

A DASH FOR FREEDOM.

W. Pitt Bridge in New Illustration Magazine.

The door of the small dining-room leading to the lawn was open, and young Mr. Gascoigne's aunt and young Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt sat there and watched the scene with great content. It was a crowded little dining room, with brand-new furniture trying to push elderly furniture out of the way, and the elderly furniture resenting it, as who should say, "I was here first."

An enormous mirror, with its aggressive gilt frame chartered by great tissue paper, couched nearly all one side of the room, and reflected everything. The villa was a forty pounds a year villa without taxes, and young Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt said that, considering what an aristocratic place Brookley was, you couldn't call it dear.

Out on the lawn, which was several yards square, and had quite obvious tufts of grass in places (just for all the world, like a real lawn), the newly married couple were playing battle-dome with tennis-bats, and enjoying it all very much.

"They'll be a happy young couple if all goes well," sighed Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt.

"Got all the world before 'em," remarked Mr. Gascoigne's aunt. "Wish Martha the servant was more satisfactory. We shall have trouble with that girl."

"I wish I'd had their advantages when I started married life. I never had any relatives to live with me and tell me how to cook and save up old bits of bread to make a pudding out of."

"Same with me," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt. "I added years to my age, all the worry of learning housekeeping. If I hadn't been naturally intelligent—"

"The rows it caused with me and my poor husband," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, with a kind of melan choly relish. "One word used to lead to another, if you understand me."

"Do I not?" said the other lady, with much feeling. "And all for the want of someone to be present with what you may call tact."

"There's a French word," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, thoughtfully, "that describes it to a T, but I could no more think of it now than—Alice! Alice, dear!"

A soprano voice from the end of the miniature lawn answered.

"What's the French word that means tact?"

"The young lady gave the answer, smiling upon her husband at the same time quite a hard pat, because he had stuck the shuttlecock ridiculous in her disturbed brown hair."

"That's it," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt. "Saverface. I was sure Alice would know, for you've only got seven ears. I heard somebody say once you can do most anything. And the funny thing was that it should have struck you and me at the same time, how nice it would be for us all to club together, so to speak, and live in the same house!"

"Look at the rave!" said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt.

"And they'll be company for us and we shall be company for them," concluded Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt triumphantly. "They won't know what it is to have a dull moment."

"I daresay they'll wait living up a bit at times."

"I'm a rare one for jokes," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt. "And as for riddles, why, I used to be asked out to parties because I was so full of 'em."

"I was never a one to go out much," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt with some pride. "My own home was good enough for me. You ought to have seen my floor! You could have eaten your dinner off 'em."

"Oh, that's nothing," retorted the other lady, lightly. "Why, my house was the talk of the neighborhood."

"What was wrong with it?"

"Wrong," cried Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, "nothing wrong at all. It was just next, I wonder! They took it about it just because it was so big and span. Wrong, indeed!"

"There's no occasion to fly all to me over nothing at all," said the other lady, trembling. "Besides, we must bear with one another if we both going to live in the same house, and look after this poor foolish young couple. How'd it be to call 'em in to supper? They'll eatch cold else. The nights began to draw in."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, coldly.

Mr. Gascoigne's aunt craned herself in a standing position, and flattered a handkerchief at the open doorway.

"Supper, children!"

The children came obediently, but reluctantly, in, and composed themselves for discreet behaviour. They were a couple of good looking young people, with a pleasant affection for the busy relatives who were preparing supper and upstairing. Martha, the small servant, as they did so in terms that would have been considered harsh if applied to a criminal of the resident eye.

"I wish, aunt, dear, you would allow me to do all this," said the young wife, anxiously. "I don't like to—"

have someone in the house who could lay the cloth.

"You're a very horrid old gentleman," said the young wife with effusion of much scorbidity. "And I believe you're an Ogra."

"No, but really dear, you'd rather do all this, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would. I want to be very much. But ever since I've been back from Deal they haven't allowed me to do a single thing."

"It's all right, my dear," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt cheerfully; "we're going to see that you don't work your fingers to the bone as some poor young housewives have to do. Martha, you dreadful creature, if I've told you once I've told you fifty times not to put your thumb in the salt-cellar when you bring it in. You'll come to a bad end, that's what you'll come to if you don't listen to what you're told."

Martha muttered something about a procuress had beginning anyhow, and leaving the room, closed the door with something of a decision.

"Martha! Martha!" The old ladies were united in their indignation. "You come back this minute and close the door properly. You don't want your month, do you?"

Martha said gloomily that she didn't mind what she had so long as she did not have quite so much jaw. Martha further added, with a furtive confidential wink at her young mistress to hint that she was not to consider herself as referred to in this remark, that too many cooks spoil the broth, and that for her part she didn't mind being led, but she wouldn't be drove, and disappeared.

"We shall soon certainly have trouble with that girl," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, warningly, "before we're done with her."

"She'll have to be taken down a peg or two, agreed Mr. Gascoigne's aunt. "She isn't the first servant I've had to take in hand."

"It occurs to me," said young Mr. Gascoigne, hesitatingly, "that—Alice, dear, if you have no bread—that perhaps if the girl were let alone—"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt.

"I'm afraid Martha feels that she—that she has a large number of commanders," said young Mrs. Gascoigne, nervously.

"Bah!" said her aunt. "You wait till you've been married forty years, my dear, and then you'll know what servants are like."

"Seems a long time to wait," said young Mr. Gascoigne.

"I ought to know something about managing servants," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, with a shiver of pride. "Once I had seven in two months."

"And don't they try to impose on you, too, when you show the least sign of weakness?" mentioned Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt.

"Rather! Take every advantage and won't let you call your soul your own."

"I rather like Martha," urged young Mrs. Gascoigne, looking at her husband, because she did not care to look at either of the two old ladies. "She seems a straightforward sort of girl."

"I'll straightforward her," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt severely, "if she doesn't pay a little more attention to what she's doing! Look at this tumbler. Does she call that clean?"

"I think," said young Mrs. Gascoigne, nervously, "that I cleaned the glasses this afternoon."

"Well," replied the old lady, "the argument's the same. And don't you go too much into the kitchen, my dear. We'll look after that."

"But I think Alice likes going into the kitchen," suggested the young husband.

"If I were you," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt to him with great emphasis, "if I were you, Herbert, I wouldn't interfere with matters I know nothing about. And, whilst I think of it, don't smoke in here when we have finished supper. It smells so in the rooming."

"But aunt!"—the young wife actually showed for a moment some spirit—"like the smell of tobacco?"

"Mrs. Gascoigne," severely, and in tones of command, "a little more of this pastry?"

"No, thank you," said young Mrs. Gascoigne, and sighed and made a Mont Blanc of the crumbs on the side of her plate. "I don't think it's very good pastry."

There was silence in the little room for a moment. The new little clock on the mantelpiece ticked away fiercely and impatiently, the old clock gave a sneeze as it recorded six minutes to eight, which meant that the real hour was now twenty-three minutes past nine.

"You are evidently not aware, my child," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt with awful solemnity, "that I"—the old lady paused and then repeated the personal pronoun—"that I made that pastry."

"That would account for it," said the young lady sharply.

And then, being a young person with a temper that never lasted, in the default form, for more than two minutes, she rose quickly, went to the head of the table, kissed the offended old lady, and penitently begged her pardon.

"Another time, my dear," said the two old ladies in jest, "another time think before you do."

For nearly a week, thanks to general forbearance, there was something

like peace at Semaphor Crescent. Even Martha brightened up a little and sang songs in the kitchen less redolent of melancholy. But the effect of young Mrs. Gascoigne's little outburst passed away in about seven days, and then ensued a policy of coercion directed by the two estimable old ladies with a view to placing the household on what they termed a proper footing. For the better enforcement of this the two had held secret council meetings in the drawing room of considerable length, and not without some dispute had eventually agreed to a plan of action.

Mr. Gascoigne, returning each evening from Somerset House, and demanding of his young wife whether everything had gone on well during the day, that young lady always answered with a smile that everything had gone swimmingly. When one evening he asked whether she had not been weeping, the young woman answered blithely that her aunt's riddles were enough to make anybody cry with laughing.

"I'm glad you three get on so well together," he said doubtfully. "I've been afraid sometimes that they were taking too much upon themselves to please you, and that—"

"What an ignorant young man it is!" she exclaimed; "positively no powers of observation."

"And you never wish in the daytime, dear, that you were back again teaching in your High School with all your girls?"

And then, quite suddenly the young woman did a very strange thing. She ran upstairs and had a good cry.

The situation became graver owing to the sudden breaking out of hostilities between the two old ladies. It arose from one of Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt's confessions, which, although it distinctly treated of washerwomen and soft water, Mr. Gascoigne's aunt insisted upon taking as offensive and personal to herself. They grew more aloof with each other daily, and they accentuated the differences by paying close and tiresome attention to the young people. Indeed, they worked so hard in this direction that young Mrs. Gascoigne found herself prevented from engaging in any domestic occupation whatever, with the result that being forced into reading countless modern novels she became quite hysterical.

"Why don't you up and give 'em a bit of your mind, Mam?" suggested Martha. Martha was slowly arriving at the decision that it would be for her to put this deplorable state of affairs in order. "Fly into a temper and give 'em your opinion of 'em. I should."

"Not to my own aunt, Martha," said the young woman severely; "and certainly not to Mr. Gascoigne's aunt."

"But the place is getting like Bedlam," urged the small maid. "Of course, I'm all right because I'm leaving to-morrow, thanks be 'em."

"I'm very sorry, Martha. You're a good girl!"

"I don't protest out to be over and above good," retorted Martha, "but I ain't a fool. And to 'ar them bickering at each other, and to watch the way they ignore you—"

"Martha! I tell you, it gives me the needs. I'm a quiet tempered girl in an ordinary way, but once I get fairly put out I can 'old me own with anyone. And before I go to-morrow night I shall have just two words—no more'n two, and it won't take me more than five minutes—two words to say to them. Talk about straight talks at Exeter! All to young men, why—"

"I shall be very sorry if you do anything of the kind, Martha. You will distress me very much."

Moreover, here Martha related her apron with a determined tug— "Moreover I'm going to have a quiet talk with master, please goodness, and let him know what goes on whilst he's away in the daytime, with them ignoring and what not between them. How they make it a perfect 'all-upon earth'!"

"Martha! You must not use such language."

"El' upon-earth," repeated the small maid with awful determination. "And how they keep on—well, as I said before, ignoring of you."

The phrase "ignoring" seemed to give Martha great satisfaction, and each time she used it she did so with increasing relish.

"And if don't do something," said Martha, "if master don't take the lot in his own 'ands I'm not so sure as I shan't ask my sister to get advice about it. Her young man's in the City police, and what he don't know about the lot isn't worth knowing. In fact, he made one of the Aldermen sit up the other—"

"Martha! Martha!" Two voices came from the kitchen.

"There they are again," said Martha.

"You good-for-nothing hussy, you!" cried the two distant voices; "where are you?"

"If there's one thing I can't stand," said Martha satirically, "it is being flattered before other people. I get as confused as anything."

"Do you think you're kept in the lap of luxury," cried the two distant old ladies, "and fed on the fat of the land that you can gallivant up hill and down dale just as you please?"

"They spoil me," said the small maid, preparing to depart, "that's what they do. There's such a thing

as being overkind to anybody. 'Ark at the gentle tones of their voices."

"You had better go Martha. And you must please not say a word to your master. I very strongly object—"

"Are you coming, Martha?" cried the distant voices wrathfully, "or are you not coming?"

"Miserable, you see," remarked Martha calmly; "fairly miserable if I'm out of their sight a moment."

Martha was indeed as good as her word in regard to the confidential talk with her master. Mr. Gascoigne looked extremely grave, and requested a straightway audience of his own aunt. He was a good-natured, easy-going young man, with a proper affection for his aunt, and even at this crisis he spoke with respect.

"I'd leave the place," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt, trembling, "I'd leave it this minute."

"To-morrow will do, aunt. I declare that I cannot endure the present conditions any longer."

"But not unless your wife's aunt goes first. Let me see her out of the house, and then I go as quick as you like. But I'm not going to leave you here, my poor, and your poor wife to be imposed upon by that—Well, I don't know what to call her. I've found out her true character during the last few weeks. She's as interfering as anything. Get rid of her, and I'll have a Pickford's van round and out I go."

But Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt took up an exactly similar attitude. Not a step would she budge, said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt with impressive determination, not so much as a single step, until Mr. Gascoigne's aunt was safely out of the house. Leave her mistress in the uncontrolled presence of a lady like Mr. Gascoigne's aunt? No, never! "Not," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, "not for forty thousand million pounds, laid on the table in solid golden sovereigns."

Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt added that she was not born yesterday—this, indeed, was a fact—and that she considered herself the equal of any other woman born or unborn. It seemed almost as though Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt was going to challenge all England, and to insist upon the stakes being left at the Sporting Life office, but she refrained from going so far as this, and contented herself by repeating with emphasis, "not for forty thousand million golden sovereigns laid on the table—in solid golden sovereigns."

The sentence of the crisis could be judged by the studied courtesy with which each old lady treated the other during the following day. Nothing was said with which each could be taken to task when the question arose late in the afternoon of going round to the stores.

"A little run will freshen you up, Madam," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt. "You're not looking quite up to the mark."

"I am quite up to the mark as it happens, Madam," replied Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt; "and if you think a run out will do you good don't let me stand in the way."

"You can't live without fresh air," urged Mr. Gascoigne's aunt; "and I feel sure that you're looking the least bit pale."

"As a matter of fact," replied Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, glancing at herself in the immense mirror, "I am usually ruddy. But how would it be if both went out?"

This it was decided. Upon their simultaneous return they upbraided the perturbed looking Martha in good set terms for not answering the bell more promptly, and demanded to know where her young mistress was. At which Martha fell into a chair, threw her apron over her face, and sobbed so bitterly that the old ladies became seriously alarmed, and changed their tone for a few moments to one of compassion. This unexpected consideration had the desired effect, and Martha resumed her usual aspect of sanity.

"What on earth," cried Mr. Gascoigne's aunt, "is the matter with the girl?"

"And where's your mistress?"

"And what makes you look so scared?"

"And what's the back door open for?"

"And why—"

"Alf a minute!" begged Martha pitiously; "one at a time, if you please. Oh, my poor, poor mistress! Oh, my poor dear mistress! She's been drove to it."

"Driven to what?" screamed Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt with great anxiety.

"Tell me instantly, my good girl."

Martha rose from the chair swiftly and stood up straight to the full extent of her five feet two.

"Don't you call me your good girl!" said Martha with great severity. "Begin to call me names and I shan't miscue my words, I can tell you."

"Thank goodness!" whispered the terrified old lady; "thank goodness, the dreadful creature loves to night."

"A disgraced, deserted 'ome!" said Martha, folding her arms. A bowling wilderness. A once 'appy 'ome wrecked and ruined."

"If you'd only explain in simple English what you mean—"

"A scandal in 'igh life' went on Martha, with a vague memory of headlines in the Sunday journals. "Fig. 1 of the un'appy wife. Her 'usband in 'ot present. Shocking disclosures!"

"What the poor demented creature means I can't be for the life of—"

"And this!" cried Martha, turning upon the two old ladies so suddenly that they started back. "This is your 'andwork! This is what comes of you two bullying and arguing, and dictating, and ignoring, and what not! This is your show, this is! You're responsible for all this!"

"If you could just tell us," moaned Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, "in a few words what has really happened, we should be able to follow you with so much more—"

"You don't follow me," said Martha, determinedly. "When I leave this miserable broken 'ome, as I 'ope to do as soon as ever I can get my box packed, I wash my 'ands of the 'ole business. If it comes to an inquest or to a police court business, it won't be me that stands in the dock!"

"If you don't mind telling us where your mistress is, Martha dear—"

"I don't know where she is. You don't know where she is. No one don't know where she is."

"My poor, dear niece," wailed Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, remorsefully. "This is what comes of leaving the house for half an hour."

"Better for both of you if you'd never come back. Better still if neither of you had ever put so much as a foot inside this 'ouse. It might 'ave saved 'ere—here Martha lowered her voice impressively—"blooded."

"Gracious!" screamed the two old ladies.

"Blooded," explained Martha, with infinite satisfaction, "in other words, the shedding of blood. For what do you suppose has happened?"

"That's just precisely what—"

"What do you say to young mistress rushing upstairs madly as soon as you was gone and dressing like one 'o'clock? What do you say to me 'earing a slam of the door, and my rushin' upstairs, and finding on the dressing-table—on the dressing table, mind you—"

"Go on, my dear good creature."

"On the dressing-table," repeated Martha, as though everything depended on this; "on the dressing-table, a note. And what do you say to that note expressing itself in the effect that her life could no longer be endured, that she'd been ignored long enough, that she proposed now to end a life that ought never to 'ave been commenced?"

"My poor, poor niece!" cried Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt tearfully.

"What do you think of this being added as a—what do you call it? As a—bless my soul!" said Martha, puzzled, "what is the word?"

"Never mind what the word is, my good girl. Tell us what else was in the letter."

"Let me think of the word I want first," said Martha, with the austerity of a leading lady. "It's on the tip of my tongue, and if you two didn't keep interruptin'—poor 'rip!—that's the word. What do you say to that? This evening I leave this world and all its cares and worries. Also, in all probability, my husband. Weep not for us, for it's a better 'uss. Martha appeared so well satisfied with this last sentence, as partaking something of the nature of poetry that she repeated it to the two white-faced old ladies. "Weep not for us, for it is better thus."

The two old ladies shook their heads dolefully, and Martha went on: "Poor master! 'o fairly off his nut when he 'ears about it. Nicu loveable young lady she was, and to be cut off in the flower of her youth, all owing to ill-treatment on the part of relatives old enough to know better. Thank goodness 'ad Martha blithely, that her goodness, it'll 'all some out in the papers! If I'm called on to give evidence I shall know what to say."

"You wouldn't tell us—an untruth, Martha?"

"I know where to draw the line," answered the small servant evasively.

"Would it be—would it be well to send for the police, I wonder?"

"Police are no good," said Martha, definitely. "They're just the same as ordinary men, only stupider. In the suburbs, I mean. All you can do is to set down and keep quiet and see what happens. And what do you say," pursued Martha, "to the poor thing taking her jewel-case, although goodness knows that'll be little use to her where she goes. And what do you say to her taking master's photo along with her so that it should be found on her body close to 'er 'eart.?"

"But is there not time—"

"Time!" snapped Martha, wrathfully. "What are you talking about? Do you think it isn't all over by this?"

"It can't—can't be really so—so dreadful."

"Can't it," retorted Martha. "Can't it, indeed! If you'd read as much of the police intelligence in the papers as I 'ave, you'd know what can be and what can't be. And if you don't believe what I'm telling you, why, say so—that's all."

Neither of the two unhappy old ladies took up Martha's defiant challenge.

"I almost begin to wish," said Mr. Gascoigne's aunt, "that we hadn't interfered quite so much. Perhaps they would have got on better by themselves."

"At all events," said Mrs. Gascoigne's aunt, with an effort, "we

acted from a good motive. At least I did."

"Am I to take that to mean that I did not?" demanded Mr. Gascoigne's aunt with scorbidity.

"I don't wish to go into other people's motives. I simply speak for myself, and I do say that I meant well in all that I did, and if you didn't—well, all I can say is, I'm very sorry for you. And to think that my poor niece should find herself ruined—"

"Look 'ere!" interrupted Martha. "You two can 'ave this little prize-fight out when I'm gone. You won't 'ave anyone to look after and interfere with, and you'll be nicely all to yourselves. And if you don't mind, I'll just do a lot of packing up and get away before there's any far 'er trouble. I don't want to be mixed up in any unpleasantness, because, of course, I'm, as you may say, young, and I've got my future to look forward to. With you two ladies, it's different."

"You surely won't leave us, Martha," appealed Mr. Gascoigne's aunt, piteously. "In our hour of need,"

"Oh! won't I?" replied Martha, confidently. "You'll see."

To the great amazement of the other servants in the Crescent, Martha, scoffing at convention, went off in a hansom, instead of the four wheeler that custom suggests. The hansom took her swiftly to town, and at a large building of reasonably priced flats Martha and her box went up the lift.

"Arrived safely, then, Martha," said young Mrs. Gascoigne cheerfully.

"Rather!" said Martha.

"And you said farewell to the old people on good terms?" asked young Mr. Gascoigne.

"Depends what you call good, sir," answered Martha, evasively. "But 'aven't you got nice cosy rooms 'ere.?"

"And you gave my message to my aunt, I hope," said Mrs. Gascoigne, "and explained that we would write and explain fully?"

"I gave 'em full information," said Martha calmly.

"I'm so glad we arranged it without any quarrelling," said young Mrs. Gascoigne. "I was very anxious to see a scene of any description."

"And Martha having explained it all quietly and without any fuss," remarked Mr. Gascoigne, "they cannot take offence or—"

"If you don't mind, Mam," interrupted Martha, "I should like to turn in a bit earlier than usual this evening. I've 'ad what you may call rather a tiring day of it."

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