

CROSSED WIRES BY John T. McCutcheon

THE STORY SO FAR:

A WEALTHY American family, the Craytons, are in Paris. A worthless Frenchman, Pierre de Barsac, tries to win Virginia, the daughter. The mother is agreeable, but Mr. Crayton is suspicious. He becomes wrathful and twice disappears for days, only to return to find De Barsac more and more firmly entrenched with his wife and daughter. In order to divert Virginia, Crayton arranges to have another young man, an American whom he has met in Paris, sail with them on the Leviathan. Before the voyage is over his mysterious manner has intrigued her. It is a great shock to her sensibilities to learn that Rasher had formerly been a truck driver. Nothing daunted, her father offers him a position as chauffeur, and it is accepted.

Rasher visits his lawyer and learns he is even wealthier than before he started on his last trip. It seems his real name is Bacon. Because of a love of adventure he prefers to travel incognito.

INSTALLMENT XIII.

The Campaign is On.

COUNT PIERRE DE BARSAC'S elegance and distinction constituted his stock in trade. He had often capitalized them in the past, and he now resolved to use them to the utmost. The stake was big, but he must work fast, for his finances could not stand a protracted siege. Within a month he must win a public announcement of his engagement to Virginia Crayton, after which it would be easy for him to obtain all the funds he needed.

If she held back, he must adopt cruder methods.

The Craytons had barely been installed in their apartment in the hotel when a handsome box of flowers arrived for Virginia. The flowers were followed shortly by a telephone call from the desk of the hotel, announcing the count.

Miss Crayton received the message while she was deeply involved in trying on a new afternoon gown.

"Ask him to come up, Celeste," she said to her French maid, "and say that I'll try not to keep him waiting more than a few minutes."



He raised her hand to his lips.

It thus came to pass that Pierre obtained his first moment alone with Celeste since that evening, weeks ago, in the Café Senegal, where they first planned the matrimonial conspiracy against Miss Crayton and her fortune. They had seen each other on the dock after the steamer landed, but no real communication had been possible.

When De Barsac entered the apartment, he was met by Celeste, who led the way into the sitting room.

"Miss Crayton will be in directly, monsieur," she announced, and then, closing the door behind her, hurried to his side and spoke rapidly in French.

"We have a few moments, Pierre, for I have contrived that mademoiselle will be delayed in her dressing, but we must talk fast. Madame is out, but there's no telling when that meddlesome old father might come blundering in."

"I tried to get a word to you on the dock, Celeste, but there was no chance."

"You must take no chances. Now attend carefully." Her voice dropped to a tense whisper. "Things look better for now, but on the steamer things looked dark. A young American shared their table. His name is Rasher—horrid name—and I have a feeling I have seen him some place before, but I cannot remember where. I think she liked him. They walked together, and one night they were on the deck quite a while. It was moonlight. I went into her stateroom after she had retired and she seemed agitated and upset. I think she was forgetting you that night, my Pierre."

Pierre frowned slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Go on," he said, shortly. "Has he seen her since they landed? Will he follow her?"

"O, no. I very innocently inquired if Monsieur Rasher was an old friend—she said he was only a steamer acquaintance—I thought she seemed a little sad—and she didn't expect to see him again."

"Well, then, there's nothing to worry about on that score."

"Yes, but you must lose no time. You must be at her side every

minute. Don't give her time to think. Sweep her off her feet—ah, you can, you wonderful Pierre, as I have reason to know too well. With your grand manners and elegance, the girl will be clay in your hands. But remember this—she doesn't love you or else she would not forget so quickly. You must make love in your most brilliant manner. You must keep your hypnotic eyes on her every possible minute. You must make her think she loves you."

Pierre lighted a cigaret from a gold lighter, flicked it shut, and inhaled deeply.

"What are their plans?" he asked.

"Monsieur Crayton goes tomorrow by train. Madame and mademoiselle follow by motor the day following. I accompany them. Now, Pierre, you must contrive to be asked to go with them. They will be several days on the trip and you couldn't wish for a better opportunity to be with her. I—sh—!" She touched her lips warningly and when Virginia appeared a moment later in her new gown, Celeste was arranging the little tea table. The count laid down the magazine he had quickly picked up and arose from his chair.

In his most elegant manner he raised Virginia's hand to his lips, where he held it a shade longer than mere formality required. She withdrew it gently and through her mind shot a vagrant thought, "How different the boys at home will greet me! 'Hello, Ginny, home again, are you? Well, say, you're looking swell. Gee, you look like a million dollars. I'll tell the world.' She could hear them and their empty banalities. They would never learn to kiss a lady's hand without snickering embarrassment."

While Virginia poured the tea and kept up a lively chatter, the count's great eyes registered such admiration and devotion that she felt the color mounting in her cheeks. Was he really as glad to see her as he seemed? She had never had a man look at her in that way before and she was distinctly flustered.

He talked but little, and while she tried to avoid meeting his eyes, she was always conscious of that absorbed and smothering gaze.

"I hope you are staying in New York some days," he said at last. "You shall show me this wonderful city. It is like a fairy-land of giants. This miracle of cities. This morning as I looked at some of those glittering towers I felt half choked—it was something almost religious. I couldn't speak for the wonder of it. You must be my guide and show me the marvels you have here."

"O, but we are not stopping," hastily exclaimed Virginia. "We are starting home by motor the day after tomorrow."

Pierre sighed audibly. "I wonder if your roads are like the lovely French roads I showed you when you were in France. O, I was so happy to be the means of showing you so much of my beautiful country."

"O, but our roads aren't nearly so lovely as yours. I'm afraid your artistic eye would be offended. We have so many sign boards."

"You are too modest, I'm sure. I know they must be wonderful, as everything is in this amazing land. However, some time I shall hope to travel your roads and then I shall judge."

There was a moment's pause. Virginia was considering. The count had certainly shown her many of France's most beautiful roads, and besides his words were so phrased that there was an implied reminder of her obligation to him. Hospitality must be reciprocal. Obviously he expected it. Before she knew it, she was asking the count to go with them.

"You will soon tire of it," she warned him. "It will not be like motoring in France. We have none of those quaint little inns. But do join us, if only for a day or two."

The count, after looking at his note book and mentioning several very important people with whom he claimed to have engagements, shrugged his shoulders.

"They can wait," he said. "I will go with you."

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(To be continued next Sunday.)



"Hello, Ginny! Home again, are you?"



"What are their plans?" he asked.

THE OPEN CASEMENT By Katharine Newlin Burt

(Continued from page one.)

gather grapes, she played with the neighboring peasant children, learning the names of their goats and the taste of goats' milk, she explored the ridged and terraced hillsides, threading her way through the hot, sloping vineyards to the darkness of live oaks and the pines. Up there on the top of their high hill . . . the Mount of Birds, she could see a world of sea, the harbor of Toulon, and, with unearthly ecstasy, a far white carving of snow Alps against the sky. She was happy, no need for him to question her. In the evenings by their lamp and fire she read the books he gave her or worked a square of tapestry, looking meek and giving him her wide glances and her shyly gallant smile. They did not talk very much. He often read aloud to her. Soon she had told him all about her life, the death of her parents, the four years in an orphanage, the discovery by charitable authorities of this aunt and the coercion of the aunt by these same charitable authorities into offering her niece a home. "But it wasn't ever that," said Lois, shaking her round, bright head. ". . . Not like this is," she added, giving his heart a twist of painful joy.

He had been desperately ill twice, once on the steamer, disguising it from her, and once soon after his arrival, when he took Odette into his confidence: indulgent, sage Odette, with her black Provencal eyes and her wisdom of a Frenchwoman, half tenderness, half cynicism. "La petite" must not be told. Monsieur was kind to "la petite." The marriage was merely a charitable arrangement for her future. Ah, this worldly wise Odette was capable of understanding, even to tears, the kindness of monsieur! Miles Howard, smiling, relished his secret. Under his tending, how the beauty that he worshipped grew; the Psyche grace, the lovely, dreamy, waiting look. They seemed to absorb into their aspect all the rosy and golden loveliness of the villa, all the grave, shadowy allurements of the garden, and all the shining veiled mysteriousness of the sea.

WINTER passed like a dream of days. One night the mistral came suddenly upon their house with a sound of roaring fire. Lois ran in from her bedroom and stood beside him, trembling in her slim gown.

"O, Miles, what is it?"

"Only the wind, child."

"It sounds awful. It woke me up. I didn't guess what it could be."

She curled beside him, sheltered there, relaxed into his arms and slept. He carried her back to her bed, returning thereafter, breathless, to his own. All night the wind roared, warm and salt, and he lay with his arms pressed across the masterful heart to which his life was vassal. Sweet Lois . . . dear child . . . would she be lonely, frightened, strange when he was gone and the sea and the wind and the trees came roaring across her solitary night? He must, before that time, find a companion for her.

Then came companionable April: roses, poppies, nightingales.

Psyche was more than ever given to her dreaming, leaned against open windows by moon and sunrise, rested along one of the pines that sloped across the sliding water, watched, brooded, waited endlessly. Miles knew that what she waited for must come just as inevitably as the visitor he waited for himself. His own delayed. The tranquil life, the softer climate had lulled his illness, had made its progress slower. He found himself able to walk about slowly along the lanes between the rose bewildered hedges. Psyche waited, smiling, patient—sometimes, when the nightingale sang his wildest phrases, vaguely sad. How her servant then watched her!

Once, at her ease, above the beach, her arms wrapped about a crooked branch, she was unconscious of his watchfulness and sang.

She had a sweet, small, unawakened voice, like a child's. The song was one of Odette's Provencal melodies, whose bold and passionate burden she could not possibly have understood, but she sang it uncomprehendingly, in a sort of trance. The sun was a great rainbow dragon fly's wing across the water. . . .

HER song paused.

Miles saw what she

saw, what had checked

her singing: a boat that

slid out from the penin-

sula, carrying over its

slender and expensive

lines an awning which

seemed to accompany

its progress without any

visible attachment, like

a rosy magic cloud. The

tiny vessel, in fact, came

like a magic, like a gift

from some fairy to an

adventurous prince, a

skiff from a cracked nut

or a broken golden egg,

came straight, impeccably

direct, across all

those sleek spaces to

their beach under the

pines. At the rudder, in

command of the oily

magic of machinery,

crouched a brown,

inscrutable mechanic,

while in the prow,

erect against the

wind, stood a tall

and slender youth,

his white clothes flut-

tered against his

body by the flying

airs of passage: all

in the strong light of

sun and sea, burning

like a young god

with color, bronzed

face, blue eyes, and

flaming red-gold hair.

The motor boat ran up against the sand, the young man sprang down, gave a brief order, and lifted up his eyes. There, unexpected as a dream at noonday, Psyche bent down above him in the shadow of her pine.

Miles, watching them from his balcony remoteness, could hear the murmur of the boy's surprise and hers, of his apology and her forgiveness, and then laughter, mutual communications. The intruder pointed to a white wall at the end of the peninsula, Lois waved a hand toward Miles. Did the ruddy, upturned face of the adventurer shadow and darken, or was that only his imagination of a worshiper? Her husband . . . that gray haired, contemplative figure in the balcony with his book!

The sun was setting; the sea, to Howard's eyes, stood up straight behind the green-black branches like a metal wall; the sky was salmon. That boat, carrying its magic cloud, skimmed away, a



She stood there, oblivious of mortality.

walking through the confused, suggestive, incomprehensible atmosphere of his own mind. It would be like this, perhaps . . . a confused, half wistful spirit . . . walking . . .

THE next day he hired a carriage and drove all across the narrow connecting strip of land to the end of the peninsula where he called upon the American Comtesse and her young son. Thereafter he and Lois lunched in the large white villa and there were boating-parties, picnics, swimming lessons. Lois was gay, bound her hair in different colored scarves and developed an interest in "le sport." The gray, gossiping, cynical Comtesse, more French than a Frenchwoman, bore Howard amiable and amusing company. Like a voice from a receding shore came the chatter of her placid and despairing worldliness. France was a "pays perdu," its morals were not, its government was a shame and a despair.

What future could there be for those two poor children? She would forget that Lois was his wife.

And gradually, Miles saw the growth of that young man's unhappiness. It burned in his blue eyes, wrenched his young mouth, made his bronzed hand, steadying Lois among the rocks, fierce and uncertain. Like fire he blazed there before her, silent, but articulate. It was a different sort of incense, truly, from that of her "pale-mouthed prophet dreaming." Was she troubled by him? Was she restless? Had she been crying secretly? What did the nightingale tell her in his bold and broken voice?

One of those nights, under a broad midsummer moon, the young man came and asked them to go out on the water and dive into phosphorescent stars from his little boat.

"You must go, Lois," said Miles. "I'll watch you from the balcony. Not too far, Jean, mind you, not too far."

"Not too far, sir. Not far at all," his voice called up sadly, eagerly from the black and silver pines. Lois, dressed for swimming and wrapped in a white cloak, flickered down to him. Miles heard their laughter, their footsteps on the beach. Then the boat drew them away, ghostly. They had stopped speaking.

It was very late, the moon had set, when the girl who was his wife came softly, slowly out to him. She sat down near him, laid a cold hand in his.

"Jean won't be coming any more," she said. "I have—forbidden him." There was an uncertainty of voice. "It was . . . that he forgot . . . you, Miles. He kissed me."

She was trembling. Miles lifted her hand in silence to his lips.

EIGHTY steep and circling steps led to the top window of the tower. Miles climbed them once, saw the great circling blue and got himself down through a sweating blackness of dangerous agony. When he was able again to move shadowily about the little forsaken house—for the youth no longer burned in the doorway or along the beach, and Lois studied and read and played her piano with a pale fidelity—he got himself paper and a pen and ink and, having by a playful pretext obtained Lois' signature, he wrote a message above it.

"You are not to come, Jean," he wrote in printed letters as though afraid hand-written English might not be understood, "unless you see a light in the top window of the tower. Then you are to come in your boat at once, no matter what you are doing, or at what hour. Please keep a lookout for the light. My husband is subject to dangerous sudden illness. I am very much alone. I know that you will come." And then her innocent, ignorant, pathetic little name of "Lois Howard."

Miles sent this message. There came a soft night of new moon, of rose-breath, of clamorous ecstatic nightingales. She was down there in the garden. He moved beside his lamp. The hour was ten o'clock and he had been very weak all day. First he read through a poem and writing a few lines on a loose piece of paper, left them on an open weighted page beside his chair. Then, having prayed to an Almighty Comprehension of Man, vaster than the night, he went slowly through his dim and golden little temple and, as though he took death by the hand for company, he climbed up, that long, and torturing, and breathless staircase to the tower. The lamp was waiting. He had strength to touch it alive, a great and golden steady flame aloft there above the darkness of the shore and sea. He could not tell how long it took him to come down. The failure of his breath delayed him terribly, but he was in his chair at last facing the long open window by which Lois would enter presently. There was the sound of the sea, (Continued on page four.)