

Light-Fingered

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back to that lonely neck-of-the-woods. Never, never, never, I—I'll take a long sentence in jail first.

She picked up her dust-cloth from the table as she spoke. Dr. Service eyed her steadily.

"What put the idea of jail in your head?" he asked, lightly.

She bent lower over the case of books she was dusting. Then she rose and looked at him. Her face was flushed.

"Sometimes," she said slowly, "I've prayed for jail."

Three days later he heard her singing softly as she tidied the waiting-room. It was the end of a very busy and tiring afternoon. His head ached with the strain of it. So it was with some wonderment and a little speculation he watched her getting into her coat—she lived at a quiet boarding-place in the next street—and smiling happily to herself.

"Made any friends yet?" he asked gravely.

"Two. Such nice girls."

"Do—er—you go downtown in the evening?"

"We haven't yet."

"You don't seem at all tired, to-night."

"I'm not, either. What is there to tire one who has been used to heavy household labor and two cows to milk, a garden to tend and even barn chores to do?"

"I thought you had four brothers."

"They're all busy with their studies. The two oldest are to go to college in the fall. Mother's not strong and dad's rheumatism gets awfully bad at times so that he can't work at all. Oh! I must tell you! But—perhaps you're not interested!"

"Tell me," he said, with a slight smile.

"Dad—dear old dad—has come into a legacy!"

"A—legacy?"

"I knew you'd be surprised! I just had a letter from mother. One of the banks notified him of it on Thursday. It's for seven thousand dollars and the donor wishes to remain anonymous. It's like a romance isn't it? Poor, shabby, old dad! I've been so happy all afternoon I could almost fly away! Only once before did anyone ever leave dad any money. The other was for five thousand and it was left him by a rich old lady who liked his lectures. She left it in her will for him and it was just after we came back from India and needed it so. But what do you suppose he did with it?"

Dr. Service shook his head. He shaded his eyes with his hand. When his head ached his eyes ached too, after so many examinations.

"Why he went and gave it back to God!"

"Back to —"

"That's what he called it. Imagine! He himself thrown on the scrap heap at 40 and yet he gave that money away in a lump to an orphanage or whatever it was! Mother scolded him so."

"Don't let him give this—back to God!"

"Oh, he won't! I guess dad has learned his lesson."

Mrs. Clay Washburn was one of those fashionably nervous women who are the backbone and mainstay of just such rising specialists as Dr. John Service. She was in and out of the office at least once a week, and specialized in bromides. About three weeks after she had paid her last large bill—she was a very satisfactory patient in the matter of settlement—she arrived in her limousine and assisted by her special attendant, a trained nurse, waited upon the doctor to ask if she should change her treatment, nay to insist that it be changed. He prescribed a sea voyage and massage instead. They argued, the nurse unable to get in a word edgewise. Mrs. Washburn was wilful. Her nerves were in shreds. She couldn't sleep and had a poor memory for even the simplest little things, she declared. Besides, unless she were swallowing something three times a day out of bottles she didn't feel as though she were getting anywhere. She related several pathetically amusing

incidents showing up her spells of absent-mindedness. It was getting fearful. People were beginning to remark it. It frightened her. She dreaded a mental break-up—or break-down. Yes, yes, more medicine and stronger this time!

She paced restlessly up and down the office, just as she had done in the waiting-room. She made even the specialist nervous. She dropped her gloves twice and overturned a vial on the desk with her elbow. To get rid of her there was but one thing to do—make up a fresh prescription. Dr. Service did so.

About an hour later as he was pondering upon the strange disappearance of a particularly fine and valuable instrument which he had searched for in vain the telephone rang.

"This is the nurse speaking," said a voice, hurriedly. "Mrs. Washburn left a gold-mesh purse there, doctor."

"That so?" Whereabouts?"

"In the waiting-room she thinks. It had some rings in it, and bills and silver to the amount of one hundred dollars or thereabouts. You know how absent she is. She —"

"I'll see about it at once. Hold the wire."

Five minutes later:

"Is she absolutely sure she dropped it here? Because we cannot locate it."

"Oh, dear me! Yes, we're both positive. I know she had it with her in the limousine."

"Did you search the car?"

"Yes, yes. And the house. We went directly to and from your office."

"I'll have another search made and call you later."

Dr. Service hung his receiver up and stared modily into space. After a moment he stirred and rapped with his clenched hand on the desk. So!

And of course that valuable little diamond-tipped instrument had gone the way of the purse. . . Well, it served him right for being so quixotic as to bring her here! . . . And yet she was so young, so unspoiled! . . . Damnable. Now for a scene—and he hated scenes!

But first he'd give her one more chance.

"Did you knock for me?" asked Miss Lister entering.

"Yes. Bell's out of order I think. Have another look for that purse, please. Mrs. Washburn is certain she left it here."

"Why, I've already looked everywhere! I took your pocket flashlight and hunted in all the corners and under the sofa, and all over. She must have dropped it in the street."

"She says not."

"But think how wrought-up she was! She was hardly accountable."

"I've promised to try and produce it, Miss Lister."

The waiting-room was filled with patients but the search went on. The halls and vestibule were examined. Rugs were lifted. Curtains were shaken. Cushions slapped. The purse was not found. Throughout the afternoon, and all through the changing interviews with patients Dr. Service felt his heart heavy.

When the last patient had gone, he sighed. He felt that he would rather reimburse the lady quietly from his own merely sufficient funds than—

But the only way to do with an offending eye was to pluck it out! He called Miss Lister. He was hardly prepared for her first words, however.

"Oh, doctor—that little instrument in the leather case you know, Dr. Ambrose sent over in a great hurry to borrow it. I forgot to tell you. That was during your lunch time. He wanted it to use at the clinic, he said. I hope you didn't miss it!"

"Oh!"

"He'll return it first thing in the morning."

The physician's heart felt a degree or two less heavy.

"I wish," he said eyeing her closely, "that we could account for the missing purse as easily."

"I wish we could, too," she rejoined, promptly.

She returned his intent look, eye for eye for a moment. Then he observed that odd veiling of her grey-blue orbs. They didn't fall. It was merely as

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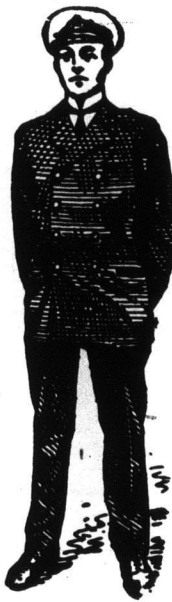
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