

THE GHOST GIRL

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The ghost girl by Edgar Saltus

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EDGAR SALTUS

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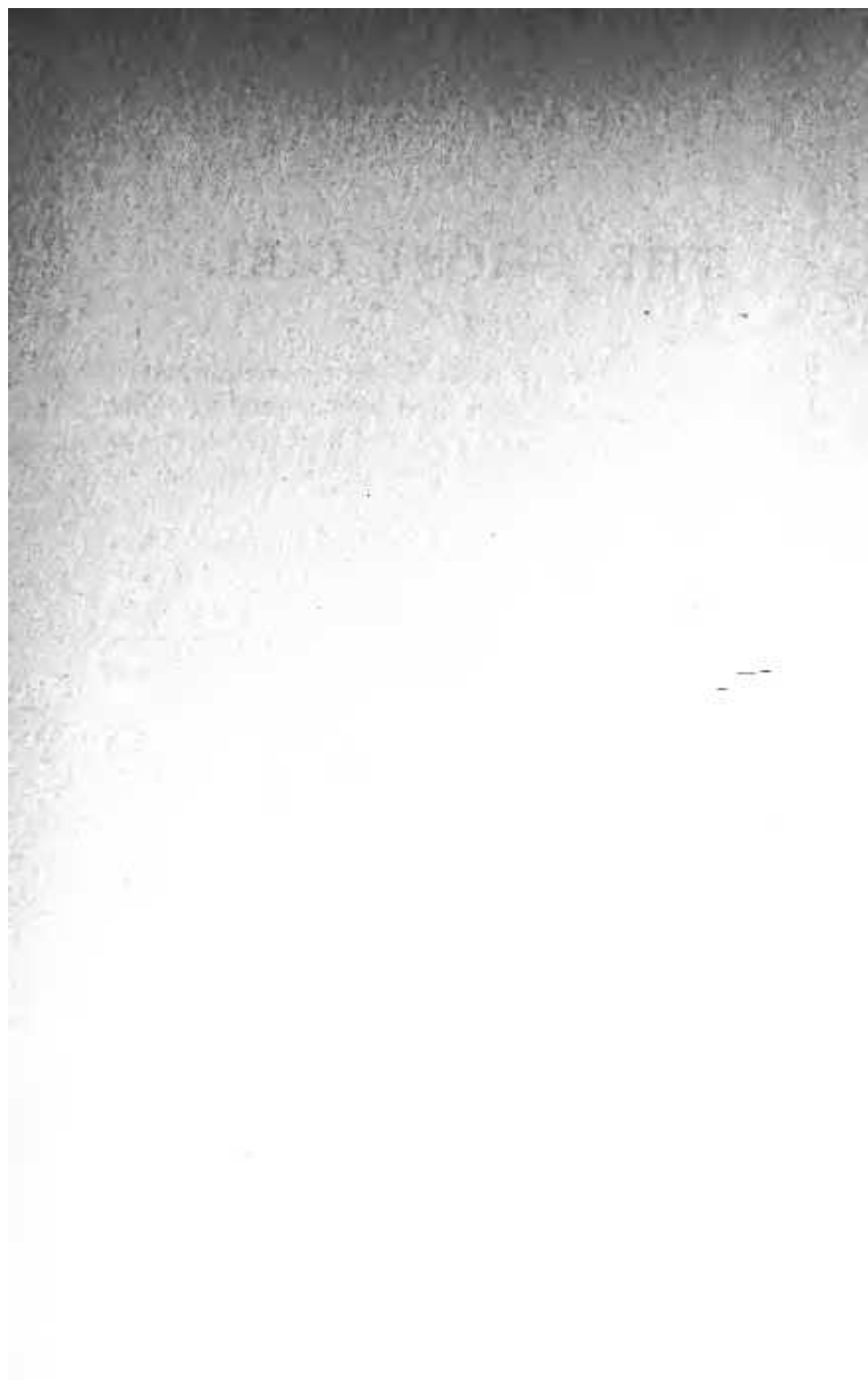
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I

THE vivid climax to Nelly Chilton's wedding startled a metropolis long since used to the startling. But the spectacular termination of the beauty's marriage was commonplace by comparison to incidents that supervened.

In Bil Sayers' novel, "The Halls of Eblis," many of these incidents are told. The telling is the admirable work of an admirable writer. Events are set forth, not as they did occur, but as they should have occurred, which is the only way to tell a story. In the present document that process has been reversed.

Among those who stood witness to the events were Jim Bradish and your servant. He and I had been classmates at Harvard, fellow students in foreign universities, companions in the proscenia and side-scenes of life. We had travelled, feasted and starved together. I may say I knew him, that is if one human being ever does know another. While in Japan a cable caught us. His father was dead. Bradish was a very rich man.

At the time, I had, or thought I had, enough to go around, a bundle of bonds with which the trustee was diverting himself. When Bradish and I reached New York he was a plutocrat and I was a pauper. I hate the alliteration. More hateful still was the fact.

I have been about a bit and I know of no place

where poverty is agreeable, or any place anywhere where it is less agreeable than in New York. Along the glittering precinct in which my people had moved, I was like the man who fell from the balloon, simply out of it. But not irremediably. Bradish did the obvious thing. He did not ask, he insisted on being my banker.

It would, I dare say, seem very fine of me if I had balked. I did nothing of the kind. I drew on him for what little I actually required. In two years I was afloat. A year later he was repaid. I was what is termed a best-seller. Nothing to boast of, quite the contrary.

Meanwhile the glittering precinct was closed to Bradish also, though, necessarily, not as it was to me. I lacked the money to walk in. He lacked the courage.

In looking back at it all now, I realise what I did not recognise then. In a previous life he must have done something very evil. What he had done only the keepers of the doors that close behind our birth could tell. But whatever it may have been, he paid for it. I have seen and, what is worse I have seen him see, people shrink back open-mouthed from before him. Karma had plastered his face with a birthmark shaped and coloured like a great scarlet spider. In spite of which he had the gentleness of a giant. After the lovable fashion of a sundial, it was only serene hours of which he took count. In unphilosophic New York that is always a feat. It is one, though, which presently he ceased to perform.

Meanwhile, I had pitched my tent in that loveliness that Harlem is. The tent was on the top floor of what is agreeably known as a walkup. Bradish hated it.

But he came there. I told him not to come. I told him I did not want him. I told him I did not want anybody. Idle tears. Up the interminable stairs he stalked and pounded and pounded, threatening to break the door down. When, cursing the interruption, I threw it open, in he would tumble, followed, as often as not, by Mike, one of his many servants, a mechanic usually bowed to the ground with a hamper of aspic and game, wine and strong waters.

In those days I was so out of it that I knew nothing except what I invented. But in Bradish's great, white, staring house, there were always men to dinner, to supper, to breakfast, for all I know to the contrary, and the talk of these men, who knew what was going on, and a lot that was not, he retailed to me and it was all so much fresh air. Again and again it supplied a situation, the slang of the day, the prompt retort.

I can see him now, sitting back, drinking his cigar, drinking, too, his strong waters and, in the orange light of my low lamp, that spider barely visible. Usually a dull brick it was only in moments of excitement that it reddened. It seemed then a living thing. There have been times when I could have sworn I saw it extending and contracting its antennæ. There have been others when it seemed about to spring. That, though, was later.

One night—it was in the third year after our return to this country—and on a night when it was snowing like the very devil, I heard the usual uproar. It was the only way that he, or anyone else for that matter, could get at me. There was no telephone. I had had the accursed thing removed. Moreover it was idle to ring, in addition to being hazardous. Touch the but-