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## The Wrong Man's Daughter

BY EDGAR JEPSON.

### PART I.

It was no fault of mine that Susie married Bellamy Tong. I was away, doing business in the South Seas—pearls. I came back to find her desperately in love with him—and he with her, for that matter. Love is a ticklish thing; and it is best to leave it alone. It would have been quite different if Susie had been a robust young woman. I should have stepped in briskly. A heart break or two does not seem to do that type much harm. But she was not a robust young woman; she was delicate, almost fragile, and tender-hearted and affectionate. A heart-break might almost be the death of her. I thought it wiser to sit tight and do nothing and say nothing.

I did not like Bellamy, and I trusted him even less. He was altogether too beautiful to be true. Of course, I knew that a man who is really fond of his daughter is apt to be prejudiced against any one who wants to take her away from him. But Bellamy was most certainly not the type of man I should have chosen for a son-in-law. He was tall and slim and dark and pale, with large brown eyes and black hair, brushed straight back without a parting, and when he laughed he showed a row of long white teeth. And he had had a fond mother.

That was why he had not gone to a public school or to the war. He spent the last three years of it in Ireland, the home of the safe. As far as I could make out Bellamy did nothing except talk nobly.

I hate sentimentalists. At bottom they are generally as hard as nails. I had little doubt that the base of Bellamy Tong's beautiful nature was good hard diamond, for I noticed that if things didn't go exactly his way his eyes would go rather harder than the next man's.

But, as I say, I came back from the South Seas too late to do anything. So I let her marry him. But I gave him his warning. He came to me to ask my consent. He really seemed to like the job, and he did it in many of the noblest words I have ever heard. I did not know him. Why should I? I heard him out and gave my consent.

Then I said quite quietly: "From my point of view, you're in the world just to make Susie happy. If you don't I'll give you hell."

Susie came back from her honeymoon very fit, stronger than she had ever been, and as happy as the day is long—a bit too happy for my liking. It is dangerous to be too happy. You have to pay for it.

However, it seemed to be lasting quite well, so, two months later, I went off on a business jaunt to Mexico—gun running—with a fairly easy mind. I came back three months later, pleased with myself and with a great deal

more money. When I set eyes on Susie my heart sank plumb and fetched up with a jolt. She was not happy any longer.

I got busy and made enquiries. Of course, women were Bellamy Tong's weakness, or, rather, not his weakness—Bellamy was that—but his diversion. There were two of them in our own set, a rackets girl and a cultured woman—married and thirty, of course.

I did not need telling that it was a perfectly infernal mess. It is always a risky business to interfere between husband and wife; and this particular husband made it harder. It was my guess that if I made it hot for him the young hound would take it out of Susie. I decided to say nothing. After all, action is my suit.

But the matter was so important to me that I did not feel quite sure of myself, and I took advice—at least, I asked it. I went to my brother William, who is the parson of one of the most fashionable parishes in London and used to being consulted about just such things, and I went to my brother Tom, who for ten years had been colonel of a crack cavalry regiment and used to handling young men, and asked their advice. They were both of them frightfully sick about the business, for they were fond of Susie; but they were as hopeless as they were sick. Both of them said the same thing in different words—that when a man has once fallen out of love with a woman all the kindness in the world is no use and drastic methods no better.

"Drastic methods" gave it me. I had had something of the sort in my mind. In fact, I had been stopping myself from thinking that Susie would be much happier as a widow. Naturally, I have not knocked about the bad lands and the Seven Seas for all these years without making some useful acquaintances. Some of the toughest of them live east of Aldgate, and they will do quite uncommon things for surprisingly little money. I thought at once of Billy Pride. What the crinkled old crimp doesn't know about shanghaiing isn't worth knowing. He arranged to hand Bellamy over to me at the corner of Chipperfield Common at 2.45 a.m. on the following Tuesday.

For the next few nights I took Susie out to dinner and the theatre and on to sup and dance at the Midnight Gallies. She did not want to go; she wanted to mope at home. But I put it that I had been having a hard time on the Mexican border and needed refreshment. So she came, and Geoffrey Franks came with us. I thought that he was good for her. He had been in love with her for a donkey's years and he was still in love with her and showed it. I could have done with him as a son-in-law very well. He is a first-class soldier and a great deal more than a soldier. There's a lot of wounded vanity to these broken hearts; and I was sure Susie would find it soothing to have it dinned into her that she was still uncommonly attractive. Geoffrey would din it in all right. He did do her good—a little.

I was shaving on the Monday morning when she came round to the house and burst into my room in a devil of a state. Bellamy had not come home the night before.

That was just like Billy. You could always rely on him to be on time.

"Well, what about it?" I said. "He's probably got caught in a poker or Chemmy game and at it still."

She wouldn't hear of it—Bellamy was not like that.

I kept telling her that nothing could have happened to Bellamy. Then I fairly dragged her off for a motor drive in the country, and we lunched at Canterbury. Coming back, we ran out of petrol in an out of the way country lane. I was trying a short cut; and I knew I was short, too, of petrol. It was 8 o'clock when we reached their flat.

She fairly dashed into it, asking for Bellamy. He had not come home. She was in a terrible state.

I helped her. I said: "I expect that the silly young ass has been dipping into the underworld—it's the fashionable thing to do, you know—with only three pounds in his pocket and is in pawn somewhere."

She was furious, like a furious sucking dove, and gave me a fine dressing down. That was what I wanted—anger could not do her any harm. I said I would go and find him at once. I went. I drove to my club, rang up Mrs. Clavering-Clayton, the cultured one, and asked whether Bellamy was there. She was rather tart with me,

and said he wasn't there and hadn't been. He had been coming to dinner the night before and hadn't turned up. She rang off. I wondered how Billy's friends had culled Bellamy so early in the evening. I rang up Enid Cooper-Calhoun, the rackets one. Mrs. Cooper-Calhoun came to the telephone and she also seemed peeved by my inquiry. She said that she didn't know where Mr. Tong was in such a tone that I gathered that she didn't care.

"I understood that he was having tea with Miss Cooper-Calhoun," I said at a venture.

"He never came!" she snapped, and rang off.

I gave myself plenty of time to get to Chipperfield Common. It would never do for Billy Pride to be on time with the goods and me not there to receive them.

It was easy driving. The streets were clear; the road was clearer; and no haze dimmed the November moon. I was at the corner of the Common at 2.35. At once I heard faintly in the stillness the slow beat of the hoofs and the creaking of a cart on the Saffrat road. At 2.44 there came round the corner a gypsy van drawn by a fat horse, and driven by a lady. A shawl hid quite as much of her face as my muffler and goggles hid of mine.

She pulled up the horse and said: "Is it Mr. Brown, of Islington?"

"Yes," said I.

"I've brought the pritty gentleman," she said, and got down.

I got out of the car to help her. She needed no help. She opened the door of the caravan, took the "pritty" gentleman by the ankles, lugged him out, snoring, hoisted him on to her shoulder, stepped across to the car, and tumbled him into the tonneau, for all the world as if he had been a sack of potatoes.

"Thank you, my dear. Here's something for your trouble," I said, and gave her a tenner.

She looked at it by the light of my lamps, squeaked, and blessed me.

I said good night and drove off.

I had a long run across country before me. I have a country house, Bostocks, on a hill near Pulborough. When I reached Bostocks I found Mrs. Whitcomb and her son, Harry, who run the house and garden for me, asleep in the kitchen, waiting up for me. They are trustworthy people. Once on a time I had pulled Harry out of a devil of a mess. If he showed his face in the West Riding the police would have him in twenty-four hours. He only shows his face, and that not too freely, on that hill near Pulborough. They did not show any surprise at Bellamy's sleepy condition.

Bostocks has a big, high roof. Under it is an attic, the length and width of the house, with sloping walls, lighted by one small wormer window. We carried Bellamy upstairs, hauled him up the ladder, through the trapdoor, into the attic, took off his overcoat, and laid him on a small mattress on the floor in a corner. Then I handcuffed him and with a safety razor shaved all that fine black hair off his head. Even by the poor light of the candle he did look an extraordinary person. It seemed a pity that he should lose such an amusing sight; and I sent Harry down for a mirror. He hung it on a nail by the window. Then I covered the snoring Bellamy with a blanket and his overcoat and went down to coffee and eggs and bacon. I enjoyed them very much.

Then I drove home. It was nearly 6 when I arrived and I had not been in the house five minutes when the telephone bell rang. It was my guess that it had rung often during the night.

Of course it was Susie. I did not wait for her to get in a question. I said in a bitter voice: "I've been up all night looking into the matter of that silly young ass of yours."

She accepted the description and said, meekly, but eagerly: "Have you found him?"

"I've found him," I said. "He has got himself into a devil of a mess, and you won't see him for at least a fortnight. I'm not going to tell you what the mess is, or where he is. But he's quite safe; and not a woman in the world can get at him. Don't come around. You won't see me. I'm going to bed, and I'm not going to be disturbed until 2 o'clock."

With that I put the receiver back. Relieved of anxiety, she should sleep herself till 2 o'clock. At a quarter past 2 she found me at breakfast. I told her that the less said about the silly young ass' scrape the better. She was not pressing. I think that she had tumbled to it that the one place in the world in which a woman can't get at a man is prison. Shocking, of course; but it couldn't be a serious offense if he would be out in a fortnight, and, after all, no woman could get at him, and that was what she really wanted.

She saw at once that I was right and went away fairly cheerful. I was pleased not to have deceived her at all. What Bellamy was exactly getting was fourteen days without the option of a fine.

(To be continued.)

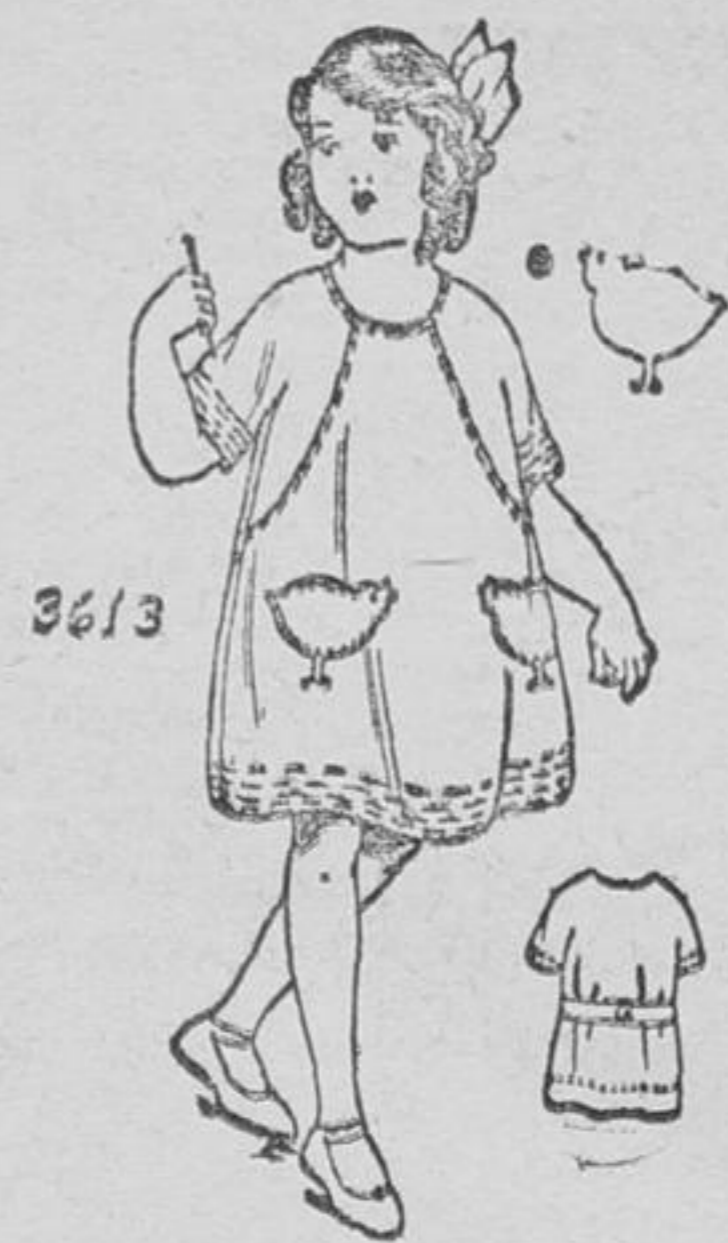
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