

THE FICTION CORNER

OUT OF THE EMBERS

By NORMAN STANLEY BORTNER

"LET'S talk this thing out," Janice had said. "For good and all." And he had agreed. Not enthusiastically. He thought he knew what it would be like. She was going to be very calm, very noble, very much the long-suffering, patient wife who will go no farther. All right, my dear. If you want one more talk, I'm game. Just so it doesn't end in another row.

He became slightly noble himself. Now that it was all over with them he was suddenly courteous. He spoke to her in a tone he might have used toward any good-looking woman not his wife: "Where would you like to sit while you pronounce sentence?"

She knew at once. She must have been thinking about that. "Not here," she said. "Would you mind if we went down to the cabin?"

The cabin. How long had it been since he had seen the inside of that two-roomed affair beside the river?

And what could have made her want to go there, of all places? "Not in the least," he said. "We'll need wraps."

They dressed for the raw December day and went out the west door. Crossing the lawn she took his arm. That was unexpected. And also a little uncalled for, he thought, under the circumstances. Why should she make a game out of splitting up? Thinking that, he stiffened and she felt it. But she did not release his arm. "Remember the first time we came down here together?" she asked.

"Can't say I do." "You mean you don't want to. It was after our honeymoon. And you held MY arm." Her voice was low and uneven and somehow queer.

"Oh," he said. "What's the matter? Getting a cold?"

"No. Not used to fresh air, I suppose. It'll be all right soon."

"In the Nevada climate, you mean?" She did not answer. Maybe she hadn't meant that. To speak of the advantages of Reno while he remained East would not fit her present mood. There had been times—plenty of them—when the important small niceties of conversation between them had been forgotten, giving way to bitterness and recrimination. But he admitted she had never been crude. To cover his own remark he said: "Has the cabin been kept clean?"

"Quite. It's always in good order. No telling when someone might want to use it. There's some wood there, I'm sure. And you remember how that fireplace heats, Will."

"That's right. I do remember." The worst of it was that he remembered too well, all at once. They had lived there—he and Jan—for

a while after their honeymoon. The big house was too big. Too many people around. Too many distractions from each other. So they had moved to the cabin. . . . They had changed a great deal since then. Not in looks. Ten years wasn't very long. In themselves, somehow.

But the cabin had not changed. It was precisely as it had been then. Seemed a bit smaller, but then time always does that to distances and dimensions. He busied himself with the kindling. There was only one big chunk of wood. Enough for a little while. The fire caught nicely.

Jan held her hands to the growing flames. "Feels good," she said. And when the chill had been taken from the room she sat on the sofa and

asked him, with a restrained, almost fearful little gesture, to sit beside her. He did, and waited—again very nobly—for her to begin this last talk she wanted.

At last she did. "This is where we started, Will," she said. "Here in this little two-by-four. Do you ever think about that time?"

"Thought of it just a moment ago," he admitted.

"We were happy then, weren't we?"

HE SHRUGGED. "Suppose we were, Jan. But I'm afraid we haven't been very happy since."

"No, not very. . . . And why, Will? Do you know? How did you lose what we had then? Not that it makes any difference, of course. Here we are, and how we got here doesn't really matter, or even who's to blame. . . . Right, Will?"

"Right." He stared into the roaring fire and considered that she was being exceptionally calm. Better than he had hoped.

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Will. I remember thinking, while you held me in your arms, that no girl could have been happier than I was at that moment. No two people could have been more in love. We were—don't laugh, please—we were like that fire is now. Just one consuming blaze of love for each other."

He couldn't help smiling at that. Jan really was in a state, to talk like that. But it disappeared when he turned toward her. She was so close to tears.

"And now, Will, look at us. We've made a wretched mess of things, haven't we?"

"Damned if we haven't." He was nearly noble enough to admit, furthermore, that it had been almost entirely his own fault, but he didn't. She might have agreed with him, and then the row would start. He was quiet for a long while, and then he said: "But fires do go out eventually, and I guess ours has."

"Yes. And what's the use of blowing on cold ashes? . . . But that's why I brought you here to the cabin, Will. I had the wild idea that

somehow we could patch it up. Try again. But we've done that too often, haven't we?"

"Too often, Jan."

The room was hushed, after that, for many minutes. Hushed, except for the crackling of the one big chunk and the rush of air through the chimney. And even that slowly decreased. The fire he had built and not replenished was burning out. Just like the fire Jan had spoken of. Burning out. It was a simple thing to throw more wood on a fire. But was it so simple to rekindle their own flame? He decided he was getting morbid.

There were only deep red embers between the andirons when she rose. "I told you last night that nothing would keep me from Reno," she said. "I meant, it, then, but—Will, I'll stay if you want me. I'll do my best to make us happy. We were once. Maybe, in some way, we could be again." She waited. He did not move; did not raise his eyes. The embers glowed.

"Will, I said I'd stay if you want me to."

Glowed.

"Must I get down on my knees to you? Is that what you want?"

Glowed dully.

"Too late, then. . . . All right, dear, I'll be packed and on my way in an hour. Would you—do you mind if I kiss you goodbye? Just for old times sake. I—won't bother you any more."

He permitted it quite nobly, and when she had leaned and kissed him full on the lips he turned away from her and toward the fire once more. The door closed behind her.

AN HOUR, she had said. Well, he would wait that long before going back to the house. No use having more farewells.

He did not stir for a long while, frowning at the fireplace. The one big chunk had only a tiny bit of redness along one edge. The rest was cold gray ash, smoking fitfully and not pretty to look at. She had been right. They had been exactly like the fire, blazing up for a time and then cooling to drabness.

"I won't bother you any more." What had she meant by that? Never see him again? He realized suddenly that he WANTED to see her again. It wouldn't be right not to. You can't live with a person ten years and simply forget it, like that. Maybe they could even be good friends, after the divorce, and have some of the fun they missed before. Without the ties of marriage, or the restraints—

He knew he was being very foolish, thinking things like that. It was all over, and she would be strange and distant whenever—IF ever—they met. Friends? Hardly. Jan was out of his life for good—that was settled.

The cabin was getting cold. He had no idea how long he had been sitting alone. Was the hour up? He rose to stir his aching legs and considered hunting more wood for the fire. With the tongs he probed at the ashy big chunk and at his touch the wood which had seemed so cold—so lifeless—jumped into flames, warm, surprising, beautiful.

A single touch had done that. HIS touch.

He gazed open-eyed. And then in quick, bounding leaps he ran up the hill and into the house. Up the stairs. Through a door he had not opened for so very long. The hour was not yet gone.

"Jan," he said. "Jan. You're as slim as you ever were. I'll carry you over, again."

JUST AS WE

The Low Down

A Welsh regimental choir was singing outside the officers' mess after dinner.

The colonel called the unmusical sergeant major.

"Look here," he said, "go and tell the choir to sing 'Sweet and Low.'" "The sergeant major went out and bawled to the leader: "If you blokes can't make less noise the colonel says you've got to clear off."

Correction

The office boy had been missing for the best part of the morning.

"Where the dickens have you been, boy?" his employer demanded furiously, when at long last the lad sauntered in.

"To the post office, sir," replied the boy, with a virtuous air.

The employer gasped. "And does it take you two hours to post a letter?" he inquired, sarcastically.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the lad with some heat. "Three letters!"

Despicable

Two girls, walking home together, were discussing their current heart interests. Said one: "Now I ask you, Isabel, how could I like him? He's so deceitful, pretending to believe me when he knows I'm lying to him!"

When Johnny was little he loved soldiers and Mary loved painted dolls. Now they are grown up. Mary loves soldiers and Johnny loves painted dolls.

Envy

Proud Poet—Hey, my man, give me the price for a crust of bread.

Rich Croesus—Beat it.

Proud Poet—If I had your dough I wouldn't mind a crust.

Rich Croesus—And if I had your crust I'd make dough with it.

ASK ME ANOTHER? A quiz with answers offering information on various subjects

The Questions

- 1. How many legs has a Bombay duck?
2. What is the 49th parallel?
3. Which of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world can still be seen?
4. Who was the "knight of the woeful countenance"?
5. Do Eskimos have beards?
6. Which was the first American city to have a single railroad station for all lines?
7. What is the true name of the dog star?
8. What is the largest flower in the world?
9. What is a satyr?
10. The poem "Charge of the Light Brigade" was inspired by a tragic incident in what war?

The Answers

- 1. It has no legs. It is a fish.
2. The Canada-U. S. frontier.
3. The pyramids.
4. Don Quixote.
5. Yes, but not luxuriant ones.
6. St. Louis. The Union station was built in 1893.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Horizontal

- 1 Pen for swine
4 Title of rank
9 Fate
12 Always
13 Girl's name
14 Dread
15 Case with open sides
17 Principal female character
19 Country in Asia
20 Less common
21 Deed
23 Dower
24 Latin conjunction
26 Rotating mechanism
29 Garden tool
31 Slang: to cheat by not paying bets
33 Homeless outcast
35 Cow's cry
37 Solitary
38 To restore
40 Resident of a convent
42 Honey-producing insect
43 Colloquial: father
44 Ethiopian title
45 Fabulous bird
48 Issues
50 Member of the electorate
54 Deltas
56 To avoid
57 Compass point
58 Pertaining to the skin
60 By birth
61 Toward
62 Entire property of a person
63 Conjunction

Crossword puzzle grid with numbers 1-63 and solution in next issue.

- Vertical
1 To pillage
2 Beginner
3 Twelvemonth
4 To make white

Answers to puzzle number 30 and 31, including words like SPA, OBI, GIB, etc.

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