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The Amateur Inn

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CHAPTER I
A NON-SKIPPABLE PROLOGUE

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OSMUN VAIL doesn't come into this story at all. Yet he was responsible for everything that happened in it.

He was responsible for the whistling cry in the night, and for the Thing that huddled among the fragrant boxtrees, and for the love of a man and a maid—or rather the loves of several men and a maid—and for the amazing and amusing and jewel-tangled dilemma wherein Thaxton was shoved.

He was responsible for much; though he was actively to blame for nothing. Moreover he and his career were interesting.

So he merits a word or two, if only to explain what happened before the rise of our story's curtain.

At this point, the boreful word, Prologue, should be writ large, with a space above and below it, by way of warning. But that would be the sign to skip. And one cannot skip this short prologue without losing completely the tangled thread of the yarn which follows—a thread worth gripping and a yarn more or less worth telling.

So let us dispose of the prologue, without calling it by its baleful name; and in a mere mouthful or two of words. Something like this:

When Osmun Vail left his father's Berkshire farm, at twenty-one, to seek his fortune in New York, he wore his $12 "freedom suit" and had a cash capital of $18, besides his railway ticket.

Followed forty years of brow-sweat and brain-wrack and one of those careers whose semi-occasional real-life recurrence keeps the Success magazines out of the pure-fiction class.

When Osmun Vail came back, at sixty-one, to the Berkshire farm that had been his father’s until the mortgage was foreclosed, he was worth something more than five million dollars. His life-battle had been fought and won. His tired soul yearned unspeakably for the peace and loveliness of the pleasant hill country where he had been born—the homeland he had half-forgotten and which had wholly forgotten him and his.

Osmun recalled the prim village of Stockbridge, the primmer town of Pittsfield, drowsing beneath South Mountain, the provincial scatter of old houses known as Lenox; the tumbled miles of mountain wilderness and the waste of lush farmland between and around them.

At sixty-one he found Pittsfield a new city; and saw a Lenox and Stockbridge that had been discovered and renovated by beauty-lovers from the distant outside world. All that region was still in the youth of its golden development. But the wave had set in, and had set in strong.

A bit dazzled and more than a little troubled by the transformation, Osmun Vail sought the farm of his birth and the nearby village of Aura. Here at least nothing had changed; except that his father’s house—built by his grandfather’s own gnarled hands—had burned down; taking the rattle-trap red barns with it. The whole hilltop farm lay weedgrown, rank, desolate. In the abomination of

desolation, a deserted New England farm can make Pompeii look like a hustling metropolis. There is something awesome in its new deadness.

Cold fingers seemed to catch Osmun by the throat and by the heartstrings; as he stared wistfully from the house's site, to the neglected acres his grandsire had cleared and his sire had loved. From the half-memory of a schoolday poem, the returned wanderer quoted chokingly:

"*Here will I pitch my tent. Here will I end my days.*"

Then on the same principle of efficient promptitude which had lifted him from store-porter to a bank presidency, Osmun Vail proceeded to realize a dream he had fostered through the bleakly busy decades of his exile.

For a ridiculously low price he bought back and demortgaged the farm and the five hundred acres that bordered it. He turned loose a horde of landscape artists upon the domain. He sent overseas for two renowned British architects, and bade them build him a house on the hilltop that should be a glorious monument to his own success and to his father's memory. To Boston and to New York he sent, for a legion of skilled laborers. And the estate of Vailholme was under way.

Fashion, wealth, modernity, had skirted this stretch of rolling valley to northeast of Stockbridge and to south of Lenox. The straggly one-street village of Aura drowsed beneath its giant elms; as it had drowsed since a quarter-century after the Pequot wars. The splashing invasion of this moneyed New Yorker created more neighborhood excitement than would the visit of a Martian to Brooklyn.

Excitement and native hostility to outsiders narrowed down to a very keen and very personal hatred of Osmun Vail; when it was learned that all his skilled labor and all his building material had been imported from points beyond the soft green mountain walls which hedge Aura Valley.

Now there was not a soul in the Valley capable of building any edifice more imposing or imaginative than a two-story frame house. There was no finished material in the Valley worth working into the structure of such a mansion as Osmun proposed. But this made no difference. An outlander had come back to crow over his poor stay-at-home neighbors, and he was spending his money on outside help and goods, to the detriment of the natives. That was quite enough. The tide of icy New England hate swelled from end to end of the Valley; and it refused to ebb.

These Aura folk were Americans of Puritan stock—a race to whom sabotage and arson are foreign. Thus they did not seek to destroy or even to hamper the work at Vailholme. But their aloofness was made as bitter and blighting as a Bible prophet's curse. For example:

When his great house was but half built, Osmun ran up from New York, one gray January Saturday afternoon, to inspect the job. This he did every few weeks. And, on his tours, he made headquarters at Plum's, in Stockbridge, six miles away. This was an ancient and honorable hostelry which some newfangled folk were even then beginning to call "The Red Lion Inn," and whose food was one of Life's Compensations. Thence, on a livery nag, Vail was wont to ride out to his estate.

On this January trip Osmun found that Plum’s had closed, at Christmas, for the season. He drove on to Aura, only to find the village’s one inn was shut for repairs. Planning to continue his quest of lodgings as far as Lenox or, if necessary, to Pittsfield, Osmun went up, through a snowstorm, to his uncompleted hilltop mansion of Vailholme.

He had brought along a lunch, annexed from the Stockbridge bakery. So interested did he become in wandering from one unceilinged room to another, and furnishing and refurnishing them in his mind, that he did not notice the steady increase of the snowfall and of the wind which whipped it into fury.

By the time he went around to the shed, at the rear of the house, where he had stabled the livery horse, he could scarce see his hand before his face. The gale was hurling the tons of snow from end to end of the Valley, in solid masses. There was no question of holding the road or even of finding it. The horse knew that—and he snorted, and jerked back on the bit when Osmun essayed to lead him from shelter.

Every minute, the blizzard increased.

The corps of indoor laborers and their bosses had gone to their Pittsfield quarters, for Sunday. Osmun had the deserted place to himself. Swathed in his greatcoat and in a mountain of burlap, and burrowing into a bed of torn papers and paint-blotched wall-cloths, he made shift to pass a right miserable night.

By dawn the snowfall had ceased. But so had the Valley’s means of entrance and of exit. The two roads leading from it

to the outer world were choked breast high with solid drifts. For at least three days there could be no ingress or egress. Aura bore this isolation, philosophically. To be snowbound and cut off from the rest of the universe was no novelty to the Valley hamlet. Osmun bore it less calmly.

By dint of much skill and more persuasion, he piloted his floundering horse down the hill and into the village. There, at the first house, he demanded food and shelter. He received neither. Neither the offer of much money nor an appeal to common humanity availed. It took him less than an hour to discover that Aura was unanimous in its mode of paying him back for his slight to its laborers. Not a house would take him in. Not a villager would sell him a meal or so much as feed his horse.

Raging impotently, Osmun rode back to his frigid and draughty hilltop mansion-shell. By the time he had been shivering there for an hour a thin little man stumped up the steps.

The newcomer introduced himself as Malcolm Creede. He had stopped for a few minutes in Aura, that morning, for provisions, and had heard the gleeful accounts of the villagers as to their treatment of the stuck-up millionaire. Wherefore, Creede had climbed the hill, in order to offer the scanty hospitality of his own farmhouse to Osmun, until such time as the roads from the Valley should be open.

Osmun greeted the offer with a delight born of chill and starvation. Leading his horse, he followed Creede across a trackless half-mile or so to a farm that nestled barrenly in a cup of the hills. During the plungingly arduous walk he learned something of his host.

Creede was a Scotchman, who had begun life as a schoolmaster; and who had come to America, with his invalid wife, to better his fortunes. A final twist of fate had stranded the couple on this Berkshire farm. Here, six months earlier, the wife had died, leaving her heart-crushed husband with twin sons a few months old. Here, ever since, the widower had eked out a pitifully bare living; and had cared, as best he might, for his helpless baby boys. His meager homestead, by the way, had gleefully been named by luckier and more witty neighbors, “Rackrent Farm.” The name had stuck.

Before the end of Osmun Vail’s enforced stay at Rackrent Farm, gratitude to his host had merged into genuine friendship. The two lonely men took to each other, as only solitaries with similar tastes can hope to. Osmun guessed, though Creede denied it, that the Good Samaritan deed of shelter must rouse neighborhood animosity against the Scotchman.

Osmun guessed, and with equal correctness, that this silent and broken Scot would be bitterly offended at any offer of money payment for his hospitality. And Vail set his own ingenuity to work for means of rewarding the kindness.

As a result, within six months Malcolm Creede was installed as manager (“factor,” Creede called it) of the huge new Berkshire estate of Vailholme and was supervising work on a big new house built for him by Osmun in a corner of the estate.

Creede was woefully ignorant of business matters. Coming into a small inheritance from a Scotch uncle, he turned the pittance over to Vail for investment. And he was

merely delighted—in no way suspicious—when the investments brought him in an income of preposterous size. Osmun Vail never did things by halves.

Deeply grateful, Creede threw his energy and boundless enthusiasm into his new duties. He went further. One of his twin sons he christened “Clive” for the inheritance-leaving uncle in Scotland. But the other he named “Osmun,” in honor of his benefactor. Vail, much gratified at the compliment, insisted on taking over the education of both lads. The childless bachelor reveled in his rôle of fairy godfather to them.

But there was another result of Osmun Vail’s chilly vigil in the half-finished hilltop mansion. During the hour before Creede had come to his rescue the cold and hungry multimillionaire had taken a vow as solemn as it was fantastic.

He swore he would set aside not less than ten of his house’s forty-three rooms for the use of any possible wayfarers who might be stranded, as he had been, in that inhospitable wilderness, and who could afford to pay for decent accommodations. Not tramps or beggars, but folk who, like himself, might come that way with means for buying food and shelter, and to whom such food and shelter might elsewhere be denied.

This oath he talked over with Creede. The visionary Scot could see nothing ridiculous about it. Accordingly, ten good rooms were allotted mentally to paying guests, and a clause in Vail’s will demanded that his heirs maintain such rooms, if necessary, for the same purpose. The fact was not

advertised. And during Osmun's quarter-century occupancy of Vailholme nobody took advantage of the chance.

During that quarter-century the wilderness's beauty attracted more and more people of means and of taste. Once-bleak hills blossomed into estates. The village of Aura became something of a resort. The face of the whole countryside changed.

When Osmun Vail died (see, we are through with him already, though not so much as launched on the queer effects of his queerer actions!) he bequeathed to his beloved crony, Malcolm Creede, the sum of $500,000, and a free gift of the house he had built for him, and one hundred acres of land around it.

Creede had named this big new home "Canobie," in memory of his mother's borderland birthplace. He still owned Rackrent Farm, two miles distant. He had taken pride, in off moments, in improving the sorry old farmhouse and bare acres into something of the quaint well-being which he and his dead wife had once planned for their wilderness home. Within a year after Vail's death Creede also died, leaving his fortune and his two homes, jointly, to his twin sons, Clive and Osmun.

The bulk of Vail's fortune—a matter of $4,000,000 and the estate of Vailholme—went to the testator's sole living relative; his grand-nephew, young Thaxton Vail, a popular and easy-going chap who, for years, had made his home with his great-uncle.

Along with Vailholme, naturally, went the proviso that ten of its forty-three rooms should be set aside, if necessary, for hotel accommodations.

Thaxton Vail nodded reminiscently, as he read this clause in the will. Long since, Osmun had explained its origin to him. The young fellow had promised, in tolerant affection for the oldster, to respect the whim. As nobody ever yet had taken advantage of the hotel proposition and as not six people, then alive, had heard of it, he felt safe enough in accepting the odd condition along with the gift.

Chapter II
AT LAST THE STORY BEGINS

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AMONG the two million Americans shoved bodily into the maelstrom of the World War were Thaxton Vail and the Creede twins.

This story opens in the spring of 1919, when all three had returned from overseas service.

Aura and the summer-colony were heartily glad to have Thaxton Vail back again. He was the sort of youth who is liked very much by nine acquaintances in ten and disliked by fewer than one in ninety. But there was no such majority opinion as to the return of the two young Creedes.

The twins, from babyhood, had been so alike in looks and in outward mannerisms that not five per cent of their neighbors could tell them apart. But there all resemblance ceased.

Clive Creed was of the same general type as young Vail, who was his lifelong chum. They were much alike in traits and in tastes. They even shared—that last year before the war cut a hole in the routine of their pleasant lives—a mutual ardor for Doris Lane, who, with her old aunt, Miss Gregg, spent her summers at Stormcrest, across the valley from Vailholme. It was the first shadow of rivalry in their chumship.

Clive and Thaxton had the same pleasantly easy-going ways, the same unforced likableness. They were as popular as any men in the hill-country’s big summer-colony. Their

wartime absence had been a theme for genuine regret to Aura Valley.

Except in looks, Osmun Creede was as unlike his twin brother as any one could well have been. The man had every Scotch flaw and crotchet, without a single Scotch virtue. Old Osmun Vail had sized up the lad's character years earlier, when he had said in confidence to Thaxton:

"There's a white man and a cur in all of us, Thax. And some psychologist sharps say twins are really one person with two bodies. Clive got all the White Man part of that 'one person,' and my lamentable namesake got all the Cur. At times I find myself wishing he were 'the lamented Osmun Creede,' instead of only 'the lamentable Osmun Creede.' Hester Gregg says he behaves as if Edgar Allan Poe had written him and Berlioz had set him to music."

From childhood, Thaxton and this Creede twin had clashed. In the honest days of boyhood they had taken no pains to mask their dislike. In the more civil years of adolescence they had been at much pains to be courteous to each other when they met, but they tried not to meet. This avoidance was not easy; in such a close corporation as the Aura set, especially after both of them began calling over-often on Doris Lane.

Back to the Berkshires, from overseas, came the two Creedes. The community prepared to welcome Clive with open arms; and to tolerate Osmun, as of old, for the sake of his brother and for the loved memory of his father. At once Aura was relieved of one of its former perplexities. For no longer were the twins impossible to tell apart.

They still bore the most amazing likeness to each other, of course. But a long siege of trench fever had left Osmun slightly bald on the forehead and had put lines and hollows in his good-looking face and had given his wide shoulders a marked stoop. Also, a fragment of shell in the leg had left him with a slight limp. The fever, too, had weakened his eyes; and had forced him to adopt spectacles with a faintly smoked tinge to their lenses. Altogether, he was plainly discernible, now, from his erect brother, and looked nine years older.

There was another change, too, in the brethren. Hitherto they had lived together at Canobie. On their return from the war they astonished Aura by separating. Osmun lived on at the big house. But Clive took his belongings to Rackrent Farm; and set up housekeeping there; attended by an old negro and his wife, who had worked for his father. He even transported thither the amateur laboratory wherewith he and Osmun had always delighted to putter; and he set it up in a vacant back room of the farmhouse.

Aura was thrilled at these signs of discord in the hitherto inseparable brethren. Clive had been the only mortal to find good in Osmun and to care for his society. Now, apparently, there had been a break.

But almost at once Aura found there had been no break. The twins were as devoted as ever, despite their decision to live two miles apart. They were back and forth, daily, at each other’s homes; and they wrought, side by side, with all their old zeal, in the laboratory.

Osmun’s cantankerous soul did not seem to have undergone any purifying process from war experience and

long illness. Within a month after he came back to Aura he proceeded to celebrate his return by raising the rents of the seven cottages he and Clive owned; and by a twenty per cent cut in the pay of the Canobie laborers.

Aura is not feudal Europe. Nor had Osmun Creede any of the hereditary popularity or masterliness of a feudal baron. Wherefore the seven tenants prepared to walk out of their rent-raised homes. The Canobie laborers, to a man, went on strike. Aura applauded. Osmun sulked.

Clive came to the rescue, as ever he had done when his brother's actions had aroused ill-feeling. He rode over to Canobie and was closeted for three hours with Osmun. Servants, passing the library, heard and reported the hum of arguing voices. Then Clive came out and rode home. Next morning Osmun lowered the rents and restored wages to their old scale. As usual, the resultant popularity descended on Clive and not upon himself.

It was a week afterward that Thaxton Vail chanced to meet Osmun at the Aura Country Club. Osmun stumped up to him, as Vail sat on the veranda rail waiting for Doris Lane to come to the tennis courts.

"I was blackballed, yesterday, by the Stockbridge Hunt Club," announced Creede, with no other salutation.

"I'm sorry," said Thaxton, politely.

"I hear, on good authority, that it was you who blackballed me," continued Osmun, his spectacled eyes glaring wrathfully on his neighbor. "And I've come to ask why you did it. In fact, I demand to know why."

"I'm disobedient, by nature," said Thaxton, idly. "So if I had blackballed you, I'd probably refuse to obey your

‘demand.’ But as it happened, I didn’t blackball you. I wasn’t even at the Membership Committee’s meeting.”

“I hear, on good authority, that *you* blackballed me,” insisted Osmun, his glare abating not at all.

“And I tell you, on better authority, that I didn’t,” returned Thaxton with a lazy calm that irked the angry man all the more.

“Then who did?” mouthed Osmun. “I’ve a right to know. I mean to get to the bottom of this. If a club, like the Stockbridge Hunt, blackballs a man of my standing, I’ll know why. I—”

“I believe the proceedings of Membership Committee meetings are supposed to be confidential,” Thaxton suggested. “Why not take your medicine?”

“I still believe it was you who blackballed me!” flamed Osmun. “I had it from—”

“You have just had it from me that I didn’t,” interposed Thaxton, a thread of ice running through his pleasant voice. “Please let it go at that.”

“You’re the only man around here who would have done such a thing,” urged Creede, his face reddening and his voice rising. “And I am going to find out why. We’ll settle this, here and now. I—”

Thaxton rose lazily from his perch on the rail.

“If you’ve got to have it, then take it,” he said, facing Osmun. “I wasn’t at the meeting. But Willis Chase was. And I’ll tell you what he told me about it, if it will ease your mind. He said, when your name was voted on, the ballot-box looked as if it were full of Concord grapes. There wasn’t a single white ball dropped into the box. I’m sorry to—”

“That’s a lie!” flamed Osmun.

Thaxton Vail’s face lost all its habitual easy-going aspect. He took a forward step, his muscles tensing. But before he could set in whizzing action the fist he had clenched, a slender little figure stepped, as though by chance, between the two men.

The interloper was a girl; wondrous graceful and dainty in her white sport suit. Her face was bronzed, beneath its crown of gold-red hair. Her brown eyes were as level and honest as a boy’s.

“Aren’t you almost ready, Thax?” she asked. “I’ve been waiting, down at the courts, ever so long while you sat up here and gossiped. Good morning, Oz. Won’t you scurry around and find some one to make it ‘doubles’? Thax and I always quarrel when we play ‘singles.’ Avert strife, won’t you, by finding Greta Swalm, or some one, and joining us? Please do, Oz. We—”

Osmun Creede made a sound such as might well be expected to emanate from a turkey whose tail feathers are pulled just as it starts to gobble. Glowering afresh at Vail, but without further effort at articulate speech, he turned and stumped away.

Doris Lane watched him until his lean form was lost to view around the corner of the veranda. Then, wheeling on Thaxton, with a striking change from her light manner, she asked:

“What was the matter? Just as I came out of the door I heard him tell you something or other was a lie. And I saw you start for him. I thought it was time to interrupt. It would be a matter for the Board of Governors, you know, here on

the veranda, with every one looking on. What was the matter?”

“Oh, he thought I blackballed him, for the Hunt Club,” explained Thaxton. “When, as a matter of fact, I seem to be about the only member who didn’t. I told him so, and he said I lied. I’m—I’m mighty glad you horned in when you did. It’s always a dread of mine that some day I’ll have to thrash that chap. And you’ve saved me from doing it—this time. It’d be a hideous bore. And then there’d be good old Clive to be made blue by it, you know. And besides, Uncle Oz and his dad were—”

“I know,” she soothed. “I know. You won’t carry it any further, will you? Please don’t.”

“I suppose not,” he answered. “But, really, after a man calls another a liar and—”

“Oh, I suppose that means there’ll be one more neighborhood squabble,” she sighed, puckering her low forehead in annoyance. “And two more people who won’t see each other when they meet. Isn’t it queer? We come out to the country for a good time. And we spend half that time starting feuds or stopping them. People can live next door to each other in a big city for a lifetime, and never squabble. Then the moment they get to the country—”

“‘All Nature is strife,’” quoted Thaxton. “So I suppose when we get back to Nature we get back to strife. And speaking of strife, there was a girl who was going to let me beat her at tennis, this morning; instead of spending the day scolding me for being called a liar. Come along; before all the courts are taken. I want to forget that Oz Creede and I have got to cut each other, henceforth. Come along.”

On the following morning, appeared a little “human interest” story, in the Pittsfield *Advocate*. One of those anecdotal newspaper yarns that are foredoomed to be “picked up” and copied, from one end of the continent to the other. Osmun Creede had written the story with some skill. And the editor had sent a reporter to the courthouse to verify it, before daring to print it.

The article told, in jocose fashion, of the clause in old Osmun Vail’s will, requiring his great-nephew and heir to maintain Vailholme, at request, as a hotel. An editorial note added the information that a copy of the will had been read, at the courthouse, by an *Advocate* reporter, as well as Thaxton Vail’s signed acceptance of its conditions.

It was Clive Creede who first called Thaxton’s notice to the newspaper yarn. While young Vail was still loitering over his morning mail, Clive rode across from Rackrent Farm, bringing a copy of the *Advocate*.

“I’m awfully sorry, old man,” he lamented, as Thaxton frowningly read and reread the brief article. “Awfully sorry and ashamed. I guessed who had done this, the minute I saw it. I phoned to Oz, and charged him with doing it. He didn’t deny it. Thought it was a grand joke. I explained to him that the story was dead and forgotten; and that now he had let you in for no end of ridicule and perhaps for a lot of bother, too. But he just chuckled. While I was still explaining, he hung up the receiver.”

“He would,” said Thaxton, curtly. “He would.”

“Say, Thax,” pleaded Clive, “don’t be too sore on him. He means all right. He just has an unlucky genius for doing or saying the wrong thing. It isn’t his fault. He’s built that way.