

Silver Lining

A Short Short Story complete on this page

By Frederick Skerry

IT WAS nearly half past ten—after the bedtime of even semi-rural communities; but a lamp still burned in the Hamlin sitting-room, and Mrs. Hamlin still leaned toward its yellow light and added to the pile of darned socks on the table.

Quiet though this scene was to the eye, the room was filled with sound from a radio in a dim corner, where sat Mrs. Hamlin's father, heedless of his surroundings, his head cocked to one side so his better ear would be close to the loudspeaker.

With loving absorption Mrs. Hamlin worked, turning each gaudy sock inside out, pulling the toes in, and folding the pairs together into compact bundles. She felt rather than heard the three sharp raps at the front door, and a little pucker of wonderment formed between her eyes as she emptied her apron of socks and hurried to answer.

The old man in the corner neither heard nor felt the knocks.

Opening the door, Mrs. Hamlin backed away from the olive-clad figure that loomed formidably in the light from the sitting-room.

A state trooper entered, closing the door behind him. "Sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Hamlin," he apologized. "Is Eddie home yet?"

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Tucker," she smiled, hastily tucking in a wisp of graying hair and leading the way to the sitting-room. "I couldn't imagine—Why, no, he isn't."

"Well, I'll wait a while," Tucker said, taking a seat by the door. "I didn't find him or any of his crowd down at the Center. And I want to see him. He's usually home by this time, isn't he?"

"Yes. But he's gone to Boston."

"That so? When did he go?"

"This afternoon—about four o'clock, I think it was." Glancing uneasily at the radio, she drew her chair close to the trooper.

"Boston, eh?" he ruminated. "He didn't take the four-fifteen—I happened to be at the station."

"No, he went in somebody's car."

"What did he want to go to Boston for? Do you know?"

"No. He said it was a secret—leastways for the time being. You know Eddie likes to be mysterious."

Tucker nodded. "I heard that he threw up his job at the mill this noon."

"Yes, he told me. He said he had a chance to make more money. But why do you ask me all these questions?"

Tucker lowered his eyes under her searching gaze and fiddled with the visor of his cap. "Oh!" she faltered, reading his hesitation correctly. "There's some trouble! I just know there is!"

"I wish there wasn't, Mrs. Hamlin," Tucker assured her. "Honest, I do. I always liked Eddie."

"Why—Eddie's not a bad boy, Mr. Tucker. He's thoughtless, I know, but he isn't bad."

"Bad company'll do lots of things, though."

"I know." Mrs. Hamlin's eyes clouded with the ache that came in her heart. "I never liked that crowd he hangs around with. But Eddie earns his money. He says he's got to have some fun. I never thought there was real harm in it. Now—But what is it,

Mr. Tucker? Why do you want Eddie?" she asked anxiously.

The trooper gazed at her soberly for a moment before replying. She'd have to know sometime. "Well," he told her, reluctantly, "the filling station at the Falls was held up this evening. I'm afraid Eddie'll have to explain something."

Confidence overcame Mrs. Hamlin's slow-forming doubt. "Oh," she declared stoutly, "Eddie wouldn't do anything like that! I just know he wouldn't." She shook her head, unbelieving.

Trooper Tucker thrust a hand into his tunic and drew forth a loud plaid cap. He noted Mrs. Hamlin's start when she saw it. "Isn't this his cap? It was dropped in the scrimmage." He knew that nobody else in town wore a cap like that.

"Why—" Mrs. Hamlin stared at the cap. "Eddie had one like that—but he lost it, he told me. And he wore his felt hat today. Oh, there's a mistake somewhere! There must be!"

SHE was quick, Tucker thought. "Maybe," he said, noticing her glance flash to the clock. "Well, perhaps Eddie can explain it."

"Of course he can. Anyway, how could Eddie be mixed up in anything at the Falls when he was in Boston?"

"Well, he couldn't," admitted Tucker.

"Not if he was in Boston." It was plain to anybody that, if Eddie were in Boston, four hours away, he couldn't have been at the Falls when the filling station was robbed.

"He's never lied to me yet," Mrs. Hamlin said, with obvious pride in her voice.

Nevertheless, the trooper had faith in his evidence. His was the enthusiasm of the policeman on a hot trail.

"Why," Mrs. Hamlin argued earnestly, "anybody as light-hearted as Eddie—singing all the time—just couldn't be bad."

"'Twould seem so," said Tucker agreeably. "He certainly can sing, can't he? We always enjoy him at the barracks." And to himself he added, with genuine regret, that the boys would miss Eddie.

They sat in silence. There seemed to be little more to say. The trooper's frowning gaze roved from the radio and the oblivious old man to the simple appointments of the room and back again to Mrs. Hamlin's face, now drawn and tense. Too bad! Too bad to make a mother suffer so! Queer, no matter how crooked a man was, there was generally a mother who believed him straight—or, if she didn't, prayed every night that he be made so.

The minute hand of the clock had passed the half hour. A leisurely tick-

tock punctuated a moment of quiet on the radio. Then came the voice of an announcer:

"Now, folks, you're going to hear the newest member of the Serenaders' Family; the songster of the Berkshires; Eddie Hamlin singing Look for the Silver Lining. We know you're going to like him. Come on, Eddie!"

A SHORT piano introduction, and the clear, well-remembered tenor flooded the room.

"God!" muttered Tucker in amazement. "That's an alibi, all right!" The old man's mouth widened in a toothless grin, and his head wagged approval. The others, almost breathless, listened while the refrain neared its end:

"... So always look for the silver lining,
And try to find the sunny side of life."

Stuffing the cap into his tunic, the trooper stood up and turned to the door. "Well, that lets Eddie out! I'm glad too. Honest, I am, Mrs. Hamlin. Sorry I bothered you. Good night!"

But Eddie Hamlin's mother neither saw nor heard him go. Straining forward, her hands clasped tightly in an attitude of thanksgiving, she heard nothing but that clear young voice; saw nothing through the blur of tears but that redeeming radio in the corner.



Illustrated by
Ray C.
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"Sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Hamlin," the trooper apologized. "Is Eddie home yet?"



Odds on Mr. Brown

By THE GENTLEMAN AT THE KEYHOLE

POSTMASTER-GENERAL WALTER F. BROWN used to be Assistant Secretary of Commerce under Secretary Hoover. That he was promoted to a place in the Cabinet is evidence enough that President Hoover thinks well of him.

In the summer of last year, after Mr. Hoover had been nominated for the Presidency, President Coolidge put Secretary Whiting in his place at the head of the Commerce Department. Mr. Whiting, although he was obviously going to be in the Cabinet only a short time, took his job with great seriousness and decided to improve upon the organization that his predecessor, Mr. Hoover, had handed down to him. After a little while Secretary Whiting went to President Coolidge and told him that, according to his way of looking at it, Mr. Hoover's famous department fell far short of efficiency.

In particular Secretary Whiting told his chief the Department of Commerce would be greatly improved if Assistant Secretary of Commerce Walter Brown and Director of the Division of Foreign and Domestic Commerce Julius Klein should be fired.

"What's the matter with them?" asked President Coolidge.

"They don't do any work," replied Secretary Whiting. "Why, I'd be ashamed to have mills run the way the Department of Commerce is run."

"Well, if you feel that way about it," replied the President, "why don't you fire them? You're the doctor. You're the head of the department."

Mr. Whiting went away from the White House carrying in his bosom one of the best stories that ever came near being told in Washington, the story of how Mr. Hoover's celebrated department had to be reorganized and made efficient by the firing of Mr. Hoover's two pet subordinates, Walter Brown and Dr. Julius Klein.

The Commerce Department is not far from the White House, but Secretary Whiting had not walked the whole way before an idea dawned upon his mind: Mr. Hoover was going to be President anyway, and maybe he would like to see some of his old friends still in office when he arrived in the White House. After all, it might be well to humor Mr. Hoover even at the cost of sacrificing such efficiency as might otherwise be put into the Department of Commerce. He retraced his steps to the White House and told Mr. Coolidge of his new idea.

"Well," said Mr. Coolidge, smiling tightly, "as I said before, you're the doctor. Keep 'em if you want to."

So Walter Brown was not fired, and neither was Dr. Julius Klein. One of

them is now Postmaster-General and the other is now Assistant Secretary of Commerce. Probably they would have got these two jobs even if they had been fired. So second thought robbed Washington of one of the best stories in recent years, the story of the gilding of the lily of the Commerce Department by Secretary Whiting.

Mr. Walter Brown, the Postmaster-General, is a Harvard graduate and a city boss. There is nothing unprecedented in this. Mr. Boies Penrose was a Harvard graduate and a city boss. And I want to say right here that no graduate of Harvard ever achieved greater distinction in his chosen line than Mr. Boies Penrose did in his. Mr. Penrose was one of the famous political bosses of all time.

But of Mr. Walter Brown it is to be said that he looks like a Harvard graduate and not at all like a political boss. If among the district leaders of Tammany Hall there had been anyone who looked like Walter Brown, the grave problem recently confronting that organization would have been instantly solved, and the better element in New York would instantly have taken out membership cards in the Tammany district clubs, so pleased would it have been with the successor of Judge Olvaney.

You gather that Mr. Brown is one of the political advisers of Herbert Hoover. Well, that is what they say in Washington. And they are making books on whether in the end it will be Jim Good, Secretary of War, or Walter Brown, Postmaster-General, who will be President Hoover's leading political adviser.

The odds should be in favor of Mr. Brown, considering the length of time he has in which to establish himself. I should say that Mr. Brown's I. Q. is about ten points higher than Mr. Good's, and over several years that should amount to a considerable advantage. Besides, Mr. Brown, like Mr. Hoover, is an ardent fisherman, and one of the best cooks over a camp fire in the world.

Then, too, Mr. Brown has never been in Congress. He has never learned to talk too much. He always seems to know something like ten times as much as he says. And he says what he has to say in the gentlest voice that was ever produced on the Western Reserve. He is never self-assertive. He is content to let you find him out. His smile is like a spring day. Imagine a man of sixty who looks as if he were fifty, as smooth as satin, who looks like an aristocrat even in a Cabinet with Adams, Stimson and Mitchell, and who withal knows his onions in that low-life game of politics. You will observe that the evidence in favor of would-be politicians going to Harvard is very strong.

All Was Ambrosial

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had been in Hollywood only three weeks so he did not realize that things are always that way in Hollywood.

It required no great mental effort for him to realize that Elerie Byron wasn't anywhere near as anxious to see him as Columbus was to sight land. He shrugged his shoulders. That much was a relief. One of the things that had worried him a little was that her infrequent letters in the last year in no way indicated that she wanted to break off the engagement. Evidently they had just been polite to each other, neither wanting to hurt the other's feelings, which showed plainly that they were not in love.

Eddie had no desire to become the husband of a Passion Girl. To attempt to keep up the pace set by those heroic leading men would be more trouble than it would be worth. When he kissed a girl he kissed her and he felt that day in and day out the Graeco-Roman method which seemed to prevail in Hollywood would turn out to be a good deal of a nuisance.

WHEN Eddie came to Hollywood he had been a little hurt at Elerie's obvious refusals to see him but he met a pain-killer in the lovely person of Celia Brandon who was playing small parts over at the De Luxe studio, where he was working in the publicity department. Next to the prize-winning float in the Tournament of Roses, Celia was the swellest thing in California and nobody short of Graham MacNamee could describe her adequately.

She liked Eddie and when he was in her presence he experienced all the pleasant sensations of a gentleman who has just done away with three New Orleans gin fizzes, hand running. Eddie was just one of the hired hands in the publicity department and she was a Wampus Baby Star getting \$75 a week, so they were about in the same social plane and could act natural.

Celia Brandon was her right name and she came from Louisville and she had a low, soft voice that was nothing more nor less than cuddley. If you don't get the idea, that's your tough luck in never having met a girl like Celia. Her big brown eyes were cuddley too, but there possibly is no need to pursue the subject further.

Celia was far different from Elerie Byron, or Minnie Schwartz, as she had been known in Eudora. Minnie had chosen her name with the help of a continuity writer who worked on her first picture, who suggested "Byron" because he said there was a man named Lord Byron who had had unusual talents, and besides it was short and would fit nicely in big letters in the electric signs. "Elerie" was her own suggestion.

Elerie was as hard as a casting director and she showed no more concern for the mob than the wife of a chief of police who is speeding down the boulevard fifteen minutes late for the matinée. She realized her power—or perhaps it was her nuisance value—and when she wanted something she accepted no substitute.

The orchestra stopped, and Elerie's party returned to the table. Eddie rose and as his eyes met hers she did not waver.

"We're going to my house now, Mr. Condon," she said, coldly. "Perhaps you will come and see me at the studio tomorrow."

"I'm sure we'd like to have Mr. Condon come along," blundered the magazine editor, thereby putting himself in

good, like a husband who tells the Whiffens, who have come over to play bridge, that he's sure we'll be glad to take care of the two canaries when the Whiffens go away for the summer, won't you, mama?

"He probably has some other engagement," said Harrigan hopefully.

"Oh, no," Eddie assured him. "I'd like to. I want to have a little talk with Miss Byron."

So Elerie marched out of the Grove at the head of her guests and they all piled into limousines and went to Elerie's house.

Elerie and Harrigan were sitting on a couch listening to Elerie talk, while the operator was getting the picture ready, and Eddie horned in.

"I just want a moment," he begged, and sat down beside her. "I've got a story I want you to read—it might make a good picture for you."

If there is anything worse than home-made beer it is an amateur with a story to sell. Elerie groaned and looked in despair at Harrigan.

"The thing for you to do, Mr.—er," he advised, "is to write your story on one side of the paper and mail it in to the scenario department with a stamped envelope for return."

"But this is a story I wrote especially for you," he insisted, looking firmly at Elerie. "You'd be marvelous in it," he added, not realizing that Elerie knew that she'd be marvelous in anything.

She tried to be patient. "Please do as Mr. Harrigan says."

"Are you a writer?" Harrigan asked him.

"You might call me that. I'm in the publicity department over at De Luxe, now."

Elerie couldn't have been more startled and pained if she had broken a tooth on a pit in a cherry pie. A publicity man! Not only a publicity man, but one from a rival studio, here at her party with all these noted people.

One of the butlers approached and bowed stiffly in the Hollywood manner.

"New York is calling Mr. Harrigan," he apologized.

HARRIGAN went into the huge hallway and drew a gold French phone out of a bronze chest. Conversation stopped in the drawing-room so that he, and the guests, could hear better.

"She won't take fifty thousand?" he asked incredulously. "Wait a minute." He called Elerie.

"Mary Dare won't take fifty thousand for Passion Island," he said. "Ziegfeld has made a big offer. The book's going like a house afire—bigger than The Sheik or Flaming Youth."

Elerie already had announced that she was going to make it. If some other star got Passion Island now, Elerie would be a joke in Hollywood, and a Hollywood joke is something fierce.

"Tell them to get it," she demanded.

"But, Elerie—"

"My contract says I can have any story I want. You'll have to pay what she asks. Tell them to get it."

Harrigan turned wearily.

"Get it," he said. He listened a moment and his face fell. "Yes, get it. Yes, I'll go to two hundred thousand, if necessary." He replaced the telephone and the guests in the next room started talking again.

"Of course, you won't mention this," Harrigan said to all of them when he entered the room and they all said, why, of course not. He looked at Eddie Condon and scowled.

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