

GILBERT PARKER

1246 lying

lying *atfalla*. [*< New Latin *lygu-**
tying' (lying), *n.*, *adj.*, *v.* —
be; the habit of telling lies;
casion.
— *at* false; not truthful.
— *at* cause of

—adj false; not truthful.

— and I am a participant
in present partitions
and the truth — by love
and in love — a participant
in present partitions.

by some on the ground

by John W. Wright

1920-21

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AN UNPARDONABLE LIAR

Gilbert Parker

An Unpardonable Liar

EAN 8596547332749

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I.

AN ECHO.

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"O de worl am roun an de worl am wide—
O Lord, remember your chillun in de mornin!
It's a mighty long way up de mountain side,
An day aint no place whar de sinners kin hide,
When de Lord comes in de mornin."

With a plaintive quirk of the voice the singer paused, gayly flicked the strings of the banjo, then put her hand flat upon them to stop the vibration and smiled round on her admirers. The group were applauding heartily. A chorus said, "Another verse, please, Mrs. Detlor."

"Oh, that's all I know, I'm afraid," was the reply. "I haven't sung it for years and years, and I should have to think too hard—no, no, believe me, I can't remember any more. I wish I could, really."

A murmur of protest rose, but there came through the window faintly yet clearly a man's voice:

"Look up an look aroun,
Fro you burden on de groun"—

The brown eyes of the woman grew larger. There ran through her smile a kind of frightened surprise, but she did not start nor act as if the circumstance were singular.

One of the men in the room—Baron, an honest, blundering fellow—started toward the window to see who the prompter was, but the host—of intuitive perception—saw that this might not be agreeable to their entertainer and said quietly: "Don't go to the window, Baron. See, Mrs. Detlor is going to sing."

Baron sat down. There was an instant's pause, in which George Hagar, the host, felt a strong thrill of excitement. To him Mrs. Detlor seemed in a dream, though her lips still smiled and her eyes wandered pleasantly over the heads of the company. She was looking at none of them, but her body was bent slightly toward the window, listening with it, as the deaf and dumb do.

Her fingers picked the strings lightly, then warmly, and her voice rose, clear, quaint and high:

"Look up an look aroun,
Fro you burden on de groun,
Reach up an git de crown,
When de Lord comes in de mornin—
When de Lord comes in de mornin!"

The voice had that strange pathos, veined with humor, which marks most negro hymns and songs, so that even those present who had never heard an Americanized negro sing were impressed and grew almost painfully quiet, till the voice fainted away into silence.

With the last low impulsion, however, the voice from without began again as if in reply. At the first note one of the young girls present made a start for the window. Mrs. Detlor

laid a hand upon her arm. "No," she said, "you will spoil—the effect. Let us keep up the mystery."

There was a strange, puzzled look on her face, apparent most to George Hagar. The others only saw the lacquer of amusement, summoned for the moment's use.

"Sit down," she added, and she drew the young girl to her feet and passed an arm round her shoulder. This was pleasant to the young girl. It singled her out for a notice which would make her friends envious.

It was not a song coming to them from without—not a melody, but a kind of chant, hummed first in a low sonorous tone, and then rising and falling in weird undulations. The night was still, and the trees at the window gave forth a sound like the monotonous s-sh of rain. The chant continued for about a minute. While it lasted Mrs. Detlor sat motionless and her hands lay lightly on the shoulders of the young girl. Hagar dropped his foot on the floor at marching intervals—by instinct he had caught at the meaning of the sounds. When the voice had finished, Mrs. Detlor raised her head toward the window with a quick, pretty way she had, her eyes much shaded by the long lashes. Her lips were parted in the smile which had made both men and women call her merry, amiable and fascinating.

"You don't know what it is, of course," she said, looking round, as though the occurrence had been ordinary. "It is a chant hummed by the negro woodcutters of Louisiana as they tramp homeward in the evening. It is pretty, isn't it?"

"It's a rum thing," said one they called the Prince, though Alpheus Richmond was the name by which his godmother

knew him. "But who's the gentleman behind the scenes—in the greenroom?"

As he said this he looked—or tried to look—knowingly at Mrs. Detlor, for, the Prince desired greatly to appear familiar with people and things theatrical, and Mrs. Detlor knew many in the actor and artist world.

Mrs. Detlor smiled in his direction, but the smile was not reassuring. He was, however, delighted. He almost asked her then and there to ride with him on the morrow, but he remembered that he could drive much better than he could ride, and, in the pause necessary to think the matter out, the chance passed—he could not concentrate himself easily.

"Yes. Who is it?" said the young girl.

"Lord, I'll find out," said the flaring Alpheus, a jeweled hand at his tie as he rose.

But their host had made up his mind. He did not know whether Mrs. Detlor did or did not recognize the voice, but he felt that she did not wish the matter to go farther. The thing was irregular if he was a stranger, and if he were not a stranger it lay with Mrs. Detlor whether he should be discovered.

There was a curious stillness in Mrs. Detlor's manner, as though she were waiting further development of the incident. Her mind was in a whirl of memories. There was a strange thumping sensation in her head. Yet who was to know that from her manner?

She could not help flashing a look of thanks to Hagar when he stepped quickly between the Prince and the window and said in what she called his light comedy manner:

"No, no, Richmond. Let us keep up the illusion. The gentleman has done us a service; otherwise we had lost the best half of Mrs. Detlor's song. We'll not put him at disadvantage."

"Oh, but look here, Hagar," said the other protestingly as he laid his hand upon the curtains.

Few men could resist the quiet decision of Hagar's manner, though he often laughed that, having but a poor opinion of his will as he knew it, and believing that he acted firmness without possessing it, save where he was purely selfish. He put his hands in his pockets carelessly, and said in a low, decisive tone, "Don't do it, if you please."

But he smiled, too, so that others, now gossiping, were unaware that the words were not of as light comedy as the manner. Hagar immediately began a general conversation and asked Baron to sing "The Banks o' Ben Lomond," feeling sure that Mrs. Detlor did not wish to sing again. Again she sent him a quick look of thanks and waved her fingers in protest to those who were urging her. She clapped her hands as she saw Baron rise, and the others, for politeness sake, could not urge her more.

For the stranger. Only the morning of that day he had arrived at the pretty town of Herridon among the hills and moors, set apart for the idle and ailing of this world. Of the world literally, for there might be seen at the pump-room visitors from every point of the compass—Hindoo gentlemen brought by sons who ate their legal dinners near Temple Bar; invalidated officers from Hongkong, Bombay, Aden, the Gold Coast and otherwhere; Australian squatters and their