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Bachelor's Ante-Mortem.

Being merciful as he is strong, and rather fond of her besides, he meant to break it to her gently. He didn't know whether she suspected the state of affairs, and he wasn't sure that she would care; but he wasn't going to take any chances. One never could tell. He had been one of her most special friends for a long time, and he thought he understood her pretty well, but now as he "sized her up" in his mind all he seemed sure of was that she was capricious, sensitive and jolly to dine with. Of her opinions he had heard much, of her feelings he was as much in the dark as if he had just met her.

He knew he wasn't an impossible person socially, and from a feminine point of view he might even be considered—well, there! he wouldn't be an ass even if he was in love. He made up a little speech for her—or at least for himself—as he strode down the avenue. His ideas were a trifle misty. Realities were just a bit blurred. He had been dining with her and her image floated dutifully before him. She was a gentle creature with an adoring expression, a limited vocabulary and frocks that made prettier women green with envy.

When he got to her house, the maid—a typical, unconventional apartment house maid—the kind they grow in windowless kitchens where a cap is kept on a nail behind the door in case the front door bell should ring—greeted him with a friendly grin. Clothed in his new dignity he bowed stiffly. "Miss—at home?" "Oh, she's in all right," he was shocked to hear.

And when she appeared, off-hand, smiling, frankly glad to see him; he forgot his speech, held her hand, looked into her eyes and blurted out the news. Perhaps it was the natural but naive vanity of six-foot-three that made him regret it a minute after.

"Don't, don't," he pleaded. "Please don't look at me like that and make your voice shake so and put your hand to your side. I didn't mean— You must have known—"
"Oh, yes, I knew. I'm not reproaching you. But even expected, inevitable things are a shock when they finally do come, you know."
His brow wrinkled sympathetically. "I came to tell you the first one," he said, in the toneless voice the beams of evil things always assume when they have to address an emotional person.

can consider it as a compliment or not, Fiffie, just as you like, but it was, remembering things you and I had often laughed and talked about that kept me from making a fool of myself."
He paused and mopped his brow. "But you were engaged when the evening was over," she observed casually.

"Ye-es."
"It was bound to come, I suppose."
"And you think I was right?"
"If I wasn't in an angelic humor I'd say it was the one sensible act of your career."
"A man ought to marry."
"To be sure. Now, let me know all about her. How old is she? And who is she?"

"She's young—oh, she's young. She's a widow, you see."
"Oh! then, of course, she's young. Might one ask how long she was married?"
"When she was twenty-one." After this speech he looked proud of himself, and she had to admit that he had reason to be.

"I knew her husband," he faltered. "Your predecessor?"
"Please don't call him—me—that. He was much older than his wife. He died abroad. I went to his funeral. It was a December day. We walked through the streets. A small boy went ahead with a cross and stumbled through the puddles. Lord! how cold it was! I had rheumatism for a month after it."
"What was he doing abroad?"
"Pleasure trip—a self indulgent chap. Believed in a short life and a merry one, and it's a good thing he had a good time while he lived, for he had nothing else to do, and money to burn."
"Ah! It won't be a case of 'marry in haste and repent in Harlem'?"

"What a sordid observation! Now, that doesn't sound like you. It sounds like that little petticoated bouncer of a Jameson girl that my sister has at the house so often. When I told her I was engaged she pretended not to believe it, called me an incorrigible flirt, and other vulgar epithets, and finally when told who the lady was said that it 'looked as if I had an object!'"
"Well, you have, haven't you?"
"Object, matrimony," as the personals say.
"They mean 'object to matrimony.' She meant money!"
"Incredible!"
"She did, indeed. I remonstrated with her and she piped, 'Never mind. The man who marries for money always gets what he deserves—but it isn't always money.' Did you ever hear such nonsense? I hate girls who make cheap epigrams."
"That wasn't an epigram. That was a prophecy. And maybe she wouldn't waste a dear one on you. You know engaged men and married actresses don't 'draw.' That's a good thing to remember now and your wedding day."
"Is that a threat?"
"Yes, that's a threat. So make the most of your last evening. 'Tis not because I love you less but because I fear her more!"

to buy the ring," he mused, frowning at the recollection. "I met a girl that I hadn't seen for three years. We used to be—well—almost sweethearts; went about a lot together and liked each other. Those were my cotillion days, and she danced like a flower in the breeze. They had a country place on Long Island and kept open house. I came near losing my practice. I spent so much time down there."
She had heard of this girl before, from him and from others. It had been the closest shave any sio-disant hopeless bachelor had ever had. There was only one reason why it had come to nothing. They were both paupers. Her father had died since and left a fortune. But that is another story.

He lighted a fresh cigarette. "As I said I—(puff, puff)—hadn't seen her—(puff, puff)—in three years—just before I met you, Fiffie. When I went to buy the ring I was awfully muddled and my sister, who went with me, wouldn't pretend to the salesman that the ring was for her, and that made me lose my head completely. I was weary and worried and was just going to take any old ring to get out of the shop when I raised my eyes from the diamonds and there before me stood—Elise. That sister of mine is a brick just the same—she took in the situation in a twinkling, said a word to the clerk and before I knew where I was he, she, the tray of rings and I were in a private office with the door shut. But when she told me how she did it I simply had to go and have a stiff high-ball. She had told the clerk that the young lady whose apparition had made me turn red, white and blue was the goddess for whom the ring was being chosen and that I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Quick-witted. Tess! She always was imaginative. You know she used to think you were in love with me."
"The wish was mother to the thought. She thinks your price is above rubies."
"Very nice of Tess, but it's never a compliment for a man's sister to admire one."
"Odd how one's ideas change! Would you believe it, I hardly feel sentimental at all now, and once I used to take my lunch at a feed-me-quick restaurant just as an excuse to look at the cashier? She was a blonde, very pretty and bright-eyed and gentle. I used to compare her to a bird in a cage—she sat behind a brass fret-work."
"That was when you were very young, I trust?"
"Indeed, it was not. It was last winter. I just tell it to you, not because it has any significance in itself, but to illustrate the impressionable, susceptible, unreasoning, not to say electrically sentimental nature of man."

"Quite clear. I had a grand passion myself once, for the Dutch consul of a French town. I was sixteen at the time."
"And you never told me that before! And how did it turn out?"
"How do such things turn out when one is sixteen? I had to write him a very decided letter bidding him farewell. It was a chef d'oeuvre. No less than five girls assisted me. We gave up our Easter vacancies to it. Part of it we stole from Balzac's 'Deserted Woman's letter.' Being a Hollander, we hoped he wouldn't recognize the slight difference in style."
"But Balzac's lady was—"
"I know she was, but we couldn't help it. I had to write a tender, decided letter of farewell, or I should have been sent home on the next steamer. Voila tout?"
"I wonder if you could be sentimental?"
"Well, it depends. A sense of the absurd is a stumbling block. Fancy a

Dutch consul of a French town and an American girl with an English accent!"
"It's a beautiful thing—I mean sentiment. And one needs it in matrimony," he said, half to himself.
"How do you know? Pinero says—"
"I might have known you'd quote Pinero to me when I feel sad."
"Well, do you know what he says? That 'marriage is two persons walking soberly through life under one umbrella, cheerfully accepting the drippings of Providence down the backs of their necks—an elevating spectacle!"
"What makes you so unsympathetic and cynical?"
"I'm 'crossed in love,' I suppose. You see, you are the third deserter this year. Boyd made such exquisite rarebits, I despair of ever replacing him, and I'm not yet out of mourning for Beethoven Smith."

The engaged man stiffened perceptibly. "If you don't mind, Fiffie, I'd rather not be placed in that class. Of course I may be presumptuous, or inordinately egotistical, but I fancied that our friendship was founded on something more solid—than rarebits and more spiritual than coon songs with mandolin accompaniments." This was delivered with much dignity.
"You forget Boyd's rarebits. And you know I can't abide coon songs, unless sung by Anna Held, for then one can't understand them. If I am unkind you must forgive me. Remember, you are on your way to that bourne from which no man returneth, while I am free and lonely."
"You really do care?"
"My dear Winstanley, life stretches blank before me, an unending vista—gray, gray, gray."
He looked distressed.

"That is morbid. Of course we'll both miss the companionship. We've been tremendously congenial and chummy and all that, and old associations are always hard to break off. When I think there will be no more walks and rides in the spring days, looking for impossible primroses and improbable pussy-willows, and no more al fresco breakfasts under Staten island's spreading chestnut trees, it makes me feel unutterably old and settled already. I went over it all last night. And no more choosing new books together. I suppose I can't send you any books now eh? And no more tennis-to-the-death whether the sun shines or the rain pours, and of course no more theater or drives or pow-wows on the stairs while the others dance. It's a wrench. I knew it would be. But when you're as old as I am you'll look as things as I do," he continued soothingly.

"When Jessie Wilson ran away with that Gray fellow I slipped out of the world for ever, as I thought. c. wasn't in love with her, but we had passed a whole summer together. Gray was a business man, but I was home all day, and she used me to fetch and carry for her in his absence. When they vanished I was so utterly lonely that I imagined I was in love. Every one else thought so, too. It has invested me with a melancholy interest for her ever since. You've met her? Red and round as an apple. And to think that I always loved slender girls! Two months after she married Gray I was tearing madly to the ferry every Saturday afternoon to spend the week-end with Elise Brimstraw. You mustn't look upon my marrying as the end, but the beginning. I know you'll like her. I'm determined that you shall. She knows you already. You shall be the first and most honored guest. You're so fond of automobiles, and we're going to have two—and private links and one of the

biggest houses in Suffolk county. I'll 'auto' down to Southampton for you every day."
"Get thee behind me, Satan! Do you think I would ride in her automobiles? I! A girl of principle? Never! I wouldn't even slide down her cellar door."
"There isn't a cellar. It's an American basement."
"But if you go to Trouville on your wedding trip, let me give you the address of a charming little chalet near the Casino, kept by a fat little woman who cooks like Brillat-Savarin, and makes you feel so much at home!"
"I don't want to feel at home."

That's not what one goes as far as Trouville for."
"You spurn my friendly suggestions. Never mind; I can have my revenge. I shall go down to see you off. I want to talk to her."
"!"
"I shall be discreet and maternal in my blessings, but I'll tell her about you nevertheless. Don't look alarmed. It's just part of my mania for being original. You know they always give the bride away. I'll reverse the order of things and give the bridegroom away!"—J. M.
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