

The Red Silk Handkerchief.

— BY —
H. C. BUNNER.

Horace was a gentleman. They all knew it. Barnes and Haskins, the business man and the champion collector, knew it down in the shallows of their vulgar little souls. Judge Weeden, who had some of that mysterious ichor of gentleness in his wino-fed veins, knew it and rejoiced in it. And Horace—I can say for Horace that he never forgot it.

He was such a young prince of managing clerks that no one was surprised when he was sent down to Sand Hills, Long Island, to make preparations for the reorganization of the Great Breeze Hotel Company, and the transfer to the property known as the Breeze Hotel and Park to its new owners. The Breeze Hotel was a huge "Queen Anne" vagary which had after the fashion of hotels, bankrupted its first owners, and now going into the hands of new people, who were likely to make their fortunes out of it. The property had been in litigation for a year or so; the mechanics' liens were numerous, and the mechanics clamorous; and although the business was not particularly complicated, it needed careful and patient adjustment. Horace knew the case in every detail. He had dredged over it all the winter, with no especial hope of personal advantage, but simply because that was his way of working. He went down in June to the mighty barracks, and lived for a week in what would have been an atmosphere of paint and carpet-dye had it not been for the broad sea wind that blew through the five hundred open windows, and swept rooms and corridors with salty freshness. The summering folk had not arrived yet; there were only the new manager and his six score of raw recruits of clerks and servants. But Horace felt the warm blood coming back to his cheeks, that the town had somewhat paled, and he was quite content; and every day he went down to the long, lonely beach, and had a solitary swim, although the sharp water whipped his white skin to a biting red. The sea taken a long while to warm up to the summer, and is sullen about it.

He was to have returned to New York at the end of the week, and Haskins was to have taken his place; but it soon became evident to Weeden, Snowden & Gilfeather that the young man would attend to all that was to be done at Sand Hills quite as well as Judge Weeden himself, for that matter. He had to shoulder no great responsibility; the work was mostly of a purely clerical nature, vexatious enough, but simple. It had to be done on the spot, however; the original Breeze Hotel and Park Company was composed of Sand Hillers, and the builders were Sand Hillers too, the better part of them. And there were titles to be searched; for the whole scheme was an ambitious splurge of Sand Hills pride, and it had been undertaken and carried out in a reckless and foolish way. Horace knew all the wretched little details of the case, and so Horace was intrusted with duties such as do not often devolve upon a man of his years; and he took up his burden proudly, and with a glowing consciousness of his own strength.

Judge Weeden missed his active and intelligent obedience in the daily routine of office business; but the Judge thought it was just as well that Horace should not know that fact. The young man's time would come soon enough, and he would be none the worse for serving his apprenticeship in modesty and humility. The work intrusted to him was an honour in itself. And then, there was no reason why poor Walpole's boy shouldn't have a sort of half-holiday out in the country, and enjoy his youth.

He was not recalled. The week stretched out. He worked hard, found time to play, hugged his quickened ambitions to his breast, wrote hopeful letters to the mother at Montevista, made a luxury of loneliness, and felt a bashful resentment when the "guests" of the hotel began to pour in from the outside.

For a day or two he fought shy of them. But these first comers were lonely too, and not so much in love with loneliness as he thought he was, and very soon he became one of them.

He had found out all the walks and drives; he knew the times of the tides; he had made friends with the fishermen for a league up and down the coast, and he had amassed a store of valuable hints as to where the first blue-fish might be expected to run. Altogether he was a very desirable companion. Besides, that bright, fresh face of his, and a certain look in it, made you friends with him at once, especially if you happened to be a little older, and to remember a look of the sort, lost, lost for ever, in a boy's looking glass.

So he was sought out, and he let himself be found, and the gregarious instinct in him waxed delightfully.

And then it came. Perhaps I should say She came; but it is not the woman we love; it is our dream of her. Sweet and tender, fair and good, she may be; but let it be honour enough for her that she has that glory about her face which our love kindles to the halo that lights many a man's life to the grave, though the face beneath it be dead or false.

I will not admit that it was only a pretty girl from Philadelphia who came to Sand Hills that first week in July. It was the rosy goddess herself, dove-drawn across the sea, in the warm path of the morning sun—although the tremulous, old-fashioned hand-writing on the hotel register only showed that the early train had brought—

"SAMUEL RITTENHOUSE, Philadelphia.
"MISS RITTENHOUSE, do."

It was the Honourable Samuel Rittenhouse, ex-Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, the honored head of the Pennsylvania bar, and the legal representative of the Philadelphia contingent of the new Breeze Hotel and Park Company.

In the evening Horace called upon him in his rooms with a cumbersome stack of papers, and patiently waded through explanations and repetitions until Mr. Rittenhouse's testy courtesy—he had the nervous manner of age apprehensive of youthful irreverence—melted into a complacent and fatherly geniality. Then, when the long task was done and his young guest arose, he picked up the card that lay on the table and trained his glasses on it.

"H. K. Walpole!" he said; "are you a New Yorker, sir?"

"From the north of the State," Horace told him.

"Indeed, indeed. Why, let me see—you must be the son of my old friend Walpole—of Otsego—wasn't it?" said the old gentleman, still tentatively.

"St. Lawrence, sir."

"Yes, St. Lawrence—of course, of course. Why, I knew your father well, years ago, sir. We were at college together."

"At Columbia?"

"Yes—yes. Why, bless me," Judge Rittenhouse went on, getting up to look at Horace; "you're the image of your poor father at your age. A very brilliant man, sir, a very able man. I did not see much of him after we left college—I was a Pennsylvanian, and he was from this State—but I have always remembered your father with respect and regard, sir—a very able man. I think I heard of his death some years ago."

"Three years ago," said Horace. His voice fell somewhat. How little to this old man of success was the poor unnoticed death of failure!

"Three years only" repeated the Judge, half apologetically; "ah! people slip away from each other in this world—slip away. But I'm glad to have met you, sir—very much pleased indeed. Rosamond!"

For an hour the subdued creaking of a rocking-chair by the window had been playing a monotonously pleasant melody in Horace's ears. Now and then a coy wisp of bright hair, or the reflected ghost of it, had flashed into view in the extreme lower left-hand corner of a mirror opposite him. Once he had seen a bit of white brow under it, and from time to time the low flutter of turning magazine leaves had put in a brief second to the rocking-chair.

All this time Horace's brains had been among the papers on the table; but something else within him had been swaying to and fro with the rocking-chair, and giving a leap when the wisp of hair bobbed into sight.

Now the rocking-chair accompaniment ceased, and the curtained corner by the window yielded up its treasure, and Miss Rittenhouse came forward, with one hand brushing the wisp of hair back into place, as if she were on easy and familiar terms with it. Horace envied it.

"Rosamond," said the Judge, "this is Mr. Walpole, the son of my old friend Walpole. You have heard me speak of Mr. Walpole's father."

"Yes, papa," said the young lady, all but the corners of her mouth. And, oddly enough, Horace did not think of being saddened because this young woman had never heard of his father. Life was going on in a new key, all of a sudden, with a hint of a melody to be unfolded that ran in very different cadences from the poor old tune of memory.

My heroine, over whose head some twenty summers had passed, was now in the luxuriant prime of her youthful beauty. Over a brow whiter than the driven snow fell clustering ringlets, whose hue—

That is the way the good old novelists and story-tellers of the Neville and Beverley days would have set out to describe Miss Rittenhouse, had they known her. Fools and blind! As if any one could describe—as if a poet, even, could more than hint at what a man sees in a woman's face when, seeing, he loves.

For a few moments the talkers were constrained, and the talk was meagre and desultory. Then the Judge, who had been rummaging around among the dust-heaps of his memory, suddenly recalled the fact that he had once, in stage-coach days, passed a night at Montevista, and had been most hospitably treated. He dragged this fact forth, professed a lively remembrance of Mrs. Walpole—"a fine woman, sir, your mother; a woman of many charms"—asked after her present health; and, then, satisfied that he had acquitted himself of his whole duty, withdrew into the distant depths of his own soul and fumbled over the papers Horace had brought him, trying to familiarize himself with them, as a commander might try to learn the faces of his soldiers.

Then the two young people proceeded to find the key together, and began a most harmonious duet. Sand Hills was the theme. Thus it was that they had to go out on the balcony where Miss Rittenhouse might gaze into the brooding darkness over the sea, and watch it wink a slow yellow eye with a humorous alternation of sudden and brief red. Thus, also, Horace had to explain how the lighthouse was constructed. This moved Miss Rittenhouse to scientific research. She must see how it was done. Mr. Walpole would be delighted to show her. Papa was so much interested in those mechanical matters. Mr. Walpole had a team and light wagon at his disposal, and would very much like to drive Miss Rittenhouse and her father

over to the lighthouse. Miss Rittenhouse communicated this kind offer to her father. Her father saw what was expected of him, and dutifully acquiesced, like an obedient American father. Miss Rittenhouse had managed the Rittenhouse household and the head of the house of Rittenhouse ever since her mother's death.

Mr. Walpole really had a team at his disposal. He came from a country where people do not chase foxes, nor substitutes for foxes, but where they know and revere a good trotter. He had speeded many a friend's horse in training for the county fair. When he came to Sand Hills his soundness in the equine branch of a gentleman's education had attracted the attention of a horsey Sand-Hiller, who owned a showy team with a record of 2.37. This team was not to be trusted to the ordinary summer boarder on any terms; but the Sand-Hiller was thrifty and appreciative, and he lured Horace into hiring the turnout at a trifling rate, and thus captured every cent the boy had to spare, and got his horses judiciously exercised.

There was a showy light wagon to match the team, and the next day the light wagon, with Horace and the Rittenhouses in it, passed every carriage on the road to the lighthouse, where Miss Rittenhouse satisfied her scientific spirit with one glance at the lantern, after giving which glance she went outside and sat in the shade of the white tower with Horace, while the keeper showed the machinery to the Judge afterward, and she got him to explain it all to her.

Thus it began, and for for two golden weeks thus it went on. The reorganized Breeze Hotel and Park Company met in business session on its own property, and Horace acted as sort of honorary clerk to Judge Rittenhouse. The company, as a company talked over work for a couple of hours each day. As a congregation of individuals, it ate and drank and smoked and played billiards and fished and slept the rest of the two dozen. Horace had his time pretty much to himself, or rather to Miss Rittenhouse, who monopolised it. He drove her to the village to match embroidery stuffs. He danced with her in the evenings when two stolidly soulful Germans, one with a fiddle and the other with a piano, made the vast dining-room ring and hum with Suppe and Waldteufel—and this was to the great and permanent improvement of his waltzing. She taught him how to play lawn-tennis—he was an old-fashioned boy from the backwoods, and thought croquet was still in existence, so she had to teach him to play lawn-tennis—until he learned to play much better than she could. On the other hand, he was a fresh-water swimmer of rare wind and wiriness, and a young scagod in the salt, as soon as he got used to its pungent strength. So he taught her to strike out beyond the surf-line, with broad, breath-long sweeps, and there to float and dive and make friends with the ocean. Even he taught her to fold her white arms behind her back, and swim with her feet. As he glanced over his shoulder to watch her following him, and to note the timorous, admiring crowd on the shore, she seemed a sea-bred Venus of Milo in blue serge.

I have known men to be bored by such matters. They made Horace happy. He was happiest, perhaps, when he found out that she was studying Latin. All the girls in Philadelphia were studying Latin that summer. They had had a little school Latin, of course; but now their aims were loftier. Miss Rittenhouse had brought with her a Harkness's Virgil, an Anthon's dictionary, an old Ballion & Morris, and—yes, when Horace asked her, she had brought an Interlinear; but she didn't mean to use it. They rowed out to the buoy, and put the Interlinear in the sea. They sat on the sands after the daily swim, and