

The Pilkington Tea Party

"And what on earth is a 'Book Tea'?" said Harold Carstairs to his sister, Mrs. Odell. "I've heard of a meat tea, and other abominations beloved of the feminine system. Does one write one's name in a confession-album, and give particulars as to a fancy respecting Bohemian or Souchong, concomitant with buttered scones or almond cake?"

"Don't be so laboriously witty and superior, Hal," said his sister; "you have lived so long among roaring cannibals as to have quite lost touch with decent civilized society."

"The Matabele are not cannibals, and have the softest language in the world; much more liquid than the Italian, even," responded her brother.

The young man was just home from Matabeleland, with a manuscript volume of travels which he was seeking a publisher for—as yet vainly. The family estate at Ashleworth had dwindled away owing to the agricultural depression and unfortunate speculation during the last years of the father's lifetime, and the son had gone into the world to try to make his way, and retrieve the position, his sister's future being secured by her marriage with Mr. Odell, a high official in the custom house, and it was at their residence, Hill View, The Spa, Gloucester, that he was temporarily staying.

Said his sister: "Never mind the Matabele and their language: I shall be able to read it all when your book comes out. I intend you to escort me to Mrs. Pilkington's tomorrow afternoon, so please allow me to post you up in the latest diversion, and don't interrupt with your rude observations again."

"All right, Sis, fire away; I apologize," said Harold, meekly.

"Each person attending a book tea wears a badge which displays a sort of rebus on the name of a popular novel, or well-known work of literature—so your book is tabooed, you perceive."

"Who's making rude observations now?" asked her brother, mildly.

"I am, just to show you how unpleasant it is. Sit for tea, and start fresh," responded Mrs. Odell. "Now you ought to be able to give me some good ideas, you've read so many books; and let me tell you that there are pretty nicknacks as prizes for the people whose titles are not found out, or those whose clever ideas in the way of design are voted by the majority of guests present to be the most worthy. There's also a booby prize for the gentleman whose badge is the most ridiculous—a prize such as an embroidered tobacco-pouch, pipe and case, and other abominations beloved of the masculine system."

"Oh, you resentful woman," said Harold. "I thought you agreed to make a fresh start, unmindful of my original indiscretion."

"I really couldn't resist that last speech; you men are so selfish with your pipes and 'baccas—flake, navy-cut and B.D.V.; I've heard the names, you see. John's vocabulary, in that direction, is just as copious as yours."

As Mr. Odell usually smoked cigars of fine brand, and had only run over the titles so that his wife might "keep her end up" with some samples of callow youth she was brought in contact with—to earn the reputation of "deuced clever woman," Mrs. Odell, don't you know, understands a fellow's ways and all that—he was not being treated with justice. But he wouldn't have minded; he was the most easy-going, kind-hearted of men and, when released from official decorum, could unbend and become a jovial companion. In fact, he had won more than one "booby" prize solely on his social merits.

"Get on to the Book Tea; initiate me into the mysteries or I'll go and smoke to torment you," said Harold Carstairs.

"Well, a word or two to that effect won't be amiss," replied his sister. "I want you to be distinctly original. For there's a rich heiress, Rosa Singleton, who is sure to be present, and makes the thing a craze, and one never knows what might happen."

Harold groaned. "I see what you are leading up to," he said. "Can't you let me enjoy my liberty? You're a born match-maker, I know, Sis, but you know the adage about driving a horse to water?"

"I know that for years there hasn't been a horse at Ashleworth to drink," said his sister quietly. "You don't always intend to be lord of a barren, curtailed heritage, I hope."

"By Jove, no," sighed Harold. "But there's my book, you know."

"Both your book, let's get on to the other books," said his sister, who, having planted her shaft home, was content. "Now I've told you that Miss Singleton makes quite a craze of the amusement, I mention

"Oh, yes, I see now," said Harold slowly. "But, excuse me, isn't it rather far-fetched? If I remember aright, the cities in which the action of the novel takes place are London and Paris."

The heiress pouted. "It seems that my little efforts are not to your fastidious taste, Mr. Carstairs, so let us talk of someone else," she said. "Tell me what does that match mean which Mr. Ramsden is wearing for a scarf pin?"

The only other male member of the company was sitting very near, and Harold saw that the match was a partially ignited one. Seeing that ideas ran in one groove, he had no difficulty in discovering it to signify "An Unequal Match," and told his questioner so.

"Really, Mr. Carstairs, I shall have to ask you to make me out a nice long list; you are quite an acquisition. Won't you tell me your own title? I'll vote for it all the same."

"I am bound by secrecy," said Harold, who was anxious to get away, and thought she would dismiss him. The hope was vain; she had still an interest to serve. "Do you know my title, Mr. Carstairs?" she said, with an air of superiority; "it's beneath your nose."

Harold scanned her up and down and saw she was wearing two tiny padlocks to fasten her shoes. The allusion was evident. "Locke on the Understanding," I presume," he remarked.

The heiress was decidedly displeased. "Really, you are too dreadfully clever," she said. "However, the gentlemen don't vote, so it doesn't matter."

Harold was disgusted with her self-interest and supercilious manner, and rose to move away, saying that he must see if his sister wanted a cup of tea. Mrs. Odell said eagerly, "Well?" and he rejoined "impossible," with an accent there was no mistaking. His sister walked off after a brief interval of speaking silence, leaving him to his own reflections. He amused himself with scanning the devices of the guests as they moved hither and thither before him. His eyes at length met another pair fixed on him, eyes that were vaguely familiar, although he could not recall the face. Their owner was a beautiful dark girl of slender, lithe figure, and about twenty-four years of age. She smiled at him, positively smiling, frankly, and made a slight beckoning movement so that he was compelled to go over to her, saying to himself meanwhile, "I must have a double somewhere; hope I shan't be snubbed for an unfortunate likeness."

"Is it possible that you have quite forgotten me, Mr. Carstairs?" said the girl, as he stood before her.

"I ought to have known the eyes," responded Harold, "but am ashamed to confess that I cannot."

"Cannot recognize the girl you vowed to love and cherish and protect, when she grew up. Not know the maiden you were to make your wife—squaw, I think you said; our home was to be on the bounding prairie, I remember. Is there nothing left of the scraggy child you fished out of the pond, put your jacket around, and carried on your back to the house?"

"Hilda Raybould, by all that's wonderful. What an ass I am! But you know."

He halted lamely, but the admiring comprehensive look must have been quite readable and satisfactory to the girl.

"My name is Hurst now," said she.

Harold looked at her, blankly. "Married," said he with a falling reflection.

"Neither married nor likely to be, though I am a rich woman. An uncle in London died and I had to take his surname with the money."

"O," said Harold, brightening, relieved, he scarcely knew why.

"Now tell me all about yourself," said she, and, nothing loth, he did, seeming to drop easily into the old childish confidence with his former playfellow. But their pleasant conversation was broken by the voting. Hilda was out of it all, she was recently down from London, knew nothing of the nature of the function, and as a stranger wore no badge. Mrs. Odell carried off first honors with "Round the Red Lamp," which everyone had thought to be "Moths," but although Harold's blank card, which meant "No Name," had not been generally understood, the "booby prize" went to Mr. Ramsden owing to the championship of the mortified Miss Singleton, whom many people wished to please.

Mrs. Odell came up jubilant, and Harold introduced the two ladies, which ended in an invitation to Hill View, for Hilda and an elderly cousin, who was playing the part of chaperone. Harold was enthusiastic over the girl, as he escorted his sister home, and this lady, mindful of her last failure, heard him patiently, but gave no advice.

The acquaintance thus made and re-

newed ripened into friendship all round, for the Odells sincerely admired the frank, high-spirited girl, whilst the cousin, Miss Martin, who was no soured old maid, but a pleasant, cultured woman, who would have been a welcome addition to any circle.

As for the young people themselves they fell naturally into the old life of comradeship; save that now there was no talk of sweethearts, for Harold was no fortune-hunter, and accepted the altered conditions without grumbling at his lot. There were picnics, tennis parties, drives, and he found these amusements delightful in her company, but their great pleasure was to take train to Oakley street walk to Westbury-on-Tyeme, and there hire a boat to ride the broad waters of the river past the hamlets in which their early holidays had been spent, or to cross to Longney by the ferry, and wander amongst the orchard lands there, now glorious with ripening fruit.

But he could experience these reminiscences of the happy past without feeling the full spirit which the scenes suggested? Certainly not, two high-spirited young people with an indeterminate future, and without binding home ties, particularly when the man was a traveller with the mystery of foreign lands and adventure clothing him as a garment and the girl represented all that is charming in the woman of leisure.

When the truth forced itself upon Harold that he was looking upon Hilda with something more than the eyes of friendship, he comforted himself with the idea that his book might bring him fortune, and so put him out of the category of lovers whose views are believed to be entirely mercenary.

But it did nothing of the kind. Messrs. Burman, the publishers, brought out the work on the royalty system, it is true, but it hung fire somehow, and Harold saw nothing before him but another exile to a land where he could put his shoulder to the wheel at employments impossible in his native land.

The idea of departure, not the idea of labor, made him dispirited and gloomy, and the girl was not slow to observe the change. "Whatever are you looking so rueful about, Harold?" she asked, suddenly one day.

"Got to go into the world again," said he, "to try gold digging, stock droving or something equally romantic—in taxes—but precious prosaic when you leave behind you all the places—and persons you love best."

"O," said the girl, the color leaving her face, and there was a painful silence for a space. Then she said, "What about the book? I think it is charming. Those descriptions of the ancient ruins, unmentioned by previous travellers, are entrancing, to say nothing of the pains you have taken to obtain the rites and customs of the Matabele, the specimens of their language you give, and the fauna and flora of the country."

"Thank you, Hilda, you're a brick. But the public don't take to the book I'm afraid. There have been one or two good reviews, but the sales are very slow. I must confess to a failure, and go and work with my hands."

"And my stay is over in a fortnight. You won't go before then, Harold, I hope? I want to see the fruit gathered at Longney, and witness the merry-making."

"We'll go," said Harold, brightening. "I wouldn't miss our last glimpse of the old days together for the brightest future in the world alone."

"Wouldn't you?" asked the girl, coloring, but she looked at him direct with the eyes he loved so well. It was a great effort to restrain his feelings at this juncture, but he put the possession by, as unmanly. "I wouldn't," he repeated simply, but there was a catch in his voice, and he turned his head away. When he looked round again, Hilda was gone.

About five days after, he received an unexpected communication from his publishers. An agent had called upon them and purchased the remainder of the edition, stating that the copies were intended for presentation to the reference libraries and institutes in various portions of the country. A reference to the fact had appeared in the newspapers, and the demand for a larger edition had come from the booksellers. They were prepared to send in their account, and offer a hump sum for the copyright, or a larger royalty.

"Let us go down the river today, to our favorite spot," said Harold to Hilda. "I've some good news, and want to ask your advice."

"Yes," answered the girl, demurely and they went.

The mellow radiance of autumn was everywhere around them, and the majestic river, called at their feet, as it had in the days of their childhood. Nothing had changed since they parted at this season, they thought, as they sat on a grassy knoll under the mighty trees high on the bank, watching the teams draw the wagons along the white road across the

water.

Harold told his news, but, as he warned to the thought of what it might possibly mean to him, the advice he asked was quite of a different nature to that which he had intended. "Do you think, Hilda, that if I got this money, and went abroad to get new impressions for another volume—I might, when I came back, find my little friend something, you know, just a little more—O, Hilda, I love you; and can't go away without saying it. I'd not a mercenary beggar. I'm willing to work like a horse, if you'll only give me a hope."

"Then you intend to go, after all," altered the girl, "just because I've got more money at present than you have."

"Well, Hilda, it's a bit awkward, isn't it? What would people think of me?"

"It's not nearly so awkward as your speeches," said Hilda, trying to laugh, but breaking into a sob. In a moment Harold's arms were around her, and money, the world, the future were forgotten, as the beating of their happy hearts drowned the river's rolling tide in their ears.

Perhaps Harold will learn some day whose loving belief in him and far-sighted policy prompted the measure which gave a hump to the sale of his book, and brought his merits before a discerning public. At present the arch-plotter was resting her head contentedly against his shoulder, comforting herself with the reflection that, if wives are morally bound to tell their husbands everything, sweethearts are not so fettered with regard to their lovers.


"Dearest," said Harold, pressing her to him, as they walked to the boat—of course he had to sustain her by the waist, the banks being steep and treacherous with yellow mud—"I looked upon the ordeal of Mrs. Pilkington's book tea with despair."

"Well, you didn't even get the booby prize," interrupted the girl archly.

"No, but it led to my winning the greatest prize in the world—yourself, sweetheart."

Allowing for a lover's ecstasy, the speech was not unduly extravagant.

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