

A Strange Romance of Adventure - THE RED CIRCLE

BY ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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SYNOPSIS.

"Circle Jim" Borden, named from a red birdmark on his hand, has served his third prison term. One in each Borden generation, always a criminal, has borne the Red Circle mark. Jim and his son, Ted, are the only known living of the Borden. Max Lamar, a detective, is detailed to keep an eye on Jim. June Travis and her mother meet Jim as he is released. Jim and Ted are killed. Next day Lamar sees the Red Circle on a woman's hand outside a curtained automobile. June, marked with the Red Circle, robs Grant, a loan shark. Mary, June's nurse, discovers her theft, and tells her she is "Circle Jim's" daughter. The Mrs. Travis does not know. Mary tricks Lamar. Lamar visits "Smiling Sam," Jim's old crime partner. Sent to Surton by Smiling Sam, Lamar is told the guests at a ball. Mary points her out to Lamar. Lamar goes to town, captures her with the jewels, and goes after Smiling Sam. On the edge of a cliff, Lamar and June are engaged in a deadly combat. Gordon, a fugitive, rescues Lamar and June to turn over Gordon from arrest. Smiling Sam sees the Red Circle on June's hand, tells her he knows her secret, and follows her to the city.

11th Instalment.

In Lamar's office Gordon stood with his back to the locked door, waiting. "Gordon," he called. "For the moment at least, he was safe, and his eyes never left the face of the girl."

"Now," cried June under her breath, "tell me everything—won't you?"

Gordon shook his head. "I can't," he said. "I'm more grateful to you than I can ever make you know—you've saved my life; or rather, my liberty. That counts for more; but—honestly, I mustn't tell you why they're after me—not now, anyway."

"But why not?" interrupted June. "Every minute is precious. Mr. Lamar is my friend—he calls me his 'first assistant.' I'm anxious to help you—I can help you—if you'll tell me everything; but how can I be of use at all when you keep me in the dark like this?"

Her earnest eyes were full of pleading, and reluctantly Gordon found himself weakening.

"You're a brick," he said, "to be interested in me at all and I'm terribly grateful."

"Then do as I say—begin at the beginning to tell me."

"How do you know, but that someone is in that next room? Do you know where the other door leads to?"

"Wait a minute," said June quickly. "I'll look in the outer office. Mr. Lamar's confidential clerk may be there. Don't mind me, come back."

On her way to the door June hurriedly hid her gloves and wrist bag on Lamar's desk, half-subconsciously noting at the same time a pair of handcuffs that lay there.

With a little shudder she passed them by, and slowly opening the office door peered cautiously out.

There, with his back to her, sat Gage, the confidential clerk, busily writing and seemingly unconscious that anyone was looking at him. June softly closed and locked the door.

Gordon gave a nervous glance around, then began.

"The whole thing in a nutshell is this: The Farwell Corporation retained me so that they might legally defraud their employees of co-operative profits."

"When I found what they were up to I rebelled and tried to expose the crooked deal—so, of course, they've had me ever since."

"There was only one thing to do—to tell the workers about it—the men who had expected to be profit-sharers and were dupes instead. So I got a crowd of them in the courtyard one day and told them the whole thing."

"Some of 'em believed me, most of them didn't—or at least were doubtful in the middle of it. A watchman and a patrolman or two came to see what it was all about, broke up the crowd with night sticks and pushed me off, threatening me with arrest for 'starting a riot.' You see I was helpless. The corporation blocked me."

"Then, not content with that, they ruined me financially."

"One day I was in my office when

"This is what the hound told me to read," went on Gordon: "The Farwell Corporation, thru its attorney, Charles Gordon, hereby rescinds its recent action of withholding co-operative profits."

"There was a blank space left for me to sign, and, like a dolt, I signed it. Then the smiling mask dropped from his face. It grew all hard and cold."

"For a minute I didn't understand the change. Then I saw the trick. Farwell had two pieces of paper, one early fastened, one above the other, just lying room at the foot of the under one for my signature. While I thought I was signing the upper one, it was really the lower paper I was pinning my name to—irrevocably!"

Farwell crumpled the upper paper—the one I had thought I was signing—put it in his ash tray and set the lower one on the desk. "Now," he said, "read and at the same time he demanded that I produce the 'securities' and 'pledge' to me."

"This is what I had signed my name to: 'July 1. Received from the Farwell Corporation this date, \$75,000 of said corporation's bonds, to be held in trust by the undersigned until called for by the said corporation. Signed Charles Gordon. Witnessed by Elias Farwell.'"

"For a minute I was too dazed to do anything. But Farwell wasn't. He rang his bell, and in came a plain-clothed man and a policeman."

"Farwell promptly ordered them to arrest me, on an embezzlement charge."

"I think I went mad. I snatched at the paper, but I couldn't get it for Farwell jammed it into the inside pocket of his coat. I grabbed him. He said I would get the paper or choke him. We had it hot and heavy for a few minutes. But of course I hadn't a shadow—three against one—I was a rat in a trap, nothing more."

"The miserable sneak!" said June. "I was facing a charge of embezzlement thru that double-paper trick of Farwell's, and I knew it. But the police were decent enough to let me go to my office for a moment. Luckily they hadn't handcuffed me. I went to my desk, and the men stayed at the back of the room."

"While I was fussing about my desk I hit upon an idea. With one eye on the men, I slowly unscrewed the incandescent globe from my desk lamp. I cut across the wires and switched them back towards it. It smashed, of course, and at the smash they both turned and looked at me. In that instant I leaped out of the open window, jammed it shut, and ran up the fire escape to the roof."

"Great!" applauded June, her right hand a-throb.

"In a second the men were after me, tho, firing their guns as they came. I cut across the roofs until I found an open scuttle door. I ran inside and closed it. From that on it was an easy matter to cover my tracks until at last I got away clean and found a hiding place in the shack at Surton."

June said nothing, but her eyes were luminous and thoughtful. Her fingers were toying with the pair of handcuffs on the desk, and suddenly she picked them up and looked at them.

Then, as her gaze took in her own hand, her face was suffused with a flush of color. There was the dreaded Red Circle, burning all too clearly against the white flesh.

"At that moment someone turned the handle of the door leading to the outer office. The force me ever since."

"At the sound Gordon raised his head and met the frightened look in June's eyes."

"I'm going to give myself up, anyway," he said indifferently.

"No! NO!" whispered June vehemently. "You mustn't give yourself up now! I'm going to help you!"

Then the knock came a second time, followed by a little pause, and after that the sound of retreating footsteps.

June moved quickly to the hall door and Gordon followed. June opened the door and looked out into the hall—then suddenly drew back, shutting and locking the door.

"It's Gage!" she whispered breathlessly. "He's making for this door, now!"

Before the words were fairly out of her mouth, the hall door was tried. A moment later there was a crash of splintered glass and Gage peered into the office thru the jagged opening his eyes were half closed. He saw no one, however, for the very good reason that June and Gordon were flattening themselves against the wall on the side nearest the door.

Gage then decided to reach thru the opening and unlock the door from the inside. June, catching a glimpse of his entering arm, slipped quickly to the desk and picked up the handcuffs, then tiptoed hurriedly to the door as Gage's hand groped for the key. An instant more and she had deftly snapped one of the handcuffs around Gage's wrist and with trembling fingers snapped the other on the door knob.

As they hurried on—with Gordon a bit in the rear—June nervously thrust her right hand into his glove; she didn't intend to have Gordon or anyone else see that throbbing Red Circle.

Outside the office building June halted and looked up and down the street in search of a taxicab. Presently one appeared and she held up her hand to stop it. As it drew alongside the curb she and Gordon got in and drove away.

"All right, so far," said June. "Now for our next move."

"Look!" exclaimed Gordon, clutching June's hand, unconsciously pressing the Red Circle. "Look! There's Farwell! Farwell, just ahead of us! Good Lord! He's with Lamar!"

"Don't worry," whispered June, returning the pressure of his hand reassuringly. "It's going to be all right—couldn't have happened better. I'll get them both now! I'm going to jump out and join them, and I want you to stay in the cab and wait for me a little way up the street. On no, the park is better."

Lamar and Farwell, deep in conversation, did not notice the sound of footsteps behind them, and so had no idea of June's approach until she came abreast of them as they reached the entrance door of Farwell's office building. June nodded and smiled at Lamar, who shook hands eagerly, his

face radiant. Then he turned to Farwell and introduced him to June.

"How do you do, Mr. Farwell," said June, in her most innocent manner.

"I wish you'd come in with us, Miss Travis," Lamar said. "Farwell is going to show me the Gordon papers—I want your advice."

As they entered the office anteroom Lamar turned to June.

"Can you make yourself comfortable here for a few minutes?" he asked, offering a chair. "Farwell and I will go over the preliminaries ourselves. In the inner office—we won't bore you with unnecessary details."

"If only that miserable secretary would go away!" she thought. Presently he did that very thing. June jumped up at once. Getting a chair from the corner of the room, she carried it to the door, jumped lightly up and applied a pair of very pretty but curious eyes to the transom.

Lamar and Farwell were seated at a table. Papers were strewn everywhere; but Farwell had separated Gordon's securities receipt from the others and was in the act of handing it to Lamar.

"There's the receipt," June heard him say. "It means prison if we can capture him."

Lamar let the paper drop to the table before him. He hated the business in hand.

"Here is where I come in again," she said to herself.

In a flash she saw how it could all be done. Jumping lightly down, she landed on the floor on the tips of her toes and slipped out into the hallway. With a quick look up and down, she tossed her wrist bag into the farthest corner of the hall door. Then she hurried back to the anteroom, tore her hat off and pulled her hair away. Next she overturned two chairs, one after the other with a bang, and staggered wildly into the private office, gasping:

"Mr. Lamar! Mr. Lamar! Quick! He's here! He's here! He's here!"

Farwell was already in full pursuit of the imaginary thief, and at June's instance Lamar promptly joined him.

This was just what June was waiting for. She ran to the paper-strewn desk, snatched up a bundle of bank notes, quick glance, and hid it in her dress.

Then her eyes on the door, she hurried to the safe. Its door was open, as Farwell had left it, when he took out the Gordon papers to show to Lamar. With trembling fingers she snatched up a bundle of bank notes, stuck them in her dress also, and started back to her place.

Then she was scourged on by still

another mad impulse. Going to the table she picked up a couple of sheets of plain letter paper, folded them together and set them aside. Her eyes gleamed oddly as she picked up a pen and, sitting down, began to print something on one of the circles.

Looking over her shoulder at every other letter, she finished her printing. Then she put the plain white circle on the dark blotting pad, got up, ran to the safe and hung the printed circle on the knob. With a sigh of satisfaction, she went back to the anteroom and collapsed into a chair, resuming her air of fright and exhaustion.

During their wild-goose chase Lamar and Farwell met the returning secretary and they all came down the hall together, talking excitedly.

While they were talking, Lamar, true to his trade, was looking; so it was he who found June's bag in the dark corner of the hall.

"Here's the bag, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "The man must have dropped it when he ran! See what Santa Claus brought for a good little girl!" he called to June, waving the bag before her as he entered the office.

"Oh thank you, Mr. Lamar! I knew you would find it for me! My moral courage! I'm a million times grateful to you!"

"Let me go home with you," pleaded Lamar.

"Oh, no, really—I'll be perfectly all right myself," answered June.

"Anyway, I shall insist on taking you down to the park."

"All right," said June, reluctantly. Lamar stood looking tenderly after June for a moment, and then he went back to his desk.

As he entered the door he collided with Farwell, who wild-eyed and panting, gripped him by the arm and half-dragged him to the table of the inner office.

"The Gordon receipt's gone!" he gasped.

At the same moment Lamar saw the white circle—it startled him most unpleasantly. Then Farwell pushed him toward the safe.

"See," he cried, "I'm robbed! They've taken a bundle of bank notes! Read this thing!" As he spoke he pulled the printed circle off the safe knob and thrust it into Lamar's hands.

What Lamar read was this: "The money will be put to a good use by the Circle Lady."

He was speechless and could only stare wide-eyed, at the paper. Speaking dazedly to himself, rather than to Farwell:

"Suspicion points to Miss Travis—but that's impossible! Impossible!"

He sat down and pulled the telephone toward him. He gave the number of his own office.

As soon as Gage recognized his voice, the clerk began pouring forth his tale about the mysterious woman who had come to the door.

"Wait a minute," called Lamar over his end of the wire. "Could you see who it was that snapped the cuffs on you?"

"No," yelled Gage. "I couldn't see a thing except a woman's hand—with a Red Circle on the back of it!"

Lamar turned white. Then he asked sharply:

"Any other clue?"

Gage's voice came hesitatingly over the wire.

"Well," he mumbled, "Miss Travis called. I showed her into your office to wait—and then she disappeared."

Just as slowly he got up. He stood thinking a moment, then turned to Farwell and said, over his shoulder:

"Keep this absolutely quiet until I investigate. I'll do all I can—good day."

Meanwhile, June, oblivious to all the trouble she had caused, made her way to the park, the coveted receipt and the banknotes hugged tight to her breast.

Gordon was still there, tho the chauffeur had wandered onto the grass somewhere.

As she neared the cab, Gordon leaned out eagerly.

"What luck?" he said uneasily.

"If I looked as happy as I feel, you surely would have to ask," smiled June, holding out the receipt.

"Ho-ho!" cried Gordon, opening the paper and reading it.

Then he looked at June and the tears came into his eyes.

"You are a wonder," he said in a low voice. "I can never repay you for what you've done for me. How did you ever get the paper?"

The happy light died out of June's eyes.

out on the other side and struck the scrambling policeman fiercely in the stomach. The officer doubled up, but held on like a mountain goat.

It was a more or less even fight, as each man had but one arm free, and neither could use his legs to any advantage.

There was no chance for science; none for a clean, effective blow. The fighters beat at each other in futile, awkward fury.

With the sign of relief, and a smile, she took the package of bank notes out of her dress. A dreamy look—a very sweet look—came into her eyes as she thought how much good that money was going to do. In her mind was a vivid picture of the hard-working men in Farwell's factory, whose "co-operative profits" had been taken away from them.

"That's what have their money, just the same," she said to herself. "If I was stealing when I took it, it was in a good cause."

With the dreamy smile still lighting her face, June stood lost in happy thought, when suddenly she heard Mary's faint footsteps, and her look changed to one of alarm.

She thrust the papers into the nearest hiding place—a table drawer, and just managed to get it shut as Mary came in from her own room with her

comfortable. I was so 'traid he'd start a rumour."

"What about mother," queried June fearfully.

"Mrs. Travis don't know a thing, as yet. But it's only a question of time, unless we can get him away from here right off. He isn't disposed to make things any easier for us than he can help, either. I heard a big noise up there just now, guess he stumbled over something. Then I heard him moan—or, maybe, swear."

"There! Hear that?" cried June and Mary simultaneously. Then they clung to each other, expecting, they knew not what.

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ror written in every line of her face.

"Why Mary," cried June, "what's the earth is the matter with you? You look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

"Have, dearie—I have! It's worse than that! Oh! Oh!" wringing her hands and crumpling her face up into a mask of tragedy. "What will we ever do now, my lamb! We're in such a lot of trouble!"

"Now, Mary, dearie, be calm! You bade the nurse, and tell me all about it—I'm sure it isn't as bad as you think."

"It is, baby, it's worse! It's that awful man!"

At that moment, unconscious of all that was going on inside the house, Lamar slowly passed by; his head bent, his face haggard and drawn. He had to come there intending to see June: to face her with the facts; and to ask her to tell him what she knew about all the wretched business. But when he reached the house he somehow found that he loved her too much to put her to the test.

"Oh, it can't be—it can't be," he said aloud. "She is as holy as—my own mother. She is above suspicion. As for above suspicion, she is a saint, a saint, a saint!"

An idea flashed into his mind, electrifying him to quick decision. "Tomorrow!" he muttered, half in dread, half in triumph. "Yes, that is it. Tomorrow will tell! Tomorrow will prove the truth!"

End of 11th Instalment.

Many of Them Are Already Fighting the Battles of the Empire, Where the Shells Are Falling Thickest.

Now I come to think of it, Snowy has not been seen in the countryside of late, and I have hardly seen for a whole year a single tramp of recruiting age pass my way who looked physically fit. Most tramps are possessed of the spirit of adventure, and Snowy was no exception to the rule. He did not own a foot of land, yet England—the England of green lanes dappled with primroses, and pheasant-haunted woods—was to him home and country; for did he not know them more intimately than many a landed proprietor.

"Snowy" (his hair, by the way, you will imagine was very fair) was of the fighting order. Of this I can give you proof; for did he not boast he would "take my measurement" one day, when, losing patience over his drinking habits, I put somebody else, in his absence, on to his job?

I was away from my farm when the snow came, and he turned up to resume his hedge-trimming, but, meeting him on the road some time afterwards, I asked him if he still wished to measure me for a new suit of clothes. He expressed his sorrow for his language, which surprised me, for when Snowy was in a temper he was a drink, knocked down a man in the hayfield, and I advised him to apologize. He said he had, and he was a sportsman to no one in his life. Uttering an untruth for which Heaven forgive me—I told him that gentlemen always apologized when they were in the wrong!

"Well, I ain't a-going to—Stewth!" affirmed this owner of a brawny fist. That was the summer when he turned up with his red pocket-handkerchief with white spots, greeting me with the statement that he was going to build my hayrick—after he had refreshed himself with "a bit of a drink" in the village. "A bit of a drink," I said, "Uncle John is building the ick."

"Uncle John be?" I tells you I'm a-going to build it same as I done afore."

"You're too late, Snowy; you can't," I answered, always.

"Can't? I know you—you, you, you me into them blinking papers. Wait till I've had 'art a pint!"

Like a bomb under the sea, he crossed the hayfield on route for the village. At midday he returned to my field, and only to fall ingloriously behind the hedge to sleep the sleep of the undisturbed for the rest of the day.

But I liked Snowy, in spite of his intemperance. The only a tramp, when sober he stood up for the dignity of labor. Upon the first occasion that he pressed himself to me for work to my astonishment, instead of the usual "I leave it to you, sir," coupled with a request for leave to do as was his own business, he asked me how much I paid an hour!

On setting down for a whole year in our neighborhood, he had acquired a lurcher, and on seeing Snowy leave the postoffice with one