

AGAINST THE TIDE

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Table of Contents

BOOK I "THE HIDDEN THINGS OF DISHONESTY"

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

BOOK II "HE WHO DID EAT OF MY BREAD"

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

BOOK III "A MAN'S HEART DEVISETH HIS WAY"

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

BOOK I
"THE HIDDEN THINGS OF
DISHONESTY"

CHAPTER 1

The old-fashioned Deming mansion, for the hundredth time in its sedate existence, was filled with a gayety which offset even the menacing weather.

Although noon was close at hand, the morning was deeply gloomy and ominous. Thunder clouds of late summer brooded over the Ohio, and rain, already sweeping across the wide crescent-bend of the river, was threatening to burst upon Evansville. Yet it was not because of these clouds that the old house was ablaze with light from cellar to attic.

From the twelve-foot ceilings of the huge rooms hung electric clusters, whose glare was softened yet quickened by tinkling prisms and pendants of crystal. Along the walls twinkled sconces and candelabra; this richer glow brought out the scarlet coats of tapestried huntsmen, pursuing stags through indefinite forests of Gobelin weave. Everywhere was light and sound and laughter.

A babel of tongues filled the rooms—crisply concise northern speech, mingled with the softer slur of southern accents. A listener might gather that this house was symbolic of Evansville itself, bordering both north and south, drinking of its best from either section; an Indiana city, yet of infinite variety, proudly exclusive, living more in past than present, yet cordial and open-hearted.

At noon, in this house, Dorothy Deming was to be married to Reese Armstrong. The wedding was yet some little distance away. Macgowan, who had been dressing for his part of best man and who was a house guest, crossed the upstairs hall toward the

stairway, just as Dorothy herself appeared from a room which was aflutter with excited feminine voices. With the license of his age and position, he led her to the window-nook and began to speak of Armstrong. Dorothy, oblivious of the confusion around, yielded to the detention and listened eagerly.

Why not? When Lawrence Macgowan spoke, few men but would have listened; not to mention a bride who was chatting with the groom's most intimate and trusted friend, and hearing wondrous things about the man whom she was soon to call her husband.

Macgowan was impressive. More impressive than J. Fortescue Deming, in whose features the Deming Food Products Company had seared deep lines; more impressive than Deming's business directors and social friends here gathered; more impressive by far than young Armstrong, whose financial genius was making its mark so rapidly.

Despite the gray at his temples, Lawrence Macgowan possessed a charm of personality, a steely keenness of intellect, a direct force of character, which dominated all who came in contact with him. Being quite used to making this impression, he made it the more readily. Men said of Macgowan that he disdained politics, had refused a supreme court appointment, and preferred corporation law to marriage as a means of advancement. True,—perhaps. Among the doctors of the law, among those upright ones who lived rigorously by legal ethics and by ethical illegality, Macgowan moved as a very Gamaliel, honored in the Sanhedrim and respected by all those whose fortunes his brain had made.

Men said, too, that some day he would set that brain to making his own fortune.

"Then," Dorothy was inquiring, "you and Reese are looking this very minute for some new business to take hold of? And you haven't found one?"

Macgowan evaded, smilingly. His whole person seemed to radiate that smile as some rich crystal radiates and warms the sunlight, and when he thus smiled all the strong lines of his face were softened; his level gaze lost its almost harsh intensity and became winning, genial, intimate.

"We're not looking, exactly," he said. "You see, we're more sought after than seeking—though I should not include myself. Reese is the whole thing. It's his genius that is the very breath of life in Consolidated. Do you know that he's put nearly sixteen thousand investors on our books by his sheer selling ability? He has actually sold himself to them. All small ones, people who can invest only a few hundred dollars each year. That is more than an accomplishment; it is a triumph!"

The girl's cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes shone like stars.

"But it's your help, your faith and backing, which made such big things possible for him. To think that he's been in New York only a year or two! To think where he will be after ten years—" Dorothy broke off, caught her breath sharply, and laughed at her own enthusiasm. "Oh, I'm intoxicated with the very thought of what he's accomplished and what he will accomplish! Now tell me about the companies you-all handle. Do you buy them and then sell them later for more money?"

Macgowan shook his head. "No. A manufacturing concern, let us say, is poorly managed yet essentially sound. We buy it. We reorganize it. Consolidated Securities owns it and continues to own it. A minority of the stock is sold to our investors, to the people who own Consolidated stock. It is their privilege to buy stock in this subsidiary company—"

"The preferred stock?" cut in Dorothy. Macgowan chuckled at her sapient air.

"Yes. Two shares and no more to each investor, but with these two shares goes one share of common at a nominal valuation. Suppose we start or reorganize two or three such companies in the course of a year—and we hope to do better than that—the chances are very good for our investors. Consolidated sells the stock, owns the subsidiary company, runs it! Thus, Consolidated must make sure that the company will not fail but succeed. The investor shares the profit with Consolidated; also, he shares Consolidated's profit from the whole group of companies. You see the idea?"

Dorothy nodded quickly, then was checked by Macgowan's air.

"There's just one thing." His tone was hesitant, embarrassed. Her eyes leaped to his face; his voice seemed to bring a swift apprehension into her mind.

"Yes?" she urged him with an eager word.

"There is one thing—" Macgowan was unaccountably at a loss for speech; to any who knew him well, an astounding thing. "You understand, the success of Reese Armstrong means everything to me; I may call myself his closest friend, at least in New York. And

I know, my dear, that with you at his elbow, with your faith and help behind him, he is invincible."

Suspense flashed into the girl's eyes. This prelude, this slightly frowning air of embarrassment, hinted at some portentous secret.

"Yes?" she prompted again.

The lawyer regarded her a long moment, his eyes gravely steady.

"Well, there is one thing I want to say to you; that's why I dragged you away for a few moments. Yet I don't want to offend you, my dear."

"You won't—it's a promise! What is it?"

"One thing, for his happiness and yours. He is a wizard at finance; success has not flung him off balance, for his one thought has ever been of work. Now, my dear Dorothy, don't let him drink too deeply of this wine of wizardry! No man can serve two masters. Business takes its toll of souls, I can assure you; it hardens the spirit, until nothing is left sacred before its spell. A man will rob his best friend in the name of business. He will take what he can grasp, and call it finance. You must see to it that Reese is not too entirely absorbed in his work—that he is not dominated by the nimble dollar."

For a moment the girl met Macgowan's steady gaze, probing for the meaning underneath his words. In her eyes rose a question, a quick protest, an argument.

Then, before she could respond, came a breathless outcry, a swish of skirts, and two bridesmaids seized upon her.

"Dorothy, you shameless thing! These brides—they all need a guardian! You've driven us perfectly *wild*! Don't you know that we've been looking everywhere for you? It's time you were dressed—your mother's waiting—"

Dorothy was hustled away in peremptory fashion.

Macgowan, smiling a little to himself, sauntered away and downstairs. As he entered the great drawing-room he was instantly seized upon. New guests were each moment arriving and Macgowan, who was to be best man, was the lion of the hour. Armstrong had not yet summoned him for moral support, and he was momentarily free.

This home wedding in its very informality held a formal dignity which was novel to the New Yorker, and which he found delightful. Many of those present were out-of-town house guests, and all were old friends of the bride; Armstrong had invited only his best man. Thus the affair had a strong sense of family intimacy.

Macgowan was quick to feel any psychic and underlying influence. Behind all this glitter he perceived a curious restraint, a pride, a singular cool dignity. Through the babel of voices, underneath the laughing faces, he was vaguely aware of this thing. It was as though many of these people, guests in this house, shared some secret which they were trying to banish from memory or thought.

Lawrence Macgowan knew exactly what this hidden thing was.

He was no untutored denizen of the metropolis who viewed the country at large only through the uncertain eyes of the press. He even had direct connections with Evansville; across the room he

saw his cousin, Ried Williams, a director and treasurer of the Deming company. The relationship was not, however, known to many; even Armstrong was unaware of it. Macgowan made his way to the side of Williams and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Well, Ried? How are you?"

"Hello, Lawrence!" The thin, sallow features of Williams suddenly radiated delight. "Here, I want you to meet Pete Slosson, our assistant general manager. Pete, this is Lawrence Macgowan; a man to whom the law is a servitor and shield, the Constitution an act of providence, and state legislatures mere soda-water bubbles—"

Laughing, Macgowan shook hands with Pete Slosson. A young man, this, of singularly clear-cut and intelligent features; yet the eyes were a bit sullen, the lips a trifle full. The entire face displayed a nervous energy not wholly natural. The man drank.

"Everything Lawrence touches," continued Williams warmly, "and every one in touch with him, succeeds! He simply never makes a failure of anything."

"Then I'll make a touch," Slosson grinned, "because I'm going to be broke one of these days."

Macgowan chuckled. "Any time you like," he returned. "But remember that the golden touch of Midas went against him at the last!"

One watching these three men closely might have fancied that beneath their light words lay some deeper significance.

At this moment the negro butler approached. He deftly bore a huge tray, upon which crowded tall silver cups, crowned with the rich green of new mint and steaming frostily from their iced contents.

"Compliments of the bride, gentlemen!" he addressed them. "If you-all is prohibition, dishyer in de centuh is gwineteed not to obstruct yo' feelin's or beliefs—"

"Not for us, Uncle Neb!" Slosson laughed loudly, as he extended one of the juleps to Macgowan. "Here's a treat for you, effete easterner! Uncle Neb's cocktails are famous from here to Nashville, but his juleps are symphonic memories of the good old days. Take a long whiff of the mint first, mind; there's only one way to drink a julep. That right, Uncle Neb?"

"Dat sho' is de truth, Mistah Slosson!" The old negro was beaming. "Yas, suh. Folks sho' do prove dey quality on de julep. Ain't dat de truth, Mistah Slosson? M-mm! And Mistah Deming he done growed dat mint his own self, too—ain't nobody knows mint like he do!"

Macgowan sniffed deeply of the raw fragrance, and raised his goblet.

"Gentlemen, I give you the health of the bride!"

At these words, an almost imperceptible contraction occurred in the features of Slosson. Faint as was this movement of the facial muscles, instantly as it vanished, Macgowan observed it.

After this, he took a deep and lively interest in Pete Slosson; and Slosson, flattered, talked freely enough. Any man would have been flattered to hold the absorbed attention of Macgowan.

"You're wasting your talents here, Slosson," said Macgowan at last. His tone was abrupt and incisive, and confidential in the extreme. "You ought to have a year or two in Chicago or Indianapolis, handling bigger things, then come on to New York. There's no advancement for a man like you in this town."

Slosson listened with sulky eyes.

"All very well," he returned. "But I'm a director, and assistant general manager of Food Products—which is a big thing here. If I went to Indianapolis, where'd I be? I've no pull up there."

Macgowan's thin lips curved slightly at this.

"Then you don't care to handle bigger things?"

"Of course I do!" snapped Slosson. "Will you give me a chance at 'em?"

"Yes," said Macgowan coolly. "Yes. Not now, though. Later on—when some things that are in the air have worked around right."

"Good! Then count on me. Between the two of us, Food Products is going to pieces soon."

Macgowan merely nodded indifferently. "Why?" he asked.

Slosson shrugged.

"How the devil should I know? Business depression, of course. We have a good line and it sells, but luck's against us. There's Deming now. Good lord! Look at his face!"

The two men turned. Their host had halted in the doorway and was signing the book of a messenger. A telegram was in his hand.

Macgowan, not at all astonished by the information just confided to him, searched the face of Deming. He read there confirmation of Slosson's words. Indubitably, the man was keenly worried. That elderly, handsome face was deeply lined with care; a far and deep-hidden weakness, a frightened panic, was about the eyes. As he stood there in the doorway, Deming tore open the envelope and glanced at the telegram which unfolded in his hand.

Even by the artificial light, Macgowan saw the deathly pallor that leaped into the man's face; he saw the fingers tremble, saw the frightful despair that sprang to the eyes. For one instant Deming lifted his head, stared blankly around, then turned and was gone. After him hurried Slosson, concerned and anxious.

Macgowan felt a touch at his elbow. He turned to find Ried Williams, who had perceived nothing of this happening in the doorway. His rather crafty eyes met the glance of Macgowan with a saturnine air.

"What d'you think of Slosson, Lawrence?"

"Good man." Macgowan glanced at his watch. "Well, I must be off to find Armstrong—"

"You don't know about Slosson, then?"

Macgowan regarded his cousin steadily.

"Disappointed rival; he'd always counted on marrying Dorothy. I've been afraid he'd take a drop too much and make a scene, but he

has a good head. And see here, Lawrence! How long have I known you?"

"Longer than I like to think about," and Macgowan chuckled in his hearty manner.

"Yes." Williams looked at him appraisingly, keenly. "Don't wriggle with me, Lawrence. You have devilish deep meanings to some things you say. When you said Slosson was a good man, you meant something. What's in the air?"

Macgowan frowned slightly. "Nothing, except wedding bells."

"Oh!" An ironic smile lighted the face of Williams. "Wriggling, are you? All right. You had a special reason for wanting to meet Slosson, and now you say he's a good man. That's enough to show me a few things—since I know you. Just how much do you know? Know that Food Products is going bust inside of six weeks or six days? I want to get from under, so give me the benefit of your advice."

Macgowan regarded his cousin with a frowning air.

"Ried, if I had your brains I'd be in Wall Street—or the penitentiary," he said slowly and smoothly, without offense in the words. "You and Slosson should both be in Indianapolis. Should be in the investment business there, brokerage, quite on your own hook, of course."

"So!" exclaimed Williams quietly. "What's in your mind, then?"

"Nothing save paternal advice."

"Have you enough confidence in our ability to underwrite the business?"

"Strictly as a matter between cousins, yes! If done quietly."

The two men looked at each other in silence, for a long moment. It was impossible to conceive what passed between them, what unspoken comprehension, what tacit agreement, lay in their minds. Williams was furtively admiring, Macgowan was blandly imperturbable. Yet one gathered that, no matter what comprehension might exist between these two men, Macgowan alone held the complete key to it.

Their talk was swiftly interrupted.

The noisy groups had become silenced and wondering, an ominous whisper passed through the huge rooms, tongues were stilled and hushed, only to rise again in subdued conjecture and low talk. Obviously, something very untoward had happened somewhere.

To Macgowan and Williams, as they stood together, Pete Slosson came hurriedly pushing his way. From his face was stripped the mask of polite amiability; that face was dark with passion, anger and fright fought for possession of the eyes, the mouth was clenched and desperate.

"Macgowan, Armstrong wants you in Deming's library right away," he said in a low tone. "You too, Ried! There's the devil to pay. The wedding's postponed for an hour."

Slosson shoved on into the throng, seeking some one else. Macgowan went to the doorway with Williams. He laid his hand on the other's arm.

"My dear Ried," he said quietly, "you predicted that something would happen within six weeks or six days. Decidedly, you must overcome this habit of making inaccurate statements!"

"Eh?" Williams looked bewildered. "You—what d'you mean?"

"You should have said, within six minutes." Macgowan chuckled again, then halted. "Here! Where's the library? You're not going upstairs!"

"It's up there," answered the other curtly, leading the way.

A hum of suppressed voices followed and surrounded the two men as they mounted to the upper floor. At this moment, one of the upper hall doors opened, and the white-clad figure of Dorothy burst out into the hall with excited words.

"I must find father at once!" she was exclaiming. "A whole hour—why, it's terrible! I don't care what the reason is—oh, Mr. Macgowan! Where is Reese? Where's father?"

Macgowan looked down into the flushed and beautiful face of the girl; he gently and reassuringly patted the hand that had caught at his arm.

"Your father has had some bad news," he said quietly.

"Bad news!" The eyes of Dorothy widened on his. "But how—"

"A business matter." Macgowan glanced at the others crowding around, then with a quiet gesture he led Dorothy to that same window-nook where they had been talking a few moments previously. A subdued exultation was in his eyes.

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