

# Recompense

By LOUIS J. STELLMAN

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So she had thrown him over! Butler turned to the letter again.

"This is final," he read. "I am very sorry—more sorry than I can tell you, but I mean it, after long and careful thought. If I cannot reconcile myself to these things before marriage—how much less so, afterward! Believe me, it is better for us both."

Three years of happiness! Three years of picturing the future through a haze of golden dreams; of planning all its little details! That had been so sweet. Of fighting desperately, against heavy odds, for the big things—for her sake. The final pride of winning victories she was to have shared, rejoiced in with him—made complete. And this was the end!

"I didn't want you to go to the city," her letter said. "I begged you not to—but you would go. And this is the result. Perhaps it is just as well. These traits would have come out in you some time. At first, when I heard you were carrying on, I did not believe it. Then I wrote to you, frankly, as a woman should. I expected you to deny it all. That you confessed was sufficient shame to me, but that you tried to justify these things is beyond all reason. You know how I have been brought up. How much religion and straight living mean to me and my people. To attend horse races; to bet money on cards; to drink wine, late at night—with women! Oh, I could never trust a man who did such things—and could not even see they were bad!"

She had set in judgment and condemned him, coldly, judicially, and without real chance for defense; proclaimed him bad—unfit for her. And why?

For nothing. Absolutely nothing but what any other man might easily have done. When her cousin came to town Butler entertained him. What else could he do? The race track to Butler was one of the sights—nothing more. Through a petty vanity—just to show the cousin he had learned city ways—he had let himself be drawn into a poker game at the club. In the evening he and the cousin called on two girls and took them to the theater. A little supper at Sherry's followed. That was all. Evidently the cousin had talked—innocently enough, for he was a very decent chap—about his "good time." If Butler had denied it—lied about it—all would have been well; or, if he had showed repentance, remorse that he could not feel. It would have been so easy to deceive her or humor her whims. But, because he had been honest, she could not trust him.

"And I loved her so!" he said, brokenly. "I loved her so!" All at once he felt very tired. His arms relaxed until they rested, listlessly, upon the table, and his head sank forward between them. Thus Higgins found him among the drawings for his first big architectural work—the plans which had, that morning, been the fuel of a glad ambition; which were now the ashes of his house of dreams.

"Go away," said Butler, after Higgins, in alarm, had pulled him to an upright posture. "I'm tired. I'm—Oh, confound it! Leave me alone."

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Higgins. "Come, tell me. Broke? Anybody dead? Brave up. This won't do at all."

Butler threw the letter on the table in reply. There were places on it where the ink had run, freshly, in little round spots. Higgins read it, gravely. As he did so Butler arose and put on his hat and coat.

"Where are you going?" asked Higgins, with quick suspicion.

Butler laughed. "Oh, I'm not going to shoot myself. Needn't be 'fraid, old chap." He indicated the letter with a bitter gesture. "What's the use of having a reputation, if you can't live up to it? I've been turned down for something I didn't do; never would have done. Now, I'm going to have a time." He pulled a handful of loose coin from his pocket and jingled it in his hand. "I'm going out and get drunk—I'm going to know. That's what I'm going to do."

"Then I'll go with you," said Higgins. "It won't hurt either of us. Tomorrow's Sunday."

"Come on then," cried Butler, almost gaily. "Come along. We'll have one grand time."

At the Architects' club they picked up two others. Butler hailed them gladly. Higgins saw no objection. He knew that in the rather precarious game they were to play that night a certain safety lay in numbers. To Butler it was all new, and, after the first few drinks, entrancing; the brilliantly lighted saloons, where men slapped him on the back like long lost brothers; where, everyone smiled and told stories of previous good times; where automatic pianos played, ceaselessly, gay, popular airs that made one want to dance; where men quarreled for the chance to extend hospitality, and no one mentioned anything tedious, disagreeable or trite.

By and by they reached a quarter more delightful still. One sat at little,

round tables and sipped beer or smoked and watched the play. Such funny things as they said and did on the tiny stage. Butler laughed and laughed. What fine figures these girls had, who sang and danced, and how well they were displayed. Some of them came to his table and talked with him. How delightfully unconventional and friendly they were.

Why did the boys laugh at him and say, "He'll do. He'll do"? Of course he would do. Were they poking fun at him? After a time he became offended, and left them with some excuse, promising to return. But he did not. He wandered out into the street and found, to his surprise, that he could not walk very well. Perhaps he was smoking too much. Yes, undoubtedly that was the cause of this dizzy feeling. He threw down his half-smoked cigar and steadied himself against a lamp-post. Everywhere were lights—thousands of flickering, twinkling lights. He walked along, unsteadily, for a little way, saluting passersby in a friendly manner and listening to the torrent of music, the merry clink of glasses, the hilarious voices that issued from every door. A policeman stopped him and advised him to go home. Home! Why, he was just beginning to enjoy himself. How absurd! He did not like the thought of home, anyhow. It was a dull place. He was by no means sure that he would ever go home. He would like to stay here, forever.

A large electric sign, reading "Dance Hall," caught his attention. He entered. This was something different from the other places he had seen. Many couples were waltzing. None of the men wore evening clothes. Some of them even kept on their hats while dancing. And what engaging manners the women had. No frigid formality for them. They made the stranger instantly at home.

One of these charming young women approached Butler, laid a hand on his arm and looked into his eyes, smiling.

"Don't you want to dance with me?" she asked.

"Delighted, I'm sure," replied Butler. He found it rather difficult to articulate clearly, which surprised him, momentarily.

"Come on, then," said the girl, as the orchestra began a new tune.

"Where sh' I put hat 'n' ov'coat?" asked Butler. "Can't (hic) dance in ov'coat 'n' hat, m' dear madam."

The girl laughed. She saw that Butler was more drunk than he seemed at first glance. She liked his face and saw that he was a gentleman—that even liquor could not make him otherwise, for he had treated her with entire respect. She doubted his ability to dance, and, moreover, she did not wish to share him with the other girls. She wanted him all to herself.

He was such a nice, clean, wholesome young fellow, despite his intoxication, and he might come to harm. She wanted him to call her his "dear madam" and treat her as if she were—well, what she used to be. She met so few men in these places who were far above the beast—even when they were sober.

"Let's sit out this dance," she suggested, forsaking the jargon of her surroundings, harking back to times, when she spoke a different tongue. "I'm tired. I've danced a good deal. There's a table over here in the corner, where we can talk—and have a drink. You have to buy drinks in these places, you know."

"I understand," said Butler with a comical assumption of wisdom that made her smile. "Un'erstand' perfectly." He signaled to the waiter. "What'll you have?"

"I'll take a small beer," said the girl, "and I'm going to order for you, too." She gave his hand a little pat. "May I?" The words sounded strange in her own ears. "May I?"

Butler smiled across the table at her. "Highly honored," he returned. "With (hic) pleasure. Highly honored, m' dear mad'm." He waved his hand with a gesture of largesse, and the waiter, expecting an order for champagne, winked at the girl, approvingly.

She looked him squarely in the eyes. "Bring him a bromo-seltzer," she said.

Butler made a wry face as he drained the frothing mixture in his tall glass. "B-r-r!" he said, and reached for a handkerchief to wipe his lips. With it came a doubly folded sheet of paper. It was the letter, which, unwittingly, he had stuffed into his pocket as he was leaving the office. Butler looked at it, dully.

"What's that?" asked the girl.

Then, quite suddenly, Butler's brain began to clear. The powerful stimulant was dispelling the roseate illusions of intoxication, and awakened memory rushed into the void. Everything changed before his eyes. The charming, newly found bohemianism which had delighted him so became a scene of sordid, bestial vice. He was shocked, startled, utterly unnerved. It was as though he had beheld a beautiful woman turn, suddenly, into a hag. The letter lay, before him, in a little pool of beer spillings—hopelessly soiled, desecrated, besmirched. He picked it up, dripping, and regarded it with horror.

"My God!" he said, with a moan of revulsion. "Oh, my God!—Her letter!" Then, for the second time that day, completely overpowered by emotion, Butler bowed his head upon his arms and shook with great, tearless sobs.

The girl watched this phenomenon understandingly, but with pain. She had seen many men act thus—including one in the long ago.

"Leave him alone," she told the waiter, who approached, curiously. "I'll take care of him. Bring me a whisky—quick."

When he had gone she laid a hand, gently, on the bowed head; gently, as a mother might—this woman of the streets. The waiter brought her drink, but she did not touch it. For a little while she let Butler sob, unrestrained. Then she spoke to him, softly, soothingly, as to a child.

"Come," she said. "Come. You are better now. It's all right. But you mustn't stay here any longer. You must go home, now."

He raised his head and glared at her wildly. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Just a woman," she answered, gravely. "Just a woman—who is sorry for you."

He continued to look at her, his eyes fevered. Then he caught at her hands, helplessly.

"Oh!" he cried. "I believe I'm going crazy. I can't think. Help me, girl—whoever you are. Don't let me be alone. Come with me, away from here—from this."

He arose, unsteadily, and the girl with him. "I will go with you to a restaurant," she said. "Something to eat will help you. Come on."

He followed, fearing to lose her, while she got her hat and cloak. Mechanically, he held the cloak for her, with a courtesy, a deference, she noted and hugged to her heart.

To a quiet little coffee house she led him, and here they seated themselves in a curtained enclosure called a "private room." A waiter came and set glasses of water before them. The girl ordered something, perfunctorily. She looked up from her bill of fare to find Butler regarding her intently.

"You are a good woman," he said, with conviction. "How did you come to that place?"

The girl laughed—a grim, heart-broken laugh it was, full of a world-old tragedy. "That is a long story," she answered; "and you are mistaken. I am not good. I am bad. I belong there. Don't fool yourself about that."

"You have been good to me," he said, doggedly. "And you are not bad. I know. I can tell by your eyes—somehow. You are much better than I; I respect you—as much as anyone."

Tears came to the girl's eyes—the first in many a day. Impetuously she caught one of Butler's hands and kissed it.

"Oh!" she cried, brokenly. "You mustn't talk like that. You don't know. You don't know."

He turned on her, sharply. "Yes, I do," he said. "I know a lot of things I didn't dream of a few hours ago. They sort of came to me—out of all this. I don't know how you got into that—that life. I don't care to. It's done and it can't be recalled. But I know you are good. Don't deny it."

Butler pulled the beer-stained letter from his pocket. It was wet and crumpled and almost illegible, but he viewed it impassively. "Do you want to know why I got drunk to-night?" He threw the letter across the table. She picked it up, hesitatingly, almost reverentially, but, as she read, her eyes hardened.

"Yes, that's why," said Butler, in answer to her look. "The world calls her a good woman. Maybe she is. Yet she wouldn't life a finger to save the man who loved her. But you—I came to that place a stranger, a drunken fool. You might have fleeced me, or let the others do it. I have a good deal of money in my pockets and a gold watch—and things."

The girl made a gesture of protest.

"That's all right," Butler went on. "I just want to show you that I understand—what you might have done, and what you did. Why, you're ten times a better woman than the girl who wrote that—ten times. This afternoon I thought my heart was broken. Now I know it was all for the best. We could never have made it together. But I wouldn't have understood—until it was too late."

The waiter interrupted them, bringing sandwiches and coffee. They fell to eating, for they were both hungry, and it was not until Butler finished his meal that he spoke again.

"I want you to do me a favor—once more," he said. "I want you to take half of this money I've got. I'd have lost all of it, only for you. It will make me very happy if you'll take it. Do what you please with it. Leave this life or stay in it. I can't tell which is best." He took from his inner pocket a roll of bills and counted them. Half of them he put back. The other half he held out to her.

"Please," he said.

The girl took the money, reluctant, yet eager.

"I won't lie to you," she said. "I want it—and I need it. And I won't promise anything, but I'll try." She slipped the bills into the bosom of her dress. "We must go, now," she said. "You have been very good, and, perhaps, you have changed my life. Perhaps you have saved me; I don't know."

She arose, and he accompanied her out into the night. Dawn was beginning to break. The streets were deserted and the lights extinguished, except here and there, where one gleamed, cold and faint, in the grey desolation.

"Good bye," said the girl.

Butler came close to her and stood, looking down into her eyes.

"Good bye," he said, very gravely. "You are a good woman. No matter what you have done, or what you may do, hereafter, you will always be that to me."

She caught his hand in both of her own and pressed it, convulsively. Then she hurried away, too greatly moved for speech. Butler watched her until she was lost in the gray mist. For a long time he stood thus, motionless, absorbed in thought. Then he took a crumpled letter from his pocket and tore it into bits.

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