

The Cash Intrigue

By George Randolph Chester

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At the end of the week Lillian went back to lonely Forest Lakes. Where Kelvin and Rollins and Herbert Reussner had helped to soothe the huge empty house and the immense acreage, it, too, empty except for the small army of gaunt and grizzled woodmen, who, with guns slung comfortably in their arms, kept close sentry, now they remained but Henry Breed and George Blagg and Dr. Zeph. Zeph met her first as she came up on the porch, peering at her through his thick glasses with the same curious regard that he would have given to a strange and brilliantly colored insect. Suddenly his eyes lighted as they caught her glance. For an instant these two looked into each other's souls, and Lillian felt her cheeks burning. But in an instant more she had closed those portals of her inmost consciousness and bestowed upon him a stare of willful insolence.

Lillian stopped for a moment in the dim old library, where Henry Breed sat in absorbed contemplation, his old, well-thumbed Bible open before him. "Cast abroad the rays of thy wrath," he solemnly intoned, "and behold every one that is proud and abase him. Look on every one that is proud and bring him low, and tread down the wicked in their place." As he finished a look of intense malignity overspread his emaciated features. The girl was shocked at the change that had taken place in him during her one week of absence.

"Grandfather," she said, sweeping toward him with the quick decision that characterized her, "you are spending too much time in this stuffy old room, since there is no one here but Zeph. It is perfectly glorious outdoors. The car is still outside. I want you to come and ride with me." She had put her hand upon his shoulder, and the touch seemed to arouse him instantly. He gazed at her with a slow return of his habitually shrewd expression.

"You are looking charming," he commented. "Your trip has done you good. Did you see Kelvin?" There was eagerness in the question.

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "He's accomplishing wonders."

"I know," he said and glanced at a pile of wireless telegrams strung upon a desk hook that lay at his right hand. "He's a marvelous young man, isn't he? He is the instrument of Providence, placed in my hands against the day of chastisement and purification and of the new birth."

"I don't know about that," returned Lillian dryly. "I am rather inclined to think that you are the instrument in his hand."

"The tail cannot wag the dog," said Breed, smiling. "The things Kelvin aims to do for himself are the things I want him to do for my own ends, and if he ever gets too big for me I'll break him as I would any other efficient but dangerous tool. But tell me about him."

"Wait until I run up and get into something more comfortable than these traveling clothes, and then I'll go out and drive around through the park with you and talk."

Lillian hurried to her apartments, where she found Elsie White standing before a photograph of Philip. Lillian smiled cruelly as she viewed this tableau and stood silent until Elsie, feeling her presence in the room, turned slowly, a flush of crimson mounting to her brow as she met Lillian's gaze.

"He's a handsome fellow, isn't he?" Lillian observed carelessly as Elsie began to smooth out her hair.

"Who?" asked Elsie quietly. Lillian glanced sardonically at Elsie in the glass, but the girl back of her had her eyes bent steadily upon her work.

"Kelvin," answered Lillian. "He's built like an Adonis and muscled like a young Hercules, but the touch of his hands, strong as they are, is like velvet." She was keeping her cold eyes now steadily fixed upon those other eyes veiled beneath their downcast lids and that cruel smile sat fixedly upon her mouth. "His lips," she lingered over the item with a relish, still watching that pale face—"his lips are cool and firm"—the hands busily engaged with her black tresses trembled slightly—"but suddenly they are like fire. I think I shall marry him! Elsie! You hurt me dreadfully that time! You are becoming more and more clumsy every day. I am afraid that I shall have to discharge you." And, having inflicted all the pain that she could, she went down the hall singing blithely. A stranger hearing her would have thought that there was nothing but gentleness and guileless joy in her heart.

She stopped in at Blagg's office. He had heard her coming. He was receiving a message at the time and the light of the tubes gave to his emaciated face a ghastly wanness. As she entered he only glanced up with smoldering hate. Lillian smiled back in all her witchery at that black look. She knew that she had never been more beautiful than now. She knew that her beauty was a perpetual torment to this man and in the absence of more entertaining prey she had toyed with him as a cat does with a captured and wing broken bird.

"You don't seem half glad to see me, Mr. Blagg," she remonstrated. "No!" he answered her, and his voice was tense and strained. "I wish you had never come back. I wish that you had died!"

"Oh, tut, tut," she said, laughing, though a glitter came into her

She was forewarned. "That is not a very cheerful reception. It seems to me that you are becoming old and peevish."

"I am," he asserted. "Lillian!"

"Miss Breed, if you please," she corrected him.

"I'll call you by a less formal name than that if I like," he flared. "I know every step that you took while you were away."

"Indeed!" she said pleasantly, realising for the first time that there was some basis for the hints that Blagg had often given her of a powerful organization of which he was the head.

Her calmness angered him. "Whatever of awe I ever had for you is gone," he declared. "Whatever of respect I ever had for you is swept away. Whatever of love I felt is dead, now that I know you for what you are, now that you have made yourself common."

"Be careful," she warned him. "It is unsafe to talk that way to me."

"Safe or unsafe," he cried, "what do I care? I have died a thousand deaths in the past week, and I cannot be further harmed."

"Too bad," she murmured in mock sympathy. "Death among the lower orders of the animal kingdom seemed quite common last week. They just found one poor fool in the Long Island woods this morning. He looked like a workman. A revolver was by his side, but he had not been shot. He had been strangled. That's a bad place down there. Somebody shot at Kelvin there earlier in the week, but it was a foolish waste of ammunition. Kelvin bears a charmed life. By the way, you have not yet stated what has made this alleged tremendous change in you." She looked at him mockingly, a half smile upon her lips.

"Are you daring me?" he cried, his nervous tension increased to the breaking point by her recital of the failure of his plans, the first news he had received of it.

"Tell me," she defied him.

"Have you not made yourself Kelvin's mistress?"

He had expected to overwhelm her with this, to meet her indignant denial, to have to brave her fury. Instead she let her half veiled eyes rest cruelly upon him and walked toward the door.

"Yes," she said.

He recoiled as though she had struck him a mortal blow. Rigid and immovable as he would ever be in death he set, and from the stairway there floated up to his numbed ears a gay little song that Lillian lightly hummed as she tripped down to the library.

(To be continued)

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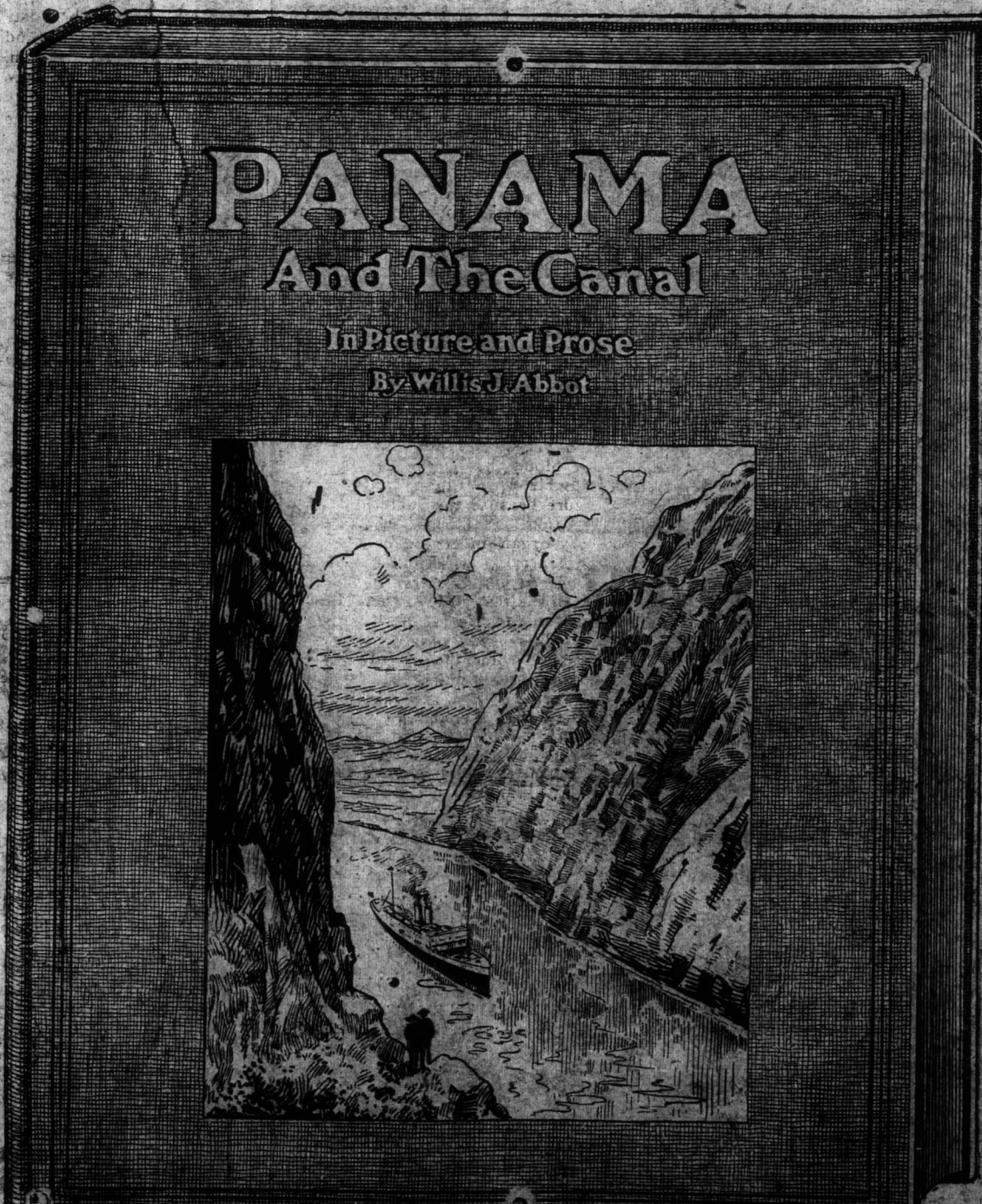
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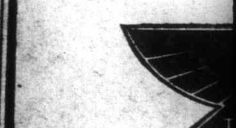
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