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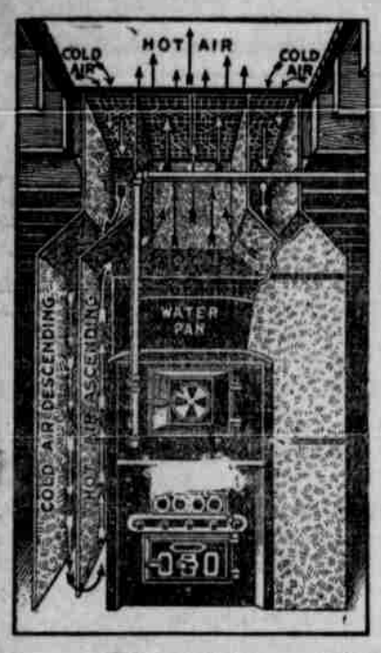

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THE SILENT BATTLE

By H. M. EGBERT.

I.

Timmins had stood between the father and his son, "Wild Bill" Lovett on many occasions. He had watched the boy develop into a drunkard, spendthrift, and prodigal. He had wondered at the father's self-control, and he had guessed at the love that tolerated the son and made a shield for his failings.

Therefore, when "Old" Timmins realized that his employer was upon the verge of a breakdown, he knew that something unprecedented must have occurred.

"Mr. Lovett, you are not feeling well today," he ventured to suggest.

Then, for the first time in those forty years, "Battleship" Lovett gave way.

"Timmins, I am the father of a blackguard," he burst out. "I have borne with the boy, hoping against hope that he would make something of himself. I hoped and believed that he had at least retained the instincts of a gentleman. I see I was mistaken. Last night he insulted Miss Audry Parkinson at a reception. The daughter of my old friend, Timmins. It was her first experience of social life in the East, and what impression she will take back with her tomorrow! He was drunk and he tried to kiss her."

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Mr. Lovett," faltered the old secretary.

"Timmins, I can unburden myself to you as I can to nobody else. You have seen my son become what he is today. What shall I do? Shall I cut him off? How will that help either of us?"

"Mr. Lovett, I'd let him see that he has lost your love. I'd teach him a lesson that would at least bring him to realize what he is. I've taken the liberty of thinking about the matter, sir, and what I would do is this. . . .

II.

"Well, Mr. Groat?"

"Wild Bill" Lovett, a little unsteady on his feet, looked at his father's lawyer. Mr. Groat had sent for him and had handed him the new will, drawn up by "Battleship" Lovett at the secretary's suggestion, to read; but "Wild Bill" Lovett had been unable to discover any meaning in the dancing letters.

"The meaning is, Mr. Lovett, that your father agrees to pay you ten dollars a week, so long as you abstain from communicating with him."

That afternoon a note came from "Wild Bill." "I have fallen pretty low," he wrote to his father, "but I will not accept your terms. I am going away. When I have made a man of myself I shall return."

III.

"You can get a meal if you are willing to work for it, I reckon."

Bill Lovett looked whimsically at the woman who confronted him in the doorway of the western ranchhouse.

"Madam, I've never worked in my life," he answered.

"Then I guess it's time you began. There's the woodpile. You'll find an ax in the corner. When you've split half a cord you can come to supper. And there'll be a dollar as well."

The deputy, who came home a little later, learned from his wife the meaning of the sounds in the woodshed.

"There, that's enough!" said the deputy. "You can come in. Pretty well done, too."

"You know who that fellow is?" the deputy asked his wife, when Bill had risen from the table.

"Not dangerous?"

"Dangerous? In the East—perhaps. It takes more than a rum-soaked idler to become dangerous in this part. That's Bill Lovett, son of the millionaire that owns those big interests up Fairbanks way."

"But what has he done?" His wife clutched at his arm. She had taken a liking to the young man, whose courteous demeanor was hardly that of a desperado. "You're not—not going to—?"

"Oh, that's all right," responded the deputy easily. "He isn't wanted. He's not wanted. That's the trouble. But his father's anxious about him, though he doesn't want the young man to know. There's a Miss Parkinson—you know old Parkinson of the A1 ranch? Well, she knew him, and it seems she spotted him getting off a train, and wired his father. The old man asked her to keep an eye on him, and let him know what the boy is doing. So we deputies have been notified—and there's a reward coming, if we keep him out of mischief."

With the new elation in his heart, Bill Lovett started for the station. He was quite ignorant of the fact that the deputy was following him; ignorant, too, that Audry, notified by wire, was waiting, conveniently hidden, at his destination.

She saw him get off the train and look uncertainly about him. She was thrilled by the evident struggle in the man's face. What did he mean to do?

She saw him cross the road toward the saloon that stood invitingly opposite the depot. She watched him with sinking heart. Bill Lovett approached the door. He stood there. She could not see his face now, but she saw him tremble as if grappling with an implacable adversary, some spiritual force for evil. Her heart stood still.

Then she saw Bill turn aside and stagger away, to fight his silent, winning battle alone.

IV.

"You can have the ranch on your own terms," said Carr.

"But—I can't offer better than—"

"See here, young man," interposed the ranchman brusquely. "I believe in talking straight. You came West an outcast. Nobody had any use for a drunkard. Don't wince; you know it's true. I offered you work, but you didn't know who asked me to. Well, never mind that. You promised me you'd keep straight. You did.

"You proved my best worker. You beat up Big Henderson, when he tried to make you drink whisky instead of mineral water. I respected you for that. So did the neighbors. I'm going South to live, and I know a man when I see one. So, if you want the ranch, it's yours on those terms."

"I'll take it, then," said Bill. "But—Mr. Carr, I can't talk any more now. I've—I've got an appointment."

He leaped into the saddle and galloped away. Carr watched him with a queer, twisted smile on his face.

"Once I was afraid," he muttered. "But now—well, that girl hasn't anything on him."

That girl listened to Bill's story with downcast eyes. She knew that but for her the one-time homeless outcast would by now be under the sod, or living a life in death. She had done all for him. He knew little of that, of her intercession for him with Carr, and of her communication with his father, nothing. But he knew he loved her, and he dared to suspect that she loved him.

"Audry, now I can tell you," said "Wild Bill." "I love you, dear. I'm not worthy to tell you so, but I love you, and I've waited till I could make good before I said it to you. Carr's going to let me have the ranch. Audry—"

He knew it now, and he looked at her with incredulity and self-condemnation before he drew her to him. He pressed his lips to hers with awe and a rushing tenderness that swept away all doubts and fears.

V.

"Old" Timmins did not at first recognize the stalwart, bronzed young man who, accompanied by his wife and four-year-old son, called at "Battleship's" office. Then he was so flustered that he could hardly take the hand that was coldly outstretched.

"Wild Bill" was as much embarrassed as Timmins at the meeting. He had forgotten all about the old man. Seeing him was like meeting one returned from the dead. All his past follies seemed to look at him from Timmins' eyes.

But Timmins was forgotten again in the reunion. Imperturbable old "Battleship" Lovett broke down as he kissed his daughter-in-law and grandson.

"I have made good," said Bill. "I kept my promise."

"I was afraid that I should never see you again," said the old man huskily.

"Old" Timmins heard that. He had followed Bill's career with the interest of one who had devised the means of redemption. Now his scheme seemed to have recoiled on him. He imagined the intensity of the young man's resentment.

"I did my best for the lad," he muttered; and, sitting down, he wrote out a letter of resignation and sent it in by the boy. Then he took down his ancient hat from its hook, clapped it on his head and started into the street.

But Timmins' legs were old, and long before he had time to disappear into obscurity his employer and Bill were reading the note together.

"Why, I meant nothing unkind," protested Bill.

"Bring him back, then," said "Battleship."

Three bounds of Bill's nether limbs equaled fifty short toddles of Timmins. The old man, struggling dismally along the street, became aware of a giant who barred the way.

He looked up into Bill's face.

"Come back, you old fool," said Bill.

"Mr. Lovett, I—I—"

Bill laughed and picked him up in his arms. Carrying him like a struggling child, he rushed up the stairs and deposited his burden upon the floor of his father's office.

"Timmins stays, and—I apologize to him," he said.

"The best thing I ever heard you say, young man," said a remembered voice.

Mr. Groat, the lawyer, had come in to complete the reconciliation.

VI.

"Battleship" Lovett had ridden into his last harbor, after a year of the greatest happiness that he had ever known, leaving his entire fortune to his son.

The young couple was returning West. Bill had decided to turn over his interests in the East to his father's representatives; he had made the West his home. There he had found his manhood—and Audry.

He was turning over his father's papers, when he came upon a promissory note for $85,000.

He started, stared at it; and all at once the secret was disclosed.

"My father bought the Carr ranch for me!" he cried.

And he saw that she knew.

"Then you were helping me all the time!" he exclaimed. "You were in touch with him?"

Audry nodded, and smiled to keep back the tears.

"And even in my worst depths I had your guardianship and never knew it? Why, Audry? Did you care for me then?"

She nodded again and, leaning her cheek against his, looked at the note. They read together:

"Paid in full with a few tears, a few heartaches, and unlimited pride in my son. W. G. Lovett."

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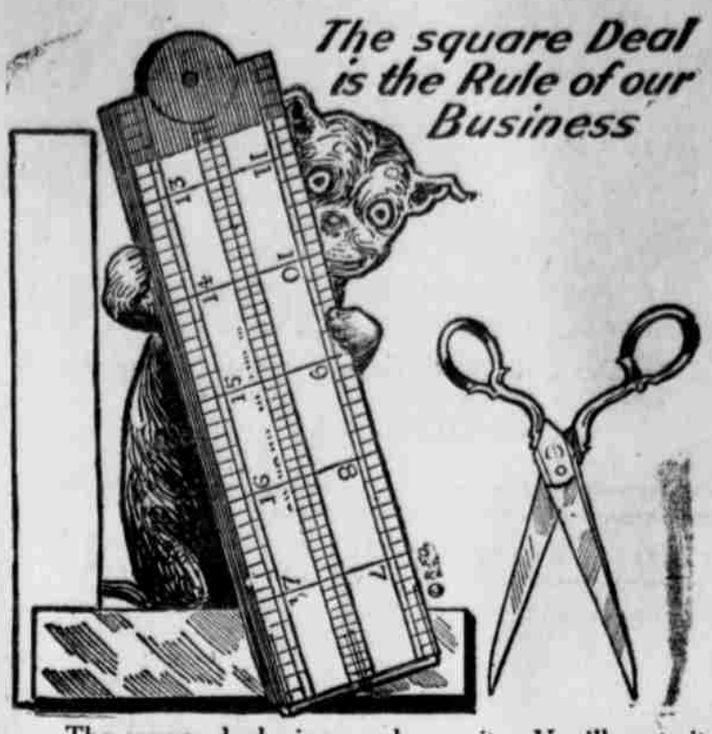

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