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The Colonel's Surprise.

By Juliet Willbor Tompkins.

ALL the way across on the steamer the colonel chuckled to himself to think how surprised Lena and Maudy would be. He had various minor surprises for them in his steamer trunk—a lorgnon for Lena, for whom he coveted above all things that mysterious distinction known to him as "style"; and for his daughter a less adventurous token in the shape of a gold bracelet, selected with trepidation, for Maudy's preferences were yearly a more baffling mystery. But he himself was to be the main surprise.

As he tramped about the deck, his eyes twinkled at the picture he foresaw: Lena and Maudy seated in the cafe of their hotel in Rome, and a tall gentleman of a comfortable stoutness, with small blue eyes set in a dark red face and an abundance of impressive white hair, coming towards them, his air off-hand and leisurely. Lena would glance at him, then she'd begin to stare. "I declare, Maudy, how that gentleman does look like your father!" she'd say, and Maudy would turn and—well, no one could ever bet just what Maudy would say; she would keep pretty cool, any way. And then Lena would half get up—still not believing—murmuring, "Well—my—good—gracious—why—it—"

And here the colonel would interrupt the picture by his own wheezing laughter, and go below for another look at the lesser surprises. Maudy would probably declare that she had known all along; he was coming; but she would be surprised, all right. There were, occasionally, things even that young person didn't guess—such as, for instance, the inner meaning of her trip to Europe, which put a wide and cool ocean between her and an incipient young man.

The colonel, landing at Naples, found that he had several hours to wait before the train left for Rome.

He wandered about the sun steeped town like a benign giant, hat in hand, occasionally running his fingers through the thick waves of ivory white hair that were his dignity and his distinction. Out of the heat grew a longing for external refreshment that finally tempted him through the wire door of a moderately promising barber shop. The proprietor bowed himself forward with a musical murmur, and then the colonel pointed to his hair and then to the bottles with an explanatory:

"Make him all clean—see?"

The barber beamed his comprehension, and translated the colonel's desires into Italian for him.

"All right, my son, I guess you know," assented the colonel, and to further questions he nodded largely, with a wave towards the apparatus, and offered his white crown with placid faith. Under the pleasant manipulation his eyes drooped and closed.

A pleased murmur in Italian finally roused him. The barber was standing off regarding his finished work with eloquent eyes and bows of congratulation. The colonel was accustomed to admiration of his ivory mane, and turned complacently to the mirror.

Then he started, and glanced quickly over his shoulder to find the stranger who faced him from the glass. But the room was empty of all but the Italian and himself.

He turned back, dazed and muttering, to the image confronting him—the oblong red face and small blue eyes, surmounted by a petrified mass of glaring black hair. He lifted his hand to his own hair, still not believing; the coarse looking brute in the mirror raised his hand at the same moment and—

When the colonel's fingers, in search of his venerable fleece, touched the hard, slippery surface of the barber's creation,

his groping mind at the same instant reached the hideous truth. He whirled on the Italian, gripping the arms of his chair.

"Why, you—you—you—!" he sputtered. "What the devil do you mean by dyeing my hair? I'll have you arrested! Why, I—you—!" Words suddenly failed him, and he sat gasping and blinking at his reflection. The barber smiled with modest deprecation, and offered a hand glass for an all round view. The colonel dashed it away with a cry of rage.

"You almighty little fool of a Lugo, I asked you for a shampoo—sham-pool! I've a mind to break your—!" His eyes again caught the mirror, and he stopped abruptly. His wrath melted like starch under rain, and he sank back cowed, humiliated, his gaze clinging helplessly to the spectacle of his dishonored head.

That this inky haired brute of an Eighth Ward heeler should be—himself! That he, colonel of militia, pillar of the First Congregational church, householder in a select and decorous suburb, stalwart figurehead who took the street with some pride in his physical advantages, could by a mere change of tint be shown a hard boiled tough such as he would hesitate to employ to run his lawn mower—He glanced about furtively then beckoned the barber nearer, his eyes still on the glass.

"Say," he pleaded, "undo him—take um black off—make all white again—savey? Go on!"

The barber listened intently, flashed his sudden and perfect comprehension, and, selecting an ominous bottle, squirted a few drops over the anthracite mass of his achieving. An odor intended to suggest roses followed.

The colonel sniffed and groaned. His rage was beginning to stir again when the striking of a clock reminded him of his train. He stood hesitating. Vengeance was tempting; but wisdom counseled that he catch his train to Rome and there find a white man to get him out of this fix. It wrenched him fiercely to pay the still smiling and congratulatory barber, but if his train was to be caught—

II.

FIFTEEN minutes later he was getting his breath, in a corner of a second class carriage, fanning himself with an Italian newspaper. He could still hardly accept the dreadful truth. Heretofore, similar embarrassments, when he had confronted the public with some mortifying eccentricity of costume, had always turned out to be dreams. But the window beside him was mirror enough to confirm the horror. He pulled his hat over his eyes, hunched up his shoulders, and prayed that no one else would get into the compartment.

"They won't if they get their noses in first," he thought wretchedly, as a nervous movement brought an acuter sense of the barber's finishing touch. "Lord, if those two ever find it out!" He did not know which he most dreaded, Maudy's sense of humor or Lena's lack of one.

The engine drew breath, preparatory to starting. At the same instant the door opened and excited passengers homesteaded the compartment with wraps and bags, stumbling in as the train started. The two women fell upon the unoccupied window seats at the other end, while the man stowed the baggage in the racks. As the colonel's eyes fell on this last he had the second shock of the morning; for it was unmistakably the incipient young man whom he and Lena had agreed, four months earlier, to separate from their daughter by the width of the Atlantic Ocean. Shocks three and four were ready for him, and he dimly knew it as he turned to look at the two feminine profiles on the other side—Lena and Maudy.



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