# The Harbinger

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Long before the springtide is felt in the dull bosom of the yokel does the city man know that the grass-green goddess is upon her throne. He sits at his breakfast eggs and toast, begirt by stone walls, opens his morning paper and sees journalism leave vernal-ism at the post.

For, whereas, spring’s couriers were once the evidence of our finer senses, now the Associated Press does the trick.

The warble of the first robin in Hackensack, the stirring of the maple sap in Bennington, the budding of the pussy willows along Main Street in Syra-cuse, the first chirp of the bluebird, the swan song of the Blue Point, the annual tornado in St. Louis, the plaint of the peach pessimist from Pompton, N. J., the regular visit of the tame wild goose with a broken leg to the pond near Bilgewater Junction, the base attempt of the Drug Trust to boost the price of quinine foiled in the House by Congressman Jinks, the first tall poplar struck by lightning and the usual stunned picknickers who had taken refuge, the first crack of the ice jam in the Allegheny River, the finding of a violet in its mossy bed by the correspondent at Round Corners - these are the advance signs of the burgeoning season that are wired into the wise city, while the farmer sees nothing but winter upon his dreary fields.

But these be mere externals. The true harbinger is the heart. When Strephon seeks his Chloe and Mike his Maggie, then only is spring arrived and the newspaper report of the five-foot rattler killed in Squire Pettigrew’s pasture confirmed.

Ere the first violet blew, Mr. Peters, Mr. Ragsdale and Mr. Kidd sat together on a bench in Union Square and conspired. Mr. Peters was the D’Artagnan of the loafers there. He was the dingiest, the laziest, the sorriest brown blot against the green back-ground of any bench in the park. But just then he was the most important of the trio.

Mr. Peters had a wife. This had not heretofore affected his standing with Ragsy and Kidd. But to-day it invested him with a peculiar interest. His friends, having escaped matrimony, had shown a disposition to deride Mr. Peters for his venture on that troubled sea. But at last they had been forced to acknowledge that either he had been gifted with a large foresight or that he was one of Fortune’s lucky sons.

For, Mrs. Peters had a dollar. A whole dollar bill, good and receivable by the Government for customs, taxes and all public dues. How to get possession of that dollar was the question up for discussion by the three musty musketeers.

“How do you know it was a dollar?” asked Ragsy, the immensity of the sum inclining him to scepticism.

“The coalman seen her have it,” said Mr. Peters. “She went out and done some washing yesterday. And look what she give me for breakfast - the heel of a loaf and a cup of coffee, and her with a dollar!”

“It’s fierce,” said Ragsy.

“Say we go up and punch ‘er and stick a towel in ‘er mouth and cop the coin” suggested Kidd, Viciously. “Y’ ain’t afraid of a woman, are you?”

“She might holler and have us pinched,” demurred Ragsy. “I don’t believe in slugging no woman in a houseful of people.”

“Gent’men,” said Mr. Peters, severely, through his russet stubble, “remember that you are speaking of my wife. A man who would lift his hand to a lady except in the way of — “

“Maguire,” said Ragsy, pointedly, “has got his bock beer sign out. If we had a dollar we could — “

“Hush up!” said Mr. Peters, licking his lips. “We got to get that case note somehow, boys. Ain’t what’s a man’s wife’s his? Leave it to me. I’ll go over to the house and get it. Wait here for me.”

“I’ve seen ‘em give up quick, and tell you where it’s hid if you kick ‘em in the ribs,” said Kidd.

“No man would kick a woman,” said Peters, virtuously. “A little choking - just a touch on the windpipe - that gets away with ‘em - and no marks left. Wait for me. I’ll bring back that dollar, boys.”

High up in a tenement-house between Second Ave-nue and the river lived the Peterses in a back room so gloomy that the landlord blushed to take the rent for it. Mrs. Peters worked at sundry times, doing odd jobs of scrubbing and washing. Mr. Peters had a pure, unbroken record of five years without having earned a penny. And yet they clung together, shar-ing each other’s hatred and misery, being creatures of habit. Of habit, the power that keeps the earth from flying to pieces; though there is some silly theory of gravitation.

Mrs. Peters reposed her 200 pounds on the safer of the two chairs and gazed stolidly out the one win-dow at the brick wall opposite. Her eyes were red and damp. The furniture could have been carried away on a pushcart, but no pushcart man would have removed it as a gift.

The door opened to admit Mr. Peters. His fox-terrier eyes expressed a wish. His wife’s diagnosis located correctly the seat of it, but misread it hun-ger instead of thirst.

“You’ll get nothing more to eat till night,” she said, looking out of the window again. Take your hound-dog’s face out of the room.”

Mr. Peters’s eye calculated the distance between them. By taking her by surprise it might be possible to spring upon her, overthrow her, and apply the throttling tactics of which he had boasted to his waiting comrades. True, it had been only a boast; never yet had be dared to lay violent bands upon her; but with the thoughts of the delicious, cool bock or Culmbacher bracing his nerves, he was near to upsetting his own theories of the treatment due by a gentleman to a lady. But, with his loafer’s love for the more artistic and less strenuous way, he chose diplomacy first, the high card in the game — the assumed attitude of success already attained.

“You have a dollar,” he said, loftily, but significantly in the tone that goes with the lighting of a cigar - when the properties are at hand.”

“I have,” said Mrs. Peters, producing the bill from her bosom and crackling it, teasingly.

“I am offered a position in a — in a tea store,” said Mr. Peters. “I am to begin work to-morrow. But it will be necessary for me to buy a pair of —”

“You are a liar,” said Mrs. Peters, reinterring the note. “No tea store, nor no A B C store, nor no junk shop would have you. I rubbed the skin off both me hands washin’ jumpers and overalls to make that dollar. Do you think it come out of them suds to buy the kind you put into you? Skiddoo! Get your mind off of money.”

Evidently the poses of Talleyrand were not worth one hundred cents on that dollar. But diplomacy is dexterous. The artistic temperament of Mr. Peters lifted him by the straps of his congress gaiters and set him on new ground. He called up a look of des-perate melancholy to his eyes.

“Clara,” he said, hollowly, “to struggle further is useless. You have always misunderstood me. Heaven knows I have striven with all my might to keep my head above the waves of misfortune, but - ” “Cut out the rainbow of hope and that stuff about walkin’ one by one through the narrow isles of Spain,” said Mrs. Peters, with a sigh. “I’ve heard it so often. There’s an ounce bottle of carbolic on the shelf behind the empty coffee can. Drink hearty.”

Mr. Peters reflected. What next! The old expedients had failed. The two musty musketeers were awaiting him hard by the ruined chateau — that is to say, on a park bench with rickety cast-iron legs. His honor was at stake. He had engaged to storm the castle single-handed and bring back the treasure that was to furnish them wassail and solace. And all that stood between him and the coveted dollar was his wife, once a little girl whom he could — aha! — why not again? Once with soft words he could, as they say, twist her around his little finger. Why not again? Not for years had he tried it. Grim poverty and mutual hatred had killed all that. But Ragsy and Kidd were waiting for him to bring the dollar!

Mr. Peters took a surreptitiously keen look at his wife. Her formless bulk overflowed the chair. She kept her eyes fixed out the window in a strange kind of trance. Her eyes showed that she had been recently weeping.

“I wonder,” said Mr. Peters to himself, “if there’d be anything in it.”

The window was open upon its outlook of brick walls and drab, barren back yards. Except for the mildness of the air that entered it might have been midwinter yet in the city that turns such a frown-ing face to besieging spring. But spring doesn’t come with the thunder of cannon. She is a sapper and a miner, and you must capitulate.

“I’ll try it,” said Mr. Peters to himself, making a wry face.

He went up to his wife and put his arm across her shoulders.

“Clara, darling,” he said in tones that shouldn’t have fooled a baby seal, “why should we have hard words? Ain’t you my own tootsum wootsums?

“A black mark against you, Mr. Peters, in the sa-red ledger of Cupid. Charges of attempted graft are filed against you, and of forgery and utterance of two of Love’s holiest of appellations.

But the miracle of spring was wrought. Into the back room over the back alley between the black walls had crept the Harbinger. It was ridiculous, and yet - Well, it is a rat trap, and you, madam and sir and all of us, are in it.

Red and fat and crying like Niobe or Niagara, Mrs. Peters threw her arms around her lord and dissolved upon him. Mr. Peters would have striven to extricate the dollar bill from its deposit vault, but his arms were bound to his sides.

“Do you love me, James?” asked Mrs. Peters.

“Madly,” said James, “but — “

“You are ill! ” exclaimed Mrs. Peters. “Why are you so pale and tired looking?”

“I feel weak,” said Mr. Peters. “I — “

“Oh, wait; I know what it is. Wait, James. I’ll be back in a minutes”

With a parting bug that revived in Mr. Peters recollections of the Terrible Turk, his wife hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

Mr. Peters hitched his thumbs under his sus-penders.

“All right,” he confided to the ceiling. “I’ve got her going. I hadn’t any idea the old girl was soft any more under the foolish rib. Well, sir; ain’t I the Claude Melnotte of the lower East Side? What? It’s a 100 to 1 shot that I get the dollar. I wonder what she went out for. I guess she’s gone to tell Mrs. Muldoon on the second floor, that we’re reconciled. I’ll remember this. Soft soap! And Ragsy was talking about slugging her!

Mrs. Peters came back with a bottle of sarsapa-rilla.

“I’m glad I happened to have that dollar,” she said. “You’re all run down, boney.”

Mr. Peters had a tablespoonful of the stuff in-serted into him. Then Mrs. Peters sat on his lap and murmured:

“Call me tootsum wootsums again, James.”

He sat still, held there by his materialized goddess of spring.

Spring had come.

On the bench in Union Square Mr. Ragsdale and Mr. Kidd squirmed, tongue-parched, awaiting D’Artagnan and his dollar.

“I wish I had choked her at first,” said Mr. Peters to himself.