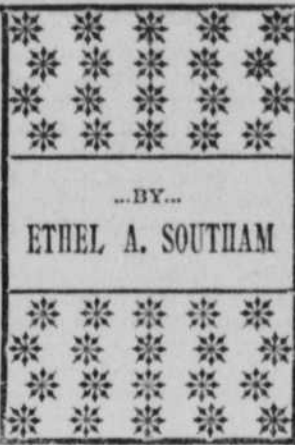


That Mysterious Major...



...BY...
ETHEL A. SOUTHAM

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"So far, so good!" he muttered. He turned round to take another cautious survey of the room, and then hurriedly tore off the sheet of blotting paper. "With my heartfelt apologies to Mr. Gillbrand!" he added, as he carefully secured it between the pages of his pocketbook. "If this is to be of the slightest use to me, however, my greatest difficulty will be in discovering if it is genuine or not. Is it possible that Miss Luttrell herself has been in here writing, or can it be that somebody else has been simply directing an envelope to her? That is the question; and, considering that I am at present hopelessly in the dark even as to the hand Miss Luttrell writes, I hardly see how this blotting paper affair is to benefit me in any way, unless—" Here the Major broke off somewhat abruptly, and, walking to the window, gazed out dubiously through the blurred panes. "Nonsense, though! I will manage it somehow!" he exclaimed after a moment's reflection. "By the aid of a little diplomacy and a plan which I believe I can carry out, the rest should be easy, and, without raising the suspicions of either Miss Luttrell or anybody else, I should gain for myself some knowledge of considerable value. All the same, if I intend to go seriously to work, the sooner I make a beginning the better; and, as in this case the beginning means a walk to the town in the pouring rain. I may as well start at once, without putting off the evil moment any longer. Ah—it is a curious affair!"—he gave a significant shrug of his shoulders—"and to think that, of all people in the world, that girl should be the victim!"

Two minutes later the Major, with his hat drawn well over his eyes and

of their lives. With some it takes the form of collecting all kinds of stamps, crests, and epigraphs, whilst with me"—he spoke in a somewhat apologetic tone—"the mania is for keeping a record of the birthdays of my friends."

"The birthdays of your friends!" echoed Evelyn.

"It is a peculiar taste no doubt, Miss Luttrell; but still I must acknowledge it; and, if you will condescend to add your name to my list of signatures, I shall esteem it the highest of compliments."

"But," commented Evelyn, "how very odd! Do you know, I always thought before that the host of birthday books which are constantly being published were used principally by girls at school and certain individuals whose whole existence is one perpetual reminiscence of pressed flowers, faded ribbons, and sentimental odes."

"Oh, yes—I know the persons exactly! Your description is most graphic!"—and the Major laughed heartily. "But, as I never wrote an ode in my life, pressed even a leaf, or have such a thing as a ribbon—faded or otherwise—in my possession, there must, at all events, be one exception to the rule."

"Well, certainly. Still I was just thinking"—contemplating Major Brown with an expression of decided gravity—"that you are the very last person in the world I should have believed would trouble with anything so trifling as a birthday book."

Again he laughed—an apparently careless laugh—as he made a futile attempt to balance a paper knife on the edge of the table, but this time his laugh rather lacked its hitherto cheerful ring.

"Anyhow, Miss Luttrell, you are not going to refuse? Tell me—what are



ANYHOW, YOU ARE NOT GOING TO REFUSE.

the collar of his mackintosh turned up closely round his throat, set out at a swiftness upon his unpleasant expedition.

CHAPTER VIII.

Notwithstanding that the rain never ceased during the Major's walk into Saltcliffe and back, and that he returned with his gaiters splashed to his knees and with the water running in a thin but steady stream from the brim of his hat, fortune certainly favored him that afternoon. In other circumstances he might have waited in vain for hours, but, as it happened, he had scarcely returned to the library and taken up his position before the fire more than a couple of minutes, when the door opened and Evelyn Luttrell entered the room.

"Oh, please do not move!" she exclaimed, as the Major pushed back his chair and glancing round to discover who the intruder might be, immediately started to his feet. "I have only come for a book which my aunt wanted, so do not let me disturb you."

"Oh, do not mention such a thing! Perhaps I can help you to find the book for Lady Howard."

"Well, most likely you can," was the reply, accompanied by a bewitching smile. "It is a thick green—Ah, that is the one! Thank you very much!" she broke off as the Major handed her the rather ponderous looking volume. "Aunt Lydia will have plenty to occupy her for the rest of the day if she reads this through."

"Yes, from its appearance, I should say that one wet day would be hardly enough. She will need two or three more of the same stamp. But I am just wondering," he proceeded, regarding her with a slight air of perplexity, "whether you happen to be in a particularly neighborly frame of mind this afternoon. The fact is—Do you know, Miss Luttrell, I have rather a strange fancy—at least, it is not exactly strange, for dozens of people have such fancies at one period or another

of the day and month of your birth?"

"The day and month?" repeated Evelyn, raising her eyebrows. "Oh, the 15th of August! I suppose you do not insist upon the year as well?"

"No—I do not insist; but anybody who is particularly anxious to give it is quite at liberty to do so. There, Miss Luttrell—the 15th of August!" He had pulled out of his pocket a small rather fantastically bound book, and, opening it at a certain page, he now laid it down before her. "There is a verse of poetry for you, and a line of Shakespeare; but whether either the poetry or the Shakespearean line is in the least appropriate I do not know."

"But how strange—nobody else has written on this page at all! Am I to have it quite to myself?"

"Yes—it seems as if you are to reign supreme. It is all the better, though, for, with five lines at your disposal"—and the Major glanced at her significantly—"you can add as many particulars as you like. Want of space cannot be made an excuse for omitting the all-important year."

"Well, at any rate, let me have a good pen!" She drew the ink stand towards her, took up a quill, and in clear legible characters wrote "Evelyn C. Luttrell." "There, Major Brown—will that satisfy you?"—looking up, to find the Major, who had come close to her side, staring down at her signature most attentively.

Her words seemed to recall him to himself.

"Thank you, I cannot tell you how much obliged I am. You have done me a great service, Miss Luttrell."

"No, indeed—I have done nothing. I am honored that you should care for my signature at all. But have you a great many names down? May I look through the book?"

"Certainly, if you care to do so, only—"

"Why did he suddenly hesitate? Evelyn, who had turned over a couple of pages and was contemplating in ob-

vious astonishment the blankness of their condition, instantly dropped her pen and glanced quickly from the leaves before her to the Major, who stood watching her movements, with the color mounting slowly but surely to his very brow.

"This is a new book," she announced in a rather ominous tone. "It is not only the 15th of August which is empty—every page is the same!"

"Yes, of course—did I not explain?" The Major's face was steadily averted from the inquiring gaze of Evelyn's blue eyes. "You see, books of this kind do get filled up in time. When there are only five lines to each date, they are gone directly—the result of which is that a new book has to be immediately supplied."

Evelyn looked slightly incredulous. "What a number of friends you must have!"

The Major gave an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

"Yes; when one comes to count them by the lines in a birthday book, it is really astonishing how many one seems to have. However, Miss Luttrell, as you have been the first to enter your name in this one"—he turned to her with a smile—"for the future I shall reserve it only for my most particular friends, and label it 'Special!'"

"So you do not mix up all your friends indiscriminately—you have different grades of birthday books?" Evelyn clasped her hands behind her head and laughed amusedly at the bare idea. "A book for the people you like, a book for the people you dislike, and another for those you simply tolerate!"

"Yes—that is my method," replied the Major, really accepting the suggestion. "As it happens, though, you see you did not come exactly under one of my three headings; therefore I had to start a new book entirely on your account."

"It was very kind of you, I am sure; but how will you manage in the future? If you now have four instead of three books, you will have to divide your friends quite differently."

"Well, it would seem so, certainly." The Major possibly detected the touch of cynicism underlying Evelyn's words. "I believe I shall have a difficulty in finding any one else to place under this new heading. The book has been begun with your name, but since we did, I intended to treat her decently and get her acquainted with the young folks round here, and I added that the nicer the girls were to her, the less nice we'd have to be. That settled it. We're all going down there some night soon and after that I am to ask Kittle to spend the evening at our house. We'll have to get Pete round then."

They met Peter that afternoon, and Clem took the opportunity to talk much of Kittle and the good times they had with her. "And that reminds me," he said, carelessly, "she thinks you're very handsome." Clem did not think

of her. "I'm not anxious for any one to know I've made a goose of myself or the girl either for that matter."

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CONDITIONS IN ALGERIA.

The present constitution, based on assimilation of Algeria to France, was framed with the chimerical idea that the native element would shrink and the French increase, says the National Review. The contrary has happened. The Mohammedans increased between 1856 and 1876 by 155,000; between 1876 and 1896 by 1,200,000. During the former period famine and typhus and the insurrection of 1871 kept down their numbers; also the oriental dread of being counted led to some falsification of the records. The idea of assimilating the native is absurd. Mixed marriages between them and Christians are practically unheard of, and they do not take up French citizenship, preferring to live under their own law. Nor do they aspire to be represented directly in the French chamber, and any idea of the sort is as extravagant as that of directly representing Hindus at Westminster. Machinery must, however, be provided by which the natives may make themselves felt, and secure respect for their interest in the local councils. The result of the laws in force during the last twenty or thirty years, whether laws of property, justice or taxation, has been the impoverishment and discouragement of the Arabs. Yet Algeria will never be prosperous till they are rich, nor secure till they are contented. In particular, the local functionaries should be able to talk their language, as our civil servants are required to do in India. When at Biskra, the chief center of the Constantine Sahara and mainly an Arab city, I ascertained that in the local postoffice there was not a single clerk who understood Arabic, and on one occasion I was able myself to explain to one of them what an old gesticulating sheik wanted him to do. It was merely a matter of telegraphing a remittance of 50 francs or so to his son in Algiers. Such ignorance in the chief postoffice of the Sahara of the language of the people is inexcusable.

Somewhat Different.

Lawyer—Do I understand that you wish to bequeath a thousand-dollar watch to your son? Dying Man (feebly)—No, no! To my friend far—for a watch upon my soul—Jewelry Weekly.

THE MATCHMAKERS.

"Let's get Peter to take her."

Clem jumped from his chair and slapped Tom roundly on the shoulder, so elated was he over his bright idea; then both young men laughed heartily and wondered that they had not sooner thought of so easy a way out of their dilemma.

It was a difficult situation. The young men had hotly resented a scolding over some boyish escapade from their "specials," Tom's cousin Lottie and Clem's sister Mary. The girls vowed never to speak to them again and by finding it convenient to visit much away from home, and eschewing evening church and festivities had managed to adhere to their resolution.

In the meantime the Kings had moved into the place, and just to show the girls that they were not the only ones in town, both young men had taken to calling on Kittle. She was a lively, pretty girl, and it was a pleasant place to visit, and so it had gone on until they had established quite an intimacy, and without either actually inviting her, they had committed themselves to taking her to the approaching county fair, by talking to her of getting up a party, in which she was included, to go in a large wagon. Then came the reconciliation and now they wanted to go as usual in their buggies with Mame and Lottie, and they had to face the problem of what to do about Kittle.

"I suppose you'll tell Pete and get him to take Kittle off our hands," said Tom.

"Well, maybe that would do, and then again maybe it wouldn't," said Clem, scornfully. "I'm not anxious for any one to know I've made a goose of myself or the girl either for that matter."

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he had not ventured to talk with her since. It had been left to Clem or Tom to see her home from church, and as she was usually with Mame or Lottie it was easy for them to walk in that direction, thus politely escorting her without special attention from either young man.

Clem was thinking it over moodily one Sunday afternoon while Mame sat writing at the table.

"Here, Clem," she said, handing him an envelope, "this is for Kittle. If you'll put it in your pocket now we'll be sure to take it with us tonight."

Clem did as requested, but a half-hour later, when he saw Peter driving past, it flashed upon him that here was an excellent opportunity to make that young man call on Kittle, and rushing out he hailed him.

Peter was going home, but would call on the way at Miss King's and leave the letter to oblige Clem. He looked at it wonderingly as he drove on.

"Must have something mighty important to say," he thought. "Saw her this morning, and expects to see her again tonight, but has to write a letter in the meantime and send it by another fellow. What's he up to, anyway? One girl doesn't seem to be enough for him. He doesn't give any one else a chance to talk to either Lottie or Miss King."

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, aloud, as a new idea came to him. "I'll get ahead of him this time. I'll speak for myself before I hand in his letter. It's fair enough. How did he know but I was going right there? Perhaps that's what hurried him so."

Peter never doubted that he was carrying an invitation from Clem for the pleasure of Miss King's company home from church that evening, and Kittle made no explanation, supposing that Peter knew the contents of the envelope and was on his way to her when Clem met him.

Clem and Tom chuckled with glee to see Kittle and Peter appear at church together, but would not ask her to the fair, now only a few days off? That was still undecided, and the boys drove down to Peter's the next evening, determined, if possible, to find out.

"See here, Pete," said Clem, "what do you say to joining teams and getting up a load of young folks to go to the fair?"

Peter looked surprised. "Thought you two were so dreadfully fond of going in buggies," he said, suspiciously.

"Well, buggies are nicer for some reasons," admitted Tom, "but we can't be so unsociable always. Clem will have his team, and with my horse and yours we could take a jolly party."

"We thought it would be pleasanter for fellows like you with no special girl to take," hazarded Clem.

Peter coughed significantly. He remembered a special girl he had taken the night before. "Well, I don't know," he said, slowly; "it's a big pull with a heavy wagon. Whom are you going to ask?"

"Oh, our set, you know, and Miss King—"

Now Peter thought he understood. The boys were anxious to have Miss King go with them, and his horse was being invited to help it along. Clem's reference to fellows with no special girls to take rankled and he grew momentarily more anxious to prevent them taking the girl, yet he dared not refuse outright, for if Kittle had already promised them he would wish to make one of the party.

"Let us know first thing in the morning, old fellow," said Clem, and they drove off, leaving Peter to do just as they hoped and expected he would, make a hasty toilet and call on Miss King.

He gave his refusal to the boys in the morning with the air of a man who had come out ahead.

Even after the fair it was fun to urge Peter along, and so they kept it up, talking continually in praise of Kittle, and by way of hints taking him into their confidence about little attentions they intended to bestow on Mame and Lottie, suggestions that the young man was not slow in acting upon. They even included him and Kittle in the special good times which they were clever in planning and carrying out, and of which Peter would never have thought, and before they realized it he was madly in love.

When the affair had reached that crisis it was simply their duty, so Clem said, to see that it came out all right; so gently, tactfully, the urging went on, and by the next fair Peter and Miss King were engaged. "He came to tell me the day was set," Clem reported, "and he wonders if you and I will assist at his marriage."

"Will we? Well, I should say so," said Tom. "We haven't assisted all along to go back on him now. We'll be there, swallow-tails and all."

And they were.

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HENS AND THEIR GOOD FRUIT.

They Are an Important Factor in the Commercial Life of the Country.

From the Richmond Dispatch: The hen of the present day is a most important factor in the commercial world not only on account of her vernal offspring, but because civilized people are daily growing fonder of her eggs. Statisticians say it is practically impossible to gain an idea as to the exact number of eggs consumed, though the export and import figures give a partial conception of its enormity. Indeed, the statistics indicate that our feathered friend has all she can attend to and barely can spare the time to assume the responsibilities of rearing a family. During the year ending July 30, 1899, the United States exported 3,693,611 dozen eggs, valued at \$641,385. During this period they imported 225,180 dozen, valued at \$21,300, the increased duty on this food supply having checked their importation. Of course, these figures are but fragments of the almost inconceivable large total which indicates the actual consumption of eggs in America. In 1898 Chicago alone handled 2,147,959 cases of thirty dozen each, of which only 1,223,356 were shipped out. The commission houses are generally the distributing points for eggs in the large cities, but in the country almost every local store deals in them. Many merchants accept them in exchange for goods, while a few receive orders from the towns and dispose of the eggs to hotels or other large concerns. The egg enters into our domestic life not only as a substantial food staple, but as an ingredient of almost every conceivable article of diet. There is practically no limit to its usefulness in this line and when one reflects it seems almost impossible that the land could hold enough hens to meet the public demand. The secret, perhaps, lies in the fact that poultry can be found in every rural barnyard and on the premises of scores of urban and suburban habitations. Every hen knows her duty and does it. While some of them apparently rejoice in their labors accomplished, as a whole they are modest and never "let on" that they realize the world could not comfortably move without them. The probabilities are that as civilization increases and the facilities for transportation become faster and better, our feathered friend with the crimson trimmings will have more and more to do. Her output in decades to come will be the grandest statistical puzzle of the age, and no mathematician will be able to make calculations as to the exact amount of her "fruit." When our neighbor's hens get in our flower beds we should recall these facts and permit only our wives and daughters to throw stones at them.

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I never answered; I was not in debt