

The Turmoil

By
BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER XXXII (Continued).

Old Man Sheridan, mightily pleased with Bibbs, has gone to Mary Vertrees with the purpose of "fixing up" the "trouble" between her and his son. He wants to see the young folks happy.

"I'm sorry," said Mary. "I hoped you'd come because we're neighbors." He chuckled. "Neighbors! Sometimes people don't see so much of their neighbors as they used to. That is, I hear so—lately."

"You'll stay long enough to sit down, won't you?" "I guess I could manage that much." And they sat down, facing each other and not far apart.

"Of course, it couldn't be called business, exactly," he said, more gravely. "Not at all, I expect. But there's something of yours it seemed to me I ought to give you, and I just thought it was better to bring it myself and explain how it happened to have it. It's this—this letter you wrote my boy."

He extended the letter to her solemnly. In his left hand, and she took it gently from him. "It was in his mail, after he was hurt. You knew he never got it, I expect."

"Yes," she said, in a low voice. He sighed. "I'm glad he didn't. Not," he added, quickly—"not but what you did just right to send it. You did. You couldn't act any other way when it came right down to it. There ain't any blame comin' to you—you were aboveboard all through."

Mary said, "Thank you," almost in a whisper, and with her head bowed low. "You'll have to excuse me for readin' it. I had to take charge of all his mail and everything; I didn't know the handwriting, and I read it all—once I got started."

"I'm glad you did." "Well"—he leaned forward as if to rise—"I guess that's about all. I just thought you ought to have it."

"Thank you for bringing it." He looked at her hopefully, as if he expected and wished that she might have something more to say. But she seemed not to be aware of this glance, and sat with her eyes fixed sorrowfully upon the floor.

"Well, I expect I better be gettin' back to the office," he said, rising despondently. "I told—I told my partner I'd be back at two o'clock, and I guess he'll think I'm a poor business man if he catches me behind time. I got to walk the chalk a mighty straight line these days—with that fellow keepin' tabs on me!"

Mary rose with him. "I've always heard you were the hard driver." He guffawed derisively. "Me? I'm nothin' to that partner o' mine. You couldn't guess to save your life how he keeps after me to hold up my end o' the job. I shouldn't be surprised he'd give me the grand bouce some day, and run the whole circus himself. You know how he is—once he goes at a thing!"

"No," she smiled. "I didn't know you had a partner. I'd always heard—" He laughed, looking away from her. "It's just my way o' speakin' o' that boy o' mine, Bibbs."

He stood then, expectant, staring out into the hall with an air of careless geniality. He felt that she certainly must say at least, "How is Bibbs?" but she said nothing at all, though he waited until the silence became embarrassing.

"Well, I guess I better be gettin' down there," he said, at last. "He might worry." "Goodby—and thank you," said Mary. "For what?" "For the letter."

"Oh," he said, blankly. "You're welcome. Goodby." Mary put out her hand. "Goodby." "You'll have to excuse my left hand," he said. "I had a little accident to the other one."

She gave a pitying cry as she saw. "Oh, poor Mr. Sheridan!" "Nothin' at all! Dictate everything nowadays, anyhow." He laughed jocularly. "Did anybody tell you how it happened?"

"I heard you hurt your hand, but no—not just how." "It was this way," he began, and both, as if unconsciously, sat down again. "You may not know it, but I used to worry a good deal about the youngest o' my boys—the one that used to come to see you sometimes, after Jim—that is, I mean Bibbs. He's the one I spoke of as my partner; and the truth is that's what it's just about goin' to amount to, one o' these days—if his health holds out. Well, you remember, I expect, I had him on a machine over at a plant o' mine; and sometimes I'd kind o' sneak in there and see how he was gettin' along. Take a doctor with me sometimes, because Bibbs never was so robust, you might say. Ole Doc Gurney—I guess maybe you know him? Tall, thin man; acts sleepy—"

machine. He told me to look out, but I wouldn't listen, and I didn't look out—and that's how I got my hand hurt, tryin' to show Bibbs to do something he knew how to do and I didn't. Made me so mad I just wouldn't even admit to myself it was hurt—and so, by and by, ole Doc Gurney had to take kind o' radical measures with me. He's a right good doctor, too. Don't you think so, Miss Vertrees?"

"Yes." "Yes, he is so!" Sheridan now had the air of a rambling talker and gossip with all day on his hands. "Take him on Bibbs' case. I was talkin' about Bibbs' case with him this morning. Well, you'd laugh to hear the way ole Gurney talks about that! 'Course he is just as much a friend as he is doctor—and he takes as much interest in Bibbs as if he was in the family. He thinks Bibbs isn't anyways bad off yet; and he thinks he could stand the pace and get fat on it if—well, this



"Bibbs isn't Like Other Men."

is what'd make you laugh if you'd been there. Miss Vertrees—honest it would!" He paused to chuckle, and stole a glance at her. She was gazing straight before her at the wall; her lips were parted, and—visibly—she was breathing heavily and quickly. He feared that she was growing furiously angry; but he had led to what he wanted to say, and he went on, determined now to say it all. He leaned forward and altered his voice to one of confidential friendliness, though in it he still maintained a tone which indicated that ole Doc Gurney's opinion was only a joke he shared with her. "Yes, sir, you certainly would 'a' laughed! Why, that ole man thinks you got something to do with it. You'll have to blame it on him, young lady, if it makes you feel like startin' out to whip somebody!"

He's actually got this theory: he says Bibbs got to gettin' better while he worked over there at the shop because you kept him cheered up and feelin' good. And he says if you could manage to just stand him hangin' round a little—maybe not much, but just sometimes—again, he believed it'd do Bibbs a mighty lot o' good. 'Course that's only what the doctor said. Me, I don't know anything about that; but I can say this much—I never saw any such a mental improvement in anybody in my life as I have lately in Bibbs. I expect you'd find him a good deal more entertaining than what he used to be—and I know it's a kind of embarrassing thing to suggest after the way he piled in over here that day to ask you to stand up before the preacher with him, but accordin' to ole Doc Gurney, he's got you on his brain so bad—"

Mary jumped. "Mr. Sheridan!" she exclaimed. He sighed profoundly. "There! I noticed you were gettin' mad. I didn't—"

"No, no, no!" she cried. "But I don't understand—and I think you don't. What is it you want me to do?" He sighed again, but this time with relief. "Well, well!" he said. "You're right. It'll be easier to talk plain. I ought to know I could with you, all the time. I just hoped you'd let that boy come and see you sometimes, once more. Could you?"

"You don't understand." She clasped her hands together in a sorrowful gesture. "Yes, we must talk plain. Bibbs heard that I'd tried to make your oldest son care for me because I was poor, and so Bibbs came and asked me to marry him—because he was sorry for me. And I can't see him any more," she cried in distress. "I can't!"

Sheridan cleared his throat uncomfortably. "You mean because he thought that about you?" "No, no! What he thought was true!"

"Well—you mean he was so much in—you mean he thought so much of you—" The words were inconceivably awkward upon Sheridan's tongue; he seemed to be in doubt even about pronouncing them, but after a hasty pause he bravely repeated them. "You mean he thought so much of you that you just couldn't stand him around?" "No! He was sorry for me. He cared for me; he was fond of me; and he'd respected me—too much! In the finest way he loved me, if you like, and he'd have done anything on earth for me, as I would for him, and as he knew I would. It was beautiful, Mr. Sheridan," she said. "But the cheap, bad things one has done seem always to come back—they wait, and pull you down when you're happiest. Bibbs found me out, you see; and he wasn't 'in love' with me at all!"

"He wasn't? Well, it seems to me he gave up everything he wanted to do—it was fool stuff, but he certainly wanted it mighty bad—he just threw it away and walked right up and took the job he swore he never would—just for you. And it looks to me as if a man that'd do that must think quite a heap o' the girl he does it for! You say it was only because he was sorry, but let me tell you there's only one girl he could feel that sorry for! Yes, sir!"

"No, no," she said. "Bibbs isn't like other men—he would do anything for anybody." Sheridan grinned. "Perhaps not so much as you think, nowadays," he said. "For instance, I got kind of a suspicion he doesn't believe in 'sentiment in business.' But that's neither here nor there. What he wanted was, just plain and simple, for you to marry him. Well, I was afraid his thinkin' so much of him—the way it does sometimes. But from the way you talk, I understand that ain't the trouble." He coughed and his voice trembled a little. "Now here, Miss Vertrees, I don't have to tell you—because you see things easy—I know I got no business comin' to you like this, but I had to make Bibbs go my way instead of his own—I had to do it for the sake o' my business and on his own account, too—and I expect you got some idea how it hurt him to give up. Well, he's made good. He didn't come in half-hearted or mean; he came in—all the way! But there isn't anything in it to him; you can see he's just shut his teeth on it and goin' ahead with dust in his mouth. You see, one way of lookin' at it, he's got nothin' to work for. And it seems to me like it cost him your friendship, and I believe—honest—that's what hurt him the worst. Now you said we'd talk plain. Why can't you let him come back?"

She covered her face desperately with her hands. "I can't!" He rose, defeated, and looking it. "Well, I mustn't press you," he said, gently. At that she cried out, and dropped her hands and let him see her face. "Ah! He was only sorry for me!" He gazed at her intently. Mary was proud, but she had a fatal honesty, and it confessed the truth of her now; she was helpless. It was so clear that even Sheridan, marveling and amazed, was able to see it. Then a change came over him; gloom fell from him, and he grew radiant.

"Don't! Don't!" she cried. "You mustn't—" "I won't tell him," said Sheridan, from the doorway. "I won't tell anybody anything!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

There was a heavy town-fog that afternoon, a smoke-mist, densest in the sanctuary of the temple. The people went about in it, busy and dirty, thickening their outside and inside linings of coal-tar, asphalt, sulphurous acid, oil of vitriol, and the other familiar things the men liked to breathe and to have upon their skins and garments and upon their wives and babies and sweethearts. The growth of the city was visible in the smoke and the noise and the rush. There was more smoke than there had been this day of February a year earlier; there was more noise; and the crowds were thicker—yet quicker in spite of that. The traffic policeman had a hard time, for the people were independent—they retained some habits of the old market town period, and would cross the street anywhere and anyhow, which not only got them killed more frequently than if they clung to the legal crossings, but kept the motormen, the chauffeurs and the truck drivers in a stew of profane nervousness. So the traffic policemen had hurried lives; they themselves were killed, of course, with a certain periodicity, but their main trouble was that they could not make the citizens realize that it was actually and mortally perilous to go about their city. It was strange, for there were probably no citizens of any length of residence who had not personally known either someone who had been killed or injured in an accident, or someone who had accidentally killed or injured others. And yet, perhaps it was not strange, seeing the sharp preoccupation of the faces—the people had something on their minds; they could not stop to bother about dirt and danger.

Mary Vertrees was not often downtown; she had never seen an accident until this afternoon. She had come upon errands for her mother connected with a timorous refurbishment; and as she did these, in and out of the department stores, she had an insistent consciousness of the Sheridan building. From the street, anywhere, it was almost always in sight, like some monstrous geometrical shadow, mark-colored and rising limitlessly into the swimming heights of the smoke-mist. It was gaunt and grimy and repellent;

it had nothing but strength and size—but in that consciousness of Mary's the great structure may have partaken of beauty. Sheridan had made some of the things he said emphatic enough to remain with her. She went over and over them—and they began to seem true: "Only one girl he could feel that sorry for!" "Gurney says he's got you on his brain so bad—" The man's clumsy talk began to sing in her heart. The accident.

She was directly opposite the Sheridan building then, waiting for the traffic to thin before she crossed, though other people were risking the passage, darning and halting and dodging parously. Two men came from the crowd behind her, talking earnestly, and started across. Both wore black; one was tall and broad and thick, and the other was taller, but noticeably slender. And Mary caught her breath, for they were Bibbs and his father. They did not see her, and she caught a phrase of Bibbs' mellow voice, which had taken a crisp ring: "Sixty-eight thousand dollars? Not sixty-eight thousand dollars?" It started her queerly, and as there was a glimpse of his profile she saw for the first time a resemblance to his father.

She watched them. In the middle of the street Bibbs had to step ahead of his father, and the two were separated. But the reckless passing of a truck, beyond the second line of rails, frightened a group of country women who were in course of passage; they were just in front of Bibbs, and shoved backward upon him violently. To extricate himself from them he stepped back, directly in front of a moving trolley car—no place for absent-mindedness. Bibbs was still absorbed in thoughts concerned with what he had been saying to his father. There were shrieks and yells; Bibbs looked the wrong way—and then Mary saw the heavy figure of Sheridan plunge straight forward in front of the car. With absolute disregard of his own life, he hurled himself at Bibbs like a football player shunting off an opponent, and to Mary it seemed that both went down together. But that was all she could see—automobiles, trucks and wagons closed in between. She made out that the trolley car stopped jerkily, and she saw a policeman breaking his way through the instantly condensing crowd, while the traffic came to a standstill, and people stood up in automobiles or climbed upon the hubs and tires of wheels, not to miss a chance of seeing anything horrible.

Mary tried to get through; it was impossible. Other policemen came to help the first, and in a minute or two traffic was in motion again. The crowd became pliant, dispersing—there was no figure upon the ground, and no ambulance came. But one of the policemen was detained by the clinging and beseeching of a gloved hand. "What is the matter, lady?" "Where are they?" Mary cried. "Who? Ole Man Sheridan? I reckon he wasn't much hurt!" "His son—" "Was that who the other one was? I seen him knock him—oh, he's not bad off. I guess, lady. The ole man got him out of the way all right. The fender shoved the ole man around some, but I reckon he only got shook up. They both went on in the Sheridan building without any help. Excuse me, lady."

Sheridan and Bibbs, in fact, were at that moment in the elevator, ascending. "Whisk-broom up in the office," Sheridan was saying. "You got to look out on these corners nowadays, I tell



He Hurled Himself at Bibbs.

you. I don't know I got any call to blow, though—because I tried to cross after you did. That's how I happened to run into you. Well, you remember to look out after this. We were talkin' about Murtrie's askin' sixty-eight thousand dollars? It's his lookout if he'd rather take it that way, and I don't know but—"

"No," said Bibbs, emphatically, as the elevator stopped; "he won't get it. Not from us, he won't, and I'll show you why. I can convince you in five minutes." He followed his father into the office anteroom—and convinced him. Then, having been diligently brushed by a youth of color, Bibbs went into his own room and closed the door.

He was more shaken than he had allowed his father to perceive, and his side was sore where Sheridan had struck him. He desired to be alone; he wanted to rub himself and, for once, to do some useless thinking again. He knew that his father had not "happened" to run into him; he knew that Sheridan had instantly—and instinctively—proved that he held his own life of no account whatever compared to that of his son and heir. Bibbs had been unable to speak of that, or seem to know it; for Sheridan, just as instinctively, had swept the matter aside—as of no importance, since all was well—reverting immediately to business.

Bibbs began to think intently of his father. He perceived, as he had never perceived before, the shadowing of something enormous and indomitable—and lawless; not to be daunted by the will of nature's very self; laughing at the lightning and at wounds and mutilation; conquering, irresistible—and blindly noble. For the first time in his life Bibbs began to understand the meaning of being truly this man's son.

He would be the more truly his son henceforth, though, as Sheridan said, Bibbs had not come downtown with him mealy or half-heartedly. He had given his word because he had wanted the money, simply, for Mary Vertrees in her need. And he shivered with horror of himself, thinking how he had gone to her to offer it, asking her to marry him—with his head on his breast in shameful fear that she would accept him! He had not known her; the knowing had lost her to him, and this had been his real awakening; for he knew now how deep had been that slumber wherein he dreamily celebrated the superiority of "friendship!" The sleep-walker had awakened to bitter knowledge of love and life, finding himself a failure in both. He had made a burnt offering of his dreams, and the sacrifice had been an unforgivable hurt to Mary. All that was left for him was the work he had chosen, but at least he would not fall in that, though it was indeed no more than "dust in his mouth." If there had been anything "to work for—"

He went to the window, raised it, and let in the uproar of the streets below. He looked down at the blurred, hurrying swarms—and he looked across, over the roofs with their panting jets of vapor, into the vast, foggy heart of the smoke. Dizzy traceries of steel were rising dimly against it, chattering with steel on steel, and screeching in steam, while tiny figures of men walked on threads in the dull sky. Buildings would overtop the Sheridan Bigness was being served.

But what for? The old question came to Bibbs with a new despair. Here, where his eye fell, had once been green fields and running brooks, and how had the kind earth been despoiled and disfigured! The pioneers had begun the work, but in their old age their orators had said for them that they had toiled and risked and sacrificed that their posterity might live in peace and wisdom, enjoying the fruits of the earth. Well, their posterity was here—and there was only turmoil. Where was the promised land? It had been promised by the soldiers of all the wars; it had been promised to this generation by the pioneers; but here was the very posterity to whom it had been promised, toiling and risking and sacrificing in turn—for what?

The harsh roar of the city came in through the open window, continuously beating upon Bibbs' ear until he began to distinguish a pulsation in it—a broken and irregular cadence. It seemed to him that it was like a titanic voice, discordant, hoarse, rustily metallic—the voice of the god, Bigness. And the voice summoned Bibbs as it summoned all its servants.

"Come and work!" it seemed to call. "Come and work for me, all men! By your youth and your hope I summon you! By your age and your despair I summon you to work for me yet a little, with what strength you have. By your love of home I summon you! By your love of woman I summon you! By your hope of children I summon you!"

"You shall be blind slaves of Mine, blind to everything but Me, your Master and Driver! For your reward you shall gaze only upon my ugliness. You shall give your toil and your lives, you shall go mad for love and worship of my ugliness! You shall perish still worshipping Me, and your children shall perish knowing no other god!"

And then, as Bibbs closed the window down tight, he heard his father's voice booming in the next room; he could not distinguish the words, but the tone was exultant—and there came the thump! thump! of the maimed hand. Bibbs guessed that Sheridan was bragging of the city and of the Bigness to some visitor from out of town.

And he thought how truly Sheridan was the high priest of Bigness. But with the old, old thought again, "What for?" Bibbs caught a glimmer of far, faint light. He saw that Sheridan had all his life struggled and conquered, and must all his life go on struggling and inevitably conquering, as part of a vast impulse not his own. Sheridan served blindly—but was the impulse blind? Bibbs asked himself if it was not he who had been in the greater hurry, after all. The kiln must be fired before the vase is glazed, and the Acropolis was not crowned with marble in a day.

Then the voice came to him again, but there was a strain in it as of some huge music struggling to be born of the turmoil. "Ugly I am," it seemed to say to him, "but never forget that I am a god!" And the voice grew in sonority and in dignity. "The

highest should serve, but so long as you worship me for my own sake I will not serve you. It is man who makes me ugly, by his worship of me. If man would let me serve him, I should be beautiful!"

Looking once more from the window, Bibbs sculptured for himself—in vague conceptions of the smoke and fog above the roofs—a gigantic figure with feet pedestaled upon the great buildings and shoulders disappearing in the clouds, a colossus of steel and wholly blackened with soot. But Bibbs carried his fancy further—for there was still a little poet lingering in the back of his head—and he thought that up over the clouds, unseen from below, the giant labored with his hands in the clean sunshine; and Bibbs had a glimpse of what he made there—perhaps for a fellowship of the children of the children that were children now—a noble and joyous city, unbelievably white—

It was the telephone that called him from his vision. It rang fiercely. He lifted the thing from his desk and answered—and as the small voice inside it spoke he dropped the receiver with a crash. He trembled violently as he picked it up, but he told himself he was wrong—he had been mistak-



Mary Stood Upon the Threshold.

en—yet it was a startlingly beautiful voice; startlingly kind, too, and ineffably like the one he hungered most to hear.

"Who?" he said, his own voice shaking—like his hand. "Mary."

He responded with two hushed and incredulous words: "Is it?"

There was a little thrill of pathetic half-laughter in the instrument. "Bibbs—I wanted to—just to see if you—"

"Yes—Mary?" "I was looking when you were so nearly run over. I saw it, Bibbs. They said you hadn't been hurt, they thought, but I wanted to know for my self."

"No, no, I wasn't hurt at all—Mary. It was father who came nearer it. He saved me."

"Yes, I saw; but you had fallen. I couldn't get through the crowd until you had gone. And I wanted to know—" "Mary—would you—have minded?" he said. There was a long interval before she answered.

"Yes." "Then why—" "Yes, Bibbs?" "I don't know what to say," he cried. "It's so wonderful to hear your voice again—I'm shaking. Mary—I don't know—I don't know anything except that I am talking to you! It is you—Mary?"

"Yes, Bibbs." "Mary—I've seen you from my window at home—only five times since I—since then. You looked—oh, how can I tell you? It was like a man chained in a cave catching a glimpse of the blue sky. Mary, Mary, won't you—let me see you again—near? I think I could make you really forgive me—you'd have to—"

"I did—then." "No—not really—or you wouldn't have said you couldn't see me any more." "That wasn't the reason." The voice was very low.

"Mary," he said, even more tremulously than before. "I can't—you couldn't mean it was because—you can't mean it was because you—care?" There was no answer. "Mary?" he called, huskily. "If you mean that—you'd let me see you—wouldn't you?" And now the voice was so low he could not be sure it spoke at all, but if it did, the words were, "Yes, Bibbs—dear." But the voice was not in the instrument—it was so gentle and so light, so almost nothing, it seemed to be made of air—and it came from the air. Slowly and incredulously he turned—and glory fell upon his shining eyes. The door of his father's room had opened. Mary stood upon the threshold. THE END. Work and the Coit. The newly broken coil should not be worked too hard this spring. Too much work just now may ruin him.