

A FLASH of LIGHTNING

By Edwin L. Sabin

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NORMAN PAGE reluctantly rolled from beneath the covers and with his feet groped on the floor beside the bed for his bath slippers. The rain was falling furiously, and the wind seemed to be increasing. Annoyed by the consciousness that a parlor window was up, he had lain as long as he had dared, hoping that the storm would slacken and relieve him of the necessity of rising.

Even had not this duty of shutting windows devolved upon him by right, he was quite certain that tonight he must be the one to attend to the matter or it would not be attended to at all. Assuredly his wife would not bestir herself after the words of the preceding evening. Hardly!

While lying awake he had gone over and over the things that had been said—the assertions, the rejoinders, the reckless threats. He smiled grimly. Yes, misunderstandings had accumulated and now had culminated. Which ever was the more to blame—and of the two it was not he—it was better that they cease association; separate for a time at least. He was sensitive and she was sensitive; he was proud and she was proud; he was stubborn and she was stubborn; discord was caused by mere trifles, yet trifles which appeared insurmountable.

So finally had come the parting of the ways. He would go on by one path and she would go by another. He would not utter a word of protest or appeal. He could live without her, he reflected angrily; he had lived thus for many years before he met her, and he simply would drop into his old bachelor role.

Now he found his slippers. His soles invested, he stood, and, lifting his bath robe from the foot of the bed, where he had thrown it upon retiring, he wrapped it around him. He began to advance cautiously, for the blackness was murky, and he could not see an inch. However, his route was comparatively straight and unobstructed, and he had in his mind a clear picture of the position of the articles of furniture in his room and in the parlor.

He did not catch a sound from his wife's chamber, the other side of the portieres. She might be awake and listening for him to move, but of course she would not indicate it. Or possibly she was not awake. With a little tugging of his heartstrings, he recalled that she must have sobbed herself into exhaustion and sleep.

Hands outstretched to warn him of immediate obstacles, he proceeded until he encountered the wall and, skirting it, in an instant more had reached the door to the hall. He fumbled blindly for the knob. His fingers clasped it, and he twisted it carefully. His irresistible desire to avoid noise did not spring on account of his wife exactly, but somehow he was seized with an inexplicable dread of noises amid that inky quiet, a quiet only intensified by the rain and the low rumble of artillery as the tempest lection marched down the horizon. Covering their withdrawal, upon the field of battle behind them the floods were descending in torrents.

Suddenly burst forth a vivid flash of lightning. It sketched to Page the figure of a man, upright, a few yards on his left. Darkness, dense, impenetrable, ruled again.

It was as if in front of his eye an instantaneous camera shutter had opened and closed, leaving an image indelibly fixed on the retina.

Stunned into an icy horror, not shifting a muscle, his hand upon the door knob, Page stood and strained his ears. Nothing met them save the irregular, busy beat of the rain.

Everything that he had lately read in the news of thugs and housebreakers rushed upon him. The slightest morsel of gossip repeated to him by his maid wife recurred to him in a gasp. Recent nights had been extraordinarily prolific of deeds by highwaymen and burglars. Not a paper but chronicled in each edition a shocking list of crimes. The city was in the throes of its yearly attack of hold ups and assaults and robberies. Nobody was exempt. Even in that very block a dwelling had been entered, husband and wife drugged and bound in their beds and the premises thoroughly ransacked.

Good God! Had this man already been in Helen's room, and was he now pursuing his work further? Yes, he must have been in Helen's room and had just made exit through the portieres between the two chambers.

And that was why Helen had not spoken, moved. She was not designated and bitterly still. She was unconscious, dead, or perhaps she was at the will of a ruffian, the confederate of the fellow revealed by the lightning. What untold tortures she might have endured, might be enduring! Supposing she were harmed—or—never to speak again. How could he bear it!

All those many things that he had said or done and that had hurt her assailed him as a life record passes before a drowning person. His impatience, his fault findings, his selfishness, the countless acts that he had ungraciously performed for her and the countless acts that he had apathetically suffered her to perform for him—these were the scenes now being branded on his brain with cruel persistency. What could he do without her smile

of welcome, her ready sympathy, her loving, jealous watch over his belongings, her quick, helpful interest in his aims and his ambitions.

Too late, too late!
Had she wondered frantically why he had not come to her aid?
Was she at the very moment even wondering and waiting? Was he to bring succor or revenge?

The responsibility was awful. How best and surest to carry out the mission put upon him? He was eager to expose himself to any risk provided that it enabled him to attain his goal. A great thirst for vengeance permeated him, burning into his marrow.

When, incapable longer of bearing her part in the exchange of words, yet disdainful to show how the rapier thrusts had wounded her, Mrs. Page had hotly fled to her room, drawing the portieres behind her, she had flung herself on her bed to find refuge in passionate tears. Then, fearing lest her



THE LIGHTNING SKETCHED THE FIGURE OF A MAN.

husband might approach and hear her, abruptly she had stifled her sobs and had begun to undress.

All her womanhood was in revolt. Her husband had been detestable; he had been brutal; he had uttered things that she never would have believed he could, and she had been led into assertions now keenly repugnant to her. Oh, he was so irritating, so masterful, so unreasonable! And thereupon thronged into her tossing mind retort after retort which she might have made, but which she had not thought of in time.

She crept into bed and softly cried afresh. These were not angry tears, but tears from the depths of a desolate heart. Thus at last her married life had gone the way of so many other married lives of which she had read and heard. The prophecies of cynical and imbibed acquaintances had come true—that she would discover she had loved the ideal and had married the real. The dreams of her girlhood had been beaten to death.

Well, as an end to the bickerings welcome the separation. She would prove to him that she was not dependent upon him, not in the slightest. She would answer defiance with defiance.

Worn out by her turmoil of resentment and grief, she sank asleep. She awakened with a start, sitting up in bed, every nerve on the alert. A thunderstorm was over the city. How long it had been in progress she did not know, but wind and rain combined were lashing roof and pane. The atmosphere was surcharged with electricity. She was quivering; a weight seemed to be upon her.

As she endeavored to collect her scattered senses her thoughts flew to the parlor window. She must go and shut it, for the rain was from that direction. Norman would not do it, and she would die rather than ask him, much as she shrank at the trip through the biting darkness. Drawing on her fleecy house slippers, she threw about her the first wrap upon which she laid her hands—a raglan coat—and desperately set forth.

Not a movement in Norman's room. Surely he was awake; he never slept through a thunderstorm. How cruel in him to stay still and permit her to make the journey—she, such a coward!
How silent the house was in the midst of sough of wind and rain and growl of thunder! Almost she was forced into speaking to Norman to ascertain if really he was awake. But, no; she never, never would acknowledge a need for him.

However, even hard in her indignation, she could not help playing the wife, and, mindful that her door stuck and was difficult to open, to avoid rousing him if perchance he was asleep she felt for the portieres and passed through in order to reach the hall by the door from his room.

She had taken only one or two steps when, instant as a saber stroke, came a flare of lightning which for the fraction of a second tipped everything with fire and was swallowed up. Brief as it was, it gave to her dazzled eyes the glimpse of a man just on her left, motionless, arrested like herself.

A burglar! A desperado! In Norman's room! What had been happening there in the night? Why was Norman so still? And this, then, was the subtle dread which had awakened her—an intuition of the tragedy.

Ah, could she but have known! Could she but have last evening back again! Could she but have the last year again!

How was she to live without Norman—her knight, her husband, her Norman? What were those petty differences beside the sound of his tender voice and the clasp of his strong arm?

Suddenly a wave of wild wrath upon her like a consuming flame. Luckily she had not cried out. Perhaps the man had not seen her or deemed that she had not seen him. The little revolver which Norman had taught her to use was in the top drawer of her chiffonier. Silently she began a purposeful retreat, her face turned toward her unseen enemy, her ears wary. It was the retreat of a tigress bereft that seeks but a vantage point for a furious leap. Vengeance, not safety, was her end.

Although while thinking Page had been listening, listening to apprehend the least indication of the whereabouts of his mysterious opponent, he had heard nothing save the dash of the drops. The silence was brimming with possibilities. He must not open the door, for this would betray him. The night covered him like a velvet pall, and, shrouded in his red robe, he was as invisible as was his antagonist.

Doubtless the other also was listening, peering, planning. Was he stealing nearer and nearer until he might grapple, or was he crouching, prepared to shoot as soon as his senses should guide him ever so little? Amid the storm a pistol shot would spread abroad no alarm.

Page fancied that he could detect the gradual approach of his ruthless foe. His faculties were concentrated until it seemed that his head must crack from the stress.

The effort was futile.
Oh, for a chance to put himself upon an equal footing! Only give him something with which to kill, kill, kill! His heavy cane was in the opposite corner. A fierce longing to clutch it possessed him.

He started to withdraw his fingers from the knob.

Another lightning flash so brilliant and unexpected that it blinded him as with a white hot iron. Crash—the thunder peal close following and jar-ring, echoing, fading away until submerged by the pelting spears!

"Norman!"

Page's heart was jumping, and his ears thumped painfully.
"Norman, is that you?"

Helen's voice! Helen was alive, unharmed! The shackles of fear that bound him were shattered instantly.

"Yes, pet; I'm coming," he answered. Recklessly bold, he strode resolutely in the direction of the dresser, hastily swept his hands over the top, seized a match and applied it to the gas. The broad jet leaped into life, and, clutching the smoldering match, Page stared with all his eyes at the spot where he had desecrated the man.

He saw only the pale face of his wife above her raglan coat.
"Oh, Norman, I was so frightened! I got up to shut the window, and the



"POOR SWEETHEART!"
Lightning showed me you, and I thought it was a burglar until the next flash!" she wailed, reaching out her arms and whimpering like a lonesome child.

"Poor sweetheart!" he said, springing to her and gathering her in his grasp to kiss her and stroke her hair.

Her forehead was damp and her cheeks were wet. A surge of compassion, regret and self reproach welled in his throat.

"I thought you were killed; I thought that I'd lost my Norrie," she quavered piteously, clinging to him.

"But I'm with you, you see," he comforted, gathering her still closer.

"And we'll never be separated!" she appealed.

"Never, dearest," he whispered.

He carried her back to her bed and with loving hands tucked her in. Then, kneeling and bending over her, he murmured impulsively:

"Dear, I was to blame. I was mean to you last!"

"No, no," she protested quickly. "I'm so sensitive. I wish I wasn't."
"You're perfect," he remonstrated, almost with indignation.

The assurance in his voice and in his kiss was complete, for with a sigh of happy contentment she nestled her head upon his arm and was silent.

Thus holding her, he remained motionless until long after she had fallen asleep and the wind and the rain had subsided.

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