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Atmosphere

By SARAH CROXTON

“ . . . without drink except water and without food except as ordered by the court . . . ”

The jury's instructions were over. They filed slowly out and the tall figure of Judge Blake moved with tired dignity toward his chambers.

Nancy Crawford turned her auburn head toward the strange young man who had been sitting next to her for three days.

“Will the jury be out long?” An apologetic smile touched the corners of her young mouth. “This is my first trial. I don't know whether to wait or not.”

The young man surveyed her with dark approving eyes.

“No one knows anything about a jury. My guess is it won't be long. It ought to be a quick acquittal—but George Evans is a demon at winning a case.” He shifted in his seat so he could face her. He had been wondering how he could attract her attention since he first saw her. “What brought you to this trial—curiosity?”

“That's what brought you, isn't it?” she countered with a touch of defiance.

He shook his head.

“Atmosphere for a story I'm writing. A lot goes on in this room besides the trial. Emotions, decisions; take that woman in black over there with the lovely brooding face . . . ”

* * *

At the back of the courtroom Martha Blake sat quietly, slim hands clasped over her black coat. Strange, she was thinking, that when she had finally decided to leave John, she had come at last to hear him preside in court. Long ago, when they were first married, she had heard him as an impetuous young attorney. By the time he had become judge she had ceased following his work, that impetuous

manner had faded into a dignified austerity. Last night when she had discussed separation with him there had been no faint recurrence of it.

What was it he had said? That he had been relinquishing her, bit by bit, for months. It shouldn't be more painful to let her go entirely. He did not reproach her with what they both knew: that she was bitterly jealous of the work which so absorbed him.

Another woman, she thought resentfully, she could have fought better. She would have known the right weapons; she would have used them instead of enclosing herself in the shell of her unhappiness.

How she had clung to her own individuality, stubbornly, blindly, and sometimes with a faint shame. She had been too popular, too much sought after; it had made her more than helpless when she had found herself neglected.

Unobserved, she had come today to watch John in the role which absorbed him in a way she had never done; a role which had devoured their happiness. She had forgotten how weary John's face had grown. Was it just the years, she wondered now, or had it been brought to a climax of fatigue with the definite cleavage of last night?

She made a sharp movement of protest. At least, she had not been like that ridiculous Grace Evans, hanging on to her husband like a plump leech, quoting interminably of George's legal victories. Smiling complacently now from her seat inside the rail, as if she were the principal actor in the drama of that unfortunate prisoner's life.

* * *

Grace Evans turned suddenly and caught the eye of Martha Blake. She bowed effusively to conceal her astonishment. Martha Blake here, of all people! It was the first time Grace had ever seen her take an interest in the judge's affairs.

Her little pointed nose quivered with excitement. She leaned forward and tapped her husband on the shoulder with a plump white hand.

"Why in the world do you suppose Martha Blake is here?" Her eyes sparkled in that curiosity which shared social ambition as the two dominating factors of her life. She smiled brightly at George's pre-occupied scowl and a tingle of elation passed through her tightly corsetted figure. Perhaps now that Martha had come off her pedestal she would attend the dinner party Grace was planning for tomorrow evening. One of those affairs which she carefully referred to as impromptu and with which she always celebrated a legal victory of George's. If given quickly enough after a spectacular trial, those dinners drew the socially prominent people Grace coveted; people who were curious to see the brilliant prosecuting attorney at close range.

George's meteoric career had propelled Grace into many aloof homes through the prompt advantage she had taken of each opportunity. Intimacy with the members of those homes had so far been unattained; but Grace, knowing her own persistency, was not discouraged.

Her roving eye fell on the young man who sat at the press table near her. She hoped he recognized her. His clever sketches of the notables here were being much talked of.

* * *

Max Brown returned the determined smile of Grace Evans. He wondered if she ever missed appearing at one of these trials. Damned bad taste the way she perched herself inside the rails behind her husband. Too bad that husband didn't try some of his famous legal tactics on her.

Heigh-ho! No use wasting thoughts on her. This was his moment. Lucky for him this trial had come up when it did. That United Press man was still in town and Max's feature article, accompanied by his sketches would catapult him before the man's attention. He hoped he hadn't sounded

too cocky yesterday, prophesying the verdict to him in the old man's office. No one had agreed with him. Well, the U. P. guy had seemed to take a fancy to him. He'd given him a swell compliment on the write-up he had made of the trial so far. That little poker party last night had helped, too. Lucky he had suggested it.

More than one talented reporter had been lifted into the U. P. ranks. These sketches of his would top off his feature article for the morning's edition. That prisoner was a swell model, with his thin anxious face. And that woman at the back of the room with her pale skin and red mouth.

His pencil stopped in mid-air. By gosh, it was Mrs. Blake! Better not draw her. The Blake's didn't go in for front page stuff. Exclusive and all that rot. Wouldn't do to get in bad with the judge.

His sharp grey eyes shifted to George Evans sorting over his papers. A handsome devil with his black hair and those piercing black eyes. A shrewd one, too, fighting his way to the top. He'd be a big man in politics some day, if Max didn't miss his guess. He was always the most conspicuous man in the courtroom.

He looked a bit white around the mouth. Strain probably, or maybe a bust of the night before.

* * *

George Evans stirred restlessly over his papers and suppressed a groan. Indigestion again! Grace's damned dinners were ruining his stomach. It would take him a week to recover from the dinner she would give after he won this case. All he wanted was relaxation. But he never did get what he really wanted.

He had never expected when he married that plump, giggling blond that she would develop over night into a society hound; feeding on his victories like an overstuffed vulture. He had been out of his head when he married her. A young fool with hurt pride, caught on the rebound. She

had been like a panacea in her pursuit of him; pretty and gay with her infectious giggle.

Well, she still had her giggle and she had never doubted that he loved her. She had never known that she was second choice.

His frown paused on her and then slid past to the young couple in the third row. He was sure they had never met before. He had seen that boy take a seat beside her three days ago, just as he saw everything that went on in the courtroom.

They were completely absorbed in each other. They looked too young, too vitally happy for his tortured stomach.

* * *

"I don't believe that prosecutor approves of us," Nancy Crawford commented. "He makes me jittery when he scowls at me."

"Shall I remove him," the young man demanded anxiously. "I have strange desires to be a knight errant."

"I thought you were here in search of atmosphere." The gray eyes sparkled in laughter, watching him.

"I have it." He pushed a paper toward her.

She glanced down at the written description on the paper: gray eyes between black lashes, reddish curly hair beneath a soft blue sport hat—even her dimples were on that paper. Nancy was certain she had not smiled at him.

She did so now.

"You forgot my freckles."

"I couldn't get past the eyes. In time I'll get to everything, name and address included."

His smile brought swift color to her cheeks. She had a strange and pleasant sensation of panic before his intent gaze. Casually, so that he might be impressed with her indifference, she said:

"You'd do better to describe the expression on the face of the defense attorney. He'd be so good looking if it weren't for something . . ."

* * *

Hayden Scott leaned back in his chair. He had sent the prisoner back to the cell with encouraging words, at any rate, even if he didn't feel them.

"They won't be out long," he had said with a confidence he did not have. "It'll be acquittal—quick verdict."

He had watched the young strained face relax, watched the stooped shoulders straighten before they disappeared through the far door. Then he had leaned back in his chair, unable to move.

He was dog tired. He envied the cool confidence of George Evans. Hayden felt all the immaturity of his thirty-four years. He had, as usual, worn himself out emotionally. He never could be detached from a case; his emotions always entangled him. He supposed it was because he always associated himself so intensely with the underdog.

He had been frightened all along, too; more so than the prisoner, he believed. Never before had he tried a case against George Evans. Something vital depended on his winning. It was such a clear case of self defense. But that meant nothing to George Evans who could make a case anything he chose.

He ran a nervous hand through his brown hair, already streaked with grey. No matter what the verdict, he wished it over. It had always been that way. When he was a boy, struggling for grades that other boys got easily, he had finally not cared what the results would be; anything, just so it would be over and he could go home. That feeling of insecurity, so cruelly and aptly named an inferiority complex, which had accompanied him through life, was understood there.

Helen understood it now. Marriage with her had done wonders for him; but even at that, he was glad she had not come down here to see him beaten by George Evans.

She was uncanny in her knowledge of him; when to laugh him out of his moods, when to leave him alone. She had been that way from the first; and it wasn't many years

ago since he had courted her as assiduously as that young man over there with the red headed girl.

* * *

"So you're Bob Crawford's sister. Then you must have heard him speak of me. I'm Dick Jerod."

"Sorry." There was little sympathy in the demure smile she gave him.

"Well, anyway, he's a great guy. And that gives me your address."

Even as she laughed her conscience again reminded her that he was moving in fast. Since he had seated himself beside her three days ago and appraised her with undisguised admiration, her conscience had been having a hard time of it.

* * *

Martha Blake sighed restlessly. She should be keeping her thoughts on the fate of the prisoner. Instead, they roved back over the years, as if seeking something.

Seeing John in an environment unfamiliar to her brought back vividly the first time she had seen him. Ten years ago and she had been twenty-two; popular, spoiled, headstrong. She had met him at a dinner party. Young John Blake, with his deep blue eyes and his laughter, who at twenty-eight showed promise of a brilliant future. It had been love at first sight and it had swept them through swift courtship into marriage. A perfect match, people had said. There had been no hint that John's eager young face would weary and tighten over his emotions through the years.

Beautiful memories lay back there in the beginning. She had forgotten their beauty, it was so long since she had paused to look back.

* * *

Grace Evans wrote busily on a perfumed lavender notebook with gilt edge. Tomorrow's dinner party would be a hastier affair than usual. She wished impatiently that they would hurry up with that verdict so she could get to her

phoning. The trial had no business ending so abruptly; she had counted on having two days' notice. No one knew better than Grace that the dinner must be given immediately while people were still curious.

She hesitated, her lips pursed over the name of the Blakes. It would mean something if they came. She could afford to forget the aloof politeness of Martha's former refusals. After all, she had probably refused more important people than Grace.

She raised her head to watch George push his chair back noisily, and gave him a smile which held just the right degree of ownership, pleasantly conscious that people were watching him and that he was very handsome.

"What kind of poison was in that food last night," He scowled into her pink smiling face. "Run out and get me some pepsin tablets. That jury is due back any minute and I'd like to live to hear the verdict."

"Surely, dear." She regarded his scowl with bright blue eyes. "Georgie, do you think the Blakes would come to dinner . . ."

"No!" he said curtly, "and neither will I!"

"You funny boy!" She giggled. No use arguing with him when he was like this. She'd just use her own judgment.

Rising, she collided abruptly with the newspaper man, returning from outside. She paused to give him the benefit of her smile.

"I'm so sorry." Now he would place her, she was sure.

* * *

Max Brown brushed by the smiling Evans woman with her avid eyes. He knew as well as if she had asked him what she wanted. He hadn't come to this trial in order to further her social ambitions. He had a few ambitions of his own.

This was the best article he had done. All ready with sketches, only waiting the verdict. He had taken a chance

and written a great finish, just to be shot over to the editor in case he had guessed the verdict correctly. Only needed a couple of lines. That verdict meant more to his future than the prisoner's; the whole trial had.

He ran a hand through his tousled hair. That U. P. guy had hinted that he liked the stuff of one Max Brown. Wait until he saw this. It would knock his eye out.

He glanced over at the red haired girl. She was a swell looker. He had met her once, but he supposed she didn't remember. Attractive girls never did seem to remember him. She was sure absorbed in that guy. He believed they had forgotten this was a trial.

Heigh-ho, he wished that dumb jury would hurry!

* * *

Martha Blake sat forward with slim hands tightly clasped in her lap. A door had opened and John stood framed in it. Long ago he had come through an open door and she had seen him for the first time. Something had clicked in her heart.

Now, after ten years, it had happened again. He had lost that eager undaunted look; he was exhausted by the vicarious emotions of his courtroom, defeated by the emptiness of his marriage. But he was suddenly young John Blake and she was seeing him for the first time.

Seeing herself, too. Seeing how she had enclosed herself in her own selfish egotism and vanity and self pity. She had taken without giving. She had never helped. But she still could. She knew that now, with her heart heralding his approach through an open door.

* * *

Nancy Crawford exclaimed reluctantly:

"It didn't take them long. Fifty-five minutes exactly."

"Not long enough," Dick Jerod grumbled. "Are we having dinner together tonight?"

"In search of more atmosphere?"

"The atmosphere can wait. I'm in search of something else, now."

* * *

Grace Evans sank into her seat with the bottle of pepsin tablets clasped in a damp palm. She was panting a little and her face was petulant.

George's silly old tablets had almost made her miss hearing the verdict and that was the most fun of all.

* * *

"We, the jury, being first duly impanelled and sworn to try the issues in this case, find the defendant not guilty."

* * *

Hayden Scott half rose to his feet, mouth opened incredulously. He had done what many other men had failed to do; he had won a case against George Evans. It couldn't be true! But it was!

He turned belatedly to the boy beside him, grasped his thin hand convulsively.

"Well, my boy, you're free!" There was a ring of confidence in his voice. "I knew you would be!"

But he wasn't thinking of the prisoner. It was he, Hayden Scott, who was free. Free of his stifling dread of George Evans, free of his uncertainties.

He scooped his papers and books together excitedly. Helen would be waiting.

* * *

Max Brown dashed up the aisle. Just as he had predicted, just as he had it already written! He and that U. P. guy would celebrate tonight; and tomorrow he, Max Brown, would be slated for a change of jobs. If he guessed right and he had so far!

He crowded past Dick Jerod and Nancy Crawford sauntering out leisurely. They didn't know yet that this was a trial, by gosh!

* * *

"I'll call for you at seven," Dick Jerod was saying. "That will give me time to meet the parents. They might as well get used to me."

"I don't remember accepting your dinner invitation." Nancy's eyes were provocative, as if to belie the flushed cheeks.

"Most unflattering of you. After this we'll depend on my memory."

* * *

Martha Blake stood up. She was unaware of the people straggling up the aisles, chattering and laughing. She was waiting. And suddenly she met John's eyes across the emptying room; astonished, incredulous, hopeful.

Holding his gaze to her as if it were something precious, she gave him a slow smile and walked down the aisle toward him.

* * *

Grace Evans leaned toward her husband.

"George, look at Martha Blake. There's something positively immoral about her expression. I didn't know wives ever looked like that at their husbands!" She opened her purse and jammed the lavender notebook into it viciously.

* * *

George Evans did not answer. He was watching the slim graceful woman walking toward John Blake. Once, before he had been famous and envied, he had known her well. He had even expected—but then she had met John, and George had been caught on the rebound by a pink and white girl with an infectious giggle who had eventually added her bit to the boredom which surrounded him and drove him into a frenzy of work.

He swallowed a pepsin tablet. Thank God, there would be no dinner party tomorrow night! Perhaps he could get some sleep!