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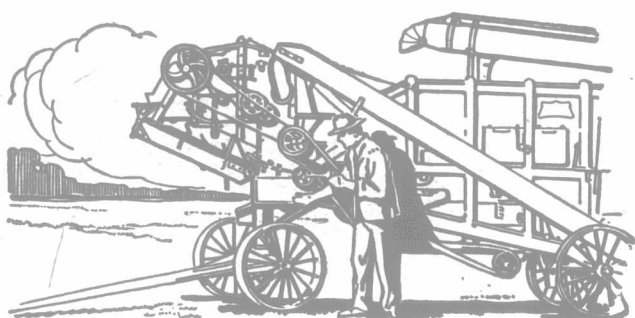
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firt has no time to waste, and Lady MacNairne is not wasteful. She was the handsomest woman at Kinloch Towers, my cousin Dave Norman's place, and a Dutchman was a novelty to her; so we amused ourselves for ten days, and I should have kept the pleasantest memory of the episode if Sir Alec had not taken it into his head to be jealous.

Poor Fleda MacNairne was whisked away before the breaking-up of the house-party, and that is the last I have seen of her, but not the last I've heard. Once in a while I get a letter, amusing, erratic, like herself; and in such communications she doesn't scruple to chronicle other flirtations which have followed hard on mine, only a short time before the making of this plot in a Rotterdam garden, a letter from her gave startling news: consequently I am now in possession of knowledge apparently denied to the nephew.

A few minutes more and the pair in the next arbor separated, the woman departing to purchase the fittings of aunt-hood, the man remaining to pay the bill. But before he had time to beckon the waiter I got up and walked into his lair.

"Mr. Starr," I said, "I'm going to stop your game."

"The devil you are! And who are you?" answered he, first staring, then flushing.

"My name's Rudolph Brederode," said I.

"You're a d—d eavesdropper," said he.

"You are the same kind of a fool, for thinking because your neighbor spoke Dutch he couldn't know English. I sat still and let you go on, because I don't mean to allow any of the persons concerned to be imposed upon by you."

He glared at me across the table as if he could have killed me, and I glared back at him; yet all the while I was conscious of a sneaking kindness for the fellow, he looked, so stricken—rather like an endearing scamp of an Eton boy who has got into a horrid scrape, and is being hauled over the coals by the Head.

"What business is it of yours?" he wanted to know.

"Lady MacNairne's a friend of mine." "Indeed! But what of that? She's my aunt."

"And Robert van Buren is another friend, an intimate one. He has told me about his cousin's motor-boat. He doesn't approve of the tour, as it is. When he hears from me—"

"Oh, hang it all, why do you want to be such a spoilsport?" demanded the poor wretch in torture. "Did you never fall in love with a girl, and feel you'd do anything to get her?"

This sudden change, this throwing himself upon my mercy, took me somewhat back. In threatening to tear the mote from his eye, what about a certain obstruction in mine?

He was quick to see his advantage and follow it up.

"You say you heard everything. Then you must see why I thought of this plan. I hoped at first Aunt Fleda might be prevailed on to come. When I lost that hope I just couldn't give up the trip. I had to get an aunt to chaperon those blessed girls, or it was good-by to them, for me. What harm am I doing? The woman's respectable; the Counsel has written me a letter about her. If you know Aunt Fay—that's my name for her—you know she would call this the best kind of a lark. I'll confess to her some day. I'd have my head cut off sooner than injure Miss Rivers or Miss Van Buren. Afterwards, when we've got to be great friends, they shall hear the whole story, I promise; but of course, you can ruin me if you tell them, or let your friend tell them, at this stage. Do you think it's fair to take advantage of what you overheard by accident, and spoil the chance of my life? Oh, say now, what can I do to make you keep still?"

"Well, I'm—hanged!" was all I could answer. And a good deal to my surprise, I heard myself suddenly burst into sardonic laughter.

Then he laughed, too, and we roared together. If any one noticed us, they must have thought us friends of a lifetime; yet five minutes ago we had been like dogs ready to fly at each other's throats, and there was no earthly reason why we should not be of the same mind still.

"You are going to let me alone, aren't you?" he continued to plead, when he

was calmer. "You are going to do up to me as you'd be done by, and give my true love a chance to run smooth? If you refuse, I could wish that fearful Flower back that I might set him at you."

My lips twitched. "I'm not sure," said I, "whether you ought to be in a gaol or in the school-room."

"I ought to be on a motor-boat tour with the two most charming girls in the world; and if I'm not to be there, I might as well be in my grave. Do ask people about me. Ask my aunt. I'm not a villain. I'm one of the nicest fellows you ever met, and I've no bad intentions. I've got too much money to be an adventurer. Why, look here! I'm supposed to be quite a good match. Either of the girls can have me and my millions. Both are at the feet of either. At present I've no choice. Don't drive me to drink. I should hate to die of Schnapps; and there's nothing else liquid I could well die of in Holland."

As he talked, I had been thinking hard and fast. I should have to spare him. I saw that. But—I saw something else too.

"I'll keep your ridiculous secret, Mr. Starr, on one condition," I said.

"You've only to name it."

"Invite me to go with you on the trip."

"My dear fellow, for heaven's sake don't ask me the one thing I can't do. It's cruelty to animals. It isn't my trip. I'm a guest. Perhaps you don't understand—"

"Yes, I do. Van Buren told me. He mentioned that you hadn't been able to get a skipper to take the motor-boat through the canals."

"That's true. But we shan't be delayed. We have our choice between two chaps with fair references; not ideal men, perhaps; but you don't need an admiral to get you through a herring-pond—"

"Each canal is different from every other. You must have a first-rate man, who knows every inch of the way, whatever route you choose, or you'll get into serious trouble. Now, as you've been praising yourself, I'll follow your example. You couldn't find a skipper who knows more about 'botoring' and Dutch waterways than I do, and I volunteer for the job. I go if you go; there's the offer."

"Are you serious?" All his nonsense was suddenly forgotten.

"Absolutely."

"Why do you want to go? You must have a reason."

"I have. It's much the same as yours."

"I'm blowed! Then you've met—"

"Them."

"I've seen them. Apparently that's about all you've done."

"You mean, if I won't get you on board as skipper you'll give me away?"

I was silent. I did not now mean anything of the kind, for it would be impossible to betray the engaging wretch. But I was willing that he should think my silence gave consent.

"They would know you weren't a common hired skipper. How could I explain you?"

"Why, say you've a Dutch friend who has kindly offered to go, as you can't find any one else who's competent for the job. You'd better not mention your friend's name at first, if you can avoid it. As the ladies have been anxious about the skipper, and asked van Buren to get one, they'll probably be thankful it's all right, and only too glad to accept a friend of yours in the place."

"Poor, deceived angels! What's to prevent your snatching one of them from under my very nose?"

"You must run the risk of that. Besides, you needn't worry about it till you make up your mind which angel you want."

"I should naturally want whichever one you did. We are made like that."

"If you don't agree, and they go 'botoring' without you, you can't get either."

"That's true. Most disagreeable things are. And there's just a chance, if you get dangerous, that Tibbe might polish you off. I saw the way he looked at you. Well, needs must when somebody drives. It's a bargain then. I'll tell the girls what a kind, generous Dutch friend I have. We'll be villains together."

(To be continued.)