

THE ALIEN THREAD.

By Charles H. Palmer.

IT was where, in years gone by, the great city of New York had stood, with its gigantic buildings of marble and steel towering into the skies; its streets choked with tiers of walks and electric railroads elevated one above another; with its clanging steam carts and carriages rattling over its iron pavements; its foundations pierced to frightful depths by elevator shafts, and honey-combed with railway tunnels and pneumatic tubes diving under and over each other, crossing and re-crossing.

"How good it is to be here, Eric; to have the fields around you, and the woods and water where you can see them every day. It seems like being very close to nature, doesn't it? It's living, to me!" Alora sat up very straight on the rock and took a prolonged whiff of the breeze that blew fresh from the sea, her eyes going out over the green stretches and the river to the hills beyond. "Oh, I don't think we can be too thankful for living now. We don't half appreciate that we are Americans of the twenty third century."

Eric stretched himself at full length on the grass at her feet and looked about him without displaying any enthusiasm over his lot. "Sometimes I think we are not so much better off," he said slowly.

"Not better off! I wish you could have read what I've been reading about New York. It just made my heart ache to think of those poor wretches and what they've missed. And I suppose they thought they were living, too! Only think of the millions who were hived up in the huge city, living by electric light, with hardly a glimpse of the sun from one year's end to the other. I

don't wonder the death rate increased to ten per cent of the population, and the daily average of suicides was two hundred. And think of that ceaseless roar! I fancied I could hear it while I read—night and day that horrible roar that filled a hundred great asylums for the insane with half a million patients. Then when it was all so bad that it couldn't get much worse came Chauvel with his theories. 'Spread out!' he said. How they laughed at him—and now New York is a name, and we are here with our Township No. 1. It was such a splendid idea to have No. 1 right on the site of the greatest of all the old cities, and make it a monument to Chauvel, 'the man with a cobweb in his brain.' I wonder if those men expected forever to go on adding more stories to their Towers of Babel, and concocting new methods for shooting people up and down them or through the streets! It was all a big treadmill. Their inventions made life unbearable. And then they had to contrive ways to overcome the obstacles their inventions had created; and the new improvements made other inventions necessary, and the more they invented the more unhappy they were. Perhaps they looked forward to our times and saw us even more enslaved than themselves to inventions still more marvelous. They thought human progress was a straight line. We are inclined to think it may be a circle. Certainly we seem much nearer to their ancestors than they were. Our advance is toward simplicity. What is it you object to, Eric?"

"A good many things. I don't half like our marriage system, for example. It is all very perfect when

you think of it in the abstract, but when you come to apply it personally it is quite probable that you might discover some flaws in it. I don't see why there isn't a chance for an immense amount of unhappiness. I can tell you I felt relieved when the Bureau finished its sitting last year. My last birthday made me eligible, and came while the Marriage Bureau was in session. I used to dread coming home at night for fear I should find my notice on the table; and I can tell you I had a whole drove of nightmares about it. You want to laugh, but it's not such a laughing matter when you come right down to it. Wait until your turn comes."

"I don't doubt it would seem a little strange at first, but what better system could we have? What is your plan?"

"I haven't any—only perhaps the old way was the best after all——"

"You wouldn't bring back the old belief in romances!"

"And why not?"

"Oh, Eric, you make my faith in you tremble! Why, how absurd the old way was. The romance of love was sung by the poets and discussed by the essay writers until all the world got into the habit of thinking it was a reality, that it was something that must come to every one. No wonder, then, that as each arrived at a certain age he imagined himself suffering with the disease. It was fancy, not common sense, that chose the life companions, and the ones selected were usually the most ill suited possible. Instead of admiring what was really admirable in each other, and making the best of what was not at all so, each must form an ideal image of the other, embodying all the virtues of the original, along with a hundred others that never existed, and not a single fault. It was marriage that shattered the image. Then those who had been mated according to reason let their fancies go, and friendship came in place of the romantic love, and they were good comrades. Other high minded persons, when the hallucination was

gone and they realized that nature had never meant them for each other, still tried to make the best of it, but there was no happiness left. They were together and yet most pitiably alone, unsatisfied, and neither life could give out the best that was in it. Another class found relief through the abomination of divorce. Isn't it reasonable that a body of the most intelligent men and women of the community, who have been married themselves, should know who are best adapted to each other better than we younger ones who have never been married? We couldn't be expected to have a very valuable opinion on a subject we know practically nothing about. Eric, your ideas are a century behind the times. That Dr. Johnson, who lived five hundred years ago, really foreshadowed our system when he said he believed marriages in general would be as happy, and often more so, if they were all made by the Lord Chancellor on due consideration of the characters and circumstances, without the chief actors having any choice in the matter. And when Mr. Boswell asked if he didn't suppose there were fifty women in the world with whom a man might be as happy as with any one woman in particular, the old fellow thundered out, 'Ay, sir, fifty thousand!'"

"Yet," replied Eric, "the Great Cham picked out a wife whom I'm sure our Bureau would never have thought suited to him, and apparently he was as happy as possible. I venture to say the Bureau would have made a flat failure had they tried to provide Samuel with a help-mate! I think I do know something about marriage. There's no reason why I shouldn't get a good idea of what it means by seeing it around me—in my father's household for example. As for the Councilors of the Bureau, most of them have had the experience of only one marriage, and perhaps that has given them a warped idea of the institution. To have a competent Bureau nothing under twenty experiences should qualify a Councilor to hold office! Joking aside, Alora, I know

I could choose well for myself. I don't want to marry whomsoever the Bureau selects for me. I want to marry you. I'm not ashamed to say I do read those old poets and believe in their love."

"That only proves what I've been saying. We've been much together, so you apply to me what you've been reading. If we were to marry you'd soon find that the real me and the image you dream about are two very different things. Shall we go? There's the Refectory bell. You mustn't be angry, Eric; I can understand that you feel a little anxious, thinking any day may bring your notice. I might feel the same if father hadn't seen the Chief Councilor, and arranged that my notice shouldn't be served while mother and he are away. Roger Elbert couldn't promise in so many words, but he's an old friend of father's, and father said it would be all right."

"Still your name might come up while Roger Elbert is ill. Some one else is Acting Chief of the Bureau now."

"You don't think it would, Eric? I'm sure Roger Elbert would speak about my father's wishes."

They walked on down the street under the arch of elms to the great town dining hall. Eric left Alora at her seat with a rather sullen good by, and took his place at the other extreme of the building, where only now and then he could catch a glimpse of the back of her head.

Alora would have been slow to admit how much Eric's suggestion troubled her as she went about her work the rest of the day. The thought of a notice served, with her mother and father away off in Africa, was not reassuring. She wished she could talk it over with Eric for a few minutes.

She was sorry, too, that she had asserted her opinions so strongly. She had been fresh from reading Lyle's inspiring account of the development of Chauvel's township theory. She had read with keenest interest the story that told how the brave man, with a handful of followers, had

gained a hearing for his ideas in spite of the bitterest opposition, and had lived to see the sons of men who had laughed at him cast their votes for the destruction of New York and the foundation of a township on its site.

Tears had come to her eyes as she read of the death of Chauvel before the work he was so eager to see was accomplished. And then as she read of the present, of the thrifty townships spread throughout the land side by side, with a healthy race of happy, prosperous people evenly distributed through them, living in touch with nature and breathing God's fresh air, with not one city to contaminate them, she had felt a new enthusiasm at the thought that she was a part of this splendid scheme. She wanted to spin perfectly her little thread in Chauvel's great cobweb.

Is there always a corresponding depression after a season of moral exhilaration? Alora began to think so. With twilight falling, it even occurred that she could cablephone her father in Africa, but her pride prevented anything so childish.

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There it lay in all its bulky importance, its white ribbons and seals flaunting themselves in her face with what seemed a ghastly mockery. In all her experience Alora had never been so unnerved and utterly helpless as at the instant when her eyes rested for the first time on this folded packet of parchment.

A minute ago she had been so happy walking briskly up the street and stopping in the garden for some flowers. And even while she was smelling the roses and rejoicing in the pleasure they gave her, this hideous thing had been lying on the table waiting her coming. Would she ever be happy again! She wondered how she could have lived on so contentedly, knowing that this that had happened was sure to come sooner or later.

The little clock told off the hours cheerily by quarters and halves, the noon bell from the Refectory rang

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its invitation, but Alora did not move. With head buried in her arms, she sat there alone with her notice.

In at the window came the sound of voices of people passing down the street. Did they know of this paper hidden beneath her arms? And if they did not it would be only a few days before they would be reading her name from the bulletin board: "Alora Swift and ——" The other name she did not know herself. At length the desire to know it overcame her dread, and she went to her room, locking herself in, to read the ominous document.

It did look forbidding, unrolled to its full length, with its authoritative way of calling attention in heavy type to important phrases, as if to warn the receiver that there was no gainsaying its provisions. It was dated June 30, and recited in a becomingly formal manner that the name of the recipient, Citizen 986, had been presented by the Committee on Eligibility for Marriage to the Board of Qualifications, which had assigned it to the proper group of names, and submitted them to the Council on Marriages. After careful consideration, the Council had selected and hereby named Citizen 504 as in all respects best suited to be the life companion of said Citizen 986. The marriage of the above named citizens would take place at the Council Hall on July 10th. Any objections to the decision of the Council must be filed at its office within three days. Such objections would be passed upon by the Board of Appeal, whose decision would be final. On a separate sheet was a brief description of Citizen 504, Lemuel Phelps.

Lemuel Phelps! So this was the man above all others who in the estimation of the Council was thoroughly suited to her! She made no attempt to conceal her anger, but dropping upon the bed, she sobbed it forth passionately among the pillows.

Late in the afternoon the ringing of the telephone bell aroused her. That was the thing to do! She would call up her father in Africa. While

she waited to be answered, Alora could see in the little metallic mirror beneath the telephone box the clerk of the Hotel Zulu leaning over the onyx counter, bantering with a stylishly dressed Chinese tourist. When he did respond it was to say that her mother and father had left that morning for Mount Ora. Their next address would be at the Summit House, Lake Nyassa, which they hoped to reach by July 10, the day appointed for her marriage. Poor Alora!

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"Is she ill?" inquired Eric.

"No," said Alora's aunt; "and yet she doesn't look really well, either."

"I came back from the north only this afternoon, and mother said she hadn't seen Alora for a week."

"She has received her notice, you know. I don't know why she should feel so, I'm sure——"

"Won't she see me—just for a minute?"

"No; she said she couldn't see you tonight."

Eric's eyebrows almost joined each other in their gloomy scowling as he walked slowly away. Down below in the darkness he could see the lights of vessels at anchor in the river, throwing long, trembling reflections that glittered in red and green. Near the shore lay a steamer that loomed up to an enormous size. It was the Tyra, which sailed the next day for Spain. While his eyes wandered restlessly over the water some one hurried by him. It was Alora. He recognized her at once, and in an instant had overtaken her. It startled him when she looked up, her face was so very white and her eyes shone so.

"What is it, Alora?"

She tried to laugh, but the laugh was a failure.

"Isn't this the trouble—isn't it that you're finding out that you do believe in the old ideas in spite of yourself? Alora, I've been thinking while I stood here that there's one way to help it all. Take me as a substitute, and we'll sail away on her tomorrow

night to Spain, and leave this accursed marriage system behind us."

"Oh, if we could!" she said, almost in a whisper, pressing her hands together tightly. "But I don't know whether I think your way, Eric. I like you better than any one else, but——"

"Never mind," said Eric, looking down at her tenderly; "perhaps I can teach you to think my way."

It was a feverish night for Alora. In the morning, as soon as she had seen her aunt safely off to make a visit in the next township, she set about her preparations. There was no one in the house, and yet she found herself stealing softly from room to room on tip toe, collecting her things like a thief.

At times a feeling of shame nearly put an end to the work; then a thought of what would happen on the next day if she stayed came to goad her on. Everything was ready at last, even to the cloak that was to hide this backsliding daughter of Township No. 1.

It was nine to a minute when Eric came. "Let me have your things, Alora; we haven't a moment's time to spare."

There were the inevitable few last indispensables to get together. Alora had gone up stairs for the fourth time to rummage for something, when unexpectedly she came upon a little book in white and gold. It was the "Life of Chauvel."

Eric was pacing the hall below, his small remnant of patience evaporating rapidly. "Come, Alora, we can't wait any longer. We've only twenty minutes now." And after a minute, "You must come at once, Alora!"

When she came down it was with her hat and cloak off. Eric looked at her in astonishment.

"I can't go." She held the book in her hand. "I found this and I can't go."

"Alora!" There was despair and entreaty in his voice.

"I've promised to him," she said, pointing to the face on the cover. "Think of what he endured. I've

been proud to believe in him, and now when my turn comes to suffer a little I turn coward. I can't be untrue to that dead man. And, Eric——"

The bell in the town hall clock rang the half hour with its usual solemnity. Eric sank into a chair. "We're too late!"

She realized fully what his words meant to her, but in the determination to be faithful to her belief at any cost she was not troubled about herself. The misfortune seemed to have fallen not on her but on Eric. She stood before him without a word or a motion.

Presently there was a sound of voices in the hall, and the maid brought in a letter. Alora broke the seal and read through the paper, at first listlessly, and then, as she began to understand it, she gave an excited little gasp and thrust the paper into Eric's hand.

"Oh, Eric, it's not too late. Read it!"

Eric was on his feet just in time to receive Alora and her shower of tears. He managed to keep one arm around her, while with the other he held the paper behind her back, where the lamplight fell on it, and read its surprising contents:

"Dear Madam, it is with profound regret that the Bureau begs to inform you that owing to a clerical error the number of the citizen assigned you was given as 504, instead of 405 (Eric Holt), which latter number is hereby substituted. In view of the unfortunate mistake, your marriage, if you so desire, will be postponed for ten days. Permit us to tender our most sincere apologies."

It was signed by the Secretary of the Bureau.

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Alora has given her husband much assistance, since her marriage, in preparing his monograph on "Is Our Marriage System a Failure?" Now that it has been conclusively proved that our system of marriage as it exists at present is not Chauvel's at all, and was not included in his original

scheme, Alora's last bit of compunction in opposing it has been removed.

Eric says that so long as he lives his first duty shall be to do all in his

power to abolish a system which makes it possible for the life happiness or unhappiness of two persons to depend upon the possibility of a clerical error.