

A Spring Song

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WITH the first whiff of Spring she drove into town in her gay little blue car and purchased a gardening set.

There were plenty of garden tools in the cellar and the shed and even in remote corners of the garage, but they were great, ugly, clumsy things such as only professional gardeners use, and she, of course, did not pretend to be anything but the most amateurish of amateurs—oh dear, no! Perhaps if she had not spied this particular entrancing set in the window of a hardware shop, marked down and greatly reduced, she might have used some of the many tools at home and been content.

She drew her car up at the curb and alighted to admire the set for a moment through the window. Then she went inside and examined it. It consisted of two kinds of rake, a hoe, a spade, a pair of shears and a tall, slender-spouted watering pot which sounds ordinary and uninteresting, but when you consider that all the handles and the watering-pot were painted a delicate apple green with little decorative bunches of fruit of conventional design, it is not perhaps surprising that she bought it then and there and stowed it away in the little blue car while she drove around on some errands. She felt that it was almost too delicate for a hardware store; it was as if she had rescued it from an ignominious end.

So much for the gardening set—that is, until she passed him just leaving the office and starting home, and stopped to offer to drive him in the gay blue car. He was none other than Rupert. Never mind what his last name was, it really doesn't matter! He accepted, of course, and looked as pleased as he sounded. He had quite a nice face, with laugh-lines beginning to show around the mouth and the dark grey eyes, and a nose that nobody would have scorned.

There was only room for two in her car, so the gardening set had to be disturbed, and her little extravagance came to light.

"So-ho," said he, examining carefully the apple-green handles and the gay bunches and clusters of fruit. "I see the Lady Alice has been indulging in useless and expensive things to add to her beauty when she gardens."

He said it with mock-seriousness and glanced up in time to see the tilt of an offended chin, barely visible because of the brim of her new spring hat which came down coquettishly in front and on his side. Provoking, the way some hats are made!

"Really," she said, pouting and concentrating on her steering, "really, I almost wish I hadn't picked you up."

He knew better than to believe this and smiled quietly over the watering-pot which sat saucily on his lap. She had driven him home "umpteenth" times before and he did not anticipate any suspension of her hospitality just because he had laughed at the apple-green gardening set. They were very good friends and it is the privilege of good friends to be frank.

"It doesn't seem to me," he went on, "that tools of that colour could be of the least use. Now could they?"

"Mere man!" said she with a gay laugh. "His point of view. No, of course not, they're meant more for beauty than use. If I were growing an acre of vegetables it might be different—turnips and carrots and onions and potatoes—ugh! I'd have to have ugly tools in that case—to match, don't you see?"

He did not, but laughed joyously nevertheless. They swung into the avenue slowly, for neither was in any hurry, and the tops of the great trees on either hand, even yet bare and with no suggestion of green, were turned to a flaming gold from the sunset glory.

She thought he was looking ahead as she was. He was not. That was how she caught him in the act of looking at her with, well, a new expression in his eyes, when she glanced up to say—

"If you intended to grow pretty bright flowers, and wear a straw gardening hat shaped like a big poke-bonnet, with silly bunches of fruit on it, wouldn't you want to have gay little tools like these?"

"Oh, I—I suppose so," he said absently, with his mind exclusively on the person who would be under the poke-bonnet.

And then she changed the subject.

HE GRUDGINGLY yielded his seat to the absurd little watering-pot when they came to his house, which was lower on the avenue than hers. It took him a very long time to get out of the softly purring blue car and a still longer time to reach his final "good-bye." Then she was gone with a wave of her hand and a cherry smile; gone, with the silly apple-green gardening set clinking and jolting about beside her.

In a very few weeks it was May, warm and fragrant with green growing things, and every now and then, through the long, sunny days, the sun would slide shyly behind a cloud barely big enough to hide it, and an absurd little shower would come tumbling down to earth no more than might be contained in

WHEN he sat beside her in her little blue car he knew she was just the wife he needed. And because he wanted her so much he found himself "a mute, inglorious Milton" when it came to actually asking her. And then—well, who'd ever imagine an apple green gardening set and a terrible thunder shower would have any influence with a man who wanted a wife, but then you never can tell—you'd better read "The Spring Song" and see for yourself!

the apple-green watering-pot. And the young green things drank thirstily and when the sun slid out from the other side of the cloud they grew some more.

One evening as the sun was setting, it showered upon Rupert and Alice and the apple-green gardening set—suddenly and unceremoniously. He had come over after his evening meal many times before, to watch her work in her garden in the short, sweet space before dark, but never before had it rained in that particular time.

He pulled up his coat-collar and held his ground. She ran to the great wide verandah and sat watching him.

In the meantime it rained quite hard for several minutes.

"Oh, you're a fine gardener, you are!" he called, highly amused. "Running for cover, just as though you were caught out in a shower in your best clothes with no umbrella."

"Don't care," she retorted, making a face at him which he could hardly have seen at that distance. "I don't garden in the rain, if you do! There's plenty of time when it isn't raining. Besides, it would spoil my hat."

He continued to stand under a twisted old apple tree and the rain filtered down upon him through the young green leaves. He leaned his great length against the trunk and whistled thoughtfully for a moment. Then—

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
"How does your garden grow?"

he chanted slowly.

"Very nicely, thank you, sir," she said, jumping up and curtsying mock-seriously. "In spite of the gardening set, which I suppose is why I am contrary, is it?"

"Oh, hang the gardening set!"

He reached the verandah in several long strides and stood before her, looking down at her with that old-new expression in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I teased you," he said, trying to see under the brim of the big poke-bonnet hat with the foolish little clusters of fruit upon it. She was looking down at her softly-tapping foot and smiling a little.

"Oh, I don't mind—really," she said. "I suppose I am a joke sometimes."

He took a hasty step nearer.

"You are not," he interrupted vehemently. "I love to watch you in your garden. You seem so—

so dainty—and—and delicate, like the flowers. I can't express it exactly—the way I feel. Maybe you will understand some day."

He stopped suddenly and looked away, into the west where the light was fast fading. She was still smiling a little wistful sort of smile; and she passed him slowly, pulling on again her gardening gloves, which smelt of rich, soft earth.

"Heigho!" she sighed. "It's stopped raining, Rupert, I do believe I can work for a few minutes longer. Want to help?"

"No thanks, I'll stay here, if you don't mind," which is just what she knew he would say, and she laughed and said,

"It's a case of,
When Eve delved
And Adam—"

"Ran," suggested Rupert, and chuckled at his own wit. "You don't run exactly," she said. "You just carefully avoid anything to do with growing flowers, that's all."

"Oh, I'm too clumsy and heavy-handed, Alice. I wouldn't have success with anything short of a pumpkin or a squash that had a good hard shell."

"Rupert, don't be ridiculous!" came amusedly from among the deepening shadows under the apple trees.

He pulled out his favourite pipe, lighted it, and sat puffing meditatively in the dusk, watching a not very big figure, scarcely visible, move about among the flower-beds. It had been a very warm day, but, after the manner of Spring evenings, a chilly breeze sprang up after sundown, and he shivered involuntarily.

"It's too cold for you," he called, "even with your heavy sweater on, and it's going to rain again, so you'd better come in."

She came, not because he had summoned her, but because it was too dark to see any more.

"Do you know," she said, after she had put away the apple-green gardening set for the night, "I don't believe you like rain any better than I do, so there!"

Which was true, but he did not immediately admit it.

THE NEXT morning brought a sullen, lowering sky, and a high wind which blew the rain in leaden sheets against the window panes. And Rupert, on his way to the office, battled with the elements in no angelic frame of mind. Alice, looking out upon her garden, saw it drinking greedily, though later in the day muddy puddles appeared in hollows in the flower beds, and the paths began to resemble little running rivers. Night came, and the wind rose and howled in the trees and around the house even louder. Alice, curled up in a big soft chair by a cheery, open fire, listened to the water pouring from the corner of the eave-troughs in splashing torrents, and wondered what Rupert was doing, and whether he would brave the storm before the evening was out and come over as he had almost every evening for weeks.

He did not come. He telephoned, and said he was sorry he could not come over to see her, but—

Yes, she knew he couldn't possibly come out in such a storm, but perhaps it would clear to-morrow. And they talked of other things for the best part of an hour, while the wire swung and sang in the gale between them.

To-morrow came and it still rained, and the garden had a bedraggled look when the wind was through with it. There was no break in the low, heavy clouds and the rain fell in straight lines from heaven to earth with discouraging persistence. Alice spent the day sitting by an upstairs window, working listlessly and not too fast upon a pile of mending, which she hated. She wondered if it would ever stop raining and if anything would be left of her precious garden, and if Rupert would come over this evening, and many other things.

Once more he telephoned, early in the dripping night, and he was still so sorry—

She was a little less sympathetic and understanding this time and they only talked for twenty minutes.

The third day dawned upon a swimming world, and the Avenue, the whole of its sloping way into town, was a rushing, muddy river and the wheels of the passing motor cars sprayed water on either hand as they went by. Nevertheless, the gay little blue car took its mistress down in the morning during a temporary lull in the downpour. The streets glistened and the overhead wires dripped and the brightly lighted shops offered a great contrast to the dull grey outside. By lunch time the heavens had opened once more and the face of the land was poured upon—a steady, unrelenting rain like a leaden veil.

Through the third evening Alice sat with a book, which she scarcely read, while outside the water from the overflowing eaves splashed noisily into great puddles and pools below and the rain kept up its insistent, droning

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