

James Illinois Bell

Harvey J. O'Higgins

Illustrated by
F. R. Gruger

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JAMES ILLINOIS BELL

By

Harvey J. O'Higgins

ILLUSTRATED BY F. R. GRUGER

Under the outer wrapping of embitterment and mystery there was something else. It was Duff, the keen-eyed inquisitor—facing this man, who told his strange story as impassively as a gambler playing his hand—who finally laid bare the motive of that mystery; and in baring that motive gives the story its unusual and vivid character.

Duff suspected, at once, that the man was lying to him, though there was no obvious reason why he should lie. He had come to Duff's office, to consult the detective, voluntarily, and Duff knew nothing whatever about him or his case. His story was entirely plausible. He answered Duff's questions with none of the ingratiating nervousness of deceit. There was nothing to be gained by misleading Duff—as far as Duff could see—quite the opposite, in fact. Yet Duff remained suspicious of him and in doubt.



He met a show-girl named Mabel Dodgett and had an affair with her that lasted “for the week she played Denver.” He was, at the time, a reporter on the Denver Republican, and he met her through a theatrical publicity man in the Denver Press Club.

His name, he said, was James Illinois Bell. He was a Westerner, an oil man from Oklahoma, and he wished to engage Duff to find his daughter. He had lived in Denver, he explained, from 1903 to 1914, and during the autumn of one of those years—about 1905 or 1906—he had met a show-girl named Mabel Dodgett and had an affair with her that lasted “for the week that she played Denver.” He was, at the time, a reporter on the *Denver Republican*, and he met her through a theatrical publicity man in the Denver Press Club. After the show moved on to the coast, she sent letters to him at the Press Club, but he did not reply to her; and when she wrote to him from New York, next summer, telling him that she was in the Maternity Hospital and asking him to send money for his child, he did not answer that letter either.

“I was cleaned out,” he said. “I hadn’t a nickel. And, of course, I couldn’t be sure that the baby was mine, anyway. So I let it ride.”

There was a boom in farmland around Denver, especially in apple orchards, and he began to speculate in fruit ranches. He made enough money, in that way, to promote some fake mining schemes; and when “the goldmine graft petered out,” he moved on into oil. Here, at last, he “struck it

rich.” He made several millions, but in the meantime he lost track of Mabel Dodgett and her daughter.

“When she wrote me from the hospital, she said she was calling the girl ‘Bell’ after me. And last year, I saw in the papers that she’d been killed in a joy ride over on Long Island somewhere—the mother, I mean—and I wanted to come on and find the girl, but I wasn’t able to get away then, and now I don’t know where to look for her. She must be about eighteen or nineteen, and she’s on the stage by this time, probably.”

Duff kept murmuring, “I see, I see. Yes, of course. Of course,” in his best professional manner—the manner of a tolerant giant with a sympathy as broad as his immense shoulders. He sat back in his swivel chair, at his shabby old desk, genial, experienced, and thoughtfully receptive; and his eyes seemed to look at Bell’s story rather than at Bell himself; but, all the time, he was noticing that Bell told his story as impassively as a gambler playing his hand, and this professional impassivity had the air of being somehow guarded and defensive.

He spoke the Western vernacular in a slow drawl but with a broad “a” that was either English or Bostonian. He wore his hair in a bang across his forehead; and under that bang his eyes were a colorless grey and stony while he spoke. His clean-shaven face was as hard as bronze and heavy with jaw-muscles. It was a face that reminded Duff of some antique bust of a vicious Roman emperor—a face that showed a sort of debased culture—the face of a man who knew the worst of himself and of the world, and dominated others more easily than he controlled himself.

“‘Bell Dodgett,’ ” Duff said. “Would she use that name on the stage?”

“Probably not,” he admitted. “Her mother used the name of Cornish—Constance Cornish.”

“The daughter would probably be Cornish, too?”

“Maybe.”

“You have no description of her at all? Blonde or brunette?”

He shook his head.

“Do you suppose she knows that you’re her father?”

“I don’t know it myself.”

“Would her mother tell her you were?”

“I don’t see why.”

“Do *you* intend to tell her?”

“I’ll face that after you find her.”

“I see.”

Duff was enjoying himself. Here was a formidable and astute man who had come to him, all carefully buttoned up, with an innocent-looking project that might very easily be wearing a mask. It delighted Duff to have anyone try to deceive him. It awoke a hunting instinct in him. And Bell was wary big game, having made his living, for years, as a superior sort of confidence man exploiting the public. He was curt to the point of tacit contempt in the indifference of his manner, and there was something coolly arrogant in the way he replied “I’ll face *that* after you find her” when Duff tried to probe him about what he intended to do with Constance Cornish’s daughter.

“Well,” Duff said, “let’s see what I’ve got to work with. Back about 1905, a girl named Mabel Dodgett—was she married?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t have any husband with her.”

“Probably not married, eh?”

“Probably not.”

“A girl named Mabel Dodgett—what was the name of the play she was in?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Remember any of the scenes, or the plot or anything?”

“Not a thing. It hadn’t any plot. It was a musical show. She just sang in it.”

“Remember any of her songs?”

“No. What’s all this got to do with it?”

“If we could find out the name of the play, we might look up the cast and get hold of some friend who remembered her—and her daughter.”

“Oh!” He thought it over. “I never really saw the show. I just went in to watch her once in the last act while I was waiting to pick her up at the stage door.”

“Would your friend remember?”

“What friend?”

“The press-agent that you met her through.”

“I lost track of him years ago.”

“Remember his name?”

“He was just one of the newspaper boys that did the publicity work for the Tabor Grand. He left Denver before I did. Went to 'Frisco, I think.”

“What was his name?”

“Hall. Tommy Hall. But there's no chance that he'd remember her or the show or anything else about it. He wasn't interested, and he didn't know *I* was.”

“I see. I might wire our correspondent in Denver to look up the newspapers around that time, and see if he could find Constance Cornish in any of the casts.”

“I should think it'd be a damn sight easier to look her up in some of the casts she played in here.”

“That's a good idea.”

Bell eyed suspiciously the simplicity with which Duff accepted the suggestion; and Duff, realizing that he had overplayed the role of innocent stupidity, smiled knowingly at Bell. “Who sent you to *me*?” he asked.

Bell regarded the smile and the question until he had evidently made up his mind what was behind them. Then he drew from his waistcoat pocket a roll of yellow-backed bills, counted off five hundred dollars, and dropped them on the desk. “You can reach me at the Marbridge any time you want me,” he said as he rose.

He put on his hat and walked out.

Duff maintained that he always knew when anyone was lying to him, but he could not explain *how* he knew it. “They're what I call ‘off normal,’ ” he would say; yet, if you asked him what “normal” was, he could not tell you. “I know if a man's going to lie to me by the way he crosses the room,” he declared. “There's something about him—all sorts of little ungovernable movements—things he's not aware of. They're different in different people, but you get to recognize them. It's like bad acting in a way. You can tell

whether a man's a good actor or not—can't you?—on the stage. How can you tell? You don't know usually, unless he's a complete flivver. You just know he doesn't convince you. As a matter of fact, you've stored up in your memory a million observations of how people speak and look and behave, naturally. You know what's 'normal' in a given scene, and you know that your actor's a bum actor because he's off 'normal,' eh? Well, that's the way I am about a man who tries to lie to me.”

In the case of James Illinois Bell, however, the matter was not so simple. Bell had not betrayed himself by any “little ungovernable movements”; he had sat back in his chair, grasping the arms of it firmly, and giving Duff a cold and thoughtful gaze. True, his attitude in the chair had made him look like a defendant on the witness stand, and his manner to Duff was the defendant's manner to the plaintiff's lawyer—a manner that seemed to say “I've nothing to conceal and I'm not going to let you make me look as if I were concealing something.” Added to that, his blank indifference to Duff resembled the professional indifference of a confidence man who knew how to get what he wanted from his victim by treating him “like he was dirt under your feet,” as a notorious wire-tapper had once expressed it to Duff. But both of these attitudes in Bell were only slightly “off normal” for a man in his circumstances and way of life. If he had been a real Western crook confronting New York for the first time, Duff might have excused his defensive air as due to the natural constraint of a swindler before the master-craftsmen of his profession. But Bell, in spite of his name, was obviously not a real Westerner. His accent and his voice belied him. They made it probable that his name was assumed. He looked like the sort of English “remittance man” you see in Colorado. He could not possibly be suffering from any of the tensions of a disprized ego in New York. No, it must be that he was definitely—no matter how slightly—off normal because he had something to conceal.

Duff frowned over it a moment before he took up his office phone. “Find Bilkey,” he ordered, “and tell him I want to see him.”

Bilkey was an operative who made a specialty of confidence men, but it was not for this reason only that Duff wished to put him on the case. Bilkey, out of office hours, was a devotee of the theatre. He was as devout a first-nighter as Diamond Bill Brady. As a boy he had collected cigarette pictures of stage favorites; now, with the same enthusiasm, he accumulated acquaintanceships with the actors and actresses themselves, with show girls and chorus ladies, specialty dancers, pony ballets, producers, stage directors, house managers, box-office boys, door keepers, ushers and even chorus

men. It was his private boast that there was no theatre in New York to which he could not go, during the last act, call the doorman by his first name and walk in unchallenged to find a seat in the last row, with a nod to the usher. They knew him as a Central Office man, who had long since left the force, having saved a lot of easy money. They did not know that he was on Duff's staff.

He looked like an actor. He looked, indeed, as if it were his ambition to look like John Drew at forty. He dressed in the most quiet good taste, and he preserved always the simplest sort of interested and observant silence. When he came to Duff's room, now, in answer to Duff's summons, he entered from the outer office, with his hat and his gloves in one hand and a light walking-stick in the other, as if he had been called in from the street.

Duff was busy with a file of reports that concerned a case on which he was engaged, but he put it aside eagerly. He enjoyed Bilkey. The man was an artist in spite of his affectations. "Sit down," Duff said. "I think I've got a job that'll interest you."

Bilkey laid his hat, his cane and his gloves on a chair by the wall and seated himself silently in another chair near Duff's desk. It was a comfortably padded leather armchair, and he sank back in it and crossed his legs without freeing his trousers at the knees. He understood that a gentleman of leisure, with an unlimited wardrobe, did not worry about bagging his trouser legs.

"I've just had a bunk artist in here," Duff explained, "named James Illinois Bell. He says he's made a fortune in Oklahoma oil. He's stopping at the Marbridge. He wants us to locate the daughter of an actress named Constance Cornish. Ever hear of her?"

"Constance Cornish." Bilkey put his elbows on the arms of his chair and rested his finger-tips on either side of his nose. It was a prominent and bony nose, and he was accustomed to fondle it in thought, as another man might stroke the chin. "Constance Cornish."

"She was in a musical show, on the road, in Denver, about 1905 or 6. So he says. She was killed in an automobile accident somewhere on Long Island, a year or so ago. Her real name, he says, was Mabel Dodgett."

Bilkey rubbed his nose. "Constance Cornish. Mabel Dodgett."

"There's something phoney about him, but I don't know what it is."

“I never heard of her,” Bilkey said, as if he were surprised that such a thing could be.

“He says she had a daughter by him, the year after she was in Denver—a girl named ‘Bell’—named after *him*. He wants us to find this ‘Bell’—‘Bell Cornish’ or ‘Bell Dodgett.’ He thinks she’s probably on the stage.”

Bilkey shook his head. “Never heard of her.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be hard to find her. The mother’s probably been off the stage for years. He didn’t seem to know anything about that. But there must be someone around that trouped with her in the old days, and they ought to be able to put you on her trail.”

“Sure.”

“And I want you to get a line on Bell himself, if you can. You’ll have to go slow on it, of course. He’s foxy. I think he’s trying to use us. If we locate the girl, we’ll have to find out what he wants with her. See?”

Bilkey nodded. “All right, Chief.” He gathered up his hat, his gloves and his stick. “See you later.”

II

His first move was simple enough. He went to the Hotel Marbridge and consulted the house detective, McGraw, who was, of course, an old professional friend of his; and, in half an hour, McGraw had gathered everything concerning James Illinois Bell that was known to the clerks at the desk, the bell boys, the elevator men, the telephone and telegraph girls, the chamber maids and the dining-room staff. It amounted to nothing. No one had called on Bell by telephone or otherwise. He had received no telegrams and no mail. He usually rose late, ate his breakfast alone in his room, went out to attend to whatever business had brought him to New York, and did not return until about six o’clock in the evening. He dined alone in a quiet corner of the basement grill, took a taxi to the theatre, and returned to his room by midnight. He had a wardrobe trunk full of “case goods,” and he ordered nothing from the bell-hops but ice water for highballs. He asked no questions. He did not talk even to the waiters. A girl on the newsstand who sold him theatre tickets was the only person who had especially noticed him, and she had been struck by the fact that he bought only one theatre seat and bought it always for the same play, an unpopular comedy of manners called “Modern Marriage.” He had been to see *that* three times.

“Thanks, Mac,” Bilkey said. “I guess I’ll have to take him from the other end.”

“Nothing serious against him, is there?” McGraw asked.

“Oh, no,” Bilkey assured him. “He’s trying to put over a deal here, and the people concerned just asked us to look him up. See you later.”

He went from the Marbridge to the Columbus Theatre, where “Modern Marriage” was billed to play a matinee that afternoon; and he found, on the program, the name of “Isabel Cornish” in a minor part.

He reported, at once, to Duff by telephone, and Duff said: “This guy’s good, eh? Well, let’s see. The poor simp! We’ll have to run a few rings around him. Get in with the man who’s producing the play. Pretend you want to buy a piece of it. Or no! Tell him you have a sucker with money and you think you can sell an interest to *him*. When you get the producer hooked, let me know, and we’ll work out the rest of it. Go slow, now, and don’t stub your toe.”

Bilkey sat through two acts of the afternoon performance in the stolid baloofness of expert contempt and looked for Isabel Cornish. There she was—a tall, dark girl of nineteen or twenty, overgrown and drooping, with a wistful and sensitive face.

His eyes remained on the play for two acts, but his thoughts were elsewhere. They were occupied with Bell, and the producer, whose name was Livingstone. He knew Livingstone. Livingstone was a newspaperman who had come into the theatre as a press-agent for a play in which he took a five per cent. interest in lieu of salary. That play had run a year and paid him like a hundred-to-one shot. He had then bought a quarter interest in a second play that made him a little money, and he had now staked all his winnings on this third play which he owned outright. Bilkey judged that he was probably on the high road to bankruptcy.

At the end of the second act, he went to see Livingstone in his private office, upstairs, on the front of the theatre building; and bankruptcy was evidently staring Livingstone in the face. It was a pale, fat face, and clean-shaven—the face of a man who always got what he wanted from the world by appearing ill and worried and pathetic. He had a touchingly

mild manner, a gentle voice, and a way of looking at you that was distressed and winning.

Bilkey sat down, uninvited. "I've got a chance," he said, "to make some money for myself—and you—if you'll help me with it."

Livingstone did not change the hopeless stare of his pale eyes.

"There's a sucker on here from the West with a roll bigger than his head, and I think I can sell him a piece of this play if you'll give me a good commission."

It was in an exhausted, death-bed voice that Livingstone murmured: "Five per cent. do?"

"No," Bilkey answered harshly, "nothing less than ten."

Livingstone closed his eyes, put his hat back from his moist forehead, drew a long breath, and sighed deeply. "All right," he said. "Bring him around."

"Not till I know how much you can sell us," Bilkey retorted, "and how much you want for it."

That led to a long negotiation in which Livingstone finally showed his books and allowed Bilkey to make elaborate notes from them. Bilkey wanted to find out how much the play had lost on the road before it reached New York and how much it was losing now. "You're about twenty-three thousand dollars in the hole to date," he summed it up, "and you're going down at the rate of twelve-hundred dollars a week. You could afford to turn nothing at all and save money. The play's a flivver, and the theatre's always been a morgue. Anything you can get from us is pure velvet. You can't hang on much longer, can you?"

Livingstone looked, despairingly dumb, at the figures he had added on his scratchpad.

"All right," Bilkey said. "I'll see what I can do. The play's no good for the movies, and a few thousand dollars would cover all we'd ever get out of stock rights. Goodbye." He held out his hand.

Livingstone rose unexpectedly to dismiss him. "I haven't said I'd sell," he murmured.

"No. And I haven't said we'd buy," Bilkey replied. "I'll have to do some tall lying if I'm to put the deal over. I'd never try it if it weren't that this poor mutt had gone sweetie on a girl in your cast."

He hurried back to report to Duff, and Duff summoned into conference another operative named Colburn—a distinguished looking moron with an impressive forehead who could pass either as a butler or a bishop. He was to act, for the evening, as a banker to whom Bilkey wished to sell an interest in “Modern Marriage,” and they coached him in his part for a patient half-hour. When they sent him home, at last, to put on his dinner clothes, it was with instructions to be at the Hotel Marbridge by seven o’clock.

“He’ll be all right,” Bilkey complained as he gathered up his notes, “if he doesn’t forget himself and call me ‘Sir.’ ”

“Well, don’t worry,” Duff encouraged him. “If this doesn’t work, we’ll try something else. We can bring Bell out into the open, any time, by notifying him that we’ve located his daughter.”

“What do you suppose his game is?”

“You run along and find out,” Duff advised him.

III

When the head-waiter in the Marbridge’s basement grill ushered James Illinois Bell to his accustomed corner, for dinner that evening, Colburn and Bilkey were already seated at the adjoining table, busy with their soup and a discussion of “Modern Marriage.” Bilkey was talking to Colburn, who had his back to Bell’s table; and, at first, Bilkey lowered his voice at Bell’s arrival, in a natural desire to keep their conversation private, but as he got deeper into his account of what business the play had done on the road, he became more unguardedly enthusiastic. “If they’d taken this show into a small house,” he argued, “it’d probably have made money from the start, but it’s lost in the Columbus. It’ll never get over while it’s *there*. The Columbus has never made money with anything but a musical show, and it never will. Never. Look at what they did with ‘Modern Marriage’ in Albany. Here’s the box-office statement. And here’s Schenectady, before that. Look at this.” He was plying the silent Colburn with papers. “The newspaper notices were so good that they thought the play could carry anything, and they loaded this white elephant on its back, and it hasn’t been able to do more than crawl since. I tell you, Mr. Hemingway, if you’ll put up the money to take this play to a small up-to-date theatre, you can make a clean-up on it.”

Colburn looked at the papers and grunted, unconvinced.

“What’s more,” Bilkey continued persuasively, “you could put a musical show into the Columbus and make five-thousand a week easily. Livingstone’s got a lease for a year at next to nothing a week. He could clean up, himself, if he hadn’t run so low that he hasn’t enough left to turn round on. If someone doesn’t buy him out pretty soon, he’ll have to close the play. There’s no use lending him money. He’s a poor showman. What you ought to do is to buy him out. Then you’d be in a position to put Miss A. in any part you pleased, without asking anyone to do it for you. As it is, you’re paying out money for her and getting nothing but a little gratitude. If you owned the play, so as to be able to star her or fire her as you chose, it’d make a big difference in the way she felt.”

Colburn grumbled some inaudible protest.

“Well,” Bilkey said, “there’s no use deceiving ourselves about these girls. They’re on the make, and nobody looks quite as good to them as a manager. Your name needn’t come out at all. You could be a sleeping partner.”

Colburn said, “Let me see those figures again.”

Bilkey began all over from the beginning, with the original cost of building the sets, hiring the stage director, rehearsing the play, and trying it out on the road. He never let his eyes wander for a moment from Colburn to the man behind Colburn, but he could see that Bell, while he pretended to read his evening paper, was getting what detectives call “an ear full.”

“A play like this,” Bilkey explained, “usually costs the management ten thousand dollars, at least, before they get it opened in New York. It can’t make any real money on the road until it’s had a New York run, you understand. Livingstone did so well on the road that he was only five-thousand dollars behind when he reached the Columbus. If the theatre’d been right, he could have made that up in a week. As it is, of course, he’s been losing ever since, but, at *that*, he’s got the theatre so cheap that if he had any real money behind him, he could shift his play to a smaller house, put a musical show into the Columbus, and make a clean-up. Look at this. Here’s his lease on the theatre, and here’s his salary list for everything in front of the stage. It’s a cinch, Mr. Hemingway, for anyone who has the money to swing it.”

Colburn ate, and listened, and studied Bilkey’s figures, and ate some more. Bilkey snatched his mouthfuls of food—in the pauses when Colburn

was reading his memoranda—and talked and talked and talked. It was one of those interminable business conferences between a voluble salesman and a “prospect” who cannot make up his mind. It lasted through the soup and the meat and the salad, and came to the coffee tired but doggedly dragging along. Colburn ended it by glancing at his watch, on a signal from Bilkey. “I’ve got to go,” he muttered.

“Well, I’ll leave it with you,” Bilkey continued undiscouraged. “You can reach me at the Bryant Park any time, but you’ll have to give me a decision in a day or two if you want to take it up. Goodbye. Don’t wait if you’re in a hurry. I’ll take care of the check.”

Colburn grumbled an apology and moved ponderously out. Bilkey sat down again, to light a cigarette and finish his coffee, staring down into his cup. James Illinois Bell cleared his throat. Bilkey did not look up.

“Are you in the theatrical business?” Bell asked.

Bilkey blinked at him as if he had been wakened from a day dream. “I beg your pardon?”

Bell was settled back in his chair, smoking a thick cigar. He eyed Bilkey a moment in a sort of sulky challenge. Then he leaned forward across the table, and said, through the cigar smoke: “Do you want to make that proposition to me?”

Bilkey was naturally surprised. “What proposition?”

“The one you made to *him*.” He indicated the departed Colburn with a sideways jerk of the head towards the door.

Bilkey looked down at his papers, embarrassed. “That was confidential,” he said.

“All right.” Bell settled back in his chair again. He drank his coffee and looked around him for a waiter, taking out a pencil to sign his check.

There was no waiter in sight and the pencil, consequently, was an obvious bluff. Bilkey studied his cigarette a moment, dropped it in his coffee cup, gathered up his memoranda deliberately, rose without a glance at Bell—and joined him at his table. “Are you stopping here? At this hotel?”

“Yes. My name’s Bell. James Illinois Bell.”

ilkey put out his hand. “Chester Bilkey. I didn’t know I was talking loud enough for you to hear me.” They shook hands on it indifferently, regarding each other with no pretense of anything but wariness. “Are you in the theatre?” Bilkey asked.

“No. And I haven’t been for years. I’m in oil. Out West. I’ve cleaned up there and quit it. I came to this damn town, thinking I could find something to get interested in, and I haven’t found anything yet that wasn’t a con game.” He mumbled it, scowling, as if he were disgusted with New York and aggrievedly suspicious of it—and of Bilkey.

Bilkey smiled a metropolitan smile. His varnished black hair was brushed back from his forehead in the style. His dinner jacket was smooth and snug on his shoulders. He looked sleek and expert and self-confident before the shaggy informality of Bell’s mode and manner. “Well, if you’re afraid of con games,” he said, “I don’t want to sell you into the New York theatre.”

“Pretty crooked, are they?”

“They’d sooner cheat you than play straight any day.”

Bell nodded. “I guess I can take care of myself. What’ve you got?”

“The trouble is I can’t very well sell it to a stranger?”

“What do you want to know about me?”

Bilkey thought it over, fingering his notes. “Well,” he decided, at last, “I’ll show you what it is and take you over to the theatre and let you look into it for yourself and then, if you want to go ahead, we can discuss the personal end when we come to it.”

Bell nodded again. “Shoot!” he said.

Bilkey shot, but not with the continuous rapid fire that he had used on Colburn. He took his time, in the manner of a man entrenched who intended to await the attack, not make it. Bell was reluctantly compelled to offer the advances, ask the questions, and leave the shelter of his silence to feel out Bilkey’s position. It gave Bilkey an advantage, and he kept it. He was polite and smiling, but he maintained the unconvinced attitude of having something to sell which Bell wished to buy, and he affected to be silently skeptical of Bell’s credit and good faith. He forced Bell to propose that they should go to the Columbus Theatre together, that

evening, to look at the play. "I'll not introduce you to Livingstone," he said, "until we get a little further along."

He did not introduce him to Livingstone or to anyone else. He left Bell in the theatre lobby while he got seats from Livingstone, and between the acts he sat in Livingstone's office and allowed Bell to wait alone in his orchestra chair. He made no attempt to "sell" the play to Bell; he showed no interest in Bell's opinion of it, or in Bell's emotional reactions to it, although he was acutely aware that whenever Isabel Cornish appeared on the stage Bell at once became secretly tense in an unblinking attention that was as still and staring as an animal's. When the final curtain fell, it was Bell who suggested that they should go to his room in the Marbridge to talk matters over. And when they were sitting in Bell's bedroom, with highballs in one hand and cigars in the other, it was Bell who began: "Well, what do you want to know about me?"

At four o'clock next morning, they separated. Or rather, at four o'clock, Bilkey rose slowly from his seat, glanced at the empty bottles on the bedroom table, and, with the same air of final and indifferent appraisal, looked at Bell sunken in his low armchair, with his chin on his chest and his hands hanging down to the floor on either side of him. Bell had been rather maudlin towards the end. He had wept at his story of his early life, his struggles, his hardships, and the malevolence of the world. He slept now, as exhausted as the empty bottles. "Well," Bilkey said to himself, "I guess I've got everything." He poured himself a glass of ice water unsteadily. "I'll have to go to a Turkish bath," he thought, "and get this booze boiled out of me. If Duff wants anything else, I'll pick it up later."

His one difficulty had been in deceiving Bell about drinking the whiskey, and that deceit had been progressively easy after the third highball. He was only fuddled in his feet as he made his way to the elevator; his head seemed clear enough; and he was solemnly absorbed in trying to rearrange, in some logical sequence, the long, rambling and muddled story that Bell had told him. By the time he reached the baths on Forty-second Street, his report to Duff was beginning to take a coherent shape. "That'll be all right," he assured himself. "Once you get sobered up, that'll come straight from there on—if you don't forget some of it."

He clung to his memory through the long ritual of the bath, fighting to clear his mind. And lying under his sheet, with his predatory beak pointed to the ceiling, he struggled against sleep for fear that some of his recollections might be blotted out before he could fix them. Sleep came, in spite of him,

but it was only a cat-nap; he awoke in a moment, as alert as a wild animal and as refreshed. He remembered everything; he continued to sort it out and pick it over while he took his cold shower, dressed absentmindedly, and drifted out, for his morning coffee, to a hotel restaurant where he began to make cryptic little notes in his microscopic handwriting, on the pages of a loose-leaf diary, with a gold pencil that was dainty enough for a social secretary.

At eight-thirty, when Duff arrived in his office, Bilkey was ready and waiting for him, as fresh as the new day, his whole report arranged and accurate in his mind. Duff listened with the twinkle of amused congratulation that was his usual expression when he was working with Bilkey. The affectations of the man were combined with a sober precision of thought and a conscienceless accuracy of method to make a contrast that was as amusing to Duff as the profanity of a dowager duchess. "Well, Bilk," he said, "you've certainly turned this poor long-horn inside out. We ought to have some fun with him now. Do you want to go on with his theatre scheme?"

"I'd like to make the ten per cent. out of Livingstone."

"That'll be all right with me," Duff assured him. "I can frame Bell without tipping off your hand. Drop in at his hotel and phone me as soon as you find he's up and doing. I'll call him over here and give him a surprise. We can't let any Oklahoma con man put up a game like this on *us* and get away with it, eh?"

Certainly not. But Bilkey considered that this part of the affair was "off his beat," as he would have said; and having waited in the lobby of the Marbridge till McGraw reported that Bell had ordered his breakfast brought to his room, Bilkey phoned the news to Duff and went home to get another nap. He had the happy faculty of being able to sleep whenever he wished to sleep, and to sleep for as long as circumstances permitted.

James Illinois Bell was evidently not so adaptable. He answered Duff's phone call as if he had had a bad night. "You can drop the case," he said irritably, when Duff reported that he had located Isabel Cornish. "I don't need you. I've found her myself."

"Yes," Duff replied, "but something else has turned up that may make trouble for you. I'd like to have a talk with you."

"What about?"

“I can’t tell you over the phone. It’s too serious. We ran into it, last night, after we found the girl. I’ll expect you here right away.”

“You can expect what you damn please,” Bell replied, at his surliest. “I can’t get over there for an hour any way.”

“Good,” Duff said. “I’ll expect you in an hour, then.” And he hung up.

Bell showed his independence by taking not one hour but two, and he came at last with an air of sulky indifference that evidently covered a suppressed and angry apprehension. He would not sit down. “I’m in a hurry,” he said. “What’ve you got?”

Duff sat and smiled at him in a pose of gigantic placidity. “There’s something wrong about this case of yours,” he said. “Our correspondent in Denver phoned us that the only time Mabel Dodgett played Denver she had her daughter Isabel there with her—an infant four months old.”

“Who the hell—He’s crazy!”

“No. He says you never had an affair with Mabel Dodgett at all. She turned you down flat and you were furious about it. You kept hanging around—”

Bell clapped his hat on. “You can go to the devil,” he said. “I don’t need you—”

“No,” Duff cut in, “but Isabel Cornish may.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That you can’t tell Isabel Cornish you’re her father. I’ll not let you get back at her mother by any such dirty trick.”

Bell stuck out a venomous forefinger and shook it at him, enraged. “You rotten Welsher! If you try to double-cross *me*—”

“You poor boob!” Duff said. “Did you think you could come in here and play me for a sucker? I knew you were lying before you’d talked to me two minutes. Sit down there. I’m going to tell you something about yourself.”

“Sit down nothing,” Bell blustered. “I’m through with you. You’re like the rest of these private detectives—you’re a blackmailer.”

“Shut up and listen to me. When you ran away from your home in Boston, as a boy, you took your little sister with you, and you went crooked for the sake of that girl. You lied and begged and cheated and stole for *her*, because you had to have money and you didn’t know how to get it honestly. It wasn’t until after she’d died, in Denver, that you quit gambling and the race-track, and became a sports reporter. Isn’t that true?”

“What the hell!” It was so true, and it was so unexpected—coming from Duff—that Bell stared at the detective as if Duff had suddenly summoned up the ghost of this sister out of a past of which no one in the world knew anything.

Duff pointed to the chair. “Sit down!” he ordered. And Bell sat down as if his body obeyed and his mind did not know it.

“Didn’t Constance Cornish remind you of your sister when you saw her in Denver? Didn’t she *look* like her?”

If the ghost had asked him, he could not have been more unable to reply.

“And doesn’t this girl, this daughter here, Isabel—doesn’t she look exactly like her mother?”

He answered only with the blink of his bloodshot eyes, evidently so confused by the thousand questions in his mind that he could not get past a bewildered amazement.

“Well,” Duff said, “this Mabel Dodgett, or Constance Cornish, or whatever you called her—the moment you saw her in Denver, it gave you a terrific kick. You got hold of the publicity man and went after her, but you started to treat her like a chorus girl, and she turned you down flat. You spent the rest of the week mooning around the theatre, and trying to waylay her, so as to put yourself right with her, and she wouldn’t look at you. You were so sore you wanted to shoot her—or yourself—and you ended up by getting drunk and making a fool of yourself all over the place—at the stage door and in the Press Club.”

Duff was feeling his way through the story in the manner of a fortune-teller, ready to hedge at once if he saw, by any change of expression in his client’s fascinated gaze, that he was failing to guess the inner truth of the incidents which Bilkey had reported.

“Then you decided that if you’d been a millionaire, she wouldn’t’ve been able to resist you, and you started out to make a fortune—a crooked

fortune—in farmland swindles and fake gold-mines and wildcat oil stock. You made the fortune, and I don't know how many women you tried to buy with it, but I can guess that it didn't get you what you wanted, because you threw it all up, at last, and came to New York to get away from it. Well! Here you run across Constance Cornish's daughter, and she's enough like her mother to start you off again where her mother left you, and you think you're going to get your revenge on the mother by blackening her memory to this girl. You think you're going to get even with the mother by pretending to her girl that she was your mistress. And you try to plant the story with *me*, as part of some crazy scheme to use me on the girl. You try to get *me* to find her and tell her that you're her father. You big dumb-bell! You don't seem to know what you're trying to do—nor why you're trying to do it. If you don't get wise to yourself, you'll end in a worse smash than you made of yourself in Denver!”

Bell asked, hoarsely, “Where did you get this stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“This stuff about me.”

“That's *my* business,” Duff replied, contemptuously. “And I'll tell you something else about yourself. Last night, you happened to hear a theatrical man, named Bilkey, trying to sell a piece of a play to that crooked old Wall street angel, Angus Hemingway. And when you found out that the play was the one that Isabel Cornish is in, you took Bilkey in to camp and started to use him the way you wanted to use *me*—as an approach to this Cornish girl. And I want to warn you that I'll tip Bilkey off to your whole dirty game if you try to go an inch further with it.”

Bell swallowed, like a guilty small boy about to make a repentant confession. “I'm not.”

“You're not going ahead with it?”

“No.”

“You're not going to tell her you're her father.”

“No.”

“No! And I'll tell you why you're not,” Duff said, with a sneer. “You act on a pattern that you don't understand. You act according to that pattern without knowing why you do it. And then you invent reasons and motives to explain your actions to yourself—fool reasons that would be disgusting if

they weren't so ridiculous. Shut up! When you saw Mabel Dodgett, out in Denver, you wanted to act towards her as you'd acted towards your sister. You wanted to help her and protect her, but you're such a damn fool about yourself that you didn't know it. You tried to play the regular stage-door Johnny with her, and you couldn't get away with it. She gave you the air. And you started out, with her in your mind, to go crooked again—the way you went crooked for your sister—and every woman that you fell for, instead of realizing that you wanted to help her and protect her, you tried to get your revenge on her. And you couldn't do it. And when you saw Mabel Dodgett's daughter, you began the same boob programme with *her*, instead of understanding that what you really wanted was to behave to this girl as if you were her elder brother. You come in here to me, full of bad whiskey, and plant a story that would ditch you both if I'd fallen for it, and then when you've got that off your chest and you're feeling ashamed of yourself, you run into a chance to buy in on this play and get next to Isabel Cornish in the way you *really* want to get next to her, and naturally you jump at the chance. You poor fish, you don't even know that you're not naturally a crook. You don't even know that you're still a kid on the streets, lying and cheating and swindling because you've never learned how to make a good living honestly. And if you try to cheat, now, for this Cornish girl, the way you cheated for your little sister, these hard-shell crooks like Bilkey will skin you alive. You're the cheapest imitation of a con man that I ever ran across—and I've known a lot of them—and unless you're going into this theatrical game to do the square thing by the girl and Bilkey and all the rest of them, you'd better go back to Denver and drown yourself in Cherry Creek.”

Bell had listened to this tirade exactly as if he were the bad little boy whom Duff described. He looked silly. He looked sheepish, with his boyish bang, and his shamed eyes, and his faltering attempts to interrupt and defend himself. And when he pulled himself together, at last, it was with a boyish bravado that he spluttered: “Is *that* so! You think you're a hell of a fellow, don't you? You can go and chase yourself. I'm not asking for any advice from you, and I—”

“Run along and sell your papers,” Duff cut in. “I'm busy.” He took up his telephone. “All right,” he said, to his outer office. “Who's next out there?” And when Bell had risen and started out, he added: “I'll keep an eye on you, and if I find you're not doing the square thing by Isabel Cornish, I'll trip you up so quick—”

“Aw, you go to hell,” Bell muttered, without turning, as he went out.

Well, Bilk,” Duff asked, some weeks later, “how’s your friend Bell getting on?”

“All right,” Bilkey said. “The play’s paying expenses over at the Forty-Fourth street theatre, and ‘Yours Truly’s’ cleaning up two thousand a week at the Columbus.”

“Good. How’s he getting on with the girl?”

“All right. I don’t know whether he intends to marry her or adopt her. He wants to give her the lead in ‘Modern Marriage,’ and I’m using that as an excuse for selling out my interest to him.”

“Don’t intend to stick and make a fortune in the theatre, eh?”

“No. You’d have to have a flock of oil wells behind you to play the game the way Bell plays it. I’m getting out.”

“Good. I want you to go to Chicago on a case as soon as you’re free.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

An archaic abbreviation, 'con.' for 'confidence' has been changed to the more contemporary word 'con'.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *James Illinois Bell* by Harvey J. O'Higgins]