

HIS GIRL BACK EAST

By H. M. EGBERT

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I.
FEELING better, ain't you pard?" Jim Syrett nodded curtly. He was appreciative of the boys' kindness in coming up to his shack to see a sick man, but sometimes he felt too ill to show his feelings. At such times he always said he was better. Although the boys tried to make him believe that he would soon be about again, Jim cherished no illusions on that score.
 "Bill," he said, turning suddenly to his friend, "I want you to promise me something. Come and sit with me when I'm going to cash in."
 "You ain't going to cash in in fifty years," said Bill, unconvinced of his own statement, nevertheless.
 "When you see the white flag flying from in front of my door, you'll know what it means," said Jim.
 It was ten days later when Bill, in the valley, saw the summons. He hurried up the mountain side. Jim Syrett was lying beside the flag; he had not had strength to return to his bed.
 "I'm all in," he said, as Bill carried him within.
 "Nonsense," said Bill.
 The other was steadily growing weaker. Toward night he opened his eyes. "Bill," he said, "there's a girl back East—"
 "I'll write her, Jim; just to ease your mind," said his friend.
 Jim shook his head and smiled faintly. "It's better not to," he said. "Nellie and I were engaged once. I guess she's got a better man, though. I always was a waster. But I never had a chance. Harvard, parents died when I was a kid, and a capital of two million dollars, you know."
 Bill nodded, because he had nothing to say.
 "She said she'd wait for me. But I was no good. You know what I was before this sickness started."
 "Never mind," said Bill. "You'll be better soon."
 "I'll be better off soon," replied the other. "But I wish I'd had a chance. I wish I'd been poor and decent. I wish I'd been brought up with Polly. I don't so much regret never being able to marry her. I want a good woman's sympathy. I'd like to be—oh, God, I'd like to be her son."
 He groaned in anguish and remorse. Presently his eyes closed. For a while Bill thought that he was sleeping; presently a strange sound from the bed aroused him. It had grown dark, and Bill was dozing unconsciously. He lit a lamp hastily and saw that his friend lay dead. On his face there was the smile that a happy child wears at nightfall.
 When Bill dressed his friend for burial he saw a curious stain, a birthmark, extending from the base of the neck an inch or two in the direction of the right shoulder.

II.
 Polly Raymond looked up from her letters at the breakfast table with a cry of distress.
 "What is it, dear?" asked her husband, coming round the table to her.
 "Jim's dead, Tom. Poor old Jim. Look at this letter from this man. It's roughly written, and the spelling isn't up to much, but it shows somebody did care for Jim, doesn't it?"
 "You cared for him once, Polly," said Tom Raymond, holding her and letting her cry in his arms.
 "Not really, dear. I thought I did. But I know now that it was only pity for him. I wanted to mother him, Tom. The poor boy wasn't bad, he just never had a chance, with all his money. Poor old Jim, dying out there all alone!"
 Polly and her husband had been back from their honeymoon two weeks, and, as everybody knows, the first honeymoon is only the prelude to the real one, which lasts all life long. The moment that she met Tom she knew that her former love for Jim Syrett had been the vainest of vain things.
 Yet she had never ceased to reproach herself for what she called her fickleness. She had known of the boy's wild attachment toward herself and that if anyone could have kept him straight it was she. And then—
 "Tom, dear," she said, rubbing her cheek against his own, "I remember something now which I had totally forgotten. I had the strangest and most dreadful dream the other night. And it must have been just at the time when Jim lay dying. It comes back to me now so vividly."
 "I seemed to be lying somewhere in space. There was nothing around me, and, although I was fully conscious of my own existence, I seemed to have no body. And then it came to me that this was that place, or condition, where dismembered souls collect, awaiting their summons either to heaven or to—some of many other possible destinations, Tom."
 "Then, as I stood there, I seemed to realize that Jim was with me. He was very much astonished at finding me there."
 "Why, Polly," he said, "don't you know that you are not to pass over for nearly a year more?"
 "I was so terrified I did not know what to do or how to answer him."
 "Yes, Polly," he said, "your time on earth will be up a year from next week. Unless—"

"And here his voice became so vague and indistinct that I could understand nothing. When I heard him again, he was telling me how he died."
 "I wanted you ever since I knew you, Polly, dear," he said. "And I am going to have you for my very own, through all eternity."
 "That will never happen, Jim," I answered.
 "Oh, yes, it will," he said, "and, more than that, you will be glad. Remember, a year from next week."
 Tom Raymond frowned impatiently.
 "Oh course, it may have been some sort of inner perception that Jim was dying," he answered. "I have no doubt such things are possible. But in dreams they become blurred and distorted, and one must never rely on such nonsense. Lose you in a year's time, indeed! I'd like to see myself!"
 He kissed away the tears that were falling freely. But after he had gone Polly remained for a long time thinking of the boy who had died in such a lonely fashion upon the mountains.

III.
 The house was strangely silent. Upstairs there was no sound at all; downstairs only that of the man who tramped slowly backward and forward in his library.
 Mercifully he had forgotten his wife's prediction. He was conscious only of that agony of soul that comes when one's dearest is wrestling with death.
 The doctor came into the room, and Tom Raymond spun around and faced him.
 "Tell me the truth!" he cried. "Is there any hope?"
 "Yes, said the doctor, frankly. "There is hope. But it is a very faint one. You must be prepared for the worst, Mr. Raymond, and I cannot delude you with any false anticipations. Your wife is dangerously ill. She is at present sleeping. It all depends on the first rest."
 "And the child?"
 "A splendid girl. She is doing finely. I have seldom seen a child so healthy at birth."
 Tom Raymond groaned. At that moment he felt utterly indifferent to his child. If only Polly lived! She must live, for his sake.
 The doctor took pity on the haggard man.
 "I don't think there is any reason why you should not sit by her bedside, if you go up very softly," he said.

Raymond ascended the stairs and entered his wife's room on tiptoe. The nurse rose from the bedside and laid her finger on her lips. Raymond crept to the chair which she had vacated and sat down.
 Polly was sleeping, but it was more correct to say that she was unconscious. She was barely alive, and her breast hardly stirred under her light breathing. Her face was ashen, her lips as pale as her cheeks.
 Sometimes her husband was afraid that she had ceased to breathe. The hours went by. He still sat at her side. Midnight sounded. He did not move. With all his power he was willing that Polly should live. And so the night passed, and gradually the light of dawn began to penetrate the room.
 Suddenly the nurse started and stepped to the sick woman's side. Her trained ear had detected the little sound of awakening. Next moment Polly was conscious, and her eyes were fixed on Tom's.
 "I am going to get well, Tom, dear."
 And Tom could read that in the tinge of color that had come back to her cheeks.
 The nurse, obedient to the sick woman's unvoiced wish, stepped to the cradle and brought out the baby.
 "Isn't she a dear, Tom?" murmured Polly. "And she has the dearest little birthmark. Show him her shoulder, nurse."
 There was a faint stain, extending from the base of the neck an inch or two in the direction of the right shoulder.

Reason for Ancient Faith in Mistletoe

Idolatry had not advanced far among the Celts, and their images of gods were rudely carved logs or simple weapons of one sort or another. Their chief ceremonial object was the mistletoe, that white berried creeper which has captured the imagination of primitive peoples all over the world.
 Sir James G. Frazer, in that most fascinating book in all the literature of comparative religions, "The Golden Bough," has tried to give the reason for the peculiar veneration attached to this plant. He maintains it is because the mistletoe has not roots in the polluted earth but seems to grow magically between heaven and earth.
 By that sorry clutching at conclusions which is all that primitive man has of logic, this plant, dangling down from the sky, is therefore thought to be endowed with magic properties. Wherever the Druids discovered it growing on an oak tree, they would approach with great awe and ceremonial pomp and cut it down with a golden sickle.
 They would be careful to catch it before it fell to the earth, and then they would use it to make a potion for the fertilizing of barren women and cattle, and for the cure of epilepsy, ulcers, poisoning and almost every other human ailment.—From "This Believing World," by Lewis Browne.

Epidemic
 Ward—I'm sort of worried about my boy.
 Neff—What has he?
 Ward—The car!—Life.

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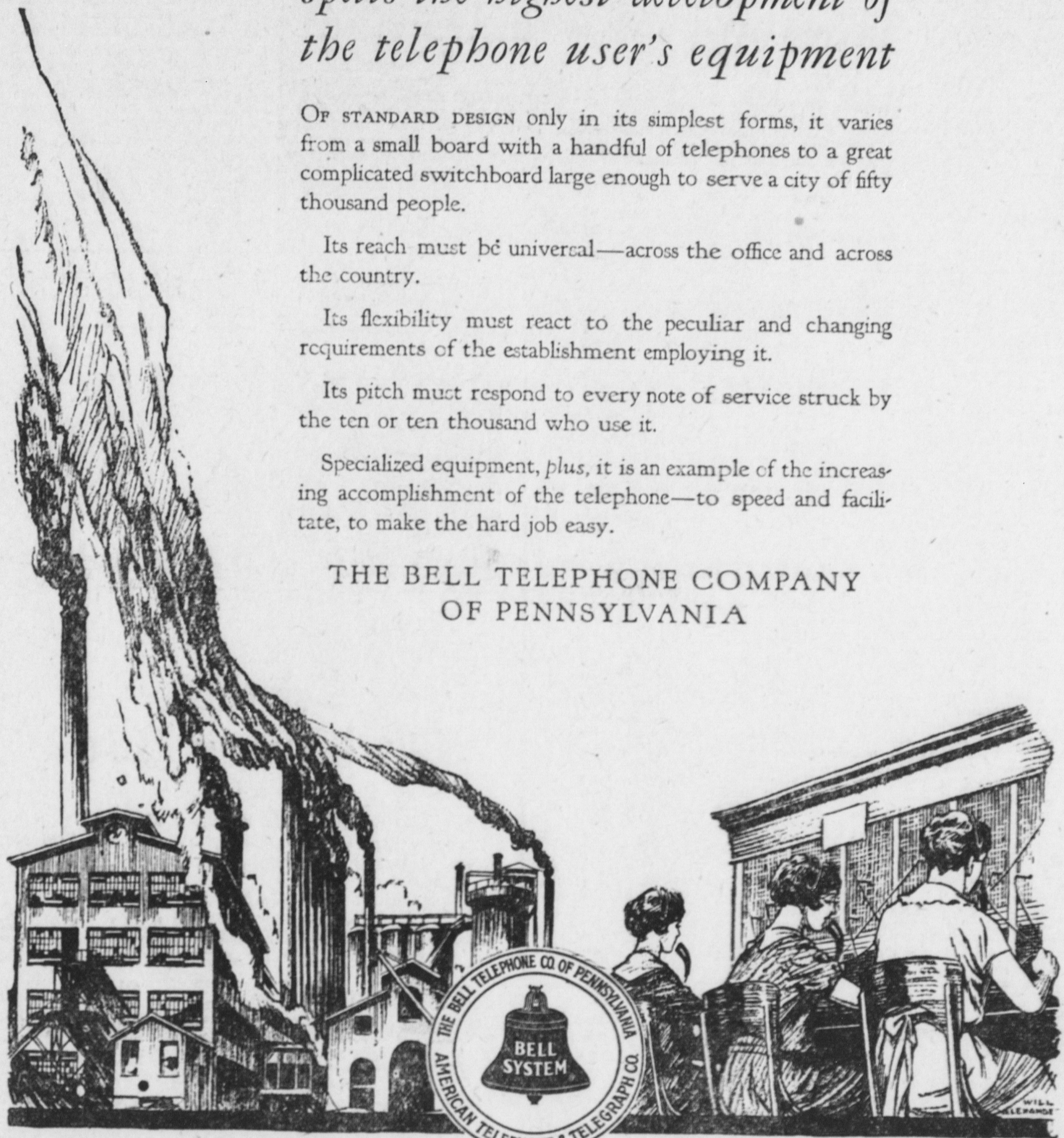
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