

Back Again



By May Harris

THE pavements shone hard and frosty and free of people under the glare of the street lights as the man walked rapidly up-town. At two o'clock in the morning, such a state, especially in winter, is a normal one, but the man looking upon the familiar streets, after an absence of five years, saw their emptiness as a changed condition. He had always kept the memory of the city as he had seen it last—these same streets on the occasion of his departure when his cab had been caught in the press of moving vehicles, and the sidewalks were thick with streams of people; people coming and going, happy and sad, grave and gay—and he had watched them from his window with the tug of longing growing stronger and stronger.

He had never wanted to leave these well-known streets—his avenues of pleasure and profit—unforgettably bound with all that had meant most to him in life. He had been a hardened cliff-dweller, taking even vacations, in the spirit of a doctor's prescription; and eager, when the time was up, for the dusty rush of the train back to the stored energy, the vivid sense of living that

the city meant to him. In the bustle, he became a piece of its mechanism, a cog in its wheel; he helped make the force of the driving power that pulsed and vibrated out to the world—its spirit was in his blood. Country solitude had always thrown him back upon himself—solitude hurt him; it created an intolerable ache for a quality he did not have. He was only dimly aware of what the lack meant to him; he had challenged life, in the old days, on even terms, but he had never been able to challenge himself.

Perhaps that had been the root of his trouble—the cause of his failure. Even now, after five years, the details crowded back with dreadful clearness—the crash, the disgrace, the trial, the sentence.

To heap up a fortune, had been his idea from the earliest time. And the fortune had come—only it had not satisfied him; he had wanted more. There were so many ways to make use of it. He couldn't call his wife to blame; she had spent a great deal, but never more than he had given her. He had always been aware of the things he couldn't give her—though he had never felt her discovery

of the lack. And there was always the sense that their married life was at worst, quite as good as that of their friends. Money, in his analysis, was the great solvent of troublesome questions—the golden assurance of cheerful yesterdays and confident to-morrows.

He and his wife had never quarreled—had never been bored; there were always people about—he couldn't remember quiet evenings spent at home. Social and business life had swallowed up domestic calm—and, perhaps, domestic unrest. Next to making money, his keenest instinct had been toward freedom—the freedom to live life as he pleased—gay, changing, irresponsible days.

Well—these last years, for him, had been quiet—like the grave! After the first dragging weeks his spirit, as well as his body, had accepted the letter of the punishment. He had stopped expecting her to write or come. She hadn't cared enough to forgive him. The only person who would have cared, and who hadn't the right, was dead.

Other people's wives—letters, visits, waiting at the prison gates—well, those other men, comrades of his in misfortune, had deserved the difference, perhaps. He had never written himself; and he realized now, in looking back, that he had never loved her enough to ask her to forgive him. At least, he had freed his conscience of one thing—she hadn't suffered materially. The house was in her name, and there was money also in her name—he had been careful to arrange things for her comfort—it had seemed the least he could do. But any speculation on his part had been idle; she had never made a sign.

And so, her telegram, which the warden had brought him that day in hospital when his time was up, had come like a shock—or a blinding light; the first word from her in those pitifully long five years. He had been

quite sick, and the warden had showed a human sympathy in his manner. The message was short:

Your house and I expect you back again.

For a long time he had been silent with the bit of yellow paper in his hand, and when he looked up at the warden, he couldn't speak—he was weak from his illness, and remorse, for the first time, had him by the throat. Not for the failure and disgrace, but for the things he had never given her—the things other women have as a right—love, honor, confidence. Perhaps their lack had mattered to her after all. More than poverty—well—it came to him in that moment, that he would at least have a chance to make it up with her; one more chance!

He meant to make good; the thought brought him strength, made him look toward his recovery. It wasn't only being free—it was the thought of being wanted that lifted him out of weakness and self-consciousness. It had been the one thing to rouse him from the helpless despondency of his illness.

He paused in front of the familiar house, and then, surprised and curious, saw that several cabs were standing at the curb. The house door was thrown open, and the light made a shining way for six men, who, very careful of their footing, went slowly up the steps, carrying a black box that was unmistakably a coffin.

It was a shock, and as he recoiled on the pavement with a feeling of superstitious dread, he hesitated at entering. All his life he had shrunk from death and the things connected with it. But he braced himself against the weakness. It couldn't be his wife—her telegram proved she was alive and well; perhaps her sister, or her brother. For his own part, he had no near relatives.

He felt it terrible to return at such a

time—and yet, if she was in sorrow, he must do his best to comfort her. It was, perhaps the opportunity he had been hoping for; the chance to do something—however small—to balance the heavy debt he owed her for the undeserved kindness of her message. And the impulse of atonement overcame his shrinking; he went up the steps, past the two or three people standing there, none of whom he knew, into the house.

In the hallway, he met the men who had carried in their burden, returning. He recognized one or two as men he had used to know, but still muffled by his coat and hat, he saw he escaped recognition. They went out, talking among themselves in grave undertones. The servant shut the door behind them, looked rather fearfully over his shoulder at the room on the right, and disappeared before he could put a question.

He felt annoyed at the man's stupidity; also—that he should feel a stranger in his own house. Very possibly the servant thought him the undertaker. He shivered at the thought. The unfortunate coincidence of his arrival had lowered his spirits, and the coming interview with his wife made the drop still heavier. As he waited uncertainly, a woman in black with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, passed him from the stairway, going into the room on the right. It was his wife, and after a moment of hesitation, he followed her. The room he entered had used to be specially his—half library, half study. There were few books—he had never cared greatly for reading; but there were good pictures—he had cared for them!—comfortable chairs of mixed periods, and his desk. The desk had been his most intimate possession. He had sat there when busy with plans that were to carry him far, and its locked drawers and secret recesses had always held his most important papers. There were some, he knew, it must still hold;

he had thought of them often—wishing them destroyed. They were things he should never have kept—and he had a fresh sense of how they would hurt his wife. His eyes went to the desk on entering; it was severe and fine of line—a good example of first empire furniture and as familiar in every detail as his own hand. There was a vase of flowers on it—heavy roses, not very fresh, for some of the petals had fallen—and somehow, he felt they had been put there in anticipation of his coming. One thing he missed that he remembered—a small, silver-framed picture of his wife. It had grown to be a mere detail of ornament to him in those other days, but he was quick to note its absence now.

From the desk, his eyes went quickly to the sinister object in the center of the room, beside which his wife was standing. The sense of its presence and the silence made him shiver again, and something held him from speaking. He felt she must be the one to give the key to their future, and it made his watchfulness of her from the shadows by the door, the more eager.

He remembered her as without beauty. Good God! If she *had* had it!—beauty and charm—the things a man wanted—and when she let her hand fall from her eyes, he saw that his memory was right. The five years had added disillusioning touches; it was a face that had forgotten youth—and her present grief caught her as he looked; she bowed her head on the coffin, and sobbed and sobbed.

His discomfort, as he stood there, was greater than any he had ever known. He wanted to speak to her—to say he was sorry for this grief that had come to her; to tell her how grateful he was to her—and he wanted—intensely—to get her out of the room, for just a moment, so he could get those letters out of his desk and destroy them. Those letters he should never have

kept—that should never have been written! He wanted to destroy them and their memory, and the memory of the woman they concerned, before he asked his wife for pardon.

Somehow, as he stood waiting, it dwarfed the other thing—it seemed—that whole episode—something fantastic and disgusting in the life of a man other than himself. How often, behind his bars, he had recalled it all with shame and longing for a chance to blot it all out. Well, he had his chance—he could begin again.

He waited, tense, and trembling, for his wife's recognition. But she did not turn when she raised her head. He saw she was nerving herself to unfasten the coffin, and on the impulse to stop her, he took a step forward. But she had lifted the top and put it aside, and he saw he could only wait again.

She looked a long time, without tears; her face in profile, took on a curious brooding tenderness—a quality that transfused and transfigured her features to a beauty—he shrank from it as from an intolerable radiance, and yet seemed to be

drawn to it by an indefinable power. It was strange to think that she—the woman he had never loved—could love like that!

She turned swiftly, still without seeing him, and went to his desk. He watched—her fingers busy with a secret spring, took out a package. The letters!—he recognized them at once. She held them in her hand, looking down at them for a moment with that strange, beautiful look that seemed knowledge, and forgiveness, and utter tenderness, still on her face. Then she took the roses from the vase, some of the petals falling over her hand to the floor, and went back to the coffin.

He stepped forward, too curious, in the midst of his shame, to wait for a better moment. Her movement was swift; as he reached her side, she was bending over and putting the letters out of sight in the coffin. Then the roses, very gently. Her hands fluttered a moment above them, and she drew back, lifting the lid to put it down. As she did so, he bent quickly over her shoulder, and looked, without surprise—at his own quiet face.