

The Bandage

by DESMOND STONE

TOM had been a nonentity for 25 years. At work he was merely one of a number of clerks, a good steady hack; at home he was a dependable son who lived quietly and behaved dutifully; and in the street he was simply one of the passing parade. He was not wholly negative. On the contrary, he was kind, conscientious, honest and loyal. But if these were positive attributes, they were also unexciting ones. They did nothing to make him stand out.

It was Tom's misfortune to be an ordinary person. He was neither handsome nor unhandsome, clever nor dumb, rich nor poor, tall nor short. To all except himself, he was any Tom, Dick or Harry.

For the most part he accepted his fate meekly and rebelled not. Yet he had his secret longings. They came most often after a night at the pictures. Exhilarated by the screen drama and carried far outside time and logic, he fairly floated down the street. He was no longer a humdrum man doing a humdrum job. He was the great Casanova himself, the idol of a hundred swooning women; he was the hero of a chiselled profile who won fame everlasting by diving fully clothed to the rescue of a drowning child; he was a poet of divine inspiration, a marvelously accomplished pianist, an artist with a canvas in the Royal Academy. He was everything that was most desirable in life. But passionately though he longed for fame and acclaim, Tom had none of the gifts that go with them.

The Monday of the great change dawned exactly like any other Monday. Tom made his same undeviating way

from bed to breakfast table, and then went out to chop the kindling as he always did. No one will ever know what happened—whether the wood was wet, or whether Tom had given himself a too ambitious casting as a bushman doing a 12-inch standing chop. At any rate, the axe slipped and gashed his hand rather badly. His mother, as fussily solicitous as a politician at election time, bandaged it carefully and sent him to work with strict instructions to return at once if his hand began to trouble him.

Trailing his damaged wing at his side, Tom boarded his bus and resigned himself to another day as another human being. He was wrong.

"Hullo," said the driver, "what've you been doing to yourself?"

Tom, who had never before been singled out by the driver for attention, was a little disconcerted.

"Has your wife been knocking you around?"

"Well yes, yes she has. Sank her teeth in this morning."

It was the same when he sat down in the end compartment. His neighbour, a burly workman who had never before wasted breath on him, except to agree that it was a lousy day, looked across with a show of interest.

"Something hit you?"

"You could put it that way."

"I suppose the other bloke's in hospital."

"He ought to be."



"Miss Smithells was a desirable woman"

Banter, Tom decided, was all very well, but it hardly did justice to what was really a jolly sore hand. Had he considered himself instead of the office, he would have stayed at home. More concern, he thought, ought to be manifested.

"As a matter of fact," he told his tobacconist in a burst of confidence, "I cut it chopping the wood this morning."

"Well, now, that's a strange thing. I had a similar experience myself just the other day," said the tobacconist as he launched into a long and gory recital.

The whole truth, it seemed to Tom, did too little credit to what was a most impressive-looking bandage. A little exaggeration, he felt, could do no harm.

It was, nevertheless, a most gratifying morning. By carrying his arm stiffly and by exhibiting it in such a way as to

suggest great pain and great fortitude, he drew upon himself more attention than he had enjoyed in years. People who customarily passed him in the street stopped to ask what he had done to himself. There were the few who said nothing. They obviously saw the bandage, for in its dazzling whiteness it could not be overlooked. But wracked though they were with curiosity, out of politeness they asked no questions. Tom respected their motives but perversely wished they would have done with etiquette and let him exploit his injury.

Much his biggest triumph of the day was reserved for his arrival at the office. He marched in as usual and muttered his daily imprecation against the janitor as he swept the wastepaper basket from his desk. And then his routine faltered. He made a left-handed throw with his hat and missed the peg by yards. The office was alert at once. Out of the corner of a watchful eye, Tom saw the head cashier look his way. Miss Smithells, he was convinced, was a desirable woman. Though she had some of the terrifying efficiency of a calculating machine, she also had a brilliant smile that never failed to bring him to his knees. If only it was more personal—less like a reflex action and more like a genuine greeting.

"Oh, Mr. Cathcart, you've hurt your hand."

Tom was elated. He had been many times Mr. Cathcart, but never "oh, Mr. Cathcart."

"Just a scratch, just a scratch," he said, then twitched a little in pain.

"Are you sure? It doesn't look too good to me."

"No, no, it's nothing. Nothing at all," replied Tom in the manner of a man deprecating fuss and yet conveying the impression of a grievous hurt. It was all very cunningly done.

"I know you're just saying that. I can see that it hurts. Doesn't it now?"

"We-ell, yes, perhaps a little."

"There, I knew it all the time," cried Miss Smithells in triumph. "Is it troubling you now?"

"Just a trifle. It throbs when I hang my hand. But (bravely) it could be a lot worse."

Accurately interpreting this to mean that it could be worse but very little worse, Miss Smithells became full of concern. "Oh, you poor man. I am sorry."

Even at half a room's distance, Tom could see the dawn of sympathy in eyes habitually lacklustre. Rising excitement upset his pose of studious unconcern and he so far forgot himself that he started across the room.

"Would you care to see it? I'll show it to you if you like."

"No, no. I couldn't bear to look at it," said Miss Smithells with a barely repressed shudder. "It makes me sick, anything like that. But how did it happen?"

"I crashed on my bike."

"I didn't know you had a bike."

"Oh, yes," said Tom darkly, hinting that there were many things about him of which she did not know. "I have two in fact. One for wet weather and one for fine."

"And how did you do it?"

"I skidded in some gravel. You know what these country roads are like—gravel piled high by the grader."

"I do indeed. Someone ought to be told about it."

"Well, that's how it happened. One minute I was up; next minute I was down."

"You must be more careful next time, Mr. Cathcart."

The conversation closed rather too inconclusively for Tom's liking. Yet on

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 664)

S	T	A	I	D	C	L	A	M	A	N	T
A	C	A	A	A	L	D	R				
L	I	T	O	T	E	S	A	L	I	B	I
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A	R	I	O	T	N	O					
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Clues Across

- Arming in order to spoil the drink? This is perhaps a border-line case.
- A general pardon here, yet man's confused.
- A little more than round, in fact, plump.
- A common type of clue, I'm afraid.
- Quarantines.
- Certifies.
- Affirmative reply.
- "The rose is sweetest washed with morning —" (Scott).
- Why rats become dark-complexioned.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Muse of epic poetry.
- This harp goes with the wind.
- "Thick as autumnal — that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa" (Milton).
- Young hare.
- Three in the wind proverbially indicates one over the eight.
- Bored, but not wearied, although you might be if you had too strenuously.
- A wet hen (anag.).
- Red Indian trophies.
- Strip.
- Health resort.

No. 665 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

Clues Down

- Any time for pleasantness.
- Beheaded, these animals become birds.
- Difficult circumstances.
- Greek sun-god.
- Figuratively thrown down as a challenge.
- Knotty.
- Abbreviated manuscripts.
- He gives the show away.
- "All the perfumes of Arabia will not — this little hand" ("Macbeth," Act 5, Scene 1).

