

The Complacent Little God

Easy-Going Enough to Arrange a Love Affair Through a Crooked Deal of a Pack of Cards

By WILLIAM HUGO PABKE

Illustrated by Fergus Kyle

DOCTOR ROBERT CORLISS alighted on the tiny platform, and frowned. There was no one to meet him. There were few occasions in his daily life that gave him cause to chafe at delay. The people that made up his world—nurses, orderlies, reverent young medical students, patients even—obeyed him instinctively, sometimes before he spoke. For precisely this reason, a wave of resentment swept over him. Impatience showed in each rough-hewn line of his young face; his long, lean body was aquiver with it. Turning toward the track, he gazed longingly after the flying train, which was becoming a rapidly diminishing streak far down the shining rails. He drew a deep breath into his barrel of a chest, frowned again, strove for an adequate expression of his disgust, and found it in one short, sharp word.

"I don't blame you, Doctor Corliss! It was perfectly, entirely inexcusable of me to keep you waiting."

The voice came from the doorway of the little station. There was a singing lilt to it, a medley of cool tones and warm tones that seemed analogous to the cool-warm airs of the October afternoon.

Corliss swung around. The motion might have been termed a swift slowness, or equally well a slow swiftness, so perfect was his poise. He beheld a feminine young person emerging into the clear-washed sunshine that flooded the platform. The feminine young persons that had hitherto come into his life had worn prim, white-cuffed-and-collared uniforms, or had been in a satisfactory state of anesthesia, which rendered them about as personal as a block of marble. This one was different.

He gazed into a pair of wide-set grey eyes so intently that the slim hand held out to him in greeting was unnoticed until too late. A vague sense of an incompletely understood emotion thrilled him. On account of its very newness, he mistrusted it. He really wished to say something, but saying things was not his strong point. Therefore, he merely kept on gazing.

"It was inexcusable of me," persisted the girl, as if he had contradicted her. She was perfectly at ease; evidently, she was quite used to being gazed at—respectfully. "You are a busy man, and should not be kept waiting by an idle girl, who drives with her head in the clouds, and ditches her motor. By the way, I'm Marjorie Lyndon."

Corliss ignored the introduction. "How's Mr. Lyndon?" he rasped, reverting to his hospital manner.

A cloud of resentment hovered over the girl's face. It was only momentary, however. With a little careless laugh, she said:

"Oh, Father's all right. He's a bit run down and nervous. It was just a whim of his to telegraph you to come up; he wanted the brilliant Doctor Corliss all to himself during his little under-the-weather spell, just as other people want something special at times, something exciting like truffles—or a new frock."

CORLISS' brows came together sharply; his hands clenched. Those two interesting cases at the hospital! And that railroad chap who had been knocked pretty much to pieces, and who really seemed to take a new grip on life during the daily five minutes that the young doctor was able to spare him! He had raced away in answer to the urgent telegraphic behest of a man whom he knew only by reputation merely to find that he was not needed. Angry thoughts flashed through his brain. Entirely lacking in the power of expression, he began, heavily:

"If Mr. Lyndon isn't ill, I must——"

"You haven't much respect for the whims of millionaires?" interrupted Marjorie, quickly.

"When does the next train leave?"

The cloud of resentment settled once more on the girl's face; her eyes grew black, stormy. She bit her lip, turned away, then faced him again, her eyes holding a smile, and behind the smile, a strange light. Had Corliss been more conversant with un-anesthetized femininity, he would have recognized

a danger signal, a challenge. As it was, he took her next remark in good faith.

"How very rude," she said, lightly. "Now that you are here you might as well enjoy it. Do you think you can?" She turned on him eyes that had become grey again, and guileless. "You haven't even asked me if I was hurt in my accident—and you a doctor!"

"Were you?" His frown was fading gradually.



"Brakes on?" he queried, over his shoulder.

"No; but I might have been. How are we going to get home?"

"You might show me the car," he suggested.

"Showing you the car won't do any good; we need a jack—and things."

As if to prove her assertion forthwith, Marjorie led the way around the small station and a short distance along the road that ran over the hills.

"There! What did I tell you!" she cried, triumphantly, pointing to the runabout.

It stood on a railless, log bridge, that spanned a small brook. Its weight rested drunkenly on rear wheels and forward axle; one front wheel hung in space, perilously. Corliss glanced at the steep hill whence the car had come, at the car itself, and then the girl, standing coolly at his side. He refrained from making the obvious remark.

"What do you need a jack for?" he growled, instead.

Marjorie shrugged her shoulders. "If you think I'm going to let you start the engine to back out with the front axle scraping, you're mistaken," she said, half laughing, half in earnest. "It's my new car. We'll walk!"

"We won't!"

Corliss stripped off his coat and laid it neatly on the seat. With serious deliberation, he rolled up the sleeves of his negligee shirt, and walked to the front of the car. Marjorie regarded him with an enigmatical smile. He bent down and grasped the axle.

"Brakes on?" he queried, over his shoulder.

"You're ridiculous!" she burst out.

"Are they?" he insisted.

She nodded, and he began to lift. Great ridges and corresponding hollows corrugated his arms. His strong neck swelled until it filled his collar to overflowing. He began to straighten up slowly. The rim of the wheel that hung in space appeared over the edge of the log, the bulge of the tire came into view, then the upward motion ceased. Marjorie clenched her hands, pressed them to her cheeks, and ceased to breathe. The car began to sink again; the movement was almost imperceptible. The girl's eyes were riveted on the straining figure before her. Suddenly, the sleeve of Robert's shirt burst where it joined the shoulder. He straightened his back sharply, and the wheel cleared the side of the bridge. He took a staggering step to the right, relaxed an inch, and set the car on the road.

"Get in," he invited

MARJORIE put her foot on the step, and turned to look at him. She was on the point of speaking, when she checked herself.

"Well?" queried Corliss.

"I suspect you of being a bit of a mindreader," she said, a trifle breathlessly, "so I might as well say what I started to: You're—rather a wonderful person!"

"Same to you," grunted Robert, realizing with a shock that a new experience had come to him—he had paid a woman a compliment, such as it was.

Marjorie climbed into the car and sat down. "What do you find wonderful about me?" she asked, her eyes opened innocently wide.

Robert considered the question gravely. Finally, with utter ingenuousness, he answered: "I don't know."

As the little car chugged valiantly up the steep incline, Corliss sat in rapt silence. He was vividly conscious of the feminine young person at his side, who was giving her undivided attention to driving. At the back of his mind lay her last question, and his inadequate answer. What did he find wonderful about her? There certainly was something, some attribute; but what? The road ran level for a space along a wide shelf. Above them, and below, were stretches of autumn-painted woods, iridescent, brilliant beneath a cloudless sky. There was a tang in the air that made the young man's pulses leap with the mere joy of living. His voice broke in suddenly on the smooth purr of the motor.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed.

Marjorie turned, an amused question in her eyes.

"It's just come to me," he continued, throwing out his arm with a wide, sweeping motion. "You're a little sister to all this!"

She followed his gesture, her eyes resting on sun-drenched valley and sparkling river and reddening maples bathed in blue-gold light. Wherever she looked was beauty.

"If you mean it," she said, in a still, little voice, "thanks—awfully."

She drove in silence for some moments. Her mood changed as a cluster of summer cottages came in sight far up the road. When these had been left behind, she turned to Corliss with a quizzical smile.

"What a talkative person you are!" she rallied him.

CORLISS knit his brows. "I have been thinking," he said. "It's not been my habit to talk much.

Besides, I don't know how you'll take my next utterance. I'm not used to women, you see."

"Go ahead," she encouraged, two dimples playing a merry little game around the corners of her mouth. "I want you!" he said.

It was like him not to elaborate. He had said just what he meant; no more, no less. He let the words stand as they were, bare, elemental. The car swerved dangerously, but Marjorie recovered herself in a moment. With the utmost composure, she said:

"That's a perfectly proper frame of mind; but——"

She gave her attention to the wheel, guiding the car between two granite posts into a flower-bordered