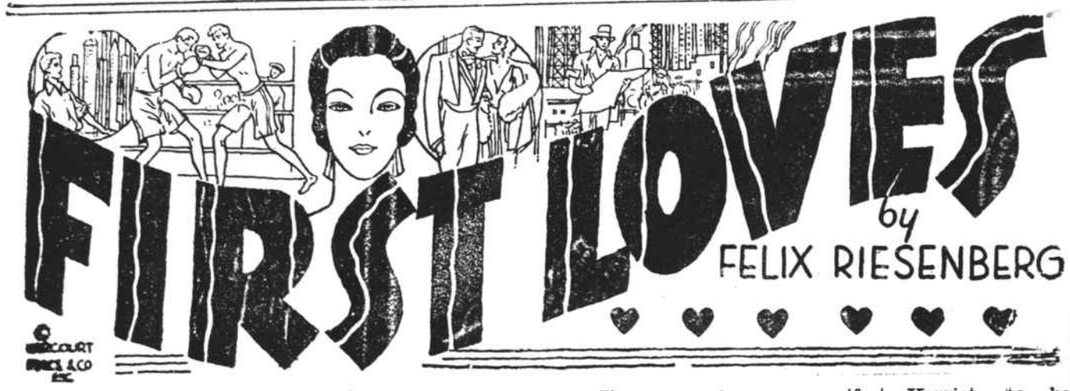

FOURTH INSTALLMENT

Johnny Breen, 16 years old, who had spent all of his life aboard a Hudson river tugboat plying near New York, is tossed into the river in a terrific collision which sinks the tug, drowns his mother and the man he called father. Ignorant, unschooled, and fear driven, he drags himself ashore, hides in the friendly darkness of a huge covered truck—only to be kicked out at dawn—and into the midst of a tough gang of river rat boys who beat and chase him. He escapes into a basement doorway where he hides. The next day he is rescued and taken into the home of a Jewish family living in the rear of their second-hand clothing store. He works in the sweatshop store—and is openly courted by Becka—the young daughter. . . . The scene shifts to the home of the wealthy Van Horns —on 5th Avenue, where lives the bachelor—Gilbert Van Horn — in whoes life there is a hidden chapter.

Now go on with the story:

Gilbert Van Horn was never married or divorced. He never worked, never worried so far as the world knew, and seldom did anything to disturb the social balance of the outer world. Having been born into a prepared position, he agreed with life, and to a large extent life agreed with him. Gilbert Van Horn was considered a typical Van Bibber, a creature utterly unknown to fact, but beloved of fiction.

Gilbert was genial. Women were attracted to him; so general was this that the effect became negligible. He had good breeding and common sense and a certain lack of perception. The combination saved him from becoming an utter loss. Had he wished he might have married money but the thought never occured to him. The daughters of a half dozen or so of the country's richest and hardest-working plutocrats might have accepted him ,one at a time, of course.

These hard-working men might even have respected him. Gilbert Van Horn stripped like a heavyweight and had a wide reputation as an amateur pugilist..

But we must go a bit further with the story of this bachelor, prize fight fan and general all 'round favorite of fortune.

He was certain of a beneficent providence that looks out for gentlemen. To be a gentleman, as he understood it, was the highest ideal of, well, of a gentleman. He never got beyond that; it was like many of the great fundamental things, it was simply so, and no gentleman could qnestion it, and still remaiu a gentleman. His code, for in those days it was the fashion to have one, included a frank understanding in advance. Whatever hopes he raised were always doomed to disappointment.

Gilbert had no desire to make money for the frugal habits of his father had left the family fortune fairly well recuperated. It was not a colossal fortune, but it was ample, at least for a bachelor. His funds had been placed in trust and this did much to make him static. He was liberal, in a way, and when the feeling seized him, he could be downright generous, actually crippling himself for months on end to do a good turn for a friend. But the trustees saw to it that his generosity was confined entirely to his income.

At thirty-five Van Horn still believed in the beneficence of his particular fortune. He was growing slightly heavy as his bent for hard exercise slackened and his hair tinged with gray. At forty doubt seized him, doubt that overtakes all men as they approach those middle years when the little question begins to be heard—'What have you done, with your precious twenties and thirties?"

What had he done? Nothing in fact. But he did remember a lot of great times, times he was fond of recalling when in company with that wit, Judge Marvin Kelly, friend of his father and big brother to the orphan Gilbert Van Horn. Marvin Kelly, a politician, not unknown in Tammany Hall, a power and a philosopher, smoothed over much rough ground in the mental trail of Van Horn.

"Judge," he said one day as they were in the library smoking and talking, "a distant connection of mine has died, out in Kentucky, a Lambert; Hosea Lambert. He leaves a daughter, Josephine. I'm thinking of having her on her. She's my nearest relative, so far as I know," he added, looking out of the window.

"How old?" Judge Kelly was practical.

"About twelve."

"H'm, safe enough — for a few years.

Josephine arrived in New York, a little girl with a sash and very long legs who rolled a hoop. It was another milestone in the life of Gilbert Van Horn. Aunt Wen, or Mrs. Anthony Wentworth, a decayed lady of quality, to describe her in formula, accompanied Josephine and remained in the Van Horn home. There was no question about her remaining, and Gilbert, when he came to consider the matter, was glad enough to have her there. Certainly many matters must arise in the life of a young girl requiring the instruction of a gentlewoman. This profound thought came to him quite as a shock. He liked to have Josephine around, liked to have her climb on his knee and make much of him. It was the first bit of honest affection Gilbert Van Horn had ever known.

Having done with the Van Horn myth let us step back for a few years and review the incident that has been slightly touched upon; the incident of the river and of the boy, born to the name of Breen, on the river, but actually begotten by Van Horn.

It was in the Summer of 1883 that the great internal and hushed-up scandal of the Hallet-Van Horn household had its beginning at the country place in Astoria, in that fine mansion overlooking Hell Gate. Gilbert, home following his junior year at college was being sheltered from the vile contacts of the city and the haunts of Brevoort Van Horn. He was studious but not so much of books as of nature. Mrs. Hallet-Van Horn's maid, a comely, lively girl named Harriet, the most satisfactory handmaiden Mrs. Van Horn had ever enjoyed, stumbled upon Gilbert, at ease in his mother's boudoir, reading Nick arter. Mrs. Van Horn was in the city shopping. The fact that the maid had stepped from a luxurious bath may have added somewhat to the astonishment of the young man. For the first time he was aware of the fact that female proportions were actual.

Very early the next year a condition of extraordinary difficulty became manifest. Harriet, to be quite plain, was in a family way, a decidedly annoying situation in view of the fact that she alone seemed able to do Mrs. Hallet-Van Horn's hair as it should be done.

At once suspicion hovered about the house. Harriet would not confess the name of the culprit. Harriet supposed, if the truth were known, that she would be imprisoned for life.

Then the eager flicker of suspicion hovered about the house. It rested in turn, one every male. Even Jules, the page, was under suspicion.

'No, ma'am, it was not him." So Harriet patiently absolved them, one by one, in the daily hourly inquisition.

"The butler, old Simmons? Lord no ma'am. Not him, oh, no no!"

Could it be immaculate conception? Mrs. Hallet-Van Horn almost wished her faith was strong enough to believe it, but no, a miracle of that sort might happen to her, but not to that girl.

A month of utter torture followed. The situation became worse. Her husband Brevoort Van Horn, must be the guilty party. He simply must.

The storming between Lida and Brevoort grew so intense that even the servants were wrought up. Mrs. Hallett-Van Horn became hysterical, to the point of speaking before Simmons.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mr. Van Horn." Simmons lingered outside the door as Brevoort left his wife's apartment. "May I speak sir?"

"By all means, Simmons. Who in hell did it?"

"I hope you will pardon my presumption, sir."

"Simmons, spill it. Was it the parson, or who?"

"Gilbert!" Brevoort stood somewhat dazed. "Great Jupiter her son. And mine," he added, as an afterthought. "Well I'll be damned!"

The bringing down of Gilbert from college he was coming anyway for the midyear recess, was an event. He had not forgotten the incidents of the preceding fall. In fact he had a rather lively idea of a renewal of the affair; Gilbert, also, was a simple fellow.

"Your mother wishes to see you, at once, Mr. Gilbert."

The meeting was in the library. Brevoort stood before the fireplace, shifting from one foot to another. His spats gave him the curious appearance of a man who is standing in a puddle of glue.

Mrs. Lida Hallett-Van Horn reclined in a large cushioned chair, her back to the windows. She was fully and somewhat formally dressed. A shawl of black lace, thrown over her shoulders, intensified her pallor. Husband and wife did not speak. After all he had done then to accuse her own boy.

When Gilbert came into the rather tense room, his father gave him a look of pity. Mrs. Van Horn, the Hallett for a moment subdued, smiled at him wanly. He bent, and she kissed his forehead. Her cheeks flushed. That handsome boy. Her boy.

"Gilbert," Brevoort tried to get things moving. He was due down at the club, at Twenty-first Street, a beastly drag, at four. "Your mother has asked us here. I have asked you, Gilbert, I mean we, that is your mother and me."

"Not me," Lida Hallet interposed, her voice sharp. "Not me, Mr. Van Horn; you, and, and Simmons." She bowed into her hands; a handkerchief dabbed at her glistening eyes.

"Well, the fact is——" Brevoort was somewhat at a loss. "Let us send for her." He looked pleadingly at his wife. Of course. It was a brilliant idea. "Ring for Simmons."

"Simmons," Mrs. Van Horn spoke with icy coolness, "have Harriet come up at once." The matter would soon be settled.

They stood for some minutes, eternities, father, mother, son. Gilbert, his eyes on the fire, began to do some thinking on his own account. Had the girl told, of— of— He had not looked at it in that light, as any harm to his parents, you know.

"Harriet can't be found, ma'am," Simmons reported. "She left the house, ma'am, cook says, this noon. She's took her own things. She has apparently left, ma'am."

"Mother——" Gilbert, awkward, nervous, asked. "What, what about Harriet?"

"Son, oh, how can I say it. The awful lies, the horror of it." She covered her face, her head bent down; sobs shook her shoulders. Her delicate white hands trembled, her rings flashedin the firelight. "I simply can't say it. Deny everything, Gilbert. Tell them they lie."

"Son," Brevoort's quick eyes caught the look of consternation, of realization, in the boy's face. Again he had an uncomfortable feeling that this thing, if told at the club, would meet with roars of mirth. "Mother's maid, Harriet, is about to, that is, to become a mother. We, that is I——"

"Not me, Gilbert, not me," she sobbed and trembled.

"We believe you are responsible for her condition. Is that so?"

Gilbert hung his head for a time. then he looked straight at his father, past his mother who suddenly faced him, her eyes bright and eager for the glad denial, ready willing, anxious to hear him fling back the vile insinuation, fling it back like a Hallett.

"I suppose I am to blame. I——"

A cry from the chair. Mrs. Lida Hallett-Van Horn had fainted. There in the library, surrounded by books as unknown as life, books filled with the stuff of dreams and crimes and love, these people enacted a scene. The young man was the least to blame.

Continued Next Week