

The Gift Horse

THE STORY OF OLD PETER HAMLIN, OF WIRRALOO RANCH,
QUEENSLAND AND HIS TWO ENGLISH NEPHEWS

By Alan Sullivan

THE Hamlin estate was one of those comparatively small affairs whose records accumulate in a tin box with a name outside—a box opened at intervals by the solicitor in whose office it rests year after year. Such business involves little work and a modest but secure profit. The Hamlin box had been in the office of Trask & Frimley for a matter of forty years, during which both Trask and Frimley had passed on to a rest of which they had no urgent need, and the firm's business came into the hands of young John Fort.

Peter Hamlin, whose age Fort reckoned must be about seventy, remained in Australia during these forty years. He wrote home to Cobham every six months—short, dry letters, generally inclosing a bond or a stock certificate to be put in the tin box. Trask & Frimley collected his dividends, reinvested them, and several times in every year submitted offers to purchase the old Hamlin house. This was a small Georgian place on the outskirts of the town. The offers were invariably declined, as was quite expected, but they made opportunity for a six-and-eightpenny item in the annual account for services rendered.

Every one had forgotten old Peter except his two nephews, and their memories were merely the lively anticipation of possible benefits later on. They never heard from him—not once. Then, very unexpectedly, a letter was handed in to Trask & Frimley, and Fort, reading it, decided that the old man was becoming a shade more human. The letter arrived in March.

DEAR SIRS:

About my house and my nephews. I'd like to do something for these two young men in a small way; so will you please have the house put in good order, and offer it to Mr. George Hamlin rent free for July, and to Mr. Michael for August,

gardener included. As to the gardener, I want you to employ William Mockridge, by whom this letter will be given you. The garden may need a good deal of work, so you can take him on at once, at say three pounds a week, or less if you can arrange it. He has had a hard time out here, wants to get back to England, and seems to know enough about flowers for the purpose.

In case either of my nephews declines this offer, the other one might have the house for both months. I may want it later myself, as I am thinking of coming over. Meantime please address me as usual. You will recognize my signature, but, anyway, a copy of this goes by post. I wanted Mockridge to get to work at once.

Yours faithfully,

PETER HAMLIN.

Fort, reading this, was not much impressed. The thing sounded quixotic and rather small for an elderly unmarried man who had a good many thousands laid by. Then he had Mockridge brought in—a small, weather-beaten man, with cautious and rather anxious eyes, a large mouth, seamed skin, sloping shoulders, and all the sign marks of life in the open.

"You know what's in this letter?" inquired Fort.

"I know the part about me, sir."

The man's voice was harsh, as if the stringy throat of him had cracked.

"Did Mr. Hamlin make any definite promise about your wages?"

"No, sir, but three pounds a week was thought of."

"That's more than is paid here—with a cottage. You can have fifty shillings."

Mockridge twisted his gnarled fingers.

"It isn't much, sir; but if it's all you'll give, I'll have to take it."

"Very well! Mr. Hamlin wants you to begin at once. A tenant will probably arrive in June. Let me know to-morrow what you'll need in the way of tools. You'll have to work, mind you. The place has run to seed."

"I'll do my best, sir; and perhaps"—he hesitated—"you'll put in a good word for me with Mr. Hamlin?"

"I will, if you justify it. Do you know the Wirraloo Ranch?"

"His place in Queensland? Yes—I've worked there."

"Mr. Hamlin says he may be in England later this year."

"Yes, sir—he told me that, too."

Young Fort would have liked to ask a good many questions about the exile, but it was too early in the game.

"Well," he said, "I'll come round in a few days and see how you're getting on."

The door closed, and, taking down the tin box, he studied its contents for awhile. The Hamlin estate would realize something more than forty thousand pounds, at a minimum.

A day or two later the confirmation of the old man's instructions arrived by post, and Fort dictated two letters, identical and very much to the point. Twenty-four hours after that, George Hamlin strolled into his wife's room and tossed the one he had received on her dressing table.

"Read that, old thing!"

Betty Hamlin put down her tongs and read, wrinkling a white brow and pouting not a little.

"Heavens, what are you going to do?"

"Search me! I suppose we'll accept, if we're wise."

"In June—the middle of the season?"

"I know when the season is."

"But, George, we can't! It's probably a poisonous place, and not fit to ask any one to come to. We can't entertain there. Couldn't we send the children down, and work in a week-end ourselves, just for the look of the thing?"

He lit a cigarette and puffed gloomily.

"I don't want it any more than you do, but we've got to think of the future. It's more hopeful than the past, and the old boy can't last much longer. If we mess this up, it might be expensive."

She pondered for a moment.

"Couldn't you offer it to Michael? It's more in his line. Tell the lawyer man we're awfully sorry, but we're all booked up—because we are."

George wasn't quite comfortable about that. They saw each other very rarely, these brothers. George and his wife rode buoyantly on top of the wave while the money or credit lasted. Michael and

Mary, his wife, lived in Ealing, where there was no wave.

George was nothing in particular, while Michael was an analytical chemist, and worked very hard. George's wife had three thousand a year—between them they spent five—while Michael earned eight hundred and spent twenty pounds less. George was rather sparkling, and did not look his forty years by at least ten. Michael was graying at the temples, had tired eyes, from too much microscopic work, stooped his shoulders, and looked much older than he was. George had two children, while Michael had four; and the rest of the comparison you may complete for yourself.

"I believe this is a sort of try-out," George announced reflectively.

"Who's the judge? Uncle Peter's in Australia."

"It's a wild guess, but I feel that way. What about the gardener?"

"Ridiculous! If your uncle's as close as he seems to have been since you were born, he wouldn't leave anything to a gardener to decide."

"Then why does he supply one?"

"He couldn't let the place at all without one." Betty puckered a pair of very red lips, and gave herself up to thought. "I've got it! The lawyer says that if you don't accept he's to offer the hole to Michael. Well, you write to him and say that while we'd love to come, we really feel that Michael should have it, because he needs it more. You needn't mention our engagements. If it's put in the right way, it ought to make an awfully good impression. You'll score like anything, and Mike will think no end of you, too. I heard from Sally Pender this morning. She wants us for the second week-end in July, and it fits just right. Now, George, toddle—I've a lot to do to my face yet!"

George toddled. After destroying much expensive notepaper, he produced a very creditable epistle, saturated with generosity and brotherly affection. He read it to Betty, who highly approved. Then he dropped it into a pillar box and telephoned for the car.

II

MICHAEL HAMLIN got his letter from Fort on the same morning. He read it aloud at breakfast, to the accompaniment of squeaks of delight from the junior members of the family.

Neither he nor Mary had thought much about the old man, though they sometimes wondered if he must not be very lonely. As to being in any way remembered, it was not to be expected now; so when Michael looked up at his wife his eyes were much brighter than usual. Their summer holiday was generally a fortnight of being packed very tight into three small rooms; and even that was welcome.

"Can we manage it, dear?"

"Of course we can, and must!" Mary fluttered like a motherly sparrow—which, in fact, she rather resembled. "Cobham is only about forty minutes from Waterloo, so you can reach us every night before seven; and the children will—oh, my dear, of course we must manage it! But I wish—"

She broke off, her eyes suddenly moist.

"What do you wish?"

"That it was for more than one month."

"It's a lot better than nothing."

"I know, but—"

She gulped a little, and fell silent, because at the moment her heart was very full. Michael looked too old, too driven, too fine-drawn. Four children and herself on eight hundred a year, and nothing much ahead! He never thought of himself. The rest of them would pull through all right, but she wanted the country for him, with its blessed spaciousness and healing calm.

Then, two days later, came Fort's second letter, inclosing a copy of the one he had received from George. It seemed that the cup of life was full. Two whole wonderful months—sixty-one precious evenings away from the grime and jar of London! So Michael's response was very grateful, and he sent such an acknowledgment to his brother as made George turn rather pink, and reply quite testily, when Betty patted him on the back and vowed that he was a tactical genius.

"And," she added, "if that queer old bird of an uncle of yours has any reasoning powers at all, we ought to score like anything. You'll hear about it yet!"

To those who know it, Cobham must seem a gracious spot, with the pine woods out Oxshott way, and lush meadows, and great oaks and elms shading the roads, and pastures where pheasants, all bronze and gold, come out to sun themselves, and mansions whose windows overlook long, smooth vistas of park, and rose-bowered cottages

that almost invite a caress. The languid river glides through field and covert till it reaches the corn mill, where there is a dripping, clacking waterwheel, and, inside, the rumble of great stones. Beside the river, on one of its loveliest bends, stood the old Hamlin house.

The place was really very complete. It had been let from time to time, and had linen—firmly woven stuff made when sheets were really sheets—and glass and silver with the Hamlin crest on it, so that Mary needed to bring but little with her.

Mockridge met them at the station, and was regarded by Philip, the older boy, with intense interest, because he must know all about gold and kangaroos. When they reached the house there were squeals of delight; and then began what is to childhood the most absorbing pursuit of all—the exploration of totally new territory.

One passes over the first week or two, except to say that both Michael and Mary began to feel younger. It may have been the vegetables that Mockridge produced in ever increasing quantities, or the still, sweet nights, or the music of the birds, or the untainted air, or the entire unexpectedness of the thing. Anyhow, it worked, so that Michael lost some of his stoop, and laughed far more than he used to. He loved the mile walk to the station in the cool of the morning; and in the evening there were always some of them who met him for the walk back.

Mary and her husband were sitting on the lawn one Sunday afternoon when the great idea swam into her mind—so great that she put it forward breathlessly.

"Mike, couldn't we buy this place?"

"Lord, how I wish we could! Just think of it!"

"But why not?"

"My dear, you're dreaming!"

"Can't we do it by paying so much down, and the rest monthly in rent and purchase?"

"We'd go on paying forever and ever, amen; and where's the first amount?"

"There's my thousand pounds. I'd love to put it into this!"

He pressed her hand.

"We swore we wouldn't touch our emergency fund."

"I feel that if we lived here there wouldn't be any emergency."

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "I'm beginning to feel that way myself; but sup-

pose Uncle Peter won't sell? He could have sold long ago, if he wished to."

"Why not try? What do you think it's worth?"

"It would be cheap at thirty-five hundred, I should say."

"That would be twenty-five hundred left, on which we'd have to pay how much?"

"Say five per cent."

"But we're paying nearly that now, and just for rent."

"I know. There's another difficulty. We're only occupying till the end of August, and we couldn't hear till the end of September."

Ealing stretched drably before her eyes, and it frightened her to realize how much she had begun to dread it.

"We could cable, couldn't we?"

"Yes."

There was a lingering note in her husband's voice that touched Mary Hamlin deeply. She silently resolved to see young Mr. Fort next day.

Then her gaze wandered to the corner of the garden in which stood the gardener's cottage. Mockridge was smoking on the doorstep, with four enraptured youngsters at his feet. She remembered that it was to be kangaroos this afternoon.

Mike and she were curious about Mockridge. From what they gathered, he had been with Peter Hamlin for a long time; but he spoke of his employer with no particular interest.

"He's a queer man, ma'am—I don't mind saying that. He's stayed up country till he's sort of got used to doing without people. Seems he wasn't much wanted at home when he was young. There's a good many in Australia like that. No, ma'am, he never said anything about his relations to me. Wirraloo Ranch—yes, it's a tin-roofed house surrounded by sheep, and as lonely as you like. Yes, I'm very comfortable here. I've always mended my own socks, thank you, and I like having the children around me, whether I'm working or not. More color now, haven't they, ma'am?"

It was then, with the great idea looming large, that she realized that without Mockridge the place couldn't be the same. Would he be content to stay?

"I haven't any agreement with Mr. Hamlin, ma'am. He gave me the job for the summer—that's all; but if it so hap-

pened you stayed on, I don't know that I'd want to move."

The idea seemed to please him—which, at the moment, meant a great deal to Mary. She felt encouraged, and ventured further, wondering how much he knew about old Peter Hamlin.

"You see, Mockridge, we'd like to buy it, if we could; but if we did, we'd have to run it very economically, and I don't see how we could give fifty shillings and the cottage. Do you think we could arrange something like your taking over the vegetable garden, just as if it were yours? I mean that you might have the cottage, and we'd buy our vegetables from you; and in that case we wouldn't pay any wages, but you'd look after the place for the use of the cottage and the land."

She said this rather nervously, but very much in earnest.

"Just as if I owned it myself?" he asked.

"Yes. Would there have to be some sort of agreement?"

"Not in Australia; but here—yes, I reckon there would have to be. I'll think it over, ma'am. Meantime I hope I'm giving satisfaction?"

She put her hand impulsively on his arm.

"I can't imagine what we'd do without you, any of us! And, Mockridge, if you don't stay, I'm not sure that we want to buy."

He touched his cap.

"I'd be glad to have Mr. Hamlin know that, if he comes here."

III

MARY HAMLIN went to see young Mr. Fort the next day. It struck her that he was secretly amused when she stated her case; but he was very understanding, and, she thought, sympathetic, though he doubted the wisdom of cabling. Mr. Hamlin would hardly cable a reply. Added to this was the fact that a few months previously he had declined a proposal to sell for a larger sum, all cash.

"I suppose," she asked rather dejectedly, "you couldn't bring any pressure on him? After all, my husband is a blood relation."

Young Fort stroked his smooth chin.

"I don't think he's the sort of man that yields to pressure."

She sighed.

"I'm afraid not. If he could only see the children, it might make a difference."

"Perhaps the wisest thing is to let the matter stand for a few weeks, until I know whether he will be in England this summer or not. It's quite possible that he may take the house himself in September."

"With Mockridge?"

"I don't believe he would part with Mockridge."

Mary realized that it had been a pointless question. She pictured this lonely, hard-fisted, cantankerous old man enjoying the house and garden while the rest of them were engulfed in Ealing. Queer how just a taste of paradise made one greedy for more! But it wasn't for herself.

"Then I'd better wait?"

"I would, if I were you."

She smiled her thanks, and all that Michael heard that night was that Mr. Fort rather expected Peter Hamlin in England before very long.

It was in the second week in August that a rakish and expensive car slid along a leafy road in the vicinity of Cobham, and George Hamlin, who was driving, had an inspiration.

"I say, old thing, wouldn't it be a decent act to look up Michael? He must be somewhere close by."

"Why?" said Betty. "We're late for tea as it is."

He put on the brakes.

"Dunno, but I've a sort of curiosity to see the place. Only take a minute." He beckoned to an elderly man who came up the road as he spoke. "Can you tell me where the Hamlin place is?"

The elderly man looked at the inquirer with a slow interest.

"I'm going in that direction myself. It's about a mile from here."

"Jump up, will you? I'll take you along."

The stranger got into the back seat, to Betty's obvious discomfort, which she made no attempt to conceal. The car moved forward, and George nodded sagely.

"We don't lose anything by a visit which you can cut as short as you like, and it backs up our generosity in giving way to Mike. Also, it keeps us in a kind of touch with the old bird himself — brothers reunited under his hospitable roof, eh?"

Betty was not much impressed, being rather worried that day. A payment on the car was overdue, and tradesmen in general had lost their manners — to her, at

least. Life, in short, on three thousand a year had become a very embarrassing problem.

"Do you think we were wise in refusing his offer, after all?" she asked reflectively.

"Dunno; but if the old boy sees my letter and swallows it, I don't believe we shall lose anything."

"How much do you think your uncle will carve up?"

"No telling, but there'll be more fat than lean. That's generally the way with misers."

"Mr. Hamlin's place is the first on the right, sir," said a dry voice from the back seat.

"Thanks! Look here, we're only going to stay a few minutes. Will you keep an eye on this bus, and I'll leave it outside?"

As a visit, it was hardly a success, and perhaps not quite fair. Mary looked flustered and surprised, and her four children were earthy from grubbing in the garden. George and Betty, in contrast, were very well dressed and Londonish. The neat things George meant to say all evaporated, while Betty sent sidelong looks at the house, and tried to imagine herself being in it.

They got away as soon as they could, and found the car with a flat tire.

"Damn!" said George. "How did that happen?"

He became busy with a jack. The elderly man helped, by request, while Betty smoked.

"We're well out of that," she said thankfully. "What on earth made your uncle think we'd go there?"

George was dirty by now, and rather cross.

"Don't ask me! Sort of long-distance throb of humanity, I suppose. Hanged if I wouldn't like to sell this bus!"

"You can't. It isn't yours yet."

"It will be, if I can raise another three hundred."

"Hope springs eternal. Did you ever see such a mess as those children?"

"I rather liked 'em."

"I didn't. I wonder if your uncle is really coming over!"

"The possibility leaves me unmoved. We'll have to ask him to stay with us, if he does."

"Think he eats with his knife?"

"Probably. I say, you, twist the other way with that wrench, will you?"

"Sorry, sir." The elderly man was rather red in the face. "I don't know much about cars."

They got off a few minutes later, George tossing a half crown, which the man missed. They left him looking for it in the ditch.

IV

MARY heard from young Fort in two weeks, with news of Peter Hamlin.

By this time the shadow of the return to London was weighing rather heavily. She had had much to be thankful for in the past two months, and they all hated to go back to town.

The exile, it appeared, had arrived in England, and hoped it would be convenient if he came to Cobham on the afternoon of the following Saturday. If they could give him a room for the next few days, he would be much obliged. Fort added that he would take the opportunity of putting the offer for the house before his client at once, and would endeavor to get a decision.

Mary met her husband at the station that evening, and he read the letter on the way back.

"Do you think there's any chance?" she said anxiously.

Michael was not sanguine.

"If I'd seen the man, I might know; but it's not overly promising."

She slipped her arm into his, and tried not to appear downcast.

Passing the cottage they saw Mockridge, and told him the news. He took it very quietly, and ventured to remind Mary Hamlin that she had promised to put in a word for him. She said that the appearance of the place ought to speak for itself—which seemed to please him.

Also she wondered if he had grown as fond of them as they had of him; but she did not put that into words, because she was attempting—though not very successfully—to keep their coming departure out of her head.

Then came a second letter from Fort, to the effect that he had communicated with his client, who might consider the offer, in order to keep the property in the family. He would decide later.

Something whispered to Mary that it was wiser to wait for more definite news before she told Michael.

Saturday morning—Michael in London—Michael's wife very busy in preparations.

They were giving Peter Hamlin their own room, the one overlooking the lawn. When it came to arranging the furniture, she called in Mockridge.

"I suppose," she said, "that this is as comfortable as Wirraloo Ranch ever was?"

He nodded.

"They're not in the same street, ma'am, for comfort."

"Is there anything special you can think of that Mr. Hamlin likes to eat?"

"There again, ma'am, you can't make any mistake. After a man has lived on fresh mutton and flapjack half his life, he'll lap up anything."

"You know," she ruminated, "I'm awfully afraid he'll change his mind about selling, and want to stay here always!"

Mockridge was inclined to agree that the exile might want to stay.

"If he does," she said with an anxious little laugh, "you'll put in a word for me, won't you?"

"I will, ma'am, if I have any kind of a chance; but Mr. Hamlin don't take kindly to influence."

"H-m! I think it would be nice if you brought in some flowers. Are there many beautiful flowers in Australia?"

"Practically none, ma'am, in the sheep country."

Then Saturday afternoon, with the Michael Hamlins on the lawn, their ears cocked for the sound of a taxi. Mockridge was out of sight for the time being. The juniors were very sleek and impatient, while Mary sent questioning glances at her husband, which he tried to answer with an encouraging but not overconfident smile. Bees were droning, and there was a whisper of wind in the trees.

"Philip," said Mary, "please tell Mockridge that he may be wanted any minute to help with Uncle Peter's luggage."

"He's not in the cottage, mother. I was there a few minutes ago."

"Then find him, dear."

Philip went off. Two—three—five minutes passed, and the boy came racing across the lawn, his eyes bulging.

"Mother, I couldn't see him anywhere, and then I found him in your old room, changing his shirt. When I asked him what he meant by it, he laughed like anything, and asked me if he would do for Uncle Peter. Did you ever hear such cheek?"

Vingo's Pirate Princess

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A STORY OF PRESENT-DAY LIFE,
LOVE, AND ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA

By Loring Brent

ACCORDING to the father of Carolina Gendron, who was in a position to know, most people go through this life seeing just about one-half of one per cent of what's in front of their noses. They all but trip over opportunities that would make them famous, or happy, or independently wealthy, or perhaps all three. Adventure waves to them to come on along. Romance flirts with them. Love throws them kisses. If success were a reptile, they would be bitten to death at an early age, they pass it so close and so often. Yes, man! Most folks blame their hard luck when they ought to be blaming their foolish eyesight.

That is Jake Gendron's opinion, anyhow, and Jake ought to know what he is talking about.

On the other hand, specialists are generally more or less narrow-minded, and you have to keep that in view when they begin spouting their philosophy of life. Jake was a railroad section foreman. He was more or less personally responsible for the ten-mile stretch of track between the Tomoka River bridge and Cypress Spoon. He took pardonable pride in the fact that no wreck had happened on his section that might have been prevented by the vigilance of his eyesight.

"Show me a successful man," Jake often said, "and I'll show you a man who uses his eyes, whether he's a bank president or a bank robber!"

Down our way, where snakes are snakes and men are malarial, an exception still helps to prove a rule, and as often as not it sows the seed of a story. The present chronicle concerns a pair of beautifully trained brown eyes—the eyes of Carolina Gendron. It would be considerably improved if only we knew what happened

after the last available chapter; but we might wait a long time for the necessary information.

And who knows but that some girl who reads this may have her whole life changed for the better by learning about the wonderful things that good eyesight did for Carolina Gendron? I know more than one woman who could profitably tear a page from Carolina's book—yes, and some men, too; but I'm not here to preach. I'm trying in my fumbling way to tell a story—that's all.

Well, Carolina Gendron had remarkable eyes. Sometimes they twinkled, and quite as often they were sad or thoughtful or mysterious, but they were always big and brown and observant.

They weren't remarkable in the sense that they could see things at night that ordinary eyes missed, or that their daytime range was beyond the normal vision. Shucks, no! An oculist would have dismissed them as a pair of perfectly healthy twenty-twenties, not in need of spectacles. A poetic young fellow with an eye for beauty would perhaps have compared them to sunlight falling on autumn leaves shining with dew. A critical artist would have declared that their color was actually hazel; but the most important comment would still be left unsaid. They were remarkable eyes because they saw what was in front of them. It is quite safe to say that what they missed seeing simply wasn't worth noticing.

From the time when she was a little thing in pigtails, Carolina had been trained to use her eyes. She had learned to be constantly observant and sharply awake for the unusual. The eyes of a good game hunter are trained in the same way. He can make out a deer or a bear almost con-