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Lifebuoy Soap

By **George Barr McCutcheon**

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Of a Music-Master.



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A month passed. Yvonne held the destiny of three persons in her hand. They were like figures on a chess board and she moved them with the sureness, the unerring instinct of any skilled disciple of the philosopher's game. They were puppets; she ranged them about her stage in swift-changing pictures and applauded her own effectiveness. There were no rehearsals. The play was being on all the time, whether tragedy, comedy or—chess.

Of the three, Lydia alone faced the situation with courage. She was young, she was good, she was inexperienced, but she saw what was going on beneath the surface with a clarity of vision that would have surprised an older and more practiced person; and, seeing, was favored with the strength to endure pain that otherwise would have been insupportable. She knew that Frederic was infatuated. She did not try to hide the truth from herself. The boy she loved was slipping away from her and only chance could set his feet back in the old path from which he blindly strayed. Her woman's heart told her that it was not love he felt for Yvonne. The strange mentor that guides her sex out of the ignorance of youth into an understanding of hitherto unrepresented questions revealed to her the nature of his feeling for this woman. He would come back to her in time she knew, chastened; the same instinct that revealed his



Of the Three, Lydia Alone Faced the Situation With Courage.

frailties to her also defended his sense of honor. The unthinkable could never happen!

She judged Yvonne too in a spirit of fairness that was amazing when one considers the lack of perspective that must have been hers to contend with. Lydia could not think of her as evil, immoral, base. This beautiful, warm-hearted, clear-eyed woman suggested nothing of the kind to her. It pleased her to play with the good-looking young fellow, and she made no pretense of secrecy about it. Lydia was charitable to the extent of blaming her only for an utter lack of conscience in allowing the perfectly obvious to happen so far as he was concerned. For her own gratification she was calmly inviting a tragedy which was likely to crush him without even so much as disturbing her peace of mind for an instant, after all was said and done. There was poison in the cup she handed out to him, and knowing this beyond dispute she allowed him to drink while she looked on and smiled. Lydia hated her for the pain she was storing up for Frederic, far more than she hated her for the anguish she, herself, was made to endure.

Her mother saw the suffering in the girl's eyes, but saw also the proud spirit that would have resented sympathy from one even so close as she. Down in the heart of that quiet reserved mother smoldered a hatred for Yvonne Brood that would have stopped at nothing had it been in her power to inflict punishment for the wrong that was being done. She too

saw tragedy ahead, but her vision was broader than Lydia's. It included the figure of James Brood.

Lydia worked steadily, almost doggedly at the task she had undertaken to complete for the elder Brood. Every afternoon found her seated at the table in the study, opposite the stern-faced man who labored with her over the seemingly endless story of his life. Something told her that there were secret chapters which she was not to write. She wrote those that were to endure; the others were to die with him.

He watched her as she wrote, and his eyes were often hard. He saw the growing haggardness in her gentle, girlish face; the wistful, puzzled expression in her dark eyes. A note of tenderness crept into his voice and remained there through all the hours they spent together. The old-time brusqueness disappeared from his speech; the sharp authoritative tone was gone. He watched her with pity in his heart, for he knew it was ordained that one-day he too was to hurt this loyal pure-hearted creature even as the others were wounding her now.

He frequently went out of his way to perform quaint little acts of courtesy and kindness that would have surprised him only a short time before. He sent theater and opera tickets to Lydia and her mother. He placed bouquets of flowers at the girl's end of the table, obviously for her alone. He sent her home—just around the corner—in the automobile on rainy or blizzard days. But he never allowed her an instant's rest when it came to the work in hand, and therein lay the gentle shrewdness of the man. She was better off busy. There were times when he studied the face of Lydia's mother for signs that might show how her thoughts ran in relation to the conditions that were confronting all of them. But more often he searched the features of the boy who called him father.

Always, always there was music in the house. Behind the closed doors of the distant study, James Brood listened in spite of himself to the persistent thrumming of the piano downstairs. Always were the airs light and seductive; the dreamy, plaintive compositions of Strauss, Ziehrer and others of their kind and place. Frederic, with uncanny fidelity to the preferences of the mother he had never seen but whose influence directed him, affected the same general class of music that had appealed to her moods and temperament. Times there were, and often, when he played the very airs that she had loved, and then, despite his profound antipathy, James Brood's thoughts leaped back a quarter of a century and fixed themselves on love-scenes and love-times that would not be denied.

And again there were the wild, riotous airs that she had played with Ferverelli, her soft-eyed music master! Accursed airs—accursed and accusing!

He gave orders that these airs were not to be played, but failed to make his command convincing for the reason that he could not bring himself to the point of explaining why they were distasteful to him. When Frederic thoughtlessly whistled or hummed fragments of those proscribed airs, he considered himself justified in commanding him to stop on the pretext that they were disturbing, but he could not use the same excuse for checking the song on the lips of his gay and impulsive wife. Sometimes he wondered why she persisted when she knew that he was annoyed. Her airy little apologies for her forgetfulness were of no consequence, for within the hour her memory was almost sure to be at fault again.

"Is there anything wrong with my hair, Mr. Brood?" asked Lydia with a nervous little laugh.

They were in the study and it was ten o'clock of a wet night in April. Of late, he had required her to spend the evenings with him in a strenuous effort to complete the final chapters of the journal. He had declared his intention to go abroad with his wife as soon as the manuscript was completed. Lydia's willingness to devote the extra hours to his enterprise would have pleased him vastly if he had not been afflicted by the same sense of unrest and uneasiness that made incessant labor a boon to her as well as to him.

Her query followed a long period of silence on his part. He had been suggesting alterations in her notes as she read them to him, and there were frequent lulls when she made the changes as directed. Without looking at him, she felt rather than knew that he was regarding her fixedly from his position opposite. The scrutiny was disturbing to her.

Brood started guiltily. "Your hair?" he exclaimed. "Oh, I see. You women always feel that something is wrong with it. I was thinking of something else, however. Forgive my stupidity. We can't afford to waste time in thinking, you know, and I am a pretty bad offender. It's nearly half-past ten. We've been hard at it since eight o'clock. Time to knock off. I will walk around to your apartment with you, my dear. It looks like an all-night rain."

He went up to the window and pulled the curtains aside. Her eyes followed him.

He was staring down into the court, his fingers grasping the curtains in a rigid grip. He did not reply. There was a light in the windows opening out upon Yvonne's balcony.

"I fancy Frederic has come in from the concert," he said slowly. "He will take you home, Lydia. You'd like that better, eh?"

He turned toward her and she paused in the nervous collecting of her papers. His eyes were as hard as steel,

his lips were set.

"Please don't ask Frederic to—" she began hurriedly.

"They must have left early," he muttered, glancing at his watch. Returning to the table he struck the big, melodious gong a couple of sharp blows. For the first time in her recollection, it sounded a jangling, discordant note, as of impatience. Ranjab appeared in the doorway. "Have Mrs. Brood and Mr. Frederic returned, Ranjab?"

"Yes, sahib. At ten o'clock."

"If Mr. Frederic is in his room send him to me."

"He is not in his room, sahib."

The two, master and man, looked at each other steadily for a moment. Something passed between them.

"Tell him that Miss Desmond is ready to go home."

"Yes, sahib. The curtain fell."

"I prefer to go home alone, Mr. Brood," said Lydia, her eyes flashing. "Why did you send—"

"And why not?" he demanded harshly. She winced and he was at once sorry. "Forgive me. I am tired and—a bit nervous. And you too are tired. You've been working too steadily at this miserable job, my dear child. Thank heaven, it will soon be over. Pray sit down. Frederic will soon be here."

"I am not tired," she protested stubbornly. "I love the work. You don't know how proud I shall be when it comes out and—and I realize that I helped in its making. No one has ever been in a position to tell the story of Thibet as you have told it, Mr. Brood. Those chapters will make history. I—"

"Your poor father's share in those explorations is what really makes the work valuable, my dear. Without his notes and letters I should have been feeble indeed." He looked at his watch. "They were at the concert, you know—the Hungarian orchestra. A recent importation. Tziganes music. Gypsies." His sentences as well as his thoughts were staccato, disconnected.

Lydia turned very cold. She dreaded the scene that now seemed unavoidable. Frederic would come in response to his father's command and then—

Someone began to play upon the piano downstairs. She knew and he knew that it was Frederic who played. For a long time they listened. The air, no doubt, was one he had heard during the evening, a soft sensuous waltz that she had never heard before. The girl's eyes were upon Brood's face. It was like a graven image.

"God!" fell from his stiff lips. Suddenly he turned upon the girl. "Do you know what he is playing?"

"No," she said, scarcely above a whisper.

"It was played in this house by its composer before Frederic was born. It was played here on the night of his birth, as it had been played many times before. It was written by a man named Ferverelli. Have you heard of him?"

"Never," she murmured, and shrank, frightened by the deathlike pallor in the man's face, by the strange calm in his voice. The gates were being opened at last! She saw the thing that was to stalk forth. She would have closed her ears against the revelations it carried. "Mother will be worried if I am not at home—"

"Guido Ferverelli. An Italian born in Hungary. Budapest, that was his home, but he professed to be a gypsy. Yes, he wrote the devilish thing. He played it a thousand times in that room down—and now Frederic plays it, after all these years. It is his heritage. God, how I hate the thing! Ranjab! Where is the fellow? He must stop the accursed thing. He—"

"Mr. Brood! Mr. Brood!" cried Lydia, appalled. She began to edge toward the door.

By a mighty effort, Brood regained control of himself. He sank into a chair, motioning for her to remain. The music had ceased abruptly.

"He will be here in a moment," said Brood. "Don't go."

Suddenly he arose and confronted the serene image of the Buddha. For a full minute he stood there with his hands clasped, his lips moving as if in prayer. No sound came from them.

The girl remained transfixed, powerless to move. Not until he turned toward her and spoke was the spell broken. Then she came quickly to his side. He had pronounced her name.

"You are about to tell me something, Mr. Brood," she cried in great



Confronted the Serene Image of Buddha.

agitation. "I do not care to listen. I feel that it is something I should not know. Please let me go now. I—"

He laid his hands upon her shoulders, holding her off at arm's length.

"I am very fond of you, Lydia. I do not want to hurt you. Sooner would I have my tongue cut out than it should wound you by a single word. And yet I must speak. You love Frederic. Is not that true?"

She returned his gaze unwaveringly. Her face was very white.

"Yes, Mr. Brood."

"It is better that we should talk it over. We have ten minutes. No doubt he has told you that he loves you. He is a lovable boy, he is the kind one must love. But it is not in his power to love nobly. He loves lightly as—"

he hesitated, and then went on harshly—"as his father before him loved."

Anger dulled her understanding; she did not grasp the full meaning of his declaration. Her honest heart rose to the defense of Frederic.

"Mr. Brood, I do care for Frederic," she flamed, standing very erect before him. "He loves me. I know he does. You have no right to say that he loves lightly, ignobly. You do not know him as I know him. You have never tried to know him, never wanted to know him. You—Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Brood. I—I am forgetting myself."

"I am afraid you do not understand yourself, Lydia," said he levelly. "You are young, you are trusting. Your lesson will cost you a great deal, my dear."

"You are mistaken. I do understand myself," she said bravely. "May I speak plainly, Mr. Brood?"

"Certainly. I intend to speak plainly to you."

"Frederic loves me. He does not love Yvonne. He is fascinated, as I also am fascinated by her, and you too, Mr. Brood. The spell has fallen over all of us. Let me go on, please. You say that Frederic loves like his father before him. That is true. He loves but one woman. You love but one woman, and she is dead. You will always love her. Frederic is like you. He loves Yvonne as you do—oh, I know it hurts! She cast her spell over you, why not over him? Is he stronger than you? Is it strange that she should attract him as she attracted you? You glory in her beauty, her charm, her perfect loveliness, and yet you love—yes love, Mr. Brood—the woman who was Frederic's mother. Do I make my meaning plain? Well, so it is that Frederic loves me. I am content to wait. I know he loves me."

Through all this, Brood stared at her in sheer astonishment. He had no feeling of anger, no resentment, no thought of protest.

"You—you astound me, Lydia. Is this your own impression or has it been suggested to you by—by another?"

"I am only agreeing with you when you say that he loves as his father loved before him—but not lightly. Ah, not lightly, Mr. Brood."

"You don't know what you are saying," he muttered.

"Oh, yes, I do," she cried earnestly. "You invite my opinion; I trust you will accept it for what it is worth. Before you utter another word against Frederic, let me remind you that I have known both of you for a long, long time. In all the years I have been in this house, I have never known you to grant him a tender, loving word. My heart has ached for him. There have been times when I almost hated you. He feels your neglect, your harshness, your—your cruelty. He—"

"Cruelty!"

"It is nothing less. You do not like him. I cannot understand why you should treat him as you do. He shrinks from you. Is it right, Mr. Brood, that a son should shrink from his father as a dog cringes at the voice of an unkind master? I might be able to understand your attitude toward him if your unkindness was of recent origin, but—"

"Recent origin?" he demanded quickly.

"If it had begun with the advent of Mrs. Brood," she explained frankly, undismayed by his scowl. "I do not understand all that has gone before. Is it surprising, Mr. Brood, that your son finds it difficult to love you? Do you deserve—"

Brood stopped her with a gesture of his hand.

"The time has come for frankness on my part. You set me an example, Lydia. You have the courage of your father. For months I have had it in my mind to tell you the truth about Frederic, but my courage has always failed me. Perhaps I use the wrong word. It may be something very unlike cowardice that has held me back. I am going to put a direct question to you first of all, and I ask you to answer truthfully. Would you say that Frederic is like—that is, resembles his father?" He was leaning forward, his manner intense.

Lydia was surprised. "What an odd thing to say! Of course he resembles his father. I have never seen a portrait of his mother, but—"

"You mean that he looks like me?" demanded Brood.

"When he is angry he is very much like you, Mr. Brood. I have often wondered why he is unlike you at other times. Now I know. He is like his mother. She must have been lovely, gentle, patient—"

"Wait! Suppose I were to tell you that Frederic is not my son."

"I should not believe you, Mr. Brood," she replied flatly. "What is it that you are trying to say to me?"

"Will you understand if I say to you that—Frederic is not my son?"

Continued on page 7.

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