

SEVENTEEN

A tale of youth and summer time and the Baxter family, especially William.
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By BOOTH TAKINGTON.

were eleven people married that were only seventeen, and this boy in love got a full beard and got married too. An' he said Mr. Genesis was only sixteen when he was married. He talked all about gettin' married when you're seventeen years old, an' he said how people thought it was the best thing could happen. So I just know he's almost married."

"You haven't any other reason, have you, Jane?" the mother asked.

"Yes'm," said Jane promptly. "An' it's a more reason than any! Miss Pratt calls you mamma, an' if it you were her mamma, she does it when she talks to Willie."

"Jane!"

"Yes'm; I heard her. An' Willie said, 'I don't know what you think about mother.' He said, 'I don't know what you think about mother,' to Miss Pratt."

Mrs. Baxter looked a little startled, and her husband frowned.

"Yes," went on Jane, "an' when they were walkin' they stopped an' talked to me, an' Miss Pratt said, 'It's our little sister.'"

"Did she really?" Mrs. Baxter asked gravely.

"Why, you can ask Willie! She said it that funny way. 'Our little sister' that's what she said. An' Miss Pratt said, 'Everybody would love our little sister if mamma washed her in soap an' water.' You can ask Willie."

"Hush, dear," said Mrs. Baxter. "All this doesn't mean anything at all, especially such nonsense as Willie's thinking of being married. It's your bedtime."

"Well, but, mamma!"

"Come along, Jane!"

"He certainly seems in a queer state," said Mr. Baxter when his wife returned.

At this his wife's tone became serious. "Do you think he would do as crazy a thing as that?"

Mr. Baxter laughed. "Well, I don't know what he'd do it on. I don't suppose he has more than a dollar in his possession."

"Yes, he has," she returned quickly. "Day before yesterday there was a secondhand furniture man here, and I was too busy to see him, but I wanted the storekeeper to see the cleared out, and I told Willie he could have what ever the man would pay him for the junk in there if he'd watch to see that he didn't take anything. They found some old pieces that I'd forgotten underneath things, and altogether the man paid Willie \$9.85."

"But, mercy me," exclaimed Mr. Baxter, "the girl may be a little bit, but she wouldn't run away and marry a boy just barely seventeen on \$9.85!"

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Baxter. "At least I don't think so. Of course girls do as crazy things as boys sometimes in their way. I was thinking—"

"Of course there couldn't be anything in it, but it did seem a little strange."

"What did?"

"Why, just before I came downstairs Adella came for the laundry, and she asked her if she'd seen Willie, and she said he'd put on his dark suit after dinner, and he went out through the kitchen, carrying his suit case."

"He did?"

"Of course," Mrs. Baxter went on slowly, "I couldn't believe he'd do such a thing, but he really is in a preposterous way over this little Miss Pratt, and he did have that money."

"By George!" Mr. Baxter got upon his feet. "The way he talked at dinner, I could come pretty near believing he hasn't any more brains left than to get married on \$9.85! I wouldn't put it past him! By George, I wouldn't!"

"Do you think he'd better go down to the Parson's? We'd just say we came to call, of course, and if—"

"Get your hat on," he said. "I don't think there's anything in it at all, but we'd just as well drop down there. It can't hurt anything."

"Of course I don't think—"

she began.

"Neither do I," he interrupted frantically. "But with a boy of his age crazy enough to think he's in love how do we know what'll happen? We're only his parents. Get your hat on!"

But when the uneasy couple found themselves before the house of the Parson's they paused in the darkness and presently decided that it was not necessary to go in. From the porch came the laughter of several young voices, and then one silvery voice, which pretended to be that of a tiny child.

"Oh, s'me! S'me on oo, big Bruvva Josie-Joe! Mus' be polite to Johnny Jump-up, or tant play wir May and Lola!"

"That's Miss Pratt," whispered Mrs. Baxter. "She's talking to Johnnie Watson and Joe Bullitt and May Pacher. Let's go home. It's all right. Of course I knew it would be."

"Why, certainly," said Mr. Baxter as they turned. "Even if Willie were as crazy as that, the little girl would have more sense. I wouldn't have thought anything of it if you hadn't told me about the suit case. That looked sort of queer."

And when they came to their own house again there was William sitting alone and silent upon the steps of the porch.

"I thought you'd gone out, Willie," said his mother as they passed beside him.

"Ma'am!"

"Adella said you went out, carrying your suit case."

"Oh, yes," he said languidly. "If you leave clothes at Johnnie's in the evening they have 'em pressed in the morning. You said I looked damp at dinner, so I took 'em over and left 'em there."

"I see," Mrs. Baxter followed her husband to the door, but she stopped on the threshold and called back: "Don't get them too long, Willie. The

dew is falling, and it rained so hard today, I'm afraid it might be damp."

"Ma'am?"

"Come on," Mr. Baxter said to his wife. "It's down on the Parson's porch, not out in front here. Of course he can't hear you. It's three blocks and a half."

But William's father was mistaken. Little he knew, William was not upon the porch of the Parson's, with May Pacher and Joe Bullitt and Johnnie Watson to interfere. He was far from there, in a land where time was not.

Upon a planet floating in pink mist, and uninhabited, unless old Mr. Genesis and some Hindu princes and the diligent Jewans may have established themselves in its remoter regions—William was alone with Miss Pratt in their own home. And after a time they went together and looked into the door of a room where an indefinite number of little boys, all over three years of age, were playing in the firelight upon a white bear rug. For in the rosiest of summer that boy's dream are made of William had indeed entered the married state.

His condition was growing worse every day.

It was the morning of the great day when a trolley ride and picnic were to be given in honor of Miss Pratt. Willie had a spirited argument with his mother on the time honored subject of taking an overcoat and finally submitted to her arguments.

She hung the garment upon his arm, kissed him, and he departed in a desperate manner.

However, having worn his tragic face for three blocks, he halted before a corner drug store and permitted his expression to improve as he gazed upon the display of "My Little Sweetheart All Tobacco Cuban Cigarettes, the Package of Twenty For 10 Cents."

William was not a smoker—that is to say, he had many the usual boyhood experiments, finding them discouraging—and, though at times he considered it humorously man about town to say to a smooch friend, "Well, I'll tackle one o' your ole coffin nails," he had never made a purchase of tobacco in his life. But it struck him now that it would be rather deplorable to disappoint himself with a package of Little Sweethearts upon the excursion. And the name! It thrilled him inexpressibly, bringing a tenderness into his eyes and a glow into his bosom.

He entered and managed to make his purchase in a matter of fact way, as if he were doing something quite unemotional, then he said to the clerk, "Oh, by the bye, ah, there's something I wanted to 'tend to, now I happen to be here. I was on my way to take this overcoat to—to get something altered at the tailor's for next winter. 'Course I wouldn't want it till winter, but I thought I might as well get it done."

He paused, laughing carelessly, for greater plausibility. "I thought he'd prob'ly want lots of time on the job—he's a slow worker, I've noticed—and so I decided I might as well go ahead and let him get it it. Well, so I was on my way there, but I just noticed I only got about six minutes more to get to a mighty important engagement. I got this morning, and I'd like to leave it here and come by and get it on my way home this evening."

"Sure," said the clerk. "Hang it on that hook inside the prescription counter. There's one there already. Bring along your friend, that young Bullitt fella. He was in here awhile ago and said a wanted to leave his because he didn't have time to take it to be pressed at in time for next winter. Then he went on and joined that crowd in Mr. Pacher's yard, around the corner, that's goin' on a trolley party. I says, 'betcher mother made crazy it,' and he says: 'Oh, no! Oh, no! he says, 'Honest, I was goin' to get it pressed! You can hang yours on the same nail.'"

It was with a lighter heart that he left his overcoat behind him and stepped out of the drug store. That brought him within sight of the young people, about thirty in number, gathered upon the small lawn beside Mr. Pacher's house. Miss Pratt stood among them in heliotrope and white, Flopitt nestling in her arms.

She saw him, the small blond head and the delicious little snuffly hat above it shimmered a nod to him. Then his mouth fell unconsciously open, and his eyes grew glassy with the intensity of meaning he put into the silent response he sent across the picket fence and through the interstices of the intervening group.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Big, Fat Lumme.

R. JOHNNIE WATSON and Mr. Joe Bullitt met him at the gate and offered him hearty greetings. All kidding and dissension among these three had passed. The lady was so wondrously impartial that as time went on the sufferers had come to be drawn together rather than thrust asunder by their common feeling.

Johnnie Watson had with him today a visitor of his own, a vastly overgrown person of eighteen, who at Johnnie's beckoning abandoned a fair companion of the moment and came forward as William entered the gate.

"I want to introduce you to two of my most intimate friends, George," said Johnnie, with anxious gravity. "Mr. Baxter and Mr. Bullitt let me introduce my cousin, Mr. Cropper. Mr. Cropper, this is my friend, Mr. Baxter and my friend, Mr. Bullitt."

The gentlemen shook hands solemnly. Mr. Cropper became more informal. "Johnnie wrote me to come over for this shindig, so I thought I might as well come." He laughed loudly. "Yes, sir," he added, "cause I'm pretty apt to be on hand if there's anything goin'."

"Well, that's right," said William, and while they all laughed again Mr. Cropper struck his cousin a jovial blow upon the back.

"Hi, ole sport," he cried. "I want to meet that Miss Pratt before we start! The car'll be along pretty soon, and I got her picked for the girl I'm goin' to sit by."

The laughter of William and Joe Bullitt, designed to express cordiality, suddenly became forced and died. The careless loudness—almost the notoriety—with which he had uttered Miss Pratt's name, demanding loosely to be presented to her, regardless of the well known law that a lady must first express some wish in such matters—these were indications of a coarse nature sure to be more than unbecoming to Miss Pratt. Both William and Joe Bullitt began to wonder why on earth Johnnie Watson didn't have any more sense than to invite such a big, fat lumme of a cousin to the party.

This severe phrase of theirs, almost simultaneous in the two minds, was not wholly a failure as a thumb-nail sketch of Mr. George Cropper. And yet there was the impressiveness of size about him, especially about his legs and chin.

At seventeen and eighteen growth is still going on, sometimes in a sporadic way, several parts seeming to have sprouted faster than others. Voices, too, often seem misplaced. One hears outside the door the bass rumble of a stroller giant, and a mild boy, thin as a cricket, walks in. The contrary was George Cropper's case. His voice was an unexpected piping tenor, half falsetto and frequently girlish, as surprising as the absurd voice of an elephant.

His chin had so distanced his other features that his eyes, nose and brow seemed almost babylike in comparison while his mountainous legs were the great part of the rest of him. He was one of those huge, bottle shaped boys who are always in motion in spite of their cumbersome.

"When do I get to meet that cutie?" he insisted to Johnnie. "You introduced me to about seven I can't do much for, but I want to get the howdy

business over with this Miss Pratt, an' I and she can get things started. I'm goin' to keep her busy all day."

"Well, don't be in such a hurry," said Johnnie uneasily. "You can meet her when we get out in the country. If I get a chance, George."

"No, sir!" George protested jovially. "I guess you're sad birds over in this town, but look out! When I hit a town I don't take long till they all hear there's something don't! You know how I am when I get started, Johnnie!"

Here he turned upon William, tucking his fat arm affectionately through William's thin one. "Hi, sport! Ole Johnnie's too slow, you toddle me over and get me fixed up with this Miss Pratt, and I'll tell her you're the real stuff—a fella we get engaged!"

He was evidently a true cloud compeller. This horrible George.

"Car's coming!" sounded. The young people poured out through the gate, and as the car stopped, scrambled aboard. William struggled anxiously to push through to Miss Pratt and climb up beside her, but Mr. George Cropper made his way into the crowd in a beaming though bulky manner, and a fat back in a purple and white "blaze" fattened William's nose, while poudrons heels damaged William's toes. He was shoved back and managed to clamber upon the foot-board as the car started.

The friendly hand of Joe Bullitt pulled him to a seat, and William found himself rubbing his nose and sitting directly behind the dashing Cropper and Miss Pratt. Mr. Cropper had already taken Flopitt upon his lap.

"Dogs are always crazy 'bout me," they heard him say in his high voice—"dogs and children. I dunno why it is, but they always take to me. My name's George Cropper, 34, Johnnie Watson's cousin. He was tryin' to introduce me before the car came along, but he never got the chance. I guess as this shindig's for you, and I'm the only other guest from out o' town, we'll have to introduce ourselves, the two guests of honor, as it were."

Miss Pratt laughed her silvery laugh, murmured politely and turned no freer-glossed glance upon her neighbor. "Flopitt look so 'till on dray, big, 'n'ormous man's lap."

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at him now. Well, I always was a good feel bigger than the fellow I went with. I dunno why it is, but I was always kind of quicker, too, as it were, and the strongest in any crowd I ever got into. I'm kind of much bound, I guess, but I don't let that interfere with my quickness any. Take me in an automobile, now—I got a racin' car at home—and I keep my head better than most people do, as it were. I can kind of handle myself better. I dunno why it is."

"My brains seem to work better than other people's, that's all it is. I don't mean that I got more sense or anything like that. It's just the way my brains work. They kind of put me at an advantage, as it were."

"Well, for instance, if I'd been livin' here in this town and joined in with the crowd to get up this party—well, it would've been done a good deal different. I won't say better, but different. That's always the way with me—if I go into anything, pretty soon I'm running the whole shebang. I dunno why it is. The other people might try to run it their way for awhile, but pretty soon you notice 'em step out of the way for good ole George. I dunno why it is."

"Well, if I'd been running this party I'd of had automobiles to go out in, not a trolley car, where you all got to sit together, and I'd of sent over home for my little racer, and I'd of taken you out in her myself. I'd like you to see that little car. Well, anyway, I bet you'd of seen something pretty different and a whole lot better if I'd of come over here to get up this party for you!"

"For us," Miss Pratt corrected him humbly. "Bofe strangers—party for us two—all bofe!" And she gave him one of her looks.

Mr. Cropper flushed with emotion. He was annexed. He became serious. "Say," he said, "that's a mighty smooth way to put it. An' he touched the stuffy rim of it with his forefinger. His fat shoulders leaned toward her yearningly."

"We'd certainly of had a lot better time sizin' along in that little racer I got," he said. "I'd like to had you see how I handle that little car. Girls over home, they say they like to go out with me just to watch the way I handle her. They say it ain't so much just the ride, but more the way I handle that little car. I dunno why it is, but that's what they say."

"That's the way I do anything I make up my mind to tackle. Just lemme make up my mind once, and it's all off. I dunno why it is. There was a brakeman on the train got kind of fresh. He didn't know who I was. Well, I just put my hand on his shoulder and pushed him down in his seat. He just got up and said, 'Who I was?'"

Miss Pratt turned to him unexpectedly and placed Flopitt in his arms. "Keep 'em close Flopitt cozy," she whispered. "Flopitt love ole friends best!"

William's heart leaped, while a joyous warmth spread all over him, and, though the execrable lumme immediately propelled Miss Pratt forward, by her elbow, to hear the descriptive remarks of the Swedish lady named Anna, William's soul remained uplifted and entranced. She had not said "like," she had said, "Flopitt love ole friends best!" William pressed forward valiantly and placed himself as close as possible upon the right of Miss Pratt, the lumme being upon her left.

When the party came out of the barn William beheld Miss Pratt, not walking at his side, but, on the contrary, sitting too cozily with George. His hand in a proprietor-like way, he began to examine the locket.

"Three hot hearts just behind pulsat'ed hatred toward him, for Johnnie Watson had perceived his error, and his sentiments were now linked to those of Joe Bullitt and William."

They were not analytical and were impressed by what he said. They dumbly accepted George at his own rating, not even being able to charge him with lack of modesty. Did he not always accompany his testimonials to himself with his deprecating falsetto laugh and "I dunno why it is," an official disclaimer of merit, "as it were?" Here was a formidable candidate, indeed—a traveler, a man of the world, without a word, even without a look, William walked vaguely away.

In the shade of a great walnut tree he gave way to tears, certainly, but to faint murmurings and little heart-lags under impulses as ancient as young love itself. Alas, he considered his sufferings a new invention in the world.

William's final mood was one of beautiful resignation with a kick in it—that is, he nobly gave her up to George and added irretrievably that George was a big, fat lumme. William saw himself a sad, gentle old bachelor at the family fireside, sometimes making the sacrifice of his reputation so that she and the children might never know the truth about George, and he gave himself the solace of a fierce scene or two with George—

"Remember, it is for them, not you, you thing!"

After this human little reaction he passed to a higher field of romance. He would die for George, and then she would bring the little boy she had named after William to the lonely headstones. Suddenly William saw himself in his true and fitting character—Sydney Carton! He had lately read "A Tale of Two Cities" immediately re-reading until, as he would have said, he "knew it by heart." And even at the time he had seen resemblances between himself and the appealing figure of Carton. Now that the sympathy between them was perfected by Miss Pratt's preference for another, William decided to mount the scaffold in place of George Cropper.

The scene became actual to him, and, setting one foot upon a thin milk pail (Continued Next Week)

George sang, "I'm Falling in Love With Some One."

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gismums!" she cried, for that was now the gentleman's name. "If Johnnie McCormack hear Untie Georgicums go shoot unself dead—bang!" She looked round to where three figures hovered morosely in the rear. "Tum tum, sin' chorus, Big Bruvva Josie-Joe Johnny Jump-up an' Ickle Boy Baxter All over Adella, Untie Georgicums Boys an' girls all sin' chorus. Tum-mence!"

And so the heartrending performance continued until it was stopped by William.

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