

HIS MYSTERIOUS CORRESPONDENT.

Marshfield, said the junior partner of the great firm of Vaughn, Clavel and Vaughn, "I want you to do me a favor."

"He was sitting on a corner of his desk, hands in pockets and swinging one foot rather impatiently his secretary thought."

"Well, I shall be pleased to what is it?"

"Have you read any of those letters signed 'Neveda' in the Metropolitan?"

"Neveda? Yes, Miss Marshfield considered for a moment, then replied: 'Yes, I have; why do you ask?'"

"Well, you have excellent taste in literature, don't you think them remarkable?"

"Why, I don't know that I do; though they are fairly good, I believe."

"Ah, you are generous with adjectives, I recollect. Now, I think they are far above the average, and I should like to discover the identity of this 'Neveda'—she interests me intensely."

"You think Neveda is a woman, then?"

"Why, yes, I should judge so; should you not?"

"I haven't given the subject much thought."

"Oh, I'm reasonably sure it's a woman, and what I want of you is to discover her for me."

Miss Marshfield looked her astonishment and asked:—

"Why not try it yourself?"

"I have tried, but failed ignominiously. The unspokeness of the sphinx is gratifying beside the silence that publishers have chosen to wrap about 'Neveda.'"

"But the silence is probably according to the instructions of 'Neveda' herself, so how can I hope to break it?"

"Why, that's what I can't exactly see; I thought perhaps your woman's wit would suggest a way."

"You seem to be a friend of the literary people—might you get some information from that source?"

"You are wrong about my footing with literary people. I know very few, and am afraid I cannot be of the least use to you in this matter."

"What a wet blanket you can be on occasion, Miss Marshfield, I insist on being shown the respect due the tall of this firm—won't you please turn round again for a moment?"

"There's a large gist of letters to-day," she reminded him, turning partially about.

"Yes, yes, I dearest, there generally is, but, Marshfield, I'm not joking about this thing. I want to know the author of those letters—man or woman."

"The question of sex does not influence your desire for acquaintance, then?"

"The secretary's penetrating gaze was fixed on her typewriter, and she asked the question with apparent carelessness."

the friendship which had grown up between them during the three years in which she had been with the firm—a friendship platonic to all appearance. Of the two, the stenographer had the greater adaptability. In the three years she had mastered the details of their immense trade, and her keen insight and quick memory were relied on by all three partners.

"Such magic with words," echoed Miss Marshfield, thoughtfully. "Have you considered that there is apt to be a wide breach between the personality of the author and his writings?"

"No, I hadn't thought of it—not particularly."

"I could point you to many notable examples."

"Oh, yes, I dearest, there are examples, but you must admit that in the world the size of this there are examples of everything."

"I did not mean to imply a rule, of course, but I think genius is often like a bright-wheeled cart on a house of very common clay. Your 'Neveda' might prove a disappointment. If you are content with the articles and better not to know the author. You might likewise be poorer by the loss of an illusion."

She looked at him with a laugh in her eyes and resolutely struck the keys of her typewriter.

"You mustn't bother me any more," she asserted. "I am behind with my work as it is."

"I ask for assistance, and you give me axioms," retorted "Neveda." "Nevertheless, I am not discouraged. Your opinions are usually worth looking into, but this is too gauzy."

"Go on," she said, over her shoulder; "never mind my opinions, but when you find yourself disenchanted, don't forget that I warned you."

"This ended the discussion for that day, and during many following days Vaughn never mentioned 'Neveda.' Then, one morning, he came into the office, looking unusually cheerful, threw off his coat, and began tossing about the mail on his desk in an absent-minded fashion. His secretary said nothing, rightly opining that he would soon disclose the cause of his satisfaction. Presently he paused in the act of opening a letter and said:—

"I feel greatly elated this morning; can you guess why?"

"I am not good at guessing."

"Well, then, I shall have to tell you. I've found 'Neveda'—or, rather, I've been able to communicate with her through her publishers, and the result is that she has consented to correspond with me as the boys trade jack-knives, out of sight 'n' unseen."

"Indeed! How did you manage it?"

"By means of my prestige as the author of 'From Sea to Sea,' which is the first intimation I ever received that I had any such prestige. I played the card in desperation and it won. Quite romantic, don't you think?"

"Well, rather, if 'Neveda' is a woman. Have you ascertained that?"

"No, I don't know yet, but I shall soon learn. It won't be possible to keep my mystified long. But all thought of that aside, I am promising myself untold pleasure from this correspondence. An interchange of ideas with a writer so versatile as 'Neveda,' is one of the keenest pleasures of life."

"I don't know anything about that, never having had a regular correspondent."

"I'm" Vaughn went on with his work after this careless comment. He was not more than ordinarily selfish, but it never occurred to him that his secretary might possibly have a personal feeling with regard to this correspondent. If she had, however, it would not have been suspected from her manner.

Some days after this conversation he pulled a letter out of his pocket, and, handing it over to her, said:—

"Now, tell me what you think about 'Neveda,' being a woman."

Miss Marshfield took the letter, smoothed it with her long, slender fingers, and asked:—

"Do you think this perfectly fair?"

One of the days when Vaughn received one of these letters he was absent-minded to a marked degree, and the burden of responsibility for that day rested on the stenographer, but she uttered no complaint, merely reminding him occasionally of neglected duties.

Sometimes he would spring suddenly to his feet in an abstract mood and pace the office floor, sometimes stand before a window and gaze long out over the adjoining vacant lots, where were piled a few pieces of old machinery. His secretary watched him narrowly at these times, and one day when she had called his attention to something which needed it, he turned abruptly and said:—

"Marshfield, there's no doubt about our being a treasure. You are the only one who should be kinder to me. I am not a good or nothing."

"Then the slight, black-towled figure had turned toward him."

"Let me advise you," she said. "I think you had better give up this correspondence of yours; it is doing you no good. Better drop it and forget it, and attend to business."

"Drop it! You don't know what you are saying. Have you any idea what part this friendship has come to play in my daily life? Now, don't, please, set me down for a drivelling idiot. I am going about with my heart on my sleeve, killing every one who 'Neveda' is to me, but there's something about you which invites my confidence notwithstanding that your criticisms have been rather acrid. I would give ten years of my life for the privilege of seeing 'Neveda's' face—of hearing her talk as she writes. Why, did I show you her letters to Egyptology? I thought I knew a few things, but she makes me blush for my ignorance. Egypt! The very name is a mine of mystic delights under her facile pen. Scott at me if you will, Marshfield—you with your cool wit and calm judgment of men, but I would willingly exchange my best prospects in machinery for a voyage down the Nile with 'Neveda' as a companion."

Miss Marshfield was rather paler than usual, but she only said quickly:—

"And she eludes you persistently?"

"Yes, and I can't see why, I have done my best. I have brought all the power there is in words to the siege, and unfortunately words are my only available weapons. She promises an interview sometime in the future, but continually puts me off. She has seen me, too, which doesn't seem all round fair."

Miss Marshfield looked at him with a frown in her eyes.

"What now?" he exclaimed in a vexed tone. "Look here, Marshfield, I've been getting together too much out of me. I see my garrulity needs muzzling. It don't seem like you, though; I thought you'd have some sympathy."

"And so I have, but I can't help contemplating the possibility of your correspondent being some leathery old woman whose romance is all in the past, and who is amusing herself by teasing me with the flame of your young passion. Of course she couldn't show herself, because that would mean—"

"You're talking most unheard-of nonsense for you. No leathery old woman could write with such fire and eloquence. She is young and enthusiastic. You have not seen all her letters."

"No? I think you might have shown them to me." She looked hard at him as she spoke, and he actually blushed under her scrutiny.

"Ah! I see," she went on, mercilessly; "'Neveda' has been making love to you."

He neither acknowledged nor denied, but turned abruptly away—for the first time in their acquaintance—angry with her.

"Supposing," she went on, as if she had not noticed, "that you meet your 'Neveda' and find her, though attractive to the eye, unlovely in character, would her genius obliterate the effect?"

"Utterly impossible for a person who writes like that to be spiritually unlovely."

"These you are in error. Neither her good qualities are absolute in real people. Nature has its moods and tenses, and I have been told that writers as a class are especially susceptible to them—in fact, that it's a very good rule to know your pet author at a respectful distance."

"Well," said Vaughn, trying to throw off his sultriness, "you may be perfectly right—I dearest you are—but all this is too complex for me. I am not an adept in analyzing character, and to tell the truth, don't think I care to be. Not, however, that I mean to disparage the habit. Probably it is a very good one, only not congenial to my tastes."

"No," said Miss Marshfield, thoughtfully. "It is not congenial to your tastes. You care so much more for ideals than for actualities."

Vaughn had been standing with his back toward her, looking out of the window. Suddenly he wheeled about and stood beside her desk.

"Marshfield, it occurs to me that I must seem very puerile and silly to you."

"No, indeed; if I have said anything to imply that, forgive me—I never meant it. I do think though, that it's best to have no enthusiasms; they leave such heartaches in their wake. Hardly anything in life comes up to the expectations of an impulsive person, while if we expect little or nothing, the good that comes to us seems a full measure. Have you not found it so sometimes?"

"Now that you mention it, I believe

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suffocated for a moment, and as Miss Marshfield dropped her eyes and color faded slightly, he sprang to his feet and asked if the room wasn't uncomfortably warm. She made some unintelligible reply and he lowered a window; then, instead of resuming his chair came and stood beside her while her nimble fingers played rather nervously over the keys. At length he spoke:—

"Your eyes would indicate the truth out of a confirmed liar, Marshfield. I may as well tell you the whole skeleton story, though, of course, you'll say it was to be expected. She's given me the sack—without even the common decency of saying good-bye. She's been trying it for a long time, and now she's done it. Very shabby of her, don't you think?"

"It undoubtedly seems shabby treatment from your point of view, but it was the most merciful thing she could do."

"Because why?"

"Because that correspondence was unifying you for business and making you more visionary and idealistic than ever, which wasn't at all necessary."

"You speak with your accustomed plainness."

"Yes, I am in earnest, but I hope you are not offended."

"Why should I be with you? When you have not been giving me good advice—which, by the way, I wish I had taken—you have been doing my neglected work. I have no reason for complaining of you, at all events. Things have turned out about as you predicted. She can't be a person of good principles—she must be a flirt. She—she must have found somebody else."

"Oh, let us cover her with the mantle of charity, and suppose her nothing but, but only wrinkled and ugly. She couldn't help that, you know. The transcendent love you offered her would have tempted any woman."

"How do you know I offered her transcendent love?"

"I have heard you talk of her several times."

"Come, Marshfield, let up on me. I'm ready now to assent to all the spiteful things you've said about her. I do hereby solemnly swear that to the best of my knowledge and belief she's a big-bearded man, that in addition to, and notwithstanding that, she's a leathery old woman who has been amusing herself with my feeble-mindedness and warming over her state romances at the fire of my idiotic passion."

"Did I really mention feeble-mindedness?"

"Oh, you might as well! But this isn't wading through that pile of letters. Some one has got to take a trip, and owing to my father's fancy that I've been confined too closely to late, it's been decided that I am the one. My father, you see, doesn't know about 'Neveda.'"

"No," said Miss Marshfield, scarcely heeding the latter part of his remark. "Shall you be gone long?"

"Two or three weeks, I think," he replied, and became absorbed in his reading.

At six o'clock they had finished, and then, as she was donning her street clothes Vaughn remembered certain things it was necessary to talk over in view of the intended trip. So they lingered by the grate fire, without lighting up, because it was pleasanter to talk in the twilight. The business affairs they discussed were no of vital importance, but the secretary seemed not to notice that, and the junior partner talked on leisurely, rocking his office chair. The freight played over their faces, and the uncurtained window shone the first refulgence of a full moon.

This was a window which commanded a view of the lots, with their lumber of old machinery. There was no snow and over the motley array the moon poured a silvery flood lending it a weird interest it was far from possessing by daylight. The sharp angles and ugly protuberances of the pile were softened by the hazy glow that made the shadows seem to hide strange things—mystical things—things which belonged to the land of dreams.

The spell of the hour was on these two, as they sat there by the fire, and neither was willing to break it. They talked in low tones, with throbbing

beats between their inconstant sentences.

Presently Vaughn leaned over to look at the clock, and when he saw that it was nearly a quarter of ten, he looked at his watch to see that his left hand easily reached and clasped her right, which lay in the arm of her chair. She did not attempt to withdraw it, but made some faint and evasive reply, which he returned with a careless smile. She looked at the clock, but his eyes were on her face.

"Marshfield!" The name was uttered very softly, and in a low, clear still. "Could you ever—would it be possible—"

Her look stopped him. She had turned on him those sparkling eyes which sometimes seemed to belie the calmness of her demeanor, and there was no mistaking their expression this time. He understood as well as if she had put it into words.

"Thoroughly agitated, he rose, and, standing behind her chair, laid his hand on her shoulder as he said, unsteadily:—

"Marshfield, you force me to believe in the luck of fools. In a natural course of events you would despise me."

"Thank God for the unnatural! Don't speak, please, I'm afraid of your speech; it might contradict what your eyes have told me, and it's too good to be contradicted." He had bent lower, until his dark locks mingled with hers.

Miss Marshfield did not speak, she was smacking with silent laughter.

"What was it," he asked; "more fun at my expense? My dear girl, I can't blame you, but I have a strange feeling. Marshfield—that it is your image I have had in my heart all the time, and never a dream of a myth. Explain that, will you?"

"Then Miss Marshfield spoke, and this was what she said:—

"Darwin, almost thou persuaded me that the only things desirable in this world are you, a moonlight night, and the Nile."

"What!" exclaimed Vaughn, straightening up, well-nigh paralyzed. "How do you know she said that?"

"Because 'she' and I are one."

Impulsively he whirled her chair about until she faced him.

"You are 'Neveda' and notwithstanding that, she's a leathery old woman who has been amusing herself with my feeble-mindedness and warming over her state romances at the fire of my idiotic passion."

"Oh, I didn't equivocate much; it wasn't necessary. You were very easy prey, Darwin."

"Was I, indeed?"

"I'll admit that my course was a little irregular, but you see I was all the time egging my conscience with the promise of an explanation. It was very exciting, and I admit that temptation made my carriage sit too far. Forgive me, pray. I have never romanced before, but you wrote such letters—ah, such letters, Darwin. You are a past master in love-making. I don't think I could have concluded to give up the correspondence so soon, but for the effect it was having on you."

"I was something undone, that's a fact. And to think it was my dear Marshfield all the time. Don't you remember when I asked why you couldn't have been 'Neveda'? You might have told me then."

"But I was somewhat plighted to see you so coolly setting me down as inferior to your plain secretary. It was evident that your plain secretary had not the ghost of a chance."

"So, then, you wanted me to fall in love with my secretary?"

"Perhaps I did—the possibility never presented itself to you, however."

"Oh, Marshfield, I have always adored you, as you very well know, but somehow it seemed to me that you were not the sort of woman to respond. Many a time I have said to myself, 'Marshfield is a delightful chum, but she wouldn't listen to a love story.'"

"I think the very gods would listen and capitulate to such a story as you have to tell; what, then, could be expected of me, whose wild desire was with you in Egypt, even when you thought me most prosaic?"

"He two shadows were close together now, in the shadows which the firelight was throwing into fantastic shapes."

"The wonder of it!" said Vaughn. "Marshfield, my dear, invaluable Marshfield, who will keep me sober and sensible whether I will or no, and 'Neveda,' the mate of my soul. Oh, 'Neveda,' you shall float down the Nile together, in fancy I see already the dark glistening waters and the glint of the moonlight on the Pyramids."—Parma Centre, in "Short Stories."

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