

THE MOCKER.

CHAPTER VI.

Six months later, late in the evening of Anzac Day, Phyllis Moore sat in front of a blazing log fire in the cosy library of her home. Janet Pryor occupied one of the high fender seats, and opposite her Anne Russell was busy with toasting-fork, currant buns and butter. Further back, Jim Pryor leaned comfortably back, legs crossed, listening idly to the three girls' chatter. Billy and Ralph had gone to some celebrations in connection with Anzac Day at Waikana, and Mrs. Moore was away on holiday, visiting friends in the South Island.

"If the doctor and fat Ralph don't hurry, these buns will be spoilt," announced Anne, as she put aside the toasting-fork and placed the dish of buns close to the fire to keep them hot.

"Yes, I wonder whatever has happened to keep them so late," Janet said.

"Run out of petrol or had a puncture," was Jim's contribution.

"I expect they will come any time now," Phyllis said cheerfully.

As she spoke, the door-bell rang loudly and long. "Whoever is that at this time of night?" she asked.

"Well, seeing I am the only man of the party, would you like me to investigate?" Jim was moving across to the door as he spoke, and scarcely pausing for answer, he went out into the hall, pulling the library door to after him.

For there was a persistent fear at the back of Jim's mind that it was neither tyre trouble nor lack of petrol that had delayed the young men's return. He knew wine would flow freely where they had been, and that, if their good resolutions failed and they returned under the influence of liquor, there was pain and humiliation in store for Phyllis. So he opened the front door, and was more dismayed than amazed at the sight of the sorry looking pair of scarecrows which confronted him.

"Ye Gods and small fishes," he marvelled, under his breath. "You have made a welter of it!"

Dirty and dishevelled, red of cheek and nose, glassy eyed, they gazed owlishly at him, while he frantically racked his brains how to dispose of

them before they were discovered. If he took the doctor home, there was still Ralph to be looked after. If only he could get them both safely up to Ralph's room, perhaps he could concoct some story to satisfy the girls afterwards. He would have to lie like a trooper and, as his thoughts raced along in this fashion, the devil whispered in his ear. Why should he lie to save the man who was his successful rival? If Phyllis saw her future husband now, would she not turn from him in anger and disgust? It would be doing her a good turn, anyway, as she would find out what he was sooner or later, and it would save her a lot of suffering, perhaps, to know first as last.

Jim pulied himself up and resolutely routed His Satanic Majesty and his cunning logic. Phyllis' disillusionment must not come from his—Jim's—hands. No! he must find some way to shield the two culprits, and with this firm determination, he turned his attention again to his two problems.

Their collars and shirts were limp and bedraggled, and Jim guessed—rightly, too—that someone had soused their silly heads in cold water to sober them enough to return home. Billy's dark hair was plastered untidily over his eyes, and Ralph's tousled head was adorned with a gaudy-coloured clown's cap. The latter clasped in his arm a faded bunch of flowers, and the former, dragged by a stout rope over his shoulder, a large bouquet of golden-brown chrysanthemums, evidently part of the holiday decorations.

"You damn fools!" burst out Jim, in a fierce whisper. "Come upstairs, you precious idiots, and I'll help you to bed before you are found out."

"Really, James, your language is rather overwhelming, my dear chap," said Billy, who was nothing, if not polite, when he had looked upon the cup, when it was red. Indeed, the deeper his potations, the more polished became his manner, and by the extreme ceremony of his conduct now, Jim realised that the doctor was very, very drunk. "I am not accustomed to retiring at this early hour, James, and I will trouble you to announce us to the ladies."

"Home, James," joined in Ralph, with a foolish laugh. "Oh, come on," urged Jim, fearful that one of the girls would come out before he

could get them away. "I'll help you up the stairs."

"Thank you, James," said Billy, drawing himself erect and nearly overbalancing in the attempt. "I am not in need of any assistance and, as I mentioned before, I do not wish to retire. I will thank you to step aside and allow us to enter."

Realising it was useless to try to get them quietly away, Jim, acting on a sudden impulse, went quickly to the library door, thrust his head in, and said, "Waddler, you're wanted here a jiffy."

Perhaps Anne could help him resolve the situation, he thought desperately. She was used to all sorts of emergencies, and had a good head on her shoulders.

Meanwhile, Billy and Ralph had come into the hall. As Billy came in, the flowers on the end of his rope bobbed and bumped over the carpet and caught in the legs of a fern-stand, bringing the whole thing down with a crash.

Anne appeared in the hall and stood for a moment surveying her two friends.

Two or three times she opened her lips to speak and shut them again. At last she said scathingly, "You beauties! Thank goodness Mrs. Moore is not home!"

(To be continued).

Rogers Hornby, famous baseball player, and manager of St. Louis World Champion Baseball Team in 1926. "I have never tasted intoxicating liquors."—"Exchange."

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