

THE TEST, A Story of

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE
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Abstractedly, but walking swiftly, he followed the homeward-bound crowds of wage-earners up Broadway, entering the Subway terminal in the rear of that gloomy monstrosity of architecture which serves New York for a post office. Abstractedly still, he boarded a train, found a seat, and permitted himself to be carried uptown — without the slightest consideration as to his destination.

It was with surprise that he came out of a brown study, wherein he had mapped out his plan for the morrow's campaign with great particularity, to find himself afoot and crossing Broadway at Seventy-second street.

He stopped short and smiled whimsically as he consulted his watch. After all, it was just what he might have expected of himself—that he should have alighted at just that station. It was foolish—ah, very foolish of him. But, all things considered, quite natural. His heart was to be held responsible.

And, since he had come so far, why should he retreat? There was a chance, a remote but delightful contingency, that he might not return unrewarded, if he persisted in that path to which his heart had led his feet. It would be odd, uncanny almost, if—

He turned toward Riverside Drive, threateningly aware of the beauty of the evening, quietly elated because of the stir on all sides and the bustle of the life that he knew and loved, since it was the life of this home town.

It was nothing to that which it would be a month later; the city was but waking, yawning and stretching itself, after the summer's lethargy; there were visible just bare glimmerings of the coming winter's brilliancy. Carriages, elaborately equipped and drawn by horses perfectly groomed, rolled past on either side of the broad street, alternating with cabs — handsome for the most part, through whose round side windows one caught fleeting glimpses of the profiles of women, flushed with the soft radiance of the western skies. Now and again an automobile, a vivid flash of color, a snoring, clamorous monster of shining brass and steel, dashed past at a seemingly reckless pace, yet threaded a sure and careful way through the maze of the more sober traffic. And the air was thrilled with an exhilarating clatter of ringing hoofs and jingling harness.

It was all good and comforting to the heart of Grey. He beamed upon the world his gracious approbation, even as he wondered, recognizing here and there a familiar face, what this or that acquaintance would think of him were his condition

known, that he trembled upon the brink of bankruptcy, made well-nigh penniless by the act of an unscrupulous business associate.

He turned out of Seventy-second street and was striding up West End avenue, humming a tuneless air between his teeth. He had made up his mind; he would just pass the house, merely take one glance at its facade, and then get on about his affairs. No more than that one glimpse of her abode, to hearten him against to-morrow's tangle; so much would suffice him.

Presently his heart began to beat a swift measure. He became aware of an empty cab, motionless by the carriage block of her home. He eyed it curiously, wastefully, wondering who had been so fortunate as to have occupied it, to have been welcome in that grey mansion; and he slowed his pace, looking up at windows through whose hangings a dim and alluring radiance tempted him, the while he gravely debated with himself the propriety of certain actions which might more properly be characterized as follies. A door opened and closed. A young woman appeared in the entryway, pausing to gather her skirts about her ere descending the steps. Grey saw her, and all but stopped stock-still, half minded to turn and incontinently to flee, wondering if a mad dash around the corner would attract her attention, and mostly wishing that the pavement might open and gulp him in to a seclusion for which he yearned unutterably just then. It was so tremendously "soft" of a chap, so cheaply lovelorn, to be caught mooning about beneath her windows, without even the shadow of a sane excuse. We understand.

And yet, through all these conflicting fears and absurd conjectures, there ran, like a strain of music or a thread of gold, a great and absorbing joy since he gazed upon her face, and a shankfulness that he should have been so favored of the gods — or of the god, if you prefer — the little god who watches over the affairs of the lovesick, or doesn't sometimes. Careless godding!

And you are to believe that Grey did not take to his heels. On the contrary, in point of fact.

As for the girl, she was making for the cab, utterly unaware of Grey's wistful regard. But halfway down the steps she had need to pause, as though she had forgotten some essential matter; and, pausing, turned to reascend, irresolute, unable to make up her mind; and finally, raked the motionless young man fore and aft with a careless glance, quite supremely indifferent to his existence. Naturally, their eyes met. The girl's widened, inquiringly, the while she smiled upon Grey with complete composure.

Promptly she seemed to settle the cause of her hesitation; Grey advancing, she came quickly to his side.

"I think," she said, soberly, "that you are the most exasperatingly unreliable person that I know." And, to the cabbie: "You need not wait, John. I have changed my mind. I shall walk."

The man touched his hat and drove off.

Meanwhile: "Why?" Grey inquired, directly.

"Because I prefer to walk, Thornton.

"Now, you know I didn't mean that.

"I meant, why am I so irritatingly unreliable, in your estimation?"

"I don't know," said the girl, gravely. She turned toward Riverside Drive. Grey swinging into step by her side, radiant with gratitude. "If I did know," she added, thoughtfully, "I should lose interest in you, I believe. It's the unexpected quality of you that makes you—h'm—bearable. One just gets comfortably accustomed to the thought that you are at a safe distance—Chesapeake Bay, was it?—mercilessly massacring, multitudes of—"

"Mallard," he laughed.

"Thank you. That rounds out the alliteration quite acceptably. And, lo! one finds you meekly waiting at one's doorstep like—like—"

"Like the famished beggar that I am—was," he corrected, hastily. "You see, I returned only this morning, and wandered up here, really without thinking whether I was bound—"

"Oh!"

"My heart led me," he explained, simply; and hereafter she forbore to interrupt him. "I was just debating whether I possessed sufficient nerve to beg for tea at this hour, just as I am, fagged from the office, covered with dust and grime—"

He laughed.

"And commissions?" she asked. "If only you had dropped in an hour ago—but I was dying for a breath of air and thought that the drive—"

"This," he returned in accents of sincere conviction, "is better—much better: Between tea in a crowded drawing room and a walk—alone, with you—there is positively no choice. I am sensible that I do not merit such happiness."

She flashed him a swift, sidelong glance.

"It's good to hear," she informed him, "that you're sensible on one subject, at least."

"I am; and terribly in earnest on another," he announced.

They had crossed the roadway and were strolling north, toward Mount Tom, on Riverside Drive. The girl paused, standing by the parapet-like wall that overlooked the parked slope, where the grass was rusty and strewn with dead leaves.

She rested the tips of her gloved fingers on the parapet, facing the dying light, her eyes shining, enraptured, and drew a long breath, slow and deep, as though wishing to draw into herself something of the beauty of the evening, and to absorb it and retain it forever.

Neither spoke; Grey, for his part, having eyes for nothing but her profile, that stood out in the gathering gloom with the effect of some rare cameo through which a light shines softly. He experienced a thrill—who had youth to know such thrills!—of immeasurable thankfulness because of her presence there, by his side, and for her incomparable sweetness and loveliness—as he considered them.

She shivered a trifle, conscious of the chill in the bracing air. The wind had blown a strand of hair across her eyes, and she smiled softly, re-arranging the errant tresses with little, deft pats of her fingers. It was like spun bronze, her hair; but where it was massed above her forehead it shone like molten copper.

Then she turned to him, still smiling, he saw her eyes and all but lost his head; because he adjudged them, from his personal standpoint, to be the most wonder-

ful eyes in the world. Which, of course, was saying a great deal, though it is undeniable that a certain amount of justification may be pleaded on the young man's behalf.

As a matter of fact, they were large eyes, shaded and long, brown lashes, which upcurled in a bewildering fashion; and the color of them was something tawny. I do not believe that the precise word to describe them has yet been invented by any lexicographer—nor by any colorist, for that matter. Even Grey hesitates when he speaks of their hue. Perhaps it was a certain something that lay in their depths that made him of the mind he was concerning them. It is hard to say.

"Let us walk," she suggested. And for a time they moved on in a silence. Grey was loathe to intrude his voice upon the wordless communion that existed between them. Moreover, since he had so many important matters to communicate, and a very brief time to do so in, he was in doubt as to where, exactly, it would be wise to begin; being only assured that it would be met unwise to begin with the three words that trembled on his lips whenever he looked toward her.

And, at length, she turned. "I must go back, now," she said. "And it seems to me, Thornton Grey, that you are sulking about something or other; which isn't pretty when I'm so nice to you."

Following which, she pretended to pout, because she knew very well, indeed, that he had not been sulking at all, and, furthermore, knew precisely why he had been speechless.

"I am not," he protested. "Only—I've something to say to you." He was thinking of his trouble; but she did not understand.

"Then why don't you?" she inquired.

"At least, unless it's something that I don't wish to hear."

"But it isn't," he protested. "At least, it is and it isn't."

"In that case," she told him, sweetly, "you'd better not tell me at all. You know what I must say."

"But you don't in the least understand what I'm driving at," he told her, gloomily. "I think you'll be glad to hear it. At least, you'll be glad to hear the first part; I flatter myself not the second."

(To be Continued.)

SAYS JAPAN WILL WIN

A correspondent of the Paris Journal, M. Balet, who writes from Tokio, takes a most pessimistic view of Russia's situation with regard to Japan. In the first place, he says, the most erroneous notions prevail as to the financial strength of Japan. The fourth national loan of 250,000,000 francs was taken up by the people as joyfully as was the first. The new taxes are paid without demur, and instead of there being any truth in the reports as to growing misery in Japan, that country was never better off. The cost of living has scarcely increased, and there has been no falling off in the savings banks deposits, but, on the contrary, an increase. There is, it is true, some stagnation in trade, he admits, but no real drop in prices. Japan, says M. Balet, can always borrow money so long as she can provide two things—guarantees and victories. If Russia fancies therefore, that she can starve out Japan save by carrying on the war for four or five years, which is unlikely, she is gravely misinformed. As for beating her in battle, he thinks that this is just as unlikely. The Russian army, in his opinion, is so inferior, all things considered, to the Japanese forces that the latter would be victorious even if pitted against its enemy in the proportion of two to three. The Japanese reserves, he declares, are far from exhausted, and Japan can make excellent soldiers in three months. This testimony from a Frenchman is significant, but it is to be noted that M. Balet gets his inspiration at Japanese headquarters.

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