

Democratic Watchman

Bellefonte, Pa., July 2, 1926.

SHOES.

(Continued from page 6, Col. 4.)

Hampton came alone, and even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed as Hampton!

But the Girl continued to wear the blue serge and the broken shoes, even though Tony, wincing, had heard Hampton tell her that she'd be a knock-out in a black velvet gown and satin slippers. Even though Hampton had gone into alluring details as he described the second-act gown of a certain leading lady—one whom the Girl had long worshipped, and from afar.

"I'd like t' see you in a party dress," Hampton had said. "Say, you'd be there, kid—there. An' I'd like t' see them pretty feet of yours dancin' th' daylighters out silver shoes with buckles t' 'em."

The serpent in Eden? Maybe he wore a checked suit and looked pitifully at the ten pink toes of Eve. Who can say!

A more stupid man than Hampton would have rushed the Girl, hoping to dull her brain with the glitter and the thrill of life. But Hampton was in no way stupid. His staying away from the shop for two long weeks was a sign of his supreme subtlety. Even Tony grateful though he was

for the interlude, felt a strange foreboding. And the Girl, coming in nearly every evening, was nervous and restive. Twice she mentioned Hampton to Tony.

"That guy—you know, wit' th' ring," she asked, "d'you guess he moved out this here neighborhood?" And again: "He had coin, the boy—she mused. 'I guess he could show the girl he liked a good time, all right . . .'"

Then with an air that proclaimed success and ready money even as a fanfare of trumpets would proclaim victory—Hampton came back. Came back one evening, and seated himself beside the Girl with an easy laugh and a bit of gay badinage as casual as it was deadly. And from the Girl's sudden excitement—that she either couldn't or didn't try to hide—Tony knew that the absent treatment of Hampton had been successful. He was not surprised to see them walk together out of the door. To see them stand talking, under the glare of a street lamp, before they separated to go their opposite directions. He was glad, in a dull way, that they did separate. But he—even as he knew that he had long watched a losing battle—could vision the approaching end. That night, as he fastened the door of his little shop, as he went slowly in the direction of his lonely lodgings, Tony moved wearily, stiffly, as an old man moves. And the eyes of him—wistful as the eyes of a stray puppy, and as warm as old wine—were clouded with the tears he could not shed.

It was the next day that the Girl

made a date with Hampton—the very next day. Hampton was leaving the shop as the Girl came in, and Tony heard him speak in the assured tone of a man who had won.

"Tomorrow," he said—and in his voice was the note of authority that Tony had heard him use to the servile men who no longer followed him into the shop—"tomorrow we'll stop out a bit, see? But first we'll do some shoppin'." His narrowed eyes swept over the Girl's shabby figure. "I got some swell friends, an' we might run inter 'em. And—well, they won't get no chance t' say I'm a bum picker. An' besides—"

The Girl laughed, but beneath her laughter Tony could sense a creeping note of hysteria.

"Say," she rallied, but weakly, "I never let no—no feller—buy clothes fer me. I—It ain't right! You ain't—" Suddenly pride flared into her face. Her head, with its heavy crown of twilight hair, was lifted. "You ain't ashamed of—of me?" Her tone held more than a question. "No matter how I'm dressed—you ain't ashamed?"

The man's voice was all at once soft. The man's hand was suddenly lying upon the hand of the Girl.

"Ashamed of you," he murmured, and almost—for a moment—Tony thought Hampton was telling the truth. "Say—how'd you get that way? It's only that I want you t' have things."

The Girl's head drooped. It was a long moment before she spoke. And then, "Where'll I meet you?" she asked.

Hampton laughed. And it was the confident note of his laughter that made Tony's hand tighten on the blacking brush he held.

"Better meet me right here," he said, "as close t' six as you can make it."

He turned, with never a backward glance, to the door. Tony left the coin that he had tossed lying upon the dusty floor and went methodically about the work of cleaning the Girl's slippers. They were so thin in spots that he was afraid to rub hard. As he brushed them lightly, gently, he was longing to ask questions, to offer words of warning and advice. It was only as he reached for the dingy rag which supplied his art's final touch that he summoned up the courage to speak.

"You an' him—" he queried, and no listener could have guessed the tumult in his mind as he jerked his head in the direction of the door through which Hampton had passed, "you an' him—will you be marry? Yess—?"

The Girl's slim, tired hand flew up until it rested against one hot cheek. She did not answer at once. But her voice scarcely held a tremor when she finally she spoke.

"If you wasn't so dumb, Tohy," she said at last, "I'd say you was fresh. But—well, you ain't meanin' any harm, I guess. . . . No—me an' Mr. Hampton ain't goin' t' get married. He's got a wife somewhere—he says."

Tony did not make comment. But something in the tense set of his shoulders, something in the hands that clenched tight upon the dingy polishing rag, goaded the Girl to further speech.

"An' you ain't got no right t' think, Tohy," she cried swiftly, "that he's more t' me than just—" she hesitated, "a good friend. You ain't got no right, Tony! Only—well—" the words came in a rush, "say, a woman's gotter have pretty clothes. She's gotter have 'em. An' sometimes it don't seem that no price is too much t' give for 'em. Fat dames with dyed hair—they come t' my counter every day. Wearin' d'monds an' fur coats. An' I've had these shoes all winter—an' I ain't bought a dress fer a year. Bein' good is all right in stories, Tony. But it don't get you nowhere in life. Not nowhere! Sometimes I think I'd sell my soul fer a velvet dress" (Oh, Hampton, Hampton!)

"An' silver slippers with buckles to 'em."

The Girl was crying as she walked past Tony and out of the door, but her head was still high.

All during the next morning, all through the long afternoon, Tony worked like an automaton. With his hands fumbling at the tasks they usually accompanied so deftly. With his feet dragging as they walked about his little shop. But with his brain leaping ahead to the appointed hour.

"As close t' six as you can make it!" so Hampton had said.

Tony's heart was a burning weight in his breast when the noon was striking. By three o'clock his cheeks were flushed and his eyes fever bright. At four he spoke his thoughts aloud, thereby astounding a short and palyid customer.

"I will maybe keel him!" said Tony simply.

The customer did not wait for the final rubbing down of his calfskin boots.

At five Tony was all a-twitch with nervousness. At five fifteen he sent two customers away, telling them abruptly that he was closing the shop. At five thirty Hampton came, bland, smiling, twirling a cane—a cane with an ivory horse's head as a handle. Dressed in a new suit of light grey, grey-topped shoes, and a pearl-tinted hat. As he seated himself leisurely in the bootblackening chair, he was humming a little tune.

And Tony? Automatically he reached for his brushes. For his blacking box. For the tools of his trade. While murder levi in his heart, he began to rub black paste into the boots of the man who hummed a tune. While hate surged through his soul he asked his usual question.

"You want 'em high polish—yess?" he asked.

Hampton ceased to hum. He looked down benignly into the little boot-black's face. He spoke.

"Sure I do!" he said genially. "Sky's th' limit tonight, Tony!"

His ancestors—bred of the feud and the vendetta—would have ended the matter with a curse and a stiletto. But Tony had drifted away from his ancestors on the tides of a new world. Blind with hate, he reached for a new bottle of liquid polish. It stood on a shelf at the elbow of Hampton, a tall bottle and dangerously full. Did Tony's hand tremble as he drew it from its place, or did anger confuse him, or was it by intent that the bottle slipped from his grasp? Who shall say! Only, as the sticky contents of it spread like an ugly spider across the grey of Hampton's suit, as flying, gummy blods of liquid attached themselves to the pearl grey of the man's hat, Tony stood erect, placid, with a half-smile—that might have reflected either bewilderment or triumph—upon his lips. As Hampton, with an ugly snarl, sprang forward, he did not flinch. As the fist of Hampton, shooting out, closed one brown, wistful eye, he made no sound. Nor did he try to defend himself. Only at the opening click of a door, only at the Girl's startled cry, did his body quiver. A man in love does not like to be seen as a weakling, even though he is a bootblack. He tried to speak, but his English vocabulary was so small, so very small! And then the fist of Hampton again crashed into his face, and the room swam, strangely, in a black and crimson mist.

Perhaps it was the touch of her hand smoothing his forehead that brought Tony back to painful realities. Perhaps it was the sound of her voice speaking as if from a distance. Speaking—but not to him.

"I big bum," the voice was saying. "Sure I blame you! You, with yer soft voice an' all, beatin' up a poor little guy half yer size. What if he did wreck yer clothes? He didn't meant to. An' you got other suits, ain't yer? I've a good min' t' call a cop, se I have!"

Through the eye that was not closed and painful Tony could glimpse the blurred figure of Hampton. Through ears that strained against the tumult of returning consciousness he could hear, the man's voice.

"Say, you got a gall," Hampton was retorting. "Call a cop—t' get me? Try an' do it! You little rat from a bargain basement. In yer old dress an' shabby shoes!"

Tony could not see the Girl, but he could feel the arrogance in her straightening figure as she spoke.

"You beat it," she advised tersely, "while th' beatin'—Mister—is good. An' remember this: it ain't every girl that has th' nerve t' wear shabby shoes in this town—see? That has th' nerve t' keep on wearin' 'em—You—" the voice shook strangely, "you beat it!"

The door closed with a slam that caused the little shop to quiver. Hampton had gone. And Tony, lying still, felt a sudden, new moisture upon his bloody face. All at once he realized that the Girl was crying in a silent way that was quite terrible and at the same time almost splendid. He sensed, rather than knew, that the sobs came as much from relief as they did from sorrow. Struggling to speak—struggling against his lack of vocabulary as well as against physical weakness—he managed a sudden halting sentence.

"Sometime," he muttered through bruised lips, so faintly that the Girl had to bend her head to catch the words "sometime—you - will - let - me - take - you - to - a - movie - yes?"

All at once the Girl's sobbing turned—it a miraculous way—to laughter. Her birth was half-hysterical, perhaps, but it was not unkind . . . — Good Housekeeping.

For Those Country Roads.

When stuck in the mud, the simplest plan is to set the emergency brakes so as to just bind the wheels a bit. This offers each wheel enough resistance so that the power dashes back and forth from one wheel to the other and is forced to actuate each one gradually rather than be diverted by the differential entirely to one wheel. This is a good tip to recall during a heavy rain ten miles from the main road.

Making a Will

Is Something that Should Not be Delayed

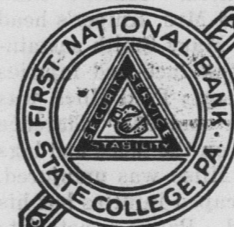
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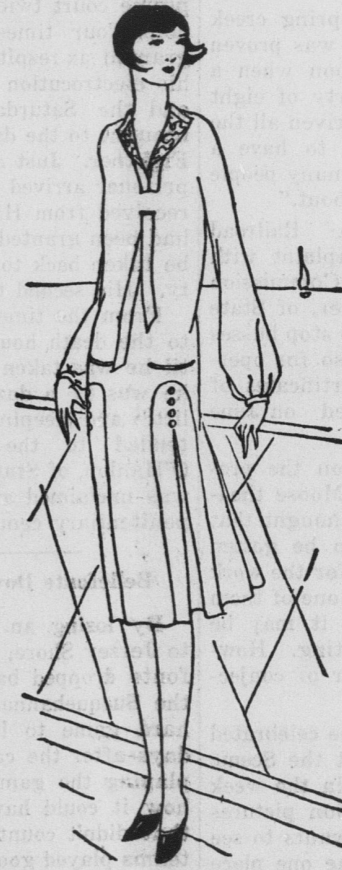
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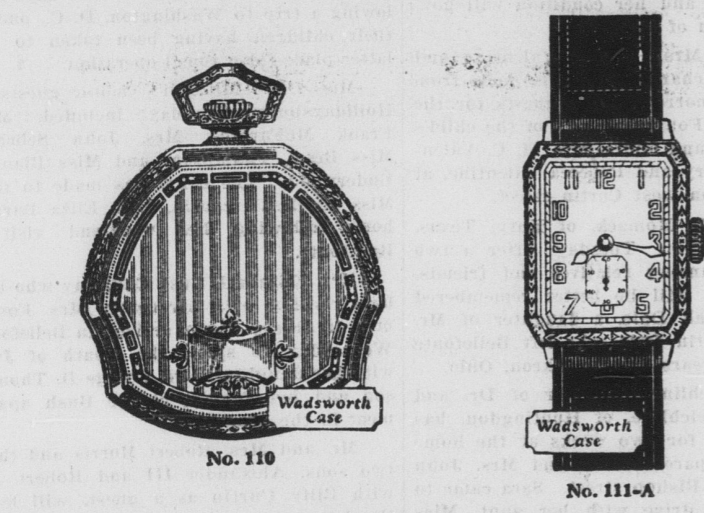


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