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Author: Edward Bellamy

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# HOOKING WATERMELONS

By Edward Bellamy

1898

The train slackened, a brakeman thrust his head in at the door and shouted "Bah,"—a mysterious formality observed on American trains as they enter towns,—and an elderly lady, two drummers, and a young man with a satchel got out, followed by the languid envy of the other passengers, who had longer or shorter penances of heat and dust before them. The train got under way again, while the knot of loafers about the station proceeded to eye the arrivals as judicially as if they were a committee of safety to protect the village from invasion by doubtful characters. The old lady, apparently laboring under some such impression, regarded them deferentially, as nervous travelers on arriving in strange places generally do regard everybody who seems to feel at home. The drummers briskly disappeared down the main street, each anxious to anticipate the other at the stores. The young man with the satchel, however, did not get away till he had shaken hands and exchanged a few good-natured inquiries with one of the loungers.

"Who's that, Bill?" asked one of the group, staring after the retreating figure with lazy curiosity.

"Why, did n't you know him? Thought everybody knew him. That's Arthur Steele," replied the one who had shaken hands, in a tone of cordiality indicating that his politeness had left a pleasant impression on his mind, as Arthur Steele's politeness generally did.

"Who is he, anyhow?" pursued the other.

"Why, he 's a Fairfield boy" (the brakeman pronounced it "Bah"), "born and brought up here. His folks allers lived right next to mine, and now he's doin' a rushin' lawyer trade down New York, and I expect he's just rakin' the stamps. Did yer see that diamond pin he wore?"

"S'pose it's genooine?" asked a third loafer, with interest.

"Course it was. I tell you he's on the make, and don't you forgit it. Some fellers allers has luck. Many 's the time he 'n' I 've been in swim-min' and hookin' apples together when we wuz little chaps," pursued Bill, in a tone implying a mild reproach at the deceitfulness of an analogy that after such fair promise in early life had failed to complete itself in their later fortunes.

"Why, darn it all, you know him, Jim," he continued, dropping the tone of pensive reminiscence into which he had momentarily allowed himself to fall. "That pretty gal that sings in the Baptis' choir is his sister."

After a space of silent rumination and jerking of peanut shells upon the track, the group broke up its session, and adjourned by tacit understanding till the next train was due.

Arthur Steele was half an hour in getting to his father's house, because everybody he met on the street insisted on shaking hands with him. Everybody in Fairfield had known him since he was a boy, and had seen him grow up, and all were proud of him as a credit to the village and one of its most successful representatives in the big outside world. The young man had sense and sentiment enough to feel that the place he held in the esteem of his native community was a thing to feel more just pride in than any station he could win in the city, and as he walked along hand-shaking with old friends on this side and that, it was about his idea of a triumphal entry.

There was the dear old house, and as he saw it his memory of it started out vividly in his mind as if to attest how faithfully it had kept each detail. It never would come out so clearly at times when he was far away and needed its comfort. He opened the door softly. The sitting-room was empty, and darkened to keep out the heat and flies. The latched door stood open, and, hearing voices, he tiptoed across the floor with a guileful smile and, leaning through the doorway, saw his mother and sister sitting by the cool, lilac-shaded window, picking over currants for tea, and talking tranquilly. Being a provident young man, he paused a minute to let the pretty, peaceful scene impress itself upon his mind, to be remembered afterward for the cheer of bleak boarding-house Sunday afternoons. Then there was a sudden glancing up, a cry of joyful consternation, and the pan of currants rolled from Amy's lap like a broken necklace of rubies across the uncarpeted floor, while Arthur held mother and sister in a double embrace. And when at length the kissing had all been done, he established himself in his familiar boyish attitude on the window-seat, kicking his heels against the mopboard, with his elbows on his knees, and the three talked away steadily till the shop-bell rang, and Mrs. Steele sprang up in a panic, exclaiming: "Father will be here in five minutes, and the currants are on the floor. Come, Amy, quick; we must pick some more, and you shall help, Arthur."

But though he went out into the garden with them readily enough, it was quite another thing to make him pick currants, for he insisted on wandering all over the place and demanding what had become of everything he missed, and the history of everything new. And pretty soon Mr. Steele also appeared in the garden, having found no one in the house on reaching home. He had learned on the street that Arthur had arrived, and came out beaming. It was good to see the hearty affection with which the two shook hands.

The transition of the son from the pupilage of childhood and youth to the independence of manhood is often trying to the filial relation. Neither party fully realizes that the old relation is at an end, or just what the new basis is, or when the change takes place. The absence of the son for two or three years at this period has often the best results. He goes a boy and returns a man; the old relation is forgotten by both parties, and they readily fall into the new one. So it had fared with Arthur and his father.

"You've got a splendid lot of watermelons," said the former, as they arrived at the upper end of the ample garden in their tour of inspection.

"Yes," replied Mr. Steele, with a shrug; "only thus far they've been stolen a little faster than they 've ripened."

"What made you plant them so near the fence?"

"That was my blunder; but you see the soil is just the thing, better than lower down."

"Why don't you buy a bulldog?"

"I think it's more Christian to shoot a man outright than to set one of those devils on him. The breed ought to be extirpated."

"Put some ipecac in one or two. That 'll fetch 'em. I know how sick it made me once."

"I did; but more were stolen next night. I can't afford to medicate the whole village. Last night I sat up to watch till twelve o'clock, when mother made me go to bed."

"I'll watch to-night," said Arthur, "and give 'em a lesson with a good load of beans from the old shotgun."

"It would n't pay," replied his father. "I concluded last night that all the melons in the world were n't worth a night's sleep. They 'll have to go, and next year I 'll know more than to plant any."

"You go and help Amy pick currants, and let me talk to the boy a little," said Mrs. Steele, coming up and taking Arthur off for a promenade up the broad path.

"How pretty Amy has grown," said he, glancing with a pleased smile at the girl as she looked up at her father. "I suppose the young men are making sheep's eyes at her already."

"It does n't do them any good if they are," said Mrs. Steele, decisively. "She's only sixteen and a little girl yet, and has sense enough to know it." "What had she been crying for when I arrived? I saw her eyes were as red as the currants."

"Oh, dear!" replied Mrs. Steele, with a sigh of vexation, "it was her troubles at the Seminary. You know we let her go as a day scholar this summer. Some of the girls slight and snub her, and she is very unhappy about it."

"Why, what on earth can anybody have against Amy?" demanded Arthur, in indignant surprise.

"I suppose it's because some of the little hussies from the city have taken the notion that they won't associate with a mechanic's daughter, although Amy is very careful not to say it in so many words, for fear of hurting my feelings. But I suspect that's about where the shoe pinches."

Arthur muttered something between an oath and a grunt, expressing the emphasis of the one and the disgust of the other.

"I tell Amy it is foolish to mind their airs, but I 'm really afraid it spoils the poor girl's happiness."

"Why don't you send her away to boarding-school, if it is so serious a matter as that?"

"We can't afford it," said his mother, whereto Arthur promptly replied: —

"I 'll pay her expenses. I 'm making a good deal more money than I know what to do with, and I 'd really like the chance of doing a little good."

His mother glanced at him with affectionate pride.

"You 're always wanting to pay somebody's expenses, or make somebody a present. It's really unsafe, when you 're around, to indicate that one is n't perfectly contented. But you caught me up too quickly. I was going to say that we could n't spare her from home, anyhow. She's the light of the house. Besides that, if it comes to objections, I 've my notions about boarding-schools, and I 'd trust no girl of mine at one that wasn't within sight of her home. No, she'll have to keep on here and bear it as she can, though it's pretty hard, I know. The trouble to-night was, that Lina Maynard, who is one of the older girls, has invited nearly everybody at the Seminary except Amy to a birthday party to-morrow. Little minx, I could shake her. And the worst of it is, Amy thinks there 's nobody like Lina Maynard."

After tea it was still light, and Arthur and Amy went out to walk. In spite of the ten years difference in their ages, he always enjoyed her company as well as anybody's in the world, because she was so refreshingly childlike and natural. Every chord of feeling answered so true and clear to the touch, that to talk with her was like playing on a musical instrument, only far more delightful. Arthur had looked forward to walks and talks with Amy as among the jolliest treats of his vacation. She tried her best now to seem light-hearted, and to entertain him with the local gossip, for which he always depended on her. But she could n't simulate the vivacious and eager air that had been the chief charm of her talk. As he glanced down, he was grieved to see the sad set of the pretty child face at his side, and how still had grown the fountain of smiles in the hazel eyes that were wont to send their ripples outward in constant succession. It is to be feared that under his breath he applied some very ungentlemanly language to Lina Maynard and her clique, whose nonsensical ill-nature had hurt this little girl's feelings so sorely, and incidentally spoiled half the fun of his vacation.

"There, there, you need n't talk any more," he finally said, rather rudely, half vexed with her, as helpful people are wont to be with those they can do nothing to help.

She looked up in grieved surprise, but before he could speak again, they came face to face with a party of girls coming from the direction of the Seminary.

There were six or seven of them, perhaps, but Arthur only got the impression of one and a lot of others. The one was a rather tall girl of lithe figure and unusually fine carriage. Her olive complexion was lighted with great black eyes that rested on you with an air of imperturbable assurance, as penetrating as it was negligent. She was talking, and her companions were listening and laughing. As they came face to face with Arthur and Amy, he saw that they barely noticed her, while glancing at him rather curiously, with the boldness of girls in a crowd of their own sex. They evidently observed that he was a stranger to the village, and of quite a different style from that of the country bumpkins and rural exquisites they were accustomed to meeting. There was in the big black eyes, as they had met his a moment, a suggestion of interest that was strangely flattering, and left a trace of not unpleasant agitation.

"Who was that?" he asked, as they passed out of hearing.

He only thought of asking for one, although there were six, nor she apparently of answering differently.

"Lina Maynard. They are 'Sem.' girls."

It was a dulled voice she spoke in, quite unlike her usual eager way of giving information. She, poor thing, was terribly afraid he would ask her why they did not seem acquainted with her, and it would have been a painful humiliation to have explained. Arthur was conscious that he no longer had exactly the same feeling of merely contemptuous annoyance toward Lina Maynard, on account of her treatment of Amy. He sympathized as much with his sister, of course, but somehow felt that to be recognized by Lina Maynard was not such a childish ambition as he had taken for granted.

It was dusk when they reached home and found Mr. and Mrs. Steele on the piazza, which served as an outdoor parlor in summer, with a neighbor who had dropped in to see Arthur. So he got out his cigar-case and told stories of city life and interesting law cases to an intent audience till the nine o'clock bell rang, and the neighbor "guessed he 'd go home," and forthwith proved that his guess was right by going.

"Gad, I'd forgotten all about the watermelons! Perhaps they 're at 'em already!" cried Arthur, jumping up and running around the end of the piazza to the garden.

When he returned, it was to meet a combined volley of protestations against his foolish project of keeping watch all night, from his father, his mother, and Amy. But he declared it was no use talking; and where were the gun and the beans? So they adjourned from the piazza, a lamp was lit, the articles were hunted up, and the gun duly loaded with a good charge of powder and a pint of hard beans. It was about ten o'clock when Arthur, with a parting protest from his mother, went out into the garden, lugging his gun and a big easy-chair, while Amy followed, bringing one or two wraps, and a shocking old overcoat hunted up in the garret, for the chill hours after midnight.

The front of Mr. Steele's lot abutted on one of the pleasantest and most thickly housed streets of the village; but the lot was deep, and the rear end rested on a road bordered by few houses, and separated from the garden by a rail fence easy to climb over or through. The watermelon patch was located close to this fence, and thus in full view and temptingly accessible from the road.

Undoubtedly the human conscience, and especially the boyish article, recognizes a broad difference between the theft of growing crops—of apples on the trees, for instance, or corn on the stalk, or melons in the field—and that of other species of property. The surreptitious appropriation of the former class of chattels is known in common parlance as "hooking," while the graver term "stealing" describes the same process in other cases. The distinction may arise from a feeling that, so long as crops remain rooted to the ground, they are nature's, not man's, and that nature can't be regarded as forming business contracts with some individuals to the exclusion of others, or in fact as acceding to any of our human distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*, however useful we find them. Ethical philosophers may refuse to concede the sanction of the popular distinction here alluded to between "hooking" and stealing; but, after all, ethics is not a deductive but an empirical science, and what are morals but a collection of usages, like orthography and orthoepy? However that may be, it is the duty of the writer in this instance merely to call attention to the prevalent popular sentiment on the subject, without any attempt to justify it, and to state that Arthur Steele had been too recently a boy not to sympathize with it. And accordingly he laid his plans to capture the expected depredators to-night from practical considerations wholly, and quite without any sense of moral reprobation toward them.

Closely adjoining the edge of the melon-patch was a patch of green corn, standing ten feet high, and at the fullest perfection of foliage. This Arthur selected for his ambush, its position being such that he could cut off the retreat to the fence of any person who had once got among the melons. Hewing down a hill of corn in the second row from the front, he made a comfortable place for his easy-chair. Amy lingered for a while, enjoying the excitement of the occasion, and they talked in whispers; but finally Arthur sent her in, and as her dress glimmered away down the garden path, he settled himself comfortably for his watch.

In the faint moonlight he could just descry the dark shapes of the melons on the ground in front of him. The

crickets were having a high time in the stubble around, and the night air drew sweet autumnal exhalations from the ground; for autumn begins by night a long time before it does by day. The night wind rustled in the corn with a crisp articulateness he had never noticed in daytime, and he felt like an eavesdropper. Then for a while he heard the music of some roving serenaders, down in the village, and grew pensive with the vague reminiscences of golden youth, romance, and the sweet past that nightly music suggests,—vague because apparently they are not reminiscences of the individual but of the race, a part of the consciousness and ideal of humanity. At last the music was succeeded by the baying of a dog in some distant farmyard, and then, ere the ocean of silence had fairly smoothed its surface over that, a horse began to kick violently in a neighboring barn. Some time after, a man chopped some kindlings in a shed a couple of lots off. Gradually, however, the noises ceased like the oft-returning yet steadily falling ebb of the tide, and Arthur experienced how many degrees there are of silence, each more utter than the last, so that the final and absolute degree must be something to which the utmost quiet obtainable on earth is uproar. One by one the lights went out in the houses, till the only ones left were in the windows of the Seminary, visible over the tree-tops a quarter of a mile away.

“The girls keep late hours,” thought Arthur. And from that he fell to thinking of Lina Maynard and the careless, almost insolent, grace of her manner, and that indifferent yet penetrating glance of hers. Where did she come from? Probably from California, or the far West; he had heard that the girls out there were of a bolder, more unconventional type than at the East. What a pity she did not fancy Amy!

What was that moving across the melon-patch? He reached for his gun. It was only a cat, though, after all. The slight noise in the corn-patch attracted the animal's attention, and it came across and poked its head into the opening where Arthur sat. As the creature saw him, its start of surprise would have shattered the nervous system of anything but a cat. It stood half thrown back on its haunches, its ears flattened, its eyes glaring in a petrification of amazement. Arthur sat motionless as marble, laughing inwardly. For full two minutes the two stared at each other without moving a muscle, and then, without relaxing its tense attitude, the cat by almost imperceptible degrees withdrew one paw and then another, and, thus backing out of the corn-patch, turned around when at a safe distance and slunk away.

A few minutes later a dog, that enthusiast in perfumes, jumped through the fence and trotted across the melon-patch, his nose to the ground, making a collection of evening smells. Arthur expected nothing but that he would scent his neighborhood, find him out, and set up a barking. But, chancing to strike the cat's trail, off went the dog on a full run with nose to the ground.

Such were the varying humors of the night. After the episode of the dog, feeling a little chilly, Arthur enveloped himself in the tattered old overcoat and must have dropped into a nap. Suddenly he awoke. Within ten feet of him, just in the act of stooping over a huge melon, was a woman's figure. He saw the face clearly as she rose. Immortal gods! it was—But I am anticipating.

The discipline at Westville Seminary had been shockingly lax since the long illness of the principal had left the easy-going first assistant teacher at the head of affairs. The girls ran all over the rules,—had private theatricals, suppers, and games of all sorts in their rooms at all hours of day or night. In the course of the evening whose events in another sphere of life have been narrated, several girls called at Lina Maynard's room to notify her of the “spread” at Nell Barber's, No. 49, at eleven o'clock. They found her sitting in a low rocking-chair, with an open letter in her hand and a very pensive, discontented expression of countenance.

“Does he press for an answer, Lina? We 're just in time to advise you,” cried Nell Barber.

“Don't say Yes unless his eyes are blue,” drawled a brunette.

“Unless they 're black, you mean,” sharply amended a bright blonde.

“Make him elope with you,” suggested Nell, “It will be such fun to have a real rope-ladder elopement at the Seminary, and we'll all sit up and see it.”

“Oh, do, do, Lina!” chorused the others.

But Lina, apparently too much chagrined at something to be in a mood for jests, sat with her eyebrows petulantly contracted, her feet thrust out, and the hand holding the letter hanging by her side, her whole attitude indicating despondence.

“Still pensive! It can't be he's faithless!” exclaimed Nell.

“Faithless to those eyes! I should say not,” cried the blonde, whom Lina called her sweetheart, and who claimed to be “engaged” to her according to boarding-school fashion.

“Don't mind him, dear,” she went on, throwing herself on the floor, clasping her hands about Lina's knee, and leaning her cheek on it. “You make me so jealous. Have n't you got me, and ain't I enough?”

“Plenty enough, dear,” said Lina, stroking her cheek. “This is only from my brother Charley.”

“The one at Watertown 'Sem.'?”

“Yes,” said Lina; “and oh, girls,” she went on, with gloomy energy, “we don't have any good times at all compared with those boys. They do really wicked things, hook apples, and carry off people's gates and signs, and screw up tutors' doors in the night, and have fights with what he calls 'townies,'—I don't know exactly what they are,—and everything. I thought before that we were doing some things too, but we 're not, compared with all that, and I shall be so ashamed when I meet him at home not to have anything to tell except little bits of things.”

A depressing pause followed. Lina's disparaging view of achievements in the way of defying the proprieties, of which all the girls had been very proud, cast a profound gloom over the circle. The blonde seemed to voice the common sentiment when she said, resting her chin on Lina's knee, and gazing pensively at the wall:—

“Oh, dear! that comes of being girls. We might as well be good and done with it. We can't be bad so as to amount to anything.”

“Good or bad, we must eat,” said Nell Barber. “I must go and get the spread ready. I forgot all about it, Lina; but we came in just to invite you. Eleven sharp, remember. Three knocks, a pause, and another, you know. Come, girls.”



The brunette followed her, but Lina's little sweetheart remained.

"What have they got?" demanded the former listlessly.

"Oh, Nell has a jar of preserves from home, and I smuggled up a plate of dried beef from tea, and cook let us have some crackers and plates. We tried hard to get a watermelon there was in the pantry, but cook said she did n't dare let us have it. It's for dinner to-morrow."

Lina's eyes suddenly became introspective; then after a moment she rose slowly and stood in her tracks with an expression of deep thought, absent-mindedly took one step, then another, and after a pause a third, finally pulling up before the mirror, into which she stared vacantly for a moment, and then muttered defiantly as she turned away:—

"We 'll see, Master Charley."

"Lina Maynard, what's the matter with you?" cried the blonde, who had watched the pantomime with open mouth and growing eyes.

Lina turned and looked at her thoughtfully a moment, and then said with decisiveness:—

"You just go to Nell's, my dear, and say I 'm coming pretty soon; and if you say anything else, I 'll—I 'll never marry you."

The girls were in the habit of doing as Lina wanted them to, and the blonde went, pouting with unappeased curiosity.

To gain exit from the Seminary was a simple matter in these lax days, and five minutes later Lina was walking rapidly along the highway, her lips firm set, but her eyes apprehensively reconnoitring the road ahead, with frequent glances to each side and behind. Once she got over the stone wall at the roadside in a considerable panic and crouched in the dewy grass while a belated villager passed, but it was without further adventure that she finally turned into the road leading behind Mr. Steele's lot, and after a brief search identified the garden where she remembered seeing some particularly fine melons, when out walking a day or two previous. There they lay, just the other side the fence, faintly visible in the dim light. She could not help congratulating herself, by the way, on the excellent behavior of her nerves, whose tense, fine-strung condition was a positive luxury, and she then and there understood how men might delight in desperate risks for the mere sake of the exalted and supreme sense of perfect self-possession that danger brings to some natures. Not, indeed, that she stopped to indulge any psychological speculations. The coast was clear; not a footfall or hoof-stroke sounded from the road, and without delay she began to look about for a wide place between the rails where she might get through. Just as she found it, she was startled by an unmistakable human snore, which seemed to come from a patch of high corn close to the melons, and she was fairly puzzled until she observed, about ten rods distant in the same line, an open attic window. That explained its origin, and with a passing self-congratulation that she had made up her mind not to marry a man that snored, she began to crawl through the fence. When halfway through the thought struck her,—wasn't it like any other stealing, after all? This crawling between rails seemed dreadfully so. Her attitude, squeezed between two rails and half across the lower one, was neither graceful nor comfortable, and perhaps that fact shortened her scruples.

"It can't be really stealing, for I don't feel like a thief," was the logic that settled it, and the next moment she had the novel sensation of having both feet surreptitiously and feloniously on another person's land. She decidedly did n't relish it, but she would go ahead now and think of it afterward. She was pretty sure she never would do it again, anyhow, experiencing that common sort of repentance beforehand for the thing she was about to do, the precise moral value of which it would be interesting to inquire. It ought to count for something, for, if it does n't hinder the act, at least it spoils the fun of it. Here was a melon at her feet; should she take it? That was a bigger one further on, and her imperious conscientiousness compelled her to go ten steps further into the enemy's country to get it, for now that she was committed to the undertaking, she was bound to do the best she could.

To stoop, to break the vine, and to secure the melon were an instant's work; but as she bent, the high corn before her waved violently and a big farmer-looking man in a slouch hat and shocking old coat sprang out and seized her by the arm, with a grip not painful but sickeningly firm, exclaiming as he did so:—

"Wal, I swan ter gosh, if 't ain't a gal!"

Lina dropped the melon, and, barely recalling the peculiar circumstances in time to suppress a scream, made a silent, desperate effort to break away. But her captor's hold was not even shaken, and he laughed at the impotence of her attempt. In all her petted life she had never been held a moment against her will, and it needed not the added considerations that this man was a coarse, unknown boor, the place retired, the time midnight, and herself in the position of a criminal, to give her a feeling of abject terror so great as to amount to positive nausea, as she realized her utter powerlessness in his hands.

"So you've been a-stealin' my melons, hey?" he demanded gruffly.

The slight shake with which the question was enforced deprived her of the last vestige of dignity and self-assertion. She relapsed into the mental condition of a juvenile culprit undergoing correction. Now that she was caught, she no longer thought of her offense as venial. The grasp of her captor seemed to put an end to all possible hairsplitting on that point, and prove that it was nothing more nor less than stealing, and a sense of guilt left her without any moral support against her fright. She was only conscious of utter humiliation, and an abject desire to beg off on any terms.

"What do you go round stealin' folks's melons for, young woman? Don't yer folks bring yer up better 'n that? It's a dodrotted shame to 'em, ef they don't. What did ye want with the melons? Don't they give yer enough to eat ter home, hey?"

"We were going to have some supper, sir," she replied, in a scared, breathless tone, with a little hope of propitiating him by being extremely civil and explicit in her replies.

"Who was havin' supper to this time er night?" he snorted incredulously.

"We girls," was the faint reply.

"What gals?"

Had she got to tell where she came from and be identified? She couldn't, she wouldn't. But again came that dreadful shake, and the words faltered out:—

"Over at the Seminary, sir."

"Whew! so ye 're one er them, are ye? What's yer name?"

Cold dew stood on the poor girl's forehead. She was silent. He might kill her, but she would n't disgrace her father's name.

"What's yer name?" he repeated, with another shake.

She was still silent, though limp as a rag in his grasp.

"Wal," said he sharply, after waiting a half minute to see if she would answer, "I guess ye'll be more confidin' like to the jedge when he inquiries in the mornin'. A night in the lock-up makes folks wonderful civil. Now I'll jest trouble ye to come along to the police office," and he walked her along by the arm toward the house.

As the horrible degradation to which she was exposed flashed upon Lina, the last remnant of her self-control gave way, and, hanging back with all her might against his hand, she burst into sobs.

"Oh, don't, don't! It will kill me. I'll tell you my name. It's Lina Maynard. My father is a rich merchant in New York, Broadway, No. 743. He will give you anything, if you let me go. Anything you want. Oh, please don't! Oh, don't! I could n't! I could n't!"

In this terror-stricken, wild-eyed girl, her face streaming with tears, and every lineament convulsed with abject dread, there was little enough to remind Arthur Steele of the queenly maiden who had favored him with a glance of negligent curiosity that afternoon. He stopped marching her along and said reflectively:—

"Lina Maynard, hey! Then you must be the gal that's down on Amy Steele and would n't ask her to the party to-morrow. Say, ain't yer the one?"

Lina was too much bewildered by the sudden change of tack to do more than stammer inarticulately. I am afraid that in her terror she would have been capable of denying it, if she had thought that would help her. Her captor reflected more deeply, scratched his head, and finally, assuming a diplomatic attitude by thrusting his hands in his pocket, remarked:—

"I s'pose ye 'd like it dummed well ef I was to let yer go and say nothin' more about it. I reelly don't s'pose I 'd orter do it; but it riles me to see Amy comin' home cryin' every day, and I 'll tell ye what I 'll do. Ef you 'll ask her to yer fandango to-morrer, and be friends with her arterward so she 'll come home happy and cheerful like, I 'll let ye go, and if ye don't, I 'll put ye in jug overnight, sure's taxes. Say Yes or No now, quick!"

"Yes, yes!" Lina cried, with frantic eagerness.

There was scarcely any possible ransom he could have asked that she would not have instantly given. She dared not credit her ears, and stood gazing at him in intense, appealing suspense, as if he might be about to revoke his offer. But instead of that, he turned down the huge collar of the old overcoat, took it off, threw it on the ground, and, turning up the slouch of his hat, stood before her a very good-looking and well-dressed young gentleman, whom she at once recognized and at length identified in her mind as the one walking with Amy that afternoon, which now seemed weeks ago. He bowed very low, and said earnestly enough, though smiling:—

"I humbly beg your pardon."

Lina stared at him with dumb amazement, and he went on:—

"I am Arthur Steele. I came home on a vacation to-day, and was sitting up to watch father's melon-patch for the pure fun of it, expecting to catch some small boys, and when I caught you, I couldn't resist the temptation of a little farce. As for Amy, that only occurred to me at the last; and if you think it unfair, you may have your promise back."

Lina had now measurably recovered her equanimity, and, ignoring his explanation, demanded, as she looked around:—

"How am I to get out of this dreadful place?" mentally contemplating meanwhile the impossibility of clambering through that fence with a young gentleman looking on.

"I will let down the bars," he said, and they turned toward the fence.

"Let's see, this is your melon, is it not?" he observed, stooping to pick up the booty Lina had dropped in her first panic. "You must keep that anyhow. You 've earned it."

Since the tables turned so unexpectedly in her favor, Lina had recovered her dignity in some degree, and had become very freezing toward this young man, by whom she began to feel she had been very badly treated. In this reaction of indignation she had really almost forgotten how she came in the garden at all. But this reference to the melon quite upset her new equanimity, and as Arthur grinned broadly she blushed and stood there in awful confusion. Finally she blurted out:—

"I didn't want your stupid melon. I only wanted some fun. I can't explain, and I don't care whether you understand it or not."

Tears of vexation glittered in her eyes. He sobered instantly, and said, with an air of the utmost deference:—

"Pardon me for laughing, and do me the justice to believe that I 'm in no sort of danger of misunderstanding you. I hooked too many melons myself as a boy not to sympathize perfectly. But you must really let me carry the melon home for you. What would the girls say, if you returned empty-handed?"

"Well, I will take the melon," she said, half defiantly; "but I should prefer not to have your company."

He did not reply till he had let down the bars, and then said:—

"The streets are not safe at this hour, and you 've had frights enough for one night."

She made no further objections, and with the watermelon poised on his shoulder he walked by her side, neither speaking a word, till they reached the gate of the Seminary grounds. There she stopped, and, turning, extended her hands for the melon. As he gave it to her their eyes met a moment, and their mutual appreciation of the humor of the situation expressed itself in an irrepressible smile that seemed instantly to make them acquainted, and she responded almost kindly to his low "Good-evening."

Amy came home jubilant next day. Lina Maynard had invited her to her party, and had been ever so good to her, and there was nobody in the world like Lina. Arthur listened and said nothing. All the next week it was the same story of Lina's beauty, good-nature, cleverness, and perfections generally, and, above all, her goodness to herself, Amy Steele. Lina was indeed fulfilling her promise with generous over-measure. And after once taking up with Amy, the sweet simplicity and enthusiastic loyalty of the child to herself won her heart completely. The other girls wondered, but Lina Maynard's freaks always set the fashion, and Amy, to her astonishment and boundless delight, found herself the pet of the Seminary. The little blonde, Lina's sweetheart, alone rebelled against the new order of things and was furiously jealous, for which she was promptly snubbed by Lina, and Amy taken into her place. And meanwhile Lina caught herself several times wondering whether Arthur Steele was satisfied with the way she was keeping her pledge.

It was Wednesday night, and Arthur was to return to New York Thursday morning. Although he had walked the street every afternoon and had met nearly all the other girls at the Seminary, he had not seen Lina again. His mother, whom he took about a good deal on pleasure drives, seriously wondered if the eagerness of city life was really spoiling his faculty for leisurely pleasures. He always seemed to be looking out ahead for something, instead of quietly enjoying the passing sights and scenery. He had consented to accompany Amy to a little church sociable on the evening before his departure. It was a species of entertainment which he detested, but he thought he might possibly meet Lina there, as Amy had said some of the Seminary girls would be present.

At once, on entering the vestry, he caught sight of her at the other end of the room among a group of girls. At the sound of the closing door she glanced up with an involuntary gesture of expectancy, and their eyes met. She looked confused, and instantly averted her face. There was plenty of recognition in her expression, but she did not bow, the real reason being that she was too much embarrassed to think of it. But during the week he had so many times canvassed the chances of her recognizing him when they should meet that he had become quite morbid about it, and manifested the usual alacrity of persons in that state of mind in jumping at conclusions they wish to avoid. He had been a fool to think that she would recognize him as an acquaintance. What had he done but to insult her, and what associations save distressing ones could she have with him? He would exchange a few greetings with old friends, and then quietly slink off home and go to packing up. He was rather sorry for his mother; she would feel so badly to have him moody and cross on the last evening at home. Just then some one touched his sleeve, and looking around he saw Amy. She put her flushed little face close to his ear and whispered:—

"Lina said I might introduce you. Is n't she beautiful, though, to-night? Of course you 'll fall in love with her, but you must n't try to cut me out."

Arthur was Amy's ideal of gentlemanly ease and polish, and she had been very proud of having so fine a city brother to introduce to the girls. Imagine her astonishment and chagrin when she saw him standing before Lina with an exaggeration of the agitated, sheepish air the girls made such fun of in their rural admirers! But if that surprised her, what was her amazement to see Lina looking equally confused, and blushing to where her neck curved beneath the lace, although the brave eyes met his fairly! A wise instinct told Amy that here was something she didn't understand, and she had better go away, and she did.

"The melon was very good, Mr. Steele," said Lina demurely, with a glimmer of fun in her black eyes.

"Miss Maynard, I don't know how I shall beg pardon, or humble myself enough for my outrageous treatment of you," burst forth Arthur. "I don't know what I should have done if I had n't had an opportunity for apologizing pretty soon, and now I scarcely dare look you in the face."

His chagrin and self-reproach were genuine enough, but he might have left off that last, for he had n't been looking anywhere else since he came into the room.

"You did shake me rather hard," she said, with a smiling contraction of the black eyebrows.

Good heavens! had he actually shaken this divine creature,—this Cleopatra of a girl, whose queenly brow gave her hair the look of a coronet! He groaned in spirit, and looked so self-reproachful and chagrined that she laughed.

"I don't know about forgiving you for that, but I 'm so grateful you did n't take me to the lock-up that I suppose I ought not to mind the shaking."

"But, Miss Maynard, you surely don't think I was in earnest about that?" he exclaimed, in strenuous deprecation.

"I don't know, I 'm sure," she said doubtfully. "You looked as if you were capable of it."

He was going on to protest still farther when she interrupted him, and said laughingly:—

"You take to apologizing so naturally that I 'd nearly forgotten that it was not you but I who was the real culprit. I must really make a few excuses myself before I hear any more from you."

And then she told him all about her brother Charley's letter, and the spirit of emulation that had got her into trouble. It was easy enough to joke about certain aspects of the matter; but when she came to talk in plain language about her performances that night, she became so much embarrassed and stumbled so badly that Arthur felt very ill at ease.

"And when I think what *would* have happened if I 'd fallen into anybody's hands but yours, you seem almost like a deliverer." At which Arthur had another access of humiliation to think how un-chivalrously he had treated this princess in disguise. How he would like to catch somebody else abusing her that way! And then he told her all that he had thought and felt about her during the stealing scene, and she gave her side of the drama, to their intense mutual interest.

"Is n't it about time we were going home, Arthur?" said Amy's voice.

He glanced up. The room was nearly empty, and the party from the Seminary were waiting for Lina.

"Miss Maynard, may I call upon you in New York during vacation?"

"I should be happy to see you."

"*Au revoir*, then!"

"*Au revoir!*" "*Au revoir!*"

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOOKING WATERMELONS \*\*\*

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