



TENTH INSTALLMENT

WHAT HAPPENED SO FAR

The Sheridan Dramatic Club, of which Tom Bilbeck, the narrator, Maryella, the girl he cares for, and Jim Cooper, his rival, are members, start a performance of Pygmalion and Galatea at the Old Soldiers' Home, but are interrupted by a fire. During the rehearsal Tom Bilbeck is accused by the husband of one of the actors, Mr. Hemmingway, of being in love with his wife. Hiding away from the scene of the ill-fated play in their costumes and overcoats, the group of players is held up by two escaped convicts, one of whom is captured by Bilbeck after a struggle.

The captured thief is tied to a chair at the Old Soldiers' Home. Unable to leave the home as the car refuses to budge, the players must stay there, and Mr. Hemmingway, hearing this over the phone, says he is coming right to the home—as he is suspicious of his wife and Bilbeck. Meanwhile the Sheriff arrives.

Hemmingway arrives just when Bilbeck is assisting Mrs. Hemmingway, who has fainted, and of course thinks the worst. Meanwhile a disturbance is heard in the cellar, and all in the house rush down to it.

The Sheriff's horse has broken loose. Meanwhile Hemmingway suspects Bilbeck more and more, and Jim Cooper mixes in to tell Bilbeck he has arranged that the Hemmingways be divorced and that Bilbeck is to marry Mrs. Hemmingway.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Comrade Dreyenfurth saw that he was not required as a conversational aid, and he left us alone.

"I want to beg your pardon for not speaking to you at breakfast," Mrs. Lillie went on nervously. "Of course I couldn't before everybody. You understand, don't you Mr. Bilbeck, that my social position as the wife of the most prominent undertaker and embalmer in town makes it impossible for me to do anything openly that might be talked about?"

I assured her absently that I understood. What was she driving at?

"But beneath my calm, conventional exterior," she went on, "I am terribly romantic! I am very broad, and although the world may flout you for loving another man's wife, I do not censure you. Oh, Mr. Bilbeck, you naughty man!"

She paused to observe the effect of her reproach.

"But how we girls do admire you rakes, you men of the world!"

Covered with blushes at her own temerity, Mrs. Lillie left me to digest her declaration. This two-hundred-pound Venus had seen in me a Don Juan and was secretly the envious Mrs. Hemmingway as the supposed recipient of my attentions.

The poor nut! What a fool situation it was. Probably no man with in a radius of a hundred miles was less capable of being a gay deceiver than I, and yet entirely without effort on my part I was thrust into a stellar part in a Decemeron romance.

How could I clear myself and become again what I had been yesterday, a good natured, conventionally in love with the sweetest girl in the world?

CHAPTER X. Skis vs. Snowshoes.

The morning train left at eleven o'clock. The colonel had telephoned the local livyman to send rigs for our party. The sheriff determined to wait and go in after we had broken the trail.

While we were waiting for the teams to come Comrade Henwether played the phonograph for us. Owing to his affliction his choice of records was nothing extra. Most of the melodies were very ancient and many were cracked. Evidently the Home got its records from the same source as its magazines.

Everyone was anxious to get away. As the time approached for the rigs to come the women folk got on their wraps and sat around expectantly near the door so as not to keep us waiting.

Maryella had spoken to me when she came from the room.

"I suppose I ought to congratulate you," she said. "Although I am sure I don't know just what one does say to a man who wins the love of a married woman."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded roughly.

"Why, Jim has just told me that he fixed it all up for you," she explained, innocently enough. "He says it is all for the best, because otherwise Mr. Hemmingway would probably have shot you."

"Maybe he will anyway," I added gloomily. What pleasure it would be to pay a fine for assault and battery committed on the person of one James Cooper, alias Jim the Fixer!

The telephone rang. Every one listened with strained attention while the colonel answered it.

"What's that?" he asked after listening a minute. "Can't get thru? ... One of the horses has hurt himself already in a snowdrift? ... That's too bad. When do you think you can make it? ... All right."

He hung up.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen," he said, turning to our group. "The livyman says they can't get thru from town. The drifts are six and eight feet deep in places and they had to turn back."

"What can we do?" wailed Mrs. Lillie.

"You'll have to stay here until they get the road broken through. They say that they can make it tomorrow if there is no further fall of snow."

"But there must be some way of getting through today."

"Not unless you use snowshoes."

We sat in moody silence. As hardly any one was speaking to anyone else, there was not much opportunity for discussion of our situation.

Mr. Hemmingway made the first move. "I'm going to town," he declared. "I can't stand it here any longer. I made it once on snowshoes, and I guess I can do it again."

"But the snow is deeper now," objected Mrs. Hemmingway, her matronly concern overcoming her anger for the moment.

"Thank you just as much for your suggestion," her husband said coldly, "but my going and coming has ceased to be any affair of yours."

Mrs. Hemmingway flushed as if she had been struck. I half rose as if to defend her. This was observed by others, who glanced at one another with significant looks as if to say, "See! The ownership of the woman has passed from the husband to the acknowledged lover!"

"We can't let you go alone," Colonel Stewart objected when Hemmingway began to bundle up preparatory to leaving. "There is really considerable danger."

"Then will someone else go with me?"

Mr. Hemmingway surveyed our group with disdain. His attitude signified that he did not think there was a man in the lot of us.

"I'll go," I volunteered suddenly. After all, why not? There was nothing to stay for.

"You go with me?" Hemmingway questioned derisively. "There is no object in your trying to get me alone. You have already robbed me of the only thing I care for in life." He cast a tragic glance at the dissolving Mrs. Hemmingway.

"Don't be unreasonable," Jim Cooper put in his oar as usual. "This is all for the best. You ought to be glad to have Tom go with you. If he's with you it is the only way you can be certain that he isn't flirting with your wife."

Jim's argument carried undeniable weight with the distracted husband. I could see him ponder it. Although he had cast her off, the idea of his wife taking up with someone else was galling to him.

At last he said, "Come on, then. If you're the only one who has the nerve to follow where I lead."

Then came the problem of snowshoes. Hemmingway had his that he had secured in town, but there wasn't another pair in the institution.

Finally we dug up some skis which had been sent by some charitable contributor with a lack of humor. If you never happened to have seen any, they are long strips of springy wood about four inches wide turned up at one end like a sled runner. If you can navigate them the chances are that you can

spell "fjord" without breaking the typewriter.

The colonel bade us godspeed and directed us on our way.

"You can't get lost," he assured us. "It may be hard to follow the road on account of everything being piled deep with snow, but if you bear due east you'll come out at the village without fail."

We started, not rapidly, as I have heard that Indians and Norwegians travel across snow-fields, but cautiously and slowly. My skis had a tendency to toe out that was very aggravating. Once or twice I had to sit down to argue with them about it. I couldn't follow both of them, and if I went with one I had to leave one leg behind.

On the few occasions when I deflected them from the outward angle they turned the other way and I got my runners crossed.

"If you're trying to make me laugh," said Mr. Hemmingway sarcastically, as I got up and dug the snow out of my eyes and ears, "you may as well give up. I'm not in the humor for it."

I was able to keep still, thank Heaven, although it would have given me great pleasure to have swatted him with the flat side of a ski.

The country round about was sloping. This is ideal ground, they tell me, for ski running. It was fairly level from the Old Soldiers' Home, however, for a distance of several blocks. I was glad that because it gave me an opportunity to sort of find my ski legs. By the time I could take three steps, without tripping or splitting, I considered that I was no longer in the amateur class.

My egotism melted away when we came to the first rise. It was a gentle slope, but I found it very difficult to climb. I had to tack or else I found myself slipping backwards.

I tried dismounting from the skis, but found that the snow was up nearly to my waist and well-nigh impossible to flounder through.

I made it somehow, but Hemmingway on snowshoes beat me to the crest by several minutes. He waited there until I got nearly to the top and then he started down the other side.

I gained the summit. It was not very high, but afforded an excellent view of the country. Under the snow it was beautiful. A group of fir trees over at the right with branches borne down with tremendous loads of white was a graceful picture.

"Come on," yelled Hemmingway, half way down the hill. "We have to catch that train!"

I wrenched myself away from my

contemplation of the beauties of nature and considered the matter of progressing further. I started to walk after him. Soon I was relieved of the necessity of effort. The gentle grade was enough to cause me to slide over the surface of the snow.

It was an exhilarating sensation and very restful. I was suddenly glad that I had skis instead of snowshoes. I had been envying Hemmingway the superior traveling qualities of his equipment, but now I could see that the advantage was going to be all my way. While he walked down the hills I was sliding gracefully and resting myself for the climb up the next one.

Wrapped in pleasant introspection I had scarcely noticed that my speed was increasing a little. Now a slight difficulty in balancing called my attention to it.

I leaped forward a trifle to restore my equilibrium. As I did so I heard a sharp swishing sound as the runners glided swiftly over the snow.

The speed increased. I looked about for some way of slowing up. There seemed to be no brake. It appeared inadvisable to turn sideways as one does when on skates in order to stop. Even as I thought, my pace accelerated to such a degree that I abandoned all idea of doing anything but pray.

Directly in my path, proceeding slowly down the hillside, was John Hemmingway. Headed as I was I could not fail to strike him. I tried to steer in some other direction. It was no use. I flew toward him as a fling to a magnet.

He was bitterly unconscious that I was overtaking him. He is a large man and so am I. The result of an impact was terrible to contemplate. It appeared inadvisable to turn sideways as one does when on skates in order to stop. Even as I thought, my pace accelerated to such a degree that I abandoned all idea of doing anything but pray.

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Horror of horrors, my runners, which had hitherto glided straight, as if on rails, now swerved sharply to one side in the direction he was going!

He saw it and redoubled his efforts to get out of range. With fiendish perversity the skis turned also. I was almost upon him! He made a supreme effort—and stumbled. I shut my eyes.

(Continued Next Week)

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On the few occasions when I deflected them from the outward angle they turned the other way and I got my runners crossed.

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