

THE QUEST OF BETSINDA-SUE

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BRISTLE IS THAT eccentric genius known to the esthetic corners of the world as the "four o'clock artist." Of all his shifting theories, the only abiding one has been his belief in the psychologic forces surrounding four P. M. He would also explain to you that the rays of the sun are then just sufficiently mellowed, softening the crudities of morning; it is the period of fleeting shadows, of nascent sunset. In summer, the heat is tempered; in winter, the air grows more brittle.

His paintings were the evanescent transitions of four o'clock arrested upon canvas. Another reason (quite unknown to Bristle) for his four o'clock devotions, was the fact that it took him all morning to make up his mind to work. "Whistling-up," he called it. Then, his pipe had a habit of hiding while he slept; he never succeeded in running it down until at least noon, and what artist can paint without his pipe?

Fondé used to call these morning agonies of Bristle's, "the birth-pangs." Fondé was the friend responsible for Betsinda-Sue; and Bristle scarcely realized how many years had sneaked by since that memorable visit to his old friend, when he first heard her unforgettable name.

She was at that time a new-made friend of Mrs. Fondé; therefore, of course, Mrs. Fondé did not admire her. Fondé did, which perhaps accounts for his never having allowed Bristle really to meet her. Mrs. Fondé had described Betsinda-Sue as "wearing her eyebrows tilted up over her nose—an affectation of pathos;" while Fondé interpolated in undertone: "Saddest eyes in the world." Mrs. Fondé had further elaborated: "Always attires herself in pink—pink silk, generally—with lots and lots of cheap lace." To which Fondé had parenthetically added: "One of those fron-frony creatures, you know—so appealingly feminine."

As Bristle recalled these varying descriptions he leaned over and lonesomely stroked Seraggs' blond head; he had named him Seraggs after Betsinda-Sue's dog.

The fire was ashes; Bristle shiveringly got into bed, grumbling: "Made up worse every day," as he sought in vain some restful valley in the rocky mountains of the mattress.

"Great bed that must have been of Betsinda-Sue's, Seraggs; old French brass. Too regal and tall for her low-ceilinged farmhouse; but Fondé said she just dug holes in the floor, let the brass legs dangle through the dining-room ceiling, and hung something on them to hold candles, making a chandelier. It seems the bed had a magnificent canopy draped with moth-eaten brocade—I bet the tones of that brocade were fine about four o'clock. But the spread, alas! was made of lots and lots of cheap lace, Mrs. Fondé said. Mrs. Fondé also said that the bed was the only proof of Betsinda-Sue's ever having had an ancestor, it being her one heirloom."

As Bristle lay sleepless, fragments flitting through his mind, he eventually found himself shamefacedly formulating a plan which he himself would have said could only be conceived by assinine youth. Getting up, he re-lighted the lamp; and walking to his desk, he unlocked the bottom drawer and took out a bundle of old letters and a tissue-wrapped package.

He fairly blushed, turning his back to Seraggs as he unfolded the paper and held in his palm a facetiously small pink slipper. Then, he laughed aloud.

"Might as well show it to Seraggs; it's the only secret I've kept from him. Here, Seraggs—keep your nose at a respectful distance—here is the last proof that your master is stark mad. I'll read you the story of Cinderella tonight, if I can find it. This is the trail you are to follow."

Seraggs sniffed obediently, violently approving the plan with his tail. The slipper was the last foolish Christmas gift Fondé had made his friend.

"I never could see what Fondé meant by dying," Bristle sighed from the depths of a great loss, as he gently untied the package of yellowing letters.

His eyes rapidly scanned the letters, pausing now and then on various items concerning Betsinda-Sue,

the first tribute of his enthusiastic friend being:

"Wonderful imagination, Betsinda-Sue's; and a perfect conflagration of ambitions! Unmentionably poor; does work one does not even like to think about. Fancy broiling that delicate face over a stove! Imagine those eloquent arms encrusted with soap-suds! Yet, when her doll of a husband is comfortably snoring, that indefatigable little woman is filling reams of paper with stories about 'Merry England,' or daring cowboys (neither of which she has ever seen). How does that dear creature retain her youthful bloom? As far as I can calculate, Betsinda-Sue has never had one wink of sleep! Yet, with all her tireless pursuit of her 'career,' she does not neglect the more practical things of life. A ripping cook! She will often insist on our having Sunday dinner with her. We naturally demur, as she has no maid; but there's no refusing, and I tell you it's a poem to see Betsinda-Sue get a dinner! Pink silk train, pinned up to her shoulder, showing the slimmest pink ankles and tiny pink slippers—and she never gets a spot on them. A great pot sending you a welcoming aroma from that wonderful soup of thirteen different vegetables; a large roast in the oven, at which Betsinda-Sue gives you aggravating peeps, using her foot to open the stove door, her hands being busy concocting some mysterious salad. Sometimes, at the eleventh hour she decides we must also have a pie. How a pumpkin can be killed, disintegrated, evolved into pie with the dinner half cooked is one on me; but Betsinda-Sue can do it. And clears all the dishes off herself between courses, diverting you by snatches of 'Sally in Our Alley' or 'Mistress Prue,' flitting back and forth so quickly as to make an impression on the eye of only a pretty pink blur.

"After dinner she takes us up to her 'studio'—a dingy room, in which she keeps the blinds closed to give it 'atmosphere.' Then, she sings. Her husband takes to the barn when he sees signs of a song-fest approaching. I've always found her voice very charming—a bit tired, perhaps; but what would you expect? She'd appeal to your artistic senses. Bristle—standing up, playing her own accompaniments, little pink foot stretched out to reach the pedal, a hand often poised on the right hip as she takes the high notes, her head thrown back like a bird's. Joye! it makes your throat catch—so anxious to do and be, and not a chance on earth!"

Bristle turned the pages searchingly. He must locate Betsinda-Sue. "Where the devil were the Fondés living that summer?" Suddenly his brows contracted, as he savagely read: "Betsinda-Sue is all delicious impulse. I broke the news to her today that I shall have all her poems privately printed—edition de luxe. She gave me a dazzling smile, exclaiming: 'Oh, I'm so happy! Kiss me quick!'"

"Fondé was a braggart," snarled Bristle; "and he neglected to mention where Mrs. Fondé was just then."

"Never believe the disillusionizing, Seraggs," he advised aloud, oracularly. "For instance, don't believe me when I say you're getting old, and are not quite the proper sort of dog for a Cinderella expedition."

Bristle laid the letters back in the drawer. "I've got the general directions for the quest; my goal is near some river, either up the Hudson or down the

St. Lawrence. Fondé abode temporarily in both places that year; but it seems to me the former is not quite so many weeks' walk for a young man and an old dog, so we'll explore the Hudson banks first."

II.

IT WAS not until he had been a-foot four days that Bristle began to have doubts of the authenticity of Betsinda-Sue's name. Fondé had had such a way of dubbing things; he even named his kitchen range "Eliza," while his walking cane was "Stevey." Who knows but Betsinda-Sue's real name might be "Carlotta-Hortense-Beatrice," or even austere "Elizabeth"?

Then, not knowing Betsinda-Sue's husband's name was slightly inconvenient; but anything pertaining to him seemed irrelevant to Bristle, and, on a quest like this, to be ignored.

"Strange thing how long it takes a man to see things correctly," mused Bristle. "Now, when I was immature—thirty—Betsinda-Sue never seemed a person to know; only one to hear about, and the last person on earth to live with! But when the bones stiffen and the laughs come harder, and there's no Fondé to put heart into a fellow, one begins to feel that a Betsinda-Sue would be a pretty jolly sort of friend to have. Lord, would n't we enjoy seeing her and old Glory charging down the turn in that road! I tell you what, Seraggs, she'd make your old legs trot; she'd put fire and ginger into your pallid bark. We've not had enough Betsinda-Sue in our lives, Seraggs; it's all been too sober and full of work. We did n't dream enough different kinds of dreams. We stuck too long to an old scent, and lost the real trophy."

Bristle was very foot-sore and dusty when he found himself before a many-gabled old house, which he recognized as one of the former tents of the Arabian-like Fondé.

"No, I'll not go in there—too wise a man for that. Never enter a place sacred to the memory of one you loved. Seraggs, because if you found stran-

gers laughing there, you might show your teeth and accidentally kill somebody. But we're on the right scent, I'm getting 'warm' on Betsinda-Sue. Have a sniff, Seraggs?"

Bristle produced the slipper from an inside pocket. They trudged on toward the river, which now showed in silver patches between the dips of hills.

"Just the sort of country for a Betsinda-Sue—hills to race old Glory up and down, sharp curves, and always the river and the distant mountains to lure the mind from the banal. Fine food for dreams—mountains, Seraggs. That's what we missed in the flatlands of home."

They were approaching a breakfast-food-box sort of farmhouse. Bristle impulsively decided to nudge Fate right here. After refereeing the fight between the farm-dog and Seraggs, and persuading the latter that possession is

nine-tenths of the law, Bristle managed to make himself heard, between barks, in a harmless request for a drink of water.

A woman of reinforced-concrete face, and a figure that time had ironed down to the perfect levels of the prairie, handed forth a tin dipper with no word or glance to sweeten the draught. Bristle experienced a strange awkwardness; he had not felt just that way since his boyhood, when he had to speak a piece at school on Friday.

He cleared his throat several times, drank a second dipperful, blew his nose, shifted his feet to an easier position, requested a third dipper of water; then, in desperation at his inability to accommodate another drop, he blurted out:

"Excuse me, Madame, but I am a stranger in these parts, and I'm looking for a very old friend's whereabouts—I've some how lost track of her—I wonder now if you could assist me—her first name is "



"Now, you seem more pitiful, some how than the others"