

The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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"It was melodrama, wasn't it?" she said. He laughed, but she shook her head.

"Purest comedy," he said gayly, "except your part of it. You shouldn't have done it. This evening was not arranged in honor of 'visiting ladies.' But you mustn't think me a comedian. Truly, I didn't plan it. My friend from Six Crossroads must be given the credit of devising the scene, though you divined it."

"It was a little too picturesque, I think. I know about Six Crossroads. Please tell me what you mean to do."

"Nothing. What should I?"

"You mean that you will keep on letting them shoot at you until they—until you?" She struck the bench angrily with her hand.

"There's no summer theater in Six Crossroads. There's not even a church. Why shouldn't they?" he asked gravely. "During the long and tedious evenings it cheers the poor Crossroaders' soul to drop over here and take a shot at me. It whiles away dull care for him, and he has the additional exercise of running all the way home."

"Ah!" she cried indignantly. "They told me you always answered like this."

"Well, you see, the Crossroads efforts have proved so thoroughly hygienic for me. As a patriot I have sometimes felt extreme mortification that such bad marksmanship should exist in the county, but I console myself with the thought that their best shots are, unhappily, in the penitentiary."

"There are many left. Can't you understand that they will organize again and come in a body, as they did before you broke them up? And then, if they come on a night when they know you are wandering out of town?"

"You have not had the advantage of an intimate study of the most exclusive people of the Crossroads, Miss Sherwood. There are about thirty gentlemen who remain in that neighborhood while their relatives sojourn under discipline. If you had the entree over there, you would understand that these thirty could not gather themselves into a company and march the seven miles without physical debate in the ranks. They are not precisely amiable people, even among themselves. They would quarrel and shoot one another to pieces long before they got here."

"But they worked in a company once."

"Never for seven miles. Four miles was their radius. Five would see them all dead."

She struck the bench again. "Oh, you laugh at me! You make a joke of your own life and death and laugh at everything. Have five years of Plattville taught you to do that?"

"I laugh only at taking the poor Crossroaders too seriously. I don't laugh at your running into fire to help a fellow mortal."

"I knew there wasn't any risk. I knew he had to stop to load before he shot again."

"He did shoot again. If I had known you before tonight, I— His tone changed, and he spoke gravely. "I am at your feet in worship of your divine philanthropy. It's so much finer to risk your life for a stranger than for a friend."

"That is a man's point of view, isn't it?"

"You risked yours for a man you had never seen before."

"Oh, no. I saw you at the lecture. I heard you introduce the Hon. Mr. Hallows."

"Then I don't understand your wishing to save me."

She smiled unwillingly and turned her gray eyes upon him with troubled sunniness, and under the sweetness of her regard he set a watch upon his lips, though he knew it would not avail him long. He had traveled along respectably so far, he thought, but he had the sentimental longings of years, starved of expression, culminating in his heart. She continued to look at him wistfully, searchingly, gently. Then her eyes traveled over his big frame, from his shoes (a patch of moonlight fell on them; they were dusty; he drew them under the bench with a shudder) to his broad shoulders (he shook the stoop out of them). She stretched her small white hands toward him and looked at them in contrast and broke into the most delicious low laughter in the world. At this he knew the watch on his lips was worthless. It was a question of minutes till he should present himself to her eyes as a sentimental and susceptible imbecile. He knew it. He was in wild spirits.

"Could you realize that one of your dang'ers might be a shaking?" she cried. "Is your seriousness a lost art?" Her laughter ceased suddenly. "Ah, no! I understand Thiers said the

French laugh always in order not to weep. I haven't lived here five years. I should laugh, too, if I were you."

"Look at the moon," he responded. "We Plattvillians own that with the best of metropolitans, and, for my part, I see more of it here. You do not appreciate us. We have large landscapes in the heart of the city, and what other capital has advantages like that? Next winter the railway station is to have a new stove for the waiting room. Heaven itself is one of our suburbs—it is so close that all one has to do is to die. You insist upon my being French, you see, and I know you are fond of nonsense. How did you happen to put 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' at the bottom of a page of Fisbee's notes?"

"Was it? How were you sure it was it?"

"In Carlow county?"

"He might have written it himself."

"Fisbee has never in his life read anything lighter than cuneiform inscriptions."

"Miss Briscoe?"

"She doesn't read Lewis Carroll, and it was not her hand. What made you write it on Fisbee's manuscript?"

"He was here this afternoon. I teased him a little about your heading in the Herald—'Business and the Cradle, the Altar and the Grave,' isn't it?—and he said it had always troubled him, but your predecessor had used it, and you thought it good. So do I. He asked me if I could think of anything that you might like better and put in place of it and I wrote 'The Time Has Come,' because it was the only thing I could think of that was as appropriate and as fetching as your headlines. He was perfectly dear about it. He was so serious. He said he feared it wouldn't be acceptable. I didn't notice that the paper he handed me to write on was part of his notes; nor did he, I think. Afterward he put it back in his pocket. It wasn't a message."

"I'm not so sure he did not notice. He is very wise. Do you know, I have the impression that the old fellow wanted me to meet you."

"How dear and good of him!" She spoke earnestly, and her face was suffused with a warm light. There was no doubt about her meaning what she said.

"It was," John answered unsteadily. "He knew how great was my need of a few minutes' companionableness with—with—"

"No," she interrupted. "I meant dear and good to me. I think he was thinking of me. It was for my sake he wanted us to meet."

It might have been hard to convince a woman if she had overheard this speech that Miss Sherwood's humility was not the calculated affectation of a coquette. Sometimes a man's unsuspecting is wiser, and Harkless knew that she was not flirting with him. In addition, he was not a fatuous man; he did not extend the implication of her words nearly so far as she would have had him.

"But I had met you," said he, "long ago."

"What!" she cried, and her eyes danced. "You actually remember?"

"Yes. Do you?" he answered. "I stood in Jones' field and heard you singing, and I remembered. It was a long time since I had heard you sing:

"I was a ruffler of Flanders
And fought for a florin's hire.
You were the dame of my captain
And sang to my heart's desire."

"But that is the balladist's notion. The truth is that you were a lady at the court of Clovis, and I was a heathen captive. I heard you sing a Christian hymn and asked for baptism."

She did not seem overpleased with his fancy, for the surprise fading from her face, "Oh, that was the way you remembered," she said.

"Perhaps it was not that way alone. You won't despise me for being mawkish tonight?" he asked. "I haven't had the chance for so long."

The night air wrapped them warmly, and the balm of the little breezes that stirred the foliage around them was the smell of damask roses from the garden. The creek splashed over the pebbles at their feet, and a drowsy bird, half wakened by the moon, crooned languorously in the sycamores. The girl looked out at the sparkling water through downcast lashes. "Is it because it is so transient that beauty is pathetic," she said, "because we can never come back to it in quite the same way? I am a sentimental girl. If you are born so it is never entirely teased out of you, is it? Besides, tonight is all a dream. It isn't real, you know. You couldn't be mawkish."

Her tone was gentle as a caress, and it made him tingle to his finger tips. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I just know. Do you think I'm

very bold and forward?" she said dreamily.

"It was your song I wanted to be sentimental about. I am like one 'who through long days of toil—only that doesn't quite apply—and nights devoid of ease,' but I can't claim that one doesn't sleep well here; it is Plattville's specialty—like one who

"Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies."

"Yes," she answered, "to come here and to do what you have done and to live this isolated village life that must be so desperately dry and dull for a man of your sort, and yet to have the kind of heart that makes wonderful melodies sing in itself—oh," she cried, "I say that is fine!"

"You do not understand," he returned sadly, wishing before her to be unmercifully just to himself. "I came here because I couldn't make a living anywhere else. And the 'wonderful melodies'—I have only known you one evening—and the melodies— He rose to his feet and took a few steps toward the garden. "Come," he said, "let me take you back. Let us go before I— He finished with a helpless laugh.

She stood by the bench, one hand resting on it. She stood all in the tremulant shadow. She moved one step toward him, and a single long sliver of light pierced the sycamores and fell upon her head. He gasped.

"What was it about the melodies?" she said.

"Nothing. I don't know how to thank you for this evening that you have given me. I— I suppose you are leaving tomorrow. No one ever stays here. I—"

"What about the melodies?"

He gave it up. "The moon makes people insane!" he cried.

"If that is true, then you need not be more afraid than I, because 'people' is plural. What were you saying about?"

"I had heard them—in my heart. When I heard your voice tonight I knew that it was you who sang them there, had been singing them for me always."

"So!" she cried gayly. "All that debate about a pretty speech!" Then, sinking before him in a courtesy, "I am beholden to you," she said. "Do you think no man ever made a little flattery for me before tonight?"

At the edge of the orchard, where they could keep an unseen watch on the garden and the bank of the creek, Judge Briscoe and Mr. Todd were ensconced under an apple tree, the former still armed with his shotgun. When the young people got up from their bench, the two men rose hastily, then sauntered slowly toward them. When they met, Harkless shook each of them cordially by the hand without seeming to know it.

"We were coming to look for you," explained the judge. "William was afraid to go home alone—thought some one might take him for Mr. Harkless and shoot him before he got into town. Can you come out with Willetts in the morning, Harkless," he went on, "and go with the young ladies to see the parade? And Minnie wants you to stay to dinner and go to the show with them in the afternoon."

Harkless seized his hand and shook it and then laughed heartily as he accepted the invitation.

At the gate Miss Sherwood extended her hand to him and said politely, while mockery shone from her eyes: "Good night, Mr. Harkless. I do not leave tomorrow. I am very glad to have met you."

"We are going to keep her all summer, if we can," said Minnie, weaving her arm about her friend's waist.

"You'll come in the morning?"

"Good night, Miss Sherwood," he returned hilariously. "It has been such a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for saving my life. It was very good of you, indeed. Yes; in the morning. Good night, good night." He shook hands with all of them, including Mr. Todd, who was going with him. He laughed all the way home, and William walked at his side in amazement.

The Herald building was a decrepit frame structure on Main street. It had once been a small warehouse and was now sadly in need of paint. Closely adjoining it, in a large, blank looking yard, stood a low brick cottage, over which the second story of the old warehouse leaned in an effect of tipsy affection that had reminded Harkless, when he first saw it, of an old Sunday school book woodcut of an inebriated parent under convoy of a devoted child. The title to these two buildings and the blank yard had been included in the purchase of the Herald, and the cottage was the editor's home.

There was a light burning upstairs in the Herald office. From the street a broad, tumbledown stairway ran up on the outside of the building to the second floor, and at the stairway railing John turned and shook his companion warmly by the hand.

"Good night, William," he said. "It was plucky of you to join in that muss tonight. I shan't forget it."

"I jest happened to come along," replied the other awkwardly. Then, with a portentous yawn, he asked, "Ain't ye goin' to bed?"

"No; Parker wouldn't allow it."

"Well," observed William, with another yawn, which threatened to expose the veritable soul of him, "I d'know how ye stand it. It's closte on 11 o'clock. Good night."

John went up the steps, singing aloud—

"For tonight we'll merry, merry be,
For tonight we'll merry, merry be."

and stopped on the sagging platform at the top of the stairs and gave the moon good night with a wave of the hand and friendly laughter. At this it suddenly struck him that he was twenty-nine years of age and that he had laughed a great deal that evening; laughed and laughed over things not in the least humorous, like an excited schoolboy making a first formal call; that he had shaken hands with Miss Briscoe when he left her as if he should never see her again; that he had taken Miss Sherwood's hand twice in one very temporary parting; that he had shaken the judge's hand five times and William's four.

"Idiot!" he cried. "What has happened to me?" Then he shook his fist at the moon and went in to work, he thought.

CHAPTER V.

THE bright sun of circus day shone into Harkless' window, and he awoke to find himself smiling. For a little while he lay content, drowsily wondering why he smiled, only knowing that there was something new. It was thus as a boy he had wakened on birthday mornings or on Christmas or on the Fourth of July, drifting happily out of pleasant dreams into the consciousness of long awaited delights that had come true, yet lying only half awake in a cheerful underland, leaving happiness undefined.

The morning breeze was fluttering at his window blind, a honeysuckle vine tapped lightly on the pane. Birds were trilling, warbling, whistling, and from the street came the rumbling of wagons, merry cries of greeting and the barking of dogs. What was it made him feel so young and strong and light hearted? The breeze brought him the smell of June roses, fresh and sweet with dew, and then he knew why he had come smiling from his dreams. He leaped out of bed and shouted loudly: "Zen! Hello, Xenophon!"

In answer an ancient, very black darky, his warped and wrinkled visage showing under his grizzled hair like charred paper in a fall of pine ashes, put his head in at the door and said: "Good mawn', suh. Yessuh. Hilt's done pump' full. Good mawn', suh."

A few moments later the colored man, seated on the front steps of the cottage, heard a mighty splashing within while the rafters rang with stentorian song:

"He promised to buy me a bonny blue ribbon,
He promised to buy me a bonny blue ribbon,
He promised to buy me a bonny blue ribbon,
To tie up my bonny brown hair."

"Oh, dear, what can the matter be? Oh, dear, what can the matter be? Oh, dear, what can the matter be? Johnnie's so long at the fair!"

The listener's jaw dropped, and his mouth opened and stayed open. "Him!" he muttered faintly. "Singin'!"

"Well the old triangle knew the music of our tread;
How the peaceful Seminole would tremble in his bed!"

sang the editor.

"I dunno huccome it," exclaimed the old man, "but bless Gawd, de young man happy!" A thought struck him suddenly, and he scratched his head. "Maybe he goin' away," he said querulously. "What become of ole Zen?" The splashing ceased, but not the voice, which struck into a noble marching chorus.

"Oh, my Lawd," said the colored man, "I pray you listen at dat!"

"Soldiers marching up the street.
They keep the time;
They look sublime!
Hear them play 'Die Wacht am Rhein.'
Tra la la, la la."

The length of Main street and all sides of the square resounded with the rattle of vehicles of every kind. Since earliest dawn they had been pouring into the village, a long procession, on every country road. The air was full of exhilaration; everybody was laughing and shouting and calling greetings, for Carlow county was turning out, and from far and near the country people came—nay, from over the county line; and clouds of dust arose from every thoroughfare and highway and swept into town to herald their coming.

Dibb Zane, the "sprinkling contractor," had been at work with the town water cart since the morning stars were bright, but he might as well have watered the streets with his tears, which, indeed, when the farmers began to come in, bringing their cyclones of dust, he drew nigh unto after a burst of profanity as futile as his cart.

"Tief wie das Meer soll deine Liebe sein," hummed the editor in the cottage. His song had taken on a reflective tone, as that of one who cons a problem or musically ponders which card to play. He was kneeling before an old trunk in his bedchamber. From one compartment he took a neatly folded pair of duck trousers and a light gray tweed coat, from another a straw hat with a ribbon of bright colors. He examined these musingly. They had lain in the trunk for a long time undisturbed. He shook the coat and brushed it. Then he laid the garments upon his bed and proceeded to shave himself carefully, after which he donned the white trousers, the gray coat and, rummaging in the trunk again, found a gay pink cravat, which he fastened about his tall

collar (also a resurrection from the trunk) with a pearl pin. He took a long time to arrange his hair with a pair of brushes. When at last it suited him and his dressing was complete, he sallied forth to breakfast.

Xenophon stared after him as he went out of the gate whistling heartily. The old darky lifted his hands, palms outward.

"Lan' name, who dat?" he exclaimed aloud. "Who dat in dem panjingeries? He gone jine de circus!" His hands fell upon his knees, and he got to his feet rheumatically, shaking his head with foreboding. "Honey, honey, hit bald luck, bald luck sing 'fo' breakfus' Trouble 'fo' de day be done. Trouble, honey, great trouble. Bald luck, bald luck!"

Along the square the passing of the editor in his cool equipments was a progress, and wide were the eyes and deep the gasps of astonishment caused by his festal appearance. Mr. Tibbs and his sister rushed from the post-office to stare after him.

"He looks just beautiful, Solomon," said Miss Tibbs.

Harkless usually ate his breakfast alone, as he was the latest riser in Plattville. There were days in the winter when he did not reach the hotel until 8 o'clock. This morning he found a bunch of white roses, still wet with dew and so fragrant that the whole room was fresh and sweet with their odor, prettily arranged in a bowl on the table, and at his plate the largest of all with a pin through the stem. He looked up smilingly and nodded at the red faced, long haired waitress who was waving a long fly brush over his head. "Thank you, Charmion," he said. "That's very pretty."

"That old Mr. Wimby was here," she answered, "and he left word for you to look out. The whole possetucky of Johnsons from the Crossroads passed his house this mornin', comin' this way, and he see Bob Skillett on the square when he got to town. He left them flowers. Mrs. Wimby sent 'em to ye. I didn't bring 'em."

"Thank you for arranging them."

She turned even redder than she always was and answered nothing, vigorously darting her brush at an imaginary fly on the cloth. After several minutes she said abruptly, "You're well come."

There was a silence, finally broken by a long, gasping sigh. Astonished, he looked at the girl. Her eyes were set unfathomably upon his pink tie. The wand had dropped from her nerveless hand, and she stood rapt and immovable. She started violently from



"Honey, hit bald luck sing 'fo' breakfus' her trance. "Ain't ye goin' to finish yer coffee?" she asked, plying her instrument again, and, bending slightly, whispered, "Say, Eph Watts is over there behind ye."

At a table in a far corner of the room a large gentleman in a brown frock coat was quietly eating his breakfast and reading the Herald. He was of an ornate presence, though entirely neat. A sumptuous expanse of linen exhibited itself between the lapels of his low cut waistcoat, and an inch of bediamonded breastpin glittered there like an ice ledge on a snowy mountain side. He had a steady blue eye and a dissipated iron gray mustache. This personage was Mr. Ephraim Watts, who, following a calling more fashionable in the eighteenth century than in the latter decades of the nineteenth, had shaken the dust of Carlow from his feet some three years previously at the strong request of the authorities. The Herald had been particularly insistent upon his deportation. In the local phrase, Harkless had "run him out o' town." Perhaps it was because the Herald's opposition, as the editor had explained at the time, had been "merely moral and impersonal," and the editor had confessed to a liking for the unprofessional qualities of Mr. Watts, that there was but a slight embarrassment when the two gentlemen met today. His breakfast finished, Harkless went over to the other and extended his hand. Cynthia, the waitress, held her breath and clutched the back of a chair. However, Mr. Watts made no motion toward his well known hip pocket. Instead he rose, flushing slightly, and accepted the hand offered him.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Watts."