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AFTER

By DENIS FRANCIS HANNIGAN

IT WAS the morning after my execution. I had been clumsily electrocuted. But in America such things are only too frequent. However, I cared little now for the malpractices of judges, juries, or executioners.

It was all over. I found myself waking out of a deep sleep. The first thing I saw was the face of the man whom I had murdered. It did not scowl at me. On the contrary, it smiled benevolently.

"Jack, old top, you did me a real good turn when you shot me," said Harold Ingersoll.

I had fallen madly in love with his wife, and she reciprocated my passion, for she had grown tired of the strange, detached, unworldly man she had married. Harold Ingersoll was a writer, a philosopher, a dreamer of dreams, who had inherited about ten thousand dollars from his father and a visionary's soul from his mother. While he worked hard at his legal profession, which he found only moderately profitable, his wife read Paracelsus and Swedenborg. The unhappily assorted pair never agreed, and I, as a friend of the family, had no difficulty in winning the affections of the woman who had married the offspring of an unimaginative lawyer and a petticoated spiritualist.

Harold had published six "impossible" novels. By the publication of every one of them he lost money, and when, at last, the reviewers began to take notice of his latest and most extravagant book, he was almost penniless.

Laura, who loved life, was disgusted with her husband's indiffer-

ence to practical considerations. I interested her by continually talking about the rise and fall of the stock market. Her husband despised sport, speculation, and the movies. Laura worshiped all three. She played tennis and hockey, and went regularly to baseball matches. I accompanied her, while Harold stayed at home reading or writing. The affair went on pleasantly for five years when suddenly Harold, no longer able to bear the irritation caused by Laura's sneers and reproaches, began to turn on her, and sometimes abused her.

One night, Laura and I were out late and came back to her husband's house shortly before daybreak. Harold came to meet us at the hall door, and sarcastically quoted a well known passage in Byron's "Don Juan." This made me feel ridiculous, and, under an impulse of uncontrollable anger, I drew my automatic revolver and shot him dead.

Laura fainted. I was arrested, tried, and found guilty.

Before the day fixed for my execution, I made a will, leaving all I had in the world to Laura.

My last moments were by no means painless. Those who pretend that the electric shock which kills the convicted criminal is not terrible are liars or ignorant fools.

2

BUT here I was in "the next world" and the man I had killed had assured me I had done him a service by shooting him.

No words can describe the place where I and my victim met. It was not so much a place as an atmosphere.

I might say that I reclined on air, for my body seemed to have no weight and no substance. Harold's face was just as it had been during his earthly life, with this difference: there were no angles, no protuberances, in a countenance which had always looked bizarre. When I killed him, he was between thirty and forty. His eyes were blue, with a slightly sardonic expression. He was clean-shaven and slightly bald. His face had all these characteristics still, but the animal traits had vanished. I realized that in spite of his bodily vesture he was a spirit.

His first words astounded me. Talk of forgiving injuries and loving your enemy!

"Harold, you are too kind to the scoundrel who took away your life," I faltered.

"Not at all," said Harold, and his smile grew warmer. "I often thought of suicide as a way out. Laura, you know, was a nuisance. She hated my ideas. She called them 'nonsense'. She often told me I should become a stock broker instead of writing books that did not 'pay'. Of course, she did not understand that I was indifferent to what men like you call success. I gradually came to the conclusion that the greatest curse is birth and that the true ideal is to cease to live. I treated her with scorn in order to make you attack me in her defense. It was all right."

I asked myself whether this was not a posthumous nightmare. The cordiality of my victim almost brought tears to my eyes. It was some time before I could utter a word.

"Anyhow, Harold, we are both dead now," I said.

"Yes, but we are saved."

The situation was becoming bewildering. "Saved!" How could we be saved? I asked him what he meant, and his smile became irresistible.

"I mean just what I say, Jack. Your worldly clergymen don't come within a million miles of comprehending these things. God does not condemn human nature. He only condemns the distortion, the depravity, of human nature. My wife had an antipathy to my philosophy of life. She hated my views. You liked her (possibly you would contend that you loved her) but I displeased, or rather horrified her. When I 'insulted' her, as she and you might have put it, you shot me. I wanted to die. Don't you see, every one of us was right, according to our own logic?"

His Socratic convincings made me feel, at the same time, intellectually satisfied and spiritually remorseful. Could it be that he was fooling me and that the course he was taking was the most subtle form of vengeance?

3

BUT it was soon manifest that Harold had spoken with a candor far greater than he had ever exhibited on earth. He now gently drew me from my reclining posture so that we moved forward arm in arm.

The landscape was beautiful. There were no fields, no trees, no streams, no houses; but Life in its fullest emanation filled my very soul with happiness.

"You now can do just as you like, Jack," said Harold. "We are free from the bonds of that world we have shaken off like the dust from our feet."

After a pause, he asked: "Would you go back to Laura, if you could?"

I felt myself a new man, a spirit growing out of the miserable bondage that is the lot of the human brute.

"No," I replied, emphatically. "For weeks before the end came, I had ceased to care for her."

Then, in that world of spirits, we clasped hands.