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An Idyll of All Fools' Day



An Idyll of All Fools' Day

By
Josephine Daskam Bacon

Author of "Memoirs of a Baby,"
"The Madness of Philip," etc.



With numerous illustrations

By R. M. Crosby

New York

Dodd, Mead and Company

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To
A. A. B.

this bit of busy nonsense
is dedicated.

J. D. B.

ILLUSTRATIONS

"Only her shriek of terror saved them from the stone wall" (p, 47) Frontispiece

Facing page "'Here we are at last, Nette dear, dressed in our best for you!'"

"'On the right,' he began didactically"

"The red-headed boy bounded beside them, whooping madly"

"At the risk of losing his straight course he stole a rapid glance at her"

"'Jump! Jump!' he cried hoarsely"

"'Well, here we are!' he said tentatively"

"Nette, wringing her hair and murmuring incoherent abnegations"

"'Mademoiselle,' he began, 'you are--you are--' he paused, for genuine lack of words"

"'This gentleman here will take you down directly'"

THE ESCAPE

I.

THE ESCAPE



"TWAS a bloomy morning, all crocuses and tree buds, and Antony sniffed it into his nostrils thankfully, even while he scowled.

"Come, come!" said his Uncle Julius, a wealthy old gentleman buttoned firmly into a white vest, "what a face! It is nothing so terrible that I ask of you! One would think it a hanging matter, to beau a pretty young girl about the place!"

"You know that I do not care for schoolgirls, Uncle Julius," said Antony severely.

"Fiddlestick!" his Uncle Julius cried, "and what are you sir, but a school boy, I should like to know? What shall we hear next, I wonder?"

Antony put on some fresh grey gloves with a sigh.

"Schoolgirl! Schoolgirl!" his uncle repeated mimickingly, "she will not be reciting her lessons, I suppose!"

Antony buttoned his gloves.

"Or if she does, it will be your fault, sir," pursued his uncle.



Antony selected a slender walking stick from a rack of many, and reviewed his collar with a critical hand.

"The young lady's topics of conversation will be a matter of indifference to me, Uncle Julius," said he, "I assure you."

"And I assure *you*," cried Uncle Julius, "that if we were not on this open porch, I should be strongly tempted to apply that stick of yours where, as we used to say, it would do the most good!"

Antony adjusted his coat trimly and started down the steps.

"But since we are upon this open porch, let us, Uncle Julius," said he, "go where duty calls us. *En avant!*"

He strode along the flagged walk with Uncle Julius puffing behind him, loquaciously indignant.

"Look at your mates, sir, as we pass them, and notice how enviously they smile," he urged the youth, who replied shortly that he observed them.



"In my time, I can tell you," said Uncle Julius, "there was no shilly shallying in these matters. We had more blood. Let any college lad be given a free day--and a fine day, too--and one of the prettiest girls that ever wore a petticoat to enjoy It with him, and he was the envy of all his fellows. And I believe," he ended with a fine optimism, "that it is so now! Not one of these lads but would change places with you at a nod."

"But you will not nod, my dear Uncle Julius," Antony responded calmly, "and so these lads--as you so felicitously call them--will never lose the opportunity I would cheerfully relin----"

"Hush! there she is!" his uncle whispered, and Antony at once removed his hat with a lordly and accomplished gesture, which Uncle Julius noted with unwilling admiration.

"Well, here we are!" he said, with an attempt at prankish levity in which he received no assistance from Antony. "Here we are at last, Nette dear, dressed in our best for you!"

"So I see. And this is, I suppose, your young nephew, Mr. Julius?" said the person at whose face Antony had not yet looked.

If she had intended to remedy this omission she could not have devised a more efficacious means. Not only did Antony look at her: he stared. From the topmost strand of her braided chestnut hair to the lowest dimple in her olive cheek--for she was of that irritatingly attractive class of females that combines deep-set violet eyes with a gipsy colouring--every curve of her audacious body spelled youth, unmitigated youth, and her tone was correspondingly insulting.



"Here we are at last, Nette dear, dressed in our best for you!"

"I am truly pleased to meet you," he said with the air of one to whom experience has lent tolerance.

"I should truly never have guessed it," she returned promptly with an amused smile.

Antony flushed. An impudent chit, this. A girl to be taught her place, and that right early.

"I am to have, I believe," he said, with a fine air of disregard for any previous conversation, "the honour of escort--of show--of, er, of entertaining you for the day."

"That distinction is indeed yours," she replied gravely, "I have no doubt that I shall be escort--show--er, entertained most agreeably."

With this insulting remark she but half concealed a yawn and Antony's blood boiled within him.

"Come," chirped Uncle Julius with a fatuous chuckle, "we are getting along famously! What did I tell you? Yes, indeed!"

To this idiotic speech neither his nephew nor that nephew's new acquaintance made any further reply than two eloquent but totally ineffective glances. They were ineffective because the glance as a medium of expression had not been included in Uncle Julius's aesthetic training.

"And what are you going to do first, hey? Where does the great day begin--see the town sights, I suppose?" this Imbecile old relative maundered on.

"It will give me great pleasure, if she wishes to see them," said Antony coldly, "to point out the various objects of local interest to Miss----"

"Good gracious!" Uncle Julius interrupted, "what's come over the boy? 'Miss,' indeed! Didn't I tell you that this is my old godmother's own daughter's stepdaughter? 'Miss!' Her name is Nette."

"Ah," said Antony.

"And his," continued Uncle Julius, with a flip of his finger at his nephew and a wink at the young lady, "is Tony. Let's have no formality among chicks of your age. No, no; Tony's his name."

"Indeed!" the young lady observed, gazing critically at the embarrassed possessor of the cognomen, "and a quaint little name, I am sure."

She smiled with a perfunctory brightness and continued in some inexplicable manner to look down at her escort--though had she been presented with ten thousand dollars for every one of the inches over five feet in her height she would not have appeared before the world as any considerable heiress. The object of this remarkably achieved envisagement writhed inwardly. Uncle Julius rubbed his hands in maudlin delight at her appreciation of his nephew's baptismal acquirements, and she continued, prettily stifling a second yawn between her white little pointed teeth:

"Since our young friend naturally pants to show us the beauties of his Alma Mater, let us by all means begin with them," *and get them over*, said the strangled yawn.

Antony bit his tongue in his seething rage and the pain turned him crimson and wet-eyed. This did not escape the intolerable chit and her deep-set violet eyes twinkled maliciously.

"It will not be at all necessary to see"--he began, when Uncle Julius's round, astonished eyes interrupted them.

"He is not going to show 'us' at all," explained this worthy but misguided man, "he is going to show you, my dear. I knew all these sights well forty years ago. Dear, dear! yes, indeed."

Antony could have choked him for the apprehension that passed over his young charge's face.

"You will not desert me, Mr. Julius?" she cried with a melting glance that visibly warmed the cockles of his infatuated old heart, "you can't mean to leave me"--*to the awkward attentions of this red faced boy!* her eyebrows continued the appeal, intelligible only to Antony.

"But that's just what I do mean, Miss Nette," he assured her, winking incredibly, "I am this moment due at my trustees' meeting. I'm off directly. You must"--and he flapped his hand with airy abandon--"endure the time without me!"

Here he smiled with disgusting coquetry and pattered like a plump white rabbit down the shady brick path. As they stared blankly after him he turned and waved his stick at them.

"Oh, I'm no spoil-sport!" he crowed, and rounded his corner. They were left alone.

"Silly old ass!" Antony muttered, and then glared angrily at the spot the buxom gentleman had quitted.

"I beg your pardon?" said the young lady, "did you speak?"

"Not to you," he replied briefly. She shook out a fluffy white parasol and under its becoming shadow looked curiously about her.

"Indeed--to whom, then," she inquired.

Antony was silent.

"Minx!" he thought.

"You are not at all like your uncle, are you?" she began, after a moment of this pregnant silence. Then after another moment she added absently, "he has such pleasant, easy manners!"

Antony settled his fleckless straw hat firmly upon his head and tightened his grip on his stick.

"My uncle," he began with great control, "is an estimable man. His intentions are of the best--that is to say, I have always believed them to be--but like too many others he does not always carry out his intentions. Take, for instance, this present situation. It was evidently his intention to give you (and me) a pleasurable day. It is quite obvious to me, at least, that he has failed in his intention--to a certain extent," he added politely, for he had by now talked himself into his usual superior calm. His eyes were fixed upon the tip of the young lady's parasol, some distance below him, as she sat on the brick steps of the old porch before which he stood, her slender figure leaning against a white pillar.

"Now, I have a suggestion to make," he continued, quite pleasantly by this time. "I can plainly see that my uncle's somewhat Philistine scheme for my showing you about the place is likely to bore you extremely. Let us, then, omit that part of the programme altogether. We must try to think of something that will attract you, however," Antony had by this time a fairly paternal interest in the young lady, "and if you will help me out, no doubt we can. Perhaps," he concluded tentatively, "you would really prefer to remain by yourself, and not be entertained at all?"

He paused, and as no reply appeared to be forthcoming, slowly lowered his eyes along the fluffy parasol till they reached the level of those deep-set violet ones. He could not have recognised them by their colour, however, for they were closed; the gentle rise and fall of the young lady's breast, the placid and uncharacteristic kindness of her half-smile made the reason for this closing only too obvious. She was sleeping.

Antony swallowed hard. Sheer rage choked him and his collar became intolerably tight. His fingers itched along the supple stick he carried and a longing to employ it in an absolutely unheard of manner nearly flooded him off his feet. "Where it would do the most good"--the obnoxious phrase flashed luminously across his mind.



The sudden silence had its natural effect upon the young person on the brick steps. Slowly, inquiringly, her eyelids lifted, and the peculiar, rain-washed effect of those dark blue eyes, so startling above her olive cheeks, was not lost upon Antony.

"Not entertained at all?" she repeated vaguely, diving under the ruffles of the parasol to cover the positively unconcealable paroxysm of the third yawn, "oh, on the contrary! Really. I am delightfully entertained, Mr.--Mr. Tony!"

"So it appears," he returned acidly. A soft dark colour suffused her gipsy cheeks, but she brazened it out. She seemed to possess no sense of shame whatever.

"This sun makes one almost sleepy," she said calmly, "and I sat up quite late last night, too--playing picquet with your uncle. He is a poor sleeper."

"Indeed. I am not acquainted with his habits," Antony responded. "We will look at the buildings now, I think, if you are sufficiently rested." A fell purpose had suddenly found itself in his humiliated breast. This insolent young puss should have cause indeed for drowsiness.

She sprang instantly to her feet with a quick and pleasing muscular co-ordination, which, again, was not lost upon Antony. She wore a white flannel costume dotted with a dull blue--the blue of Canton china. Of this colour, too, was the silk stocking that flashed down the steps above her low-cut shoes. A ludicrous and daring colour for a brunette--until you encountered her eyes.

"I am quite ready," she said demurely, and Antony started briskly down the street.

"On the right," he began didactically, "you will see Wadsworth Hall, the building of applied sciences. It was presented by the two sons of Mr. Ezra Bement Wadsworth in memory of their father, a prominent graduate. It cost three hundred thousand dollars and is one of the most completely equipped buildings of its kind in the country, I believe."

"How interesting!" she murmured.

"Yes," Antony agreed, "it *is* interesting."

"To what are the sciences applied?" she inquired placidly.

"To--er, to--really, I have never gone into it so far as that," Antony returned, biting his lip, "I am not interested in science myself. But that is what it is generally called: it is on a bronze tablet on the corner. It is probably only an expression."

"Ah, yes, probably," she assented.

"Beyond it and a shade to the left you will see," he continued, with a wave of his stick, "Mansfield Hall. It is a dormitory, occupied by sophomores."

"And who presented that?" his companion inquired, gazing respectfully at the end of his stick.

"I do not know," he informed her briefly.

"Oh, you do not know," she repeated in her low voice. Something in the falling inflection caused her guide to wriggle uneasily.

"Nobody knows," he added, rashly. "I should think nobody would want to, it is so hideous."

"To be sure," she said. "And sophomores live there. Are you perhaps a sophomore, Mr. Tony?"

"I?" Antony exclaimed; then in level tones, "I am a senior."

"Really!" she murmured. "I suppose that means that you are one of the older pupils, then? In the first class?"

"It does," he assented grimly, adding as a cutting afterthought, "a sophomore, I suppose, would be beneath your notice?"

She smiled sweetly. "Oh, dear me, no!" she assured him, "not in the least--it is all the same to me, you see, Mr. Tony!"

Antony should have realised by this time the folly of any further tilting, but he did not.

"Your interest naturally turns, then, to men of my uncle's age?" he inquired caustically.



“‘On the right,’ he began didactically”

She considered this with a pretty seriousness.

"N-no, hardly that," she said at length. "It is only that I do not-- that I am not--somehow, young men (*and such very young men!* her eyes added) do not exactly . . ."

"You need not trouble to explain yourself any further," Antony broke in coldly. "It is somewhat unfortunate," he continued, enunciating carefully, with averted eyes, "that I, of all people, should have been selected for your escort this morning."

He had never said anything so nearly rude to a woman; but then he had never to his recollection been so thoroughly annoyed by one, since the dimly distant days when a series of deprecating aunts and spying nurses had darkened his youthful horizon.

"Indeed. And why is that?" she asked pleasantly. She had, when she chose, an exceedingly pleasant manner.

"Because," he returned, astonished at himself, but firm nevertheless, "I am not sufficiently accustomed to the society of young ladies to be certain of my ability to entertain even the ordinary variety--much less those who prefer the society of eccentric old gentlemen." *Come*, he reflected, *that's not half bad. Perhaps that will teach her a thing or two!*

It seemed to him that there was a flash of respect in her eyes, but he could not be sure, it was so fleeting.

"I suppose your studies take up so much of your time that you have no leisure for society," she said kindly, "but you must not let yourself grow shy: ladies are not very difficult to entertain, really!"

To this remark Antony made no reply, perhaps because he could not think of one which combined the expression of his feelings with anything remotely resembling propriety. They walked on, therefore, in utter silence.

The village through which they took their way was but a tiny one, a green and sheltered cradle for the warm brick walls and lichened chapel of the old college; and soon the grass-grown flagged walk gave way to one of trodden earth, the houses grew sparser and smaller, the trees thicker and less carefully tended. They were in the country. The season was well forward: though the calendar marked April, the warm blue sky, the odorous earth, the fresh, full grass, all smelled of May. The early flowers were out long before their wonted times; the birds, misled by the generous sun, were already nesting musically; shock-headed urchins, those most delicate barometers of the real seasons, had bravely cast off their shoes and stockings and renewed the year in the splashing puddles of some recent rain. All the scene spoke peace and promise of better to come--all, I say, but those two fractious young souls who walked diverse among the lovely unity of the pleasant world about them. Antony strode on, his eyes fixed on the winding road, though it is to be doubted if he saw it. Who would have thought to find him, Antony, in such a baited, hot-necked frame? The day had gone hideously awry from the beginning, and it was all the fault of this blue-eyed, brown-cheeked chit.

She, for her part, moved easily and it must be admitted, gracefully, beside him. Her step shot out from the hip, elastic as a boy's; only the faintest shade of red under her skin confessed to the pace he drove her; she drew regular breaths, through her small nostrils. Though she could not match his stride, she yet fell into a sort of rythmical accompaniment to it; evidently she was an accomplished and enduring dancer.



They swung around a sharp corner under a great sprawling oak and fairly mowed down an unattractive red-headed boy, insufficiently attired and freckled beyond belief, who was hurrying frantically in a direction only too obviously opposed to their own. Conscious of a distinct relief at the necessity for constructive action, Antony stooped and raised the howling and resentful creature, who dug his grimy knuckles into his eyes and yelled the louder at each polite query as to his injuries. After a few minutes of this fruitless performance, Antony, irritated at his failure to bring even this sordid incident to a triumphant conclusion, was about to produce a coin and leave his victim to the sovereign solace of Time, that great healer, when his companion, who had stood, hitherto, discreetly aside from the business, now stepped forward and laid a small brown hand on the heaving shoulder of the injured infant.

"Where were you going, Bubby?" she asked abruptly.

He looked up from his bent and screening arm, stared a moment, and replied in a matter-of-fact tone, without a trace of the sobs that still echoed about them:

"To see the big snake!"

"The snake?" She shuddered involuntarily. Had the child mentioned Leviathan, the monster would not have seemed more exotic to this rural and domestic spot. By judicious questioning they elicited from the suddenly secretive imp the successive facts of the spectacular and recent arrival of an enormous foreign reptile; its display under a tent on the outskirts of the village, very near their present station; the establishment of a tariff of fifteen cents for one view, or two separate opportunities for excitement at the comparatively small sum of a quarter of a dollar; and lastly, the cruel certainty that the delay occasioned by this unexpected and sudden meeting had undoubtedly cost their informant his only possible view of the monster, since the price of his admission, though offered voluntarily by his maternal uncle, was contingent upon his arrival at the tent ahead of his cousin, who, in case of a previous appearance, was to receive the prize.

Overcome afresh by the bitterness of his lot, the red-headed boy would have renewed his unpleasant and gulping demonstrations, had not Antony hastily produced a coin of sufficient size to insure two periods of ecstasy and offered it in reparation for what he handsomely described as his clumsiness. Staggered by this princely generosity, the urchin balanced the silver piece doubtfully, then with a shy and unlooked-for courtesy suggested that they should use it together.

"And what should I do, then?" asked the young lady with a smile--I have mentioned that she had, when she saw fit to employ it, an exceedingly pleasant manner.

The boy hesitated.

"Girls don't like snakes," he finally mumbled; "you could wait outside!"

"Where is that tent?" she demanded indignantly, and they hurried on, one on each side of their unconscious guide. No kindly premonition laid a thrilling chill along Antony's stiff spine; no wholesome doubts as to the successful issue of that doomed expedition slowed the springing step of his companion. They hurried on, I say, each with a hand upon the earth-stained, ragged shoulder of that freckled imp whom Fate had selected as the instrument of their destiny, and in ironic rivalry they literally urged him on, and shot him, panting, through the roped enclosure that protected the elect possessors of the admission price from contact with the envious herd.

With the curt direction to their guide to invite, if he pleased, a friend to enter with him, Antony slapped down a coin on the improvised counter, received two greasy green cardboard slips and strode towards the canvas flap of the small tent. The mingled odour of tobacco smoke, crushed grass, and tethered horses, the cheerful, chattering crowd, the honk and blare of a great claret-coloured motor-car, hurtling inquiringly up the slope, all imparted a festival air, a holiday spirit; and it was with a mild excitement that Antony pushed into the close tent, clearing the way punctiliously for his companion.



In the middle, under the opening, was a standard painted a dull, forbidding red, and on this, in a cage of twisted iron, lay a monstrous, coiled thing, hideously and brilliantly mottled, his blunt, flattened head lazily resting on his topmost ring, his malignant, weary eyes fixed in a listless stare, that drooped over the human mushrooms around him, over the seas he had travelled, back to the old gods and the beginnings of things. The inked diamonds along his great length gleamed in a dreadful, supple pattern; the eye, entranced in a seductive terror, followed the massive rounds of those murderous coils, longing, yet dreading, to trace them to their horrid head: it seemed that a faint, uncanny odour, a hint of dead spices, like the secret wrapping cloths of old mummies, hung in the air. Now Antony knew, or supposed he knew, that cobras exhale no such odour, and in a disgusted curiosity he peered about for the source of it, but found nothing in the stained and faded tent, nor any nook or cranny in the obvious bareness where the source of it could lurk.

The scene was a strange one; no officious showman called attention, in a raucous voice, to the ugly thing in the middle. There appeared to be no director, no advertisement of any kind, no appeal to a credulous or morbid crowd. The tent could contain but a score of visitors simultaneously, and they pushed in, fairly quiet as soon as they had entered, slowly encircled the scornful, wicked-eyed heap on the standard, discussed it in low tones and went out through another flap to make room for the next group. Indeed, the accustomed ease with which they performed these evolutions awoke in Antony the wonder whether they had not rehearsed them many times, and he involuntarily mentioned this idea to the girl, who gazed, at once fascinated and repelled, as Eve at the Seducer.

"I suppose," she returned musingly, "they keep coming to see if it will by any chance bite some one."

At this precise moment there pushed through the entrance-flap one who by his distinctive dress showed himself the mechanic of the claret-coloured motorcar. He was as obviously a foreigner, and among the simple rural types that filled the tent his mustachioed personality stood out as startlingly as the great cobra's. Elbowing his way through the little crowd he made himself a place directly beside Antony and the freckled boy, who had attached himself definitely to his patron, and smiled at the young man in easy cosmopolitan contempt of the rustics, conveying at the same time, in a graphic Continental hint of respectful salutation, his duty to the young lady. Antony accepted the smile with a lordly nod, expressive of his familiarity with mechanics as a class and his appreciation of their place in the general scheme of things, and the two men surveyed the reptile in silence.

"I know heem well," volunteered the big fellow in the leather suit, at last.

"*C'est Monsieur le Cobra*, zat one. We have take ze car all s'rough 'is country. Wait--I will amuse Mademoiselle. Watch heem!"

Lowering his head till the great goggles on his cap fronted the slitted eyes in the cage he emitted a long, piercing hiss, a nerve racking, whistling call. Everyone in the tent jumped backward spasmodically; Antony threw out his arm and pushed the girl behind him before he realised that there was no danger.

Upon the great snake the effect of the sudden noise was even more appalling. His ugly flat head appeared suddenly high above his writhing folds; no one saw the movement, for it was too lightning-quick for sight, but it was undoubtedly the fact that his head was no longer pillowed. The symmetrical turban on his forehead puffed and quivered, his cold eye caught every eye in the tent with a swift, horrible glance; and every eye shrank, terrified, from his.

"A very unpleasant old party, that snake," Anthony remarked, "I trust our friend won't think it advisable to repeat----"

In the middle of his sentence the Frenchman hissed again. The cobra, irritated beyond further endurance, threw its massive weight against the side of the cylindrical cage, which swayed slightly and then dropped forward into the panic-stricken crowd.

Antony felt a soft, sighing breath on his neck and caught his companion as she fell; he heard the ribs of her fluffy parasol crack under somebody's stamping feet and braced himself to meet the crushing, struggling rush of the frightened crowd. Through the oaths and shrieks of the nightmare moment piped shrill the voice of the red-headed boy.

"Mister, the cover's on! The cover's on tight."



Between the grovelling legs of two infuriated men, fighting like demons for leeway from the horrid cage, Antony caught a glimpse of it and realised that it was, indeed, completely fastened. Though it rolled and bounded under the lashings of its excited occupant, it was securely padlocked, and another moment of frenzied struggle for the door-flaps emptied the tent sufficiently to give passage to two angry men who threw a heavy canvas over the cage and righted it, breathing hard.

One of these as he rose to his feet met Antony's eyes, shifted his gaze to the fainting girl on his arm, and thrust his hand into the capacious pocket of his flapping linen coat.



"Try her with this," he said shortly, "I've got the crowd to settle. Then we'll kill the Frenchy, and then we'll leave!"

Antony forced the offered flask into the girl's mouth and dragged her backward through the open flap. As the air reached her she gasped and choked, gulping down the strong spirit nervously, then stiffening herself in his arm and adjusting her hat.

"Your town is not dull, at any rate, Mr. Tony!" she observed, and the observation, though a little breathless, was almost perfectly under her control.

Antony felt his admiration rise into his eyes, nor did he seek to conceal it.

"You are a brave, sensible--for heaven's sake, what's the matter now?" he cried anxiously, staring at a point behind her. Involuntarily she turned and looked in the same direction.

The greater part of the crowd had scattered and fled far down the long hill; only a few groups of the most hardy and venturesome among the villagers remained at varying distances from the deserted tent. The most important of these groups now fell apart slightly, disclosing as its centre a large and writhing human figure, prone on the grass. The light box coat, the great goggles, proclaimed this figure the ill-fated mechanic. Even as he sprawled and twisted, the men who surrounded him turned and looked at Antony and his companion, and there was an unpleasant fixity, an unmistakable threatening, in their regard that chilled the young gentleman slightly, though he was utterly at a loss as to its import. Presently one of the men caught his eye and beckoned commandingly.

"They seem to want me over there," he said to the girl, with an attempt at unconcern, "perhaps I'd better step over a moment--I'll return immediately. You don't object?"



She looked at him with a curious vague smile, then shook her head slowly. This he took for acquiescence to his request, and as she said nothing, he left her and joined the group about the prostrate foreigner. She stared idly at him, but appeared little impressed by his irritated and repeated pantomimic denials of what was, to judge from the faces of the men, a grave charge of some sort. Even when he threw off a hand on his arm and hastened angrily back to her, his countenance dark with angry concern, she did not alter that vague smile, and this vexed him still further, as he began to explain their situation.

"I am very, very sorry Miss--Miss Nette," he began, his voice fairly trembling with irritation, "but a most absurd and disgusting complication has arisen. This French fellow swears he has been bitten, and they think he is accusing you of hissing at the snake. I don't think he is really such a cad as all that, but he is practically hysterical, and now I don't believe he knows what he is saying. There is certainly some mark on his wrist and one of the men says that he saw the snake's head touch him, and they have filled him so thoroughly with whisky that he really is not responsible for what he says. I think,"--he marvelled at her lack of fright or emotion of any kind--"indeed, I am sure, that they have merely misunderstood his broken French, but these people are so idiotically obstinate, you know. They've sent for a doctor, and they insist that they hold--me responsible, and that if we don't stay here quietly they'll--in short, I don't see what to do. I'm dreadfully sorry."

He paused, ready for reproaches, for tears, for rebellion. But none of these was apparent.

"How silly!" said Nette carelessly, glancing a moment at the group of men.

Antony felt slightly relieved, but only slightly.

"I'm afraid that it can be made quite disagreeable, however," he explained gently, "though it is silly. The fellow deserved to be bitten--if he is, which I'm not at all certain of," he interjected hastily, "and it's none of our business and all his fault; but I've tried everything--bribing and bullying--and we seem to be caught here. I regret it so much--as soon as we can get to my uncle, it will be all right, of course, but nobody here will take a message for me and--and I think perhaps it will make less publicity and fuss, you know, if we go quietly with--with whoever they ask us to and . . ."

He ground his teeth--if only he had been alone! He saw himself the butt of the whole college, nick-named for eternity, blamed by his uncle, that bulwark of convention, self-disgraced by reason of utter, crude failure in this, the greatest social crisis of his life. It was maddening, humiliating--and this thick-skinned, feather-headed girl by his side seemed absolutely indifferent to her (to say the least) embarrassing situation. Stealing a glance at her he perceived that she was still smiling. Nay, more, she now directed the smile straight at him, and though its warm brightness cheered him irrationally for a moment, it was for a moment only, and the gloom of their plight shut round him again as he caught the eye of the leader of the hostile group beyond.

Suddenly he felt a tug at his coat, turned to see the gleaming red head of the author of all his woes, and seized him by the arm with a confused idea of vengeance.

"The doctor's coming, mister, he's nearly got here!" panted this unconscious instrument of Fate, "and I'll bet that foreign man dies! I'll bet he does! He got a terrible bite! Did you see it?"

Antony throttled the boy hastily and looked apprehensively at his companion; he had hoped to spare her this. To his surprise she turned to the child and laughed lightly.

"Oh, dear, no!" she said, "he won't die, little boy. Chauffeurs don't die--they explode!"

Antony had a sense of moral shock. This passed frivolity. Really, the girl was scarcely human; sympathy was wasted on her.

"Did you know the sheriff was coming?" the freckled-faced imp pursued, after a mildly contemptuous stare at his patron's incomprehensible friend. "I wouldn't go with him, if I was you. My uncle says he's got no right to make you."

"Of course he's got no right," Antony exclaimed angrily, "but what can I do about it? I can't fight eight or ten men, can I? I'd rather go than be carried."

"Why don't you jump into that automobile?" the boy asked abruptly. "I would. She goes easy--I saw him start her up before. She'll whizz off, I'll bet you!"

The girl turned abruptly. "That's it!" she cried; "let's do that, Mr. Tony!"

In a flash he caught the practical possibility of the scheme. Once at his uncle's and the affair was finished. But common sense gave pause.

"I can't run the thing," he admitted with vexation, "I don't know the first thing about them."

"Oh, that's nothing--they run themselves!" she said competently, "I'm used to them. Hurry--here comes a man, now!"

It was indeed the fact that a burly, self-satisfied creature was advancing towards them, and Antony's blood boiled at the pompous rustic's meaning glance.

"Come, come, Mr. Tony!" she urged excitedly.

"Can you run?" he muttered desperately, "it's no good if you can't, you know."

"Of course I can," she replied, and he noted how different the tones of her voice had grown, how much richer and more alluring. "I can beat you to the car! Come!"

The freckled boy plucked at his coat urgingly, and in a moment, as one flees in dreams, he was dashing down the slight slope that led to the little tableland at the head of the steeper hill where the huge car stood, pointed towards freedom.

A hoarse, suety cry issued from the constable, answered by the farther group; a number of men rushed hastily in their direction, but no one seemed to realise the object of their flight and the way was left clear. The red-headed boy bounded beside them, whooping madly; Nette's pale skirt flashed valiantly a trifle ahead of them; the loose stones rolled under their flying feet.



"The red-headed boy bounded beside them, whooping madly"

With a light bound the girl dropped on the wide leather seat, and Antony tumbled in after her, an agile village boy almost at his heels. Even as it was, this boy would have seized him had not the freckled arbiter of their destinies dexterously tripped him, grinning derisively at his downfall as he dashed to the side of the car and panted:

"Let her go, mister, let her go!"

Mechanically Antony grasped the steering wheel as he had seen others grasp it and turned to his companion. But she had toppled breathless against his shoulder and huddled there motionless. He stared helplessly at the approaching pursuit--his head whirled.

"Here, I'll pull it!" cried the red-headed urchin and fumbled mysteriously at Antony's feet. A low, raucous buzzing began forthwith, and as three men dashed up to them triumphantly, the great car shuddered a moment and lurched down the hill, gathering speed with every quarter-second.

There flashed before Antony's eyes a quick panorama of the extended Frenchman, the kneeling doctor, the threatening men; his ears resounded with the gleeful cackle of that freckled Fate who had launched them, and then he faced an empty country road, silent but for the whirring of their chariot. He turned his face to the girl, unconsciously moving the simple steering apparatus so as to keep the car in the middle of the road, while he spoke.

"May I trouble you to take this now?" he said politely. "Your knowledge of this business has undoubtedly saved you a great deal of mortifying bother and delay."

She stiffened sensibly beside him, and in her voice he caught no hint of the momentary rich abandon that he had noticed at the beginning of their flight, for she spoke with the cool and airy dryness of their first meeting.

"My knowledge?" she repeated, with an obviously sincere surprise, "my knowledge? What do you mean? Why should I take it? I never handled a car in my life!"

Antony's fingers stiffened and grew damp against the wheel. For a few sick seconds he sat utterly silent, stunned and incredulous, not knowing what he did, while his hands, with a strange muscular memory all their own of the days when he had propelled a little mechanical velocipede steered by a wheel, kept the whirring vehicle in the centre of the long, empty road.

"Good heavens!" he muttered at last, "I thought you told me--you certainly said--I understood you--oh, the devil!"

"Put your foot on something!" Nette cried feverishly; "that's the way they do! It can't be hard to stop it for just a moment. Put your foot----"

With that she stamped her little white shoe on a round metal disc projecting like a toadstool from the floor in front of her, and immediately, whether from that cause alone, or because Antony unwittingly complicated the manoeuvre by some untoward pressure of knee or wrist, the car, with a tremendous jerk, began to revolve backward upon itself in a dizzy swoop. A moment more had seen them in the deep ditch beside the road, had not Antony dislodged her foot with an ungraceful but timely kick and allowed the mechanism to right itself and lumber into its course again.

"For God's sake, sit still!" he shouted hoarsely. "Is it possible you do not understand you are in danger? Do you wish to kill or maim us both before it is necessary? I order you to sit perfectly quiet until I tell you to jump!"

"Very well," she replied meekly, with a short, frightened intake of the breath, and they sped along.



THE FLIGHT

II.

THE FLIGHT



ANTONY had now--so wonderfully resilient is youth--won sufficient confidence in himself to realise that there was yet a chance of bringing this dangerous expedition to some sort of successful issue, if fate should prosper them with a straight and empty road. They were not, fortunately, travelling at any tremendous rate of speed; though jumping from the car would have been extremely unwise, it remained a possibility, at least, and if, as was fairly probable, the car had already travelled a considerable distance, its motive power would become exhausted sooner or later and they could dismount safely. In a few curt sentences he explained the situation, as it appeared to him, to his companion.

"I must beg you to believe," he concluded, "that I somehow got a distinct impression of your telling me that you were used to managing these things--I cannot understand how I could have made such a mistake. I am particular in repeating this, because in case of accident--and it would be the merest idiocy to deny that a very grave accident is quite likely to happen at any moment--I do not want you to think too hardly of me. But of course your realise that unless I had been quite certain of your ability I should never have attempted such a foolhardy thing."

She made no answer, and at the risk of losing his straight course he stole a rapid glance at her.

To his surprise she was crimson with what was obvious, even to his fleeting view, as embarrassment. Her fingers twisted nervously; the tears that suffused her eyes were certainly not tears of grief or fright. She bit furiously at her under lip, and began more than one sentence that faltered away into confusion. Indeed, they had triumphantly climbed and descended a hill that sent Antony's heart into his throat before she succeeded in the task she evidently loathed but had as evidently determined to fulfil.



"At the risk of losing his straight course
he stole a rapid glance at her"

"Mr.--Mr. Tony," she began suddenly, alarmed in her turn at their increased speed as they went down the hill, "in case, as you say, anything should happen, I must tell you something. When I said that about--about my running the car perfectly well----"

"You didn't, of course, put it in that way," he interjected, as she seemed unable to go on.

"Oh, didn't I?" she asked. "I thought you said I did."

"You said that they ran themselves, you remember, and that you were used to them," he reminded her, "and I took that to mean----"

"Oh, that's what I said," she repeated, thoughtfully.

"Don't you know what you said?" he demanded, a spasm of terror catching him and quickening his heart-beat as a great waggon loomed into sight horribly near them. Despairingly he glanced at the shining metal paraphernalia that encompassed him--his eye fell upon an unmistakable brass horn at his right, terminating in a rubber bulb. This could be but one thing, and cautiously loosening one clammy hand from the wheel, he pressed the bulb nervously. A loud, harsh cry from its brazen throat relieved him inexpressibly and sent a glow of confidence through him. He repeated the pressure, the driver of the cart looked leisurely around, and with a scowl drew off to one side of the road. Antony's

blood resumed its normal pace, and as the course was now clear for a moment, anyway, he repeated his question:

"Don't you know what you said?"

The trees, the full brooks, the grazing cattle, unrolled behind them like a painted ribbon for several seconds before she answered. At length his ear caught a faint, short murmur.

"N--no."



"Why not?" he demanded briefly.

"I would rather not tell you," she replied with a return of her old spirit.

"You must tell me," he said angrily. "Here come two carriages--oh, why did I never notice how they stopped these things? Reach under my arms and squeeze that horn--quick!"

The carriages separated and he went, quaking, between them.

"Now, go on--this luck can hardly last," he warned her. "I intend to know for how much of this nightmare I am responsible."

"You are responsible for all of it, then," she cried recklessly. "You had not the slightest excuse for making me drink all that nasty, burning stuff!"

Regardless of his wheel, Antony turned and stared at her, and only her shriek of terror saved them from the stone wall that bordered a curve in the road.

"You mean you were----"

"If you dare to say it I shall jump!" she interrupted, plucking nervously at her skirt, and he saw that she was quite capable of carrying out the threat.

"But--but you drank it yourself--I thought you knew----" he stammered.

"It was down in my throat--I couldn't help it--I pushed it away as soon as I could--I never tasted anything but champagne and sherry and I thought they were all the same, those things. . ."

She was on the point of tears now, and even in his keen sense of danger Antony was conscious of a gratified consciousness of that calm masculine superiority so long denied him.

"I see, I see," he said hastily. "I am very sorry. I did the best I could at the time: I am not accustomed to resuscitating fainting young ladies and I rather lost my head. I assure you that I assume all the blame."

"I think you had better," she replied vindictively, and Antony's conscious magnanimity collapsed instantly into an intense irritation.

"I must beg you to observe," he said, somewhat jerkily, as they bounced up and down the irregularities of a rough country road, "that I am hardly responsible, even with the best will in the world, for your inability to consume five or six swallows of bad whisky without--without----" in a panic of terror as her hands flew to her skirts and her knees stiffened, he concluded impotently, "oh, have it any way you like! It's all my fault. Now, for heaven's sake, sit still and listen to me. Do you or do you not know anything whatever about motor cars? I ask because it is absolutely necessary," he added hastily.

"I know nothing whatever about them," she returned with an icy finality, an air of uninterested irresponsibility, that maddened even while it appalled him.

"Very good; neither do I," he said. "We are, as you see, on a long, empty, practically uninhabited country road. This is extremely fortunate for us, but it will not last much longer, for we are coming into Huntersville, which was, on the occasion when I last went through it in one of these ungodly machines, full of babies, chickens, unhitched horses, and large, disagreeable dogs. Rather than go through Huntersville I would run this thing at a tree, now. If I could estimate the force of the shock, I'd do it anyway. But I cannot estimate it, and I do not want to frighten you to death. Besides, it might send the thing backward. The same reasoning applies to a steep bank. Now, as I remember it, there is a wild sort of road that turns off to the left very soon and goes up a long hill somewhere or other. I haven't the least idea where, but it must lead to something. My idea would be to go up that road and try to wear the machinery out on it. If it runs into a field, it can't be helped. At any rate, I think there is less risk. Are you willing to try it?"

His sincere and serious manner had its effect and she answered simply, "Anything that you think is best, of course. But could we not experiment a little, and try to stop it? It cannot be anything very complicated, since it has to be done so often."

"No, no, no!" Antony cried nervously, "not while I'm in my right mind! It may seem foolish to you," he continued more stiffly, "but I have reached my limit of experiment. I--I know nothing of any kind of machinery--I loathe it. As soon as I began anything of that sort, my nerve would go. You remember the result when you stamped on that brass knob? Well, I admit that I am not equal to a repetition, to be quite frank."

"I thought men always understood machinery," she murmured impatiently. "All the men I know are quite clever at it."

Now, curiously enough, this pettish and really inexcusable fling did not produce its presumable effect upon Antony. Whether he felt that it was partly justified and that he was really in some sort unworthy of his sex, or whether the actuality of their pressing danger rendered him immune as regards such flighty stabs, is not known, but it remains a fact that he merely pursed his lips indulgently and spoke as follows:

"You are indeed fortunate in your acquaintance. I regret that practice in steering horses, sail boats, bob sleds and to a certain small extent, dirigible balloons, has left me little leisure--and less inclination--for these evil-smelling devil-waggons. Neither the steamfitter nor the engineer has ever appealed to me----"

He ceased abruptly, and as his voice died out she looked questioningly at him, for even her slight acquaintance with the young gentleman had taught her that he was not one to leave a well-planned sentence incomplete from choice.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"That wild road is on the other side of Huntersville!" he said, with an utter absence of comment that impressed her more deeply than any of his previous conversational embroideries.

Indeed, the pointed spire of the Huntersville church rose white before them and scattered houses even now lined the road.

"I wish we were going uphill now," Antony began, "and I should advise you to jump. I don't believe you'd make such a mess of it as a great many girls would be likely to. Of course, you might have on the last hill, but I hated the idea of it. It may be steering will do. But if it's a question of running someone down, you'll have to, of course, and I'll turn sharp about and take my chance. Or aim at tree. Now, blow the horn hard, please, and when I say jump, go the way the car is going, and clear it well. You may sprain your ankle or get a bruise or two, but that won't kill you. It's a small sort of place, and we might get through. Don't stop the horn a moment. What's that idiot doing?"

On the side of the road an overgrown boy of eighteen hopped wildly on one foot, the other stretched at right angles in front of him, while his lank red wrists beat the air like the arms of a windmill.

These apparently purposeless evolutions he performed mechanically so long as his ungainly figure filled their vision, and the maniac appearance of the yokel rasped Antony's over-strained nerves unendurably.



"If that is a fair sample of Huntersville youth, it would be a real blessing to the community to murder a few," he muttered malevolently, as they dashed, at what seemed to him a terribly accelerated pace, into the little town. A large sign-board sprang up suddenly, as it seemed, and faced them.

Village limits. Slow down to six miles an hour (it read) by order of Commissioners. Offenders Will be---

But Antony, though desirous of reading further, even at the cost of a halt, was unable to do so.

It was high noon and the main artery of travel could not have assumed a condition more favourable to an unwilling excursionist. Save for a group of children, which scattered to safety at the steady warning of the horn, and a laggard team of greys, whose languid progress from the middle of the road to their legitimate anchorage at the side cost their master his hind wheel, only a pompous speckled hen disputed their right of way. To his companion's shriek of horror--"The hen! The hen, Mr. Tony!"--Antony replied only, through set teeth, "This is no time to think of hens-- blow that horn!" and drove like Attila the implacable over whatever of domesticity and motherhood that obstinate fowl may have represented. One more heap of empty barrels making a treacherous curve, one more angry woman, leaping into a puddle to protect her wide-eyed urchin, one heart-stifling ne'er-do-weel lurching at the last possible quarter-second with drunken luck, out of destruction's way, and it was over: Antony, firmly convinced that his hair must be snowy white, suffered the pent-up breath to escape at last from his lungs, only to catch it desperately again as a burly man, whose ostentatiously drawn-back coat displayed a gleaming metal badge, stood deliberately before them, not a hundred feet away, and waved his hand with unmistakable meaning. In this hand fluttered a bit of yellow paper which recalled irresistible memories of the telegraph office; the other grasped a large nickel watch that winked derisively in the sunlight.



"Stop!" he bellowed majestically, and balanced upon his bow legs.

On one side stretched a hastily constructed barrier of old boards and flimsy crates through which the blue sky line gleamed in bright bars; on the other a heavy waggon rested at an evidently intentional slant.

"Blow, blow!" gasped Antony, and, "Get out of the way, you fool!" he cried with ineffective hoarseness, grinding his teeth as it became apparent that the creature meant to brazen it through.

"Look out! We can't stop! Oh, please go away!"



The shrill scream of the girl at his side accomplished more than the horn: the terror in her eyes spoke loudly for her, and with a face wherein rage and incredulity struggled, this vidous obstructor of highways stepped unwillingly aside and left them a scant five feet of passageway. But for Antony, in his present state of nerves, five feet was all too scant. Had he then escaped all the chances and changes of this mad morning, had he won through by a miracle of success, only to be balked at the last by an incalculable old village marplot? Should a paunchy waddler of this sort wreck at once his pride and his car? Thus he frothed and boiled in his heart, and perhaps that overheated organ clouded his eyes and vibrated in his wrists, for the heavy front wheels of the great vehicle crashed into the flimsy right-hand barrier, mowed down the crates and planking as if they had been of straw, scattered them, crackling and clattering, far and wide; and worse than this, the hind wheels, with an utterly unintentional flirt which had nevertheless all the effect of a malicious and brilliantly executed manoeuvre, jolted the barrier-waggon so violently that the horse attached to it sprang quickly forward, thus unfortunately upsetting the pury and authoritative native who had retreated to that side for safety. Down he rolled in the dust, yelling frantically, while the frightened horse with a sharp turn fled back through the town, scattering still further the wreckage of the ill-fated barricade. Nette, turning involuntarily, saw all this and saw, too, that even as he bit the dust the outraged wearer of the metal badge still clutched, and as it seemed to her brandished, with a sinister motion the square of yellow paper.

She stole a glance at Antony, but his set jaw and lowering brow did not invite confidences, and she sat in silence during the few remaining moments that sufficed to set them free of the village outskirts.

"Here is the road," said Antony briefly as they turned into a winding, stony track that closed behind them like a gate; and on this occasion no untoward happening checked the deep breath that he allowed himself.

"I have ridden along this road ten miles at least," he continued, "and it is practically deserted. They have to keep it in some sort of shape because it is the only way they have to haul timber in the autumn from the woods beyond, and telegraph poles; then they send them away by boat down the river. I never followed it to the end, but I should suppose it would wind into Brookdale, which is on the Northern Trunk Division, and nowhere near us by rail, you know."

"Brookdale . . . Brookdale?" she murmured vaguely, as he seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

"What I propose to do," he went on, quite easily now, and steering the car, within the simple limits possible, almost unconsciously, "is to go on like this as long as the road is deserted as it is now. As soon as we reach Brookdale--or

whatever village we touch first--I will try to find a big enough sweep to turn around in and simply retrace our way. This I shall continue to do until this brutal machinery runs down. It will be dull, but safe. All the farmhouses have turns for their own waggons, and I can be fairly sure of a clear path around a watering trough or sign board, you see. There is a good broad sweep, I noticed, in front of the last farm before we turn into the woods here and I'm not afraid to go as near Huntersville as that. To begin with, they'd never believe that we would be so foolish as to come back, and they will naturally suppose that we took the regular state road and got across the river; touring-cars like this don't go up this way--unless they are obliged to," he added grimly, as an unusually rough spot shook them till their very teeth rattled. "I hope you approve of this plan?" he concluded politely.

"I suppose it is the best thing to do, considering everything," she answered after a little pause, "though I wish . . . when shall we reach Brookdale?"

"I am unable to tell you," Antony replied with a touch of asperity, "and I really cannot see what difference it makes, since we can hardly hope to stop there on our first trip."

"To be sure," she said, "I forgot. You manage the car so well that I forgot that you can't do anything you like with it. You must excuse me."

At these words a comforting and fragrant warmth, the very subtle aroma of well-being, stole about Antony's heart, and his face relaxed insensibly. He could the more readily excuse her ingenuous error because he had more than once in the last hour fallen into it himself. It was difficult to believe that his control of this cumbrous soft-bitted monster, answering so sweetly to the slightest contraction of his wrist, was merely nominal; that only the most extraordinary good fortune stood between him and crushing ruin.

"Why do you suppose that ugly fat man wanted to stop us, Mr. Tony?" Nette demanded suddenly--"did he have any right to, or any reason?"

Antony sighed thoughtfully, and his various feelings struggled in his face.

"As to his rights," he answered judicially, "I really could not say. He certainly had some kind of badge. But as to his reasons, I fear the only difficulty will be to count them."

"To count them?" she repeated curiously. "Are there so many, then?"

Antony shrugged his shoulders expressively.



"In the first place," he began, "we are supposed to have purposely irritated an extremely unpleasant old snake to the point of biting, perhaps fatally, a French chauffeur. If fatally, the law wants us on that account. In the second place, we have stolen a large and costly touring car and are apparently occupied in making away with it as fast as possible. And the law wants us on that account. In the third place, we have violated the speed regulations of Huntersville and refused to stop when called upon to answer for it, and the law wants us on that account. In the fourth place, we have knocked down and, for all I know, seriously injured an official of Huntersville, and the law wants us on that account. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear," she replied soberly, and then, without the slightest warning, she burst into a rich gurgle of laughter, so rollicking and infectious that Antony had joined her before he realised it, and the wood rang with their united mirth. The massive mechanism, whose least lever they could not have explained, had it been to save their lives, rolled ponderously along, clanking and hissing beneath them; and they, perched like flippant butterflies on its upholstered surface, chuckled and trilled and rejoiced in their youth. As the Indian child leads the mighty elephant by a leash of meadow grass, so Antony directed his car with a flick of the wrist, and like the child thought nothing of what he did, save that it was amusing and showed forth his mightiness. Death glided along beside them, revolving softly with each turn of the four broad tires; terror lurked at every vine-twisted bend in the road; not a smooth beech nor a rough chestnut but might have hidden behind it some horrid destiny--and they rode on lightly, as the froth on the breaker before it crashes on the beach.

Upon Antony, indeed, positive serenity had fallen, and a consciousness of readiness for any emergency. It was with some strong sense of this that he leaned down to his companion and said with a masterful smile--the smile of one whose thorough acquaintance with himself precludes any idea of self-gratulation:

"Perhaps, my dear Miss Nette, it is, after all, as well that you have one of us despised young fellows with you to-day? Even the most fascinating of greybeards might have found this crisis a little too much for him?"

Only the lowest curve of her flushed cheek was visible. Grapelike curls of warm brown shielded her eyes, but he remembered their astonishing blue and glanced with keen appreciation at her silken instep to strengthen the memory. When all was said, what pluck she had! How many girls would have skimmed so swiftly and surely down that hill, would have faced a danger so evident with such buoyant courage, would have smiled so comradely in the face of fear? What if

her tongue were a little sharp? She was not the ordinary brainless twitterer of her age. And something more than brain had flashed and deepened in her eyes. . . . She was speaking.

"Perhaps, my dear Mr. Tony," she responded affably--alas, too affably--"it is, after all, as well to remember that even the least fascinating of greybeards would be hardly likely to involve me in such a crisis!"

The car rose to a large irregular stone that punctuated the already rough road, and Antony bounced angrily from his seat, descending with a shock that jarred his spine throughout its length. It seemed to him that the machinery clanked and laboured more heavily, that they were going a little more slowly; only a little, perhaps, but still more slowly. But he was too vexed to care if their progress were slow or quick. He loathed the pert, confident creature at his side from the bottom of his heart. Viewed in the sudden sultry heat of his feelings, what was her self-possession but brazen effrontery? Was such diabolic quickness of *riposte* even creditable to her years and sex? He considered the situation briefly: why were they in their present plight? Because, to put the matter baldly, he had been misled by the statements of a young woman who had openly admitted herself in no condition to be held responsible for her words--a pretty state of things! Really, it was hardly . . . hardly . . . but she was speaking again.

"Mr. Tony," she said softly (she had the knack of making a soft murmur rise above the clamour of the machinery), "please do not think, Mr. Tony, that I do not appreciate your courage, and--and sensibleness after it all happened! And I fully realise that it was partly my--that I--that if I had not----"

"Not at all," he answered stiffly, taking pity in spite of himself at her evident embarrassment. "As you implied, the initial responsibility was all mine."

But though his words were stiff, his heart had grown insensibly supple under the pressure of her voice. After all, what did her condition prove--that condition that had prompted their mad flight-- but her very innocence and ignorance of alcoholic stimulant? A very good showing, in these relaxed and indecorous days. We should always try to be just.

Drifting on these conflicting tides of feeling, Antony ceased to study the winding road with the severe scrutiny he had hitherto applied to it, and as the way was now very rough, he failed utterly to observe for what it was, a certain grassy cart track curving into their path, and took it with a twist of the wheel, even as his companion cried out in alarm.



"What are you doing? This cannot be right!" she warned, but it was too late, and Antony realized that on the very verge of the wood road, just as he should have looked for a space to turn in and retrace their safe course, he had left that course entirely and was steering along a now barely perceptible wheelway through a rough and rolling pasture lot.

He shut his lips tightly and affected not to have heard her, and for a few seconds they rode, in silence, through the stony field. Suddenly she grasped his arm and for the first time terror sharpened her voice.

"Oh! oh! see those cows! Oh, don't you see them? Go back! Go back!"

Antony shook her off impatiently and grazed a stump on the right only to bump against a jagged boulder on the left. The car was undoubtedly moving more slowly; he could swear to it.

"I believe it is an established fact that the cow is not carnivorous," he observed, peering in spirit to the limits of the field and wondering if he could turn in case a stone wall threatened.

"I am going to jump," she announced quietly, and a spasm of fear shot through him remembering the pointed stubble and the flinty rocks.

"Listen," he commanded, "and try not to be a little idiot. What harm can a cow do you? Or if it could"--with a burst of inspiration--"why should you throw yourself into the middle of them--perhaps with a broken leg?"

A smothered gasp told him that this shot had told, and he drove on grimly; the nearly obliterated track led straight into the nibbling herd. As the monstrous, labouring chariot neared them they lifted their heads, stared gloomily a moment, and lumbered off, herding into a clumsy canter as the unknown enemy gained on them. Stunted firs rose here and there beside the track; the wheels crushed the smaller stumps now, and tipped more alarmingly as they took the unavoidable stones. They two might have been the first (or last) of human pairs in all the world, for they rode utterly alone between the dun earth and the blue sky. Each moment Antony expected to wake, gripping the sheets, and each moment this dreamlike progress, this mad chase of dappled cows, this pitching, tossing, clangorous flight, grew more real, more ludicrous, more menacing.

Suddenly the path grew smoother; even, it seemed to Antony, more slippery. The wheels took a different motion, the noise of machinery grew by tiny degrees less and lower and died into a drone. It almost seemed that they were gliding with the force of gravity alone, for the track (now a broad muddy band) dipped slightly but steadily. They appeared to be bound for a providential gap in an ugly stone wall; below this stretched a wonderfully green field bounded by a thick row of feathery sage-coloured trees, the first full foliage they had seen.

Drugged with the steady head-wind of their flight, his hands mechanically glued to the wheel, his brain a mere phonograph that sang, over and over, "Keep in the track! Keep In the track!" Antony took his juggernaut through the scant six feet in the wall, marked how those of the cattle that had crowded through the opening made for the thinnest place in the fringe of trees, tried to estimate the force of a collision with one of those gnarled and twisted trunks, and realised to his horror that all power of initiative was exhausted in him. Helpless and hypnotised, fatalistic as a wild-riding Arab, he could only sit and grasp the wheel and wonder vaguely what would happen. Would she jump? He was practically certain that the motive-power was completely or nearly exhausted, and that they were slipping along on a different and sloping soil. Even as this flashed through his mind he saw a welcome gap in the sage-green trees and made for it, though in doing so he left the path, which, for that matter, split inexplicably into many tiny paths.

What was that behind the green? What fields or walls or trees are blue? What blue shimmers and sparkles? . . .

"Jump! Jump!" he cried, hoarsely, but she sat fascinated, turned to stone by his side.



“Jump! Jump!” he cried, hoarsely”

As one watches the water in a globe of coloured glass by the seashore and smiles at the tiny splashing mites that sport in it, so Antony watched a large red-and-white cow stagger helplessly down a steepish slope, and smiled as she plunged clumsily into the broad river. "It is beyond her depth, for she is swimming," he thought, and then they hung for three seconds on the brink of the tiny slope, a maddening three seconds, in which they might have jumped, but could not--and plunged, with a sharp, sweet scream from the rigid girl by his side, into the river. It rose up strangely, as it seemed, to meet them, and with the cold shock of the water Antony's will returned to him, and he rolled over the side of the car before it was quite submerged, dragging Nette with him, and pitching her over beyond him with his left arm. She slipped from his grasp by the very force of the movement and went down, and the current caught them both.

THE RETURN

III.

THE RETURN



EVEN as he sank in the river, Antony perceived that he was in the grip of a terrible current. He struck out with all his strength against it for a moment, instinctively, before he realised that it was folly to combat it; and as he rose to the surface, staring eagerly along the course of its tugging compulsion, he saw, as he had hoped to see, a sleek small head several yards in advance of him. With a shout of encouragement he made for the small, floating dot, and swam as he had never swam before, marking its distance each second in order to be able to dive when it should disappear. But it did not disappear. To his delight it floated serenely along, and as he caught up with it, still yelling in his excitement, it turned towards him.

"Don't you think you might as well stop that noise, now?" said Nette calmly. "We seem to be saved. Is it far to the shore?"

Antony's jaw dropped and he swallowed more of the river water than was conducive to his comfort.

"I--I don't know, really," he gasped, "but it can't be, of course, if this beastly current will only let us land. Shall I hold you a little? Aren't you tired?"

"Not yet" she answered briefly. "I'll let you know. Of course my clothes make a dif---"

She paused abruptly and devoted her breath to keeping up with him. Antony was a strong and rapid swimmer and had had more than one occasion to practice the art when fully dressed. Rising on his stroke, he glanced about him and saw with joy that the current was sweeping them gradually, though not directly, to the left bank of the river. He could in fact discern their course in the different texture of the water as it sparkled in the sun.

"Just put your hand on my shoulder," he begged. "There's no use wasting your strength. I think we ought to be there in five minutes, at this rate. It must be awfully hard in those skirts."

Her breath came short and hard now; with a slight motion of her head she indicated her assent, and placed her hand on his shoulder, and they slid in silence through the water. The bank, which now loomed clearly over them, was quite high at this point, and Antony deliberately neglected more than one place where a brief effort would have got them out of the current, in order to make sure of an easy slope by which to land. Suddenly his eye lit on what he had been waiting for, a winding, easy path up through the cleared underbrush, with a rough, three-sided shanty near it.

"Here we are!" he cried encouragingly. "I think I can get you across--by Jove, it's taking us there!"



And this was so: the current, with a distinct twist, urged them in towards shore, and in a moment more Antony touched the bottom of the river and towed his companion, now hanging heavily on him, in to safety. They dragged themselves wearily up the little path, soggy and dripping, Nette's skirts heavy with water, and sat down with one accord on a sunny rock in front of the decaying old building, evidently a deserted boathouse, from the coils of rope and broken oars that lay there. They looked dully at each other, and as they looked they shivered, for hot as was the sun, the river, not yet warmed by this specious early spring, had chilled them to the bone.

Antony shook himself and tried to overcome the lassitude that had crept on him.

"Well, here we are!" he said tentatively, pressing his teeth together to hide their chattering. "It is a mighty good thing you swim so well, isn't it? Now we must get out of this as soon as possible--your lips are blue. I suppose you really ought to run about a little, oughtn't you?"

"I suppose so," she assented wearily, "but I shall not do so, nevertheless. Is there no house near here?"



"'Well, here we are!' he said tentatively"

They gazed about them, but no chimney, no red barn, no white steeple, rewarded the inspection. Robinson upon his isle could have felt himself no more abandoned. Jutting headlands cut off their view up and down the river; high pasture land broken with woods covered all they could see on the opposite bank, and the one upon which they found themselves appeared to consist entirely of sand pits, gnarled roots, and fallen trees, with what seemed a rather formidable forest behind.

"It seems idiotic," Antony began, "and of course we must be somewhere--this is a ridiculous sort of country; one would think we were in the middle of Africa--but just at the moment I cannot say that I see any signs of humanity but this old boathouse. I will take a run up beyond that little promontory and look about. Please jump up and down while I am gone, and could you not take that skirt off and dry it in the sun?"

She nodded.

"And by the way," she observed casually, "where is the motor-car, do you suppose?"

Antony sat down from sheer force of surprise. He had utterly forgotten the motor-car. Life to him had begun anew when he staggered up the bank. He looked piteously over the shining river.

"Well, we've done it, now!" he exclaimed, and as he sat in huddled misery a fit of senseless laughter shook him, nor was his dripping companion long in joining him. They laughed till the decayed old boathouse echoed, and when, from very fatigue, they stopped, no trifles such as cold or wet or isolation or the justly merited terror of the Law could cloud their invincible youth after that baptism of mirth.

"Anyway," Antony began, his voice still shaking, "we are on the other side of the river, and there is no bridge for two miles, certainly, and we came through a pasture to get here and so the old car is pretty safe to be under the mud by the time she could be traced. They say the bottom is mostly quicksand all about here--if we are here--for heaven's sake, what is that?"

He pointed to a black rectangular object floating placidly on to shore, not ten feet from them.

"It is a trunk," Nette replied excitedly, "a black, waterproof motor trunk! And a suit case behind it! And oh, see, do you see that hat box?"

They held their breath as the strange squadron sailed majestically along the guiding current into their tiny port, the trunk floating high, displaying its white stenciled monogram proudly, the suit case following, the absurd little chimney-pot ducking and bobbing in the rear. Suddenly, as the suit case seemed likely to drift out again, they rushed to the bank, and while Nette dragged the trunk to shelter Antony strode into the water and gathered in the smaller craft.



They were all of wicker, with a lining of oiled silk and a covering of thick waterproof rubber material, and as Nette pulled at the fastenings of the trunk and flung back the lid it was at once evident that both these shielding materials had admirably performed their office: the contents were uninjured. They looked upon a shallow tray divided into two parts. In one lay what was apparently a small, fantastically shaped cloud of palest mauve. Upon one side of this cloud there was fastened with a sort of jewel a long, soft feather of a slightly deeper tint of mauve. This feather curled caressingly about the cloud and Antony's experience instructed him that the object was quite terrestrial--was, in fact, a hat. An indistinguishable, fluffy, shimmering mass of mauve filled the other compartment, and in the cover a cunning artificer had set a fair-sized mirror, surrounded by numerous loops of leather which held brushes, combs, and other toilet accessories. As Antony regarded this collection of objects, he was aware of a long, soft sigh, and turning to his companion he beheld her bowing as in a trance before them, lost, like the persons in a well-known hymn, in wonder, love and praise.



"Oh! How perfect!" she breathed, and at the picture of her, dripping and draggled, shivering and ecstasied, he shook his head in thoughtful amazement.

"Now, Miss Nette," he said abruptly, "do you know what you are going to do. This is simply too extraordinary to be anything less than providential. You are going to follow me into this little shed and when I have taken the trunk there, you are going to put on everything you can find in it. If there's anything sensible enough there, please give yourself a good rub-down with it. Will you take cold with your hair wet?" he added masterfully.

Either moisture or the sight of the mauve glories had taught her meekness, for:

"Oh, no, my hair will dry in a few minutes--it dries very quickly," she assured him, adding timidly, "but ought I--they are so lovely-- have we any right----"

"I suppose you have a right to avoid pneumonia," he interrupted her rudely "and as far as the question of rights is concerned, this is rather late in the day to go into that, I think!"



He marched to the little shed, bearing the trunk, as it had been the crown regalia, on outstretched arms, and Nette, wringing her hair and murmuring incoherent abnegations concerning her unworthiness of the mauve mysteries, followed nevertheless.



“Nette, wringing her hair and murmuring incoherent abnegations”

Repeating sternly his injunctions as to the value of thorough rub-downs, he left her, and falling upon the suit case, which he prophetically connected with the comforting masculine hat box, he carried it behind the shed, and at a chivalrous distance opened it. Then in that deserted wood there was a silence, like that which fell in heaven, for the space of half an hour and, it may be, a little longer. At the end of this silence there appeared from behind a large oak a very dignified and handsome young gentleman attired, perhaps a thought impractically for his surroundings, in a fleckless frock coat with the appurtenances usually thereto accredited by our leading metropolitan tailors, such as stiffly creased grey trousers, patent-leather shoes, and delicate gloves dangled in the hand. Walking somewhat mincingly, this gentleman, elaborately backing around the shed and apparently not observing it, sought a rubber-incased hat box lying on the ground, and stooping gingerly, unclasped it, drew from it a glossy, black hat, and after a few affectionate strokings, which, applied to its surface, could but recall to any student of literature the painting of the lily, placed the same upon his sleek head with an absorbed and even slightly terrified expression, which melted slowly into one of deep satisfaction. After this he coughed politely and prepared to back again around the little hut. In this operation he was, however, interrupted by a soft tug at one of his almost too perfect coat tails.



"I look very well, too, I think," said a hesitating, sweet voice, and in an instant he was bareheaded before her.

Charming as Nette had appeared in her simple walking dress, Antony was utterly unprepared for the picture she now presented. In the absurd and yet wonderfully effective setting of the brown, budding trees, the broken and forbidding rocks, against the dull background of the dingy, decaying hut, her soft, pale tints of hat and gown gleamed like some one of the perfumed daintinesses Watteau traced upon his tricky, tempting court fans. The whole costume, from the sweeping cavalier feather to the saucy, buckled slippers, recalled subtly that delightful pretense at Arcadia, that amusing pastoral figuring and posturing that broke under a sigh too ardent, a pressure too fiery, into the scented powder puff and the satin stays. One looked for a spinet, garlanded with golden cupids, for a white lamb smelling like Araby the blest, for a wreathed crook with a tiny mirror artfully set in its curve. To gaze upon that diabolically contrived simplicity was to produce in the susceptible breast, and most particularly in the susceptible masculine breast, an odd tumult of sensations too conflicting in their nature for description.

Nette's hair ran vine-like under the melting, tender-coloured plume; her skin glowed softly rosy, and two faint violet shadows under her brilliant eyes toned sweetly with the colours of her misleading gown. Around her neck on a slender golden chain was hung a singularly perfect fresh-water pearl, large, with shifting colours, utterly unadorned by any jeweller's fancies; an odd and very elegant bauble that caught Antony's eye instantly.

"Mademoiselle," he began, "you are—you are----" he paused, for genuine lack of words. "You are absurdly charming," he concluded, not altogether lamely, after all, and she swept him a graceful courtesy, her long, pale sash-ends floating out against the rough bark behind her. Nor was Master Antony displeased at the satisfaction at his appearance which he surprised in her eyes. Intrinsicly inartistic indeed is the garb of our modern male, and yet to our accustomed eye there is a fine air of fitness, a grave elegance, in his sombre bifurcation; an ordered poetry in his candid vest, his lustrous neck scarf; a twinkling luxuriousness in his polished and costly footwear. All this appeared to perfection in Antony's dignified figure, just sufficiently above the middle height to allow of his being called tall.

"The sleeves," he informed her, "are a little short and I am not sure that I have not stretched the shoulder seams a little, but the shoes are exactly my own size. The underwear," he added absently, "was silk. Apricot colour----"

"My shoes," she began hastily, "are too large, but I think I can keep them on. The skirt is too long, of course, but I can hold it up. The hat," she concluded, with softened eyes, "I should like to be buried in."

"I should dislike to have you buried in it," he said briefly, "and now," he continued briskly, "the next thing is to get away. I have put all my things into the suit case and I will, with your permission, put yours there too. Then we will leave the suit case and the hat box under a pile of old boughs near where I dressed, and the trunk—is there anything in the trunk?" he broke off.

"No, I put them all on," she assured him, flushing delightfully. "There was just enough--of everything."



“ ‘Mademoiselle,’ he began, ‘you are—you are’—he paused, for genuine lack of words”

"I see. Well, I think we'll simply leave it here. Perhaps I might hide it a little," and he tossed a dusty roll of cocoa matting and a coil of rope over the receptacle, which being small became from that moment unnoticed.

"And now," said Antony, when he had conveyed the neat, damp roll she handed him to its hiding place, "let us get along. We can do no better than follow this path, which seems to grow broader, if anything, and it stands to reason we must come out somewhere. I may as well confess that I have a very poor idea of location, and I don't as yet find any landmarks. From the moment that we struck off into that field track I lost my bearings entirely. I should suppose we were opposite--or almost opposite--Brookdale; perhaps a bit lower down. We can get a rig and drive back probably--unless we die of hunger," he ended angrily. "I have only a little change with me --forgot it when I changed my clothes, of course, this morning. I suppose, though, I could get some money on this," and he fingered the scarf pin at his throat. It was a horseshoe of small diamonds of the purest water, and as Nette's eyes fastened on it she started suddenly.

"Was that what you had on this morning?" she asked.



"No," he answered, flushing a little. "I found it in a jeweller's box on the top of the things in the suit case, with a letter. I have the letter--it says only 'Amory' on it. I put the pin on," a trifle shamefacedly, "more or less to go with the whole rig, you know!"

Antony looked very boyish as he made this confession and Nette could but smile as he fingered the little horseshoe consciously. This smile was not lost upon the youth, and turning, he walked on in silence, advancing steadily if delicately along the path, which, though narrow enough to force them into single file, was sufficiently clear to afford a certain margin of safety to Nette's billowy splendours. Antony occasionally held back a threatening bough, and she from time to time moaned apprehensively as some projecting stump detained her drapery for a terrifying second; but for this they exchanged no further conversation.

Antony's faculties, stretched to their utmost since morning, unfortified by food, absolutely refused to rally around him on this occasion, and though he cudgelled his brains for a solution of the probabilities of his conduct when they should emerge from the wood, it was a useless performance. He was capable of walking erectly through the trees, of keeping his shoes bright, of shielding his hat from indignity--and of nothing more. Thus oblivious to all but the sensations of the moment, he plodded steadily on, and it was with an expression of positive stupor that he burst all at once and without the slightest transition of the foliage out of the rude woods into a trim gravel road flanked by incredibly artificial Lombardy poplars. In front of him swept a terraced lawn; far across it rose a lordly Elizabethan mansion composed, apparently, of weathered oak and gay window boxes; a marvellously rolled tennis court swam before his dazzled eyes. As he felt Nette at his side and opened his lips to speak, a loud, triumphant shout burst upon the air and a carriage and pair stationed at the end of the drive sprang into rapid motion towards them.

"'Ere you are, sir! 'Ere! Just in time, sir, jump in! All right, sir--I knew by the lady's dress--could you h'open the door yourself, sir? Mr. Richard said he knew you'd try the old road-- 'owever did you get over the old bridge, sir? I doubt we can make it this late, but we'll try. Excuse me, sir, but there's no time for talk--in you go, sir!"

Under the piercing eye of the garrulous old servant Nette slipped into the brougham and Antony after her, as one in a dream. The fat bays literally galloped along the crushed stone, whirled through an elaborate iron gateway, and devoured the stretch of country road whose scattered houses Antony tried in vain to identify.

"Where are we going?" Nette asked fearfully, but he could only shake his head.

"Somewhere near a railroad station, I hope," he answered; "we couldn't very well walk along the road dressed like this. Evidently this old idiot knows your dress--that's very unfortunate."

"He cannot know it," she insisted, "for it has never been worn. I am sure of it."

"Nonsense," said Antony brutally, and at her incredulous displeasure he softened only so far as to demand:

"Then how did he know you?"

"I don't know," she admitted, and they drew up suddenly among a crowd of carriages and motor-cars gathered around a quaint stone church.



"Now we'll slip out," Antony began, when all at once a slender young man sprang to the door of the brougham, wrenched it open, seized Antony's hand, and burst into a torrent of language.

"Well, you took your time, didn't you? At last! Ritchie was sick with rage--till we got the telegram. How's Auguste? Car gave out, of course. Poor Emily felt dreadfully. Miss---excuse me, but all I can think of is Gertrude, you can just get in--dash over to the cloister and they've left a place, *So* glad to have met you-- yes, indeed. This is Williamson. Please ask for mother's carriage directly the ceremony is over--we're going to form an arch or something at the house. Hurry up, old man--I had all your work. The rest are in by this time, but I have to attend to the carriages and you are to take in the late ones. Family on left of white ribbons-- for heaven's sake, Miss Gertrude--*run!*"

He dragged Nette from the step and raced her toward the church; she lifted her skirts and skimmed like a swallow beside him. Antony stumbled to the puffing old coachman, pulled all the silver out of his pocket and handed it to him mechanically.

"Thank you kindly, sir--I did my best. So many not knowing either you or the young lady, sir, it was 'ard for us, but I did my best. She looks beautiful, they tell me--h'isn't that some one waving for you, sir?"

Antony ran wildly towards the church door, whence issued a pompous and familiar peal from the organ; a strongly accented march, to whose measures, he reflected dizzily, no one whom he had yet encountered had ever been able to adapt his steps. He peered up the little, crowded aisle. Half-way along it paced a solemn party of young men; four visions of mauve and feathers followed them, and even as he removed his hat four more hurried past him and entered the door. They were in couples, each bearing a great armful of white and purple sweet peas, and the maiden nearest him in the last couple, flushed and panting, with one bare arm, was none other than poor Uncle Julius's godmother's own daughter's stepdaughter! She moved demurely, her eyes downcast, the great pearl rising with her quick breath, and Antony wiped the troubled sweat from his brow. A stir behind him, a murmured, sighing tribute, and the bride was passing by. White as the lilies in her hands, a frostlike veil falling over her glistening train, she glided beside her portly father, and the crowded little church turned to mark her passage as a hedge of sunflowers seeks the sun.

Antony sighed and turned to confront a massive lady swathed in rose-coloured satin and variously adorned with precious stones of all colours. She fixed him with a protruding grey eye and directed toward him a hissing whisper.

"I am the bride's Aunt!" she declared. Antony stared vaguely at her.

"And I hope there is a seat well to the front," she continued severely, if hoarsely.

With a shock of comprehension Antony thrust forward his arm.

"I am sure that there is, madam," he said politely, "pray come with me."



And so it happened that he led the massive satin creature up the aisle in the wake of that mystic procession, outwardly a mask of courtly solicitude, but within him the premonitions of whirling mania. He was literally faint with hunger; the strong sweetness of the lilies and other aromatic plants disposed about the church for its decoration affected him almost unpleasantly with their cloying odours, and the menacing fear that with every step he was involving himself further in a list of crimes so confused as to be, perhaps, yet uncatalogued in the annals of the law, shadowed his soul.

"*I, Emily Hildegarde, take thee, Richard---*"

the tones of the frost-like bride were as clear and silvery as her veil. Richard would encounter a certain amount of self-

possession, it appeared. But perhaps young women were all self-possessed, now. Antony could not recall a bride that had trembled in his experience.

The solemn service hastened to its conclusion. Suppose the marriage should prove to have been invalid because of a fraudulent and criminal usher? It might be possible. . . .

"I am sorry, but the church is filled," he murmured suavely to a beseeching violet-scented pair, marvelling at his own self-command.

It was over. Mendelssohn announced it and his echoes shook the windows. Two more hopeful voyagers had launched out upon life, arm in arm down the smiling, tearful aisle; two more combatants with armour scarcely buckled smiled boastfully on entering the field, nor noted that it was strewn with the breakage of their predecessors!

Thus cynically did Antony muse as the glowing pair swept by, when all at once a soft voice murmured close to his ear:

"Ask for Mrs. Williamson's carriage!"



She was gone. They were all gone, in a perfumed cloud of mauve, and with a bound he cleared the three entrance steps and ran to the crowd of vehicles that began to move about.

"Is Mrs. Williamson's carriage here?" he called loudly, and, as a one-horse coupe drew up to him, the odour of sweet peas was wafted across his nostrils and she swept in beside him, jealously guarding her skirts from harmful contacts. Obedient to her imperative gesture, he took his seat beside her, and feeling unable to combine into any intelligible sentence his emotions and apprehensions, gazed questioningly into her flushed and sparkling countenance. She pressed the sweet peas to her breast, and as the carriage moved off at a rapid pace she looked deep into his eyes and spoke.

"Wasn't she lovely?" she said dreamily.

Antony opened his mouth and closed it, opened it again and again closed it. For a moment it seemed to him that his mind was reeling from its foundations; that perhaps, after all, he was the legitimate usher of Emily's wedding and that this lustrous-eyed creature with him was Gertrude . . . and then a wholesome rage came to his assistance.

"For heaven's sake," he cried, "talk reasonably! Where are we going? What town is this? Do you realise the awful situation we are in? I shall go raving mad if this thing keeps up much longer!"

She laid a small gloved hand on his knee and spoke calmly to the quivering youth.

"Listen," she said, "I do not see that we can do better than go on to the house. It is a very big wedding and we can mix very easily in the crowd if only I can get another dress--or a long coat, somewhere. Perhaps I can. Especially now, when hardly any one is here yet. Then you can get hold of a carriage and we can drive to the station. We can at least get something to eat, for I know how hungry you are. Nobody knows who half the people are at a wedding--it is the safest place in the world for--for----"

"For escaping criminals," he concluded bitterly, yet with an unreasonable lightening of heart. "It is true, nobody will know me. And perhaps I can find out where we are."

"And who we are," she reminded him, smiling kindly.

He was amazed at the almost maternal gentleness, the sweet poise of her manner. She might have been the very bridesmaid she simulated.

"Did any one speak to you?" he asked curiously.

She shook her head.

"I was so late. I think I am *her* friend, and they don't seem to know each other so very well. The first four are friends, but my four, no. Still, I can't very well see them again, for she will ask about me--oh, who can this be?"

They had turned in at a different gate from the one by which they had left and were following a driveway that led along a series of stables and offices. From one of these a house-maid ran out, stopping the carriage with a gesture. At her embarrassed request Antony opened the carriage door.



"I was to ask the first one that came by this way, if you please-- you are an usher, aren't you, sir?"--Antony nodded grimly--"to go to the laundry, right here, sir, and pick out the best arches. They're in the tubs. The other gentlemen will help carry them in. Mr. Richard thought the ladies would know best about the arches," she added shyly, smiling graciously, Nette stepped lightly from the coupe, and as Antony followed her she nodded to the coachman,

"You may go back now," she said, "we will walk up to the house in a few moments."

He touched his hat and drove on, the house-maid hastened in the same direction, and Nette, followed by her companion, stepped into the laundry. There indeed were the arches, twined with purple and white sweet peas; the dim, damp room reeked and bloomed with them. As they confronted each other uncertainly, a high, excited voice floated toward them, evidently nearing rapidly.

"We must have every carriage guarded and the trains watched, that's all. They must be in the house, and they had no luggage, so how can they change their clothes? That dress will mark the woman absolutely. They will try for a motor, of course."

Steps were at the laundry door. In an agony of terror Antony dragged the girl into a back room, and hardly knowing what he did, beckoned her up a narrow, dingy stair. Like shadows they fled up it, and crouched at its head listening to the tramping feet of what was evidently a group of men: young men from their tone and manner.

"It's perfectly clear," began the unmistakable voice of Williamson, "they are, of course, that same couple that got off with three big touring cars last season. It's their specialty. The man drives like a demon, and the woman is the coolest little devil that ever walked. They have Amory's car, they got the clothes, and by coming so late they actually put the thing through. I hope no jewelry is gone, but we mustn't alarm the guests at any cost--Emily would never forgive us."



"The woman is marked--I know all the bridesmaids now, and I shall make it my business to locate the eighth. Harvey, will you stay with the presents? Ritch, like a fool, refused to have a detective."

"What did he look like, Williamson?" some one demanded.

"Kick me, if you want to, Harvey, I couldn't tell to save my life I--I was so excited, and he was so decent about it--he's just like anybody else. And I'm the only one that said a word to him-- it's maddening! We'll have to let him go--we can't grab every man we see, and nobody knows who half these people are. But watch the dining-room. Amory ought to be here any minute. He's nearly crazy, I suppose."

"Oh, I don't know," drawled a third voice. "If his precious Gertrude is with him, what's a scarf pin more or less to Ammy?"

"Nevertheless, I'm sorry for the man that took that car," said Williamson curtly, and Antony bit his lip nervously on the stairs as he listened to the low murmur of assent that followed.

"Well, don't let us stay here all night," Williamson began again fussily. "Grab some of these damned wreaths, you fellows, and see if we can get them up to the house without sitting down in them!"

They bustled out, arguing over the best methods of tracking down their victims, who cowered miserably above them.

Fear, insensate, reasonless fear, had laid his quivering, livid fingers on their shoulders, and chilled the blood in their veins. To get away-- to get away, at any cost!

Antony, stooping over the crouching figure by his side, whispered in her ear:

"I'll step down and look about a bit. There must be some way--I'll get you a coat somewhere and we can slip out. Wait here."

All was empty and silent in the laundry, but as he stopped a moment behind the door before peering out, a hand knocked gently on it and a boy's voice questioned softly.

"Are ye' there, then? Are ye, sir?" Instinctively and before he could catch back the word, Antony whispered hoarsely:

"Yes!"

"I'll be puttin' this in the durway, then, and Miss Delia Nolan said for me to say for ye to please wait an hour for her, an' she'd surely come. She does be needed in the bedrooms upstairs to watch the ladies' clothes f'r fear they'd be stolen, she says. But if ye'll wait the hour, she'll be with you, with more, maybe, if she can get it. Trust me for the horses, sir!"



There was a rattle and a thud as of some heavy object deposited on the floor in the open door, and the messenger scurried away. Antony looked cautiously around the door, and as he looked his eyes grew large and round, for there before him lay a mammoth tray filled with dainties to wake an appetite in one far less famished than poor Antony. Two half-emptied bottles reared their grateful promise high in the middle, and the jellied fowl vied with the crusted croquet, the rich pâté gleamed among the feathery wheaten rolls, the lobster nestled coyly in his luscious mayonnaise, seeming indeed to blush under the young man's ardent and devouring gaze. Breathlessly he lifted it, eagerly he bore it to that musty upper room, and there, with soft little cries of surprise from her and long-drawn sighs of satisfaction from him, they fell upon it. With every morsel of the food, with every throatful of the heartening, still beaded wine, courage, nay, audacity, crept softly over their jaded spirits, as the gentle but inevitable tide creeps up the beach.

"To Miss Delia Nolan!" he cried lightly, raising high his glass; "long life to her and her coachman!"

And "long life to her and her coachman!" Nette echoed, smiling from the broken chair she sat upon at Antony, who knelt before the tray. Through the chinks of the closed, dusty blinds vivid pencils of light streaked her delicate dress: she gleamed like a modish crocus in the bare lumber room. The rich viands before her, the dainty opalescence of the frozen sweet she held in a tinted, flower-shaped glass, the very dusk of the closed chamber, making her youth and loveliness more jewel-like, all enhanced the piquancy of the picture she presented. Antony's resolution flamed high in him: should such pluck, such beauty, such resource, be captured now, now after all they had gone through?

Never! He swore it.

As he registered this oath she rose lightly from her chair, and still jealously protecting her billowy skirts, began to peer about the room. Of a sudden she stopped and stood like a pointer dog, one finger raised to command his attention.

"What is in that basket?" she whispered excitedly.

There was no need to whisper, for not only the laundry but all the ground about it was absolutely deserted. But secrecy and flight have but one language and must conspire in whispers at the Pole itself. The basket in question, which lay in the darkest corner of the room, was of the description commonly in use among laundresses when they would return the purified objects of their toil. Bending over this, Nette fumbled a moment among its contents, and with a triumphant exclamation held up to Antony's bewildered vision a fresh, creased garment striped alternately with blue and white.

"And here is the apron! And here is the cap!" she murmured exultantly, "now I defy that horrid Mr. Williamson to find me! 'A marked woman,' indeed!"

Instantly the feasibility of the plan struck him, and he congratulated her warmly.

"Now all we need is to know where we are," he assured her, "and enough money to get away from it, wherever it is, and we are safe! I will step out and look about a bit while you change your dress; I feel confident that we shall find some means--luck would not have the heart to desert us now!"

He tiptoed, needlessly, it is true, down to the laundry, and in the very act of opening the door stumbled upon a plump old gentleman-- the very gentleman upon whose doubtless paternal arm the frost-like bride had preceded Antony to the altar. Ere the youth had time to catch his breath the portly one addressed him querulously.

"Oh! how d'ye do? So dark in here--senseless place to send a man! No more sweet peas, that I can see--can you? Pack-horse, too, I suppose like the rest of us? Fine business for my guests!"

"There is not a sweet pea left, sir," said Antony respectfully, "and if there were any I should certainly not allow you to undertake the transportation of them. You have enough on your mind, I should say." With a long drawn sigh the portly gentleman sank upon an inverted wash tub and wrung his hands miserably.

"Never in my life!" he mourned, "never in all my entire life!"

Antony uttered a soothing sound, of vague but apparently satisfactory import.



"Not that we mind the loss of the car at all," continued the old gentleman, more collectedly now, "only this morning his mother told me with tears in her eyes that she had offered him the price of it to give it up; so far as that goes, she is, as she only just now informed me, thanking her Creator on her bended knees and begging Him never to let us see or hear of that horrible machine again. Ammy promised her on his honour that if anything happened to this one, he would never buy another. It was his seventh."

Antony's heart leaped up, but he spoke decorously.

"It seems to me, sir," he said, "that you will, in all human probability, never see that car again."

"Thank God!" said his host fervently. "What is a stickpin to Richard?" he demanded explosively, "what, in heaven's name, do I care for a paltry fresh water pearl? It is the disgrace, the publicity; the laughing stock--in my house they tell me, these scoundrels are! At my daughter's wedding. Eating my food at this moment, perhaps, Mr. Williamson warns me!"

"This Mr. Williamson," said Antony gently, "seems to be a very keen person."

"The keenest," replied the old gentleman eagerly, "he is hunting for the woman now. It is unfortunate that he is the only one of the ushers who did not know Ammy, you see."

"I see. It was certainly unfortunate," said Antony suavely.

"Ammy is due in a few minutes," said the old gentleman, pulling out a wealthy gold watch, "and here I am sitting here! I am so overcome, you must excuse me. The five:three. I was to send someone."

"Can I not go, sir?" Antony asked feverishly, "just get me somebody's trap--anybody's--and let me go to get him and save you any further trouble."

"Why, that is very kind, I am sure," said Gertrude's father, "I will call the first one I see."

There was a scurrying down the narrow stair and as the old gentleman turned to go, a neat and very pretty housemaid rushed towards him.

"O sir, excuse me, sir," she cried, blushing delightfully, "but Miss Gertrude said I was to ask you for five dollars, sir, to pay for the C. O. D, at the station, sir. She wants it immediately. If some one is going down, sir, could he take me?"

With a practiced hand the father of the bride reached into his pocket, lifted from it a thick, green bundle, and placed a bill in the pink trembling hand held out for it.

"This gentleman here will take you down directly, Mary--Delia--er, my dear," he said kindly, "I don't recall his name at the moment, but we are all very informal to-day, and I'm sure he won't object.-- Here, boy, call me a carriage--anybody's! I'll see you later, my dear boy, and I am much obliged."



“ ‘This gentleman here will take you down directly’ ”

"Don't mention it, sir," Antony replied, and leaped nimbly into a gorgeous station-waggon, taking his seat beside the driver. The housemaid, displaying, as she mounted to the back seat, remarkable hosiery and footgear for one in her humble walk of life, followed quickly, and forth they drove.

The blood was tingling in his fingertips, his head reeled with a strange mixture of terror and delight--the intoxication of the artist in dangerous adventure--but Antony's voice was level as he inquired of the driver beside him:

"And what's the next station up the road, do you know?"

"Brookdale, sir, and there you can get the other road if you want it."

"I see. And is this the up train?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose Mr. Amory had to go out of his way to make any connection--the trains are poor here, sir. Mr. Ashley had to have two specials put on for to-day. You see, Cliffwood is a small place, sir."

Cliffwood! Antony could have kicked himself for not recognising in all this pomp of iron-gated villas, the scattered collection of estates thus poetically christened.

"That's a bad business about them murdering thieves, isn't it, sir?" pursued the driver confidentially.

Antony's heart sank like lead. "Murdering?" he gasped, "did the Frenchman die, then?"

"Oh, him!" returned the driver scornfully, "no, he didn't, the foreign pup. How could he--that old snake hasn't a fang in his head!"

Antony grasped the seat beneath him and drew a long, deep breath.

"I--I am glad to hear it," he said concisely, and as he spoke the incoming train whistled--a mellow, pleasing note that sang of freedom (yea, and guiltless freedom!) to wedding guest and housemaid alike.

Forth from the train, ere hardly it had stopped, leaped an eager pair, a man and a maid, not too precisely attired, for their garments were rumpled and not such as the critical in these matters assume when bound for a wedding festival. Yet they did not seem unhappy, these two, but rather lenient and tender in their judgments upon all the world, for they smiled sweetly upon the empty platform, and sweetly, if a little vaguely, upon Antony, who advanced to meet them, hat in hand.

"Mr. Amory, I presume?" he said airily. "I came down to get you, but I find I must send a telegram, on account of the trains running so poorly here, and so I will not detain you a second, as I am sure you cannot see Mrs.--Mrs. Richard too soon. They will send back for me."

"Thanks, old man--are they caught?" cried the lately arrived, making for the station-waggon, and staring at the diamond horseshoe in Antony's pearl grey tie, Antony touched it knowingly and smiled.

"No. They are not caught yet," he said, "but we're on the scent!"

"Good!" exclaimed the other, "now jump in, dear," and as the last bit of baggage left the train and the waggon turned, Antony fled through the station and raced up the steps of the moving car, hand in hand with the pretty housemaid.

They seated themselves amid curious and friendly smiles.

"I will speak when the wheels are well started," thought Antony, and then, "when she gets her breath, I will say something," but with each minute overwhelming embarrassment wrapped him, more deeply, and he sat, with averted eyes, in silence. Just as they slackened pace to pause at Brookdale and he motioned her to rise, she spoke, huskily and with an evident effort.



"What will you do with the chain and the pin?"

"Put them, with all these clothes and five dollars, in the trunk, row the three pieces across the river, meet them with a cart and express them to Mr. Ashley from Turnersville," he answered, promptly and with a rapid lucidity which astonished himself.

"They will be surprised," she remarked indifferently, as she descended the steps of the train, and:

"It is probable that they will," he agreed.

It was some three hours later that a vehicle conducted by one horse moved solitary under a rich and rising moon along the fair white road that leads to one of the most venerable if not the largest of our colleges. Dogged by its own black shadow, whose wheels, smaller but no less symmetrical, rolled silently beside it, this vehicle would inevitably have stirred romantic interest in the breast of any imaginative spectator of its progress. And this with reason, for one of its two occupants was a girl, who slept, white-faced beneath the moon, her head, on which was perched askew a housemaid's cap, drooped forward on her breast, her lips slightly parted. The other, a well-dressed young man, allowed the easy-going beast to pick its own way, the while he gazed at the sleeping face, compassionately, it would seem, for all at once, with a pitying exclamation, he slipped his arm behind her, and gently guided her head to his shoulder. With a sigh of relief she nestled against him and her face relaxed with the comfort of her new attitude, while still she slept. Thus they drove on for many minutes, nor did his eyes once leave that white, appealing face. So small she seemed, so helpless--could this slender creature have stood by him so gallantly, have matched her wits so triumphantly against the incredible crises of the past day? Day? Antony felt that the ordinary partitions of time had henceforth no meaning for him and that the philosopher who questioned the validity of time itself knew well whereof he had written.

What a spirit the girl had! How beautiful she had looked in the wood! He sighed, and at that or some other slight sound she opened her eyes and gazed in terror at him. And as she gazed the terror slowly melted and disappeared, a lovely child-like confidence grew in its place, and she spoke softly.

"It is you!" she said, and half awake, she smiled deliciously, straight into his bending eyes, "you are here?"

A great wave seemed to break in Antony's breast.

"Here?" he cried, deep voiced, "where could I be but here--with you? Who could be here--but me?"

Fully awakened now, she started from him, a flood of red sweeping her pale face as she saw where she had been resting.

"No--no!" she stammered, "you are--we are--I was only dreaming that----"

With his eyes he entreated her, for their steed, spying the lights of home, had started forward and Antony's hands were busy.

"Ah, Nette, dearest Nette," he begged her, and something in his voice shook her so that she trembled beside him, "if waking makes you hate me again, then dream! For when you dream, I am sure you love me."

"I do not! I do not!" she cried, covering her face with her hands.

The eager horse tugged at the bit: Antony forced her by his mere will to meet his eyes.

"Not?" he said, low and clearly, "Not? Not after to-day, Nette?"

She bit her lip, and then, as the old college bell rang out nine sharp strokes she laid her arms swiftly about his neck and his cheek quivered under her warm soft hair.

"You are right," she whispered, "after to-day--everything!"

The streets were no longer empty. They sat, separate, with whirling hearts, trembling under the mounting moon. They were in the familiar street. . . .

"After to-day--after to-day!" he muttered dizzily, when suddenly she laughed out beside him, sobbed brokenly, then laughed again.

"To-day is the first of April!" she cried.

And once again the polished moon threw her needless glory over youth and love and laughter.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN IDYLL OF ALL FOOLS' DAY ***

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