

The Vanishing Men



BY RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

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(Continued From Last Week)

the figure of Parmalee who had risen as she had come in.

With a gesture of gallantry he took her furs from her and put them across the white papers on his desk, and when she sat down he touched those furs carefully for several moments. He might have been thrusting his glances at her, but she could not tell. Dusk had entered the office, too, and he became only a figure of two dimensions, without thickness, from which after a moment there came a voice which Brena scarcely recognized, so weary was it and yet so unrelaxed and tense.

"You are sure that all you told me was accurate," he said.

She needed no explanation; she said at once. "Of course," in a tone of indignation.

"I know," said he. "But there was just one more thing. Did he leave a paper with you?"

"A paper? No, he left no paper. He gave me—"

She hesitated and went on: "He gave me some money, and there was a little scrap of paper in it. I remember, because I did not know whether to keep it or throw it away. He might have wanted it. It had on it an arrow drawn with ink and a lizard drawn beside it and two words under-

neath. 'THIS SIGN.'"

"Well, that was nothing," said Parmalee. "Where is it now?"

"It disappeared. You haven't—"

"No. Not a word. He has gone." She was silent.

"In fact, it was not because of anything to do with it that I wanted to see you," the man said. "You will say when you know why I sent for you that you have never heard of anything like it in all your life."

Brena sat down.

"Did you ever hear of a man who had made a final killing—who a year ago was juggling riches and insolency in one hand and success and failure in the other, wanting to talk about himself to an eighteen-year-old orphan?"

"No," she said with a little laugh. "I never heard of that."

"I sent for you to tell you about myself—not about what I have been—but about what I am. I did this after having seen you once and once only. It is because there was a sympathy between us that was most extraordinary—more than you know."

"I think I understand."

"It is not love," said he. "Let me make it plain that I am not deluded, that I am not in love with you. You will never hear me talking about the love of youth. I am not old, but the passion and idealism of love have gone—worn out perhaps in taking risks and jarring to pieces within while like a carved marble on the outside. No, I will not make love to you."

"No," said Brena, giving affirmation.

He played with the furs a little more.

"Ten months ago I scraped together all the money I could and I threw it into a final play. That's neither here nor there. I am now worth a little over two million dollars, I am through with business, with trading, with speculation, with this office, and with Dallas, Texas—forever!"

"And now—" asked Brena.

He laughed. "That is it—What? The fur stole on the desk in front of him he smoothed gently with his open hand. Brena made no suggestion as to what he should do with his life, and after a moment he went on. "There is left to me now collecting books, travel, perhaps an opportunity to do some one a kindness now and then and taking good care of my health. I shall buy a painting occasionally. Can you think of anything else?"

To Brena the problem was new; she did not have a ready answer.

"I have burned out," said Parmalee. "I am ashes."

Of this he spoke cheerfully as if he had repeated it over and over to himself until it had lost its blackness and now gave the strange pleasure that all final conclusions of human limitations and disasters give at last when they are accepted.

"You see, I am not a great man," he explained. "It was necessary for me to throw all of myself into the fight—every resource I could summon. I do not smoke. I know as much about smoking as any man alive. I have measured its effect with accuracy. It is a greater devitalizer than alcohol. But I do not drink, either. I have conserved and guarded all my sensations until I have none. All my life—my last twenty years of life—I have promised myself indulgences—indulgences of gigantic and exquisite design, but now that I can have them, this body of mine rejects them all, refuses them all. Fate laughs in my ear and says, 'You're done for. The most sensuous pleasure you shall have will be the flavor of that apple sauce you have eaten for lunch for fifteen years and will eat for lunch for the rest of your days.' Isn't this a grim joke, Miss Selcoss?"

"I do not know," said Brena uneasily.

Even in the dark he sensed her desire to go.

"Don't leave me," he said with a voice which almost broke into a low sob. "You are the only one who can understand."

"All right," she said, astonished that she had become important to anyone. "I'm sorry, Mr. Parmalee."

"Let me tell you something else," he went on. "I have dreamed of a certain prestige—a kind of background of life that I would enjoy when I was ready. To that end I have given liberally to campaign funds. Next year if I wish I can be minister to Portugal. Personally I think this is a grim jest. It is the system, however."

Brena clasped her ungloved hands in her lap and thrust her arms out until it appeared that she was expressing something of the thrill of imagination which the picture of diplomatic life in a European capital had given her.

"But I shall not take the office," said Parmalee.

Brena uttered an exclamation.

"No, I shall not take it. I do not want more brilliance. I want more dim light. I like the dusk. I do not want to see my name in printed letters. I never want to see it again. I do not want men and women to say, 'That is Compton Parmalee. I want all strangers to neglect me. I want to live in a dim light—like this—now in this office.'"

He sighed.

"I've made many mistakes," he said. "I want now to become buried, to be unseen—like a ghost."

Brena protested. "There are so many things you can buy with your money," she said.

"Only one," he replied sharply.

"And that—"

"Is you."

She pushed her chair back from the desk with both her hands.

"You need not be alarmed," said his calm voice. "I have stated it purposefully at its worst. It is better for you to have this thought presented at first and perhaps we can overcome it later. I put it in the terms of the world will use; Dallas will say, 'He bought her.' But, after all, we will not be in Dallas. We will be in Feking or in Bombay or in sight of the Pyramids or in the crags of the Norway coast. I am more than twenty years older than you are. But the varied and interesting and important persons with whom we may dine will only say, 'He has a beautiful young wife with a free mind. Her father was a patriot of Greece.'"

"You know—"

"All that I could about you," said



"There Are So Many Things You Can Buy With Your Money," She Said.

"But it has been a long time," Brena said, as if cross-examination might bring clarity to displace her puzzled mind. "You did not—"

"Come back?" he asked. "No."

Outside the plate glass window the rising wind tuned mournfully.

"You are very young," he said. "You would not foresee as I foresaw that I could not see you without starting the tongues of scandal. You are penniless, young, working. I am rich, worldly, conspicuous. I should have liked to send you extravagant presents. You would not have understood. You would have thought I was an old fool trying to be a lover. I was not that, but the others would have said even worse of me. So I waited, clinging to a single strand that brings us together."

"Us?"

"Yes—sympathy. Because you saw in me the one thing left that you might salvage and find valuable. Not because I am a man and you are a woman, but because I am a human being and you, who can see with a vision of the gods, saw in my ashes one unburned thing."

"You knew!"

"Yes, I knew," he said sadly. "No one else could see. Underneath there is something left—a kind of tenderness for humanity. It is to fan this spark that I want to buy you."

Brena said nothing; he had made what he craved that he would tell

her something she had never heard of before.

"I do not want a wife," he said. "That would be the title, but I do not want a wife. It is too late. I want a mother. I want you to make my spirit clean and white as it was when I was ten."

"And yet," said Brena, "you do not think of me."

Suddenly this unhappy man rose to his feet trembling, intense, gesticulating.

"Think of you," he said. "How can you say that I have not thought of you? Is this thing I propose so unnatural as the foolish world has said of it? Is it base of me to want to take a diamond from the mud where no one else has seen it? Is it an ugly thought that I feel repulsion when I see you, who are made of the rarest materials, wasted upon cheap labors and cheap, garish surroundings and being worn down like a fine, wonderful machine, abused by coarse use? Am I a fool to believe that with the only contacts available to you, you will only meet the vulgar men you can never marry? Did I not see that you had a vision as from Olympic heights which was being blinded in this routine of middle-class horrors?"

Brena's face, upon which the last light fell, was white and frightened as if she had seen a ghost. It was enough to tell him that she knew that he spoke truly.

"I do not ask you to give anything to me except your help to make me new again," he said. "I do not ask young love. I have none to give. I cannot take you away or keep you near me without marriage. It would blast us both. But if you marry me you shall be made free whenever the day comes that you wish to go. I ask no promises."

Brena got up and stood looking out the window. The tall office building overlooked not only the old center of the city and the red angular prisons of brick and the square roofs laid out like fields upon level farmland, but also the distant stretches of rolling prairies. There was an impulse to go over that distant horizon: the same strong impulse of youth, adventure, ambition that runs like a current in the blood of animals and men. To be free! To grow! To range! To know! To be emancipated from the sordid round of days!

"Do not answer now," said Parmalee. "I have said all I can. It has taken me several weeks to plan how I should say this. I have said it all in a cold, fair statement. No one could say I had made love to you, Brena."

She took his hand; it was as cold as ice.

"Write me," said he brusquely.

A week later he got her letter: it was on his desk apart from the business envelopes. He tore it open

"Nothing you said to me can be denied," she wrote. "You have inquired about me; I have no hesitation in telling you that I have inquired about you. I do not feel that I have gained anything by my inquiry, for it is true that there comes to me at strange moments a clear vision and an insight. I think you are, above all, honorable."

Parmalee must have uttered an exclamation of triumph; he alone knew that she was wrong.

"I want to make my life of greater service than it can be here. I am impatient for a richer soil in which to grow. I am willing to help you, too, if I can. It seems a little vague to me how I can do this and yet, though I am very young, I can live in you—I can feel all that you feel and I can see the better part of you."

(To be continued next week)

About City Parks

Almost every town has parks of some kind. Many of these are well kept and have gay beds of flowers and perhaps shrubbery plantations and so forth, but are dull and commonplace. You would hardly feel like recommending your friends to go to them. Yet every city, town and village has its open spaces and most of them could well afford to have more.

Every one of these open spaces could be made into a work of art of vital interest and value to the community. Each has its own individuality, which needs only to be discerned and developed. Not all in an equal degree (for some sites lend themselves to treatment much better than others), but each according to its own character and conditions.—Harold A. Caparn in Parks and Recreation.

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Pergola Popular

Pergolas are becoming more and more evident in the better homes of both town and country. Whether simple or ornate, they provide a secluded nook on the lawn that may be fitted up with chairs, benches and tables to provide a very suitable substitute for the parlor in warm weather. The pergola may be built with one or more doors, lattice work and pillars. Flowers and vines are, of course, a necessary part. There are several varieties of the nonflowering vine, particularly the ivy, which are acceptable, and the more popular varieties of flowering vines are the clematis, the trailing roses and geraniums.—Chicago Post.



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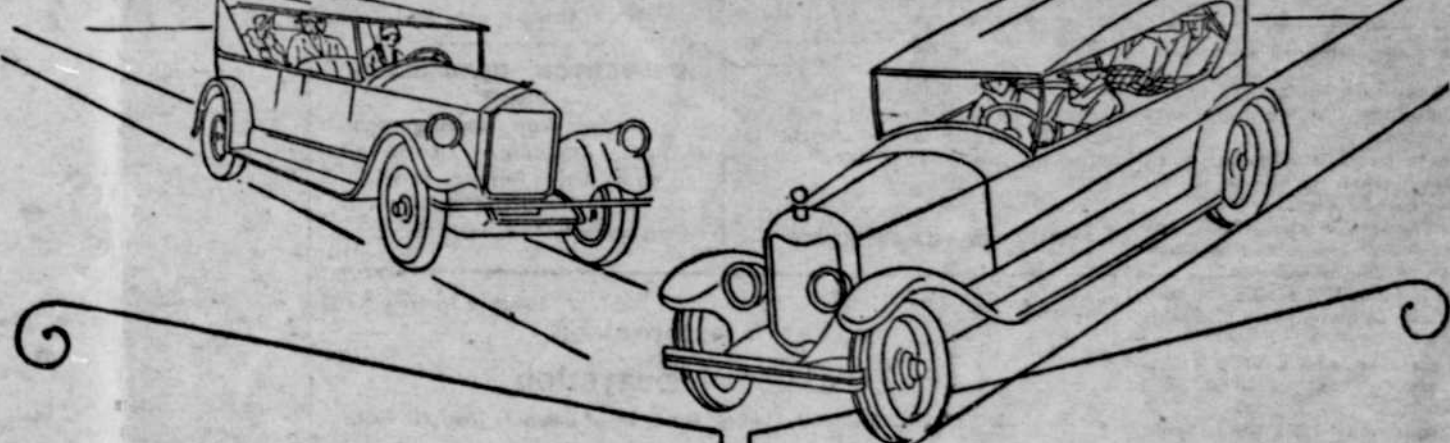
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