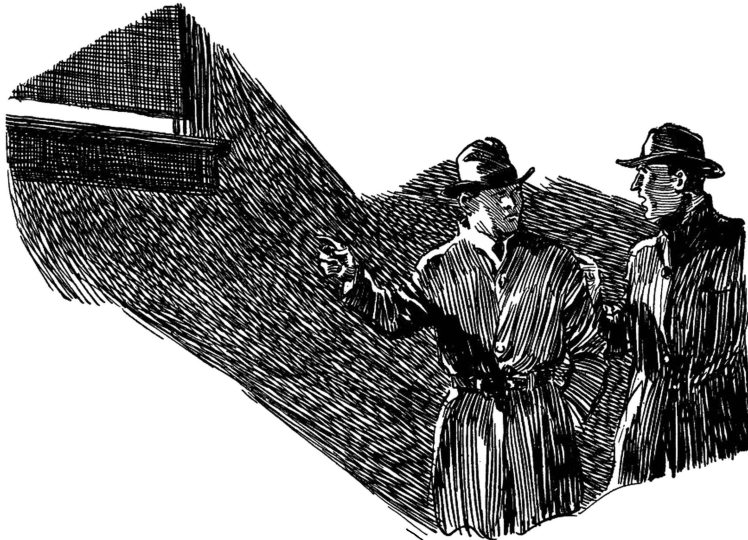


*An Unexpected Thing
Happened to Bennett Tierney*

After the Storm

A Short Story

By SARAH HARBINE WEAVER



BENNETT TIERNEY did a queer thing. We were in his rooms on Central Park South, discussing Tom, Dick and Harriet when my gaze was arrested by a photograph on his desk.

It was the picture of a girl in décolleté gown, with a rose fastened in the diaphanous draperies of her bodice—a girl of classic beauty. For the nonce, I forgot everything trying to recall where I had seen that vivid face.

When I had sauntered into Bennett's bachelor apartments, he had called my attention to the view from his windows. Now, he suddenly sprang to his feet and with a wide gesture cried:

"Look, McDonald, there goes a Cardinal—in that victoria!"

As I glanced down at a figure in ecclesiastical scarlet, Bennett strode quickly across the room. I turned in time to see him grasp the photograph which had piqued my interest and throw it into the drawer of his desk. Then he dropped into a chair where he sat motionless—his face a mask.

"What on earth—" I began, and stopped abruptly. One could as soon chuck President Coolidge under the chin or wink at General Pershing as assume liberties with Bennett Tierney. But why on earth, I wondered, did he want to get that picture out of my sight?

The incident brought to mind talk I had heard of Bennett's engagement to an out-of-town girl. But whether the match had materialized I never had heard. I was endeavoring to piece together odd fragments of gossip when Bennett brought me back to actualities.

"It's odd how you and I have drifted," he began. "Pals at Harvard—now almost strangers. You're still at 111 Broadway?"

"Oh, I'm there all right, although my clients don't seem aware of the fact. The population of Greater New York is over seven millions, yet, judging from the eager multitudes which flock to my door, Manhattan might be a desert

island. I'm dipping in real estate, and just now am on the lookout for a Long Island demesne for a weary plutocrat. Know of anything?"

Tierney's eyes narrowed as if he were seeing things far away. Then he laid a hand on my shoulder. "In all probability, I've the very place you're looking for. I've decided to sell Ravensnest—the old Tierney home."

It seemed to me that I was on the trail of a pretty commission and my attention was entirely unforced, as Tierney described his property on the North Shore of Long Island—over a hundred acres of gently rolling land, a thirty-room dwelling, a small lake, woodlands, et cetera.

"There have been a lot of places in that neighborhood broken into recently," said Tierney, "and I've been intending to go out and look things over. Suppose we drive out next Friday and slay two birds with a single pebble?"

It sounded good to me, so I accepted the offer with alacrity.

"There's no use in going about this thing half primed!" exclaimed Bennett, who appeared to me to be laboring under excitement, unwarranted by the facts in the case. "You admit, old chap," he continued, "that your safety deposit box isn't jammed with securities, while I freely confess that I'm utterly weary of this town. Find me a buyer for Ravensnest, and we'll go to South America and buy a ranch! What do you say?"

His enthusiasm infected me. New York is crammed with lawyers and the adventure beckoned. Moreover, I had finally come to the conclusion that Edith Noland cared for me only as a passing acquaintance. I had little to lose, much to gain, and Bennett's dark persuasive eyes were on me. I considered for the space of a moment.

"Done!" I shouted. "I'm with you."

"Good for you!" cried Bennett, extending his hand to bind the bargain.

"I'll not fail you," I returned seriously. "Old Grigsby will probably jump at the chance to get your place, but if he doesn't, Long Island real estate is in demand and there'll be another purchaser."

"You'll not regret your bargain. Will Seranton was in last week, chock-full of the opportunities down there. He's made a fortune in Paraguay, you know."

My ardor had waned somewhat when we parted a little later. Instead of going to my office, I took a northbound Madison Avenue car to the home of the girl I had decided never again to bother

with my presence. Things were different now, and soon thousands of miles would stretch between us.

Edith Noland was in and greeted me in a heart-warming manner. Her big eyes stared reproachfully into mine as she said: "You've neglected me frightfully of late, Bobby McDonald."

"I thought you never wanted to see me again," I fondered hopelessly.

Her face, which, though sweet as a rose, was without the imperial pulchritude of the girl whose portrait Bennett had whisked from his desk, clouded instantly.

"I always wanted to see you," she whispered softly.

This was too much for my Scotch-Irish blood, and a moment later she was in my arms and I was babbling sentiment in her ear. Evidently, Edith thought I deserved a lecture, for she was soon telling me that I was very foolish to conclude that she cared anything for a person just because she went about with him some.

"And," she concluded, "much of the world's unhappiness is caused by the unjust suspicions and silly pride of folks. False judgments and egotism! Now, look at Bennett Tierney, deliberately making himself miserable."

What Edith meant by her remark about Bennett, I knew not, but the mere mention of his name paralyzed my fervor. Here was a maddening mix-up! Edith was dearer to me than the world, yet my hands were tied. Small wonder that when I left here I was fuming because I had abandoned a sure heaven for Bennett's chimera.

THOUGH the time we set for our rendezvous was two o'clock, it was almost four when Bennett hurried into my office. To my suggestion that we postpone the trip until we could make an earlier start, he retorted grimly that there was no time like the present.

We made haste to get away, but as we were crossing Blackwell's Island Bridge, Bennett remarked apprehensively:

"I don't like the feel of the air. Looks as if we're in for a ducking."

A glance at the shrouded heavens convinced me that he was probably weather-wise, but the matter was not to remain long in doubt. We had scarcely passed Kew Gardens when the storm was upon us. For several moments we whizzed along while flash followed flash and rumble succeeded rumble.

"There's no use in being reckless," said Bennett, after a deafening clap. "There's a road-house near here with something of a reputation for its cuisine.

We'll turn in there, eat a leisurely dinner and see Ravensnest afterward. The storm's too thorough-going to last long."

The meal at the small hostelry was better than I had anticipated, but even the smothered duck failed to elicit a word of commendation from Tierney, who had grown unaccountably gloomy. Though thinner and more distinguished-looking than the man I had known at Harvard, he had not changed much physically. Yet I became convinced that, in some subtle way, not easily discerned or diagnosed, he was greatly altered. He seemed more serious, more sensitive, and paradoxical as it may sound, more master of himself.

We had reached the cheese and coffee stage of our repast and the storm had celebrated its grand finale, when I, thinking of Edith Noland's sentient face, soft little hands, and the snatched kiss, ventured a remark which upset Bennett's composure.

"Bennett," I began sententiously, "I've seen quite a bit of life, and although I'll concede that but few marriages lead to unadulterated bliss, I've concluded that celibacy is a forlorn mistake. You ought to marry. Let's reconsider our South American project."

He put down his demi tasse with such haste that some of the coffee slopped over into the saucer.

"No!" he returned savagely, "and don't talk marriage to me either."

With oxen-headed stupidity, I was about to make some jovial retort, asking if he'd been stung or something of that sort, when the hurt look in Tierney's eyes arrested me. So I merely said that as the storm's hysterics seemed to be passed, we might as well conclude our journey.

Tierney leaned toward me, one arm flung out, a smile twisting his appealing face. "We'll start in a few minutes. As for my ever marrying—well, the fact is, I'm married already, and we've shaken hands on the ranch proposition."

With the dignity which was a part of him, he rose and led the way to the lounging-room. There we puffed our cigars for a time in silence until I again suggested our getting under way.

He looked at me quizzically as he replied: "I've lived most of my life at Ravensnest and I rather hate to think of parting with it. Going there with you tonight is bound to rouse from their perches a horde of recollections and make me as blue as Egypt's sky."

I knew how he felt and only said that I realized the hold such places make on one's affections, but that Ravensnest must be worth a fortune, tritely adding, probably from force of habit, that the

time to sell a thing was when somebody wanted it. I hoped Bennett would ultimately refuse to sell and thereby queer our South American project. Since we had made our mad contract, my law business had lived up amazingly. Besides, there was Edith Noland—

"Oh, I suppose you're right," he agreed wearily. And then as we stepped out on the porch, "Hello, it's growing dark."

It was, indeed, for, although the rain had ceased, clouds curtained the heavens and night had arrived prematurely. We stopped at a grocery store in the next village, Maple Valley, and bought matches and some candles.

"Now, I guess we can see the place—and perhaps, burn the house down in this bargain," announced Tierney.

A few moments later, the car stopped before an impressive entrance to the magnificent grounds of Ravensnest. A heavy steel chain barred the gateway.

"I'm sorry," said my host, "but we'll have to get out. I've a key to the house, but not to this contraption. We'll have to walk up."

We leaped over the chains and entered the park. I am not an expert at judging distances, but it must have been about a third of a mile before a turn in the driveway brought us directly in front of the regal old dwelling. It was highest in the pillared central part where there were three stories, for the wings on either side had but two floors and were rather low and extremely inviting.

As we approached the majestic facade, the moon, pinoretting with the clouds, suddenly lighted the mansion with a pale and fickle radiance. We paused for a moment under the lofty, silent trees, gazing at the house. Then the eerie brightness faded from the windows, and with a levity I did not feel, I turned to my companion.

"It's a wonderful old place, Bennett, wonderful! But it would be much more cheerful with a few dozen thirty-two candle power Mazdas distributed throughout its interior. A phonograph phonographing at full capacity, or ten or twenty young voices singing 'Nelly Kelly' would liven things up a bit."

"It does look lonesome," admitted Tierney, whose face in the moonlight, appeared as cheerful as a calla lily's.

"These old oaks and elms must be priceless," I went on, with simulated zest. "But it strikes me as abominably spooky, stealing in here in the night like two crooks. There aren't any ghosts, are there?"

Tierney smothered a sigh and pointed to a balcony over which wistaria

hung and clung in waving, dark festoons. We left the front of the house and wandered around under the shadow of the right wing. All at once Tierney clutched my arm with a grip that hurt.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely.

MY EYES followed his rapt gaze, and there under the drawn shade—an almost drawn shade, I should say—filtered a ribbon of light. My breath came quick, for the surprise of the thing got me.

Then I crept to the window with Tierney, and, standing on my toes, peered into the room. Instinctively, I drew back, for not eight feet away, was a man sitting at a table.

"S-s-s-s-h!" cautioned Bennett, as I bettered my position for another peep within.

My second glances was more prolonged and took in some details of the large, handsome apartment where the man sat. It was evidently a living-room or back parlor, with books in glassed cases, and, on the walls, covered pictures. There were three doors leading to it, so that it occurred to me immediately if Tierney guarded one entrance and I another, the man might escape through the third—or leap through a window. But it was the housebreaker himself who riveted my attention.

He was slouched in a leather chair, apparently reading. A student's lamp stood near him, while a large volume lay open on his knee. But even as we gazed, his eyes closed, his head dropped lower and lower and he appeared to doze. His face was turned slightly away from the window, but even so I could see that he was more blond than swart, of powerful build, a Viking in appearance.

Bennett pulled me away a few paces where we could consult without much danger of being overheard. We backed into some ivy on a *porte cochere* and got a drenching shower of raindrops down our necks.

"Have you a pistol?" whispered Tierney.

I half drew from my pocket the black handle of my 32-calibre revolver. "I've a hunter's license and never go to the country without a gun. And you?"

He held up his fists. "Only these, but I know how to use them."

I recalled Bennett's skill at wrestling and was not ill-pleased.

"We'd better go in the rear door and take him by surprise," he went on.

"Do you know him?"

"No, but as I told you there have been a number of robberies around here of late, terrorizing Maple Valley."

"Looks like we've found the robbers' lair," I hazarded in an all but inaudible voice.

Bennett drew me still further away.

"Robert," he said, "I got you into this, and it looks ugly. These people (for there are probably more than one) are at least housebreakers. The fellows who broke into Cushing's place last week were professionals—armed to the teeth. That sleeping giant is no Mallin's Food baby. If you say so, we'll drive back to Maple Valley for reinforcements—"

"Never!" I cried. "We've got the advantage of surprise on our side, and as for me, I'm for the attack and the adventure."

"Good," was Bennett's only comment, but he said it in a way to warm the blood.

As we passed the living-room windows, we paused to see whether the old fellow still slept. No, he was wide-awake, and had reason to be! A short man, wearing a mask, had strapped the Viking to his chair, and even as we watched, proceeded to gag him. A second man, also masked, who walked with a slight limp, kept him covered with a revolver.

In a flash I recalled a newspaper account of an escaped criminal, "Limping Larry," known to be on Long Island and described by the police as a hardened villain, who had taken more than one life.

"Smash the window with the barrel of your gun," whispered Bennett hoarsely, "and pick off the big fellow. Then, wing the other."

I smashed the window and fired at once. "Limping Larry"—for it was he—staggered forward on to his knees and crumpled up, firing his revolver as he hit the floor. The other, who was rifling the old man's pockets, jumped and ran. I fired after him twice, and it seemed to me that he wavered slightly as he went, but he didn't stop. We rushed around to the rear of the house to cut him off, but the advantage was on his side. We had just turned the corner of the house when the kitchen door was flung open, and he sprang out and went tearing along toward the dense shrubbery. My revolver spoke again, but in a trice he had disappeared.

I was about to pursue him, but Bennett stopped me. "He's headed for the grove. We'd never find him in a century. Better go back."

Suddenly, Bennett jerked my arm and uttered a stifled exclamation. "Look upstairs! What's that?"

Standing there among the bushes we could see lights gleaming from four upper windows. My blood was up.

"Some more of 'em!" I cried. "Let's creep in and nab 'em."

"All right. We'll take a look at the old man first and at the fellow you shot."

We stole noiselessly through the open back door and into a long corridor as black as Erebus. Piloted by Bennett, we tiptoed to the living-room. "Limping Larry" was sprawled in a heap where he had fallen. It took but a glance to see that a bullet in his heart had put an end to his evil career. The Viking was struggling to free himself from his cords. Tierney spoke coolly.

"We're going upstairs to see what's wrong. Then we'll be down and give you a chance to explain yourself."

A horrid, heaving, guttural sound issued from the old man's gagged mouth.

"Sorry," said Bennett tersely. "Can't take any chances with you now. This happens to be my house."

As we groped up the back stairs, two of the steps creaked, but, although we stood stock still for several minutes, nothing happened, so we concluded we had not been heard. The halls in the second story were dark, too. The shades were lowered and we dared not use our candles.

Suddenly, Bennett gave a sort of gasp and fell head first over something on the floor. My foot struck it about the same time and I shrank back, thinking I had run against a human body. In a trice Tierney was on his feet again, towing me along.

"That was a rug," he panted, "rolled up." And then he came to an abrupt standstill, bending toward me. "I'm going to open the door to the wing now. If we make any noise, they'll hear us."

"All right," I whispered.

Bennett slowly turned the knob and we pushed ahead. With infinite caution, we tiptoed to where a half-opened door emitted a broad belt of light and we gazed into the room.

Never, if I live a thousand years, shall I forget the picture stenciled on my vision.

Opposite us, in a four posted Colonial bed, lay a pallid, young woman. Her limbs showed straight beneath the thin covering; her hands rested together, loosely; heavy gold braids were arranged on either side of her exquisite, bloodless profile. I have played my part, not ignobly I hope, in hand-to-hand encounters, but I confess that for an instant, as I looked at that inanimate

figure, my heart ceased to beat. Suddenly, Bennett lurched heavily against me, and when I saw his distorted countenance, I thought he must have gone mad. He was as white as a corpse and choking—actually choking in an effort to speak. Finally, the words came:

"She's dead!" he murmured.

"You don't need to tell me that," I retorted.

Tierney, pulling himself together, took a stumbling step forward.

Then a startled voice arrested us: "Colonel Rogers! Is it you?"

From an embrasure at the other end of the room, a young woman in a nurse's uniform came forward. Bennett scarcely looked at her. He stood staring at the fair young form on the bed.

"Is she dead?" he asked hoarsely.

The nurse shook her head negatively. Her hand was at her left side over her heart, as if she, too, had been startled. With silent authority, she motioned us from the room and followed us into an adjacent chamber where a lamp burned in a corner.

"Now, tell me who you are and why you came?" she insisted.

It did not occur to me that the explanations should have been hers. I looked at Bennett, but as he did not appear to see me, I answered for him.

"This is Mr. Bennett Tierney, the owner of this property, and I am here in the interest of a client."

"Tell me," broke in Bennett, "will she live?"

The nurse scanned Bennett's drawn face as she answered: "She will live, but she very nearly crossed over this afternoon."

Bennett gulped. "I know it! But why did she come here? Tell me all."

"I don't know all," she returned gently, still looking at Bennett. "She never talked much, but he has told me enough."

"He?" stammered Bennett.

"Her father—Colonel Rogers. Didn't he let you in? He's downstairs trying to compose himself, poor soul."

I confess I was all at sea, but Bennett nodded.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, about all I know is that she married secretly a year ago. She was visiting in the East so that her people did not know her husband. I don't think her father has ever seen him to this day. After a short time, she and her husband had a misunderstanding—not a real quarrel. Some trivial thing in connection with this estate grew into

an impossible situation. Sort of a tempest in a teapot, I suppose, which grew into a storm.

"He wanted to live here, but she didn't. So he gave her the keys to the house, telling her when she used them, he would return to her here where they'd begin again. Both were high strung and proud. Oh, very, very proud! It seems she thought he didn't trust her, and as he wouldn't give in, and she wouldn't give in, they separated. She discovered two things, soon afterward."

"Yes—yes," entreated Bennett.

"She discovered that she adored him and—that there was to be a child."

"A child?" cried Bennett.

The woman nodded gravely. "That is why her father and I brought her here secretly a month ago. She wanted her child to be born in her husband's house, and she felt that both of them had been wrong and headstrong. We nearly lost her, but she was so brave, it almost broke my heart, and four hours ago her little son was born."

Bennett took a deep breath. He rubbed the back of one hand against his eyes and did not speak for some time. When he turned quietly to me, his voice seemed strangely unfamiliar.

"McDonald," he said huskily, "rush down to my father-in-law and release him. Do what you can for the old man. I'm going to my wife—and stay there!"

He took a few steps, then stopped.

"After that, Mac, drive to the florist's in Maple Valley. Get all the flowers he has—roses, carnations, asters. Make him hurry. They must be here—all around her—when she awakens."

He crept noiselessly away, his face suffused with a vast joy. The nurse and I hurried to Colonel Rogers, who was still ineffectually struggling with the coils of rope. He accepted my explanations with almost wordless gratitude. I think he was feeling too deeply for speech.

"Scared away some prowlers the other night. Got some money out of the bank yesterday. Guess they saw me and looked through this window. You've probably saved my daughter's life. In her present condition, sir—" and he completed his meaning by a wave of his hand.

I went back to the second floor to get the key to Tierney's car which I recalled he had locked. As I waited at the door to Mrs. Tierney's room while the nurse got the key, I could not refrain from staring in.

The girl's beautiful face was still deathly pale, but I could see the lace

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AFTER THE STORM

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tremble on her bosom. Tierney was not sitting beside her. He was on his knees with his head close to the pillow. And if ever a man looked as if he had found a divinity, that man was Bennett Tierney.

A sudden wild elation possessed me. Bennett would probably keep Ravensnest. Whether he did or not, there would be no South American ranch for

us. And Edith Noland, bless her! the only girl I'd ever wanted would—

With an effort I wrenched myself back to the present and the nurse lighted me to the door. I paused to ask a question, "Might it not be too much for Mrs. Tierney in her weakened condition to find her husband there when she awakes?"

The nurse smiled a trifle tremulously. "Happiness does not kill," she said softly.