

# A Gambler's New Day

"A New Day," He Repeated, "That Will Last to the End. We'll Live it Together, You and I!"

By WILLIAM HUGO PABKE

CORTLANDT VAN VLECK had spent his thirtieth birthday at the poker-table in the gaming-house that virtually belonged to him, matching his keen wits against the apocryphal skill of a group of millionaire Chicagoans. None of his lieutenants had he deemed capable of successfully mulcting the rich prey; and he himself had stood the racking strain of a six-hour game. The winnings of the house had run up into five figures, and, in spite of that fact, or because of it, he was very tired.

He went home to his apartments, where he spent a solitary evening, unique in its effects. As he sat brooding by his fire, there came a revulsion of feeling, the first he had ever experienced. As he realized that the first day of his fourth decade was over, squandered like many days that had gone before, his illegal occupation, stripped at last of its glamour, filled him with disgust.

On the upleaping flames for a canvas, his fancy painted the portraits of his associates during the years of his professional career. Hard, cruel, mask-like faces passed in phantom procession before him, each stamped with its look of greed, with the acquisitiveness begotten of the habit to get without labour.

The man that sits dreaming by his fire and can not call up the face of some woman who has touched his life and emptied it of man-things, man-ways, filling it for the time being with woman-fancies is abnormal. In all the long length of Van Vleck's reverie, he had dreamed of nothing but the faces of men; of mean men, cruel men, desperate men, of gamblers. Not a woman in the world was soul-close enough to him to send her spirit winging through the darkness to give him cheer.

He became suddenly conscious of his acute loneliness, and, with all the strength of his manhood, he revolted against it. In the black hour of his introspection there came a resolve; for once in his life he acted on impulse.

"A gambler needn't be particular as to his methods of courtship," he said, grimly, as he moved to his desk and penned the advertisement announcing his needs to the world at large.

"An American gentleman, thirty," he wrote, "desires the acquaintance of a lady younger than himself, who will help him to make life worth living. Object, matrimony."

Out of a basketful of answers, he culled the following:

"I'd like to help."

"ANNETTE STIRLING."

As Van Vleck pressed through the early-evening crowd on his way to meet the woman that was to become his wife, his heart beat high with anticipation and an unwonted sense of excitement. He looked beyond the first meeting and glimpsed a vision of home, a thing he had not known since childhood. Happy dreams of future joys; tender resolutions to cherish this woman-creature that would come to him from somewhere out of the pulsing life about him; wonder as to how he, in his crudeness, might win her for his own; fear that he might fail made his blood surge through his veins with a pound, pound, pound, that in its very newness, carried an uplift of soul.

His face was the usual gambler's mask, however, as he approached his favourite waiter in his favourite restaurant.

"Has Miss Stirling inquired for me, Emil?" he asked, crisply.

"She awaits you upstairs, sir."

It was to Emil's credit that his manner betrayed not the faintest trace of surprise. That a woman should ask for Mr. Van Vleck was in itself a rare thing, although it had happened once or twice before, and nothing had come of it except a contemptuous refusal on the part of Mr. Van Vleck to claim the acquaintance. But that Mr. Van Vleck should ask for a woman—

Emil preceded him up the ornate stairway, stopped before a white-and-gold door, rapped, turned the knob, announced, "Misder Fan Fleck," and retired.

VAN VLECK paused in the doorway, holding his eagerness in check with a professional gambler's instinctive caution. He might have been making a tentative raise with four aces in his hand, so expressionless was his face. In the farther corner stood his guest facing him.

"I didn't know you were as good-looking as that!" she exclaimed.

Slowly entering the room, Van Vleck threw a lazy glance in her direction. He stopped short, bewildered, at sight of her slender loveliness. Unused as he was to women, it gripped him with the potent charm of some strange, new drug.

"Are you embarrassed?" queried Miss Stirling, a flash of mischief in her grey eyes. "I am—just a bit."

"Let's eat," suggested Van Vleck, touching the bell.

The girl threw back her head and laughed unrestrainedly. As the clear peal rang out, gay, wholesome, without a trace of coquetry, the gambler drew in his breath sharply with delight. Without knowing it, he had hungered for the sound of a laugh like that through the years of his manhood.

"It's evident that I am going to be the talkative member of the—the family," she hazarded, seating herself at the small dining-table.

Van Vleck was conscious of a thrill as he heard the intimate word; but, as he seated himself opposite the girl, his years of training showed in the cold quiescence of his face. In his most hopeful dreams he had not dared to imagine her quite like this. From beneath half-closed eyelids, he studied the charm of her exquisite daintiness.

She was far lovelier than the picture that she had sent had led him to expect; the photograph had robbed her fair hair of its light-gold sheen, and had failed most signally to depict the perfection of her colouring. Her mouth, with the sensuous charm of its full curves, appealed to him. He trusted it implicitly, because, in her eyes, he read an absolute innocence that held its passion in leash. And this most desirable little person had just admitted her willingness to belong to him!

In chillingly even tones, he said: "Then, it's a go?"

The girl gazed across the table at him with the wide-eyed look of a hurt child.

"Why, of course it is," she faltered, a hint of tears in her voice; "I said I'd like to help." Then, after a bewildered pause, "don't you like me?"

Van Vleck merely smiled in answer. His smile, partly on account of its rarity, was singularly effective. It banished the hurt look from her face in a twinkling, its appeal bringing a happy little answering smile to her lips. She was still blissfully reflecting on her power to lighten this somber man's mood when Emil entered, and Van Vleck commenced the task of giving his order. Turning to her, he asked:

"Shall we have wine?"

"O please! Champagne for to-night!"

"You kid!" he chuckled. "We'll have it, although I don't take it as a rule."

"You grim person," she laughed, when they were alone; "you rather frighten me with your sternness."

"I'm not really a bear; but, you see, I'm not used to women."

"That's nice. I'm glad," she said, regarding him with friendly scrutiny.

"And I don't talk much," continued Van Vleck. "I'd rather listen to you."

"You'll have plenty of chance."

"A lifetime?" queried the gambler, quickly, his guard down for the first time.

She nodded gravely.

"And I love to hear you laugh," suggested Van Vleck. Then, suddenly, "tell me of your life," he urged.

A shade of sadness crossed the girl's face. "If I do that," she said, seriously, "I can't laugh."

VAN VLECK felt a resentment at the fate that had bullied and harassed this creature of laughter, who was meant for happiness. Tyro that he was in the art of consolation, he merely said, brusquely:

"We'll change all that."

"Yes; you look as if you could change whatever you didn't like," she mused.

It was a happy, one-sidedly-merry little dinner. The excitement of the novel situation flushed the girl's cheeks and raised her spirits to the point where her grave companion could not follow. He merely watched and listened appreciatively, now and then paying her fascination the warm tribute of his brilliant smile.

For the most part, she talked generalities; but, unconsciously, she gave him little glimpses of her struggle to gain recognition on the stage, emphasizing the pitiful successes and bringing her sense of humour to bear on making light of the more frequent failures. Suddenly, she stopped speaking, and looked at him whimsically for a long moment.

"Do you know," she began, with head cocked judicially on one side, "you are the very coolest person I ever met?"

Van Vleck cast one quick glance toward her, saw the alluring invitation beckoning in her eyes, circled the little table in two strides, and caught her up in his arms. She raised her lips to his frankly, smiling into his eyes.

"If—you will sit down—on the other side of the table," she suggested breathlessly, after a moment, "you may—hold my hand."

Instantly, Van Vleck obeyed her command; her grateful glance rewarded him.

"Say, Kid," he began, explosively, "this evening has boosted the happiness limit for me. Pshaw!" he ejaculated. "I'm goin' to shake the gamblin' joint talk—I mean—" he laughed wryly—"I shall endeavour, in future, to forswear the vernacular."

"Out of respect for the lady?" she suggested, happily.

"You get me!"

"They laughed light-heartedly."

"Seriously, I am going to change. Do you mind if I talk for a while?"

"Go ahead," she encouraged. "When you do say anything, it's worth while listening to."

"We must begin with mutual trust," said Van Vleck, earnestly. "I'm sick of the bluff of my life. Will you believe me—always?"

She gripped his hand more tightly. "It's easy," she said.

"Then, you'll believe me when I tell you that this is the happiest evening of my life?"

"I want to think that," she said, with an eager acceptance of the compliment.

"It's not so much the pleasure of this particular evening, although it's been pretty nice"—he smiled his quick smile—"as what it stands for—the evenings to come, the companionship, a home." His voice dropped. "You want a home?" he asked, suddenly.

"Oh!" breathed the girl.

"I guess you do," he said, huskily. "And children?" he queried with a sharp intake of his breath.

THE small hand in his flexed until it felt like some light, strong metal. Unflatteringly, she raised her eyes to his. An expression of grave happiness came over her face as she slowly nodded her head.

Van Vleck sprang to his feet and paced up and down the small room, his face growing more boyish every moment under the humanizing influence of his dreams. His repression was thrown to the winds.

"It's come to me suddenly, dear!" he exclaimed—"and, well—I guess I'm all yours. I'm going to look for a job to-morrow—anything that's honest—and, when I get it, you're going to help me live."

She sat with hands tightly clasped before her, a happy, far-away look in her eyes.

"And I thought you were made of granite and ice," she mused.

"There was only one quality that I required in my wife," continued Van Vleck. "I might have added a whole lot more restrictions and found that you fitted them all."

"The one quality?"

"I said to myself that my wife must be a good woman."

The girl looked up with a start. Slowly, the happiness died out of her face, and her eyes grew wide with misery. With a little choking cry, she flung her arms out across the table and buried her head between them. For a moment, she was quite still; then, her slender body began to shake with the racking force of her sobs.

"I'm not a good woman—I'm not—I'm not," she cried bitterly.

Van Vleck crossed to her side. He bent over her yearningly.

"Why, Annette," he said, dazedly. "Why, Annette—I don't understand. It can't be! Your eyes! No bad woman ever had eyes like yours!"

"Oh, I don't want to be bad! I don't want to—I don't want to!" moaned the girl. "You have shown me to-night a perfect heaven, a heaven of decency—a heaven that it's hell to lose!"

"You haven't lost it," said Van Vleck, gravely. "No matter what you've done, I'm not worthy of you."

She raised her eyes questioningly and her hands went out to him as though she besought his protection.

Slowly, falteringly, she told the whole pitiful story. This time, she did not make light of the failures, nor did she exaggerate the successes.

It was a nasty story of a brutal beast of a manager, who had deliberately kept her on starvation wages, dangling ever before her eyes a glittering success in a good part if she would pay the price. For weary months, she had struggled bravely, trying unsuccessfully, in the meantime, for other employment. At last, she had tentatively decided to renounce the hall bed-room and the irregular meals for the lure of material success. Still, she hesitated, and, before she told her tyrant of her decision, the gambler came into her life.

"And you call yourself a bad woman!" scoffed Van Vleck, exultingly.

"But I meant—"

"You game little sport," he interrupted; "I knew your eyes were true."

"But—but," she faltered again.

"Forget it!" he ordered, crisply.

He pulled his watch from his pocket and held it up before her. "Look," he said. The hands were pointing toward the zenith. As he spoke, they crossed.

"A new day has begun," he whispered.

She crept close to him and rested her cheek on his shoulder, as though she were very tired.

"A new day," he repeated, "that will last to the end. Come, sweetheart," he raised her chin and looked deep into her eyes; "we'll live it together—you and I."