

HOMER

A NOVEL
By
GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN
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CHAPTER XXXIII—Continued.

In those days when once more his thoughts demanded to be seen in their relation to Alix, that steady voice within him was his only comfort. The flood at Fazenda Flores had swept away all that his hands had done, but the things that Fazenda Flores had done for him could not be swept away by any material force. They stood and feared nothing—except Alix.

Wherever his mind turned, it came back to Alix and found in her an impasse. Alix assumed more and more the portentous attributes of one unattached, sitting in judgment over his acts. His memory of her frailty, of her flowerlike detachment from the bones—the skeleton—of life, her artificiality, made her seem ludicrously incongruous in the role of judge. He could not picture her, much less estimate the sentence she would pass. His thoughts led him daily up to that impasse and left him. Then came the doubt and the question—why should he lead himself bodily to the impasse at all?

He was still fighting this point when he reached Barbados but there an incident befell which brought a new light to his mind and then a new peace to his soul.

He had gone ashore at Bridgetown simply because his whole body, perfectly attuned by three years of long hours of toil, was crying out for more exercise than the narrow decks of the freighter could afford.

When the little group of passengers reached shore, with the exception of Gerry and an old returning Barbadian, they all turned in the same direction as if by a common impulse.

The Barbadian glanced at Gerry and jerked his head at the disappearing group. "Men of the world in the big sense," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Gerry. "Son," said the old Barbadian, who was very tanned and whose kindly eyes blinked through thick glasses, "when a chap tells you he's a man of the world you ask him if he ever had a drink at the Ice house. You don't have to say 'in Bridgetown.' Ever have a drink at the Ice house? Just like that; and if he says, 'No,' you know he meant he was a town rouser when he said he was a man of the world."

Gerry smiled and fell naturally in step with the Barbadian as he moved slowly on.

"Yes," said the old man. "It's a sure test. The man that hasn't crooked his elbow at the big, round deal table in that old, ramshackle drink-house can't say he's really traveled. Long-lost brothers and friends meet there, and when men that roam the high seas want news of some pal that's disappeared down the highway of the world they drop in at the old Ice house and ask what road he took. It's halfway house to all the seven seas."

"Have you lost anyone?" asked Gerry. "No, I'm not thirsty for a drink just now," said the Barbadian with a smile. "And you?"

"Nor I," said Gerry, laughing. "I'm out to stretch my legs."

"You can't do that here," replied the old man. "You don't know our sun. Come with me." He hailed a ramshackle victoria.

Gerry hesitated. "You must have a home you want to go to and friends to see. Don't worry about me. I'll be careful about the sun."

"Boy," said the Barbadian, "I've got a home and I'm going to see it, but there's no reason why you shouldn't come along. As for friends—the ones I left here won't get up to meet anyone till the last trump sounds. Come along. You are the only company and I'm the only host in our party."

They climbed into the rickety cab and the Barbadian gave directions to the driver. The driver answered in the soft guttural of the West Indian black.

Slowly they crawled through the crooked streets of the town. Gerry leaned back and gazed at the freakish buildings. They were all of framework. Some swelled at the top, and Gerry wondered why they did not topple over; some swelled at the bottom and he wondered why these did not cave in.

The Barbadian watched his face. "Funny town, eh?" Gerry nodded.

rent of words that tried their best to be harsh and failed. From around the obstructing house came an old darky. When his eyes fell on the Barbadian he rushed forward. "Lor, Misteh Malcolm, when did yo' get back?"

"Just now, Charles," said the Barbadian. "What's the matter here?"

The darky's eyes rolled. "Matah, Misteh Malcolm? Why, that ole Cunnell Stewaat he's jes' so natcherly parsimonious that he requires me to pay rent fo' havin' ma house on his lan', so I says to ole mammy, we'll just move this here residence on to a gentleman's lan', and Misteh Malcolm me'n mammy 'n the chile are jes' a-movin' it on to yo' old cane fiel'."

The Barbadian laughed a little dryly and shrugged his shoulders. The driver got down, protesting, and helped the family carry the house across the road. Then the cab went on and soon turned up an avenue under a fiery canopy of acacia flamboyants.

As they progressed, thick, twining growths, spangled with brilliant blooms, walled in the avenue. The air grew cool but heavy with scents and the full-flavored spice of a tropical garden under a blazing sun.

The air made Gerry dreamy. He woke with a start when the Barbadian said to the cabman, "This will do. You needn't drive in. Wait here."

The cab stopped. Just ahead was the ruin of a great gate. The two pillars still stood, but they were almost entirely hidden by vines. To one of them clung the rusted vestige of a gate. Beyond the pillars there was a winding way. Once it had been a road continuation of the avenue, now it was but a tunnel through the densely crowded foliage. Along the center of the tunnel was a narrow path. Even it was overgrown. The Barbadian led Gerry down the path.

They came out under a grove of mighty trees whose dense shade had kept down the undergrowth, and beyond the trees Gerry saw a vast, irregular mound of vines, with mingled giant geraniums, climbing fuchsias, honeysuckle and rose. Then he spied a broad flight of marble steps; at one end of them an old moss-grown urn, at the other, its fallen, broken counterpart. Above the mound rose the roof of a house; through the vines, as the two drew nearer, appeared shuttered windows and a door, veiled with creepers.

The Barbadian went up the steps and tore the creepers away from the



"Have You Lost Anyone?" Asked Gerry.

door. Then he drew from his pocket an enormous key. With a rasp the lock turned and the door opened, letting a bar of light into a wide, cool hall.

Gerry followed the Barbadian through the hall to a broad veranda at the back of the house. A large living room faced on to the veranda. The Barbadian entered it, opened the French door-windows and, dusting off two lounge chairs, invited Gerry to sit down.

Gerry looked around curiously. The living room was comfortably furnished. There were one or two excellent rugs on the waxed floor; a great couch, set into a bow-window; lace curtains, creamy with age; a wonderfully carved escurtoire in rosewood; a sideboard, round table and chairs of mahogany that was almost as dull and black as ebony. Over all lay a coat of dust.

The Barbadian walked to the round table and with his finger wrote in the dust, then he sat down in a worn and



CHAPTER XXXIV

It was ten o'clock on a morning in early autumn when Gerry finally got free of the freighter and took the ferry for the other side of the river. He had left all his baggage to be delivered at the house later. The morning was clear but sultry. In the city the apathy of summer days had settled down. People glanced at Gerry's heavy tweeds and antiquated hat but they did not smile, for Gerry himself was such a sight as makes men forget clothes. The tan of his lean face, the swing of his big, unpadding shoulders, his clear eyes, carried the thoughts of passers-by away from clothes and city things. They seemed to catch a breath of spicy winds from the worn garments that clung to the stranger's virile body and in his eyes they saw a mirage of far-away places.

As Gerry reached his own house, he was outwardly calm, even delib-



"Why Was He Waiting?"

erate, but inwardly he was fighting down a turmoil of emotions. What was he to do in Alix? Had he anything to give in exchange? Had he too much? He climbed the steps slowly. His hand trembled as he reached out to raise the heavy bronze knocker. Before his fingers could seize it, the door swung softly inward. Old John bowed before him. For a moment Gerry stood dazed. The naturalness of that open door, of the old butler, of the cool shadows in the old familiar hall, struck straight at his heart with the shrewd poignancy of simple things. Old John raised a smiling face to greet him but down one wrinkled cheek crawled a surprised tear.

Gerry held out his hand. "How do you do, John?"

"I am very well today, sir," said John. "Mrs. Gerry is in the library. She told me to telephone to the club and if you were there to say she wished to see you."

Gerry was puzzled. Why should Alix think he would go to the club? He handed the butler his old hat and strode to the library door. The door was closed. Somebody said, "Come in." The words were so low he hardly heard them. He opened the door, stepped inside and closed it behind him.

Alix, dressed in a flimsy blue and white house-gown, stood in the middle of the room. With one hand upraised, the other outstretched, she seemed to be poised, equally ready for advance or flight. Her eyes passed swiftly over Gerry's face, swept searching down to his feet and back again to his face. For weeks she had been wondering. Terrible things had come to her mind. Alan and Gerry, with his heartless note, had conspired to mystify, to terrify her. All the joy she had looked forward to in Gerry's home-coming had turned into a bitter pain. They had not known on the bill how she was suffering. Only Kemp had seemed to understand a little and had brought his drop of comfort to her.

As her eyes searched Gerry the sense of impending calamity left her. He was well, well as she had never seen him before. Except for that he seemed almost weirdly familiar, as though only a good night's sleep lay between him and the morning of three years ago when he had bullied her until she had fought back and overwhelmed him.

A hundred little differences went to make up this solitary change. The flush of too many drinks had given way to a deep healthy glow, the eyes were deep and grave instead of deep and vacant, the broad shoulders that had taken to hanging were braced in unconscious strength. Every line in the body that she had seen start on the road to grossness had been flung down. The body was no longer a mere abode for a lingering spirit. It had become a mechanism, tuned to expression in action. It was the body of a time-server. Alan's sole word of comfort came back to her. "I never thought the old rock would ever loom so big." What force

had done this thing to Gerry? She felt a pang, half envy, half remorse. If she had been wise, less than that, if she had been merely sage, could she not have saved Gerry to himself and spared her faith the test of the three long years lost out of their youth?

Gerry stood erect by the door, one hand still holding the knob. Why was he waiting? Alix' raised hand went slowly out to him in welcome but he did not move. She smiled at him but his eye remained steadfast and grave. A lump rose in Alix' throat and then, as pride came to her aid, a flare of color showed in her cheeks. Her lips opened. What could she say to hurt him enough, to pay him back for this added, unjust rebuff? She knew so little about this new Gerry. How could she wound him?

And then he spoke. "Will you please sit down? There are things I must tell you."

Gerry had blundered on magic words. There is no moment so emotionally tense that a true woman will not drop the immediate issue to sit down and listen to the untold things she has wanted to hear. Alix was a true woman. The flare died out of her cheeks. She sank into a chair beside the dully shining mahogany table and with a nod of her golden head motioned Gerry to a seat opposite her. She watched the easy swing of his body as he moved across the room. Gerry's mind was in sore conflict, but a body in perfect health has a way of taking care of itself.

Gerry sat down and gripped the edge of the table with outstretched hands. He looked steadily into Alix' eyes. The moment he had foreseen had come. Alix sat in judgment. She planted her bare elbows on the table, laid one hand, palm down on the other and on them both rested her cheek. Her head with its heavy crown of hair was thus to one side but also tilted slightly forward. That slight forward tilt gave strength to the pose and intensity. A curious, measuring look came into Alix' eyes. She was silent and she was waiting.

Gerry dropped his eyes to the table and began to talk. "The things I have got to tell you," he said, "begin with that day—our last day. I went out and walked for hours and realized that I had been rough and unjust and to blame. I came over to the avenue and was standing looking at some flowers when you passed. I saw you in the plate-glass of the window. I turned around to make sure. I recognized your trunk. I followed you to the station. I saw Alan signal to you. I saw you get into the train."

Gerry stopped. His premise was finished and he found that he had no tongue to tell the things he had thought—the long argument of the soul. He realized that all that must be left out. He must confine himself to mere physical facts, let them troop up on him and file naked before Alix. She must dress them as she saw fit, as her sympathies and her justice directed. He would give her but the ground-work, plain simple words such as he could command, telling the events that had come upon him and how he had met them.

Of the trip out he had nothing to say but of Pernambuco he told her in detail. Somehow it seemed the least he could do for the filthy and beautiful city that had given him an unquestioning asylum. He told her of the quay, the Lingueta, with its line of tall, stained houses, its vast plane trees and its cobbled esplanade, the stage where the city's life was in perpetual review. His words came slowly but they left nothing out. Unconsciously he created an atmosphere. A light of interest burned in Alix' eyes. She saw the changing scene. It charmed her to restfulness as it had Gerry.

She smelt the stacks of pineapples, the heaped-up mangoes, the frying fish, and through his eyes she saw the blue skies dotted with white, still clouds and glimpsed the secret, high-walled gardens with their daring hibiscus, trailing fuchsias, fantastic garden coconuts and dark-domed mango and jack trees. She sat with Gerry and, later, on the long slim coasting craft she listened with him to the creak of straining masts and stays and to the lap of hurrying waters. She followed him up the San Francisco, felt his impatience with Penedo, took the little stern-wheeler and learned the fascination of a river with endless, undiscovered turns. They came to Piranhas. Here she felt herself on familiar ground. Letters from the consul's envoy had made this place hers. Unconsciously she nodded as Gerry described the tiers of houses, the twisted, climbing streets, the miserable little inn.

Gerry told of the happy days of ponderous canoeing and of the unvarying strings of fish. He lingered over those days. Thus far he had brought Alix with him. He felt it. Now he came to the morning when he must leave her behind. He told her of the glorious break of that day, of the sun fighting through swirling mist. She saw him standing stripped on the sandspit. She saw the canoe nosing heavily against the shore and his pyjamas tossed carelessly across a thwart. She knew that she had come to the moment of revelation. She breathed softly lest she should lose a word for Gerry was speaking very low. Then he showed her Margarita, Margarita as he had first seen her, kissing and kissed by dawn.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Infant Mortality in China. There is a high infant mortality in China. The English authorities in Hongkong have endeavored to keep statistics, and the results indicate that only 72 Chinese Children in 1,000 survive the first year.

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