

THE DAY OF DAYS

A Story of Romantic Adventure in New York. By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE "THE BRASS BOWL" Author of

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(Continued from Last Week.)

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

The story opens as P. Sybarite, a fifteen-dollar-a-week clerk with aristocratic forefathers, pummels his friend, George Bross, for a taunt, then invites him to share some theatre tickets he has been given. In the party are Violet Prim, a chorus girl, and Molly Lessing, a shop girl, whose address is the boarding house where they all live.

The play is "Kismet," with its suggestion that a magic Day of Days, when all things are possible, may come to any one.

On the way to the theatre P. Sybarite is shown a newspaper cutting which indicates that Molly Lessing may be in reality Marian Blessington, an heiress who has disappeared from her guardian's home to escape a proposed marriage with his son. Later, in front of the boarding house, Molly is accosted by a man who leaps from a taxicab and whom she seems to know. P. Sybarite stands by, ready to aid the girl, if need be.

STAGGERED, Bross recovered quickly.

"That's just her cuteness. She doped it out the safest place for her would be the last place he'd look for her!"

"And you really think that she, accustomed to every luxury that money can buy, would voluntarily come down to living here, at \$6 a week, and clerking in a department store—simply because, according to the papers, she's opposed to a marriage that she can't be forced to contract in a free country like this?"

"Well— . . . George floundered helplessly for a moment and fell back again upon an imagination for the time being stimulated to an abnormal degree of inventiveness:

"Praps old Shaynon's double-crossed her somehow we don't know nothin' about. He ain't above it, if all they tell of him's true. Maybe he's got her coin away from her, and she had to go to work for a livin'. Stranger things have happened in this burg, P. S."

It was the turn of P. S. to hesitate in doubt; or, at all events, so George Bross inferred from a sudden change in the expression of the little man's eyes. Momentarily they seemed to cloud, as if in introspection. But he rallied quickly enough.

"All things are possible, George," he admitted, with his quizzical grin. "But this time you're mistaken. I'm not arguing with you, George; I'm telling you you're hopelessly mistaken."

"You think so—huh?" growled George. "Well, I got eight iron bucks that says Marian Blessington to any five of your money."

He made a bold show of his pay envelope.

"It'd be a shame to rob you, George," said P. Sybarite. "Besides, you're bad-tempered when broke."

"Never you mind about that. Here's my eight, if you've got five that makes a noise like Molly Lessing."

P. Sybarite laughed softly and produced the little wad of bills that represented his weekly wage. At this George involuntarily drew back.

"And how would you settle the bet?"

"Leave it to her," insisted George, in an expiring gasp of bravado.

"Here she comes now," added P. Sybarite, glancing up the street.

"Quick, now; you've only a minute to decide. Is it a bet?"

With a gesture of brave decision, George returned his money to his pocket.

"You're an easy mark," he observed, in accents of deep pity. "I knew you'd think I meant it."

"But didn't you, George?"

"Nah—nothin' like that! I was just kiddin' you along, to see how much you'd swallow."

"It's all right, then," agreed P. Sybarite. "Only—George!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you breathe a word of this to Miss Lessing?"

"Why not?"

"Bssh!" P. Sybarite warned him, sibilantly. "Miss Lessing might hear you. . . . What will happen if you ven mention the matter to her," he

added, as the shop girl turned in at the gateway, lowering his own voice and fixing the shipping clerk with a steady stare, "will be another accident, much resembling that of this afternoon—if you haven't forgotten. Now, mind what I tell you, and be good."

Mr. Bross swelled with resentment, exhibited a distorted and empurpled visage, but kept silence.

P. Sybarite's window commanded an elevated if non-exhilarating view of back yards, one and all dank, dismal, and littered with the debris of a long, hard winter. Familiarly, however, had rendered P. Sybarite immune to the miasma of melancholy they exhaled; the trouble in his patient blue eyes, the wrinkles that lined his forehead, owned another cause.

Perhaps it was true. Perhaps George had guessed shrewdly. Perhaps Molly Lessing of the glove counter really was one and the same with Marian Blessington of the fabulous fortune.

Old Brian Shaynon was a known devil of infinite astuteness; it would be quite consistent with his character and past performances if, despairing of gaining control of his ward's money by urging her into unwelcome matrimony with his son, he had contrived to overreach her in some manner, and so driven her to become self-supporting.

Even if George's romance were true only in part these were wretched circumstances for a girl of gentle birth and rearing to adopt. It was really a shocking boarding-house.

Now, however . . . P. Sybarite realized suddenly that habit had instilled into his bosom a sort of mean affection for the grim and sordid place. For an entire decade he had occupied the same chair at the same table in the basement dining-room, feasting on beef, mutton, Irish stew, ham-and-beans, veal, pork or just-hash—according to the designated day of the week. . . .

The very room in which he sat was somehow dear to him; upon it he wasted a sentiment in a way akin to that with which one regards the grave of a beloved friend; it was, in fact, the tomb of his own youth. Its narrow and impoverished bed had groined with the restless weight of him all those many nights through which he had lain wakeful, in impotent mutiny against the outrageous circumstances that made him a prisoner there. Its walls had muted the sighs in which the desires of youth had been spent. Its floor matting was worn threadbare with the impatient pascings of his feet (four strides from door to window; swing and repeat of *Hittum*). Its solitary gas-jet had, with begrudged illumination, stinked o'er the pages of those innumerable borrowed books with which he had sought to dull poignant self-consciousness.

A tomb! . . . Was the radiant spirit of youth and gentle loveliness (who might, for all one knew to the contrary, be Marian Blessington after all) to be suffered to become one of that disconsolate crew?

What could be done to prevent it? Nothing that the wits of P. Sybarite could compass: he was as inefficient as any gnat in any web. . . .

Being Saturday, it was the night of ham-and-beans. P. Sybarite loathed ham-and-beans with a deadly loathing. Nevertheless he ate his dose of ham-and-beans. He sat on the landlady's right, and was reluctant to hurt her feelings or incur her displeasure. Besides, he was hungry: between the home-exerciser and the daily walks to and from the Brooklyn Bridge, his normal appetite was that of an athlete in plink of training.

There remained half an hour to be killed before time to start for the theatre. George Bross joined him on the stoop. They smoked pensively, while the afterglow faded from the western sky.

But presently Miss Prim and Miss Lessing appeared and changed all that in a twinkling.

"Well," observed Violet generously, later on, at the end of the play, "I thought little me was pretty well stage-broke; but I gotta hand it to Otis. He's some actor. He had me going from the first snore."

"Some actor is right," affirmed Mr. Bross with conviction, "and some show, too, if you wanta know. I could sit through it twice. Say, I couldn't quit thinkin' what a grand young time I'd start in this old burg if I could only con this 'Kismet' thing into slippin' me my Day of Days. Believe me or not, there would be a party."

"What would you do?" asked Molly Lessing, smiling.

"Well, the first flop I'd nail down all the coin that was handy, and then I'd buy me a flock of automobiles—and have a table reserved for me at the Knickerbocker for dinner every night—and . . . His imagination flagged.

The wonder and the romance of "Kismet" were still warm and vital

in P. Sybarite's imagination, infusing his thoughts with a roselate glamour of unreality, wherein all things were strangely possible. The iridescent imagery of the Arabian Nights of his boyhood (who has forgotten the fascination of those three fat old volumes of crabbéd type, illuminated with their hundreds of cramped old woodcuts!) had in a scant three hours been recreated for him by Knoblauch's fantastic drama with its splendid investment of scene and costume, its admirable histrionic interpretation and the robust yet exquisitely tempered artistry of Otis Skinner.

Presently, with an effort, blinking, he pulled his wits together, and, a traffic policeman creating a favorable opening, the two scurried across and plunged into the comparative obscurity of West Thirty-eighth street, sturdy George and his modest Violet already a full block in advance.

Discovering this circumstance by the glimmer through the shadows of Violet's conspicuously striped black-and-white tassets, P. Sybarite commented charitably upon their haste.

"If we hurry we might catch up," suggested Molly Lessing.

"I don't miss 'em much," he admitted, without offering to mend the pace.

She laughed softly.

"Are they really in love?"

"George is," replied P. Sybarite, after taking thought.

"You mean she isn't?"

"To blush unseen is Violet's idea of nothing to do—not, at least, when one is a perfect thirty-eight and possesses a good digestion and an infinite capacity for amusement *a la carte*."

"That is to say," the girl prompted.

"Violet will marry well, if at all."

"Not Mr. Bross, then?"

"Nor any other poor man. I don't say she doesn't care for George, but before anything serious comes of it he'll have to make good use of his Day of Days—if Kismet ever sends him one. I hope it will," P. Sybarite added sincerely.

"You don't believe—really?"

"Just now? With all my heart! I'm so full of romantic nonsense I can hardly stick. Nothing is too incredible for me to believe to-night. I'm ready to play Haji the Beggar to any combination of impossibilities Kismet cares to brew in Bagdad-on-the-Hudson!"

Again the girl laughed quietly to his humor.

"And since you're a true believer, Mr. Sybarite, tell me what use you would make of your Day of Days?"

"If? Oh, I"—Smiling wistfully he said: "Well, for instance, I'd like the chance to go far for a friend, somebody who had been kind to me, and—ah—tolerant—if she were in trouble and could use my services."

He fancied her glance was quick and sharp and searching; but her voice when she spoke was even.

"Then you're not even sure she—your friend—is in trouble?"

"I've an intuition: she wouldn't be where she is if she wasn't."

"But—seriously—you're not sure, are you, Mr. Sybarite?"

"Only, Miss Lessing," he said soberly, "of my futile, my painfully futile, good will."

She seemed to start to speak, to think better of it, to fall silent in sudden, shy constraint. He stole a side-long glance, troubled, wondering if perhaps he had ventured too impudently.

She wore a sweet, grave face, *en profile*; her eyes veiled with long lashes the haunts of tender shadows; her mouth of gracious lips unsmiling, a little trist.

He didn't groan, save inwardly; but respected her silence, and held his own in humility and mortification of spirit until they were near the doorway of their boarding-house. And even then it was the girl who loosed his tongue.

"Why—where are they?" she asked in surprise.

Startled out of the deeps of self-contempt, P. Sybarite discovered that she meant Violet and George, who were nowhere visible.

"Violet said something about a little supper in her room," said P. Sybarite in a moment.

The girl paused at the gate. "Then we needn't hurry," she suggested, smiling.

"We needn't delay," he countered amiably. "If somebody doesn't interrupt 'em before long George won't be too late to get the pitcher filled. This town shuts up tight at midnight, Saturdays—if you want to believe everything you hear. So there's no need of being too indulgent with our infatuated fellow-inmates."

"But—just a minute, Mr. Sybarite," she insisted.

"As many as you wish," he laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I loathe draught beer."

"Do be serious," she begged. "I want to thank you."

He was aware of a proffered hand, slender and fine in a shabby glove, and took it in his own, uneasily conscious of a curious disturbance in his bosom.

"It was kind of you to come," he said jerkily, in his embarrassment.

"I enjoyed every moment," she said warmly. "But that wasn't all I meant when I thanked you."

His eyebrows climbed with surprise.

"What else, Miss Lessing?"

"Your delicacy in letting me know you understood."

Disengaging her hand, she broke off with a startled movement and a low cry of surprise.

A taxicab, swinging into the street from Eighth avenue, had boiled up to the curb before the gate and, pausing, discharged a young man in a hurry; it was the facts that he had the door open when halfway between the corner and the house, and was on the wing-board before the vehicle was fairly at a halt.

It was a stride this one crossed the sidewalk and pulled up silently, trying to master the temper which was visibly shaking him. Tall, well-proportioned, impressively turned out in evening clothes, he thrust forward a handsome face, marred by an evil, twisted mouth, and peered searchingly at the girl.

Instinctively she shrank back inside the fence, eying him with a look of fascinated dismay.

As instinctively P. Sybarite bristled between the two.

"Well!" he snapped at the intruder.

"Ah! Miss Lessing, I believe?"

The voice of the man from the taxicab was poisoned with a malicious triumph that grated upon the nerves of P. Sybarite.

"Say the word," he suggested serenely to the girl, "and I'll bundle this animal back into that taxi and direct the driver to the nearest accident ward."

"Get rid of this microbe," interrupted the stranger savagely, "unless you want him buried between glass slides under a microscope."

The girl turned to P. Sybarite with pleading eyes and imploring hands.

"I'm afraid I must speak alone with this"—there was a barely perceptible pause—"gentleman."

Ignored by the man, Sybarite strutted back to the brownstone stoop.

The man seemed at once insistent, determined and thoroughly angry. In a lapse of minutes the fellow seemingly brought forth some telling argument. She wavered and her accents rose in doubt.

"Is that true?"

P. Sybarite's reply was patently an affirmation.

"I don't believe you!"

"You don't dare doubt me."

The girl showed evident irresolution, preying her abrupt surrender.

"Very well," she said in a tone of resignation. "I'll go, but I must leave a message."

"Senseless!"

She showed displeasure in the lift of her chin. "I think I'm my own mistress—as yet."

He growled as she turned back to the house.

Impulsively she gave Sybarite her hand a second time; with as little reflection as he took it in both of his own.

"Is there nothing I can do?"

"I must go," she repeated in a low tone. "I can't refuse. But—alone. Do you understand?"

"You mean—without him?" P. Sybarite nodded toward the man fuming in the gateway.

"If you could suggest something to detain him long enough for me to get into the cab and say one word to the chauffeur—"

"Moll!" cried the man at the gate.

"Don't answer," P. Sybarite advised. "If you don't, he'll lose patience and come to fetch you. And then—"

"Moll!"

"Do be quiet," suggested P. Sybarite.

"What's that?" he barked in a rage. "I said hold your tongue."

"The devil you did!" With a snort the man rode in to the stoop. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

Stepped aside, as if in alarm, Miss Lessing moved behind the fellow and darted through the gate.

"I don't," P. Sybarite admitted amiably. "but your nose annoys me."

"You impudent puppy!" stormed the other.

"Who are you?"

"Who's that?" echoed P. Sybarite in surprise. The girl was now instructing the chauffeur. "Why," he drawled, "in the guy that put the point in dis—"

At the curb, the door of the taxicab closed with a slam. Simultaneously the drone of the motor thickened to a rumble. The man with the twisted

mouth turned just in time to see it drawing away.

"Hill!" he cried in surprise and dismay.

But the taxi didn't pause; to the contrary, it stretched out toward Ninth avenue at a quickening pace.

P. Sybarite found himself ducking beneath the swing of a powerful fist.

And this last, falling to find a mark, threw its owner of his balance. Tripping awkwardly over the low curbing of the dooryard walk, he reeled and went a-sprawl on his knees, while his hat fell off and rolled several feet away.

P. Sybarite withdrew to a respectful remove and held himself coolly alert against reprisals that never came. The other picked himself up quickly, cast about for the taxicab, discovered it swiftly making off—al-ready twenty yards distant—and with a howl of rage bounded through the gate and gave chase at the top of his speed.

Sighing, P. Sybarite went back to the stoop and entered the hall. And so Molly Lessing might very well be Marian Blessington, after all!

In which case the man with the twisted mouth was, more probably than not, none other than that same Bayard Shaynon, the son of her guardian, whom the young lady was reported to have jilted so arbitrarily.

Turning the topper over in his hands, it occurred to P. Sybarite to wonder if he did not, in it, hold a valuable clue to this riddle of identity.

It was a handsome and heavy hat of English manufacture; it carried neither name nor initials on its lining and lacked every least hint—as to its ownership—so it seemed until the prying fingers of P. Sybarite turned down the leather and permitted a visiting card concealed therein to flutter to the floor.

The hall rack was convenient; hanging up the hat P. Sybarite picked up the card. It displayed in conventional script the name, Bailey Penfield, with the address, No. 97 West Forty-fifth street; one corner, moreover, bore a pencilled hieroglyphic which seemed to read: "O. K.—B. P."

"Whatever," P. Sybarite mused, "that may mean."

At least he meant to know more about Mr. Bailey Penfield before he slept.

He strolled toward sixth avenue, then walked to Forty-fifth street, turned off to the right, and in another moment was at a standstill, in the extremest perplexity, before No. 97.

By every normal indication the house was closed and tenantless. Disappointed in the conviction that he had drawn a false lead, the little man strolled on eastward a little distance, then, on sheer impulse, gave up his project and, swinging about, started to go home. But now, as he approached No. 97 the second time, a taxicab turned in from Sixth avenue, slid to the curb before that dwelling and set down a smallish young man dressed in the extreme of fashion—a person of physical characteristics by no means to be confused with those of the man with the twisted mouth—who negligently handing a bill to the chauffeur, ran nimbly up the steps, rang the doorbell, and promptly letting himself into the vestibule, closed the door behind him.

Here was mystery within mystery indeed! The circumstances annoyed P. Sybarite intensely. He turned boldly up the steps, pressed the bell-button, laid hold of the door-knob, and entered into a vestibule as dark as his bewilderment.

Instantly the bare and narrow vestibule was flooded with the merciless glare of half a dozen electric bulbs, and at the same time he found himself sustaining the intent scrutiny of a pair of inhosptitable dark eyes set in an impassive dark face—this last abruptly disclosed in the frame of a small grille in one of the inner doors.

"Well?" he was gruffly asked.

"The saints be praised!" returned P. Sybarite. "I find myself so. And yourself?" he added civilly, not to be outdone.

"What do you want?"

P. Sybarite stiffened his neck.

"To see Mr. Penfield," he returned firmly.

"What Mr. Penfield?" asked the other, after a pause which to P. Sybarite indicated beyond question that at least one Mr. Penfield was known to his cautious interlocutor.

"Mr. Bailey Penfield," he replied.

"Who else? I have his card with this number—got it from him only to-night."

"Card?" The face returned to the grille.

"I believe you'll find that authentic," P. Sybarite observed with asperity.

By way of answer, the grille closed with a snap; but his inclination

to kick the door was nullified when, without further delay, it opened to admit him. Nose in the air, he strutted in, and the door clanged behind him.

He stood in the main hall of an old-fashioned residence. To his right a double doorway revealed a drawing-room luxuriously furnished, but, as far as he could determine, quite untenanted. On the left a long staircase hugged the wall, with a glow of warm light at its head. To the rear the hall ended in a single doorway through which he could see a handsome mahogany buffet elaborately arranged with shimmering damask, silver and crystal.

"It's all right," announced the warden of the grille, his suspicions to all seeming completely allayed. "Mr. Penfield ain't in just at present, but—here he grinned shrewdly—"I reckon you ain't so dead set on seein' him as you made out."

"On the contrary," P. Sybarite retorted stiffly, "my business is immediate and personal with Mr. Penfield. I will wait."

"Sure." Into the accents of the other there crept magically a trace of geniality. "Will you go right on up, or would you like a bite of something to eat first?"

At the mere hint of food a frightful pang of hunger transfixed P. Sybarite. "I don't mind if I do, thank you."

He found the back room one of good proportions—whatever the architect's original intention—now serving as a combined lounge and grille richly and comfortably furnished in sober, masculine fashion, boasting in all three buffets set forth with a lavish display of food and drink, and presiding over them the typical colored butler.

Poising a tiny glass delicately between thumb and forefinger, P. Sybarite treated himself presently to one small sip—an instant of lingering delectation—another sip.

It was years since P. Sybarite had tasted a cocktail artfully concocted.

Now, it mustn't be understood that P. Sybarite entertained any misapprehensions as to the nature of the institution into which he had stumbled. He had not needed the sound, sometimes in quieter moments audible from upstairs, of a prolonged whirr ending in several staccato clicks, to make him shrewdly cognizant of its questionable character.

So at length, satiate and a little weary—drawn by curiosity besides—he rose, endowed Pete lavishly with a handful of small change (something over fifty cents; all he had in the world aside from his cherished five dollars), and slowly ascended to the second floor.

Here, in remodelling the house for its present purposes, partitions had arbitrarily been dispensed with, aside from that inclosing the well of the stairway; the floor was one large room, wholly devoted to some half dozen games of chance. With but few of these was P. Sybarite familiar; but on information and belief he marked down a faro layout, the device with which his reading had made him acquainted under the designation of *les petits chevaux*, and, at either end of the salon, immense roulette tables.

The carpet, golden brown in tone, was of a velvet pile so heavy that it completely muffled the sound of footsteps. The room, indeed, was singularly quiet for one that harbored some two-score players in addition to a full corps of dealers, croupiers, watchers and waiters. The almost incessant whine of racing ivory balls with their clattering over the metal compartments of the roulette wheels, clicking of chips, dissonant voices of croupiers, seemed only to lend emphasis to the hush.

The warmth of the room was noticeable.

P. Sybarite was a lonely exception to the rule of evening dress. But this discovery discomfited him not at all. The wine buzzing in his head, teeth tight upon an admirable cigar, he strutted hither and yon, ostensibly as much in his native element as a press agent in a theatre lobby.

A few minutes sufficed to demonstrate that the owner of the abandoned hat was not among those present; which fact, coupled with the doorkeeper's averment that Mr. Bailey Penfield was out, persuaded P. Sybarite that this last was neither more nor less than the proprietor of the premises.

His tour ended at last in a pause by the roulette table at the rear of the room.

There were perhaps half a dozen players around the board—four on one wing, two on the other. Of the latter one was that very young man who had been responsible for P. Sybarite's change of mind with regard to going home. With a bored air this prodigal was frittering away five-dollar notes on the colors, the columns and the

dozens—his ill success stupendous, his apparent indifference positively magnificent. But in the course of the little while that P. Sybarite watched he either grew weary or succeeded in emptying his pockets, and, ceasing to play, sat back with a grunt of impatience more than of disgust.

The ball ran its course thrice before he moved. Then, abruptly lifting his finger to the croupier: "Five on the red, Andy," said he.

"Five on the red," repeated the croupier; and set aside a chocolate colored chip in memorandum of the wager.

Carelessly he tossed it upon the red diamond. Black won. Unperturbed, he made a second oral bet, this time on black, and lost; increased his wager to ten dollars on black, and lost; made it twenty, shifted to red, and lost; dropped back to five dollar bets for three turns of the wheel, and lost them all. Fifty dollars in debt to the house, he rose, nodded casually to the croupier, and left the room.

In mingled envy and amazement P. Sybarite watched him go. "Looks easy," meditated P. Sybarite with a thrill of dreadful yearning. "Why not?" A minute later he was shocked to hear his own voice:

"Five on the red," it said distinctly, with an effect of extravagant apathy. A thought later he caught the croupier's eye and drove the wager home with a nod. His heart stopped beating.

Five dollars! All he had in the world!