

Rex Beach Short Stories



Continued from Last Week

and their commiseration has worn itself out they will gradually fall away. It always happens so. I'll be 'poor Bob Austin' and I'll go feeling my way through life an object of pity, a stumbling, incomplete thing that has no place to fill, no object to work for, no one to care. God, I'm not the sort to go blind! Where's the justice of it? I've lived clean. Why? Why? I know what the world is; I've been a part of it. I've seen the spring and the autumn colors and I've watched the sunsets. I've looked into men's faces and read their souls, and when you've done that you can't live in darkness. I can't and I won't!"

"What do you mean?"
"I'm going away."
"When? Where?"

"When I can no longer see Marmion Moore and before my affliction becomes known to her. Where—you can guess."
"Oh, that's cowardly, Bob! You're not that sort. You mustn't! It's unbelievable!" cried his friend, in a panic.
Austin smiled bitterly. "We have discussed that too often, and I'm not sure that what I intend doing is cowardly. I can't go now, for the thing is too fresh in her memory. She might learn the truth and hold herself to blame, but when she has lost the first shock of it I shall walk out quietly, and she will not even suspect. Other interests will come into her life. I will be only a memory. "Then?"—After a pause he went on, "I couldn't bear to see her drop away with the rest." His face wrinkled, and his muscular hands clenched themselves tightly.

"Don't give up yet," urged the physician. "She is leaving for the summer, and while she is gone we'll try that Berlin chap. He'll be here in August."
"And he will fall, as the others did. He will lecture some clinic about me, that's all. Marmion will hear that my eyes have given out from overwork or something like that. Then I'll go abroad and I won't come back." Austin divined the rebellion in his friend's heart and continued quickly: "You're the only one who could enlighten her. Do, but you won't do it. You owe me that much."

"I—I suppose I do," acknowledged Suydam slowly. "I owe you more than I can ever repay."
"Wait!" The sick man raised his hand for silence, while a light blazed up in his face. "She's coming?"

To the doctor's trained ear the noises of the street came in a confused murmur, but Austin spoke in an awed, breathless tone, as if he were entering some holy place.

"I can hear the horses. She's coming to—see me."

"I'll go!" exclaimed the visitor quickly, but the other shook his head.

"I'd rather have you stay."

Austin was poised in an attitude of the intensest alertness, his angular, awkward body drawn to its height, his lean face lighted by some hidden fire that lent it almost beauty.

"She's getting out of the carriage!" he cried in a nervous voice, then felt his way to his accustomed armchair. Suydam was about to go to the bay window when he paused, regarding his friend curiously.

"What are you doing?"

The blind man had begun to beat time with his hand, counting under his breath: "One! Two! Three!"

"She'll knock when I reach twenty-five. Sh-sh!" He continued his pantomime, and Suydam realized that from repeated practice he had roused the seconds Marmion Moore required to mount the stairs and took this means of holding himself in check. True to Austin's prediction, at "twenty-five" a gentle knock sounded, and Suydam opened the door.

"Come in, Marmion!"

The girl paused for the briefest instant on the threshold, and the speaker noted the fleeting disappointment in her face. Then she took his hand.

"This is a surprise!" she exclaimed.

"I haven't seen you for ever so long." Her anxious glance swept past him to the big, awkward figure against the window's light. Austin was rising with apparent difficulty, and she gilded to him.

"Please don't rise! How many times have I told you not to exert yourself!"

Suydam noted the gentle proprietary tone of her voice, and it amazed him.

"I am very glad that you came to see me." The afflicted man's voice was jerky and unmusical. "How are you today, miss?"

"He should not rise, should he?" Miss Moore appealed to the physician.

"He is very weak and should not exert himself."

The doctor wished that his friend might see her face as he saw it. He began suddenly to doubt his own judgment of women.

"Oh, I'm doing finely," Austin announced. "Won't you be seated?" He waved a hand comprehendingly, and



"See! I brought these flowers to cheer up your room."

Suydam, marveling at the manner in which he concealed his infirmity, brought a chair for the newcomer.

"I came alone today. Mother is shopping," Miss Moore was saying.

"Feel! I brought these flowers to cheer up your room." She held up a great bunch of sweetpeas. "I love the pink ones."

Austin addressed the doctor. "Miss Moore has been very kind to me. I am afraid she feels it her duty—"

"No, no!" cried the girl.

"She rarely misses a day, and she always brings flowers. I am very fond of bright colors."

Suydam cursed at the stiff formality in the man's tone. How could any woman see past that glacial front and glimpse the big, aching heart beyond.

Even at best Austin was harsh and repellent when the least bit self-conscious, and now he was striving deliberately to heighten the effect. She was impulsive, dainty, high bred, with a figure of rare sensitiveness and a face that told of fine physical inheritance, while he was awkward and inept at everything to which she was accustomed.

The physician wondered why she had gone even thus far in showing her gratitude. As for a love match between two such opposite types, Suydam could not conceive of it. Even if the girl saw the sweet, simple nature of the man and felt her own affection answer to his he believed he knew the women of her set too well to imagine that she would marry a blind man, particularly one of no address.

"We leave for the mountains tomorrow," Marmion said, "so I came to say goodby for a time."

"I—shall miss your visits," Austin could not disguise his genuine regret. "But when you return I shall be thoroughly recovered. Perhaps we will see again."

"Never!" declared Miss Moore. "I shall never ride again. Think of the suffering I caused you. I—I am dreadfully sorry."

To Suydam's amazement he saw her eyes fill with tears. A doubt concerning the correctness of his recent surmises came over him, and he rose quickly. After all, she might see and love the real Bob as he did, and if so she might wish to be alone with him in this last hour. His own restraining presence might lead to a tragedy. But Austin laughed at his excuse.

"You know there's nobody waiting for you. That's only a pretense to find livelier company. You promised to dine with me." To Miss Moore he explained: "He isn't really busy. On the contrary, he has been complaining for an hour that the hot weather has driven all his patients to the country and that he is dying of idleness."

The girl's expression altered curiously. She shrank as if wounded and scanned the speaker's face with startled eyes before turning with a strained smile to say:

"Ah, doctor, we caught you that time. That comes from being a society physician. Why don't you practice among the masses?"

"I really have an engagement," murmured Suydam.

"Then break it for Mr. Austin's sake. He is lonely, and I must be going in a moment."

The three talked for a time in the manner all people adopt for a sick room, and then she rose and said, with her palm in Austin's hand:

"I owe you so much that I can never hope to repay you, but you—you will come to see me frequently this season. Promise! You won't hide yourself, will you?"

The man smiled his thanks and spoke his farewell with unassuming politeness. Then as the physician prepared to see her to her carriage she said:

"Nal. I may and gossip with our invalid. It's only a step."

She walked quickly to the door, flushed with a smile and was gone.

Suydam heard his patient counting as before.

"One! Two! Three!"

At "twenty-five" the older man groped his way to the open bay window and bowed at the carriage beneath. There came the sound of hoofs and rattling wheels, and the doctor, who had taken stand beside him, saw Miss Moore turn in her seat and wave them a last adieu. The blind man continued to nod and smile in her direction even after the carriage was lost to view. Then he felt his way back to the armchair and sank flumpily into it.

"Gone! I—I'll never be able to see her again."

His accents caused Suydam's throat to tighten miserably.

"Could you see her at all?"

"Only the outlines. But when she comes back in the fall I'll be as blind as a bat!" He raised an unsteady hand to his head and closed his eyes.

"I can stand anything except that! But to lose sight of her dear face!" The force of his emotion wrenched a groan from him.

"I don't know what to make of her," said the other. "Why didn't you let me go, Bob? It was her last goodby. She wanted to be alone with you. She might have—"

"That's it!" exclaimed Austin. "I was afraid of myself, afraid I'd speak if I had the chance." His voice was like a moan as he went on. "It's hard—hard, for sometimes I think she loves me, she's so sweet and tender, and in those moments I am a god. But I know it can't be; that it is only pity and gratitude that prompts her. Heaven knows I'm unclean enough at best, but now I have to exaggerate my rudeness. I play a part—the part of a lumbering, stupid lout, while my heart is breaking." He bowed his head in his hands and closed his dry, feverish eyes once more. "It's cruelly hard, and I can't keep it up."

The other man laid a hand on his shoulder and said, with husky tenderness:

"I don't know whether you're doing right or not. I—half suspect you are doing her a bitter wrong."

"Oh, but she can't—she can't love me!" Austin rose as if frightened.

"She might yield to her impulse and marry me, for she has a heart of gold, but it wouldn't last. She would learn some time that it wasn't real love that prompted the sacrifice. Then I should die."

The specialist from Berlin came, but refused to operate, declaring bluntly that there was no use, and all during the long, hot, summer days Robert Austin sat beside his open window watching the light die out of his eyes, waiting, waiting for the time to make his sacrifice.

Suydam read Marmion's cheery letters aloud, wondering the while at the wistful note that sounded now and then. He answered them in his own handwriting, which she had never seen.

One day came the announcement that she was returning the first week in October. Already September was partly gone, so Austin decided to sail in a week. At his dictation Suydam wrote to her, saying that the strain of overwork had rendered a long vacation necessary. The doctor writhed internally as he penned the careful sentences, wondering if the hurt of the delir-

ous "One! Two! Three!"

He felt himself smothering and with one sweep of his hand ripped the collar from his throat.

"Five! Six! Seven!"

He was battling like a drowning man, for in truth the very breath of his life was leaving him. A drumming came into his ears. He felt that he must call to her before it was too late. He was counting aloud now, his voice like the moan of a man on the rack:

"Nine! Ten!"

A frenzy to voice his sufferings swept over him, but he held himself. Only a moment more and she would be gone. Her life would be spared this dark shadow, and she would never know.

Toward the last he was reeling, but he continued to toll the seconds with the monotonous regularity of a timepiece, his every power centered on the process. The idea came to him that he was counting his own flickering pulse throbs for the last time. With a tremendous effort of will he smoothed his face and felt his way to the open window, for by now she must be entering the landau. A moment later and she would turn to wait him her last adieu. Her last! God! How the seconds lagged! That infernal thumping in his ears had drowned the noises from the street below. He felt that for all time the torture of this moment would live with him.

Then he smiled. He smiled blindly out into the glaring sunlight and bowed, and bowed and smiled again, clinging to the window casing to support himself. By now she must have reached the corner. He freed one hand and waved it gayly. Then with outflung arms he stumbled back into the room, the hot tears coursing down his cheeks.

Marmion Moore halted upon the stairs and felt mechanically for her gold chataleine. She recalled dropping it upon the center table as she went forward with hand outstretched to greet Austin and turned back, then hesitated. But he was leaving tomorrow. He would not misapprehend the meaning of her reappearance. She meditated, so summoning her courage, she mounted the stairs quickly.

The door was half ajar, as she had left it in her confusion. Mustering a careless smile, she was about to knock, then paused. Austin was facing her in the middle of the room, beating time. He was counting aloud. But was that his voice? In the brief instant she had been gone he had changed astoundingly. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that she stood plainly revealed, he made no sign of recognition, but merely counted on and on, with the voice of a dying man. She divined that something was sadly amiss and wondered for an instant if he had lost his senses.

She stood transfixed, half minded to flee, yet held by some pitying desire to help. Then she saw him reach forward and grope his way uncertainly to the window. In his progress he stumbled against a chair. He had to feel for the casing. Then she knew.

She found herself inside the room staring with wide, frightened eyes at him, one hand pressed to her bosom to still its heaving. She saw him nodding toward the street below and saw his ghastly attempt to smile. She heard the breath sighing from his lungs and heard him muttering her name. Then he turned and lurched past her, groping, groping for his chair. She cried out sharply in a stricken voice:

"Mr. Austin!"

The man froze in his tracks, then swung his head slowly from side to side as if listening.

"What?" The word came like the crack of a gun. Then after a moment, "Marmion!" He spoke her name as if to test his own hearing. It was the first time she had ever heard him use her maiden name.

She slipped forward until within an arm's length of him, then stretched forth a wildly shaking hand and passed it before his unworking eyes as she still disbelieved. Then he heard her moan.

"Marmion!" he cried again. "My God, little girl! I—heard you go!"

"How long will you be gone?" she queried.

"Oh, I haven't decided—a long time, however," he replied in a tone that bewildered her. "It is the first vacation I ever had. I want to make the most of it."

"You—were going away without saying goodby to—your old friends?" Her lips were white, and her brave attempt to smile would have told him the truth had he seen it, but he had only her tone to go by, so he answered indifferently.

"All my arrangements were made. I couldn't wait."

"You are offended with me," said Miss Moore after a pause. "How have I hurt you? What is it, please? I—I have been too forward perhaps."

He dared not trust himself to answer, and when he made no sign she went on painfully:

"I am sorry, I did not want to seem cold. I owe you so much. We were such good friends"—In spite of her efforts her voice showed her suffering. The man felt his lonely heart swell with impulse to tell her all, to voice his love in one breathless torrent of words that would undecipher her. The strain of repression lent him added brusqueness when he strove to explain, and it left her sorely hurt. His cold indifference filled her with a sense of betrayal and checked the impulse yearning in her breast. She had battled long with herself before coming and now repeated of her rashness, for it was plain he did not need her, as she had hoped, as she had dreamed of nights. This certainly left her sick and wounded, so she bade him adieu when the occasion came and with aching throat went blindly out and down the stairs.

The instant she was gone Austin leaped to his feet, the agony of death upon his features. Breathlessly he began to count:

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