

THE CRUCIBLE

By Arthur Stringer

*The Play or the Woman;
In the long run—which?*

PRENTISS sat down on the Rachel Chair, the chair on which a thousand passions had been torn to shreds. He peered across the Edwin Booth Desk at Borowsky's mop of white hair. His gaze fastened itself on the one longer lock which swung tassel-like down the wrinkled brow, to be pulled at as though it were a sailor's cue.

Prentiss knew what was coming. He had felt it drawing nearer day by day. He felt it even before he had stepped wearily into "The Governor's" inner office, the inner office that always reminded him of an astrologer's den. He still abhorred that room, as he had once abhorred its owner. He nursed a secret contempt for some note of voluptuousness about it, for its rose-coloured shades and its soft rugs and its startlingly white statuette of a nude Sappho. The entire studied, Lydian softness of the hushed chamber seemed to centralise in that white and naked woman. The marble stood out like a splash of light against the darkness; the room centred in it as definitely as a target centres in its bull's eye.

But he remembered that the Governor—Borowsky was by no means averse to the traditional nomenclature—was a master of lighting, and it was natural to think of such things in even a private office. It was, indeed, all a part of the game, the game which prompted the Governor to carry his knowledge of stage values into actual life.

Prentiss, during the last few weeks, had begun to feel a certain belated respect for these theatricalities. He had even been compelled to readjust his estimate of Borowsky; he had even begun to understand why the older man's power had been whispered of as uncanny, why his most envious rival had dubbed him the "Old Hypnotist." Even away from the footlights there were illusions worth sustaining.

BUT it was not a man's room. It was as feminine as a *boudoir*. It was an affectation for the impressionable, decided Prentiss, as he sat waiting for the Governor to raise the white-mopped head so sunk in conscious dejection. The head, rising a benignant white above the garb of monkish black, was something "set," like the room itself. It was set, Prentiss felt, as a stage is set—but essentially for women. Yet both were significant, for in both the figure and its environment lay a certain key to the mystery of Borowsky's success. That success had been through his understanding, his instinctive understanding, of women. He knew their capabilities, their emotions, their self-contradictions; and out of this knowledge he had made his name.

Prentiss turned suddenly back to the table, across which the great manager had thrown his listless arms, with the unhardened white hands relaxed. The gesture was the dramatic conclusion to an equally dramatic "stage-wait."

"And now you've seen it," said Borowsky.

"What?" asked Prentiss. But like the man of imagination he was, he had already worked out the scene in his own quick brain, so that when the words actually fell from the Governor's over-full Hebraic lips, as curved and mobile as a woman's, he had the sense of listening to something which had already fallen on his ears.

"We're not going to land it!" were the words he heard.

Prentiss did not look up at the other man as he answered.

"I know it!" he said.

This was the truth, but its mere articulation sent his heart down in his boots. He felt a sense of shame, too, that his first thought was of the play, not of his wife. He wondered why it was that panic, with its every-man-for-himself brutalities, could produce such a reversion to type, such a relapse to barbaric selfishness. Then he tried to justify his own position by letting his mind dwell on how he had carried that play with him for 2 years, how he had carried it in his brain, month by month, as a mother carries her baby in the crook of her arm. And now it was to be a failure.

He refused to become like the rest of them. He deliberately swung the trend of his thought back to his wife. She was not so much his own, per-

haps, as the play was. But she was more important. He had always stood a little in awe of her. He knew her imperiousness, her moods and whims; they were the offshoots of her power, the wayward back eddies in that full and sweeping current of strength. He even loved them, but it was an adoration touched with amazement. He knew only too well how hard she had worked on the part, for his sake, for the Governor's sake, for her own sake. They had made up a trinity from whose efforts a new star was to be born. And God knows, they had all worked, if mere work could do anything. He remembered the "part" that for weeks she had carried about with her. The one hundred and sixty "sides" of typewritten dialogue, by the time she was letter-perfect, had come to look like a bundle of soiled bank notes, over-scrawled and worn and dog-eared, and amended and again amended. But now he was nothing more than an ordinance clerk, with no place on the firing line. His work was over; he was unable to do anything more. "Favina Williams," during those turgid weeks of rehearsals, no longer seemed even his wife. It was her own battle, and she had to fight it out in her own way. He had merely equipped her with an instrument. The campaign remained with her and her general. But now it was not even to be a campaign.

Prentiss looked up, conscious that the Governor was waiting for him to speak. The older man had not the gift of words. He was in many things almost inarticulate. But his instincts were active; they tapped ahead of thought like a stick before the blind.

"What do you want me to do?" the young playwright asked. Yet the moment he had uttered it he felt the weakness of the question.

"I want you to go away for ten days," was the Governor's unexpected answer.

"But won't you need me?" began Prentiss.

"No, I won't," was the quick retort. "Can't you see you've done your part? It isn't *you*!"

"Who is it then?" asked the unhappy young husband.

"It's *her*!" was the other's explosive answer. I tell you we can't go on this way! We can't do it!"

"Then what can I do?"

"Pack your bag and get out. Go down to Lakewood, to Atlantic City, anywhere. Only get out!"

"And what good will that do?" demanded the younger man, with a combative stare at the white mop.

"It'll do this: it'll give me a chance to save my star, and save your play!"

PRENTISS squared himself in his chair. He had heard rumours of the Governor's ways, of his methods in the past, of old-fashioned third degree brutalities, of Vesuvian blasphemies and threats and that frenzy of diabolism which lashed the over-taxed spirit into its last paroxysm of speed. It was all very well for mule-driving. But the day for that sort of thing, for anything but levee roustabouts, was over and gone.

"I prefer staying right here!" said Prentiss, meeting the other man's haggard and hound-like eyes.

He was about to add: "And go down with the ship!" when a glance into the Governor's averted face with its tell-tale purple shadows of weariness close under the eyes, brought him up short. But he did not surrender. "I can't do it," he declared. He said it with almost a touch of regret. "I can't go."

"You've got to go!" Borowsky had swung round on him, with one fat hand slapping on the table edge. Prentiss hated to think of his wife as being played on like an instrument by those fat white fingers. He abhorred the thought of her being kneaded and shaped and moulded by that adroit master of charlatanism, for it was, after all, nothing more than charlatanism, nothing more than make-believe. "I tell you I can't afford a failure," the master was declaring. "You can't afford a failure. *She* can't afford it. I've got to land that woman, and I've got to land that play!"

"But she's worn-out—she's all in! Look what she's like, even now!" demurred the husband.

They never mentioned her by name; she was, during those weeks of work, the one and only woman in the world to both of them. It was about her, and her alone, that their entire little planetary system of activity revolved.

"All in! What does that count? She's got her part to play, and I've got my production to get over!"

"But she's a human being, you know!" was the younger man's protest.

"Then why can't she *act* like one?" snapped back the other. He was on his feet by this time, striding back and forth on the soft rugs. "Don't you worry about her not standing it. They all stand it, when they have to!"

THEY stood it, Prentiss knew, very much as a rider in a six-day race stands his last hour of effort. The one thing was to get the first night over, to get the thing launched. Once over, once established, it would carry itself along, almost automatically, like a clock wound up. But into that one first night had to be flung the heart-breaking frenzy of effort that made the record, that set the pace. To the audiences, he knew, it would seem the beginning; to those behind the scenes it would be more like the end.

"Yes," cried the manager, with his womanish irreligion of utterance, "that's just what's the matter! You keep giving her sympathy! You keep wheedling and pitying her! You undo everything! Good heavens, man, don't you see *what's going to happen*? She's going to kill your play! She's going to put you back ten years! She's going to put herself out of the running!"

"I know it's—it's not shaping up the way it ought to!" He was once more thinking of his play, and his play alone.

"Shaping up? It's awful! It's rotten!" Prentiss winced at the uncompromising stage-life adjective. "And you know why! That woman's been with cheap people for five seasons. She whines and she yodels. She's all arms. She thinks those stained glass attitudes'll still go down. All she's been taught is to look pretty, and to show her teeth. But she's never learned to act. Every damn thing's wrong. Her method's wrong. Her way's wrong. Her voice is wrong. And she won't see it; she won't face what she's got to face, or go under!"

"I—I thought she rather got away with that third-act speech of hers this morning," ventured Prentiss. He remembered the tired and weary face, the unctuous and shadowy eyes, the lithe and spirited body as it pulsed and shook with its pretended emotion, as it quivered with its eagerness to do a master's bidding.

"It's wrong, I tell you, every word and move of it. And she knows you're backing her up in what she's doing. She knows it!"

"I never imagined there was any conspiracy against your authority," murmured Prentiss. His sarcasm was wasted on the other man.

"Then pack your bag and get out so I can exert that authority."

It dawned on Prentiss that a week's rest away from it all, would be more of a blessing than he had imagined.

"But what would you do, even if I did go away for a week or so?"

"Knock some of that nonsense out of her—try to teach her how to act!"

The young husband moved a little uneasily in his chair.

"You mean she's got to—knuckle down?" he suggested with the ghost of a smile. "Knuckle down, to you?"

"She's got to knuckle down to authority, whether it's to me, or to you, or to any other man who knows the game. She's got to learn that forty years at this business can sometimes teach a manager something!"

Prentiss could readily enough concede that point. The Governor knew the game; he knew what to give and how to give it. He could foretell what would effervesce into applause, simmer slowly up into tears, explode into laughter. He was able to count on his reactions as positively as a chemist toying with his allotted acids.