

EARLY FRIENDS.

I met a man on the mountain As the sun was sinking low, When night seemed loath to hasten And the day unwilling to go.

IRIS AND AUNTIE.

"But you're not in earnest?" I said. "Certainly I am," replied Bob, and his face corroborated his assertion.

"Where's the objection?" he began, in an injured tone. "Because it's not conventional, because it's contrary to custom? That's conventionality's fault, not mine."

"You're young Reggie," replied Bob, in a tone that made my lip curl. "We will return to our hypothesis. If Iris is an angel—which at present I am inclined to allow—and if she is expecting me to put the marriage question—which I feel positive is a fact—where is the harm if you go to a private detective—to Norton Scrubbs, to wit—and say, 'I want to know the ups and downs of Miss Iris Maypel; here's my money, report as soon as possible?'"

"And if the detective report is not to your liking?" "Ah, that's where the gain comes in. I am saved a life-long disaster. There are fools who aver that marriage is a lottery. Bosh! Built on a commercial basis it's as sure a thing as exists. Start without any bad debts—without any misunderstandings, fallacies, preconceived embellishments which never existed but in your imagination, and there's lifelong happiness to draw from as you require. Where, I repeat, is the harm of inquiry?"

"Her innocence alone should protect her from such duplicity," I argued as I walked. "To attack such guileless rusticity with the subtleties of urban resource was blackguardly in the extreme. Even Iris' maternal aunt, who had piloted her through her first London season with creditable care and watchfulness, would hardly be alert to Bob's unprincipled suggestion."

"I wished, as I went my way, that one of Iris' brothers would suddenly present himself, for I felt equal to proving my friendship to Bob by disclosing his intention ere he could perpetrate it. But, after all I knew, Iris was brotherless. I had never managed to elicit much information of her people beyond the simple fact that they lived in the country; certainly that huge, rambling mansion buried in the recesses of a well-timbered park from which there issued in the morning gay squires and fair ladies in full hunting rig, and where, at night, love's soft cooing was echoed by the woodland doves and the roar of a hunting chorus was mocked at by the owls."

"I was too disgusted to reply, so pleaded an engagement and left him. Bob Pallant was my friend, and I doubt if I could have swallowed his impudent suggestion had it referred to a stranger, but when Iris, the pretty, soft-voiced, downy-cheeked, innocent-eyed Iris was concerned my stomach absolutely refused. For I adored Iris Maypel, and that she should be subjected to such an insult as Bob proposed made me simmer. For it was an insult this prying into her spent life, even if Iris were conscious of the liberty. Moreover, I had read of how these private inquiry agents would pry even around the domestic hearth, and by mistake or intent—throw such lurid light upon a little error as to make it appear ghastly and terrible."

"She doesn't look her age," I retorted. Bob grunted and continued: "Family renowned for rectitude of purpose, moral severity, generosity and unworldliness."

"I could have told you that," I interrupted. "Iris carries all that, and more, in her face. 'Go on!'" "The ladies noted for their enduring beauty, innocence of mind and splendid physique. The Maypels came over with William of Normandy and are hence of Norman extraction; their—"

"That's enough!" I interrupted angrily. "Why will you continue to insult the girl you pretend to love?" Bob laughed heartily. "Confound your impudence and your inhospitality!" he said. "Haven't you some whiskey or something to pledge me with, Reggie?"

"I found him liquor, and he drank, but mine stood untasted, though I did, in a feeble way, wish him everything he desired. My recent hope, quashed so soon after birth, left me limp. "By the bye," I remarked, presently, "you take Scrubbs' report; for gospel I notice. You don't question his—er—veracity?" Bob laughed merrily. "Question the accuracy of Norton Scrubbs! Doubt the written word of the smartest man in his profession! No, my boy, only an idiot would do that. Why, even the bar acts upon it, sometimes. Besides, look at his bill of costs. Fare to Maypel Court, first return—£3 18s. Lodging and board at hostelry in the vicinity of the Court, together with tips for information and so forth—£ 3 4s. What do those items mean?"

"Oh, I suppose it's all right," I replied. "I don't doubt that one of the hounds has followed the scent but it's amazing to me that you can be satisfied with the report of any third person and yet be incredulous of your own eyes." "Now, look here, old man," said Bob, with a paternal flourish, "what's mine card? be yours—where a wife is concerned at all events; so make up your mind to the inevitable, and if you must love Iris Maypel learn to love her as a sister, though there's greater security both for you and me, to say nothing of our friendship, if you drop loving her at all."

"He left me to ponder over his well meaning hint and I was vainly endeavoring to perceive the truth in it when a letter from Iris was handed in. The first few lines led up to this: "Why have you deserted us so long, Mr. Clive? Failing to meet you at any social gathering where you are usually to be found, we quite expected you to call. I have with great difficulty, dissuaded dear auntie from the belief that I have offended you. Will you not come and assert my innocence? Dear auntie's box for Wednesday's 'first night' is not filled, and if you will honor us by helping to fill it dear auntie will be really delighted—as also yours, etc."

"P. S.—Kindly drop us a line to-day. If you have the inclination to bring your answer, auntie will be at home—as also yours, etc."

I read the lines and then endeavored to read between them. Iris had never before approached me in so intimate a mood—in fact, I had been shown to comprehension more than once that Bob's friend was not necessarily upon the same family footing as Bob. And as for the auntie—certainly her cold civility had often impressed me, but I had never flattered myself that she would have concerned herself if Iris had offended, ay, insulted me a dozen times a week.

However, I quickly resolved upon action. I would call upon Iris, and if things looked favorable I would promise myself for the Wednesday, if not, I could easily invent an excuse.

The fact is, hope, so recently evaporated, condensed again, and I drank it with avidity. I fancied there was a smile on the man's face when he opened the door of the pretty flat in St. James', and said: "Miss Maypel is in the conservatory, sir, and expecting you."

The man's smirk spelt what else would have been my record heart-leap. Still, it looked hopeful that Iris was waiting for me in a place I knew from observation her aunt did not frequent. The man left me hurriedly at the door, and I walked around the conservatory twice and peeped behind every available refuge—there were glass panes and no less glass screens in plenty—but Iris was not there. I stood perplexed, wondering if there were any connection between Iris' absence and that ugly serving-man's smirk. But suddenly I heard a voice, at first faintly, and then most distinctly.

"Don't you be a fool," it said. "You'll get your money, right enough, if you wait. Only let me run alone. I've got my head screwed on right, I can assure you. If you interfere you'll suffer for it, that's all!" It was Iris' voice! "But, my dear—" There was the thin, piping voice of her aunt. "Don't but at me!" interrupted Iris, angrily. "Bob Pallant is off, I tell you, and all your arguments won't bring him on again. Little Reggie Clive's my man now."

going to marry a man who has been humbugged like that?" "You're unusually tender about a little imposition." "Thank you, that will do. I didn't pick up a chap and pay her handsomely to stand auntie to me for a season and introduce me to society to be bullied by her in earnest. There are no men to hear us now, remember. I'm not a kid. I've ceased to blubber, and I won't be whipped. Can't you see that if I marry Bob Pallant after this, my chance of pleasure—to say nothing of your chance of your fee—wouldn't be worth a week's notice? He would jolly soon undeceive himself, and then—" "You wouldn't be to blame. You didn't deceive him."

"No, but Norton Scrubbs did, and it would ruin his reputation and close his purse to me forever. Norton has already given me to understand as much and advised me to understand as much and advised me to take on Reggie Clive. But there, you haven't any sense."

What an awakening! How I mentally cursed myself! How I mentally cursed Bob for having married his innocent-lipped, downy-cheeked, dove-eyed Iris right away without inquiry, and so spared me the agonizing predicament I was in. How I cursed—like-wise mentally—Norton Scrubbs and all his kith and kin. And all that mental imprecation came out through my pores until drops of sweat fell soft and silent upon the lorn petals of a dying chrysanthemum.

But I had suffered in silence long enough. Scene or no scene, scandalous slander, or what not, I cared not—I was callous to them all. I would reveal my hideous presence. The revealing was done for me. That smirking servant appeared and announced in a sepulchral voice that Mr. Clive had arrived.

There was a little flutter at the announcement and I heard a fleeting footstep that betokened auntie's departure, for it was Iris who replied: "Very well, Adams, show him in." "I have already shown him to Miss Iris," stammered the man. "Didn't I tell you to show him here—to the conservatory?" said Iris, severely. "And so I did, Miss Iris. I brought him here several minutes ago, and I have been searching for you ever since to tell you so."

I stepped from behind the screen just in time to witness the full comedy of the moment. Iris was a spectacle to behold! She baffled all description. Amazement mingled with fear, shame, guilt, horror, rage, indignation, and a number of other symptoms peculiar to such a nervous shock. I walked to where she still sat, too paralyzed to move.

"Miss Maypel," I said, "I have overheard your conversation, and I know you will call me a coward and an eavesdropper; but my conscience is innocent. I was put here by your man, and you had already committed yourself before I could warn you of my presence, so I waited in the hope that you would leave me before discovering me."

She made no reply, so I gladly walked to the conservatory and the house. I went home and tried to see the end of the business. What attitude would Iris adopt when Bob, in the flushing pride of Norton Scrubbs' report, proposed marriage to her? I gave up the conundrum when, far into the night, I had failed to solve it.

I went down to the club the following day resolved to tell Bob all when his familiar face—wearing anything but his familiar expression—looked in. He came straight across to me, and without any preliminaries said: "Reggie! Where's Iris?"

"I pushed my plate aside and returned his gaze. "How should I know if you are ignorant," I replied. "Isn't she with her—her auntie?" "Possibly," returned Bob. "In fact, probably. But where's her aunt? They've disappeared from their flat—down, owing six months' rent besides salaries and unpaid bills innumerable—and have left no address."

"Well," I said reflectively. "I'm not surprised after what I overheard in their conservatory yesterday afternoon." "What did you hear?" asked Bob, eagerly. "I told him. Poor old Bob! I won't attempt to record his subsequent remarks about women in general and Iris and auntie in particular, since no self-respecting type would consent to chronicle them.—Illustrated Bits."

The Origin of Lingers. A correspondent sends the following derivation of the term "lingers": "Early in the forties there moved from Vermont to one of the then flourishing cotton manufacturing villages of New Hampshire, a man with a large family of children, to keep one of the corporation boarding houses. He was a tall, lank dyspeptic. There was but one shoe store in the village; in the rear of the store was a room for making and repairing shoes. Here was a Frenchman, and a lover of mischief. One day the lanker entered the shop and said, 'Hello, are you a shoemaker?' 'Yes,' was the answer, 'and linger at it.' The Frenchman caught on, and in a day or two, there was hung outside the building, with other store goods probably the most uncouth, bunglingly made pair of shoes ever seen on the continent, labelled 'Lingers.' There they hung until every man, woman and child in the village had looked them over. From that day the members of the dyspeptic's family were known as 'lingers.' And the word was applied to everything as a superlative; to a fine yoke of oxen, or a big fish."—Boston Journal.

A Good Case. "No," said Smallwort, who was taking his ease under his own vine and fig tree, "no, I won't give you anything to eat, but if you will do some work, I will give you a quarter in cash."

"Do you know," said Everett Wreast, "that I've got a mighty good case, ain't you fer attempted bribery, if I only felt like pushin' it?"—Cincinnati Triune.

The New Squaw. An Indian named "Man-Afraid-of-Nothing" married a white woman in Montana recently, and in one week after her attempted bribery, he applied his tribe to have his name changed.—San Francisco Post.

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