



# Then I'll Come Back to You

By Larry Evans

AUTHOR OF  
ONCE TO EVERY MAN

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

And the little figure preceded him across his soft, cropped lawn. Caleb Hunter had never married, and even now at the age of forty and odd in particularly mellow moments he was liable to confess that, while matrimony no doubt offered a far wider field for both general excitement and variety, as far as he himself was concerned he felt that his bachelor condition had points of excellence too obvious to be treated with contumely. Perhaps the fact that Sarah Hunter, four years his senior, had kept so well the coars of the domestic machinery of the white place on the hill that their churning had never been evidenced may have been in part an answer to his contentment.

For Sarah Hunter, too, had never married. To the townspeople, who had never dared to try to storm the wall of her apparent frigidity or been able quite to understand her aloof austerity, she was little more than a weekly occurrence as dependable as the rising and setting of the sun itself. Every Sunday morning a rare vision of stately dignity for all her thinness, assisted by Caleb, she descended from the Hunter equipage to enter the portals of the Morrison Baptist church. After the service she reappeared and, having complimented the minister upon the sagacity of his discourse, again assisted by Caleb she mounted to the rear seat of the surrey and rolled back up the hill.

That was as much as the townspeople ever saw of Cal Hunter's maiden sister unless there happened to be a prolonged siege of sickness in the village or a worse accident than usual. Then she came and camped on the scene until the crisis was over, soft voiced, soft fingered and serenely sure of herself. Sarah had never married, and even though she had in the long interval which year by year had brought to Caleb a more placid roundly grown slender and slenderer still and flat chested and sharp angled to face and figure Caleb knew that underneath it all there had been no shrinkage in her soul—knew that there were no bleak expanses in her heart or edges to her pity.

They often joked each other about their state of single blessedness, did Caleb and his sister. Often, hard upon his easy boast of satisfaction with things as they were, she would quote the fable of the fox and the high hanging grapes, only to be taunted a moment later with her own celibacy. But the taunt and the fable had long been stings. For Sarah Hunter knew that one end of Caleb's heavy gold watch chain still carried a bit of a gold coin worn smooth and thin from years of handling; she knew that the single word across its back, even though it had long ago been effaced so far as other eyes were concerned, was still there for him to see. And Caleb, rummaging one day for some lost article or other in a pigeon hole in Sarah's desk, in which he had no license to look, had come across a picture of a tall and black haired lad brave in white trousers and an amazing waistcoat. Caleb remembered having been told that he had died for an other with that same smile which the picture had preserved—the tall and jaunty youngster. And so their comprehension was mutual. They understood, did Caleb and his sister.

But sure as he was of Sarah's fundamental kindness Caleb experienced a twinge of guilty uncertainty that August afternoon as he closed the iron gate behind the grotesque little figure which had already started across his lawn. For the moment he had forgotten that the sun was low in the west. He had overlooked the fact that it was customary for the Hunter establishment to sup early during the warm summer months. But when he turned to find Sarah watching, stiff and uncompromising, from the doorway he remembered with painful certainty her attitude toward his propensity to pick up any stray that might catch him in a moment of too pronounced mellowness—stray human or feline or lost yellow dog.

"Supper is served, Cal," she drawled in her gentle, almost hissing, voice. Caleb received the statement as if it were an astounding bit of lithered undreamed of news.

"Comin', Sarah," he chirped briskly. "Comin' this blessed minute!"

### CHAPTER II.

The Logical Custodian.

WHEN, with a logical attempt at disingenuousness, Caleb said:

"I—I've a friend here, Sarah, whom I'd like to—er—present to you. This is my sister, Miss Hunter," he announced to the silent boy, "and this young man, Sarah, this young man is—er—ah—Mr.—"

"I'm Steve," said the boy mildly. "I'm just Stephen O'Mara."

"Certainly!" gasped Caleb. "Quite so—quite so! Sarah, this is just Steve."

The frail little woman with her quaint dimity of another decade failed



"I'm just Stephen O'Mara."

to move. She did not unbind so much as the fraction of an inch. But hard upon the heels of Caleb's last words the boy went forward unhesitatingly. Hat in the hand that balanced his big steel trap, he stopped in front of her and offered one brown paw.

"Haow d'ye do, Miss Hunter?" he saluted her gravely, and with a slow smile that discovered for her a row of white and even teeth: "Haow d'ye do? I—I reckon you're the first dressed up lady I ever did git to know!"

The calm statement took what little breath there had been left in Caleb's lungs. It left Sarah breathless too. But after an infinitesimal moment of waiting she held out her own delicate fingers and took the outstretched hand.

"Haow d'ye do, Steve?" she answered, and Caleb was at a loss to interpret the suppressed quality of her voice. "And I—some day I am sure it will be a great pleasure to remember that I was the first!"

Then she faced her brother.

"Will you—will your friend, Mr.—Steve—remain for supper, Cal?" she asked.

And Caleb, quick to see an opening, made the most of this one.

"Stay for supper!" he repeated her question, and he laughed. "Stay—for—supper!" Well, I should hope he would! Why—why, he's going to stop for the night."

From the vantage place there at the top of the steps Sarah stood and surveyed her brother's wide and guileless face for a second. Then her lips began to twitch.

"Very clever, Cal," she told him. "Quite clever—for you!"

And she nodded and withdrew to see that the table was laid for three.

Caleb, chuckling, watched her go; then, with a nod to the boy, he started to follow her in. But Steve paused at the threshold, and when the man stopped and looked back to ascertain the cause of his delay he found that the boy was depositing the bear trap upon the porch door—found him tugging to free the rusty old revolver from his belt.

"I'll leave Samantha here," the one called Steve stated, and Caleb understood that he meant the trap. "And I reckon I'd better not lug my weapon into the house neither, he? I? She might—"

He nodded in the direction of Sarah's disappearance. "Old Tom says women folks that's gentle born air kind-a skittish about havin' shootin' irons around the place. And I don't reckon it's the part of men folks to pester 'em."

Caleb didn't know just what to say, so he merely nodded approval. Again he had been made to feel that it was not a boy, but some little old man, who was explaining to him. Silently he led the way upstairs, and after he had seen the blanket pack deposited in one corner of Sarah's beloved guest room, after he had seen the rusty coat peeled off as a preface to removing the dust accumulation of the long hot day from hands and face, an inspiration came to him. While the boy was washing, utterly lost to everything but that none too simple task, he went out of the room on a still hunt of his own and came back presently with the thing for which he had gone searching. He found the boy wrestling a little desperately with a mop of wavy chestnut hair, which only grew the more helpless with every stroke of the brush.

"Never mind that," Caleb met the misapprehension in the boy's eye.

"Never mind that. And I—I've taken the liberty of digging out this old canvas shooting coat. It's one I got for

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Sarah—for my sister—but, as you say women folks are mighty skittish about anything that has to do with a gun. She never would go even so far as to try it on, but if you don't mind— That coat of yours must be a trifle hot for this weather, I should say."

Steve reached out a hand that trembled a little and took the coat. He took it and stared at it with that same strained and hungry look which he had bestowed a half hour before upon the "city."

"Do you mean," he asked, and his lips remained parted breathlessly upon the question—"do you mean—this yer's for me?"

Caleb thought of the "injin"—the steam injine.

"I mean just that if you'll have it," he replied.

The boy slipped his little body into the garment and wheeled to survey himself in a mirror. In comparison with his old coat it was the purple of a Solomon. There was a cartridge web across his front, with loops, and after he had looked long and long at his reflection the boy thrust both his thumbs into the belt it made.

Then: "Them's fer kertridges," he announced solemnly.

He scowled judiciously and nodded. And, "I'll bet to git me some the first thing in the mornin'," he said.

At table the boy talked freely, at ease with his wide eyes upon the face

of his questioner, always in the grave and slightly drawing idioms of the woods. Again he confided that he had never before been out of the timber. He explained that Old Tom's untimely taking off a fortnight back had been alone responsible for this pilgrimage. And that opened the way for a question which Caleb had been eager to ask him.

"I suppose this—this Old Tom was some kin of yours?" he observed.

The boy shook his head.

"No," he answered, "no, I ain't never had no kin. I ain't never had nobody—father ner mother, neither."

Caleb saw Sarah start a little and bite her thin lips. But the birdlike movement of surprise was lost upon the speaker.

"I ain't never had nobody," he reiterated, and Caleb, straining to catch a note of self pity or plea for sympathy in the words, realized that the boy didn't even know what the one or the other was. "I ain't never had nobody but old Tom. And he was—he wasn't nuthin' but what he called my—my"—the sentence was broken while he paused to get the phrase correctly—"he was what he called my 'logical custodian'."

Guiltily Caleb knew that his next question would savor of indelicacy, but he had to ask it just the same.

"Still I suppose his—his taking off must have been something in the na-

ture of a blow to you?" he suggested.

The boy pursed his lips.

"Wall, no," he exclaimed at last nonchalantly: "no-o-o. I can't say it was. We'd both been expectin' it, I reckon."

And the rest of the words were quite casual.

"I kind-a reckon he'd hev made it at that," he offered his opinion, "if they'd hev been a trifle more water. But the rocks was too close to the surface fer comfortable swimmin'. The Jenkinses found him down in the slack water Sunday noon or thereabouts, and they sed he'd never be no deader, not even if he'd a-died in a reg'lar bed, with a doctor helpin' him along."

Caleb threw his sister one lugubriously hopeless glance. Sarah had choked apparently upon a crumb of bread and was coughing stragglingly.

This time when Caleb lifted his eyes he met a startled gleam behind Sarah's half dropped lashes. She was peering steadily into the boy's lean, untroubled face. Caleb voiced the query which he knew must be behind her quiet intentness.

"You said your name was O'Mara, I believe. I suppose that was—ah—Old Tom's last name too?"

Steve laughed. He laughed frankly for the first time since he had halted hours before outside in the dusty road.

(To be continued next week)

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"Do you mean—this yer's for me?" Old Tom he often sed he knew that