The Green Seal

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

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CHAPTER IV.—(Cont'd).

"Enough of this. We are getting morbid and it's all beside the point anyway. What information did your Aunt Lois give you?"

"None. Since that day I have begged and implored her to, but the very thought of it seems so terrible to her that I grew afraid to insist. Whatever horrors may remain unrevealed to me, it is perhaps best that I know nothing of them."

"Much trouble that might have been averted," I commented, "has been caused by a misguided policy of silence. Nothing your aunt might tell you could be worse than this cruel, unrelieved half-knowledge."

"But what's the use, Mr. Ferris? A fact like this can't be relieved. Aunt Lois proposed that we go away somewhere where we were unknown; but I refused. I couldn't agree to such a faint-hearted course. After looking at the matter from every conceivable angle I determined to fight it out right here. You can't alter the truth by trying to run away from it."

"And you did exactly right," I sincerely assured her.

A silent pause fell. We were busy with out thoughts. By and by I said:

"How did Hardwick learn about your father?"

She shook her head. "I can't imagine. It's something Aunt Lois and I supposed was secret between us, and our habits of life have grown out of an elaborate process of trying to forget."

The detail somehow clung to me, demanding consideration; but it prompted no definite, comprehensible conclusion.

"It's strange," I said at last, "that he should have known it all. Besides, what difference could it have made for him? It's not a notorious fact, and you are guiltless."

Another silent pause ensued, during which she seemed to be revolving something in her mind. She looked at me presently.

"I've speculated about it a good deal, of course," she said, "but to no purpose." After another moment of consideration she pursued with a deliberate air:

"Within the last few weeks something has happened that may or may not throw some light on the subject, though I must confess that I can't see how. I hate to trouble you with private affairs, but I have been just wild to ask—"

"Huh!" I grunted inelegantly. "This is no time for nice observances of propriety and decorum. If I thought you'd withhold anything now I'd raise Old Ned, and he's been dead an age of blue moons. So you'd better be candid with me."

She flashed a bright smile at me and got up from her chair.

"I'll take you at your word," said she. "The queerest thing that ever happened to a girl has happened to me only recently. I'll tell you about it when I get some letters and a telegram from my desk. It will take but a minute."

I returned to my chair and waited while she went to fetch them.

CHAPTER V.

Miss Fox was absent only a few seconds, and when she reappeared I observed that she laid aside her notebook and all the pencils except one that was thrust through the heavy bronze coil of her hair.

That pencil must have been a badge of her profession; I never knew her to use that particular one, and I can not remember ever to have seen her without it. After the first day she began to affect a plainer costume than the one I had first seen her in: a plain, dark tailor-made skirt and white shirt waists with high collars, and no jewelry at all, not even a ring; but no amount of bullying or coaxing could persuade her hair to refrain from coquetting. It was constantly falling into curls and ringlets and waves, each blessed one possessing its own peculiar allurement; and at some angle or other the sharpened pencil invariably was thrust through it.

I have said that her hair was brown, and that it was bronze; the truth of the matter is that it was of many shades. Here there was a shining lock, as golden as ripe wheat, trying to lose itself in another that was darker than a hazel-nut. And there were other locks that were like burnished copper, or were frankly red, and as she moved her head one might catch all the gradations of light and dark and all the nuances of shading that blended these different hues into one. It was, I know, the most beautiful hair in the world.

As I remarked before, I observed that she had laid aside her notebook and pencils. She was now carrying several letters, and I recognized a yellow Western Union envelope. She moved quickly and gracefully to her former place, and laid the envelopes in a certain order upon the desk in front of her.

"It is a strange story I have to tell, Mr. Ferris," she began with an apologetic smile. "If you have no other interest in listening, I believe its strangeness alone will pay you for the few minutes you are kind enough to give me."

"Of course I'm interested," I said shortly. "I'm as curious as the dickens."

"Very well. I hope what I have to relate will supply you with some clue—but, no, it's absurd to expect anything of the kind."

She selected the first one of the envelopes and continued:

"Here is a mighty queer letter for any girl to get; it came to me the second day of last December—more than four months ago. It speaks for itself, except that it is the first intimation I ever had that any such person existed. You see," she sadly added, "how little I know about my past. And what little I do know is hardly of a nature to encourage me to try to learn more."

She handed me the envelope across the desk, bidding me read its contents.

I noted, first of all, that it bore an outlandish foreign stamp, for which the postmark, after I had made it out, accounted. The letter had been mailed at Colombo, Ceylon, and was addressed to Miss Fox, in a ricketty hand that was suggestive of unfamiliarity with the pen. I took out the enclosure and with some difficulty deciphered the letter. It was not, to describe it charitably, an epistolary model; its grammar and orthography alike left much to be desired, and it will be unnecessary to transcribe it here.

After apologizing in an awkward manner for addressing a young lady who was a stranger to the writer, the latter then said he was on a steamship en route from Singopore to Gibraltar, a long journey which afforded him his first opportunity in many years to write at length. It would seem that in his case the art of letter-writing was an operation requiring time, patience, and perseverance. He hoped to have the letter finished by the time the ship touched at Colombo.

Then the writer's purpose was revealed in a declaration that if Lois Fox was the young lady he had numerous reasons for suspecting her to be, it would be to her great advantage to communicate with him at once. It had been only during the preceding month (November), that he had heard of her existence together with sufficient of her history to prompt him to write at all, and if she proved to be the right person the matter was of enough importance for him to make the long journey to Los Angeles expressly to see her.

He gave an address in London where a letter to him would be held pending his arrival there.

After an attempt to allay whatever doubts and misgivings his strange letter may have excited, he assured her she need have no hesitation about replying, as he was a man of sixty-odd, and though unmarried it was because he had always been too considerate of womankind ever to ask one to share his rough mode of life and adventuresome career. "But," he added, "don't get the idee theres enny brokin hartes laying round, because Ide run from a Woman quickeren i would from a Gattlin Gun which last i no somethin about. I cant say the same of wimmin."

The name signed to this curious epistle was "James Strang."

Despite its illiterate composition, there was a certain unmistakable ring of sincerity about it, a rough sort of courtesy, that prompted me to say: "You answered it, of course?"

"Certainly," Miss Fox returned. "Aside from its promise of benefit to me, it excited my curiosity. I never heard of anybody by the name of Strang; and as for Singapore, Ceylon and the rest, why, I have no associations whatever with such out-of-the-way places. I have spent one vacation at San Diego and one in San Francisco, besides having made several trips to nearby towns; otherwise my whole horizon is bounded by Los Angeles. Any woman placed as I am would have answered that letter, Mr. Ferris, and been on needles and pins till she got another."

"You seem to have gotten several"—for she was holding out another envelope. "Did anything come of it all?"

"Well, no," she said slowly. "That's another queer thing about it; the episode has not ended yet; or, rather, it came to an abrupt end without getting anywhere. But read the rest of these astonishing letters and you will know all that I know."

The second letter was postmarked at London, and had followed Miss Fox's reply to the writer's first communication. It was no more definite in imparting information than the other had been, except that it reiterated the former assurances that if Miss Fox were the right person, some great advantage would accrue to her through the writer's instrumentality. As to the nature of the advantage no hint was given. The reason advanced for reticence was a plausible one, namely: after a fuller investigation Miss Fox might prove not to be the person whom the writer was seeking, in which event he did not want to excite hopes and then be obliged to disappoint them.

The missive then categorically laid down a number of questions, all of which, with one important exception, related to her infancy, a period of which she possessed only the haziest and most inconclusive sort of knowledge.

Whether effected intentionally or otherwise, a peculiarity of these interrogations was to be found in the circumstance that they betrayed nothing which our own limited conversance with the facts enabled us to consider as being of especial significance—excepting, as already pointed out, they were confined to a period when she was scarcely more than a baby.

The point of this conclusion was: If Miss Fox was the girl James Strang suspected her to be, she had dropped out of his life some time during her infancy, and he had heard of her again, in a manner not stated, only last November.

There was one other thought which the character and tone of these letters prompted in my mind, but which I did not voice to Miss Fox. If the writer believed her to be Steve Willets's daughter—so the reflection shaped itself—was his reluctance to be more communicative prompted by an inherent sense of delicacy in an otherwise rough nature, an instinctive desire not to wound or offend, or had he at some time in the past been an associate of Willets's—a "pal" in the fugitive bandit's earlier criminal escapades—and was his secretiveness to be attributed only to selfish motives of shielding himself? There was no apparent way of determining.

Among the questions the exception referred to in a previous paragraph seemed to me to be one which should determine the question of identity definitely.

"Why, bless you!" I exclaimed when it fell under my eye. "This ought to settle it. Listen." And I read aloud from the second letter, disregarding the spelling: "'Have you anywhere on your body a crazy-looking design tattooed?'" I looked sharply at her, with kindling excitement.

"Have you?" I asked.

My bluntness, I realized too late, was embarassing to her, altogether too personal; but for the moment devouring curiosity blunted my gentlemanly instincts—to my discredit, be it confessed, when compared with the unpolished Mr. Strang's natural forbearance and restraint. I was unpardonably rude. When I noted a wave of color mounting to Miss Fox's cheeks, I found myself exceeding uncomfortable.

I began an awkward apology, adding: "You need not answer, of course. I can only plead that this muddle makes me forget myself. You are not moved from your balance, though; I don't see how you take it so calmly."

She smiled forgiveness—indeed, showed a disposition to ignore my awkwardness and to discuss the matter frankly. Laying a hand upon her bosom, she replied to my question:

"I have such a mark—right here. But it is not a tattoo-mark; it is too irregular and purposeless in design to be that. Besides, Aunt Lois has assured me that it is a birthmark."

"Well," I commented at length, "it is at least a curious coincidence that such a thing exists. It sounds like the identifying mole on the stolen heiress of good old orthodox melodrama. How did you reply to that question?"

"I described it to Mr. Strang much as I have to you."

There were only two more letters: a second written from London, deploring the fact that Miss Fox could give no more definite information about herself, but adding the encouraging statement that the little given almost satisfied Strang that she was the person he suspected her to be. It concluded by saying that the writer would sail for New York as soon as certain business was disposed of, and that she would without fail again hear from him when he arrived in that city.

The last letter was written at New York, and merely mentioned his safe arrival and the train he was to take for the West.

The telegram, which had been sent from Denver, read: "Arrive Los Angeles Saturday afternoon. It bore the date of April 17th.

"Why," observed I, "that was only last Thursday! Did he show up Saturday?"

"No. He has not showed up at all, and I don't know what to think. There has been nothing since the telegram."

(To be continued.)

Up to the Wrong Ears.

Knicker—Is Jones up to his ears in debt?

Bocker—Worse; it has come to other people's ears, too.

The best way to get along with some people is to get along without them.

GERMANY TO BLAME.

Learned Bavarian Places Responsibility for War.

Dr. Gruber, one of Barvaria's most learned professors, has been lecturing on "War, Peace and Biology," and comes to some remarkable conclusions.

"This war, he declares, was inevitable and unavoidable. It might have been postponed, but it had to come sooner or later. It is idle to debate who is most to blame for the outbreak of hostilities. As a matter of fact, Germany was to blame, says the professor; not blame-worthy in any moral sense. Germany is to blame because she had stretched and used her power to its utmost, because in 4 years it had increased in population from 40 to 68 millions. The war was, therefore, a biological necessity.

The war says the professor, has become a battle of ideas, caused by varying conceptions of human development and of human freedom.

In conclusion, Professor Gruber mentioned certain "biological demands" for the future. One of these must be a strengthening of the nation by a large increase of the population, and to such an extent that Germany will be rendered invulnerable. If the population of the Empire grows at the rate of the first five years of this century it will have reached 250,000,000 in the year 2,000.

THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT OFFERS SUGGESTIONS FOR FRUIT PRESERVING.

In an advice circulated throughout Canada, the Fruit Branch Dept. at Ottawa suggests as being best for preserving purposes, certain brands of peaches: St. Johns, Elbertas, Crawfords and Smocks, and for plums Bradshaws, Gages, Lombards, Reine Claude.

The advice is timely and to it may be added that many of the most successful makers of preserves have for years insisted on securing from their grocers the St. Lawrence Extra Granulated Sugar (Pure Cane).

It is well known that the slightest organic impurity in sugar will start fermentation in the jam, and St. Lawrence Sugar which tests over 90% pure has never failed the housewife. Grocers everywhere can fill orders for this sugar. The best way to buy it is in the original refinery sealed packages 2 or 5 lbs. cartons, 10, 20, 25, and 100 lbs. bags.

Identifying Dead Soldiers.

Each of the armies in this great war, says the Christian Herald, has a system that enables it to identify the dead. The Russian soldier wears a numbered badge; the French soldier has an identification card stitched into his tunic; the German soldier has a little metal disk that bears his name; the British soldier has an aluminum disk, with identification marks and church affiliations; the Japanese soldier has three disks, all alike, one round his neck, another in his belt, and another in his boot; and the Austrian soldier has a gun-metal badge, with hs name on a tiny parchment leaf within. The Turk is the only soldier so lightly valued that he carries no badge. Identification is evidently regarded as unnecessary in his case.

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PRACTICAL FARMING

Protect the Skunk.

The skunk stands among the most important animals that choose for their diet insects harmful to the farmer. It is the best-known enemy of army worm, including the common army worm, the wheat head army worm and the fall army worm, all of which are destructive to small grains, corn and grasses, and cause heavy losses every year to farmers, according to the United States department of agriculture's biologist.

Two kinds of tobacco worms, which also attack tomato and potato plants are eaten by the skunk in large numbers. These worms change their diet from tobacco to tomatoes with such adaptability that they have spread over wide areas in the United States. The skunk's eagerness for the worm is such that he will dig them out from the ground in great numbers in the late summer and destroy them.

The white grub is also dug for by the skunk and consumed by him, and the strawberry growers generally regard this animal with favor, even though in its eager search for the grubs it may uproot the plant or eat a few berries. The skunk also eats many mature May beetles and June bugs which hatch from the white grubs.

Skunks also destroy the hop grub, grasshoppers, cut-worms, crickets, sphinx moths, sweet potato beetles, Colorado potato bbeetles, field mice and rats. The animal is especially useful in destroying the rats and mice that commonly infest farm buildings. If a skunk takes up his residence near premises where these rats are abundant, it will remain there if not disturbed until practically all of the rodents are destroyed.

So useful an animal should be fully protected. With insects increasing with wonderful rapidity, the farmer and gardener is put to great expense and labor in fighting them, and any animal that will help the cultivators of the soil to fight their insect battles should be encouraged and protected. Many farmers are shortsighted enough to kill every skunk they can find, to obtain for the skin a price that seems high, but is nothing as compared with the good it does.

Protect Stock From Flies.

Relief from attacks by flies may be brought to live stock on the farm by the use of sprays. The following spray is suggested by F. L. Washburn, entomologist of the Minnesota college of agriculture.

Three parts of fish oil and one part kerosene. The spraying is best done with a knapsack sprayer, and it takes only two or three minutes to spray a steer or horse. The spray appears to keep off all flies for two days.

The Split Log Drag.

The split log drag has contributed more toward the economic maintenance of public highways than any implement of modern usage. It does not require special acts of the legislature, bond issues or expensive educational campaigns to make it available as usually proceeds construction work. A drag can be built or purchased for $20 and easily operated by anyone who can drive a team.

Pruning Dont's.

Don't prune with an ax.
Don't cut off the lower limbs.
Don't cut off the short spurs.
Don't leave stubs.
Don't use dull tools.