

Hulbert Footner



***The Handsome
Young Men***

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My older readers will remember the great sensation that was caused some twenty-odd years ago by the marriage of Van Sicklen Harker to Cornelia Mittlinger, thus uniting two of the greatest fortunes in the country. In due course this couple had a daughter, who was also christened Cornelia. The newspapers dubbed her the billion dollar baby. Throughout her childhood items about her feeding bottles, her lace caps and the diamond buckles on her little slippers continually found their way into the press. If ever a child was reared upon publicity this was it. When she was about ten years old her parents were divorced; and each subsequently re-married; but Van Barker's second wife and Mrs. Barker's second husband have nothing to do with this story. Throughout her childhood, little Cornelia lived in her own great house surrounded by her own servants; and was visited in turn by her father and mother.

I suppose the old-timers were astonished when they read in the papers of little Cornelia's own love affair. That is the way with children; they will grow up. It may be objected here, that quite enough about Cornelia Barker's affairs has already been printed. Upon the death of her father recently, the whole thing was rehashed in the press. But that is the very reason I have made up my mind to write it. The exact truth never has been told; and during the few years that have elapsed since these things happened, so many fables have become attached to the story, that it is almost unrecognisable. It is an amazing story, worth telling for its

own sake, quite apart from the prominence of the people concerned in it.

It broke with dramatic suddenness in the account of how Van Sicklen Harker, one of the best-known men about town, attempted to thrash a youth named Arpad Rody in the crowded lobby of the great Hotel Palazzo. They were separated by friends. Rody was described as a handsome young Hungarian, who had been engaged by the hotel as a sort of semi-professional dancer in the tea-room. The cause of the quarrel was kept out of the papers for the moment; but of course it was freely whispered about that Cornelia had become infatuated with her handsome partner in the tango.

A few days later all reason for secrecy vanished, when Cornelia, then eighteen years old, sent for the reporters to her house, and bluntly informed them that she was in love with Arpad Rody, and he with her; and that they intended to get married in spite of all the fathers in Christendom. What a sensation this interview caused! Every phase of the affair was conducted in a blaze of publicity.

Her father countered by summoning the reporters to his house in turn, and informing them that his daughter was under age; that she possessed no means in her own right; and that if she persisted in marrying Rody, whom he termed an unprincipled adventurer, it was his intention to cut her off without a cent. Upon this I believe Rody sued Harker for libel; but this side issue was soon lost sight of in the events which followed.

Cornelia's answer to her father's pronunciamento was to march out of the great house with which he provided her,

carrying only a satchel containing her dressing-case and night clothes. She engaged a room in a cheap boarding-house, and hired herself out as a cashier in a down-town restaurant. The proprietor of the restaurant had to call on the police for help in handling the crowds that besieged his place.

After a day or two Harker succeeded in rescuing his daughter out of the restaurant; and a truce was patched up. Each announced to the press that a reconciliation had been effected. They appeared in public together. Young Arpad Rody was not in evidence. Finally father and daughter departed for a visit to the Grande Canyon in Harker's private car.

In three days Cornelia was back. She announced that her father was too dictatorial for her taste, and she was not surprised that her mother had found it impossible to live with him. She established herself in her big house again, where Arpad Rody was a frequent visitor. The young couple were photographed together twenty times a day. They ostentatiously visited Tiffany's to buy a ring.

From his house Mr. Harker announced that he and his daughter were sailing on the *Baratoria* in a week's time for a world tour.

From her house Cornelia announced that she had no intention of leaving New York.

Harker repeated his statement that they were going away.

Cornelia repeated hers that they were not.

The *Baratoria* was to sail on a Wednesday. On the Monday a fresh sensation was created by the disappearance

of Cornelia Harker. She had walked out of her house on Sunday afternoon; and had failed to return. Neither was Arpad Rody to be found. The father was in a state of distraction.

On Tuesday the young pair turned up smiling. They announced that they had been married in Wilmington. They did not return to Cornelia's house, but engaged a suite at the Hotel Palazzo. And everybody supposed that the play had ended—ended as plays ought to be with the discomfiture of the stern father.

Up to this moment it had been pure comedy. It was looked on as a sort of burlesque upon the evil of having too much money. In view of the girl's ridiculous bringing up, it was held that Harker had received no worse than he might have expected. Popular opinion was bound to be on the side of the handsome young lovers, who made a bluff of daring poverty for the sake of love. There was nothing for the father to do but to back down as gracefully as he could. Good comedy; everybody was laughing at it.

The Tuesday evening papers carried a brief story of the marriage; and the Wednesday morning papers amplified it. At noon on Wednesday I was startled by hearing the boys cry an extra in our street. Their voices suggested that something was really the matter, so I hastened down to the door and bought a paper. What I read in it turned me a little sick with horror. An hour before, Arpad Rody had been found shot dead in the suite at the Palazzo, with his bride lying in a faint near by.



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I carried the newspaper to Mme. Storey in her private office. This was the long room that I have so often described, furnished with priceless Italian antiques, and lighted by a row of casements at one end looking out on Gramercy Park. Here at a wide black oaken table with her back to the windows, works my beautiful mistress like a chemist in his laboratory, analysing souls. Like everybody else she had been interested and amused in following the Harker affair from day to day. When I showed her the brief, bald announcement, she did not, like others, waste her breath in protestations of horror. Her face turned grave. She said:

“Bella, we will be called on to act in this matter. Send a boy to obtain a room plan of the Palazzo, showing the suite occupied by the young couple. Make a file of the newspaper reports of the case. Get in touch with Inspector Rumsey at Headquarters; and tell him that I would be obliged if he will furnish me with the latest information. Order Crider and Stephens to report at the office.”

I was back in my own room attending to these instructions, when the outer door banged open, and four men came tumbling in. They were well-dressed men; they looked like persons to whom consideration was due; but at the moment all four had a frantic air. I had never seen any of them before. They all cried in a breath:

“Madame Storey ... where is she?”

“Who are you, please? And what do you want of her?” I asked in astonishment.

“I am Van Sicklen Harker,” said one.... “He is Mr. Van Sicklen Harker,” echoed the other three.

“Please be seated,” said I, making for the door of Mme. Storey’s room.

I doubt if they heard me. They all seemed half beside themselves. When I opened the door they pushed in with me. What could one do?

As it turned out, Mme. Storey was acquainted with Mr. Harker, and she took in the situation at a glance. All four men began talking to her at once. I picked out such phrases as: “Rody has been shot! ... Cornelia taken to Headquarters! ... We fear she may be arrested! ... No weapon has been found! ...”

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!” protested Mme. Storey, waving her hands in front of her. “One at a time! ... Who are these gentlemen, Mr. Harker?”

“My friends ...” he said helplessly.

He was truly a pitiable object. A man accustomed to show a good front to the world, his path had always been smoothed for him, and now he suddenly found the ground cut away. At the touch of tragedy his weakness was revealed. His hands shook; his eyes rolled; his tongue stuttered. He looked very young to be the father of a married daughter; not above forty. The other three were merely his toadies; his hangers-on. Harker was the type of millionaire who always carries them around with him. There was nothing genuine in their distress. They were secretly

pleased at being concerned in such an important affair. They lent a comic touch to the grim situation.

"What is it you want of me?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Help me ... help me!" said Harker imploringly.

He seemed to be unable to get any further; and one of his friends stepped forward. He was the most intelligent-looking of the three; a clean-shaven man of indeterminate age with a wary blue eye. He was elegantly dressed and there was a subtle assurance in his manner; Fifth Avenue, Newport, Lenox, was stamped on him, like labels on a piece of luggage. A comely man, but a little too soft and smooth.

"Poor Harker is overwhelmed," he said solicitously. He had the flat, reedy voice of his type. "I am Algernon Bleecker. I have had the pleasure of being presented to you; but perhaps you have forgotten me."

"I remember you very well," said Mme. Storey with a polite and inscrutable smile.

"How nice of you," purred Mr. Bleecker. "Let me explain this matter to you."

"I am sorry," interrupted Mme. Storey, "but I must deal with the principal. If you gentlemen will be good enough to wait in the outer room ..."

All three gentlemen were indignant; but they dared not show it openly in the light of my mistress's cool and level glance. With angry glances among themselves, they retired into my office. I have no doubt Mme. Storey was well abused in there.

"Sit down," said Mme. Storey more kindly to Harker. He dropped into a chair. She pushed the cigarette box towards