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**The One  
Letter**

By  
**CHANNING POLLOCK**

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After they had come to an understanding Frank Claxton took Virginia Carter to dinner at Giovanni's. This understanding, the result of many misunderstandings, put an end to their engagement, and they chose to hold the wake over their dead love at the tiny restaurant where it had been born. Neither talked much during the meal, and when either spoke, for some reason not easily explained, it was in a very low tone. The man said, "I suppose I had better return your letters?"

"There must be a great many of them," responded the girl, the corners of her mouth trembling into a faint smile. "Yes, in—three years!"

"I shall send yours tomorrow—that is, I shall send all but one. I should like to keep one—in memoriam. May I?" "If I may." "Certainly. 'A fair exchange,' you know."

Claxton left her at the door of her apartment something less than an hour later. On the way to his own home he marveled that he should regret what had happened so little. The petty quarrels of the past few months had worn out his endurance, he thought, and rendered him indifferent to their culmination. He wondered how she felt about it. At all events, the separation would leave him with more time—more time to work, more time to devote to the friends he had neglected since he had begun caring for her.

In the matter of the quarrels he did not consider himself blameless. He realized this, and admired himself a bit for the inherent generosity which prevented his holding her solely to account. Claxton reached his "place" in rather a relieved frame of mind. He opened the door with a key fastened to a silver ring that she had given him on his birthday and walked straight across the library to his typewriter. Beside the machine was a tiny cushion she had made for him to rest his elbow upon when he was "reading copy." He recalled that it had come wrapped in numberless pieces of paper, each one inclosed inside the other, like the eggs in a Chinese puzzle. That was about the time that the interest aroused by his tale of Central American life had opened the hearts of editors toward him.

Somehow the detective story he had intended to begin did not fly from his finger tips as speedily as he had expected. The first paragraph, after writing which, he told himself, things would go better, stood alone on the page, a succession of stilted and uninviting sentences.

"Not in the mood," he confessed at last and strolled down Broadway to his club. The boy at the door didn't know him, and when, after satisfying the stupid fellow of his membership, he sauntered into the lounging room he was in an exceedingly unpleasant humor. "Parsons been here this evening?" he inquired brusquely of an attendant.

"No, sir," replied the man. "He does not come very often now, sir. Married, I believe."

Claxton cursed Parsons from the bottom of his soul. "Graham?" he asked.

"Mr. Graham was in about a week ago. We don't see him more than once a fortnight."

"Funny," mused Claxton. "By George, I wonder if there's any one in the place?"

There was, in the writing room—Frederick Ford Ferguson, a youth just coxing a timorous mustache into existence and tolerated only for the sake of his father, Major Ferguson, formerly of the Ninth Infantry. Claxton would gladly have passed the youngster by, but he was halted before he could regain the hall.

"Stop a bit, old chap. I want to read you a line I'm sending to a friend of mine at Daly's. Rather a clever letter, you know."

Claxton tore himself away and went back home. "What was Miss Carter doing? He would have wagered a hundred that Phelps had called and taken her out. Confound Phelps!"

The story went more smoothly, stimulated by the resentful energy of its author. From 10 o'clock until nearly daylight the typewriter clicked incessantly. When it stopped clicking, seven pages of manuscript, much marred by pencil marks, lay on the table near at hand. It was a good story, he felt sure, although there were two or three details concerning which he would have liked a conservative opinion. "I'll take Virginia out for luncheon and read it to her," he thought. Then he remembered that they had agreed never to see each other again—voluntarily, that is.

The day, which began with his rising at noon, dragged along monotonously. It was hard to realize that he might not speak to her over the telephone that stood on his desk and harder still to be convinced that she would not call him up. Toward mid-afternoon Claxton unlocked a drawer and took out the nine packages of her letters that represented a correspondence of three years. He must choose the one letter and return the rest to her.

To do this he must read every epistle in the nine bundles. Claxton, in common with most men who write or act, was a sentimentalist, and he wanted that the one letter should be the dearest of all. The first that met his

eye he laid aside in the belief that it would prove the dearest. Miss Carter had penned it when he lay ill of fever at San Jose de Guatemala. "Your cable was repeated to me at Chicago," was the message. "Otherwise I should have been with you now. I know that if your illness continued you would need a nurse, and I felt that I could not delegate to strangers the privilege of attending you." It was a womanly letter—the letter of a woman mature in heart and brain—and Claxton pondered a long while before putting it aside.

Next came a telegram, sent to his apartments before the telephone had been installed: "Please come tonight. Am blue. Have wired Minnie stay home." A very sweet, dependent little message, but of course not to be thought of as the single memento of so close a friendship as theirs had been. It was even preferable to retain the short note which he had always ascribed to her literary genius rather than to her feelings. "Each thought of you, dropping into the waters of my heart, produces ever widening circles of tender recollection."

Then there was an envelope from her, on the back of which he had composed a fragment of verse. It began:

Thou art so dear to me, my love—  
So dear and, oh, so necessary!

Claxton remembered that she had prized the poem above anything else he had given her. "It is so fine to be thought 'necessary,'" she had said. In this manner he progressed through five of the nine packages. Each letter seemed more desirable than the rest, and every moment made a selection less easy. This scrawl was a reassurance which she had penciled on the leaf of her programme at the theater; that sheet of blue paper bore the first words of affection he had ever received from her.

At the bottom of the fifth bundle was a long envelope with the name of a publishing company on its upper left hand corner. The postmark was over two years old. "Rejected manuscript," Claxton concluded, tossing it to one side contemptuously. That had come back in the days when rejected manuscripts had not been half so rare as good dinners or money with which to pay rent. Something approaching curiosity made him pick up the envelope again and draw the contents from its mouth. The story that lay before him was headed, "From Frank Claxton, 211 West Twenty-first Street," but the type unmistakably belonged to the machine which still remained a fixture at Miss Carter's. The tale was one that she had sent over his signature to an editor of whose opinion she had felt certain, and it had in consequence been returned to him when that gentleman had classed it as "unavailable."

"I thought you'd get a check," Virginia had confessed, "and I knew you'd spend it without considering why and wherefore. It's just like Phelps! He was enthusiastic over the plot when I told it to him last week."

"Virginia," he had remonstrated, "it was like offering me charity."

"Nonsense! I shouldn't have thought of handing you money. I simply wrote a story for you that you might have written yourself if you had taken time."

"Taken time! Good Lord, how much time he had taken that year in just such discouraging, unremunerative labor! How unhappy he had been and how awfully, awfully hard up! He hadn't begun spending every evening with her then, and he hadn't begun selling whatever he wrote either. "Nobody ever did—at first," she had assured him.

For twenty minutes Claxton sat silently on his chair island in the middle of a sea of letters. His fingers clung to the rejected manuscript, but his eyes looked beyond it into the past. All the half forgotten history of his love for Virginia Carter had been recalled to him with wonderful vividness—her unvarying goodness, the sweetness of their intercourse, the erstwhile strength of his affection for her. A ship's clock in the adjoining room struck 2, the nautical fashion of saying that the hour was 5, and with quick resolution he began climbing into his evening clothes.

"I've come to take you to dinner," he said to Miss Carter when she responded to his pressure on the button at her door.

"So you were lonely, too?" she asked him.

"Lonely? By George, and those letters!"

She was too clever a girl not to seem surprised, and he could not look through the sides of her trunk into the tray where reposed several packages of his letters to her, unsearched, untouched, since first they had been read and laid away.

**Blue Jays.**  
Blue jays never go south, but stay north during the coldest winters. It is said they live to be a hundred years old. Very few people have ever seen their nests of young. They can sing a dozen different tunes. I never kill them, for they once saved my life. I had been lost in the woods for two days. Night was coming, and it began to snow. I built a bough camp, and while cutting wood cut a hollow stub. When I split it open I found four blue jays and about a bushel of bread and meat. I built a fire and ate about a peck of the provisions. The jays did not go away, but came up to the fire and appeared to enjoy the heat. My feet were cold, and I commenced to dance to warm them. Then the birds sang the prettiest jig tune I ever heard. The storm lasted twenty-four hours. When it was over I climbed a tall pine, but I came down mad as a wet hen. I had discovered the lumber camp about fifteen rods distant.—*Lewiston (Me.) Journal.*

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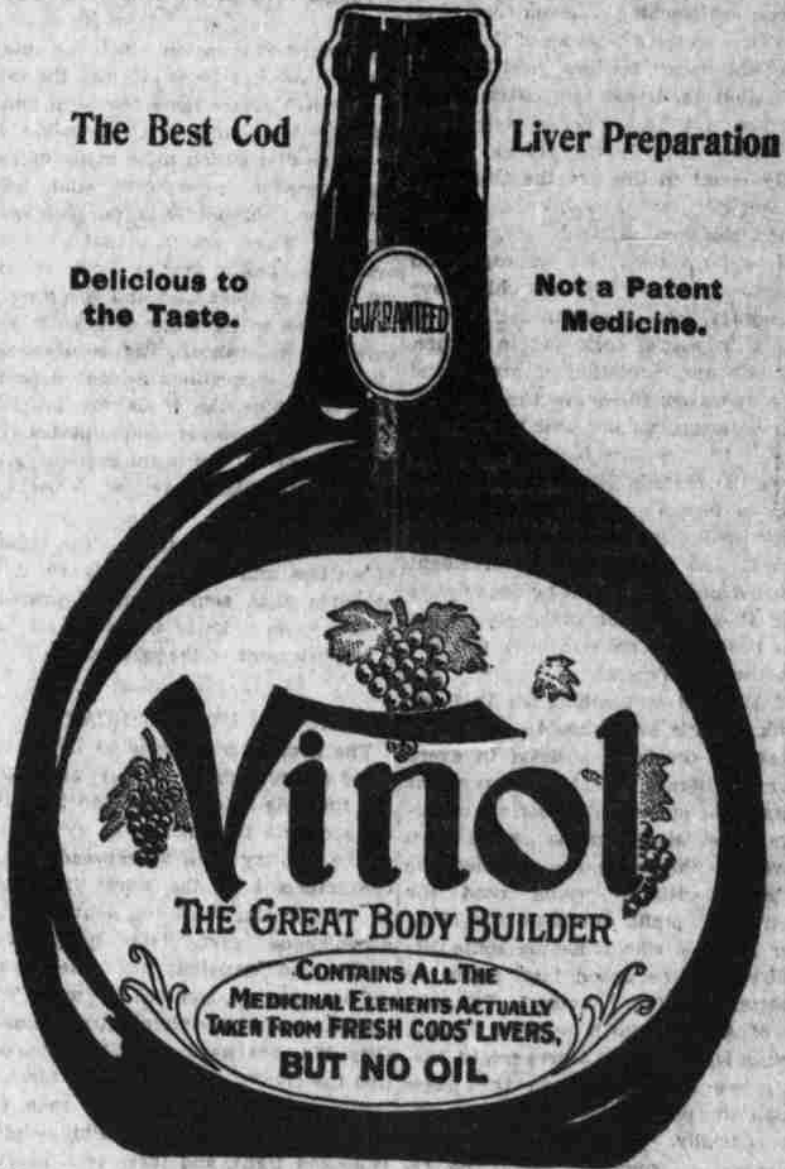
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