

The Girl and the Bill

By Bannister Merwin

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS



Alcraente laughed. "Oh, he could have placed you in a number of different ways. He may have got your description from one of the servants—or from the clerk. But it is enough that he did know you."

"Well," said Orme, "this is beyond me. That five-dollar bill seems to be very much desired by different groups of persons."

Alcraente nodded. "I am not sure," he said slowly, "but that it would ease your Poritol's mind if you would place the bill in my hands."

"What do you want?" demanded Orme. "Your pocket book," replied one of the men—"queek!" He smiled an elusive smile as he spoke.

"What if I refuse?" said Orme. "Then we take. Be queek!" A call for help would hardly bring anyone; but Orme gave a loud cry, more to disconcert his enemies than with any hope of rescue.

At the same instant he rushed toward the door, and struck out at the nearer Japanese.

The blow did not land. His wrist was caught in a grip like an iron clamp, and he found himself performing queer gyrations. The Japanese had turned his back toward Orme and swung the imprisoned arm over his shoulder.

A quick lurch forward, and Orme sailed through the air, coming down heavily on his side. His arm was still held, and in a few seconds he was on his back, his assailants astride him and smiling down into his face.

Orme struggled to free himself, and promptly felt a breaking strain on his imprisoned arm. The knee of the Japanese was under the back of Orme's elbow. A moderate use of the leverage thus obtained would snap the arm like a pipe stem.

Orme realized, as he ceased struggling, the strain on his arm relaxed slightly, but the grip was maintained.

"Jiu-jitsu," explained the Japanese in a tone that sounded gently apologetic. "This is of course, as you will see, merely thinking of my young friend's peace of mind. I am his fellow countryman, you see, and his confidence in me—" he stopped, with another chuckle. "Singular, is it not, how impressionable are the young?"

Orme said nothing. He did not enjoy this fencing. "Look at the lake," Alcraente suddenly exclaimed. "How beautiful an expanse of water. It has so much more color than the sea. But you should see our wonderful harbor of Rio, Mr. Orme. Perhaps some day I shall be permitted to show you its magnificences."

"Who knows?" said Orme. "It would be very pleasant." "As to the bill," continued Alcraente quickly, "do you care to give it to me?"

Orme felt himself frowning. "I will keep it till the morning," he said. "Oh, well, it is of no consequence." Alcraente laughed shortly. "See, here is your hotel. Your company has been a pleasure to me, Mr. Orme. You arrived most opportunely in the park."

Orme jumped to the curb and, turning, shook the hand that was extended to him. "Thank you for the lift, senior Alcraente," he said. "I shall look for you in the morning."

"In the morning—yes. And pray, my dear sir, do not wander in the streets any more this evening. Our experience in the park has made me appreciative." The minister lifted his hat, and the cab rattled away.

The entrance to the Pere Marquette was a massive gateway, which opened upon a wide tunnel, leading to an interior court. On the farther side of the court were the doors of the hotel lobby. As a rule, carriages drove through the tunnel into the court, but Orme had not waited for this formality.

He started through the tunnel. There was no one in sight. He noted the elaborate terra-cotta decorations of the walls, and marveled at the bad taste which had lost sight of this opportunity for artistic simplicity. But through the opening before him he could see the fountain playing in the center of the court. The central figure of the group, a naiad, beckoned with a hand from which the water fell in a shower. The effect was not so pleasing. If one wished to be so-so, why not be altogether so? Like the South Americans? Was their elaborate ornamentation plastered on an inner steel construction? Orme wondered.

quickly scrambled to his feet and wheeled about. Two men stood between him and the door, which had been closed silently and swiftly. They were short and stockily built. Orme exclaimed aloud, for the light that filtered through a window from the street showed two faces unmistakably oriental.

If this was an ordinary robbery, the daring of the robbers was almost incredible. They ran the risk that the porter would return—if they had not already made away with him. Only the most desperate purpose could explain their action.

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"Then we do meet again," she exclaimed,—"and as usual I need your help. Isn't it queer?"

"Any service that I—" Orme began haltingly—"of course, anything that I can do—"

The girl laughed, a merry ripple of sound; then caught herself and changed her manner to grave earnestness. "It is very important," she said. "I am looking for a five-dollar bill that was paid to you today."

Orme started. "What? You, too?" "I, too? Has—has anybody else—?" Her gravity was more intense.

"Why, yes," said Orme—"a little man from South America." "Oh—Mr. Poritol?" Her brows were knit in an adorable frown.

"Yes—and two Japanese." "Oh!" Her exclamation was appreciative. "The Japanese got it," added Orme, ruefully. That she had the right to this information it never occurred to him to question.

The girl stood rigidly. "Whatever shall I do now?" she whispered. "My poor father!"

She looked helplessly at Orme. His self-possession had returned, and as he urged her to a chair, he condemned himself for not guessing how serious the loss of the bill must be to her. "Sit down," he said. "Perhaps I can help. But you see, I know so little of what it all means. Tell me everything you can."

With a sigh, she sank into the chair. Orme stood before her, waiting. "That bill tells, if I am not mistaken," she said, wearily, "where certain papers have been hidden. My father is ill at our place in the country. He must have those papers before midnight tomorrow, or—" Tears came into her eyes. Orme would have given much for the right to comfort her. "So much depends upon finding them," she added—"more even than I can begin to tell you."

"Let me help," said Orme, eager to follow those papers all over Chicago, if only it would serve her. "Hear my story first." Rapidly he recounted the adventures of the evening. She listened, eyes intent, nodding in recognition of his description of Poritol and Alcraente. When he came to the account of the fight in the porter's office and spoke of the Japanese with the scar on his forehead, she interrupted.

"Oh! That was Maku," she exclaimed. "Maku?" "Yes, that was Maku," she said. "Our butler. He must have overheard my father and me."

"Then he knew the value of the papers?" "He must have. I am sorry, Mr. Orme, that you have been so roughly used."

"That doesn't matter," he said. "They didn't hurt me in the least. And now, what is your story? How did you get on the trail of the bill?"

"We came back from the east a few days ago," she began. "My father had to undergo a slight operation, and he wished to have it performed by his friend, Dr. Allison, who lives here, so we went to our home in one of the northern suburbs."

"Father could not go back east as soon as he had expected to, and he had the papers sent to him, by special arrangement with the—with the other parties to the contract. Mr. Poritol followed us from the east. I—we had known him there. He was always amusing company; we never took him seriously. He had business here, he said; but on the first day of his arrival he came out to call on us. The next night our house was entered by a burglar. Besides the papers, only a few things were taken."

"Poritol?" exclaimed Orme, incredulously. "It happened that a Chicago detective had been in our village on business during the day," she went. "He had recognized on the streets a well-known thief, named Walsh. When we reported the burglary the detective remembered seeing Walsh, and hunted him out and arrested him. In his pockets was some jewelry belonging to me, and in his room the other stolen articles were found—everything except the papers."

"Did you tell the police about the papers?" "No, it seemed wiser not to. They were in a sealed envelope with—my father's name on it, and would surely have been returned, if found with the other things. There are reasons why they would have—would try to please my father. We did not let them know that an envelope containing something of value had not been recovered, and told them to make a thorough search."

"The afternoon after the burglary the news of Walsh's arrest was telephoned out to us from Chicago. I talked with my father, who was not well enough to leave the house, and it seemed best that some one should go to the county jail and see Walsh and try to get the papers. My father had reasons for not wishing the loss to become known. Only he and I were acquainted with the contents of the envelope; so I insisted on going to Chicago and interviewing the burglar."

She laughed, interpreting Orme's admiring look. "Oh, it was easy enough. I planned to take our lawyer as an escort."

"Did you?" "No, and that is where my troubles really began. Just as I was preparing to go, Mr. Poritol called. I had forgotten that he had asked him out for an afternoon of golf. He is such a funny player."

"As soon as I told him I was going to the Chicago jail to interview a burglar about some stolen goods, he insisted on acting as escort. He was so anxiously persistent that I finally agreed. We set out for the city in my car, not waiting to take a train."

"When we reached the jail I presented a letter which my father had written, and the officials agreed to let me have a private interview with Walsh."

Orme opened his eyes. The girl's father must have considerable influence.

"It is a horrid place, the jail. They took us through a corridor to Walsh's cell, and called him to the grating. I made Mr. Poritol stand back at the

other side of the corridor so that he couldn't hear us talk. "I asked the man what he had done with the papers. He insisted that he had seen none. Then I promised to have him freed, if he would only return them. He looked meditatively over my shoulders and after a moment declined the offer, again insisting that he didn't understand what I was talking about. I took the other things, miss," he said, "and I suppose I'll get time for it. But so help me, I didn't see no papers."

The girl paused and looked at Orme. "This seems like wasting minutes when we might be searching."

Orme was pleased to hear the "we." "Well," she went on, "I know that the man was not telling the truth. He was too hesitant to be convincing. So I began to promise him money. At every offer he looked past my shoulder and then repeated his denial. The last time he raised his eyes I had an intuition that something was going on behind me. I turned quickly. There stood Mr. Poritol, extending his fingers in the air and forming his mouth silently into words. He was raising my bids!"

"It flashed upon me that the papers would be of immense value to Mr. Poritol—for certain reasons. If only



"I, too? Has—anybody else?" I had thought of it before! I spoke to him sharply and told him to go outside. It always seemed natural to order him about, like a little dog."

"However, little dogs have the sharpest teeth," remarked Orme. "That is true. He replied that he couldn't think of leaving me alone in such a place. So there was nothing for me to do except to get up and go to return later without Mr. Poritol. 'Come along, I said. 'My errand is done.'

"Mr. Poritol smiled at me in a way I didn't like. The burglar, meantime, had gone to a little table at the back of his cell. There was an ink bottle there and he seemed to be writing. Looking into the cell, Mr. Poritol said: 'The poor fellow has very unpleasant quarters.' Then he said to Walsh: 'Can't we do something to make your enforced stay here more comfortable, my dear sir?'

Orme smiled at the unconscious mimicry of her accent. "Walsh came back to the grating. He held in his hand a five-dollar bill—the one that has made so much trouble. It had been smuggled in to him in some way. 'You might get me some 'bacca,'" he said, thrusting the bill through the bars and grinning. "Now I understood what was going on. I reached for the bill, as though it were intended for me, but Mr. Poritol was quicker. He snatched the bill and put it in his pocket."

"I didn't know what to do. But suddenly Mr. Poritol seemed to be frightened. Perhaps he thought that I would have him arrested, though he might have known that there were reasons why I couldn't. He gave me a panicky look and rushed out of the corridor. Afterward I learned that he told the guard I had sent him on an errand."

"Well," she sighed—"of course, I followed after a last glance at Walsh, who was peering through the grating with a look of evil amusement. He must have been well paid, that burglar. But then," she mused, "they could afford it—yes, they could well afford it."

"When I got to the street, Poritol was just disappearing in my car! I can only think that he had lost his head very completely, for he didn't need to take the car. He could have mixed with the street crowd and gone a-foot to the hotel where—" "Alcraente?"

"Yes, Mr. Alcraente—where he was stopping, and have waited there. But Mr. Alcraente was playing golf at Wheaton and Mr. Poritol seems to have thought that he must go straight to him. He cannot escape from being spectacular, you see."

"He ran out through the western suburbs, putting on more and more speed. Meantime I set a detective on the track of the car. That is how I learned what I am now telling you. As for the car, Mr. Poritol sent it back to me this morning with a hired chauffeur."

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four. He wrote a note of abject apology, saying that he had been beside himself and had not realized what he was doing.

"After setting the detective at work, I went out to our place by train. I dreaded confessing my failure to father, but he took it very well. We had dinner together in his study. Maku was in the room while we were talking. Now I can see why Maku disappeared after dinner and did not return."

"But how did Poritol lose the bill?" asked Orme. (To Be Continued.)

Looking Backward. "Are Boston children usually precocious?" "I have known of one who was only three years old who could get into a reminiscent vein."

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