

The MAN in LOWER TEN BY MARY ROBERT RINEHART

CHAPTER XIII. The Gold Bag.

I have always smiled at those cases of spontaneous combustion which, like fusing the component parts of a self-lit powder, unite two people in a bubbling ephemeral ecstasy.

Not that I followed any such line of reasoning at the time. I would not even admit my folly to myself. But during the restless hours of that first night after the accident, when my back ached with lying on it, and any other position was torture, I found my thoughts constantly going back to Allison West.

Some things were mine, however, and I would hold them. The halcyon breakfast, the queer hat, the pebble in her small shoe, the gold bag with the broken chain—the bag! Why, it was in my pocket at that moment.

I got up painfully and found my coat. Yes, there was the purse, bulging with an opulent suggestion of wealth inside. I went back to bed again, somewhat dizzy, between effort and the touch of the trinket, so lately hers.

"Well," he said cheerfully. "How did you sleep after keeping me up half the night?" I slipped my hand around; the purse was well covered.

"Here in Washington?" I asked, as naturally as I could. "Yes. Going to stay a week or two." "Oh, I had a little hen and she had a wooden leg."

"Nothing of the sort," I denied testily. "Because a man reaches the age of 30 without making maudlin love to every—"

"Probably hadn't yet discovered the Bronson notes—providing you hold to your theory that the theft was incidental to the murder. May have wanted his own clothes again, or to thank you for yours. Search me; I can't think of anything else."

"Pretty good shape," he said. "How did you sleep?" "Oh, occasionally," I replied. "I would like to sit up, doctor."

"Keep your mouth closed," the doctor said peremptorily. "No. A woman, with a fractured skull. Beautiful case. Van Kirk was up to his eyes and sent for me. Hemorrhage, right-sided paralysis, irregular pupils—all the trimmings. Worked for two hours."

"Did she recover?" McKnight put in. He was examining the doctor with a new awe.

"No. The nurses said her clothes came from a Pittsburgh tailor." "She is not conscious, I suppose?" "No; she may be to-morrow—or in a week."

"I am saddest when I sing!" he quoted unctuously. "It's pure reaction, Lollie. Yesterday the sky was low; I was digging for my best friend. To-day—he lies before me, his peevish self. Yesterday I thought the notes were burned; to-day—I look forward to a good cross-country chase, and with luck we will draw."

"I've taken to long country rides," he went on reflectively, "without listening to me, and yesterday I ran over a sheep; nearly went into the ditch. But there's a Providence that watches over fools and lovers, and just now I know darned well that I'm one, and I have a splendid idea. The both."

"I have an idea," I said grimly, "that this small matter of the murder is going to come up again, and that your uncle will be in the deuce of a fix if it does. If that woman is going to die, somebody ought to be around to take her deposition. She knows a lot, if she didn't do it herself. I wish you would go down to the telephone and get the hospital. Find out her name, and if she is conscious."

"Why not the daughter?" I inquired. I touched the little gold bag under the pillow.

"Well," he said judiciously, "you've always declared against the immaturity and romantic nonsense of very young women."

"I hardly know what prompted me to take out the gold purse and look at it. It was an impulse, sentimentality, what you wish. I brought it out, one eye on the door, for Mrs. Klopton has a ready eye and a noiseless shoe. But the house was quiet. Downstairs McKnight was flirting with the telephone central and there was an odor of bonnet tea in the air. I think Mrs. Klopton was fascinated out of her theories by the fractured arm."

"With my one useful hand I fumbled the things back into the bag and thrust it deep out of sight among the pillows. Then I lay back in a cold perspiration. What connection had Allison West with this crime? Why had she stared so at the gun-metal cigarette case that morning on the train? What had alarmed her so at the farmhouse? Why had she taken back to the gate? What did she wish she had not escaped from the wreck? And last, in heaven's name, how did a part of her necklace become torn off and covered with blood?"

"Downstairs McKnight was still at the telephone, and amusing himself with Mrs. Klopton in the interval of waiting."

"I slipped my hand around; the purse was well covered. 'Have it now, or wait till I get the cork out!' he rattled on. 'I don't want anything,' I protested. 'I wish you wouldn't be so darned cheerful, Richey.' He stopped whittling to stare at me."

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be repeated. "Well, wrecks are queer things, Mrs. Klopton. The suit may have turned gray with fright. Or perhaps wrecks do as queer stunts as lightning. Friend of mine once was struck by lightning; he and the caddy had taken refuge under a tree. After the flash, when they recovered consciousness, there was my friend in the caddy's clothes, and the caddy in his. And as my friend was a large man and the caddy a very small boy—"

"Hello—yes. Thank you very much. Good-by." He came upstairs, two steps at a time.

"Look here," he said, bursting into the room, "there may be something in your theory, after all. The woman's name—it may be a coincidence, but it's curious—her name is Sullivan."

"I have an idea," I said grimly, "that this small matter of the murder is going to come up again, and that your uncle will be in the deuce of a fix if it does. If that woman is going to die, somebody ought to be around to take her deposition. She knows a lot, if she didn't do it herself. I wish you would go down to the telephone and get the hospital. Find out her name, and if she is conscious."

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on an imaginary harp, with devotional eyes. But McKnight's light-heartedness jarred on me that morning. I lay and frowned under my helplessness. When by chance I touched the little gold bag, it seemed to scorch my fingers. Richey, finding me unresponsive, left to keep his luncheon engagement with Allison West. As he clattered down the stairs, I turned my back to the morning sunshine and abandoned myself to misery. By what strain on her frayed nerves was Allison West keeping up, I wondered? Under the circumstances, would I dare to return the bag? Knowing that I had it, would she hate me for my knowledge? Or had I exaggerated the importance of the necklace, and in that case had she forgotten me already?

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voice preceding him, and I groaned with irritation. "Wake up!" he called. "Somebody's sent you a lot of flowers. Please hold the box, Mrs. Klopton; I'm going out to be run down by an automobile."

"I roused to feeble interest. My brother's wife is punctilious about such things; all the new babies in the family have silver rattles, and all the sick people flowers."

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I said, mendaciously, with my heart beating until I could hear it. She had not forgotten, after all. McKnight took a bud and fastened it in his buttonhole. I'm afraid I was not especially pleasant about it. They were her roses, and anyhow, they were meant for me. Richey left very soon, with an irritating final grin at the box.

"Good-by, sir woman-hater," he jeered at me from the door. So he wore one of the roses she had sent me, to luncheon with her, and I lay back among my pillows and tried to remember that it was his game, anyhow, and that I wasn't even drawing cards. To remember that, and to forget the broken necklace under my head!

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