

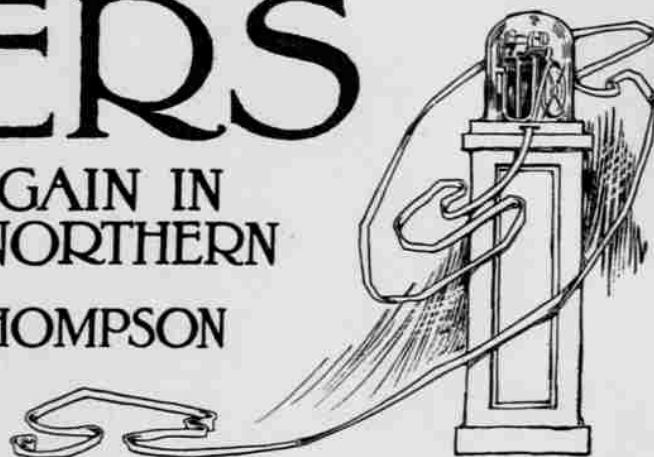
FETTERS

BINDING A BARGAIN IN
CONSOLIDATED NORTHERN

BY

LILLIAN BENNET-THOMPSON

ILLUSTRATED BY
WILSON DEXTER



THAT'S all, thank you, Ferguson; I'll ring if I want you again." The butler set the tray on the tabourette beside the desk, filled the cup with coffee from the silver pot, and left the room, closing the door behind him.

John Coyle drank the coffee slowly, as he bent over his desk, studying the neatly-tabulated columns of figures before him with careful attention. Then he leaned back in his chair, and his stern mouth relaxed.

The telephone in the hall rang sharply, and presently came a knock at the door.

"Well?"

"Mr. Mannering on the wire, sir," announced the butler. "He says he must speak to you—that it's a matter of life and death."

Coyle shook his head.

"Tell him I'm not at home. If he wants to talk to me, let him call me up at the office in the morning. And don't disturb me again, Ferguson."

"Very well, sir."

COYLE lighted a cigarette and, rising, strolled over to the long French window that opened on the side verandah.

Before him the lawns lay bathed in a flood of moonlight, trees and shrubbery rising in black silhouette, or touched with silvery radiance. A vagrant breeze brought to his nostrils the scent of the climbing roses and honeysuckle that clustered about the trellises; a cricket chirped cheerily at the edge of the driveway; from somewhere, afar off, a whip-poor-will's plaintive call sounded faintly.

"Just four years," said John Coyle aloud. "Four years ago tonight. And tonight—" He flung the half-burned cigarette out onto the lawn, where it lay a glowing point of light, with a slender spiral of smoke ascending and dissolving in the warm air.

"And tonight," he repeated. Then he shrugged his shoulders, as if to shake from them a burden that weighed too heavily, and went back to his desk.

"John!"

He turned. Just inside the room a woman was standing, one hand resting on the window frame, the other half extended toward him. She was all in white. Her gown, soft and clinging, showed the long, sweeping lines of her slender figure. Her head was thrown back, and the light from the electric globes fell full on her beautiful, upturned face.

"John!" she said; "John—won't you speak to me?" Her voice was low, and musical, and held a note of pleading.

For the barest fraction of a second, Coyle hesitated. Then he rose, bowed and stepped forward.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Mannering. I had no idea anyone was here. When you spoke, I was a little startled. Will you sit down?" He indicated a chair.

"I should not have come this way, I know; but I saw the light from your windows, and knew you were here. It—it seemed a little less trying than ringing the bell, and—and all that. I don't know what you will think of me for coming here at all; but I am past considering conventionality. I—I had to see you, John. And so—I came."

Again Coyle bowed.

"Won't—won't you sit down, John? I'm afraid I can't say what must be said if you stand there. You look so stern and uncompromising. I—I—hardly know how to begin." She was clasping and unclasping her fingers nervously about the carved jade handle of her fan. "Please be a little patient with me; I shall not keep you long."

"I am quite at your service, Mrs. Mannering," Coyle said quietly. Beyond that first involuntary start he had given no sign of agitation. He turned his chair half around, so that his back was toward the light.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, while his grave eyes regarded her steadily. She had not changed. There was the same satin-smooth skin, with its tints of ivory and rose; the same deep blue eyes, veiled behind long curling lashes; the same wonderful pale-gold hair—

"You find me—altered, John?" She seemed to read his thoughts.

"No."

"But you—you are older, John. There are gray hairs about your temples; your face is thinner."

"**Y**OU had something you wished to ask of me, Mrs. Mannering?" he interrupted, evenly.

"Not that," she begged. "You make it so much harder for me by treating me as a stranger. It is hard enough—without that."

His mouth tightened, and the knuckles of the hand that rested on the edge of the desk showed white. From under lowered lids, she watched him. Assuredly, she had lost no whit of her power over this man.

She waited for him to speak, but he did not. A sigh escaped her.

"I am sorry," she said simply; "and yet I realize that it is not your fault. Will you hear what I have come to say, John, and try not to—judge? I will try to be brief; I know you are busy; I—"

"I am quite at your service," he told her again. "But first, let me ask you one question: did you come here tonight of your own free will?"

"I—I—"

"Thank you; I am answered,"—grimly. "Perhaps I can state your errand for you? You have come to ask that I do not demand delivery of certain blocks of stock, amounting to 20,000 shares, in the Consolidated Northern Railroads."

"But—"

"The closing price today of C. N. was 150 bid—and none offered. None will be offered. I do not know whether you understand financial terms, Mrs. Mannering; but the situation resolves itself into this.

"Mannering & Company sold to me 20,000 shares of Consolidated Northern at fifty, in the expectation that the stock would go down. Instead, it advanced. As I told you, it closed at a hundred and fifty today. But"—and Coyle smiled, a smile that was not pleasant to see—"there is not a share of C. N. to be had at any price—except from me. The certificates are in my safe. I control C. N.; I own C. N.; I am C. N. Is that quite clear to your husband, Mrs. Mannering—and to you?"

SHE nodded, her face averted.

"I know"—very low. "He—my husband has explained it to me. It means—ruin, John. And I have come to ask you to be merciful. He must have the shares; you can put your own price upon them and force him to pay it. But—it means that we shall be paupers, if—if you are not generous."

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