

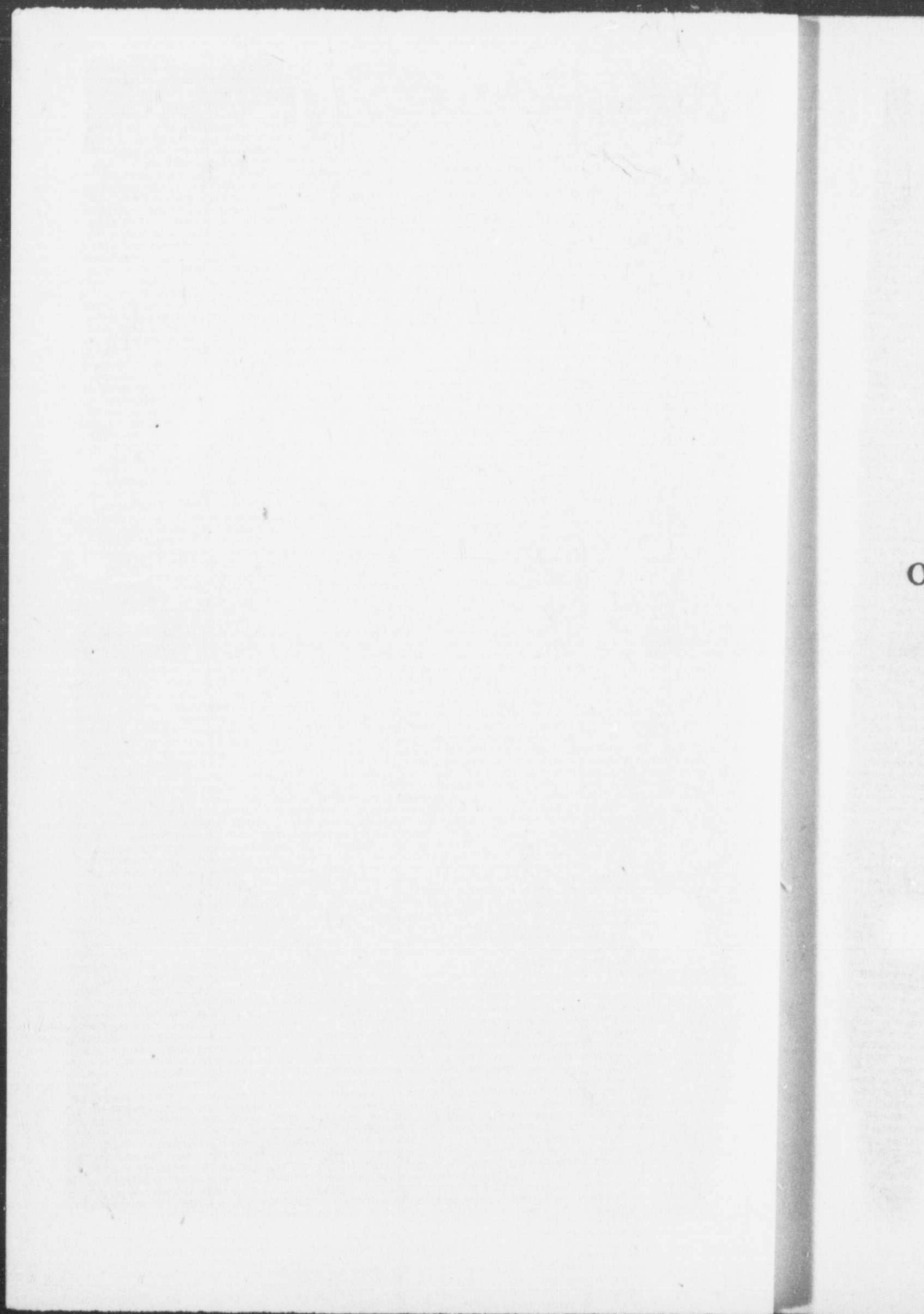
ON
COMMON
GROUND



SYDNEY H. PRESTON

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ON COMMON GROUND

THE
Abandoned Farmer

BY
SYDNEY H. PRESTON

12mo, \$1.25

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THE COPP, CLARK CO., LIMITED
TORONTO

ON COMMON GROUND

BY

SYDNEY H. PRESTON

AUTHOR OF "THE ABANDONED FARMER"

TORONTO

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Published April, 1906

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ON COMMON GROUND

FROM one point of view it looks perfectly idiotic for a man of my age to begin a journal; but, after all, why shouldn't I do so if it amuses me? I've got back to youth once more,—I'm rejuvenated, made over, without either the morbid egotism or illusive susceptibility of my teens. I've got down to the elemental at last, and any reflections I indulge in here will be matter-of-fact observations deduced from the everyday experience of a—*farmer!*

I find I can't write that word without a chuckle of delight. Most farmers seem solemn and unconcerned in regard to their vocation: perhaps I, too, shall arrive at that stage in ten years or so, but not in the near future,—I'm too new-fangled over the fact. Yesterday I couldn't have written the word without a qualm of inward doubt, but to-day I can shout it to the winds, for to-day I put my hand to the plough, literally. Joseph was at work in the back field when I went out to give him the orders after breakfast, and

I watched his slow clumsy movements in a sort of brown study as fold after fold of moist rich loam crept up from the plough point, swelled along the concave silvery smoothness of the mould-board and turned gently over with a crumbling crest. I looked on, smoking my cigarette with outward calm, but I could have got down and grovelled in the turned-up soil, through pure exultation that it was mine, but for the restraining presence of Joseph. That man is a dull clod: I drew his attention to the resemblance to wavelets in the freshly turned soil, but he couldn't see it,—said there couldn't be no waves without water.

I watched his big feet plod slowly after the plough up and down several furrows, then as he started the team on a fresh one, I suddenly threw away my cigarette and pushed him aside. He stood in open-mouthed amazement as I grabbed the plough handles, jerked the reins and started the horses. The next instant a thrill of delight shot through me as the earth broke away from the point, but I needed all my nimbleness to keep it from wobbling like a compass needle with the motion of the horses. Joseph permits himself

to be dragged lazily along the furrow, but I skipped out and in, first on one side, then on the other, in the effort to keep a fairly straight line. In this I succeeded, though I even risked disaster by a swift triumphant glance backward to see if Joseph was petrified. Far from it!—he was executing a jig just where I left him, his large mouth distended into an ecstatic grin. When I reached the end I saw him preparing to amble after me with the evident intention of regaining possession, but I called to him to keep off, and turned the horses myself, finishing the return furrow in fine style. “You done well, sir,” remarked Joseph solemnly, when I breathlessly motioned him to take my place; then he added with another grin that the horses would turn more readily for me if I didn’t shout haw while I pulled the gee line. When I got my breath I floored him by pointing out that he always shouted haw-gee-whoa-back-up-get-on-there, in one breath, yet the horses didn’t seem to mind.

I can see that if I were to do the ploughing myself it would be done in half the time, for Joseph is a crawler. I have timed his gait: it is sixty steps to the minute. That means two

miles an hour, approximately, reckoning three feet to the pace, but his is only two feet seven-and-a-half, and he slips back about three inches at each step when I try to hurry him. The worst of it is that he has trained the horses to strike his gait. I shall have to teach them to move more briskly when I take them in hand.

Ploughing, I take it, is exhilarating work, but overheating. After my exertion I sat on the grass in a shady fence corner and fanned myself with my straw hat, while Joseph lagged stolidly after the plough. He has no germ of emulation in his make-up; he doesn't seem to realise that spring is the season for planting, and while I am in a fever heat to get things in, he dawdles along as if any time before winter would do; but I have made up my mind not to spoil my enjoyment of the season by urging him on.

It was one of those balmy spring days filled with brilliant sunshine, blue sky, rapturous bird-songs and scent-laden breezes, and as I lay on the grass I could almost fancy that the myriads of tiny rootlets and up-thrusting blades sent earth pulsations through my body: that I could feel the thrill of the vigorously flowing sap

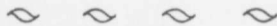
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swelling the countless tree-buds. I even had an impulse to cast off my tennis shoes and walk with bare feet in the warm, sandy loam, but alas!—the artificiality of many years revolted, and I shuddered at the thought of grimy skin. I regret that I have never been a barefoot boy—now it is too late!

The suggestion reminded me that my hands were soiled and rough from contact with the plough handles and reins, so I went back to the house and washed, then reclined in the hammock for the rest of the morning, enjoying the sensation of well-earned repose that only a tiller of the soil can experience to perfection when his work is ended.

As I write, I find myself constantly stopping to rub my fingers together; the skin feels dry and rough as if still grimy from my labour. Why should I be so squeamish? I am even tempted to wear gloves, but I shall not. Farmers do not wear gloves.



Ploughing, and Joseph!—and my youthful diary was filled with Millicent Tyrwhitt, heroics and romance!

I suppose it is natural for most men to look back with regret to the dreams of youth, but youthful joys are nothing to the realities that are mine. I believe I know every kind of happiness except that of despair, for, since the brief infatuation of immaturity, I have escaped the troubles and perplexities that assail men who imagine themselves in love.

I met Millicent on the train a few weeks ago: she is portly, *passé*, and the mother of three,— I am glad they are not mine. Yet once I thought her angelic! The flaxen hair (more golden), the blue eyes (rather washy), are still there, and the light complexion is higher,—much higher,— but she can still blush.

Positively, I feel a glow of vicarious shame creeping up my spinal column. How can a woman of her age be so sillily foolish, to put it mildly? She blushed repeatedly and cast down her eyes when she met my glance, raised them again and tapped me coyly with her fan, and while her children were occupied with caramels she shielded her face from them with the outspread fan and talked in confidential tones of the days when we were—friends. She meant no

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harm, of course, but—oh, Good Lord!—I verily believe she thought from my heightened colour I hadn't married because of her. Well, romance dies hard with some women, for Millicent is no longer young. I'm thankful I have never been an adult fool.

There are times when one fancies things don't just happen, but are foreordained, as in this case. Not a month ago I was glancing over the advertising pages of a periodical in mere bored idleness when my eye caught the words "The Hermitage," and on the instant my imagination blazed with desire. Of course fire doesn't break forth without cause, but I wasn't conscious at the time of anything beyond the usual spring restlessness, and the accustomed nebulous idea that a man might get a good deal of simple pleasure out of the possession of a few acres and a house that he could call home.

But I was mistaken, in degree. Simple pleasure!—there is nothing simple about it, but the most soul-satisfying complexity of sensations that defy analysis. No longer am I an individual capable of one impression at a time, but like an electric cable I am the medium gathering to-

gether the numberless sensations Mother Nature lavishes upon receptive souls. As for the dulness, the sameness, of country life!—blind and deaf must be the man unconscious of its infinite variety.

After all, what attracted me in the advertisement? There are other farms of a few acres, with orchard, lawns and garden, picturesque dwelling houses—one can find them by the score—but there is only one “The Hermitage,” and it is mine. Perhaps it was the name that caught my fancy, and the brick fireplaces, the rambling old house with its spacious rooms, “its commanding situation overlooking the lake,” and the wine cellar. Yes, I honestly believe the wine cellar spurred my desire, though why I should want one is a mystery, for I do not drink wine, yet I like to go down and peer into its dim and dusty recesses and gloat over its being mine. I understand now how a woman yearns over an ancient spinning wheel and delights in its possession, though she may not know the spindle from the treadle.

And the rooms!—I can use, at the most, but three or four, yet it gives me a sense of space

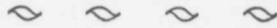
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and freedom to know the unused ones await my pleasure, and there is nothing gloomy or depressing to me in the thought of being the solitary occupant; the reverse, indeed, is the case, for I want to be alone and enjoy to the full the refreshing experience of a simple and natural existence. Yes, I shall till the genial soil, earn my bread by the sweat of my brow, unhampered by the petty conventionalities of my previous state.

I chuckle to think of Langley. Only a fortnight ago he clapped me on the back with half-jocular friendliness, saying that I looked rather out of sorts. "Get a wife, for heaven's sake, Merivale," he adjured me, "and don't grow into a confounded cranky old bachelor." And then he proceeded to spout platitudes about the joys of domestic life, oblivious to the fact that the warmth of my regard for him has cooled considerably since his marriage, and that it is impossible for me to believe him to be quite as sociable as he used to be. But that is the way with the friends of my youth: one by one they have surrendered to the cares and responsibilities of which I am happily free, and now I have simply dropped

out of their lives, and not even Langley has the faintest idea I have become a farmer. He doesn't dream that I now look back pityingly on *him*.



Keeping a journal is more entertaining than I expected. There is nothing to do after dark but to read or play patience, and when I begin to write I get positively garrulous, and time flies. As for reading, I'm tired of it,—when a man reads for entertainment he doesn't want to be revolted by gratuitous love-making. Perhaps my encounter with Millicent has made me supersensitive, but in future I shall leave magazine short stories to youths, and to women who are no longer young.

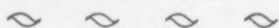
I shall continue to write about what interests me at the moment, no matter how prosaic the details, for I mean to make this a record of impressions. I am conscious that my mind is in the state that psychologists term plastic, and that my senses are receptive to a degree which I can never again approach. Perhaps when I am an old and *blasé* agriculturist I may peruse this record with cynical amusement, but I don't think so. I

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shall never tire of this pastoral seclusion. I am old enough to know what I want, and I no longer grasp at bubbles.

Now that I have attained to my ideal, I willingly admit that I have long been conscious my life lacked something—I didn't know what. Sometimes I have told myself, and my friends have told me, that I should marry,—I have even, at times, felt a pleased expectancy that I would yet meet a woman at whose feet I would be glad to lay me down and die, but no such madness has ever possessed me, thank heaven. I have never met one who made my heart go pit-a-pat, (shade of Millicent, take notice, I was only a boy!) though somewhere within me lurked an unsatisfied desire that has vanished since I began to lie at the feet of Nature.



I think I remarked that Joseph is a dolt: close observation leads me to qualify the assertion by adding that he looks like one. In fact, I don't know what to think of Joseph; his mind may not be as sluggish as his body. I begin to regard him with curiosity, doubtful as to whether he is

a type or an individual. I bought him with the place; that is, he was my predecessor's hired man, and as he showed a marked inclination to stay in this part of the country, I engaged him for the farm work. Otherwise I know nothing of his antecedents, and I may have made a mistake in supposing his presence on the spot a providential arrangement for my convenience.

But I was in luck to find a suitable woman living near at hand to come in every day to do the housework. I can get along better in this way without the complications of a resident housekeeper, and infinitely better than with—a wife! I find myself gulping as I write that word, and I break into a cold sweat at the thought that I might—it's just barely possible—I *might* have married a Millicent.

But now, I have all the comforts of a home, without the drawbacks. Easy chairs and lounges, but no curtains, not even blinds; a few rugs, but no carpets; a few pictures, but no decorative monstrosities. I know where to find things by remembering where I used them last.

Mrs. Biggles wanted to put blinds on the windows, but I was firm. The house is well back

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from the road, surrounded by trees and shrubbery, and even if it were possible for curious people to peer in after the lamps are lighted, what would they see? Up to ten o'clock, a weary and happy farmer of philosophic cast of countenance lounging in an easy chair with legs outstretched to the grateful heat of the fireplace. Perhaps he is reading, or watching the flames as he reviews the delightful experiences of the day; later, he sits up and writes his journal or plays patience, then about midnight puts out the lamps and goes to bed. His last thought as he drops to sleep is that he *will* get up early, but the next morning it is eleven before he is ready to sally forth and prod Joseph, who has been at work, he supposes, since sunrise.



Langley told me once that he never knew anyone so self-centred and impervious to externals as I am, but he'd open his eyes if he could see how impressionable I have become to the wholesome influences that surround me. My nature is unfolding in a way which makes me realise that I appeared stolid to him; but then he is so constituted that he can't get along without the

society of women, so he can't understand my outlook. He doesn't see that I'm not really set against the sex, but that I don't find trifling conversation entertaining. It is the evident affectation and the self-consciousness that they *are* women I shrink from; although when I come to think of it, mannishness is infinitely worse.

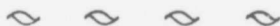
Mrs. Biggles, my housekeeper, is satisfactory on the whole, though rather inclined to be garrulous; but I do not check this tendency, for she is the soul of good-nature, and I find her conversation rather entertaining. She is a middle-aged Englishwoman, the mother of a family, who has not been long enough in the land of liberty to learn that all are free and equal, or to lose that soothing deference of manner which implies without servility that she is proud to be at your service. If anything, she is almost too attentive to my needs, in her anxiety to make me comfortable; an anxiety almost approaching motherly sympathy at times, for she seems to find it hard to believe I can live by myself without pangs of loneliness.

But then, I do not need society in the ordinary sense of the term, and though I am genial to the

fellow-farmers I meet casually, I fancy we are bound to remain upon terms of non-intimacy. I don't know the password, it appears; in their eyes I am still a "city feller." I am in the position of a boarder who pays for all "the comforts of home life," yet is conscious that he is not one of the family.

My near neighbours are few. On the other side of the road most of the land is still uncleared; the next place north belongs to Abner Singlestick, a shrewd-looking elderly man who is distinctly unprepossessing; that to the south, with a most attractive looking house and grounds, is "The Briars," Mrs. Biggles tells me, and the owner is a Miss Humphrey. And in regard to the latter my informant overflows with superfluous information, for there is something particularly objectionable to me in the thought of a woman farmer, and the more capable she is the more I recoil. This one is evidently not a brawny female who drives her produce to market and wields a knife at pig-killing, but she is probably without the veneer of pseudo-refinement which sometimes makes the unwomanly woman tolerable in the city. It is an unfortunate thing for

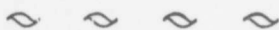
me that her father died a couple of years ago, for everyone says he was a kindly, honest old man, well educated, and an excellent farmer. I should have liked to hob-nob with such a man in a neighbourly way, and smoke a pipe with him in the long evenings. As it is, I seem to be neighbourless, but I shall not lack for entertainment as long as Mrs. Biggles's conversational powers endure, and her flow of language seems to come from a living spring.



But what difference can it make to me who are or are not my neighbours, when my life here is filled with such a continual variety of interests that I am kept in a state of pleasurable excitement? To-day, for instance, my hens arrived. They are pure bred Leghorns, and cost me four times the price of ordinary fowls, but I do not grudge the money, for they are beauties. Their plumage is a glossy snow-white, their combs and wattles the deep rich crimson of the cardinal flower, their legs bright yellow. They are timid, and eye me askance, so I have spent most of the day in winning their confidence, and some of them will now pick up the corn I throw to them

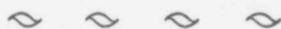
from a distance; in consequence, I am hopeful that in course of time they will begin to feel at home. It seems incredible that they will ever be really tame, but Joseph assures me they will. I shall not feel satisfied until they trust me enough to eat out of my hand. I went out with a lantern this evening to see them roosting in a long white row; it seems odd they prefer to sleep that way instead of sitting comfortably in straw,—but how much more wonderful it is that they will lay eggs and hatch chickens!

I expected to enjoy living in the country, but I looked for a reposeful, almost monotonous existence; instead, I find myself in a whirl of recreative pursuits. If I craved dulness I would go back to the city.



I wish Mrs. Biggles wouldn't talk so much about my neighbour to the south; her constant allusions are getting on my nerves. I have no doubt this Miss Humphrey is a paragon, but I don't see why Mrs. Biggles should be so determined to emphasise her perfections to me. The arrival of my piano yesterday prompted the in-

formation that Miss H. can dust off the pianner keys wonderful, this assertion being qualified by the opinion that though her pieces are awful hard there ain't much toon to them, from which I gather that she may be really musical. It is odd to think of a woman who chooses farming as an occupation clinging to this remnant of bygone culture; but, after all, I am a farmer, and I find it a pleasure to sit down to the piano occasionally and sing some of my favourite songs.



Before I was up this morning I heard a commotion among the hens, and from the cackling one might have supposed they had all laid at once. They hadn't, however, though I found one egg, the first, still warm in the nest. Up to this time I have always supposed that hens laid eggs; now it is no longer a supposition, it is a miracle wrought under my own observation, and I shall never forget the thrill of wonder that ran through me when I put my hand into the nest and found a real egg laid by one of my own hens. It is not an ordinary egg either; the shell is ivory white with a smooth dead finish, and the shape

is more pointed than that of the commercial article. I showed it to Joseph exultantly, but he seemed as indifferent as if I had exhibited a blade of grass, remarking that Miss Humphrey gets about fifty of 'em every day, so he had seen lots of 'em before. This is not the first time that Joseph has taken it upon himself to dilate upon Miss Humphrey's achievements, and as he worked for her last year for a brief time, I took the opportunity of expressing surprise that he hadn't stayed in a place where everything was done so perfectly. After prolonged consideration he concluded it was because a feller didn't like to be bossed by a woman, and she got up so gosh darned early you couldn't get no work done till she was at you to do somethin' else. Evidently it is a virtue in me not to get up too early!

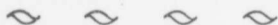
Occasionally I have met people in a casual way whom I would like to know, and to-day as I walked to the post-office I saw someone who attracts me strangely. The person is a lady; a young lady, in fact, who appeared to be on her way to take the train to the city, and it was my good-fortune to pick up a small parcel she

dropped on the path and hand it to her. She thanked me courteously, but it is not the words that haunt me; it is her eyes, clear and thoughtful, the quick yet reserved smile, the musical cadence in her voice, the shape of her daintily gloved hand. Why should such a trifling incident linger in my memory? Yet I find myself wondering who she may be, and if we shall ever meet again.

This evening I looked over the latest number of *The Ordinary Groove* and became absorbed, against my resolution, in one more of these absurd short stories. This one is fascinating in its very absurdity, but so outrageously sentimental that I am about to swear I shall never read another. The heroine meets the hero, a stranger, casually, in the lobby of a theatre; their eyes meet in a lingering glance; his face haunts her; her face haunts him; they are mutually thrilled by an inward conviction of inevitable destiny. Two years later, at a Legation ball in Washington, Angelica strays into a conservatory and meets her unknown lover face to face. He smiles tenderly, opens his arms, and she falls into them with a low happy cry. "Ah, love,—at last!" he mur-

murs; "At last!" she breathes. (Of course they are shielded from the gaze of the vulgar public by the huge leaves of a banana tree.)

I don't know what there is about this production that arouses my indignation, and at the same time touches some inward responsive chord which makes such a situation appear possible in its impossibility. I am inclined to write a letter of protest to the editor for insulting the intelligence of readers who have a right to expect that the fiction in a great magazine shall be interesting and amusing, but neither instructive nor idiotic. And why, I should like to ask, why should the taste of the helpless reader of average intelligence seeking mental recreation be ignored, and the space of the magazines given up to the entertainment of the chocolate-caramel young person?



It is several days since my hens arrived, and already they are tame. It is almost incredible that such a short time ago they eyed me with suspicion and fled at my approach, for my appearance each morning is a signal to scurry from the most distant parts of the orchard and stand

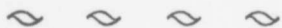
on tip-toe around me until I empty my pocket of corn. They will now eat out of my hand, and the rooster has almost got to the point of putting his bill into my pocket. It is a great pleasure to have such beautiful fowls around me, and I am glad to see they are attracting general attention. Passers-by crane their necks to get a better view, and several have stopped to ask about settings of eggs. I have decided in consequence to save all that are laid at present, and buy some at the store for domestic purposes. In this way I can soon get profitable returns from my investment. None of the men who spoke for settings inquired about the price, which shows that farmers are progressive and far from niggardly when they see a good thing, though they charge the highest city prices for produce that one would naturally suppose might be bought cheaper at the point of production. I mentioned this anomaly to a man who delivered a load of hay to me yesterday. "You see," I argued, "it's ten miles to the city market, so you save a day and a twenty mile trip for yourself and team; you should be willing to sell me that hay at least three dollars a ton cheaper."

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“Well, Mr. Merry-well,” he answered thoughtfully, “it’s about as broad as it’s long. It’s a good ten mile to the market, as you say, and if you was to go there to buy your hay, you’d lose a day and have to pay a good three dollars a ton to have it teamed out here, so if each of us saves that much we’d ought to call it square. Step up there, Dan!”

According to this reasoning I should charge two dollars a setting for my eggs, the price at the poultry farm where the fowls were bought, but I am determined to give my neighbours an example of moderation,—I shall charge only one dollar.



The weather has turned warm and summer-like. Instead of sitting before the fire in the evenings, I have taken to lying out on the lawn under the trees. It is peaceful, soothing, it is the poetry of possession, to lie there in the dusk after the heat and labour of the day, and feel that it is all your own: the light, cool breeze, the rustle of the leaves, the carpet of white clover at your feet, the faint twinkle of the stars, the occasional

twitter of sleepy birds in the spruces. I draw a breath of deep content, of thankfulness that fate spared me the misfortune of profitable speculation that might have meant great wealth, Millicent, the whirl of society, and a family of caramel-absorbed children. Instead, I have a little farm well-tilled as the solace of my solitary existence, and there is nothing that could add to my comfort,—nothing whatever,—nor is there anything to detract from my simple enjoyment of this rural life.

There are occasional jarring notes in the evening quiet, for people pass in the darkness and scraps of conversation reach me from the road. For example:—

First Voice, high-pitched, nasal, punctuated by the jolting of a buggy: “*Who?*”

Second Voice, raucous and explosive: “*Merrywell!*—one o’ them city fellers with more money ’n brains!”

Two Voices, tenor and bass: “He, he, he!—haw,—haw!”

Second Voice, with the crack of a whip: “G’lang there, Jumbo!”

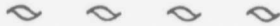
First Voice, rapidly receding, convulsed by its

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own wit: "Bet yer life in a year he'll have less money, and——"

Second Voice, seizing the point before its utterance and breaking in with a mighty shout: "Right about the money, but I wouldn't bank on the....." (Faint explosive cackling, mercifully distant.)



I am getting skilled in the voices of the night during these warm evenings when I lie out under the sky and meditate. There is the solemn boom of the great owl from the cedar swamp, the rasping note of the night-jar, the eerie chattering cry of the little screech owl, the solitary whistle of the whip-poor-will, and to-night another intrusive haunting sound reached me, bringing back my vanished youth in a sudden rush of desolate yearning. At first it came only as a vague regular thrumming that made me sit up and listen breathlessly, then the triple rhythm resolved into bass notes of definite pitch, and I caught the faint tinkle of the treble in these cloying thirds and sixths of ancient memory. Heavens!—how these half-forgotten strains of Strauss tug at one's heart-

strings! The glow of youth, love, laughter, the beat of slippered feet and scent of flowers, red lips and flashing eyes, the radiance and glamour,—and with it all the undertone of sadness like the warning toll of a distant bell-buoy over the misty sea. Alas!—the flickering torch of youth! I thought I had reached the age when one's fancy is not lightly stirred, yet my heart beat fast as I listened to these haunting strains; for an instant an ecstatic vision of Millicent as we floated together through Elysian fields one blissful night transfixed me, then I came to myself with a laugh at my own folly. Yet something in the insistent rhythm impelled me to stroll restlessly down to the gate, then almost without thought I found myself on the path under the pines hurrying in the direction of the music. Suddenly it stopped, and I stood still; then I heard the first low notes of my favourite Allegretto, the one that breathes the very spirit of twilight to me. Surely it must have come to Beethoven in that half-hour between the lights, when the brief day of youth is fading, and retrospect is strong.

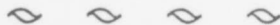
I am depressed to-night, almost sentimental, perhaps. I have been writing my journal all

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evening, yet I haven't told all, or nearly all. I have even omitted to say that the music came from Miss Humphrey's house. It is screened from the road by a high hedge, so I have never happened to see her in passing, but I don't think it possible she is the player. Perhaps she has a visitor, or more probably a boarder, who is musical, for it is the season for summer boarders. I would like to meet the person who plays with that sympathetic touch. It awakens all my former craving for music, which has of late years been petrified by gymnastics and fireworks.



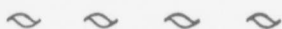
The vapours of last evening have cleared away; I was getting a trifle morbid. To-day the sun is shining, the birds are singing, my heart is light, and I wonder at the entry of last night. It must stand, however, for I am determined to keep an absolutely frank record of my impressions.

These White Leghorns have got extraordinarily tame. A few days ago I flicked grains of corn to them from the front verandah; since then

they have frequently come around to the same place, eyeing me with eager expectancy, and I have amused myself watching them scramble for the grain. To-day, however, they came up on the verandah while I was having my afternoon nap, and I was awakened by the clatter of their feet. It annoys me to be wakened, so I shooed them vigorously, and they fled with terrified squawks in all directions. Afterwards I felt ashamed of my surliness, and if they had come back I would have apologised with corn. They didn't, however, and it is just as well, for they must not get too familiar: the line must be drawn at the verandah. I felt some slight misgiving, though, when I read an article in *The Poultry Fancier* in which the writer claimed that laying hens must be carefully guarded from sudden fright; in fact they must be treated with the same delicacy and consideration as milking cows. What if the flow of eggs at one dollar a dozen should suddenly cease!

Mrs. Biggles is not a widow. She has mentioned Biggles casually several times, but I did not learn positively from her remarks until to-

day that he is still alive; and from the fact of her living alone in her cottage with her children I took it for granted that her husband was merely a memory. He is alive, however, she tells me, but is temporarily absent from this neighbourhood; whether he is ten, or a thousand miles, from her she does not say. Indeed, she hints he is travelling; for health, pleasure, or on business, does not appear, which leads me to suspect he is an improvident fellow or worse, who has left her to shift for herself.



I have been hoarding eggs for the men who spoke for settings. To-day one of them arrived and called out from the road: "Got them aigs?" I answered in the affirmative, invited him in with the pleased alacrity of a tradesman who expects a large order, and after genially conversing on the weather and the crops, I laid thirteen of my precious eggs reverently in his basket. Not until that moment had I realised what a wrench it would be to part with them, but the certainty of their perishability made it inevitable.

"How much d'ye make it?" he asked, thrust-

ing his hand into his pocket and drawing forth a handful of copper coins.

“One dollar,” I replied modestly.

A spasm contorted his features; he stared at me in silent amazement. “One *dollar?*” he gasped, at length. “Jee-rus’lem!—d’ye know what they’re wuth?”

“Two dollars,” I replied.

Without a word he laid the basket down and took out the eggs with trembling hands, then he faced me.

“I’ve heerd of gold-brick men, and such-like sharks before,” he averred solemnly, “but I’m darned if I ever seen a man with gall enough to ask a dollar for eggs that’s sellin’ for nine cents a dozen down to the store.” And with a glare of infinite scorn he hurried out of the gate, leaving me to wrestle with my thoughts.

Not one of those eggs shall be sold at nine cents a dozen—I shall eat them, if possible. If not—ah, well!—there is an Orphans’ Home in the city, I believe. Perhaps I shall see among the list of contributions gratefully received:

“1 basket of eggs, from A Farmer.”

It is a melancholy thought.

I feel that I was a trifle harsh and impatient with those hens when I shooed them yesterday; to-night I am rather conscience-stricken, for they have behaved with dignity and intelligence. They are evidently determined to avoid me, for since then I haven't got a glimpse of them even in the distance. I remarked their absence to Joseph, but instead of enlightening me, he looked unusually silly and volunteered the irrelevant assertion that wheat's a-headin', and about this time hens gets shy of people lookin' at 'em. It is an extraordinary phenomenon, but I have learned not to betray too much surprise when I listen to statements which may seem incredible, simply because I am unused to country life. After all, it is no more remarkable than that they should bathe in dust instead of water, or look ashamed of their nakedness when their feathers fall out. Joseph says he feeds 'em good, but there ain't no use tryin' to keep 'em about the house this time of year without shuttin' of 'em up, which I told him not to do on any account. It would be a cruel thing to confine them because they are seized by an instinct to shun observation.

To-day Mrs. Biggles propounded a question without warning that left me speechless at first.

“Mr. Merry-well,” said she, with a mournful intonation, “be you acquainted with them lines,

‘’Tis better to ’ave loved and lost,
Than never to ’ave loved at all.’”

I was betrayed into a start of surprise, then I gazed at her in stupid wonderment. “I—I think—I’ve heard them before,” I stammered, at length, for she still regarded me with tense pleading inquiry, and I was confused by the thought of Millicent.

“And be they *true*?” she insisted, her eyes suddenly swimming with tears, “or was they just wrote to sound—tinkly?”

There was an ominous tremour in her voice that hastened and added to the vigour of my response.

“Not a doubt of it!” I ejaculated reassuringly, and again I thought of Millicent with devout thankfulness that she was lost to me. “I believe, Mrs. Biggles, that nothing truer was ever——”

I stopped, aghast: the very catastrophe I sought to avert was precipitated. Her mouth shot open as if worked by a spring and a wail of real anguish came forth. "Oh, Mr. Merrywell," she cried brokenly, "you don't know what a comfort—them words—is to me!"

"Do you mean," I asked in agitation, "that you—you have loved and——"

"Biggles," she sobbed, as she turned and fled.

Really, I don't know what is to become of me if this sort of thing goes on. I cannot stand having my emotions stirred up in this fashion, nor am I willing to play the part of comforter in these delicate family matters.

Undoubtedly, Biggles is a brute; there can be no question about it. He has deserted her, as I suspected, and yet she—poor soul!—instead of calling down vengeance on his stupid pate, fondly treasures the memory of bygone happiness and is evidently longing to welcome the sinner back to the fold. It is an extraordinary point of view to me, for I am positive that if I were in her place I would yearn for his return, but for the sole purpose of applying some painful weapon of castigation to his worthless body.

It is curious that my name is in process of transformation, in spite of the care I take to pronounce it distinctly and even spell it for my rural acquaintances. With equal distinctness and genial insistence they invariably address me as Mr. Merry-well, evidently assuming either that I am mistaken or that my name should be Merry-well, if it isn't. I have tried to teach Mrs. Biggles to say it correctly, but without avail; in fact, I have come to the conclusion that it is out of the range of possibility to teach Mrs. Biggles anything which she doesn't want to learn, and this appears to be hopeless, so I have resigned myself to the inevitable. It is odd that while she addresses me so persistently by a name I do not bear, she speaks of my neighbour sometimes as "*Miss 'Umphrey,*" and again as, "*Miss-'Umphrey,*" and I have not been able to grasp the distinction, if there is any. At one time I thought of the possibility of Miss Humphrey's having a younger sister and of Mrs. Biggles thus distinguishing between them, but a guarded inquiry brought forth the information that old John Humphrey had but one daughter, Miss Anne, and that she wouldn't take no boarders. So I

am forced to the conclusion, pathetically unromantic, that the player I listened to is none other than this strong-minded, mature tiller of the soil, who sat at the piano in the twilight, and thus gave expression to some such shadowy, regretful imaginings as those which her music awoke in me.

I suppose it is the strains of Strauss that put me in a reminiscent mood, musically, for to-day I unearthed a volume of songs of a generation ago, the tuneful sentimental ballads, artlessly simple; the kind that young gentlemen with long wavy hair and strapped trousers listened to with tender solemnity, while young ladies in crinoline and flounces sighed and smiled and dropped a furtive tear behind their swansdown fans. Yes, I sang these ancient melodies without a smile, and with a certain enjoyment and appreciation I have never felt before, but without the remotest idea that an unseen auditor stood with the kitchen door ajar, listening in rapt ecstasy. It was during the second stanza of "Ever of Thee I'm Fondly Dreaming," that I heard a smothered sob, and turning quickly I saw Mrs. Biggles standing in the doorway with her apron up to her face.

It is absurd, distressing, but at the same time flattering, that my singing should move anyone to tears, and I am astonished that a woman of her maturity should be so easily moved, but there is no doubt whatever she is absurdly sentimental. Of course she begged my parding for the interruption, but she 'adn't never 'eard them songs sung so natural and life-like. Sometimes it seemed to her that there wasn't nothing prettier to listen to than a young lydy a-playin' of the pianner, but it didn't touch the 'eart like the 'uman voice; still, if she had her choice, her idyll would be to listen to a hexpressive barytone voice a-singin', with a young lydy a-playin' of the pianner in sympathy, at one and the same time.

Confound the woman!—what does she mean? Nothing, I could swear, for she smiles and beams upon me in the most artless manner. And yet the thought came into my own mind, before she spoke, that it would be pleasant to know someone of similar tastes, who could play the piano sympathetically, for my own scratch accompaniments are woefully inadequate.

I sat on the lawn this evening and listened for

the piano, but there was no sound. It is only when there is a slight breeze from the south that the music can reach me, even faintly, and as the wind was blowing from the north I strolled down the road, impelled by mere idle curiosity, to listen. The silence was depressing, and I felt a sudden craving for companionship, for sympathetic communion—on the artistic side, of course—with the person who played the Beethoven Allegretto. The hedge around the Humphrey homestead looks extremely forbidding; not more so, however, than the conventions which forbid my intrusion, though my soul should starve for a crust of music. If old John Humphrey had lived a year or two longer, we might have been on such neighbourly terms that I could have sauntered over in the evenings to smoke a pipe with him on the lawn, and surreptitiously listen to his daughter's playing. It is strange that I should be so suddenly seized by this soul hunger, at a time when I supposed every æsthetic taste was submerged in absolute content with my bucolic surroundings. A foolish thought came into my mind as I walked back to my usual solitude; scarcely a thought, either, but a fleeting vision of

myself sitting reposefully before the fire in the twilight, the room filled with fantastic shadows from the cheery blaze that glints from polished mahogany and bric-a-brac, throwing the filmy pattern of delicate lace upon the drawn window blinds; for there are curtains and cushions and dainty knick-knacks, in strange contrast to the actual bare comfort that a lone bachelor provides when he thanks heaven he is not as married men are. And the room is not merely aglow with fire-light, but is filled with soft music that no longer breathes the spirit of what might have been, for a pair of dainty hands wander over the piano keys in a dreamy Berceuse, instead of invoking the uneasy spirit of Strauss in these heart-throbbing echoes of the past.

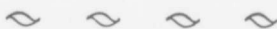
There, I have written it!—and I smile with unjoyous mirth at the fantasy, knowing full well it was only the distance and my receptive mood that lent enchantment to the music, and that the first glimpse of the unseen player would rudely shatter my dream. Her hands are not soft, nor her fingers tapering; her figure inclines, I am positive, to solidity and portliness; she plays, of course, but like a boarding school miss of the

eighties, rolling the bass with fervour, slithering the melody, a firm pressure on the loud pedal throughout, and an unvarying thump on the first beat of the measure. And the piano she plays upon is an old tinkling rattlepan. I know it—I am sure of it! So now I shall put all this nonsense out of my head.

I have been obliged to tell Mrs. Biggles with unusual dignity that I prefer not to have my neighbour's name mentioned so constantly in her conversation. I was rather irritated by something she remarked, or I might not have spoken so bluntly, but perhaps it is just as well. At least I shall be spared the nervous annoyance of wondering whether she is going to say, Miss—'Umphrey, or Miss 'Umphrey.

I don't know why I am irritated by such trifles, for perfect happiness and comfort should tend to placidity of temper, yet I have spoken harshly to Mrs. Biggles, and the other day I repulsed those poor hens with unnecessary brutality. More remarkable still, since then I have been absolutely unaware of their existence, but to-morrow I shall look them up with a pocket full of corn and try to atone for my conduct. One

might have supposed that in a day or two they would forget being driven away, but they seem to be still in retreat, for I cannot recall having seen them.



I awoke this morning with the determination to devote myself exclusively to agricultural pursuits; incidentally I also awoke to the fact that for the past few days I have been mooning. I am not sure of the precise meaning of the term, but I think it describes my condition. Joseph has plodded his stolid course undisturbed; long silky tresses have pushed upward between the stalks and blades of the corn since I last saw it; potato bugs have arrived; the brown, furry heads of the red clover are coyly nodding on long stems and flushing with pink; countless other marvels have unfolded before eyes that did not see, but this morning they burst upon me as I strolled about the place, and the exultant pride of ownership once more took possession of me, recalling the ecstatic thrills of that perfect day in spring when I put my hand to the plough and began this journal. It is summer now, and I am older and wiser, agriculturally; so much so, indeed,

that I began to fear my learning had changed the delight of the neophyte into philosophic acceptance of the miracles of nature, but that doubt vanished when I succeeded in throwing off the depression of the past few days, and rousing my interest afresh. It was annoying to find that Mrs. Biggles noticed I was out of sorts, for she eyed me with sympathetic commiseration and spent herself in devising dishes to tempt my appetite. She is a good old soul, but her motherliness is too unrestrained. Her mouth, when at rest, is normally horizontal, but I have noticed with irritable fascination for the past few days, that it inclined to the perpendicular when her gaze rested upon me. One cannot resent a silently sympathetic glance, but the line must be drawn at an oblique mouth; besides, it is seldom at rest, fortunately or otherwise. In fact, she talks too much and implies more than she says, all out of spontaneous good-nature; for instance, she has repeatedly remarked that this house is too large for a single person, or that it do give her the creeps sometimes to think of me being alone at night, or that it don't seem right to 'ave all them rooms shut up what might do for a whole fambly,

not to mention all them closets and presses and corner cupboards that many a woman would give her eyes for.

"Mrs. Biggles," I demanded sternly, on this occasion, "would you be kind enough to tell me what you mean?—precisely, if you please," I added, with an icy stare.

Mrs. Biggles has a willowy figure, which swayed and bent before my gaze, as if exposed to a gale; she flushed and smiled and twisted her apron and looked foolish, then faced me with a transparent attempt at innocence, ejaculating: "Nothink, sir—nothink at all, I assure you—nothink whatever, Mr. Merry-well," then her mouth slanted and she wiped a corner of one eye with her apron, and I hastened to smile acceptance of her explanation. Not five minutes afterward she remarked cheerfully, that Biggles would have been in his grave years before, if he had been a single man.

Biggles, I learn, left home only this spring, shortly before my arrival, which seems providential for me, otherwise his wife might not have been willing to act as my housekeeper. He had been steadily at work as foreman of a railway

section gang for some years, she tells me with pardonable pride; and her affection seems to be quite as strong, or perhaps stronger, than if he still held that position and supported her. She talks of him without reserve as a usual thing, but seems to avoid referring to his leaving home. There is some mystery about it, and the poor woman's cheerfulness is quite pathetic, in view of the possibility, present in my mind, that Biggles, spurred perhaps by some imaginative impulse, and tiring of the endless vista of steel rails and telegraph poles, has abandoned a monotonous existence for a life of adventure. I suspect, in fact, he has become a tramp.

But I have digressed, as I did in my walk this morning. I started with the fixed purpose of finding the hens, noting the things I have mentioned by the way, but when I had completed the circuit of my farm they were still missing. So was Joseph; he had evidently gone to the mill for feed, as he usually does when I want him particularly, so I returned to the house and made inquiry of Mrs. Biggles.

No, she 'adn't saw the hens, leastways not ex-

actly, as you may say, (rolling her eyes and looking extremely agitated) but of course hens, after all, was only just hens, and *Miss 'Umphrey* herself says they'd sooner steal one grain than have ten give to them, so she don't blame——

I suppose my face at this point intimated she had transgressed, and that I did not care to hear that person's opinions, for Mrs. Biggles coughed apologetically, allowed her mouth to droop, and abruptly repeated she 'adn't saw the *hens*, then compressed her lips in a way that suggested she knew much more than she proposed to tell. Of course I was obliged to adopt a conciliatory tone and beg of her to reveal what she had seen, and presently I drew forth the information that yesterday a certain little dog called Towhead, accompanied by someone who is nameless at present, had been engaged in driving nine white hens and a rooster out of a wheat field. Mrs. Biggles was not indelicate enough to imply that the fowls were mine, or the field *Miss Humphrey's*; it was quite unnecessary.

Rarely have I been so suddenly overwhelmed with mortification. In a flash I saw myself obliged to make a formal call upon this woman

farmer, to tender my humble apologies and offer compensation. And Mrs. Biggles, good woman, seemed divided between remorse for acquainting me with the unpalatable fact and a cheery optimism that it was really of no account.

"As I says to a certing person," she rattled on genially, "'It's annoyin' to 'ave other people's hens eatin' your grain, but I can assure you,' says I, 'Mr. Merry-well's a gentleman, and he'll be that put out when he hears, that I hope he won't never know, and I wouldn't like to be the one to tell him. Besides,' I says, 'there's no knowin' what troubles in this world won't turn out for the best, and there ain't no reason to my mind why hens shouldn't make neighbours more neighbour-like instead of stirrin' up trouble.'"

Mrs. Biggles glanced swiftly at me as she spoke, with a knowing archness of demeanour it was impossible to mistake, then avoided my penetrating gaze.

"And then?" I inquired, with forced calmness.

"And then," burst forth Mrs. Biggles, as if mastered by some pent-up indignation, "didn't

she flare up and say she'd feel obliged if I wouldn't never mention your name again!"

I smiled grimly: it was plain that Miss Humphrey was not prepared to accept apologies.

"And I'm sure," went on Mrs. Biggles, with an air of virtuous intention, "I 'adn't no idea of anythink more than to make things look cheerfuller, when I said mebbe you'd come right over and explain 'ow it 'appened."

"And I've no doubt," I commented, "you made that remark after you were requested not to mention my name?"

"I did," confessed Mrs. Biggles triumphantly, "but I didn't mention it. I said 'a certing person.'"

Really, I cannot cope with this woman's inconsequent brain. I was exasperated, yet amused, but not truculent, like my neighbour. She had even more right than I to resent this absurd situation; if my personality had been thrust upon her, as I more than suspected, she had just cause for irritation. Of course, under the circumstances, I could not call upon her: when Joseph returned I would send him over with my regrets and authority to pay for the

damage. In the meantime, I set forth to find the depredators.

Alas, and alas!—if one but knew! But I didn't, and there is no use repining, though a hundred times since my brain has circled in hopeless bewilderment over the cruel chance that brought me to the fatal spot at the same time as my neighbour.

Perhaps if I hadn't resolved to be perfectly frank in these chronicles I should omit reference to the painful scene that followed; as it is, I cannot bring myself to state more than the bald facts.

There is a screen of shrubbery and young trees following the line of fence dividing the two farms; thus it happened that the fiends who caused all this trouble, were hidden from my view while I searched for them, and it was not until I heard a feminine voice calling, "Tow-head!—here they are!" and the excited barking of the dog, that I realised I was within a few feet of my hens and my neighbour. Of course I stood petrified, listening to the alarming yelps and squawks that succeeded, then one after the other the hens whirred through the leafy screen

with wild cackles; these, strange to say, I noticed but casually, for my gaze became riveted upon my gorgeous rooster, who, trusting to his legs, dived under the lowest fence rail and approached me with fleet strides, his graceful tail plumes within an inch of the gaping red jaws of a silky-haired terrier. His imminent danger aroused me, and I plunged forward with an instinctive shout of warning, tripped on a root and fell—not, alas!—on the ground. No—not on the bird: there was still a lower deep of humiliation reserved for me. Perhaps to a non-participant it might have seemed absurd, possibly such a situation on the stage might cause me to smile, but it is hours since, and I cannot imagine myself ever smiling again.

I fell on the dog.

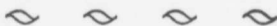
I am sure the little beast was not crushed. I don't think he can be injured, internally or externally. Perhaps I had presence of mind and humped myself to shield him from harm, perhaps a kind Providence suspended the law of gravity and I merely fluttered downward like a feather. I cannot recall feeling anything under me but an

assortment of terrified yaps and yelps, and while I was still struggling to arise, I heard a feminine cry of alarm and caught a momentary glimpse of a pair of startled, flashing brown eyes, framed in a sunbonnet, peering between the rails of the fence. With a mighty effort I arose as the terrier darted away, and parted the shrubbery.

“Madam,” I cried, “I assure you——”

My voice died away, for there was no one nearer than a swiftly receding figure in blue gingham with a little dog’s tousled head peering over one shoulder. I turned in the other direction: nine other feminine figures in white had become specks in the distance as they neared The Hermitage, the flowing tail plumes of the rooster distinguishable as he sprinted after his family. I was alone.

I followed the rooster.



It is—how many? Yes, but two days since I made an entry in this journal. It seems like two weeks. Nothing has happened to make the time drag, at least nothing but my mental perturba-

tion. There is something wrong or trifles would not be magnified to this extent, for I have short periods of lucidity in which I am perfectly aware that the cause does not justify the effect. Here is the case in a nutshell: my hens stole my neighbour's grain, therefore I should pay for the damage. It is a simple matter to send over a five-dollar note with an apology for the trespass, but some strange paralysis of my will-power prevents action. I suffer, and do nothing, and suffer still more. I loathe the thought of money in connection with the matter: there must be some instinct at work. Ah, I think I see! It must be because the party of the second part is not a he. It could not be done without the effect of: "Here, my good woman, take this." Awful! Then the manly course would be to call and apologise. Yet I haven't the courage, for I cannot imagine myself in her presence except as speechless, bumping my head on the floor in abasement. This is sheer idiocy, I know—but the dog!—there is a rumour afloat that I tried to kill the poor little critter. Doubtless she supposed from the frantic movement of my arms that I was pommelling him. The evidence is so devilishly cir-

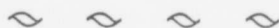
cumstantial, for it appears that a juvenile Singlestick crossing the fields on his way from school avers that he seen me lammin' Towhead like old Hickory, and I have a vague impression that I caught a glimpse of an open-mouthed youngster on a distant eminence during the fracas. If the animal were a bulldog or a mastiff some credence might be given to the plea that I fell upon him accidentally.

It was through Joseph I learned of this unfortunate complication. I upbraided him for not telling me that the hens were in the wheat, and he retorted that he told me a week ago, and supposed I wanted them there. I believe, from his resentment, he must be guilty, but when he sniggered and said he heered I gave the Humphrey dog fits for runnin' the hens, I was speechless. I think I turned white: I felt so. Joseph added with relish that it served the little beast right: he was always tryin' to nip the speaker's legs when he went over to see Jenny in the evenin's. Jenny is Miss Humphrey's maid-of-all-work.

I am more suspicious of Joseph than before. A well brought up dog has a wonderful instinct,

and if he nips the legs of an outwardly respectable person, there's something wrong.

Mrs. Biggles wears a grieved wouldn't-have-believed-it expression. She has repeatedly dilated upon the cute doings of Towhead, and also dwells upon his mistress's love for him, which she hints is rather excessive, but of course no stronger than might be expected where the owner has neither 'usband nor fambly to lavish her affection upon.



The hens have been shut up in the hen-house and run for the last three days. I have had an occasional gleam of satisfaction in watching them poke their heads through the meshes of the netting in the delusive hope that their bodies might follow, and then wander restlessly back and forth singing doleful ditties of disappointment. Liberty is sweet to hens, but liberty and a forbidden grain field must be Paradise lost to these wretches under present conditions: therefore my satisfaction in regarding them. They watch my approach with demonstrations of joy, but instead of corn they receive ironical smiles.

This afternoon, however, I found the run

empty, and a hole scratched under the fence showed me where they had popped out one by one to enjoy the delights of freedom. Of course it was useless to look for them elsewhere than in the one place where their presence was most objectionable, and I lost no time in following them to the wheat field, but my most honeyed and persuasive tones were without avail, and my efforts to induce their return resulted in failure. In the end I was obliged to cross the fence and chase them through the standing grain before I could head them homeward. I hoped my actions were unperceived, but alas!—a distant yapping caused me to look guiltily in the direction of Miss Humphrey's house, and I saw a feminine figure in blue gingham standing beside a flower bed and shading her eyes to get a better view of the proceeding. Towhead was barking in great excitement, so he has apparently quite recovered.

I am getting hardened, for I do not feel much more humiliated than before, or perhaps I had got to the lowest notch, for the sight of that trim figure in the distance aroused sudden irritation that anyone who—that is, any person who might be supposed to possess ordinary refined instincts,

should make a point of discovering me in embarrassing moments. Certainly if a neighbour tramped over my crops in the laudable endeavour to drive out predatory hens, I should consider myself wanting in delicacy if I did not at least look the other way. The incident settled my doubts for the time, and stung me into a course of action which was perhaps ill-advised. I handed Joseph ten dollars and told him to settle with Miss Humphrey and explain that the hens had escaped accidentally to-day, also that I was willing to pay more than the actual damage in consideration of the annoyance they had caused. Joseph's face is usually inexpressive, but this time he grinned unmistakable approval, assuring me he could fix things all right when he went over to see Jenny in the evening. In spite of this assurance I feel horribly uncomfortable, I don't know why. Yes, I do, after all. It is because I am haunted by the misgiving that Miss Humphrey is not the humdrum farming person I imagined at first; that she is, in fact, a lady, one who doesn't reckon everything in dollars and cents.

This is illogical, but then I am illogical; my

nerves are shaken; I am a wreck. My hand trembles as I write; I perspire with agitation. Something within me, it must be one of those beastly still small voices, keeps on telling me I lie with every word, that I am deceiving myself, yet I don't see how that can be. Since this miserable business began I have thought of nothing else, and all to no purpose. I am still harrowed by doubt, but I have written down my inconclusive conclusions without one mental reservation, even these somewhat sentimental reflections stirred by her playing. I allude, of course, to my neighbour, Miss Humphrey, the woman farmer. I think if I had seen her face these perplexing doubts would not assail me. Of course I had that brief glimpse between the fence rails of a horizontal slice about the eyes framed in a sun-bonnet, but I was not in a position to note details. The eyes were dark, and they flashed; that is all I know, but they were not more expressive than her back, distractingly trim and graceful, but rigid with tense indignation.

Sometimes I think Mrs. Biggles has put a thought on me, for though I resented her obvious allusions, I find myself inclined to go off into

dreamy abstractions in which a trim little figure in blue gingham glances up at me with dark eyes no longer sparkling with anger. But what nonsense!—this simply shows I am distraught with worry and out of physical condition. I recall now that I have had no appetite lately, and cannot even remember what Mrs. Biggles has placed before me, though I know she has regarded me with a wistful expression and urged me to eat. Yesterday I took an opportunity to mention that I fell upon Towhead accidentally, and her eyes suddenly swam with tears, but her delight radiated like sunshine behind a small cloud. It was a relief to both of us, for I found myself profoundly affected by the fact that I was no longer misunderstood; indeed, I had somewhat the feeling of childhood that finds pent-up grief assuaged upon the maternal bosom. I think Mrs. Biggles felt moved by a reciprocal instinct, but I hastened to add in some alarm and with formal emphasis that it was a matter of no importance whatever; indeed, of so little moment, that it would be well not to mention it to anyone who could possibly think the accident was not purely accidental. And Mrs. Biggles nodded know-

ingly, with the glib assurance that she wouldn't do such a thing, not by no means, sir, in precisely the tone she said, "Nothink—nothink whatever, I assure you, Mr. Merry-well," a few days ago.

Heavens!—what does this mean?—what has become of my self-respect? She will tell a certain person, I know full well; she will fill in relevant and irrelevant details, imaginary or otherwise, kind soul, so that this dastardly slur upon my reputation will be neutralised, I hope. This is better than any attempt at self-justification; it is even more dignified, for in her presence I should have looked like a culpable weak-kneed liar.

I did not know I had so much pride. I suppose it is better to have too much than little or none, but the latter state must be infinitely more comfortable.

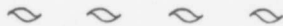
It is my pride that has been hurt; that is why I have been so troubled; strange that I didn't see it in this light before. Now, if all goes well, I can put the whole thing out of my mind. No, I can't, either, until Joseph tells me in the morning that he has tendered the money for the damage to the wheat. But how will that settle my mind? I

may as well admit that if she accepts I shall be bitterly disappointed: if she declines the money, my ideal will be preserved. In the latter case I shall have deserved a dignified rebuff for my boorishness. Never mind, it is the lesser of two evils, for I am more jealous for her self-respect than for my own. That is because she is a woman; it is a chivalrous instinct that is born in me for the sex in the abstract.

This evening I strolled along the road after dark in the hope of hearing some music. I think I am lonely for music; that is what is the matter with me. She was playing, but what a change! No longer did I listen to these vague heart-throbings of Strauss, these echoes of a long vanished youth: I stood in the road breathless with tense rapture, for the music was of the kind that keys one up to almost fierce exaltation. I felt stirred by the elemental desire that must have worked in the blood of doughty knights when they donned their armour and sallied forth to adventurous deeds. It was Schumann's "March of the Davidsbündler Against the Philistines," and I knew that no one but an artist could play it with such virile, almost passionate fervour, yet it was the same

player whose quiet, dreamy music had suggested my retrospective mood but a few evenings since.

It stopped, and I drew a long breath; then an icy chill ran down my back. The player, to arouse such responsive emotion in me, must be animated by some personal militant instinct; possibly her own thoughts, as she played, hovered indignantly around a certain person who had made an unprovoked attack upon poor little Tow-head—and later sent ten dollars to serve as a solatium!



It was before I was wide awake this morning that the truth dawned upon me, and in that brief half-conscious period preceding complete return from the land of dreams I lay stunned, realising with growing intensity that this marvel of marvels has come into my life.

I am in love!

There it is: the simple explanation of everything.

Did I lie there and dream or try to comprehend the marvel? No, I leaped into my clothes and rushed out of the house for Joseph. It was early, about nine o'clock, but he wasn't to be

found, then I rushed back and wildly demanded of Mrs. Biggles where he was. She screeched and clapped her hands to her bosom when she saw me, so I gather that I looked agitated, though I had not been conscious of it.

It turned out that Joseph, the beast, had come over in his store clothes an hour previously to say he couldn't work, had an attack of water-in-the-eye, and had to go to the city to see a doctor. I don't know the complaint, nor does Mrs. Biggles, but she fancies it is something in the line of 'ollow 'orn what cattle has. I hope it's quite as bad, but not immediately fatal. I feel as if I couldn't live until he returns to let me know about that devilish ten dollars. I should like to make him eat it.

My sensations are extraordinary. I am elated, momentarily depressed, then I want to fight something big and strong, a tiger, I fancy, but I can do nothing, absolutely nothing, until that clod with water-in-the-eye appears. If only the creature had had enterprise enough to abscond with the money, or even enough to get drunk with it, I could have forgiven him. But no—he must come over sober and respectable in his Sunday clothes and leave a reassuring message with

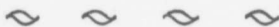
Mrs. Biggles, and in the meantime I am doomed to pace back and forth like a caged animal, frantic with suspense, hoping that by some happy chance my future may not be wrecked, yet fearing the worst. At times my spirits rise with the supposition that water-in-the-eye may be a sudden and ferocious malady, and that Joseph was attacked last evening before he had a chance to call on his beloved; in that case there is a bare possibility the ten dollars may still be in his trousers pocket. I had a hope also that he might appear by an early train, so I spent a considerable portion of the day at the station ready to pounce upon him the moment he appeared, but in vain. The last train stopped at dusk, and only one man got off. I ran forward to the smoking-car as I saw him step down, thinking he must be Joseph, but the light of the brakeman's lantern revealed a floridly dressed sport in a derby hat tilted forward, with a huge cigar and gilded jewellery much in evidence. He disappeared into the darkness with a lurching gait resembling Joseph's, but infinitely spryer. What if Joseph should never return! I am tormented by the ~~fear~~ that some mortal accident has squashed him,

or that he has been taken to an asylum for imbeciles where I could never find him. I see by the evening paper that a man from the country tried to climb over the wire caging on the wrong side of a moving trolley, but was rescued by a policeman and a reporter just in time, the latter failing, however, to learn the name of the rescued, who merely grinned vacuously when plied with questions. That sounds like Joseph.

If he doesn't turn up by the early train tomorrow, I shall go to the city to look for him; another day of inactive suspense would kill me. I can inquire of the police at first: failing information in that way, I shall telephone all the doctors in turn asking if a rural stranger has consulted them about water-in-the-eye: if so, have they got him yet? The latter is quite possible, for I understand the process of removing the eyes and replacing them is getting fashionable, and Joseph is just the sort of booby to permit a slight liberty of the kind to oblige a practitioner who wants to get his hand in. If a man of true insight gets hold of him, however, he will be reserved for some more certainly fatal experiment; indeed, I should think even a youth-

ful graduate would know at a glance that Joseph never would be missed.

I hope he will escape.



When I came down this morning at nine-thirty, Mrs. Biggles told me that Joseph had reappeared in holiday attire, harnessed Fire Fly into the buggy and started for the circus at Stibbville. When I think calmly, which is difficult, I remember that last month he asked me if he might have a holiday when the circus came, to which I assented unthinkingly, so he has merely taken advantage of my previous permission; but of course when a hired man takes a holiday the chances are that he is in for a high old time, so there is no hope of his returning before night. I could not face the prospect of another day of anxiety, so I lost no time in concluding to follow him.

I was obliged to hire Abner Singlestick to drive me to Stibbville, as Joseph had left me nothing but the plodding farm team. I must hasten to withdraw the word hire, as Abner is not a livery man, and assured me he hadn't never

hired out to drive no one nowheres, but seein' as I couldn't find no one else what hadn't gone to the circus, he wouldn't see me stuck—dashed if he would!—though he'd calculated to stay at home and git a load up for market. Still, when it comes to obligin', neighbours must give and take. And as to pay? Well, dog-gone it, he wouldn't take a dashed cent more 'n fifty cents an hour if it wa'n't for the way he was situated, but considerin' it was a favour, he thought it ought to be worth a dollar an hour—still, if I thought that was high, fix it to suit myself, he added magnanimously.

Favours come high in the country, but how could one appear small by haggling with this noble soul!

How many hours Abner and I were on the road, I cannot say: on an average, I fancy there was a break in the harness or buggy once every mile, at one dollar an hour, but in the end we arrived, though so late that the doorkeeper told me the performance was half over. I squeezed in, however, and looked around the sea of faces for Joseph, realising then that I could do nothing but trust to the chance of meeting him in the

crowd afterward. The performance, in fact, was much more than half over, and by the time my attention was attracted to the ring the last number had begun: an absurd travesty played by a burlesque band, garbed like tramps, with battered instruments, every member of which eyed the mock conductor and obeyed his ludicrous gestures with extravagant abandon. The number was a pot-pourri of well-known melodies rendered in excruciating time and hopelessly out of tune, yet I gave way to laughter at the grotesque effect, and when a solo cadenza was introduced in "Home, Sweet Home," by "The Worst Trombonist in America," it was irresistible. Never have I listened to anything quite so funny as the marvellous sounds produced by the player, but the air of smug solemnity with which he received the derisive plaudits of the audience was even more diverting, and I forgot Joseph and my trouble until the stout little man bowed his acknowledgments with much dignity and strutted from the ring.

Then I remembered my quest, but I searched in vain through the surging crowd that issued from the tent: Joseph was not visible. Later, I

found him among a crowd on the outskirts of the grounds, but it was difficult to gain an audience. He still essayed the rôle of sport; a celluloid rose adorned his buttonhole, another fat cigar his mouth, his derby was dinged in the crown, and he loudly challenged any man who called him a liar to come on. No wonder I hadn't recognised him when he stepped from the train last evening, for I could scarcely believe the evidence of my senses that this pugnacious individual was none other than my sluggish, stupid Joseph. No one responded to his invitation, and I caught his roving eye and beckoned him aside. It was difficult to concentrate his attention, but he appeared eager to assure me that everything was all right, gov'nor: no more trouble 'bout hens. Ten dollars? Oh, yes—lemme see—real lady—said nine-fifty was 'nough—yesh, pretty gosh darn sure that was the way—nine-fifty, and here—he searched in several pockets and handed me a fifty-cent piece!

That was all I needed to know: all, indeed, I could bear to hear. Joseph was in no condition to be dealt with according to his demerits, so I left him to his own devices, and prepared to re-

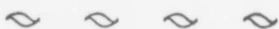
turn homeward. It was hours, however, before I found Abner Singlestick, and his utterances were far from coherent when I captured him, for he had also been enjoying himself, but he was eager to relate his experiences. Hadn't I saw the crowd taking after Joe Gullede and them thimblerriggers 'bout half an hour ago? Dog-gone Joe if he hadn't been the means of gettin' a cool five hundred out of the crowd in less than an hour—for how was anyone to know when they seen him win five tens hand runnin' on which half of the shell the pea was under, that it was a put-up job to egg the boys on to stake their money—but they got on to the game at last, and started in to clean out the hull outfit, and if they once got their hands on Joe he'd ride a rail sure, if he wasn't lynched first.

When I insisted upon starting for home at once Singlestick demurred, declaring his chest was weak and he'd have to step into the hotel for a bracer to protect him from the chill evenin' air. It was quite unnecessary even at this time, and when I got him into the buggy at last the fresh air recoiled another three feet at least, for he carried his own atmosphere with him. Before we

left the town I was obliged to take the reins, for Abner became completely absorbed in yelling with endless iteration, "*He's a daisy, he's a peach—he's the slickest Jo-o-seph!*"—appealing to me at intervals to ask if it wasn't a great song, and assuring me solemnly that as true as he was a sinner it was his very, very own. At last my forbearance gave way: I grabbed him by the collar and shook him into silence, then with freezing politeness I informed him that I would not drive an intoxicated man except as a favour, and as favours are expensive I couldn't do the job for less than a dollar an hour if I were compelled to listen to a composer rendering his own composition. Abner was completely awed, and only once did he inadvertantly begin, "*He's a dai—*", then he clapped one hand over his mouth and humbly apologised. Later, he professed profound regard for me, declared that anyone could see I was a gen'leman and no farmer, but, for all that, Joe Gulledge had salted my tail too blame thick; it wa'n't right for no hired man to lay in his bed till nine or ten in the mornin'; it wa'n't straight, nohow. "I 'sure you, Mer'well," this genial soul continued, "you can

count on Shingleshtick: Gulledge 's no gen'leman, Mer'-well's no farmer, but,—dog-gone it! —Shinglesthick 's both!"

Ah me,—what does it all matter!



Until this morning it never occurred to me that the plausible Joseph might have lied in regard to the money. Perhaps I might have suspected him sooner, but for the staggering circumstantiality of the fifty cents; on the other hand, he may have counted upon my telling him to keep it, which, in fact, I did. I don't know why, I'm sure, but I have acted as unaccountably before, and I fancy it possible that in the country one is influenced unconsciously by the composite mental conception of the community as to how a gentleman should act.

And now I am inclined to believe that Joseph deliberately used the money for his own purposes, for he has not returned, and Fire Fly came back to-day driven by a man who said he found him abandoned at the railway station where Joseph boarded the train to escape his pursuers. Yes, there is no doubt Joseph is a designing rascal,

and the certainty filled me with such exultation this morning that I boldly resolved to call upon my neighbour this very day, but now it is night once more, and Joseph's misdeeds interest me as a matter of mere idle speculation only, and I have no desire to call upon Miss Humphrey! This is how it happened.

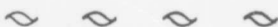
I think I have mentioned before that the Humphrey homestead stands far back from the road, and is completely shut in from view by a high hedge. This accounts for the fact that though I pass frequently on my way to the post-office, I have never seen her, I mean the owner of the place, the woman farmer, of course. But this morning while I was passing, a rather portly, pleasant-looking woman of middle age emerged from the gate and turned briskly toward the station, followed the next instant by Towhead, who darted after her frisking with delight. She turned with an exclamation of dismay and tried in vain to send him back, and at this critical moment the gate opened once more and Jenny appeared to the rescue; in fact, Jenny and I arrived simultaneously, and it took the two of us to capture the dog, a process rendered slightly more

difficult by the fact that he seemed to know me, and that I was under some nervous strain to avoid the appearance of falling upon him. However, we succeeded, and it was merely a pleasant encounter, up to that moment, between a genial ladylike person, a chubby giggling maid servant, and a—a farmer. But when Jenny turned at the gate with the dog in her arms and called after her mistress: "I'll hold on to him tight this time, Miss Humphrey!" my castle-in-the-air tumbled earthward with a crash.

It is strange that in such a tragic moment one is compelled to wear a smiling mask and talk of trifles. We naturally walked on together, Miss Humphrey and I, and as a matter of course I introduced myself and apologised for the incursion of the hens, and Miss Humphrey, in the heartiest manner, assured me it wasn't worth mentioning, and what was a little grain, anyway, and hens were hens whatever way you took 'em. I even had presence of mind to refer to having fallen upon Towhead accidentally, to which she returned the most beaming assurance that he wasn't hurt one mite, and hoped I wasn't either. Our *tête-à-tête* ended with a hearty invitation to

me to come over and call, and a sympathetic acknowledgment on my part that I should be delighted.

There,—it is ended! I have loved and lost—
an abstraction.



For the last day or two I have begun to get into a saner frame of mind, though for the time I thought this journal was a sealed book, but now I have begun to take up the thread of life once more, and to feel that there is no escaping the thousand and one daily distractions that obtrude upon the mournful retrospect of blasted hopes.

Mrs. Biggles, for instance, is in great glee. She has had a letter from her husband, the first since his departure, she now admits, though she has received a newspaper once a week from a different town each time, and that is how she knew he was travelling. She insisted upon my reading the letter, and I consented rather listlessly, I am afraid, smiling sadly as I read, "deer Mriar I hop yur wel so am i yeres ten dolrs yurs trooly. John Biggles."

And so the world wags on, heedless and uncaring, for even Mrs. Biggles's sympathetic soul

fails to divine my hidden sorrow. Perhaps, after all, this has been a brief madness which will pass away and leave me as peaceful as of yore, and yet, strange to say, I would not have it so. Hidden thoughts and emotions have broken through the crust, vague longings have crystallised, and I can no longer blink the fact that beneath the surface I am a lonely, mateless being. For a time I dreamed, and though the dream is over, the retrospect is sweet: it is the afterglow, perhaps.

It is curious how easy it is to deceive one's self! I know now that during all these weeks since I handed the young lady the parcel she dropped, her image has been cherished in my heart, and through some strange unconscious association of ideas the face that rose before me when Mrs. Biggles rhapsodised over a certain person, was hers, and when my soul responded to the distant music it was her figure my fancy pictured at the piano. Yes, through some fond illusion I had begun to hope, to believe, that she was Miss Humphrey!

I have been in love; there is no doubt about it—and now I ask myself, with whom? If with an ideal, an impersonal abstraction, as I thought

when the actual Miss Humphrey confronted me, then must I still be in love. Again, if the feeling that took possession of me was inspired by the chance meeting with her whose image I have since treasured in my inner consciousness, the mere fact that she is not my neighbour cannot alter my affection,—I must still be in love with *her!* It is a puzzling problem, and I know so little of this mysterious force that I cannot solve it, nor yet can I recall any situation in fiction to give me a clue to the solution.

There is yet another alternative, one I almost hesitate to weigh, to put in words, but in my perplexity it recurs as a bare possibility. Am I in love with the real Miss Humphrey? If so, I feel certain that I would not need to ask myself the question, yet reason wars with intuition, urging that she is in appearance a sensible, pleasant, comely woman, not much beyond the prime of life, and though she is not what my fancy painted, the charm may exist beneath the surface.



It is astonishing how one's depression wears off: I do not feel as old as I did a few days ago,

and I even listen to Mrs. Biggles with complacent amusement once more, though no matter what topic she begins with she is sure to gravitate to my need of social intercourse and the accomplishments of my neighbour. She never alludes to her by name, in deference to the objection I made, I suppose, but speaks of her as "a certing person," or sometimes as "a young lydy." The latter term almost provokes a smile on my part sometimes, for the person she alludes to must be in her forties.

Yet, as portrayed by Mrs. Biggles, she has a strange fascination for me: that is, I listen with interest to casual remarks that I know are adroitly designed to impress me, though at the same time I feel positive the woman is romancing, for it is quite incredible that my neighbour possesses all these graces and accomplishments. If Mrs. Biggles's eyes were not a washy blue and of a roving habit, I would begin to fear that I am being hypnotised into the married state, for if she is as persistent with Miss Humphrey, and depicts my personality with as little regard for veracity, we might, in the end, be pushed up to the altar, willy-nilly.

I am rarely out of patience with Mrs. Biggles, but I suppose I must have been feeling a little sensitive to-day, or her conversation would not have goaded me into the comment that, considering her varied accomplishments, it seemed extraordinary to me that the person she spoke of had reached such an age without marrying.

When Mrs. Biggles is really angry, I have discovered, she rocks sideways on her feet, and the florid elegance of her diction becomes more pronounced.

"Mr. Merry-well," she replied, with suave hauteur, "it is obvious to me, perfectly obvious, I may say, that the young lady 'as reached the hage of twenty-three without bein' merried because she ain't never wanted to,—*like some other people*,"—she added, with a cold society smile that caused me to wilt like a tender leaf. "And that's the kind that's took 'ard, when they *is* took, Mr. Merry-well," she concluded amiably.

Did I reply? No. I was helpless, humbled, dumb, which is perhaps the easiest way to arouse feminine compunction, for presently my adversary was chatting confidentially of her own love

story. She was seventeen, she said, when Biggles won her 'eart, and if he hadn't appeared until she was twenty-three she thinks she would have waited; but beyond that age a woman may become discouraged, if the choice of her soul fails to appear, and take the second best.

It has occurred to me that in these months I have lived at The Hermitage I have been a veritable hermit. Rarely have I gone beyond the limits of the farm, except to the post-office, so I have seen but little of my fellow creatures; but now I have concluded to arouse myself from this lethargy and take every opportunity of associating with other people.

It is strange that just after coming to this decision, the rector of the parish should call. I am not partial to clergymen as a class, but Mr. Worthall impressed me favourably at once. He is serious without being sanctimonious: he can be quite unprofessional without being material; he has a delightful humour that never verges upon the irreverent clerical joke. It should be made a criminal offence for a professional man to make a professional jest: it tends to eliminate the re-

spect or reverence we ought to feel for the things we don't know.

Perhaps one thing that attracted me particularly in Mr. Worthall is his musical enthusiasm. In some way he had learned that I sing, which causes me to wonder if Mrs. Biggles could have incited him to call. A good voice was a rare gift, he said, and his choir was sadly lacking in male singers, he added mournfully; a want more noticeable, perhaps, on account of the excellence of the instrumental music. They were extremely fortunate in having even for a brief time an organist who was an artist. "Your neighbour, by the way, Mr. Merrivale," he added blandly.

I am not easily discomposed, but his words sent a rush of blood to my head; why, I cannot say. I am unnerved, perhaps, and I have no reason to suppose that he mentioned her in any but the most casual manner, but it seems odd that a perfect stranger should happen to speak of her within a few minutes of our acquaintance. I am disturbed by the coincidence, as well as by the effect: it seems almost as if some relentless fate had ordained some such outcome as Mrs. Biggles has planned. Can it be that I *am* in love with

Miss Humphrey? How do people who are in love feel, anyway? I cannot recall any moment of my brief infatuation for Millicent that was glamourless; but in this case there is no glamour whatever. To my mind Miss Humphrey is merely an average pleasant-looking person of mature age; yet the rector, a man of culture and musical appreciation, declares she is an artist, and the piano playing I heard impressed me similarly; besides, everything I hear of her gives me an odd, inexplicable thrill. And what does all this mean? I don't know. I'm going to church on Sunday.

There is another member of the Biggles family who is away from home at present, I find; the eldest daughter, Miss Almira Biggles. She is a progressive young woman evidently, for her mother tells me with mingled pride and sadness of the meteoric school career which has enabled her to take a position as teacher at the age of nineteen in the Tuffington Academy.

From an early age, I am told, she displayed proclivities and inclinations that could not have been inherited from either of her parents, nor is

she at all like her little brother Tommy; and certainly no one would dream to look at them together that Emmy and Mariar were her sisters. "Why, from the time she could crawl on the floor she begun to put letters together, and after that it was nothink but schoolin' and book learnin' for her while the others was playin' games.

"Yes, Almiry was always different from the rest, and she was tret different, too. For one thing, she never was spanked. The nearest she come to it was one day when she was only eight. I was over the washtubs when the little minx marched up in front of me with a book under her arm, and says most quiet and solemn, 'Maw,' says she, 'I'm old enough now,—I want you to tell me the truth.' 'The—*truth?*' says I. 'Yes,' says she, 'about me.' 'What about you?' says I. 'Maw,' says she, 'you may as well tell me,—I can bear it. I ain't your child and Dad's.'

"Well, when I got my breath I went to the roller towel and begun to wipe the soap suds off my arms, and I was tremblin' all over. 'Maw,' says she, watchin' me close, 'why don't you speak?' 'Because,' says I, 'I'm busy gettin' ready to give you the worst spankin' a child ever

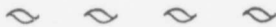
got.' She never budged, but she turned a little white. 'You ain't,' says she, settin' her lips tight and givin' her head a nod. 'Why not?' says I, took by surprise. 'I won't allow anythink so shameful and vulgar,' says she, lookin' me fair in the eyes.

"And really, Mr. Merry-well, there's been lots of times since then when I've looked at Almiry and turned sort of shivery at the thought of her sayin' she didn't belong to me and Biggles. If she 'adn't just growed up under my very eyes, for she was the first and wasn't never out of my sight, I'd begin to think she was took when she was a infant. Biggles never wanted to get on no platforms, as far as I know, and if it was to save Biggles's very life, I couldn't get up on a table and say, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star,' before my own Tommy. But Almiry!—the pieces she'd speak!—and the poertry she'd gabble! But as for love!—and merriage!—*she ain't inclined that way, Mr. Merry-well.*

"No, not even when she was a little bit of a girl, Almiry wouldn't 'ave no boys taggin' after her, though she liked to see them settin' in rows where she could look over their 'eads when she

spoke pieces. My!—to set in front and see that child recitin' 'Curfew Must Not Ring To-night!'—you'd actually think she was swingin' high up in the steeple from the bell clapper, and you'd want to stretch up and grab her little thin legs before she let go. And just when you was ready to screech, she'd give her stiff little bow and walk off with her mouth tight shut like a clam's and her eyes as wide and innercent as if she 'adn't never done nothink."

Mrs. Biggles has divided poetry into two classes, she tells me, poertry of the 'ead, and poertry of the 'eart. The former the speaker can listen to with equanimity if she remembers not to think, but the latter thrills her through and through like nighting-gales a-singin' in the dusk. But here again Almiry is different: Almiry gambols in poertry of the 'ead, and the 'arder it is to understand the better she likes it, but the real poertry of the 'eart is only beautiful to her because the ideas is clothed in beautiful langwidge.



This morning I went to church. During the first part of the service the organ music gave me

that strange exalted feeling produced by the "March of the Davidsbündler," though it was utterly simple and devotional. I knew then there was no mistake: the player in both cases was the same. From where I sat the organist was invisible, though I could see the top of her hat over the screen. I have never studied a feminine hat with such care, such poignant anxiety, and no wonder, for I felt without a shadow of doubt that I was in love with the woman under it. I know nothing about the technic of hats, but this one did not suggest Miss Humphrey, though if she had been on the organ bench, as I expected, I would have loved *her*. But she wasn't, for at that very time she was seated in the fourth pew on my right, quite unconscious of her narrow escape. It was the first time I have realised that a hat may have a character, an individuality. This one had, as even I, unlearned, inexperienced, could see. It was not obtrusive: there were no jiggly things sticking up on spikes; it was neither tall nor flat. I think it had a brim, but if so it was not turned up perkily, and there was some dark gauzy stuff either over or under the brim, if it had one. As I say, I know nothing about

hats, but I had an intuition that this one was in good taste.

I cannot describe the sensation with which I watched its movements, not knowing what I would see under it, but at last the hymn before the sermon was sung, and the congregation leaned back in their seats, except me. I realise now that I leaned forward, and I hope my face did not express much of my inward tumult as the hat slid along the top rail of the screen, and then!—she came into view for an instant as she took a seat behind the choir, but in that instant I recognised—the woman of my dream!—and the eyes, now soft and subdued, were the eyes that had witnessed my assault upon Tow-head,—and the figure was none other than the figure I had admired last in a blue gingham dress.

I should have waited to speak to the rector after service, but I fled in unseemly haste, my one desire being to get to Mrs. Biggles without delay, for as the congregation filed out of the church I heard someone remark that the organ sounded like a different instrument since Miss Humphrey began to play.

Mrs. Biggles was stirring gravy over the kitchen stove when I entered precipitately.

"Who is the young lady that plays the organ?" I demanded breathlessly.

"Law sakes!" ejaculated Mrs. Biggles, staring at me, her gravy spoon uplifted.

"Tell me where she lives—who is she?" I demanded vehemently.

"Law sakes!—she's the young lydy I've been tellin' you about all summer—she's a-visitin' of her aunt."

"And her *name*—her *name*?" I implored, hoarse with agitation.

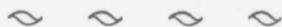
"Miss 'Umphrey," cried Mrs. Biggles, in haste,—“Miss—Holivia—'Umphrey.”

"And her aunt?" I asked, with dawning perception.

"Why she's *Miss* 'Umphrey, of course."

There!—how wonderfully simple, yet how perplexing! Of course if I hadn't been living like a mole, or if I had allowed Mrs. Biggles to be more explicit in her conversation, I would have found out long ago. She is the favourite niece of Miss Humphrey, and after a few months'

visit is going to Germany for two years. The former organist has become an invalid, and she has only consented to fill the place temporarily.



This is Monday. I meant to call upon Miss Humphrey, senior, to-day, but I could not summon up my courage. I love, yet fear, the glamour of a certain person's eyes: I would be dumb in her presence. However, I called upon the rector, which was perhaps more politic, and we had a most agreeable conversation. I told him how much I enjoyed the service, particularly the sermon: he beamed upon me with such evident pleasure that I think the remark quite justifiable. It may have been an unmoral compliment, but I feel sure it was not immoral. We talked more music, and he found me so responsive that he invited me to join the choir, as I hoped he would. Mrs. Worthall sings soprano in the choir, and when she came in her husband proposed we should sing a duet, and we sang together. I think we were both pleased, also the rector; in fact, he seemed elated, and spoke of an approaching church concert, as if he would like me to take

part. Oh, how my heart thumped when they talked of the organist!—but it sank down at the mention of the brilliant artistic future before her. Mr. Worthall sighed mournfully, and feared there was no hope of keeping her for any length of time, whereat Mrs. Worthall smiled and said: “Mr. Teeterley may have something to say about that, my dear.”

I don't know who Mr. T. is; perhaps a guardian; but I made up my mind that someone else would strain every nerve to change her plans. But when I consider how few months there are before winter, and that we are strangers (at least, I am), I am filled with doubt.

Choir practice to-morrow evening. I shall not only see her; I shall speak to her. It is better, I think, this casual beginning.

She walks to the Rectory on Tuesday afternoons, stays for evening choir practice, then Mr. Worthall drives her home afterward. I wonder if he is subject to grippe. I hope not, but if he should suddenly be seized by that fell complaint, would it not be possible that a humble member of the choir who lives near her home might be allowed the privilege of escorting her?

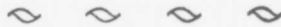
This evening I attended choir practice, and the rector formally introduced me as a member. My manner, when she raised her eyes and bowed to me demurely, was restrained in converse ratio to the tumultuous thumping of my heart. With one exception, I haven't the faintest idea what any of the other members of the choir are like, for I sat where I could see her face and watch the graceful motion of her fingers over the keys. The exception I allude to is this man Teeterley, who is conducting the choir, non-professionally. He attracted, or distracted, some of my attention. He is about six feet long and one foot wide; has curly light hair and goggly blue eyes, and a perpetual smirk, and his manner to everyone is rather familiar. He picked up a spray of blue asters that fell from a bunch Miss Humphrey wore, and then slipped the stem into his button-hole, saying to Mrs. Worthall, *sotto voce*, with his head on one side: "'Tis but a little faded flower.'"

Yes, I know now who Mr. Teeterley is—a presumptuous toad!

I made some guarded inquiries of Mrs. Big-

gles about this Teeterley: she dilated at length upon him. He is the son of a retired magnate who has a large country estate a few miles from here, and that well off, people say he can jest pick and choose when he don't want to travel single no longer. And that fond of music! My, to 'ear him a-plyin' of the flute!—you could jest shut your eyes sometimes and you actually couldn't tell in them fast pieces that it wasn't one of them brass canary birds that you fill with water and blow through, what made all the trills and squeaks and gurgles that bubble through the holes under them long fingers of his. Be you fond of flutes, Mr. Merry-well? No,—well, that was like her. There was people what said his slow meltin' pieces made them feel tender-like in their 'earts, but for her part she didn't see how the 'oller sounds of a flute could stir the 'eart of a mud-turkle—but for *real* 'eart-stirrin' music, *give—her—the—cornick!* My, how she did wish that Biggles had took up the cornick when he was young—but no!—he was jest as 'appy as the day was long if he could blatt away on his old trombone. But at last she up and told him he could 'ave either her or the trombone, but he

couldn't 'ave both—now which would he take? And Biggles wouldn't say on the spot, declaring he'd take time to think it over, but the very next day he went off and traded his old trombone for a brass preservin' kettle and a iron spider. But then, of course, every woman wasn't like her, and there was others maybe that'd sooner have a 'usband that fluted than one that played the cornick. But I would hear Mr. Teeterley and Miss 'Umphrey play at the church concert, and she didn't think the pianner *and* the flute went bad together.



It is now Thursday, and to wait until Sunday to see her once more seems an interminable time, yet I must not call too soon. The whole truth is that I need more time to think; I haven't the faintest idea how—what is the proper way to—approach the—oh, confound it!—*to make love!* It seems a brutal thing to write, yet I don't see how it can be more delicately expressed, and I may as well face the truth. I've got to do it—and I don't know how! It seems absurdly easy when one reads how the other fel-

low did it, but the trouble must be that I am not the other fellow, who is a hero, of course, and lives up to one's expectations. And I am not a hero, and have only my own expectations to live up to, and they are of the most lugubrious character. In the spring I gave up reading magazine stories because they harped so unceasingly on love affairs, but for the past few days I have taken to them for a different purpose than mere idle entertainment, and although I have found many suggestive hints, I think I am more at sea than before. While there are many striking situations that appeal to one, I can only imagine myself a hero for a brief, a very brief, space of time, for I am oppressed by the conviction that when the climax of my life comes I shall be a flushed and agitated lover, suddenly struck dumb by the memory of a painful occasion when the party of the other part saw him sprawling on top of a poor little helpless dog. There are complications in the matter, but I judge from what I have read that this is not an unnatural state of affairs; why there should be, I can't imagine, but there is no doubt on that score, unless it is part of the craft of authors to unani-

mously and deliberately lie. But I must not give way to apprehensions: when the time comes I shall pull through, I must pull through. In the meantime, considering that fellow who appropriated the blue asters, I must find some method of arriving at that stage without loss of time.

I am conscious, since reading once more the story "Predestined," which so aroused my antagonism a few weeks ago, that my opinions are somewhat modified, now that I am myself experiencing the extraordinary state of mind described as being in love. I am less circumscribed in my horizon, less narrow in my views. It is as if one stood upon a pinnacle and gazed over a far-reaching landscape with eyes that had always been hemmed in by the limitations of a valley. And this story: how truly simple and natural! They meet casually (as we did), an interval of time elapses, and they meet again; he opens his arms, she falls into them. It is all over, like the drawing of a tooth, in a moment.

Now I should like to know: *is this life?* At the time I was convinced it wasn't; so convinced, indeed, that I wrote an indignant protest to the

editor. Of course I never sent the letter, yet it relieved my mind, and I feel sure it is quite as effective in my desk, but now my attitude is one of humble ignorance, and I feel that I can appreciate much that previously seemed foolish and unaccountable.

Yes, they meet, and then they meet again, and all is done. There are no misunderstandings, explanations or complications; no doubt or hesitation on either side; no rivals; nothing but absolute trust and certainty. By some strange irony I can understand the attitude of the hero. Like me, he is a man past his first youth, who has ambled through life serene and unconscious of the heights of happiness and depths of misery that attend the awakening of love, until the moment when he looked into her eyes. And then. . . .

But the similarity ends at this point. The second time *they* met was at a Legation ball: the second time *we* met was not a social function. And then I have no reason to suppose that I am looked upon with anything more than tolerance, considering that Mrs. Biggles was requested at one time to refrain from mentioning my name.

My mind has been so filled with other things of late that I have almost forgotten I am a farmer! Fortunately since Joseph's departure there has been little to do agriculturally, and I hired one of the Singlestick boys to attend to the horses, so that I don't have to rise earlier than usual. I miss Joseph, though, for in spite of his straying from the narrow path, there was something not altogether unattractive in the man, and his sudden development in the wrong direction interests me.

For the past two days I have been continuing my researches in magazine fiction; in fact, I have now completed reading all the short stories which have accumulated since spring, with the result that my mind is a chaos. I am aghast at the maze of obstacles which hedge about the course of true love, and the amazing ingenuity of the lovers: at the spirited declaration of the hero that he loves, and of the heroine that she loves him not, while willing in the very next page to fall into his arms and admit that she does. I cannot be spirited, I cannot be ingenuous, even under difficulties, and I blush to

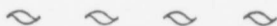
think of saying anything in the nature of what appears to be the correct thing. Indeed, I am quite of the opinion that many of the conversations between the hero and heroine are of too intimate a nature for publication. How can the author betray the sacred confidences of his characters so brazenly—how can the proofreader and editor allow them to pass uncensored—how can the typesetter, even if he is but a machine, set 'em up without emendation!

I have just discovered in my researches that the editor who published "Predestined" in his magazine has been conducting a series of heart-to-heart talks with his readers under the heading of "Editorial Soliloquies." This department contains a series of articles suggested by letters from readers and authors complaining that the magazine stories are not as good as the ones the readers (might) have written, or as the ones the authors have had returned with thanks. This I gather from the letters quoted, but I have read a great many pages of the editor's genial soliloquies without getting more than a vague impression of his meaning, probably on account of the chaotic state of my mind. As far as I can gather,

however, he intimates that while life is earnest, nature is art and art is nature exemplified, and that nothing is published by him that is not the highest exemplification of both life and nature: that reality is often most unreal, while not seldom unreality is given the guise of truth.

This is not what I want to know, and as he says he welcomes comment, I have written to him. It is a vital matter to me, and I hope to be enlightened in one direction or the other, for I have asked but one simple and direct question in regard to the story which has made such an impression upon me. I have simply said: "*Is this life?*"

Perhaps he will say Yes; perhaps he will say No.



It occurred to me last night, as I lay awake thinking over puzzling problems, that much might be learned from Mrs. Biggles. She, of course, is not only willing but eager to tell the truth; authors, perhaps, incline in the other direction. Temperament, training, artistic perception, the inclination to idealise, I fancy, may all

tend to obliquity of vision. The artist may seek for truth at the bottom of the well, but perhaps he is more likely than a common mortal to be distracted in his quest by the reflected beauty on its surface. But Mrs. Biggles is a plain, sensible, uneducated woman, who would naturally see things as they are, and her impressions should be of value if naturalness and truth are desired. It was this consideration which led me to sketch the plot of "Predestined," and casually ask her opinion.

Mrs. Biggles is no prude, and never before have I seen her show the slightest indication of a shock to her ideas of propriety, but she stared at me in such a fixed and grieved manner when I quoted the climax, that I hastened to assure her the characters were fictitious and the author not even a forty-second cousin of mine, and that I merely asked her opinion of the story.

Still she gazed at me, then slowly and solemnly, as a judge addresses a prisoner at the dock, she said: "Mr. Merry-well, would you 'old hout your arms to a lydy you 'adn't kept *company with*, for her to drop into them?"

I quailed under her searching glance. "Oh, Lord, no!" I cried involuntarily.

"If you did, Mr. Merry-well, would you expect any *lydy* to drop into them?"

"I should think not!" I protested indignantly. "I tell you, Mrs. Biggles, I—I never thought of such a thing."

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't," echoed my examiner heartily. "No gentleman would act in such a scandalous manner to a *lydy*. Biggles, now, ain't got any too much gumption, but he knowed enough not to 'old out his arms to me the second time he seen me."

"Certainly," I agreed in haste, for as Mrs. Biggles made this announcement she had the air of intimating that Biggles would have embraced something equivalent to a set piece in a fireworks display, had he been so presumptuous. "I can see that it would be most improper to begin that way," I added, marvelling secretly that Biggles had ever reached that stage.

"I believe," concluded Mrs. Biggles, finally, "and you can take my word for it, Mr. Merry-well, the story's nothin' more or less than a hout-rageous lie." A smile of reminiscent tenderness

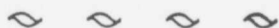
lit up her face. "It do beat all how folks makes a beginnin' without hardly knowin' of it, once they gets properly acquainted," she went on meditatively. "The first time me and Biggles met was at a picnic: he was with a girl named Mandy Simpkins that was settin' her cap for him, and I—well, I was took by a smart young feller in the plumbin' business, who was earnin' twice the wage of Biggles and was twice as good lookin'; but me and Biggles 'adn't more than sot eyes on each other and said 'appy to meet you, when a awful queer feelin' ketched me right here, as if my 'eart was a bird what had two 'ands clapped over it. And Biggles, he stood back on one leg, then he stood back on the other, and he got kind of red, then he got redder and put one hand over his mouth and coughed, and at last he looked sideways as if the sun was in his eyes, and bust out, 'A bee-yutiful day for the picnic, Miss Skiffley?' And I was that wrought up, and it was such a relief to my feelin's, that I clapped my hands together and fairly screeched almost simultaneous, 'Ow-h, *love-ly*, Mr. Biggles!' Then we both felt better, and after a while Biggles, he said would I do him the

honour of a turn in the merry-go-round, and I said I'd be most 'appy; and once it begun to slide neither of us wanted to say another word, but every time I tried to get a good look at him sideways he'd be peekin' out of the corner of his eyes at me, then we'd both get red and cough and look the other way."

I swear I asked no questions, but when Mrs. Biggles paused in these affecting reminiscences, I hinted that it seemed a trifle sudden. Mrs. Biggles thereupon begged me to understand that whatever feelings either participant indulged in were very properly hidden from the other; indeed, after Biggles began to spend Saturday evenings in the parental parlour, it was weeks before he was allowed to hitch his chair close without another imperceptible movement that widened the gap again—and the 'arder Biggles pressed the 'arder she held off, until one evenin' they completed the circuit of the room, when Biggles jumped up and swore he wasn't goin' to play merry-go-round no longer. And of what followed the narrator preserves a modest silence, but I gathered from her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes that had it been decorous to say,

so, she would have been proud to confess that this bold rogue Biggles kissed her, and there is no doubt whatever that she liked it.

This is illuminating!



This is Sunday, and in consequence I awoke with the brightest anticipations, donned a suit of working clothes, and went out to see if my driving outfit was in church-going condition. It wasn't, for young Singlestick hasn't Joseph's talent for thoroughness, and I was obliged to give the finishing touches to Fire Fly, brighten up the harness trimmings and properly dust the phaeton. The latter I bought last week, though it is not a vehicle appropriate to a single man, but in the country, especially on Sunday, it is possible one may happen to overtake another person to whom a seat in a phaeton would look more inviting than one in a high buggy or dog cart. Joseph would have attended to all these details properly, and I wish he had concealed his true character for a few months longer, in which case I would not be in the present deplorable condition, for I am temporarily a helpless cripple,

condemned to fume and wonder why the merest trifling accident should so suddenly bowl me out. I was standing in front of Fire Fly in the act of drawing on my glove, when the mare pawed impatiently, the edge of her hoof coming down on the toe of my boot—and my soaring fancy dropped to earth.

It is humiliating, distracting; there is no occasion for a doctor's services, no bones are broken, my foot is unhurt; one cannot say indifferently that a toe is slightly bruised, for the truth is that it is the most plebeian of all. Even the most kindly disposed and sympathetic person cannot be expected to hear that Mr. Merry-well is nursing his big toe, without an involuntary chuckle. Fortunately, Mrs. Biggles was at home preparing her children for church, and I was enabled to apply first aid to the wounded myself and calmly consider the situation. It flashed upon me with bitter irony that in fiction an accident to the hero frequently results in hastening the consummation of his heart's desire: if he alights from his horse headforemost and is put to bed unconscious, he awakes at a light imprint on his brow, and opens his eyes to find the goddess of

his dreams gazing fondly into them: does he become mangled in an heroic attempt (successful, of course) to save a worthless street urchin from the deadly trolley, she runs the gauntlet of doctors and nurses to assure him that the little that is left is all in all to her. And then, if he has but the good-fortune to sprain his ankle, what a variety of delightful situations result, more drawn out, perhaps, than in the other cases, but the very acme of good luck!

It was weak of me, perhaps, yet I shall not equivocate; it was not forced upon me by an exigency, for I had two hours to think it over, and I calmly made up my mind to avoid needless humiliation; there was nothing romantic in my condition, but there should have been. When Mrs. Biggles returned I was stretched upon the sofa with a sprained ankle!

I may record here that I am beginning to have a remarkable intuition about what is fiction and what is fact in life, and the moment Mrs. Biggles's eyes rested on my helpless form, I realised without a shadow of doubt that had I been in a condition to awake from unconsciousness there was but one feminine face and figure that would

have met my longing gaze. I am thankful my injury is trifling, but I cannot think that Mrs. Biggles would have been much more energetic in relieving my pain had I been in dire extremity. In spite of my protests she turned down the leg of my sock, produced a bottle of liniment labelled good for man or beast, and rubbed it on vigorously. In vain I implored her to be gentle: she replied spasmodically that the 'arder—she rubbed—the sooner—and then without a word of warning she grabbed my foot with one hand, holding my shin with the other, and worked the ankle joint back and forth rapidly, like a rusty hinge that has just been oiled. I lay still, dumb and helpless: once—twice—thrice—I counted in fascinated apprehension, watching her hand slip gradually to the danger point, then with the fourth movement came a diabolical pinch that caused me to leap to my feet with a shout of anguish.

“Now see what you’ve done!” I sputtered fiercely. “I *knew* you would!”

Mrs. Biggles held the sock in one hand and gazed in wide-eyed wonder at the discoloured member, then stooped and peered more critically.

"I declare to goodness!" she ejaculated, with an ingenuous smile—"if that ain't the wonderfulest liningment—it's drove it into your toe!"

Of course I apologised, submitting to hot water, and more liniment that was good for man or beast, but I could not forbear a chuckle, with the suggestion that perhaps such a powerful lotion might drive the pain to my heart with fatal results.

"Not a bit of danger, Mr. Merry-well," she laughed; "there ain't no room there."

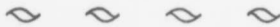
Really, it is not safe to leave one's self open to such comments, but since I had exposed my king row by a stupid move, I couldn't blame her for taking advantage of it. I asked her to be kind enough to give the ankle another rubbing, and she solemnly obeyed.

"And you'll remember, if you should be questioned," I prompted her, "that I sprained my ankle, and that you needn't go into further particulars?"

"Why, certingly, sir," she assented; "most certingly!—why, there was a time when I wouldn't for the world 'ave let Biggles know I 'ad such a thing as a big toe."

"Mrs. Biggles," I cried, in exasperation, "will you oblige me by explaining what you mean by that remark—precisely, if you please!"

"Ow-h, nothink at all, Mr. Merry-well," she declared smilingly, twisting her apron, "nothink whatever, I assure you!—except that I wouldn't—that's all!"



This morning my ankle was so painful that I could not put a boot on, and it is with difficulty I hobble about the room; still, I have had no chance to feel the forced confinement, so much has happened to give me food for thought. First, while Mrs. Biggles was at work in the kitchen after breakfast, I heard her open the door, and a brief conversation in feminine tones followed. Presently Mrs. Biggles appeared, her face glowing with repressed exultation, and announced, "A young lydy to see you, sir." I suppose some foolish fancy possessed me, for I felt hot and cold as I bade Mrs. Biggles show her in, and then entered—Miss Humphrey's Jenny!

Now Jenny's errand was a simple one, but I felt distinctly story-bookish when she opened a basket and produced a bottle of elderberry wine

with *Miss* Humphrey's compliments, and then unrolled a long brown tissue, which proved to be an eel skin. Jenny was rather incoherent and excited in her recommendation of the latter, but I gathered with relief that it was not to be used internally, and having properly expressed my gratitude and entrusted her with an appropriate acknowledgment to deliver to her mistress, it might have been supposed that an embarrassed young maid servant would immediately depart; but Jenny hesitated and looked down at the floor, vivid blushes chased each other over her plump cheeks, two big tears gathered on her eyelashes, and in some agitation I hastened to say that it was a beautiful day.

"Oh, *love-ly!*" cried Jenny, with galvanic celerity and a grateful, smiling sob.

It wasn't; it was a beastly, dull, bleak day, but that didn't matter, and Jenny with beseeching smiles and tears and burning blushes, burst forth: "Mr. Merry-well, you ain't a-goin' to lay no information agen poor Joe, if he comes back, are you?"

There—it was out!—and I did my best to soothe poor Jenny's nerves, and presently the

tears vanished and the diffident maiden held herself erect, and with flashing eyes poured forth the tale of Joseph's few virtues and many wrongs. And I listened sympathetically—who wouldn't?—while this loyal, trusting little soul justified and excused with maternal ardour the rascally doings of her lover. And of course I agreed that Joseph appeared to be more sinned against than sinning, instead of telling her that in my opinion he was a scapegrace that she would do well to cast off. And she departed radiant with joy.

After the door closed I meditated upon this marvel: the old story of woman's faith standing firm against the buffeting of man's weakness. Ah, well!—there are not enough worthy men like me for all the Jennys, and they wouldn't take us as a gift while their inconsequent trustfulness can find a rascally——

At this point Mrs. Biggles again poked her head in the doorway.

"A *gentleman* to see you, sir," she announced, with a peculiar intonation, her eyebrows arched and the corners of her mouth, that fascinatingly flexible mouth, turned upward. I have seen her mouth slant at every angle, and also turn down

at the sides, but never before bowed upward. So startled was I at this phenomenon that I made no reply. Her head vanished, there was a heavy clumping tread, and—Joseph stood before me! Yes, Joseph in his working jeans, his corduroy cap twisting nervously in his hands, his foolish grin, his general air of good-natured stupidity—and in spite of all, I believe I was slightly glad to see Joseph. Of course, I preserved a decorous sternness, but when he told his story I couldn't refrain from being impressed by its plausibility.

It was the first glass of beer done for him.

It began with water-in-the-eye, of course, and when the doctor examined his eyes he looked exceedingly grave and shook his head and said it wasn't water-in-the-eye at all, but a bad case of a-stick-my-tism, which frightened Joseph out of his boots; then he opened a number of drawers containing gleaming instruments and spectacles and glass eyes, studied them thoughtfully, and told his patient to come back at two o'clock and he'd attend to him. And Joseph, weak with apprehension, escaped, and feeling faint, dropped into a saloon for a glass of beer, and meeting there a friendly

and loquacious person, he learned that in cases of a-stick-my-tism the doctor replaced your eyes with a glass pair while he soaked the old ones in whiskey for a month to clear the sight. And the learned acquaintance solemnly adjured him to soak his own and save the expense by getting on a drunk, which he accordingly did, with deplorable results in some ways, he admitted, but with complete success in regard to the painful malady. But as for the base slander that he was a confederate of the pea-and-shell men, it was worthy of the dolts who didn't see that all he was doing was to bet on the nimble pea being where it didn't appear to be. Of course he had to fly to escape the mob, but he was innocent; and more, the swindlers had robbed him of his just winnings when they got clear of the crowd. He had been ashamed to come back, but—but—he twisted his cap frantically, and then blurted forth with a sweep of his sleeve across his eyes, that he—he couldn't do without Jenny!

He might go to work, I told him curtly: if I hadn't been quick, I believe he would have blubbered on the spot.

This is love!

Biggles, his wife now tells me, sends her money every week, so she gathers that he must have regular employment, but the mysterious part of the matter is that he is never two weeks in the same place, or two days even, as far as she knows; consequently she is filled with wondering curiosity. Biggles has no knowledge of a trade which could be practised by a peripatetic mechanic, so she is at a loss to account for his prosperity; but as he sends no address she cannot write for information.

In the afternoon Mr. Worthall called to condole with me. Incidentally he let me know that I was very much missed at yesterday's service, which is extremely gratifying, though he did not say by whom; still, it is pleasant to know I have already made a niche, even as *A Voice*, and that is at least a step toward something. I think with longing of Mrs. Biggles's remark about a rich voice a-singin' with a young lydy a-playin' of the pianner at the same time. Ah—how I could sing, under certain conditions!

This thought was in the background when Mr. Worthall asked me rather apologetically if I

would be kind enough to take part in the church concert by singing one number; he added that Miss Olivia Humphrey would doubtless consent to play my accompaniment, as she was also to accompany Mr. Teeterley in his flute solo. Of course I accepted eagerly, assuring the rector that my foot would be strong enough to use in a day or two, which I had every reason to believe would be the case.

But in spite of this assurance Mr. Worthall appeared to be extremely perturbed over my ankle; his eyes wandered restlessly as we talked of other things, becoming fixed in a searching, fascinated stare on the injured member, and for the life of me I could not help looking conscious and shifting my leg uneasily, whereat he would glance quickly at my face, and the instant our eyes met avoid my suspicious gaze with a celerity equal to my own. 'At last I could no longer banish the fearful doubt that was becoming a certainty; *he knew!* My share in the conversation became incoherent, and I realised how probable it was that Mrs. Biggles might unguardedly or in confidence have told him the truth. Swelling resentment against her

became submerged in a desperate resolve to justify myself, for I felt sure he was divided between his duty as a clergyman and his courtesy as a gentleman.

"There is nothing more annoying in the way of a slight accident than to have one's ankle out of joint," he remarked, with a sympathetic smile.

"There is," I confessed desperately. "It is infinitely more humiliating to have the public informed that you are alive, but confined to the house with your big toe."

Mr. Worthall laughed outright. "That reminds me," said he, "of a little incident that happened last year. I dropped a stick of wood on—on one of my toes, and I was laid up for some days. When I began to go about again I was quite relieved to find that my parishioners insisted that the injury had been to the small bones of the instep, and Mrs. Worthall assured me it would be quite undignified, if not indelicate, to contradict the impression, so I allowed it to stand. But in regard to this ankle of yours, Mr. Merrivale, if you will allow the liberty"—he leaned forward and squeezed it with a professional air.

"Look out!" I began apprehensively.

His face lit up with a gratified smile, as he pressed a forefinger firmly into a slight depression near the large bone. "Ah!" he cried, "here's the trouble. If you'll allow me to give your foot a slight twist as I press on this spot, I can——"

"For heaven's sake," I protested, "don't—don't touch——"

I was too late; already his long fingers had gripped the arch of my instep; his eye sparkled with determination. "I may explain without seeming to boast, I hope," said he, "that I have acquired a little skill in correcting these trifling dislocations. One of Mrs. Worthall's ankles occasionally gets troublesome, but with a slight twist, like this, I can——"

If there is such a thing as a funny bone in one's ankle, that is the sensitive medium through which he conveyed the galvanic shock that caused me to groan, my face contorted with pain.

Mr. Worthall rose with a complacent smile. "A momentary twinge," he assured me. "You'd better stand up now and we'll see if it's quite effective."

I set my teeth together and slowly obeyed. "Oh, quite—quite effective," I returned faintly.

"Then by to-morrow, I have no doubt, you'll be able to walk," he assured me delightedly, and took his leave.

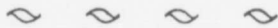
I sank back on the lounge and called Mrs. Biggles.

"For the land's sake!" she screamed, after a glance at the swollen joint. "What's 'appened it now?"

I smiled wanly. "You put too much of that confounded liniment on the toe," I muttered, between my teeth, "and it's driven the swelling back."

It is the first time I have known Mrs. Biggles to appear staggered; she looked from the toe to the ankle, then back again helplessly.

"Well," she commented, at length, "if that ain't the wonderfulest liningment!—to make the same swellin' go from one place to the other and stay in both places at the same time."



This is Tuesday, choir-practice evening. I had hoped to be able to attend, but yesterday's

accident leaves me incapable of standing; I shall have to submit to inaction for the present. In the meantime I have quite enough to think about to keep me from ennui, and though I fret and fume I am confident that in the end this apparent misfortune must be counterbalanced. It is strange, perhaps, that I should have that feeling, for I am not given to intuitions, or rather, to superstitions, but how else can one account for the widespread belief among authors that a sprained ankle surely leads to happiness, unless there is some underlying truth in the idea? And I have one now: there is no need of drawing on my imagination, except to rigidly safeguard the fact that Mr. Worthall manufactured it.

What really worried me to-day is this: last evening, the wind being southerly, I distinctly heard the tootle-tootling of a flute accompanied by a piano, and the sounds appeared to come from Miss Humphrey's house. I object to the flute as a usual thing, but at this particular time it was maddening, and the intervals of silence between the spasms of tootling were even more distracting. One can understand that a flute in action may have a reason for being, but one

that lies down on the piano at short intervals to stare at the ceiling through its eyeless sockets is a monstrosity. I didn't see it, but I knew it was there, and its presence in this locality is doubly insulting as I realise that there is no possibility now of my being able to take part in the concert. No, I cannot stand and warble, as I fondly dreamed, where last evening the flute tootled!—it will be days before I can stand anywhere, and in the meantime my opportunity to pour out my soul and feel it borne upward on the wings of her music is gone.

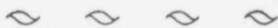
When Mrs. Biggles came in this morning she was visibly radiant—I suppose she had just got another remittance from Biggles—but not in too good spirits to be oblivious to my depression. I admitted that I hadn't slept well, but didn't mention having been disturbed during the evening. However, Mrs. Biggles, apropos of nothing at all, turned as she was leaving me to my breakfast, and said over her shoulder in the hollow, mysterious tones of an actress confiding a secret to the audience: “She—’*a-ates*—the flute!”

Somehow the assurance gave me a feeling of

extraordinary elation, and I could not forbear asking my informant when she came back how this came to her knowledge. Jenny, it appeared had told her; and Jenny, I gathered, had heard the fact emphatically stated by a certain person to *Miss 'Umphrey*. I am morally debased, or I could at least have made a show of being shocked at learning anything in such a manner; instead, I gloated over it openly. I even glowed with pleasure at hearing incidentally that Jenny, innocent maiden, was so brimful of gratitude to me that she could not refrain from singing my praises; not for any special charm or virtue she has discerned in me, I suppose, but altogether because I allowed her dear Joseph to again take up his plodding course as my manservant. The latter is precisely the stupid-looking, good-natured dolt he seemed to be before his meteoric development as a sport, and yet I fancy there must be some indefinable change in the inner man. Is it possible that this clod is becoming in the smallest degree beatified through the subtle power of love? And yet, why not? I know that I am a different man from the person who began this journal, and why should I doubt that Jo-

seph's coarser clay may come through the fire refined and purified?

Mrs. Biggles has been as busy as an ant, as spry as a grasshopper, and as cheerful as a cricket to-day. I am convinced there is something unusual afoot, but she declares there is nothink whatever, and that she's jest takin' the chance to tidy up a bit while I'm not able to get round and muss things up. The result is that I have been obliged to submit to something which looks suspiciously like a house-cleaning; even my books and papers, which have heretofore reposed casually on tables, chairs, or the floor, have been sorted into prim piles, while, if I wished, I could sit down at my desk to write without any preliminaries. But the piano!—well, I was obliged to express gratification at the marvel she wrought in transforming that dull-looking monument into a creation of polished mahogany. As for the andirons and fireirons and fender, they have lost the mellow dulness of old brass, but there is no denying they gleam and sparkle cheerily in the firelight.



In reply to my repeated inquiries this morning,

Mrs. Biggles allowed me to extract the information that she wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Worthall should accompany her husband when he came to see me again, and she suggested that she might have a pot of tea handy if they called this afternoon. In this I concurred, of course, and her exertions seemed to be redoubled to have everything in presentable shape; indeed, I became so infused with the spirit of her preparations, that without in the least understanding why, I felt perceptibly fluttered and expectant; and in the afternoon I even directed the rearrangement of some of the furniture with a view to its artistic effect. It was while I was thus engaged that I happened to notice with some surprise the book of familiar old songs I have mentioned before, standing open on the piano rack, a book I usually keep on the bottom shelf of the music cabinet. I was puzzled, because although it is my custom to leave things where I use them, I had not opened the book for weeks. A closer examination explained the mystery, for I saw it was open at "Ever of Thee," and instantly I knew Mrs. Biggles had placed it there.

It pains me to record that my opinion of the woman has of late been completely reversed. She may tell the truth sometimes, but I cannot be blind to her delight in fiction; indeed, if I heard her testify in court I should be inclined to fear she was incapable of comprehending the sanctity of an oath, and I am sure that ordinarily the number and variety of her inventions are limited only in regard to plausibility.

In this case she began the plea of nothink at all, then suddenly remembered she *had* placed the book there, because, she explained with roving gaze, the pianner looked so shiny and new when she came into the room, it sort of reminded her of one of them *empty* caskets in a shop winder, and she jest took a shiver until she found a old-lookin' book to make it sort of homelike—and this song!—Lor'!—it jest 'appened, for it would be a meracle to open a song book and find a sermon or a recippy for plum puddin', so it jest had to be a song.

It was at this point of our discussion that the door bell clanged, and my heart gave a wild thump. I closed the book and placed it on top of the piano, and when I turned Mrs. Biggles

was proudly ushering into the room—Mr. and Mrs. Worthall, it is true, but also *Miss 'Umphrey*, and —*Miss 'Umphrey!*

Well, it is over now, and nothing but a happy memory, so I suppose I must forgive Mrs. Biggles, but when I recall the facts I have no doubt she should be immediately dismissed. In the first place, she gave an afternoon tea in my house without my knowledge or consent, invited the guests (indirectly, of course, and by what strategy I know not!), and obliged me to act as host; worst of all she took it upon herself to arrange a musical programme for the occasion, and—well, I may chronicle that I sang the charming ditty of her choice. It is almost humiliating that one must act as the woman ordains, but apparently there is no help for it; she either anticipates fate, or I am under the spell of her roving eye.

And yet, like the virtuous politician who indignantly defies his accusers to place a finger on one corrupt act, she covers up her tracks; there is no proof, but merely a glimpse of something here and there that might dovetail into other

circumstances if one were an adept in fitting things together. And to see Mrs. Biggles, willowy, demure, her wisps of hair curled into ringlets and surmounted by an unaccustomed cap for the occasion, to see this embodiment of whole-hearted simplicity flitting casually in the background, makes it hard for one to realise that she is the moving spirit of the occasion. But we are the pawns she moves at will, I am convinced, though I think my guests are in happy ignorance of her guile. I have concluded that she is capable of fabricating tales of my condition to suit her own purposes, and there are several indications to support the hypothesis. In the first place my general appearance of health and good spirits excited surprise, though Miss Humphrey, the elder, solicitously cautioned me against over-exertion, which is often dangerous where the heart is weakened by illness; and from this I infer she must have supposed my condition to be more picturesquely precarious than it is. Of course, this might be due to unconscious exaggeration on the part of my housekeeper, but surely she could have awakened enough sympathy without describing me as a lone orphan and the only child

of my parents, without a near relative in the world. But I did not contradict this preconceived impression, for Miss Humphrey, who seems to have a passion for genealogy, purrs on melodiously without a pause for breath or punctuation, and by the time one's presence of mind return after the shock, it is too late to interrupt the even monologue that has left the subject in the misty past. I like Miss Humphrey; her voice is low and musical, and her conversation is entertaining; but it was a welcome break to me when the tray arrived, and I could ask her to pour the tea. It was during the delightful period of social ease that followed, that Mrs. Worthall glanced toward the piano, nodded and smiled at me and murmured: "A charming old song, Mr. Merrivale!—it is years since I heard it." And while my petrified gaze rested on the familiar pages, Miss Humphrey exclaimed: "'Ever of Thee!'—the dear old song!—Mr. Merrivale, you must sing it for us—you really must. Olivia, dear—you'll play the accompaniment?"

And when Olivia (with what tremours I write the name so familiarly!) said she would be delighted, what could one do?

Well, I sang it, and with a fervour and abandon which may have seemed the perfection of art to my hearers, but it was the voice of nature that spoke, and I forgot them all—all, save one—until the final prolonged note of the climax, and then my eyes suddenly caught a gleam of white reflected in the glass of the picture over the piano, and my voice wavered unexpectedly.

There, before me, unseen by my guests, stood a miniature Mrs. Biggles. She was peering through the partly open door of the kitchen opposite the piano, her jaw dropped, her eyes agog, one hand pressed to her bosom, and her face illumined by the most idiotic expression of rapt exaltation that ever mortal wore.

I have ventured to protest about several of these matters, but uselessly: she avers I told her I was an orphing, that I feared the liningment would affect my 'eart, and as for being guilty of sleight of hand in replacing "Ever of Thee" on the piano, "Ow-h, Mr. Merry-well!—" with an hysterical gasp of rapture, "if only *Biggles* had sung like that instead of blattin' on his old trombone!"

Up to the time of Mrs. Biggles's afternoon tea I had been a worshipper of an abstraction, an ideal, but now I feel that I am no longer dreaming; I am in touch with something almost too vital and real to permit the expression of my deeper emotions in words. It is strange that one can converse rationally, when beneath the conventional phrases of ordinary acquaintance there is a tumult of passionate devotion to be rigidly repressed. And yet she is so calmly unconscious, her friendliness is so unaffected, almost impersonal, that her presence is like oil on troubled waters, and I am possessed for the time by an atmosphere of calm resignation. Sometimes I hope she enjoys my society, again an awful fear afflicts me that she must think me a bore, for of course anyone so well-bred would conceal her impression under a mask of courtesy. I am alternately buoyed up by stern determination, and depressed by the magnitude of my presumption; then I am driven frantic by the tootling of Teeterley's flute, for the fellow has actually spent another evening with her in supposed rehearsal for the concert; while I, caged because I cannot walk, am debarred that sweet privilege, and have

no prospect of being able to leave the house this week. The only relief to my feelings is to sit with hands clenched, repeating fiercely: "She *'ates* the flute—she *'ates* the flute!" in the nearest approach I can compass to Mrs. Biggles's inimitable accent.

It seems to me that person might have thought of some more cheerful remark to make when she saw that I was out of sorts this morning. "It do beat all, Mr. Merry-well," said she complacently, setting the coffee-pot within reach.

"What?" I inquired absently, for I had been wrapped in meditation.

"The power of love," she returned, with a simper.

"The power of love!" I echoed, staring at her; then I flushed suddenly. "What do you mean?" I demanded.

She sighed, simpered again, looked at the floor, then turned her head away coyly. "To think I married Biggles when I did so *'ate* the trombone!" said she.



This morning Joseph gave me notice. His eyes were red and swollen, his voice husky, and

the general cast of his countenance was that of an old, an extremely old, sheep. This is the more noteworthy, because during the short time since his return he has improved considerably in appearance, and has carried himself with an air of buoyancy bespeaking inward content, consequently I felt sure there was cause for his sudden dejection. A question or two, and it all came out. While there are attendant complications, the main fact is that his heart is broken. Jenny, it appears, has thrown him overboard. It is incredible, appalling, but there is no doubt, for she told him distinctly that she hated him.

I must say this occurrence gives me a shock, for I could swear that ten days ago this ingenuous maiden loved him with all his stupidity and unworthiness—and now she hates him! A man, it is plain, may reach the summit of human bliss, and then be toppled off without warning into the bottomless pit of misery on the other side.

The question is, would it not be wiser to avoid these dizzy heights than to court such a fate? Alas, I have climbed so far up the slope that, like the youth in "Excelsior," I must mount higher.

And now I ask myself, is it possible under any circumstances that I could look like an old, old sheep? I hope not, but if I had realised that such things were possible, my courage would have failed me before I put my hand to the plough. A woman may publicly announce that she can't do without poor Joe, and a short time afterward declare a deadly hatred for him.

Jupiter!

Joseph's life is ruined; he is a broken reed. I feel for him, but I can say nothing consoling. If I were in his place, I—well, I don't know what I would do; it is easier to plan a proper course of action for someone else. Joseph says he is going to the Klondike, and I think he has reached rather an heroic plane, for him. He is divided, however, between succumbing to the hardships of the Chilkoot and coming back next year with untold wealth. I think he had better succumb, for I see little satisfaction in the latter scheme. He wanted to buy a sleigh robe of mine to make a sleeping-bag, but I gave it to him as a parting gift. He seemed profoundly moved, and said with a ray of poetic insight that it would do to

be buried in. It is unfortunate that under stress of emotion I am dumb, but I grasped his hand in warm approval, and he seemed to understand.

First, however, he is going to punch young Dick Singlestick.

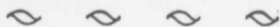
The latter, it seems, is a P. W. K. X., or something of that sort, in the Temperance Lodge, and took part in the ceremony of initiating Joseph on Tuesday. Joseph sees no harm in a glass of beer, but he joined solely because he thought it would please Jenny, for whom, he says, he would give up bread and water. Jenny was one of the spectators, and young Singlestick sat on a dais in imposing regalia and lengthily adjured the kneeling neophyte to look not upon the wine when it is red; then he solemnly gave away such an extraordinary variety of grips and passwords, that Joseph, who supposed they were to be memorised on the spot, got muddled in his frantic efforts to follow his leader. This was a breach of etiquette, and the P. W. K. X. forgot his dignity and snickered at Joseph's contortions, and the audience broke into laughter; then the neophyte renounced his half-completed

vows and proceeded to make ducks and drakes of the regalia adorning the P. W. K. X. Finally, overpowered by numbers, he was ejected from the Lodge and the door, not only tiled, but securely barricaded—with Jenny inside. The faithful Joseph, however, waited in the cold and darkness, but when his lady love emerged she merely glanced haughtily at him and passed by—escorted by Dick Singlestick. Last evening he called upon her for an explanation. He got it.

Jupiter!

To me the most amazing part of this is the attitude of Mrs. Biggles. One would suppose that she, so sympathetic, would be moved almost to tears by this harrowing tale of shattered hopes, but when I mentioned the matter to her she made an extremely brief comment. "Tut!" she exclaimed, with a most contemptuous toss of her head.

I must have looked shocked, for she smiled pityingly, and added in a softened tone, "The booby!—wait till to-morrow."



This afternoon—I grind my teeth as I write

it—Teeterley called. I feel like a caged animal. Here I am, temporarily a cripple, shut in by the invisible bars of courtesy and convention that forbid me even to growl or show my teeth, while this fellow is permitted to peer curiously through. He had the temerity to mention casually that he had just been over to The Briars rehearsing, and with a smile of triumph which belied the words, he professed himself deeply concerned to hear that I would be unable to sing at the concert. Yes, it was the concert he spoke of, but it was the rehearsals that were in his mind; I knew it by the mocking gleam in his eyes and the curl to his lips, and I longed to clutch him by the throat. Instead, I assumed an imperturbable suavity, and conversed with an appearance of cordial hospitality. He matched me with gay vivacity, and professed himself delighted with my society; so much entertained, indeed, that he proposes coming again to-morrow, although he has finished rehearsing at The Briars. The latter statement is made deliberately, I can see, for the purpose of throwing me off my guard. If I were in his place there would never be a last rehearsal; they should increase and multiply to the inevit-

able end. He says he will be able to stay longer to-morrow!

Gracious heaven!—how shall I stand it!

It seems that Joseph, in place of departing in dignified silence for the Klondike, was so weak and fatuous as to make a final call on Jenny last evening to exhibit the broken heart he proposed leaving behind him. The result is that he is never coming back from the Klondike, for the simple reason that he is never going. If he knowed he could pick up nuggets of gold the size of straw-stacks, he wouldn't leave Jenny for one week.

Jenny, he says, loves him, after all—not merely loves him as of yore, but ten time more!

Neither of them, I understand, regrets this passing cloud, for the sun of happiness now shines with such surpassing radiance that never again can it be dimmed.

They rejoice, in fact, for how otherwise would they have been brought to realise the love of ten times more?

Jenny never hated him: it was because she loved him so much that she said she did! . . .

Great Cæsar!

Incidentally, Joseph is a hero: he done right.

Dick Singlestick is beneath contempt: therefore he is not to be punched.

Jenny has renounced her vows and resigned from the Lodge: in future (that is, for the present) she and Joseph will meet on Lodge nights in Miss Humphrey's kitchen.

This, apparently, is life, and I am constrained to the belief that they are two idiots, quite irresponsible idiots. I felt a certain sympathy, even a fellow-feeling, with Joseph, yesterday; to-day, I am vaguely disappointed, though of course I do not grudge him his happiness, if he insists upon being happy with a woman who declares untruthfully that she hates him; at the same time, the whole thing is so horribly inartistic that I am almost inclined toward fiction once more. I don't know why, but it seems to me Joseph should have gone without displaying the fragments of his heart so prematurely; then if he had survived untold privation and suffering, his character might have developed some strength and dignity. In the meantime, Dick Singlestick could devote himself to Jenny, who (if she really loves Joseph, which I cannot believe possible)

would hold him off until driven by pride and pique to despairingly fall into his arms.

That is the time for Joseph to return, if he insists upon returning. In this way the whole affair would prove much more interesting to all concerned, including spectators. Jenny would have two chances in place of one; Dick would have one instead of being left out in the cold; Joseph's would be cut in twain, it is true, but he would have an experience of life that he can never hope to have under present conditions; and whether he returned with a bagful of gold or resigned himself to eternal slumber beside the trail, one could look back upon his course with admiration and approval. But it is too late now, I suppose; he has thrown his self-respect, if he ever had any, to the winds, and prefers to subsist upon the crumbs from Jenny's table.

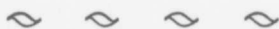
It is extraordinary that Mrs. Biggles shows such a lack of interest in the whole affair. She knowed how it would be, and if all the men lit out for the Klondike the first time their women-kind said they 'ated them there'd be the biggest collection of boobies up there on the face of the yearth. Why, a woman can't 'ate a man with no

proper kind of spirit without lovin' of him first!

My ankle is not yet strong enough to stand my full weight, so I can only limp about with the help of a cane, but I can bear this trial with equanimity, for it elicits a certain amount of sympathy and concern that is very soothing. The rector is mystified, and says it is the first time he has failed to give immediate relief, but I assure him the ankle might be much worse, and that it does not feel the same as before the operation. And Mrs. Biggles tells me of the most kind and sympathetic inquiries which are made through her by my neighbours; indeed, I fear she repeats remarks which are not intended to reach my ears; for she said that faithless Jenny told her she heard someone say that my voice—but I cannot write it, for although the remark is gratifying to me, I cannot feel justified in recognising information reaching me in such a fashion. Yet Mrs. Biggles, poor woman, would be astonished and grieved if I reprov'd her, and she is so casual and devoid of intention in repeating these harmless items of gossip that I must ignore the

apparent breach of propriety. I think my neutral attitude is the correct one under the circumstances: I do not encourage; I listen in silence; I do not record anything confidential.

I wonder if I *do* sing with the expression of a hartist!



Last night I was sleepless and feverish, and spent hours with wide-open eyes staring into the darkness, while I imagined many things. To-day, odd fancies still crowd my brain; that is, thoughts which might appear a trifle unusual to other people if I gave utterance to them, especially to Teeterley.

He spent most of the afternoon with me, and appeared to be trying to make himself entertaining. It is extraordinary that I am compelled to be courteous and outwardly agreeable to this man; it is humiliating to be conscious that while we smile and chat there is slowly forming in some loathsome deep of my moral being a fell design. Yes, it lurked and stirred, formless at first, then took shape and reared itself against my will, until I feared that Teeterley, with all his conceit and smugness, must surely be aware

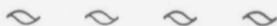
of a ferocious gleam shooting forth from my eyes, a danger signal he would do well to heed. But no, he declared when he said good-bye that he would come back to-morrow and bring his flute, little recking that the devilish instrument is the one thing lacking to goad me to desperation.

I recall with misgiving my joy in the wine-cellar that I shall never use for wine: I must have had some strange inward premonition of the use I shall make of it, if things come to the worst. He shall not have her; that I have determined; but it is only dire necessity that shall drive me to such extremities, though I see no simpler way. But, I repeat, if things come to the worst, I shall lure him into the wine-cellar. It is a cellar within a cellar; massive walls, sound-proof, dark. I know that in the abstract it would be a wrong thing to do, but sometimes worthless individuals must be sacrificed for the higher good, and I am sure that Teeterley never would be missed, except by persons who would be thankful for his absence. But I would be unselfish in carrying out this purpose: I would take no unfair advantage to my own profit. Teeterley shall

not have her, but neither shall I: I shall not offer myself. I could not do so honourably without making a clean breast of my deed, and she might object. She might even want me to let him out!

But I shall be merciful, magnanimous to my enemy. I shall not shut him up alone.

He shall have his flute!



After another wakeful and restless night I am feverish, and possibly a little excited. Mrs. Biggles seemed to think so, and looked relieved when Teeterley appeared to keep me company. He not only brought his flute, but tootled exhaustively for my delectation. He also strummed on the piano and sang part of his repertoire, evidently meaning to be as entertaining as possible; and I smiled politely, making appropriate comments, so that he could not guess how I suffered. Still, considering his possible fate, I am content to suffer; indeed, being fair-minded and honourable, I am bound to let him amuse himself in this way, even at some trifling inconvenience to myself. Besides, I am his host, and thus I am obliged to treat him with consideration; even

when I shoot the bolt of the wine-cellar door, I must do so with suave apologies and good wishes.

He has the vivacious manner of a woman, and talks entertainingly of trifles. I notice also that he is diffuse and almost deferential in addressing Mrs. Biggles; one would think she was some near relative of his, judging from his solicitous inquiries about each of the little Biggleses by name, not forgetting the absent Miss Almira. Did her mother think it at all possible that Miss Almira would come home for a day and take part in the church concert? One, even one, of her inimitable recitations, would be a priceless boon.

So Mrs. Biggles, vicariously flattered, has promised to write to Almiry, who, she avers, would be willing to travel from here to Chiny to stand on a pump platform.

Teeterley plays chess. I only discovered this shortly before he left, but we had one game, and for the time I forgot that he was Teeterley. I shall make use of him in this way for a day or two, and as he plays rather well, I have decided to place a jug of water and a loaf of bread in the

wine-cellar, in case of certain eventualities, so to speak.

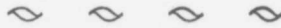


Mrs. Biggles wants me to have a doctor, but I will not listen to her; I wish she would leave me alone, and give me a chance to think without constant interruption. I am bright, even hilarious, I fancy, and in excellent spirits in every way, though a trifle feverish and wakeful; yet I find when I watch her narrowly that she regards me with an outrageous air of doleful anxiety.

As a chess player I have nothing against Teeterley; in fact, he plays so well that I have decided to place a chunk of smoked bacon in the wine-cellar, in addition to the other luxuries. I cannot conveniently cook it, but that doesn't matter. He will have a pocket knife, so he can cut off pieces of a suitable size and chew on each for an indefinite period, and expenditure of time will be an object to him.

He had the impertinence to offer to bring a doctor to-morrow, and I resented the suggestion with some heat. I believe Mrs. Biggles put him up to it, for I hear them whispering together in the hall when he arrives and departs. I am

thinking of dismissing Mrs. Biggles; she is getting presumptuous.



This *is* the last straw: positively the last. I thought I could keep him at the chess board, but again he brought his flute; not only brought it, but insisted upon playing me a composition of his own.

I knew what was coming; I did not assent blindly, though I might have forgotten my manners, but for certain soothing reflections: it is not for long; it need not happen again. I knew what was coming, for in years gone by I have listened to authors reading their own works; indeed, there was a time when, attracted by some morbid fascination in the feat, I missed no opportunity of doing so. At times, but rarely, my sympathy has been aroused by the evident shrinking of a sensitive soul from what he knows he cannot do, but usually I have been spellbound by the fatuous and exuberant enjoyment of the reader. I am convinced that in another decade public opinion will put a ban on such exhibitions, and authors will no longer compete, as it were, in

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the size of their own turnips and cabbages and mangel-wurtzels. Probably a similitude of modesty will oblige them to pair off, each reading the other's inventions, in a dual appearance on the same platform. The revered apostle of realism and the popular romanticist, the purist and the dialectic expert, the poet and the heart-rhymer, the nature-inventor and the observer of nature; all these literary lions and lambs, if they appear in combination, will fill their own coffers and their impressario's to repletion.

But alas!—on this occasion there was no antidote to Teeterley, and though he is an amateur composer and performer, he possesses the true artistic spirit which is never so happy as when revelling in his own creative work, so there was no escape for me. I lay down on the lounge to listen, and I may have groaned unconsciously, for the performer turned as he raised his instrument, and gazed at me in such a steadfast and penetrating manner that I feared I had been talking to myself. However, I returned his look, accompanied by a pleasant smile, and told him to go ahead; then I closed my eyes the better to bear it, and he began. I have heard trills

and roulades and arpeggios chase each other like inconsequent butterflies through other flute solos, but never have I listened to them strung together in such myriads, never have I known them to scale such impossible precipices, leap such yawning chasms, or bound from crag to crag at such incredible speed, like flocks of maddened goats possessed of the devil. Flute solos are kaleidoscopic; all are different, yet all are alike—except this one. It is a hideous composite. He asked me to think of a suitable name as he played, and though I didn't think of it, the name came to me as an inspiration. It is "The Maniac's Dream."

I lay on the lounge, as I said, and listened with closed eyelids, but perhaps my senses became dulled by some merciful provision of nature; possibly I may have momentarily drowsed, for the sounds became gradually faint, and there came before my mind's eye a vision of a tall man with light curly hair, the colour of a Jersey cow's, as he stands enshrouded in the Egyptian darkness of a wine-cellar. His goggly blue eyes are distended, and his teeth gleam through a ghastly set smile as he gropes blindly

around the impenetrable walls in the vain hope of finding a possible opening in the bricks and mortar.

He desists, at last, with a despairing groan; as his dry lips meet, he becomes aware that escape is not of the slightest consequence, except as a means of once more getting within reach of something liquid and cool. Then a thought strikes him, and he gropes his way to the nearest wine-bin; rapidly his eager tenuous fingers play over the dusty boards, but there is nothing to quench his burning thirst, and with ever-lessening hope he goes from one bin to another, till he reaches the very last, when he halts with bated breath, fear and despair clutching at his heart. He stretches out one faltering arm, then draws it back as if the tips of his fingers had touched live coals; something is dripping from them; they are not burned; it is It.

He clasps a huge bedroom water-jug in both hands, and drinks in long, low, gurgling arpeggios. The mouth of the jug is wider than his, and a stream runs down on each side, but he would not have it narrower; no, but he would have his mouth wider. At last he carefully low-

ers the jug with a sigh of content, but it touches something in the bin with a crunching sound and almost topples over. He rights it hurriedly with one hand and feels a smooth familiar shape with the other—marvel of marvels, it is bread! He eats with the loaf in both hands, squirrel fashion, and thinks with deep gratitude of the generous hand that provided these dainties. He gnaws more deeply, then suddenly stops and sniffs the air. He drops the loaf beside the water jug unheeded, and sniffs again; he has become aware of a delicious odour; it is pervasive, unmistakable; it is smoked bacon! He begins a systematic, hopeful search; buoyantly he carries it on, knowing that the object of his desire cannot escape through an opening in the walls, as there isn't one; he cannot fail for want of time, for he has all the time there is. He has combed the walls and floor with his fingers, and now he raises his hands aloft and walks from end to end of the cellar feeling along the rafters; his fingers find nothing, but suddenly something soft and clammy smites him between the eyes with delicious force, and he grasps it with a shout of joy just as the music crescendos into an ear-

piercing climax—and I open my eyes as the player lowers his flute.

He turned to me, flushed and triumphant. “What do you think of that?” quoth he.

“Wonderful—simply wonderful!” I ejaculated, rubbing my eyes. “I never heard anything like it,” I added truthfully. He smiled vacantly as if waiting for more; they always do. “You play like—like the devil!” I declared, and I could think of nothing more, so I said it with strong emphasis.

Teeterley started, looked at me fixedly, broke into a short, ill-pleased laugh. “And the name?” he asked, in the tone of one who humours an invalid.

“‘The Maniac’s Dream,’” I answered.

Just then Mrs. Biggles entered the room and I turned to speak to her, and as I did so I caught a glimpse of Teeterley making a swift motion with one hand and tapping his forehead twice. At the same moment a spasm contorted Mrs. Biggles’s countenance, and she answered a simple question in a stammering and incoherent manner. Then Teeterley said good-bye to me, and followed her out of the room, explaining that he

must have a few words with her about the concert.

I was glad to have him go, for I wanted to think. My brain is unusually active and clear to-day, and I see things in a different light. Even considering the great provocation, it would not be strictly honourable to shut him up alone with his flute; he might require human companionship, and as I cannot offer myself to Olivia, for the reasons stated, I may as well accompany him. In that case, I shall add a dozen candles to the luxuries, so that I can entertain him by playing chess.

There is one thought that gives me pause. When we come to the last, the very last, piece of bacon rind, who shall have it? Can I trust myself to play the hospitable host to the end, or will savage nature assert itself and prompt me to take it from him? I think not.

But the flute!—the flute? *It* shall stay outside.

I had scarcely time to think this out when Mrs. Biggles came back and bothered me about having a doctor, though I never felt better in my life. She declares that my 'ead is 'ot and 'eavy and

my eyes is like two burnin' coals, and I have the general appearance of a man who is gambolling for 'igh stakes. She thinks I must be taking dry grippe, and I should have something to make me go to sleep. I fiercely repudiated the suggestion; I am as strong as a hyena, and I declared furiously I would not be answerable for the consequences if a doctor came into the house. She looked alarmed, but immediately remarked that she believed in the bottom of her 'eart that most doctors didn't know nothink anyway, and she'd just run over home and get the bottle of Soothing Syrup and give me a good big dose of that, and I'd go off to sleep like a hinfant.

She means well, poor woman, but I did not want Soothing Syrup; I didn't want anything but to be left alone to think and write my journal, and to prepare for certain contingencies, and her solicitude annoyed me. I would not eat the food she prepared for my supper; eating seemed such a waste of time, a trivial process; besides, I would have plenty of time to eat in the wine-cellar. She protested that nothink was so good for a light 'ead as a full stummick; she wheedled in vain. I insisted upon everything being taken

from the table untouched, and at last she obeyed. I thought I had got rid of her for the night, but she returned, tearful, her voice trembling, and declared she 'adn't the 'eart to leave me without a bite or sup within reach. Now if I'd just let her make some toast and fry a few thin slices of smoked bacon—

A brilliant idea flashed into my mind. She was not to be trusted with my plan, but I could turn her persistence to account and pacify her at the same time.

“Capital!” I ejaculated, with a smile that I feared looked cunning. “I’m getting hungry and thirsty now. Bring me a jug of water, Mrs. Biggles—a large jug, if you please.”

Thrice had I to send the woman for more, but at last she placed the huge jug I wanted on the table, and I satisfied myself that it was filled to the brim.

“Now,” I said, “a loaf of bread—a whole loaf.”

She could make me a bit of toast in three minutes, she pleaded, and even cold toast was more tasty than—

“*Bread!*” I commanded—“this instant!”

She fled, then came back with a loaf which she placed beside the jug of water. Her eyes were wild and startled, and wandered back and forth from the table to me.

I gazed at the loaf thoughtfully; there must be one for each of us. "Not enough," I decided. "Another, if you please."

"Merciful 'eavings!" gasped Mrs. Biggles; but she obeyed.

"Now," I continued, "some bacon, and then you may go. Bring me five or ten pounds."

"How—*much?*" she shrieked.

"Five or ten pounds," I repeated slowly and distinctly, "a piece about a foot square."

"Mr. Merry-well, if you'll let me fry a few slices, I'll——"

"I prefer it raw," I interrupted, gazing at her steadily, and trying to appear calm. "*Raw,*" I repeated in a low menacing tone, "and at once."

When she returned with the bacon her face was white and scared; her hands trembled as she placed it beside the bread and water.

"Thank you, Mrs. Biggles," I said, half penitently. "Now, if you'll be good enough to hand

down the package of candles from the corner-cupboard, I'd like six or eight——”

“Mercy me!—oh, law sakes!” she murmured.

“——on a plate,” I finished, ignoring the interruption. “Yes, that's all—you may go now.”

“Mr. Merry-well,” she said solemnly, “I can't go without warnin' you that no mortal man could eat all them vittles, and——”

“Yes, yes,” I interrupted impatiently, “I know!”

“——and drink all that water, and not——”

“What nonsense!” I shouted. “Mrs. Biggles, *will* you go?”

She precipitated herself through the doorway without concluding the sentence in my hearing, and I could hear her hurried footsteps break into a run outside the window. I drew a sigh of relief that she was gone at last, for I could have found the provisions myself with half the exertion. And feeling rather exhausted, I lay on the lounge and rested for a time. It may have been ten or fifteen minutes later, that I was aroused from my meditation by a sound of cautious footsteps outside the window; listening attentively, I could hear something like the murmur of low

voices. There was no blind on the window, for I do not like blinds, but when I sat up suddenly and looked out I could see nothing, though I had a strong impression that Mrs. Biggles was peering in at me from the outer darkness. Just then came a sound of tramping footsteps and a knock at the kitchen door, and I hobbled there in time to see it open cautiously just wide enough to admit a small boy's head. Now when a door opens and a head appears it is natural to suppose that its appearance is voluntary, but in this instance no second glance was needed to tell me that Tommy Biggles, whose apprehensive countenance I beheld, was not a free agent. His blue eyes were distended with apparent alarm, his mouth opened and closed soundlessly, and the lower part of his body seemed to be struggling backward against some unseen force, instead of following his head.

I gazed at him in bewilderment. "Why, Tommy," I cried, at length, "what's the matter? Come in, my boy."

Never have I know such an instantaneous acceptance of an invitation. Tommy, strictly speaking, did not come, he did not enter, he did

not thrust himself in, he certainly did not walk, and I now have reason to suppose that he was shot in, but before the words were quite uttered he was almost in my arms. I smiled engagingly upon him and repeated my question, as I led him from the kitchen to the living-room.

"Please, Mr. Merry-well," he gasped breathlessly, as if suddenly uncorked, "Miss 'Umphrey's—Miss *Holivia*—'Umphrey's compliments—and would you lend her the loan of a hunk of baccn?"

I stared at him stupidly; his face was as innocent as his own mother's, and childlike as well; then I remembered my manners.

"Why, certainly," I answered. "I have a piece right here."

"Towhead broke into the smokehouse and eat it all," he explained, as I placed the meat in the basket he carried. "And the baker never come neither, and they ain't got no bread. . . . Yes, two loaves, please Mr. Merry-well,—and she'd like to borry a good big jug of water, for the cat fell into their well. That there 'un'll do, Mr. Merry-well."

Never have I seen a graver, more truthful

countenance; it was impossible to doubt his word.

“And is there anything else, Tommy?” I inquired solicitously, for he stood on one foot and then on the other in a hesitating manner, as if he feared to impose still further upon my generosity. “Are you sure that’s all?”

Tommy’s roving eyes scanned the table doubtfully, then his face shone with sudden recollection. “Cracky!” he cried. “I ’most forgot! Coal ile’s give out, and Miss Holivia told me to ax you if you could spare her some candles—six or eight of them kind?”

I looked at him closely. His basket was full to overflowing with bacon and bread, the heavy jug of water monopolised the other hand; all told, the little chap was laden with full thirty pounds of luxuries, twenty of them water. Even my clouded brain doubted the possibility of his stowing away the candles, unless he carried them in that flexible mouth, so like his mother’s, but at that moment his mouth appeared to be tightly clamped, as if he had read my unspoken thought. I have never seen a more solemn and stolid countenance than Tommy’s, but—did my eyes deceive

me?—was his head settling lower on his shoulders and his little chest swelling?

I gathered the candles in my two hands, shaking my head doubtfully. "You can't carry——" I began.

"*Pockets,*" snapped Tommy, between his teeth.

I say snapped, for though my eyes rested upon him at the time I did not see him utter the word, so briefly were his lips unclamped. I told him to stand still, while I began to fill these useful appurtenances, but suddenly he doubled over with a convulsive movement, dropped the provisions and clapped one hand over his mouth in a vain attempt to force back an explosive burst of mirth, and then began to hop about the room on one leg, his eyes agog and rolling with his inward struggles.

Never have I seen a funnier object. I gripped the table to support myself, and burst into peal after peal of spontaneous laughter, while Tommy capered still more frantically, with choking sputters that would escape his restraining hand.

"Gee!" he shrieked, at length, giving up the

struggle and abandoning himself to unrestrained merriment.

How wholesome and purifying is the influence of innocent mirth! How long Tommy Biggles and I laughed together, I know not, but I know that my befogged brain grew clearer with every peal; the clouds lifted, and things began to assume their normal proportions.

At length I loaded Tommy up, with intermittent chuckles, suggesting that his mother might be awaiting his return. The bacon and bread and jug of water, the candles bulging from his pockets, he looked at in turn doubtfully, shot a quick glance toward the window, then started resolutely for the door.

"Wait, Tommy!" I called after him, "what made you laugh?"

He grinned silently, and again his glance wandered to the outer darkness beyond the window. His name is Biggles, but his nature is Skiffley.

"The idea of a feller—eatin' candles!" quoth he, with a gurgle, vanishing into the darkness.

After his departure I sat down and laughed

some more, and as I laughed I became aware that both morally and physically I had been in need of a physician, and that the vapours which had been afflicting me were rapidly dissipating. I also fancied that I began to see things which made me laugh still more heartily, and lastly my latent hunger asserted itself: I longed for something to eat, with a mighty longing. Tommy, the rascal, had swept my table clear, and the table had held the contents of the larder, no doubt; and though there might be some candles left in the cupboard, I didn't want candles. I wanted crisp hot slices of bacon, innumerable slices of unwholesome buttered toast, and a great deal of strong tea; and as these were unattainable, of course, I must hunt for a scrap of bread and some cold meat.

I limped toward the kitchen, and as I opened the door a delightful odour greeted me, the most appetising odour one could imagine; but for this, the room was as Tommy had left it. But from the outer summer kitchen mysterious sounds attracted me, and I opened the further door and looked within. The room was lighted, a fire crackled in the stove, the air was a pale diaph-

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anous blue, and over a sizzling, sputtering spider I dimly discerned a willowy feminine figure turning the most ravishing slices of bacon that had just begun to curl. I saw her, but I made no sound; there was no room for one, so filled was the air with the delicious music of the spider; besides, on the table in the corner I saw the following:

Item: One hunk of bacon.

Item: Two loaves of bread.

Item: One jug (large) of water.

Item: Six or eight candles.

So I withdrew, silently, with a momentary sinking sensation, but with unimpaired appetite, and waited. I did not wait in vain. Mrs. Biggles bustled in as usual and set the table, brought in my supper, and I ate it with unusual relish, though I refrained from calling for more; and neither of us seemed to suppose that the hour was late. We conversed on ordinary topics, and avoided extraordinary ones, and then Mrs. Biggles cleared the table and prepared to depart. Before she left, however, she drew a long narrow

bottle from her pocket and poured some of the contents into a wine glass.

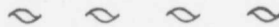
“Drink that, Mr. Merry-well,” she said genially, proffering it to me.

“Wha-at—what is it?” I queried weakly.

“Hippypeckuhanner-and-squills,” she replied with instant celerity.

I took it without protest.

I have had a capital sleep.



I am better. Mentally, indeed, I am quite well, and as my ankle is slowly mending, I shall be able to walk about in a few days. It is mortifying, though, to know that it will be more than a few days before I can wear a proper boot, on account of this injury to one of my toes, consequently I cannot look forward to making a formal call for another week at least. In the meantime Teeterley is able to go anywhere and do anything. In spite of this I greeted him with some warmth when he came to-day, being smitten with compunction for the thought I had harboured. If he would remain silent and play chess I could stand him better, but he insists

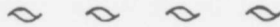
upon talking, and has got to the point of constantly addressing me as "Old Man" and "Merrivale." Indeed, I have a suspicion that he imagines himself to be in love, and is eager to unbosom himself to me. This would be a most repugnant development, and I cannot allow it. I am in love, and I know what real love is, and I do not want to confide in anyone, not even sympathetic Mrs. Biggles. Teeterley is not; he couldn't be; it isn't in him. How could a man whose attitude toward women in general is so nonchalant and free from constraint be capable of anything more than an insipid fancy for one of them? Yet he may imagine himself to be moved by deep passion, for he hints that it would be a relief to him to talk quite freely to a friend who cared to listen. I cannot allow it: without being discourteous, I hastily change the subject and look forbidding. I have modified my former opinion that he looks upon me as a rival, and I also conclude that he may not be so full of conceit as he appears, for he sighs heavily at times as if he were beginning to feel humble and unworthy.

But the news that Miss Almira Biggles is will-

ing to stand on the concert platform has filled him with exuberant joy, and he is warm in his gratitude to her mother, who seems won by his charm. Why, she says, he's just as easy and sociable as if he was settin' beside her at the Sewing Guild with his work in his lap.

Yes, Almiry is coming, as she knowed she would, though she hasn't thought it worth her while to come home to see her Ma and little sisters and brother all summer, having spent her holidays at a place where grown-up men and women meet together in the pursuit of what she calls 'igher culture.

Fiddlesticks!—'igher *platforms!*



It is somewhat unfortunate that I relaxed to Teeterley, for he has taken an unfair advantage of my remorseful cordiality: he has impetuously declared, in fact, that he cherishes a passion, semi-hopeless, he fears, but strong and changeless. There is a gulf between them, an intellectual gulf, which he cannot cross; he knows not how. He might attempt the passage and perish willingly did she but smile and beckon; but no,—

she stands on the farther heights and looks across, it is true, but far above and beyond him, though in his direction. Could he but reach the farther shore and stand beside her, then might he hope through tortuous by-paths of æsthetic and literary grace to reach her heart. But he is conscious of his own short-comings in that direction; he cares not for poetry, literature, or the high ideals of aspiring souls. He likes family and social life, and the outer actualities of existence; but he would sacrifice his own tastes, could he ever hope to attain, for example, to the higher plane of understanding Browning without a club. He was not without poetic sense, he wanted me to understand, for when he listened to poems—good poems—recited, well recited—*Gad!*—it stirred him up to want to do something great; made him feel, in fact, that there were unplumbed depths of power slumbering within him which needed only the inspiring companionship of—
of——

But before he could get breath to say another word, I checked him. I should have done so before, but that he talked so rapidly and with such fervour, and I was so petrified that he should

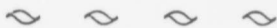
innocently unbosom himself to me. It was quite evident now that I had been mistaken in supposing that he looked upon me as a rival; so puffed up in his own conceit was he that he had failed to imagine such a possibility. So I stopped him before he dared to speak her name; I could not have borne that. I did not speak rudely, brusquely: my manner was perhaps a trifle frigid, but I merely said I would be obliged to him if he would refrain from mentioning the object of his affections to me; there were reasons, I intimated, which made it impossible for me to sympathise with his aspirations.

Now, if Teeterley had not been so obtuse he might have divined the reason for my request, but he was so plainly mystified and hurt by my attitude that I yielded to a momentary twinge of compassion and hastened to assure him that certain circumstances made the subject painful to me, but that I did not hold him personally responsible. Let him discuss any other topic, I added, and I should be only too ready to respond with sympathetic counsel, if he so desired.

Teeterley is an ingenuous fellow, but not at all discerning. He grasped my hand and pressed

it warmly, saying, "I understand, old man—it's all right!—not another word. I've never been a woman hater myself, but somehow I know how you feel, and I'll try to keep off. Jove, Merri-vale!—if you were in my shoes, you'd be irresistible, with all you know of art and higher culture—perfectly irresistible!—and it's good of you to offer to post me—mighty good!"

This is awkward for me—awkward and perplexing, for he grows more cordial and affectionate, and I dare not rebuff him again. I wish he would go away until I recover.



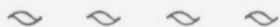
Blessings on Miss Almira Biggles's artistic soul! At the eleventh hour she has changed her mind about the selection she is to recite at the concert. Her mother is not surprised at this; she says it has been the nature of Almiry's mind to outgrow in a night what she has took in the day before; which, Almiry explained to her, was merely the expansion of the soul reaching up to 'igher and nobler high-deals. For her part, Mrs. Biggles says, she thinks Almiry started too 'igh when she was a child: she got so used to

swingin' from the bell-clap in the steeple with everyone a-gazin' up at her open-mouthed, that she never could bear to think of coming down to yearth again. And yet to this day Almiry gets madder than a burned 'ornet if anyone 'appens to as much as say the word "curfew" in her presence, and she can't a-bear to get within sight of a church steeple.

So Mrs. Biggles says it is natural enough for her to choose a selection of a newer and more artistic type; this one, as she gathers, not being simple poertry unadorned, but poetry garlanded in wreaths of expressive music played at one and the same time as a hobligatter.

Of course, Teeterley is to play the appropriate wreaths of soft music on his flute, and as Miss Almira cannot arrive until the evening of the concert, he has volunteered to run up to Tuffington to rehearse with her at the Academy. He is a good-natured soul, and is willing to go to any amount of trouble for the sake of performing on his flute, and I am grateful to Miss Almira; he will not have time to come to see me again until after the concert. I shall have a breathing space, and I need it to prepare for what is coming: in

a few days I shall be able to wear a boot and walk over to The Briars. My heart beats fast, and I tremble at the thought.



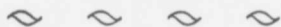
In the bustle of preparation for the concert my friends have left me to commune with my own soul; it has not been a soothing occupation. Now that there is nothing to distract me from calm contemplation of what is coming, I cannot contemplate calmly; I am distracted by doubt and hope and fear, largely the latter. In spite of all my careful study of fiction, and of all the illuminating side-lights thrown on the canvas from Mrs. Biggles's inner experience, I still grope in darkness. Maledictions on the editor of *The Ordinary Groove!* Had he answered my question with a simple monosyllable, then would I have something tangible to grasp. I asked him for but a tiny kernel of truth, and he answered with a smothering-armful of wood; the kernel may be there, but I cannot find it. There are but two truths which I have learned with absolute certainty in this connection; *I don't know how; Teeterley does,*

Yes, he knows! He could make love—I shudder at the phrase, but that's what he would do—make love to a hundred women, without a qualm. He can be airy and joyous and sociable, he can smile and talk persiflage, attitudinise and gesticulate with absolute ease and unconcern. I want to do none of these things, but if I might have a tithe of Teeterley's assurance, then would I be willing to wear curly light hair and bright blue eyes, even if a trifle goggly. Further, I would even be willing to play upon the flute!

But there is no use in repining. I can no more change my natural inclination than I can change the colour of my dark and sombre eyes, or my habit of sitting bolt upright in the presence of ladies, or my manner of slow and deliberate speech.

Mrs. Biggles is excited over her daughter's coming arrival, and also over the concert. Almiry, she admits, has been a disappointment from the time the child was old enough to utter sentiments foreign to a Biggles, yet she has a sort of feeling that there is yet hope; just when love and marriage and the cares of a family are furthest from her thoughts, a slumbering vol-

caner of emotion and longing for 'uman fellowship may bust forth at the touch of a 'and or the glance of a eye, and once this 'appened she will 'ave her mind took up with something better than the 'uman race in general. With all her notions Almira knowed how to do for herself, and a girl what finished her schoolin' and took all the diplomers she took before she was eighteen, would 'ave sense enough when she was near twenty to know that the 'igher above the yearth she soared the smaller she'd look from below—and the further she'd have to come down.



I have got a boot on again for the first time, and to-morrow—I turn hot and cold at the thought—I shall call at The Briars. I have no plan, and my mind is a chaos, but I shall take whatever course seems natural. I don't know why the story, "Predestined," haunts me so, for Mrs. Biggles made the impropriety of the action perfectly clear, yet I feel as if my fate were somehow bound up in it.

The concert is over at last, and I have heard

some interesting items from Mrs. Biggles. Miss Holivia and Mr. Teeterley played beautiful; never had she thought that the flute and pianner could unite in such perfect harmony. "The pianner would say somethink low and deep and solemn, then the flute would tootle kind of pleadin' and stop with a sort of shrill high note like a question, and the pianner would answer with a little ripplin' laugh at the top and start off helter-skelter down to the bottom, with the flute close behind, like a boy and girl playin' tag; and if you closed your eyes as you listened, you could almost see the pianner getherin' up her skirts as she ran and lookin' back over her shoulder at the long-legged flute, until he got his arm round her waist and they both swung off into the most 'eavenly waltz that made your 'eart jump like the sound of a full milingtary band. Ow-h, Mr. Merry-well, if you could have 'eard it! . . . You wouldn't want to? Well, of course the flute ain't the cornick, but then again, it ain't the trombone. . . . You don't never want to be under the same roof with a flute again? Law me!—do you 'ate it that bad! But if you could have saw

Miss Holivia lookin' as bee-yutiful as the music she made with her little white hands flittin' over the keys! There's 'andsomer men than Mr. Teeterley, too, but to see him in his swaller tails and a yeller rose a-bowin' Miss Holivia on and off was the elegantest. . . . I beg your parding, Mr. Merry-well?

“Yes, Almira spoke her new piece, and Mr. Teeterley played the hobligatter, and people said it was a wonderful interpretation, as they always do when its somethink where the meanin' doesn't rise to be skimmed off, like cream. Almiry was a nun, Sister 'Ildegarde, walkin' in a convent garding and questioning of her own soul. The lights was turned low, and the garding illumed by the pale glow of the radiant celestial horb in the sky, as Almiry said; and there was a hole-ander in a green tub and a palm in a red pot and two pink geraniums for trees, and the lectern readin' desk for a sun dial. The horb in the sky was a white pianner lamp globe with a stable lantern inside shinin' through a hole in a blue curting, with her little brother Tommy on a step-ladder outside a-holdin' it. There wasn't no story to speak of, but the questions!—law me!—

you couldn't hardly believe any mortal man could think up as many for a woman to ask her soul, or that any woman but Almiry could remember them all, especially as there wasn't no soul there to answer except Mr. Teeterley's flute. Well, it all come to this: Sister 'Ildegarde had the key of a gate in the garding wall, and if she unlocked it and slipped out there was someone right there to take her in his arms, and if she didn't she'd 'ave to go back to her cell and never get another chance; but she takes so long trying to get her soul to tell her to open the gate that you kind of hope someone will climb over and settle it. But he doesn't, and then she puts both sides before the moon so fair that you don't know which is right and which is wrong, or how she can do one without doing the other to even up; and she doesn't neither, so she raises her arms and leaves it all to the moon, and the moon settles it by gettin' behind a cloud and leavin' the garding so dark that you don't know when the lights is turned up whether Sister 'Ildegarde slipped out of the gate or went back to her cell. Almiry is a little put out with Tommy because the moon fell out of the sky, but he was peeking

through to be sure her arms was raised, and burned the tip of his nose on the lamp chimbley so that he had to let go and clap his hand over it."

But there is another piece of information that Mrs. Biggles imparted to me in confidence, which fills her with exuberant gratification. Almiry, she declares positively, has begun to take notice! A certain young man presented her with a huge bouquet of yellow roses last evening, and she not only carried them, but smiled upon the giver more than once, and returned one to him, which he wore in his buttonhole.



It is over—my first call at The Briars, and I have returned feeling rather desolate, for I did not see Miss Olivia. Apart from this disappointment I spent a pleasant hour with Miss Humphrey, who is most hospitable and entertaining and talks of her niece with genial unrestraint, little dreaming how every word thrills me through. Had I called yesterday, or waited until to-morrow, I would have seen her, for Miss Humphrey says she is usually at home in the afternoons, but to-day she had gone up to the

church with Miss Teeterley to take down the decorations for the concert. When I learned this, I was smitten with a pang of envy, for I leaped to the conclusion that Teeterley was there also; but in this I was mistaken, for when I returned to The Hermitage he was awaiting me. His apparently whole-hearted effusiveness is embarrassing, for although it is only four days since his last call, he greeted me with the warmth of a long-lost friend, averring that his life had been so full of a number of things since then that the time seemed an age. He had much to tell me; much that he must not tell me, he added with a sigh, looking unutterable things, from which I inferred he alluded to sentiments with which I am incapable of sympathising. He appears to be developing mentally, for he is deeply moved by "The Convent Garden," which Miss Biggles recited. Gad, he says, he had no idea that a woman's soul was such an intricate thing; it makes a fellow realise how much—how little—didn't I know? I did not, but I felt impelled to smile soothingly, and he appeared satisfied, and alluded to the noble sentiments and exquisitely beautiful language of the poem. The end is

rather elusive to him, but he expects to comprehend in the future in what way it is so artistic. But he is in no doubt whatever that he wanted Sister Hildegarde to unlock the gate without bothering about her soul—the idea of a woman like that being immured in a cell is monstrous, he says, and there is no right or wrong about it. This, he tells me frankly, though he wouldn't mention these convictions to everyone; but he is sure that I can understand his point of view without being shocked with any fancied impropriety in it. Much of this beautiful poem he does not fully comprehend, but he can see that it is miles above Longfellow and Will Carleton, for example. Never before had he felt that it was in him to appreciate high-class poetry, but now when he tackles a beautiful line and the first vague interpretation begins to filter into his brain it thrills him like skating on clear, thin ice, that bends under your feet, but you cannot fully comprehend until you break through into the crystal depths below. He is pleased with this simile, which he made up in his own mind this very day; so much pleased, indeed, that he turned it over and over until he wrested a polite

admission from me that it was apt. At intervals he placed his hand over the spot where his heart is supposed to be, and smiled rapturously, then sighed, remarking that he was wearing something there, but he must avoid the subject; he was debarred from mentioning it to me. Later, he drew a little leather case from an inside waistcoat pocket next the region I have mentioned, let it lie in the hollow of his hand, and gazed at it reverently. He was not going to open it, he hastened to reassure me, then he decisively roused himself as with an effort, and replaced it. He would enter into no particulars which might be painful to me, he stated, but there was a certain gulf he must cross, and I could help him. Furthermore I had volunteered to help him, for which he was deeply grateful; I could scarcely realise what it meant to him to have a friend like me at this time. Yes, he had come to claim my promise; he would like to be an author!

He didn't want to look like one, he explained—hanged if he did!—for when you saw 'em cut out of magazine advertisements and pasted into his sister's scrapbook, they made a rum-looking

collection, and it gave a chap a pretty good idea of how clever their books must be to sell against such a handicap.

And he doesn't want to be an author out and out, any more than he wants to look like one; he knows he couldn't write a poem without getting stumped on the rhymes, and he doesn't suppose he could write a rattling good story like *St. Elmo* without a deuce of a lot of hard thinking, but what was there to prevent a fellow writing one short story, and becoming a temporary author, so to speak, if by so doing he could cross the aforementioned gulf, and win the serious consideration of her whom he loved?

At school, of course, he was a mighty poor hand at composition, but his sister read somewhere quite lately that every man had one good story to write, if he cared to write it, and by Gad, Merrivale!—he was going to try. In fact he had the beginning of a story in his head now; how the devil it got there, he didn't know, but there it was. It came into his head without thought, you might say, so it must be an inspiration or something of that sort, he guessed. And the queer part of it was that he could see the

scene more vividly when he closed his eyes than when he opened them. There was a rocky projection running out into the sea, a small headland or something, with the blue waves tumbling about its base, and on the rocks stand two figures.

It was at this point that Teeterley paused for the first time, looking at me inquiringly. I had not uttered a word so far, for two reasons: first, he had given me no opportunity; second, I had nothing to say. And when he stopped so unexpectedly I gazed at him in astonishment, for I had supposed him to be about to explain his idea.

"Go on," I said, at length, for he appeared to be struck dumb.

"How can I?" he cried; "that's all I've got!"

"But the two figures on the rocks," I protested indignantly, "you can't leave them there!"

"I can't get 'em off," replied Teeterley, with serenity; "but if you can tell me how, I'll be awfully obliged, old man."

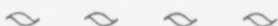
Yes, it was literally true; he handed them

over confidently without restrictions of any kind as to age, sex, colour or nationality; and he would not brook a suggestion that it might be well to let the tide come up and sweep them off to sea. The rocks were too high; and if he lowered them, the story would be too short.

It would perhaps have been kinder had I discouraged Teeterley from attempting his story, but I have an uneasy conscience about the fellow, and I feel that I should try to make some recompense for my former harsh thoughts, so I have humoured his fancy. It would be easier to draft some kind of a plot for him to work on were it not for the fact that he is unyielding on some points; for example, he obstinately refuses to have more than two figures on the rocks, or to allow an arm of the sea to isolate the headland at high tide. He says there are but two figures there, and that the landward approach is absolutely secure—and that's all there is about it. I can make the figures masculine or feminine, or both, but I must not add to the number, or make them statues. He thought of making them a man and a maid, but the difficulty about that is that the man would impetuously propose on

the spot, and she might accept him; and if she did, the story would go up in smoke. I cannot make him see that the author has this in his own hands; he declares that it would be a cold-blooded and brutal thing to force her to reject him before we know whether he is the right man or not, and I have been obliged to admit that we don't know what sort of a chap he is. I wanted to have a third figure arrive in a boat and make complications, but he says there must be two, and two only, on the rocks—that is the way he sees it. However, I have arrived at a solution that he assents to; the figures are to be both masculine; there is a feminine one inland somewhere; they both love her secretly, and on this occasion one confides in the other. This he thinks excellent, but he draws the line at my further suggestion that they fight on the spot and one of them is pushed into the sea; he will not hear of this because the right one might be pushed over and the wrong one left; and to my contention that we could force the wrong one over, he argues that it would be unfair to take sides, and that when two men get fighting it is impossible to predict which will come out on top.

So they are not to fight until we know them better, and they are to be wheedled in some way off the rocky headland, to avoid the possibility of either of them falling in accidentally—since there are but two!



It is perhaps as well that Teeterley comes to distract me and fill in the time, for I cannot call at The Briars on two successive days to begin with; I must allow an interval of two days, though Miss Humphrey said she would be glad to have me drop in any time.

I took it for granted that he would have made some progress with his story before he came for further suggestions, but he hasn't; he says he thinks the whole plot from first to last will have to be clear in his mind before he begins to write. This necessitates some elaboration of detail which I had not counted upon as my share, but I consented. First of all, the two men must be classified; one of them is worthy, the other is unworthy—or rather the former is less unworthy than the latter, in comparison to the heroine, who is a divinity. We have named them A and B, respectively, and the author, who

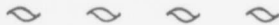
would not hear of their being men of similar type, seems to be possessed of a malignant hatred of B. If we had not already hurried them inland he would have prompted A to push B over the rocks, even with certain disaster to the story assured; and it is very difficult for me to get his consent to A's treating his rival with common civility, but his eyes sparkled with approval when I broached a fiendish plan of luring the latter into a wine-cellar and closing the door. I must say that I was shocked at his cold-blooded approval, and more so that I could not get him to place even a jug of water there for poor B; and as for bread and bacon, it was preposterous!—the sooner a brute like that was put out of the way the better. What did he want to go and imagine he was in love with Miranda for, when any one or more of a hundred thousand ordinary women would do well enough for him? Then, I said distantly, I would leave the story to him; if I had a hand in the matter, B would not enter that wine-cellar until the provisions were there, but I was willing to compromise and let B, the unworthy and unscrupulous, incarcerate A, which I thought would be more artistic.

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It was the latter word which checked Teeterley's strenuous objection; he calmed himself and begged me to explain. The result is that A is to be jailed by B the villain; the former is to be accompanied by his flute, which the provisions give him strength enough to play for three days, when Miranda, who has discovered her love for him when he is reported missing, hears the faint tootling of "The Maniac's Dream" issuing from his dungeon. He is released, and as he staggers out of the darkness, he is blinded by a transcendent vision; it is Miranda, who falls into his arms and pillows her head on his bosom.

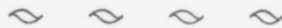
Gad, it is immense!—Teeterley says. He has gone home to write it; he will bring the completed work to-morrow for my edification.



It is now to-morrow. Teeterley has not come; I have not heard from him.

Mrs. Biggles has had a letter from Almira, who states that she is coming home for a day or two at Thanksgiving; also that if she ever does marry she will choose an author for a husband: he must possess a soul which rises above

the sordid and commonplace, and which recognises the beautiful in the humblest expression of nature. Mrs. Biggles is rather puzzled over this; she doesn't know who he can be, for she didn't think the young man that Almira took notice of at the concert was that kind; she thought like he had more sense. But then you never can tell how much sense a man will lose once he gets fairly in love; the quantity depends on how much he has to begin with, and she sometimes thinks that them that has least comes off best.



It is several days since I made an entry in this journal. The truth is that I have been too busy living to think of writing; besides, there has been no particular happening to chronicle. It is true that I have been over to The Briars three times, and I seem to have already reached the pleasant footing of friendly acquaintance with *Miss 'Umphrey*, but—but her niece is—different. I cannot explain it, but there is something elusive in her manner which is not quite aloofness or restraint, nor yet indifference; perhaps benignant withdrawal more nearly expresses

the attitude which makes it difficult to include her in the continuous stream of conversation between her aunt and me. Miss Humphrey and I are contemporaries, I discovered, when we were discussing reminiscences of twenty years ago; our talk brought back recollections of Millicent, and I think from her pensive smile that some such memories of her own youth were revived. She is forty, and I am nearing that turning point, yet it seems but a few years since the days of my youth when I looked upon forty as an appropriate age to die. And now I am only beginning to live!

Teeterley has not yet appeared with his story. I wish he would, for I have a wrathful suspicion he may have other and more attractive ways of spending his time at present, though I have not seen him pass.

Mrs. Biggles regards me with curious affectionate concern. I am thoughtful, perhaps abstracted, and I suppose I sometimes respond absently to her flow of conversation, but she perseveres in claiming my attention to various reminiscences of her courtship. Biggles, she has informed me, made it perfectly plain on the occa-

sion of his first Saturday evening call that he came to see her—and not her Ma.

Some men, she has heard, could start in a straight line and keep on and on without a thing 'appening to them until they got all round the yearth, and *then* they'd get the—biggest—surprise—of their lives. Did I know what that was? Why, to find they had took all that trouble to get to where they was at first!

It beats all, too, how some men feels backward about pushin' of themselves forrard, even when they want a thing real bad, and knows perfekly well they're the best men for the job. There was even Biggles: if she hadn't egged him on the day old Aleck Finney was struck by the Pacific flyer, he'd be a plain section hand this minute, if he was at home. He'd wait till after the funeral, he said, but she up and told him he'd wait till after his own funeral if he stood round while Dan Quigley was makin' tracks for the office. Biggles knowed he'd make a better boss than Quigley, but the better a man is the more modester he seems to be, and that's how fellers like Quigley gets ahead of them. . . . Why, if there wasn't that white-faced bay of Mr.

Teeterley's passing again with the covered buggy!

Confound that fellow! Several times I have caught a glimpse of a covered buggy going in the direction of The Briars, and Mrs. Biggles declares it was attached to a white-faced bay, though she says also that it *may* have been driven by Miss Teeterley.

I am like a vessel on her course with a favouring wind—but no land ahead! There's the trouble now—blue sky, shimmering water, but no port anywhere in sight for me. We are upon friendly terms; there is no bar to ordinary social intercourse, and yet I might be her brother-in-law—or perhaps her uncle!

But I have the encouragement of knowing that her aunt likes me, and I am sure the latter will favour my purpose, when it becomes plain, for she laments unceasingly her niece's determination to pursue her musical studies in Germany, never imagining the daring ambition which possesses me.

The trouble is that I don't see any possible way of making it plain, though I am so much

at home at The Briars that occasionally her aunt has left the room and I have been alone with her for a brief time. On such occasions my heart thumps so violently that it is difficult to speak, and I draw long breaths as if suffocating; indeed, I fear that I gulp, but I cannot help it, and I have even experienced a sense of physical relief on Miss Humphrey's return to the room. The truth is, I suspect, that I am a stick.

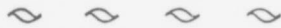
I understood that the male lover ordinarily finds it impossible to conceal his devotion: I find it impossible to divulge mine. The more hopelessly engulfed I become, the more guarded and formal is my manner: while I am yearning to humbly drop on my knees and kiss the hem of her skirt, I hold myself stiffly erect and talk banalities in the most precise and matter-of-fact tone, inwardly thanking my stars when I have passed the danger point that she is not gazing down upon me in horrified amazement or sudden laughter.

It seems, after all, that one doesn't really get much enlightenment from fiction or from second-hand experience of life. I shudder at the thought

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of once weighing the possibility of happiness being attained through some cataclysmal upheaval of nature as that described in "Predestined," and the curious phenomenon observed by Miss Skiffley at her first meeting with Mr. Biggles has no counterpart in my case, for the person of the second part is as obviously calm as I appear to be when we meet, and by no possibility can I imagine her heart fluttering like a bird on the nest with two hands clapped over it.



After a lapse of five days, Teeterley has reappeared, a phantom, a shadow, of his former self. He dragged himself into the room, sank into a chair in a long limp heap, and gazed at me with lustreless, sunken eyes. Never have I looked upon a man whose face and figure typified such absolute exhaustion, and I grasped his hand with a sudden rush of sympathy: he was no longer a possible rival; he had been wiped off the slate. I think I muttered consolingly that the darkest hour was the hour before the dawn, or that there were still good fish in the sea; but whatever it was, he felt my sympathy, his eyes moistened,

and he still gazed at me in dumb, sorrowful gratitude. At length he spoke, and the words seemed to come from afar, so wan and tired were they.

"Gad, old man," said he, "I wish you hadn't put me up to it!"

"Put you—up to it!" I cried. "*What?*"

"That damned story," he replied, closing his eyes faintly.

Yes, that was the trouble: his literary labours had exhausted him, and when I asked if he had brought the story with him he replied in the affirmative, but still made no move to produce it. He merely closed his eyes and rested his head wearily on the back of the chair, until I asked him where the manuscript was, then he half raised himself and replied with some warmth that it was in his head, of course; I was welcome to it if I could get it out: he couldn't.

He had not written a line, it appears: there were two insuperable difficulties. First, he could only see the story when his eyes were closed; second, he could not write a word with them open. He has slaved, he says, as no author has ever slaved before, but to no purpose; there is some missing link between his brain and fingers,

but it has taken five days for him to be convinced of this. He had always supposed that when an author had a story, all he had to do was to sit down and write it; now he knows there must be some intermediate process, but he has no desire to learn what it is. He does not blame me; he knows I meant well; all the same he wishes I hadn't put him up to it.

I have tried to cheer him in spite of this reiteration, as I am sure he is not quite responsible; I even spoke words of wisdom into his ear as follows:

Woman loves us, not for what we do, but for what we are.

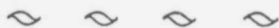
I don't know how this came into my mind; it startled me; it startled Teeterley. He made me repeat it twice, until he could say the words after me; he says he will keep on saying it for a few days until the interpretation comes to him, for it sounds as if there would be comfort in it for a fellow, could he realise what it meant. He asked me pathetically if I were sure it was true, and I told him there could be no doubt of that whatever, for I had made it up myself.

Since he left, I am a little bothered about the

latter statement, and I begin to fear that the words have merely lain dormant in my brain: they may belong to Marcus Aurelius—or to Mark Twain.

I am getting restless. This is very pleasant, but I wish something would happen. I can imagine that if Miss Olivia fell overboard and I rescued her, matters might crystallise; or that if we were wrecked and cast ashore on some tropical desert island where the stereotyped conventionalities do not prevail, things might be different, but under present conditions I don't see my way clear. My divinity is hedged about by some impalpable circle which I dare not enter. I suppose lovers must begin in some way—but how? I have a vague idea that much may be expressed by a lingering clasp of the hand, but I am aghast at the thought—besides, I fancy there is usually some preliminary exchange of sentiment through the windows of the soul, yet I am in the dark as to the precise point where this begins, or whether it is absolutely essential. As for her eyes, they are soft and dark and beautiful, but utterly frank and unconscious, yet with unplumbed depths that

I dare not attempt to fathom; and mine, I am sure, are as expressionless as if they were made of china or glass.



Last evening I ventured to ask Miss Olivia to play the "March of the Davidsbündler." We were alone, and as I sat near the piano listening to the music that made my pulses leap, I could see in the glow of the shaded lamp that her eyes were alight with the joy of the artist, her figure swaying rhythmically in unconscious exaltation, and I suddenly realised that she was so completely absorbed that I was forgotten. Perhaps I was smitten with an unreasoning pang of jealousy, perhaps I was intoxicated by this unre-served study of her face with its veil of reserve lifted, perhaps the martial thrill of the music fired me with hope and resolution, but as she neared the climax, I leaned forward impulsively and——

"Well, I do declare, Olivia," cried her aunt, bustling into the room, "if you're not playing that old crash-bang march without any tune to it, for Mr. Merrivale. Now do play something that people can understand and enjoy. Did you

ever hear 'The Storm,' Mr. Merrivale? . . .
No, well I think it's just grand, a little old-fashioned, I know, but you'll like it, for you like 'Ever of Thee,' and if you sit over here I'll explain it as she plays. Now, Olivia, not one word—go ahead. I'll whisper, Mr. Merrivale, for Olivia's fussy about anyone talking out loud when she's playing, but I think she ought to be glad of a little chatter, instead of having people sit around like mummies. There now—hear that little tinkly tune?—that's a shepherd playing on his pipe as he follows the sheep down the mountain side in the sunshine. Now he breaks off short . . . the sun goes behind a cloud, (that's the cloud) and he's gazing up into the sky. There, he's turned up his coat collar and put the pipe in his pocket! Did you notice that low growl in the bass? That's the first mutter of thunder, and here's another louder growl! . . . and those screechly octaves in the treble mean lightning. And there are the first drops of rain, those spattering staccato notes, and now we're into it! Doesn't it come up fast, and isn't that thunder deafening? Oh!—there's the part that makes me jump, when the flash and crash come

together . . . and now the worst of it is over. It begins to taper off, like everything else, and the shepherd boy turns down his collar and begins to pipe again as if nothing had happened. He's getting farther and farther down the valley—can't you just see him? . . . and now it's going to end up as soft as a snowflake! . . . There, Olivia, I knew Mr. Merrivale would like it—and he does!"

But afterward, when we listened to the Strauss waltz I asked for, Miss Humphrey had not a word to say, though I noticed that one foot moved gently to the rhythm, and she sat with her face shadowed; and once she brushed her handkerchief lightly across her eyes. Yes, she is forty, rather stout, and of a practical turn of mind, but her heart responds to Strauss.

And Miss Olivia sits at the piano, demurely obedient, playing what is asked for, but I fancy that the tips of her fingers flit over the keys laughingly at times, and again that the rhythmic accents are like the throbbing of her heart. One swift smiling glance of innocent understanding passed between us when she turned after playing the innocuous composition which her aunt ad-

mires, and I thought she was going to challenge my statement that I liked it, but she turned to the piano again without speaking.



This morning we met as I was returning from the post-office, and I walked back with her.

“And so you really like ‘The Storm’?” said she, her eyes sparkling with hidden laughter.

She looked straight along the road as if she dared not meet my eyes, a most bewitching smile suggested in the curve of her mouth. I hesitated; I was lost.

“Miss Olivia,” I burst forth impetuously, “I—I like anything *you* play.”

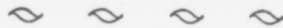
For one instant she flashed upon me a fleeting, startled glance, drew in her breath with a half-uttered, “Oh-h!”—then—we had just reached the entrance to The Briars—she turned quickly in at the gate, saying: “Good-morning, Mr. Merrivale,” in her usual tone, but with a perceptible flush of colour in her cheeks.

It was a bold thing to say; the boldest thing I ever said. Pray Heaven I have not scuttled the ship!

I hesitated this evening about going over to The Briars, on account of this remark to Miss Olivia about her playing, but I concluded it was better to know the worst than to remain in suspense. I don't think she is offended, otherwise there would be a chill in her manner, but I cannot detect the slightest change. She sat at a table in a corner of the room copying music, and begged me to excuse her going on with her work. Her aunt and I sat by the fire and talked, but I took occasion to glance over to the table in the corner as opportunity offered. It was when Miss Humphrey was safely launched in a lengthy anecdote, that I suddenly raised my eyes and saw Miss Olivia with her pen poised in one hand and her chin resting on the other, regarding us with the most puzzled, amused, almost mischievous expression. The next moment she was at work demure and absorbed; so much so, indeed, that had not her face become flushed I might have thought myself mistaken. I cannot help vain surmises as to what she was thinking.

Mrs. Biggles says she read in the paper that Mr. Silas B. Sheldrake, the wealthy plumbing

contractor, has reached the dignity of being indicted for bribery in connection with the city hall contract. Did I know who he was? Well, he was the smart young feller with twice as good a wage as Biggles who escorted her to that memorable picnic at home when she had a ride in a merry-go-round. Just to think that she might have been Mrs. Silas Sheldrake, if Biggles hadn't happened to make her acquaintance that day, for many a girl takes the wrong man if the right one holds off too long in letting her know she's all the world to him!



Mrs. Biggles mentioned casually this morning that Miss Olivia intended driving up to the village in the afternoon to do some shopping for her aunt; later she discovered that the tea-caddy was empty and that she needed some thread, and as it was such a fine day for a walk she'd run up to the village herself; also, if I should happen to go for a walk before she got back I was to be sure to lock the door. Had I saw those yeller and scarlet maple trees on the hillside about two miles up the road? If not, I really oughter before the

leaves dropped; of course she knowed I hadn't any great fancy for walking alone, but the chances was that someone driving back from the village would give me a lift, and them trees was a sight to behold.

I had not thought of going for a walk, but I began to feel restless in the afternoon, and finally I locked the house and started in the direction of the trees Mrs. Biggles had described. The clear frosty air and brilliant sunshine were invigorating, and my spirits rose at the thought that every step was bringing me nearer to a sight of a certain person who was probably driving homeward in a top buggy drawn by a chestnut mare. And as a matter of fact, long before I was half way to the hillside I espied the hood of a top buggy appearing on the horizon, like the topsail of the distant vessel in the geography of our youth; and even as I looked, I made out a rufus shade in front of it which rapidly developed into a quadruped that resembled Miss Humphrey's chestnut mare, but for the rapidity with which it approached. Another minute and my doubts were dispelled, for I could see her elephantine hoofs and hear their ominous clump

on the frozen ground. She neither trotted, galloped nor ran, but gathered her hoofs together in a group that seemed to disperse with centrifugal force and result in a series of kangaroo leaps, causing the buggy to sway and rock alarmingly. There was no one visible inside, but as it drew nearer I could see a pair of hands clinging to the dashboard, and hear a series of shrieks arising behind it. Even in the excitement of the moment I remember thinking that this was at odds with my conception of Miss Olivia, who might have been expected to sit erect with her lips compressed to the end. But this was merely a fleeting impression, as I braced myself and grabbed Betty's bridle at the end of one leap and before the next materialised. This sounds quite commonplace, but I was horribly excited, and when the vehicle came to an abrupt stop and another shriek arose, I rushed toward it with my arms extended, and a—a reassuring remark—on my lips.

I am not sure that I said it aloud, but that was my impression, though I now have a hope that it was under my breath, and—and that no one quite took in my meaning. And yet at the

present moment the possibility that my remark may have been audible causes me to redden to the tips of my toes with apprehension.

But whether it was heard or not, my arms were outstretched, and I was prepared to have someone fall into them—and to—to hold her for one breathless moment; but I was not prepared for the tall feminine figure which stood up uncertainly, and which by no stretch of imagination could belong to anyone but Mrs. Biggles!

I don't know, but I think I staggered backward; anyway, Mrs. Biggles jumped down without precipitation, and also without my help; she was breathing hard, but appeared comparatively calm, it struck me, considering the circumstances.

“Ow-h, Mr. Merry-well!” she cried, one side of her mouth drooping to a piteous slant. “If it only—wasn't *me!*”

I was too dazed for further speech; I stared vacantly.

“Ow-h, Miss—*Hollie!*” she wailed, tilting her head backward and clasping her hands tragically, her voice high-pitched and hysterical.

I was galvanised to sudden action. “Where

—*is* she?” I demanded frantically. “Was she—thrown out?”

No, she hadn't never been in after Betty started. She had just picked Mrs. Biggles up on the street on the way home, and then gone into Fogarty's tinshop, and no sooner had she got inside the door than the chestnut mare clapped her tail over the reins, and when Mrs. Biggles tried to pull them away from her she began to go up and down like a rocking horse, and the harder the driver pulled the faster they moved, and before she thought of screeching for help Fogarty's tinshop and the village had vanished.

I turned the equipage, and asked Mrs. Biggles if she proposed to return at once for Miss Olivia.

She shivered, looked faint, partly closed her eyes, then stated not if Miss Hollie had to walk to Chiny would she get behind that awful beast.

A sudden thought struck me; I climbed into the buggy.

It is astonishing how completely a woman fails to have presence of mind when a trivial

emergency arises. Mrs. Biggles knew perfectly well that Betty had a habit of clamping the reins with her tail, and she also knew in her normal state of mind that the mare would release them of her own accord if the driver refrained from pulling, yet at the moment she forgot!—even after being warned to remember by Miss Olivia before she went into Fogarty's.

It is no wonder, then, that Miss Olivia stood still in amazement when she saw me approaching, for she knew nothing more than that Mrs. Biggles, after having been left in charge, had immediately driven away. And when I explained how the latter's departure had been quite involuntary, she flushed indignantly and cried: "The dreadful—woman!" her voice dropping to a breathless gasp on the last word. But when I went on to describe how I had accidentally met the runaways, she suddenly laughed.

"I know!" she cried, her eyes sparkling; "you thought it was Aunt Anne!"

I drew a very long breath and looked directly at her. "No," I said solemnly, my voice trembling, "I thought it was *you*." I meant my tone to be tender; I think it was.

"Oh!" said Miss Olivia, looking demure and embarrassed. "And—and it wasn't."

Then we both laughed quite suddenly, and once more became grave, and had nothing to say, because, I fancy, we were both thinking hard about Mrs. Biggles.

And that is all: all there is to chronicle in words, I mean. The rest of our conversation was trivial, perhaps, but there were a great many gaps, and when these occurred strange inexplicable sensations thrilled me.



The rain came down to-day in a steady relentless pour, and it is no wonder that the blues are about. I went out to the barn to look up Joseph, finding that he had finished his usual chores and was sitting on a box threading twine into a darning needle, the old sleigh robe over his knees. He looked dejected, admitted that he was beginning to work on the sleeping-bag, but declared that he was not preparing to start for the Klondike; that is, not unless he was drove to it. He did not enter into particulars this time, which is perhaps an indication of the up-

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lifting power of love, but hinted darkly that a feller with his affection of the heart might be standing fair and square on his heels one minute, and find himself topsy-turvy on his head the next. The worst of it was that once you took holt you couldn't let go; you might wriggle and dance, but you got to take what's goin'. Perhaps I wouldn't mind mentionin' to Mrs. Biggles, off-hand like, that Joe was workin' on his bag; it might help to straighten things out a bit, and bring a certain party to some sort of reason, particularly if it was mentioned that he didn't want no one to know what he was doing. Say, Mr. Merry-well, do you happen to know whether pine-apples grows on trees like cocoanuts, or on vines like punkins?

Really, I feared for poor Joseph's sanity, for in addition to the irrelevance of the question, he uttered an exclamation of surprise and relief when I enlightened him upon the primary facts of pineapple culture, declaring that it let him out.

I mentioned his occupation casually to Mrs. Biggles, who ejaculated, "Tut!"—then to my amazement she asked if I 'appened to know

whether pineapples grows on trees or like punkins? Her, also, I enlightened, in some bewilderment over the sudden popular interest in the growth of tropical fruits, then I begged for an explanation. This is it:

Jenny and Joe 'ad it 'ot and 'eavy last night over the problem, and in the end Joe declared he would eat his 'at and go to the Klondike if they grew on trees,—and it was to be left to me!

And Jenny retorted that it would be a good riddance, and if they grewed like punkins he could *go* to the Klondike, and, for all she cared, marry a squaw!

Jupiter!

Mrs. Biggles is perhaps too much absorbed in her own affairs to properly sympathise with these young people in their sorrows, for her mind is largely taken up in vain surmises over the doings of the recreant Biggles. Still he travels, and week by week her curiosity is intensified, and her devotion justified, by the arrival of a letter beginning "dere Mriar," and ending "yures truely," with an enclosure of ten dollars. And each letter is an exact duplicate of the first, but with a different postmark. And Biggles is hon-

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est and faithful and true, she declares with emotion; and already she has put by enough money for a cow, a cherished ambition of years; but what is a cow without Biggles?—nothing but sackcloth and ashes and Dead Sea fruit. She wants Biggles, and if she can't have him, never will she console herself with a cow, and though she has worked through the alphabet in naming all the possible occupations of a peripatetic nature, she cannot fit one of 'em to Biggles.

Sometimes I fancy her loss is my gain, and that the tender solicitude for my material comfort might be less unstinted if she had her husband at home to care for; certainly, she spares no pains in ministering to my wants, though I am conscious, when I stand off and impartially survey my characteristics, that I am given to a particularity which may be distressing in some ways.

There is my breakfast egg, for example. There are so many things to be considered in the cooking before one may hope to attain that scientific attention to detail which alone can ensure perfection; yet Mrs. Biggles, while not infallible, has learned to become reasonably expert in its

preparation. She is careful now not to let the water boil, to see that the fire is not too hot nor yet too dull, to allow more time for an egg above the average size and less for a small one, to see that the saucepan is neither hot nor cold when the water is poured into it, and to gently warm the egg, if it is chilled, before the cooking proper. And yet, how little avail all these things if one has not the delicate inward instinct that prompts its removal from the water at the psychological moment!

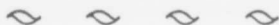
But there are times when her anxiety to please me is distinctly annoying, for she has formed the habit of awaiting the breaking of the egg-shell in breathless suspense, scanning my countenance penetratingly at the critical moment when its contents are disclosed. It is an aggravating function, but I am helpless; in spite of my protests, persuasive requests, strategical devices, she never misses the operation, and I have succeeded only twice in performing it in seeming privacy by eating all the toast and sending her for more. But the second time, even when I chuckled over my own ingenuity, I caught the gleam of her eye at the crack in the kitchen door!

At choir practice last evening Teeterley conducted with dignity, for the first time. Never once did he smile or gesticulate or make a remark with his head on one side; he held himself erect, his lips compressed, his eyes deep-set and fixed, stern determination graven on his face. At least that was the impression I got, though some of the younger and frivolous members of the choir giggled, and hinted that he was suffering from a stiff neck or a worse affliction. I am inclined to the belief that sorrow and disappointment will improve him immensely, and I believe if he knew how much more becoming is this attitude of quiet dignity, he would be content to suffer. He drew me aside after the service today and solemnly gave the choir into my charge, as he is going away for a time. He explains that his absence may be brief, or it may be prolonged; he even implies that under certain circumstances he may never return, but he wishes me to regard this as confidential. He also intimates that he would come once more to see me, but for the inward conviction that he would be overcome by an irresistible impulse to tell me everything, which might awaken painful mem-

ories of the past that he sees I would fain leave buried. But before we part, he wishes me to know what a solace and encouragement those words of wisdom have been to him since he interpreted them. Of course he had known from the first that I was a heavy gun mentally, but he hadn't supposed anything short of a prophet could swallow and fire a charge like that on the spur of the moment. He would not listen to my suspicion that the saying was not original; he believed in being modest, but that was going too far. He had got the coin hot from the mint, and it rang true every time, and if I could get one or two off every day he believed I might be able to write one of those deuced clever novels constructed like a corduroy road, that you could only read slowly, one line at a time. As for this utterance, it reminded him of a striking motto he had once learned, so pregnant of wisdom that you could shuffle the words like a pack of cards and get a pleasing combination every time. He had done that with mine, but he liked it best as the words had fallen from my lips:

Woman loves us, not for what we are, but for what we are not.

Yes, he believed on the whole that it was the best and most satisfying form, and he honestly believed not many fellows could show a cleaner sheet on the negative side than he could; and though he had always liked the society of the opposite sex and enjoyed a little harmless flirtation at times, even that was a thing of the past. He had determined to raise himself to a higher plane of negative attainment; and in carrying out this purpose he would remember my sympathy and counsel with gratitude—in spite of the story!



Nothing has happened since our drive with Betty; that is, nothing which could be stated explicitly in words, yet I am conscious of some inward transformation in our relations. Of course the topics we discuss are those which are rather impersonal: books, art, music, travel; but there is an infinitude of subtle impressions, reflecting inner thoughts and feelings, to be treasured from these ostensibly commonplace conversations. In fact, an inexperienced person would naturally conclude that we have arrived at a stage when it might be considered permissi-

ble for me to say something further to indicate the nature of my feeling for her, but it was this presumption which led me to the verge of destruction to-day. It is the dream of her life to attend the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, and perhaps it was the interest and enthusiasm which shone in her eyes when I talked of my own experiences there, that inspired the remark I ventured to make.

It was not, I think, too bold; it was not an empty compliment; anyway, I said it with reckless unpremeditation, with heartfelt earnestness.

And now I wish I hadn't said it!

Or, seeing that I did, I wish I hadn't repudiated meaning anything whatever by the statement.

Yet, sometimes, I am almost rash enough to wish I had been bold enough to declare that I meant infinitely more.

But in the latter case, I might have wrecked the vessel upon a reef in the forlorn attempt to reach the lagoon beyond. No, I think I did well to sheer off: nothing is lost, after all, save honour.

Her response was immediate; I had no oppor-

tunity to weigh my course. It was the second time, she declared angrily, that I had said something utterly inane and meaningless, and it was so humiliating to—to have anyone talk like that. Did *all* men think it desirable to say these silly things, and did they think a woman could endure to be treated like a spoiled child—and did I know they were exactly the sort of things that Mr. Teeterley said to everyone?—and they were so unspeakably odious! And what, for example, could I mean by such a remark?

Nothing whatever, I declared shamefacedly.

Perhaps it was the implication of my reminding her of Teeterley which caused me to so frantically disclaim intention.

Teeterley!—Great Cæsar!

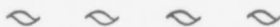
I hope that sometime Teeterley will experience the bitterness of being compared to Merri-vale.

But, after all, it was because my remark suggested him that she was annoyed; therefore the comparison must be favourable to me. I wish he knew.

We are friends; otherwise, she couldn't have explained to me so frankly how she felt. And

now, always and forever, I am to refrain from the appearance of Teeterley-isms.

I don't wonder that people do wrong: it is heavenly to be forgiven! I could have grovelled when she began to look pitying, and I had an insane desire to seize her dear little hand and kiss it. I know who would have done so with infinite presumption: that restrained me. But it looked so kind, so benignant, so inviting!

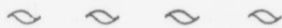


Teeterley's behaviour is extraordinary, but his absence is welcome to me at present, for if he were here I should feel nervous, and perhaps yield unwisely to my natural inclination to hurry matters; and it behoves me to hasten slowly, to take no risks. He is not here, and I know not why, unless his ignorance of the state of my feelings may lead him to suppose it is wiser for him, also, to hasten slowly. He is in love, unmistakably in love, but his conduct lately suggests to me a possibility that I may be mistaken as to the object of his regard. But there can be no mistake, for it is quite plain that Mrs. Biggles is convinced that he aspires to Miss Olivia, for she

loses no opportunity of putting me on my guard; so I can only conclude that he fancies he can make himself invincible by cultivating his superficial graces.

Teeterley cannot write a story, but his pen flows freely in the letters he writes to me, and he seems content in his new environment. He has become a devout, a reverent, pupil in the School of Aesthetic Expression from which Miss Biggles graduated, and a world of intellectual development is opening before him, though just at present he is spending most of his time in learning to breathe, and to rise from and subside into a seat. There is much that he would like to tell me, were he not debarred from doing so by my attitude toward a certain subject; he sympathises with me in this, but he has lately begun to hope, in spite of any unfortunate experience I may have had in my youth, that I am not yet too old to yield to the softening influence of the gentler sex. He did not say so directly, but he hinted that he believed there were lots of women good enough for me, if I would come out of my shell and put myself in the way of meeting them.

I am annoyed at the tone of this letter. I shall not answer it.



How sweet are the ties of friendship: how blessed the assurance of a perfect understanding!

Since my transgression and its forgiveness, the invisible barrier between us has vanished. We can talk without restraint, express opinions without hesitancy, enjoy each other's society like good comrades. If I had realised before how delightful it is just to be friends, I would not have accepted the situation with such misgiving. It is infinitely easier than trying to be anything closer; it is like floating down stream after pulling hard against the current. We have discovered many likes, dislikes, and tastes in common; that must be what makes it so easy; then, too, neither of us ever before expressed ourselves so freely to any other friend. Indeed, neither of us ever had a *real* friend before!

We are going to write to each other when she goes to Germany—if I can spare the time from planting potatoes and hoeing corn! No one but ourselves knows how desperately funny that is.

Originally she expected to leave for Germany

in November, but I have urged the chance of a stormy crossing at that season, and her departure has been postponed until midwinter, possibly until spring, for the climate of Leipsic is detestable in winter; later, if necessary, I hope to be able to show that as spring is almost summer, it would be well to wait for the Wagner festival and go direct to Bayreuth. Of course I shall not hint that I may go also.

In the meantime we are both enjoying this delightful September weather to the utmost, and we go for long walks together every day; though, strange to say, neither of us ever cared for walking as a recreation before. But then there never was, in our memory, such ideal hazy sunshine, such an exhilarating frosty tang in the clear air, such restful benignant rainfalls to lend additional charm and variety to the perfection of the season. Walking, as a means of locomotion, appears to be novel to the natives we happen to meet, for they regard us with undisguised interest, and I have occasionally noticed a peculiar grin light up their faces. We have not spoken of this phenomenon, but I think Miss Olivia has observed it also, for sometimes she

flushes and looks exasperated without other apparent cause.

Mrs. Biggles is inflated with good spirits; she is all smiles, and she moves about with the light and airy exuberance of one who treads on soap bubbles, her fount of eloquence flowing unabated.

It do jest put her in such spirits that she feels like dancin'! What do? Why, to think of the 'eavingly frame of mind she and Biggles was in when they was young. Indeed, if she had to do it all over again, she believed she'd set out to make it twict as long, for of course if you ain't merried, the kitchen stove can't smoke or the porridge get burned or the baby take whoopin' cough and measles, and it's them sort of things that takes the friskiness out of young people. Besides, in merriage, for the woman, it's syllabub before, and 'am sangwidges and cold tea after, if he's that kind of man, and anyway she'd better make sure of the syllabub.

It's scandalious!—perfectly *scandalious!*—the way people do talk. About what? Why, about things they don't know. Actually, if they 'aven't all got it that there's to be a merriage round these parts next month. And she jest up and told

them that mentioned it that there wasn't a word of truth in the story, and that there's others would know first when there was. Of course, (confidingly) she didn't never say such a thing, but she thinks to herself it ain't got that far yet.

I was at breakfast, and at these words I stirred my coffee and obviously reflected. "Mrs. Biggles," I said gravely, at length, "I shall tell you exactly how a certain matter stands. I think, under the circumstances, you should know, and I am sure I can rely upon your discretion." Mrs. Biggles grabbed the side hems of her apron and held tight, regarding me with eyes dilated with expectancy. "In the first place," I resumed solemnly, "you are on the wrong tack; there is nothing—ah—of a tender nature between the persons—absolutely nothing, I assure you."

"Ow-h Lor'!" gasped Mrs. Biggles in shrill astonishment, but she gripped her apron still more firmly and stared at me with unusual steadfastness.

"In fact," I went on, returning her gaze with engaging frankness, "it is simply a case of Platonic friendship."

A look of deep concern overspread her countenance; her hands dropped limply. "A—*which?*" she inquired, in a tone of alarm.

"A Pla-ton-ic friendship," I repeated, with slow emphasis.

"Ow-h Lor'!" she ejaculated again, helplessly. "What's that?"

"Nothing but a—a friendship between—people," I assured her—"companionship, social intercourse, without anything of a—a non-sensical nature to create embarrassment."

Mrs. Biggles's face lit up with smiling relief. "My!—ain't that nice," she commented cheerily—"a sort of play-brother-and-sister friendship—and jest as easy and entertainin', when you know how, as walkin' sawlogs in the water?"

"Ye-es," I agreed.

"Two can do it," went on Mrs. Biggles approvingly. "I've saw 'em many a time, but the minute one of 'em takes a fancy to *teeter*—Law, Mr. Merry-well, ain't your egg right?"

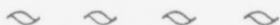
I had started suddenly, staring at her in expectant wrath. "Go on," I said fiercely.

"The minute one of 'em begins to teeter the

log," she continued complacently, "you know what 'appens?"

"What?" I asked meekly.

"They *both* fall in!" cried Mrs. Biggles joyfully.



Teeterley is not offended because I answer his letters only by perfunctory notes; he writes voluminously, and continues to imply much that he says he must not mention, on account of my sensitiveness on a certain subject. He hopes, however, that when we meet again I will unbosom myself to him, so that we can commune together over our experiences without restraint, and he urges me to forget the past and look hopefully toward the future, for he believes that if I take the advice he gave me I may have years of calm domestic comfort before me yet. He does not spend much space over my affairs, however, so engrossed is he with his own, for which I am truly grateful. He has got beyond the preliminary stage of breathing, rising and subsiding, and he finds how true it is that the reflex sensory nerves of physical action stimulate the co-ordinated intellectual activities. For ex-

ample, he is now able to grasp the meaning of many passages in "The Convent Garden" which were quite beyond him previous to attaining skill in these simple exercises, and, enlightened by a lecture on the subject of Cryptic Conclusions of Artistic Masterpieces, he now sees that no other ending to that remarkable production was æsthetically possible. He wishes I could have heard this eye-opening discourse, the beautiful central thought of which was, that the deepest problems of humanity must be left to the final judgment of each individual soul; strikingly illustrated by a ballot taken among the students, which resulted in seven affirming that Sister Hildegarde unlocked the gate and went to her lover, and four asserting that she went back to her cell; while one advanced the theory that she did neither, but threw the key over the garden wall and remained screened behind the laburnum tree to await further developments.

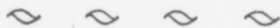
It is not two weeks since Teeterley began to attend the School of Aesthetic Culture, yet his attitude is becoming distinctly patronising and explanatory; he implies that there is much that I have had no opportunity of learning, but he will

be willing to enlighten me at any time; and anything he can't answer himself, he will drop into the question box.

The close of his last letter puzzles me; he encloses a few lines of rhyme, and begs me to let him know at once if I can guess who is the author. Here they are:

“ My love gave unto me a rose from out her hair,
A yellow rose, of fragrance rare;
And now while o'er my heart its withered leaves
I wear,
She dwells within, more fragrant still, and
fair.”

In a postscript he asks me to reply by telegram at his expense. I shall ignore the request: I don't care who wrote these absurd lines.



If I had answered Teeterley's last without delay, he might not have descended upon me so unexpectedly, but I do not regret this visit. He ran down especially to see me, he said, because he was so eager to know if I had guessed the

author. I hadn't, and I had some difficulty in concealing the fact that I didn't care, and hadn't thought about the matter, but he scarcely listened in his impetuous haste to confess that he invented the lines all by himself, except for the mechanical help of a rhyming dictionary. Professor Homer Jones, Ph. D., had pronounced it a poetical thought, beautifully expressed, but he would like my candid opinion—yes, and my candid criticism, if I saw any flaw in it. The latter statement he submitted in a challenging manner, as if he defied me to point out a flaw in the crystal, twisting his moustache and beaming upon me expectantly. I think I have heard that authors, when they ask for criticism, expect praise, so I soothed him until his face assumed an expression of blissful idiocy.

"Then," he murmured, as if to himself, "I shall send it to her."

"To—*her!*" I echoed stupidly.

"She gave me the rose," he breathed softly, his eyes upturned; "it is all true."

"Never!" I cried indignantly. "It's—it's impossible!"

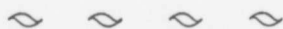
Still smiling gently as if he saw angels hover-

ing overhead, he pressed his hand to his waist-coat, sighing happily. "I wear it here," said he—"the rose my love, my dear Almira, gave to me!"

I have been a stupid muff: I think that expresses it, for I can see quite plainly that I would have known how matters stood long ago, if I had allowed Teeterley to unburden himself earlier. As for Mrs. Biggles, who seems to have been aware of his passion, she disclaims ever having implied that she supposed him to be particularly interested in any other young lydy, and she has a distinct recollection of telling me the incident of the rose the day after the concert. She says love works wonders, but she hadn't dreamed that it could work poetry of the 'eart into the 'ead of a young man like Mr. Teeterley. Of course he had confided in her, and she had told him plump and plain that Almiry had been inclined against love and merriage and the cares of a fambly from the time she was able to creep, but that no power on yearth could predict what might or might not 'appen if once the secret spring of Almiry's 'eart was touched, if she had one. Her

own preference in the matter of a possible son-in-law is entirely negative; let him be what he will, provided he is not an aged philosopher with flowing white side-whiskers attached to a bald 'ead like a punkin.

There is one point upon which I can see that her usual penetrating philosophy is at fault: she remarked some time ago, that the men who have least sense to begin with usually lose a smaller proportion when they are in love than those who have more. I cannot, of course mention this to her, but I notice that Teeterley, who had very little to begin with, has absolutely none left; he is reduced to unalloyed idiocy. I cannot imagine a man of normal intelligence acting in such a silly and unbecoming manner; indeed, I see nothing in the condition of being in love, as it is termed, to prevent anyone being at least outwardly calm and dignified. Of course, in expressing this thought I am speaking in the abstract, and do not wish to draw any invidious comparison.



There is no doubt that, as Mrs. Biggles says, people talk. Of course the matter has not been

mentioned between Miss Olivia and me, but I gather from certain signs that she is aware of the gossip. There is just the shadow of constraint in our intercourse at present, and I am conscious of a charming hesitancy in her manner, which has latterly been so frank and direct. When we shake hands I notice that her clasp is less firm, almost reluctant; when our eyes meet, her glance sometimes wavers; in our conversation I feel rather than know that there are reservations instead of her usual directness of expression. And the astonishing result is that *I* am growing bolder! I am losing my self-consciousness, and incline, I fear, almost to presumption. I dare to hold her hand just a trifle longer than the form of salutation demands; I incline to gaze somewhat searchingly into her eyes when occasion arises, and if in mine there is a trace of the admiration I feel, I do not try to altogether repress it, justifying myself by the thought that one may quite properly admire one's friend. I carefully avoid Teeterley-isms; but I welcome the opportunity of discussing stories based upon that tender theme which once aroused my ignorant scorn. It is surprising how much alike our ex-

perience has been in the matter of reading. With her, also, it has been a passion, a solace, a resource; and a year ago, she tells me, she wouldn't have dreamed of leaving the magazines unread, but quite lately she has turned against that kind of light literature. She didn't tell me so at first, but gradually, as we compared notes, it became plain that her distaste arose—marvel of marvels!—from precisely the same cause as mine. We are in such perfect accord, that this coincidence might very well be more likely than unlikely, but it seems marvellous at this time; and when we discover any such similarity of inner experience we regard each other with smiles of wonder and delight.

Short stories, we agree, the kind popular with editors of the present decade, are demoralising in excess: they give a one-sided impression (if any) of life, and are suited, perhaps, to the immature and illogical appreciation or entertainment of youth, but to others who have reached an age of discernment, they create mental exhaustion. We suffer through the tension of hoping that we are about to come on a fresh situation, and the fear that the characters are going to say or

do all the foolish and sentimental things we have too good reason to apprehend they will.

We deplore the decadence the more, because we both remember quite distinctly that there were *really* good stories in the magazines years ago, stories which one could read with enjoyment and satisfaction, though the titles and the names of the authors have slipped our memories, and therefore we have a hope for the future: that in the natural order of things there will be a reversion to decorous sentiment without sentimentality, strength and vigour without brutality, and a cheerful optimism uppermost to help us through the shadows. But—um—*love!*—enough, and more than enough! We, of course, are aware there is such a thing, that people do form attachments, that young persons are often fatuous and silly; but is that just cause, we ask, for flaunting their affection before the reading public? And if authors insist upon treating this theme to the exclusion of more interesting phases of life, how much more seemly would it be to avoid particularity of detail, and leave mutual tender expressions of regard to the imagination of the reader—who cares to imagine such things.

Then there is Jenny—and Joseph! Naturally, we have discussed their infatuation for each other, and here again we agree. They have announced their intention of marrying, poor things, as soon as Joseph has saved enough money to rent a little cottage, buy a cow, a pig, and some hens. Jenny is a capable servant, earning good wages, living in a comfortable house, no worries or responsibilities (except Joseph), and enough leisure to enjoy life in the simple pleasures that fall to her lot: yet here she is, not only willing, but eager, to exchange all this for a bare subsistence, with hard work and no pay, with poverty and worry knocking at the door to begin with, and—Joseph! Yes, there is the marvel: this trim, buxom little maiden wants this ungainly oaf so much that she is willing to give up all the comforts of life to have him.

And to become Mrs. Joseph Gullidge, adds Miss Olivia.

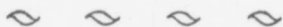
Yes, it is remarkable, and Miss Humphrey says, with a reflective sigh, that it is undoubtedly the height of foolishness, but you can't blame her: it is what we must expect with young people. And we all shake our heads and smile

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pityingly, with benevolent and not scornful toleration, and at the same time our hearts are warmed by the thought of Jenny's and Joseph's folly.



Olivia—I call her so in my thoughts, and why shouldn't I write it so in my journal?—told me something to-day which she never told anyone else—something she thought she never *could* tell anyone. I am a proud and happy friend over this token of her confidence: it is as if she had pinned her favours on my breast—only, of course, that isn't done where people are merely friends. But this came naturally through our conversation on current fiction, and—well, she can't quite explain why, but suddenly she wanted to tell me: perhaps to ease her conscience, she thinks.

I had been telling her (without naming the story which prompted it) of my letter to the editor of *The Ordinary Groove*, and of his reply which said neither Yes nor No, but referred me to the last six numbers of the magazine, where I would find the subject exhaustively treated, and she remarked laughingly that it was odd that she,

also, had once got a letter from him. Years and years ago, (seven, I think) when she was a schoolgirl, she wrote a story—it was awful, unspeakable, she declared, with heightened colour and a little shudder. (Never, I protested vehemently—it couldn't be!) It was, she insisted, mawkish and—oh, so *dreadful!*—but with youthful presumption and enthusiasm she sent it to *The Groove*—and it was accepted!—Just fancy! And then—well, somehow the romantic nonsense evaporated, and she knew too late that it was nothing but vapid sentimentalism. And so she waited and watched for its publication with helpless humility, but year after year passed, and then—she drew a long breath and laughed delightedly.

“And it was published?” I cried. “The name?”

And then, she went on, there was a great fire, and *The Groove's* publishing house went up in smoke, and providentially a number of unpublished manuscripts, one of which never, never could be replaced, were supposed to have been lost, and so she was saved the dreadful mortification of having it appear.

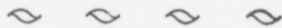
I groaned in disappointment. "What was the name?" I asked hopelessly.

"PREDESTINED."

I don't know how I kept from taking her in my arms, she looked so bewitchingly crestfallen and appealing, and I felt so profoundly affected, so sympathetic, so amazed, so delighted; but I didn't give in, and now that I am at a safe distance, I can see how horribly shocked and indignant she would have been had I yielded.

You-mustn't-do-that-with-a-friend!

I have been reading it once more, with tears in my eyes--it is divine!



I am walking a tight rope, and this journal is a balancing pole: that is about the position. Willy-nilly, I must make a confidante of myself, an accomplice, a fellow conspirator; or succumb under the burden of the secrets I carry. In consequence I am making a clean breast of things; I am writing what at one time I scarcely would have dared to think, what I would **not** have dreamed of recording.

I am a miserable sinner.

There is no doubt of that whatever, but I am getting hardened, for I say it with complacency; I state it as an acknowledged fact, but I resolutely continue in unrighteousness, without blinking the moral obliquity of my course. I cannot risk all by the confession that I long to be something nearer and dearer than even a real friend.

But in spite of my unworthiness the friendship is progressing, and I am amazed to find how delightful such a relation may be, when one resolutely ignores attendant complications which might make one self-conscious and ill-at-ease.

To-day the conversation drifted back to our first meeting. I'm afraid I'm unduly vain-glorious, for she remembered!—not only remembered, but allowed me to infer that in that brief glance she had received an impression that I was not—not unprepossessing. But she didn't know who I was until that memorable day her aunt asked her to send Towhead after my hens, and I fell upon him—and that seems like years ago to both of us.

It is thrilling to recall these first impressions, but there are times when it is difficult not to

betray the hopes and fears which beset me before we became friends. I dare not tell her that "Predestined" was published, or how strangely that charming idyll influenced me, for I could not speak of it calmly, and she would be overwhelmed with quite unnecessary mortification.

We are a month nearer her departure for Europe. She is to stay (perhaps) one, two, or three long years. It is a short period in relation to art, but to love it is a lifetime, and I become agitated when the subject is casually mentioned. I realise in anticipation the poignant anguish of being left desolate, and I fear my expression resembles that of a forlorn dog artistically seated on a waste of snow wow-wowing at the moon.

"I shall miss you—I shall be—lonely," I said tremulously, the other day. There was that in my tone, I am positive, which she who listens might interpret.

She flushed in ready sympathy, her eyes glistening. "I shall miss you, too," she said softly, with the divinest compassion—"and dear Aunt Anne."

"I'd like to go too!" I declared recklessly, "if—if there were artistic possibilities for me."

I added the saving clause just in time, as a startled flash in her eyes transfixed me.

"Oh!" she said, drawing a long breath. "I thought you were devoted to country life?"

"I am," I returned, "under present conditions, but I could live anywhere rather than be left alone. I never had a friend before," I explained pathetically.

"Nor I," said she. "How strange!"

We must have gone over this a score of times, but she doesn't seem to be conscious of that, and I love to do it again.

"I have no relatives," I went on mournfully, "except Uncle John Buffington and his family. He's a respectable old rascal and a pillar of the church, and the rest of them are devoted to good works."

"And you are an orphan," she added commiseratingly—was there a gleam of fun in her eyes?—"Mrs. Biggles said so."

"It is true, for a wonder," I admitted. "And I gathered from a chance remark of hers that you are one also."

She flushed indignantly. "Mrs. Biggles is—is irrepressible!" she cried.

"Exactly," I smiled. "But she means well, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," relentingly, "but I do wish she wouldn't talk nonsense. I hope she hasn't been saying any other foolish things about me?"

"N-no," I reflected; "but she revels in autobiography."

"You don't mean that she told *you* about——" her voice broke into a quivering laugh.

"She did," I chuckled, "beginning with the picnic."

We laughed together, both concluding that Mrs. Biggles is an extraordinary woman, then we fell silent and thought about her.

It is astonishing how one thing leads to another: now that we can talk freely about Mrs. Biggles and her idiosyncrasies, we have recognised the fact that people gossip. We do not put into words what they are supposed to say, but we are drawn insensibly closer by our mutual sympathetic indignation. It is scandalous, positively scandalous, as Mrs. Biggles says: that is the summing up of our opinion. Furthermore, it is shocking that two persons cannot enjoy each other's society without being subjected to public

comment. But of course these poor people could not understand such a friendship as ours, and they are rather to be pitied than blamed; and we are quite determined that nothing in the way of misconstruction shall interfere with the enjoyment of each other's society. And something has happened to seal our pact.

I confessed.

That is, I confessed that in my thoughts she was now and always *Olivia*, and if I might venture to drop the formal prefix, and if she would address me simply as Ralph, I would look upon it as a token—that is, I would feel—in fact, I would——

I never finished. At this point I stammered and stumbled and could give no valid reason for the proposition, and Olivia looked rather surprised and doubtful; the colour ebbed and flowed in her face as she weighed the suggestion, while I awaited her decision breathlessly. Somehow I felt as if my very life hinged on her answer. Was it to be Yes, or No?

It was neither.

With the most adorably distracting hesitancy she admitted that we knew each other as well as

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if we were cousins, or even members of the same family, but we must remember that to outsiders it was different.

But we have just decided not to mind what others think?

Yes, of course; but there was Aunt Anne, for instance; we wouldn't want her to think it odd.

But I would explain to her, I urged enthusiastically. (I didn't see just how.)

Well, we would think it over for a week, and if it seemed wise then—I might call her Olivia!

“And you'll call me Ralph?” I pleaded joyfully. “No woman has called me that since——”

“Since when?” she asked, looking up quickly, as I halted.

“Since I was a mere lad,” I added hastily; “when I used to go to Uncle John Buffington's for the school holidays.”

“Then I would be the first woman to use your name—the very first?”

“The very first,” I solemnly averred. (I didn't count Millicent, of course, for she was only a chit of a girl—a mere infant.)

A sudden silence fell between us: I think it was what might be called a brooding silence. We were sitting before the open fire in the homely, comfortable living-room, and Aunt Anne was busy in the kitchen over a batch of doughnuts, and for half an hour I had been praying that there would be several bushels of them, and thanking a kind Providence that she had been busy enough to neglect coming to light the lamps when the first shadows of the early twilight began to creep into the corners of the room. Olivia sat with her hand shading her eyes from the dull glow of the fire, and I could not see her face in the shadow, but only her graceful figure leaning back in the huge rocking chair, with the filmy white lace at her throat rising and falling quickly with her breathing. Even at such a time, the air heavy with portent, one is constrained, I understand, to notice trivial sights or sounds that harmonise with the situation, and, properly speaking, there should at least have been the frequent enough lonely call of a mourning dove to its mate from the neighbouring pine woods. But there wasn't, as far as I know; indeed, to be exact, the air was filled with

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the most ravishing smell of frying doughnuts, intensified at that very moment by an insistent and rapturous sizzling as Aunt Anne opened the door from the kitchen to the back hall.

I tremble now as I think of it; how our fate hangs by a thread! If her bustling energetic steps had carried her beyond the hall pantry, something which happened would not have happened; the mystic spell would have been broken; I would have been brought back to the proper observance of conventions; Olivia's faith in me would still be unshaken. But Aunt Anne halted in the pantry, and it needed no gift of second sight to divine her movements; to see arising under her practised fingers, with the hugest blue platter as a base, a rugged foothill of crisp light brown objects; a foothill which if placed beside a mountain might well tempt the latter to descend with a roar and gobble it up.

I drew a deep, a very deep breath. I don't know why, for I didn't need it; I spoke in the softest, most mellifluous tone.

"A week is a long, long time to wait," I suggested.

There was a faint little sigh, a gentle move-

ment. "Is it?" said she, in a dreamy half-whisper; and then, wonderingly: "Why?"

"Because I love you," leaped to my lips; leaped, but got no further. I sat up straight and gripped the sides of my chair; in fact, I sat tight, for against reason and volition I was being carried up, up and over the barrier of friendship, with my heart in my mouth, for a cropper.

"*Olivia!*" I ejaculated hoarsely, somewhere about the highest altitude, then I began the descent through space; down, down, I plunged, and:

"*Ralph,*" responded her sweet voice, musical and lingering.

I might have known I couldn't stand it. I opened my eyes in bewilderment, found myself seated in the chair, had a momentary dazed vision of that inviting figure opposite, and——

No, I refuse to write such a thing; I can scarcely believe it possible. I have impressions, fleeting, heavenly impressions, but no recollection of my exact movements. But whatever I did was quite unpremeditated; it was as much of a surprise to me as it could have been to—anyone. Remembrance begins at a point where I

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found myself standing at one side of the big rocking chair, and Olivia at the other, while Towhead, who had been lying on the rug apparently asleep, was hanging on to one trouser leg and growling viciously.

Olivia was passing her hand over her cheek, her eyes flashing upon me. "Oh-h," she shuddered,—“how—how *could* you!”

“What have I done?” I gasped wildly; “I didn’t mean to!”

“I trusted you,” she cried, “and you——”

“I know,” I wailed; “I kissed you—but it was quite in-vol-un-tary.” My utterance was thick but determined. I reached out to grasp her hand, as a token of good faith, I suppose; she backed away.

“You said you were my *friend*, and——”

“I was; I *am*.” I interrupted despairingly.

“And you——” She broke off suddenly, stood in a listening attitude, as if I were forgotten. “Aunt’s coming!” she cried. “You mustn’t wait—I couldn’t stand it.”

“Let me—explain,” I faltered.

The door from the kitchen to the back hall opened; I heard Aunt Anne’s footsteps.

"Go," she commanded, with an impatient little motion of her hands, shooing me toward the hall. "Down, Towhead!"

"I could explain," I protested, moving mechanically to the door.

"Some other time," she said in a low tone, with a shadow of a smile.

Aunt Anne almost collided with me in the doorway, a plate of doughnuts in her hand.

"Just in time, Mr. Merrivale," she cried—"I want you to try my doughnuts. Why, Olivia, you haven't got the lamps lighted!"

"Mr. Merrivale's just going, Auntie, and he hasn't got a minute to spare."

"Just one," insisted Aunt Anne pleadingly, holding out the plate. I looked at them longingly. I could have eaten three or four, but for the want of time and the tragedy of the moment. I glanced at Olivia. She was wearing what might be described as a bright society smile, and her eyes were inflexible.

I grabbed a doughnut, with disjointed thanks, saying that I was in such haste I would just put it in my pocket; then I said good-bye—with a breaking heart.

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I think I remember a vivid story I read long ago, of a clown who night after night delighted the flippant public with his antics, while dull deadly misery gnawed in his bosom instead of the gayety and mirth he simulated. There must be many such tragedies on the stage, and the grotesque whitened face and scarlet lips of the mask that blots out one's real self haunts me now with an added ghastliness. I am not a clown; I am denied the plaudits of the multitude; I cannot hide my dejection behind a painted mask; therefore my sorrow is at once spotted by Mrs. Biggles. Indeed, I would not hide it from her if I could, for I crave sympathy, though in a sort of hopeless devil-may-care way. I crave sympathy, but Mrs. Biggles is cheerful, or assumes a cheerfulness, which shows that she doesn't realise what a vital wound I have received.

"What ails you Mr. Merry-well?"

"Nothing." I shake my head pathetically.

"Whereabouts in your insides do you feel it?" she persists.

"It's all outside." My lip curls ironically in appreciation of my own wit.

"Then it's something like measles, Mr.

Merry-well; they ain't so bad when they once come out. You got chilled, most likely?"

"Ye-es—yes."

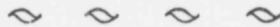
"I know!" cried Mrs. Biggles. "The log rolled!"

"Perhaps so," I admitted.

"And you thought you was drownin', and paddled frantic with your front hands like a puppy dog, and then you stood round and dripped and shivered and said you slipped accidental."

"Well?"

Mrs. Biggles eyed me with keen disapproval. "Mr. Merry-well," said she, with something akin to shy hesitation in her manner, "as I once told Biggles, if there's a time when a woman don't like a man to be too sorry it's jest when he's did something that can't be undid, and she's took up with a various lot of feelin's that she ain't got time to sort out; and I can tell you, Mr. Merry-well, it ain't no help to have a man stand round and say he didn't mean to!"



Time has turned backward in his flight. I am

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at the beginning of things once more—or is it the end?

Don Quixote, when he tilted at windmills, had at least the satisfaction of being knocked out by something he could both see and feel.

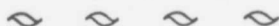
When the unquenchable spirit of Denys rose with the immortal cry, "*Courage, mon camarade; le diable est mort!*" it was in the face of danger, real, imminent, tangible.

I do not resemble either of these heroes in the slightest, but I am in a more difficult situation. With all the courage of determination and despair, I contend against—nothing!—that is, nothing but an impalpable remoteness that is impossible to grapple with, which I am powerless to dispel.

Since the unfortunate incident which marked a period in our friendship, I have not seen Olivia alone, and while I was prepared for some evidence of resentment, of indignation, of coldness, or even hostility in her manner, I was not prepared for polite amiability. It is a hateful word, and I shrink from its application; it reminds me of my only cousins, the Buffingtons, who are devoted to good works; but nothing could be more

utterly foreign to Olivia as I know her. Yet I cannot stop even here: her manner is now not only amiable—but (I must tell the truth as I see it!) *affable*.

I have seen a beautiful little wax lady under a glass shade, always smiling, the perfection of dainty symmetry, a joy to the eye; you could look at her as much as you pleased, but—she never could be touched. That is Olivia!



Sudden enthusiasm over pleats, side-gores, puffed or semi-puffed sleeves, and the best fabric for travelling dresses, awakened me from my lethargy. Yesterday, when I called, Miss Humphrey and Olivia were revelling in these and kindred topics, to the utter exclusion of more serious matters; indeed, though they nodded and smiled and spread crumbs of conversation for me to peck at, their efforts not to appear oblivious of my presence in the face of things of real moment were quite apparent. I came away fired with desperate resolve.

Of course in the presence of Aunt Anne I can say or do nothing, and I have noticed for the

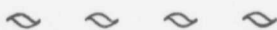
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last few days that she is always present, though it has heretofore been her habit to allow herself to be frequently called away during my visits for the purpose of looking after her household affairs. I also noticed to-day that when in the absorption of the subject, Aunt Anne said she would run up to the sewing room to look for a certain pattern, her niece regarded her with a fixed, momentarily unamiable, stare, and she desisted.

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Shortly afterward I took my leave, but when Olivia gave me her hand I held it longer than usual, with a firm pressure, and looked fixedly into her eyes. I think my expression was stern, tragic; I know my lips were tightly compressed. I don't know what I meant to convey, but I had an instinct that if I looked like that it would mean something to her. Evidently it did; for a moment her neutral smile fled, and a slightly apprehensive look took its place. I can only surmise, but I think she gathered that while I had good reason to resent her conduct, my feeling was grief rather than resentment, and that I am resolved to demand an explanation without delay. This she may have read from my manner,

but I don't think she can have guessed my cognisance of the fact, mentioned casually by thoughtful Mrs. Biggles, that the monthly meeting of the Ladies' Auxiliary takes place in the church to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock. I shall not attend the meeting, but Aunt Anne, who seldom leaves the house except on such important occasions, is President, and at two-thirty at the latest she will pass The Hermitage behind her chestnut mare. Directly afterward I shall wend my way to The Briars, and at two-thirty-three the knocker on the door of the old-fashioned house behind the hedge will rat-tat-tat to announce the arrival of a visitor who is not in the habit of calling at such an unconventional hour.



Jenny came to the door.

Yes, Miss Ollie was in. Would I be so kind as to step in, and she would go upstairs and tell Miss Ollie?

I would; I did; then Jenny reappeared. Miss Ollie wished to know if I would kindly excuse her, as she was engaged—(here Jenny stopped

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and stared at my face in alarm)—for a short time, but if I could wait——

“She is a-getting dressed, Mr. Merry-well,” added Jenny in a stage whisper, smiling encouragingly as she left the room.

Dear Jenny!—it was as if she offered me a nosegay of buttercups; it was all she had, but she knew I would not betray her trust; a sweet assurance that although convention demanded silence, her sympathetic feminine soul was not averse to letting me know unofficially that I was awaiting the termination of a sacred rite. I wonder if angels preen their feathers in early afternoon!

She came, at last, looking so fresh and dainty and bird-like, so politely gracious, yet so unapproachable, that I could scarcely believe, but for an elusive light in her eyes, that explanations were in order. It was her assurance that Aunt Anne would regret not seeing me, and the information that she had just gone to a meeting of the Ladies' Auxiliary, that gave me an opening.

“Yes, I know,” I said complacently; “that’s why I came so early.”

"Oh!" she ejaculated, with an involuntary start.

"I wanted to see you alone," I continued solemnly. "It is time for an explanation."

"Oh, dear!" she cried, her colour mounting higher. "I didn't want one."

It was difficult to look severe, injured. "But you owe it to me," I continued inflexibly.

"I?" she ejaculated. "Good—*gracious!*—what have I done?"

"You have ignored—everything," I went on desperately. "You have treated me like a mere acquaintance—you have taken pains to be amiable."

I think it was the last word that roused her anger. "Mr. Merrivale," she said with dignity, turning slightly pale, "I didn't think anyone would ever apply that term to me. Don't you think I treated you better than you deserved?—don't you see that you couldn't act toward a friend the way you did without breaking the friendship?—and don't you think I overlooked a great deal when I treated you so considerately?"

"It's awful to be treated considerately," I groaned.

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"I thought you were a gentleman," she said bitterly.

"I thought so, too," I rejoined, "until I found I was a man."

I think I scored one; there was a faint relenting smile. "You wouldn't give me a chance to justify myself," I urged.

"Certainly not!—what justification *could* there be?"

"Only one," I answered. She was sitting on the sofa in the corner of the room, and in my agitation I crossed over and stood before her. "You must listen," I said, looking into her wondering, perplexed eyes, "even if it ends all." I sat down and took her hand, which she seemed too amazed to withdraw. "I—love you!" I ejaculated.

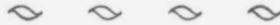
No, I must leave a gap; I cannot write all. Ages after these words I asked her if she could learn to love me, but she shook her head mutely.

"Never?" I implored, a dart of anguish shooting through me.

"*Never,*" said she.

"Why?" I groaned, holding her closer.

She turned her face. "It is too late," she whispered, smiling, "to learn."



How many lives has a lover? I don't know how many I have had since I met Olivia on the road in the spring, but now through successive stages, or through alternate periods of buoyancy and despair, I am reincarnated. I have reached the summit of earthly—no, heavenly bliss. No happiness could ever be so perfect, no calamity could ever again more than ripple the surface of our changeless, fathomless love.

Poor Joseph!—with his limitless limitations, his infinite incapacity for the exalted exaltation which is the lot of finer clay—the soft, unglazed pottery in comparison to delicate fired china—the temper of the ploughshare to that of the Damascus blade!—that is Joseph's fatuous affection in comparison to my love. And Jenny!—buxom little maiden, incomprehensibly devoted to Joseph, but a Tartar, if there ever was one!—doesn't she give him the devil of a time!—doesn't he dance to her piping! Twice lately have I almost caught him in the act of sewing

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on the sleeping-bag—twice has he shamefacedly thrust it aside and vainly pretended to be engaged otherwise, but never a word to me of further domestic infelicity—his course is run, his friskiness departed, his gambolling time is over, green pastures far away have lost their charm, and poor Joseph will placidly graze and chew the reflective cud, with no desire to wander beyond the restraining influence of the silken thread that limits his range.

And poor Mrs. Biggles!—how common, how vulgar, was that ecstatic period in which she steeps her romantic soul, in comparison to this. And yet, dear woman, my happiness is her vicarious delight, and I could not breathe such a thought to her, for it is plain she thinks she knows it all.

Did I tell her of this miracle? No, it was needless. When the sun rose on the first day of my new life—or, rather, when I came down to breakfast an hour or two later—she clasped her hands and uttered a joyous exclamation that brought me earthward; then as she beamed upon me with tears starting from her eyes, she spake tremulously as follows:

"Mr. Merry-well, you don't know what it is to me to see you look like that!"

"Like what?" I cried.

"Like Biggles in the merry-go-round," said she, with emotion. "Your liningsments ain't alike, but it's the very look of a mortal man glory-fied that I've saw before on Biggles."



To return to Joseph, and the power of love: he has ambitions, dreams that never would have awakened in his breast but for the inspiration of his passion. I have chronicled the rise and fall of his vision of the Klondike; yet the shadow of it lingers, I find, less poetic, more ambitious.

To-day he described with kindling eye a magnificent touring automobile, and concluded by asking me what one of them things cost.

"One to ten thousand dollars!" he repeated, with a tense, faraway look in his washy eyes. "I wouldn't buy one for a gosh darn cent under ten thousand—that's the way I'll come back!"

"From where?" I queried.

"Klondike," he answered briefly, his absorbed gaze still on the future. "And do you know

what I'd do first go-off, Mr. Merry-well? I'd whizz up to Miss Humphrey's kitchen door like a sky-rocket, and I'd call out to Jenny to step in for a whirr; and by Jinks, Mr. Merry-well, she'd have to be mighty spry about it; she wouldn't have no time to look snifty and tell me to go and polish the heels of my boots, for I can tell you there's a dozen others within five miles that'd jump at the chance." Joseph gave a snort of provisional defiance.

"Then you'd go and get the other twelve, if Jenny held back?" I asked.

My question pricked the bubble. "No," he replied helplessly; "not if they was twelve thousand. I s'pose I'd leave the blamed thing to puff and thrash, then I'd step inside and ask as meek as Moses what in hell was wrong now."

I could not forbear a chuckle. "Joseph," I asked, "tell me honestly why you go on sewing the sleeping-bag?—do you mean to go to the Klondike?"

Joseph grinned ruefully. "Perhaps you ain't never been in the same box, Mr. Merry-well," he responded, "or you'd ask something easier. It's one of them darn things you can't

understand till you know, and you can't know till you understand—that's about the size of it. As for the Klondike—as sure as fate I'm a-goin' the day after I put the last stitch in that there bag."



Olivia and I laugh, as we talk this over, yet we feel the pathos of the situation. Poor Joseph, poor Jenny!—they fritter away so much of this blossoming time in silly quarrels; instead of cherishing the precious flowers of love which strew their path, they trample them heedlessly and cast them aside, to trifle with thorns and nettles. It is said that human nature is the same everywhere: how thankful I am that ours is different. We bear not a trace of ill-will toward each other or anyone; we have even forgiven the ill-natured people who insinuated that we were engaged when we were not. We smile pityingly at the certainty that now many of them are saying: I told you so. Nothing can disturb our serenity; it lies too deep beneath the surface of our outward life. The days slip away like some delightful dream, for there is so much to tell each other, to review, to explain, to linger over,

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to repeat again and yet again; so the common everyday life has faded into a misty background, and this perfect companionship is the reality.

It is so odd to look back upon these weeks of misinterpretation, of individual self-examination, for we see now that against reason and judgment we were inwardly conscious of each other's love. Olivia confesses that ever so long ago she was *afraid* she must be learning to love me, though she tried to believe it was only friendly attachment, but from the first she was aware that I didn't exactly act like her ideal of a friend, and after a while she could see perfectly well, though I didn't appear to know, that our friendship couldn't stay Platonic. Of course, I have confessed my duplicity, and, because we love each other so much, she has forgiven me, but if I ever deceived her about the smallest thing again, it would be the end of everything; she could never, *never* forgive me—so there! And I have assured her with cheerful solemnity that such a catastrophe is impossible, for I could not withhold even the most trivial thought from her.

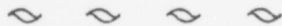
To-day Mrs. Biggles brought over all the papers and letters she has received from her husband. She can stand the suspense no longer, she says, and if I will be kind enough to trace out his course on the map, then compare the dates of his letters with the most conspicuous advertisements in the newspapers, and tell her what I think about it, she will tell me what she thinks.

Well, between us we have come to the conclusion that Biggles ran away with the circus!

It is a staggering supposition, considering the character and lack of attainments of the man, though the opportunities for individual distinction in such an aggregation are by no means few; but Mrs. Biggles assures me that it would not be possible for Biggles to do anything even so simple in the acrobatic line as to stand on his 'ead, though she admits he might stay in that position for a phenomenal length of time if he succeeded in getting into it, for he is afflicted with an obstinate disposition and a desire to excel in accomplishments for which he is unfitted by nature. But as for ridin' of barebacked 'osses and jumpin' through burnin' 'oops, she

is positive he couldn't ride two yards on a saw-horse, or jump through a hoop without being fired from a cannon. He is bold enough, however, to put his head in a lion's mouth, though she believes he has too much sense to do it unless driven to do so by a suggestion that his head is too big for the feat. On the whole, she is inclined to surmise that he is not a performer, but is engaged to fill the balloon, on account of his wonderful lung power; yet she graciously considers my suggestion not unreasonable that as he has had so much practice in driving railroad spikes, he may be a simple tent-pegger. Still, I can see that while she fears my theory may be the correct one, she hopes he has a position of some distinction.

I am going to find the advance dates of the circus, and have persuaded Mrs. Biggles to telegraph to her husband on the chance of the message reaching him. I think her mind will be more at rest if she can get a reply.



Joseph's aspirations have turned in a new direction. Having recovered from his temporary

depression, he has consigned the automobilly to the improbable future, and now yearns to possess a telly-phone, a phonny-graft, or a granny-phone. He ain't no ways particular which it is, but he wants one bad. What, he asks, is the use of living in a age of marvels, if you don't get no good out of them by hitching on to one yourself? This is an age of progress, he declares, evidently quoting 'from a stump speech, and every man jack of us has a right to a liberal eddication, which, he takes it, is an eddication a feller pays well for, and by Jinks!—he's willing to pay liberal for one of them things, if he has to wear his Sunday clothes on week days and his week day clothes on Sundays to get it.

What would he do with a telly-phone? Why, he'd string a wire from the barn to the kitchen (with my permission) and get Mrs. Biggles at the kitchen end, with him in the barn, and practice on her till he could talk real good; and when Mrs. Biggles got enough of it, he'd put the other end in Miss Humphrey's kitchen, (with her permission) and teach Jenny how to use it, then he could begin a conversation when it suited him, and have the last word at will.

As for them other things!—why you'd think the devil himself was bottled up in the small end of the horn, and he'd got to sing or play whatever you darn pleased. Bands, orchestrys, choirs, comic songs, gospel hymns, that'd make you laugh or cry or dance just as the notion took you—what could be finer in the way of a liberal eddication!

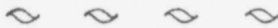
Mrs. Biggles dictated the telegram to-day. It gives her no little satisfaction to have made it exactly ten words. This is it:

“Mr. Jerry Biggles,

“Care of Puffley's Circus Aggregation.

“Be you a tent-pegger or be you a performer?

“MARIA BIGGLES.”



Two hours afterward an answer arrived which caused her to laugh and shed tears of joy. It was so like Biggles, she declared, that she could actually hear him speak, and it was also characteristic that he was more chary of words than of the silver he paid to have them carried

to her. Evidently the operator supposed the message to be in cipher, or it would have been censored. This is a copy:

“Mrs. Mariar Biggles,

“Tenpegger bedamd. Puffomer.

“JERRY BIGGLES.”

I have had another call from Jenny. She looks as if the cares of a lover may be wearing. Joseph was away for the afternoon, as she knew, and this visit was to be a secret, so far as he is concerned. It was about that sleeping-bag. Was there really and truly such a thing, Mr. Merry-well? There *was*?—oh, land!—and her mouth drooped with dismay. And was Joe actually a-sewin' at it, and how far on had he got, and did I know where he kept it, and did Joe lock it up when he was away? Well, if it was in the harness room, would I mind just letting her have a peep at it?

So Jenny and I went to the harness room, and half guiltily I displayed Joseph's treasure, and she grabbed it with a pathetic little cry, and with

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tears in her eyes and laughter in her voice she turned back the flap with trembling hands, and disclosed the rough, uneven stitches which Joseph's clumsy fingers had achieved, then with a little gasp, she shook her pretty head and asked me did I *ever*? Next, a sombre, vengeful expression clouded her face and she looked as if she would like to hang and quarter it, and she asked if it would be any harm jest to stow it away somewheres where Joe couldn't lay his hands on it again. It was black, and she knew it would bring them both bad luck, and she just believed it was nothing else made Joe so touchy and pig-headed sometimes. But my conscience awakened, and I firmly declined to allow any questionable proceeding, even to comfort poor Jenny; but I did comfort her in the end, and she went away happy in my promise that I would induce Joseph to part with his treasure, and that he would do so willingly.

"But you won't keep the dashed thing about you, Mr. Merry-well?" she asked, in sudden trepidation.

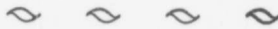
"Why not?" I inquired.

She shuddered. "It would bring *you* bad

luck," she responded, in an awestricken tone—"it's worse than ten black cats!"

And so to soothe the poor child's feelings I agreed there was nothing to be done with such a demonish invention but to burn it in a bonfire some night when no one wouldn't be round to see, and I am to make sure that no tufts of black hair escape.

And this agreement reminds me that Joseph has been unwittingly fated to prepare the funeral pyre, for he has been gathering a huge pile of dead potato stalks and other rubbish in the back field behind the orchard, and I shall have no preparations to make for the ceremony but to throw the sleeping-bag on top and apply a match below.

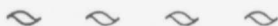


How unutterably thankful I am that I have not a past! It is an awesome thought that but for some mere chance of temperament I might have been more unworthy of her love; that my soul might have lurked in the shadow, fearing the searching gaze of her clear eyes. But now there is nothing to conceal; my follies, my virtues are alike laid bare; the magic key of love

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unlocks them all, and there is nothing I would keep back. Yet my conscience is somewhat supersensitive, for at times a misty memory of Millicent flits through my inner consciousness, like the swift-moving shadow that crosses one's path with the flight of a bird overhead. It is a disturbing impression when it comes, and I wish the memory of that youthful fancy could be blotted out instead of slowly fading into a shadowy, haunting phantom, like an ancient daguerreotype. Some day I shall tell Olivia, of course, and we shall smile together over the foolish passion of this Ralph of long ago; but up to this time, there has been no opportunity of recalling anything so far in the past; we have so much to talk over, so much to live through, in the present.



It is a pleasure to see someone else's dream realised. I am sorry for the practical people who are too sensible to dream themselves; too limited in vision to see the barrenness of utility; incapable of sympathising with the æsthetic impulse which leads the comparatively poor and humble to aspire to the least needful luxury.

This moral dissertation is inspired by the fact that Joseph has a gramophone!

I am the owner of a sleeping-bag, uncompleted. Joseph is happy; I am content.

There is nothing in the world I need less than a sleeping-bag, yet, strangely enough, I find an odd fascination in possessing the thing which makes me almost regret my unconsidered promise to burn it. I noticed that Joseph, also, though he was in transports of exuberance over the gramophone, heaved a deep sigh over finally parting with his treasure, gazing at it with evident emotion as he laid it on the floor of the living-room.

"I don't know what *you* want with a thing like that, Mr. Merry-well," he remarked, "but if the time ever does come when you think you've got to do somethin' desperate, jest set down and sew about six inches on that there bag, and, if you're like me, you'll kinder feel that mebbe you can pull through for a day or two longer. There's a bunch of waxed threads and a three-sided needle inside the flap, and the head won't run into your finger if you use them little pinchers to push it halfway through, and then pull it the rest of the way by the point. It's kinder slow,

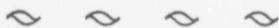
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but sure, and you don't want to get to the end too soon, for its one of them things you draw your pay from as you go along, and it stops once the job's done."

Of course I thanked him, and with a kindly smile, for the poor fellow means well, and I am in honour bound to let him think what he wills, rather than give him any inkling of the true state of affairs. So the sleeping-bag is stowed away in the attic to await a favourable opportunity for its disposal; and Joseph departed at the close of his day's work grinning from ear to ear, with the box containing the unpacked gramophone under his arm.

It is a fiendish invention, to my mind, but I could almost bring myself within earshot of it for the sake of seeing Joseph when the band begins to play.



When I awakened to drowsy consciousness this morning I had some difficulty in persuading myself that I was not still dreaming, for the band *had* begun to play. There was no doubt of it whatever, for the air was filled with the crash and bang of martial music, distant but unmistakable.

I looked out of the windows with puzzled curiosity as I dressed, but could see nothing unusual, though the sounds neither receded nor got nearer, then presently, with a *con fuoco* climax, the playing stopped. There was a brief pause, followed by a paralysing confusion of voices breaking into a rollicking chorus; then the explanation flashed upon me; it was Joseph's gramophone!

On my way to the barn, whence the sounds proceeded, my ears were tortured by the strident, tuneless tones of a cockney music hall singer, and by the time I arrived at the open doors a piano and violin had apparently struck up a lively quickstep, accompanied by the unmistakable shuffling of heavy feet upon the barn floor.

I meant, of course, to sternly reprove Joseph, but at the sight which confronted me my indignation melted away. On a box at the far end of the barn stood the demoniacal machine, while in the centre of a cleared space in front of it, his back to me, was Joseph. Was he listening in rapt idleness, as I expected, an idiotic grin on his face? No,—his arms raised high above his head, he stripped the husks off an ear

of corn with a graceful motion of his hands, flung it into a bin, scooped up another, repeated the operation, his feet meanwhile keeping up the shuffling jig in approximate time. To me it was a marvellous revelation of agility, a combination of barbaric impulse and æsthetic exaltation, for Joseph was carried out of himself, transported into a world of sensuous delight apart from his ordinary humdrum existence.

"Tell you what, Mr. Merry-well," he ejaculated breathlessly, sitting down on a box as the music stopped,—“I wouldn't change places with the Czar of Rooshia! I'm the luckiest dog on the face of the earth! Jenny, *and* a granny-phone,—by Jinks!” And he fell to work at the corn-husking in a rhapsody of self-gratulation.

What was the sense of a feller going off his feed and thinking he might as well pass in his checks, as long as money was to be had for work, and a granny-phone to be had for money? Why would a feller want to go to the tavern or to church meetings, when with a turn of his wrist he could have the choicest selection of sinners and saints to keep him company whenever and wherever he pleased? And if a feller felt down in

the mouth enough to string himself up in his barn, let him buy or beg or steal a granny-phone, and he'd have the devil in chains instead of the devil having him.

Say, Mr. Merry-well,—just you wait a jiffy, and I'll start her up on the funniest song you ever heerd in all your life!

Of course I waited, to please the poor fellow,—and the song?—well, the song was comic, even funny, but far from humorous; the music hall cockney variety delivered in an ear-splitting tone from which I recoiled. Yet I laughed spontaneously, not at the song, nor at Joseph, but with him; for his paroxysms of enjoyment were contagious when the invisible personator related how he went to serenade his lady-love and sang, "*Ow-h Sophiar!*" under her window; how the fire brigade turned out and seized the serenader on the charge of raising a false alarm, while he protested indignantly that he didn't shout "'*Ouse a-fire!*" but merely sang, "*Ow-h Sophiar!*"

After all, why should I shudder? Why should I hold myself aloof and sigh over the perverted taste of the multitude, why declare that Joseph has no real appreciation of music and no

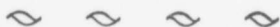
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sense of the truly humorous, when it is perfectly plain that his enjoyment is more spontaneous, his delight more intense than my own.

Our standards are different!

There it is in a nutshell; our standards differ, even as Jenny differs from Olivia. Then away with patronising platitudes about uplifting the masses, with ultra-fastidious deification of the classical and artistic, with placid content in one's own undoubted superiority! Joseph shall enjoy his granny-phone without let or hindrance from me, his innocent delight in the toy shall be unchecked, and he shall never know that his tastes are unæsthetic and vulgar.



I am reminded by a long letter from Teeterley that I have practically forgotten him of late, and that I left the previous one unanswered. I am filled with magnanimity toward the poor fellow, for he wants so little to make him happy, and he is quite likely, I should judge, to have his desires gratified; for Miss Almira's letters to her mother indicate a less exalted conception of her mission in life: indeed, she has begun to take the Domestic

Science lectures at the Tuffington Academy, and has already learned to make oatmeal porridge. She has also had a photograph taken of herself as Sister Hildegarde to send to an intellectual friend who was inspired by her rendition of "The Convent Garden" to write an exquisite quatrain as a memento of the occasion.

Mrs. Biggles is pathetically joyful over these and other signs of a change of heart, and is eager to fold Almiry to her sympathetic maternal bosom when she returns for Thanksgiving next week. It is seven years, she says, since Almiry rebelled against being taught anythink domestic, and never will she forget how 'ot and prickly all over she got at 'aving to tell a little chit like that how necessary it was for girls to be fitted to have 'usbands and children of their own when they growed up, and how Almiry just tilted up her chin and said she knowed all that long ago, but that her mind was made up to consecrate her life to nobler purposes, and she was quite content to leave the rearing of superfluous famblys to ordinary girls like Emmy and Mariar.

And now the young lady has begun her aerial descent, while Teeterley spreads his pinions for

an upward flight, and it is a foregone conclusion that they will meet; and it is to be hoped that in the combination of their high aspirations more sense will be evolved than either of them appears to possess at present.

Teeterley writes that hope arises apace within him, and he has concluded to risk all by declaring himself when she comes home at Thanksgiving.

To-day Olivia and I had a long talk, not about the past, but of the future. It is strange that until now we have never spoken of the momentous ceremony which will throw open the portals of our married life. A hundred times I have been upon the point of asking her how soon we may be married, then with the words almost on my lips, I have instinctively refrained. And when at last I spoke, I realised why I had hesitated.

"Oh, Ralph," she cried, shrinking from me ever so little, her eyes glistening with sudden tears—"why do people need to marry!—aren't we perfectly happy now?—then let us enjoy the present while it lasts, and not bother about getting married."

Of course her words struck me with an icy

chill. I fell into a panic, implored her huskily to tell me the truth: had she begun to doubt her love for me?

No, it appeared she hadn't; indeed, it was sweet recompense for the shock to my nerves, to be so completely and lovingly reassured. It took a long time to explain her point of view, and I don't know, now that I come to think it over, that I quite comprehend it, but as far as I can gather, it amounts to this:—

The reason she shrinks from the thought of marriage is simple and clear: she loves me so much!

There!—and I have promised never, never to entertain a passing doubt again, which is quite unnecessary, for it would be impossible for me to harbour such a thought for a moment. It is not that she doesn't mean to marry me some time, if I wish, but that she doesn't want to be married just now, and doesn't want to think about it. And though I urged a gloomy view which gripped me at the moment, a passing fear that possibly there may be some truth in the current belief that unnumbered deadly microbes lurk in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat,

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and that delay might be fatal to our dream, Olivia only laughed and declared I was getting morbid and story-bookish.

I cannot understand why love should have such a contrary effect: the stronger my affection, the more I yearn for wedded life, while with Olivia the opposite obtains. I cannot understand, yet I realise my own limitations, and that Olivia's feeling is prompted by some subtle sense finer than my own. But I am happy, thrice happy, in the certainty that nothing can come between us to make our present happiness less perfect.

And just as I write these words I am momentarily aghast at the devilish suggestion which obtrudes itself like a grinning phantom. What if she is mistaken in thinking that she already loves me with her whole soul: what if there is a higher plane yet to be reached, a cloud-piercing apex to which she may attain, where married life is unthinkable!

What if she should learn to love me too much?

But no; I shall not harbour such a disloyal thought; it is as foolish as my passing fear that she didn't love me enough.

One ambition gratified leads to another. Joseph having attained to Jenny and a gramophone, finds a new desire burning in his bosom: he yearns to sing; in fact, I suspect he has even aspirations toward public performance. One would suppose that the knowledge of being able to produce the machine-made article at will would have a deterrent effect, except in a case where music bubbles forth spontaneously, or where one has tasted the seductive delight of extemporaneous composition. But with Joseph it is another matter: he can keep time with his feet, but he has little ear for tune. His voice, when he soars above the speaking pitch, is a foggy bellow wandering in an undiscovered void between speech and song, but being blissfully unconscious of this, his case is hopeless.

To-day while I was at dinner Mrs. Biggles called out the alarming news that the barn was on fire. I ran out hurriedly, hearing a confused clamour of voices shouting, "'Ouse a-fire!" from the interior, but when I arrived on the scene I found it was merely the gramophone and Joseph practising; that is, Joseph was imitating the sounds issuing from the machine to the best of

his ability, but a half measure behind, and in a key that cannot be described.

Of course I laughed, as poor mortals must laugh at the pathetically grotesque, but Joseph didn't mind; he rolled his eyes at me in flattered exultation, finishing the selection before he spoke, and then:—"Ain't I gettin' it good?" he chuckled.

Heaven help me!—I assented!—I allowed him to believe he was gettin' it good.

Of course I am ashamed; I know it is a failing of mine to sheer off from unpalatable truths, a deplorable lack of moral stamina; but if I am a sinner, the world is full of sternly virtuous saints equipped with fire buckets and wet blankets, —then why should I make an effort to be disagreeable?

Besides, Joseph trusts me; I could no more deal him this mortal blow than I could hand a faithful dog a cayenne-pepper egg. I am in his confidence, for I am the only person who has heard even the gramophone perform this inimitable song. He has kept the record apart from the others for his own private edification and education, so that when he bursts forth from his

chrysalis the bloom of the composition will not have been rubbed off. First of all, however, when he knows it perfectly, he will sing it to Jenny, who doesn't yet dream he can sing.

Great Cæsar!—what a circus there will be!

But, after all, though I am sorry for Joseph, and would willingly spare him ignominy, it is better thus. If one must lose a member it is better to do so in the hands of a skilful surgeon than to trust to the swift whirr of a buzz saw; besides, in the surgery of love, I fancy, though I don't know, there are antiseptics and anæsthetics and afterward, Joseph loves her so deeply, the hurt will heal, and he will not be embittered against mankind in general.

Personally, however, if I were Joseph, I would prefer thawing a stick of dynamite to singing that song to Jenny; so would Joseph, perhaps, if he knew; but if the ground is mined where he treads, it is better for him not to know. He will be spared anticipation; he will enjoy the passing moment.

It will be hard upon Jenny, but first of all she will have her laugh, and that is worth something; she cannot help it; then she will laugh still harder,

and not be able to tell him to stop. Afterward, perhaps, she will cry with vexation; and I fancy Joseph may also.

Neither of them know what is coming: what a kindly dispensation of nature! None of us can guess the misery or joy in store for us, but I am selfishly thankful that my share is unadulterated joy. Olivia is not Jenny; I am not Joseph.

What would become of men, without women to keep them straight? I know, of course, that men do not monopolise the folly of the world, that the feminine temperament is supposed to oscillate between disagreeable extremes; but few women, I imagine, are capable of the fatuous, insensate folly of a man spurred on by a false estimate of his own powers. I don't know this from experience; it merely comes to me at the present moment as an intuition. I don't forget Millicent.

(I wish I could!)

But I feel that Joseph's folly is not purely individual; it is typical; I, too, might go off at a tangent, given the inspiration. I have a fellow-feeling for Joseph.

I fear it makes me feel smug and virtuous to write in this strain, but it cannot be helped.

It is true, but no truer than my deduction that none of us know what is coming. It is better not to know!



It is an eternity since I wrote those fatal words; some strange prophetic instinct prompted the utterance; an eternity of experience, yet it was but last night that everything seemed bright and I pitied Joseph for the trivial mischance about to befall him. And even a few hours ago I was light-hearted, little recking that my soul would so soon be enveloped in the blackness of the pit.

Why should I write?—why should a prisoner in solitary confinement for life set himself an allotted task? It may be the instinct which sometimes spurs a man dying alone to record his sensations up to the inevitable moment when the pen falls from his fingers.

But I shall not die,—that is the worst of it!—men do not die of a broken heart, except in stories. I shall live,—no, exist,—according to the law of nature. Just now I don't feel that sleep is possible to-night, yet in an hour or two,

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in spite of my misery, I shall feel drowsy, stupid; in the end, I shall crawl into bed as if sleep were the sole craving of my life. And to-morrow I shall arise and dress as if nothing had happened; it is incredible, but I shall go down to breakfast, and then I shall eat; not only eat, but notice critically, as usual, whether Mrs. Biggles has again attained perfection in the cooking of my egg, fallen short, or over-reached the mark. And that woman will know; yes, the instant she looks at me she will know; and if she looks deeply concerned, grieved for my grief, I don't know what will happen to me. I cannot carry a broken heart, and sympathy also; I shall break down. If there is anyone left in the world who cares for me, who understands my need, I want that person to wear a face of adamant, to appear callous and utterly indifferent.

It was very brief, this catastrophe, like a flash of lightning which stuns one. We had been for a long walk, and had almost reached home when it happened. It was a delightful walk, up to that fatal moment, and we enjoyed to the full the quiet brooding stillness lending charm to these shortening autumn days, the fluttering descent of

the leaves and their gentle rustling underfoot, the mellowing haze that softens harsh outlines and lends a glamour to the familiar landscape. Olivia had permitted me to make plans of the future, even suggesting half-laughing amendments; then we fell suddenly silent, and in the swift-gathering twilight under the sombre pines near the gate of The Briars, I looked down and said softly, "Olivia!"

"Ralph," she responded lingeringly.

That was all; another silence, then Olivia said once more that she couldn't love to say my name so much if another woman *had* used it,—*any* other woman.

I started violently; she had expressed the idea before, but never until that moment had I recalled meeting Millicent on the train in the spring. We both stood still and faced each other, as if by a common impulse.

"By the way," I forced myself to begin, at last, with an attempt at gaiety, "I've just remembered a trifling incident that happened in the spring,—I met a former friend on the train, and she—she called me Ralph."

Olivia made no response; she stood motionless,

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but I saw, from the poise of her head outlined against the clear pink glow of the sky in the west, that she waited inquiringly.

"Not a real friend," I blundered. "Millicent is almost a stranger, in fact. I hadn't met her since she was married, and she has a family almost grown up."

"Then what right had she to call you Ralph?"

Her voice was so clear and steady that the nervous tension of mine suddenly subsided.

"Oh," I laughed,—not that I thought it amusing, but from sheer relief,—“we had a fancy for each other ages ago; nothing but the infantile attraction of propinquity, you know.” And again I laughed in my insensate folly.

Yes, my laugh rang out, and stopped in deadly silence,—I was alone! Through the gathering darkness I could just make out dimly her vanishing figure. “Olivia!” I called, running after her in frantic despair. Still no reply, but just at the gate of The Briars I caught her by the arm. “You must listen,” I implored desperately, “while I tell you——”

This time it was she who laughed; a soft,

mirthless laugh that strangled my words. "You wish to tell me that you loved her—that you kissed her?" said she in the same quiet steady tone.

"I did," I groaned, "but"—I was going to insist that we were mere infants, but she checked me.

"Stop!" she commanded. "I have something to tell *you*."

My heart throbbed heavily with despair, but in that waiting moment before she spoke again, hope stirred; my breath came in deep gasps. "Well?" I queried tremulously, oppressed by the silence.

Slowly and clearly came the words: "I—hate—you."

It was as if I had lifted my face to meet a crushing blow. I stood there alone, stunned, bewildered, then the clang of the gate awoke me to a last hopeless effort; I stumbled after her, but she neither hurried nor slackened her pace until I barred her way at the corner of the hedge close to the house.

"It's impossible," I entreated. "It's an awful mistake—you don't quite—*hate* me."

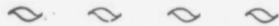
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I felt the shudder in her tone before the words burned into my brain. "I lo-oathe you!" she cried, with scathing vehemence.

She passed on, entered the house, closed the door on my life.

I stood outside as if turned to stone. The night was still, and I could hear her receding footsteps pass up the stairway, become fainter, again gradually more distinct as she reached the upper hall, then I felt that she was standing at the open window directly above the door. It was a last, a hopeless chance, yet I clutched at it before the waters of despair finally engulfed me. "Olivia," I said, looking up into the darkness, "it lasted only three weeks—I was only sixteen!" There was no response but the measured closing of the window, which shut out my last ray of hope in the tacit assurance that nobody cared whether I was sixteen or sixteen hundred.



Another day has passed, and still I live!—that, is, to all outward appearance, but my heart has got gradually benumbed, and this is somewhat of a relief after the acute agony of the first few

hours. The remorseless hammering of the fatal words against my brain makes the tragedy a hoary ancient fact: she hates me—*lo-oathes* me!

Yes, I got up and dressed as usual, and looked out of the window at the landscape, which showed no trace of last night's cataclysm, nothing but indifference to these mere trifling disturbances which afflict mortal mind through imagination carried to excess. I do not say that my outward placidity equalled that of the landscape when I prepared to face Mrs. Biggles, for there were moments when a glance out of the window intensified the poignant sympathy with my condition so much that I became profoundly affected; but I took my place at the breakfast table with wooden stoicism, and to my relief Mrs. Biggles showed no sign of noticing anything unusual. And, strange to say, my whole soul was momentarily wrapped up in anxiety as to the condition of my egg: never had I felt so much depending on the fact of its being overdone, underdone, or in a state of perfection. When I reached forth to grasp it, my hand trembled; when I placed the knife in position for decapitation, it rattled against the shell as if I had the ague.

I knew that Mrs. Biggles was watching for the result with as keen anxiety as my own, that she could not fail to see that my hand trembled, that she must inevitably scan my speaking countenance and thus discover traces of unusual emotion. Nevertheless, I affected indifference, cut the shell, and looked within.

Alas!—it was *almost* perfection, yet fell just so far short that one must feel to the full the anguish of having almost had!—for while most of the encircling white was delicate, trembling, jelly-like, perfectly equipoised between toughness and elusive slipperiness, there was an inner ring of clear albumen next the yolk.

I suppose there was no real cause or justification for what happened; I do not pretend to explain it. I would like to think I was momentarily possessed of the devil, but had that been the case it is scarcely likely that my action would have been so weak, so ignoble. I hate to record it, but there is no use trying to steer around the truth. Here it is:—

My chest heaved, and before I knew what made it heave, a mighty sob burst forth!

It wasn't a sneeze, as I instinctively tried to

pretend it was, or a plain choke,—it was a choking sob, of the semi-dry variety.

The egg was merely the last straw, of course. Now that I am calmer I see that, but at the moment my greater grief was compressed into that fragile shell. Had the egg been merely tough, then I had been glum: had it been slithery, then had I been peppery: but being so near to perfection, my grief and anger burst lawful bonds. I pushed back my chair, glaring at Mrs. Biggles through blurred eyes, she gripped the edge of the table and stared at me, her mouth slanting sympathetically with a zig-zag finial of alarm at each corner.

“Take it away!” I sputtered explosively.

“Ow-h!” shrieked Mrs. Biggles, holding tight to the table as if she couldn’t let go.

“Away!” I commanded, with a gesture of repulsion.

With a sudden clawing motion she grabbed it from the table, and fled without a word. As for me, I mopped my face, swallowed a few bites of toast, drank a little coffee, and retired, hopelessly humiliated.

I wanted absolute quiet, and I stole like a

criminal to the attic, where Mrs. Biggles would not be likely to find me, and where I could meditate undisturbed. There my eye fell upon the sleeping-bag. I had forgotten it, forgotten Joseph and Jenny; now their trials came back to me, the trivial petty quarrels, so foolish, so needless, so easily made up. I stood over the bag in deep thought, recalling Joseph's suggestion with a bitter smile, then I sat down beside it, threaded the needle and began to sew. It was tough work, but I made three stitches, marvelling at the amount of imaginary misery which must have inspired Joseph to accomplish so much; then at the fourth I found myself subsiding into a strange dogged calm, and being wrapped in thought I absently ran the eye of the needle into my thumb. One might suppose that in my condition a trifling accident would scarcely cause pain, but this one did; indeed, I jumped up, flung the bag from me, squeezed the thumb and said things; and then I kicked the precious sleeping-bag about the floor with infinite relish. I suppose I must have made considerable noise, and have kept up the pastime long enough to attract Mrs. Biggles, for presently she appeared with a bottle of liniment in her hand.

Her eyes were red, and I knew in one remorseful glance that she had been weeping, but smiles beamed in relays on her countenance. She dressed my wound, while I apologised. I admitted it wasn't the egg at all, and she said she knowed it wasn't, and she might have knowed it at first if she hadn't been a eedjet.

So I had hurted my thumb a-sewin' on the booby bag?

The *what?*

The booby bag. Joe called it a sleepin'-bag, but she up and told him no one but a booby wouldn't make such a thing, and no one but a booby wouldn't sleep in it when it was made.

My thumb throbbed and stung, and I declared emphatically that she was right, with inward wonderment that I could notice such a trifling injury.

No two ways about it, though, Joe thought he was drove to do somethin', and it was better for a man to ease his feelin's that way than by goin' on a buster. Did I know what Joe should have did, if he'd been a real sensible feller, when Jenny said she 'ated him? Why, jest eat from three to six 'earty meals a day, with lots of

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lemmingade and ice-cream in between to keep his blood cool, and lay in a 'ammick and smoke his pipe and read penny-dreadfuls and shilling-shockers the rest of the time. And then, if he wanted to pull a long face and say a last good-bye, Jenny would be jest as glad to fall into his arms as if he'd spent all that time a-breakin' of his 'eart and a-fittin' of the pieces together again.

Law sakes!—the amount of sense men didn't 'ave!

But then, of course, poor things, they had to learn, jest like puppy dogs. Bring a outdoor puppy into your best parlour and pet him and tell him to be good, and he'll jest frisk and waggle his tail and jump for joy, and first thing you know, over goes your little three-legged table with the blue and white chiny tea-pot. Of course, he doesn't mean no harm, and the chances is he doesn't know he's broke anything precious, but any woman with proper feelin's will grab the poker or the broom and drive him out of the house, and say she don't never want to see his face again. And she *means* it!—she 'ates him when she's gatherin' up the pieces of her tea-pot, and she wishes she 'adn't never made a pet of him.

And then she begins to think about other people's dogs!

And after a while she opens the kitchen door a crack and peeps out to see if he's badly hurted, and if he's a proper puppy dog she'll see him sittin' off at a safe distance, with his 'ead hangin' down most mournful, a-waitin' to see if he can't think what he done before it's time to say he's sorry; then he stiffens up and cocks one ear and then the other, and tries his tail very slow and cautious, and first thing she knows the door is wide open and she's got him in her arms tellin' him he mustn't never never do it again.

And does he do it again?

Of course he does, because he doesn't know any better, but not with the same chiny tea-pot; that's broke, but there's other things that goes, one by one, and by that time she's got so used to 'avin' him around that she jest thinks he's good warm flesh and blood, anyway, and the precious things is mostly baked clay. Besides she's got used to doin' for him, so she couldn't 'ave the 'eart to give him to anyone else.

Poor Mrs. Biggles! The dear woman little recks how I listen to her prattle, and what faint

gleams of hope pierce the darkness through her cheerful philosophy.

Of course, she is a woman, and she knows; but then, she isn't Olivia, and I am not a dog. And I am not merely hated: I am *loathed!*

Joseph is in high fettle. He gave the last rehearsal to "Ow-h Sophiar!" at noon, and he informed me that he knows it perfectly. To-night, therefore, he intends to sing it to Jenny. I smile mournfully over the information, almost envying him, for what is about to happen to him is but a trifle, a jolt in the rut of complacency in which he moves, something to keep him from luxurious self-satisfaction. He won't like it, but he must take what she gives him because he loves her, and she will give it to him freely from her heart, because she loves him. And for that reason, also, he will swallow his pill partially concealed in sweet sauce, combined with the assurance that it is for his own good; an assertion which will goad him to strenuous resistance at the moment, but the truth of which he must realise when his mind ceases from ferment.

And to-night I, too, shall appear in one-and-one-only performance, for after Mrs. Biggles has

gone home, and Joseph is safely ensconced in Miss Humphrey's kitchen with Jenny, I shall emerge from the house into the darkness with a cumbersome black bundle clasped in my arms, wend my way through the orchard to the back field, place my burden on top of the pile of rubbish, strike a match, and that accursed booby bag shall be resolved into the elements.

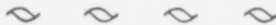
I am not superstitious, but I shall breathe more freely when it is no more. Jenny warned me that it would bring bad luck, but that is nonsense: at the same time, I shall feel that I am rid of an incubus, and to-morrow, perhaps, I may be strong enough to try to fan the faint embers of hope into a flame. I shall do something, I don't know what; but how willingly would I be a puppy, and sit afar off, if only I might have the opportunity to waggle my tail ever so doubtfully.

And to-morrow is Thanksgiving!—this is a grim thought, an added pang, for I was to have taken dinner at The Briars, as one of the family, so to speak. And Mrs. Biggles is to spend the day in the bosom of her family, including Almiry, who is to arrive this evening; and she is in a bustle of preparation over the dinner, which is

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to be the most sumptuous one in the history of this generation of Biggleses. Everything is ready, but she fears that at the last she will become a mourner at the feast, and succumb to her grief before the children at the sight of the vacant chair. Her eyes are red, and she admits that she could see but dimly to stuff the turkey, and now that it is stuffed and trussed, she doesn't know how she will summon courage to put it in the oven, for there is something in its appearance so like—Biggles!



How can I begin to chronicle last night's events? My head is a seething maelstrom which refuses to disentangle things into logical sequence, and amid the eddying whirl the only piece of flotsam that I can see quite clearly is the certainty that Olivia would never kiss a creature she hated, could never kiss a man she loathed.

Yes, that is the miracle which has been wrought; how, I do not know, nor do I seem to care.

Yesterday afternoon I had firmly determined not to engage in a tussle with fate until that

devilish booby bag was disposed of, but I had no sooner concluded the preceding entry in my journal than I was seized by a frantic desire to see Olivia at once.

That is the way with lovers, apparently: reason, will, intellect, everything must give way to the strength of the magic bond. As Joseph told me, when you once take hold, you may wriggle and dance, but you can't let go. And in spite of my determination, following blindly the instinct of the moth whose wings have been singed, I hastened over to The Briars.

But there was no need for haste,—I was too late. Aunt Anne received me with a little cry of surprise, and instant sympathetic inquiry about my thumb. She hadn't believed I would be able to go out for days, after hearing of my dreadful suffering: to think that I had walked the floor all night and endured the pain without a murmur, and then been so sweet and patient as to try to eat my breakfast as usual. Mrs. Biggles said it was just wonderful the way I bore up, and the speaker and Olivia couldn't help feeling frightened at the thought of my arm swelling so, after listening to so many cases of people who

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had their arms cut off to stop the blood poisoning. And to think it all came from my sitting down last evening to sew on buttons! Really, Mrs. Biggles just sat there with the tears streaming down, to think she had neglected to look over my garments, and had thus been indirectly the cause of the accident. And didn't I know perfectly well that any little sewing I needed would be just a pleasure to her or Olivia?

Good Lord!

I did the only thing I could do. When a man's mind breaks loose and begins to flap in the wind, he had better remain silent, hold on with both hands and look intelligent.

I thought the accident had happened that very morning, that I had been sewing the booby bag instead of buttons, that there was no night before; and I had no recollection of walking the floor, or of appearing sweet and gentle, and I didn't remember any swelling in my arm. Therefore I listened to Aunt Anne in wonderment.

What a talker Mrs. Biggles was! Olivia had a nervous headache this morning, but she couldn't help laughing and then crying over the story of a dog that Biggles brought home to her two or

three years ago: how fond Mrs. Biggles got of him against her better judgment, for she wasn't partial to dogs, and declared he would never set a foot in her house; and then she relented and let him in one day, and he was so delighted that his frisking knocked over her little parlour table that held her great-grandmother's black Wedgewood cream jug and bowl. But perhaps she had told me about it? No,—well, I must get her to tell the story; it was perfectly amazing how sorry she made you feel for the dog, though you couldn't help groaning over the black Wedgewood being smashed into little bits. You'd actually think from the way she described its feelings, she must have learned first-hand how heartbroken the animal felt at being driven out of the house with a mop. Yes, concluded Aunt Anne, Mrs. Biggles said that when she saw the look in Roger's eyes, she made up her mind that the worst thing a woman could do was to make a pet of anythink and then turn on it when it didn't mean no 'arm.

Doesn't it seem sometimes as if no one woman could have had all the experiences she tells about? But then it was impossible, when you listened to

her, to believe that anyone could make them up, everything was so circumstantial and natural. Besides, she was so absolutely straightforward and honest that it made one ashamed to dream of such a thing. Anyway, what reason could she have for saying such things happened, if they didn't?

But my thumb,—was I quite sure the swelling was going down? She was so alarmed when she heard of the accident that she said to Olivia they would just slip on their things in the afternoon and run over to see me, but Olivia was feeling so wretched that she suddenly decided to go to the city to look at the winter hats and get a little change of air. She would be so surprised when she got back in the evening to hear that I had been out.

So after a comforting chat with Aunt Anne, I returned to think over things; to look with awe and wonderment upon Mrs. Biggles, but without a word of reproach; for what is the use of telling a person who appears angelically serene and innocent that you have learned without a shadow of a doubt that she rarely speaks the truth?

No, a woman of her age, gifted with such a vivid imagination, is beyond the reach of moral law; she dwells in the rarefied atmosphere where genius reigns supreme, and anything I might say would be as effective as firing at a balloon with a pea-shooter. And, of course, if there is truth in the old-fashioned idea that our lapses are faithfully recorded in realms beyond, she must ultimately be called to account, and be given an opportunity to once more cheerfully plead that she meant nothink whatever.

So with the dear woman I can afford to be just, even generous. I must consider that she cannot help it, and refrain from dwelling upon the possibility that she would not if she could. I must remember that none of us can be quite faultless, except those disagreeable people who always say precisely what they think, and mean just what they say; and therefore her weakness is one which is common to humanity, but growing luxuriantly like a picturesque weed in the fertile garden of her good intentions.

Aunt Anne said Olivia would return at six o'clock, and I felt tempted to go up to the train to meet her, but the thought of passing the

fatal spot under the pine trees where we stood last evening deterred me; besides, I had a foolish growing fancy that I must rid myself of that unlucky bag before we met. In the evening there would still be time after its destruction to call at The Briars as usual.

Darkness closed in early last evening, the sky becoming black with heavy clouds, and I awaited Mrs. Biggles's departure with impatience; then, allowing a few minutes for her to reach her little cottage opposite The Briars, I stole out to the field with my burden. There was no sound of vehicles from the road, and nothing visible in the darkness except a bright gleam from the kitchen at The Briars, toward which Joseph's eager footsteps must already have hastened, so there was little danger of a brief blaze attracting undue attention. As I struck the match, I smiled involuntarily at the thought of poor Joseph; how little he dreamed what was about to happen to his former treasure, how soon he might once more reach out, but in vain, for the accustomed solace of needle and waxed thread. There was no wind, and the tiny flame flickered in the shelter of my hands for a moment, then crept slowly through

the heap of dry stalks, the faint crackle grew into a snapping blaze that rushed upward with a sudden roar, and the booby bag was wreathed in tongues of flame. Never have I seen a more beautiful fire, or gazed with such a strange mixture of emotions at the fascinating leap and play of the flames. It was a period in our lives, Joseph's and mine, I moralised, and even as the gross elements of our natures subjected to the scorching fire of love became transmuted and purified of——

There are times, when given the occasion, I might preach a wondrous sermon; this was one of them, but my train of thought was interrupted by a muffled stentorian shouting from the direction of The Briars, which led me to run to the edge of the field, from where the lights of the house were clearly visible. I listened intently, and the sounds reached me in a sort of savage rhythm and cadence that I knew too well,— Joseph's performance had begun!

So I stood and listened, a distant, fascinated auditor and speculator; for I could see the light in the kitchen, and though the words were indistinct I well knew every syllable he uttered, and that

he was fast approaching that culminating shout of unutterable idiocy. I pictured poor Jenny, helpless, speechless with laughter, but frantically imploring for mercy in dumb show: Joseph, elated, rising to higher and still louder flights, eager to reach the side-splitting climax, "Ow-h, *So-phiar!*" At last it came, and even at that distance, it seemed to explode with amazing force. The next instant the door opened with a bang, and I saw the light streaming forth from the doorway; then again Joseph bellowed forth, "Ow-h *So-phiar!*" Was Jenny, failing to shut him off otherwise, attempting to escape with her hands clapped over her ears. Even as I stood conjecturing, a rush of wind moaned through the leafless trees, and a great flare shot up behind me and cast my shadow over the field. There was a piercing screech from Jenny, a renewed rapid shouting of "Fire!" from Joseph, and I knew they had seen the blaze, for the freshening breeze had fanned the flames into a brilliant glare. I turned, and busied myself trampling out the sparks that were falling close to the fence, and but for these I might have fled to escape detection, before the pounding clump of Joseph's boots

warned me of his approach. He arrived hatless, excited, incoherent, and I gathered that he supposed the barn to be in flames, but he required no explanation, for his whole soul was consumed with desire for the sleeping-bag. Take the granny-phone, Mr. Merry-well, and every dashed thing he had, he implored, but give him back his——

But before I could reply a buxom little figure darted out of the encircling blackness beyond the glow of the fire. "Oh, Mr. Merry-well, don't give it to Joe!" screeched Jenny, and before I could draw breath to speak, her arms were clasped around that person's neck, and she was wailing with heart-rending pathos: "You'd rather have *me*,—wouldn't you, Joe?"

Now I don't know how Joseph responded, but the last glimpse I got of him he was standing like a fence post, his face illumined with that utterly silly grin which with him means perfect bliss. I don't know how he reassured her, I say, for just then I fled like a startled gazelle out of sight and hearing. At such a time one doesn't wait to reason why, but I suppose my action arose from a mixture of motives; among which, per-

haps, predominated a delicate consideration, totally unnecessary, I now believe, for both lovers were so entirely engrossed in each other and their own affairs that they regarded my presence not at all, or looked upon me as a member of the family. However, I withdrew, which was perhaps the best thing for a lone bachelor to do under the circumstances, if he wishes to avoid personal embarrassment; I withdrew, but in my haste I ran trustingly into what I took to be my own shadow. It was not; it was Mrs. Biggles in the act of arriving within the charmed circle of firelight. We sat down opposite each other: I, silent and reserved, my presence of mind missing, while Mrs. Biggles was raising a blood-curdling lament which almost persuaded even me that poor Mr. Merry-well was no more. She declared afterward, she 'adn't no time to think, but she knowed somethink or someone was burned up, and she supposes she took me for my ghost. But whatever she meant, her cry hastened the approach of Aunt Anne and Olivia, who were not far behind, and I had some difficulty in convincing them that I was alive and whole.

And, of course, we all gathered around the waning fire, looking on with awed fascination at the glowing shapeless mass which writhed and twisted, rose as if with despairing effort, and slowly subsided into flaky fragments that shone golden, violet, a dazzling white, then dulled to an ashy grey. I confess that my feelings were strained to a nervous tension, slowly relaxing, and as I glanced swiftly around the circle, I saw that Jenny's eyes were snapping and her red lips compressed into a tight thin line; Joseph stared woodenly with his mouth bulged outward; Mrs. Biggles had her hands clasped, with the fingers interlaced in a basket pattern, and one corner of her mouth was deflected downward; Aunt Anne's eyes were distended in wondering perplexity; and Olivia, beside me!—I cannot picture the divine smiling sympathetic tenderness which irradiated her countenance as she looked up and met my gaze. "You poor, poor man!" she breathed.

It was just then that a vagrant, eddying whirlwind descended in our midst, snatched up the dying embers, and away it spun, the soul of my booby bag, a mocking demon that derisively scudded through the darkness in a fiery attenuated

spiral, leaped high into the air, then dissolved into a shower of twinkling, vanishing sparks.

Something like a groan burst from Joseph's protruding lips. "Beast!" ejaculated Jenny, shaking an absurd little fist toward the sky.

"Ow-h, Lor'!" cried Mrs. Biggles.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Aunt Anne wonderingly.

Darkness descended suddenly upon us, as Joseph proceeded to kick clods of earth over the embers; then I came to a sense of my duty, and sent him to the stable for a lantern to light our way across the fields to The Briars. I think Jenny must have gone also, for when he returned she was walking close beside him.

They led the way, and it was patent to anyone with eyes that Joseph's right arm encircled his companion; also, though I hesitate to record it, that one of Jenny's partially encircled Joseph. I can understand that Joseph might want to hold his beloved close at such a time, but I cannot understand why a comparatively winsome and attractive young person like Jenny should care to voluntarily embrace Joseph's ungainly bulk, and I think Aunt Anne and Mrs. Biggles, who

followed the young couple at a short distance, had good reason to resent such an exhibition. But they didn't, as far as I know; in fact, they were deeply absorbed in recounting the events of the evening, and scraps of conversation floated back to Olivia and me.

"When I heard the shouting," recounted Aunt Anne's melodious, carrying voice, "I was sure there was something wrong with Joe, and I was going to the kitchen to find out, but Olivia listened and she declared he was reciting 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' to Jenny, and that it would be a pity to——"

"When Joe began to holler," screeched back Jenny, from far in advance, "I didn't believe there was no fire, but he seen it; and the more I tried to shut him off, the louder he hollered!"

Dear, loyal, little Jenny,—the soul of discretion! Joseph's secret was safe: never would the vulgar public know that in his first and last appearance as a performer he had been hooted off the stage.

It is not a long walk from the back orchard field of The Hermitage to The Briars, and we lingered, Olivia and I. What mattered it if we

fell far behind the rays of Joseph's lantern, or that the sound of Aunt Anne's voice became faint and indistinct! What mattered anything, except the intoxicating bliss of knowing that one is no longer hated or loathed, but loved with the marvellous intensity of ten times more! We lingered, for the untrodden way over the fields in the darkness was the road to Paradise.

And then there was so much to tell, to explain, and so little time; but, after all, no explanation seemed to be needed, though I learned incidentally why no one had inquired what I had burned at the stake, as it were.

They all knew!

Yes,—Joseph, Jenny, Aunt Anne, Mrs. Biggles, and Olivia, were all quite well aware, by instinct or otherwise, that it was the writhing remains of the booby bag which they gazed upon. For faithless Mrs. Biggles, as a crowning artistic climax to her mendacious achievements, after piercing a certain tender heart by the tale of Biggles's supposititious puppy dog and her parlour table, had just finished riving it to fragments when Joseph sounded the alarm of fire.

Yes, the woman had gone over to The Briars

and confessed the truth: (and more!) that instead of sewing on buttons, I had been working night and day with a bleeding 'eart on the sleeping-bag that I had promised Jenny to burn!

Hysterical laughter startled us: we stood still and listened. It was Mrs. Biggles's voice; and Aunt Anne's, persuasive, expostulatory, rose above it, demanding why she was sitting on the cold ground, and why she laughed. And again Mrs. Biggles's voice broke into laughter or grief, we couldn't be sure which, and then: "There's something so simple and hinnercent about young people!" she cackled, and relapsed once more into hysterics.

And again Aunt Anne reasoned and entreated, and by the time we had drawn nearer, the two women were walking together, but Mrs. Biggles's words were broken by real sobs. "I'll tell you the truth, *Miss 'Umphrey*," we heard her say, "the real truth! It's *Biggles!*—I want *Biggles!*" and her voice broke into a pathetic wail.

Now, if Biggles had been an inanimate object which could have been purchased in a shop, I would cheerfully have paid a large sum for the

pleasure of handing him over to his wife, worthless as a man must be who could basely desert her for months as he had done; but, as it was, Olivia and I could do nothing but feel pitying, and indignant with Biggles, and also with Mrs. Biggles for wanting him. But Aunt Anne succeeded in calming her by the assurance that for her part she should think that any person with common sense would know she was better off without him. And Mrs. Biggles's fount of tears dried on the instant, and with dignified utterance she remarked that no one couldn't possibly understand who 'adn't never 'ad a man to do without.

And scarcely had this remark reached our ears when it was followed by an ecstatic cry of, "Oh, *Maw!*" in a different feminine voice; and once more we halted and listened to the unmistakable sound of two women laughing and weeping for joy in each other's arms, and this was mingled with excited masculine ejaculations.

"Almira—*Biggles!*" whispered Olivia, pressing my arm.

"*Teeterley!*" I gasped.

I think we both had an impulse to turn and

flee, for it was a time when one resents the intrusion of people who only think they are in love, and don't know what real love is; but before we could move I heard my name shouted, and descried a tall, narrow figure moving rapidly around in half circles, like a hound off the trail. He bore down upon me with a shout of joy, flung one long arm around my neck, and wrung my hand ecstatically, ejaculating breathlessly, "It's—all right, old man!"

"I con-gratu-late you!" I exclaimed with difficulty, under his embrace.

"And I congratulate *you!*" he cried with renewed ardour. "Gad, Merrivale, but you—you were a sly dog!"

I escaped from his clasp and looked around. Olivia had deserted me on his approach, and I could make out her figure joining the group ahead.

"I'm the happiest man in the world," exulted Teeterley, as we hurried after the others.

"Indeed?" I commented, as we caught up. It was not necessary to discuss the point—poor devil!

We had just turned down the lane past Miss

Humphrey's, when a blatant shout reached us from the darkness of the road. It resembled the croak of a bullfrog more than the sound of a human voice, yet it appeared to me like: "M'riar!"—and I was not surprised that Mrs. Biggles, in her state of nerves, uttered a little shriek when she heard it.

There was a tense, petrified silence, then: "Be that *you*, M'riar?" resounded near at hand, and Mrs. Biggles darted ahead.

When we overtook her she was embracing a stocky little man who stood in the road, stolid, unresponsive, silent, clasping in both arms a strangely shaped object in a green baize cover.

"It's Biggles!" cried his delighted wife. "'Old the lantern, Joe."

The light fell on that odd, woodeny figure, standing unmoved like an image, save for the rapid blinking of a pair of small, dark eyes. And this was Biggles! Where had I seen that broad, flat nose, the pursed-up projecting mouth, with its peculiar fixed smugness, the large, mallet-shaped head?

Suddenly one side of his upper lip lifted and a brief remark in the same hard croaking tone

came forth. "Will you 'ave both on us, *now*, M'riar?" he said.

Mrs. Biggles stared, gasped. "Biggles," she said faintly, "what—what's *that*?"

For answer his arms swiftly relaxed; he drew forth a battered but glittering trombone, holding it lovingly in the hollow of his arm.

"*Both* on us?" he demanded.

Then I knew: Biggles and "The Worst Trombonist in America" were one.

For an instant Mrs. Biggles recoiled, then: "Ow-h, Biggles!" she cried, opening her arms, "it ain't the cornick—but it's *you*!" And she embraced them both.

THE END