

He Must Think It Out

Henry Fitts took up Gray's letter. It was the last in his mail to be reached and he had avoided the big document largely because of its bulkiness. With pressing financial adjustments to make, Fitts was in no mood for discursiveness in any form.

While he was frowningly considering his mail, Henry's daughter Irene had interrupted. Fitts had resignedly pushed aside the disturbing literature to look upon his daughter, equally disturbing in her way, and now bound upon an expedition of "week-ending."

Irene had found her father in a familiar attitude, and had rallied him, as was her habit.

"Cheer up, darling!" she had said, as with calm assurance she had swept the sheets from before him and established herself upon his desk. "This outfit is not entirely to the bad. I expect it to land me on Hazard's staff. I have a hunch it made a big impression on Minnie Hazard at the class luncheon today. I'd like to embrace you, but haven't time to trifle with my make-up. Now, brace up, dearest. You were nice to marry early so as to have many years to enjoy the prosperity to be achieved by your wonder child!"

Although Irene had drawn the usual caressing smile, her banter had slipped off the edge of her father's mood. There was quiet, approving fondness in his eyes, as he watched the youthful figure whose vitality and poise were so clearly revealed in its costuming.

Irene was talking now seriously but practically and vividly, talking of

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her plans, but Fitts was not following her, although his mind and heart were absorbed in her.

What had it meant to produce this clear-cut, adorable young thing, this vigorous, healthy body in its absurd yet fascinating clothes, the clear, responsive mind, the cultivated taste? It had cost more than money, and money had never come easily to him. It had cost frayed nerves and anxious days. But her ambition was no greater than his. He was proud of his children—how proud!—how fondly proud! Irene, the eldest, the best beloved, she was his gift to posterity.

It had been nearly closing time when Irene had taken her affectionate and lively departure from his office. Fitts took up the letter and saw with surprise that it was from Gray, Ephraim Gray. Why should Gray, whose office was in the same building, whom he ran across in or out of court, almost any day—why should he send a letter, a long letter in long hand, and in his own hand, at that?

In the growing quiet he began to read. The outer office was by now deserted. His own stenographer had long since clicked daintily down the corridor. The doors of the elevators had given their last clank, and a few belated passengers were running down the stairs.

Fitts glanced at his watch as he picked up Gray's letter. It was time to go home, and he would take the letter with him; and yet, somehow, he would rather read it here. Besides, it would take only a few minutes to run it over.

What the deuce, anyway, had Gray to say on paper? True, they had been thrown together, in a way, on government cases, but Gray was counted in another race; was, in fact, a Negro, and except in the courts, very seldom seen.

In a way, Fitts had been an admirer of Gray. He had admired the strong personality of the big man whose deep, arresting voice carried an irresistible human, as well as logical, appeal. He had wondered at the poise which held through circumstances of so persistently tragic a flavor. They had been drawn together in a certain kind of restricted companionship, and Fitts had enjoyed the dry and genial humor of the man. It had been only a few days ago that they had laughed together over an old photograph, which Fitts produced, of one of his forebears wearing the strained expression and painful best clothes called for in photographs of the "sixties."

"If they could only have caught him unawares, Gray. By George, he has the same lion head as yourself!"

He had lingered as Gray had told some incidents of his own life and experiences, a field which the man had seemed loath to enter, but from which, under the spell of Fitts' sympathy, he drew tales of tragic interest. They had sat late that day, so late that Fitts had a passing regret, more or less poignant, that it was not possible to take the man home with him, to eat dinner with them, to charm Bella and Irene. But of course that was unthinkable; the idea had been hurriedly, almost frantically, dismissed!

Harassed as Fitts had been, and was, by the many demands of a growing family, he naturally had his ears open for any current tale of opportunities for big money; although it had never happened, he was always hoping for some ideas, some suggestions that might be grasped for his own benefit; so when Gray had approached him a short time before with a tale of possible wealth for a client of his, Fitts had been an interested listener.

Gray's story had been about a recently-built highway leading to a newly-developed manufacturing center which had brought some old forgotten woodlots and their to-be-found owners into prominence and prosperity. During the telling it had been impossible for Fitts to suppress a twinge of envy and a surge of bitterness. Of course Gray's clients must be Negroes—Negroes inheriting American land! While he, Fitts . . . It was a damned shame that he had no help. With the hope of getting, without reading the letter, an idea of what it was all about, Fitts began to glance hastily through the many sheets he had taken from the envelope. There were enclosures. There were arresting phrases. He snapped on his desk light and sat down to read:

My Dear Fitts:

The information which I am passing on to you, in this statement, I have withheld until I was absolutely sure of its validity; more than this, I have not brought myself to give you these facts until I had become convinced myself that it was the right and proper step for me to take.

I have been weeks in coming to this conclusion, and now that the decision that you should have the facts has been reached, I shall not weary or annoy you by beating around the bush.

In investigating my client's claim to the tract of woodland whose ownership has recently come into dispute and of which we have so often talked, I found that there was an adjacent lot in demand and waiting the appearance of a legal owner. Naturally I interested

myself in an endeavor to trace the ownership of this property. So successfully have I done this that I tracked the original owner to Texas, and then identified him as the original owner of a tract of land there on which oil wells were afterwards discovered, and which lately has gained much notoriety as the "Garden Oil Fields."

Stephen Griggs, in whose name the title of the Ardley Woodlots (those of which we have talked) rests, was the brother of Eben Griggs, who owned adjoining lots, those claimed by my client as a descendant of Eben Griggs. Stephen Griggs disappeared while a young man,—in fact, while a boy,—and was entirely lost sight of by relatives and friends. Eben Griggs had two daughters, both of whom left the lonely homestead. One appears to have dropped out of sight, after taking service in a distant city; the other moved away upon her marriage, but her descendants never lost sight of their claim to Eben Griggs' property, for the title was redeemed by his grandson in recent years. This grandson, in the absence of other known heirs, had also claimed title to the lots left by his great-uncle Stephen.

In settling this claim for my client, who is the great-grandson of Eben Griggs, I have given much time to an effort to track and locate the descendants of Stephen Griggs, should he have any. It has been a long and tiring process, the details of which I will submit to you at another time. Here and now I will briefly outline the results.

I have found that Stephen Griggs never married, and that he wandered by degrees into the far southwest. Then he evidently took up a small tract of land of little apparent value, but which probably kept him alive. At his death he left his little property to be held by the courts until a legal claimant should appear.

For many years those sixty lonely acres of Stephen Griggs went almost unnoticed. At one time they were rented in order to obtain land fees, but in the main they were overlooked. Recently a tenant discovered oil upon this land and made a frenzied attempt to purchase and obtain a clear title. It was through the broadcasting of this sensational news that my attention was attracted, and that, after a long investigation, I connected the owner of the land upon which these oil wells were located with the original unknown owner of the Ardley Woodlots, whose sale I was negotiating. I am now convinced that Stephen Griggs was the owner of both and

that the collateral descendants of Stephen Griggs can claim title not only to his share in the Ardley woods, but also to one of the best yielding oil fields now operating. You may be asking of what interest this can be to you?

Simply this, I have found through my investigations that you are indisputably a lineal descendant of the brother, and, with one other, the only legal heir, of Stephen Griggs!

You will recall my interest in an old portrait of your great-grandfather's which you showed me, your sole heirloom, you said. My client has its duplicate. It is his great-grandfather, also, which would make him (my client) your cousin one degree removed. Further proof will be found in enclosed papers and in those which I am forwarding, which are copies of birth and death and marriage certificates that have been secured to prove your claim.

If there should seem to be impropriety in my using our acquaintance to help obtain this knowledge, you must lay it to a lawyer's propensity to investigate, and my natural desire to push my client's interest.

At this, Fitts threw down the sheets and leaped excitedly to his feet.

"My God, man, make no excuses! You've saved my life!" He spoke aloud, the words tumbling from his lips.

With hands trembling and blood pounding in his temples, he went back to his reading.

Among the papers I am sending you, you will find description of both properties and of the great potential wealth within your grasp.

Before allowing you to publicly investigate and corroborate this claim, there is one other piece of information which I must pass on to you. I do it reluctantly, for although it is so, yet it is dastardly that these facts should be a matter of such vital import. However, there is no course open to me but to tell you that my client, co-heir with you, the great-grandson of your great-grandfather, the son of your mother's cousin and the great-nephew of Stephen Griggs is, myself, Ephraim Gray!

With bulging eyes Fitts read again and yet again. "The son of your mother's cousin"—what did the man mean? What was he driving at? How

could Gray, who was almost black in color, be the son of *his* mother's cousin? Was this a fool joke? Was it possible that Gray was trying to blackmail him?

"The black rascal! How dare he?" He almost shouted the words.

Then he stopped short, stabbed with a remembrance of Gray's impressive sincerity. Suppose it were true—impossible of course, but just suppose . . . Tied up with a black family!

"No, no!" he almost shrieked, as he threw down the papers and rushed to open the window. "Damn him, no, no!"

So violent was his instinctive protest that a feeling of nausea overcame him as he leaned against the open window seeking air. For some minutes he stood there, fighting down the mental and physical surge which was becoming chaos within him.

Regaining, after a while, a measure of composure, he stumbled back to his desk and attempted to take up the disordered sheets of Gray's letter, but the full sense of the hideous implications again overwhelmed him. He—"a nigger" and Irene, his Irene, his gay, lovely daughter . . . It was a lie! a *lie!*

He flung his arms over his desk, and in doing so uncovered a snapshot of Gray,—one taken in the corridor by an amateur photographer in the building. Glancing at it with eyes dulled by pain and anguish, his slow gaze was caught by something familiar in the picture: the outline, the poise of the body, the set of the head suggested some one—he hadn't noticed it before, but there it was. Yes, the resemblance was there—no need to bring out the portrait of old Eben.

Fitts tore the card in two and sank his head into his hands. Well, it might be true. No, not *really* true, never, *never*; but how to keep down any suspicion that any one had thought it to be true. It was Gray that must be handled. He must be made to swallow his words, they must be forced down his throat.

He fumbled for Gray's letter and steeled himself to go on.

traces of Negro blood have grown faint with subsequent white infusions. Lois Griggs, your grandmother and sister to Nancy Griggs, my grandmother, seems, as I said, to have left home early in life to take service with a family in a distant city. Her movements were never checked by her family, but you will find among the papers a true record which leads straight to your birth, the son of a white mother and a supposedly white man; but, really, the grandson of old Eben Griggs, Negro and Indian.

After the signature came a postscript:

It is no reflection upon my regard for you or on the sincerity of our intercourse that from the first I have had an idea of our relationship. In fact, from letters which were left by my father and which you will be allowed to examine, I judged that just such a situation would develop. I confess I have been on the outlook, ready to follow any and every clue. America's attitude in such relationships made it impossible for me to be more open with you. Even now, whatever may be your future plans, they may be made without reference to me.

Fitts straightened himself stiffly. The impressiveness of Gray's personality was too strong upon him to allow a complete rejection of the whole matter. He arose from his chair and dragged himself to the door of his coat closet, stumbling over a chair in his way. He turned on the light and consulted the mirror sunk in the door.

Yes, he had the same face, a face which was even a little whiter than it was before he had received the staggering news that he was no longer a white man. If this thing proved to be true, what was he, and where did he belong? Where would he look for friends? He gave himself a prolonged stare. He was the same man identically, the same man that he was at this time yesterday, and yet he must be damned by what—for what . . .

And what about his family? Fitts' eyes grew wild as the thought of Bella, of Irene, came into his mind, and then he laughed at his reflection in the glass. Was it not ridiculous for him to be afraid to face facts? But his laugh cracked. He *was* afraid, miserably afraid! He shivered as his imagination leaped forward and tortured him with the pictures it drew. Doors closed on Irene, his loved and lovely Irene, so adequately prepared

and so gallantly facing a friendly world—doors closed everywhere and on every side—in schools and stores and churches and homes!

And then, that Jim Crow business, with sheriffs waiting for objectors! He would shoot, kill! Let any one dare insult his daughter! Yes, he would show how this thing should be met! But how absurd to imagine that Irene would be treated like a common black girl! And he laughed again, and again the laugh broke.

There was that incident of last winter. He had seen the girl in Gray's office—a girl as fair as his Irene. It was a judgment against him that he hadn't been more outspoken. But now—he would cry their crimes from the house tops.

Of all persons why should this curse come upon *him*, upon him who had always been tolerant and sympathetic? Why hadn't some of those ugly fanatics, Negro-haters,—why hadn't they been the ones to suffer?

It wasn't fair—it was unjust that a good man, that a sweet girl, should be so punished. Punished? *Cursed!* Talk about a merciful God! Hadn't he been a Christian—hadn't he been upright? And God had let this come upon him. He would not submit—he would maim, he would murder! He would rather see Irene dead!

"Better dead!" he whispered as, spent with emotion, he slumped into a nearby chair. His overwrought feelings gave way, and for a while he sprawled motionless and blessedly thoughtless. Into this lethargy other thoughts began to creep. Why need the truth be divulged? Why couldn't that be managed? It shouldn't be hard!

Fitts jerked up straight, his head lifted, the light returned to his eyes. He was foolish to despair. There was always a way.

Gray was leaving America. He would get Gray's promise of secrecy. He would not appear as a claimant of the fortune. He would pay *that* price for secrecy. Gray could be trusted! And Fitts laughed again. He threw up the window and drew deep breaths of the cool night air. The world was all right again—everything was all right—all right! What a fool he had been to give way! To let himself get worked up to such a frenzy! It was a good thing no one had seen or heard him.

The thing to do was to swear Gray to secrecy and to avoid all contact with him or people of his kind.

And now for home and his delayed dinner. Get away, get away—The phrase persisted in his mind! But if he was to get away, why not take the money? Think what it would do! If he didn't take the money, Gray would

know the secret just the same. Would there be any advantage not to take the money? In either case, he would be at the mercy of Gray. *Could* Gray be trusted? And if he could, why couldn't they manage together that the world shouldn't know the truth?

What would happen should Gray die? That would have to be arranged; could it be arranged?

Would it be better to refuse the money, after all? What difference would it make, except that he would be poor instead of rich? He was getting confused again; but another gleam shot through his confusion.

"Bella!" he almost shouted in his relief. "I'll talk with Bella! She'll know what is best. She always does." Why hadn't he thought of her before? She always saw light in the darkest problems. Why, of course.

But he stopped short again. Tell Bella what?—that in marrying him she had been deceived, betrayed, condemned? No, he could not tell Bella. Even that comfort was denied him. Fate was giving the last twist to the implements of torture!

Well, what was it he was trying to decide?

He must concentrate!

He must think it out before he saw Bella.

He must think it out.

He must think it out alone.

The bell of the telephone shrilled again and again, unheard in the darkened room.

Henry Fitts was thinking it out—and alone!