

Another Fantastic Tale
By the Author of "The Snake Fiend"
And "The Teakwood Shrine"

POISONED

By FARNSWORTH WRIGHT



IT WAS a trifling quarrel indeed that broke the life-long friendship of Aubrey Charles the lawyer and Aubrey Leclair the apothecary.

"Look for the woman," says the old proverb. It was not a woman that caused the quarrel between the two Aubreys, but it was because of a woman that the breach widened and friendship turned to hate. Thereby the proverb justifies itself once more.

"Board is play, Aubrey," said Charles as Leclair threw down a king upon the first player's ace.

"Don't be a fool, Aubrey," said Leclair. "I meant to play my deuce. Anybody in his right senses would know I would never play my king on your ace."

"Board is play, Aubrey," repeated Charles, with a rising inflection in his voice. "It's not my fault that you play like a dunce."

Leclair threw his cards into the air, seized his hat, opened his mouth as if to speak, then stamped out of the lawyer's office without a word, slamming the door behind him.

There had been petulant outbursts before, due always to Leclair's habit of taking back his cards after he had played them. Charles had frequently vowed to himself that he never would play with Leclair again. But the pair were inseparable, and they were always at it again next day, the apothecary taking back his plays as carelessly as ever.

Leclair stormed out into the street, distressed beyond measure that Aubrey Charles placed so little value on his friendship as to insist on such an obviously ridiculous play. Aubrey Charles sat in his inner office berating himself for his irritability, and prepared once more to swallow his dignity, as he had done on several occasions before. He had been unreasonable, and he knew it.

"But I was right, the idiot!" he exclaimed aloud, striking the desk in a fury of resentment. "Board is always play. Good God! Mut I be always babying him to keep his friendship?"

There the quarrel might have ended, had it not been for Mazie Lennox, who had nursed both Aubreys through the

flu and was engaged to marry Aubrey the attorney. Aubrey Charles, ready to unbend and eat humble pie, yet full of his wrongs, pulled the telephone to him to call up the other Aubrey and apologize, when it struck him that the apothecary would hardly have had time to reach his drug store. So he telephoned to Mazie instead.

In lieu, therefore, of a contrite apology over the telephone from Aubrey Charles, the apothecary got a severe dressing down from Mazie Lennox. It was Mazie who called him first, before the attorney got the wire.

"What under the sun did you mean by stamping out of Aubrey's office and scattering your cards all over the place?" she stormed. "Aubrey, I am downright ashamed of you. Have you no more sense than to let a disagreement over a card game lead to a quarrel between you and Aubrey? What on earth was the matter with you?"

"But Aubrey wanted me to throw away my king on his ace," Aubrey the apothecary exclaimed, scandalized.

To the sense of injury that he nursed against Charles was now added a sense of personal outrage because Charles had told Mazie about the quarrel. Leclair did not know that at that very moment the other Aubrey was trying to reach him on the telephone to beg his pardon and repair the breach between them.

"He treated me as if I were a naughty child, and got angry because I didn't want to throw the game to him by letting the wrong play stand. He called me a dunce."

"What if he did?" said Mazie. "I can't let the two best friends I have in the world quarrel. Now listen, Aubrey. I am going to Klickitamas tonight over the week end. You and Aubrey, both of you, are to follow me tomorrow and forget your differences. I simply won't have you quarreling. That's flat."

With that she rang off, leaving Aubrey the apothecary jiggling the telephone and trying to get her back, wiping the perspiration from his brow as he waited for her to answer. But Mazie was on her way over to the office of the other Aubrey to go out with him to dinner before she left for Klickitamas.

Too proud to refuse Mazie's invitation, too angry to call up Aubrey Charles, Aubrey the apothecary arranged to be absent from his drug store over Sunday, and the next noon he took the train for Klickitamas.

A word or two on the telephone from Aubrey the attorney, who was undoubtedly in the wrong, would have applied

balm to his hurt feelings and averted all the tragedy that followed.

But Aubrey the lawyer hated to be put in a false light. Dignity to him was a fetish, before which he worshiped. It was his principal stock in trade. There was not in the whole country a man who made a more impressive appearance in court. Always expensively but conservatively dressed, with upright carriage, serious and noble countenance, heightened by a close-cropped mustache that made him look older than he was, he impressed the juries by his very appearance. Even his games of cards with Aubrey the apothecary were always conducted in the lawyer's inner office, for Aubrey Charles did not wish the public to see him in his moments of relaxation, when he stooped to so trivial a pastime as playing cards.

Therefore Aubrey the lawyer, who in the first flush of contrition over the quarrel had sought to call up Aubrey the apothecary, now waited for the apothecary to make the first move toward reconciliation. He would apologize then, but his dignity would be saved if Leclair called him up first. He could not go to Klickitamas. If he telephoned the apothecary and told him this, he knew very well that the apothecary would also stay away from Klickitamas. But it would seem an admission that he feared to leave Mazie with Leclair over the week-end. Would not Leclair think that it was this reason alone that prompted him to call up and apologize? Reasoning thus, Aubrey the lawyer refrained from telephoning to his friend, and Aubrey the apothecary went to Klickitamas alone.

Aubrey Leclair, as the closest friend and confidant of the other Aubrey, regarded Mazie as a pal, but nothing closer, for she was the future wife of his friend. He liked Mazie immensely, and used to follow her about the room with his eyes, feasting them on her well-fitting nurse's garb and her mobile mouth and mysterious brown eyes, when he was recovering from the flu. But from the beginning she and the other Aubrey had taken to each other. They had gone together, after the two Aubreys were out of the hospital. Aubrey the apothecary was the third party, the friend of both, and he had accepted the love of his two friends for each other as a matter of course. He was loyal to his friend Aubrey Charles, and glad to see him win so sterling a girl as Mazie.

But that night everything seemed different. The spell of moonlight and the water worked in him a spring madness, and he desired the girl for himself. Her eyes invited confidences, and her tone

was one of tender friendship. Her face was near his. The sense of loyalty to his friend—the friend who had injured him—dissolved like one of his own drugs, in the water and the moonlight. His lips met hers. Mazie drew away and laughed, softly, nervously.

"By proxy," she said, "I enjoyed that. Did you give that to me for Aubrey Charles or Aubrey Leclair?"

He had hardly brushed her lips with his own, but the thrill and promise of the slight kiss intoxicated him, and the warmth of her lips heated his blood.

"That may have been for Aubrey Charles," he exclaimed, in a voice choked with sudden emotion, "but this is from Aubrey Leclair."

He pressed her tightly to his breast. Again and again he kissed her, on the throat, the lips, the eyes. She did not struggle, but lay limply in his arms, speechless, powerless, amazed by this treachery of her friend to her friend, as in burning words he declared the strength of his own love.

"Not Aubrey Charles, but Aubrey Leclair," he repeated. "I was loyal to Aubrey while he was loyal to me, but he has broken with me for nothing at all. I refuse to yield you to him."

"Aubrey!"

Mazie's voice rang out, at once angry and beseeching.

"Aubrey, do you realize what you are doing?"

She held out her hand in front of his eyes. A large diamond sparkled in the moonlight. Aubrey the lawyer had placed it upon her finger. The sparkle of that betrothal diamond was to Aubrey Leclair like a piece of ice laid across his heart. The spring madness still possessed him, but it had been touched by the rigor of winter.

"Mazie!" he exclaimed.

His voice sounded far away and distant, like some sinister whispering from evil lips.

"Mazie, I cannot let you marry Aubrey Charles! You with your purity, your sweetness! You must not! I have stood by Aubrey, despite my knowledge of certain events he has kept hidden from the world, because a man looks on such lapses quite differently from a woman. Did you ever hear of Lena May?"

Mazie clapped her hand roughly over Aubrey's mouth, as if to silence him. Then she shrank from him, and shook herself free of his embrace.

"Lena May?" she exclaimed, standing up and confronting Aubrey desperately.

Even in the moonlight Aubrey noticed how pale she was.

"What has Lena May to do with Aubrey?"

"Ask him," replied Aubrey Leclair. "He can't deny it. He wouldn't give her fifty dollars each month for the support of her child unless it were true. I have delivered the money to her each month as Aubrey's errand boy, for he wants no checks made out to her, by which he can be blackmailed later on. You are wearing Aubrey's ring, but it is Lena May who should be wearing it."

A strong shiver of revulsion shook Mazie.

"You beast!" she exclaimed. "You filthy beast! And you call yourself his friend!"

She fled into the house.

UNBENDING pride on the one hand, resentment and spring madness on the other—the breach was accomplished in the long friendship of the two Aubreys.

Mazie Lennox ceased to wear Aubrey Charles' ring. A year later she was married to Dr. Armitage, who had been a friend of her youth. Both Aubrey Charles and Aubrey Leclair were silent guests at the wedding. Neither had spoken a word to the other since the day when Aubrey Leclair stormed out of Aubrey Charles' office, scattering the cards about the room as he went.

The tall, dignified lawyer had never seemed so frigid and reserved as on that day when his heart's treasure was given to another. The usually jovial apothecary was as unsmiling and reserved as the other Aubrey. His face was a sober mask.

Aubrey Charles the lawyer left immediately after the minister spoke the words that made Dr. Armitage and Mazie Lennox man and wife. Aubrey Leclair the apothecary was even more downcast than the other Aubrey. He had not only lost the girl himself, but his treachery to Aubrey the attorney had lost him the friendship that he valued above anything that had ever come into his life. He felt that he was to blame for the whole tragedy. A senseless quarrel had ruffled the smooth surface of his comradeship with Aubrey Charles, and he, Aubrey Leclair, instead of steering for untroubled waters, had deliberately wrecked the craft of friendship and overturned the boat. He hated the other Aubrey with all the animus of his nature, venomously, with a hate that would stop at nothing. But at this moment he wanted air. He was choking in the festival atmosphere of the wedding, drowning in the whirlpool of his own emotions. He left the house of mirth

abruptly, stepped into his car and left the little city behind him.

Racked by his thoughts, tortured by regrets, stung by hatred, he hardly noticed where he went, until he heard his name called. He drew up beside the curb. He found himself in the streets of a city twenty miles from his own. It was a friend, a fellow apothecary, who was calling to him.

Aubrey got out of his car, and wandered arm in arm into the drug store with the friend who had called to him. He welcomed this brief respite from the torment of his thoughts. And here he learned news that smote him first with a pang of conscience, and then made him glow with pleasure. For the apothecary told him, confidentially, that Aubrey the lawyer had bought a strong poison to kill a large dog, or so at least he had told the druggist when he bought it.

"A dog?" exclaimed Aubrey in some surprise.

"A great Dane he has had for several years," explained the druggist. "It has a tumor, he says, and he finds it necessary to kill the dog. I sold the poison to him because he is a close friend of yours. But I wonder he did not go to you."

"Perhaps," Aubrey said, musingly, "perhaps he was afraid I was so much attached to the dog that I would insist on trying to cure it. Much obliged."

"For what?" asked the apothecary.

"For selling the poison to my friend."

AUBREY LECLAIR had something new to occupy his thoughts as he motored slowly back. Aubrey the lawyer had never possessed a dog. He evidently did not want Aubrey the apothecary to know that he wanted poison, so he came to this other city to get it. He wanted it, then, for himself. He was very despondent, although his face and demeanor in public showed no relaxation from his habitual dignity and reserve.

Aubrey Charles had indeed bought the poison to slay himself, but his sense of dignity prevented him from carrying out his intention. He found it easier to support the pangs of despondency than to let the world peep into his heart at a coroner's inquest. That inevitable scene was enacted in his mind a hundred times. Always it cost him a shudder to picture the curiosity of his little world of acquaintances (for he had no close friends now that Aubrey Leclair had forsaken him) as they learned how Mazie Lennox had cast him aside because of his clandestine affair with Lena May. Aubrey would be dead when these revelations were made, but even his soul must shrink in shamed humiliation when the world

saw what a sorry figure he had cut. So he lived with his bitter thoughts, and the poison remained unused in a cupboard of his inner office.

Aubrey Leclair the apothecary, cheated of the suicide of Aubrey Charles, felt that fate had treated him cruelly. Like the lawyer, he had been robbed of his chum and his girl. Even revenge was denied to him. So when a trivial legal matter that involved his interests made it necessary for him to sign certain papers, he went to the office of Aubrey the lawyer to arrange the matter. This visit would give him the opportunity to see for himself just how deeply the lawyer was suffering from their mutual disaster.

No figure of bronze could have been more unbending than Aubrey Charles when Aubrey Leclair entered the lawyer's office, except that this figure opened its mouth and spoke.

"I will not shake hands, Aubrey," said the figure, slowly. "I do not wish to revive old friendships. But because we were once friends, you and I, I will offer you a glass of wine, pre-prohibition vintage."

The figure moved majestically into the inner office. Aubrey the apothecary, imitating the lawyer's lofty reserve, stood with folded arms awaiting his return. Behind the closed door of the inner office the lawyer's haughtiness dropped from him like a mantle. Feverishly he hunted for a white powder he had placed there some weeks before, at the time of Mazie Lennox's marriage to Dr. Armitage. Finding it, he poured it into a wine glass, filled the glass with wine, and poured out another glass for Aubrey.

Returning to the outer office, he placed one glass before Aubrey Leclair. Before himself he carefully put the poisoned glass. His hand shook so that he spilled some of the wine. His brow was damp with perspiration. His icy reserve had melted utterly. Aubrey the apothecary still stood with folded arms. Slowly he shook his head.

"You drink too much, Aubrey," said the apothecary.

"Not for the love of liquor, Aubrey," replied the lawyer, "but to forget sorrow. You have hurt me, Aubrey, but you have hurt yourself equally. Let us drink."

"You began it," said Aubrey the apothecary, coldly. "I will not drink with you."

"Perhaps the wine is too strong," persisted Aubrey the lawyer. "You are not a drinking man like me. I will get you some water."

Aubrey the apothecary did not answer. The lawyer seemed perplexed and unwilling to leave the room. The apothecary still stood, an icy statue. Anyone knowing the two, knowing the dignified reserve of the lawyer and the genial good-fellowship of the apothecary, would have thought Aubrey Leclair was the lawyer and Aubrey Charles the apothecary. The lawyer suddenly left the outer office and went quickly into the inner room. Aubrey Leclair heard him turn on the tap. In a minute he returned with a pitcher of water and another glass. The apothecary stood with folded arms as before. Apparently the glasses had not been moved, but Aubrey Leclair's face showed a trace of agitation, which seemed to satisfy Aubrey the lawyer.

"No water, please," said Aubrey the apothecary. "I will drink it as it stands."

"To the health of Mazie Lennox!" said Aubrey Charles in ringing tones, looking with a strange expression of shrewdness and triumph at Aubrey the apothecary.

Without an instant's hesitation, he lifted his own glass, clinked it against the glass of Aubrey Leclair, and carried it to his lips. Both men drained the last drop. Aubrey Charles then snapped the stem of his glass, and tossed it into the waste basket.

"And now to business, Aubrey."

The lawyer had resumed his habitual calm. The two men sat down. Aubrey

Charles read aloud, very slowly, the paper that he wanted Aubrey Leclair to sign. From time to time he cast a quick glance at the apothecary. Always he found the eyes of the other fixed on his face. He grew nervous at this unwavering stare, and his glances at the apothecary became more frequent. Aubrey Leclair's gaze never faltered.

A sense of impending tragedy held Aubrey Charles in a vise. His face twitched spasmodically. Why was this? He tried to fight off the dreadful doubt that clutched him. He reasoned with himself thus: Aubrey Leclair has changed the wine glasses, thereby taking for himself the poisoned glass. He thinks that I gave him the poisoned glass, and that he has given it back to me. If it were not so, why would he watch me thus? He is looking for symptoms of poisoning. But it is he who has drunk the poison. Why should I be afraid?

Again his face twitched. He sprang to his feet. A sharp pain shot through his heart. He saw Aubrey the apothecary relax from his intense stare and settle back in his chair, satisfied. A horrible suspicion set the lawyer's brain on fire. Had Aubrey been watching him through the chink in the door? But that could hardly be. Another pang shot through his heart. A strong shudder racked his body. He clutched at the table, missed it, and fell to the floor. Aubrey Leclair smiled at him.

"Aubrey!"

It was the lawyer who spoke. His

whole body was convulsed from the poison.

"Yes, Aubrey?"

The apothecary smiled again.

"Aubrey! Did you—did you change the glasses?"

The smile vanished from the lips of Aubrey the apothecary as he leaned over his dying enemy. His brows were knit in anger, and hate sat on his face like a dark cloud.

"Yes, Aubrey, I changed the glasses."

The apothecary's voice thrilled with triumph.

"You are caught in your own death-trap," he continued. "I would not drink your wine, for I knew you had poisoned it. While you were in the inner office I changed glasses. I not only gave you the glass you intended for me, but I poisoned your wine myself, to make sure. I took no chances."

Now it was Aubrey the lawyer who smiled, as he lay in convulsions on the floor.

"Then we shall meet again," he said weakly. "Au revoir, Aubrey, but not good-by. Au revoir! Au rev—"

He made a final attempt to rise, but suddenly pitched forward on his face. His body slowly stiffened.

Aubrey Leclair did not see him die, for he had suddenly gone blind. He groped toward the table. His foot caught on the head of Aubrey Charles. With a half-smothered cry he fell across the body of the lawyer, and a moment later he was dead.

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