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MESSENGER'S MILLION.

By T. C. BRIDGES.

Author of "The Other Man's Crime," "The Price of Liberty," "The Home of Her Fathers," etc., etc.

CHAPTER VII.—THE VAMP.

Ida's whole face hardened. All its charm was gone and she looked her full thirty years or even more.

"What do you mean, James?" she asked, and her voice was as sharp as her looks.

"Just exactly what I say, my dear Ida. I've overdrawn at the bank, bills pile in every day, and if something isn't done we'll have to pack up and clear in a hurry."

"Clear—where to?"

"I shall go to America. You—well I should suggest that you might find an opening in some seaside hotel where good-looking barmaids are still in request."

"You're a beast, James. You always were a beast."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Abuse won't get you anywhere. The remedy is in your own hands. You have only to catch this boy, and we're in easy street for the rest of our lives." Ida's face was furious with scorn.

"So you think you'll share Messenger's million?" she sneered.

"I'm quite sure I shall," replied James calmly. Defiance shone in Ida's eyes.

"Suppose I turn the whole thing down. Paul Shelcott would marry me any day."

"You'll never marry Paul Shelcott," James stated.

"You mean you'd tell him?"

"Exactly. I don't want my half-sister prosecuted for bigamy."

"It will be bigamy just the same if I marry young Stratton," cried Ida.

"Speak a little more quietly, my dear," advised James. "Maids have long ears. Yes, of course it will be bigamy in any case, if you marry again while your present husband is still alive; but if it's Stratton, that doesn't matter, for a small allowance paid quarterly will keep Master Purvis's mouth shut."

"I think you are a devil, James," said Ida very slowly and distinctly.

"Not a devil or an angel—merely a man," replied James. "Now let's have an end of these heroics. Stratton is coming again on Sunday, and it's a pity if you, with all your cleverness, can't catch a raw boy like that."

He turned and left the room, and Ida dropped upon a chair and sat biting her lip, trying hard to compose herself. She was old enough to know that scenes like this played the very devil with her looks. She wasn't left long in peace, for within three minutes James was back in the room with a newspaper in his hand, and a look of unusual excitement on his face.

"Here's a nice business," he said sharply. "Old Messenger is missing." He held the paper out to her, pointing to a headline.

"A Missing Millionaire." Ida took the paper and glanced quickly down the column. Presently she looked up.

"They seem to think he's dead," she said slowly.

"And the odds are they're right," responded James. "When a man of that age stays away from his home, you may take it as certain that something has happened to him. He has either drowned himself or someone has knocked him on the head."

"Then—then—" said Ida. "It's too late."

"Too late—what do you mean?"

"They will find Gilbert Stratton and tell him that he is the heir," Gilbert gave a short laugh.

"Anyone would think you were thirteen instead of thirty," he sneered. "Haven't I told you a dozen times that you and I are the only people that know that Gilbert Stratton is old Messenger's nearest relative. The lawyers—everyone believes that fat fellow, Aspland, is the heir, but he's only a great nephew," he added, "and Stratton is grandson. Stratton's mother was Messenger's own daughter." Ida thought a little.

"But won't Aspland claim the money?" she said at length.

"Probably he will, but he can't touch it till there's proof of the old man's death." He paused. "All the same, it doesn't leave us much time, and the sooner you get to work the better. You want to have him tight before a word gets out," he added cynically. Ida shuddered.

"A raw boy like that," she muttered.

"Better than an old lag," retorted James brutally. "And once you've landed him you needn't have any more to do with him than you like." He stood looking down at her with hard eyes.

"All right. I'll do it," she said, and with a laugh James again left the room.

Gilbert, meanwhile, had started work at Elford. He was a little nervous at first, but soon found that, though there was plenty to do, there was nothing beyond his powers. His new employer was amazingly competent, and worked, himself, a full eight hour day. He lived in a small house close to the office where the wife of one of the quarry men did his cooking. Each morning he had Gilbert into his office and gave him dry, precise directions as to what was to be done, directions which Gilbert had no difficulty in carrying out. Gilbert had the happy knack of getting on with the workmen and before the week was out had come to know most of them.

Sharp at twelve on Saturday work ceased for the week, but Gilbert was so accustomed to carrying on that he automatically went back to the office after his mid-day meal. A few minutes later Mr Cowling entered.

"Have you not finished your week's work?" he asked drily.

"I've pretty well cleaned up, sir," replied Gilbert.

"Then kindly leave the office, and go and take some exercise or amuse yourself. I do not care to have my employees damaging their health by working overtime, unless there is special need."

"Very good, sir," said Gilbert quietly, and retired. His spirits rose. He had money in his pocket, and the afternoon was fine. He made up his mind that he would walk to Taverton and see if the new bicycle he had ordered was ready. Shelcott had paid up all right.

To his delight he found the machine waiting for him, and he tried it out with great joy. It was a joyful contrast to the old rattle-trap which Vindex had destroyed. Then he went to the tailor from whom he had ordered his new suit on the previous Thursday. He had begged the man to try and get it finished by Saturday, but had hardly expected him to do so.

Here was another pleasant surprise. It was ready and it fitted well. Gilbert had it packed, he paid for it, then made a round of the shops and bought new shirts, socks and ties. He even indulged in a new hat. After that he fell in with Tom Horner who asked him to tea and was anxious to hear all about his work at Elford. Gilbert assured him that he got on capitally with Cowling.

"He's a queer old bird," he said. "Do you know anything about him, Mr Horner?"

"Not much," admitted Horner. "When he opened his account with us he transferred from a Cornish bank, so he must have been in tin or clay down there."

"He knows granite," said Gilbert. "He'll make Elford quarry pay better than it's ever paid yet."

"So much the better for you, my son," smiled Horner; and then Gilbert said goodbye and went off with all the goods strapped on the carrier of his new machine, making him look as if he was a traveller in the drapery business. He had had a very good afternoon, and he spent a pleasant evening sorting out his purchases and putting his rooms to rights. It was jolly to have two rooms of his own after his one little bedroom at Clamps', and he was very busy fixing up his sitting room. He wanted it to be fit to receive visitors.

Next day was fine again, and he shaved and dressed with unusual care. The quarry woman who acted as his house-keeper smiled at him when she had laid his breakfast.

"You're proper smart this morning, Mr Stratton," she said. "Looks like you be going courting." Gilbert, to his disgust, got very red, which tickled the good woman immensely.

A little after twelve Gilbert went off on his new machine, and as he ran easily down the long winding road he could not help thinking how much had happened in the one week. More than in any year of his life previously. He had met the Merrill's, quarrelled with Shelcott, stayed with Bobby, got a new job and—he felt an odd thrill as he remembered—made friends with Nance Aspland. He found himself wishing that he was going to lunch with Nance instead of Ida, and suddenly he was very cross with himself. "You're an ungrateful brute, Gilbert," he remarked emphatically, and pushing over the lever, sent his machine whizzing down the slope.

The door of Woodend opened almost before his finger had left the bell push, and there was Ida, looking, so Gilbert thought, perfectly lovely. She was indeed a handsome woman, but Gilbert, in his innocence, was not to know how much her looks owed to art. She gave him both hands.

"How smart you are, Gilbert!" she exclaimed. Then she looked a little confused. "Forgive me. I ought to have said 'Mr Stratton.'"

"Please don't," begged Gilbert. "Gilbert sounds so nice from you." Her eyes widened a little. "He's not such a fool as he looks," was her thought, but what she said was:

"Then you'll have to call me Ida."

"I'll try," replied Gilbert laughing. She took him round the garden, cut a late rose for his buttonhole, and they saw nothing of James until lunch time.

Lunch was perfect as usual. There were partridges cooked as Gilbert had never seen them, a cream deliciously mixed with late autumn raspberries, and a savoury of very delicate puff pastry just flavoured with cheese. James sat and smoked a while with Gilbert, and talked of sport. It was one of the things James could talk about. Then he excused himself on the plea of having letters to write, and left Gilbert in the drawing-room with Ida. Ida made room for him on the sofa beside her. She laughed.

"It's absurd to think it's only a week since we first met," she said. "Tell me how you like your new work."

"I like it immensely," declared Gilbert. "Mr Cowling gives me orders, but I have a free hand in carrying them out."

"Well," said Ida, "I'm glad you have found something not too far away. I was afraid, when you left the clay pits, that you might go out of this county altogether, and then we should have seen no more of you." Gilbert was flattered. What youngster of his age would not have been?

"Would you have minded?" he asked.

"Of course I should," said Ida softly. "Haven't I told you how lonely life is here on the moor?"

"But you and your brother must have plenty of friends."

"Acquaintances, yes, but friends are not so easy to find."

She looked up at him, and Gilbert saw that her eyes were not really green but a curious bright. They fascinated him, and all of a sudden he felt an intense desire to kiss her. And somehow he knew that she would not mind being kissed. He bent towards her.

Another instant and his lips would have been on hers when all in a flash Nance's face rose between them, Nance, with her fresh, clear skin and bright honest eyes. The illusion was so strong that Gilbert stiffened.

"I beg your pardon, Ida," he said, gently.

"What for?" In spite of herself, Ida's voice was sharp. She had failed, and she had not the faintest notion why she had failed. She was furious.

CHAPTER VIII.—DEAD MAN'S SWIM.

Just before dusk that afternoon, Gilbert arrived at Bobby Barr's place at Handlestone, and Bobby welcomed him boisterously.

"Gosh, look at the man! I say, Gilbert, you didn't put on those togs to call on me," Gilbert tried to laugh, but made rather a poor job of it, and Bobby, who had a heap of good, sound common-sense under his happy-go-lucky exterior, saw at once that something was wrong, and quickly changed the subject.

"I got another salmon yesterday, Gilbert. You must take a chunk of it home with you. But here's Mrs Clard to say tea's ready. Come in and have a mug." He chatted away so cheerfully that Gilbert soon began to feel better. The tea was hot and strong, and there were Devonshire "tough cakes," light as feathers, with Devonshire cream and Devonshire strawberry jam. Bobby waited until he saw that his friend was in a better frame of mind, then began to angle artfully to get at the source of his depression.

"You been lurching with the Merrill's haven't you, old man?"

"Yes," said Gilbert rather shortly, and Bobby knew at once that he was on the track.

"Are you going there next Sunday?"

"No."

"Then come here. I want to fix up a picnic to Black Tor Gorge. You remember that girl you rescued from the bull, Miss Aspland?"

"Yes, of course."

"She and her father are coming. Is it a go?"

"Rather," Gilbert brightened so that Bobby nearly laughed. But not quite. He was too wise for that.

"I think it will be rather jolly," he went on.

"Topping, if it's a fine day," agreed Gilbert cordially; "but I say, I didn't know you knew the Asplands."

"I didn't till you told me about them. Then I went and called. Nice little place they've got at Brimmacombe, and Miss Aspland knows how to run it. Pretty girl, too, rather!"

"Pretty—she's lovely," declared Gilbert indignantly, and again Bobby smothered a grin.

Gilbert sat with his legs straight out, and an unlighted cigarette between his lips. He was gazing into space and Bobby, too, sat silent. After a bit Gilbert took the cigarette from his mouth and turned his eyes on Bobby.

"I say, Bobby, you'll probably think I'm an awful fool, but can a chap be in love with two girls at once?"

"Of course he can," said Bobby promptly. "He can love one because she's pretty, and the other because she's nice." Gilbert nodded gravely.

"I see. One's a physical attraction and the other mental."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Bobby, and waited again. He knew too much to ask questions.

"Did you ever meet Ida Merrill?" Gilbert asked presently.

"Yes. Now there's a pretty woman for you, if you like."

"Why do you say woman?"

"Because she's thirty if she's a day," Gilbert's eyes widened.

"Thirty! You're crazy. She can't be a day over twenty-five."

"Ask her," said Bobby, then he laughed. "No, that wouldn't be much use. Go and look up her baptismal register. Anyway I'll bet you five bob to five pence that she'll never see thirty again."

A shocked look had come upon Gilbert's face, and Bobby, watching him shrewdly, began to size up the situation.

"That dame's been trying to vamp the poor kid," he said to himself. "I wonder what her game is."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about women," said Gilbert at last.

"Don't worry!" grinned Bobby. "You'll learn."

"Oh, I'm learning all right," replied Gilbert, rather grimly, and got up. "Now I must push off." Bobby tried to get him to stay for supper, but Gilbert quietly refused.

"All right, if you must go," said Bobby at last. "But it's a date for Sunday next. Come early, will you?" Gilbert promised and rode off into the darkness of the calm autumn night.

As he rode slowly up the long hill he met a car, and in the glare of his own headlight spotted it as Shelcott's two-seater. Shelcott, too, recognised Gilbert, and gave him an ugly stare, then swished past and turned down a side road.

"Going to Woodend for supper," said Gilbert to himself; and went on home, very thoughtful.

Next day he had a charming note from Ida, asking him to lunch again the following Sunday. In reply, instead of merely pleading a previous engagement, Gilbert

thought it was up to him to explain just what that engagement was, and ended by thanking Ida and her brother for all their kindness, and saying he hoped to call some day soon.

The weather remained fine till Friday, when it blew a gale and rained; Saturday it poured all day, and that afternoon Gilbert sat in his snug room reading, and every now and then looking out at the grey sheets driving past his window. It seemed certain that the weather had broken completely, and that the picnic was doomed.

Sunday dawned dark and dull, but the wind had changed to east, and the glass was rising slowly. Just after breakfast a gleam of pale sunshine broke through the clouds, then like magic the sky cleared, and by ten o'clock the great moor basked under an arch of purest blue. Gilbert could not have asked a finer day had it been made to order. Bobby had told him to come as early as he could, and Gilbert started at eleven.

He was surprised to find an A.A. man posted on the top of Merril Hill, who warned him that the main road was partly washed away, and that he would have to go round by Woodend. As he passed the house with its pretty trees, their foliage glorious with autumn tints, he suddenly felt glad that he was not spending his Sunday as he had spent the last two. He realised that there was something odd about the atmosphere of Woodend, and began to wonder again, as he had wondered a fortnight earlier, why the Merrill's had been so civil to him.

Then his mood changed, and he cursed himself for an ungrateful ass. These people had been extraordinarily kind, and, after all, it was entirely through meeting them that he had left Shelcott, got decent work, better prospects, and—this, of course, the biggest thing of all—met Nance. And now he was going to meet Nance for a second time, and his spirits shot up. He switched on more power and roared away down the valley with the river in full flood roaring louder still to his left. Bobby greeted him joyously.

"Pon my Sam, work agrees with you, Gilbert. You're looking fine."

"It isn't work, you ass!" retorted Gilbert. "It's the prospect of some play."

"With the fair Nance?" grinned Bobby.

"Here, let up, you big bully!" he protested, as he found himself picked up bodily and hung upon a sofa. "You shan't have any lunch if you do that again," he threatened. They fooled like two schoolboys, and when Nance and her father arrived they found the pair in the highest spirits. The hamper was ready, so was the car; they all packed in, and Bobby and Mr Aspland in the front, Nance and Gilbert in the dicky, and off they went.

Black Tor Gorge is one of the show places of the Moor. Here the Thane breaks down from the High Moor through a bed of granite for a distance of about two miles, forming a narrow gorge about a hundred feet deep, at the bottom of which the river runs narrow, dark and swift. A footpath has been cut along one side just high enough above the river to be beyond the reach of floods, and the cliffs on either side are covered with mountain ash, bramble, all sorts of growth, and huge sheets of ancient ivy.

In the summer the gorge is lovely, but to-day majestic was a better word to describe it, for the river, swollen by two days' rain, came thundering down through the depths with a force and fury that filled the great cleft with terrifying sound. The four stood on the road bridge and looked down into the depths, and for a while were very silent.

"A terrible place," said Reginald Aspland at last in a very subdued voice.

"Wait till you've seen it closer," said Bobby cheerfully.

"This is close enough for me," declared the other.

"It's quite safe," protested Bobby. "The path is rattled." Aspland shook his head.

"You can go if you like. I'll take care of the car and the tea."

"You're just lazy, Dad," chaffed Nance, as she left him. A flight of wooden steps took the three down to the level of the footpath. The flood swirled only a foot or so beneath, a mass of spinning eddies covered with clots of yellow foam. The boom of the penned waters in the great hollows underneath the path was deafening the very rock seemed to quiver under the impact of their rush.

"Dad's right," said Nance in an awed voice. "It's simply terrific."

"You'll see it better lower down," Bobby told her. "There's a footbridge a bit below there. We cross by that and go up the steps on the other side." Nance looked doubtful.

"Is it safe?" she asked. Gilbert saw his chance.

"Take my arm and you'll be right as rain," he assured her; and without waiting for further permission slipped her hand through his arm, and they started after Bobby. There were several places where the path was muddy and slippery with earth washed from above, and Gilbert thrilled as Nance slipped a little and he felt her weight on him.

"I ought to have nailed shoes," she told him. "Really I'm pretty good on rocks."

"I think you'd be good at anything you tried," said Gilbert in a matter-of-fact tone. The roar of water made talking difficult, and the walking was none too easy, but Bobby scrambling ahead, led them to the footbridge and stood aside for Nance to cross first.

"You'll get a topping view from the middle, Miss Aspland," he said. "That pool below—they call it Dead Man's Swim." Nance shivered.

"What a horrid name! Why do they call it that?"

"Because if anyone falls in above that's where they're found," Bobby explained.

(Continued on page 3.)