



**A** first nobody knew him; then the Hotchkisses knew him, and then it seemed as if everybody had always known him. He had run the gantlet of gossip and come through without a scratch. He was first noticed sitting in the warm corner made by Willcox's annex and the covered passage that leads to the main building. Pairs or trios of people, bare-headed, their tennis clothes (it was a tennis year) mostly covered from view by clumsy coonskin coats, passing Willcox's in dilapidated runabouts drawn by uncurried horses, a nigger boy sitting in the back of each, his thin legs dangling, had glimpses of him through the driveway gap in the tall Amor privet hedge that is between Willcox's and the road. These pairs or trios having seen would break in upon whatever else they may have been saying to make such remarks as: "He can't be, or he wouldn't be at Willcox's"; or, contradictorily: "He must be, or he'd do something besides sit in the sun"; or, "Don't they always have to drink lots of milk?"; or, "Anyway, they're quite positive that it's not catching"; or, "Poor boy, what nice hair he's got."

With the old-timers the newcomer, whose case was otherwise so doubtful, had one thing in common a coonskin coat. It was handsome of its kind, unusually long, voluminous and black. The upturned collar came above his ears, and in the opening his face showed thin and white, and his eyes, always intent upon the book in his lap, had a look of being closed. Two things distinguished him from other men: his great length of limb, and the color and close cropped, almost molded effect of his hair. It was the color of old Domingo mahogany, and showed off the contour of his fine round head with excellent effect.

The suspicion that this interesting young man was a consumptive was set aside by Willcox himself. He told Mrs. Bainbridge, who asked (on account of her little children who, et cetera, et cetera) that Mr. Masters was recuperating from a very stubborn attack of typhoid. But was Mr. Willcox quite sure? Yes, Mr. Willcox had to be sure of just such things. So Mrs. Bainbridge drove out to Miss Langrais' tea at the golf club, and passed on the glad tidings with an addition of circumstantial detail. Mister Masters (people found that it was quite good fun to say this, with assorted intonations) had been sick for many months at—she thought—the New York Hospital. Sometimes his temperature had touched a hundred and fifteen degrees and sometimes he had not had any temperature at all. There was quite a romance involved, "his trained nurse, my dear, not one of the ordinary creatures, but a born lady in impoverished circumstances," et cetera, et cetera. And later, when even Mister Masters himself had contradicted these brightly colored statements, Mrs. Bainbridge continued to believe them. Even among wealthy and idle women she was remarkable for the number of impossible things she could believe before breakfast, and after. But she never made these things seem even half plausible to others, and so she wasn't dangerous.

Mister Masters never remembered to have passed so lonely and dreary a February. The Sunny South was a medicine that had been prescribed and that had to be



# Holding Hands

By Gouverneur Morris

Illustrated by W. B. King

swallowed. Aiken on the label had looked inviting enough, but he found the contents of the bottle distasteful in the extreme. "The South is sunny," he wrote to his mother, "but oh, my great jumping grandmother, how seldom! And it's cold, mummy, like being beaten with whips. And it rains—well, if it rained cats and dogs a fellow wouldn't mind. Maybe they'd speak to him, but it rains solid cold water, and it hits the windows the way waves hit the portholes at sea; and the only thing that stops the rain is a wind that comes all the way from Alaska for the purpose. In protected corners the sun has a certain warmth. But the other morning the waiter put my milk on the wrong side of my chair, in the shade, namely, and when I went to drink it it was frozen solid. You were right about the people here all being kind; they are all the same kind. I know them all now—by sight; but not by name, except, of course, some who are stopping at Willcox's. We have had three ice storms—*kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen*." I am getting to *kennst* it very well. But Willcox, who keeps a record of such things, says that this is the coldest winter Aiken has known since last winter!

"But in spite of all this there is a truth that must be spoken. I feel a thousand times better and stronger than when I came. And yesterday, exercising in the privacy of my room, I discovered that there are once more calves upon my legs. This is truth, too. I have no one to talk to but your letters. So don't stint me. Stint me with

money if you can (here I defy you) but for the love of heaven keep me posted. If you will promise to write every day I will tell you the name of the prettiest girl in Aiken. She goes by eight times every day, and she looks my way out of the corner of her eye. And I pretend to be reading and try very hard to look handsome and interesting.... Mother!..... just now I rested my hand on the arm of my chair and the wood felt hot to the touch! It's high noon and the sun's been on it since eight o'clock, but still it seems very wonderful. Willcox says that the winter is practically over; but I begged him not to hurry...."

Such was the usual trend of his letters. But that one dated March 7th began with the following astonishment statement: "I love Aiken....." and went on to explain why.

**BUT** Mister Masters was not allowed to love Aiken until he had come through the whole gantlet of gossip. It had first been suggested that he was a consumptive and a menace ("though of course one feels terribly sorry for them, my dear"). This had been disproved. Then it was spread about that he belonged to a wealthy family of Masters from the upper west side ("very well in their way, no doubt, and the backbone of the country, my dear, but one doesn't seem to get on with them, and I shouldn't think they'd come to Aiken of all places"). But a gentleman who knew the west side Masters, root and branch, shook his head to this; and went so far as to say, "Not much, he isn't"; and went further and shuddered. Then it got about that Mister Masters was poor (and that made people suspicious of him). Then it got about that he was rich (and that made them even more so). Then that he wrote for a living (and that was nearly as bad as to say that he cheated at

cards—or at least it was the kind of thing that they didn't do). And then, finally, the real truth about him, or something like it, got out; and the hatchet of suspicion was buried, and there was peace in Aiken. In that Aiken of whose peace the judge, referring to a pock-marked mulatto girl, had thundered that it should not be disturbed for any woman—"no—not even were she Helen of Troy."

This was the truth that got out about Mister Masters. He was a nephew of the late Bishop Masters. His mother, on whom he was dependent, was very rich; she had once been prominent in society. He was thirty, and was good at games. He did not work at anything.

So he was something that Aiken could understand and appreciate; a young man, who was well born, who didn't have to work—and who didn't want to.

But old Mrs. Hotchkiss did not know of these things when, one bright day in passing Willcox's (she was on one good foot, one rheumatic foot and a long black cane with a gold handle) she noticed the young man pale and rather sad-looking in his fur coat and steamer rug, his eyes on his book, and stopped abruptly and spoke to him through the gap in the hedge.

"I hope you'll forgive an old woman for scraping an acquaintance," she piped in her brisk, cheerful voice, but I want to know if you're getting better, and I thought the best way was to stop and ask."

Mister Masters' steamer rug fell from about his long