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The Strange Tale of a Fish

(Continued from page 9.)

will pity me. There may be a good many, too, who won't care a rap either way." She mused over this last.

"There's been three more reporters here this morning, asking for pictures," said Cora. "Your mother seen 'em."

"Not a doubt of it," returned the other, dangling a pink foot over the side of the bed.

The motion of that swinging foot brought a flood of memories to her. She saw herself sitting on a big gray rock, dabbling her feet in the crystal waters of a silent pool; she felt herself slipping from that rock almost noiselessly into the deeps and rising to the surface blowing the drops from her eyes and swimming to a wood-scented shore. And her arm twitched with longing, as in imagination her fingers closed over a slim rod, at the end of which three flies swayed delicately on the surface of the pool. She even looked with disgust at the pink draped bed, thinking of a rude couch of balsam boughs, sweeter than all the perfumes of Arabia to the true lover of the wilds. Then her thoughts wandered off to Dick Bartlett and she shook her lithe young body in its lace drapery, as though to free herself of the fetters which bound her to reporters, fittings, a wedding cake ten stories high and all the other tiresome mummerly of a great society wedding.

"I've half a mind to chuck it," she said rebelliously and aloud.

Cora, impatient, disapproving, stood negligee and slippers in hand.

"Can't see any sense in spoilin' dresses just for want of a fittin'," she remarked.

"What's to-day?" asked Mildred, suddenly.

"Monday. And in three more days you'll be gone!"

Mildred laughed.

"And your troubles will be over," she said.

"Your bath's getting cold," suggested the laconic Cora.

All through the tedious morning Mildred kept saying resentfully to herself,

"Isn't Dick the lucky man? Off there in the woods with none of this fuss and flurry; He has escaped everything—and, oh, the showers I have had to endure—they are enough to have drowned me!"

Mrs. Ellery took a different view.

"It is strange that Richard is not back," she said. "I thought he would have taken the night train and reached here this morning. It does not look very gracious, I must say, to avoid all the entertaining which should have been given to both of you."

"He'll be stuffed with it tomorrow," the girl replied.

TUESDAY morning brought no bridegroom. Ushers and best man began to show signs of grouchiness—the only thing they enjoyed about the wedding was the thought of making a fool of Dick. Mrs. Ellery was distinctly nervous and was at her wits' end for excuses when so many inquiries were made for the missing groom. When Wednesday morning came bringing no sign of Bartlett she was in a state of total collapse. Even Mildred, who would have been delighted to forego the ordeal as planned by her mother and called in the society columns "nuptials," and who in the depth of her sporting soul sympathized with Dick, even Mildred felt sorry for her. A dozen times during the early morning she wandered distractedly into her daughter's room, crying:

"What do you think has happened?" To which the girl consistently answered:

"I don't think anything has happened. He has probably forgotten all about the wedding! You know, nothing is of much consequence when you're fishing."

"Oh!" Mrs. Ellery's tone and manner suggested that she had come to the limit of her endurance. "How can you take the thing so calmly? And why, in the name of Heaven, could you not have chosen a human being instead of a savage like Richard Bartlett. This will ruin you, Mildred, in

spite of all I can do. You take my word for it—it will ruin you."

"Jilted for a fish," murmured the girl, smiling a little. "It is a pretty fancy." Then seeing her mother's face, she cried: "There, now, mother, don't worry any more! I have a plan. Just leave it to dad and me. By to-morrow noon, we will be dressed in our wedding clothes and the affair will be 'the most brilliant of the season.' I mean it!"

Monday had been for Bartlett barren of result. Tuesday the King Pin had taken some notice of the Scarlet Ibis, and once had bitten at him. This was at the exact moment set apart by Dick for saying good-bye to the little lost pool, and making for civilization and Mildred. Unfortunately, the minutes slipped by while His Majesty swam around and about, getting a view of the fly from all angles, and to Dick's consternation he found he had missed the golden opportunity of making the train back.

"By the jumping gods, Peter," he said, "while it is an ill wind—well, there's no use quoting you—while this misfortune gives me another try at the king, it is not giving up trouble for me with a certain severe party I know."

"Madame?" queried the grinning Pierre.

"YOU guess well. But to-morrow, mind, there must be no such stingy margin. We've got to leave in good time. Savez."

"Sure," said Pierre, cheerfully, to the accompaniment of frying bacon.

Four o'clock on Wednesday morning found Dick examining his hat-band. He made a careful selection, and cast. For hours he waited for something to happen, every now and then calling to Pierre to know the time. At ten o'clock he changed his flies, and was rewarded by a sight of the big fish, who was plainly uneasy, but had not sufficient curiosity to deliver himself into the hands of his enemy. Two hours rolled slowly by. Then—

At precisely five minutes to twelve, when the kit lay packed on the trail and Pierre crept through the bushes to tell his M'sieu that time was up, the leader went down with a swift, sure jerk.

"Mon Dieu," whispered the guide trembling, "c'est le roi! You get him!"

Under his tan Dick paled a little. Although his hand and his eye were steady, his nostrils quivered.

Sure enough the King Pin awaking from a delightful nap, forgetting the invasion of his territory by a queer species of fly, he saw a brilliant Ibis skimming on the surface of the pool. He bethought him of a meal, and bit. Even when he learned his mistake, he did not worry. Not he! With a playful dart, he made for the fallen tree, where there were a dozen snags under and over which he could twist that slender thread and free himself. A sudden backward jerk on a slack line would, he knew by instinct, reverse the fly in his mouth. The kingfisher's wife, sitting on the end of the tree, should see him fool the great beast on the edge of the pool.

The reel buzzed merrily as the fish swam the length of the pool, with Dick's sensitive thumb just touching it. No sooner had the King darted amongst the snags than it tightened a little, and he felt the strain of that annoying hook. He tried several turnings always to find himself held in tighter than he had thought possible of that slim thread the other end of which was in the great beast's hand. Back he darted toward a friendly rock, hoping to free himself there, if not during the run for it. There were sharp jags, he knew, where with so taut a line as that in his mouth, he could saw himself loose. And he rather laughed in his fins, in the swimming.

But to his surprise, when he reached the rock, the line was loosened, in no way could he make it tight enough to saw; indeed, he was obliged to keep swimming in order to feel that it was