

Through the Medium of Lettuce

Casey Maginnis Took the Bit in His Teeth When He Visited Mlle. Brenda LaFoi

By MADGE MACBETH

JUST as many men find solace and inspiration in a pipe, Mr. Casey Maginnis found surcease from worry in a tooth-pick; it was, one might say, the Damon to his Pythias. He sat, feet propped high, hat tilted low, in a small hotel's small bedroom by the window, which overlooked as varied an assortment of roofs as could be found in a cosmopolitan city. Flat roofs, sloping roofs, tin roofs, gravelled roofs; roofs decorated with the short and simple flannels of the poor, garbage tins or gin bottles; roofs upon which a feeble attempt at landscape gardening had been made, lay unfolded to Mr. Maginnis' callous gaze. He saw none of them; his heart was not in his eyes, so to speak. In fact, that organ, leaving its comfortable ribular quarters—quarters it had occupied for exactly twenty-nine years come Good Friday, was doing its thumping elsewhere. Laying aside the mantle of metaphor, it may be tersely stated that Mr. Maginnis was in love.

Misfortunes had lately descended upon the gentleman in staggering lumps, although they were not of the variety which prevented him from exuding an atmosphere of material prosperity. He was not a minion of the City Hall, sweltering in summer and shivering in winter in a creditable attempt to do what his employers never tried—to "clean up the city." Mr. Maginnis was not a White Wing out of work; nor a White Wing at all. He was not a foreman, nor a timekeeper, nor a porter, nor a carter—vocations which had called many hundreds of his countrymen to swell their ranks. Mr. Maginnis was his own master. He owned an estate some fifty miles beyond the line defined as the city limits, and he grew lettuce under glass.

There was no mortgage on the estate. Lettuce had seen to that. For, with an ease which Atlas might have envied, it lifted what small indebtedness there was, upon its curling shoulders and hurled it back into Isadore Moluski's gold teeth. Why should the owner of the two acres of unmortgaged lettuce worry?

Mr. Maginnis was a bachelor. Females had no place in his scheme of life, with the exception of ancient Norah, the housekeeper; Molly, the equine quadruped; Dolly, the bovine, and Polly, the canine hero-worshipper. Lettuce had provided all the diversion his fancy craved. To those who understand, it combines many alluring attributes; it coquettes, it blushes, it responds, it nestles, it yields, or it withholds. It is an unfathomable study. But with all its feminine characteristics, it cannot keep house. And Norah's rheumatic, but tireless, old fingers were now stilled forever.

Mr. Maginnis had tiptoed about the house for three days after her death, unable to fully realize his loss. Every time a board creaked he looked up smiling, expecting her to appear. He sat at his solitary meals in a state of tension, waiting for some one who did not come. His loneliness in the evenings was intolerable, and the third night found him decided to go to the city in quest of another housekeeper.

The natural thing to do under the circumstances would have been to consult the parish priest. But as the reverend shepherd of the flock had several times made pointed remarks about Mr. Maginnis' celibate condition, he deemed it wise to adjust his domestic trouble without parochial consultation. Until a few moments previous to the opening of this simple chronicle, Mr. Maginnis had not desired a wife; merely a housekeeper. Cynicism was not a part of his makeup, and he did not confuse the two terms. But so ironical is Fate, that here he sat, in a small hotel's small back bedroom absently wielding a tooth-pick and gazing with unseeing eyes out upon the amorphous roofs of a city's lesser causeways—hopelessly in love!

Is it any wonder that the tooth-pick lost its cunning?

CUPID had hit Mr. Maginnis clean between the eyes on the first night of his arrival in the metropolis. He had eaten a healthy supper under the stimulus of metropolitan excitement and had helped himself to the contents of the glass bowl which, adorned with a telling red bow, sat on the table in front of the lady who punched meal tickets. He had found the tooth-picks good ones—capable of much ruminative though unconscious usage.

Feeling that nothing could be gained so late in the evening, Mr. Maginnis had set out upon a digestive stroll before wrapping himself in slumber. But—the gaping maw of a vaudeville house yawned at his feet. As fast as the victims disappeared behind the swinging green doors, the greedy monster smacked its lips and gaped for more atoms with which to fill its body.

Mr. Maginnis threw himself into the breach. He halted before seven photographs of Mlle. Brenda LaFoi, tastefully arranged (with gilt thumb tacks) on an easel, and stared into the wide-open, wistful eyes of the headliner, who was briefly announced as being "THIS WEEK."

Then he bought a ticket and went inside.

"Begorra," said Mr. Maginnis to himself. "Be-

gorra, but Millie Brenda shure has got a great pair of lamps!"

He was right. Mlle. Brenda LaFoi realized the kindness of Nature in the matter of lamps, and used them effectively. She was a small creature, black-haired and round faced. Her lips, very red without the use of salve, pouted. Her nose—a good nose—seemed to turn away from the disagreeable odours of life, and her eyes were surely unequalled in the world of mortals. Big, staring eyes, grey, heavily fringed, and set in a dusky ring, which merged into the faint pink of her round cheeks. She had a distinctly modern act, bought for the modest sum of twenty dollars from a wild-eyed young woman on Broadway.

"That's dashed good stuff—for you," the agent had grudgingly approved when she tried it. "I don't know what it means, but that ain't one, two, six. I gotta hunch that you can put it across—and that's all that matters."

Brenda, thus encouraged, put herself in the wild-eyed young woman's hands and learned her lines in a parrot fashion, which, strangely enough, added rather than detracted from them. She bought clothes of irreproachable style and cut, and happily fulfilled Mr. Murray's prophecy by "putting the stuff across," at thirty-five a week. Further, she had risen on the bill-boards to the top of the column, which, next season, would mean a substantial financial advance.

She was a product of the East Side and started out in life as Mamie Begg, to distinguish her from other New Yorkers. But even without a name, Mamie would have moved in an aura of her own. She was a wonderful accident set in uncongenial surroundings.

"I d'clare, I don't see how you came to be a child o' mine," Mrs. Begg was wont to remark with resentment, when her eldest-born would absent herself from the scene of general conflict occasioned by the inebrious homecoming of Mr. Begg. "Aint you got no feelin' fer yer Paw?"

"If yer mean, aint I the nachel jackass to stand aroun' duckin' while he th'ows things, same's one of them Indian knife slingers—No! I aint gotta feelin' in de woid!"

Thereupon Mrs. Begg would express her soul-stirred horror of such unfilial heresy by taking a pull at the gin bottle, and muttering into its warmish depths:

"Fer de lawd's sake!"

MAMIE cut loose from the family tree early in life. With a dozen younger branches to shed their umbrage over the parent stem, she was not greatly missed. She was an odd mixture of knowledge and ignorance, suspicion and innocence, and she looked upon every male creature with eyes of aversion. She saw in all of them the embryonic replica of Mr. Thaddeus Begg, her parent.

She had been variously wooed, especially since her advent into the theatrical world; callow youths haunted the stage entrance, and were more or less serious in their attentions, members of the bill angled for her favour, and local managers, who generally had a wife tucked conveniently out of sight, sought to lure her to suppers. She refused them all. Her encouragement thrown across the heads of the orchestra to the front-seaters was only sufficient to insure her five "curtains." When the presumably bald gentlemen had served her purpose she was finished with them.

"No trained hyenas for dearie," she would say to the guardian of the stage door. "When they come laughin' behind a bokay of toolips, give 'em a bone, an' tell 'em to beat it. When I pick out a joy-ridin' pardner I'll pick a noo style—one that aint fed some flossy in cafes since he wuz out er de kindergarten. T'anks!"

So the guardian of the door, seeing that she was in earnest, usually stood between her and the cavalier world. He naturally thought that she had a jealous husband "in front" and had to behave herself.

Upon occasions when the persevering slipped by, she would remark after a caustic dismissal:

"Hevings! has it come to surroundin' myself wit' bulldawgs fer protection? Don't you let no more of that brand loose on me, son! I'm a noivous woman."

On the evening in question she looked unconsciously into the eyes of Mr. Casey Maginnis as she drawled in the languid voice so fashionable in the best circles, and added another slave to her chariot wheels.

"No, Reginald, I cannot marry you! Do not press me for a reason—I find you false! False!"

Mlle. LaFoi turned slightly to the left and dropped her voice three notes, thereby giving the intelligent person the cue that Reginald was speaking.

"False? What can you mean, Genevieve?"

"Look! These tell-tale documents betray you! Can you deny that you never had your adenoids removed?"

"Genevieve! You can't throw me over thus! Think of the years I have spent in training! Think of the perseverance I have shown in conquering my pigeon toes! Think of the dieting I have done—all—all for you!"

Mlle. LaFoi turned slowly back to right, thereby assuming the character of Genevieve, and spoke in a ringing voice:

"Clarence Pauncefort!"

"The blackguard! He cannot compete! Listen, my girl, and be warned! Clarence Pauncefort has chilblains!"

There was a good deal more of it, but it went, and Brenda retired from the stage twice a day, wondering at the simple idiocy of the public. She disliked the work, disliked the attention her costumes attracted, and was disagreeably conscious that elegant simplicity in dress required less and less in the matter of fabric. A fold of tissue in front, a hook and eye in the back—Brenda's skin was very white!

Mr. Maginnis, supposing that each one of her upward glances singled him out as an object, squirmed, applied his faithful tooth-pick, and felt shivers race up and down his spine.

HE found his way back to the small hotel in a daze. He mechanically prepared himself for rest, but he stood sleep off until sunrise. Ordinarily, he would have blamed the city's noises, the flat-wheeled cars, the rumbling trucks, the penetrating argument of a hundred cats. But Mr. Maginnis was shamelessly honest with himself. He knew the cause of his sleeplessness.

Therefore, at exactly two o'clock, he removed his feet from a nearby chair, arranged his hat at a more conventional angle, and sauntered forth to sacrifice himself once more to the open mouth of the Empire. This time he secured a seat in the front row.

"Millie" Brenda appeared in due course, with a dazzling change of raiment, the lack of which rendered the stricken Maginnis limp. A strange duel began within him; although he abased himself before the tiny regal creature who represented a world so far above him, yet he longed to pull her from her aristocratic perch; he hungered to hear more human and understandable utterances from her redly-arched lips; in brief, he wanted to bridge the gulf between Millie Brenda and himself.

"I got me nerve, all right," he told himself, picking an uncertain way around to the stage entrance. "Maybe she'll have a bunch of dukes and an earl or two waitin' for her. If she turns one of them frozen looks on me, I'll faint, shure's there's a heart in lettuce."

The ferocious guardian who sat at the door was not a subtle person. But he saw in a glance that a reading of Mr. Maginnis' horoscope would have proven his astral colour "green." That an adult, measuring six feet without boots, should be green where vaudeville was concerned tickled Mr. Corby through and through. He was moved under the stress of amusement to practical joking.

"You want to see Miss LaFoi?" he repeated, sternly. "Are you the hair-dresser?"

Mr. Maginnis disclaimed all knowledge of hair-dressing.

"Oh, then you must be the cub reporter she was expectin'," continued the guardian.

Although this sounded like an insult, Mr. Maginnis bore it meekly. His denial was convincing.

"Have you gotta 'ppointment?" demanded Peter Corby, with startling suddenness.

"Not for this afternoon," returned the visitor, with stress upon the time of day, which in nowise deceived the student of human nature.

"Oh, well, you kin try! No. 1 on your left. Mind the steps!" and Mr. Corby smiled as he fancied this huge figure speeding down the corridor, closely followed by a rouge pot, a slipper, a bar of soap, or some other missile convenient to Mlle. LaFoi's unerring hand.

"She said to turn a noo type loose on her, didn't she? Well, here was a poor simp, who by the look of him hadn't never saw the inside of a dressing-room. Gosh, but he looked scared!"

MR. MAGINNIS tread uncomfortably between rows of doors, most of which were wide open. He risked an eye at the juvenile of thirty-five, who sang questionable songs in a shrill key; he recognized the black-faced comedians and the lady tumbler. Then, he felt his hands grow clammy and his throat grow dry as he was brought up face to face with No. 1.

He rapped—a rap in which timidity and manly determination sprang combined from his knuckles.

"Come in!" called a deep voice, from the other side of the panel.

Mr. Maginnis opened the door, slid through the aperture and closed it swiftly.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Excuse me, Miss. I thought you were alone!"

Seated opposite the door in more or less dishabille, (Continued on page 20.)