

A REJECTED MANUSCRIPT

Written for The London Advertiser by Hubert McBean
Johnston of New York.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. The rain had been falling all day, and the asphalt sidewalks and roadways reflected the blue glare of the electric lights in long, straggling lines that would have gleamed pathways down to one's very feet were they not broken by the multitude of belated, home-scurrying pedestrians.

Up in her office beside a desk littered with papers and manuscripts, the disorderedly appearance of which was intensified by the bright incandescent light swinging above it, sat Mrs. Beatrice Hubbard Wheeler, the editor of the Monthly Argus. The issue had just gone to press an hour before, and she was dead tired. Tomorrow it would begin all over again starting work on a new number, and already she was preparing for the next month's labors by sorting over the papers in the various pigeonholes, putting those that were of value where they belonged and culling out the dead matter.

Picking up a manuscript from the little pile representing the work of writers who had by some carelessness neglected to sign their names, and were unidentified, she carefully spread it flat and commenced to read thoughtfully. Once before the same story had survived a similar house-cleaning, and now again she was questioning whether or no it would go into the waste basket. In fact, last time she had thrown it in, and then picked it out again. She did not know exactly why. It had an unpleasant ending, and she knew perfectly well that she could not use it. It was the tale of an ill-mated marriage, and wound up in a divorce court. The man was a very bad man, either, the girl was a very good one, and she was seeking separation only at her parents' suggestion. Then beyond that, for it was the supposed autobiography of the man in the case, the story went on to deal with his life afterward. In graphic language it told how as long as his money lasted he went hunting for a new girl, and how he was later when it was exhausted he sunk lower and lower, until nothing but charity separated him from the grave. His utter helplessness, his misery, his despair were depicted with at least a taste on the part of the author of what he was describing. The last paragraph left him sitting brokenhearted in his garret, longing for release. The little story was full of pathos, and Mrs. Wheeler felt herself deeply moved by it, yet clearly enough it was not available for her publication, and she wondered at it before she had not having destroyed it before she was unclaimed. Yet did she wonder, she questioned? Did she not know? Had it not appeared to her because of its similarity to the story of her own life? Was it not because there was somehow a familiar ring about it? Of course her story had been different in many ways. In her case the man really had been a brute. Then to cap it all, after court had declared them no longer man and wife, he had had the audacity to write her a letter asking a chance to make explanation. As though that was possible! Bah! It was beyond reason. It made her face sting even now to think of it. With a sudden gesture of disgust she threw the story into the waste basket. Then after half an instant's reflection she stooped and, picking it up, restored it to its place in the pigeonhole.

There was a tap at the door. "Gentlemen," said the man, "said the office boy, sticking a dazzling red head into the room. Plainly Mrs. Wheeler was annoyed. "Didn't I tell you that if anyone called I was busy?" she demanded. "Now you go right back and tell him that."

"Yes," answered the boy, apologetically. "I did that, and he just kept on coming back, till you were busy. And I think he will, ma'am," he added.

"Oh, well," she replied, impatiently, "and get rid of him yourself, and don't bring him back unless you can't help it. It's a wonder that people can't call during office hours." She continued to herself as the boy disappeared. "That fellow is a nuisance. I found at this hour of the night. It's simply preposterous."

As the stranger was ushered into

the room she made a pretense of being very busy, and appeared to be delving deep into her desk for something. The boy went out and left him standing there. When the door closed, she made no sign that she even knew of his existence until he had made his presence known by a number of little shuffles and coughs.

"Well," she said, asked, crossly, without turning round, "what is it you want?"

"I came to see about a story I sent you some time ago," answered the stranger nervously. "I—I—that is—I didn't hear from you, you know, and I thought I might call and find out about it."

"You can leave me its name," Mrs. Wheeler said, shortly, "and I'll have the manuscript clerk look it up and let you know about it."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied. "It's called 'The Path of Destiny.' I had hoped perhaps you might be able to let me know now. You have had it so long, you know."

That was the name of the story she had been the point of throwing out a few minutes ago. Mrs. Wheeler stopped playing with the pen-wiper, and, swinging round in the chair, she looked at the man. His hair was grey, but as yet undeveloped womanhood. Now she was a woman grown, and not without her share of gray hairs. That she might be other than an interloper to him never entered her head, and seeing it, she was glad of it.

She controlled her voice with an effort. "Remember your story," she replied after a moment's pretended thought. "A story of matrimonial troubles, was it not? Something about the life of a man who had been divorced from his wife?"

"That's it," he assented eagerly. "That's it. And you accept it? You can use it?"

She was on the point of giving him a negative answer when suddenly she changed her mind. "The plot possesses a newness of handling, and there is a certain ring about it," she said. "Then you do accept it?" he questioned. "Did she not know?" she questioned? Did she not know? Had it not appeared to her because of its similarity to the story of her own life? Was it not because there was somehow a familiar ring about it? Of course her story had been different in many ways. In her case the man really had been a brute. Then to cap it all, after court had declared them no longer man and wife, he had had the audacity to write her a letter asking a chance to make explanation. As though that was possible! Bah! It was beyond reason. It made her face sting even now to think of it. With a sudden gesture of disgust she threw the story into the waste basket. Then after half an instant's reflection she stooped and, picking it up, restored it to its place in the pigeonhole.

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