

of ladies sitting on the grass at a little distance away.

All such things as these only served to throw weight to balance in favor of Johnny, which John remained too dense, or too wrapped up in his own sure-footedness to take into consideration.

After this and the stand taken by her parents, meetings between Mabel and Johnny assumed a sort of clandestine complexion. Mabel had evidently chosen, notwithstanding the confidence of John and the barrier put up by her parents as well as the warnings of divers friends and chums.

The awful example which Johnny represented would have been enough to discourage the average girl—his doubtful future, his poor prospects as the backbone of a family. Such wabby support would not appeal to many, but Mabel ignored all this (for love is still blind), and determined to risk her whole future welfare, and life, which promised to be a long one, with a derelict that was already almost down to deck-level in the water.

Johnny's diplomacy had won the day, even although that worthy had, just recently, been conducted home one night, "spificated" by the police, those ever vigilant guardians of local society.

In the meantime, John, still blind to the virtues of his rival as opposed to his vices, continued to bask in the fool's paradise of Mabel's second choice sunshine. By surface markings he fancied he was the whole cheese; while, in the bottomless pit of her heart, Mabel stored sweet memories of the more or less reclusive Johnny.

John placed more weight on his refined breeding, his superior education, and his cultivated manners than any personality that he may have possessed to win Mabel; and, while marking time in the dark, Johnny's natural instincts and unassumed pose was the real conqueror.

But John's imaginary security was not without grounds, for what lover could for a moment picture the beautiful and refined Mabel trusting all her future in such a leaky craft as Johnny offered, when the splendid yacht offering of John was the other alternative.

John sat firm on his throne while Johnny undermined the very ground beneath him.

Mabel's infatuation indeed began to convert vices into virtues. She began to admire Johnny in his deplorable weaknesses. The pipe and the cigarettes were not so bad, and a large percentage of men smoke, and his manner of filling and lighting his pipe became a source of great pleasure to Mabel. The time came when the odor of whisky and tobacco from his mouth became like the aroma of roses to her, so awful a thing in Mabel became that mysterious infatuation called love.

It was when things had taken on this complexion that John proposed marriage to Mabel one evening, never dreaming of anything but immediate acceptance.

"But, Mr. White, this is so sudden!" exclaimed Mabel.

"Mr. White" mimicked the astonished John. "Am I not John to you?"

"Since when?"

"Then you have deceived me," replied John, with real emotion.

"Deceived you nothing," Mabel defended. "I never promised to marry you, did I? We're not even engaged, are we?"

"But, Mabel, surely you don't mean it?" pleaded John in alarm.

"I do mean it."

"What! After all these years?"

"What years?"

"All those years of happiness together. All those years of promise."

"What promise?"

"You led me on, didn't you?"

"But we were only children together," she excused the past.

"Well, I'm real angry with you," groaned the young man. "I thought we were solid."

"But you went about it so awkward. Go home and rehearse and come back later and try it all over again," she laughed at him.

Poor John laughed too. She was only fooling him. Something had upset her this evening. So he went home to rehearse and wait a more opportune time with never a suspicion of serious rivalry. And he planned for the honeymoon and a new home for the bride. He had already purchased a lot in a choice section of the village. Oh what a future was to be his with Mabel as a companion! Was mortal man ever so fortunate.

But sister had the thing all framed up from her own feminine point of view. She had seen signs that big brother refused to see; or, if he saw them, refused to accept the writing on the wall.

As a friend, as well as a sister, she warned him.

"It's not always the good little boy who wins the prize," she cautioned him one day with her superior philosophy.

"Mind your own business, will you!"

"A girl doesn't fall in love with a man's face or fine looks either, Chump," she continued to philosophize.

"Oh, shut up, it!" he fired back at her.

In the meantime Johnny and Mabel were making hay. Johnny had the right line of goods and Mabel was in a mood to buy.

It would be doing Mabel an injustice, however, to record that, although through her biased eyes she admired and enjoyed certain of her lover's rough stuff, she did not, during more rational moments, realize the tragedy that he carried at all times against him.

Often when they met "behind closed doors" when Johnny would be "lit up," even Mabel would admit, getting a whiff of his awful breath, that the aroma of roses was a little overestimated. She would be slightly piqued but a little backward at taking issue with him.

For oh how she loved the derelict to which she had anchored her little craft! she was prepared to sink or swim with him. Even his vices were little jewels of virtue to her. And, did he not love her with all his noble heart? Was he not prepared to sustain her weight during all his half-foundered life no matter how weighty the cargo might become?

Then, there was the other side of Johnny. He was kind, unselfish, forgiving, tolerant. He was full of sunshine and optimism even when all other skies were dark and dreary. Apart from the rusty links in his chain, had he not been to her all that a woman could desire of a man she loves?

So long as Johnny could hold his head above water, he was in no immediate danger of drowning; but then, one cannot be in the water too long without becoming water-logged. Mabel's better feminine self realized that too much immersion might make Johnny in time heavier than water.

When she met him one evening the law of compensation, or some other law of self preservation, willed that she should be in one of her serious moods.

The publicity of the street and the shame attached to censure perhaps tuned her nerves to rebellion, for she was abnormally angry with him:

"The people are all talking," she complained. "Why don't you stop this sort of thing?"

"Let them talk."

"It's disgraceful anyway, come to think of it, can't you see?"

Johnny laughed:

"A little drink won't hurt anybody," assured Johnny. "I drink in moderation anyway."

"Looks like it. You can scarcely stand up."

"I can drink, or I can leave it alone," Johnny complimented himself.

"And you know what father thinks," continued Mabel.

"That's all right. If he don't like it, he can lump it. And if he don't consent to our marriage, I will run away with you."

This was more of Johnny's diplomacy; and, during the course of a few more meetings in caucus, it was arranged that they should elope. Johnny, however, had promised solemnly to quit drinking. He had promised faithfully also to seek employment in their new hunting grounds, and to remain at work eight hours a day, six days a week, and the prescribed number of working days during the year.

And Mabel hung the cloak of her entire future on the loose pegs of these promises.

The elopement took place on schedule like the hanging of a criminal, a few moments before the departure of the train for the east at midnight. They had six hours of darkness as a start before the village awoke to the fact of the elopement. But by this time the fugitives had criss-crossed like a fox and had made good their escape. They went away east and nobody knew where they had gone to.

John threw a fit when he was forced to accept the unbelievable truth, and the whole town had the laugh on him, he had been so sure of the ground under his feet. He had to dispose of the building lot and offer the honeymoon asset to the highest or any tender.

And oh, how sister did rub it in!

(Next story "Anthropoidea," Chapter V. of the Fifty-fifties.)

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