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MAMMON'S MATCH

By James Branch Cabell

“IT is very inconsiderate of you, Peter,” said Mr. Wyke, reproachfully, “very inconsiderate, and not at all what I should have expected of you. Moreover, it’s foolish. What good do you get out of having the gout, anyway?”

Whereupon, Peter Blagden desired to be informed if Mr. Wyke considered those with various-adjectives-accompanied twinges in that qualified foot to be a source of personal pleasure to the owner of the very-extensively-hiatused foot. In which case, Mr. Blagden felt at liberty to express his opinion of Mr. Wyke’s intellectual attainments, which was of an uncomplimentary nature.

“Because, you know,” Hunston Wyke pursued, equably, “you wouldn’t have the gout if you didn’t habitually over-eat yourself and drink more than is good for you. In consequence, here you are with a foot of the same general size and shape as a hay-rick, only rather less symmetrical, and quite unable to attend to the really serious business of life, which is to present me to the heiress. It is a case of vicarious punishment which strikes me as extremely unfair. You have made of your stomach a god, Peter, and I am the one to suffer for it. You have made of your stomach,” continued Mr. Wyke, venturing aspiringly into metaphor, “a brazen Moloch before which you are now calmly preparing to immolate my prospects in life. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Peter!”

Mr. Blagden’s next observation was describable as impolite.

“Fate, too,” Hunston Wyke la-

mented, in a tragic voice, “appears to have entered into this nefarious conspiracy against me. Here, not two miles away, is one of the greatest heiresses in America—clever, I am told, beautiful, I am sure, for I have yet to discover a woman who sees anything in the least attractive about her—and, above all, with the Woods millions at her disposal. Why, Peter, Margaret Hugonin is the woman I’ve been looking for these ten years—she is, to a hair, precisely the sort of woman I’ve always intended to make unhappy. And I can’t even get a sight of her! Here you are laid up with the gout, and unable to help me; and yonder is the heiress making a foolish pretense at mourning for the old curmudgeon who left her all that money, and declining to meet people. Oh, she’s a shiftless woman, Peter! At this very moment, she might be getting better acquainted with me; at this very moment, Peter, I might be explaining to her in what points she is utterly and entirely different from all the other women I’ve ever known. And she prefers to immure herself in Selwoode with no better company than her father, who’s an ungodly old retired colonel, and a she-cousin, who’s somewhere on the undiscussable side of forty—when she might be engaging me in amorous dalliance! That Miss Hugonin is a shiftless woman, I tell you! And Fate—oh, but Fate is a vixenish jade!” cried Mr. Wyke, and shook his fist under the nose of an imaginary arbitress of destiny.

“You appear,” said Peter, drily, “to be unusually well informed of what’s going on at Selwoode.”

"You flatter me," said Hunston Wyke, with proper modesty. "You must remember that there are maids at Selwoode. You must remember that my man, Byam, is—and will be until that inevitable day when he will attempt to blackmail me, and I shall kill him in the most lingering fashion I can think of—that Byam is, I say, something of a diplomatist."

Mr. Blagden regarded him with disapproval. "You're a damn' cad, you know, Hunston," he pensively observed. "You're the most unblushing fortune-hunter I ever knew. I can't, for the life of me, understand why I don't turn you out of doors."

"I don't know where you picked up your manners," said Mr. Wyke, reflectively, "but it must have been in devilish low company. I'd cut your acquaintance, Peter, if I could afford it." Then he fell to pacing up and down the floor, with a certain indolent grace. "I am, as you have somewhat grossly worded it, a fortune-hunter. And why the deuce shouldn't I be, Peter? A fortune's the only thing I need. I have good looks, you know, of a sort; ah, I'm not vain, but both my glass and a number of women have been kind enough to reassure me on that point. And that I have a fair amount of wits my creditors will attest, who have lived promise-crammed for the last decade, feeding upon air like chameleons. Then, I have birth—not that good birth ensures anything but bad habits, though, for you will observe that, by some curious freak of Nature, an old family tree seldom produces anything but wild oats. And, finally, I have position. I can introduce my wife into the very best society; ah, yes, you may depend upon it, Peter, she will have the privilege of meeting the very worst and stupidest and silliest people in the country on perfectly equal terms. You will perceive, then, that the one desirable thing I lack is wealth. And that I shall naturally expect my wife to furnish. So, that point is settled, and you may give me a cigarette."

Peter handed him his case, with a snort. "You're a conceited ass," Mr. Blagden was pleased to observe. "You ought to have learned, by this, that you'll never get a rich wife. God knows, you've angled for enough of 'em!"

"You are painfully coarse, Peter," Mr. Wyke pointed out, with a sigh. "Indeed, your general lack of refinement might easily lead one to think you owed your millions to your own thrifty industry, or some equally unpleasant attribute, rather than to your father's very commendable and lucrative innovation in the line of—I remember it was something extremely indigestible, but, for the moment, I forget whether it was steam-reapers or a new sort of pickle. Yes, in a great many respects, you are hopelessly parvenuish. This cigarette-case, for instance—studded with diamonds and engraved with a monogram big enough for a coach-door! Why, Peter, it simply reeks with the ostentation of honestly acquired wealth—and with very good tobacco, too, by the way. I shall take it, for I am going for a walk, and I haven't any of my own. And some day I shall pawn this jeweled abortion, Peter—pawn it for much fine gold, and upon the proceeds I shall make merriment for myself and for my friends." And Hunston Wyke pocketed the case.

"That's all very well," Peter growled, "but you needn't try to change the subject. You know you've angled after any number of rich women who've had sense enough, thank God, to refuse you. You're utterly good-for-nothing, Hunston."

"It is the one blemish," said Mr. Wyke, sweetly, "upon an otherwise perfect character. And it is true," he continued, after an interval of meditation, "that I have, in my time, encountered some very foolish women. There was, for instance, Elena Barry-Smith, who threw me over for Bob Townsend; and Gabrielle Ullweather, who had the bad taste to prefer Teddy Anstruther; and Anne Willoughby, who very inconsiderately married Jack

Charteris instead of me. These were very foolish women, Peter, but, while their taste is bad, their dinners are good, so I have remained upon the best of terms with 'em. They have trodden me under their feet, but I am the long worm that has no turning. Moreover, you are doubtless aware of the axiomatic equality between the fish in the sea and those out of it. I hope before long to better my position in life. I hope—ah, well, that would scarcely interest you. Good morning, Peter. And I trust, when I return," Mr. Wyke added, with chastening dignity, "that you will evince a somewhat more Christian spirit toward the world in general, and that your language will be rather less reminiscent of the blood-stained buccaneer of historical fiction."

"You're a grinning buffoon," said Peter. "You're a Jack-pudding. You're an ass. Where are you going, anyway?"

"I am going," said Mr. Wyke, "to the extreme end of Gridlington. Afterward, I am going to climb the wall that stands between Gridlington and Selwoode."

"And after that?" said Peter.

Hunston Wyke gave a gesture. "Why, after that," said he, "fortune will favor the brave. And I, Peter, am very, very brave."

II

A HALF-HOUR subsequently, Mr. Wyke, true to his word, was scaling a ten-foot stone wall thickly overgrown with ivy. At the top of it, he paused, and sat down to take breath and meditate, his legs dangling over into as flourishing an Italian garden as you would wish to see.

"Now, I wonder," Mr. Wyke queried, of his soul, "what will be next? There is a very cheerful uncertainty about what will be next. It may be a spring-gun, and it may be a bulldog, and it may be a susceptible heiress. But it's apt to be— No, it isn't," Mr. Wyke amended, promptly; "it's

going to be an angel. Or perhaps it's going to be a dream. She can't be real, you know—I'm probably just dreaming her. I'd be quite certain I was just dreaming her, if this wall were not quite so humpy and uncomfortable. For it stands to reason, I wouldn't be fool enough to dream such unsympathetic iron spikes as I'm sitting on."

"Perhaps you are not aware," hazarded a soprano voice, "that this is private property?"

"Why, no," said Mr. Wyke, very placidly; "on the contrary, I was just thinking it must be heaven. And I am tolerably certain," Hunston Wyke commented further, in his soul, "that you are one of the superior angels."

The girl lifted her brows. She sat upon a semicircular stone bench, some twenty feet from the wall, and had apparently been reading, for a book lay open in her lap. She now inspected Mr. Wyke with a sort of languid wonder in her eyes, that gentleman returning the scrutiny with unqualified approval in his.

And, in this, he had reason. The girl was eminently good to look upon.

So Hunston Wyke regarded her for a rather lengthy interval, considering, meanwhile, with an immeasurable content, how utterly and entirely impossible it would be to describe her subsequently to Peter. Clearly, it would be out of the question to trust to mere words, however choicely picked, for, upon inspection; there was a delightful ambiguity about every one of her features that defied any such idiotic attempt. Her eyes, for example, he noted with a faint thrill of surprise, just escaped being brown by virtue of an amber glow they had; what color, then, was he conscientiously to call them? And her hair he found a bewildering, though pleasing, mesh of shadow and sunlight, all made up of multitudinous gradations of color that seemed to vary with the light you chanced to see it in, through the whole gamut of bronze and chestnut and gold; and where, pray, in the bulkiest lexicon, in the very weightiest thesaurus,

was he to find the adjective that could be applied to hair like that without trenching on sacrilege?

And, in his appraisal, you may depend upon it that her lips were passed quickly over as a dangerous topic, and dismissed with the mental statement that they were red and not altogether unattractive. Whereas, her cheeks baffled him for a time—but always with a haunting sense of familiarity—till he had, at last, discovered that they reminded him of those little tatters of cloud that sometimes float about the setting sun—those irresolute wisps that cannot decide whether to be pink or white, and so waver through their tiny lives between the two colors.

To this effect, then, Mr. Wyke discoursed with his soul, what time he sat upon the wall-top and smiled and kicked his heels gently to and fro among the ivy. By-and-bye, though, the girl sighed.

"You're placing me in an extremely unpleasant position," she complained, wearily. "Would you mind returning to your sanatorium and allowing me to go on reading? I'm interested in my book, and I can't possibly go on in any comfort so long as you elect to perch up there like Humpty Dumpty, and grin like a dozen Cheshire cats."

"Now, that," spoke Mr. Wyke, in absent wise, "is but another instance of the widely prevalent desire to make me serve as scapegoat for the sins of humanity. I am being blamed now for sitting on top of this wall. One would think I wanted to sit here. One would actually think," Mr. Wyke cried, raising his eyes toward heaven, "that sitting on the very humpiest kind of iron spikes was my favorite form of recreation! In the interests of justice," he continued, falling into a somewhat milder tone, "I must ask you to place the blame where it rightfully belongs. The injuries now being inflicted upon my sensitive nature, and, incidentally, upon my not over-stocked wardrobe, I am willing to pass over. But the claims of justice are everywhere paramount. Miss Hugonin, and Miss Hugonin alone, is responsible for my pres-

ent emulation of Mahomet's coffin, and upon that point I am compelled to insist."

"May one suggest," she queried, gently, "that you are probably—mistaken?"

Hunston Wyke sketched a bow. "Recognizing your present point of view," said he, gallantly, "I thank you for the kindly euphemism. But may one allowably demonstrate the fallacy of this same point of view? I thank you; for silence, I am told, is proverbially equal to assent. I am, then, one Hunston Wyke, by birth a gentleman, by courtesy a lawyer, by inclination an idler, and by lucky chance a guest of the Mr. Peter Blagden, whose flourishing estate extends indefinitely yonder to the rear of my coat-tails. My hobby chances to be gardening. I am a connoisseur, an admirer, a devotee of gardens. It is, indeed, hereditary among the Wykes; a love for gardens runs in our family just as a love for gin runs in other families. It is with us an irresistible passion. The very founder of our family—one Adam, whom you may have heard of—was a gardener. Owing to the unfortunate loss of his position, the family since then has sunken somewhat in the world; but time and poverty alike have proved powerless against our horticultural tastes and botanical inclinations. And then," cried Hunston Wyke, with a flourish, "and then, what follows, logically?"

"Why, if you aren't more careful," she languidly made answer, "I am afraid that, owing to the laws of gravitation, a broken neck is what follows logically."

"You're a rogue," Mr. Wyke commented swiftly, in his soul, "and I like you all the better for it." Aloud, he stated: "What follows is that we can no more keep away from a creditable sort of garden than a moth can from a lighted candle. Consider, then, my position. Here am I on one side of the wall, and on the other, is one of the most celebrated examples of formal gardening in the whole country. Am I to blame if I succumb to the tempta-

tion? Surely not," Hunston-Wyke argued, very earnestly; "for surely to any fair-minded person it will be at once apparent that I am brought to my present very uncomfortable position upon the points of these *very* humpy iron spikes by a simple combination of atavism and injustice—atavism, because hereditary inclination draws me irresistibly to the top of the wall, and injustice, because Miss Hugonin's perfectly unreasonable refusal to admit visitors prevents my coming any further. Surely, that is at once apparent?"

But now the girl yielded to his grave face, and broke into a clear, rippling carol of mirth. She laughed from the chest, this woman, laughed boyishly. And Hunston Wyke, perched in insecure discomfort on his wall, found time to rejoice that he had finally discovered that rarity of rarities, a woman who neither giggles nor cackles, but has found the happy mean between these two extremes, and knows how to laugh.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Wyke," she said, at last. "Oh, yes, I've heard a deal of you. And I remember now that I've never heard you were suspected of sanity."

"Common sense," Mr. Wyke informed her, from his pedestal, "is exclusively confined to that decorous class of people who never lose either their tempers or their umbrellas. Now, I haven't any temper to lose, and, so far, I have managed to avoid laying aside anything for a rainy day, so that it stands to reason I must possess uncommon sense."

"If that is the case," said the girl, "you will kindly come down from that wall and attempt to behave like a rational being."

He was down—as the phrase runs—in the twinkling of a bed-post. On which side of the wall, I leave you to guess.

"For I am sure," the girl continued, "that Margaret would not object in the least to your seeing the gardens, since they interest you so tremendously. I'm Avis Beechinor, you know—Miss Hugonin's cousin. So, if you like, we'll

consider that a proper introduction, Mr. Wyke, and I'll show you the gardens if—if you really care to see them."

Mr. Wyke's face, I must confess, had fallen slightly. Up to this moment, he hadn't a suspicion that it was not Miss Hugonin he was talking to; and he now reconsidered, with celerity, the information Byam had brought him from Selwoode.

"For, when I come to think of it," he reflected, "he simply said she was older than Miss Hugonin. I embroidered the tale so glibly for Peter's benefit that I was deceived by my own ornamentations. I had looked for corkscrew ringlets and a simper in Miss Hugonin's cousin—not an absolutely, supremely, inexpressibly unthinkable beauty like this!" Mr. Wyke cried, in his soul. "Older! Why, good Lord, Miss Hugonin must be an infant in arms!"

But his audible discourse was prefaced with an eloquent gesture. "If I'd care!" he said. "Haven't I told you I was a connoisseur in gardens? Why, simply look, Miss Beechinor!" he exhorted her, and threw out his hands in a large pose of admiration. "Simply regard those yew-hedges, and parterres, and grassy amphitheatres, and palisades, and statues, and cascades, and everything—everything that goes to make a formal garden the most delectable sight in the world! Simply feast your eyes upon those orderly clipped trees and the fantastic patterns those flowers are laid out in! Why, upon my word, it looks as if all four books of Euclid had suddenly burst into blossom! And you ask me if I'd care! Ah, it's very evident *you* aren't a connoisseur in gardens, Miss Beechinor!"

And he had started on his way into this one, when the girl stopped him.

"Isn't this yours?" she queried, in a rather curious voice. "You must have spilled it coming over the wall, Mr.—er—Wyke."

It was Peter's cigarette-case.

"Why, dear me, yes!" Hunston Wyke assented, affably. "Do you know, now, I'd have been tremen-

dously sorry to lose that? It's a—a sort of present—an unbirth-day present from a very dear friend."

She turned it over in her hand. "It's very handsome," she marveled. "Such—such a pretty monogram!"

"Eh?—oh, yes, yes!" said Mr. Wyke, easily. "P. B., you mean? That stands for Perfect Behavior, you see. My friend gave it to me because, he said, I was so good. And—oh, well, he added a few things to that—partial sort of a friend, you know—and, really—why, really, Miss Beechinor, it would embarrass me to tell you what he added," Hunston Wyke protested, and modestly waved the subject aside.

"And that," his meditations ran, "is the absolute truth. Peter did tell me I was good. And it really would embarrass me to tell her he added 'for-nothing.' So, this far, I have been a model of veracity."

Then he took the case—gaining thereby the bliss of momentary contact with a certain velvet-soft trifle that seemed, somehow, to set his own grosser hand a-tingle—and cried: "Now, Miss Beechinor, you must show me the pergola. I am excessively partial to pergolas, you know."

And, in his soul, he wondered savagely what a pergola was, and why on earth he had been fool enough to waste the last three days in bedeviling Peter, and how under the broad canopy of heaven he could ever have suffered from the delusion that he had seen a really adorable woman before to-day.

III

BUT, "She is entirely too adorable," Mr. Wyke reasoned with himself, some three-quarters of an hour later. "In fact, I regard it as positively inconsiderate in any impecunious young person to venture to upset me in the way she has done. Why, God bless my soul! my heart's pounding away inside me like a trip-hammer, and I'm absolutely light-headed with good-will and charity and benevolent intentions toward the entire universe! Oh, Avis,

Avis! you *know* you hadn't any right to put me in this insane state of mind!"

Mr. Wyke was, at this moment, retracing his steps toward the spot where he had climbed the wall between Gridlington and Selwoode, but he paused now to outline a reproachful gesture in the direction from which he came.

"What do you mean by having such a name?" he queried, sadly. "Avis! Why, it's the very soul of music, clear and sweet and insistent as a bird-call, an unforgettable lyric in four letters! It's just the sort of name a fellow can't possibly forget. Why couldn't you have been named Polly or Margaret or something commonplace like that, Avis—dear?" And this combination of words apparently appealing to Mr. Wyke's sense of euphony, he repeated it, again and again, each time rolling out the syllables with a more relishing gusto. "Avis dear! dear Avis! dear, dear Avis!" he experimented. "Why, each one's more hopelessly unforgettable than the other! Oh, Avis dear, why are you so absolutely and entirely unforgettable all around? *Why* do you ripple all your words together in that quaint fashion till it sounds like a brook discoursing? *Why* did you crinkle up your eyes when I told you that da—blessed flower was a *Calycanthus arithmeticus*? And *why* did you pout at me, Avis dear? A fellow can't forget things like that. And, oh, dear, dear, dear Avis, if you only knew what nearly happened when you pouted!"

He had come to the wall by this, but again he paused to lament. "It's very inconsiderate," said Hunston Wyke, "very! She might at least have asked my permission, before upsetting all my plans in life. I had firmly intended to marry a rich woman, and now I'm about as capable of doing it as I am of scaling the heaven yonder and purloining one of the stars. I'm going to marry Avis Beechinor, if she'll have me; and, if she won't, I'm going to commit suicide and leave her a pathetic little note forgiving her in the most noble and wholesale

manner for irrevocably blighting a future so rich in promise. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do. And, if she'll have me"—and here he paused, with an intake of the breath, and for a single heart-beat considered that rosette chance—"good Lord, if she'll have me! Why, I wouldn't change places with the Pope of Rome or the Czar of all the Russias! Ah, no, not I! I prefer to go back to that dreadful poor-man's country, as they very idiotically call it, and drum up a flourishing law practice, and take a flat up Harlem way—yes, even one of those condensed flats, with a stunted drawing-room and an emaciated hall and pantomime furniture that turns into something else when you press the right spring—and be quite immeasurably, and insanely, and unreasonably, and unadulteratedly happy! Ah, Avis! dear, *dear* Avis!" Mr. Wyke pleaded to the bland morning-air, "please be accommodating and have me!"

Then Mr. Wyke started somewhat; for, on the bench where he had first seen her, he perceived a book lying open. It was the book she had been reading when he interrupted her, and he now picked it up with a sort of reverence. He regarded it as an extremely lucky book.

Subsequently, "Good Lord!" said Mr. Wyke.

For across the open pages—serving as a book-mark, according to a not infrequent shiftless feminine fashion—lay a handkerchief. It was a flimsy, inadequate little trifle fringed with a tiny scallopy black border, and, in one corner, the letters M. E. A. H., all askew, contorted themselves into any number of flourishes and irrelevant tendrils.

"Now, M. E. A. H.," Mr. Wyke reflected, "does not stand, by any stretch of the imagination, for Avis Beechiner. Whereas, it fits Margaret Elizabeth Anstruther Hugonin uncommonly well. I wonder, now——"

He wondered for a rather lengthy interval. Then he laughed, a little bitterly. "So Byam was right, after

all," said he. "And Peter was right, too. Oh, Hunston Wyke, Hunston Wyke, your reputation must truly be malodorous, when at your approach timid heiresses seek shelter under an alias! 'I've heard a deal of you, Mr. Wyke'—ah, yes, she'd heard. She knew I'd make love to her simply because she was wealthy. She knew the sort of man I was, and she defended herself. It—it's rather a nasty business, this coming face to face with what you've made of your life. It hurts. It shames—ah, dear God, yes! it shames."

I fancy the moneyed friends of Mr. Wyke—he hadn't any that weren't moneyed—would have been a trifle astonished to have come upon their buffoon just then. His face was not a jester's face, for all that he presently flung back his head and laughed.

"Eh, well!" said he; "I'll let no sordid considerations stand in the way of my happiness! I'll marry her, even though she's rich. You have begun the comedy, my lady, and I'll play it to the end. As there's a God in heaven, you're the woman I love, and you're the woman I'm going to marry!"

IV

"WELL?" said Peter.

"Well?" said Mr. Wyke, defiant.

"What's the latest quotation on heiresses?" Mr. Blagden demanded. "Was she cruel, my boy, or was she kind? Did she set the dog on you, or have you been thrashed by her father? I fancy both, for your present hilarity is suggestive of a gentleman attending his own funeral." And Peter laughed, unctuously, for his gut slumbered.

"His attempts at wit," Mr. Wyke reflectively confided to his wine-glass, "while doubtless amiably intended, are, to his well-wishers, painful. I dare say, though, he doesn't know it. We must, then, smile indulgently upon the elephantine gambols of what he is pleased to describe as his intellect."

"Now, that," Peter pointed out, "is not what I would term a courteous

method of discussing a man at his own table. You're damn' disagreeable this morning, Hunston. So I know, of course, that you've come another cropper in your fortune-hunting."

"Peter," said Mr. Wyke, in admiration, "your sagacity at times is almost human! I have spent a most enjoyable day, though," he continued, idly. "I have been communing with Nature, Peter. She is about her Spring cleaning in the woods yonder, and everywhere I have seen traces of her handiwork. I have seen the sky, which was washed over night, and the sun, which has evidently been freshly enameled. I have seen the new leaves as they swayed and whispered over your extensive domains, with the fret of Spring alert in every sap-cell. I have seen the little birds as they hopped among said leaves and commented upon the scarcity of worms. I have seen the buxom flowers as they curtisied and danced above your flowerbeds like a miniature comic-opera chorus. And besides that——"

"Yes?" said Peter, with a grin, "and besides that?"

"And besides that," said Mr. Wyke, firmly, "I have seen nothing."

V

THE next morning, Hunston Wyke discoursed with his soul, what time he sat upon the wall-top and smiled and kicked his heels gently to and fro among the ivy.

"For, in spite of appearances," Mr. Wyke debated with himself, "it is barely possible that the handkerchief was not hers. She may have borrowed it or got it by mistake, somehow. In that case, it is only reasonable to suppose that she will miss it, and ask me if I saw it; on the contrary, if the handkerchief is hers, she will naturally understand, when I return the book without it, that I have feloniously detained this airy gewgaw as a souvenir. And, in that case, she ought to be very much pleased and a bit embarrassed, and will preserve

upon the topic of handkerchiefs a maidenly silence. Do you know, Hunston Wyke, there is really the making of a very fine logician about you?"

Then Mr. Wyke consulted his watch, and subsequently gave a grimace. "It is also barely possible," said he, "that Margaret may not come at all. In which case—Margaret! Now, isn't that a sweet name? Isn't it the very sweetest name in the world? Now, really, you know, it's very queer her being named Margaret—extraordinarily queer—because Margaret has always been my favorite woman's name. I dare say, unbeknownst to myself, I'm a bit of a prophet."

But she did come. She was very much surprised to see him.

"You!" she said, with a gesture that was practically tantamount to disbelief. "Why, how extraordinary!"

"You rogue!" Mr. Wyke commented, internally; "you know it's the most natural thing in the world." Aloud, he stated: "Why, yes, I happened to notice you forgot your book yesterday, so I dropped in—or, to be more accurate, climbed up—to return it."

She reached for it. Their hands touched with the usual result to Mr. Wyke's pulses. Also, there were the customary manual tinglings.

"You are very kind," was her observation. Afterward, she opened the book, and turned over its pages expectantly, and flushed an attractive shade of pink, and said nothing.

And then, and not till then, Mr. Wyke's heart consented to resume its normal functions. And, then also, "These iron spikes—" said its owner.

"Yes?" she queried, innocently.

"—so humpy," he complained.

"Are they?" said she. "Why, then, how silly of you to continue to sit on them!"

The result of this comment was that they were both late for luncheon.

By a peculiar coincidence, at twelve o'clock the following day, Mr. Wyke happened to be sitting on the same

wall at the same spot. Peter said at luncheon it was a queer thing that some people never could manage to be on time for their meals.

I fancy we can all form a tolerably accurate idea of what took place during the next day or so.

It is scarcely necessary to retail their conversation. They gossiped of simple things. They talked very little; and, when they did talk, the most ambitiously conceived sentences were apt to result in nothing more prodigious than a wave of the hand, and a pause, and, not infrequently, a heightened complexion. Altogether, then, it was not oppressively wise or witty talk, but it was eminently satisfactory to its makers. As when, on the third morning, he wished to sit by her on the bench, and she declined to invite him to descend from the wall.

"On the whole," said she, "I prefer you where you are; like all picturesque ruins, you are most admirable at a little distance."

"Ruins!"—and, indeed, he was only thirty-four—"I am a comparatively young man."

As a concession, "You are tolerably well-preserved."

"I am not a new brand of marmalade."

"No, for that comes in glass jars; whereas, Mr. Wyke, I have heard, is most prominent in family ones."

"A pun, Miss Beechinor, is the base coinage of conversation, tendered only by the mentally dishonest."

"Besides, one can never have enough of marmalade."

"I trust they give you a sufficiency of it in the nursery?"

"Dear me, you've no idea how admirably that paternal tone sits upon you! You'd make an excellent father, Mr. Wyke. You really ought to adopt some one. I wish you'd adopt *me*, Mr. Wyke."

Mr. Wyke said he had other plans for her. Discreetly, she forebore to ask what they were.

"Avis——"

"You must not call me that."

"Why not? It's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes—to my friends."

"Aren't we friends—Avis?"

"We—we haven't known each other long enough, Mr. Wyke."

"Oh, what's the difference? We're going to be friends, aren't we—Avis?"

"I—why, I'm sure I don't know."

"What a color you have, Avis! Well—I know. And I can inform you, quite confidentially, Avis, that we are not going to be—friends. We're going to be——"

"We're going to be late for luncheon," said she, in haste. "Good morning, Mr. Wyke."

Yet, the very next day, paradoxically enough, she told him:

"I shall always think of you as a very, very dear friend. But it is quite impossible we should ever be anything else."

"And why, Avis?"

"Because——"

"That"—after a pause—"strikes me as rather a poor reason. So, suppose we say November?"

Another pause.

"Well, Avis?"

"Dear me, aren't those roses pretty? I wish you'd get me one, Mr. Wyke."

"Avis, we are not discussing roses."

"Well, they *are* pretty."

"Avis!"—reproachfully.

Still another pause.

"I—I hardly know."

"Avis!"—with disappointment.

"I—I believe——"

"Avis!"—very tenderly.

"I—I almost think so—and the horrid man looks as if he thought so, too!"

There was an interval, during which the girl made a complete and careful survey of her shoes.

Then, "You must give me until tomorrow, Mr. Wyke," and a sudden flutter of skirts.

Hunston Wyke returned to Gridlington treading on air.

For he was, by this time, as thoroughly in love as Amadis of Gaul or Aucassin of Beaucaire or any other hero of romance you may elect to mention.

Some two weeks earlier, he would have scoffed at the notion of such a thing coming to pass; and he would have demonstrated, too, reasonably enough, that it was impossible for Hunston Wyke, with his keen knowledge of the world and of the innumerable vanities and whims of woman-kind, ever to go the way of all flesh. But the problem, like the puzzle of the Eleatic philosophers, had solved itself. "Achilles cannot catch the tortoise"—but he does. It was impossible for Hunston Wyke to fall in love—but he had done so:

And it pricked his conscience, too, that the girl should not know he was aware of her identity. But she had chosen to play the comedy to the end, and Mr. Wyke, in common with the greater part of trousered humanity, had, after all, no insuperable objection to a rich wife; though, to do him justice, he rarely thought of her as Margaret Hugonin, the heiress, but considered her, in a far more comprehensive fashion, as perhaps the one woman in the universe whose perfections triumphantly over-peered the skyiest heights of preciosity.

VI

THEY met, then, in the clear May morning, with what occult trepidations I may not say. You may depend upon it, though, they had their emotions.

And about them, Spring was marshaling her pageant, and from divers nooks, the weather-stained nymphs and fauns stared at them with candid, considerate gaze; and above them, the clipped ilex-trees whispered knowingly. As for the birds, they twittered to one another with point; for, more favored of chance than imperial Solomon, they have been the confidants in any number of such affairs, and regard the way of a man with a maid as one of the simplest matters in the world.

"Mystery!" they shrilled. "Pouf! See how they meet, see how they greet! Ah, sweet, sweet, sweet, to

meet in the Spring!" And that these two would immediately set to nest-building, they considered a foregone conclusion.

Hunston Wyke took both her firm, warm hands in salutation, and held them, for a breathing-space, clasped between his own. And his hands seemed to him two very gross and hulking, raw, red monstrosities, in contrast with their dimpled captives, and appeared, also, to shake unnecessarily.

"Now, in a moment," said he, "I am going to ask you something very important. But, first, I've a confession to make."

And her glad, shamed eyes mocked him. "My lord of Burleigh!" she softly breathed. "My liege Cophetua! My king Cophetua! And did you think, then, I was blind?"

"Eh?" said Hunston Wyke.

"As if I hadn't from the first!" the girl pouted; "as if I hadn't known from the very first day when you dropped your cigarette-case! Ah, I'd heard of you before, Peter!—Peter, the misogynist, who, after all these years of railing against women, was ashamed to go a-wooing in his proper guise! Were you afraid I'd marry you for your money, Peter?—poor, timid Peter! But, oh, Peter, Peter, what possessed you to take the name of that notorious Hunston Wyke?" she demanded, with uplifted forefinger. "Couldn't you think of a better one, Peter?—of a more respectable one, Peter?"

In answer, Mr. Wyke made an inarticulate sound.

"But you were so grave about it," the girl went on, happily, "that I almost thought you were telling the truth, Peter. Then my maid told me—I—I mean she happened to mention casually that Mr. Wyke's valet had described his master to her as a young man and an extraordinarily handsome young man. So, then, of course, I *knew* you were Peter Blagden."

"I perceive," said Hunston Wyke, reflectively, "that Byam has been somewhat too zealous. I begin to sus-

pect, also, that kitchen gossip is a mischancy petard, and rather more than apt to hoist the engineer who employs it. So, you thought I was Peter Blagden—the rich Peter Blagden? Ah, yes!”

Now the birds were caroling on a wager. “Ah, sweet! what is sweeter?” they sang. “Ah, sweet, sweet, sweet, to meet in the Spring.”

But the girl gave a wordless cry at the change in Hunston Wyke's face.

“Because I happen to be Hunston Wyke—the notorious Hunston Wyke,” he continued, with a wry smile. “I—I am sorry you were deceived by the case. I remember now; I borrowed it from Peter. What I meant to confess was that I've known all along you were Margaret Hugonin.”

“But I'm not,” the girl said, in bewilderment. “Why—why, I told you I was Avis Beechinor.”

“This handkerchief?” he queried, and took it from his pocket. He carried it next to his heart, did this cynical Hunston Wyke.

“Oh—!” And now the tension broke, and her voice leapt an octave to high, shrill, hysterical speech. “I'm Avis Beechinor. I'm a poor relation, a penniless cousin, a dependent, a hanger-on, do you understand? And you—ah, how—how funny! Why, Margaret always gives me her cast-off finery, the scraps, the remnants, the clothes she's tired of, the misfit things—so that she won't be ashamed of me, so that I may be fairly presentable to the world. She gave me eight of those handkerchiefs. I meant to pick the monograms out with a needle, you understand, because I haven't any money to buy handkerchiefs for myself. Ah, I remember now—she gave them to me on that—that first day, and I hadn't time to fix that one. Ah, how—how funny!” she cried, again, with a tense, pitiful shiver; “ah, how very, very funny! No, Mr. Wyke, I'm not an heiress—I'm a pauper, a poor relation. Ah, no, you've failed again in your fortune-hunting, Mr. Wyke! I—I wish you better luck the next time.”

He raised his hand as though to

ward off a physical blow. “Don't!” he said, hoarsely.

And all the woman in her leapt to defend him from this vital shame. “Ah, no! ah, no!” she pleaded, and her hands fell caressingly upon his shoulder; and she raised a penitent, tear-stained face toward his; “ah, no, forgive me! I didn't mean that. It's different with a man. Of course, you must marry sensibly—of course, you must, Mr. Wyke. It's I who am to blame—why, of course, it's only I who am to blame. I've encouraged you, I know. I came back that second day because I thought you were the rich Mr. Blagden, you understand. I was so tired of being poor, so tired of being dependent, that it simply seemed to me I couldn't stand it for a moment longer. Ah, I tell you, I was tired, tired, tired! I was tired and sick and worn out with it all! Ah, Mr. Wyke, you don't know what it means to a girl to be poor!—you can't ever know because you're only a man. My mother—ah, you don't know the life I've led! You don't know how I've been hawked about, and set up for inspection by the men who could pay my price, and made to show off my little accomplishments for them, and put through my paces before them like any horse in the market! We're poor, Mr. Wyke—we're bleakly, hopelessly poor. We're only hangers-on, you see. And ever since I can remember, she has been telling me I must make a rich marriage—must make a rich marriage—must—” And the girl's voice trailed off into silence, and her eyes closed for a moment, and she swayed a little on her feet, so that Hunston Wyke caught her by both arms.

But, presently, she opened her eyes, with a wearied sigh, and presently the two fortune-hunters stared each other in the face, piteously.

“Ah, sweet! what is sweeter?” sang the birds. “Can you see, can you see, can you see? It is sweet, sweet, sweet!” They were very gay over it, were the birds.

After a little, though, Hunston Wyke opened his lips, and moistened them

two or three times before he spoke. "Yes," said he, very quietly, "I think I understand. We've both been hangers-on. But that, somehow, seems to me a long time ago. Yes, I've been a fortune-hunter all my life. But I think that I loved you from the first moment I saw you. Will you marry me, Avis?"

Oh, the wonderful, tender change in her face! "You care for me—just me?" she breathed.

"Just you," he answered, gravely.

And he saw the faint start, the faint shiver that shook her body as she leaned toward him a little, in surrender; but, quickly, she laughed.

"That was very gentlemanly in you," she said, "but, of course, I understand. Let us part friends, then, Hunston. Even if—if you really cared, we couldn't marry. We're too poor."

"Too poor!" he scoffed—and his voice was joyous, ineffably joyous, for he knew now that it was he she loved and not Peter Blagden's money; "too poor, Avis! I am a rich man, I tell you, for I have your love. We've made a sad mess of the past, Avis, but the future remains to us. We're the earthen pots, you and I, who wanted to swim with the brazen ones. They haven't quite crushed us, these big, stupid, brazen pots, but they've shown us the danger. And, now, we're going back where we belong—to the poor man's country, Avis—to the country of those God-fearing, sober, honest folk who earn their own bread. You'll come with me, won't you, dear? You won't have quite so many gowns there, Avis, but you'll have love, and you'll have happiness, and, best of all, Avis, you'll give a certain very undeserving man his chance—his one chance—to lead a man's life. Are you going to deny him that chance, Avis?"

Her gaze read him through and through; and he bore himself a bit proudly under it; within himself, he gave thanks to God that his heart was all filled with love of her, and that the new-born manhood in Hunston Wyke could meet her eyes unflinchingly.

"It isn't sensible," she wavered.

How he laughed at that! "Sensible! If there is one thing more absurd than another in this very absurd world, it is common sense. Be sensible and you will be miserable, Avis, not to mention being disliked. Sensible! Why, of course, it isn't sensible. It's stark, rank, staring idiocy, isn't it, to think of chucking the brass-pot world?—this pompous brass-pot world that has never done anything for us, so far as I know, but make us envious and worried and discontented, and that is, between ourselves, as boresome a place as was ever invented. Why, it's the act of a raving maniac to chuck all that misery and get nothing in return but happiness. Of course it is, Avis. What will Mrs. Grundy say to it? what will she say, indeed? Avis, just between you and me, I don't care a double-blank domino what Mrs. Grundy says. Will you marry me, Avis?"

She gave him her hand frankly, as a man might have done. "Yes, Hunston," said Miss Beechinor, "and, God helping us, we'll make something better of the future than we have of the past."

In the silence that fell, one might hear the birds. "Sweet, sweet, sweet!" they twittered. "Can you see, can you see, can you see? Their lips meet. It is sweet, sweet, sweet!"

VII

BUT, by-and-bye, she questioned him. "Are you sure—quite sure," she queried, wistfully, "that you wouldn't rather have me Margaret Hugonin, the heiress?"

Mr. Wyke raised a deprecatory hand. "Avis!" he reproached her; "Avis, Avis, how little you know me! That was the solitary fly in the amber—that I thought I was to marry a woman named Margaret. For I am something of a connoisseur in nomenclature, and Margaret has always—*always*—been my pet detestation in the way of names."