

The Magpie's Nest

By ISABEL PATERSON

Illustration by MARY ESSEX

NORRIS CARTER told her afterward it was her eyeglass that drew his attention first; the sun glinted on it, and the sparkle caught his glance. Hope looked up and through him, with concentrated scorn, and fixed her rapt gaze on a woman in purple hat and tangerine coat, and then she bent to her pad again. The eyeglass infuriated Carter as a woman's eccentricity does any man, because he knows he is too great a coward to dare so much himself in the face of his fellowmen. He leaned against the railing and looked at her, getting a crick in his neck doing it, since the press box is high.

"She looks dissipated," he pronounced, observing her pallor, but failing to note the faint hollow of her cheek, its concomitant. "Queer eyes. That green fades them, or something. Her eyelashes are black. I'm sure she drinks." Then he caught sight of her spats, as she shifted and crossed her feet. "I have really got to meet her and find out why she does it," he said, being thoroughly alive, and interested in almost anything. He was waiting for a reporter he knew. "She looks horribly bad tempered," he concluded, charitably. There was Ellerslie, the man he knew. He rushed forward and seized him.

"No, I don't know her," said Ellerslie, "but I'll find someone who does. Another, Nick? Gad, you're the limit." They climbed to the box.

But it seemed as if no one knew her. At last another reporter said he had met her, once, but she did not seem to remember it, judging by her frosty look. Under repeated urgings, however, he went forward and recalled the incident to her.

"I think I do remember," she said, not so uncordially as he had feared. "But you know I'm a perfect idiot about that sort of thing. My friends invariably throw a brick at me by way of salutation, to remind me of their existence and identity. I'm glad there is someone here I know. Isn't that blackpointed bay a lovely thing. I've got ten dollars on him—of course, you may introduce someone. Howjedo, Mr. Morris. Did you order a rainstorm? There's one coming. I hope my bay can swim." She continued gazing at the horses, and was not quite sure of which of the several men at her elbow—they were crowded now, since some people have almost a mania for pressboxes—had been introduced.

There was a rainstorm coming up. Carter disclaimed any responsibility, and tried to tell her his real name. She called him Cartwright, and he began to feel deeply exasperated. Later, as the last race was ending and they were making their way gingerly across the muddy "lawn" toward the exit and the cars, she piled on the last straw. He had implored her to wait for an umbrella, or whatever protection he might be able to conjure up.

"Thanks, but don't trouble," she said. "I daresay I'm more used to this sort of thing than you."

He wanted to box her ears. Did he look like a man of sugar? Or as if he feared the weather? All she had in mind was that it rained eight months of the year in Seattle; but he could not know that.

"Why," he began in an aggrieved tone, "I've lived half my life out of doors—I—"

Now what had she done? She knew that tone, from long habit of stepping on people's toes unaware. How had she insulted this—she took her first real look at him—very agreeable young man?

A very comely young man, too—was it possible? He had strong looking hands, tanned beyond fashionable requirements; he had no stick; he had a fresh brown face with wide-open blue eyes—and where had she seen such yellow hair on any man? It was unusual, but familiar.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked, voicing her thoughts so neatly that she started.

"Could you ever forget me?" she asked gravely, keeping her eyes down.

"Not now," he countered readily.

"Oh, piffle!" was her mental comment. "Served me right." And she did not answer, not knowing what to say. They splashed along silently.

"You look tired," he ventured at last, banally.

"Do I?" with marked indifference. "It's this green suit; makes me look yellow. I fancy you mean cross, though. I lost twenty dollars on those deceitful horses; can you blame me? Look at my lovely white spatter-dashes—nice name, they look it now." The mud was creeping up them in streaks and spots; they were a deplorable sight. "All the money I had in the world," she went on dreamily. Somehow that remark gave him a dreadful pang—to think of her losing all she had in the world. All she was thinking was that it meant she simply must, now, find a cheaper room somewhere, for this extravagance of betting, on top of her previous extravagance of clothes, had taken almost all her reserve fund.

But he could only express his anxiety indirectly, and returned to the weather. "You're getting soaked," he declared, almost angrily.

"I like it, honestly," she said. "Like rain, and the feel of rough weather if it isn't too cold; I like even this mud, after the New York pavements. You know—those millions of miles of streets, and even the parks paved and railed off—make you feel as if you'd never get your feet on the earth again. People in New York don't, do they? I get homesick for the wilderness, sometimes; I don't want it always but, a touch of it is so sane." She was surprised that she had found so much to say, and still more at his quick enthusiasm. He asked her if she did not love the Adirondacks, and she confessed they were no more than a name to her.

"I came from a very far country," she said, and named it vaguely as "the Northwest."

"Where?" he asked. "I travelled through there once—more than ten years ago—"

"No—did you?" She turned and looked at him hard. Now—now she knew—she had seen him before, the picture rose in her mind vividly. Would it for him? No, that was not possible; she had merely fallen back on a *cliche* when he had said that. To punish him she was silent on what was going through her mind; it was more amusing not to tell him, and she remained purposely vague to his repeated "Where?"

"All over," she said. "I cannot stay anywhere. By and bye I shall fly away from New York. There is my car—thank you."

"Where do you live in New York?" He tried to make the question casual as he helped her aboard; duty compelled him to rejoin the party he had come with, though they might have gone by now. She told him the name of her hotel, and maliciously refrained from adding that she would undoubtedly leave within a day or two. He would forget it anyway; people did forget in New York. And he did not write it down, so she felt more certain.

He did not in the least need to write it down.

CHAPTER XX.

WATCHING him unobtrusively from the corners of her long light gray eyes, Mrs. Sturtevant felt certain that Norris had something on his mind. Being a woman, she felt equally certain it was another woman. It was not intuition so much as the mere vanity from which neither sex is exempt, a vanity of sex itself, told her so; but it was truth none the less. They were in Mrs. Sturtevant's own drawing-room, a very delightful room, full of sunlight and graceful Colonial furniture and masses of pale flowers. Norris was there very frequently, as a cousin may be without examining his conscience on the matter, even if only a second cousin.

The drawing-room suited Grace Sturtevant perfectly. She knew that, and had once, in a moment of studied cynicism, told a friend that she had been obliged to eliminate her husband—by way of the divorce court—because he simply did not match either of them. He was a large, ruddy, full-blooded creature, or had been when she saw him last, some years before. What he was now she neither knew nor cared; though, to do her justice, she had once cared very deeply.

She was tall, almost taller than her cousin, and looked as like him as one so different could. But the likeness was faded down, attenuated, as in a half-tone copy of an oil painting. She was slim, and very white; her complexion endured with credit the proximity of the white and pale pink blossoms she loved; her hands and feet were long and narrow, what is called patrician, and her straight, silky hair of an ash-blonde tint. Distinguee, her friends called her; she did not object to the adjective.

"Do sit down, Nick," she said at last. Her voice was cultivated, clear, passionless; it seemed to express her perfectly—and did not. "Spare my carpet," she added lightly. "I cannot afford a new one. Are you in love or in debt? You have all the symptoms."

"Neither, thanks," he said, slowly. For one fleeting moment he was inclined to confide in her; it was no particular distrust of her stayed his tongue, but rather a shamefaced thought that the whole matter was so trivial as to border on the absurd. The fact was that had he belonged to the species for which such naive volumes are compiled, he would have been resorting to a "Guide to Manners," on "How a Young Gentleman Should Pay His First Addresses to a Young Lady He Respectfully Admires." He wanted, in brief, to call on Mrs. Angell—he did not know her name was Hope, and frankly wondered what it might be.

Now he had never before found it a difficult matter to call upon any woman, and that alone upset him seriously. Perhaps it was because of her mal-treatment of his name; possibly he feared she would call him Mr. Cartwright again, or even be unable to get so near as that to fixing his identity. It would be quite horrible to have to account for himself in detail and give a reason for his mere existence while attempting at the same time to explain why he was there giving such a reason. The matter at that point became too complicated to be pursued further, but it seemed to have endless possibilities and ramifications. Nor was it simplified by the fact that he had, already, been to her hotel and discovered her absent; and the knowledge of having bribed the desk clerk with a cigar to ask of the baggageman whither her trunk had been conveyed—she had said she would call for letters, if any came,—weighed on him like a secret crime.

But, having gone so far, he felt bound in honor to himself to reach a conclusion—and the lady of his quest. He had got her telephone number, too; at least, that of her landlady. It was a real problem to him whether he should telephone her, or go in person. . . . Actually, he had twice removed the telephone from its hook intending to take the first alternative, and backed down ignominiously, and the remembrance of that made him rise and walk across the room each time it came to his mind, which was every five minutes or so. He wondered feebly if his brain might be giving way.

Hang it all, she would hardly bite him . . . she was only about as big as a minute . . . and also, he reflected with a certain malignant satisfaction, she wasn't a bit pretty. He repeated that to himself several times. No, she looked washed-out, and her profile was smudgy. . . . And he distinctly recalled crows' feet at the corners of her eyes. . . .

"No, I just feel restless. Sick of town. If I could get away I think I'd go up to the North Woods for a month; I'd like to sniff a campfire again, and sleep under the stars." . . . She had been talking about the wilderness. . . .

"My dear Nicko," said Mrs. Sturtevant, with provoking calm, "you came back from the Adirondacks just ten days ago, didn't you? Think up a better one. Or why not tell the truth?"

"Oh, Grace," he said, with a rather rueful laugh, "call off your bear. You always make me feel as if I'd been up to something positively criminal. I can't help it if I'm a wild ass of the desert. I guess I'll beat it down town; I ought to be there anyway. Business," he added, with that firm vagueness a man always employs when using that magic word, twin sister to charity in its powers of benevolent concealment.

"If you'd only grow up," sighed Mrs. Sturtevant, and came to him, laying her long white fingers on his sleeve. A faint glow, a warmth, came into her cool eyes; and a veiled impatience. Ah, if he would! She had waited so long, years, for him to grow up; and he was still the boy she had played with when she was in pig-tails and he in knickers. She had grown up, though she was one of those fine-grained, poised creatures who awaken slowly. Marriage had been her hothouse, but when she had come to maturity there was nothing one-sided about it; her excellent brain was equal to her well-conserved emotional nature. And now, sometimes Nick made her feel not only mature but old! Why, why did he remain so maddeningly the same, when all else in her apparently solid world had changed so incredibly? There were times when she very primitively longed to slap him, as an exasperated tutor might an inattentive pupil.

"Oh, now, Gracie," he began deprecatingly, his eyes twinkling. "What do you want—gray hair, or to see me tottering around on crutches?"

What did she want? Her hand dropped; she turned away, her movements gracefully deliberate, and went to the window, a curiously general trick of anyone who has need of concealment.

"You are a fool, Nick," she said sharply, "but not so much as that. I made the mistake of being really interested in—in your welfare; you will pardon me. If you do not care, there is no reason why I should."

Sometimes he thought Grace was growing a bit shrewish, she disapproved of him so often and so candidly. But he was used to it; he put it down to her one great disappointment—the one of which he knew. Women, anyway, he thought, were rather inclined to worry a chap. They were always scolding him, at least, and it was not that he was ever anything but nice to them. And good old Grace was really fond of him, he felt sure; comfortably sure, just as he was of his own fondness for her.

"I'm getting on your nerves," he remarked resignedly. "I'm off."

"Nonsense," she said brusquely. "Aren't you going (Continued on page 43)



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