The Social Pirates

STORY NO. 5

The Millionaire Plunger

Plot by George Bronson Howard, Novelization by Hugh C. Weir

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"YOU needn't try to argue with me, you know, dear," said Mary. "I think I'm even more firm than you are! And this isn't what you started to say, is it? If it's time for us to resume our campaign—why, I'm ready."

"It is time. It's the time of times. We've got some nice things—and Heaven only knows how long they'll stay nice! The fashions have been changing over night lately. But right now, this minute, we can go out and know that there won't be two better dressed girls in town. It's time for us to strike our next blow—because the iron's as hot as it ever will be."

"Agreed," said Mary. "But—where is the iron?"

"We've got to find—him!" said Mona. "Think, Mary! And—let me see the paper while you're doing it!"

"I believe that was what you wanted all the time," said Mary, suspiciously, "the paper. Still—there you are!"

Mary had finished her breakfast and she went, now, to the window in the next room, and looked out, while Mona, with a smile, took the paper. She glanced through it while she sipped her second cup of coffee. And suddenly she exclaimed, under her breath, as her eyes fell on a certain headline. She read the story beneath it—and then read it again. And then, very slowly, her brows knitted in thought, she went to Mary.

"I wonder!" she said, half to herself. "Mary—did you see this?"

"The hot iron?" said Mary, skeptically. "So soon?"

But she took the paper, and looked at the article Mona pointed out to her.

"Tomlinson Gerry!" she said, surprised. "You're flying high, Mona!"

"We've got it!" said Mona. "It isn't small game we're after! And read the rest. Do you see what it says? That he tired of the bright lights—tired of being talked and written about just as a spendthrift. That he's going to work—Tomlinson Gerry, with his millions, is going to work!"

"As an architect!" said Mary, reading on. "He's opened offices in the Sterling Building! Mona—I believe you're right!"

Gerry, before he had inherited his uncle's millions, had been the principal in some rather shady transactions, and the girls were more than ever determined to go after him when they learned that he had swindled their laundress out of her paltry savings. The fact that, since he had come to money he had tired of being a profligate and had settled down after six years of riotous living, to a decent occupation, the girls decided, should not save him.

As always, Mona and Mary worked rapidly and two days later, Mona sent her card in to the architect.

"Miss Hartley?" said Gerry, inquiringly, rising, and glancing at Mona's card.

"So good of you to see me, when I came without an appointment, Mr. Gerry," said Mona, holding out her hand, which Gerry took, delightedly. "You see—oh, I'm just like every other woman, I suppose! When I get an idea I want to carry it out at once!"

"I'm very much at your service," said Gerry.

"I want to build a home, Mr. Gerry," said Mona, "and I haven't the least idea of how to go about it! But I suppose the first thing to do is to get an architect—and so here I am!"

"My wants are ever so modest!" continued Mona. "I have got one or two general ideas, but I think you'll find that they don't interfere at all with your conceptions. I want a bungalow, you see—a nice, rambling sort of place, and I thought—can't you help me with the land, too?"

"I'll do my best," said Gerry. "I'll tell you what—it just happens that I have an option, right now, on some suburban property. If you like it, I'll turn the option over to you. Why don't you let me drive you out to have a look at the land right now? My car is downstairs," she consented.

Mona had gone alone, according to the plan the two girls had arranged, for her visit to Gerry. But Mary had followed, and she waited anxiously across the street from the building that housed Gerry's office. When she saw Mona and Gerry come out together, chatting eagerly, she smiled. And when Gerry put Mona into his roadster, with the utmost solicitude, tucking a robe about her, and making sure that she was comfortable, Mary smiled again.

"So that's all right," she said to herself. "I might have trusted Mona, she's such a dear that no man of Gerry's sort could help falling for her!"

She wasn't anxious about Mona for a minute. Gerry's reputation, of course, was well known to her. He was rather notorious for his easy conquests of women who were generally supposed to be impervious to the darts of Cupid. But Mary knew there was not the slightest danger for Mona, no matter how persistent Gerry tried to make their rel[illegible]tions.

The thing now, it seemed to Mary, was to arrange a way to turn Gerry's very attentions to account in Mona's account. It must be brought considerably under control. Mary was more and more pleased to her own wisdom in refusing, on any account, to take a hand in the game until the right moment came. An open hand, that is Mary preferred, the role of wire puller. She wanted to see the cast of the characters in the little drama as puppets, for those in a Punch and Judy show, with hers the main pulling them and moving them, according to her own pleasure.

"We're going to need help!" she said to herself, frowning slightly, after she had watched Mona and Gerry out of sight. "I don't see how we can do it all alone."

The thought was an unwelcome one. She and Mona, she felt, might, so far as possible, play a lone hand. But—the help of some man seemed necessary. And suddenly Mary saw both the man and the inspiration she was looking for. It was the man who gave her the great idea. He was across the street, and at first he did not notice her at all. But, though he had changed a good deal since she had last seen him, and for the worse, Mary knew him at once. He was Jack Deering, a telegrapher.

Some time before Mary had been employed in the offices of a great telegraph company, in another city. It was there, indeed, that she had had some of the bitter experiences that had led her to make her present pact with Mona, in which she and Mona were allied against men. Deering had been one of the few men among her fellow workers in whom Mary had seen any signs of chivalry and decency. He had been kind to her, and, apparently, without thought of any reward. She knew him exactly for what he was: a weak, pleasant chap, who never meant to do wrong, and seldom, as a matter of fact, did right; a man who was always an easy victim of a stronger will, and could be, if [illegible] ability, to be used in the cause she was already forming.

She crossed the street and walked along behind Deering, studying him. It was plain that he was seeing bad days. His clothes were shabby. His elbows were shiny; his heels were run down. There was a dispirited sag to his shoulders. His whole bearing spoke eloquently of discouragement, of a ready surrender to adversity. His gait was shambling. He lacked purpose. Plainly he was one of the great army of the down and outs. Mary's eyes brightened. She caught up to him.

"Why—Jack Deering!" she said, heartily. "Whoever would have thought of seeing you here?"

He responded instantly to the warm friendliness of her tone. And he made an instant effort, too, to grace up, to prevent her from seeing how hopeless he really was.

"Hello, Mary!" he said. "It's good to see you! How's every little thing?"

But the gaiety of his voice was forced.

"Fine, Jack!" said Mary. "How is it with you? You look—well?"

"Oh, I'm all right!" he said. "I've had a little hard luck, but things are going to break better for me now. I've been sick, you see."

"Come into the park and we'll have a talk, for old times' sake," said Mary.

He went with her willingly, and when they were seated on a bench Mary turned on him frankly.

"Now, Jack," she said, "'fess up! You're up against it, aren't you? You needn't be ashamed to tell me—I've been to you for help!"

He broke down quite suddenly.

"I didn't think I'd ever go crying to a woman," he said, bitterly. "But you're right, Mary! What's the use of living? They've got me pretty nearly down and out!"

"Here," said Mary. She slipped him, very quietly, a bill. "Take it!" she said, furiously, when he tried to refuse. "What good's a friend if you won't let them help? Besides—this isn't a gift. It's an advance. I'm going to need your help. I want you to go to some place where I can reach you at any time. You're ready for pretty nearly anything, aren't you?"

"For anything at all!" he said. "God bless you, Mary!"

"I'll give you a chance to prove it," she said. "Now, go to this little hotel and wait till you hear from me. It won't be long."

Mona, meantime, had thoroughly enjoyed her ride with Gerry. Almost from the first, Gerry had been disposed to be more friendly than it is necessary for an architect to be with his client. But Mona had had no difficulty in keeping him at arm's length. She had adopted the simplest of all woman's expedients; she had simply pretended not to understand the significance and the real meaning of his advances.

And so the enslavement of Gerry was begun. It went on apace. Before long the state of his feelings toward Mona was no longer a secret. He was ready to anything to win her. But Mona pretended a blissful unconsciousness, and Gerry—Gerry the heartbreaker, the squire of dames—was actually afraid of her! He was afraid to put his fate to the test. Sometimes, it seemed to him, Mona liked him immensely. But there were other times when she was cold and distant, and he was never sure which Mona would greet him when he came, with the fast-growing portfolio of sketches of the bungalow he was to build for her. He never saw Mary when he called, as he did, now, nearly every afternoon. If she was in when he came she always stayed in her own room; if she was out, she looked up at the window when she neared the house. If Gerry was calling, Mona always arranged a signal, and Mary, seeing it, would turn and walk for an hour or so, to give Gerry time to leave.

"It seems a shame, almost—he's so easy," said Mary.

"I hate him—and it may be easy for you, but it isn't for me!" said Mona. "He's always trying to make love to me! And I—I wouldn't marry him if he were the only man on earth!"

"You certainly would not, my dear," said Mary. "I'd marry him first!"

"All joking aside, though," said Mona, "I think it's time to put your plan into execution, dear. Deering knows his part thoroughly. And I think Gerry is as ripe for plucking now as he ever will be."

"I've been thinking that myself, Mona. Suppose you let him take you to lunch tomorrow. He asked you, didn't he?"

"Yes—and I said I'd telephone to him in the morning."

"All right. Tell him to make it the San Marco at one o'clock. I'll be there—and you can notice me, after you get comfortably settled at your own table. You know what to do? We've rehearsed it often enough."

"Half past twelve!" said Mona, after a moment's thought. "It's dreadfully early, but we don't want to leave too little time, if we really decide we can start something tomorrow."

"All right—I think that's a good idea, Mona. I'll let Jack Deering know tonight then. Well—the great adventure is really going to begin at last! The preliminary skirmish is over. Not nervous, are you?"

"Not even a little bit! There's no reason to be! I know Gerry, you see!"

NOTHING more? Are you sure?" asked Gerry. They were finishing their lunch at the San Marco. Mona had accepted very few invitations from him; it was her desire that he should regard her company at lunch or dinner as an event, and she had been thoroughly successful in this regard. He was all attention; he was ready to meet, to anticipate, indeed, her slightest wish. Certainly he was reduced to exactly the condition that Mona and Mary wanted him to be in!

"This coffee is delicious—no, nothing else, thanks," said Mona. "You ordered a heavenly lunch. Oh!" Her exclamation was caused by the sight of Mary, who sat at a table on the opposite side of the room. She bowed delightedly.

"Who is that?" asked Gerry, naturally.

"Mary Burnett," answered Mona. "She was at school with me, and I haven't seen her for years. I didn't know she was in town. Mary's terribly proud, and her people haven't much money, so she has rather avoided me and some other old friends, I'm afraid, because—"

"I understand," said Gerry. "It's the same sort like—not who always seem to feel that the ones you don't like are never insulted—those they're poor."

"I'd like you to meet her," said Mona, [illegible] wonder if she'd come over and have [illegible] with us?"

It proved that Mary would, which wasn't surprising, since the whole episode had [illegible] carefully planned, down to the last detail, the night before. Gerry smiled as the two girls [illegible] expressed their delight at seeing one another again, which seemed to him to be entirely unaffected. He admired Mona's tact in talking to this girl who was less fortunate than herself; it seemed to him that it was exquisite.

"Dad!" said Mary, her eyes becoming troubled. "Oh, I don't know, Mona, dear. I'm afraid he's bothering about something. You know, he's been with the Union Telegraph for years, and they don't treat him well at all. They're just as mean and stingy as they can be. And he says that, if he wanted to, he could make more and ever so much money."

"He ought to do it!" said Gerry. "Once—I'm glad to see a mean outfit like that stung any old time!"

"That's what I say!" said Mary. "But he doesn't like the idea, and, besides, he says it would take some money, and he hasn't got enough to make it worth while."

"I could lend him some," said Mona, impulsively.

"If that isn't just like you!" said Mary. "Listen to her, Mr. Gerry! She doesn't even know what it is, and she's willing to take a chance!"

"It's people who do that who get the big rewards, though," said Gerry. He was convinced of the innocence of the two girls, but he, himself, thought he had an inkling of what was in the wind. He was decidedly interested, and quite glad that Mona had seen her old schoolmate.

Mary tried to change the subject. But Mona came back to her father's troubles, and his idea again and again.

"Oh, I don't know, Mona!" said Mary, at last. "But I'll tell you what we can do. We might go down and see Dad! Then you could talk to him."

"Splendid!" said Mona. "Let's start at once!"

"I'd like to come, too," said Gerry. "I'll get my car and take you down. How about that?"

"That would be splendid!" said Mona. "Are you willing, Mary?"

Mary was. And so it was arranged. Gerry, of course, did not see Deering, who was waiting outside the restaurant, spring into a taxicab when Mary dropped her handkerchief. But that was what happened. And when, a little later, they came to the Union Telegraph Building, far downtown, and went up in the elevator, it was Deering, in alpaca office coat and green shade, who encountered them, to his own great surprise, in the corridor. He was standing outside a door marked: "Private Wires." And at the sight of Mary he started, in great dismay.

"Mary—you shouldn't bring people to see me here!" he exclaimed. "You might make all sorts of trouble!"

"Oh!" said Mary, disappointingly, "I thought——"

"Go away now—but meet me around the corner," said Deering—or Burnett, as he was, henceforth to be known. "You can wait in the restaurant there. I'll be off duty in half an hour."

Then he dashed into the room. And, of course, as they were in the elevator, they did not see that he was out again in a moment, with a man angrily asking him what he was doing, and that he took another coat from a nearby washroom, and hid the green shade in his pocket. They were waiting for him eagerly when he joined them, a little more than half an hour later. By this time Gerry was sure he knew what was in the wind.

"The dirty hounds!" said Burnett, as he sank into a chair. "Oh, I'll get even with them now, if it's the last thing I ever do! Twenty years I've worked for them—and today they gave me two weeks' notice."

"Father!" cried Mary, and burst into tears. "Whatever are you going to do?"

"Live better than we ever have!" he snarled. "I've got a way to get even! I handle the racing wires! By the arrangement with all the pool-rooms we hold the results back for ten minutes—but I know them. I'll find some one to go and bet and give me half the winnings. I'll telephone him the winner—and he'll place his bet. His horse will have won already, but the pool-rooms won't know it! There's enough to make up for all I've done in one big killing!"

"By Jove! Sounds good!" said Gerry. "I might take a flyer myself, you know."

Then there had to be explanations. Burnett was distrustful, but he weakened when Mona, his daughter's friend, vouched for Gerry.

"Well—we'll try it tomorrow," he said. "I'll slip Mary here the word on one race, and you can put down a small bet, if you like. If it goes all right we'll pull off a big one the next day."

"You're sure there's no risk of losing?" said Mona. "I wouldn't care so much for myself, but I'd hate to think Mr. Gerry—"

"Don't you worry about me!" boasted Gerry. "I've cut my eye teeth, little girl!"

He was delighted at the chance to be associated with Mona in an enterprise of this sort. It seemed to him more of a hold on her than he had ever had before, and that, if this went through she would find it much more difficult to maintain their relationship on a formal plane. And he thought, too, that what he had seen was enough to prove that there was a great deal of deception. It was the evidence of his own eyes that he relied upon. And it was upon exactly this fact that they had all counted.

"Come back to the office, won't you?" asked Mona. "I've got some more ideas you really ought to see at once."

"Well, I ought," she agreed.

And so she did. Mary and Burnett, [illegible] were a very handsome double. They [illegible] A good deal was to happen and there were [illegible] hours. They had been afraid to mail [illegible] arrangements. In fact, they went out at [illegible] a letter for the accounts department no longer in a safe [illegible] street. A typewriter, an extra telegraph [illegible] instruments were hastily installed, and in a few hours the place looked like a fully equipped practicable. Deering had provided the necessary "copy" for the [illegible] operators, cashiers, sheet writers, and even customers. The trap was baited and ready to spring.

The next day Mona and Mary again met Gerry by appointment. But now Mary was very nervous.

"Dad said he'd telephone to me [illegible] as it was safe to do something," she said. "[illegible] I do hope nothing goes wrong. I'm afraid to think of what will become of us if this doesn't go through as we've planned it!"

"Don't you worry," said Gerry. "There's no reason why it shouldn't. And if Miss Mona and I both slide our winnings with you, according to our plan you won't have to worry about the future for some time, I can tell you!"

"Are you really going to make big bets?" asked Mary, tearfully.

"This isn't any game for pikers," said Gerry. "A chance like this only comes along about once in a lifetime, you see, and you want to jump on it hard when it does come! No—you can rest easy about this! I've made arrangements to get hold of a good deal of cash—a good deal more than I can usually command in a hurry! And it's going down when your father gives the final word."

"I'm taking a big chance, too," said Mona. "Oh, Mary—don't let anything go wrong! I'd be in the most perfectly dreadful hole if we lost!"

"We can't lose," said Gerry, confidently. "There's no chance of that. All I'm afraid of is that we won't have the chance to win. I'd think that was pretty nearly as bad as losing myself, after our hopes have been raised this way."

And just then a waiter came up.

"Miss Burnett?" he said. "You're wanted on the telephone, Miss."

Gerry and Mona were ready to leave when she came back, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

"Dad says it's all right," she said. "We've just got time to hurry over and make a bet. I'll do it today, you see—I've got enough."

"Oh, we'll all risk a fiver or so," said Gerry. "What odds will we get?"

"Not very big—this is just for a try-out, you see," said Mary. "But hurry—hurry—or we'll be too late."

In the pool-room, however, they found there was plenty of time, since the clock there was slower than Gerry's watch.

"Dad's had that fixed," she whispered. "So it gives us even more of a margin, you see."

Gerry smiled reassuringly at her. It certainly looked good. Then came the opening of the window, and the exciting few minutes in which a man at the wire read off the description of the race. They had bet on Tessie, at even money, in the fourth race, and at last came the final announcement:

"In the stretch—Blue Bird ahead—Tessie being ridden out—Tessie leads—Tessie a head—Tessie a length—Tessie wins!"

They cashed in the small bets they had made, and Mona was almost hysterical with delight. She managed to repress her enthusiasm until they were outside, but it was with difficulty.

"Oh, I can't wait until tomorrow, now that I know it's so sure to come all right!" she cried. "Mary, isn't it wonderful?"

"I really think we needn't worry any more," said Mary, her relief plain in her voice.

"Of course not!" said Gerry, heartily. "Look ahead tomorrow!"

"Need we wait until tomorrow, even?" asked Mary, suddenly. "I think Dad might have something more, even today!"

"We'd have to get some real money," said Gerry.

"The banks haven't closed yet," said Mona.

"You telephone Mr. Burnett," said Gerry. "I'll drop Mona at her apartment and we'll go to your own. When we come [illegible] we've got another good thing—why, we'll make the big plunge!"

So it is arranged. They drop Mary at a drug store, and then Mona slipped her hand, which wasn't here at all, under that [illegible] days at all events, she couldn't hope to indulge in the luxury of a real bank account. But when Gerry came back for her she emerged from the cab, closing her hand [illegible] which was quite, perhaps as if she had [illegible] and [illegible] stepped his foot [illegible] and they drove on to the d[illegible] Mary had left Mary.

She came [illegible]

"Oh, you're [illegible]!" she cried, breathlessly. "Dad's just gone to the [illegible] race-track. Listen!"

She flourished some [illegible] of paper. She could [illegible] and he took [illegible] glancing at the [illegible] horse. They hurried on to the pool-room, and found that they were only just in time.

"There's [illegible]," said Gerry, confidently, at the window. "Fifteen thousand dollars [illegible]"

"Have [illegible]?" [illegible] "Oh, the [illegible]!"

The bets were placed. Almost at [illegible] the sixth of the [illegible] set on Bella. Bella [illegible] set the pace through [illegible] And then, just as the [illegible] the favorite, [illegible] was second, and the [illegible]

"We win! We win!" [illegible] "Oh, [illegible] Mona. And then [illegible] so swiftly that [illegible] second. With a [illegible] on the other, [illegible] hat. It glanced [illegible] back, and then [illegible] tiny, resolute [illegible] Before the group [illegible] out, there was a [illegible] smoke, and Mona [illegible] gathering on her temple.

"Oh!" shrieked Mary. "I am sorry I did it!"

Gerry, staring in horror [illegible] his own plight. It would [illegible] volved in a murder. He dashed for the door. [illegible] two of the "cappers" held him back.

"Wait, young man! We'll need you when the police arrive!"

The words added to Gerry's [illegible] He darted another glance at the perpetrator [illegible] on the floor, but it was not of her [illegible] ing. All of his selfishness and baser instincts [illegible] come of a sudden to the surface. He was concerned only with the thought of protecting himself. Desperately, he pushed the check [illegible] and fountain pen, and hurriedly scribbled a large check to "Cash."

"Now, will you let me go?" he pleaded.

The group around him hesitated. Mary [illegible] bent over Mona, sobbing pitifully. But at a sign from Deering the check was accepted.

"I'll take a chance," he said, "after it is cashed!"

And not until a messenger returned with a rubber-bound packet of bills was the white-faced Gerry suffered to depart. As the door closed [illegible] steps could be heard clattering wildly down the stairs.

At the sound the scene in the pool-room changed as by magic. With a little cry of relief, the "dead" girl on the floor scrambled to her knees, dabbing with her handkerchief at the red paint which she had clapped to her temple.

"Is—is he really gone?" she gasped. "And is it all over?"

Mary threw her arms around her neck. "You did it splendidly, dead! I really thought I had killed you!" The two joined in the hysterical laugh.

Mona turned to the men.

"Now, we'll divide! Here, take your money, and go. We were glad of your help, but we won't need you any longer, I think."

"The only thing I am sorry for," said Mary a little later, as they were hurriedly packing up in their cosy apartment, "is that we will have to move! But—we have made a splendid haul, haven't we, dear?"

And Mona, her head and shoulders buried in trunk, nodded agreement.

(End of Episode Five.)

MONA AND MARY WATCH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR CLEVER PLOT.

FOR A MOMENT THE TWO GIRLS GLARED AT ONE ANOTHER.