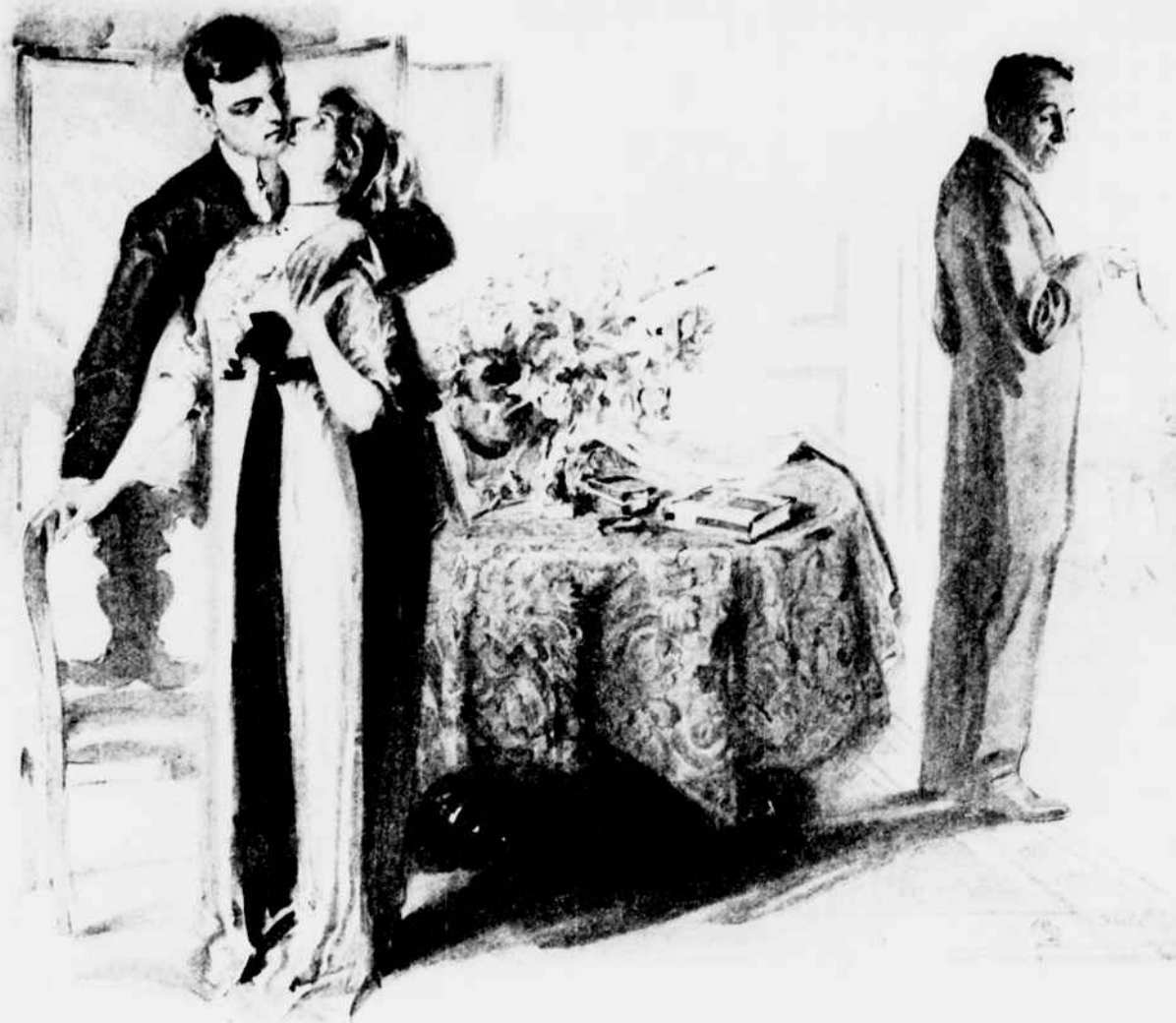


A BADLY WRITTEN COMEDY

By HELEN WARD BANKS



"And I Pluck My First Rose!" He Whispered.

is up to me," he said; "but the curtain rang up so quickly I didn't quite get my cue."

He swung his stick slowly between his legs; but the woman made no answer.

"I suppose the fact of our both being here presupposes our willingness at least to read through our parts," he went on.

"Yes," said Anne Chisholm.

When Harley spoke again, it was slowly as if he was feeling for his words. "It isn't wholly an easy situation. In the first place, the drama must begin with autobiography, which isn't good literature, and in the second place, speech will have to be frank enough to be almost brutal."

He looked up, to meet his companion's direct gaze. She was regarding him with a thoughtful little frown between her eyes.

"We will abjure all sentiment and discuss merely a business proposition," she said concisely.

Harley drew a breath of relief. He was dealing with commonsense instead of with a recognized style of spinster. His eyes were on his swaying stick, and his thoughts turned inward as he began again.

"If the first monologue is to be mine, I shall make it as brief as possible. My mother died when I was fifteen. I was very fond of her. I have never cared seriously for any other woman. I belong to the large class of humanity that unites expensive tastes—and, I may add,

a somewhat indolent spirit—with a small checkbook. I have had enough always to afford modest luxuries for one and to permit me to choose my leisure. I have of course had my times of being captivated by a pretty face, and even of considering a home for two; but, contemplated in the clear light of commonsense, I have known it would be only a home of sordid, petty economies; and when I turned on the limelight and saw myself wrestling with my own cuffbuttons or looking after my own luggage or perhaps even putting coal on the furnace, and perceived the girl, with her pretty face grown worried over meeting ends, pouring impossible coffee into lukewarm cups, I knew it wouldn't do! I knew it definitely after three or four temptations. I could not afford domesticity."

Miss Chisholm's smile flickered over her face again; but she did not speak.

"Consequently," he went on, "each year has made me more selfish. I am a confirmed clubman, living all over the world, and impatient of any bondage. All this is very dull listening and rather banal; but it is necessary to show not only why Mr. Trufitt's letter moved me (I am a bit tired of sailing in other men's yachts and riding other men's horses. I must either quit or sail and ride my friends a bit in return); but it shows also that I am an impossible sort of creature to cage and should make life miserable for any woman who wanted to settle down to domestic bliss. That is distinctly brutal."

"It merely says," said Miss Chisholm quietly, "that you cannot have the money without a wife; but that you would if you could. Remember, I am hampered in the same way."

Harley looked at her a moment, and then he laughed. "You're a true sport," he said, "and I thank you for not making my position more intolerable than it has to be. It is time for your cue. I offer you all I have,—not much I fear,—my hand and my name and a very deep respect that my mother has left me for all women. And I should like to add that it is only since I have seen you that I have definitely decided to benefit by my half the fortune if it be your good pleasure. Now, may we have your monologue?"

She threw up her head with a quick sigh. "Mine is all French. I teach it in a girls' college, and I've been in the same place fifteen years. For fifteen years I've taught girls to turn Hawthorne's faultless English into execrable French. I've taught the poems that move my soul and shivered at the accent in which they've been recited. I have watched girls take laborious notes from the lectures over which I had agonized, and then go out of class questioning whether a troubadour was a cobbler. I have read classics with them till I have read all the beauty into shreds. And all this time I have

TOBIAS TRUFFITT, junior member of the firm, Truffitt & Truffitt, legal in every line of form, face, and attire, tipped back on two legs of his chair and longingly fingered an illegal and unlawful cigarette. On the table before him lay two notes; one signed "Harley Grange," from a New York club; the other, from a woman's college, carrying in a firm, concise hand the signature, "Anne Chisholm."

The two halves of Tobias Truffitt's brain were running races. "The will itself isn't so remarkable," thought the trim, legal half of Tobias. "Lots of men have left their money to two people on condition the two would marry and keep the millions intact. But," interrupted Tobias's human half, "this case interests me. It's like a play. Really it is. The curtain's gone up on old Timothy Mountjoy, dead these ten months, and on the certain news now that his son Silas went down on the Fire Island twelve months ago. Then—enter leading lady and gentleman; for they're both coming."

He leaned over and picked up one of the notes. "Harley Grange doesn't sound as if he would lift a foot to chase fortune; but he's coming, all the same! Lazy sounding sort of chap—as if life was all a joke that he'd laugh at with you if you were smart enough to understand him. He hears with surprise of the existence of his somewhat theatrical cousin, Timothy Mountjoy; but leaves the matter in Miss Chisholm's hands. If she will meet him, he will count it an honor to be present at any hour she names. He may be lazy; but he's coming, all right!"

He dropped that note and picked up the other. "And she's coming too. She doesn't waste any words. I bet there's no shilly-shally about her; even her handwriting shows it. Since Mr. Grange has signified a desire to meet her, she will be at this office at eleven o'clock."

A genial grin spread itself over the dried up features of the junior partner. "Jiminy! It will be a play! I'd give a lot to stay and hear 'em talk to each other; but I'm only a scene shifter. After I've introduced them, I suppose it's up to me to clear out. I'd like to stay and see a play acted out in this stale old office!"

A KNOCK at the door made an end of the grin and the unlighted cigarette and the tilted chair. There was only legal decorum in the room when Harley Grange was ushered in. As he entered he gave a quick glance around.

"I am the first?" he asked.

"Miss Chisholm has still five minutes' leeway to make her appointment good," Truffitt answered in his most professional tone.

"What dried little nuts these lawyers are!" Harley thought, as he turned to the window. "I hope Miss Chisholm will not be very late and give me much more time to speculate on all the kinds of a spinster she may be, or she'll find a lunatic to talk to her. Heaven only knows the varieties,—prudish or kittenish, learned or emotional, didactic or humorous! If she's only five years younger than I, she's had enough time to get hard set in anyone of them. And if she wants me now, she's bound to get me. Oh, Harley, my son, why didn't you stay at home and be content with poverty?"

A second knock at the door made Harley swing round breathlessly. As Miss Chisholm entered the room, unconsciously each looked straight into the eyes of the other, and then Truffitt introduced them. Anne Chisholm frankly extended her hand, and Harley Grange bowed low over it. It was a good hand, he noticed,—nervous and compact and well gloved. The woman herself was tall and slim, with dark hair, a resolute mouth, and clear gray eyes that in that instant had searched his soul.

"This—er—affair strikes me rather like a play," Truffitt said. "I—er—suppose I must leave you to your discussion. Let me first state once more the premises,—what has occurred, let me say, behind the scenes. Mr. Timothy Mountjoy, our client for many years, amassed a large fortune which he desired should not be divided. He was never on very good terms with his son Silas; nevertheless, Silas was to have the fortune if he survived his father. Otherwise, it was to pass to two distant cousins—one on the maternal and one on the paternal side, Harley Grange and Anne Chisholm—if they would marry and not separate the estate. On their refusal the whole sum goes to found an Old Men's Home. I seem to be only—er—chorus; so I will leave you now to—er—settle matters."

AS the door closed behind the lawyer, Harley Grange turned to Miss Chisholm with the short, frank laugh his friends liked. "The little chap has some humanity in him, after all, hasn't he? But he didn't tell us whether we are to make tragedy or comedy."

Anne Chisholm was sitting by the window. She flashed a quick smile at him which lighted the gravity of her face. "Let's not have it tragedy, whatever happens," she said, and turned her gaze back to the busy street.

"That dimple is rather nice," thought Harley. "I must make her do that again."

He drew up a chair and sat down opposite her. "In the conventional role of man, I suppose the first speech