

SHORT STORY AMERICA

CREATED HE THEM

JACK LONDON

SHE met him at the door.

"I did not think you would be so early."

"It is half past eight." He looked at his watch. "The train leaves a 9:12."

He was very businesslike, until he saw her lips tremble as she abruptly turned and led the way.

"It'll be all right, little woman," he said soothingly. "Doctor Bodineau's the man. He'll pull him through, you'll see."

They entered the living-room. His glance quested apprehensively about, then turned to her.

"Where's Al?"

She did not answer, but with a sudden impulse came close to him and stood motionless. She was a slender, dark-eyed woman, in whose face was stamped the strain and stress of living. But the fine lines and the haunted look in the eyes were not the handiwork of mere worry. He knew whose handiwork it was as he looked upon it, and she knew when she

consulted her mirror.

"It's no use, Mary," he said. He put his hand on her shoulder. "We've tried everything. It's a wretched business, I know, but what else can we do? You've failed. Doctor Bodineau's all that's left."

"If I had another chance . . ." she began falteringly.

"We've threshed that all out," he answered harshly. "You've got to buck up, now. You know what conclusion we arrived at. You know you haven't the ghost of a hope in another chance."

She shook her head. "I know it. But it is terrible, the thought of his going away to fight it out alone."

"He won't be alone. There's Doctor Bodineau. And besides, it's a beautiful place."

She remained silent.

"It is the only thing," he said.

"It is the only thing," she repeated mechanically.

He looked at his watch. "Where's Al?"

"I'll send him."

When the door had closed behind her, he walked over to the window and looked out, drumming absently with his knuckles on the pane.

"Hello."

He turned and responded to the greeting of the man who had just entered. There was a perceptible drag to the man's feet as he walked across toward the window and paused irresolutely halfway.

"I've changed my mind, George," he announced hurriedly and nervously. "I'm not going."

He plucked at his sleeve, shuffled with his feet, dropped his eyes, and with a strong effort raised them again to confront the other.

George regarded him silently, his nostrils distending and his lean fingers unconsciously crooking like an eagle's talons about to clutch.

In line and feature there was much of resemblance between the two men; and yet, in the strongest resemblances there was a radical difference. Theirs were the same black eyes, but those of the man at the window were sharp and straight looking, while those of the man in the middle of the room were cloudy and furtive. He could not face the other's gaze, and continually and vainly struggled with himself to do so. The high cheek bones with the hollows beneath were the same, yet the texture of the hollows seemed different. The thin-lipped mouths were from the same mould, but George's lips were firm and muscular, while Al's were soft and loose--the lips of an ascetic turned voluptuary. There was also a sag at the corners. His flesh hinted of grossness, especially so in the eagle-like aquiline nose that must once have been the other's, but that had lost the austerity the other's still retained.

Al fought for steadiness in the middle of the floor. The silence bothered him. He had a feeling that he was about to begin swaying back and forth. He moistened his lips with his tongue.

"I'm going to stay," he said desperately.

He dropped his eyes and plucked again at his sleeve.

"And you are only twenty-six years old," George said at last. "You poor, feeble old man." lilt.

"Don't be so sure of that," Al retorted, with a flash of belligerence.

"Do you remember when we swam that mile and a half across the channel?"

"Well, and what of it?" A sullen expression was creeping across Al's face.

"And do you remember when we boxed in the barn after school?"

"I could take all you gave me."

"All I gave you!" George's voice rose momentarily to a higher pitch. "You licked me four afternoons out of five. You were twice as strong as I--three times as strong. And now I'd be afraid to land on you with a sofa cushion; you'd crumple up like a last year's leaf. You'd die, you poor, miserable old man."

"You needn't abuse me just because I've changed my mind," the other protested, the hint of a whine in his voice.

His wife entered, and he looked appeal to her; but the man at the window strode suddenly up to him and burst out:--

"You don't know your own mind for two successive minutes! You haven't any mind, you spineless, crawling worm!"

"You can't make me angry." Al smiled with cunning, and glanced triumphantly at his wife. "You can't make me angry," he repeated, as though the idea were thoroughly gratifying to him. "I know your game. It's my stomach, I tell you. I can't help it. Before God, I can't! Isn't it my stomach, Mary?"

She glanced at George and spoke composedly, though she hid a trembling hand in a fold of her skirt.

"Isn't it time?" she asked softly.

Her husband turned upon her savagely. "I'm not going to go!" he cried. "That's just what I've been telling . . . him. And I tell you again, all of you, I'm not going. You can't bully me." "Why, Al, dear, you said--" she began.

"Never mind what I said!" he broke out. "I've said something else right now, and you've heard it, and that settles it."

He walked across the room and threw himself with emphasis into a Morris chair. But the other man was swiftly upon him. The talon-like fingers gripped his shoulders, jerked him to his feet, and held him there.

"You've reached the limit, Al, and I want you to understand it. I've tried to treat you like . . . like my brother, but hereafter I shall treat you like the thing that you are. Do you understand?"

The anger in his voice was cold. The blaze in his eyes was cold. It was vastly more effective than any outburst, and Al cringed under it and under the clutching hand that was bruising his shoulder muscles.

"It is only because of me that you have this house, that you have the food you eat. Your position? Any other man would have been shown the door a year ago--two years ago. I have held you in it. Your salary has been charity. It has been paid out of my pocket. Mary . . . her dresses. . . that gown she has on is made over; she wears the discarded dresses of her sisters, of my wife. Charity-- do you understand? Your children--they are wearing the discarded clothes of my children, of the children of my neighbors who think the clothes went to some orphan asylum. And it is an orphan asylum . . . or it soon will be."

He emphasized each point with an unconscious tightening of his grip on the shoulder. Al was squirming with the pain of it. The sweat was starting out on his forehead.

"Now listen well to me," his brother went on. "In three minutes you will tell me that you are going with me. If you don't, Mary and the children will be taken away from you--to-day.. You needn't ever come to the office. This house will be closed to you. And in six months I shall have the pleasure of burying you. You have three minutes to make up your mind."

Al made a strangling movement, and reached up with weak fingers to the clutching hand.

"My heart . . . let me go . . . you'll be the death of me," he gasped.

The hand thrust him down forcibly into the Morris chair and released him.

The clock on the mantle ticked loudly. George glanced at it, and at Mary. She was leaning against the table, unable to conceal her trembling. He became unpleasantly aware of the feeling of his brother's fingers on his hand. Quite unconsciously he wiped the back of the hand upon his coat. The clock ticked on in the silence. It seemed to George that the room reverberated with his voice. He could hear himself still speaking.

"I'll go," came from the Morris chair.

It was a weak and shaken voice, and it was a weak and shaken man that pulled himself out of the Morris chair. He started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" George demanded.

"Suit case," came the response. "Mary'll send the trunk later. I'll be back In a minute."

The door closed after him. A moment later, struck with sudden suspicion, George was opening the door. He glanced in. His brother stood at a sideboard, in one hand a decanter, in the other hand, bottom up and to his lips, a whiskey glass.

Across the glass Al saw that he was observed. It threw him into a panic. Hastily he tried to refill the glass and get it to his lips; but glass and decanter were sent smashing to the floor. He snarled. It was like the sound of a wild beast. But the grip on his shoulder subdued and frightened him. He was being propelled toward the door.

"The suit case," he gasped. "It's there . . . in that room. Let me get it."

"Where's the key?" his brother asked, when he had brought it.

"It isn't locked."

The next moment the suit case was spread open, and George's hand was searching the contents. From one side it brought out a bottle of whiskey, from the other side a flask. He snapped the case shut.

"Come on," he said. "If we miss one car, we miss that train."

He went out into the hallway, leaving Al with his wife. It was like a funeral, George thought, as he waited.

His brother's overcoat caught on the knob of the front door and delayed its closing long enough for Mary's first sob to come to their ears. George's lips were very thin and compressed as he went down the steps. In one hand he carried the suit case. With the other hand he held his brother's arm.

As they neared the corner, he heard the electric car a block away, and urged his brother on. Al was breathing hard. His feet dragged, and shuffled, and he held back.

"A hell of a brother you are," he panted.

For reply, he received a vicious jerk on his arm. It reminded him of his childhood when he was hurried along by some angry grown-up. And like a child, he had to be helped up the car step. He sank down on an outside seat, panting, sweating, overcome by the exertion. He followed George's eyes as the latter looked him up and down.

"A hell of a brother you are," was George's comment when he had finished the inspection.

Moisture welled into Al's eyes.

"It's my stomach," he said with self-pity.

"I don't wonder," was the retort. "Burnt out like the crater of a volcano. Fervent heat isn't a circumstance."

Thereafter they did not speak. When they arrived at the transfer point, George came to himself with a start. He smiled. With fixed gaze that did not see the houses that streamed across his field of vision, he had himself been sunk deep in self-pity. He helped his brother from the car, and looked up the intersecting street. The car they were to take was not in sight.

Al's eyes chanced upon the corner grocery and saloon across the way. At once he became restless. His hands passed beyond his control, and he yearned hungrily across the street to the door that swung open even as he looked and let in a happy pilgrim. And in that instant he saw the white-jacketed bar-tender against an array of glittering glass. Quite unconsciously he started to cross the street.

"Hold on." George's hand was on his arm.

"I want some whiskey," he answered.

"You've already had some."

"That was hours ago. Go on, George, let me have some. It's the last day. Don't shut off on me until we get there--God knows it will be soon enough."

George glanced desperately up the street. The car was in sight.

"There isn't time for a drink," he said.

"I don't want a drink. I want a bottle." Al's voice became wheedling. "Go on, George. It's the last, the very last."

"No." The denial was as final as George's thin lips could make it.

Al glanced at the approaching car. He sat down suddenly on the curbstone.

"What's the matter?" his brother asked, with momentary alarm.

"Nothing. I want some whiskey. It's my stomach."

"Come on now, get up."

George reached for him, but was anticipated, for his brother sprawled flat on the pavement, oblivious to the dirt and to the curious glances of the passers-by. The car was clanging its gong at the crossing, a block away.

"You'll miss it," Al grinned from the pavement. "And it will be your fault."

George's fists clenched tightly.

"For two cents I'd give you a thrashing."

"And miss the car," was the triumphant comment from the pavement.

George looked at the car. It was halfway down the block. He looked at his watch. He debated a second longer.

"All right," he said. "I'll get it. But you get on that car. If you miss it, I'll break the bottle over your head."

He dashed across the street and into the saloon. The car came in and stopped. There were no passengers to get off. Al dragged himself up the steps and sat down. He smiled as the conductor rang the bell and the car started. The swinging door of the saloon burst open. Clutching in his hand the suit case and a pint bottle of whiskey, George started in pursuit. The conductor, his hand on the bell cord, waited to see if it would be necessary to stop. It was not. George swung lightly aboard, sat down beside his brother, and passed him the bottle.

"You might have got a quart," Al said reproachfully.

He extracted the cork with a pocket corkscrew, and elevated the bottle.

"I'm sick . . . my stomach," he explained in apologetic tones to the passenger who sat next to him.

On the train they sat in the smoking-car. George felt that it was imperative. Also, having successfully caught the train, his heart softened. He felt more kindly toward his brother, and accused himself of unnecessary harshness. He strove to atone by talking about their mother, and sisters, and the little affairs and interests of the family. But Al was morose, and devoted himself to the bottle. As the time passed, his mouth hung looser and looser, while the rings under his eyes seemed to puff out and all his facial muscles to relax.

"It's my stomach," he said, once, when he finished the bottle and dropped it under the seat; but the swift hardening of his brother's face did not encourage further explanations.

The conveyance that met them at the station had all the dignity and luxuriousness of a private carriage. George's eyes were keen for the ear marks of the institution to which they were going, but his apprehensions were allayed from moment to moment. As they entered the wide gateway and rolled on through the spacious grounds, he felt sure that the institutional side of the place would not jar upon his brother. It was more like a summer hotel, or, better yet, a country club. And as they swept on through the spring sunshine, the songs of birds in his ears and in his nostrils the breath of flowers, George sighed for a week of rest in such a place, and before his eyes loomed the arid vista of summer in town and at the office. There was not room in his income for his brother and himself.

"Let us take a walk in the grounds," he suggested, after they had met Doctor Bodineau

and inspected the quarters assigned to Al. "The carriage leaves for the station in half an hour, and we'll just have time."

"It's beautiful," he remarked a moment later. Under his feet was the velvet grass, the trees arched overhead, and he stood in mottled sunshine. "I wish I could stay for a month."

"I'll trade places with you," Al said quickly.

George laughed it off, but he felt a sinking of the heart.

"Look at that oak!" he cried. "And that woodpecker! Isn't he a beauty!"

"I don't like it here," he heard his brother mutter.

George's lips tightened in preparation for the struggle, but he said:--

"I'm going to send Mary and the children off to the mountains. She needs it, and so do they. And when you're in shape, I'll send you right on to join them. Then you can take your summer vacation before you come back to the office."

"I'm not going to stay in this damned hole, for all you talk about it," Al announced abruptly.

"Yes you are, and you're going to get your health and strength back again so that the look of you will put the color in Mary's cheeks where it used to be."

"I'm going back with you." Al's voice was firm. "I'm going to take the same train back. It's about time for that carriage, I guess."

"I haven't told you all my plans," George tried to go on, but Al cut him off.

"You might as well quit that. I don't want any of your soapy talking. You treat me like a child. I'm not a child. My mind's made up, and I'll show you how long it can stay made up. You needn't talk to me. I don't care a rap for what you're going to say."

A baleful light was in his eyes, and to his brother he seemed for all the world like a cornered rat, desperate and ready to fight. As George looked at him he remembered back to their childhood, and it came to him that at last was aroused in Al the same old stubborn

strain that had enabled him, as a child, to stand against all force and persuasion.

George abandoned hope. He had lost. This creature was not human. The last fine instinct of the human had fled. It was a brute, sluggish and stolid, impossible to move--just the raw stuff of life, combative, rebellious, and indomitable. And as he contemplated his brother he felt in himself the rising up of a similar brute. He became suddenly aware that his fingers were tensing and crooking like a thug's, and he knew the desire to kill. And his reason, turned traitor at last, counselled that he should kill, that it was the only thing left for him to do.

He was aroused by a servant calling to him through the trees that the carriage was waiting. He answered. Then, looking straight before him, he discovered his brother. He had forgotten it was his brother. It had been only a thing the moment before. He began to talk, and as he talked the way became clear to him His reason had not turned traitor.

The brute in him had. merely orientated his reason

"You are no earthly good, Al," he said. "You know that. You've made Mary's life a hell You are a curse to your children And you have not made life exactly a paradise for the rest of us."

"There's no use your talking," Al interjected. "I'm not going to stay here."

"That's what I'm coming to," George continued. "You don't have stay here." (Al's face brightened, and he involuntarily made a movement, I meet, as though about to start toward the carriage.) "On the other hand, it is not necessary that you should return with me. There is another way."

George's hand went to his hip pocket and appeared with a revolver. It lay along his palm, the butt toward Al, and toward Al he extended it. At the same time, with his head, he indicated the near-by thicket.

"You can't bluff me," Al snarled.

"It is not a bluff, Al. Look at me. I mean it. And if you don't do it for yourself, I shall have to do it for you."

They faced each other, the proffered revolver still extended. Al debated for a moment, then his eyes blazed. With a quick movement he seized the revolver.

"My God! I'll do it," he said. "I'll show you what I've got in me."

George felt suddenly sick. He turned away. He did not see his brother enter the thicket, but he heard the passage of his body through the leaves and branches.

"Good-by, Al," he called.

"Good-by," came from the thicket.

George felt the sweat upon his forehead. He began mopping his face with his handkerchief. He heard, as from a remote distance, the voice of the servant again calling to him that the carriage was waiting. The woodpecker dropped down through the mottled sunshine and lighted on the trunk of a tree a dozen feet away. George felt that it was all a dream, and yet through it all he felt supreme justification. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing.

His whole body gave a spasmodic start, as though the revolver had been fired. It was the voice of Al, close at his back.

"Here's your gun," Al said. "I'll stay."

The servant appeared among the trees, approaching rapidly and calling anxiously. George put the weapon in his pocket and caught both his brother's hands in his own.

"God bless you, old man," he murmured; "and"--with a final ueeze of the hands--"good luck!"

"I'm coming," he called to the servant; and turned and ran through the trees toward the carriage.