

## **The Golden Castaways**

## By Lloyd Osbourne

All I did was to pull him out by the seat of the trousers. The fat old thing had gone out in the dark to the end of the yacht's boat- boom, and was trying to worry in the dinghy with his toe, when plump he dropped into a six-knot ebb tide. Of course, if I hadn't happened along in a launch, he might have drowned, but, as for anything heroic on my part--why, the very notion is preposterous. The whole affair only lasted half a minute, and in five he was aboard his yacht and drinking hot Scotch in a plush dressing-gown. It was natural that his wife and daughter should be frightened, and natural, too, I suppose, that when they had finished crying over him they should cry over me. He had taken a chance with the East River, and it had been the turn of a hair whether he floated down the current a dead grocer full of brine, or stood in that cabin, a live one full of grog. Oh, no! I am not saying a word against THEM. But as for Grossensteck himself, he ought really to have known better, and it makes me flush even now to recall his monstrous perversion of the truth. He called me a hero to my face. He invented details to which my dry clothes gave the lie direct. He threw fits of gratitude. His family were theatrically commanded to regard me well, so that my countenance might be forever imprinted on their hearts; and they, poor devils, in a seventh heaven to have him back safe and sound in their midst, regarded and regarded, and imprinted and imprinted, till I felt like a perfect ass masquerading as a Hobson.

It was all I could do to tear myself away. Grossensteck clung to me. Mrs. Grossensteck clung to me. Teresa--that was the daughter-- Teresa, too, clung to me. I had to give my address. I had to take theirs. Medals were spoken of; gold watches with inscriptions; a common purse, on which I was requested to confer the favour of drawing for the term of my natural life. I departed in a blaze of glory, and though I could not but see the ridiculous side of the affair (I mean as far as I was concerned), I was moved by so affecting a family scene, and glad, indeed, to think that the old fellow had been spared to his wife and daughter. I had even a pang of envy, for I could not but contrast myself with Grossensteck, and wondered if there were two human beings in the world who would have cared a snap whether I lived or died. Of course, that was just a passing mood, for, as a matter of fact, I am a man with many friends, and I knew



some would feel rather miserable were I to make a hole in saltwater. But, you see, I had just had a story refused by Schoonmaker's Magazine, a good story, too, and that always gives me a sinking feeling--to think that after all these years I am still on the borderland of failure, and can never be sure of acceptance, even by the second-class periodicals for which I write. However, in a day or two, I managed to unload "The Case against Phillpots" on somebody else, and off I started for the New Jersey coast with a hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket, and no end of plans for a long autumn holiday.

I never gave another thought to Grossensteck until one morning, as I was sitting on the veranda of my boarding-house, the postman appeared and requested me to sign for a registered package. I opened it with some trepidation, for I had caught that fateful name written crosswise in the corner and began at once to apprehend the worst. I think I have as much assurance as any man, but it took all I had and more, too, when I unwrapped a gold medal the thickness and shape of an enormous checker, and deciphered the following inscription:

Presented to Hugo Dundonald Esquire for having With signal heroism, gallantry and presence of mind rescued On the night of June third, 1900 the life of Hermann Grossensteck from The dark and treacherous waters of the East River.

The thing was as thick as two silver dollars, laid the one on the other, and gold--solid, ringing, massy gold--all the way through; and it was associated with a blue satin ribbon, besides, which was to serve for sporting it on my manly bosom. I set it on the rail and laughed--laughed till the tears ran down my cheeks--while the other boarders crowded about me; handed it from hand to hand; grew excited to think that they had a hero in their midst; and put down my explanation to the proverbial modesty of the brave. Blended with my amusement were some qualms at the intrinsic value of the medal, for it could scarcely have cost less than three or four hundred dollars, and it worried me to think that Grossensteck must have drawn so lavishly on his savings. It had not occurred to me, either before or then, that he was rich; somehow, in the bare cabin of the schooner, I had received no such impression of his means. I had not even realised that the vessel was his own, taking it for



granted that it had been hired, all standing, for a week or two with the put-by economies of a year. His home address ought to have set me right, but I had not taken the trouble to read it, slipping it into my pocket-book more to oblige him than with any idea of following up the acquaintance. It was one of the boarders that enlightened me.

"Grossensteck!" he exclaimed; "why, that's the great cheap grocer of New York, the Park & Tilford of the lower orders! There are greenbacks in his rotten tea, you know, and places to leave your baby while you buy his sanded sugar, and if you save eighty tags of his syrup you get a silver spoon you wouldn't be found dead with! Oh, everybody knows Grossensteck!"

"Well, I pulled the great cheap grocer out of the East River," I said.
"There was certainly a greenback in that tea," and I took another look at my medal, and began to laugh all over again.

"There's no reason why you should ever have another grocery bill," said the boarder. "That is, if flavour cuts no figure with you, and you'd rather eat condemned army stores than not!"

I sat down and wrote a letter of thanks. It was rather a nice letter, for I could not but feel pleased at the old fellow's gratitude, even if it were a trifle overdone, and, when all's said, it was undoubtedly a fault on the right side. I disclaimed the heroism, and bantered him good-naturedly about the medal, which, of course, I said I would value tremendously and wear on appropriate occasions. I wondered at the time what occasion could be appropriate to decorate one's self with a gold saucer covered with lies--but, naturally, I didn't go into that to HIM. When you accept a solid chunk of gold you might as well be handsome about it, and I piled it on about his being long spared to his family and to a world that wouldn't know how to get along without him. Yes, it was a stunning letter, and I've often had the pleasure of reading it since in a splendid frame below my photograph.

I had been a month or more in New York, and December was already well advanced before I looked up my Grossenstecks, which I did one late afternoon as I happened to be passing in their direction. It was a house of forbidding splendour, on the Fifth Avenue side of Central Park, and, as I trod its marble halls, I could not but repeat to myself: "Behold, the grocer's dream!" But I could make no criticism of my reception by Mrs.



Grossensteck and Teresa, whom I found at home and delighted to see me. Mrs. Grossensteck was a stout, jolly, motherly woman, common, of course,--but, if you can understand what I mean,--common in a nice way, and honest and unpretentious and likable. Teresa, whom I had scarcely noticed on the night of the accident, was a charmingly pretty girl of eighteen, very chic and gay, with pleasant manners and a contagious laugh. She had arrived at obviously the turn of the Grossensteck fortunes, and might, in refinement and everything else, have belonged to another clay. How often one sees that in America, the land above others of social contrast, where, in the same family, there are often three separate degrees of caste.

Well, to get along with my visit. I liked them and they liked me, and I returned later the same evening to dine and meet papa. I found him as impassionedly grateful as before, and with a tale that trespassed even further on the incredible, and after dinner we all sat around a log fire and talked ourselves into a sort of intimacy. They were wonderfully good people, and though we hadn't a word in common, nor an idea, we somehow managed to hit it off, as one often can with those who are unaffectedly frank and simple. I had to cry over the death of little Hermann in the steerage (when they had first come to America twenty years ago), and how Grossensteck had sneaked gingersnaps from the slop-baskets of the saloon.

"The little teffil never knew where they come from," said Grossensteck, "and so what matters it?"

"That's Papa's name in the slums," said Teresa. "Uncle Gingersnaps, because at all his stores they give away so many for nothing."

"By Jove!" I said, "there are some nick-names that are patents of nobility."

What impressed me as much as anything with these people was their loneliness. Parvenus are not always pushing and self-seeking, nor do they invariably throw down the ladder by which they have climbed. The Grossenstecks would have been so well content to keep their old friends, but poverty hides its head from the glare of wealth and takes fright at altered conditions.



"They come--yes," said Mrs. Grossensteck, "but they are scared of the fine house, of the high-toned help, of everything being gold, you know, and fashionable. And when Papa sends their son to college, or gives the girl a little stocking against her marriage day, they slink away ashamed. Oh, Mr. Dundonald, but it's hard to thank and be thanked, especially when the favours are all of one side!"

"The rich have efferyting," said Grossensteck, "but friends-- Nein!"

New ones had apparently never come to take the places of the old; and the old had melted away. Theirs was a life of solitary grandeur, varied with dinner parties to their managers and salesmen. Socially speaking, their house was a desert island, and they themselves three castaways on a golden rock, scanning the empty seas for a sail. To carry on a metaphor, I might say I was the sail and welcomed accordingly. I was everything that they were not; I was poor; I mixed with people whose names filled them with awe; my own was often given at first nights and things of that sort. In New York, the least snobbish of great cities, a man need have but a dress suit and car-fare--if he be the right kind of a man, of course--to go anywhere and hold up his head with the best. In a place so universally rich, there is even a certain piquancy in being a pauper. The Grossenstecks were overcome to think I shined my own shoes, and had to calculate my shirts, and the fact that I was no longer young (that's the modern formula for forty), and next-door to a failure in the art I had followed for so many years, served to whet their pity and their regard. My little trashy love-stories seemed to them the fruits of genius, and they were convinced, the poor simpletons, that the big magazines were banded in a conspiracy to block my way to fame.

"My dear poy," said Grossensteck, "you know as much of peeziness as a child unporne, and I tell you it's the same efferywhere--in groceries, in hardware, in the alkali trade, in effery branch of industry, the pig operators stand shoulder to shoulder to spiflicate the little fellers like you. You must combine with the other producers; you must line up and break through the ring; you must scare them out of their poots, and, by Gott, I'll help you do it!"

In their naive interest in my fortunes, the Grossenstecks rejoiced at an acceptance, and were correspondingly depressed at my failures. A fifteen-dollar poem would make them happy for a week; and when some of my editors were slow to pay-on the literary frontiers there is a great deal of



this sort of procrastination-- Uncle Gingersnaps was always hot to put the matter into the hands of his collectors, and commence legal proceedings in default.

Little by little I drifted into a curious intimacy with the Grossenstecks. Their house by degrees became my refuge. I was given my own suite of rooms, my own latch-key; I came and went unremarked; and what I valued most of all was that my privacy was respected, and no one thought to intrude upon me when I closed my door. In time I managed to alter the whole house to my liking, and spent their money like water in the process. Gorgeousness gave way to taste; I won't be so fatuous as to say my taste; but mine was in conjunction with the best decorators in New York. One was no longer blinded by magnificence, but found rest and peace and beauty. Teresa and I bought the pictures. She was a wonderfully clever girl, full of latent appreciation and understanding which until then had lain dormant in her breast. I quickened those unsuspected fires, and, though I do not vaunt my own judgment as anything extraordinary, it represented at least the conventional standard and was founded on years of observation and training. We let the old masters go as something too smudgy and recondite for any but experts, learning our lesson over one Correggio which nearly carried us into the courts, and bought modern American instead, amongst them some fine examples of our best men. We had a glorious time doing it, too, and showered the studios with golden rain--in some where it was evidently enough needed.

There was something childlike in the Grossenstecks' confidence in me; I mean the old people; for it was otherwise with Teresa, with whom I often quarrelled over my artistic reforms, and who took any conflict in taste to heart. There were whole days when she would not speak to me at all, while I, on my side, was equally obstinate, and all this, if you please, about some miserable tapestry or a Louise Seize chair or the right light for a picture of Will Low's. But she was such a sweet girl and so pretty that one could not be angry with her long, and what with our fights and our makings up I dare say we made it more interesting to each other than if we had always agreed. It was only once that our friendship was put in real jeopardy, and that was when her parents decided they could not die happy unless we made a match of it. This was embarrassing for both of us, and for a while she treated me very coldly. But we had it out together one evening in the library and decided to let the matter make no difference to us, going on as before the best of friends. I was the last person to expect a girl of eighteen to care for a man of forty, particularly



one like myself, ugly and grey-haired, who had long before outworn the love of women. In fact I had to laugh, one of those sad laughs that come to us with the years, at the thought of anything so absurd; and I soon got her to give up her tragic pose and see the humour of it all as I did. So we treated it as a joke, rallied the old folks on their sentimental folly, and let it pass.

It set me thinking, however, a great deal about the girl and her future, and I managed to make interest with several of my friends and get her invited to some good houses. Of course it was impossible to carry the old people into this galere. They were frankly impossible, but fortunately so meek and humble that it never occurred to them to assert themselves or resent their daughter going to places where they would have been refused. Uncle Gingersnaps would have paid money to stay at home, and Mrs. Grossensteck had too much homely pride to put herself in a false position. They saw indeed only another reason to be grateful to me, and another example of my surpassing kindness. Pretty, by no means a fool, and gowned by the best coutourieres of Paris, Teresa made guite a hit, and blossomed as girls do in the social sunshine. The following year, in the whirl of a gay New York winter, one would scarcely have recognised her as the same person. She had "made good," as boys say, and had used my stepping-stones to carry her far beyond my ken. In her widening interests, broader range, and increased worldly knowledge we became naturally better friends than ever and met on the common ground of those who led similar lives. What man would not value the intimacy of a young, beautiful, and clever woman? in some ways it is better than love itself, for love is a duel, with wounds given and taken, and its pleasures dearly paid for. Between Teresa and myself there was no such disturbing bond, and we were at liberty to be altogether frank in our intercourse.

One evening when I happened to be dining at the house, the absence of her father and the indisposition of her mother left us tete-a- tete in the smoking-room, whither she came to keep me company with my cigar. I saw that she was restless and with something on her mind to tell me, but I was too old a stager to force a confidence, least of all a woman's, and so I waited, said nothing, and blew smoke rings.

"Hugo," she said, "there is something I wish to speak to you about."

"I've known that for the last hour, Teresa," I said.



"This is something serious," she said, looking at me strangely.

"Blaze away," I said.

"Hugo," she broke out, "you have been borrowing money from my father."

I nodded.

"A great deal of money," she went on.

"For him--no," I said. "For me--well, yes."

"Eight or nine hundred dollars," she said.

"Those are about the figures," I returned. "Call it nine hundred."

"Oh, how could you! How could you!" she exclaimed.

I remained silent. In fact I did not know what to say.

"Don't you see the position you're putting yourself in?" she said.

"Position?" I repeated. "What position?"

"It's horrible, it's ignoble," she broke out. "I have always admired you for the way you kept yourself clear of such an ambiguous relation--you've known to the fraction of an inch what to take, what to refuse--to preserve your self-respect--my respect--unimpaired. And here I see you slipping into degradation. Oh, Hugo! I can't bear it."

"Is it such a crime to borrow a little money?" I asked.

"Not if you pay it back," she returned. "Not if you mean to pay it back. But you know you can't. You know you won't!"

"You think it's the thin edge of the wedge?" I said. "The beginning of the end and all that kind of thing?"



"You will go on," she cried. "You will become a dependent in this house, a hanger-on, a sponger. I will hate you. You will hate yourself. It went through me like a knife when I found it out."

I smoked my cigar in silence. I suppose she was quite right—horribly right, though I didn't like her any better for being so plain-spoken about it. I felt myself turning red under her gaze.

"What do you want me to do?" I said at length.

"Pay it back," she said.

"I wish to God I could," I said. "But you know how I live, Teresa, hanging on by the skin of my teeth--hardly able to keep my head above water, let alone having a dollar to spare."

"Then you can't pay," she said.

"I don't think I can," I returned.

"Then you ought to leave this house," she said.

"You have certainly made it impossible for me to stay, Teresa," I said.

"I want to make it impossible," she cried. "You--you don't understand--you think I'm cruel--it's because I like you, Hugo-- it's because you're the one man I admire above anybody in the world. I'd rather see you starving than dishonoured."

"Thank you for your kind interest," I said ironically. "Under the circumstances I am almost tempted to wish you admired me less."

"Am I not right?" she demanded.

"Perfectly right," I returned. "Oh, yes! Perfectly right."

"And you'll go," she said.

"Yes, I'll go," I said.

"And earn the money and pay father?" she went on.



"And earn the money and pay father," I repeated.

"And then come back?" she added.

"Never, never, never!" I cried out.

I could see her pale under the lights.

"Oh, Hugo! don't be so ungenerous," she said. "Don't be so--so----" She hesitated, apparently unable to continue.

"Ungenerous or not," I said, "damn the words, Teresa, this isn't a time to weigh words. It isn't in flesh and blood to come back. I can't come back. Put yourself in my place."

"Some day you'll thank me," she said.

"Very possibly," I returned. "Nobody knows what may not happen. It's conceivable, of course, I might go down on my bended knees, but really, from the way I feel at this moment, I do not think it's likely."

"You want to punish me for liking you," she said.

"Teresa," I said, "I have told you already that you are right. You insist on saving me from a humiliating position. I respect your courage and your straightforwardness. You remind me of an ancient Spartan having it out with a silly ass of a stranger who took advantage of her parents' goodnature. I am as little vain, I think, as any man, and as free from pettiness and idiotic pride-- but you mustn't ask the impossible. You mustn't expect the whipped dog to come back. When I go it will be for ever."

"Then go," she said, and looked me straight in the eyes.

"I have only one thing to ask," I said. "Smooth it over to your father and mother. I am very fond of your father and mother, Teresa; I don't want them to think I've acted badly, or that I have ceased to care for them. Tell them the necessary lies, you know."

"I will tell them," she said.



"Then good-bye," I said, rising. "I suppose I am acting like a baby to feel so sore. But I am hurt."

"Good-bye, Hugo," she said.

I went to the door and down the stairs. She followed and stood looking after me the length of the hall as I slowly put on my hat and coat. That was the last I saw of her, in the shadow of a palm, her girlish figure outlined against the black behind. I walked into the street with a heart like lead, and for the first time in my life I began to feel I was growing old.

I have been from my youth up an easy-going man, a drifter, a dawdler, always willing to put off work for play. But for once I pulled myself together, looked things in the face, and put my back to the wheel. I was determined to repay that nine hundred dollars, if I had to cut every dinner-party for the rest of the season. I was determined to repay it, if I had to work as I had never worked before. My first move was to change my address. I didn't want Uncle Gingersnaps ferreting me out, and Mrs. Grossensteck weeping on my shoulder. My next was to cancel my whole engagement book. My third, to turn over my wares and to rack my head for new ideas.

I had had a long-standing order from Granger's Weekly for a novelette. I had always hated novelettes, as one had to wait so long for one's money and then get so little; but in the humour I then found myself I plunged into the fray, if not with enthusiasm, at least with a dogged perseverance that was almost as good. Granger's Weekly liked triviality and dialogue, a lot of fuss about nothing and a happy ending. I gave it to them in a heaping measure. Dixie's Monthly, from which I had a short-story order, set dialect above rubies. I didn't know any dialect, but I borrowed a year's file and learned it like a lesson. They wrote and asked me for another on the strength of "The Courting of Amandar Jane." The Permeator was keen on Kipling and water, and I gave it to them--especially the water. Like all Southern families the Dundonalds had once had their day. I had travelled everywhere when I was a boy, and so I accordingly refreshed my dim memories with some modern travellers and wrote a short series for The Little Gentleman; "The Boy in the Carpathians," "The Boy in Old Louisiana," "A Boy in the Tyrol," "A Boy in London," "A Boy in Paris," "A Boy at the Louvre," "A Boy in Corsica," "A Boy in the Reconstruction." I reeled off about twenty of them and sold them to advantage.



It was a terribly dreary task, and I had moments of revolt when I stamped up and down my little flat and felt like throwing my resolution to the winds. But I stuck tight to the ink-bottle and fought the thing through. My novelette, strange to say, was good. Written against time and against inclination, it has always been regarded since as the best thing I ever did, and when published in book form outran three editions.

I made a thundering lot of money--for me, I mean, and in comparison to my usual income--seldom under five hundred dollars a month and often more. In eleven weeks I had repaid Grossensteck and had a credit in the bank. Nine hundred dollars has always remained to me as a unit of value, a sum of agonising significance not lightly to be spoken of, the fruits of hellish industry and self-denial. All this while I had had never a word from the Grossenstecks. At least they wrote to me often--telephoned--telegraphed--and my box at the club was choked with their letters. But I did not open a single one of them, though I found a pleasure in turning them over and over, and wondering as to what was within them. There were several in Teresa's fine hand, and these interested me most of all and tantalised me unspeakably. There was one of hers, cunningly addressed to me in a stranger's writing that I opened inadvertently; but I at once perceived the trick and had the strength of mind to throw it in the fire unread.

Perhaps you will wonder at my childishness. Sometimes I wondered at it myself. But the wound still smarted, and something stronger than I seemed to withhold me from again breaking the ice. Besides, those long lonely days, and those nights, almost as long in the retrospect, when I lay sleepless on my bed, had shown me I had been drifting into another peril no less dangerous than dependence. I had been thinking too much of the girl for my own good, and our separation had brought me to a sudden realisation of how deeply I was beginning to care for her. I hated her, too, the pitiless wretch, so there was a double reason for me not to go back.

One night as I had dressed to dine out and stepped into the street, looking up at the snow that hid the stars and silenced one's footsteps on the pavement, a woman emerged from the gloom, and before I knew what she was doing, had caught my arm. I shook her off, thinking her a beggar or something worse, and would have passed on my way had she not again struggled to detain me. I stopped, and was on the point of



roughly ordering her to let me go, when I looked down into her veiled face and saw that it was Teresa Grossensteck.

"Hugo!" she said. "Hugo!"

I could only repeat her name and regard her helplessly.

"Hugo," she said, "I am cold. Take me upstairs. I am chilled through and through."

"Oh, but Teresa," I expostulated, "it wouldn't be right. You know it wouldn't be right. You might be seen."

She laid her hand, her ungloved, icy hand, against my cheek.

"I have been here an hour," she said. "Take me to your rooms. I am freezing."

I led her up the stairs and to my little apartment. I seated her before the fire, turned up the lights, and stood and looked at her.

"What have you come here for?" I said. "I've paid your father-- paid him a month ago."

She made no answer, but spread her hands before the fire and shivered in the glow. She kept her eyes fixed on the coals in front of her and put out the tips of her little slippered feet. Then I perceived that she was in a ball gown and that her arms were bare under her opera cloak.

At last she broke the silence.

"How cheerless your room is," she said, looking about. "Oh, how cheerless!"

"Did you come here to tell me that?" I said.

"No," she said. "I don't know why I came. Because I was a fool, I suppose--a fool to think you'd want to see me. Take me home, Hugo." She rose as she said this and looked towards the door. I pressed her to take a little whiskey, for she was still as cold as death and as white as the



snow queen in Hans Andersen's tale, but she refused to let me give her any.

"Take me home, please," she repeated.

Her carriage was waiting a block away. Hendricks, the footman, received my order with impassivity and shut us in together with the unconcern of a good servant. It was dark in the carriage, and neither of us spoke as we whirled through the snowy streets. Once the lights of a passing hansom illumined my companion's face and I saw that she was crying. It pleased me to see her suffer; she had cost me eleven weeks of misery; why should she escape scot-free!

"Hugo," she said, "are you coming back to us, Hugo?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Why don't you know?" she asked.

"Oh, because!" I said.

"That's no answer," she said.

There was a pause.

"I was beginning to care too much about you," I said. "I think I was beginning to fall in love with you. I've got out of one false position. Why should I blunder into another?"

"Would it be a false position to love me?" she said.

"Of course that would a good deal depend on you," I said.

"Suppose I wanted you to," she said.

"Oh, but you couldn't!" I said.

"Why couldn't I?" she said.

"But forty," I objected; "nobody loves anybody who's forty, you know."



"I do," she said, "though, come to think of it, you were thirty- nine--when it first happened, Hugo."

I put out my arms in the dark and caught her to me. I could not believe my own good fortune as I felt her trembling and crying against my breast. I was humbled and ashamed. It was like a dream. An old fellow like me-forty, you know.

"It was a mighty near thing, Teresa," I said.

"I guess it was--for me!" she said.

"I meant myself, sweetheart," I said.

"For both of us then," she said, in a voice between laughter and tears, and impulsively put her arms round my neck.