

Hearts and Hazards

A Love Affair and a Business Deal Get Entangled

By Edwin Baird

PART II.

He found her alone in a lawn swing, stationed beneath a patriarchal oak in the side yard. A novel lay open on her lap, but she wasn't reading; and now, at his approach, she closed the book and dropped it on the seat beside her, and greeted him without rising. She wore pale pink, her best color, and she looked more enchanting than ever. He took the opposite seat.

The afternoon was perfect. A warm breeze, laden with the perfume of many flowers, gently stirred the leaves above. A thrush sang ecstatically on the topmost bough. The spot was like a scented bower, screened from the street by a lilac hedge and from the veranda—whereon sat Mr. and Mrs. Sage—by an almost opaque growth of clematis. Everything was felicitous for his purpose.

He spoke of the weather and then of the thrush, and in both topics she exhibited a polite if tepid interest. Then, reddening somewhat, and feeling warm and big and awkward—as he always felt when near her—he approached his point obliquely: "Mother and I," he said in his slow way, "drove out to the farm yesterday."

She submitted another polite comment. "It's beautiful in the country now—beautiful. I believe you told me once," he continued, watching her anxiously, "that you were 'crazy about country life.'"

"I must have been crazy when I said it," she laughed.

"You mean—you're not—crazy about it now?"

"Hardly! If I had to live in the country I would go crazy, sure enough."

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, because it's so dull, I suppose,"—turning, she looked briefly, though searchingly, toward the street.

"But it's not dull," he insisted.

"It's the most exciting thing in the world. It's crammed full of life and interest, and you always feel that you're living close to God." . . . He spoke leaning towards her earnestly, shows on his knees, watching her face for some reflection of his eager enthusiasm. On most subjects he was slow of speech, but here he was thoroughly at home and no hesitation impeded his tongue. He was in love with his theme and his talk showed it.

Before he had proceeded far, however, he perceived he had awakened in her not even a lukewarm interest, and his zest cooled, his eagerness lost its fine edge and he came lamely to a pause.

"I'm sorry I can't see it that way," she said, and again turned and looked toward the street, as if expecting another caller. He too, following her gaze, looked streetward, but saw nobody there.

"What is your ideal of life?" he asked.

"I've never given it much thought, one way or the other, but I suppose it would be one spent largely in travelling. I'd like to visit foreign countries and see something of this little planet we happen to be living on."

"But you can do that and still live on a farm. Farmers often travel—and so do their wives."

"But I tell you I don't like farm life, Mr. Abbott," and the touch of impatience in her voice cut him like a whip. "I couldn't bear it. I'd die! If I had to choose my place of residence I'd choose a big city, like Chicago or—" Abruptly she stopped and looked at him queerly. It had suddenly dawned on her that there was a hidden meaning in all this talk.

Ben dismally filled in the pause:

"Then you couldn't even bring yourself to marry a farmer?"

Still watching him she shook her head gently. Her pretty face had softened. At last she understood what he had been trying to say.

"No, Mr. Abbott; at least, not unless I cared for one very, very deeply."

He glanced at her quickly, but his brief hope fled when he saw her eyes. Only compassion was there. Sighing, he rose and picked up his hat and stood looking down at her from his great height. Something he had heard Henkel say to her, night before last, recurred, and he wondered if there was any connection between Henkel's utterance and her present antipathy to country life. He decided there was, and felt strongly urged to denounce Henkel then and there. But his was a methodical, deliberative temperament, not given to impulse, and on second thought he merely said, "Good-bye," then turned and left her.

Had he looked back toward the swing as he descended the brick-paved walk he might have seen her gazing after him wistfully, as if half-minded to call to him. However, he didn't look back.

Emerging on the street he came face to face with Henkel, who had just alighted from his automobile and was crossing the sidewalk toward the gate. This encounter and the memory of Gertrude's expectation stirred the slow wrath smouldering in him. He blocked the path of the smaller man, towering above him like a St. Bernard over a mongrel.

"I advise you to leave the town," said Ben in a quiet voice, "before it gets too disagreeable."

"I don't understand you," said Henkel coldly. Ben's powerful right hand, hanging loosely at his side, closed in an iron fist, and his face went white.

"I reckon you haven't forgotten the time we met in Chicago?"

Henkel's hard, bright eyes shifted from Ben's head to his fist, from his fist to his feet, then back again, as if puzzled and annoyed.

"I never saw you before in my life."

Ben drew a deep breath and his clenched fist moved backward a few inches menacingly. But he controlled his mounting anger.



"But I Tell You I Don't Like Farm Life, Mr. Abbott"

"All right," he said. "But just remember my advice." Then he swung off down the street toward home. And now another gaze followed him—though not a wistful one.

The noise of Henkel's motor car, proclaiming the arrival of that young man, stimulated Gertrude boundlessly. No longer wistful, she sped to the lilac hedge and peering below from this elevation, she beheld Ben and Henkel conversing near the gate. She saw Ben turn abruptly and walk away, and Henkel staring after him.

Then, as Henkel came in her direction, she ran back to the swing, composed herself there and opened the novel. Resting her silk-clad foot on the opposite seat, she agitated the swing lazily to and fro. Her attitude denoted an absorption in the book and a sweet obliviousness to any other presence; but she was fully conscious of the lovely picture she presented, swaying gently in the summer afternoon, surrounded by flowers and foliage and attired in her most becoming frock.

Thus Henkel found her, apparently unaware of his coming, and occupied the seat lately filled by Ben. Unlike Ben, however, he was at no loss for a well-turned speech:

"You quite took my breath away," he said, retaining her hand as he sat down. "I've been devouring you from behind that trellis yonder."

"Have you fully recovered from the shock?"

"I fear the wound is permanent. At least, my heart is still abnormal. You," said Mr. Henkel, with an eloquent gesture at the pastoral milieu, "belong in this environment as a pearl belongs in a diamond setting."

Her large eyes lowered demurely to the book, permitting him to observe the length of her lashes. A delicate warmth flushed her soft cheeks faintly.

"I wonder if you know what you're saying," she murmured without looking up, "or if you mean half of it?"

"I mean more," he declared. Then he laughed apologetically, as though surprised at his own boldness. "But I really called today to talk about—Can you surmise what?"

She idly turned a page of the novel.

"Naturally I have surmised you have come to talk about me."

He laughed again, very softly. It was not an unpleasant laugh.

"I can conceive of no topic," said he, "that would afford me more delight. I could talk about you endlessly. But—with another graceful wave of his hand—"it seems necessary to bore you with business."

"But I don't know a thing about business, Mr. Henkel."

"Perhaps," he smiled, "you might be willing to learn if you saw a chance to make your father immensely wealthy."

"You mean your gasoline compound?" She was unable to conceal a note of disappointment, being dissatisfied with this new turn in their talk. He nodded brightly.

"My idea is to form a corporation for making the product. I know there is vast money in it. I've tried to interest your father, but unfortunately I haven't achieved any signal success; and now I should like to enlist your aid. No doubt you have considerable interest with your father. Do you suppose you could prevail upon him to make this investment?"

"Probably," she said, wondering how she could best steer the conversation back to its original channel. "But honestly, Mr. Henkel, I don't know a thing about it."

"Then," said Henkel, with his brilliant smile, "the thing for me to do is to tell you all about it." And this he proceeded to do in his accomplished manner.

Gertrude made no effort to follow what he said, and presently his words ceased to convey any meaning whatever. Contemplating him she grew conscious of a vague disturbance in her heart, which signified that her infatuation for this strange young man, of whom she knew almost nothing, was approaching a dangerous stage. But she, far from being alarmed thereat, was thrilled enchantingly. Somewhere in the back of her brain a phrase repeated itself over and over: Here is my ideal! Her enchantment grew. His cosmopolitan air, his polished speech, his comely appearance, even the way he wore his clothes—these appealed to her girlish fancy. She contrasted him with Ben; plodding, honest, awkward and slow, and a mild pity tinged her fascination. . . .

Henkel spoke on, and pretty soon she evinced in his discourse a genuine interest. He was alluding, in a casual way, to several prominent Chicagoans, whose names she knew as well as her own, and his allusions implied there existed between them a bond of cordial friendship. With avidity she had often read, in the society columns of Chicago newspapers, about the social activities of these people, for theirs was a life that enraptured her; and now, hearing their hallowed names fall lightly from the lips of this interesting young man, he waxed more charming still—more evil, too, if she had but known.

After that Henkel had an attentive audience, and when at length he took his departure he had a definite promise from her.

True to this promise she cornered her father, after tea, in the library, and, perching herself on the arm of his chair, broached the matter on which Mr. Henkel had fixated glowingly.

"We mustn't talk business on Sunday night," he laughingly protested.

"But, Dad, I told him I'd speak to you about it right away, and I don't see why—"

"Oh, so that's the way, it is!" Sage put his book aside and regarded her thoughtfully. "You seem to be taking a pretty keen interest in this young man."

"I'm only trying to be nice to him, Dad."

"Take care," he cautioned her, "not to be too 'nice.' You mustn't forget you know nothing about him."

"But I do know something about him," she asserted. "I know he's the most interesting man I've ever met; and he's on very intimate terms with all the best people in Chicago."

Continued on Page 26