

The Girl Across the Aisle.

By E. H. HOUGH.

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RETURNING to my car as the train started, I noticed that I had neighbors across the aisle, apparently a well dressed, gray haired and bearded man, his wife and their daughter, the latter so lovely that I stared at her until my persistency provoked a keen, fierce glance from her father, whereupon I withdrew my gaze, and he resumed his newspaper.

Immediately the girl across the aisle glanced around, and I intercepted a flash from a pair of dark eyes instinct with what seemed like fear or entreaty.

But not even the beauty of my fair vis-a-vis could successfully divert my mind from the painful theme upon which it was dwelling with a consciousness of humiliating failure.

The cashier and confidential man of a large business house had absconded with half a million dollars in cash and negotiable securities, and simultaneously the only daughter of the firm's senior member had eloped with a worthless suitor.

My firm was not professionally interested in this branch of the case. We were to trace the absconding cashier, described as twenty-seven years of age, tall, slender and dusky, heavy black mustache, smooth shaven cheeks, while certain memoranda evidently forgotten and discovered in a secret compartment of his desk seemed to render the task of overtaking him a matter of little time and ordinary skill.

My assignment on the case was a high compliment, and I had been sanguine of success. But most of the clues I followed ended in a "pocket," my carefully formulated theories and hypotheses proved fruitless, and while debating as to what I should do next I received a peremptory telegram directing my immediate return to headquarters.

While ruminating thus I fell to drumming with my fingers on the arm of the seat. Instantly the girl across the aisle looked up, darting a keen, inquiring glance at me. Her lips moved as though repeating some formula, and as I kept on drumming her excitement visibly increased. Just then her father, looking up from his paper, frowned at her and, glancing over at me, tapped his forehead, waving his other hand toward the girl.

For awhile I kept up my drumming, and while the girl did not appear to notice me I could see that she was listening intently; her lips moved, and her expression varied from one of hope to the deepest depression. For the want of better occupation I continued the experiment awhile, finally ceasing altogether, whereupon she sank back against the seat, pale and inert.

By and by the cars stopped again, and my attention was attracted to a boy on the platform jerking a roined string through a drum shaped piece of cardboard—a sample of the basketful he carried and which he was demonstrating with a zeal and volume of discordant sounds that rivaled pandemonium. Instantly the girl across the aisle—that was the side nearest the station platform—became violently excited. The blood rushed to her cheeks and tears to her eyes. Touching her father's arm, she exclaimed eagerly:

"Papa, papa, buy me one of those pretty, noisy playthings!" I fancied I detected a sinister gleam in the man's eye, but he answered roughly:

"No; that thing is only for boys and children!" "Oh, please, please, papa!" she persisted, clasping her hands. "I must have it! I want to see if it will sing for me. Quick, quick, before he is gone!"

As she would not be pacified and some of the passengers were looking at her, her father smiled grimly and thrust one hand into his pocket.

"Anything to please a fool!" he muttered. Opening the window, he bade the boy outside toss up one of his infernal machines, snatched it from him, threw out a quarter and shut the window.

"There!" He tossed it in the girl's lap. "See how long that will amuse you." As he resumed his paper I watched the girl across the aisle with a new interest, coupled with growing mystification.

She turned the toy over and over, held it to her cheek and lips, her face instinct with passionate yearning, then slowly and timidly drew the string back and forth, producing a succession of short, jerky, rasping sounds, which she gradually tempered and softened. Finally, tiring of watching her, I resumed my pastime of drumming with my fingers. Instantly she stopped, regarded me eagerly, then, sadly shaking her head, dropped her crude plaything in her lap.

toward her father and toward me, the girl across the aisle resumed, with an air of desperate determination, the same unvarying iteration of sounds and pauses until the performance became almost intolerable. Indeed, it was getting upon my nerves, and I was contemplating an appeal to her father when I stumbled into the light. Her maneuver was making its way not upon my nerves alone, but upon an inner consciousness, slowly responding to the magic code. I began to follow and analyze that rhythmical succession of sounds and pauses until I was able to recognize, distinguish and translate them. The girl across the aisle was communicating through her crude plaything telegraph messages to me!

Noting my expression, she stopped, then flashed a significant glance toward her father. Obeying her unspoken injunction, I busied myself with a book, but in a moment she was at work again, and her message read:

"I am trying to speak to you. Do you understand?"

My response was to cast a bewildered glance at her. Instantly she turned her face from me toward the window, but I was on the alert for the next message.

"Drum with your fingers on the arm of your seat as you did before. I can read that. Don't look at me."

Here was the last link in the riddle. I rapped:

"I understand you. How can I help you?"

She appeared not to notice me, sitting with her hands relaxed, apparently lost in reverie. But another message soon followed.

"This man who pretends I am crazy is not my father nor an old man—only twenty-seven. Read again."

I rapped "Yes," keeping my eyes on my book. Then her improvised telegraph spoke again.

"He robbed my father, abducted me and will force me to marry him as soon as he is safe from capture. He threatens to kill me if I try to escape or betray him. His name is Jeremy Saunders. Have you understood?"

Had I? If ever I needed nerve it was then. On my return home, defeated, baffled, I found myself by a freak of fortune hot on the trail. Across the aisle, so near that I could touch him, yet so secure in his disguise that he could mock me to my face, sat my quarry, while to this girl, his prisoner, had come the heaven sent inspiration we both needed.

Steadying my fingers by an effort, I rapped:

"Yes. Your name next. Will aid you with my life."

"I am Almo Osgood," she responded.

"The woman is Saunders' sister. We alight at Rochester, and unless help comes quickly I am lost."

I consulted my time table. We would reach Rochester in an hour.

"Do you fear arrest and temporary detention?" I rapped.

"I fear nothing that will free me from this man," was the prompt response.

"Very good," I replied. "If in mortal power I will free you. Say no more. It is risking too much."

As I rapped the last words Saunders fung down his paper.

"Be done with that infernal din!" he exclaimed. "It is past all endurance!"

"Yes!" said the girl wearily. "The tune won't come, and I'm sleepy!" She lay back, with closed eyes.

"About time!" I ejaculated. "Will you have a cigar with me in the smoker? I'm feeling a bit dotty myself."

"Thanks, no. I dare not leave the girl. This is the first outing for three weeks, and I swear it will be the last."

"I don't blame you. Well, I'll have a smoke and dispose of this thing." I took the toy gently from her lap. "So long."

Passing through the train to the telegraph operator's car, I sent a code message to the Rochester authorities:

"Arrest man, woman and girl alighting from car Cumberland, train 47. Will signal. Send man who knows me. Farnham."

When I returned to my section Miss Osgood was still sleeping and Saunders reading, but I managed to engage him in conversation until we reached Rochester. Then he made a sign to his sister, who shook Miss Osgood none too gently.

"You alight here?" I said. "So do I. We may see more of each other."

"I think not," he answered shortly. "I stop over but a few hours."

As his sister was arousing her charge I rapped one more message.

"Stumble when you reach the station platform. Cough if you understand me."

A brief suspense, then Miss Osgood sat up, coughed sharply and shot a look at me. The woman fairly jerked her to her feet, and we proceeded, Saunders first, I behind him, and the others following. Glancing through the end window, I spied three men scanning the cars. On the platform Miss Osgood stumbled, falling heavily against me. Instantly I caught Saunders by the shoulder, exclaiming:

"Here they are! Take all!"

One officer seized Saunders, and as his sister tried to drag the girl away I caught her arm, jerked her around and in a moment she and Miss Osgood were prisoners.

After the first gasp of astonishment and fury Saunders fought like a demon. He plunged one hand in his pocket and shot it out toward Miss Osgood, who was close beside him, but I struck his elbow, sending the object flying, then, springing past him, secured it. It looked like a fountain pen, but proved to be a hollow tube with a sharp metallic tip and filled with poison. One prick of that tiny weapon on the girl's flesh and she would have been dead past all help. Handcuffs were finally

snapped on Saunders' wrists, and we were all marched off to a vehicle in waiting.

Committing Miss Osgood to the care of the prison matron, who took her to her own comfortable home, we kept telegraph and long distance telephones hot for awhile. I was the hero of the occasion, receiving eulogiums from my chiefs and from Mr. Osgood, all of



SHOT IT OUT TOWARD MISS OSGOOD, whom requested me to await their arrival. That evening I heard Miss Osgood's story.

"Saunders was my father's confidential man," she said, "and a secret suitor for my hand. I disliked and distrusted him. The day of the robbery he seized me on a bystreet, put me in a carriage and kept me somewhere, right in the city, for several days. I overheard him when he thought I slept telling that he had written father that I had eloped with a man I had long before dismissed. Finally we left Cincinnati, and he has passed me off as his crazy daughter and declared that when safe from pursuit he would force me to marry him to prevent father from prosecuting him."

"Tell no more if it pains you!" I urged as her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears.

"It relieves me," she replied. "You were the first friend I found, and by that time I was nearly in despair. But from the moment I looked into your face I felt that I could trust you. I had studied telegraphy as a pastime, so of course I recognized your tapplings immediately. How I thanked heaven for that knowledge!"

"And I thank heaven that I took up the study when a lad, intending at that time to fit myself for an expert telegrapher," I answered fervently.

"When I am thinking deeply I fall instinctively into the habit of keeping tally, as it were, with my fingers. But why did you not try to open communication with me in the same way?"

"I was afraid to risk it for fear Saunders would notice me and suspect what I was doing."

"What would he have done in that case?" I asked.

"Nothing that any one would be likely to notice. He would simply have pressed a tiny needle point into my arm, and I should have fallen back dead, while, as he took care to warn me beforehand, the only verdict would be heart disease. But when I caught sight of that boy with his wares I believed I could find the way, while inducing Saunders to believe that I was temporarily demented—as he evidently did—to catch and fix your attention until you discovered what I was really about."

"You certainly kept me guessing a good while," I said, smiling.

"But it took you so long to guess right!" she rejoined, with a sigh. "But, really, the greatest risk was when you began to reply," said Miss Osgood after a pause. "I feared that one of us might make some unlucky slip or gesture that would betray us and ruin all."

I stayed with Miss Osgood as late as her hostess would permit ere I bade her good night. When the various interested parties arrived the following day I was lauded to the skies. Mr. Osgood declared I had made him my debtor for life. Morning brought the news that the prisoners had made a simultaneous and almost successful attempt at suicide, but they were discovered in time and subsequently tried, convicted and sent to long terms of imprisonment.

When I bade Miss Osgood farewell two days later as she left Rochester with her father her sweet eyes confirmed his cordial invitation that I should be his guest at the first opportunity, and my chief very kindly made that opportunity an early one.

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