

G. SHARPE AND A FLAT

By DOUGLAS Z. DOTY

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Gregory Sharpe, president of the Consolidated Gas company, sat in his private office dictating letters to his stenographer.

Outside a long line of people waited their turn to pay their gas bills at a small window in the wire partition, for it was the first of the month.

To the young clerks, who managed to dress right smartly on ten or twelve dollars a week, Sharpe was a constant source of wonderment. Careless, not to say unkempt, at times in his attire, from early to late he toiled at his office, and his employees thought what a great pity it was that this man, who knew so little how to enjoy life, should be the one to possess Aladdin's lamp.

As a young chap—he was now about thirty-eight or forty—he had had his unfortunate love affair. Then after a few black weeks he had set his teeth and thrown himself heart and soul into his business.

"That's all, Miss Hagen," said Sharpe as, with hands in his trousers pockets, he paced the floor of his sanctum. The sunlight streaming in through a tall window beyond the cashier bothered him every time he made the turn of his office. He might have called to a dozen fellows to pull up the shade, but it was like the man to go and attend to it himself. It was also characteristic that he should open the front door for a slip of a woman with a big bundle in her arms.

"Thank you!" said a sweet, low voice. "Thank you!" said a pair of big violet eyes looking up into his face. "Pretty little thing!" was Gregory's passing thought.

The girl readjusted the bundle and in doing so dropped a familiar green slip. Gregory knew by heart the printed matter on it. The statement was terse, businesslike and rather grim. "If the inclosed bill is not paid by the 1st, we shall be obliged to cut off your gas supply on that date."

The girl thanked him again as he picked it up for her, a wave of scarlet slowly spreading over her face. "Do they—do they—can you get an extension of time about paying if you promise to pay in a week?" she asked nervously.

"Well," said the president, "we have found that an extension of time generally makes matters worse. Let's see your bill. H'm! I'll see the cashier about this," he muttered and strode off.

The girl's eyes followed him. He looked less prosperous than many of the well groomed young fellows on high stools behind the wire netting. Perhaps he had something to do with the mechanical department. She was a little surprised to note with what alacrity the haughty looking cashier left his place at the window and the long line of waiting people. Gregory seemed to do all the talking, the cashier simply nodding at frequent intervals.

The girl's heart throbbed hopefully. She had always regarded that cashier as a most unapproachable individual. In a moment Gregory was back.

"You may have another fortnight in which to meet this bill," he announced kindly.

"Oh, thank you!" cried the girl joyfully. "It was so good of you to take the trouble. And the cashier—please tell him how grateful I am for doing as you asked."

"I will," said Gregory heartily, and his mouth twitched suspiciously as he moved her out the door.

"Send Fielder to me," he said on reaching his room. The cashier appeared on the instant.

"Yes, sir."

"That young lady I just spoke to you about, Miss?"

"Miss Josephine Locke, sir."

"Yes. Well, she wished me to thank you for being so kind as to grant her two weeks' extension of time."

Gregory shook with laughter, and Fielder grinned appreciatively. Two weeks later Fielder appeared before his chief.

"About that case you interested yourself in awhile ago, sir. Locke was the name. Time was up yesterday, and the bill isn't paid. I'm afraid it's the same old story. That soft kind, with big eyes and whining voice, are most generally fakes."

Gregory pondered. "I was fooled once before. Perhaps I am again. Oh, these women!" Then aloud: "Leave the papers with me, Fielder. I'm just curious enough to order a special inquiry. If we've been fooled, never again will I show any leniency."

It was half past 5 before he was ready to leave the office. He looked rather guiltily at Fielder plunging into his topcoat. Gregory meant to conduct that investigation in person.

By the time he had reached the dingy looking flathouse and had climbed four flights of dark stairs Sharpe repented of his bargain. Groping along a narrow hallway, he came to a card stuck

over a push button and inscribed "Mrs. L. T. Locke."

It was Miss Violet Eyes herself who opened the door. She recognized the caller in an instant.

"Oh, it's you!" she faltered, nervously twisting the knob of the half open door. "You've come to cut off the gas, I suppose." And she slowly made way for him to step in.

A little, white haired lady appeared. "Won't you step into the parlor?" she said.

Everything was so neat and the grate fire so cheery that at first Gregory did not realize how barren and poverty stricken the place was. The little old lady piloted him skillfully to the only easy chair in the room, which faced the little coal fire.

The best chair and the best outlook the room afforded!

A sweet old gentlewoman, thought Gregory, who has learned to keep up appearances under conditions that would have swamped most housewives with less pride and fewer resources.

"I suppose," murmured the old lady, smoothing out her black silk apron—"I suppose one should not indulge in the luxury of a grate fire with the gas bill unpaid, but," with a deprecating gesture, "it has been very cold, and one loses one's courage so easily when one can't keep warm."

It was said quietly, with gentle dignity, but the pathos of it!

"Madam," said Gregory in a voice that shook a little, "you are quite right. Pray do not think I am criticising you."

"You see," went on the lady, "my son has gone out west. He had such a splendid chance! He needed a little money to get started. I let him have it. He was to pay it back very soon. We've been expecting him to write for us every day for, oh, a long, long time—I almost forget how long! One loses track of the days somehow when one is waiting and one doesn't hear. But we heard today. He is coming home as soon as I can send him the fare."

A door banged. There was the rustle of skirts, and the fragrant odor of steaming tea reached Gregory's nostrils.

Then Josephine appeared with a tray of dishes, which she placed by her mother. Her face was flushed from standing over a fire.

"There, mother," she said, with a strange mixture of tears and defiance. "I guess I've used another cubic foot of gas, but your supper is as hot as the gas range could make it. If you'll step this way, sir, I'll show you where the meter is."

"You needn't mind," said Gregory slowly. "I only called to see when it would be convenient!"

He could not finish the sentence. There was something else to do. The girl, turning ghastly white, fell in a huddled heap at his feet.

She came back to life while her mother was searching for the brandy flask. She looked into his face anxiously.

"It's nothing—nothing—except that I am—hungry. But she mustn't know!"

She sank back, and the violent eyes were again hidden from Gregory's view.

* * * * *

"Gregory," she murmured as he bent over to fasten her gloves, for they were on their wedding journey, "how could you marry a girl who deliberately fibbed? I knew I couldn't pay that bill when the fortnight was up!"

"My dear girl," he murmured irrelevantly, "will you stand by me through thick and thin, as you did by your mother?"

But for reasons best known to Gregory Sharpe, president of the American Consolidated Gas company, his wife was unable to make reply.

Saved by His Wit.

The Duke of Wellington once met by accident an officer in a state of inebriety.

"Look here, sir," said the Iron Duke. "What would you do if you met one of your men in the condition in which I find you?"

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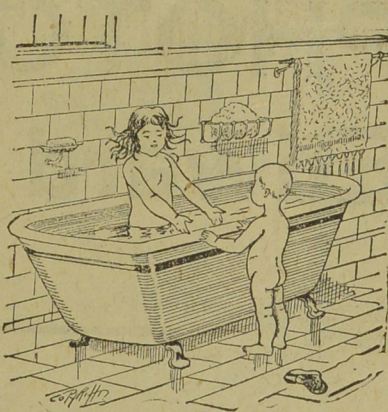
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