

THE AMAZING PAIR

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THE Avona Castle from the Cape had struck Southampton late on the afternoon of a dull November day, and now the boat "special," freighted with an impatient lot of passengers, was doing the best time she could up the line to town. She was not, however, likely to make a record journey, for the mistiness of the day had increased with night-fall and frequently she ran into patches of fog that necessitated slowing up.

Sitting comfortably in the corner of one compartment was a young man. He was quite young, twenty-five at the utmost, and an agreeable specimen of open-air manhood.

"Dear old Gran!" he laughed to himself, as he folded up a letter, "always harping on the old string—my responsibilities—time for settling down and all the rest of it! Well, I'm in no hurry—don't think I'm much of a sentimentalist!"

The train came gradually to a stop and, a feeble light gleaming through the carriage window, he saw they were drawn up at a small station. The name on the oil lamp showed the name of the place to be Bamstoke, a tiny village about half-way towards London.

He drew his rug closer round him and was about to pick up a magazine when the loud blare of a motor horn reached his ears. He looked out of the window again; there was a road running parallel to the line, and through the fog he could just see the head-lights of a large car coming towards the station. The train began to move.

Then, suddenly, something very astonishing happened!

From the wooden shelter—almost opposite his carriage—a lady emerged. She made a dart for his compartment, opened the door, and jumped in as the train was moving. He grasped her arm and shut the door after her. As he did so, he heard a hoarse shout from the platform, and caught a glimpse of the big motor car, now at a standstill by the station.

Then he resumed his seat and glanced at his new companion. She was leaning back against the cushions opposite him, a trifle exhausted with her exertion. She was a young girl, and the first look told him that she was bewilderingly pretty.

"I'm so sorry!" she burst out breathlessly. "I must apologise for disturbing you in this fashion. This is a special train, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Yes, I knew there was to be one—they told me. I was waiting for the ordinary one in a few minutes' time, but—" she came to a nervous stop.

"The motor horn?" he suggested.

A little swift wave of colour suffused her cheeks. It struck him again that she was wondrous pretty. "You heard?"

He inclined his head with a smile.

"Of course, I know it's a very strange proceeding on my part, and it looks—" she paused in confusion.

"It looks," he put in helpfully, "yes, it looks remarkably as if you were doing a bolt!"

She gave a little gasp of relief.

"Yes, that's just what it is!"

She looked across at him appealingly.

"You won't—you won't give me away?"

What eyes she had! Give her away!

"Not I," he cried. "Why on earth should I?"

"Well, you might think it your duty—if you knew."

"I won't know! Leastways, only as much as you care to tell me! You can count me down your friend!"

She held out an impetuous little hand to him. "Thank you!" she said gratefully, and again their eyes met.

"All the same, I feel I owe you some explanation," she went on.

"Tell me as little as you like—the merest of bald outlines—not but that I'm frightfully interested," he added.

"Well, I had better not mention any names; you won't have any clue then, and therefore your sense of duty won't be aroused."

"Is it very bad then?"

She hesitated.

"Not from my point of view. You see, I've bolted from my guardian for two days."

"If you've left a suitable explanation, he may not be very much annoyed," he hazarded.

"I'm afraid he will—I think he'll be furious. In two days' time I shall be twenty-one."

A light broke over him.

"And out of his jurisdiction, eh? He wanted you to do something you didn't like in the last few days of his guardianship. Why didn't you do it?"

"You see, it was rather a big something," she paused. "He wanted me to marry someone I didn't want to marry at all."

"Jove—the man with the motor car?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes; despite my unwillingness my guardian insisted, and the marriage was arranged for tomorrow. To-night, I pretended I had a head-ache, went to my room, packed a few things in this basket, and slipped away. They must have somehow discovered my escape."

"And hence the pursuit in the motor car?"

"Yes—mustn't he have been annoyed to find the special had stopped to pick me up?"

"I expect he was."

"But, it seems rather rough on him," he said, trying to impart a little severity into his tones. "Unless, of course, he's—er—well, somewhat detestable."

"Oh, he is—and more so," she put in emphatically.

He was relieved.

"He needn't be pitied, then?"

"Oh, no! He knew I hated him. I think he is only getting his deserts. You are not wavering—you will be my friend?" she asked suddenly.

"As firm as ever!" he cried. "I'm glad though to hear it's only mere justice." He paused. "We must think of business. What are your plans for to-night?"

"All complete!" she said triumphantly. "I've written to an old school friend who lives at Hampstead. I'm going there to remain in hiding for two days. I've got her letter with the address here." She opened a little bag that hung from her wrist, and she felt in it.

She gave a little quick cry of alarm.

"Gracious, I've left it behind! And being a new address, I don't remember it. It's frightfully awkward. I must have dropped it somewhere. I'm certain I brought it away with me. Anyway, I must hope for the best. I daresay when I get to Hampstead I shall be able to find her house by inquiring."

He shook his head.

"On a foggy night in November, and rather late—no, that won't do—for you," he said with a frown.

"I suppose I could go to an hotel?" she put in anxiously.

"By yourself? No." He looked up quickly.

"You must come and stay at my grandmother's—that is what you must do!" he said with an air of finality.

The novel and somewhat sudden suggestion made her laugh.

"But perhaps she won't be delighted to welcome me?"

"Not a bit. She's a charming old person."

"I'm quite sure of it," said the girl. "But don't you see, I'm doing something illegal, and it would not be fair to let anybody else be brought into it. What do they call it?—aiding and abetting, or something of that kind?"

"She won't mind that. You see, she makes rather a fuss of me, and, besides, I'm coming home after a six months' shooting trip, and am going to spend my first night in town with her—and she thinks it rather nice of me. So, you can take my word it will be quite all right. You'll come, won't you?"

"If you're quite sure," she said. "And I can go on to Hampstead the first thing in the morning. It's really awfully kind of you to take so much trouble," she added gratefully.

"I'm enjoying it. I'm going to see you through—even if I get five years for it!" he declared.

"It's a bit awkward, though, our not being able to know one another's names," he went on. "Do you think it would be frightfully indiscreet if we were to go a little way and say, tell each other our Christian names?" he ventured.

Her cheek dimpled.

"Under ordinary circumstances that would be going rather a long way in the first half hour, wouldn't it?"

"But since we simply can't use our surnames—and I must refer to you as something! And, of course, the Christian names will give no clue whatever!"

"Well, my godfathers and godmothers in my baptism decided on Coralie," she answered, a trifle shyly.

"People of discernment, too!" he said, thinking "Coralie" a jolly name for quite one of the jolliest girls he had met.

"And . . ." she said inquiringly.

"Oh, most of my friends call me Jim," he answered, boyishly.

"Yes," she said, looking at him critically. "I like that. You are Jim."

Some thirty minutes later they were at Waterloo—the time seemed to have passed like magic. Then there was a hansom cab, and a hurried drive through foggy London streets.

"Well, if, somehow, I did not feel certain you were one of the nicest men in the world, Jim, how horribly frightened I should be!" she whispered.

"Thank you, Coralie," he said soberly.

A few minutes later, and they were standing together in the hall of a large house near Hyde Park.

"In the drawing-room, you say? No, don't announce me," Jim said to the manservant.

He turned to Coralie with a smile.

"This way," he said, and led her across the hall. "Come along in."

An elderly lady with white hair was sitting before a fire at the far end. With a bound Jim crossed the room to her, and she rose from her seat with a little cry.

"Why, Jim, my dear boy!" she exclaimed.

He put his arms round her neck and kissed her affectionately. Then the old lady glanced at Coralie.

"Gran," cried Jim, "a quite extraordinary thing has happened to-night. This young lady is on her way to a friend at Hampstead, but has lost the address. I'm going to ask you to be good enough to put her up for the night."

The old lady gave Coralie a keen little critical glance, then, without further ado, made her way across the room to her.

"Of course, my dear," she said kindly. "I shall be only too pleased to be of any assistance to you."

"It's more than kind of you," broke in Coralie. "I know it must seem very extraordinary, but—" She came to a stop helplessly.

"That is all right," said the old lady, patting her hand. "I am quite satisfied to carry out any idea of Jim's," she added, with a fond glance at the young man.

"Didn't I tell you?" he cried triumphantly.

The old lady went to the wall and pressed a button. A maid appeared.

"Will you show this lady to a room, Straker. She will stop the night."

She turned to Coralie.

"If you will come down in a few minutes, my dear, I'll have some refreshment waiting. I am sure you must both be famished!"

Almost in a maze, Coralie followed the trim maid out of the room.

"Thank you, Gran," he said. "You are the dearest, most sensible old lady I know. Now I'll tell you the whole story."

And he did, right from the time he heard the blare of the motor-horn.

"She's one of us, Gran. I could see it at a glance."

"It certainly is rather romantic—but then, I like romance; we get so little of it nowadays. She seems to have made rather an impression upon you."

"Of course she has! Hasn't she with you?"

"I'll tell you more about her later on!" replied the wise old lady.

And then Coralie re-appeared and "Gran" led the way to a cosy little room where the daintiest supper imaginable was in waiting. It was all wonderfully pleasant, thought Jim as he glanced across at the girl. With her hat and coat removed she seemed prettier than ever! And in an armchair at the back sat the old lady, watching the pair closely with her sharp little eyes. She paid more attention,