

The Philandering of Philander

By Hugh Pendexter

Drawings by M. Leon Bracker

WHEN Philander Weeks entered Lawyer Philpot's office, he simulated the mien of one who pays an inconsequential, friendly visit, and his broad face was elaborately carved into the semblance of a carefree smile. But the false placidity of his flaccid lineaments in nowise deceived the lawyer; beneath the shallow surface Philpot discerned the writhing of the monster Apprehension. There were two Philpots. One walked the village streets, radiating amiability, an easygoing, cheery chap, who cracked jokes in the postoffice and called all the townsmen by their pronomens; the other Philpot was found only in his office, where his directness of purpose in seeking a fee approximated the rifle ball speeding toward a target. Philander knew the Philpot of the street only; hence, his smirking presentment.

In law as in medicine it is sometimes politic, especially in dealing with shallow natures, to seat the client, or patient, close to fear. When weak men are afraid, they tell the truth; strong men plead their privilege. And as Philander's demeanor seemed to need chastening, Philpot's gaze was cold and inflexible as it briefly acknowledged the inception of a boisterous greeting. The rasping pen traveled a protesting path across another page of foolscap; the hand that held it seemed sinister, immutable. How different from the lingering, clinging hand of the street, the hand that corrected one's tie, or patted one's shoulder!

Despite the innocence of his expectation, Philander began to sense something disquieting, something professional, and his nonchalance rapidly evaporated. Philpot, taking his visitor's temperature and pulse in one lightning glance, silently passed him a book to read, and continued writing. The volume was open at "Penalties," etc., and Philander shivered and pushed it from him. The room, the furnishings, its occupant, all at once became implacable, inexorable. But why? They personified the Law! And what were veiled lines of uneasiness in Philander's face now elongated and deepened into furrows and trenches, until his whole countenance was frankly in a state of siege. His pale blue eyes shuddered despair from the last ditch.

PHILPOT, shrewdly deciding his visitor to be sufficiently reduced in spirit, now lifted his angular face abruptly, and demanded, "Philander Weeks, what's on your mind?"

The formality of this address was unnerving. On the street it was always "Phil," or "Philly." So Philander surrendered unconditionally, and made a moaning sound, and plucked confusedly at his tie. The tie was warm and reckless in color scheme and had been selected as symbolizing the wearer's light hearted indifference to results. It was crumpled and frayed by the time its owner said, "I'd rather you was a dentist, Abner. If I could suffer physical pain and be done with it, I'd shout with joy. If there's any profession licensed to bring a man to sorer, it's driving the Otisville stage. I vum! I wish I was insulated on a deserted island!"

Philpot added four wrinkles to his bony forehead and shook his head dubiously at a calf bound tome, and finally murmured, "Why?"

Philander moistened his lips and bitterly explained, "Because then I'd never see a woman from one year's end to another!"

The lawyer's brow cleared instantly. He was like a surgeon who had been puzzled but now discovered the cause of the trouble; also, his manner in deliberately searching among various legal blanks was much like that of the man of the scalpel who seeks a favorite instrument. Philander vaguely sensed this atmosphere of professionalism, and as the lawyer made a double chin and nodded for him to continue he shivered. He had expected sympathy; he was getting the probe.

"Well?" prompted Philpot.

Philander loosened his collar, and, drawing a deep breath, began, "Abner, you know my easy, obliging natur', don't you? Say, Ab, you know I'm a kind man at heart, and am always putting myself out to do errands for the women folks. I've always tried to be accommodating. Tibbetts was saying last Saturday, 'Why do you do it, Philander, when you ain't paid to?' And I says, as I'm saying

to you now, 'My motter always is, Be Neighborly.'"

Philpot sucked in his cheeks and tapped his fingers impatiently, and again spurred, "Well?"

Philander twisted uneasily; then, despite his iniquitude, his voice took on a touch of egotism, and he laughed nervously as he continued. "Well, it's got so several women on my route have come to consider, or at least to claim, I've paid 'em attentions,—attentions beyond what my professional services call for. Lawd! the way they look and talk! Of course, it amounts to nothing; I thought it might amuse you. Ha-ha!"

Philpot pursed his lips and frowned, and ignored the artificial merriment. "Huh!" he mused, scowling at the ink, "this looks very bad. If stage drivers are false to their trust, in whom can we believe?"

"Dod rot it!" gasped Philander, his jaw losing all

been caught at thy counter!" lamented Philpot. "If it had been—say—potatoes; but a ribbon is such a sentimental thing! With a yard of baby blue ribbon in evidence, a jury wouldn't be out five minutes without finding damages. Only think of what ribbons suggest!"

"Don't!" gasped Philander, his face growing purple. "Don't! It's undelicate." "They suggest wedding finery," completed the lawyer firmly.

"Her younger brother fought in the Civil War," mumbled Philander.

"Was it a black ribbon?" asked Philpot in eager hopefulness.

"Pink," sighed Philander.

Philpot slumped back in his chair, and in a sorrowful voice said, "The worst color possible! Any other lawyer would pronounce it all settled, and simply wish you to be happy in your new life."

"Hold on!" fiercely remonstrated Philander. "I ain't married yet. It happens I've bought napkins for Miss Turner."

Philpot shuddered and palmed his forehead, as he solemnly declared, "You've dug two matrimonial graves for yourself. Why did you have to be so cussed sentimental in every errand you did? I may have to have counsel. It's almost too much for one lawyer to handle. But, napkins! Symbolic of a cozy hearth supper for two loving hearts,—two lives pulsating as one—"

STOP! I'll pay you to quit!" moaned Philander. "I know it sounds awful; but I glided into these difficulties before I knew it. First, Miss Simms got me to taste her mustard pickles. Every time I driv' by she had a new batch. Wanted to know if they was too spicy for me. Then she got to calling 'em 'our pickles.'"

"And what did you say?" sternly whispered the lawyer.

"Why, I guess I used to call out something about, 'How's our pickles gettin' along?' No harm in that, eh?"

"She has a beautiful case against you," purred Philpot. "Your only defense would be to allege that she laid a trap for you, baited with the pickles; but I guess the court would hold that a woman has a right to trap a man into marriage. But go on."

"Well, Miss Turner knit me a pair of mittens. Wanted to know if I liked red in 'em. I said I did. Danged if she didn't put red hearts all over 'em!"

"Too bad! Too bad!" sighed Philpot. "Either one has a perfect case."

"But, Abner," pleaded Philander, "you must help me out of this! If you don't, there'll be a fine opening for a new stage driver in Otisville soon."

"Huh!" grunted the lawyer. "You don't intend to wait till they begin making trouble! You intend to head 'em off, eh? Wisely decided. Ahem; as we members of the bar have it, *Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator*. (A man without money can sing when held up by robbers.) In other words, you wish to sign away your property, so there will be no inducement for any woman to marry you."

Philander glared in sullen indignation for a few moments, and then reached for his hat. His voice trembled as he rose and said, "I didn't know I'd given you to understand anyone was after my property." And he squared his shoulders haughtily. "I don't know but what I might be desirable for myself alone,—not being deformed, let alone being engaged in a profession that, if I do say it, makes a man fascinating."

"Philander," begged Philpot, jumping to his feet, "don't go! I was careless in my conclusion. I didn't mean what I said. I was simply clearing the ground of every possible remedy until we could hit on the right one. I was looking at it through the eyes of a jury. Now, as to the two *femme sole*—huh! unmarried women, you know—these two—"

MORE'N two," interrupted Philander, sinking gloomily into his chair. "There's Minerva Porter. Her mother, a reg'lar Hard-Shell Baptist, whispered to me this morning that I was the only Universalist who ever shook her daughter's blessed belief in hell."

"There, there!" remonstrated Philpot, lifting a hand. "Say no more. When a woman will swap her religion, it's the man, not his property, she wants. Dear, dear! so many of them! Couldn't you put a man in your place for a few weeks?"

"He couldn't marry nine miles of old maids and widders," reminded Philander listlessly.

"There's much truth in what you say," mused Philpot. "You must have some sweeping—"

"That's it!" eagerly echoed Philander. "The more sweeping the better. You can't make it too broad. It's got to reach from here to the junction. I vum! I wish I was a ward of the Government,



"I Ain't Been False to No Trust!" Gasped Philander.

its vanity. "I ain't been false to no trust. Quit talking that way!"

"I was simply looking at your case as a jury will," soothed Philpot, reaching for a lawbook. "So, Philander, you're in for a breach of promise suit, eh? Name of plaintiff?"

"Oh, don't say that!" groaned Philander, lifting his hands in protest and his eyebrows in horror. "Don't act as if it was so real! I can't name no individual; there's several. They might form a stock company and sue—"

"Philander," broke in Philpot heavily, now assured of a generous retainer, "if anyone can help you, I can. But I want to say it looks bad. I want you to tell me the worst, the very worst. On what do you base your fears?"

ISWAN! I don't know how to begin," said Philander, his voice now thoroughly cowed. "Well, I've matched ribbon for Miss Simms."

Philpot threw up his hands as if warding off a blow, and his eyes filled with pain as he softly cried, "Philander! how could you? Great Scott! when I asked for the worst I didn't expect ribbons!"

"She's old enough to be my mother," muttered Philander defiantly.

"Ribbons! Oh, ribbons! How many men have