

MARY RAYMOND ANDREWS

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The little District Telegraph boy, with a dirty face, stood at the edge of the desk, and, rubbing his sleeve across his cheek, made it unnecessarily dirtier.

"Answer, sir?"

"No—yes—wait a minute." Reed tore the yellow envelope and spread the telegram. It read:

"Do I meet you at your office or at Martin's and what time?"

"The devil!" Reed commented, and the boy blinked indifferently. He was used to stronger. "The casual Rex all over! Yes, boy, there's an answer." He scribbled rapidly, and the two lines of writing said this:

"Waiting for you at office now. Hurry up. C. Reed."

He fumbled in his pocket and gave the youngster a coin. "See that it's sent instantly—like lightning. Run!" and the sharp little son of New York was off before the last word was well out.

Half an hour later, to Reed waiting at his office in Broadway impatiently, there strolled in a good-looking and leisurely young man with black clothes on his back and peace and good-will on his face. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting, Carty," he remarked in friendly tones. "Plenty of time, isn't there?"

"No, there isn't," his cousin answered, and there was a touch of snap in the accent. "Really, Rex, you ought to grow up and be responsible. It was distinctly arranged that you should call here for me at six, and now it's a quarter before seven."

"Couldn't remember the hour or the place to save my life," the younger man asserted earnestly. "I'm just as sorry as I can be, Carty. You see I did remember we were to dine at Martin's. So much I got all right—and that was something, wasn't it, Carty?" he inquired with an air of wistful pride, and the frown on the face of the other dissolved in laughter.

"Rex, there's no making you over—worse luck. Come along. I've got to go home to dress after dinner you see, before we make our call. You'll do, on the strength of being a theological student."

The situation was this: Reginald Fairfax, in his last year at the Theological Seminary, in this month of May, and lately ordained, had been seriously spoken of as assistant to the Rector of the great church of St. Eric's. It was a remarkable position to come the way of an undergraduate, and his brilliant record at the seminary was one of the two things which made it possible. The other was the friendship and interest of his cousin, Carter Reed, head clerk in the law firm of Rush, Walden, Lee and Lee, whose leading member, Judge Rush, was also senior warden at St. Eric's. Reed had called Judge Rush's attention to his young cousin's career, and, after some inquiry, the vestryman had asked that the young man should be brought to see him, to discuss certain questions bearing on the work. It was almost equivalent

to a call coming from such a man, and Reed was delighted; but here his troubles began. In vain did he hopefully fix date after date with the slippery Rex—something always interfered. Twice, to his knowledge, it had been the chance of seeing a girl from Orange which had thrown over the chance of seeing the man of influence and power. Once the evening had been definitely arranged with Judge Rush himself, and Reed was obliged to go alone and report that the candidate had disappeared into a tenement district and no one knew where to find him. The effect of that was fortunately good—Judge Rush was rather pleased than otherwise that a young clergyman should be so taken up with his work as to forget his interests. But Reed was most anxious that this evening's appointment should go off successfully, while Rex was as light-hearted as a bird. Any one would have thought it was Reed's own future he was laboring over instead of that of the youngster who had a gift of making men care for him and work for him without effort on his own part.

The two walked down Broadway toward the elevated road, Rex's dark eyes gathering amusement here and there in the crowded way as they went.

"Look at Billy Strong—why there's Billy Strong across the street. Come over and I'll present you, Carty. Just the chap you want to meet. He's a great athlete—on the water-polo team of the New York Athletic Club, you know—as much of an old sport as you are." And Reed found himself swung across and standing before a powerful, big figure of a man, almost before he could

answer. There was another man with the distinguished Billy, and Reed had not regarded the two for more than one second before he discovered that they were both in a distinct state of intoxication. In fact, Strong proclaimed the truth at once, false shame cast to the winds. He threw his arm about Rex's neck with a force of affection which almost knocked down the quartette.

"Recky," he bubbled, "good old Recky—bes' fren' ev' had—I'm drunk, Recky—too bad. We're both drunk. Take's home." Rex glanced at his cousin in dismay, and Strong repeated his invitation cordially. "Take's home, Recky," he insisted, with the easy air of a man who confers an honor. "'S up to you, Recky."

Rex looked at his frowning cousin doubtfully, pleadingly.

"It almost seems as if it was, doesn't it, Carty?" he said. "We can't leave them like this."

"I don't see why we can't—I can," Reed asserted. "It's none of our business, Rex, and we really haven't time to palaver. Come along."

The gentle soul of Rex Fairfax was surprisingly firm. "Carty, they'd be arrested in five minutes," he reasoned. "It's a wonder they haven't been already. And Billy's people—it would break their hearts. I know some of them well, you see. I was with him only last week over in Orange."

"Oh!" Reed groaned. "That Girl from Orange again." He opened his lips once more to launch nervous English against this quixotism, but Strong interposed.

"'S all true," he solemnly stated, fixing his eyes rollingly on

Reed. "Got Orange-colored cousin what break Recky's heart if don't take's home. Y'see—y'see—" The President of these United States in a cabinet council would have stopped to listen to him, so freighted with great facts coming was his confidential manner. "Y'see—wouldn't tell ev'body—only you," and he laid a mighty hand on Reed's shoulder. "I'm so drunk. Awful pity—too bad," and he sighed deeply. "Now, Recky, ol' man, take's home."

"Who's your friend, Billy?" Rex inquired, disregarding this appeal.

Billy burst into a shout of laughter which Fairfax promptly clipped by putting his hand over the big man's mouth. "He's bes' joke yet," Strong remarked through Rex's fingers. "He's go'n' kill himself," and he kissed the restraining hand gallantly.

The two sober citizens turned and stared at the gentlemen. He looked it. He looked as if there could be no step deeper into the gloom which enveloped him, except suicide. He nodded darkly as the two regarded him.

"Uh-huh. Life's failure. Lost cuff-button. Won't live to be indecent. Go'n' kill m'self soon's this dizhiness goesh pasht. Billy's drunk, but I'm subject to—to dizhiness."

Rex turned to his cousin with a gesture. "You see, Carty, we can't leave them. I'm just as disappointed as you are, but it would be a beastly thing to do, to let them get pulled in as common drunks. What's your friend's name?" he demanded again of Strong.

"Got lovely name," he averred eagerly. "Good ol' moth-eaten

name. Name's Schuyler VanCourtlandt Van de Water—ain't it Schuylie—ain't that your name—or's that mine? I—I f'rget lil' things," he said in an explanatory manner.

But the suicide spoke up for himself. "Tha's my name," he said aggressively. "Knew it in a minute. Tha's my father's name and my grandfath's name, and my great grandfath's name and my great-great—"

"Stop," said Rex tersely, and the man stopped. "Now tell me where you live."

Billy Strong leaned over and punched the man in the ribs. "You lemme tell 'em. Lives nine-thous-n sixt'-four East West Street," he addressed Rex, and chuckled.

"Don't be a donkey, Billy—tell me his right address." Rex spoke with annoyance—this scene was getting tiresome, and although Reed was laughing hopelessly, he was on his mind.

"Oh! F'got!" Billy's tipsy coyness was elephantine. "Lives six thous'n sev'nty four North S—South Street," and he roared with laughter.

Rex was about to learn how to manage Billy Strong. "Bill," he said, "be decent. You're making me lots of trouble," and Billy burst into tears and sobbed out:

"Wouldn' make Recky trouble for worlds—good ol' Recky—half-witted ol' goat, but bes' fren' ev' had," and the address was captured.

Rex turned to his cousin, his winning, deprecating manner warning Reed but softening him against his will. "Carty," he said,

"there's nothing for it, but for you to take one chap and I the other and see 'em home. It's only a little after seven and we ought to be able to meet by half-past eight—at the Hotel Netherland, say—that's near the Rush's. We'll have to give up dinner, but we'll get a sandwich somewhere, and we'll do. I'll take Strong because he's more troublesome—I think I can manage him. It's awfully good of you, and I can tell you I appreciate it. But it wouldn't be civilized to do less, old Carty, would it?" And Reed found himself, grumbling but docile, linked to the suicide's arm, and guiding his shuffling foot-steps in the way they should go.

"Now, we'll both kill ourselves, old Carty, won't we?" Rex heard his cousin's charge mumble cheerfully as they started off, with a visible lengthening of his gloom at the thought of companionship at death.

Strong was marching along with an unearthly decorum that should have made Fairfax suspicious. But instead it cheered his optimistic soul immensely. "Good for you old man," he said encouragingly. "At this rate we'll get you home in no time." And Billy, at that second, thrust out his great shoulder into the crowd, and almost knocked a man down. The man, whirled sidewise in front of them, glared savagely.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded. Strong, to whom nothing would have given more joy than a tussle, bent down and peered into the other's face.

"Is it a man or a monkey?" he piped, and shrieked with laughter.

The man's strained temper broke suddenly and Rex caught him by the arm as he was about to spring for Strong, and promptly threw himself between the two.

"Look here, Billy," he remonstrated, "if you fight anybody it's got to be me," and he spoke over his shoulder to the stranger. "You see what I'm up against. I'm getting him home—do just go on," and the man went.

But Billy's head was in his guardian's neck and he was spluttering and sobbing. "Fight you? Nev'—s' help me—nev'—Fight poor, ole fool Recky—bes' fren' ev' had? No sir. I wouldn't fight you Recky," and he raised a tear-stained face and gazed mournfully into his eyes. "D'ye think I'd—"

"Oh, shut up!" Rex ejaculated, "and hold your head up, Billy. You make me sick."

The intoxicated heavy freight being under way again, Rex looked about for the rest of the train, but in vain. After a halt of a minute or so he decided that they were lost and would have to stay lost, the situation being too precarious, in this land of policemen, with one hundred and ninety pounds of noisy uncertainty on his hands, to risk any unnecessary movement. Billy kept every breath of time alive and varied. Within two minutes of the first adventure he managed to put his elbow clearly and forcibly into a small man's mouth, and before the other could resent it:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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