

THE LORDS OF HIGH DECISION

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

CHAPTER XXXIII

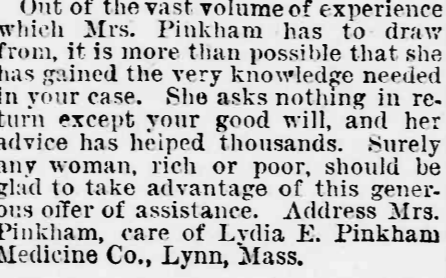
An Angry Encounter.

"I'm leaving the office on the first. I'm going down to the mercantile company with Walsh."

lawyer. And he's sitting out there now in the reception room waiting for you to see him; he's been trying to see you all winter, but you won't let him in. And Addie, poor Addie up there at the house, you deceived her, too, for she thought she was marrying a man; and the night you went to Boston without her because you were afraid of springing her on the Broderick—she found you out."

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The door slammed upon Wayne as he returned for the last time to his own room, and began collecting the papers in his desk. He had burned his bridges and there was no retracing his steps. His heart was still hot; he experienced no contrition, though he regretted immediately his reference to Addie which could only result upon her. But in the main he was satisfied that he had settled accounts with his father at last.

The door was closed between Roger Craighill and his son, blown shut by the winds of wrath. Col. Craighill sat staring at the wall that separated them. These last weeks had tried him sorely and his head sank upon his breast and he remained there late, pondering his affairs. The stringency of the fall and winter had pinched hard; his own buoyant optimism had been badly shattered by it. The control of the towering Craighill building had passed from the colonel's hands. When the banks demanded additional collateral on loans that had been carried easily for several years he found that the securities in a number of his enterprises were looked upon coldly by discount brokers. Even the Hercules National, in which he had been a director since its organization and which had always readily accommodated him, called his loans on a dime; it was said from the controller's office. It was trying to Col. Craighill's pride to be summoned to the private rooms of banks to discuss his own affairs with men who had suddenly ceased to be friends and were now gravely inquisitorial. They did their best for him, though; even his bonds and stock in the Craighill building corporation were "deposited"—that was the distinguished term—with three trustees for the benefit of creditors and this was a relief to his wounded vanity. With a breathing time and the return of confidence Col. Craighill declared he would reclaim them. His faith in the great Mexican plantation scheme was unshaken, and his colonial investments would yet prove his wisdom. He begged his inquisitors, in their austere mahogany cabinets, to have patience and all would be well; values were intact; credit only had been stamped; and he cited world conditions with his accustomed familiarity, which, however, did not relieve the immediate pressing fact that he owed a large sum of money which he could not pay.

An unexpected attack in another quarter had disturbed him greatly; and oddly enough it was the Rev. James Paddock of the parish house at Ironstead who had fired an arrow into the weakest plate of Col. Craighill's armor. The minister had written a letter to the authorities directing attention to the vile condition of a group of tenements in Ironstead, not knowing who owned them, and it happened that one of the objectionable buildings belonged to Col. Craighill. The Mail, a vigorous young independent newspaper, made the most of this opportunity in its red-hot editorial. The fact that this leading citizen, well known for his labors in behalf of the negroes in the South and for other notable philanthropies far removed from Pittsburg should thus ignore the squalor at his own door, aroused the Mail's righteous indignation, and it demanded an investigation by the local branch of the Municipal Service League, of which Col. Craighill was the national president. "Col. Craighill," to quote the Mail—"is an excellent type of the after-dinner reformer, posing in the lime-light abroad, but avoiding the discomforts that attend sincere, vigorous participation in home affairs. It is not our esteemed fellow-citizen we are after; it is the smug complacency and cant of many men of similar high position in our American cities, who wax eloquent in bemoaning our political depravity, but through cowardice or their own culpability are never heard from when there is any real work to be done."

Paddock was sorry to have caused this explosion and he called on the colonel to explain; but Colonel Craighill's rage was not appeased. He wanted to sue the newspaper, but his lawyer advised against it; the conditions in the tenement were about as the Mail's artist portrayed them, and there was no disputing the fact that the colonel owned the property, though, to be sure, he had lately mortgaged it. The refusal of the Star to spring to his defense astounded Col. Craighill. It was not the Star's

of them myself and it's enough. He's hot because he let go of the mercantile company; he has to find some excuse now for doing it and he says you tricked him into selling. The money you paid him went into the hole without making any impression on it."

"I paid him a fair price and he knows it. The figures were all checked by the audit company. But you had no business breaking with him. I don't like it. He means to be square; he's taken his business too easy and now that some of these fancy schemes he's in have gone bad and the banks are worrying him you oughtn't to have allowed him to get hot. You oughtn't to have done it, boy. And, besides, you might have helped him. You must be good for rich on to eight hundred thousand dollars—all good stuff. It's all clean. You don't owe anything, do you?"

"No; nothing worth mentioning." "You ought to help him. It would be the fine thing to do. He's your father—you can't get away from that."

But Wayne was not in a mood for magnanimity. Walsh dwelt at length on his duty, on what was, in the old fellow's phrase, "the right thing." He indicated concrete instances of what might be done to help Col. Craighill back to a firm footing. Certain things should be dropped as worthless encumbrances; the real estate ventures would work out in time; various stocks now pledged as collateral should be redeemed. The pledging of half of Wayne's estate would strengthen his father immensely with the creditors and might save him from ruin. Wayne listened attentively to Walsh; he saw that it might be done, but he felt no impulse to act on Walsh's suggestions; he was Roger Craighill's son no longer.

"Sorry I can't see it your way, Tom, but I have my side of the case, too. That row yesterday proves how far apart father and I have been. If our relations had been right and what they ought to be he would have asked me for help, or I would have gone to him. But he's always taken that high and mighty way about things, treating me as though I were a fool, incapable of understanding. He doesn't really appreciate the serious trouble he's in. He hardly admits that it's a temporary embarrassment; you know his way. No, Tom, I don't feel called on to do the dutiful-son act and dump down on his desk the good assets I inherited from my grandfather and have added to a little bit on my own account. I don't owe father anything—not even money. I've ordered my cars sent to a public garage; I'm going up now to pack my things."

"The house is all clear; that's your."

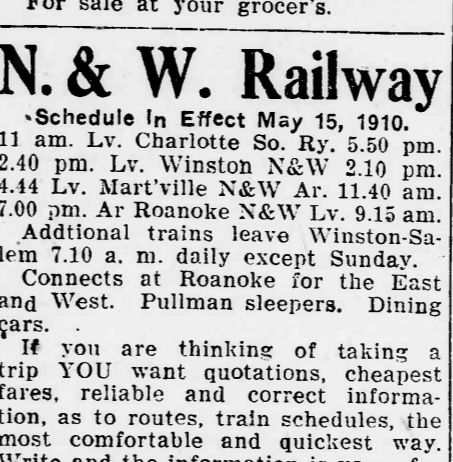
"Yes," replied Wayne with sudden asperity; "it's my own house I'm leaving."

"Um, I hope these troubles of the colonel's won't be hard on the little white bit on my own account. I don't know what he'll do about it, but I've ordered my cars sent to a public garage; I'm going up now to pack my things."

Wayne found a letter in the club office. It was from Jean, written in New York. A large, plain sheet of paper with the writing confined to a square in the center; the handwriting small, even, distinctive. It was the first message he had ever received from her and he carried it to a quiet corner of the lounging room to read.

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