



(Continued)

Raxon was aroused from his pleasant reflections by a noise on the door. It was Alfred, the dark footman, who entered and told him that he was wanted on the long-distance telephone. Raxon shut the precious envelope in his wall safe and passed out, not even glancing at the man who stood respectfully at the door.

When Fleming Bradney was assured that Raxon had gone, he hurried back into the room. Then he did a curious thing. He knelt down by one of the bookcases and pried back a board with a screw-driver. Then he peered into the darkness where he had recently been mistaken for a rat. Bradney reached into this space and pulled out Nita, head first.

She wore riding breeches and golf stockings, and at first could hardly stand upright. The constraint of the position had become torture. In Nita's hands was a notebook, several pencils, and a flashlight. Every word which had passed was taken down. It was her task now to go to her room and transcribe it for Peter Milman's benefit.

It was not until the two had passed the danger zone that they spoke. "Well," Bradney demanded, "did you get anything?"

"I got everything," she answered. He wondered why there was no exultation in her voice.

Bradney resumed his duties, which consisted mainly in handing refreshments to thirsty dancers. For a little while he stood by Barnes.

"It's all right," Bradney whispered; "she says she has everything."

"She must be tickled to death at getting it—eh?"

"On the contrary, she looked depressed. I didn't understand it at the time. Of course, there was physical discomfort and constraint, and the possibility of being found out."

"She'll be all right tomorrow," said Barnes gleefully.

Later he had the opportunity to talk it over with Viscount de Guillain.

"Well," said the sculptor eagerly. "What happened?"

He listened to what Barnes had to say.

"Has Nita shown you anything yet?"

"No. None of us can go to her room because she's supposed to be out for the evening, and it's locked. Bradney says she wasn't as cheerful as she might have been. I wonder why."

"She might have heard something damaging to McKimber."

"Why should that distress her?"

"Haven't you yet seen that your girl and Robin are in love with one another? My God," Malet went on passionately, to Barnes' extreme surprise, "are you so blind?"

Floyd Malet had witnessed the whole affair. He was more sensitive to it than his companions, because he had fallen hopelessly in love with her himself. It was one of those charming and romantic attachments which come to men of middle years and bring them at first an agony that time transmutes to the truest of friendships, never wholly separated from the love which brought it to flower.

"Nita would do nothing to upset our plans," Barnes said. "If she has one quality above others that I admire, it is loyalty. She'll stick by us."

"I didn't doubt her loyalty," Malet said quietly. "There is something which brings in its train great suffering. I leave tomorrow. I'm afraid I have not been much use."

"Nita's as good as fired," said Barnes. "Gertrude Raxon fights her all the time. I shall be glad to get out of it. I've been talking to the Swedish maids about it. They seem certain she's going and don't want her generous wage-scale to be cut down."

Barnes was presently called into Mr. Raxon's presence.

"It appears," said Raxon, "that you told the other man to fetch me to the telephone for a long-distance call. Central tells me there have been no long-distance calls since luncheon. How did that happen?" He looked keenly at Enry.

"Central!" said Enry with lofty scorn. "If I was you, sir, I'd complain about that young woman. I've had to speak to her very severe myself, but she don't care. With your permission, I'd like to call her up and give her a piece of my mind."

"It would not be a valuable present," Raxon said. "I will see that this does not occur again."

"Anything else, sir?" Enry asked, a trace of insolence in his voice.



"Nita's as Good as Fired," Said Barnes.

CHAPTER X

Mrs. McKimber was only concerned that the girl her son chose should be sufficiently in love with him. She loved beauty, and had been attracted to Agatha at first sight. Mrs. McKimber was prepared to help her son. She realized that it would not be easy to bring her husband to agree with her. McKimber had learned that a senator, even from the Empire state, does not ex officio find the doors open to him that shelter the great names in American society. He wished Robin to marry into a family which had entree to the best.

When Robin had gladly made the sacrifice, he found the girl put obstacles in the way. She did not flutter to his arms. She was no beguiling to his King Cophetua. Gloomily he wondered if she was fond of some other man. The viscount was good looking; he had poise and breeding. Agatha had been brought up in Europe, where disparity in age is less a bar to marriage than in the United States. They had met before. They had common acquaintances, and the De Guillains, he was told, were all rich. Robin smoked many cigarettes over the problem. He was surprised to hear a knock at his door. It was his father who came in.

"Why, father," he cried, "is there anything the matter?" Mr. McKimber was stooped. His bold, resolute carriage was gone. He looked as one might who had undergone severe mental or physical strain.

"Not a thing," said the elder, with an effort at smiling. "I've been thinking, Robbie, and I see I have made a great many mistakes in my life."

Robin listened in silence. Never before had he heard his father in anything but an assured and contented mood.

"I tried to dictate to you awhile ago," said McKimber, "and I tried to dictate to the girl you're fond of. I told you if you didn't marry a girl I approved of we should pull apart. I told her that if anyone knowing what money you would inherit thought she could get it by marrying you without my consent, there wouldn't be any money."

Robin's face hardened.

"You had no right to do that. We may as well understand one another. I've asked Miss Brown to marry me. I haven't your social ambitions. If she won't marry me, nobody else will be asked."

"That's the right spirit," said McKimber. His son looked at him amazed. "A man who lets another dictate about whom he's to marry is a weakling and a coward. I didn't. The Grahams, all except old William, hated me. I wasn't well born or educated. I was a machinist and my hands were thick-fingered, and I hadn't any parlor tricks. I married your mother in spite of their lies and plots to separate us."

"Do you mean to say you approve of Miss Brown?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I suppose you are wanting to know why I have changed. Robbie, don't ask me. There are things that happen in a man's life that change him instantly. It may be the ghost of old follies which rises to remind him of what he had forgotten. No, don't ask me, Robbie, but just bring the girl to your mother and me. She shall never

want for love where we are."

He walked heavily from the room. His son could not comprehend this astounding change. There was a stricken look in his father's face. Not since Robin was a boy had he been called "Robbie." But his speculation on the cause of the change was lost in joy at what it meant to him. Agatha told him she would be back at about ten. He looked at the clock. It was past two. Eight weary hours before he could see her!

At seven he was on the golf links playing a few holes. Three hours to wait. At eight o'clock he saw her coming slowly in his direction.

"I didn't think you were going to return so early," he said, smiling. "Agatha, how lovely you look."

"I feel miserable," she said soberly. "Darling," he whispered, "how can you feel miserable on this bright, glorious morning?"

Nothing could depress him now. There was a look in her eyes that told him what he wanted to know.

"You know, Robin, one isn't always free to do as one likes. I think if I had foreseen this week I should not have had courage enough to endure it. Robin, we must both of us forget it."

"Forget the only week I have lived," he cried. "Never." Her air of dejection communicated itself to him. "Tell me why I should?"

"There are so many things," she said slowly. "One is your father's objection. I like him because he sets such store by you, but I'm not going to come between you and him."

Robin laughed joyously. "Don't worry about him. He's for you now just as strongly as mother is. He thinks you are just the girl to look after me for life. You've conquered him. He just had to give in, so what more is there to say?"

Looking at him it seemed to the girl that the task she had set herself was beyond her strength. Why, she asked herself, had she kept heart-whole all her life to find in Robin McKimber the only man she could love? How could she tell him that she must choose between her sworn loyalty to her father and his comrades and her love for him? She was associated with men who had determined to get from Raxon's safe the documents which incriminated John McKimber and made the realization of his ambitions impossible. She saw, very clearly, what course Peter Milman would pursue, and how in the carrying out of his plans of revenge he would have no consideration for the McKimbbers.

"There is more to say," she told him, her voice trembling a little. "My dear, it is the hardest thing to say. Robin, it's good-by."

"Good-by," he repeated. "Agatha, what do you mean?"

"That I am leaving here today and shall not see you again. Don't ask me to explain. I can't tell you anything except that there is something which makes all the things I hoped impossible."

She could see the gray under his tanned skin. She knew she had wounded him bitterly. There was a terrible quietness in his distinct, clear voice.

"Then you never really loved me?"

"I did," she said simply; "that's what makes it so hard."

"If you love me," he cried, "nothing can come between us."

"Something has come between us. I do love you, Robin, and I shall never care for anyone else; but there is someone who needs me more than you do."

"I'm not going to say good-by," he said gently.

"But you must," she insisted. "It is all over, Robin. One little week of happiness and years and years of regret."

Suddenly she turned from him and walked away. He followed with the seething gestures until he saw that De Guillain was approaching. It seemed to him that Agatha almost ran to the elder man.

"What have you been doing on this lovely morning?" Malet asked.

"Breaking my heart, I think," she answered. "Please walk back to the house with me. I don't want to have to speak to anyone."

Malet was not deceived by the smile with which she tried to hide her suffering. He wished he had words to help her. He walked to the big house, his heart aching because she was hurt. He wondered what it was about. Of course, it had to do with young Robin McKimber. He felt he hated the tall, handsome lad who had the power so to wound this lovely daughter of his friend. Vague desires to administer chastisement swept over him and departed. What right had he to interfere? And what but harm does one do who attempts to adjust lovers' quarrels?

After breakfast Mrs. Raxon sent for her social secretary.

"Your month is up today," she said. "I do not think you need remain. I shall pay you for another month in lieu of notice."

"Why are you sending me away?" Miss Brown asked quietly.

"You ought to know," Gertrude Raxon cried. "We've watched you trying to get Robin McKimber as if you were one of our friends instead of being hired to help."

Miss Brown could even smile.

"I am quite sure," she said sweetly, "that nobody who knows me would ever suspect me of being your friend."

"And you needn't apply to us for recommendations," shouted the girl.



"Please Walk Back to the House With Me. I Don't Want to Have to Speak to Anyone."

"I shall not," said Miss Brown calmly. She gave a little smile and bow and left them.

Mrs. Raxon wished she could walk like that. She was filled with a sudden sense of having acted badly. She had never let her daughters know how much she admired her social secretary. The girl had made no vulgar scene, as Mrs. Raxon had dreaded. She had not raised her voice; nor had she begged for another chance. She was calm, aloof, superior. Mrs. Raxon looked at her own daughter a little sourly.

"How I'm to arrange the menus and see the servants do their work I'm sure I don't know."

"Hire someone else," said Gertrude, "and let me see her first."

Half an hour later a taxi came to the front door and Miss Agatha Brown left Great Rock. Paul Raxon did not learn of it until later. He only hoped the household efficiency would not be impaired. Miss Brown had had her uses. He had learned a great deal from the criticism of one used to the homes of the great. And, he mused, it might be better for him in the long run that she was replaced by someone of rather less physical attractions. He had been thinking too much about her.

"My dears," she had said to her footmen, "you must stay on if you can until Uncle Peter has read what I have written. He may have other uses for you here."

The blond footman dropped his Cockney accent and the lackey's manner as he kissed her. "Shan't be very long here, I expect," he said. "I'm getting tired of it. Just as I open a bottle of wine and light a good cigar some d-d nobody rings for ice water, or the fire needs logs, or there's a mouse in a bedroom and I'm elected to slay it."

"But, daddy," she reproved him, "you are here on duty, and a very great deal more may depend on you than you think. I've been awfully proud of the way you carried it off."

Neeland Barnes went about his work with greater spirit.

"When I think of a man of your genius doing this sort of thing," she said to Fleming Bradney as she shook hands, "I can't admire you enough."

She left them, smiling brilliantly. They felt she had the secret of success with her. Yet, alone in the taxicab, she cried unrestrainedly.

Robin McKimber did not find out she was gone until luncheon. The Raxon girls had not forgiven him. He was so obviously in love with the despised Agatha that they admitted collective and individual failure.

Robin chafed that his parents seemed to have decided to stay a few more days. He did not like to leave at once; he feared people would think he had pursued Miss Brown. All day long his father was with Raxon in his distant suite. The delay seemed intolerable. More than anything else Robin wanted to find where Agatha had gone. His appeal to Sneed brought no results. Then he thought of De Guillain.

Robin had not hitherto liked this man. He had been jealous of all who seemed intimate with the girl. But he decided to make a clean breast of it.

"I have asked Miss Brown to marry me," he said quietly. "Yesterday it seemed as though she loved me. This morning, out on the links, she said she had to go, and something had happened which made everything impossible. Perhaps she has heard things about me that I could explain. Can't you help me to find her?"

Malet did not answer immediately. His first impulse was to help young McKimber. But he remembered in time that he was engaged in a conspiracy in which the elder McKimber might be involved. For the time the two must be kept apart. It would not do to let him suspect he knew her present address.

"Alas, that I cannot help you," he returned. "Madame la Duchesse de Fromage-Verte, at whose chateau in the Department of the Loire I first met Miss Brown, is now traveling in Tuscany. Perhaps a cablegram addressed to her might bring results."

"How do you spell her name?"

Robin demanded.

A few minutes later he came face to face with Mrs. Raxon and asked her bluntly how it was she had engaged an inefficient person.

"She had references from the countess of Horsham, at Horsham in England, and Mrs. Hamilton Buxton of Westbury Old Manor."

It was her daughters who pointed out later that he had obtained the addresses he sought by a ruse. "They were very bitter."

Mrs. Hamilton Buxton would probably not have received a stranger had she not seen him coming up the drive in his fast car. She was a lady of many loves, and she had once seen him at Piping Rock, although her own set did not stoop to intimacy with that in which the McKimbbers moved. She liked handsome young men.

"But, my dear Mr. McKimber," she cried, "I have never even heard of a Miss Agatha Brown. If she used references signed by me, she forged them."

Her experienced eyes had shown her that this beau garcon was in love, and probably with an adventuress.

Instantly he drove to a Western Union office and dispatched a cable, with answer prepaid, to the countess of Horsham, Horsham, England. Until the reply came he was hardly a successful or amiable guest.

"Lady Horsham," he read, "has never heard of Agatha Brown and recommends Robin McKimber to put the matter in the hands of the police."

There remained that great French noblewoman, the duchess of something or another. His mother saw him peering uncertainly at a piece of paper.

"What's that look like to you?" he asked. He did not know French, and the name was indistinct. Mrs. McKimber read the language easily. He did not want to make a mistake. He determined to describe Agatha this time. Possibly she had adopted a nom de guerre.

"It means," said Mrs. McKimber, "the duchess of Green-Cheese."

"Couldn't there be such a person?" Robin was flushing red with anger.

"Of course not. Where are you going to in such a hurry?"

He had no time to answer. He wanted very much to see the viscount. But here again he met disappointment. Sneed informed him that he had gone and left no forwarding address for his mail. A friend at his club advised Robin to consult the new Almanach de Bruxelles, in whose pages the nobility of continental Europe is described. There was no men-

(Continued on page 5)

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