pry, to pry something

Old Zeke Wines said

tone, "Bullet must have

through the hole when

goes, never even touch

lodged in the wood then

"Yes," said Linda.

rose. "Yes, yes. Yes,

cried, loudly, her

shrill.

For one phrase was

her thoughts, over and

bara's words: "If father

her, there'd be another

where."

And Linda thought:

There is! But no wonder

find it! In the shadow,

here by the door. You

even now unless you

the lock. How sharp the

eyes must be. . . .

"Well, thank'ee, Miss"

Wines meekly. "I'll bid

day."

And he would have

But Linda came to life; her

began to clear. She caught

"No," she said eagerly.

Please! Wait. This is

This—"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Merganser Family of Ducks Destructive
Found to Be Menace to the Trout Stream

The three members of the merganser family of ducks can well be named "wild fowl without a friend."

No one cares to fight their battles for protection. Despised by the duck hunters, considered by epicures as unfit for food, condemned by fishermen as a menace to our trout streams, the merganser ducks, called useless, destructive and predatory, are seriously threatened with the death penalty, notes Albert Stoll, Jr., in the Detroit News.

The thousands of conservation officers and fish culturists throughout the United States have been empowered to destroy mergansers if they appear to be destructive to fish life. There will be few so deputized who will refrain from "shooting on sight" the first merganser coming within range of the gun.

Those who are on intimate terms with these birds, and know of their food habits, seem to agree that they constitute one of the greatest enemies of our brook trout. They remain in their northern habitat until ice completely covers even the smallest pot hole or open expanse of river water, feeding continually upon whatever fish life these waters may furnish. Unlike other species

of ducks, their appetite

pears satisfied.

The examination of the

contents of an American

killed on the Boardman

that this bird had just

a ten-inch rainbow trout

breakfast. This is not

is surprising how large

merganser can swallow

the effort.

Possibly a thinning in the

the merganser is justified,

a certainty that ornitho

not countenance their

termination.

Weather Forecasting

In many parts of the

weather man can tell

curately what the weather

for weeks or even months

The St. Lawrence river,

stance, becomes frozen

second week in December

flows again mid-April

est. Near the equator

the same, very hot and

but a little hotter and

er at the time of the

Bombay, India, the mon

ty sure to come right

of June.