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RUNAWAY JUNE

By George Randolph Chester and Lillian Chester

FIRST EPISODE The Man With the Black Vandyke

CHAPTER I

THE quivering center of all the intense agitation in Brynport was Bouncer. That energetic collier could remember no occasion so exciting as this in the Moore household.

June Moore, standing by the long, low row of fleecily curtained windows, was the nucleus of all the frothing white.

Marie, Marie of the broom and duster, black haired and red gummed, waited near, with a wide grin and moist eyes, to have things hung upon her when there was no more space upon the little white bed nor any on the chairs. Over by the door, talking incessantly was Iris Blithering, June's bosom friend.

There were pink bridesmaids at every window, and a nice, regular father, gardenia and silk batted and Prince Alberted, walked up and down the porch, looking at his watch until an eternity dragged by, but when the end of time was come the limousines began to move.

What was this new world which she was approaching? No bride knows and no woman. June sailed contentedly. Ned—how he had filled her world! And how happy they were to be!

Here was Ned close beside her and trembling! In a mist they kneeled and said responses, and Ned put a ring on her finger. His own fingers were cold and clammy, but his voice was clear and earnest as he promised to love, love, cherish and protect her as he bestowed upon her all his worldly goods.

Someone in the church was crying softly—Iris Blithering, the bosom friend. Husband Bobbie was patting her hand. There was a general dabbling of handkerchiefs. Bright-eyed little old Grandma Moore smiled and smiled through it all, a gay little grandma with as smart a gown as any there. Ned's father, a strong-faced, handsome man, sat stolidly with his arms folded and went over the ceremony with his lips word for word.

Then the organ pealed again and beneath the vine swung the portals which June Moore had entered on the arm of her father, June Warner, on the arm of her husband, now emerged into the world of caroling birds and gay sunshine. And so they were married!

Then the bustle and confusion began again—the mad scramble into traveling clothes and the going away amid showers of rice and the earnest goodspeeding of friends and the semihysteria of Iris Blithering.

Just before June came downstairs in her trim little traveling suit of blue her mother had slipped something into the hand of her daughter. It was the symbol of every woman's tragedy. It was a purse stuffed with crackling bills.

At last they were alone, launched upon the sea of life. They were in the tiny drawing room with a white toothed porter stowing things into racks and hanging things upon hooks and sticking flowers everywhere.

Ned had clasped her in his arms and had covered her blushing face with kisses in that first realization, and now she sat by the window, her head pillowed contentedly upon his shoulder, and outside the world they had known up to this point was slipping past them.

A tiny cinder darted into her eye. Her first instinct was to grab her handkerchief, and the search for that resulted in a little cry of dismay.

"My purse!" she gasped.

"Too bad!" Ned's voice was full of sympathy. "Anything in it?"

"My money," she replied in concern, with all at once a panic springing into her heart.

"Is that all?" he laughed. "Well, little wife—and he laughed again at her swift blush—"why am I here?"

"I know," she faltered, "but—"

She stopped, confused, and cast down her eyes at her interlacing fingers.

He studied her a moment in perplexity.

"I'm just the same as your purse, except that you can't lose me," he told her, dwelling with fond eyes upon her long lashes, her smooth round cheeks, her red lips. He reached into his pocket with bluff heartiness and produced a roll of bills.

"I think you'll feel happier carrying this around."

He stuffed the bills into her clasped hands. She tried to close her hands against it with a sudden instinct which she could not fathom, tried to draw away from the money, but his fingers were the stronger, and, laughing, he kissed her and straightened up to put the balance of the money in his pocket.

She looked at the bills; a slow flush of crimson came up over her face. Why should this have embarrassed and humiliated her? It seemed absurd, for this was a part of the marriage.

Ned sat beside her and put his arms around her, and she held up her lips to be kissed. Suddenly she buried her head on his shoulder and cried. Something had been swept away from her, something had been broken. The man had given and she had received.

CHAPTER II

THERE was a shadow in the Palisades, the grayness of a cloud which had not been there as they had started upon this journey. Money—the woman's money. It had been all right for June to coax her mother and wheedle her father, but they were mummy and daddy. Yes, Ned would give her all he could afford, but that was it—he would give it to her! She would be the recipient of his bounty, or, worse still, would be paid for being his wife! She suddenly arrived at the startling fact that this was the status of every wife. It was a most disquieting thought, destructive to self respect. It was unbearable.

Ned Warner felt the precious head on his shoulder become heavy. Poor little girl! Getting ready to be married was wearisome work. Well, little wife's terrible tribulations, such as separating and being made to give an account of herself, were all over. Ned braced himself against the arm of the seat for fifteen minutes while the tired head drooped lower and lower. Poor little girl! Her neck would be stiff from that strained position. He moved over so gently, but the gentleness was an un-

necessary precaution. When he tried to shift her she slid into his arms without a flicker of her eyelids and lay there sleeping like a baby, her long lashes curling on her cheeks, her red lips half parted. Ned Warner was amazed at his wonderful luck. Who was he to deserve such a peerless creature as this?

He lifted June into the other end of the seat. She gave herself one pretty shrug, which settled her into the graceful lines of perfect rest, put a pink palm under her cheek and slept straight on.

Ned covered her with a cloak, kissed her cautiously on the outermost surface of her cheek and strode out to the smoker.

He was back in five minutes to see how she was resting. The pretty little bride had not the rosy flush of sleep which he had expected to see. Her face had the pallor of weariness, and her beautifully curved brows were knotted as if in distress. He thought that the light in her eyes disturbed her and drew down one of the blinds.

The troubled knitting of June Warner's beautifully arched brows had not been due to the light shining in her eyes, but to the lurid flame which had sprung up in her mind, and that flame danced itself into the figures of weird dreams. She saw Ned tipping the white toothed porter; then she saw Ned, with equally hearty generosity, giving her three bills. The difference was \$29.

Ah, the tantalizing fragrance of fresh cookies! She was in her mother's kitchen, and old Aunt Debby, black as midnight and round as a barrel, was drawing a pan of the delicious cakes from the hot oven.

In her dream June saw Ned's office, a stiff, prim place, as stolid as the elder Warner. There was a nice looking stenographer, quite obviously great friends with a nice looking young secretary and there was also a nice looking office boy. It was evidently Saturday night, for Ned presently rose from his desk, and walked over to the nice looking stenographer. He handed her the envelope containing her pay, and they exchanged a frank smile and a few pleasant words. Pretty good pay the stenographer received. She earned it.

Ned handed the nice looking secretary an envelope. They exchanged a few pleasant words and a frank smile. Ned handed the nice looking office boy an envelope and laughingly squeezed the boy's chin and playfully rumbled his hair. The boy grinned delightedly and popped the envelope into his inside pocket. Then Ned walked over to June and handed her an envelope. It was larger than the others. He bowed to her courteously as he presented it.

He spoke a few pleasant words, but did not smile frankly, and she cast down her eyes. There seemed to be a distinct understanding that she had not earned her envelope.

A poor, shivering old woman sat huddled in a doorway. Ned stopped, looked at the old woman a moment and then walked across to her and handed her a coin. He was very magnificent about it in spite of his compassion. He broadened his chest with the exhilaration of the good deed; then he smiled down at his wife most generously. Yes, his wife, for the old woman was gone, and June, in luxurious furs, but huddled, was in the doorway. It was she to whom he had given the coin!

What wonderful country was this? A bleak, wild country with strange, huge birds flying over it and no human habitation in sight. There were human creatures, though, two of them—a big, ponderous jawed savage with matted hair, who carried an enormous club over one shoulder. Behind him trudged a smaller figure, a woman, with matted hair hanging to her waist. In her nose was a ring, and to this ring was attached a leather thong, the other end of which was in the man's hand. He was taking home his bride! Music, the wedding march, the little gray, ivy hung chapel at Brynport. Was that Ned coming down the aisle? Was there a June just behind him? Was there a leather thong in Ned's hand? Oh! Was the other end of that thong—

There was a sudden jolt and screeching noise, a rattle and a bang and the sound of hissing steam. June Warner jumped wildly to her feet and gazed around the little compartment. There were the flowers, the boxes of candy, the scattered rice. Comprehension came to her slowly, for she was still halting in her dream. The train had stopped. She snatched up her cloak, jumped up on the seat and brought down the paper bag which contained her pink little traveling hat; then she jerked open the door. In the opening she stopped with a sudden flash of memory. Ned's money, the first of his generous bounty, the first of her pay for being Ned's wife. She jerked it from her belt, threw the three bills on the seat, ran down the steps, jumped to the ground and sped across the tracks to the opposite platform. She had no idea of where she was going, but anywhere would do.

As the train started to pull out she had a mad impulse to run after it to have it stopped, to call Ned, but there was no movement in her.

Across the tracks in front of the station a man, tall, splendidly groomed, black Vandyked, stood watching her intently.

CHAPTER III

HE pulled out from that momentous station, was in the wash room of the smoker, with a pleasant smile on his lips, making the most elaborate toilet of his existence. He was to have the honor of dining alone for the first time with his charming wife.

Thoroughly complacent, he strolled back through the car to awaken the sweetest girl in the world.

"June!" he called and turned to bend over her seat.

She was not there! He hurried out to the vestibule. Not there! And now for the first time he saw the three ten-dollar bills on the seat. One of them was slightly torn; all of them were crumpled.

Frantically he rang the bell; then he rushed out to meet the white-toothed porter on the way.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded.

The porter's eyes widened until they made his teeth look gray.

"Deed I don't know boss," he replied, as seared by contagion alone as if he had been accused of throwing the pretty little bride out of the window.

"Honest to the Lord, I don't know!" The delicious search began from that instant. In about two minutes the conductor, the brakemen, all the porters and half the passengers were searching for June Warner.

Ned, in his most lively vision of all, saw her dropping off the train, crushed and mangled beyond all recognition. No vision, however, portrayed to him his bride slowly crossing the track toward the black Vandyked man! As she approached the man gave her a sharp scrutiny, smiled and strolled across the station platform to the bulletin board. New York local was due at 4:10. An express was due at 4:30.

June Warner, alone on the station platform, had grappled meantime with the first problem of her independence. That problem had to do with the means of getting to New York, and it was concretely expressed in her beautiful little gold watch.

In the meantime Ned's train had drawn up at the next stop, and he had the station master in Farnville in a minute and was inquiring for a lonely bride.

"Why, yes," huskily shouted the station master at Farnville, "a young person of that description has been loafing around here on the platform, and she's just getting on the down local," reported the station master. She's with a tall fellow with pointed black whiskers. He's helping her on the train.

A train thundered in—a down train. Ned looked at the bulletin board. The New York express. It arrived in New York at the same time as the local. The first person to board that train was a perspiring faced young man, swinging four pieces of white-ribboned luggage.

June, paying but little attention to the man who had helped her, turned nervously into the car, a day coach, and viewed the interior with despair. In that coach there were only two passengers, a man and a woman sitting together.

"Would you like to buy a watch?" invited June in her smallest voice as she confronted the rigid woman and held out her merchandise.

"No," returned the woman without moving a muscle. Only her feather wobbled. The man cast at the merchandise a look of contempt.

"It's a very nice watch," urged June. "It's a solid gold case and I don't know how many jewels. I only need money enough to get to New York and hire a taxi. Then I must find some work."

The black Vandyked man's eyes lighted. "I don't want it," observed the woman, looking straight ahead, while the man's glance of contempt strayed from the merchandise to the vender.

"Very well," nodded June, and a grain of rice fell from the brim of her little blue hat and bounced right into the woman's lap.

The woman turned sharply; then she half rose and looked at the top of the hat. There was more rice on it!

"Let me see that watch," she said icily. One lid contained a picture of June and her dog, and the other the date of the gift and her name and address.

"How much do you need for this?" "She wants about \$10 ma'am." This was from the pale-faced conductor, who was so broad and stuffy that he was an offense in the narrow aisles, but his eyes were full of twinkles.

The rigid lady snapped the watch shut and turned to her husband. "Dan." It did not seem possible that her voice could take on a wheedling tone, but it did. "I want \$10."

The man turned to her with cold disdain. He produced \$10 from a tight-bound wallet, and instantly there flashed into June's mind that picture of her standing before Ned a piteous beggar!

The runaway bride took a seat by herself and was presently given the discomfort of knowing that the man was grumbling at the woman incessantly for having bought the watch. The black Vandyked man went over to them, and she saw him pay them some money, and then he came back to June with the watch in his hand.

"Of course you won't permit me to present you with this?" he pleasantly observed. "If you care to send for it later, however, I will be very glad indeed to give you my card."

"Thank you," she accepted, and taking the card, put it in her belt. "You are very kind."

It was not until they were nearing the station at New York that he spoke to her again.

"Pardon me," he said, bending over her, "if I can be of any service to you on your arrival I shall be very happy indeed."

"There is nothing, thank you," she replied, smiling up at him. "You are very kind."

At that particular moment the New York express overtook the local and slowly forged ahead, and Ned Warner, peering feverishly into every passing window, saw the suave black Vandyked stranger bending gracefully over his wife, and June was smiling up at him. Then Ned, against his will, passed on.

The express, however, was delayed a moment, and the local pulled in ahead of it. Ned Warner was the first passenger out of the express, and he landed on the platform just in time to see the Vandyked man and June going through the gate side by side. Ned rushed after them, but it was not until he reached the Vanderbilt Avenue stairway that he saw them again. June was darting through the door and just behind her was the man. He was smiling. With a rush Ned rounded the balustrade and went up three steps at a spring. He arrived only in time to see June speeding away in a taxicab and to see the black Vandyked man starting after her in another. He jumped into a third one and shouted:

"Chase them!" "Hold on there!" gasped a breathless voice, and a panting porter piled Ned's white-ribboned luggage on top of him.

Away through the tangled traffic, across Forty-fourth Street and up Fifth Avenue rushed the three taxis at break-neck speed.

(Concluded next week)

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