

The Confidential Clerk.

By HOWARD FIELDING.

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GEORGE BLAKE was a sort of confidential secretary for old Lemuel Pettus, the money lender. Everybody knows Pettus. He is not averse to a certain sort of publicity. Three or four times a year he permits himself to be interviewed at some length and held up to the young as an example of thrift, integrity and other virtues. He has a favorite interview for early summer on the folly and wastefulness of vacations, and it must be ranked among the happiest achievements of unconscious humor, for it is based upon the serious conviction that the most worthy object of human ambition is to become a narrow, scheming, selfish skindint like Lemuel Pettus.

Blake was nearly forty and had been in the employ of Pettus for fifteen years.

In the course of his connection with Pettus, Blake had become like an old man. His life was dry as dust. He had been rather a handsome fellow, with an excellent figure and carriage, but now he was thin and shuffling in gait, and his clothes were almost as shabby as Pettus'. He was a fine example of the advantages of the no vacation habit.

Pettus never took any chances. He always had two dollars' worth of unimpeachable collateral for every dollar that he put out. The reader who is familiar with such phases of life will not be surprised to learn that Blake, who existed in this atmosphere of "sure thing" finance, was himself a reckless investor. He could save and sometimes make a little money, but he could not keep it. At the time of the events which form the subject of this tale Blake had \$2,000 tied up in a gold mine which was nothing but a hole in the ground, scarcely deep enough to hide the man who dug it.

This man had been a schoolfellow of Blake's and had drifted about the mining regions of the west since then. He had narrowly missed several great fortunes, according to his own story. Upon the occasion of his father's death he came east and secured a very small inheritance, which he converted into cash. He did the same for the share of the estate which fell to his half sister, who was more than twenty years younger than himself. With these two lumps of money and Blake's \$2,000 he went west again to develop his mine.

The half sister, Amy Lessing, remained with a distant relative in New Hampshire, but when this relative discovered that Amy had given all her money to her brother a painful inharmonious arose. Amy, in despair at this situation, wrote to Jack Lessing and addressed the letter to him at the Calabash mine, which the United States postal employees seemed unable to find. At any rate, Amy received no reply. After waiting some weeks she wrote to Blake, asking if he could find work for her in New York.

Blake had begun to entertain suspicious as to Lessing, and these were increased by learning that the man had taken his sister's money and had not mentioned it to his partner. It looked as if the poor girl might be in rather hard circumstances, and Blake felt vaguely responsible, as her cash had gone into a mine of which he owned one-half. With an awesome



"YES, SIR; I AM ENGAGED TO MISS AMY LESSING."

sense of assuming a burden that might be entirely beyond his powers, he wrote inviting her to come to New York.

Jack Lessing had been a good fellow in his youth, and Blake had been fond of him, but Jack was not remarkable for personal beauty. He looked like an unkind caricature of Napoleon Bonaparte, and Blake unconsciously assumed that his sister resembled him. This may have been an artifice of fate for Blake's enamored. The girl had not an eyelash in common with her brother; she was as pretty as a rose in June.

Blake had formerly been fond of women's society, but had grown quite away from it. Pettus was a woman hater, although a married man and singularly well mated, having secured the nearest counterpart of himself that ever existed in the ranks of femininity. Perhaps because he knew that there was none like Mrs. Pettus the money lender scorned the sex and regarded with suspicion the smallest hint of a romance in the life of an employee.

One day, however, Blake appeared in the office clad in new raiment. He looked an inch and a half taller and ten years younger. The change had been taking place in him gradually during several weeks, but the new clothes were required to complete the revelation. Pettus eyed him, narrowly, but said nothing. A few days later he called in one of his spies and had the matter investigated.

"I hear," said he to Blake after receiving the report, "that you have become interested in a young woman."

"Yes, sir," responded Blake. "I am engaged to Miss Amy Lessing."

For years Pettus had had Blake under his thumb and had very nearly squeezed the human soul out of him, but Pettus had now become a pale figure on tapestry, and Amy Lessing was the one living reality and central influence of all creation. Pettus did not know this, and he proceeded to deliver a lecture against designing women. This is not regarded in polite society as the most delicate response to the announcement of a gentleman's engagement, but Pettus was a cad. His true thought was that this marriage would destroy Blake's usefulness to him, for he would never dare trust a married man with the valuable secrets which he had been accustomed to permit his confidential clerk to know.

Blake endured a considerable length of this discourse from a mere habit of humility, the product of a gradual loss of self respect in Pettus' employ, but at last the old rascal overstepped the bounds, and Blake's temper exploded for the first time in many years. He consigned Pettus to the subcellar of the bottomless pit and walked out of the office.

Two days later Blake and Miss Lessing were married. They had less than a hundred dollars in money and no employment. Their happiness, however, was worth starving for, if such should be their fate. An intoxicating sense of freedom thrilled them with unimagined joys. Both had been buried hitherto, the girl in a gloomy home, the man under the in-



"MR. HOFNAGEL WANTS TO SEE YOU."

black gown was doing her miserable best to be affable and to give an air of the usual to this extraordinary incident.

"My husband was very sorry to lose you, Mr. Blake," said she. "He would be glad indeed if you would return to his employment, and I'm sure that all your differences could be adjusted upon a basis that would be very satisfactory to you. At any rate, you and I have no quarrel, and I'm sure you will do me this little favor."

Amy saw her husband's face hardening, and she hastened to the rescue of her guest.

"Mr. Pettus has gone away," said she, "and no one knows where. He wrote a letter to Mr. Hofnagel which doubtless explains everything, but it cannot be read. Meanwhile Mr. Pettus' sister has fallen very ill, and they desire to communicate with him at once."

The fiction of the illness of the sister did not impress Blake, but he lacked the hardihood to refuse this request under his own roof.

"Have you the letter?" he asked, and Mrs. Pettus produced it from her rusty black hand bag with the celerity of a conjurer.

Blake glanced at it, and his face became an inch or two longer than ordinarily. The letter looked as if it had been written in the dark on the back of a bucking horse. The lines ran together; the words trod upon one another's heels.

"This will take me all night," said he, "but you shall have it tomorrow morning if the thing can be read at all. I will send it to Mr. Hofnagel's office."

Mrs. Pettus departed with profuse expressions of gratitude and esteem and promises of remuneration, which were firmly set aside by Blake.

"I will take no money for this," he said. "I regret to say that my feelings for Mr. Pettus are not sufficiently cordial for either friendly or business relations."

"You wrong him; indeed you do," said Mrs. Pettus. "He is really very fond of you."

Immediately after dinner Blake sat down to his task, and for two hours he worked without appreciable result. Amy became so tired watching him that she fell asleep in her chair, and finally Blake picked her up as if she had been a child and carried her to her room.

At 4 o'clock in the morning Blake returned to that room. He was trembling from head to foot with exhaustion and excitement. His face was pale, and his eyes were sunken, but very bright.

Amy was asleep precisely where he had put her. Apparently she had not moved hand or foot. She was very beautiful in her healthy youth and staidness of heart.

As Blake turned up the light she stirred and spoke:

"If we can manage the rent we'll be all right. Why, George, I was asleep!"

"You were indeed," said he, "and a bad dream you were having. Rent, eh? Well, well, my dear, just cast your eye on this and then talk to me of beastly bills. I guess not!"

His manner was so strange that she could not think of anything else. He was obliged to force the sheet of paper into her hands and make her read. It was a copy of the letter which Pettus had written to his lawyer:

Dear Hofnagel—I'm off to Denver, Am writing this in a cab on the way to the station. See George Blake, formerly in my employ, and buy his interest and his wife's in the Calabash mine, Braisted, Colo. They have put in about \$3,500 between them and will sell for less. They're hard up. Squeeze them. Make trouble for Blake somehow and force him to sell. Her brother is the other owner. He is sick in a hospital in Denver. Was on his way east. He wired Blake at my office, and I have the telegram; also a letter. I wired my man Hastings in Denver, and he says to come at once. The thing is a fortune. I may be able to get Lessing to sign something if I can fix the hospital doctors, but you must buy the other interest anyhow. Don't fail in this. Wire me Denver, care Hastings. You have several days for this, as Lessing is out of his head, I understand, and can't communicate, but don't lose any time. I'll fix you all right for this. Yours, PETTUS.

"And at midnight," said Blake in an awestruck voice, "I was on the point of giving up the job. Amy, that letter is undecipherable; nobody can read it. I didn't read it; the Lord did it for me. Why, at midnight I hadn't even found out that my own name was

lamenting the loss of the Calabash mine, Braisted, Colo.' You see, he made a special effort to write that plainly. From that moment I was inspired."

"We must go to Jack at once. But how? We have no money."

Blake laughed.

"My excellent friend Hofnagel would be glad to give me some," said he. "But don't worry about that. I'll raise it somehow, and we'll start on the 1 o'clock train."

They were in Denver on the third day and found Lessing already beginning to mend. Pettus, alarmed by wire from his lawyer, had fled back to his lair defeated. It was a great stake that he had lost, for the Calabash is a wonderful property. Those who are in a position to know declare that Pettus sometimes paces the floor of his office holding his head in his hands and lamenting the loss of the Calabash. He needed that gold mine, poor man, for he is worth only about \$30,000,000.

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