



THE CASUAL HONEYMOON

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GIVE you the captain's own account of it, though I abridge in consideration of his leisured style. Pompous and verbose I grant him, even in curtailment, but you are to remember that these were the faults of his age, ingrained and quite defiant of deletion. And with this prelude—

Miss Allonby—says Captain Audaine—was that afternoon in a mighty cruel humor. Though I had omitted no reasonable method to convince her of the vehemence of my passion, 'twas without the twitch of an eyelash that she endured the volley of my sighs, the fusillade of my respectful protestations; and perfect candor compels me to admit that toward the end her silvery laughter disrupted the periods of a most elegant and moving peroration. And when the affair was concluded, and for the seventh time I had implored her to make me the happiest of men, the rogue merely observed: "But I don't want to marry you. Why on earth should I?"

"For the sake of peace," said I, "and in self-protection. For so long as you remain obdurate I must continue to importune, and presently I shall pester you to death."

"Indeed, I think it more than probable," she returned, "for you dog me like a bailiff. I am cordially weary, Captain Audaine, of your incessant persecutions; and, after all, marrying you

is perhaps the civilest way of being rid of both them and you."

But by this I held each velvet-soft and tiny hand. "Nay," I dissented, "the subject is somewhat too sacred for jest. I am no modish lover to regard marriage as a business transaction and the lady as so much live stock thrown in with the estate. I love you with sincerity; and give me leave to assure you, madam, with a freedom which I think permissible on so serious an occasion, that, even as beautiful as you are, I could never be contented with your person without your heart."

She sat with eyes downcast, all one blush. Miss Dorothy Allonby was in the bloom of nineteen, and shone with every charm peculiar to her sex. But I have no mind to weary you with poetical rhodomontades proving her a paragon and myself an imbecile, as most lovers do; in a word, her face and shape and mien and wit alike astounded and engaged all those who had the happiness to know her, and had long ago rendered her the object of my entire adoration and the target of my daily rhapsodies. Now I viewed her in a contention of the liveliest hopes and fears, for she had hesitated, and had by hesitation conceded my addresses to be not utterly distasteful; and within that instant I knew that any life undevoted to her service and protection could be but a lingering disease.

But by and by, "You shall have your answer this evening," she said, and so left me.

I fathomed the meaning of "this evening" well enough. For my adored Dorothy was all romance, and by preference granted me rendezvous in the back garden, where she would nightly tantalize me from her balcony, after the example of the Veronese lady in Shakespeare's spirited tragedy, which she prodigiously admired. Personally, my liking for romance had been of late somewhat tempered by the inclemency of the weather and the obvious unfriendliness of the dog; but there is no resisting a lady's commands, and, clear or foul, you might at any twilight's death have found me under her window, where a host of lyric phrases protested my devotion, and a cold in the head confirmed it.

This night was black as a coal-pit. Strolling beneath the casement, well wrapped in my cloak—for it drizzled—I meditated impartially upon the perfections of my dear mistress and the tyrannic despotism of love. Being the source of our existence, 'tis not unreasonably, perhaps, that this passion assumes the proprietorship of our destinies and exacts of all mankind a common tribute. To-night, at least, I viewed the world as a brave pavilion, lighted by the stars and swept by the clean winds of heaven, wherein we enacted varied rôles with God as audience; where in turn we strutted or cringed about the stage, where in turn we were beset and rent by an infinity of passions; but where every man must play the part of lover. That passion alone, I said, is universal: it set wise Solomon a-jigging in criminal byways, and sinewy Hercules himself was no stranger to its joys and inquietudes. And I cried aloud with the Roman: "*Parce precor!*" and afterward on God to make me a little worthier of Dorothy.

Engrossed in meditations such as these, I was fetched back to earth by the clicking of a lock, and, turning, saw the door immediately beneath her balcony unclose and afford egress to a slender, hooded figure. My amazement was considerable and my joy unbounded.

"Dorothy!" I whispered, as I hurried toward her.

"Come!" was her response; and her finger-tips fell lightly upon my arm, and she guided me to the gateway opening into Jervis Lane. I followed with a trepidation you may not easily conceive; nor was this diminished when I found a post-chaise there, into which my angel hastily tripped.

I babbled I know not what inarticulate nonsense. But, "Heavens!" she retorted, "do you mean to keep the parson waiting all night?"

This was her answer, then. Well, 'twas more than I could have hoped for, though to a man of any sensibility this summary disposal of our love-affair could not but smack of the distasteful. Say what you will, every gentleman has about him somewhere a tincture of that venerable and unsophisticated age when wives were taken by capture and were retained by force; he infinitely prefers that the lady should hold off to the very last; and, properly, her tongue must sound defiance long after the melting eyes have signaled how desirous is that anatomical Tarpeia, the heart of woman, to betray the citadel and yield the treasury of her charms.

Nevertheless, I stepped into the vehicle. The postilion was off in a twinkling, as the saying is, over the roughest road in England. Conversation was impossible, for Dorothy and I were jostling like two pills in a box; and as the first observation I attempted resulted in a badly bitten tongue, I prudently held my peace.

This endured for perhaps a quarter of an hour, at the end of which period the post-chaise stopped on a sudden, and I assisted my companion to alight. Before us was a villa of considerable dimension, and situate, so far as I could immediately ascertain, in the midst of a vast and desolate moor; there was no trace of human habitation within the radius of the eye; and the house itself presented no sign of either tenancy or illumination.

"In God's name——" I began.

"Hasten!" spoke a voice from with-

in the parsonage. And Dorothy drew me toward a side door, overhung with ivy, where, sure enough, a dim light burned. 'Twas but a solitary candle stuck upon a dresser at the farther end of a large, low-ceiled apartment; and in this flickering obscurity we found a tremulous parson in full canonicals, who had united our hands and gabbled half-way through the marriage service before I had the slightest notion of what had befallen me.

And such is the unreasonable disposition of man that this, the consummation of my most ardent desires, actually aroused in me a feeling not altogether unakin to irritation. This skulking celerity, this hole-and-corner business, I thought, was in ill-accord with the respect due to a sacrament; and, personally, I could have wished my marriage to have borne a less striking resemblance to the conference of three thieves in a cellar. But 'twas over in two twos. Within scantier time than it takes to tell of it, Francis and Dorothy were made one, and I had turned to salute my wife.

She gave a shriek of anguish and drew away, staring with wide eyes. "Heavens!" said she; "I have married the wrong man!"

Without delay I caught the guttering candle from the dresser yonder and held it to her countenance. You can conceive 'twas with no pleasurable emotion I discovered that I had inadvertently espoused the Dowager Marchioness of Falmouth, my adored Dorothy's grandmother, and candor compels me to admit that the lady seemed equally dissatisfied. Words failed us; and the newly wedded couple stared at one another in silence.

"Captain Audaine," said she, at last, "the situation is awkward."

"In faith, dear lady," I returned, "that is the precise thought that has just occurred to me."

"And I am of the opinion," she continued, "that you owe me some sort of explanation. For I had planned to elope with Mr. Vanringham——"

"Do I understand your ladyship to allude to Mr. Francis Vanringham, the

play-actor, at present the talk of Tunbridge yonder?" said I.

She bowed a grave response.

"This is surprising news," said I. "And grant me leave to tell you that a woman of mature years, possessed of a considerable fortune and unquestionable gentility, does not ordinarily sneak out of the kitchen door to meet a raddle-faced actor in the middle of the night. 'Tis indeed a circumstance to stagger human credulity. Oh, believe me, madam, for a virtuous woman, the back garden is not a fitting approach to the altar, nor is a man her suitable companion there at eleven o'clock in the evening."

"Hey, my fine fellow!" says my wife; "and what were *you* doing there?"

"Among lovers," I returned, "it is an established custom to keep watch beneath the windows of the adored fair one. And I, madam, have the temerity to desire an honorable union with your granddaughter."

She wrung her withered hands. "That any reputable woman should have nocturnal appointments with gentlemen in the back garden, and implicate her own grandmother in an odious marriage! I protest, Captain Audaine, the world to-day is no longer a suitable residence for a lady!"

"Indeed, this is a cruel, bad business," the parson here put in. He was pacing the apartment in a contention of dubiety and amaze. "Mr. Vanringham will be vexed."

"You will pardon me," I retorted, "if I lack time to sympathize with your Mr. Vanringham. Just at present I am sufficiently engrossed with my own affairs. Am I, indeed, to understand that this lady and I are legally married?"

He rubbed his chin. "Faith," says he, "'tis a case that lacks precedents. But the coincidence of the Christian names is devilish awkward; the service takes no cognizance of surnames, and I have merely married a Francis and a Dorothy; so that, as far as I know, the ceremony is quite as legal as though I had, as I intended, married the Dorothy in question to Francis Vanringham and not to Francis Audaine."

"Why, then," said I, "there is but one remedy, and that is an immediate divorce."

My wife shrieked. "Have you no sense of decency, Captain Audaine? Never has there been a divorce in my family. And must I be the first to drag that honorable name into a public court? To have my reputation worried at the bar by a parcel of sniggering lawyers, while the town wits buzz about it like flies about carrion? I pray you, do not suggest such a hideous thing."

"Here's the other Francis," says the parson, at this point. And it was—a raffish, handsome fellow, somewhat suggestive of the royal duke, yet rather more like a sneak-thief, but with an aroma of the dancing-master. He had missed his lady at their rendezvous, owing to my premature appearance, and had followed us post-haste.

"My Castalio!" she screamed. "My Beaugard!" She ran to him, and with disjointed talk and quavering utterance disclosed the present lamentable posture of affairs.

And I found the tableau they afforded singular. My wife had been a toast, they tell me, in Queen Anne's time, and even now the lean and restless gentlewoman showed as the abandoned house of youth and wit and beauty, with only here and there a trace of the old occupancy; and always her furtive eyes shone with a cold and shifting glitter, as though a frightened imp peeped through a mask of Hecuba, and in every movement there was an ineffable touch of something loosely hinged and fantastic. In a word, the marchioness was not unconscionably sane, and was known far and wide as a gallant woman resolutely oblivious to the batterings of Time, and so avid of flattery that she was ready to smile on any man who durst give the lie to her looking-glass. Demented landlady of her heart, she would speedily sublet that dusty chamber to the first adventurer who came prepared to pay his scot in the false coin of compliment; and 'twas not difficult to comprehend how this young Thespian had acquired its tenancy.

But now the face of Mr. Vanringham was attenuated by her revelations, and the wried mouth of it, as clogged, suggested that the party be seated, in order to consider more at ease the unfortunate contretemps. Fresh lights were kindled, since we were one and all past fear of discovery by this; and we four assembled about the long table that occupied the center of the apartment.

"The situation," Mr. Vanringham began, "may reasonably be described as desperate. Here we sit, four ruined beings. For Doctor Quarmby has betrayed an unoffending couple into involuntary matrimony, an act of which his bishop can scarcely fail to take official notice; Captain Audaine and the marchioness are entrapped into a loveless marriage, than which there is no greater misery in life; and my own future, I need hardly add, is irrevocably blighted by the loss of my respected Dorothy, without whom continued animation must necessarily be a hideous and hollow mockery. Yet there occurs to me a panacea for these disasters."

"Then, indeed, Mr. Vanringham," said I, "there's one of us who will be extremely glad to know the name of it."

He faced me with a kind of compassion in his eyes. "You, sir, have caused a sweet and innocent lady to marry you against her will. Oh, beyond doubt, your intentions were immaculate, but the fact remains in its stark enormity; and the hand of an inquisitive child is not ordinarily salved by its previous ignorance as to the corrosive properties of fire. You have betrayed confiding womanhood, an act abhorrent to all notions of gentility. There is but one conclusive proof of your repentance; need I add that it is self-destruction?"

"You will pardon me," I observed, "but suicide is a deadly sin, and I would not willingly insult any gentlewoman by evincing so marked a desire for the devil's company in preference to hers."

"Your argument is sophistry," he returned, with a trace of contempt; "since it is your death alone that can endear

you to your bride. Death is the ultimate and skilled assayer of our mingled natures; by his art our gross constituents—our foibles, our pettinesses, nay, our very crimes—are severed from the sterling ore, that spark of divinity that yet glows in the vilest bosom; and from his crucible memory, like an ethereal spirit, mounts to hallow our renown and enshrine our final resting-place. Ah, no, Captain Audaine! Death alone may canonize the husband and render him the touchstone for tearful and individual comparisons. Once you are dead, your wife will adore you; once you are dead, your wife and I have before us an unobstructed road to marital felicity, which, living, you sadly encumber; and only when he has delivered your funeral oration may Doctor Quarmby be exempt from apprehension lest his part in your marriage ceremony bring about his defrockment. I urge the greatest good for the greatest number, captain; living, you plunge all four of us into irretrievable misery; whereas the nobility of your death must necessarily exalt your soul to Heaven, accompanied and endorsed by the fervent prayers of three grateful hearts."

"And faith, sir," says the parson, "while no clergyman extant has a more cordial aversion to suicide, I cannot understand why a prolonged existence should greatly tempt you. You love Miss Dorothy Allonby, as all Tunbridge knows; and to a man of sensibility, what can be more awkward than suddenly to have thrust upon him grandfathership of the adored one? You must, in this position, necessarily be exposed to the committal of a thousand gaucheries daily; and if you insist upon your irreligious project of procuring a divorce, what, I ask, can be your standing with the lady? Can she smile upon the suit of a person who has publicly cast aside the sworn love and obedience of a being to whom she owes her very existence?—or will any clergyman in England participate in the union of a woman to her ex-grandfather? Believe me, sir, 'tis less the selfishness than the folly of your cling-

ing to this vale of tears that I deplore. And I protest that this rope"—he fished up a coil from the corner—"appears to have been deposited here by a benign and all-seeing Providence to suggest the manifold advantages of hanging yourself as compared with the untidy operation of cutting your throat."

"And conceive, sir," says my wife, "what must be the universal grief for the bridegroom so untimely taken off in the primal crescence of his honeymoon. Your funeral will be unparalleled both for sympathy and splendor; all Tunbridge will attend in tears; and it will afford me a melancholy but perfectly sincere pleasure to extend to you the hospitality of the Allonby mausoleum—which many connoisseurs have accounted the finest in the three kingdoms."

"I must venture," said I, "to terminate this very singular conversation. You have, one and all, stated certain undeniable advantages incidental to my immediate demise; your logic is unassailable, and has proven suicide my unquestionable duty; and my refutation is confined to the simple statement that I will cheerfully see every one of you damned before I'll do it."

Mr. Francis Vanringham rose with a little bow. "You have insulted both womanhood and the established church by the spitting out of that ribald oath; and me you have with equal levity wronged by the theft of my affianced bride. I am only a play-actor, but in inflicting an insult a gentleman must either lift his inferior to his own station or else forfeit his gentility. I wear a sword, Captain Audaine. Will you grant me the usual satisfaction?"

"My fascinating comedian," said I, "if 'tis a fight you are desirous of, I can assure you that in my present state of mind I would cross swords with a costermonger or the devil, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, with quite equal impartiality. But scarcely in the view of a lady; and, therefore, as you boast a greater influence in that quarter, will you kindly advise the withdrawal of yonder unexpected addition to my family?"

"There is an inner room," says he, pointing to the door behind me; and I held it open as my wife swept through.

"You are the epitome of selfishness," she flung at me, in passing. "Had you possessed one ounce of gallantry, you had long ago freed me from this odious marriage."

"Madam," I returned, with a *congé*, "is it not rather a compliment that I so willingly forfeit a superlunary bliss in order to retain the pleasure of your society?"

She sniffed; and I closed the door behind her; and within the moment the two men fell upon me, from the rear, and presently had me trussed like a fowl and bound with that abominable parson's coil of rope.

"Believe me," says Mr. Vanringham, now seated upon the table and indolently dangling his heels—the ecclesiastical monstrosity, having locked the door upon Mrs. Audaine, had taken a chair, and was composedly smoking a churchwarden—"believe me, I lament the necessity of this uncouth proceeding. But what the devil! man is a selfish animal. You conceive, Captain Audaine, my affection for yonder venerable lady is not overwhelming; but a rich marriage is the only means adapt to repair my tattered fortunes, and so I cheerfully avail myself of her credulity. By God!" cries he, with a quick lift of speech, "to-morrow I had been a landed gentleman but for you, you blundering omadhaun! And is a shabby merry-andrew from God knows where to pop in and spoil the prettiest plot was ever hatched?"

'Twas like a flare of lightning, this sudden outburst of arid malignity; you saw in it quintessentialized the man's hatred of a world that had ill-used him, stark and venomous; and 'twas gone as quickly as the lightning, yielding to the pleasantest smile imaginable. Meanwhile, you picture me inanimate, lying helpless beneath his oscillating toes.

"'Twas not that I lacked the courage to fight you," he continues; "nor the skill, either. But there is always the possibility that by some awkward thrust or other you might deprive the

stage of a distinguished ornament. As a sincere admirer of my genius, I must, in decency, avoid such risks. 'Tis quite necessary to me, of course, that you be got out of this world speedily, since a further continuance of your existence would disastrously interfere with my plans for the future; having gone thus far, I cannot reasonably be expected to cede my interest in the marchioness and her estate. Accordingly, I decide upon the simplest method, and tip the wink to Quarmby here; the lady quits the apartment in order to afford us opportunity of settling our pretensions to her hand, with cutlery as arbiter, and returns to find your perforated carcass artistically disposed in yonder extremity of the room. Slain in an affair of honor, my dear captain! The disputed damsel will think none the worse of me, a man of demonstrated valor and affection; Quarmby and I will bury you in the cellar; and, being freed from her late, unfortunate alliance, my esteemed Dorothy will immediately seek consolation in the embraces of a more acceptable spouse. Confess, sir, is it not a scheme of Arcadian simplicity?"

'Twas the most extraordinary sensation of my life to note the utterly urbane and cheerful countenance with which he disclosed the meditated atrocity. This unprincipled young man was about to run me through with no more compunction than a naturalist pinning a new beetle among his collection may momentarily feel.

Then my quickened faculties were stirred on a sudden, and for the first time I opened my mouth.

"You were about to say?" he queried.

"I was about to relieve a certain surplusage of emotion," I retorted, "by observing that I consider you to be a chattering, vain fool; to be a lean-witted and improvident fool!"

"Harsh words, my captain," says he, with lifted eyebrows.

"But not of an undeserved asperity," I returned. "Do you think the marchioness, her flighty head crammed with scraps of idiotic romance, would elope save with strict regard for the canons of romance? Not so; depend upon it,

a letter was left upon her pincushion announcing her removal with you, and in the most approved heroic style arraigning the obduracy of her unsympathetic grandchildren. Do you not think that Gerald Allonby will follow her? Depend upon it, he will; and the proof is," I added, "that you may hear his horses yonder on the heath, as I heard them some moments ago."

Vanringham leaped to the floor and stood thus, all tension. He raised clenched, quivering hands toward the ceiling. "Oh, King of Jesters!" he cried, in horrid blasphemy; and then again: "Oh, King of Jesters!"

And by this men were shouting without, and at the door there was a prodigious and augmented hammering. And the parson wrung his hands and began to shake like a dish of jelly in a thunder-storm.

"Captain Audaine," Mr. Vanringham presently resumed, "you are correct. Clidamira and Parthenissa would never have fled into the night without leaving a note upon the pincushion. The folly that I kindled in your wife's addled pate has proven my ruin. Remains to make the best of Hobson's choice." He unlocked the door. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," says he, with deprecating hand, "surely this disturbance is somewhat outré, a trifle misplaced, upon the threshold of a bridal-chamber?"

Gerald Allonby thrust into the room, followed by Lord Humphrey Degge, my abhorred rival for Dorothy's affection, and two attendants.

"My grandmother!" shrieks Gerald. "Villain, what have you done with my grandmother!"

"The query were more fitly put," Vanringham retorts, "to the lady's husband." And he waves his hand toward me.

And thereupon the newcomers unbound me with many exclamations of wonder. "And now," I observed, "I would suggest that you bestow upon Mr. Vanringham and that blot upon the Church of England yonder the bonds from which I have been so recently ejected, or, at the very least, keep a vigilant watch upon those more than

suspicious characters, what time I narrate the surprising events of the evening."

Subsequently, I made a clean breast of affairs to Gerald and Lord Humphrey Degge. They heard me with attentive, even sympathetic, countenances; but presently the face of Lord Humphrey brightened as he saw a not unformidable rival thus jockeyed out of the field; and when I had ended, Gerald rose and, with an oath, struck his open palm upon the table.

"This is the most fortunate coincidence," he swears, "that I have ever known of. I came prepared to find my grandmother the wife of a beggarly play-actor; and I discover, to the contrary, that she has contracted an alliance with a gentleman for whom I entertain the most sincere affection."

"Surely," I cried, aghast, "you cannot mean to accept this most iniquitous and inadvertent match!"

"What is your meaning, Captain Audaine?" says the boy sharply. "What other course is possible?"

"Faith!" said I, "after to-night's imbroglio, I have nothing to observe concerning the possibility of anything; but if this marriage prove a legal one, I, for my part, am most indissuadably resolved to rectify my error in the divorce court without delay."

Now Gerald's brows were uglily compressed. "A divorce," said he, with an extreme of deliberation, "means the airing of to-night's doings in open court. I take it 'tis the duty of a man of honor to preserve the reputation of his grandmother stainless; whether she be a housemaid or the Queen of Portugal, her frailties are equally entitled to endurance, her eccentricities to toleration; can a gentleman, then, sanction any proceeding of a nature calculated to make his grandmother the laughing-stock of England? The point is a nice one."

"For conceive," said Lord Humphrey, with the most knavish grin I ever knew a human countenance to pollute itself with, "that the entire matter will be consigned by the shorthand writers to the public press, and after

this be hawked about the streets; and that the venders will yell particulars of your grandmother's folly under your very windows; and that you must hear them in impotence, and that for some months the three kingdoms will hear of nothing else. Gad, I quite feel for you, my dear!"

"I have fallen into a nest of madmen!" I cried. "You know, both of you, that I adore Gerald's sister, the incomparable Miss Allonby; and, in any event, I demand of you, as rational beings, is it equitable that I be fettered for life to an old woman's apron-strings simply because a doctor of divinity is parsimonious of his candles?"

But Gerald had drawn with a flourish. "You have repudiated my kinswoman," says he, "and you cannot deny me the customary satisfaction. Harkee, my fine fellow, Dorothy will marry my friend, Lord Humphrey, if she will be advised by me; or, if she prefer it, she may marry the Man in the Iron Mask or the piper that played before Moses, so far as I am concerned; but as for you, I hereby offer you your choice between quitting this apartment as my grandfather or as a corpse."

"I won't fight you!" I shouted. "Keep the boy off, Degge!" But as the infuriate lad rushed upon me, I was forced, in self-protection, to draw likewise, and after a brief engagement presently knocked his sword across the room.

"Gerald," I pleaded, "for the love of God, consider! I cannot fight you. Heaven knows this tragic farce has robbed me of all pretension toward your sister, and that I am just now but little better than a madman; yet 'tis her blood that animates your veins, and in that dear fluid I cannot imbrue my hands. You are no swordsman, lad—keep off!"

And there I had blundered irretrievably.

"No swordsman!" he shouted. "You lie, you rascal! No swordsman! By God, I fling the words in your face, Frank Audaine; must I send the candlestick after them?" And within the instant he had caught up his weapon and

had hurled himself upon me, sobbing in a depraved fury. I had not moved. The boy spitted himself upon my sword and fell, gasping.

"You will bear me witness, Lord Humphrey," said I, "that the quarrel was not of my seeking."

But at this juncture the outer door reopened and Dorothy came into the room, preceding Lady Allonby and Mr. George Erwyn. They had followed in the family coach to dissuade the marchioness from her contemplated match by force or by argument, as the cat might jump; and so it came about that my dear mistress and I stared at one another across her brother's lifeless body.

And 'twas in that poignant moment that I first saw her truly. In a storm you have doubtless had some utterly familiar scene leap at you from the darkness under the lash of lightning, and be for that instant made visible and strange; and with much that awful clarity I beheld her now. Formerly her beauty had ensnared me, and this I now perceived to be a fortuitous and happy medley of color and glow and curve, indeed, but nothing more. 'Twas the woman I loved, not her trappings; and her eyes were no more part of her than were the jewels in her ears. But the lovely mirth of her, the brave heart, the clean soul, the girl herself, how good and generous and kind and tender—'twas this that I now beheld, and knew that this, too, was lost; and in beholding, the little love of yesterday fled whimpering before the sacred passion that had possessed my being. And I began to laugh.

"My dear," said I, "'twas to-night that you promised me your answer; and to-night you observe in me alike your grandfather and your brother's murderer."

Lady Allonby fell to wringing her hands, but my adored Dorothy had knelt beside the prostrate form and was inspecting the ravages of my fratricidal sword. "'Mph!" says she immediately, wrinkling as to her saucy nose, "had none of you the sense to perceive that Gerald was tipsy? And as for the wound, 'tis only a scratch here on the

left shoulder. Get water, somebody." And her commands being obeyed, she cleansed the wound composedly and bandaged it with the ruffle of her petticoat.

Meantime we hulking men clustered around her, fidgeting and foolishly gaping, like a basket of fish; and presently a sibilance of relief went about our circle as Gerald opened his eyes. "Sister," says he, with a profoundly tragic face, "remember that I died to avenge the honor of our family."

"To avenge a fiddlestick!" said my adored Dorothy. And, rising, she confronted me, a tinted statuette of decision. "Now, Frank," says she, "I would like to know the meaning of this nonsense."

And, thereupon, for the second time, I recounted the dreadful and huddled action of the night.

When I had ended, "The first thing," says she, "is to let grandmother out of that room within. The second is to show me the parson." This was done; the dowager entered in an extremity of sulkiness, and the parson, on being pointed out, lowered his eyes and intensified his complexion.

"As I anticipated," says my charmer, "you are, one and all, a parcel of credulous infants. 'Tis a parson, indeed, but merely the parson out of Mr. Vanbrugh's 'Relapse'; only last Monday we heartily commended your fine performance, sir. Why, Frank, the man is a play-actor, not a priest."

"I fancy," Mr. Vanringham here interpolates, "that I owe the assembled company some modicum of explanation. 'Tis true that at the beginning of our friendship I had contemplated matrimony with our amiable marchioness, but I confess that 'twas the lady's property rather than her person that was the allure. And reflection dissuaded me; a legal union left me, a young and not unhandsome man, irrevocably fettered to an old woman; a mock marriage afforded an eternal option to abrogate the match—for a consideration—with her relatives, to whom I had instinctively divined our union would prove distasteful. Accordingly, I

availed myself of our friend Quarmby's skill in the portrayal of clerical types, rather than resort to any parson whose authority was unrestricted by the footlights. And accordingly——"

"And accordingly, my marriage," I interrupted, "is not binding?"

"I can assure you," he replied, "that you might trade your lawful right in the lady yonder for a two-penny whistle and not lose by the bargain."

"And my marriage?" says the marchioness. "The marriage which was never to be legalized, you jumping-jack!—'twas merely that you might sell me afterward, like so much mutton, was it, sir?"

But I spare you her ensuing gloss upon this text.

•I rode homeward in the coach with Dorothy at my side and Gerald recumbent upon the front seat. The boy, in the most friendly fashion, fell noisily asleep after a minute's driving.

"And you have not," I immediately asserted—"after all, you have not given me the answer which was to-night to decide whether I, of all mankind, be the most fortunate or the most miserable. And 'tis nearing twelve."

"What choice have I?" she murmured. "After to-night, is it not doubly apparent that you need some one to take care of you? And, besides, I have been in love with you for seven whole weeks."

My heart stood still. And shall I confess that for an instant my wits, too, paused to play the gourmand with my emotions? She sat beside me in the darkness, you conceive, waiting, mine to touch. And everywhere the world was filled with beautiful, kind people, and overhead God smiled down upon His world, and a careless seraph yonder had left open the door of heaven so that quite a deal of its splendor flooded the world about us. And the snoring of Gerald was now inaudible, because of a stately music that was playing somewhere.

"Frank!" she breathed. And I knew that her lips were no less tender than her voice.