

Hearts and Hazards

A Love Affair and a Business Deal Get Entangled

By Edwin Baird

PART I

Ben Abbott came home from work somewhat earlier than usual on that July day, and anybody might have seen that his mind was not at rest. He was, in fact, so preoccupied that he failed to acknowledge the greeting of his dog, Nestor, a Newfoundland of notable intelligence, who romped joyously to the gate.

Ben walked around the house to the garden at the rear and stood for a moment, straw hat in hand, gazing thoughtfully at the well-kept beds of flowers and vegetables now in their prime. Here was epitomized, in a small way, Ben's innate love for the soil; but on this evening, perhaps for the first time, no light leapt to his eye as he beheld his handiwork. In an absent-minded way he plucked a cluster of gorgeous nasturtiums, blooming near the walk, then entered the kitchen, where his mother was preparing supper.

"Where's Lucy?" he asked, pinning the bouquet to her apron.

Mrs. Abbott smiled at him apologetically.

"She just ran over to see Angela McLennan. She—"

"She ought to stay here," he interrupted, "and help you once in a while. She's not home half the time lately."

His mother, inserting a pan of biscuits in the oven, smiled at him over her shoulder in gentle protest, her face flushed rosily from the heat. She spoke, but was again interrupted.

"I don't like it," he said. "It's not fair to you." And then, deaf to her expostulation, he threw off his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and helped her in the kitchen till supper was placed on the table.

As they sat down, Lucy telephoned. She would not be home for supper, she said, but would dine instead with the McLennans.

Returning from the telephone Ben continued his meal in a moody silence. But his mother, watching him with thoughtful eyes, saw that something besides his sister's absence accounted for his depressed abstraction. Later, when they sat together on the front porch in the midsummer dusk, he confirmed this belief by telling her what was really troubling him:

His employer, Frank Sage, a Peoria produce dealer, had been approached today it seemed, by a man known as Presley Henkel, who was trying to interest Sage in a "chemical discovery which would reduce the cost of gasoline to one cent a gallon." Ben knew the man. Two years before, while visiting Chicago, an oily-tongued individual had attempted to inveigle him into a confidence game. Ben, who was nobody's fool, had tried to shake the fellow off, but this proving difficult a policeman was called and the crook was arrested.

"That crook," concluded Ben, "and this man calling himself Henkel are one and the same person. And now the question I am trying to answer is this: Shall I tell Mr. Sage what I know about this penny-a-gallon fellow, or just keep still and let matters take their course? What do you advise, Mother?"

She looked at him through the fading light, one hand resting on the head of the Newfoundland, who lay beside her chair.

"I think, Ben, you will have to do as your heart dictates. I have always believed—and you have, too, I'm sure—that an informer must be a pretty mean person. But doesn't this particular case alter things a little?"

He nodded silently. Like many men of powerful physique and steady nerve, he was not a rapid thinker, although a methodical one. He mentally revolved the problem in his slow, deliberate way and was unable to reach an immediate decision.

His mother, still watching him, was reminded of something she had often meant to ask, and now, the time appearing propitious, she uttered it for the first time:

"Ben, haven't you asked Gertrude Sage to marry you yet?"

He continued to gaze into the shadowy yard, and a small silence followed.

"No," he murmured at last, almost in a whisper. Then, abruptly, he began talking in what, for him, was a hurried voice: "If Mr. Sage had only consulted me the thing wouldn't be so hard. But he didn't, and I hardly know what to do. If I go to him voluntarily and tell him Henkel is a grafter, it'll look malicious, won't it? And

of course Henkel will say he never saw me in his life—and, after all, I can't prove he is a grafter." "Your word should be enough," said Mrs. Abbott. "Ben, why haven't you asked her?"

"Because," answered Ben, "I know she wouldn't have me."

"But how can you tell, unless—"

"Well, maybe it's because I haven't any gumption. Anyway," he added, clearly not cheered by the change of topic, "that hasn't anything to do with this. Can't you tell me what I'd better do about it?"

"Suppose," said she, "you look at it from Mr. Sage's viewpoint. Suppose you were dealing with a man whom Mr. Sage knew to be a scoundrel, and suppose Mr. Sage knew of the transaction, would you ever forgive him—Mr. Sage, I mean—for failing to warn you?"

"No, I don't believe I would. In fact, I know I wouldn't. Mother, you've solved it. I'll see him tonight."

Hence, as soon as his sister returned, he got his hat and set forth in the direction of the Sages' home. But as he walked on through the warm summer night, beneath the starry sky, his mind was occupied, not with Sage, but with Sage's lovely daughter, Gertrude.

The Sage home, a big house of red brick and white stucco, stood in superb eminence on one of Peoria's many hills. Drawing near, Ben beheld, in the street below, the head lamps of a motor car, which advertised the presence of a guest. With a touch of dismay he turned in at the gate and ascended the winding walk which led upward to the house and the feeling waxed stronger still when he came within sight of the broad veranda. Thereon sat the girl who had been uppermost in his thoughts for the last twenty minutes and beside her sat the man against whom he had come to caution her father.

"Mr. Abbott, have you met Mr. Henkel?" Ben nodded briefly to the other man, who had risen from his chair with easy cordiality.

"We saw each other at the store today." And he thought of adding, "We also met in Chicago once," but he held his tongue.

"Mr. Henkel," continued Gertrude, who evidently felt it incumbent upon her to keep the conversation going, "has invented a marvellous compound for making gasoline. It's really quite wonderful. Just think—gasoline at one cent a gallon! At that rate everybody could afford to keep a motor. Do tell him about it, won't you, Mr. Henkel?"

Henkel smiled at her, as if in good-natured protest. "It's not quite an accomplished fact, you know. But I have the formula, and with sufficient capital—" He broke off to address Ben, who stood at the top of the veranda steps, a tall, silent figure in the moonlight.



"Ben, haven't you asked Gertrude Sage to marry you yet?"

"Are you interested in gasoline, Mr. Abbott?"

"Yes," said Ben quietly.

There was, somehow, a certain significance in the monosyllable, but if Henkel noticed it he gave no sign. He spoke well and entertainingly of his "great discovery," withal modestly too. He seemed at some pains to convince his hearers that he was concerned not so much with the fame and fortune, which presently would accrue to him, as with the tremendous benefit his "discovery" would confer on mankind. He was a rather handsome young man of the blond type, inferior to Ben in physical build, though better dressed and more polished in manner.

Ben, leaning ungracefully against the veranda railing, with nothing to say, with his ears reddening and conscious of it, felt suddenly big and awkward and ungainly and altogether uncouth; and he felt, also, that Gertrude was aware of this sharp contrast between him and the other man and that he suffered grievously in her estimation. More compelling, however, than anything else was his smoldering anger at seeing her on terms of friendly equality with a man whom he knew to be an arrant rascal.

Her parents joined them presently and, after an uncomfortable period, he took his departure without having mentioned what was in his mind.

His mother was still on the porch when he returned home. Lucy was in the living room, playing a late "rag" on the piano. He slumped into a chair, exhaling audibly. And then, for a while, the stillness of the night was unbroken save for the gentle creak of his mother's rocking-chair, the syncopated sounds that came through the open windows of the living room and the crickets and katydids in the moonlit yard. Finally Mrs. Abbott asked:

"Ben, did you speak to Mr. Sage?"

"No," he answered absently, contemplating the silvery night with a disconsolate gaze. After a pause: "Mother, we made a mistake in coming to Peoria. I wish we had stayed on the farm."

She knew then that his mission tonight had been unhappy as well as unsuccessful. He invariably spoke thus when especially discontented with conditions in town. Murmuring an acquiescence to what he had said, she glanced back to the time, some nine months ago, when, following her husband's death, they had rented a six-room cottage in Peoria and leased their farm to Philip Lukens, a Chicago man who had contracted the back-to-the-soil fever. This had been in direct opposition to the wishes of Ben, who, coming from a race of farmers, placed agriculture head and shoulders above all other pursuits. But Lucy's desire had inclined otherwise; she had wanted to leave the farm and live in a city, preferably Chicago. Mrs. Abbott, too, had undergone a change of sentiment after her husband's death. Theretofore happy with country life, she had conceived a pensive dislike for it, since her daily environment had constantly summoned memories of her departed husband. No Ben, though disinclined to leave the farm, had acceded to their desires. His one compensation these last nine months had been the 100-foot garden plot which went with the Peoria place and which—in a small measure at least allowed an outlet for the main ambition of his life—farming.

Perceiving it was his wish to say nothing of his visit to the Sages' home, she turned the talk into another channel. Ben's mind, however, once it was established in a certain groove, could not easily be displaced, and at the first opportunity he began talking again of the farm.

"You're still longing to go back, aren't you, Ben?" And she looked at him with a sort of wistful fondness.

"I'd go back tonight," he vowed—"if I could. Yes, and walk all the way, too."

"Perhaps," she began, tentatively, "when Mr. Lukens's lease expires in September, we might arrange—that is, if we could—"

"Mother," he cried, and sat suddenly erect, his eyes alight with joy. "Will you do it?"

"I've sometimes wondered," she said, smiling at his exuberance. "If I wouldn't be just as happy there."

"You'll be happier," he assured her positively. "I guarantee that. Mother, I shan't give you a moment's peace after this till you've definitely promised to go home in September." And now he was talking jubilantly, quite failing to

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