

THE TIME OF HER LIFE

Result of a Visit to the "Shores of Bohemia."

By CONSTANCE D'ARCY MACKAY

One morning when Billy and I were lingering over our rolls and coffee Betty came in with a tragic air and an open letter in her hand.

"Listen to this!" she exclaimed. "Eleanor Cuyler is coming to New York to visit her aunt, and she says she simply must see us because she's always wanted to visit the 'shores of Bohemia!'"

"The shores of what?" said Billy. "I'm sure there's nothing bohemian about us."

"That's just it," wailed Betty, "but Miss Cuyler doesn't see it that way. She's full of ideas about people who 'do things,' and she says she never met any, so she begs that she may come to dinner some night, quite informally, and be one of us. She thinks that because Kate writes and you're an artist and we all live in a little flat—I mean apartment—we are—well, we are queer and unconventional!"

"Who is this Eleanor Cuyler?" said Billy, with a frown.

"She's a Philadelphia girl Kate and I met when we were in the mountains last summer. She was awfully nice to us in ever so many ways, and now it's our turn to do something for her. It's no use suggesting the matinee or a luncheon. Eleanor's rich as Croesus and tired of all that, and there's nothing else we can afford. Oh, I don't see what we're going to do!"

"Do!" cried Billy. "Why, it's as plain as day! Satisfy her craving for the unconventional! If we're not bohemians we can at least put up a good imitation of the real thing. We can ask the Englishman, Harry Rockminster, he'll add a continental flavor. And there's Perry Dashwood; he can sing staid songs better than any one I ever knew. We'll get Cynthia to come and recite, and Worthington to bring his violin. They can pretend they're professionals. Cynthia will be an actress just starting on her career, and Worthington a struggling musician. 'Struggling' is the right touch, isn't it? And let's see—this is Monday. Write and invite Miss Cuyler for Wednesday evening. Bohemians aren't supposed to give much notice when they ask people to their parties." And Billy looked over at me and laughed.

While Betty was furiously writing her note I went to explain things to Aunt Pattie. Aunt Pattie had mothered us ever since we were children, and nothing we do ever surprises her, so she fell in with our plan at once. "But I couldn't be a bohemian if I tried," she declared. "I wouldn't know how to act, and I'd make you all miserable and myself too. You can easily excuse my absence!"

"But you'll miss all the fun," I objected.

Aunt Pattie's eyes twinkled. "Oh, I mean to be there!" she cried. "Since we have no maid I'm going to serve the dinner myself!"

In vain we all protested, coaxed, commanded. Aunt Pattie was firm in insisting that as Miss Cuyler had never seen her it could make no possible difference. Yet somehow it did to me, for I could imagine with what horror my Englishman might look on such proceedings. Even after I had written to him and explained the circumstances I was tormented by misgivings, for although he didn't know it, his good opinion mattered more to me than anything else in the world.

All Wednesday Betty and I worked like majors. We had always rather prided ourselves on the artistic arrangement of our little parlor. Now, in order to make it look bohemian we had banked it with all the bizarre and startling things we could lay our hands on. Billy's delicate water color sketches were jostled by flamboyant posters, theatrical photographs adorned the mantel, and sundry pipes and ash trays littered the table. It certainly looked queer; but, as Betty and I confessed to ourselves, we didn't. Betty was demure in a gray gown, and I wore my black net. I was just fastening one of Harry Rockminster's roses in my hair when the bell rang.

"There she is!" cried Betty hysterically. "Now, don't act as if anything unusual were happening!"

Eleanor Cuyler was enthusiastic in her greeting, and she was still telling of her joy in seeing us when we crossed the threshold of the parlor. At sight of the room she smothered a little gasp, which showed that our work had not been in vain. Then Billy came forward, and the loose blouse and soft tie which he wore for the occasion made him look as if he had stepped straight out of the L. in quarter. But Miss Cuyler wasn't any more surprised at his appearance than he was at hers. Somehow neither Betty nor I had told him what a beauty Miss Cuyler was—a childish little beauty with a tuft of golden hair and deep blue eyes that opened very wide when anything astonished her.

Perry Dashwood and Harry Rockminster came early, but there wasn't a sign of Cynthia and Worthington.

"They're half an hour late already," said Betty to me in an aside. "What on earth can be keeping them? I'm afraid the dinner will be spoiled."

Something of our uneasiness reached Billy, and he turned abruptly to Betty.

"I really think we'd better not wait for the others," he said. "They may be quite late. You never can tell what may happen on the shores of Bohemia."

But we were hardly seated before we heard the turn of Worthington's latch-key and the swish of Cynthia's skirt down the hall. She made a dramatic pause at the dining room door and looked perfectly dazzling in a crimson Spanish costume glittering with sparkles.

"I hope you won't mind my coming in costume," she said. "We were kept late at rehearsal, and there wasn't time to change. I met Worthington on the stairs," she continued nonchalantly. "He'll be in in a moment. He's a musician, Miss Cuyler, and you know what uncertain hours musicians are forced to keep, especially when they are young and struggling."

Cynthia moved toward her chair with slouching grace. She said afterward that the Spanish costume had entered into her blood and she wasn't responsible for anything she did. Neither was Worthington, for he wore a peculiar, shabby black coat and carried his violin under his arm. But his crowning glory was his hair, or perhaps I should say his wig, which was very long and straight.

"The Music Master," by Jovel!" ejaculated Harry Rockminster.

Yet not once did a triumphant gleam illumine the eyes of Signor Worthington. To this day I've always wondered how he managed to keep that dreamy, abstracted expression. Of course I knew I could count on Cynthia and Worthington, but I never knew I could count on them to such an extent as that. Eleanor Cuyler was delighted. She looked at them and listened to them in open-eyed wonder as if they were beings from another world. And all my fears of what Harry Rockminster would think were set at rest when he whispered, "I say, isn't this a stunning lark?"

And now if Aunt Pattie didn't act too much like a lady, our bohemian dinner would be a complete success, but one false note would ruin everything. I toyed with the grapefruit as long as possible. Then I rang the bell. As I did so I kept my eyes fixed on Billy. He sat opposite the kitchen door and would be the first to see Aunt Pattie. The kitchen door creaked, swung open, and the expression on Billy's face signaled me that something had happened.

"Auntie," he burst out and then checked himself.

From behind me came a soft voice with the pleasant shrill accent of the south. "I reckon you's sprised to see me, Mars' Billy! You didn't know I was to cook de dinner, did yo'?"

I turned and beheld Aunt Pattie, and yet not Aunt Pattie, for the face that beamed from beneath a bandanna turban was as black as the ace of spades!

To Miss Cuyler this apparition was nothing more than a ludicrous dusky servant, but the rest of us were in ecstasies of mirth. We have vowed ever since that we owed the whole success of the evening to Aunt Pattie, for not only was the dinner deliciously cooked and splendidly served, but it went with a whirl. Harry Rockminster was never more brilliant in his life and told stories of marvelous escapades in which he had taken part. Cynthia recited "Lascia" with true dramatic fervor. Between courses Worthington played snatches on his violin, and we all sang songs—songs for which Perry made up funny impromptu choruses. The men smoked, and through the blue haze shone the radiant face of Miss Cuyler.

When dinner was over she leaned back in her chair with a little sigh. "It's just as I fancied Bohemia would be," she declared. "Oh, what fun you all must have every evening. Of course it's just a common occurrence to you, but I shall never forget it. Never! And I can't thank you enough for this glimpse of it."

Billy said she thanked him fervently again when he saw her to her carriage. "I've had the time of my life!" she reiterated—"the time of my life!"

"Well, she wasn't the only one," said Worthington. He had taken on his wig and was mopping his brow, while the rest of us sat about the dining room table nibbling.

"Miss Cuyler did seem to appreciate it," said Cynthia.

"Appreciated?" cried Billy. "I think it's we who ought to appreciate her coming. Why, just to look at her is a feast! She has exactly the kind of eyes I want for my 'Queen Titania.'"

"Why don't you ask her to pose for it, then?" suggested Cynthia slyly.

"I have asked," answered Billy quite simply. "and we are going to begin tomorrow."

"What?" sniffed Betty. "I smell orange blossoms!" And under cover of the laughter Harry turned to me.

"Miss Cuyler had the time of her life. Billy's had the time of his, and there's just one thing wanting to give me the time of mine." His lips were smiling, but there was no mistaking the look in his eyes.

"I'd hate to spoil your evening by saying 'No,'" I whispered back. And then, although I was so happy, I had an absurd desire to cry, and if Billy hadn't suddenly interrupted with a toast to the shores of Bohemia goodness knows what might have happened!

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