

A MODERN DIOGENES

BY EDWARD RIDDLE PADGETT



"She's the Dearest Little Woman in the World."

DIOGENES—he who in ancient Greece wandered abroad with a lantern in a hopeless search for an honest man—yawned wearily as he rose from the big leather chair in the lobby of the Hotel International. This business of being up to date had quite got upon his nerves; and the hurlyburly of twentieth century life more than offset his freedom from the nagging wife who used to belabor him with a washboard back in old Hellas to show her sympathy in his pursuit of philosophic ideals.

He flicked an ash off the lapel of his fashionably cut evening clothes and glanced down at his watchfob. Even it had changed. No one—scarcely he himself—could recognize this electric flashlight device, pendent from the fob, as the lantern of centuries ago with which he prowled through the alleys and byways of ancient Athens in his futile quest for an absolutely honest man. Even it had changed with the times. Even it was up to date.

With a sigh of resignation he reached for his coat and swung out of the hotel, homeward bound, nodding to the night clerk as he watched his opportunity to dodge through the revolving doors.

It was raining outside, a chill, drizzly New York rain. The wet streets, reflecting the cold glare of the arc lights, were anything but inviting. He signaled the lone taxi in the street before him. The driver clambered reluctantly out from beneath his lap robes and opened the door.

DIOGENES had just ensconced himself comfortably in the yawning seat and the car was wheezing and coughing for its initial lurch forward, when a man rushed down the hotel steps and motioned vigorously to the chauffeur. There was a hurried word or two, the passing of something crisp from the one to the other, and the chauffeur turned and flung open the door.

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger, "but I'm in a deuce of a hurry. For once in my life I find this the only taxi in front of a New York hotel. Would you mind giving me a lift? I haven't far to go. And, believe me, I must get there! I know my request is an imposition; but—"

"Not at all, not at all," assented Diogenes, ever on the alert for the unexpected. "Step right in."

"Thanks," said the stranger and, giving the chauffeur the address of his destination, he climbed in.

With a dexterous adjustment of the catch on the electric flashlight attached to his watchfob, Diogenes had, all unknown to the stranger, enveloped him in a penetrating glow. It brought out distinctly his every feature—the pleasant, energetic, aggressive face of the average Gotham breadwinner.

His eye met Diogenes', and he smiled easily. "You certainly saved my life, old man!" he exclaimed.

Diogenes started. Could he be a malefactor escaping the police?

"Oh, no," the stranger laughed, quickly interpreting the quizzical glance, "nothing like that in my family. I'm on my way home, and I've got to hotfoot it, too. I'll be only too glad to pay for my ride and yours as a

return for your letting me butt in on your party."

"I hope it's nothing serious," suggested Diogenes amicably.

"Serious?" echoed the stranger. "I don't quite understand."

"Your haste," explained Diogenes tersely.

"Oh, I see. No, nothing serious; only—it may be. Don't you ever have to get home in a hurry?"

"No," replied Diogenes thoughtfully. "I don't believe I do."

"Hu-m-m," commented the stranger. "I see. You aren't married."

"No," admitted Diogenes slowly. "That is, I was once; but I'm not now."

"Then you no longer have to make excuses? Gee! what a relief that must be!"

Diogenes frowned. "Excuses?" he asked. "For what?"

The stranger stared at him in surprise. "For about a million and one things, real and imaginary. For not getting home sooner, for instance. The happiness of my home frequently depends upon my versatility in that line."

"What line?" inquired the obtuse Diogenes.

"Gee whizz!" exclaimed the stranger, exasperated. "Why, on the excuses I give my wife when I get there. I haven't been home for dinner, and I've got to fix up a corker. I telephoned her about five o'clock that I didn't think I should be able to make it, and advised her not to wait for me. The only reply I got was, 'Very well, suit yourself, George,' and the bang of the receiver against the hook. It's eleven-thirty now. You see how strong I've got to come across to get by with it."

Diogenes regarded the stranger for a moment in silence. "Perhaps," he suggested sadly, "she'll be asleep."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

"Humph! You don't know my wife. She's really the dearest little woman in the world; but her idea of matrimony is to have a husband home every evening of the week and all day Sunday. If I'm a half-hour late for dinner, I am made to feel that I deserve a life sentence in a juvenile house of correction, and if I spend an evening away from home—whew!—I'm the chirpiest little skylark on Broadway!"

FOR the moment Diogenes had a fellow feeling for the sufferer, as he recalled the days of the washtub and his spouse's imprecations; but he quickly suppressed the unpleasant memory. "Perhaps you are magnifying your troubles," he suggested encouragingly.

The stranger looked at him in disgust. "If I were," he replied, "I might have some chance of getting by with them. But, believe me, I'm up against it! Why, I can't even say I've been working! Unfortunately, my wife once saw my stenographer. She is really a sensible, practical business woman who wouldn't stand for nonsense from anyone; but my wife insists that I employ her just because she has a flaxen swirl and dimples. You see? If I say I'm late because of a customer, her eyes fill up and she declares I love money more than I do her. I can't even tell her I was at a lodge meeting; for I get a printed schedule of those events every month—and you can bet your last dollar my wife beats me to the postman when he brings it!"

Just then the lantern attached to Diogenes' watchfob began to flicker. Diogenes glanced down at it. What! Could it be that this worried, harassed man was telling an untruth? Strange—and yet that lantern never failed to grow dim in the presence of even a white lie!

"Twice since we've been married I've indulged in a little game with the boys," continued the stranger, thoroughly warmed up to his subject. "The first time I lost two and a half, the second sitting five dollars—money I thought well spent, considering the good time I had getting rid of it. Ever since then, if I'm out of her sight for so much as a half-hour, she has visions of me being led astray by a set of conniving rascals who are flimflamming me out of the family funds she needs for fur coats and diamonds. Tonight, I am sure, she has been nursing the comforting suspicion that she is the original 'Gambler's Wife.'"

"Would you mind telling me exactly what you have been doing since you 'phoned your wife at five o'clock?" asked Diogenes coldly. Surely so outspoken a man could not be altogether dishonest!

THE stranger glanced up quickly. He seemed to feel that Diogenes had failed to respond with the sympathy appropriate to such an occasion.

"Not at all," he answered presently. "A representative of one of the biggest firms to which I sell goods came in about four o'clock this afternoon, and asked me to show him around the city. He had his sister in tow, and she'd never been here before. Naturally, I couldn't overlook an opportunity like that. So I called a taxi, and we went around to the hotel after his sister. I expected to meet a comfortable spinster, fat and forty;

so, when a slender, smiling doll in a striking black gown approached us, I looked straight ahead."

"Flicker, flicker!" went the lantern on Diogenes' fob in a most insistent manner. He placed his hand upon it and stroked it much as one would a restless pet dog intent upon jumping down to the floor.

"But she was his sister," continued the stranger, unconscious of the light, "and a charming widow not over twenty-six, or even twenty-two. I suppose I might as well confess,—what I had looked upon up till then as a tiresome business obligation now became a pleasure. There was nothing to it but riding around in the taxi and a corking little dinner in a secluded corner. I leave it to you, was it my fault that their train for Paris (Kentucky) was three hours late? And wasn't it up to me to suggest dropping in at one of the roof gardens to fill in the interim? When I finally sent them off to the station it was after eleven. You saw how I rushed out of the hotel as soon as I got them off my hands, didn't you? Well, could I possibly have got home any sooner?"

But the quizzical eye of Diogenes gave back no answering gleam of understanding. Instead, he seemed to be weighing the explanation in the balance and finding it wanting; for the light on his watchfob was sending out desperate signals of distress. Diogenes cleared his throat impressively and asked:

"Did you happen to mention to them—to this widow—that there was a little wife at home for whom the hours dragged slowly in your absence?"

The stranger sat bolt upright. "Well, I'll be—Say, you trying to kid me?" he blurted out. "Sure I did—not!"

JUST then the car slowed up, and the stranger started forward and peered out through the dripping window glass.

"Hey, you!" he called angrily to the chauffeur in a hoarse whisper. "Drive on down to the corner—don't stop in front of my house!" and, turning to Diogenes, "Imagine what my wife would say if she saw me drive up in a taxi! Whew! I'm cold all over! See that light in the second-story window—that's her!"

Poor old Diogenes, doomed as ever to disappointment in his eternal quest, sighed wearily and gazed sadly, vacantly, out the window.

The car stopped at the corner, and the chauffeur reached back and opened the door.

"My friend," said Diogenes, seizing the last straw, "why don't you tell your wife what you told me—the truth?"

The stranger turned and paused, one foot on the pavement the other on the running board. He handed the chauffeur a crumpled bill, and stared at Diogenes. "Excuse me for being so personal, especially since you've been so kind," he replied slowly; "but, really, Mr.—er—er—a—I guess you must have married that one woman in ten million we always hear about but never see; or you've been a widower so long that you've forgotten the ropes. You believed my story, so would any fair minded person. But my wife? Why, she wouldn't believe it—not even if I had an affidavit from the Angel Gabriel! There is no hope. Goodnight, and thanks for the lift."

With that he slammed the door of the car and was off up the street.

Diogenes shook his head mournfully.

Suddenly he glanced down at the lantern. Just one tiny, feeble ray lit up the dull interior; then it too died out, leaving him in darkness. But not before his weary gaze had fallen upon something round and hard and white lying on the seat just vacated by the stranger.

It was a poker chip!



"It Was a Poker Chip!"