



MARK STEERED FOR MY BANK, WHILE ANGELA FACED ME

The Unexpectedness of Mark

By Margaret Hilda Wise

Illustrated by Stella Grier

THE only trouble with Mark was that you always knew exactly what he was going to do or say. He never disappointed you by doing the unexpected. But that was before the War.

The first time he appeared in polite society—meaning, of course, *our* society—after the War, was one week-end when we were entertaining a house-full of assorted people down at Crowley Court. Angela and the Shrimp were playing tennis. Angela is my sister, and not a bad one, at that. The Shrimp is so-called because of his complexion. His devotion to tennis amounts to a passion. At the moment, I was busily engaged in doing nothing in particular. It was a hot afternoon, and ambition of any kind had deserted me.

The Shrimp was in the act of serving when he caught sight of Mark coming up the drive, behind me. There was a loud cry of,

"What ho! A blinking warrior!" and the Shrimp was over the somewhat-sagging tennis net before I could turn around. What followed resembled a "footer" scrimmage more than anything else, with Angela hovering on the edge. Finally, the Shrimp and I found ourselves each in possession of one of Mark's hands, working it up and down furiously—this being the outward and visible sign of our extreme pleasure in seeing him again.

"Where *have* you been all this time, you old blighter?"—I think it was I who asked the question.

"Where do you suppose?" Mark was grinning cheerfully, and his teeth looked very white in the midst of his heavy tan.

"Five to one," said the Shrimp to me, "five to one, this conscientious old brute has been up fighting the blooming Bolsheviks. Any takers?"

"Right you are," Mark put in, before I could answer. "Couldn't get enough excitement across the Channel. So *après la guerre* in France I went off to look for some more. Angela, I'm dev—I'm awfully glad to see you."

They shook hands, and the Shrimp and I sighed ostentatiously over Mark's propensity for going off and doing just what one would expect him to.

"We were wondering," Angela was saying, "what had become of you. After the Armistice everybody came home but you, and we thought—"

"We said," I interrupted, "that it would be just like you to hunt up another scrap."

"Which he did—" this, in a disgusted tone from the Shrimp.

"You might have let us know," I went on.

"It's a very long time since you were here last," Angela remarked.

"Yes," Mark replied, and he looked hard and long at Angela, "it's a very long time. And in the meantime you've grown up."

Angela is rather pretty when she blushes, though it has always seemed to me she does it over nothing at all.

"I heard in town," Mark went on, speaking to me, "that you were spending your leave here, so I ran down to see you, and everybody. Just for an hour or two." Mark always was the most exasperatingly modest creature!

"How many times," I asked him, "have I—we—everybody told you that any time you show up here there's a bed for you and a seat at table?"

MARK looked sheepish, and the Shrimp clapped him on the back. "Priceless old idiot! He hasn't got his tooth-brush and his nightie, so he's 'fraid he can't stay."

"Wrong this time," Mark answered triumphantly. "They're down at the 'Hound and Hunter.' I was going to spend the night there."

The Shrimp and I called him every name we could think of on the spur of the moment, which of course affected Mark not at all. Angela had departed, no doubt to fix up a place for Mark to lay his head, and we propelled him across the tennis court and threw ourselves on the lawn beyond.

"Now," I began, "you're going to tell us the dark story of your young life from the time we last saw you. And what an occasion that was! Shrimp, do you remember?"

"Do I? The Carlton—New Year's Eve—1917, wasn't it—leave up the next day—and all that. Whew! Proceed, Mark, with your tale of frightfulness, or we may be compelled to rag you."

"No," Mark said quietly, "not at the moment. Who's staying here?"

"I note with regret," the Shrimp broke in facetiously, "that our honourable friend does not ask us to tell him singly and collectively what we've been doing in his absence."

"I don't much care," Mark answered, leaning back on one elbow, "since you're both here and none the worse. I repeat—who's here?"

"Since you ask," I replied, "we'll tell you no lies, will we, Shrimp? An old friend of yours—Mrs. Whitford. Jessie Davidson she was, in your palmy days."

Mark made a noise something between a grunt and a sigh.

"You had it badly, Mark," the Shrimp reminded him. "But she hasn't changed, and there is still hope for you."

"What do you mean?"

"She's a widow now," I explained. "Whitford was killed about two years ago, poor beggar—a few months before the Armistice."

Mark said nothing and looked like the Sphinx.

"I very much fear," I continued, "that the Shrimp

has strong leanings in that direction."

"Confound your fears," the Shrimp leapt to his feet—"She doesn't know a good game of tennis when she sees one."

Whereupon he proceeded to rag me and was immediately joined by Mark.

They persisted in this form of amusement until Angela came back, and the Shrimp insisted on finishing their tennis set and left me in peace with Mark.

Later on, tea appeared and the clan began to gather. The Mater came out from a nap and was delighted to find Mark. She has always looked upon him with favour, even in the early days when I used to bring him down from Harrow for holidays and we used to make the Mater's life a burden for the time being. Dad brought Major and Mrs. Burke and the Wylie-Ferris's home from motoring round the country all afternoon, and Jessie Whitford turned up with our near-neighbour, Edgar Howat. They had been riding since lunch. Lastly, my young brother appeared with his crony, Barringham minor, and they sat on the outskirts and devoured bread and jam and cake shamelessly, after having fallen upon Mark with joy.

AFTER tea, Dad took Major Burke and Mr. Wylie-Ferris off to look at the horses, and the Shrimp gave us an imitation of Napoleon crossing the Alps, on the Mater's own particular rock-garden. My young brother and Barringham minor applauded loudly, and the Mater made a valiant effort not to show that she trembled for her flowers. I noticed that Mark had gone over to sit beside Jessie Whitford. His back was turned to me, but they appeared to be enjoying themselves. Edgar Howat had moved across to talk to Angela. After a few minutes, I got up and gave a bird-whistle which was the signal peculiar to the Shrimp and me. Napoleon descended from the Alps, and we walked away and into the copse.

"It appears," the Shrimp remarked, "that we are slightly *de trop*."

"Our grey hairs tell against us," I rejoined. "But I don't feel as if I were exactly tottering into the grave just yet—do you, Shrimp?"

"Can't say I do"—the Shrimp leaped lightly over a tree stump. "But speaking of our grey hairs—that old idiot Mark is going to bring them with sorrow to the grave you just mentioned."

"What do you mean?"

"If he marries that—ahem—that person, after having escaped it once—" The Shrimp gave me a meaningful look, and began to sing,

"Are you old enough to marry, do you think?"—

"Leave 'Mikado' alone," I growled, "and let us consider Mark's future seriously."

"Serious is my watchword. And good old Mark is up to his old tricks of doing just what you'd expect."

We stretched ourselves on the ground, and I produced my most-faithful pipe and lit it. "Well," I remarked,

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