

The Vanishing Men

BY RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

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(Continued From Last Week)

It may have been true that Brena had in her eyes...

and sang persons who were comically without ideas or taste in a round of interest in such things as straw-berry festivals, new hats, pink celluloid hair receivers, Sunday newspapers, half pounds of chocolates, card games, etiquette, naphin-rings, the domestic lives of actresses and royalty, souvenir spoons, picture postal cards, talking machines, baseball scores, spiritualism, and decorated sentiments or vulgarities framed for the wall, was an anomaly like planting a peony among the cabbages.

But Brena, conscious of this, found herself wondering whether every human being did not have the feeling that he or she was a gem in an inferior setting. Her mother's sense of

she looked at each face at the table severely.

"But that's nothing," she added. "His own father, who is dying of Bright's, hasn't heard from him—not for three months."

"Oh," said Brena as if reflecting and weighing the matter. She left the table, and going into the front room, she played in lively time upon the piano there—a piano with a sheeny red case and with a tone intended to be the startling opposite of the tin-pan attributes of old pianos. This one had tones extravagantly round like the softness of an elocutionist reading poetry.

Brena had remembered this piano and described its affection. It was nothing to her that those who heard her play on it said: "Oh!—She makes it talk," for they were the same persons who said, "What beautiful flowers! They're like wax!"

Brena at the piano that evening felt as she always felt, that she was alone in the world—the friend of certain dogs and cats which lived in houses along the way home from work.

It came in the form of Compton Parmalee. Brena had been writing in her hot room under the roof. It was still hot, although the Texas fall had come and Brena, with her sleeves rolled back from her shapely young arms by their cream-colored skin, had been bending over her little table trying to see down in the form of a written drama the story of the one other girl who worked now in the Porto Rican Embroidery store. The story was not as dramatic a story as it may have appeared to Brena at seventeen. Nor could Brena have written a play because she had no knowledge whatever of the craft of writing plays, which she later found out is a matter of skilled carpentry and not inspired, as Brena had conceived it. For all of this she now asks to be forgiven, since everyone, usually in extreme youth, writes a play and nearly everyone, as Brena, started and surprised at the secret labor, thrusts the manuscript into a drawer when a knock comes.

It was Mrs. Wilkie. "Well!" she said, exploding her usual astonishment, inquiry and disapproval in one puffed word.

Brena smiled put yourself to rights!" said the landlady, holding the edge of the varnished yellow door. "You better dress your best! You've got a caller."

"To see me?" "Yes, to see you. And such a caller! It's Mr. Parmalee."

Brena stiffened. She asked: "What does he want to see me for?" "I don't know," Mrs. Wilkie admitted. "I certainly wish I did. He has oodles of money! He speculated during this year and he's made a fortune!"

"I will go down just as I am," said Brena calmly and firmly. "I do not care about his fortune. Mrs. Wilkie, I want to find out what he wants of me."

Compton Parmalee did not appear at all anxious to say what he wanted. He was a small, wily man, careful of his dress, who above everything else was self-contained. He thrust his glance. As Brena Selcoss came in the door he thrust a glance at her and then looked up at the ceiling as if his mind was digesting that which his gray eyes had photographed. As she came toward him inquiringly, he rose, thrust another glance at her and looked out the window considering. When she stopped he thrust once more and sat down looking at the carpet. Everyone who ever knew Compton Parmalee will remember the characteristic inspection of that daring speculator.

"Are you Miss Selcoss?" he asked, as if now that he was able to fasten his case upon her, he found it improbable that the girl he saw in all her freshness of youth was the girl he had come to see.

"Yes," she said.

French pear and California black walnut roots are resistant to the mushroom root rot fungus in Oregon while Japanese sand pear and English walnut roots are highly susceptible, reports the O. A. C. experiment station.

rumor was in her ear and she saw her escape not by fluttering at the walls but by climbing over them. Even at seventeen, no doubt her face had begun to take on that calm of maturity with its tenderness and patience and wistfulness and understanding as if she carried eternal hopes and bore the sufferings of all mankind; it was only her mother's sense of humor that thrust its light through this mountainous and heroic expression. Later, the punctuation of fear, expressed only through her eyes, had become a characteristic interruption.

Mrs. Wilkie often mentioned the journey to St. Louis. She would have given Brena a week's board to know why the girl had gone, but even Mrs. Wilkie sensed some quality in this beautiful child which made her a creature of a different species and Brena even asked twice whether Hennepin had written. She chose moments when the two other women boarders and the accountant of the Southern Pacific were at the table.

"Written!" said Mrs. Wilkie, puckering her little mouth as if she were going to whistle her sentence. "Written? Not he! But I might expect that; I have never found that I could expect gratitude—from anybody."

This was the man who withheld his questions, hid his time and gazed at Brena Selcoss with frank admiration on his absurdly youthful and academic face. He turned away from her, walked to the window and looked out at the night, at the wall of the neighboring house upon which the light of the full moon was bluish white, and then, like an actor who has rehearsed the part of a cool and collected man he walked toward Brena and said clearly and calmly, "I've come for information."

He could not see the slightest quiver in the girl's eyes, though he looked for it.

"Yes," said he. "May I close this door?"

Mrs. Wilkie, who was outside pretending to read the names in the telephone book, saw the front room door gently swing to and heard the latch.

"How old are you?" Parmalee was asking Brena.

"Eighteen this month," she said.

"Well, that's surprising—very, indeed," he said. "You are more of a woman than a girl."

Brena was not pleased by the patronizing manner of this rich cotton man. She said promptly:

"The information you wanted? Was it about me?"

Parmalee looked up with a single sharp thrust of his glance; he adjusted his tie and his opinion of Miss Selcoss at one time. He put upon his unwrinkled, clean-shaven face a typical ingratiating smile. He took his pointed chin, which, combined with his upslanting eyebrows to give him a satanic expression, not unpleasing, in his small, white, cold hand.

He stopped, simulating perhaps a reluctance to speak the name.

"Jim Hennepin," he said. "An employee—or perhaps a better word is associate."

Without a flutter in her dark eyes, Brena said:

"Oh, then you do not want to see me—you want to see Mr. Hennepin's aunt—Mrs. Wilkie."

Parmalee shook his head from side to side. "Perhaps we'd better sit down," he suggested.

Her face flushed as she told him she would prefer to stand, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

"Has he heard from him?" he asked. "Today?"

"No," said Brena. "She hasn't had a line from him since he left Dallas. There isn't anything at the office."

"No, his accounts are all right," replied Parmalee. "It appears that you are anxious on that point—in his behalf. Are you fond of him?"

"Not in the slightest," Brena answered with a voice which showed no emotion whatever; she might have been asked whether she liked cold raw sliced tomatoes.

"Well, that's surprising—very, indeed," he said with a thrust of his glance. "You were friendly?"

pharmatee had come to Texas from the desert country of southern California when he was twenty-six. He knew that country well. In his years in Dallas, acting as a cotton commission man and commodity gambler, he had collected a large and valuable library about the whole historic Southwest, its Indian tribes, the Pueblo, the strange customs and secrets of savage men carrying some of the traits and traditions of prehistoric Aztecs, and the Jesuit missionaries. It was said by some persons that his quiet ways were a veneer put on by some studious years in Berkeley at the university, but rumor had it that Parmalee with his rather pale, young face that made him look thirty instead of forty-three, his small, well-shaped hands, his immaculate linen, his soft voice, had once shot a man across a roulette table which he himself owned and operated.

That he was ever a man of violence is very doubtful. He was an unquivering gambler, but not with his personal safety; his personal safety was his principal concern. He wore gloves on all occasions—to keep the germs off his hands; he had his massive mahogany desk, in the office building across from the new hotel, wiped down every morning with an antiseptic; long years before the practice had become a worthy fashion he had himself examined periodically by specialists. He was always tearing contagion. He gargled. He snuffed. He sprayed. He read medical journals. He feared cancer above all other things. He loved his life so much that he had loved no woman for many years; the monopoly of this devotion excluded competition. He loved his life with an unending passion; he ruined it by fearing to lose it.

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"Yes," she said. "I suppose that we were very friendly. I do not know why you are asking me these questions."

"That will appear," he said gravely. "You will see that I am your friend in this, Miss Selcoss. I think you will say that I came here to do you a service."

For just a flick of time something rose from the depths of Compton Parmalee and Brena saw it. It was almost an effluvia of the buried being in him—the stir of a dying thing trying to come to life. It was half a benevolent love of his fellow man; half the call of an isolated, warped and lonely soul. It was the thing which she saw later and to which she gave in her folly, but now it flickered for a moment on that strange esthetic gambler's face and was gone.

"You telegraphed to Jim Hennepin from St. Louis," he said. "That telegram was opened."

"When?" asked Brena. "When it came? Of course."

"I know." "And why now do you come to me?" "You needn't tell me anything you do not wish to tell. I assume that you arranged to meet him in St. Louis."

Brena put her hand up and felt her throat. It was hot—the skin was not under the cold hand.

"It was a great mistake," she said in a low voice—"a great mistake."

"The idea was marriage?" "It was my idea—if I had any clear idea."

"You were very young." "Yes, I think so—looking back."

"You know what was in Jim Hennepin's mind?" "She did not answer."

"The dirty dog!" said Parmalee. "What a smiling face he had!" Brena shuddered.

"Well, here is the telegram," said the visitor. "I opened it myself. There is no one else who knows it was ever sent."

He wet his thin lips; he said: "It is a secret—ours," and stretched out his hand with the yellow envelope held daintily in his fingers.

The girl, however, was looking searchingly into his eyes; she was young but not too young to be suspicious of a secret shared by two, when one treats that secret as if it were a kind of asset.

Apparently he read her thoughts, for he said hurriedly, "You needn't feel under any obligation to me for keeping the secret. I have my stains and blights, but they are not of that kind. As I said, all I came for was information."

She took the telegram, which he had held toward her, and nodded.

"Of course, if he were to meet you he probably told you more. He probably told you where he was going, eh—and why?"

He leaned forward as he asked this question and turned one side of his face as if the answer could best be heard by his right ear alone.

"No," she said. "I spoke of making a great sum of money, of getting it from some place."

"He did not say where?" "No."

Parmalee sighed as if he had gone up a blind alley and had found its end.

"He spoke of some call—some message," said Brena.

The broker's eyes widened until they were in a staring distention.

"Hi! So he did! What did he tell you?"

"Nothing."

Parmalee sat down in a chair and stared at the carpet for a long time.

"It is very peculiar," he said at last. "He left you to meet him in St. Louis. He went on an errand of some strange kind and refused to tell you what it was. Well! Well! And then you waited in St. Louis—in vain."

"How did you know he didn't come?" "Your telegram."

Brena said: "I waited three days. I waited. I was frightened. But I grew more in those three days than I have ever grown in three years."

"Yes," said Parmalee with a flicker of tenderness again. "I can understand."

"You have heard no word from him since?" "No word. And I thought that it might be my duty to tell—"

"No, no, no!" exclaimed the man, jumping up. "If there is any duty in the world it is not to tell. Few would ever understand—as I understand. It would do no good. If I can do nothing, what purpose would it serve you to try? For God's sake think of yourself."

"And I promised him," she said. "What difference does it make that I see clearly now what a man he is—my promise to keep silent?"

"Quiet!" commanded Parmalee. "Not so loud. No purpose is served by stirring up a search."

"A search? You mean that you do not know where he is, Mr. Parmalee?"

The Ancient One Gives Advice

Martha Manning Thomas

"I WAS very young. He was also very chubby. There was a kind of pink, shining newness about him delightful to behold. And he stood waiting on the near side of twelve o'clock midnight."

"I WAS very old. He was also very bent. There was a kind of shining sadness in his eyes, as if he had seen more than any one else in the world. And he stood on the far side of twelve o'clock midnight."

"What I can't understand," chirped up Chubby, "is why anyone need look so aged when they are only a year old. People would take you for Methuselah, any day."

"What I can't understand," rumbled the ancient one, "is how I ever looked as pink and inexperienced as you!"

So there they stood regarding each other, Chubby and the ancient one.

"Why must you look so old?" persisted Chubby. "Because I have lived more than a million lives!"

"Whew!" whistled Chubby, "How do you make that out?"

"You'll know well enough, my son," said the ancient one, "this time next year."

"But tell me now!" insisted the young cherub. "I look old because I have been part of the sorrow, the gladness, the misery, the joy and happiness of every one in the world. I have been a year, every day, hour and minute in the lives of people all over the globe. They could no more escape me than I could lose them. We were one,—I and those teeming millions. I will live with them as long as they live, through the influence of what happened during our year of acquaintance. I may live after them, not only in memory, but in the good or bad they accomplished while they knew me, and I, them."

Chubby wrinkled up his white, babyish brow and tried to follow the words of the ancient one. But he could not. It was impossible for him. He could see and feel and act, perhaps, but he could not think wisely; he needed experience.

"One-two-three-four-five— . . ." the bells began ringing out the midnight hour.

"Goodbye, son!" called out the ancient one, "May you see as much happiness as sorrow. And may you learn to read the high hopes in people's hearts, and see what they see, no matter how differently their lives turn out. This is all that really matters . . . remember . . ." the voice of the ancient one grew faint and far-away. "remember . . . son,—it is their aspirations . . . that really count . . . not their visible and worldly success . . ."

He was quite gone now. He was part of yesterday.

Chubby stepped over the threshold into his first minute of being The Happy New Year.

"That's all very well," he thought, "but I can't understand why he should look so old!"

Perhaps he will by midnight of 1926!

FARM REMINDERS

Potato seed balls are of little use except to some one interested in developing new potato varieties. Most workers along this line do not care for seed balls unless they know the plant supplying the pollen also. Seeds may be washed out of the balls like tomato seed. These seeds planted in a green house in March, transplanted to cold frames in April and to the field in May, often produce fair sized tubers the first year. Much variation always occurs and selection and testing must follow for several years.

Experience at the Astoria experiment station shows that those varieties of ruta bagas that grow deeper in the ground are more likely to stand severe freezing in Oregon than those that stick up in the air. Some of the more resistant roots seem a little more fibrous than the more tender varieties.

Bacterial gummosis of cherry in western Oregon is capable of wrecking a fine healthy young cherry orchard in the first few years of its life. Orchardists who use mazzard cherry seedling trunk and frame work for all varieties of sweet cherries find that the bodies of such trees nearly always escape this destructive disease.

Grain is often sowed in Oregon during favorable weather through the entire winter, says the O. A. C. experiment station. There is less chance of loss with wheat that has been treated with copper carbonate than with the old treatments but there is always the chance that the grain will start and be caught before well established when there is a period of surface freezes and thaws. Unless there is too much land to handle in the spring it is probably best to wait till spring opens up and sow the standard spring varieties.

For Sale—(earhart knitting machine. Value, \$35. Will trade for anything I can use or sell cheap for cash. Bridge's Second Hand Store. Adv p 5-6

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