

Hearts and Hazards

Gertrude Receives a Letter and Sees a Rival

By Edwin Baird

Part V.

"I think," said Ben, choosing his words with care, "it's a little because of both."

"You've heard of the disagreement between my daughter and myself?"

Ben nodded.

"And you know what caused it?"

"I heard—Yes, I know what caused it."

"Then don't you think," said Sage with paternal persuasion, "it would be best to tell me why you came to strike that bound in the face?"

Ben drew a deep breath.

"I'll tell you the whole truth, Mr. Sage, in a dozen words, if you will promise not to mention it to anybody else."

Sage nodded for him to go ahead.

"Well, I happened to overhear Henkel speak of Miss Sage, and I didn't like his speech. And that," concluded Ben, turning to go, "explains it all."

"But hold on!" cried Sage, beside himself with joy. "Don't run away! This changes the complexion of the whole thing."

"I'll have to be going," said Ben, freeing himself from Sage's detaining grasp. "I haven't had my supper yet, and it's getting late."

"Well, by George, a pretty excuse! Come in and eat with me, you rascal!" Sage attempted to drag him toward the house.

"No, I'll have to be going. Good night. And don't forget, Mr. Sage, that you promised not to tell."

But Sage's new-born delight did not decrease as he saw the enveloping darkness swallow Ben's powerful form. His eyes still shone and his heart filled with content, the first he had known in upward of a week. For he was thinking:

"I didn't promise! I only nodded. I didn't say I wouldn't tell. And Ben should be vindicated."

And then he went indoors to tell Gertrude all about it.

As Ben had predicted, Gertrude would not believe a word of it.

"He made it all up," she spiritedly declared, when her father had finished, "just as he made up that other atrocious story against Mr. Henkel. Dad, I'm surprised that you can still believe in this man. Can't you see he's simply adding one slanderous falsehood to another?"

"Nothing of the sort!" protested Sage, emphatically; but she would not listen.

"Mr. Henkel is a gentleman," she hurried on, "while this bumpkin, Ben Abbott, hasn't one single spark of decency. His behaviour, all the way through this disgraceful affair, has proved that. It's just like him, after almost killing poor Mr. Henkel, to hide behind my skirts; to drag my name into it and pretend he was fighting for me. Who but a cad would do such a thing? Oh!" she raged, closing her fists, "I wish I were a man!"

Sage, ascending to his room that night, trod the stairs heavily, sighing at every step. He paused while removing his shoes and sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. Suppose he secured some proof besides Ben's word? Ben's word, of course, was enough for him, but it was obvious enough that Gertrude wouldn't believe it on oath. If, therefore, he could find another person who had overheard Henkel—Here Sage's thought in that direction came to a close, retarded by the same consideration which had made Ben silent when repeatedly urged to tell what started the fight. It would never do to have it publicly known that Gertrude's name had been sullied at large by a drunken crook of Henkel's stripe. From the horror of that Sage recoiled with shuddering, and, hemmed in on every side, recognizing the hopelessness of ever convincing his daughter of the truth, he undressed and went dolorously to bed.

On his daughter's bitter attitude he said nothing to Ben next day, nor the next. On the day after that, Saturday, Ben left the firm of Sage & Company, never to return there again.

The black clouds which now obscured Ben's horizon were mitigated by one bright ray of sunshine—he would be able to resume his chosen work at least a month earlier than he had expected.

His mother, enkindled by his enthusiasm, was as eager for the farm as he, and preparations for return-

ing moved forth apace. A tenant was found for the Peoria cottage; the household goods were packed; Lucy went to Springfield to stay with Aunt Ma till school opened; and at last Ben and Mrs. Abbott started for the railway station. It was within walking distance and they went afoot, he with two thumping suit cases, she carrying the cage which enclosed her canary.

En route they passed the Sage's home; and Ben, lifting his eyes that way, saw Gertrude on the veranda with a crowd of gay young people, all making merry in the warm afternoon. She, apparently, was the merriest of all, and he wondered if it was because she knew he was going away. Thereupon he was overwhelmed by a rush of unhappy memories which he had been trying to drown in the swirl of these last few busy days.

But the world wore a different hue once he was established on the farm again. Back in his native environment—and it was the only environment for which he really cared—he felt as a bird released from a trap to fly at will. The harvest was beginning and he was busy occupied from dawn till dusk. He ate enormously, his mind always on the work ahead and he went to bed early and slept like a child.

His life thus crowded, there was no room or time for melancholy musings, but there came periods, after the second week, when he looked sadly back over all that had happened since that Sunday afternoon he had tried to say he loved her. These wistful thoughts of the past were bred in solitude and came only during the rare intervals in the twenty-four hours when he was not engaged with the work of the farm. Sometimes, too, though not often, when working in the fields he would have the feeling that his life was not the perfect thing it seemed to be. He was conscious at these times of something lacking—of a vague yet undeniable void.

Because of the blinding passion which had inflamed his fighting blood that night, Ben had not discerned that Henkel's words were heard by another—namely, the furtive-eyed person to whom these words were addressed. And, though not disinterested, Blackie was destined to be the one to impart this knowledge to Gertrude.

Descending to breakfast on a warm morning in late August she discovered her parents discussing

a matter which patently concerned her. Sage passed her the morning newspaper, at the same time indicating an item on the first page.

"Read it," he said briefly. "I think it'll interest you."

It was about Henkel, and, as she read, a swift revulsion went through her. Henkel had been arrested for swindling a Chicago woman out of two thousand dollars in a fraudulent stock scheme, and he now languished in the county jail of that city.

"Who's lying now?" chuckled her father.

She devoted herself to sliced peaches and cream and said nothing.

"Seems to me—" he began, but his wife, looking at him meaningly, shook her head with vigor, and he desisted. After all there was no use of rubbing it in.

Gertrude's initial repugnance changed, after breakfast, to a sense of shame—that she, who had always thought rather well of herself, could have been infatuated with such a creature! And this feeling crystalized when the postman came, bringing a letter addressed to her in lead pencil. The enclosure, similarly inscribed, began without preliminary:

"I want to wise you up to something I think you oughta know. That guy, Abbott I think his name is, slamed Henk that night because he herd Henk speak dirt of you. I wont repeat the dirt Henk said, but it was enuf to make this Abbott all-fired mad. I don't blame him for what he done. Henk is a no-good guy, he aint even square with his pals, I & he was side kicks once but he double-crossed me."

Folding the sheet of cheap paper, Gertrude stared bitterly off into the shady yard, a bright gleam in her long, dark eyes. She was breathing a bit more rapidly than usual, and her under lip was drawn in between her teeth.

Mrs. Sage, sitting near-by on the broad piazza, observed these things from the tail of her eye.

"Who did you hear from, dear?"

Gertrude unfolded the note, glanced at it, and after a brief debate with herself handed it silently to her mother. Mrs. Sage read it through, but the phraseology puzzled her.

"Perhaps," ventured Mrs. Sage, after a little pause, "it would be well to let Ben know—"

"Oh, Mother," she interrupted, "I've been so horrid to him! How could he ever forgive me?"

"You might at least ask him to, dear. I believe if you ask him in the right way—"

"Couldn't I write, Mother? Wouldn't that do just as well?"

"Perhaps. But it would seem more gracious if you called on him and his mother at their farm."

Gertrude made no reply to this, but sat brooding in a heavy silence until her mother rose to go indoors.

She started thirty minutes later, feeling an urgent desire for haste, now that she had decided to see the ordeal through. But when she drew near the Abbotts' farm her courage began to evaporate. Every unkind thought she had spoken of him, every unjust act, was now green in her mind and accusing, and she felt she would rather die than go to him with an apology on her lips. No apology, she firmly believed, could ever undo the wrong she had done.

She drew within sight of the two-storied farmhouse and motored past it, telling herself she would return in a minute—or as soon as she had her courage back. And then she saw him. He was leaning against the wire fence which separated his farm from the one adjoining and he was talking with a comely young woman, who also leaned against the fence.

Immediately Gertrude, seeing a way out, pounced upon this excuse. Of course, she reasoned, he would not care to be interrupted now, so the only thing to do was to go back home and write him a letter. She left promptly.

Ben meanwhile, having glanced toward the road and failed to recognize the heavily veiled young woman in the automobile, turned back to Carrie Ortmann, his neighbor's daughter, and finished explaining to her the most efficacious way of fighting army worms.

During the first part of her homeward trip, Gertrude sedulously sketched in her mind an outline for the contemplated letter to Ben; but



He was leaning against a wire fence, talking with a comely young woman.

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