

THE CLUB CINDERELLA

BY EDWIN PUGH.

Beechwood is married, intensely married. But there is an excuse for him. Her name is Peggy and she is his wife. She is perfect; or, if not perfect, the perfection of charming imperfections. It is understood, generally, that that marriage has blighted my life. That sort of thing makes a man feel older than he looks. I do not mind, that is to say, I should not mind if only Beechwood would let me alone but he does not seem to see the necessity for this.

The other day, for instance, I was talking to Wickham. We were in the club. Suddenly Beechwood loomed upon us. He thrust himself into the conversation, and perhaps I was a bit peevish.

"Never mind, old chap," he said, quite irrelevantly, "no doubt you will find your affinity some day." And he patted me on the shoulder.

"Which of us do you mean?" asked Wickham, who affects misogyny, and had not seen the cause of my peevishness.

"Both of you," said Beechwood, genially.

"If both of us find my affinity there will be trouble," said I. "By the way, I saw you the other day with your aunt."

"You don't know the lady evidently," I said. (She really was my aunt, but I dissembled.)

"I thought she was your aunt," he said. "She looked like an aunt."

"Her name is a rich widow," Beechwood regarded me doubtfully. Wickham, falling into my trap, winked at him.

"Surely—," muttered Beechwood, looking aghast. He deliberated. "Love is the only excuse for marriage," he said, trenchantly.

"But money is a justification," I retorted.

Wickham cocked a careless thumb at me. "Our friend Gill is getting to be a profound cynic, you see," he said. "A cynic," I remarked. "Is never profound."

"Well, perhaps, you're not profound exactly," Beechwood conceded. "Still, you are a sort of cynic, aren't you?"

"My little brother is one, I believe," I replied unpleasantly. (Is anyone a cynic after twenty?)

"We won't go into that," said Beechwood. "I really dropped in to ask you to dine with us tomorrow, that's all. Peggy is dying to see you again. She hears so much about you, you see, one way and another."

"What does she hear?" I exclaimed, rather startled.

"Only what I tell her. I edit you carefully," he assured me. "So I went, Beechwood called for me at the office. We journeyed on to the Tube."

"Wonderful invention!" he said, puffing at his cigar.

"Marriage?" I queried.

"No, no. The Tube," he laughed. "What made you think I meant marriage?"

"You usually do mean marriage," said I.

"I wish you would settle down," he sighed. "Look what a useless life you lead!"

"It's useful to me," I pleaded.

"Always bored—," I have married friends."

"Never content. Nobody to care a button about you."

"Come," said I. "You don't know that. What is a landlady compared with a wife?"

"My landlady is a wife," he said. "Is that her fault?"

He gazed at me, alarmed. "Surely," he said, "she was not the lady I saw you with the other day?"

"Do rich widows take in lodgers?"

"No. Not paying lodgers, anyhow," he admitted.

We alighted at Shepherd's Bush and went our way toward Bedford Park.

"I say, old chap," said Beechwood, "I believe I've hit on the very girl for you."

"Yes, you have," said I, "and married her."

He was grave. "Of course," he said, "there isn't Peggy's equal in the world."

"And yet," I reminded him, "you are always advising me to marry a girl like her."

"I mean well," he protested.

"Yes," said I. "You mean well; but I haven't forgotten the fable of the fox who lost his tail in a trap and tried to persuade the other foxes to get rid of their brushes."

"After all, it is a fable," he laughed. Presently he said: "You remember that girl at the last Club Cinderella?"

"Which girl?" he asked.

"The girl you liked so."

"No, I don't remember her," said I. "I remember—"

"You'll meet her this evening," I flung grammar to the winds. "Meet who?"

"Miss Pyle."

"Don't know her."

"You danced with her three times."

"If to dance with a girl is to know her—," she remembers you. Often talks about you to Peggy. Thinks you no end clever and all that. Perhaps I oughtn't to mention it."

"Go on," said I, forcing an appearance of interest.

"No," said he, perceivingly. "I see now. I ought not to have mentioned it."

We arrived at his house. Mrs. Beechwood greeted me with a matronly ease of manner that was slightly ridiculous, considering.

"Let me introduce you to Miss Pyle," she cooed. "Ah, how stupid of me! I forgot you were quite old friends."

I bowed to a girl with fluffy hair, whom I did not recognize, ever to have seen before. I wondered what the Beechwoods meant by it. Then I felt that I knew very well. Still, one is always a gentleman.

"It was rather a jolly function, wasn't it?" said I.

"Function?" Her eyebrows climbed her forehead.

"That last Club Cinderella."

"You were there?"

I stared at her. "I danced with you three times, you know," said I.

"That last Club Cinderella."

I glared across at Beechwood savagely. If this were his notion of humor—!

We went down to dinner. There were just four. The Beechwoods did not mind the talking. When the two ladies had withdrawn I asked Beechwood plainly what the devil he meant by it.

"Have a cigar," he said. "I'm sorry."

"So you ought to be," I breathed.

"I don't mean I'm sorry about you," he said. "I'm sorry about her."

"Confound her," I cried.

"You see," he went on, "I'm afraid I was a little indiscreet before dinner."

"She might have been worse. It might have been dinner."

"As a matter of fact, old chap," said Beechwood, betraying embarrassment, "Miss Pyle is a hang it all—one can't say it. You understand?"

"You are always so lucid. I understand that she thinks me an impertinent ass. I don't believe I danced with her at all that Cinderella. Anyhow, she's clean forgotten me."

"Did she say so?" he reflected.

"Of course she would say so."

"She was a deal about it. Almost snubbed me."

Beechwood looked puzzled. "You have your vices, I know," he said; "but I never numbered modesty among them before. Man, are you blind?"

He rose hurriedly and paced the floor. "Gill, old chap," he said, "he really ought not to you know. It isn't fair."

"What isn't fair?"

"That trick of yours. That way you have of looking at a woman as if she were the only one of her sex in the world." He rumbled his hair. "Now, I've been and done it! For the Lord's sake don't let Peggy know I've given her away."

"Do you mean that Miss Pyle is in love with me?" I asked him.

"I don't wonder you are surprised," said he.

"All I can say is, she has an odd way of showing it."

"That's not her way of showing it. That's her way of concealing it. Women are like that."

I was a good deal astonished, but not displeased. Of course, it was rough on Miss Pyle. I should have to disabuse her mind."

"Shall we join the ladies?" said I. He accepted the suggestion.

Mrs. Beechwood was playing the piano. Beechwood crossed the room and trifled with the keys. There was nothing for me to do but talk to Miss Pyle.

"Mr. Gill," said she, "I hope you didn't think me rude. I did remember you, really."

She was flushed and eager. How extremely sorry I felt.

"You see," said I, "I remembered you so well."

"But why should you?"

"That was an embarrassing question. I involved my wits in a florid compliment that ended in a long-drawn stammer."

"Sit down," she said, nervously. "Let us talk."

We talked. She was rather a bright girl; despite the state of agitation into which my proximity naturally threw her we got on very well together after a while.

At midnight we broke up. Miss Pyle was sleeping in the house. I shook hands with Beechwood on the doorstep.

"See you at the next Cinderella," said he. I nodded. "She'll be there," he informed me.

"Ah," said I, "it will be a nuisance."

"Rather pretty, don't you think?"

"Not quite my style," said I.

"Bless your sweet complacency!" said he. "There—I mean well." And with that cryptic remark we parted.

The cruel work of disabusing Miss Pyle's mind could not begin too soon. Accordingly I went.

I stood in the doorway and looked about me. Instantly I noticed Miss Pyle, walking with a fellow who obviously could never make any woman happy. The stewards marked me down, nodded, and were fairly humble.

The waltz came to an end. Miss Pyle promenaded the room with her partner. I carefully avoided her gaze.

"Here you are then!" said Mrs. Beechwood's voice in my ear. "Agatha—Miss Pyle—here."

"Yes," said I. "I haven't spoken to her yet."

"Has she seen you, do you think?"

"I'm sure she hasn't," said I.

"You've been watching her pretty closely, then."

I denied this. I explained that I had purposely evaded meeting Miss Pyle's eyes. But women do not seem to understand that a man of the world can keep whom he will under close observation without betraying the fact to his quarry. Mrs. Beechwood laughed, and left me to join Miss Pyle. I turned to meet the question of a whisky and soda with Beechwood, but, he, too, had disappeared. It was a bit dull. An hour passed and still Miss Pyle had not seen me, though once or twice we were almost face to face. Or was it that she fought against fostering a hopeless passion by intercourse with its object? I would gladly have bestowed myself on another partner for the evening and kindly killed poor Miss Pyle that way; but the absurd preponderance of men continued.

At last I could stand it no longer. Obeying a signal from Mrs. Beechwood, who was sitting out, I marched across the room and joined her. As I reached her side Miss Pyle appeared, emerging from the shelter of some hangings close by. She blushed at sight of me. For a few seconds the very soul of the woman seemed to look out of her eyes. Then she recovered herself.

"I'll leave you two together, if you don't mind," said Mrs. Beechwood, rising to leave. I saw Archie making towards the bar again. She turned to me. "You won't seem so dreadfully out of it now, Mr. Gill, with the prettiest girl in the room to amuse," she said.

She tripped away with a smile and a backward glance. It seemed to me she was not acting wisely.

"Please," said Miss Pyle, "don't let me keep you."

"She was in a flutter. Her breathing was spasmodic. Her whole demeanor expressed distress."

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"Three years ago," writes Mrs. John Graham, of 2011 Plum Street, Frankford, Philadelphia, Pa. "I had a very bad attack of dropsy which left me with heart trouble, and also a general weakness. I was so bad that I did not know what to do with myself. My children advised me to take your 'Favorite Prescription,' and I had been taking so much medicine from the doctor that I was discouraged with everything. I determined to try it myself. I took seven bottles, and to-day I am a strong, well woman, weighing 150 pounds. Have gained 50 pounds since I started to use 'Favorite Prescription.'"

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