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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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BITTER RETURN

By ALFRED SPRISLER

A five-minute story

AS Dirck van Heuvelen walked nervously down the leafy tunnel of the Grachtstraatje that early autumn evening it seemed that the five years he had been away had been but a moment. The same lindens, the same stones in the road, the same placid canal; nothing was changed, and he sensed that Siska would be the same also, unchanged by five years of married life.

He told himself it was a quixotic thing thus to return to see her. He had left the university immediately following that tense night when, a sudden emotional flame igniting their souls, he had taken her into his arms and kissed her. And after he had heard from her lips that she loved him, he saw the thing was impossible. He knew the mischief that could arise from his love for the wife of a professor, and, since he was a student in one of the men's classes, it might possibly end in tragedy. But it was their youth that had done it; for the lack of sympathy from her brilliant husband, several years older than she, had made Siska go to this student for comradeship. But love——

So he had fled. And after five years in Rotterdam, his stories and his two novels having gained popularity, and his reputation as the interpreter of youth having been made, he had felt that he had to see Siska. A month hence that feeling, that burning desire to see her if only to look upon her golden hair and to hear her sweet, low and liquid voice, had become so intense that it was unendurable. He fought it as best he could, but finally, after a month of mental flagellation, he had come back to Oudedorp. To see her through a window, from a distance,

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would suffice, he knew, and the very sight of her would enable him to return to his neglected work refreshed and strengthened.

He sat down upon the stone bench at the roadside, the very bench on which he and Siska had sat many years ago. She had not complained of Willem's treatment nor of his neglect. A professor of mathematics could not be expected to give much time to his young wife, but even his spare time had been taken up with his piano playing. Her pathetic eyes, her evident longing for someone who understood, had caused Dirck to forget the realities and to take her in his arms.

And he remembered how he had stroked her golden hair, which reminded him of the spun gold casques the peasant dames of his native village wore beneath their high caps on feast days, as he had tried to comfort her. He recalled how the pent-up grief, like the first gush of water through a dike, had poured out in long, agonizing sobs. How futile his attempts to pacify had been!

He looked up, and in the eery half-light of the leafy tunnel of the Grachtstraatje he made out a white-clad figure coming toward him. It was Siska. He took her hand, and gently led her to the bench.

Some subtle, analysis-defying change had taken place with her. Her face, always charming, had taken on an ethereal beauty, the very poignancy of which made him mute. Her magnificent hair, like an aureole, was unchanged, and he caressed its golden fineness with reverent fingers.

She spoke. "It has been long, Dirck,

but I have waited very patiently." She paused, and he kissed her eyes. "And I have watched over your work," she went on. "Your success has been my own."

He kissed her lips, noting that they were icy. "Every word was for you, dearest. . . . I had to see you. It is rash, but I felt I must. . . ."

They sat there on that stone bench for time unmeasured. No word was spoken, nor was there need of any.

"I must go now, Dirck," she finally said, gently disengaging herself from his grasp and rising. "And remember, love, I shall wait for you." And powerless to detain her, he watched her walk down the Grachtstraatje, toward her house. But some vagrant moonbeam picked the gold of her hair, and it seemed to Dirck that he could see the golden tresses long after the white of her dress had become invisible in the distant gloom. Some time later, he took the same direction.

Even from the roadway he could hear Van de Bijl playing the *Moonlight Sonata*. The professor, Dirck thought, had always been playing the *Moonlight Sonata*. Five years ago he had played it just as badly as now. Through the window the young man saw Van de Bijl, a trifle grayer, seated before the battered grand piano, plodding over the familiar notes with mathematical precision.

Grasping the heavy brass knocker Van Heuvelen knocked once.

The music stopped, and Dirck heard Van de Bijl's heavy tread. Suddenly the

upper half of the door swung inward, leaving him bathed in the pool of outpouring light.

Van de Bijl peered at him. "So it's you, Van Heuvelen," he remarked, acidulously, but not opening the lower half of the door. "You're unexpected."

"Rather," said Dirck, "but I just met Madam Van de Bijl up the Grachtstraatje. She told me to come here, that she would wait for me."

A terrible change distorted Van de Bijl's face. Dirck thought he was seized with a fit.

"Are you crazy, swine?" cried the professor, when he had acquired some measure of control. "Siska died a month ago!"

ALONE in his compartment on the train bearing him back to Rotterdam, Dirck went back over the incident carefully. The appearance of Siska, he told himself, had been the result of the working of an overwrought imagination centered too intently on one subject over too long a period of time. On that bench in the Grachtstraatje, in the atmosphere of their old love, his mind had dwelt so much on Siska that it had conjured up her image and her dear words. And pleased with himself at so settling a difficult problem, he reached for his pipe and tobacco. But as he did so he started, his eyes staring.

On the sleeve of his coat, like a thin-spun yellow thread, lay a long golden hair.

