

HOME

A Story of Today and of All Days

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SYNOPSIS.

Alan Wayne is sent away from Red Hill, Pa., by his uncle, J. Y., as a moral failure. Clem runs after him in a tangle of short skirts to bid him good-by. Captain Wayne tells Alan of the falling of the Wayne. Clem drinks Alan's health on his birthday. Judge Healey defends Alan in his business with his employers. Alan and Alix meet at sea, honeymoon bound, and start a flirtation. At home, Nance Sterling asks Alan to go away from Alix. Alix is taken to task by Gerry, her husband, for her conduct with Alan and defies him. Gerry, as he thinks, sees Alix and Alan sloping, drops everything, and goes to Pernambuco. Alix leaves Alan on the train and goes home. Gerry leaves Pernambuco and goes to Pernambuco. On a canoe trip he meets a native girl. The judge falls to trace Gerry. A baby is born to Alix. The native girl takes Gerry to her home, and shows him the ruined plantation she is mistress of. Gerry marries her. At Maple House, Collingford tells how he met Alan—'Tan Per Cent Wayne'—building a bridge in Africa.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

The next morning, with Clem as cicerone, Collingford went over to the Firs to pay his respects to Alix. They found her under the trees. "How do you do?" said Alix. "The Honorable Percy, isn't it?" "What a memory you have for trifles," said Collingford, laughing. "May I sit down?" "Do," said Alix. She was perched in the middle of a garden seat. On each side of her were piled various stuffs and all the paraphernalia of the sewing circle. Collingford sat down before her and stared. Clem had gone off in search of game more to her taste. Alix seemed to him very small. He felt the change in her before he could fix it in what it lay. She seemed still and restful in spite of her flying fingers. Spiritually still. Her eyes, glancing at him between stitches, were amused and grave at the same time.

"Doll's clothes?" said Collingford, waving at a beribboned morsel. "No," said Alix. Collingford stared a little longer and then he broke out with, "Look here, what have you done with her? Over there, the young Mrs. Lansing—spice, devilry, scintillation and wit—blinding. Over here, Mrs. Gerry—demure and industrious. Don't tell me you have gone in for the Quaker pose, but please tell me which is the possessive: you now or the other one?" Alix laughed. "I'm just me now, minus the devilry and all that. Come, I'll show you what I've done with it."

They threaded the trees and came upon a mighty bower, half sun, half shade, where in the midst of a nurse and Clem and many toys a baby was enthroned on a rug. "There you are," said Alix. "There's my spice, devilry, scintillation and wit all done into one roly-poly."

"Well, I'm blown," said Collingford, advancing cautiously on the young monarch. "Do you want me to feel him or say anything about his looks? I'll have to think a minute if you do."

"Booby," said Alix, "come away." But Collingford seemed fascinated. He squatted on the rug and poked the monarch's ribs. Nurse, mother and Clem flew to the rescue, but to their amazement the monarch did not bellow. He appropriated Collingford's finger. "I wonder if he'd mind if I called him a young 'un,'" soliloquized the attacking giant.

"Silly," said Clem, "of course not." "What are you staring at him that way for?" said Alix. "Can a baby make you think? A penny for them." "I was just thinking," said Collingford gravely, "that a baby is positively the only thing I've never eaten."

A horrified silence greeted his remark. The nurse was the first to recover. She strode forward, gathered up the baby and marched away. Alix and Clem fixed their eyes on Collingford. He slowly withered and drew back.

Then the judge and Mrs. Lansing came out to them. Collingford was introduced. Mrs. Lansing turned to Alix. "Have you asked Mr. Collingford to stay to lunch? The judge has asked himself."

"No, mother," said Alix. "I'm afraid we couldn't give Honorable Percy anything new to eat. He says—"

"My dear Mrs. Lansing," interrupted Collingford, "it's all a mistake. I positively loathe eating new things, no matter how delicious and rosy and blue-eyed they look."

"Are you speaking of cabbages?" inquired the judge. "No, babies," said Clem. "He wanted to eat the baby."

Mrs. Lansing laughed. "I don't blame him," she said. "I've often wanted to eat him myself." Collingford spent a good deal of his week at the Firs. Clem went to see the baby daily as a matter of course and he went along, as he said himself, as another matter of course. Clem talked to the baby, Collingford to Alix. He said to her one day, "I've read in books about babies doing this sort of thing to gad-about."

"Gad-about," interrupted Alix, "is just, but cruel."

"Well, butterflies," compromised Collingford. "But I never believed it really happened."

"Oh," said Alix, "it wasn't the baby. Not altogether. You see, Mr. Collingford, Gerry Lansing—I'm Mrs. Gerry—disappeared over a year ago—before the baby came. He thought I didn't love him. I might as well tell you about it. I believe in telling things. Mystery is always more dangerous than truth; it gives such a lead to imagination."

So she told him and Collingford listened, interested. At the end he said nothing. Alix looked at his thoughtful face. "What do you think? Isn't there a chance? Don't you think he's probably—probably alive?"

The judge was not there to hear the meek appeal of faith for comfort. Collingford met Alix' eyes frankly. "If I were you," he said, "I would probably believe as you do. I've met too many dead men in Piccadilly looking uncommonly well ever to say that a man is dead because he's disappeared. Then there's the other side of it. Bodsky says a man is never dead while there's anybody left that loves him."

"The judge told me about Bodsky. He's the man that said there had been lots of murderers he'd like to take to his club. He must be worth while. I'd like to talk to him."

"I don't suppose," said Collingford absently, "that Bodsky has talked to a woman since he killed his mistress." Alix started and looked up from her work. "Don't you think you had better come back—and bring the talk back with you?"

It was Collingford's turn to start. "I beg your pardon," he said. "You are right, I was in another world. Only you mustn't get a wrong impression. Everybody says it was an accident—except Bodsky. He has never said anything."

CHAPTER XIII

Alan Wayne had been away for a year. He had not returned from Montreal but had gone one from there to work in South America and, later, to Africa.

He had been in town for several days when he met the judge one afternoon in November on the avenue.

"Judge," he said without preamble, "what's this I hear about Gerry disappearing?"

"It's true," said the judge and added grimly, "he disappeared the day you went to Montreal."

Alan colored and his face turned grave. "I am sorry," he said. "I didn't know it."

"Sorry for what?" asked the judge, but Alan refused the opening and the judge hardly regretted it. They were not in time and he felt it. His heart was heavy over Alan for his own sake. He had broken what the judge had long revered as a charmed circle. He had exiled himself from that which should have been dearer to him than his heart's desire. The judge wondered if he realized it. "You're not going out to Red Hill?" he asked, trying to make the question casual.

Alan glanced at him sharply. What was the judge after? "No," he said after a pause, "I shall not break the communal coma of Red Hill for some time. I'm off again. McDale & McDale have loaned me to Edlinson's. I've become a sort of poobah on construction in Africa. They get a premium for lending me."

Alan's speech habitually drew except for an occasional retort that came like the crack of a whip. The judge looked him over curiously. Alan's dress was almost too refined. His person was as well cared for as a woman's. Every detail about him was a studied negation of work, utility, service. The judge thought of Collingford's story and wondered.

They walked in silence for some time and then Alan took his leave. The judge followed his erect figure with solemn eyes. Alan had deteriorated. One cannot be the fly in the amber of more than one woman's memory without clouding one's own soul, and a clouded soul has its peculiar circumambience which the clean can feel. The judge felt it in Alan and winced.

If Alan did not go to the Hill, in certain measure, came to Alan. The next afternoon found the captain once more established in his chair in a window at the club with Alan beside him. The captain had not changed. His hair was in the same state of white insurgency, his eyes bulged in the same old way, and he still puffed when he talked. His garb was identical and awakened the usual interest in the passing gamia.

"You'll never grow old, sir," said Alan. "Old" said the captain. "Huh, I grow old before you were born." The captain spoke with pride. He straightened his bullet head and poised a tot of whisky with a steady hand. "What did I tell you?" he said into space. "How's that, sir?" "What did I tell you?" repeated the captain swinging around his eyes, "about women?"

Alan flushed angrily. He had no retort for the old man. He sat sullenly silent.

The captain colored too. "That's right," he said with a surprising touch of choler. "Snik. Every badly broken colt sulks at the grip of the bit. What you need, young man, is a touch of the whip and you're going to get it."

And then the old man revealed a surprising knowledge of words that could lash. At first Alan was indifferently amazed, and finally recognized himself beaten at his own game. He came out of that interview thoroughly chastened and with an altogether new respect for the old captain.

The captain's code was peculiar, to say the least, and held the passionate pilgrim in ample regard but, as he pointed out to Alan, it was a code of honor. It played a game within rules. He further remarked that the hawk was a bird of evil repute but personally he preferred him to the eagle that fouls its own nest. There were other pregnant phrases that hinged in Alan's mind for some time and half awakened him to a realization of where he stood. Many a man, propped up by the sustaining atmosphere of a narrow world, has passed merciless judgment on such sins as Alan's—metal, unproved, twisting in judgment over the bar that twists in the flame. But the captain was not one of the world's confident army of the untested. He had roamed the high seas of pleasure as well as the ocean wave. Alan would have struck back at a saint but he took chastisement from the old sinner with good grace.

Alan left the captain and presented himself at the downtown offices of J. Y. Wayne & Co. They were expecting him and he was shown in to his uncle immediately, to the exasperation of several pompos, waiting clients. It was the first time that uncle and nephew had been face to face since their memorable interview at Maple House.

J. Y. Wayne was aging. He had lived hard and showed it, but there was no weakness in his age and he met Alan without compromise. He nodded toward a chair but did not offer his hand. When he spoke his voice was low and modulated to the tone of business. "I wanted to see you to tell you that you have overpaid your account with me. The balance has been put to your credit. You can see the cashier about that. I want to tell you, too, that I have made too much money myself to admire a surprising capacity in that direction in anyone else."

"Don't think that I don't appreciate the significance of your wiping out a debt which you incurred unwittingly. I can see that you had to do it because a Wayne must carry his head high in his own eyes. But—" and here J. Y.'s eyes left his nephew's expressionless face and looked vaguely into the shadows of the room. His voice took a lower key. "With all your sacrifice to pride you have failed in pride. You have not been proud in the things that count."

J. Y.'s voice fell still lower. His words hung and dropped in the silence of the room like the far-away throb of a great bell on a still night. "Yesterday Clem was crying because you had not come to the house. I try to think, Alan, that it's because Clem is there that you have not come. If I could think that—" J. Y.'s eyes came slowly back to Alan's face. A dull red was burning there. J. Y. went on, "Shame is a precious thing to a man. Differences—different circumstances—carry us to various lengths. Ethics are elastic today as never before, but as long as shame holds a bit of ground in a man's battleship, he can win back to count."

For a long minute there was silence, then on a common impulse they both arose. Alan's eyes were wide open and moist. He held out his hand and

J. Y. gripped it. It was their whole farewell.

Back in his rooms Alan sat down and wrote to Clem:

Dear Clem: We are all two people. Uncle J. Y. cut his other half off about thirty years ago and left it behind. The judge has his other half locked up in a closet. He has never let it out at all. And so on, with every one of us. This sounds very funny to you now but some day when you are grown up you will catch your self looking at me and then you will understand what I mean. I am two people too. The half of me that knows you and loves you and Red Hill and that you love has been away longer than the rest of me. He only got back twenty minutes ago, and it is too late for him to come and see you because he and the rest of me are off tomorrow on another trip. But he wants you to know that he is awfully sorry to have missed you. Next time I shall bring him with me. I hope, and I'll send him to you the day we arrive.

CHAPTER XIV

There is no stronger proof of man's evolution than his adaptability—his power of attainment through the material at hand, however elementary. From the very beginning, the necessities of his new life called to Gerry's dormant instincts. For the first week he would not hear. The past loosens its tendrils slowly. He was listless and loafed restlessly about the house. The two darkies worked for his well-being, the two white women waited on him hand and foot. At first it was jarring; then it was wearying. He began to wander from the house.

But the week had not been altogether lost. He had gathered together but primitive information. Occasional re-occurring words began to be more than mere sounds. The girl's name was Margarita. The wrinkled little woman was her aunt, Dona Maria. The two darkies were lingering relics of slave days. They had been born here. They had gone with emancipation, but they had come back. The name of the plantation was Fazenda Flores. To them it was the world. They had wandered out of it hand in hand with liberty but they had come back because freedom was here. They needed someone to serve. Margarita had long been an orphan. The place was hers and had once been rich. But before her day water had become scarce. The place was unweeded for and had fallen into its present ruin. It was well, she said, for if she had been rich suitors would have searched her out long since. She was eighteen. She had been a woman for years!

These things, some of them distinct, some only half-formed impressions, ran in Gerry's head as he wandered over the fazenda. It had once been rich, why was it not rich now? Fertility sprang to his view on every side save

Gerry did not grudge the months of toil in the ditch. As he worked he thought and planned. This ditch was the very real foundation for the attainment of his vision. Deep and strong and carefully graded it must be before he cleared the sand barrier to the river's surge. The ditch was slow of growth but there was something about it which held his faith. It was rugged and elemental. It was the ugly source of a coming resurrection.

When it was all but done he took Margarita and showed her his handiwork. He pointed out the little sluice ways, each with its primitive gate, a heavy log hinged on a thole-pin with a prop to hold it up and a stone to weight it when down. On the Fazenda side were innumerable little trenches that stretched down into the valley.

But not until he led her to the cleft in the river gorge and showed her that half an hour's work on the sand barrier would let the river into the great ditch did she understand. And there she caught his arm and burst into violent protest and pleading. "No, no," she cried, "you shall not do it. You shall not let in the river. The river is terrible. You must not play with it. It does not understand. You think it will do as you wish but it will not. Oh, if you must, please, please play with it below the rapids. There it is kinder. It lets one bathe. It lets one wash clothes."

Gerry got over his astonishment and laughed. Then he soothed her. At ready the simpler phrases of his tongue came easily from his lips. He told her that she was foolish and a little coward. She must watch and see how tame the river would be.

The next morning Gerry was up early. He was excited. From this day the ditch, the parched slope, the valley would know thirst no more. With the long dry season even the great bottoms had begun to wilt. He called Bonifacio and they started off to the work.

Under direction Bonifacio was digging a great hole just at the back of the sand-bank. Gerry measured its capacity and finally called the old darkey out. He jumped down on to the sand-bank himself and dug a small trench to the water. The river surged through it gently. Gerry climbed out. With each pulse of the come-and-go a wave rushed through the little trench, widening it and occasionally carrying away a block of the sand-bank into the hole. Gradually, then in rapid progression, the barrier was leveled. The hole filled with water that rose till it began to trickle down the long length of the ditch. They followed the tiny stream. Soon it came in rushing surges. Hours passed, Bonifacio slept, but Gerry had forgotten time. The ditch silted. The water started to flow back into the river. Along all its length the ditch held.

He climbed a point of rock and gazed around him. Far down to the left gleamed the old plantation house in the midst of its waste lands. His eye followed the long depression and he began to understand many things. The ruin was a young ruin like himself. In itself it contained the seeds of rejuvenescence. It had been robbed of its tallness and its tallness was water. Tons of water flowed past it and left it thirsting for drops. Irrigation is coeval with the birth of civilization. It had been here in this depression, lived, and passed away before he and the girl were born. He tried to explain to her what once had been, but she shrugged her shoulders. She was not interested; she did not understand. Together they walked back to the house. Gerry was silent and thoughtful. He saw a vision of what Fazenda Flores had once been, what work could make it again.

What's This I Hear About Gerry Disappearing?

"Doll's Clothes?" said Collingford.



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