

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 saddle 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 you 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 lovable you are, so that you will understand how serious it is when I say that I've decided not to love you any more."

"B-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 dresses 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 helpess, 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. So we'd better turn our backs on each other and march."

Mr. Randolph looked at her through narrowed eyes.

"I suppose," he said, "you have picked out the man with a hundred thousand a year?"

"Not finally," said Miss Van T., "though they are not so scarce in this hurly-burly world as your question implies. After all, it isn't the cash I'm keen on, but what it will bring. If necessary, I'll earn my own living."

"Earn your own living!" exclaimed Mr. Randolph. "Will you please tell me how you could earn anything?"

"Well," said Miss Van T., "I've had a couple of offers without even asking. When I tried to tell Simon Simon down on this very frock on the grounds that I was hard up, he said, in the nicest way, that he would take me on at sixty a week any day during the next five years."

"And the other?" asked Mr. Randolph.

"The other," said Miss Van T., dropping her eyes, "was Beacher Tremont. He wasn't quite so nice, but he offered more. He said he was looking for a private secretary, who could name her own price."

"During the next five years—at your own price," repeated Bobby, his mind dazed but nevertheless going straight to the kernel of each proposition. "Madge, do you know what you're saying? Do you know the horrible things you infer?"

She moved one hand impatiently.

"Bobby," she said, "don't get theatrical. I tell you New York is a fever. I've caught it, and I'm not a bit sorry. The choice between being a Van Teller corpse and a fastish woman is easy. The semi-declassees of New York, if they play for high enough stakes, have a world of their own that is worth moving in. Money is merely an adjunct to it—nothing but the bridge across which clever men come to show themselves off at their untrammelled best."

"Madge," said Bobby, at once frightened and earnest, "you only half know what you're talking about. There is such a world as you speak of—it's the



"It Would Take Me Years to Learn to Kiss You Again."

world of insatiably hungry women. It's brilliant and fascinating for a while, but it breathes a poisoned air, and all its roads lead down. Every woman that goes into it with her eyes open has an idea that, with her beauty and her brains, she can buck the tiger and get away with it. She won't look over her shoulder and read the record of an endless losing run on the black."

Miss Van T. smiled.

"I'm already beginning on my re-

continued. "You read happy stories to the public taste of midnights, show-room 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, straight-lipped. "I'm through, and I'm going." 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 muffer 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 Teller 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 Pansy 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 he, she, and especially it, the dog, became the center and circumference of an animated pin-wheel.

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 more months to forget 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 max enough to look out for yourself. It isn't going to make a devil of a lot of difference to me where the cash goes so

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.

The cab was moving more slowly than Mr. Randolph's subconscious mind, which led him to step into it and quietly close the inviting door. Upon seating himself, he tried to analyze the impulse that had lifted him from the curb. He decided that it was not so much the curiosity as to the destination of empty cabs as a natural and ancient dislike for being pushed and elbowed by people.

It was not long before the cab, unwittingly loaded for bear, drew up with a final honk at the stage-door of the Crocodile. Immediately came a rasping voice that was vaguely familiar to Mr. Randolph.

"Well," it said, "you sure took your own time getting here." The driver, expert in aggravating repartee without words, pressed the bulb of his atrocious horn three times. "Cut it out!" said the rasping voice. "There isn't any hurry now."

It was incredible, reasoned Mr. Randolph with himself, that anyone should forget that voice once heard, and he was right. He remembered it. It was the voice of Mr. Duke Beamer, whom he had had the distinct pleasure of blackballing for one club in college and three in town. Mr. Beamer, to his honest mind, was the best living example of animated slime in tailor-made clothes.

Mr. B. was not alone; Mr. Randolph could just see his companion through the slant of the half-raised window-glass, and even that distorted glimpse was very close to a vision. The girl was young, beautiful, and troubled. Her cheeks were thin and pale, her parted lips quiver; her chin was tremble. Of course she was very cheaply but neatly clothed.

"Make up your mind," said the rasping voice. "Ride with me or walk the streets by yourself, and don't forget that there's no job behind you. You've said good-by to that door for good."

The girl's wan face went through that contortion which says, "I won't cry," and doesn't, thereby achieving a pity beyond the meed of tears. The quivering of her lips, the trembling of her chin grew more pronounced—only to steady down as she swept up stricken and imploring eyes to the face of the unseen man.

"Oh, Duke," she begged, "promise—promise you'll be always good to me." "Of course, little one," said the rasping voice, promptly and much relieved, promising lightly to pay on demand, in full for a soul delivered in advance. "You'll never regret it, believe me."

The girl tore her doubting eyes from his face and stepped toward the cab. Mr. Randolph made himself exceeding small in the corner nearest the curb. An unseen agent opened the door; the girl slipped in and turned to seat herself; her escort made to follow. Then did Mr. Randolph suddenly lean forward and proceed to push in the face of Mr. Beamer with his open hand and the full weight of his shoulder. That astonished scion of a once gentlemanly house reeled backward and sat down on the pavement kerplunk.

"My, what a bump!" spoke a keen young voice over Mr. Randolph's



"My, What a Bump!"

shoulder, but he was too occupied to take note of it at the time. He leaned far out so that the driver could get the full effect of his modish top-hat and spoke cryptic words.

"Ten dollars' worth of the park," is what he said.

The driver welcomed the sudden apparition with a friendly grin, honked defiantly three times, and threw in the clutch. They were off, and trailing after them came such a string of blasphemous utterances as made Mr. Randolph wince.

The girl was laughing. No longer did her eyes search for a gleam they thought they had lost forever. It was there within them, come back to roll in her pupils and spill itself in reckless spending.

"Oh! Oh! What a bump!" she gasped.

"Funny, wasn't it?" said Mr. Randolph weakly.

"Awfully," said the girl.

Thereupon fell a long silence. The cab cut across the traffic, reached the Avenue, and eventually the dark park before Mr. Randolph found anything further to say.

"Funny, wasn't it?" he remarked.

The girl cast him a startled look. "Why," she gurgled, "that's what you said before."

"So I did," said Mr. Randolph, frowning thoughtfully. "So I did. By the way, what's your name?"

The girl caught her breath and swallowed her laughter.

"Vivienne Vivienne," she said, after a pause.

"How awful!" commented Mr. Randolph. "One of those deliberate alliterations that go with the back row of the chorus."

"Front row," Vivienne defended promptly, but unsmiling. Her lips twitched down at the corners. "At least, it was front row."

"I know," said Mr. Randolph. "You've been fired. I heard what Beamer said to you. How long have you known that snake?"

"Not very long," she answered. "He got me on, and I suppose he got me off. She drew a long breath and turned appealing eyes to Randolph. "Please," she said, "don't let's talk about him. I want so to be happy for a few minutes. I love the park at night with its border of lights. Let's play a game."

"A game?" said Randolph doubtfully.

"Yes. We'll guess which is Central Park West and which is One Hundred and Tenth street and which is the avenue. It is not as easy as you think after you've been going round a while. I'm feeling d-dizzy a-already."

"You are!" exclaimed Mr. Randolph. "Well, let me tell you it isn't from buzzing round a two-mile circuit."

What did you have for dinner?" Miss Vivienne shut her lips tight.

"Won't you please play my game?" she asked faintly.

Mr. Randolph frowned as though considering the subject very seriously, but the matter that held his attention was not the proposed guessing-match. That would not have been fair nor amusing, as the headlights of his own very comfortable apartment blinked at him every time they came to Fifty-ninth street. He was justifying to himself a very questionable move. He wished to feed this stray damsel and, at the same time, talk to her with a purpose. He could not see himself doing it in a cabaret, and every hotel supper room had already become one of those things. He came to a decision and spoke.

"I'll take a hand in your game, all right, but not just as you think. Do you—would you trust me?"

Immediately the girl was on her guard. She looked into his face and read it.

"I would never have thought of not trusting you if you hadn't asked that old, old trap question," she said gravely.

"Forget that I asked it," said Mr. Randolph promptly, and leaned out to give the driver his address. A thin-lipped and weary scorn was still on that individual's face when he drew up before Mr. Randolph's abode and honked three times derisively to the world in general as seen from the front of a taxi.

"Wait," said Mr. Randolph to the Jehu, as he handed out the girl. She paused with one foot half-way to the curb, but that single word directing anything as expensive as a taxi to stand by reassured her.

Randolph preceded her to show the way and turn on lights. He never looked back to see if she followed, and this implied trust in herself seemed to drag her after him up the single flight of stairs that led to his rooms.

"Old-fashioned but cozy," he said, as he applied a latch-key and opened a door that gave directly on a large square sitting room. "I hate elevators in a place you call home."

In an open grate was a dying wood fire. He proceeded to poke and feed it at once, saying over his shoulder:

"Sit down anywhere, will you?"

Facing the fire was a deep and much worn leather couch, with a pedestal at each end carrying shaded lamps. They were the only ones he had lighted and their glow was so subdued that it blended with that of the fire without fighting it. The girl chose to seat herself stiffly in a corner of this couch.

Mr. Randolph looked at her rigid pose with marked disapproval, but said nothing. Having rejuvenated the fire till it leaped merrily to an attack on the fresh backlog, he left the room and was absent for a considerable time. When he returned, it was to place a small table before his guest, and then he fetched a tray well loaded with those things which grace in perpetuity a healthy bachelor's larder.

He drew up a chair for himself and, with an inviting nod, started to eat a great deal and very rapidly.

"Get in on the lunch while there's time," he admonished. "I warn you there's nothing more in the house."

The girl gave him a grateful look and proceeded to fill herself with the most sustaining food within reach.

She did not fail to note that there was nothing to drink but water. When they could eat no more, Mr. Randolph removed the table, and then seated himself in the opposite corner of the couch.

"You don't seem to be at ease here," he said presently. "If you think you'll be more comfortable, we can go down and sit in the cab. I want to talk to you."

The girl considered gravely for a moment; then her face broke into a rippling smile that swept up and settled in her eyes. She reached for a cushion, put it at her back, tucked one



"Now Talk," She Said.

foot under herself, and waved the other in the same fashion as had Miss Van Teller earlier in the evening.

"Now talk," she said.

"Do you like me?" asked Mr. Randolph.

She nodded her head.

"You're not afraid to be here?"

She shook denial.

"Have you ever been in a man's room before?"

She looked him straight in the eyes and made no other sign.

It was Mr. Randolph's turn to flush.

"Then," he said, "if you like me and if you're not afraid, please begin at the start and tell me all about it."

The girl's eyes fell and sought the fire. Her face slowly paled to the shade of her somber thoughts. She was no longer pretty; she was beautiful, with a revealing transparency that made her seem unfeigned, a disembodied spirit of sincerity and truth, indubitably pure.

"I had a nurse once," she said, in a low voice, "and a wire-haired terrier, a show-dog and a darling. His name was Sport." She raised solemn eyes to Randolph's face as though measuring his powers of understanding. "My nurse died and then, one day, I had to sell Sport; I wasn't old enough to sell myself."

She stopped speaking with an unmistakable finality. Randolph was overwhelmed by the flood of information that this slip of a girl had packed into two-score words. A life-story in four lines and a revelation of the heart thrown in for good measure! Over and above that, he had to reckon with the confirmation of a suspicion which had been slowly establishing itself in his mind that he had met her before, that not for the first time this night had those soft lips, curved for merry words, cried, "My, what a bump!" within his hearing.

So many considerations pressed to his immediate attention that he awoke to the actual present too late to stem the tide of tears that suddenly rose to the girl's eyes.

"Oh," she sobbed, "what is to become of me? I was so happy here, if you hadn't made me think!"

If anything has been said in the course of these pages to give the impression that Mr. Randolph was modeled after Joseph or heven out of ice or packed with probity to the exclusion of red blood, forget it. At the sight of those tears, he slid the length of the couch to first base, fielded the girl in his arms, switched her round so that she lay across his knees, drew her face against his shoulder, and rocked her gently.

"You poor kiddie," he said softly, "what a devil of a time you've had! But believe me when I tell you it's all over. This is the night that starts your old happy sun into the blue sky again. Don't worry."

She stopped crying and looked up into the honest face so close to her own, puzzling as to how just those words could have come from it; but the world had taught her a hard lesson in varying standards. She drew a long quivering sigh.

"If you could only wait until I love you, body and soul," she breathed.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Why, then it wouldn't be so bad—so ugly."

"I don't get you," remarked Robert Hervey.

"A man told me just a little while ago that he was making a catalogue of reasons why women give themselves," she continued. "He had eleven already, and yet he was one of the nicest men I've met. He talked to me as though he were showing me a way that I must travel alone."

"Really?" said Mr. Randolph, stiffening perceptibly.

"The lowest reason of all was for cold cash," she went on, as though he had not spoken. "Then came the glitter of precious stones, and, after that, silk underwear."