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The Major and I.

The major and I had always been good friends. For one thing, we both liked the same kind of a cigar.

"A cigar," said the major, "should be neither too good nor too bad. If a man gets into the habit of smoking bad cigars, not only is he a continued source of regret to his friends, but, graver still, he experiences a moral deterioration that no amount of pious influence can offset. If his cigars are too good, on the other hand, he is obliged to live up to them. I began once to smoke a fifty-cent cigar a day—only one. At first it was a difficult financial adjustment. Then my mind got used to it—so used to it that I began to smoke two—then three. For some time afterward I was puzzled to know why I never seemed to have any cash in hand, until it dawned upon me that I was making a steady glow of my bank account."

At the time I met the major we were both on the same twenty-cent brand, and this being enough to insure our confidence in each other, we became friends, and it was not long after this when by mutual consent we arranged to have our apartments next to each other.

This arrangement was a great success. Each one of us rubbed away the loneliness of the other, and we did it without any irritating consequences. There were moments of reminiscences, of reverie, when I saw that the major must not be disturbed. He divined the same of me. During these intervals we protected each other from the outside world. And during those other intervals, when we felt the need of companionship, it seemed as if I had just what the major needed and the major had just what I needed.

I was older than the major. He was fifty and I was thirty, but age is never fully expressed in years. It is in feeling. I have never been able to be sure about the exact time when I caught up with the major, but I think it must have been when I was twenty and he was forty. I feel sure that, if we had met then, we should not have agreed. We should have been too much alike.

At present, however, there was enough difference between us to insure a fortunate combination. The major was a perfect child about business matters, while I had a keen sense of those important details. He never thought of doing anything without consulting me. On the other hand, his sense of true human relationship was very much finer than mine. He taught me the art of dealing with my fellow-men. He taught me, or at least made me a student of, that rare art of gentle courtesy which in these days we seem to lack; and I learned from him that amid the wear and tear of modern life it is still possible to retain one's simplicity of character.

One day the major said to me: "My friend, we must go to the seashore. We need the change. It will do us both good."

So I made all the necessary arrangements, and together we went. We selected a quiet spot on the Maine coast. Alas! since then I have learned this axiom: that there is no quiet spot anywhere upon the face of the earth that does not contain at least one widow.

I well remember the day she burst upon us in all the subdued splendor of her pony-cart. The ponies were black, the harness was black, the widow's clothes were black. But in strong contrast to her surroundings was the shining face of the widow.

I looked into the major's eyes and he looked into mine. I must confess that I saw something that startled me. I know now that if there is such a thing as love at first sight for one, it holds equally good for two. In an instant I realized that the major and I were in love—and with the same woman.

The next day we met her. Some change in the outgoing and incoming guests put us at a new table. There

she was, radiant, demure, smiling. In the afternoon we had a three-cornered conversation at the shady end of the piazza.

Did the widow object to cigars? Never! She doted upon them. So between us the major and I consumed eighty cents' worth of them.

As we made our toilet before dinner, the major was more silent than usual. So indeed was I. It seemed to me that I was being drawn into a vortex from which there was no escape. The widow's eyes haunted me. An atmosphere of gentle, pathetic experience surrounded her, and through it she seemed transfigured into an angel. I was fearful lest she might prefer the major to me, and fearful lest she shouldn't. Indeed, so much I admired and esteemed my friend that I knew she would be lowered in my opinion should she prefer me. On the other hand, how could I now live without her? It was indeed a problem.

Finally the major spoke, laying his hands upon my shoulders in the old familiar manner when he was so much moved. There were tears in his eyes. For this kindly old soul, who had fought undaunted through a score of battles, was as sentimental as a child.

"My boy," he said, "that widow has captured me. The moment I saw her I realized that all was lost. And yet as I look into your face I perceive that all is not right with you. Let us be men. Let us meet this issue together. Speak, my boy!"

I also was much moved. "Major," I said, "you have read my secret aright. I, too, am heels over head in love with the widow. Do you blame me?"

It was a trying moment. Both of us realized instinctively what it meant. We had both in a very large sense become necessary to each other. I could not conceive of life without the major—and the widow. And I saw too plainly that he was thinking of the same thing—he could not conceive of life without me—and the widow.

"My boy," said the major at last, "I have a plan. Of course, I don't blame you. You could not have been the friend to me that you are if you had not done the same thing. The mere fact that we have fallen in love with the same woman only proves that we have not been mistaken in each other."

"What is your plan?" I asked, with breathless anxiety.

"It is this. We must divide the widow up. You have her one day, and I the next. Between friends such as we are, it is the only way. We'll draw lots for the first choice, and after that may the best man win!"

"It was just what I knew you would do!" I exclaimed, embracing him. Our glasses touched.

"Major," I said solemnly, "I drink to your success!" And the major's voice quivered as he replied:

"And I, my boy—to yours!"

The major won the toss and the next morning I bade farewell for the day and evening.

Never have I passed a more miserable time. Faithful to my promise I kept in the background, but in the distance I caught glimpses of the widow and the major, and it was quite evident to me that he was losing no time. But all things have an end, and the hour came for us to meet again.

There was a new light in the major's eyes. "My boy," he said solemnly, "I will keep my promise. Tomorrow is yours."

The next day I arose bright and early, while the major kept to his room.

I realized that I must do my best or the major never would forgive me. Besides, once within the widow's spell I could not help myself. With years and endurance on my side, why should I not win? I consoled

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