

May and December

By W. R. Gilbert

IT was thirty years since the man who called himself Coggs had been to Great Wibley. He had promised himself the visit often, and at inconvenient last moments had changed his plans, for this tiny village with its broad greens and its incoherent plan of construction had a wince for him in every tree, a sharp stab of sorrow in every woodland path—and years had not entirely dulled the sting of memory.

Once there came a young American lady on a holiday. She had been ordered quiet by a doctor to help out her convalescence. Here, too, in the 'seventies, a young man reading for the bar, had arrived to fish.

The American lady went back with her people to Virginia, the student followed her, for he loved her. He loved her so much that when she told him, as she did, gently and sweetly, that she did not love him—that way—he felt he would die, and in truth nearly did.

But such casualties are rare in life.

The young man returned to England and plunged into his studies with feverish energy, but he did not forget the fragrant lady of Virginia; not success, nor parliamentary honors, nor the patronage of a grateful government dulled the freshness of her picture. And there came a time when he felt he could go again to Great Wibley-by-the-Hill without arousing painful memories. Once he had got so far as the London railway station—he had turned back.

Year followed year; each begun with a plan for spending the vacation—a plan which underwent change at the last moment.

Time after time his work had brought him within a dozen miles of the village, but he had resisted the temptation.

And here he was at last—with the first shock of re-acquaintance past, a gruff man who hid the magic of love and its dead memory behind a mask and a manner.

To him, as he sat upon the bench before the "Lion Inn," came Pipper, a carpenter and a gossip.

"There's an American lady down at Horrockses," said the diffident little carpenter.

"Hey?" He felt a sudden tightening of heart at the association of the two words. It was at Horrockses, from time immemorial a boarding-house for visitors, that another American lady had sojourned.

"There's an American lady down at Horrockses," repeated Pipper with a sort of nervous triumph. "They other fellers thought she wor French owin' to her veil, but I know 'um to be 'Merican, 'cause of the way she do talk."

The stranger eyed him severely, yet with the ghost of a smile.

"You know a great deal," he said, offensive to the last degree. "If I knew as much as you I'd hire myself out to—something or other. You gossiping little beggar, why don't you mind your own business?"

Thus he rid himself in irritation of a tiny wave of sorrow which came surging over his own soul.

It was a point of view which had been urged upon Mr. Pipper before, so that he had grown callous, and was,

moreover, prepared with a stereotyped answer.

"Anybody's business is everybody's business in a small village like this," he said glibly. "Thart you'd like to know, you bein' a stranger, sir. She'm got lodgin's at old Mrs. Horrocks, up top o' village. Fine wench she be by all accounts—widdler likely, vor her's in proper black an' ari."

Mr. John Coggs growled into the earthenware pot he was raising to his lips at that moment.

The little carpenter stood for a moment awaiting the invitation which came not, then he turned sorrowfully and walked back in the direction of his ramshackle "shop."

Coggs looked at him, a twinkle in his eye, but a dull little ache in his heart. He watched him till he disappeared round the elbow of the straggling village street, then he walked into the "Lion" and demanded his rods.

"I hope you'll have better luck to-day, sir," said the landlord, as he handed the

deliberation of the habitual smoker. Mechanically he filled it, never taking his eyes from the serene view of valley and hill before him.

He smoked calmly, majestically, contemptuously, as only a man smokes who loves the fragrance of a mixture burning truly and evenly in a wooden bowl.

He did not fix his rods, he was content to lower his eyes occasionally to the busy little stream, to the shadowy places by the bending rushes, to the sunlit centre where a shallow bed of shingle set the surface a-bubbling.

It was a great thinking place, this hollow. A man had space and silence, for the noises of Nature are the very rainbows of sound. They blend tone to tone, and harmonize in one soft octave.

He thought of many things, including the American lady he had never seen. His thoughts were in the main prospective, and in an idle way speculative.

He sat for two hours, charging and recharging his pipe, never attempting to unwind his line or fit his rods, then he looked at his watch and was on the point of rising when he heard a footfall on the little hill path.

of laughter and a love of life. He might be forty or fifty, or sixty for the matter of that. His eyes were deep-set, and bushy eyebrows that were neither brown nor grey.

She went on her way with the vague sense of satisfaction which every woman experiences who meets a man in a lonely spot and finds him approvable.

She had been told that there was a tiny bridge across the stream, and beyond this a path which led through the fields to the village of Weyton, where a wonderful old Norman church rewarded the tourist. But she had come the wrong way and there was no bridge.

She looked around with a gentle helplessness which was eloquent to the man, watching the graceful figure on the bank, of her difficulty and error. He walked softly towards her, and she turned as his cap came off.

"Forgive me," he said (Pipper would not have recognized the soft, musical voice), "I think you are looking for Brakes Bridge?"

She smiled. "Yes, I'm afraid I have mistaken the path; I do not know the country very well."

He had known from the first that she was the American lady. It did not need the soft accent which makes even the most educated of Americans distinctive to the English ear. There was nothing of the stiffness which such an introduction would have engendered were she English and he younger.

She saw he was older than she thought; he had a courtly, almost an old-world grace in his attitude towards her. Once he put out his hand to help her as they stumbled back to the place where he had left his rods, and when she laid her hand on the extended forearm to steady herself, she felt a triceps that was like the stone arm of a statue.

"Do you mind if I rest here a little?" she asked. "I shan't be disturbing you?"

She had a quick smile that came suddenly and departed without warning, leaving the face a little.

"You will not disturb me," he said, "and I shall not disturb the fishes. Indeed," he confessed, with a little chuckle, "I'm rather a fraud. I harrow the feelings of that poor man, the landlord of the 'Lion,' by the slight I put upon the river, but I have not as yet taken my rod from its case."

She nodded quickly. "You like to be alone, and you want an excuse," she said. "I know that feeling; sometimes I feel when people, well meaning and kindly, come around I could just scream."

She saw the open tobacco pouch that lay on the bank.

"Won't you smoke?" she asked. "Please do, I like to see men smoking."

"I am a great believer in old men smoking," he said, as he filled his pipe; "it keeps their thoughts diffused. It is only to the young that tobacco gives concentration."

He said this simply, using the words, "old men" with an assurance which neither invited nor rejected comment.

She saw the hands that were clasped about his knee were big and veined, and knew that he spoke without illusions.

"I owe something to your lovely country," he said; "I smoked my first pipe in Virginia," he chuckled again. "It was like eating one's first oyster at Whitstable."



American Troops passing the historic British Parliament Buildings.

fishing gear across the bar. "There is usually some nice fish in the river round about now. I can't understand why they're so shy. Pollock the blacksmith, was telling me he caught—"

"Oh, I'll catch a fish before I leave," grumbled the unpleasant Mr. Coggs. "I take very little interest in the sport—but next to smoking it is the finest justification for doing nothing that I know."

It was observable that the tone he had adopted to the landlord was more kindly than that which he had used to the carpenter.

He carried his rods beneath his arm across the parsonage field, through Brakes cove, and over the gentle crest of Brakes Hill. The wind was keen with the nip of early spring, the trees and hedgerows were vivid with the fresh green of the season. Far away to the south under great white clouds that moved majestically like aerial galleons with all sails set across an ocean of infinite blue, were the red hills of Devon.

Coggs went stumbling down the steep path on the other side of Brakes to the chattering little river that fought its way through many troublesome miles to the broad Tamar.

He sat down on the bank, pulled out a polished briar and filled it with the

He looked up. A girl was descending the steep declivity. She was young, and, as he judged women, beautiful. Her face was thinner than that of most women of her age; he judged her as about twenty-nine or thirty. Her eyes, big and sad he thought, must be grey; her lips, firm and full, drooped ever so little. She put up a gloved hand to push a stray strand of hair that had blown across her face.

In the tilt of her delicate chin he read resolution and a certain character; in the brief, calm scrutiny with which she favored him he diagnosed an independence which for many years had been unfamiliar to him.

He knew it in the governing classes for insolence, in the eyes of a woman of the people for boldness.

Here it was tempered by an indefinable honesty, such as Leonardo da Vinci gave to the eyes of Lucretia Cavilla, the love of Il Moro.

It was that glance, sidelong, all-absorbing, which recalled the most wonderful portrait in the world to him—and something else.

She hesitated, looking at him for the space of three seconds. She saw a man, tall, broad, grey. His face was strong and masterful. His jaw grim enough to make you forget the lines about the mouth and eyes which told so plainly