The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

She had been absent from Antioch four years. These years had been spent in the east and in travel abroad with a widowed and childless sister of her father's. She was, on the whole, glad to be home again. As yet she was not disturbed by any thoughts of the future. She looked on the world with serene eyes. They were a limpid blue and veiled by long dark lashes. She possessed the poise and unshaken self confidence that come of position and experience. Her father and mother were not so well satisfied with the situation; they already recognized that it held the elements of a tragedy. In their desire to give her every opportunity they had overreached themselves. She had outgrown Antioch as surely as she had outgrown her childhood, and it was as impossible to take her back to the one as to the other.

The doctor patted Oakley on the shoulder.

"I am glad you've dropped in. I hope, now you have made a beginning, we shall see more of you."

He was a portly man of fifty, with kindly eyes and an easy, gracious manner. Mrs. Emory was sedate and placid, a handsome, well kept woman, who administered her husband's affairs with a steadiness and economy that had made it possible for him to amass a comfortable fortune from his straggling country practice.

Constance soon decided that Oakley was not at all like the young men of Antioch as she recalled them, nor was he like the men she had known while under her aunt's tutelage—the leisurely idlers who drifted with the social tide, apparently without responsibility or care.

He proved hopelessly dense on those matters with which they had been perfectly familiar. It seemed to her that pleasure and accomplishment, as she understood them, had found no place in his life. The practical quality in his mind showed at every turn of the conversation. He appeared to hunger after hard facts, and the harder these facts were the better he liked them. But he offended in more glaring ways. He was too intense, and his speech too careful and precise, as if he were uncertain as to his grammar, as, indeed, he was.

Poor Oakley was vaguely aware that he was not getting on, and the strain told. It slowly dawned upon him that he was not her sort, that where he was concerned she was quite alien, quite foreign, with interests he could not comprehend, but which gave him a rankling sense of inferiority.

He had been moderately well satisfied with himself, as, indeed, he had good reason to be, but her manner was calculated to rob him of undue pride. He was not accustomed to being treated with mixed indifference and patronage. He asked himself resentfully how it happened that he had never before met such a girl. She fascinated him. The charm of her presence seemed to suddenly create and satisfy a love for the beautiful. With generous enthusiasm he set to work to be entertaining. Then a realization of the awful mental poverty in which he dwelt burst upon him for the first time. He longed for some light and graceful talent with which to bridge the wide gaps between the stubborn heights of his professional erudition.

He was profoundly versed on rates, grades, ballast, motive power and rolling stock, but this solid information was of no avail. He could on occasion talk to a swearing section boss with a grievance and a brogue in a way to make that man his friend for life. He also possessed the happy gift of inspiring his subordinates with a zealous sense of duty, but his social responsibilities numbed his faculties and left him a bankrupt for words.

The others gave him no assistance. Mrs. Emory, smiling and good humored, but silent, bent above her sewing. She was not an acute person, and the situation was lost upon her, while the doctor took only the most casual part in the conversation.

Oakley was wondering how he could make his escape when the doorbell rang. The doctor slipped from the parlor. When he returned he was not alone. He was preceded by a dark young man of one or two and thirty. This was Griffith Ryder, the owner of the Antioch Herald.

"My dear," said he, "Mr. Ryder." Ryder shook hands with the two ladies and nodded carelessly to Oakley. Then, with an easy, careless compliment, he lounged down in the chair at Miss Emory's side.

Constance had turned from the strenuous Oakley to the newcomer with a sense of unmistakable relief. Her mother, too, brightened visibly. She did not entirely approve of Ryder, but he was always entertaining in a lazy, indifferent fashion of his own.

"I see, Griff," the doctor said, "that you are going to support Kenyon. I declare it shakes my confidence in you," and he drew forward his chair. Like most Americans, the physician was something of a politician, and, as is also true of most Americans not professionally concerned in the hunt for office, this interest fluctuated between the two extremes of party enthusiasm before and nonpartisan disgust after elections.

Ryder smiled faintly. "Yes, we know just how much of a rascal Kenyon is, and we know nothing at all about the other fellow except that he wants the nomination, which is a bad sign. Suppose he should turn out a greater scamp! Really it's too much of a risk," he drawled, with an affectation of contempt.

"Your politics always were a shock to your friends, but this serves to explain them," remarked the doctor, with latent combativeness. But Ryder was not to be beguiled into argument. He turned again to Miss Emory.

"I am glad you've dropped in."

"Your father is not a practical politician or he would realize that it is only common thrift to send Kenyon back, for I take it he has served his country not without profit to himself. Besides, he is clamorous and persistent, and there seems no other way to dispose of him. It's either that or the penitentiary."

Constance laughed softly. "And so you think he can afford to be honest now? What shocking ethics!"

"That is my theory. Anyhow I don't see why your father should wish me to forego the mild excitement of assisting to re-elect my more or less disreputable friend. Antioch has had very little to offer one until you came," he added, with gentle deference. Miss Emory accepted the compliment with the utmost composure. Once she had been rather flattered by his attentions, but four years make a great difference. Either he had lost in cleverness or she had gained in knowledge.

He was a very tired young man. At one time he had possessed some expectations and numerous pretensions. The expectation had faded out of his life, but the pretense remained in the absence of any vital achievement. He was college bred and had gone in for literature. From literature he had drifted into journalism and had ended in Antioch as proprietor of the local paper, which he contrived to edit with a lively irresponsibility that won him few friends, though it did gain him some small reputation as a humorist.

His original idea had been that the management of a country weekly would afford him opportunity for the serious work which he believed he could do, but he had not done this serious work and was not likely to do it. He derived a fair income from the Herald, and he allowed his ambitions to sink into abeyance in spite of his cherished conviction that he was cut out for bigger.

Oakley had known Ryder only since the occasion of the doctor's dinner, and felt that he could never be more than an acquired taste, if at all.

The editor took the floor, figuratively speaking, for Miss Emory's presence made the effort seem worth his while. He promptly relieved Oakley of the necessity to do more than listen, an act of charity for which the latter was hardly as grateful as he should have been. He was no fool, but there were wide realms of enlightenment where he was an absolute stranger, so when Constance and Ryder came to talk of books and music, as they did finally, his only refuge was in silence and he went into a sort of intellectual quarantine. His reading had been strictly limited to scientific works and to the half dozen trade and technical journals to which he subscribed and from which he drew the larger part of his mental sustenance. As for music, he was familiar with the airs from the latest popular operas, but the masterpieces were utterly unknown, except such as had been brought to his notice by having sleeping cars named in their honor, a practice he considered very complimentary and possessing value as a strong commercial indorsement.

He felt more and more lonely and aloof as the evening wore on, and it was a relief when the doctor took him into the library to examine specimens of iron ore he had picked up west of Antioch, where there were undeveloped mineral lands for which he was trying to secure capital. This was a matter Oakley was interested in, since it might mean business for the road. He promptly forgot about Miss Emory and the objectionable Ryder and in ten minutes gave the doctor a better comprehension of the mode of procedure necessary to success than that gentleman had been able to learn in ten years of unfruitful attempting. He also supplied him with a few definite facts and figures in lieu of the multitude of glittering generalities on which he had been pinning his faith as a means of getting money into the scheme.

When at last they returned to the parlor they found another caller had arrived during their absence, a small, shabbily dressed man, with a high, bald head and weak, nearsighted eyes. It was Turner Joyce. Oakley knew him just as he was beginning to know every other man, woman and child in the town.

Joyce rose hastily, or, rather, stumbled to his feet as the doctor and Oakley entered the room.

"I told you I was coming up, doctor," he said apologetically. "Miss Constance has been very kind. She has been telling me of the galleries and studios. What a glorious experience!"

A cynical smile parted Ryder's thin lips.

"Mr. Joyce feels the isolation of his art here."

The little man blinked doubtfully at the speaker and then said, with a gentle, deprecatory gesture, "I don't call it art."

"You are far too modest. I have heard my foreman speak in the most complimentary terms of the portrait you did of his wife. He was especially pleased with the frame. You must know, Miss Constance, that Mr. Joyce usually furnishes the frames, and his pictures go home ready to the wire to hang on the wall."

Mr. Joyce continued to blink doubtfully at Ryder. He scarcely knew how to take the allusion to the frames. It was a sore point with him.

Constance turned with a displeased air from Ryder to the little artist. There was a faint, wistful smile on her lips. He was a rather pathetic figure to her, and she could not understand how Ryder dared or had the heart to make fun.

"I shall enjoy seeing all that you have done, Mr. Joyce, and of course I wish to see Ruth. Why didn't she come with you tonight?"

"Her cousin, Lou Bentick's wife, is dead, and she has been over at his house all day. She was quite worn out, but she sent you her love."

Ryder glanced again at Miss Emory and said, with hard cynicism: "The notice will appear in Saturday's Herald, with a tribute from her pastor. I never refuse his verse. It invariably contains some scathing comment on the uncertainty of the Baptist faith as a means of salvation."

But this was wasted on Joyce. Ryder rose, with a sigh.

"Well, we toilers must think of the morrow."

Oakley accepted this as a sign that it was time to go. Joyce, too, stumbled across the room to the door, and the three men took their leave together. As they stood on the steps the doctor said cordially, "I hope you will both come again soon, and you, too, Turner," he added kindly.

Ryder moved off quickly with Oakley. Joyce would have dropped behind, but the latter made room for him at his side. No one spoke until Ryder, halting on a street corner, said, "Sorry, but it's out of my way to go any farther unless you'll play a game of billiards with me at the hotel, Oakley."

"Thanks," curtly. "I don't play billiards."

"No? Well, it is a waste of time, I suppose. Good night!" And he turned down the side street, whispering softly.

"A very extraordinary young man," murmured Joyce, rubbing the tip of his nose meditatively with a painty forefinger. "And with quite an extraordinary opinion of himself."

A sudden feeling of friendliness prompted Oakley to tuck his hand through the little artist's arm. "How is Bentick bearing the loss of his wife?" he asked. "You said she was your cousin."

"No, not mine; my wife's. Poor fellow! He feels it keenly. They had not been married long, you know."

CHAPTER III.

OAKLEY took the satchel from General Cornish's hand as the latter stepped from his private car.

"You got my note, I see," he said. "I think I'll go to the hotel for the rest of the night."

He glanced back over his shoulder as he turned with Dan toward the bus which was waiting for them at the end of the platform.

"I guess no one else got off here. It's not much of a railroad center."

"No," agreed Oakley impartially; "there are towns where the traffic is heavier."

Arrived at the hotel, Oakley led the way upstairs to the general's room. It adjoined his own. Cornish paused on the threshold until he had lighted the gas.

"Light the other burner, will you?" he requested. "There, thanks, that's better."

He was a portly man of sixty, with a large head and heavy face. His father had been a Vermont farmer, a man of position and means according to the easy standard of his times. When the civil war broke out young Cornish, who was just commencing the practice of the law, had enlisted as a private in one of the first regiments raised by his state. Prior to this he had overflowed with fervid oratory and had tried hard to look like Daniel Webster, but a skirmish or two opened his eyes to the fact that the waging of war was a sober business and the polishing off of his sentences not nearly as important as the polishing off of the enemy. He was still willing to die for the Union if there was need of it, but while his life was spared it was well to get on. The numerical importance of number one was a belief too firmly implanted in his nature to be overthrown by any patriotic aberration.

His own merits, which he was among the first to recognize, and the solid backing his father was able to give won him promotion. He had risen to the command of a regiment, and when the war ended was brevetted a brigadier general of volunteers along with a score of other anxious warriors who wished to carry the title of general back into civil life, for he was an amiable sort of a Shylock, who seldom overlooked his pound of flesh, and he

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