

AN AT STYER—A GIRL'S ADVENTURES IN SOCIAL PIRACY

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE, Author of "The Lone Wolf," "The Brass Bowl," Etc.

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Sally Manvers, 21 years out of the work of her house, in New York, driven to seek a new life in Philadelphia...

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

It reminded her, among other things, of the fact that she had not seen LITTLETON since an adventitious glimpse of him going in to breakfast just as she was leaving the house to deliver the batch of invitations.

She wondered idly about him, in an odd humor of tolerant superiority, as one might contemplate the presumption of an ill-bred child. And she wondered dumbly at herself, whom she found able to imagine without flinching an entire description of the madly flirtatious descriptions which she had read in the papers...

For all the strength of her tower of refuge, Sally shivered. And she realized with a twinge of sinners regret that she would never dare return and share those happier fortunes with those two unhappy partners of her days of suffering and privation.

Mrs. Goenold, she assumed, must have moved it. "For what purpose? To what end?" A knock on the door announced the arrival of her costume by the hands of Mrs. Goenold's personal maid.

"Tell her I'll be there in 15 minutes." Moderate disappointment waited upon recognition of the character of her assumed disguise. She had had visions of some very splendid, something almost barbaric in its richness and grandeur...

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she wore to pass through the corridor in memory of Mrs. Goenold's injunction; the effect was quite positively fascinating. And she proved to be far from superfluous, for when she followed her knock into the boudoir of her mistress she was thunderstruck to find nearly two dozen people, men and women, gathered together, there, sitting and standing about in a silence which seemed curiously constrained, taken in connection with their festive attire. For they were all in costume and, with the single exception of Mrs. Goenold, all masked.

This last was very brilliant in the billowy silken skirts, puffed sleeves, tight bodice and wide ruff of Queen Elizabeth, but after setting in motion the machinery for tonight's amusement, which I have long had in mind, devoted the day to a quiet investigation, as a result of which I am convinced that the house servants had no part in the robbery. In short, I am persuaded that the thief is now in this room. I do not, however, wish to know his or her identity. And I am especially anxious to avoid the scandal which must follow if this affair leaks out.

"Finally, I feel so sure you all share in knowing positively who committed this crime that I ask you all silently to pledge yourselves to secrecy—and then to humor my plan for regaining my jewels and covering up the affair completely. I have thought it might be accomplished this way: 'Marie has given you each a card, an envelope and a pencil. The cards and envelopes have no distinguishing marks. The pencils are all alike. The authorship of anything you may care to communicate cannot possibly be traced, if you will be careful not to write, but to print.'

The slight stir occasioned by her addition to the company subsided, and the sense of constraint became even more marked. Nobly appeared to care to know his neighbor; that was not his perine, no murmuring, even the indispensable fidgeting was accomplished in an apprehensive and apologetic manner. A few men breathed audibly, a few fanned themselves imperceptibly, a few fans perchanced with radiations from a summer's evening; there were no other sounds or movements of any consequence. Nobody appeared to care to know his neighbor; that was not his perine, no murmuring, even the indispensable fidgeting was accomplished in an apprehensive and apologetic manner.

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had framed itself in her mind as she sped down the corridor from that remarkable meeting in Mrs. Goenold's room. 'I have not told you everything—but I am innocent,' thus ran the words which she felt were destined to be a legitimate privilege, her duty to herself in sheer self-preservation. And as they wrote themselves down before her mental vision, she saw two heavy strokes of the pen underlining 'ever this and her own true name Sarah Manvers, following in the place of the signature—no more 'Sally Manvers.' Mrs. Goenold's explicit commands to the contrary notwithstanding!

But that had been an impulse only natural in the first shock of horror inevitably attending the disclosure of the robbery; to clear herself, or rather, to reaffirm her innocence. For with second thought had come the consideration: Was she not already cleared when her innocence not already established?

She was prepared to believe that Mrs. Goenold knew everything. That extraordinary woman! What had she not known, indeed! Mark how cunningly she had drawn from Sally the admission that she had been up and about the house and grounds long after she had gone to her bedchamber for the night—at the very time when the robbery was being done! And that had been by way of preface to the pledge she had made Sally of her protection before starting a confession from the girl—a pledge not only given in advance, but by implication at least renewed when the truth was out.

And all that asserted consistently with her statement that she did not wish to learn the thief's identity, as well as with her invention of a means for obtaining restitution without such intelligence. So Sally ended by believing it rather more than possible that Mrs. Goenold knew as well as the girl herself who had consummated the crime—or, at all events, shared in the damning suspicions engendered in Sally's mind by circumstantial evidence. LITTLETON, of course, Sally entertained

but the slightest doubts of his black guilt. If innocent, what had he been carrying hidden in the hollow of his arm? What had he left down there on the beach? Why had he left it there? Why such anxiety to escape observation as to make the man alert to notice Sally's head peering over the parapet of the landing at the head of the cliff? And if he had been employed in no way to be ashamed of, and had no consequences to fear, why that roundabout way up the cliff again and that ambush of his watcher? And why those signals between window and yacht, if not to apprise the latter that something had been consummated, that the coast was clear for its tender to come in and take away the plunder? It would have seen, then, that Mr. Littleton must have had a confederate in the house, and for that role Mrs. Standish was plainly designated. An understanding of some close sort between her and Littleton had been quite evident from the very first day. And whose bedchamber window had shown the signals, if not hers? Not the pretty young widow's—not in any likelihood Mrs. Artemus's. To believe the latter intimate with the affair was to assume an understanding between her and Littleton—or else Trego.

Sally was conscious of a slight mental start, a flurry of thoughts and sensations, of judgment in conflict with emotions. Why not Trego? A likelier man than Littleton for such a job, indeed. Trego had such force of personality as to excite the suspicion that what he might desire he would boldly go after and possess himself of. With a nature better adapted to the planning and execution of adventures demanding courage, daring and boldness of action than Littleton, Trego was capable of anything. Littleton was of flimsier stuff, or instinct was untrustworthy.

But after a little the girl sighed and shook her head. It was less probable, this effort of hers, to cast Trego for the role of villain. True, he might have invented that story of the marks on the sands; true again, he might have acted in accord with Mrs. Artemus, but those were far-fetched possibilities. Unless, indeed, professed distrust and dislike of Mrs. Artemus had been altogether ingenuous, a mask manufactured in anticipation of just this development. No, it wasn't likely of Trego. She could not overlook the impression he conveyed of rugged honesty and straightforwardness. However strong the aversion he inspired, Sally could ignore neither that impression nor yet its correlative, that if he was not an over-righteous scorn of lies, he was the sort that would suffer much rather than seek to profit by a lie.

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