



13th 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 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.

To get back home, Hemmingway must travel by foot, and Bilbeck offers to go with him. In violent disagreement they nevertheless start out together on snowshoes and skis and soon Bilbeck tumbles over Hemmingway, the going being difficult.

They lose their sense of direction. They separate. Bilbeck finds himself back at the Old Soldiers' Home after going in a circle, sees an intruder and jumps in a window, to find himself in Maryella's room. The sheriff comes in, holding out a gun and saying he saw someone come in and Bilbeck had to come out from under the bed, where he had been hiding.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

In the room stood an army company comprising almost all of the male population. The sheriff was taking no chances of being outnumbered.

"You didn't know I was awake, did you?" the sheriff exclaimed. "Well I was. I heard you break in and I followed you to this room and locked you in." He peered nearsightedly at my face. "Well I'm blessed, darn me if I ain't. Ain't you one of the men that started for town?"

"I am," I admitted.

"Tom Bilbeck," exclaimed Jim Cooper, coming forward. "I'm glad you came back. It's all for the best. I want you to be the first to congratulate me on my engagement to Miss Waite."

My stunned mind refused to assimilate his statement. In the midst of a battle I suppose a soldier would not pay much attention to the news that his sweetheart had married another man.

The mention of Maryella's name, however, made me think with a sinking sensation of the predicament I had unwillingly placed her in. I looked around to see how she was taking it.

She was nowhere in sight.

At first I was puzzled. Then I noticed the door across the room. She must have gone in there. Probably it was a closet.

I made no mention, however, of my suspicion. Possibly the incident could be ended without her taking part in it.

"What were you doing here?" demanded the sheriff. "There's something peculiar about this."

"Yes, there is," I admitted. "Come down stairs to the main room where it is warmer and I'll explain what happened."

My plan was obvious. By leading the crowd off I would give Maryella an opportunity of getting out.

The men started to go when we were stopped at the door by the hurried arrival of Mr. Hemmingway, who forced his way past the others into the room and stood a figure of vengeance, shaking his fist under my nose.

"I've caught you," he said, glaring at me.

"Caught me?" I repeated wonderingly.

"Yes! I thought there was something funny about it when you agreed to separate from me out there. I suspected that you wanted to throw me off the track and come back to my wife. You didn't deceive me. I came back and follow-

ed your tracks in the moonlight. And now I've caught you, you viper!"

All at once his eyes fell upon the dresser. There in plain view lay the strand of pearls which Maryella had worn at Galatea.

"My wife's pearls!" he exclaimed savagely. "So you came right to her room! My God, I can't conceive of such iniquity. Where is she now? What have you done with her?"

I preserved a dignified silence. What was to argue with a raving maniac like that?

"Have you killed her?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where is the body?"

He ran around the room, looked under the bed and in bureau drawers as if he expected to find mangled portions of his spouse cut up into convenient size and stored away.

At last he saw the other door and approached it.

"Don't go in there," I warned.

"Why not? Ha! So that's where you have her concealed?"

I barred his way but he ran at me like an enraged bull and hurled me aside with insane violence.

He yanked the door open and then fell back in open mouthed amazement.

Standing in the doorway blinking at the sudden light was a man whom I recognized after a moment as Julius, the escaped convict!

No one was more surprised at the turn of events than I was. To be expecting to see a beautiful girl in negligee emerge from a closet, and instead to behold a tough-looking man with three days' growth of whiskers, is startling.

Where was Maryella? I did not ask the question out loud.

"Evening, gents," said Julius genially.

"What are you doing here?" the sheriff inquired.

"Why it was sort of cold outside," explained Julius, "and I thought you wouldn't mind my coming in to get warm. Besides I thought it was about time for Bill and me to be moving, so I come to get him."

"Well, of all the cussed nerve!" the sheriff wondered.

"Then where is my wife?" shouted Hemmingway. "What have you done with the woman I love?"

"Oh, John, do you mean that?" From the rear of the crowd came Mrs. Hemmingway's voice. She struggled through the throng to reach the side of her mate.

He held out his hands to her, but paused suspiciously. "Where have you been?"

"Safe in bed until all this racket woke me up."

"Then this isn't your room?"

"No."

"But your pearls were on the dresser!"

"I lent them to Maryella for the show."

The explanation seemed satisfactory. Without asking any further questions he folded her in his arms and they cooed over one another with shameless disregard of the audience.

While interest was centered on the reunited Hemmingway family Julius the convict seized the opportunity to edge near the door. No one noticed his gradual progress, and now, all at once he made a quick dash for liberty.

The crowd started in pursuit, leaving the Hemmingways to their own devices.

Fortunately for Julius most of his pursuers were at least twice his age, and were further impeded by rheumatism, corns and crutches. I might possibly have caught him, but I hadn't the heart. I was in too low spirits myself to wish to see any other human being in trouble.

The rest followed him outdoors, but I considered that I had done my duty when I had gone as far as the main floor. Something else was worrying me. The problem of Maryella's disappearance was of a thousandfold more interest to me than the mere capture of the ex-convict.

Knowing that I was safe from interruption for a moment, I went upstairs to Maryella's room once more. It was empty. The Hemmingways

had evidently retired to her room to settle their differences as best they could.

Maryella's room was certainly a wreck. The dismantled bed gave a very different air to the entire apartment. There was only one place she could be. I walked directly to the closet, the door of which stood open, and penetrated its obscure depths. There, hidden by old clothes, I found her unconscious upon the floor, huddled up in a disconsolate heap.

No wonder she had fainted. To step into a closet as a haven of refuge and unexpectedly to find it occupied by another human being was enough to shake the strongest heart.

I lifted her out. How beautiful she was even in a faint! How clear her skin and how soft the flesh around her throat! I put her down on the floor while I reconstructed the bed.

After I had put her upon it I hunted up Mrs. Lillielove, to whom I briefly explained the facts in the case, swearing her to secrecy. She was immensely flattered at being taken into one of my amorous adventures, and agreed to help.

Together we worked over Maryella until she showed signs of returning consciousness. Then, at Mrs. Lillielove's suggestion, I left. It would be better to reserve explanations until after Maryella had been rested by a long sleep.

I was glad to let it go at that. I was unbelievably tired myself. The long hike on skis and the nervous strain of the last hour had worn me out completely.

I hunted up the cot which had been assigned me in the first place and threw myself upon it, perfectly content to let things stand in statu quo until morning.

CHAPTER XIII
By Ice-Boat

The searching party had given up the chase of Julius long before I got up. It was a mighty tired bunch of old men that assembled for breakfast. They were going to eat and then to go to bed for an all-day snooze.

As for me, I was tremendously refreshed and ready to face anything that came along.

While we were at breakfast the sheriff, who had gone in to look at his other prisoner, came back wide-eyed and trembling.

"Boys," he said, "I've got bad news."

"What is it?" we demanded.

"My prisoner is dead."

"Dead?" some one echoed.

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"Yep. I didn't know he was ailing, neither. I went in just now to untie the ropes that I used to hitch him in bed with and he didn't move. I put my hand on his head and it was cold—as ice. He is a corpse, I tell you. I want one of you fellows to come and examine him for me."

The old soldiers showed little inclination to move, even for so exciting an adventure, so it was up to me. I accompanied the sheriff to the room which he was using as a temporary jail. The shades were drawn, but on the cot I could see the dim outline of a man's figure.

Just as the sheriff had done, I first obeyed the impulse to put my hand on Bill's forehead.

It was cold and lifeless. I shuddered a little at the presence of death.

"Pull up the curtain," I suggested. The sheriff fumbled with the shade, which escaped from his nervous fingers and went up to the top with a bang. We both jumped as if we had been shot.

I drew back the covers from the inanimate form on the cot.

It was the papier-mache statue of myself!

"Gosh! What is it?" stammered the sheriff, who had not seen our performance and doubtless thought that Bill was a trifle pale.

I explained briefly.

"Then he has escaped, too," the sheriff sighed.

"It looks like it," I said. Indeed he had. Pinned to the wall we found a penciled note. It ran: Dear Sheriff: I am mighty glad to have met you and should like to stay longer, but I've got another engagement. Thanks very much for your horse.

Yours affectionately,
BILL.

I am afraid I laughed. It was such a foolish ending to our supposed tragedy.

I went up-stairs to see how Maryella was getting along. I found her awake, but still in bed. She claimed she felt as well as ever.

I told her briefly what had happened the night before and this morning. It seemed as if she had an explanation due her. Then she told of her terror at finding the strange man in the closet. Of course, his being there substantiated my story to her the previous night when I had said that I followed a man to that room.

"I am glad he got away," said Maryella kind-heartedly, "especially as he didn't steal anything. The only thing I had of value was Mrs. Hemmingway's pearls." She looked over toward the dresser where she had put them the night before.

"Why, where are they?"

(Continued next week.)

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