

# TAXI

## An Adventure Romance

### GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

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PART I.

## Moral Emblems.

Please don't skip this description of Robert Hervey Randolph—six feet straight up and down, broad of shoulder and narrow of hip, sandy-haired, blue-eyed. Slightly up-ended and wearing a bundle of faint freckles, clean shaven, well groomed, very correctly dressed, and twenty-six years old. Let it be added that his eyes were placed just far enough apart to stamp him forever honest; he had an open and most prepossessing countenance.

At the moment of the start of this rapid yarn, he was standing in the Van Tellers' library, looking down in pained and flushed surprise at Miss Madge Van T., who was sitting in a huge leather chair half facing the fire in the open grate, one leg very much under her, the other waving a satin-and-silk combination of foot and ankle in distracting accompaniment to her disturbing speech.

"Bobby," said Miss Van T., "you are darned good-looking; you're strong, straight, and a gentleman; there are times when you are wholly adorable, but, nevertheless, I'm not going to the show with you tonight, or to the opera tomorrow, or anywhere any more. There, there, dear boy; you don't have to say anything. You have one of those faces that is absolutely beyond the aid of a vocal organ. It says everything that is in your heart of gold before your brain has time to tinkle a bell."

"Look here, Madge," said the pained Mr. Randolph: "are you making fun of my face or of my brain or of both?"

"My dear," said Miss Van T. quite gravely, "I'm not making fun of you in any way whatsoever. I'm merely telling you how lovely you are, so that you will understand how serious it is when I say that I've decided not to love you any more."

"But how can you help it?" stammered Mr. Randolph, his tongue for once saying the same thing as his face at the same time.

Miss Van T.'s breast fluttered as though rising against its mistress to the defense of this disingenuous young man, and she was obliged to swerve her eyes from his and draw a long breath before she answered.

"I can, because I will," she said, her face paling. "Oh, Bobby, can't you wake up? Look round you and come to earth! You are born and bred on Manhattan, yet you've never seen New York."

"I guess you're right," said Bobby thoughtfully. "Look here, Madge: why should I try to see New York, and why should we be talking ash-cans when I've got you to look at in one of the most bewitching and abbreviated bits of dress goods that ever revealed a completely adorable person? Tell me that."

"Well," said Madge, her face hardening, "I will. It's a long story, not in words but in generations. The Van Tellers have lived in East Ninth street since the year one of the island. That is, they used to live here; now they hardly exist. They are merely an assorted lot of animated corpses that crawl out of their tomb periodically to take a strange air, leaning on a rotten stave called the 'Old Order.' Listen to this, Bobby: The new New York is a fever, and I've caught it. I want a rainy-day car, a calling-car, and a touring car; I want dressed that will stab with envy the heart of every woman that looks at them; I want my jewels to run to size and quality, and I want a yacht just for the papers to talk about, because I hate to ride in the smelly things."

Bobby's eyes had grown rounder and wider as the list progressed.

"Do you think you could get along on a hundred thousand a year?" he asked very softly.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I've been going into the subject rather thoroughly, and a hundred thousand would be running it on a pretty close margin. By the way, just what is your allowance under that crazy will?"

"Ten thousand," said Bobby.

"Well," said Miss Van T., "there you are! Just enough to keep you comfortably in debt, and you want to marry me on it! It wouldn't be quite so out of the question if you knew you were going to have it forever, but you don't. It may be cut off."

"Any day," said Bobby promptly. "It isn't likely, after all these years, but it may."

"Well, there you are!" Miss Van T. repeated herself. "I'm not altogether a pig, Bobby. Ten thousand with you thrown in is enough to make any woman think three times, but the truth is you have been killed by too little and too much kindness. If you had never gone on as super for a disappearing heiress, you might have amounted to something by now. In-

stead of making you, that money has buried you."

"You don't know me altogether, Madge," said Bobby. "Do you think I've never thought things out? When I need to make money, I'll do it. The great thing nowadays, it seems to me, is not to have too much."

"Not to have too much!" exclaimed Miss Van T., a puzzled frown on her forehead. "Bobby, do you know that you've said something original? No; I won't put it quite as strong as that, but I will say that you've given birth to an exotic idea."

"But it doesn't alter things as far as I am concerned," she continued, almost without a pause. "In fact, it only simplifies matters. You've signed the warrant. I want loads of money; you're afraid of having too much. He turned toward the door.

"Not without kissing me good-by, Bobby!" cried Madge.

He looked over his shoulder with a polite but impersonal smile.

"I'm not much on kissing strange women," he said lightly. "It would take me years to learn to kiss you again."

He left the room and the house.

With his top-hat pushed back on his head, the ends of his muffler flying loose, his overcoat half unbuttoned, he swung up the deserted lower reaches of the Avenue, punctuating his thoughts with the solid rap of his stick on the pavement. It might be supposed that he was thinking and mourning over the sudden demise of the Miss Van Tellier he had thought he had known for many years, but such was not the case.

Mr. Randolph was not built on mourning lines; at the moment under review, he was thinking about himself and the strange fate that had made him a foster-child of fortune. He proceeded to look back ten years. Just a decade ago he had had his one meeting with the young lady whose disappearance had brought him an unstable affluence. It had taken place on this very avenue and less than forty short blocks away. He had reason to remember the encounter, for it had brought into sudden conjunction a lovely Persian cat, a lovely wire-haired terrier, a lovely child, and himself. The cat had dashed from a proud front door to cross Forty-something street under the nose of a taxi-cab; the dog had flown in yapping pursuit and, in the act, yanked his young mistress off her pins. He, Mr. Randolph, had seized one of her flying feet, hauled her and the terrier back to safety, and no sooner placed her upright and smoothed down her absurdly short skirts than she, he, and especially it, the dog, became the center and circumference of an animated pinwheel.

Her unshaken determination to hold to the leash, whatever happened, brought disaster. The said leash wound three times round her ankles and those of Mr. Randolph, bringing them both down kerplunk and facing each other. "My, what a bump!" she had cried, in startled tones, and then thrown back her curly head and laughed.

It was so that he remembered her—a child of ten or eleven summers and no winters, merry as a sunny day, dark-haired, dark-eyed, pink-cheeked, pampered but unspoiled. She had risen and taken his hand, told him her name, thanked him, ordered a flurried nurse to thank him, shaken her finger at the terrier, and said,

"Good-by" and "Come on, Maggie," all while he was still rubbing the seat of his first long trousers.

On that day she had been Miss Imogene Pamela Thornton, petted darling of the gods and Mr. Brewster Thornton, banker and widower; two months later had come Thornton's financial smash and, immediately afterward, his spiritual, moral and bodily collapse.

Everything that had made for life in him having been swept away, he died as a matter of course, and was buried.

For sole inheritance, little Genie Thornton found herself possessor and

possessed of one Maggie O'Rourke, a nurse of long standing, of earnest and faithful face, and a monster heart imprisoned in a pitifully thin chest.

It had taken Genie's great-uncle,

Asa Thornton, six months to

get a quarrel of sixteen years' standing with his nephew, and by that time child and nurse had been seeped into that lower world which can't afford morning and afternoon editions and is too busy praying for daily bread to look for a rain of manna in the daily press.

In short, Maggie and her charge,

traced down the ladder of reputable,

disreputable and impossible lodgings,

had slipped ultimately from sight and

the ken of people with addresses, and,

as a result, Mr. Robert Hervey Randolph, whose relationship to Mr. Asa Thornton is of no import whatever to this tale of cause and effect, came into ten thousand a year and a string—the string being the possible reappearance of Miss Imogene Pamela.

"Bob," had said old Asa, on the

verge of a tardy demise, "I'm not introducing you to a war between conscience and self-interest. There's no silly story-book test about my money; you are under no obligation to look for Imogene or to shout if you step on her by any twist of chance. My lawyers have all the instructions necessary along those lines; they are to make every reasonable effort, and if they succeed, why, you're mac enough to look out for yourself. It—it isn't to make a devil of a lot of difference to me where the cash goes so

continued. "You read happy stories to the public taste of midinettes, show girls, and dress-models, and perhaps you think they mirror the life. Why, Madge, the taunts that those girls fling indifferently at virtue and at vice are so vile that they couldn't be repeated even among half-decent men. And the other way, the private door for the private secretary. That's a road of burned bridges. Every man, decent or indecent, feels a queer sinking of the heart when he hears of a woman taking it." He looked at her shrewdly. "And yet you may do it," he said, half to himself. "If you are one of the hungry women, God help you, for they all walk blindfolded."

"They don't walk," said Madge, flushing, and her eyes gleaming strangely. "That's just the point: they rush, whirl, and—"

"And crash," finished Bobby.

"That's the very word," said Madge. "If you'll only keep on the way you've started, I'd love to talk to you all night."

"No chance of that," said Bobby. "I'm through, and I'm going." He turned toward the door.

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long as I die with—die with the credit."

With that last sentence, his mind had stumbled and wandered off to memories of his nephew Brewster. Looking back from the vantage of twenty-six years, Randolph caught, for the first time, the full import of Asa Thornton's farewell words to him and to life: "Die with the credit." They held the kernel of the old man's carefully measured amend.

"Great old top!" murmured Mr. Randolph aloud, and half unconsciously turned to the left at Forty-second street. Five minutes later he was caught in the maelstrom of the Thanksgiving crowd milling around Times square.

Presently he found himself on the edge of a human sea, banked up to give passage to a honking empty taxi-cab. Here was another question for a suddenly inquiring mind. Where did taxi-cabs, empty ones, go to in such a hurry? The door of this one was swinging open, and the proof of how intent the crowd was on its myriad individual goals is evidenced by the fact that a dozen voices did not inform the driver that the season was off for fans on wheels.