

The Maiden and The Beau Gallant

WRITTEN FOR THE ADVERTISER
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Mr. Richard Dorrance, meditatively rolling a cigarette, cast about him an approving glance.

"Perfect country," he drawled to nobody in particular, though Tom Darby was at hand to hear; "orange sunshin on the yellow sands, magenta shadows, ultramarine sea, luxuriant foliage to beat all creation. This beats tossing around on board a yacht, anyway. Thank I'll marry and settle down to dream out my days in peace."

He lit the cigarette and flopped over on his back, flourishing heavenwards his lengthy and immaculately white duck-clad legs. Tom Darby resented the resultant display of vivid hosiery and growled. Darby was in a resentful mood; he had been most comfortably aboard Dorrance's private yacht, the Beau Gallant, and saw no earthly reason why he should have been dragged therefor on a mile's row over the steaming shallows to the end that they might merely loaf on the edge of the beach. Moreover, he was athirst.

"There's not a drink in sight," he said, crossly, "nor a suggestion of a breeze. This is plainly the jumping-off place. And we'll be caught in the deuce of a thunderstorm, if I'm not mistaken."

"Disappointed, you mean?"

"Besides," Darby went on, defiantly, ignoring the correction, "who'd have you, I'd like to know."

"That's immaterial. I'll find someone." He raised his voice and chanted: "Young gentleman, rich and of distinguished appearance, desires a wife. Object, matrimony. No triflers—"

Darby grunted and resumed his disgusted contemplation of Dorrance's socks. He was about to make an unpleasant remark when both became aware of the presence of a third person.

How she ever got there so quietly Darby could never understand, but she stood before them, trim and neat and most desirable, in a chic muslin frock, and a canary-colored hat of some sort, with ribbons, perched saucily atop her curly brown hair. Brown eyes she had, too, and the very devil of mischief lurking in their depths, and rosy lips, with the shadow of mirth in their corners. Darby believed that her nose is tip-tilted, just the least bit, but he will never dare assert it. At any rate, she was entirely to be adored, with the sun filtering down through the leaves and dotting her with little blurs of light.

Dorrance was on his feet in an instant, and you may believe that Tom Darby was not far behind him. The two stood like idiots, gaping at her as if she had dropped from heaven. And she might have that, but the dancing eyes were against the theory.

She glanced from the one to the other, apparently enjoying the situation immensely. She fairly laughed when at last she said:

"Good evening, gentlemen."

Both stammered incoherent responses, and then the young lady calmly pointed at Dorrance with the tip of her dainty parasol.

"I'll marry you!" said she; she might have been asking him to tea.

But Dorrance was every more ready than Darby—and lucky. It is but fair to state that Tom was staggered, but Dorrance!

"I was convinced of that when I laid eyes on you," he said, bowing.

"Just so," she laughed.

And then Darby found his tongue.

"Perhaps you've overlooked me," he said, timidly. "Dorrance is all very well, but I have my points." He stuck out his chest, looking low and with a flourish.

"They're well covered," said Dorrance, hastily.

"Which you hereby respectfully submit to my consideration?" she asked.

"Just so; but you're a trifle late. Mr. Dorrance, I think you said? Mr. Dorrance asked first."

Darby protested. "But he never imagined—"

"Oh, but I did," Dorrance interrupted, unblushingly. "I've expected this right along."

"Of course he has," she added, severely. "That was very ungentlemanly of you."

Darby collapsed. He had never learned to accept defeat gracefully.

"Just my luck," he moaned. "I never raised a little dog, and learned to love its soft brown eye, but what—"

"O, dry up," said Dorrance, ungraciously enough. "Besides, you have it wrong."

Tom Darby snickered. The maiden eyed Dorrance somewhat approvingly. He returned her gaze with admiring interest, but she kept her countenance—only those eyes would dance divinely.

Neither spoke till she extended a tiny hand with a firm pink palm.

"Come alone," she said, "since we are to be married."

"Ever at your service," And he took the hand.

"Squire of dames!" Tom Darby snapped.

"But you are disagreeable," she said wonderingly.

"Don't mind him," Dorrance said soothingly; "we cannot justly blame him."

They moved off, hand in hand. Darby remained motionless, in high dudgeon; the affair was so distinctly preposterous—and the girl was so distinctly pretty. He heard Dorrance laugh, and there was a familiar gleam in his tone which warned Darby that his friend was ripe for any absurd adventure. Moreover, Darby confessed to the sin of curiosity. He relented sufficiently to permit a glance over his shoulder; they were quite some distance away, disappearing around a bend in the beach. He ran after them, shouting. They turned and waited.

"Mayn't I come too," he pleaded humbly.

"If you'll be nice," she stipulated. "And he can be best man," said Dorrance, tentatively.

"Come," cried Darby, eagerly, "that's some consolation! But Dick, the Beau Gallant?"

"Bother the Beau," said Dorrance, warmly. He looked out to sea; the yacht was beating steadily up against the breeze. "Hendricks can take care of her all right. Tisn't every day a fellow gets married."

"No indeed," Tom Darby assented heartily, and followed them at least he could see Dorrance through, even should he fail to keep him from egregious folly. And he himself was falling into the mad humor of the proceeding.

"Ruth," Dorrance began over his shoulder.

"Who?"

"My fiancée, sir!"

"O!"

"Introduce me," she said demurely.

"Ruth, this is my chum, Mr. Tom Darby."

"Thomas Edgerton Darby—"

"Tom—my promised bride, Miss Ruth Wharton,"

Again Darby bowed, this time over a pink and white confection of a hand. Decidedly, if Dick did—which of course was monstrous—if he actually should win her, he was open to congratulations.

"Ruth," said Dorrance, "is taking us to her ancestral home. We are to meet her paternal uncle, Mr. Henry Wharton, this evening. At present he is not at home."

"Naturally, she wants her family to inspect her choice. I promise to make no revelations as to your character; I'll maintain a most discreet—"

"And damming silence. I prefer that you talk."

"It is not far now," said Ruth.

"The walk has made me thirsty," Darby complained.

"It has, then, accomplished the inevitable," Dorrance remarked loftily.

They had struck inland from the beach, passing through a sparse belt of pines, and now emerged upon a narrow strip of sandy road. Opposite them was a lichened stone wall, surrounded by broken glass and boasting a rickety, rusty gate of iron. The three plowed across to this and entered fairly spacious and well-kept grounds. Magnolias and shrubbery grew here and there and the orange trees were in blossom; there were prim little beds of old-fashioned flowers; also, a castron stage, severely weather beaten. The tinkle of water from a hidden fountain was very grateful to Tom Darby's ears. At the end of a glade he caught glimpses of white corinthian columns, evidently the facade of a mansion. Darby's misgivings vanished under the influence of this peaceful scene; if Ruth were heir to such a stately property, then Dorrance—O, Dorrance was plainly favored of the gods.

Meantime this remarkable young lady was setting a pace that was quite uncomfortable for Darby, who was—and is—pump (let us say), and firmly opposed to exertion at any time. So that he felt somewhat in the rear and thought it mightily discourteous that the two should converse in tones so low that he was able to hear never a word. Nevertheless, he persevered—though with much puffing—and was presently rewarded with an easy chair upon a broad, coolly shaded veranda, and left the Dorrance and his precious Ruth entering the house, engaged in the most earnest of conversations. Darby felt horribly neglected and out of drawing, till, to his huge delight, an aged negro appeared with a tray and glasses. He forgot his sorrows in the rattle of cracked ice.

The purple shadows slowly lengthened on the lawn; a fitful gust sprang up to fan the heated air; a nightingale sang plaintively of a lost love, and Darby's soul was filled with sadness. He began to feel very sorry for himself; no one cared for him; he was very useless in this world; even Dorrance was quick to turn on him, his closest friend, for the smile of a total stranger.

From the open window came the murmur of voices, a steady monotone suggestive of anything but peace and silence. What on earth did it all mean, anyway? Darby's glass was empty; he contemplated it mournfully and slowly stirred himself to retreat. He realized that he was very hungry.

Dorrance came out abruptly and seated himself on the railing of the veranda. Darby ignored him; he was offended to the last degree. Finally, however,

"Try a julep, Dick," he said; "they're excellent."

"You were ever a carnal creature, Tom."

Darby looked up sharply; Dorrance's tone was strange. He found him smiling rather grimly, an odd, touchant expression which was at variance with his usual placid contentment.

"Hello!" Darby was alarmed. "What's up?"

"Got nerves, Tom?"

"Not a nerve—lost in adipose tissue." He promptly belied himself by his discomposure and repeated anxiously, "What's up?"

"I want your assistance. It's just this, old fellow, the uncle of this angel—"

"Meaning your betrothed?" Darby grinned in hollow fashion.

"Just that same, and seriously."

Darby experienced a flash of comprehension; this might explain why Dorrance was so momentarily solemn.

"Man, you don't actually intend to commit matrimony?"

"But I do, and I may before morning."

"Lord!" said Darby helplessly.

"No joking matter, Tom. This uncle, Henry Wharton, as near as I can make out, is a thorough-paced scoundrel."

"The villain of this dramma?"

"Gwan!"

"Listen to me, you infernal idiot!"

"Ruth—"

Darby wagged his head hopelessly. Dorrance fixed him with a stern glare.

"Ruth!" he repeated with determination. "Is heires to a pack of property—this and more. She's an orphan and old Wharton is her guardian. She comes into possession when she's 18, and she will be that tomorrow."

"A woman's age—"

"Be quiet. Is she marries before that, nine-tenths of her inheritance reverts to her guardian."

Here Darby grew befuddled.

"Then why in heaven's name does she want you?"

"I don't know that she does, except as an alternative. This amiable uncle is added about money; wants to get her married—even tried to force her into a match with a—O, a real dayvillish sort of fellow, Peter by name. Now, Fetter won't do, according to Ruth. She doesn't want him, nor nobody, for that matter."

"Not even you?"

"Not even me!"

"How do you know?" she queried archly from the doorway. And Darby is positive that a prettier picture never was than she made framed in its rich, somber darkness. "Are we not engaged?"

"I hope so," Dorrance cried fervently. "I'll have you if you'll let me, though all the world—"

"O, here," Darby exclaimed, hastily. "I'm a modest man. Go on with the plot; I begin to see a light!"

"Well, then," Ruth took up the thread of narrative, "as a last resort, he persuaded me to come down here from Atlanta, knowing that I could never escape. And I never thought. It's 20 miles to the nearest village—18 to the nearest railroad. I could not walk it if I tried, and Cassius keeps close watch on me. The horses uncle took with him when he left this morning, saying that he would return this evening. I am positive that he means to bring back with him this odious Mr. Fetter and a clergyman."

"Two and two," said Darby.

"And—and I know you thought me a bold creature this afternoon, but I was desperate, helpless. I could not think what to do. You will help me dear Mr. Darby—won't you? And believe me, she plumped down on her knees before him."

Darby was so embarrassed that he jumped as though she had kissed him. He adopted a paternal tone, speaking with the matured judgment of 23 years.

"Why, of course, my dear, you may rely on me." He was in a fine conceit with himself for that speech.

"O, thank you."

"Not at all! Not at all!" Darby marvels that he restrained himself from saying: "Tut, tut, my dear!" He added with a relieving inspiration: "Then the best thing we can do is to get right aboard the Beau Gallant!"

"No in a thousand years," said Dorrance firmly.

"Why?"

Dorrance eyed him curiously. "I've a better plan," he said at length.

"Well."

"I'll tell you later. For the present, you stay here; I'm going to trot down to the beach and signal Hendricks. We dine abroad tonight, you and I."

"That's a mercy. At what time?"

"Not in a minute, please."

"He is just splendid, isn't he?" said Ruth.

"Dorrance?" (with a start). "O, yes, he's all right. If you marry him—"

"I've promised." She hung her head in such sweet confusion that Tom Darby was more than ever envious.

"But he will not hold you to that promise."

"Indeed," she flamed, defiantly, "he has the right."

"I wish I had," said Darby. "He's a lucky dog."

Here he suddenly executed a backward leap of some several feet. Ruth had whipped out from beneath her skirts a small revolver. To Tom Darby its size approximated that of a cannon.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "You can have him. I'm not thinking of interfering. Don't."

For a moment her surprise was only equalled by his own. Then she began to laugh convulsively.

"Take it," she gasped. "It's—for you."

Darby was suspicious. "What for?" he inquired.

"You might need—it should uncle—Henry come. He—he would be angry."

Darby approached and took the weapon gingerly.

"Is it loaded?" he asked, with trepidation.

"Of course."

"Very well, then" (in resignation). He deposited it softly upon a table convinced that at any second he might become an involuntary suicide, and retired to a distance. Ruth fled into the hallway. Darby eyed the revolver askance and swore softly, sighed and lit a cigarette.

Twilight was falling. And from behind him came stifled mirth.

Come 10 o'clock on a cool, starlight night, and the Beau Gallant was speeding westward, under a full head of steam. To the north loomed the dim, low coast of Alabama.

In the saloon was assembled a motley party, to a champagne supper, of which Dorrance and Tom Darby formed the only self-satisfied members, the others being plunged in deepest gloom, despite all attempts to enliven them.

First, Mr. Henry Wharton aged in years and sin—if his countenance be allowed as evidence—glowering evilly across the table at Darby, whom he had mistakenly conceived to be the moving spirit of the enterprise; then, Mr. Fetter, younger and weak-willed, lacking excuse for his existence, but mightily impressed with his own simu-

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lation of rakish worldliness; lastly, a pale, frightened person, a clergyman by his cloth, but deep in the clutch of a raging thirst for strong drink, these were the unwilling guests.

Mr. Wharton addressed himself to Tom Darby, who was contentedly engaging the breast of a tender chicken. Mr. Wharton shook a lean fist framed in soiled linen at him.

"I'll have the law on you!" he cried, quivering with rage. "You'll find, young man, that this is not a country where you can kidnap—yes, kidnap!—peaceful citizens at your will, and not suffer for it."

"I wish," said Darby, calmly, "that you wouldn't wear your cuffs more than a week at a time; you spoil my appetite."

Mr. Wharton fumed, speechless. Fetter laughed.

"He's right there, pop," he said, irreverently. "But don't you think you are a little lawless?" he added to Darby.

"Not at all," Dorrance interposed, smiling indulgently. "The parson will be witness that you came willingly."

The parson raised expostulating hands. "At the pistol's point," he protested, very truthfully.

"Nonsense!" Have another." The parson held out his glass to the offered bottle. "I merely invited you to a stag on my wedding eve, and you came with alacrity, though I did understand that you had a pressing engagement."

The parson smiled faintly. Mr. Wharton attempted to control himself. "I'll tell you what," he said, speaking slowly and thickly. "If you'll take us back immediately I'll give you \$1,000."

"Fifteen hundred?"

"You ante too low," Tom Darby suggested.

"Three thousand," he snarled.

"O, make it worth while, and I'll raise you, Pop," cried Fetter.

"Five!"

"No," said Dorrance.

"Ten, then. I'll give you ten."

Mr. Wharton's hands were trembling violently. Dorrance politely filled his glass for him. He tossed it off eagerly.

"Twenty?" he pleaded.

"Where-ew?" Darby whistled. "I had no idea the stakes were so high."

Mr. Wharton hesitated; every moment was now of consequence. He stammered painfully.

"Fifty—fifty thousand," he managed to say.

Dorrance rose and looked at his watch. "You have no security to offer but your word," he said wearily, "and that is worthless."

Mr. Wharton's jaw moved loosely, but no sounds came.

"Moreover," Dorrance continued, "I don't need your money, nor do I want it."

"I'll have the law on you," Wharton repeated sullenly; hope was dead in his breast.

"I wouldn't if I were you. And you will not. This is rather a noisome business which you've attempted—and failed at; your credit would suffer were it known. So you will say nothing. I'm

happy to inform you that you're too late. It is 11 o'clock, and your ward will be her own mistress in one hour."

Dorrance walked to the door and gave an order. The engines began to chug more slowly and the Beau Gallant came almost to a standstill. Mr. Wharton sputtered threats and obscenities.

"I believe you were right," said Dorrance to him; "we do not desire your company after all. Come on deck. I'll put you ashore now."

The four followed him.

"That is Mobile," he said, indicating a haze of light on the northern horizon.

"There is a landing here and a fair road; by hard walking you should reach it in the early morning. Thence you can get home by noon, if you're lucky. But by that time Ruth and I will be married."

"So that's your game," Fetter sneered. "I thought you didn't care for the money."

"My dear sir," said Dorrance, unmoved, "when you have associated with decent people for any length of time—if you ever do—your thoughts may be of some consequence. At present, your opinion is of absolutely no moment."

"The boat is ready, sir," a man reported.

"And now, gentlemen, I thank you for the pleasure which your company has afforded me. O, not a word, sir—to Mr. Wharton—the obligation is entirely on my side. Good evening." He was bowing them over the side when a thought struck him. "O, parson! I quite forgot we may need your services. Do not go."

So the parson stayed—most willingly. It seemed to Darby, and the Beau Gallant turned tail on the lights of Mobile, picked up her boat and steamed swiftly back over her course.

The dawn found the yacht swinging lazily at anchor. Mr. Dorrance came on deck, refreshed by a bath and a breakfast, yet with a carking doubt for a background to his thoughts. He received an immediate impression that all nature was chuckling in huge enjoyment of his predicament. The tilting wave-lets, tremulous with living gold; the whirling, eddying breeze; the deep, tender beauty of the sky, flecked sparsely with shreds of mist; the far reaches of the southern landscape palpitant with the touch of spring, to him all were laughing softly as at a successful practical joke. Even the mocking birds were true to their reputation, gleefully chaffing him from the pines.

He leaned upon the rail, scowled and down at the careless sea.

Here, an hour later, the slothful Darby found him.

"Well," cried Darby, genially, "for an expectant bridegroom—"

Dorrance favored him with a heavy glare.

"Bridegroom," he said slowly, "but eternally—"

"What! Why, but yesterday—"