Love—Hypnotism—Telepathy—Crime

The Witching Hour

By Augustus Thomas

Founded on His Successful Play of the Same Title.

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Jack Brookfield, a Louisville, Ky., gambler, has a strange telepathic power over his fellow men. He learns to use this power through instructions from Justice Prentice. Jack's former sweetheart, Helen Whipple, becomes a widow and returns to Louisville with her son, Clay. Jack renews his suit for her hand. Clay is engaged to Jack's niece, Viola. The lad has an hereditary horror of "catseye" jewelry and is goaded into killing a man who thrusts a catseye scarfpin upon him. He is twice tried for murder and by Jack's telepathic power over the jury is at last acquitted. Hardmuth, Clay's rival and prosecutor, becomes a fugitive from justice when his connection with a recent murder is revealed by Jack. Brookfield explains his own telepathic power to Lew Ellinger, an old man-about-town, by "reading" cards the latter holds.

CHAPTER XIII.

(Continued.)

"You've Won."

"I didn't know it—I just thought you had." Brookfield spoke slowly and sadly as he returned to the centre of the room.

"Can you do it again?"

"I don't know." Brookfield paused. "Draw one card."

Ellinger obeyed. "All right."

"Is it the ace of hearts?" Brookfield asked, without looking toward him.

"It is."

"I never tried it until to-night," Brookfield answered, slowly—"that is, consciously. I've always had luck, and I thought it was because I took chances on a guess, same as any player; but that doesn't look like it, does it?"

"Beats me," Ellinger confessed.

"And what a monster it makes of me—these years I've been in the business."

"You say you didn't know it before?" Ellinger repeated, his little eyes aglitter with interest.

"I didn't know it—no; but some things have happened lately that made me think it might be so; that jury yesterday"—Brookfield recurred to the event with impressive solemnity—"some facts I've had from Justice Prentice—telepathy of a very common kind, and I guess it's used in a good many games, old man, we aren't on to." Brookfield was half sitting on the large table in the centre of the room. Lew leaned forward on the edge of his chair at the little card table opposite him.

"Well, have you told anybody?"

"No."

"Good!" Lew stood up in great excitement. "Now, see here, Jack"—he came quickly to Brookfield—"if you can do that right along I know a game in Cincinnati where it would be like takin' candy from children."

"Good God!" Brookfield exploded. He turned with an impulse of denunciation upon the old sandpiper at his side. One look into Lew's keen face, however, convinced him that there was no room for moral consideration in the undiluted rascality of Lew's intention. Brookfield could only say: "You're not suggesting that I keep it up?"

"Don't overdo it—no," said the old man cautiously; "or you show me the trick and I'll collect all right."

"I don't know how I do it—the thought just comes to my mind stronger than any other thought."

"God A'mighty gives you a mind like that, and you won't go with me to Cincinnati!"

Jo entered and announced Justice Prentice.

"Ask him to step up here," Brookfield ordered. He then went to the door of the dining room and called to his sister and Helen: "Justice Prentice is coming up, and I'd like you to join us!"

Lew was again affectionately regarding the five cards he had dealt himself.

"Can the old man call a hand like that, too?" he asked Brookfield.

"Been losing, Mr. Ellinger?" Mrs. Campbell inquired, as she and Helen came into the room.

"Losing? I just saved fifteen thousand I was goin' to throw away like sand in a rat hole. I'm a babe eatin' spoon victuals, and only gettin' half at that." Lew sorrowfully replaced the check in his pocket.

The Justice came into the room.

"I stopped at your hotel, Mr. Justice," Jack said, "but you were out."

"Yes," Prentice explained, "I have been making a few parting calls, and I stopped"—

The hurried entrance of Viola and Mrs. Campbell's exclamation at sight of her interrupted the Justice.

"Where's Clay?" Helen asked, with repressed excitement.

"Downstairs."

Viola greeted the Justice and turned to Brookfield, who excused himself to the others and, stepping aside with his niece, inquired:

"Did the gentleman come with you?"

"Yes."

"Won't you ask Clay, my dear," Brookfield continued to Viola, "to take him through the lower hall and into the dining-room until I'm at liberty?"

"Certainly." Viola left on her errand.

"I am keeping you from other appointments," Prentice said.

"Nothing that can't wait."

Brookfield offered him a chair, but the Justice declined it, and going to the ladies he extended his hand.

"I am leaving for Washington in the morning."

"We shall all be at the train to see you off, Mr. Justice," said Brookfield.

"That's good, because I should like to say good-by to the young people—I can see them there. I sha'n't see you then, Mr. Ellinger?"

"Good-by, Mr. Justice," said Lew; "you've given me more of a 'turnover' than you know."

"Really?"

"I'd 'a' saved two hundred thousand dollars if I'd met you thirty years ago."

"Well, that's only a little over six thousand a year, isn't it?"

"That's so; and I have lived!" At this statement, and with the recollection behind it, there came into Lew's ruddy-duck smile that unctuous suggestion of good feeling which was peculiarly his own. The smile abided, and the retrospection grew during the succeeding moments in which the Justice was bidding farewell to the ladies and leaving Jack in the hallway.

As Jack returned his sister, who had been looking into the dining-room, came quickly to him.

"Is that Hardmuth in there?" she asked, nodding over her shoulder.

"Yes," Jack answered.

"I don't want to see him."

"Very well, dear; I'll excuse you."

"Come, Helen." Mrs. Campbell left the room.

"I'd like you to stay," Jack said to Helen.

Left alone with Helen and Ellinger, Brookfield crossed to the dining-room door and opened it.

"Come in" he said.

Viola entered, followed by Hardmuth and Clay. In her excitement she had forgotten to lay off the fur coat which she had worn in the automobile. As Brookfield removed the coat from her shoulders he said to her:

"Your mother has just left us, Viola; you had better join her."

"Very well." As the girl started to go out her uncle took her hand, detaining her a moment.

"I want you to know, my dear, how thoroughly I appreciate your going on this errand for me. You're the right stuff!" Jack kissed her affectionately; Viola left the room.

Brookfield turned to Hardmuth, who was standing by the side of Clay. Hardmuth was haggard and had a hunted look. He wore a dark overcoat of some light material; in his hand he held the automobile goggles which Clay had given him. Brookfield found it difficult to put into speech the severity which he felt the situation demanded.

"You are trying to get away?" he began, interrogatively.

"This your note?" Hardmuth said, in reply, extending Brookfield's letter.

"Yes."

Hardmuth glanced at the page. "You say you will help me get out of the State?"

"I will."

"When?"

"Whenever you are ready."

"I'm ready now."

"Then I'll help you now."

"Now?" Ellinger cried out, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Doesn't that render you liable in some way, Jack, to the law?" Helen said anxiously.

"Yes, but I've been liable to the law in some way for the last twenty years." Brookfield turned to Clay. "You go down and tell the chauffeur to leave the machine and walk home; I'm going to run it myself and I'll turn it in."

"Yes, sir." Clay left the room.

"You're going to run it yourself?" Hardmuth asked with quick suspicion.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"Across the river, if that's agreeable to you—or any place you name."

"Anybody waiting for you across the river?"

"No."

Again Hardmuth extended Brookfield's letter. "Is this all on the level?"

"Completely."

"Why, I believe you mean that," Ellinger said in perplexity to Jack.

"I do."

"But I've got something to say, haven't I?"

"I hope not." Brookfield's answer was full of authority.

"Well, if you're in earnest, of course," Lew apologized; "but I don't see your game."

"I'm not fully convinced of Mr. Hardmuth's guilt."

"Why, he's running away!"

"I know what a case they would make against me," Hardmuth blustered. "But I'm not guilty in any degree."

"Frank," Brookfield sternly interrupted, "I want to do this thing for you; don't make it too difficult by any lying. When I said I wasn't fully convinced of your guilt, my reservation was one you wouldn't understand." He crossed to the mantel and pushed the electric button. Clay had entered the room while he was speaking, and stood respectfully waiting to report. Brookfield now inquired of the boy:

"Is he gone?"

"Yes."

"My coat and goggles?"

"Below in the reception room," Clay said.

"Thank you. I wish now you would go to Viola and her mother, and keep them wherever they are."

"All right, sir." Clay left the room. Brookfield turned to Hardmuth.

"Hungry?"

"No, thank you."

"Got money?"

"Yes."

The darky boy came in answer to the bell. "Jo take Mr. Hardmuth below and lend him one of the fur coats." And then to Hardmuth, "I'll join you immediately."

Hardmuth followed the boy from the room.

Again left alone with Ellinger and Helen, Brookfield turned to Lew and said:

"Lew, I called that ace of hearts, didn't I?"

"And the three queens," Lew answered, with reminiscent regret.

"Because the three queens and the ace were in your mind."

"I don't see any other explanation."

"But suppose instead of the cards there had been in your mind a well-developed plan of assassination—the picture of a murder"——

"Did you drop to him that way?"

"No; Raynor told me all I know of Hardmuth. But here's the very hell of it." It was evident to Helen that Brookfield's mental agony was unfeigned. "Long before Scovil was killed I thought he deserved killing, and I thought it could be done just as it was done."

"Jack!" Helen exclaimed, in a whisper.

"I never breathed a word of it to a living soul, but Hardmuth planned it exactly as I dreamed it, and a guilty thought is almost as criminal as a guilty deed! I've always had a considerable influence over that poor devil that's running away to-night, and I'm not sure that before the Judge of both of us the guilt isn't mostly mine."

In her wish to diminish Brookfield's mental suffering, Helen sympathetically took his hand. "That's morbid, Jack, dear," she urged—"perfectly morbid."

"I hope it is; we'll none of us ever know in this life." He turned to Ellinger. "But we can all of us"——

"What?" asked Lew, as Brookfield paused.

"Live as if it were true." With an effort Brookfield threw off the sombreness of his mood and prepared for action. "I'm going to help him over the line. The roads are watched, but the police won't suspect me, and they won't suspect Lew, and all the less if there is a lady with us." He turned again briskly to Ellinger. "Will you go?"

"The limit," the old sport answered, in characteristic phrase.

"Get a heavy coat from Jo."

"All right."

Brookfield was left alone with Helen. He turned to where she was sitting at one end of the library table. The hour, the lighting of the room, their relative positions recalled with photographic vividness their conversation on the night of the opera, the conversation in which he had received the first hint of the power of which he had since become so responsibly conscious, and which had worked such regeneration in his life. He put one hand over her hand, resting on the table as it had rested then.

"You know you said I used to be able to make you write to me when I was a boy at college?"

"Yes."

"And you were a thousand miles away while this fellow Hardmuth was just at my elbow half the time."

Helen rose quickly and came to him close. "It can't help you to brood over it, Jack."

He took both her hands in his, laying them upon his breast in the protective and tender way that had grown upon him.

"It can help me to know it and make what amends I can. Will you go with me while I put this poor devil over the line?"

"Yes, I'll go with you," she answered at once. She turned and got from the sofa the great coat that Viola had worn.

Brookfield took it from her and held it, assisting her to put it on. As he hooked the chain fastening of the collar under her chin he said:

"Helen, you stood by your boy in the fight for his life."

"Didn't you?"

Brookfield looked pleadingly into the eyes of the woman he loved. "Will you stand by me," he asked, "while I make my fight?"

She answered simply: "You've made your fight, Jack—and you've won."

(The End.)

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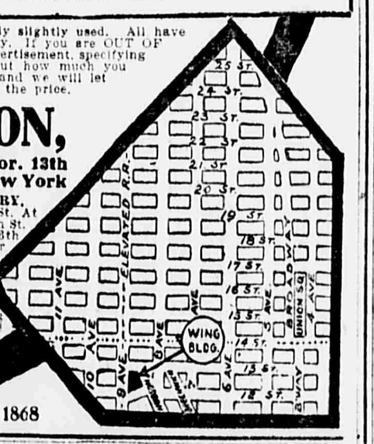

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