

MR. CUPID, TAILOR AND HABERDASHER

(By Allan P. Ames.)

Under the circumstances, Mrs. Massinger's error was quite natural. A four-mile tramp through the brush had deprived an old camping suit of its last sartorial reminiscence, while a two-weeks' growth of beard completed a disguise as unflattering as it was effective.

Primarily, however, the fault was neither mine nor Mrs. Massinger's, but her husband's. When he urged me to put in a few days at his Adirondack camp I had accepted, without knowing more about the place than its location, and forgetting his habit of disparaging his own hospitality.

"If you're up in the woods this summer," he had said, "don't fail to drop in at our shack. You'll find things rather unconventional; but if you don't mind roughing it, I can promise you some of the best fishing south of the St. Lawrence."

Remembering that Massinger knew what good fishing was, when, early in July, I found myself the sole survivor of the party with which I had entered the mountains, I packed a modest bag and started to drive over to his lake. Expecting to meet no one but John and a few of his male friends, I was dressed for comfort and convenience only.

Arriving about seven o'clock, while the sun was still above the horizon, I stepped out of the woods into the midst of a group of buildings that would have done credit to the most luxurious summer resort between Bar Harbor and Palm Beach. The main structure was of rough-hewn logs, but lacking not one attribute of comfort. Near at hand were a stable and carriage house and a separate cottage for the servants, while about fifty yards distant appeared through the trees a palatial boat house.

Yet even this unexpected magnificence failed to prepare me for the surprise of the interior. As luck had it, the door of the dining-room stood open onto the long verandah, and, mistaking it for the main entrance, I strode in unannounced.

Without the actual experience, no one can appreciate the sensation of stepping out of the primeval forest into a twentieth-century house party in all the bravery of evening attire.

Never had woman's beauty flashed with such dazzling splendor, nor well-groomed men appeared so gallant. As I stood, dumb and staring, on the threshold, uncertain whether to advance or withdraw, one face shown out from the circle about the table and, puerile as the impulse was, I could not bring myself in such a plight to meet its owner before the rivals with whom she was surrounded.

If she failed to recognize me, what could be expected of the rest? Massinger himself was not there. Moreover, the curtains were drawn and the room dimly lighted, so that until the butler pointed me out to Mrs. Massinger I escaped their notice altogether.

"Yes, but well set up. He looks strong enough to portage a canal boat," remarked a man at her left as careless of my presence as though I had been a dog or a horse.

"He's quite good looking," said one of the young women, "if his face were more refined."

I was beginning to wonder how much of this I could stand, when the grave butler motioned me toward the kitchen. Glad of the opportunity to retire and collect my scattered wits, I was hastening after him, when a new voice called me back.

"One moment, my good fellow. Can you handle a canoe?"

I nodded silently.

"Why, of course he can, Sir George," laughed the hostess. "What would be the use of a guide who couldn't?"

"I can't get the hang of the beautiful craft myself," replied the man. "It's quite unbecoming to punt."

"Here, let me show you," said Miss Ten Broeck, who had consented to let me take her out on the lake after dinner, and I am obliged to get somebody to paddle."

Naturally, at this, I stared hard at the speaker. Even without hearing his title I should have placed him as an Englishman. He could not have been far from thirty-five, and as I took in the perfect fit of his dinner coat, his breadth of shoulder and his ruddy, clean-shaven visage, jealousy assailed me in a new and concrete form.

I remembered him then as the Northumberland baronet who had been pursuing her from house to house and with a perseverance worthy of success.

Miss Ten Broeck, however, was talking to her neighbor, apparently unconscious of the smile her suitor's frank admission had sent flickering around the table. Her manner might mean everything or nothing, but the Englishman's was alarmingly like the assurance of a man who, if he had not already won, never dreamed of defeat.



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scenery, strained my self-control to the limit; but I had gone too far to turn back now, therefore I only inclined my head a second time and backed through the door into the welcome refuge of the kitchen.

While eating what the cook set before me and inventing a complete biography to satisfy her questions, I pondered in vain to find some avenue of escape. When my luggage arrived I could assume the footing to which I was entitled, but until then I concluded to remain incognito and obey orders. The situation was trying, but, on second thought, endurable.

Far down in my heart even lurked a mean and guilty joy because Fate might give me power to foil any plan of conquest that might be planned for that moonlit eve.

When I reached the boat house the sun had set and the afterglow was fading. Sir George and Miss Ten Broeck were waiting, the former impatient to embark. The canoe they selected was a sumptuous affair, broad enough amidships to enable two to sit side by side, and of this feature they took immediate advantage, settling themselves comfortably among the rugs and cushions in the bottom.

Not a sound broke the stillness but the chorus of frogs and insects along the wooded shore. Even beyond the shelter of the tall trees the waters lay unrippled. The light canoe scarcely rippled the glassy surface.

"Paddle as quietly as you can," Sir George cautioned, and, though I say it, my best in canoeing is something to brag of. The blade never left the lake, and not a drop splashed to mar the glistening silence.

The twilight lingered in until it was impossible to say just when the day ended and the night began, for before the transformation was complete the full moon showed pale above the tree-tops, growing gradually smaller and more luminous until it ruled the heavens.

As they watched it rise, Sir George and the girl stopped talking and even I laid the paddle across the thwart and let the soothing beauty of the night sink into my harassed soul.

It was a spell soon broken. The Englishman doubtless figured on permitting his companion just enough rapt contemplation to perfect a frame of mind most favorable to his purpose. When they began to speak again it was in tones which on shore would have been inaudible three feet away, but on that breathless stretch of water, even though they faced in the opposite direction, every syllable came back to the stern with perfect distinctness.

He wasted no words leading up to his theme; the situation was introduced enough. From a few stereotyped phrases of the present scene he passed to the beauties of his English home and thence to his family and those tenderly intimate topics a man brings forward when he is bent on fixing a girl's interest in himself. He did it well, too confoundedly well! and as I recognized the trend of his remarks I fidgeted with impotent rage. Her face I could not see; but there was nothing in her attitude, as she sat carelessly training one hand in the water to indicate a distaste for either existing circumstances or the end she must have foreseen.

The climax came sooner than I expected. In meaning accents Sir George recalled his faithful pursuit since their first meeting; "You must have perceived it," said he, "you must know what I am after. Tell me—don't you understand—Aldine?"

As he spoke her name he reached over and took her hand.

"Did I wait to see whether he would be allowed to hold it? Never! The act and the 'Aldine' together proved the last straw upon my fast-weakening powers of endurance. With an incoherent protest on my lips I knocked the paddle out of the way and sprang forward. The cranky craft lurched wildly, and before I could catch my balance, upset and dumped us into the lake.

Because I was standing, I fell clear of the canoe, and when I rose and shook the water from my eyes I found it floating bottom up, beyond my reach. Fearful lest the others might be entangled under it, I swam with all my strength. At the second stroke a damp, curly head bobbed up right before me. It was Miss Ten Broeck, and, although she gave no evidence of needing to be rescued, I hastily thrust a hand under her shoulder and helped her reach the canoe. Barely had I secured a hold on the pointed bow when around from the opposite side came the Englishman, splashing like a side-wheeler, and, regardless of the fact that she was already well cared for, seized her by the other arm.

"Don't be frightened," he cried; "I will hold you up."

"I'm not frightened," she calmly replied; but, without noticing her manner, he turned and began berating me for causing the accident.

"Here, that'll do," I interrupted at last, growing weary of his abuse. "I may have tipped the lady out, but I'm perfectly able to get her ashore and without any help from you, either."

I may have spoken with considerable heat; for while the sudden immersion had not quenched my wrath it wiped out all remembrance of the assumed role. The baronet could not have shown more amazement if I had struck him in the face. He gasped and almost lost his hold on the canoe, while his monocle, which has survived all previous vicissitudes, forsook the shelter of an amazed eyebrow and dropped into the lake.

"Why, fellow, you are impudent!" he stammered. "How dare you lay a hand on this lady? Remove your arm, instantly!"

The retort I had framed was equally vigorous, but before it had passed my lips he turned his face full into the moonlight and instantly my resentment died. The plunge had plastered his thin, straw-colored hair down over his forehead with a meek effect, which the ferocity of his crimson visage and bristling moustache ludicrously belied. His former dignity was so totally eclipsed that, in spite of myself I laughed aloud. Yes, I laughed; and no wonder, for at that moment I realized that so far as appearances went we were at last on an equal footing. When a man is up to his neck in water it matters little how he is clothed.

"Take my hands off!" I chuckled. "Oh, I guess not. I think too much of the lady's safety." With this I slid my arm into a firmer hold about her waist.

The opening of this dispute gave Miss Ten Broeck her first opportunity to hear my voice. That she found it familiar I know, at once by the way she started and the intentness with which she scanned my dripping features. She said nothing, however, nor did she move, except to settle back almost imperceptibly against my supporting arm, in a manner that to me at least, indicated satisfaction with the existing arrangement.

But it was far otherwise with Sir George. "I tell you I am responsible for this lady's safety and do not require your assistance," he retorted, glaring so absurdly that I could not repress a smile.

Then, for the first time, the lady took a hand. "Gentlemen, isn't this a poor place for a quarrel? I'm not much of a swimmer, and both of you can probably find enough to do getting me ashore."

"Pat," I cried, the baronet, "I refuse to let you place yourself under obligation to this man when I am quite able to care for you myself. You don't seem to realize that his clumsiness is responsible for our present plight."

"Wasn't it you, Sir George, who proposed coming out here?" she inquired, with a lurking smile.

"Miss Ten Broeck, this is not the time nor place for pleasantry," he responded angrily. "Will you, or will you not, command this fellow to release you?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't even if I told him to; so what's the use?" she asked, plaintively. "But there's room for you both. Please do something of your own. This water is so cold."

"It is evident that you do not trust me," said Sir George, with returning dignity. "Since you refuse my aid, there is nothing more I can do. Good evening."

If he had been wearing a hat, I am sure he would have made a most handsome bow; but the hand that was bent involuntarily to his forehead found none, so he replaced his eyeglasses instead and, letting go of the canoe, struck out for the shore.

"Hi!" I shouted, "You're headed wrong, the camp's in the opposite direction. But he swam steadily on, heedless of the warning. The point he sought was half a mile away while the boat-house lay distant barely a hundred yards, though hidden from sight by the canoe."

"Don't worry about him," said Miss Ten Broeck, unfeelingly. "He looks like a strong swimmer, and a good, long soaking in this mountain lake water will certainly improve his temper."

Until our feet touched the pebbly bottom she remained silent, seconding my efforts with an intelligence and coolness that provoked my boundless admiration. But the moment we began to wade she burst out with the query I had long expected:

"Now, sir, what does it all mean?" "Does all what mean?" "This silly masquerade. When did you take up guiding?"

"Before I answer that," said I, "bear with me while I put another question of far more importance: Was the choice you made back there in the lake merely for the occasion, or was it one that you meant to last?"

"What choice?" she asked innocently. "That which led me to infer that you consider me a more desirable protector than the Englishman. Why did you send him away?"

"I didn't. He swam off of his own accord, in a huff. You saw him."

"That's not answering my question," I persisted. "What made you choose me instead of him?"

As I repeated the query we stepped from the water and stood on the clean strip of beach near the boat-house. The air was so much warmer than the water that the change was extremely grateful. The moon streamed in Aldine's face as I confronted her and waited.

"Well, what do you want me to say?" she inquired at length; but her eyes sank beneath my eager scrutiny. "You know very well."

Her look traveled down her limp and dripping dress, then rested on my bedraggled figure—suddenly her hands went out in a gesture of protest. "Oh, stop! Please stop!" she implored. "Don't you see what you are doing? This is not the time. Look at us!"

"I want my answer," I repeated to Aldine stubbornly.

"But can't you wait, only half an hour," she begged, "until we are able to get dry clothes and make ourselves a little less like scarecrows?"

"Clothes? Clothes be hanged! I don't want you to love my clothes."

Suddenly Aldine's whole manner changed. She advanced a step and returned a steady gaze. "Was that the reason you dressed so and pretended to be a guide?"

How I longed to dignify my silly artifice with the romantic explanation she was so ready to accept. A simple "Yes" would have done it.

"No!" I shouted desperately, fighting down the temptation. "That wasn't the reason. I wore these disreputable duds because I expected a rough fisherman's camp like the one I had left; and when in the midst of all that glitter I found you—I was ashamed, yes, afraid, to let you see me. So when nobody recognized me—not even you—and Mrs. Massinger mistook me for a guide, I thought I should."

"Heaven bless the girl! Her answer was a low, sweet laugh, two cool, wet arms around my neck, and—"You dear old simpleton! I'd rather love you, in rags, than Sir George, or anybody else, in the smartest clothes that were ever turned out of Poole's."

It was Christmas eve, and regular winter weather, and the snow was flying thick and fast. Poor old Granny, with tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks, stood poking at the scouldering fire, which would not be coaxing into a blaze, just as Karl entered and threw down an armful of chips.

"Couldn't you find drier ones? These wet ones make the fire smoke like that it makes Sonny cough worse. But never mind, do not start out for them now, for your poor little hands are stiff and blue with cold, and, anyhow, Sonny is crying for you."

Poor Sonny, on his miserable straw bed! Little did he know how it was breaking old Granny's heart when he kept asking her if she thought Santa Claus was coming this year to fill the little torn boot he had insisted upon her placing by the chimney piece, when she hadn't enough covering to keep his poor little sick, shivering body warm, and was racking her brain how to get nourishment for him.

"Say, Granna," said Karl, after he had heard Sonny whimpering and crying, and had asked the question. "Had he seen anything of Santa Claus while he was picking up chips?" "Say Granna, I don't believe Santa Claus knows where we live, do you? You've always told us how good and kind he is; and if he knew how Sonny wants him, and where we live, I'm sure he would come down the chimney to-night. Don't believe he knows where we live."

And Granny shook her head and said, sorrowfully: "I am afraid that's it, my boy."

Just then the deep-toned bell of a nearby church rang out for the children's Christmas festival.

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around and place their presents on the bed. Just then he awoke, calling out: "He has come! He has come, Granna, ain't he?" "Yes, my child, he has come," said Miss Courtright, bending over him and stroking the sunny curls from his forehead. "Yes, he has come, and he never will go by your house again. Don't you see him fussing around the fireplace, filling that little boot?"