

# The Mistake

HOW WYNCOME GORTON BEGAN A NEW CHAPTER IN HIS LIFE

By Ellis Parker Butler

THE death of Wyncome Gorton's father hit him like a splash of ice-cold water in the face. He was still gasping for breath when he ran to Doris Sunlight and told her all about it—which was the worst thing he could have done, but just like him. When he had wept, and had spent half an hour in explaining that now he saw the true light, and would put aside carnal things forever, Doris laughed.

"Oh, boy!" she said. "I don't know what you're talking about, Winny, but—fifty thousand dollars! Me for the white lights and the high spots from now on! How about some good eats right now? This news makes me hungry."

"But you don't understand," Gorton said, with such deep earnestness that tears stood in his eyes. "It is renunciation. It is a new and better life—a life into which you cannot follow me."

Doris laughed again, and a remarkably hard and cold laugh it was.

"Say, listen!" she said. "Where do you get that 'can't follow' stuff, Winny? You watch me! Not follow fifty thousand dollars? Listen to him!"

Wyncome Gorton buried his face in his hands and moaned.

"Let me give this to you straight, Winny," Doris said. "I don't understand this talk about going back to your old ideals and taking up the great work, and all that, but it looks to me like a plain case of trying to throw me down just because a bunch of money comes to you. It won't work! You don't chuck me like that, Winny. I don't stand for it. I've got letters. How many times do you think you've asked me to marry you, you poor coot? And now you're going to!"

"I was mad—mad!" groaned Gorton.

"Well, look out how you treat me, or I'll be the one that's mad—mad," Doris

told him. "When I'm mad—mad, I'm real mad—mad, too. You go home now and think it over. You've got the pip or something, or you wouldn't act this way. Imagine! Coming to me and saying 'I've got fifty thousand real dollars now; go chase yourself!'"

Gorton arose. He wiped his eyes and went out.

"Hey! Ain't you going to kiss me?" Doris fired after him, and then laughed as she closed the door.

"He's a poor shrimp," she said; "but anybody's fifty thousand looks thoroughly good to me. I'd be a nice one to let it get away, wouldn't I? Watch me!"

Gorton returned to his room in Mrs. Brait's boarding house, threw himself on his narrow bed, and wept. Doris put on her best hat—she had two—and visited Marcus M. Greenbaum, a lawyer who knew just how to handle young men and old men who had written letters that should never have been written.

"It's a cinch," Mr. Greenbaum said cheerfully. "I give you my word it's a cinch, Miss Sunlight. We sue for one hundred thousand dollars damages, and we get maybe the whole fifty thousand off him. I write a letter to-day, and if he don't come across and marry you in a week we get busy with the courts. Is he a fighter?"

"Him?" said Miss Sunlight scornfully. "He's a wilted shrimp, that's all. Honest, Mr. Greenbaum, I never knew why I took up with him, he was such a lemon. I must have had a hunch."

"Wunst in a while we get them hunches," agreed Mr. Greenbaum. "All right! This is my busy day. Good luck!"

## II

THIS was no conspiracy; it was a deserted young lady trying to secure justice.

It is not to the point that Doris Sunlight was merely a member of the second row of the chorus of Jack Hardon's "Ladies of Leisure" burlesque company, or that she was thirty years old. She had her rights, and she meant to maintain them.

Wyncome Gorton, stretched across his bed and in tears, had no doubt whatever that Doris meant to maintain her rights. She had a mouth which meant that she was one of the most unyielding maintainers in the world when fifty thousand dollars was in sight.

The whole affair of Doris Sunlight, as he saw only too plainly now, had been an awful mistake. It seemed a hideous nightmare. He felt that he must indeed have been mad. His misery now was as great as his mad elation had been when he first found Doris willing to play with him.

Gorton had been astonished that Doris even so much as looked at him. He knew he was not much to look at, and this made him meek. He was in many respects the meekest young man in New York. He was also awkward and inept. He was often on the wrong side of the walk, where the hurrying crowds bumped into him; then he begged people's pardon and tried to efface himself against the wall.

For a youth of twenty-one years he was ridiculously girlish and simple. He blushed constantly. In time it was likely that his retreating chin would have a few straggling yellow hairs on it. At fifty he would be a timid little man, bald, with thick-lensed spectacles, nervous, and always losing his umbrella. He would wear rubbers on damp days, and would be an exceedingly faithful pastor of a starved church in southern Illinois or middle Iowa, or perhaps a missionary to China. Now, at twenty-one, he possessed less gumption than the average boy of eighteen and less boldness than a kitten.

At nineteen he had told his father that he meant to be a minister of the gospel. His father, who had been a horse buyer and had become part owner of a gambling establishment, had told him to go to the devil.

"Why, you poor nunny!" he told Wyncome. "You poor half baked loon! Here I am ready to set you up in any sort of decent business you take a mind to, and you want to be a preacher. Listen, Winny—you ain't got the looks of a preacher, or the jaw action for one, or nothing. Have

some sense—let me buy you a store or something. All my life, since you was so high, I been worrying about you—afraid you wasn't maybe all on hand in the upper story. No offense, but I've been afraid maybe you wasn't all there. I've planned things out so that when I set you up in business I could keep a lookout for you and hand you some sound advice when you needed it. Now what kind of help can I give you if you go into this preacher game? None! That's one game where I can't stand by and pass you an ace when you need it most, boy. Forget it, won't you, and let me set you up in something I can help you at—won't you, boy?"

"I can't," Wyncome had said sadly. "This is something I must do. I can't help it. I am dragged on by something within me."

"That's the deal, is it?" his father asked. "That's the last card in your deck? You mean that?"

"Irrevocably," Wyncome had assured his father.

"Then go to the devil! I'm done," Gorton, Sr., had said.

Coming down to New York, aglow with independence and with the great vision of helping his fellow men, Wyncome Gorton ran right flat up against the problem of three meals a day and a place to sleep. These things were quite necessary, and he took the first job that offered. It was that of collecting money for an installment house. It was the hardest work a diffident young fellow could have chosen. He tramped the streets, climbed stairs, had doors slammed in his face, met scowls, and was cursed now and then. Once he was kicked.

The vision sustained Gorton nobly at first. Ridiculous as his aspiration might have seemed to others, it was supremely noble to Gorton. It was, indeed, essentially noble in itself. He had consecrated his life to the service of his fellow men, through the pulpit. His narrow present seemed to him like a dark gully between the hills, out of which he would soon fight his way into the wide-spreading valley of glorious service and self-sacrifice. Never was consecration more complete or more sincere.

The job he had found had compensations, too. He had his evenings and nights for study, and the pay was sufficient to allow him to buy a few books and to put by

a few dollars. In time—perhaps not for many years, but that did not matter—he would be able to take up his studies in a seminary. In the miserable confines of the cheap boarding house he studied and struggled and became enormously lonely.

The loneliness of a devotee is not like other forms of loneliness. Always behind the door is the haunting specter of doubt. It comes out when the flesh grows weak from overstudy, and when the spirit sinks from weariness.

“Do I believe?” is the agony of all who do believe, and in the loneliness of the boarding house and of the huge city Wyncome Gorton had to wrestle with his specter alone.

Two years of this was a great deal of it. He had to carry his great vision and his vast plan of service alone.

One Sunday he had dared to wait for a famous clergyman after the morning service, and had told him of his high hopes. The great man had been kind.

“There is no nobler service,” he had said, after he had listened to the young man; “but you should consider well before you decide.”

It sounded like saying, “You don’t look like good material to me,” and Wyncome knew that was what the great man was thinking.

This did not alter the youth’s intention, but it left him lonelier than ever. It was when his depression was at its greatest depth that he met Doris Sunlight.

### III

IN the weeks that followed he was not himself; he was no one he had ever known. All the wild oats of his whole life were cast in a heap in those few weeks, and flared up and overtopped him. He went mad, as a starving, fasting hermit goes mad, and forgot everything but Doris Sunlight.

Nothing else mattered. He was like one blind, deaf, berserk. Sometimes, late at night, he wept and beat himself with his fists, but he did not mean it. He was infatuated. He was as mad as the violently insane.

To Doris Sunlight he was, during those weeks, merely an odd but most acceptable “meal ticket.” Somehow she had to get through the weeks of rehearsal until the “Ladies of Leisure” began to draw pay, and Wyncome Gorton would serve as well as another.

“He’s awful!” she said to herself. “He’s the prize hick, for fair, but ladies must live. Maybe I can stand him until the pay envelopes begin. Then the can for him mighty quick!”

Doris was as hard as old-fashioned cut nails. She knew life, and she had her opinion of it.

“Sure, he’s a lemon,” she admitted to her dearest chum; “but one lemon’s as good as another while it has juice in it. I got to eat, ain’t I? Say, listen, Mag—what’s the sense fussing around for a gent in a fur coat when this thing simply falls in my lap?”

As a love affair, it had all the beauty of a hard-faced Bowery prize fighter jerking around a skinny monkey at the end of a chain. Doris Sunlight had all the knowledge in the world, and Gorton had none of it. Gorton was simply mad. He was having a brain storm of love brought on by loneliness and brooding.

The revulsion was sure to come sooner or later. The hermit always repents bitterly and returns to his water cress and solitude. With Gorton, repentance came when his father’s death struck him like a splash of cold water in his face. He awakened from his madness in a moment, and saw the hideousness of his behavior with frightful clearness.

Gorton knew what he must do. He had been like a train that had run unexpectedly upon a side track; he must get back on the main line at once. He did not make light of his fall from grace, but he knew that others had so fallen and yet lived to do such goodly work as he meant to do. There must be no further faltering, however. The thing must end at once. He must go to Doris Sunlight and tell her so.

He came from his interview with her dazed and frightened. This he had not expected. In his misery he had told her all his hopes and intentions. He had expected that she, a girl of the theaters, would at once renounce him, a man of the lowly church. Instead of renouncing him, she claimed him fiercely.

The next day Gorton received a letter from Marcus M. Greenbaum. For an hour he sat in his hall bedroom, his face hidden in his hands, and considered his life as it must be if he married Doris.

It would be a ruined life. It could be nothing, he believed, but long years of the life he had been leading for the past few

weeks. However high he might aspire, she would drag him down. His work would be hampered, made of no avail. "You shall not yoke the ox and the ass together."

He thought of flight, but how could one fly from the law, when the law had a hundred thousand eyes and a hundred thousand hands? Go where he might, Marcus M. Greenbaum and Doris Sunlight would follow him until they had ruined his career.

In his desperation Wyncome Gorton went out and bought a pistol. He bought it with shame, thinking that the man who sold it would know for what purpose he wanted it. The salesman may have guessed, but a sale is a sale, and if one man does not sell another will. Those who, all over the country, have their windows decked temptingly with firearms probably justify the crime-suggesting displays on this theory.

Back in his room, Gorton sat on his bed and felt a mighty fear of the huge weapon he had purchased. In his small room and on his small bed the blue-black pistol seemed as formidable as a cannon. Its discharge threatened to be as loudly tremendous as the explosion of a battery of heavy artillery.

He saw then that this room in which he had lived so long was not the place to do this thing. The landlady would come running in. Miss Toosey, whose nerves were so touchy, would come running in and scream and faint. The other boarders would rush in and make the remarks they might be expected to make.

Under his bed Gorton had a brown leather suit case, on one side of which his initials were painted—W. G. He knelt down by the bed, as he had knelt so often in prayer, and drew out the suit case. He dusted it with his towel and packed it with his few belongings, putting the blue-black pistol at the bottom. He took his fortune—all in ten Liberty bonds—from the secret place he had found for it, and put it into his coat pocket. He washed his hands carefully, and rescued the pink soap when it fell on the floor.

At the door he looked back. There was dust on the bed, where he had placed the suit case while packing, and he went back and knocked off the dust with his hand.

Looking at the room again, he saw his ink bottle on the narrow shelf. This reminded him that he must tell Doris that he meant to end his life. He put down his

suit case and opened the drawer of his small table. There was paper, but no envelopes, and he decided that he could write to her later. He stole out of the house and congratulated himself that he had not been seen.

#### IV

At the Pennsylvania Station he learned that the first train he could take for Philadelphia was No. 3, leaving at nine o'clock in the evening. No. 19, he was told, had just gone.

"Nine train gets to Broad Street at eleven forty-five," the ticket agent told him.

"I'll take a ticket, then," Gorton said. "If you please," he added.

With the ticket in his hand, he went to the wicket. There was no delay, and he was glad. He did not care to stand around. He went down the iron stairs, found a coach, and entered it. There were many vacant seats. He took one, and arranged his suit case so that it might not incommode whoever should chance to sit beside him.

The coach filled rapidly.

"Not taken?" a passenger asked, pausing beside Gorton.

"No, not taken," Gorton replied.

The stranger seated himself. From time to time he looked over his shoulder toward the door, and he seemed relieved when the train began to move. He was older than Gorton, and had a hard face and cruel gray eyes.

Before the train was fairly into the tunnel he had out a time table and scanned it, putting it back into his pocket. Once he stood up and looked from end to end of the car. He drew his own brown leather suit case up on his knees and unstrapped it, opening it only enough to allow his hand to slide inside. He felt in the suit case, closed it, and strapped it again. Then he looked at Gorton.

"Excuse me," Gorton said huskily, "but I'm going to Philadelphia. I don't know anything about Philadelphia. Do you know a hotel there? Not a costly hotel—just an ordinary hotel."

"There's the Gray Eagle," the stranger said. "I'm going there. That's a fair to middling hotel. You can get a room for three dollars. I don't call it much of a hotel, but it's near the station and everything. Going to be there long?"

Gorton swallowed.

"No—not very long," he said still more huskily.

"It ought to do well enough for you, then," said the stranger. "I'll go there with you, if you want me to. We can take a taxi together."

They conversed as the train hurried across New Jersey. The stranger talked far more than Gorton talked. He seemed nervous and eager to make the time pass rapidly by talking. He told Gorton his name, Henry Gibbings, and said that he was from Danbury, Connecticut. He was going to Philadelphia, he said, but he did not mean to stop there. He had to go to Washington the next day. He was in the insurance business, he told Gorton.

"He's lying to me," Gorton told himself. "I wonder why he is lying! There is no reason why he should lie to me, unless—"

He chilled as he thought that this man might be a detective sent by Marcus M. Greenbaum to shadow him, if that was what it was called. But no matter—shadowed or not, the morning would not find Gorton except among even more elusive shadows.

He let the stranger ramble on, heaping lie on lie. The train arrived at Philadelphia on time.

The Gray Eagle was more of a hotel than Gorton had expected. It had its share of gilt and flummery in the lobby, but this concerned him very little. He followed the stranger to the clerk's desk, and registered as he saw the stranger register. He had never registered at a hotel before, but he knew that it was required.

The clerk was using the telephone. When he had finished, he turned the register and looked at the names just written.

"I can give you a double room for five dollars, or single rooms at three," he said.

"We want two single rooms," said the stranger.

"Yes—single rooms," said Gorton.

The clerk jotted a number opposite each name, took two keys from the pigeonholes, and slid them to the edge of the counter.

"Boy! Boy!" he called sharply, and two bell boys hurried to pick up the room keys and the two suit cases.

"Twelve, George," said Gorton's boy, as he entered the elevator.

"Eleven," said the stranger's boy.

The elevator shot upward. The stranger still talked.

"Well, good night," he said, as he stepped from the car at the eleventh floor. "See you again in the morning, shouldn't wonder."

The corridor down which the bell boy led Gorton was softly carpeted, and two corners were turned before he stopped at the door of No. 1254. The boy unlocked the door, turned on the lights, glanced into the bathroom to see that towels were there, and waited a moment after he had inserted the key in the door on the inside of the lock.

"Oh, yes," said Gorton, and gave the boy a quarter. He had heard that it was usual to give the bell boy a tip.

"Thank you—good night," the boy said then, and closed the door behind him.

Gorton stepped to the door and turned the key. He looked around the room. In comparison with the hall bedroom he had occupied so long, it was palatial. The carpet on the floor was thick and soft; the paper on the wall was unfaded and fresh; there were three pictures, framed and glazed; the bed was neat and clean, and a folded gray blanket was at its foot.

Through the single window Gorton looked out over a vast city, glittering with lights. He could see an electric sign twinkling on and off. He pulled down the shade, took off his overcoat, and threw it on a chair. He looked into the bathroom, where the boy had left a light burning. Here was the place!

Suddenly he felt unutterably weary—physically weary, and weary of life. The boy had placed the suit case on a small stand evidently meant for just such a purpose. Gorton walked to it and put his hand on the handle to open it; but as he did so, his eye fell on a book which he knew must be a Bible. It lay on the night table beside the bed. He took it up and read:

Placed in this hotel by the Gideons.

He opened the book, and began to read at the place his eyes alighted on.

For an hour Gorton read, and then he remembered the letter that he meant to write to Doris Sunlight. He opened the drawer in his table, and found there pen, ink, paper, and envelopes.

The letter he wrote was too long and too complex for Doris. She never did quite understand all that Wyncome wrote; but she understood that he thought his life

ruined if yoked with hers, and that he meant to destroy himself in order to escape.

When he had completed the letter he addressed an envelope, sealed the letter in it, found a stamp in his pocket, and went to the door. He unlocked the door and opened it, looking up and down the hall. A guest passed.

"Excuse me, please," said Gorton, "but can you tell me how I can mail a letter?"

"Easiest thing, friend," said the man cheerfully. "There's a chute at the elevator, and all you have to do is drop it in."

"Which way is the elevator?" Gorton asked.

"Lost in a great city, hey?" joked the man. "Right down that way. Turn to the left, and then to the left again, and you'll bump into it."

"Thank you," said Gorton. "I'm not used to hotels."

"You're in luck!" the man laughed. "Good night."

## V

BACK in his room again, Gorton locked his door once more. There was no escape now. The time had come!

He pitied himself weakly, and thought of what might have been, and of the good he might have done, had he been able to live his life as he wished, free from Doris Sunlight; but that was impossible now. He unbuckled the straps of the suit case, laid it open on the little stand—and stared. This was not his suit case! There met his gaze shirts he had never owned, ties he had never seen, a coat he had never worn.

He was staring down at these things when three peremptory raps sounded on his door.

"Yes!" he said. "Yes—one minute!"

Closing the suit case, he went to the door and opened it. A man who stood outside pushed past him into the room and closed the door, locking it and putting the key in his pocket. He was a heavy man, severe of face. He glared at Gorton—frowned at him.

"You know what I'm here for, don't you? I'm the house detective," he said.

"Here for? You? House detective?" stammered Gorton, panic-stricken. "No, I don't know. I—I haven't done anything wrong, have I?"

He had a miserable feeling that he must have broken some rule of the hotel. Perhaps lights were supposed to be out at a

certain hour. Perhaps he should not have put the letter in the chute so late at night.

"Don't give me any nonsense, now!" said the detective harshly. "Don't you know what I'm here for?"

"Ought—ought I to have the lights out?" asked Gorton. "Is it the lights? I didn't know, if that is what it is."

"Don't you know what I'm here for? Talk up, now! Don't you know?"

"No, sir. If it's anything—I'm sorry—I didn't mean—" said poor Gorton.

"You came into the hotel with another man, didn't you?" asked the detective. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Gorton.

Suddenly he thought he knew what this was all about. It was the other man's suit case. They thought he had stolen it.

"Well, what about him? Who is he? What do you know about him?" the detective asked.

"About him?" faltered Gorton. "I don't know anything about—I mean he told me his name. He rode from New York with me, but I never set eyes on him before that. I asked him what was a good hotel to come to, and he told me about this one. We came here in the same taxi. He said his name was—"

"Never mind that! We know his name well enough. What else do you know about him? Know where he came from?"

"He said he was from Danbury, Connecticut," said Gorton, "but I didn't believe that. I thought he was lying. I thought he was lying all the time he was talking. I wondered why he thought he had to lie to me."

"And you never saw him before you got on the train? You never knew him before that? He was no friend of yours?"

"Oh, I hope he was my friend," said Gorton eagerly. "I hope I made him something of a friend. I try to make all men my friends—"

"Never mind about that!" said the detective. "I've no time to waste with that. You don't know anything about him—is that it? Sure you don't?"

"No, sir; I don't," said Gorton.

"All right!" said the detective, suddenly changing his manner. "You've got to excuse the way I went at you. Sometimes we can get at things by throwing a good scare into a man right at the first jump, but I guess you're straight. When a thing like this happens in a hotel—"

"What has happened?" asked Gorton hoarsely. "What has happened?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said the detective. "This fellow you hope is your friend, this Wyncome Gorton down in No. 1134, has shot and killed himself."

"But—but that's not his name!" stammered Gorton. "He's not—"

The detective thrust his hand at Gorton imperatively.

"Now, listen," he said. "Don't try to tell me, because I know. I don't care what he told you his name was. I know what he registered when he signed the register, and I know what the stuff in his suit case proves his name is. There's plenty there to prove it—letters from some girl, and plenty of other letters. One's from a lawyer. That's where the reason he suicided comes in, if you ask me. The girl was after him through the lawyer."

Gorton wet his lips stealthily.

"And he's dead?" he asked in a whisper.

"Dead for keeps," said the detective, and added: "Poor devil!"

## VI

WHEN the door had closed behind the detective, Wyncome Gorton stood looking at nothing for many minutes. He knew what had happened—he had followed the wrong bell boy. In the morning the world would hear that he, Wyncome Gorton, was dead. Marcus M. Greenbaum would hear that he was dead. Doris Sunlight would hear that he was dead. He was free! Even the letter he had written and sent down the mail chute would be added evidence that Wyncome Gorton was no more.

He put his hand to his coat and felt the Liberty bonds in his pocket.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "if there is a theological seminary in some town where the 'Ladies of Leisure' are not apt to go! I don't think I would care to meet Miss Sunlight again, now that I'm dead."

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## ROOM FOR A MAN

OH, there's not much room to spare  
On a ship that sails the sea;  
There's ten steps from lee to port,  
And ten back from port to lee.

In the city's huddled streets  
There is not much room to spare—  
And what's true of sea and town  
Is the same thing everywhere.

Where the plains and forests roll,  
Where snow-sifted mountains rise,  
You can only fill the place  
That your body occupies.

That is all the body holds  
To the day of death, from birth;  
But the space that bounds your soul—  
That is measured by your worth.

And though some accept the dark,  
Broken by unnumbered wars,  
Others win their way at last  
To the height that bounds the stars!

Yet, no matter how you thrive,  
What your race or creed or clan,  
Everywhere on sea and land  
There is room to be a man!

*Harry Kemp*