

A RANDOM SHOT

A Story

By **HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.**

The camera and the girl had nothing to do with each other. The camera belonged to Westcott, who was enjoying the surf at that moment, and was not troubling his head about anything terrestrial. The girl belonged—temporarily—to the young man who had driven her over from the Breakers that morning and who, incidentally, would have been glad to make his claim a permanent one.

The name of the slim young man, who came chuckling out of the water after half-drowning an offending acquaintance by holding his head under water, does not signify. He had grown to six feet something, while remaining essentially a boy. This morning under the exhilaration of his dip and the salt air, he exuded mischief at every pore. The proximity of the camera and the girl appealed to him irresistibly. He picked up the former and took a second view of the latter. She made an even prettier picture than he had expected, as she looked dreamily beyond the antics of the bathers to the changing sea. The young man pressed the button, wound the film and went on grinning diabolically to play fresh pranks on a long-suffering public.

When Westcott came in, from his swim the camera stood where he had left it, and the girl who had unconsciously posed for the slim young man in the bathing suit had disappeared. Westcott had no notion that fate had been at work. It did surprise him, however, to find out that of his roll of films there were but three left instead of four. Westcott took several animated views of the bathing beach and left the film in the hands of an accommodating photographer.

When the prints came back to him he experienced a distinct shock, for along with the miscellany to be expected when one carries a camera on the Boardwalk was the face of a girl. Westcott knew he had never seen her, since it would be impossible to see her and forget it. What she was doing on his roll of films was a mystery beyond his solving, but there was no escaping the fact of her presence.

Westcott gave a dangerous amount of thought to the pretty, dreamy face. He was not unaware of the folly of this procedure. He told himself savagely that in all probability she was married to somebody, since it was inconceivable that such a piece of perfection should grow to maturity without being snapped up by some figurative early robin. Yet this realization did not prevent him from inserting the picture in his watch, looking at it wistfully at least once a day, and thinking about it considerably oftener. He also developed the questionable habit of regarding strange young women with the alert expression characterizing a lost retriever searching for his master.

At the expiration of a year Westcott and the picture in his watch were on terms of close intimacy. He told it a good many things he did not confide to others, and even asked its advice on certain questions.

When Westcott went to the shore the following summer his lost retriever expression was noticeably in evidence. He knew that many people besides himself have a liking for visiting the same resort season after season, and he could not rid himself of the impression that he might find the original of the face in the watch. The outcome was the exact opposite of his hopes. For one afternoon, as he attempted to consult his timepiece to inform himself as to the proximity of the dinner hour, he made this horrible discovery: His watch was gone.

Under ordinary circumstances this calamity might have been faced with courage. Westcott's watch was a substantial, serviceable article, without any especial association. It is not difficult to replace a reliable timepiece. The complication in this case was that the watch contained the girl's picture. A sentimental reluctance to duplicate her, which in the light of events appeared to Westcott incredible stupidity, had brought it about that the picture in the watch was the only one in existence and the film had been accidentally destroyed. Westcott's state of mind was that of the conventional lioness deprived of her cubs.

While his frenzy was at its height an automobile party speeding joyously along a stretch of open road was halted by a shriek from a blond young woman on the

first seat. "Stop!" she cried, "I saw a gold watch lying beside the road."

"Nonsense, Irene!" exclaimed the other girl of the party. "You couldn't possibly distinguish a gold watch when we are going at this rate. It would look like a yellow streak." But the young man who drove the car and was Miss Irene Fenton's slave brought the machine to an immediate stop and went back with her to conduct the search.

The reappearance of the pair, watch in hand, silenced the scoffers. "Perhaps there's a name inside," suggested the girl who had jeered, a new respect in her voice.

"I was just about to look inside." Miss Fenton proceeded to open the case deftly and started. Her friend, looking over her shoulder indulged in a little scream.

"Why, Irene, how much that looks like you."

"I don't think so." Irene made an unavailing effort to close the lid upon the dreamy face, but a remorseless hand prevented.

"Irene Fenton, it is you. That's the blue dress you wore last summer. Whose watch is it?"

"I've no idea, Laura."

The other girl coughed, a cough significant, amused, incredulous. "If you want to be believed," she said blithely, "you musn't blush in such a whole-souled fashion."

The comment did not tend to decrease Miss Fenton's color, while the owner of the automobile turned the yellowing green of jealousy. The party that returned to the hotel was not the hilarious quartet which left it. Three were suspicious and one puzzled.

In the "Lost and Found" columns of the next morning's papers appeared the following insertion:

"Lost—Open-faced gold watch. Seal fob. Prized for associations as well as for intrinsic value. Liberal reward will be paid for its return to the Surf House. No questions asked."

Immediately following, like the question and answer in a book of riddles, came the companion notice:

"Found—Gold watch. Open face. Seal fob with monogram. Owner can secure property by calling at the Breakers and proving his right to same."

Westcott's call at the Breakers was early, even for the informal seashore. Miss Fenton thought best to see him herself. She had, of course, expected that the owner of the watch would prove a decrepit old gentleman. The discovery that he was young and not ill-looking came in the nature of a shock. But her confusion was nothing compared with that which Westcott exhibited. His attempt to identify his property must have convinced any disinterested listener that if the watch had ever been in his possession he had stolen it.

But Irene was not difficult to persuade. She interrupted his stammering by producing the watch. "Since this is evidently your property Mr.—Mr"—

"Westcott," prompted the owner of the name.

"Mr. Westcott," she said very sweetly, "I'm glad to return to you all that belongs to you."

Suspecting something under the smooth speech, Westcott made a hasty examination of his property. Then he groaned. "Oh! say, that isn't fair," he exclaimed. "It was because of the picture that I was in such a stew over losing the watch."

"Can you deny it is my picture?" This very haughtily.

"At least it's my property."

"Any man," said Miss Fenton impressively, "who would snap-shot a girl when she wasn't looking and then"—

"No, upon my honor! It wasn't that way. Just wait and let me tell you."

The tale Westcott recounted was sufficiently improbable to tax the credulity of the least skeptical, yet somehow Miss Fenton believed him. But even then she was not quite certain as to the ownership of the picture. She said she would have to think it over. Fenton bowed to her will.

It was six weeks before they found the solution of the problem, which like most solutions seemed absurdly simple when once worked out. Westcott took both the picture and the girl. Cupid has many disguises. Even a bathing suit will serve.