The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK.)

"No, you couldn't. It's the ribbon of superiority in your buttonhole. I know several women who manage to live without men to open doors for them, and I think I could bear to let a man pass before me now and then or wear his hat in an office where I happened to be, and I could get my own ice at a dance, I think, possibly with even less fuss and scramble than I've sometimes observed in the young men who have done it for me. But you know you would never let us do things for ourselves, no matter what legal equality might be declared, even when we get representation for our taxation. You will never be able to deny yourselves giving us our 'privilege!' I hate being waited on! I'd rather do things for myself."

She was so earnest in her satire, so full of scorn and so serious in her meaning, and there was such a contrast between what she said and her person—she looked so pre-eminently the pretty marquise, the little exquisite, so essentially to be waited on and helped, to have cloaks thrown over the dampness for her to tread upon, to be run about for—he could see half a dozen youths rushing about for her ices, for her carriage, for her chaperon, for her wrap, at dances—that to save his life he could not repress a chuckle. He managed to make it inaudible, however, and it was as well that he did.

"I understand your love of newspaper work," she went on less vehemently, but not less earnestly. "I have always wanted to do it myself, wanted to immensely. I can't think of a more fascinating way of earning one's living. And I know I could do it. Why don't you make the Herald a daily?"

To hear her speak of "earning one's living" was too much for him. She gave the impression of riches, not only by the fine texture and fashioning of her garments, but one felt that luxuries had wrapped her from her birth. He had not had much time to wonder what she did in Plattville. It had occurred to him that it was a little odd that she could plan to spend any extent of time there, even if she had liked Minnie Briscoe at school. He felt that she must have been sheltered and petted and waited on all her life. One could not help yearning to wait on her.

He answered inarticulately, "Oh, some day," in reply to her question and then fell into outright laughter.

"I might have known you wouldn't take me seriously," she said, with no indignation, only a sort of wistfulness. "I am well used to it. I think it is because I am not tall. People take big girls with more gravity. Big people are nearly always listened to."

"Listened to!" he said, and felt that he must throw himself at her feet. "You oughtn't to mind being Titania. She was listened to. You"—

She sprang to her feet, and her eyes flashed. "Do you think personal comment is ever in good taste?" she cried fiercely, and in his surprise he almost fell off the bench. "If there is one thing I cannot bear, it is to be told that I am 'small!' I am not. Every one who isn't a giantess isn't 'small.' I detest personalities. I am a great deal over five feet, a great deal more than that—I"—

"Please, please," he said, "I didn't"—

"Don't say you are sorry," she interrupted, and in spite of his contrition he found her angry voice delicious, it was still so sweet, hot with indignation, but ringing, not harsh. "Don't say you didn't mean it, because you did! You can't unsay it, you cannot alter it, and this is the way I must remember you! Ah!" She drew in her breath with a sharp sigh and, covering her face with her hands, sank back upon the bench. "I will not cry," she said, not so firmly as she thought she did.

"My blessed child!" he cried in great distress and perturbation. "What have I done? I—I"—

"Call me 'small' all you like," she answered. "I don't care. It isn't that. You mustn't think me such an imbecile." She dropped her hands from her face and shook the tears from her eyes with a mournful little laugh. He saw that her fingers were clinched tightly and her lip trembled. "I will not cry," she said again.

"Somebody ought to murder me. I ought to have thought—personalities are hideous"—

"Don't! It wasn't that."

"I ought to be shot"—

"Ah, please don't say that," she said, shuddering. "Please don't, not even as a joke, after last night!"

"But I ought to be for hurting you. Indeed"—

She laughed sadly again. "It wasn't that. I don't care what you call me. I am small. You'll try to forgive me for being such a baby? I didn't mean anything I said. I haven't acted so badly since I was a child."

"It's my fault, all of it. I've tired you out, and I let you get crushed at the circus, and"—

"That!" she said. "I don't think I would have missed the circus."

He had a thrilling hope that she meant the tent pole. She looked as if she meant that, but he dared not let himself believe it.

"No," he continued, "I have been so madly happy in being with you that I've fairly worn out your patience. I've haunted you all day, and I have"—

"All that has nothing to do with it," she said, with a gentle motion of her hand to bid him listen. "Just after you left this afternoon I found that I could not stay here. My people are going abroad at once, and I must go with them. That's what is almost making me cry. I leave here tomorrow morning."

He felt something strike at his heart. In the sudden sense of dearth he had no astonishment that she should betray such agitation over her departure from a place she had known so little and friends who certainly were not part of her life. He rose to his feet, and, resting his arm against a sycamore, stood staring away from her at nothing. She did not move. There was a long silence. He had wakened suddenly. The skies had been sapphire, the sward emerald, Plattville a Camelot of romance, a city of enchantment, and now, like a meteor burned out in a breath, the necromancy fell away and he gazed into desolate years. The thought of the square, his dusty office, the bleak length of Main street, as they would appear tomorrow gave him a faint physical sickness. Today it had all been touched to beauty. He had felt fit to live and work here a thousand years—a fool's dream, and the waking was to arid emptiness. He should die now of hunger and thirst in this Sahara. He hoped the fates would let it be soon, but he knew they would not; knew that this was hysteria, that in his endurance he should plod on, plod, plod dustily on, through dingy, lonely years.

There was a rumble of thunder far out on the western prairie. A cold breath stole through the hot stillness, and an arm of vapor reached out between the moon and the quiet earth. Darkness fell. The man and girl kept silence between them. They might have been two sad guardians of the black little stream that plashed unseen at their feet. Now and then a reflection of faraway lightning faintly limned them with a green light. Thunder rolled nearer, ominously. The gods were driving their chariots over the bridge. The chill breath passed, leaving the air again to its hot inertia.

"I did not want to go," she said at last, with tears just below the surface of her voice. "I wanted to stay here, but he—they wouldn't—I can't"—

"Wanted to stay here?" he said huskily, not turning. "Here? In Indiana?"

"Yes."

"In Rouen, you mean?"

"In Plattville."

"In Plattville!" He turned now, astounded.

"Yes. Wouldn't you have taken me on the Herald?" She rose and came toward him. "I could have supported myself here if you would, and I've studied how newspapers are made. I know I could have earned a wage. I could have helped you make it a daily." He searched in vain for a trace of raillery in her voice. There was none. She seemed to intend her words to be taken literally.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that I want to stay here; that I ought to stay here; that my conscience tells me I should; but I can't, and it makes me very unhappy. That was why I acted so badly."

"Your conscience!" he cried.

"Oh, I know what a jumble and puzzle it must seem to you!"

"I only know one thing—that you are going away tomorrow morning and that I shall never see you again."

The darkness had grown intense. They could not see each other, but a wan glimmer gave him a fleeting, misty view of her. She stood half turned from him, her hand to her cheek in the uncertain fashion of his great moment in the afternoon. Her eyes, he saw in the flying picture that he caught, were troubled, and her hand trembled. She had been irresistible in her gayety, but now that a mysterious distress assailed her, of the reason for which he had no guess, she was so adorably pathetic and seemed such a rich and lovely and sad and happy thing to have come into his life only to go out of it, and he was so full of the prophetic sense of loss of her, it seemed so much like losing everything, that he found too much to say to be able to say anything.

He tried to speak and choked a little. A big drop of rain fell on his bare head. Neither of them noticed the weather or cared for it. They stood with the renewed blackness hanging like a drapery between them.

"Can—can you—tell me why you think you ought not to go?" he whispered finally with a great effort.

"No; not now. But I know you would think I am right in wanting to stay. I know you would if you knew about it; but I can't, I can't. I must go in the morning."

"I should always think you right," he answered in an unsteady tone, "always." He went over to the bench, fumbled about for his hat and picked it up.

"Come," he said gently, "I am going now."

She stood quite motionless for a full minute or longer; then, without a word, she moved toward the house. He went to her, with hands extended to find her, and his fingers touched her sleeve. Together and silently they found the garden path and followed its dim length. In the orchard he touched her sleeve again and led the way.

As they came out behind the house she detained him. Stopping short, she shook his hand from her arm. She spoke in a breath, as if it were all one word.

"Will you tell me why you go? It is not late. Why do you wish to leave me, when I shall not see you again?"

"The Lord be good to me!" he broke out, all his long pent passion of dreams rushing to his lips as the barrier fell. "Don't you see it is because I can't bear to let you go? I hoped to get away without saying it. I want to be alone. I want to be with myself and try to realize things. I didn't want to make a babbling idiot of myself, but I am. It is because I don't want another second of your sweetness to leave an added pain when you've gone. It is because I don't want to hear your voice again, to have it haunt me in the loneliness you will leave. But it's useless, useless. I shall hear it always, just as I shall always see your face, just as I have heard your voice and seen your face these seven years, ever since I first saw you, a child, at Winter Harbor. I forgot for awhile. I thought it was a girl I had made up out of my own heart, but it was you all the time. The impression I thought nothing of then; just the merest touch on my heart, light as it was, grew and grew deeper till it was there forever. You've

She sprang to her feet, and her eyes flashed.

known me twenty-four hours, and I understand what you think of me for speaking to you like this. If I had known you for years and had waited and had the right to speak and keep your respect, what have I to offer you? I couldn't even take care of you if you went mad as I and listened. I've no excuse for this raving— Yes, I have."

He saw her in another second of lightning, a sudden, bright one. Her back was turned to him, and she had taken a few startled steps from him.

"Ah," he cried, "you are glad enough now to see me go! I knew it. I wanted to spare myself that. I tried not to be a hysterical fool in your eyes." He turned aside, and his head fell on his breast. "God help me!" he said. "What will this place be to me now?"

The breeze had risen. It gathered force. It was a chill wind, and there rose a wailing on the prairie. Drops of rain began to fall.

"You will not think a question implied in this," he said, more composedly, but with an unhappy laugh at himself. "I believe you will not think me capable of asking you if you care"—

"No," she answered, "I—I do not love you."

"Ah, was it a question, after all? I—you read me better than I do, perhaps. But, if I asked, I knew the answer."

She made as if to speak again, but words refused her.

After a moment, "Goodby," he said very steadily. "I thank you for the charity that has given me this little time—with you. It will always be—precious to me. I shall always be your servant." His steadiness did not carry him to the end of his sentence. "Goodby"—

She started toward him and stopped. He did not see her. She answered nothing, but stretched out her hand to him and then let it fall quickly.

"Goodby," he said again. "I shall go out the orchard gate. Please tell them good night for me. Won't you speak to me? Goodby!"

He stood waiting, while the rising wind blew their garments about them. She leaned against the wall of the house. "Won't you say goodby and tell me you can forget my"—

She did not speak.

"No!" he cried wildly. "Since you don't forget it! I have spoiled what might have been a pleasant memory for you, and I know it. You are already troubled, and I have added, and you won't forget it, nor shall I—nor shall I. Don't say goodby! I can say it for both of us. God bless you, and goodby, goodby, goodby!"

He crushed his hat down over his eyes and ran toward the orchard gate. For a moment lightning flashed repeatedly. She saw him go out the gate and disappear into sudden darkness. He ran through the field and came out on the road. Heaven and earth were revealed again for a dazzling white second. From horizon to horizon rolled clouds contorted like an illimitable field of inverted haystacks, and beneath them enormous volumes of bluish vapor were tumbling in the west, advancing eastward with sinister swiftness. She ran to a little knoll at the corner of the house and saw him set his face to the storm. She cried aloud to him with all her strength and would have followed, but the wind took the words out of her mouth and drove her back, cowering, to the shelter of the house.

Out on the road the lashing dust came stinging him like a thousand nettles. It smothered him and beat him so that he covered his face with his sleeve and fought into the storm shoulder foremost, dimly glad of its uproar, yet almost unconscious of it, keeping westward on his way to nowhere. West or east, north or south, it was all one to him. The few heavy drops that fell boiling into the dust ceased to come; the rain withheld while the wind kings rode on earth. On he went in spite of them. On and on, running blindly when he could run at all. At least the wind kings were company. He had been so long alone. There was no one who belonged to him or to whom he belonged. For a day his dreams had found in a girl's eyes the precious thing that is called home. Oh, the wild fancy! He laughed aloud.

There was a startling answer—a lance of fire hurled from the sky, riving the fields before his eyes, while crash on crash numbed his ears. With that his common sense awoke, and he looked about him. He was two miles from town. The nearest house was the Briscoes', far down the road. He knew the rain would come now. There was a big oak near him at the roadside, and he stepped under its sheltering branches and leaned against the great trunk, wiping the perspiration and dust from his face. A moment of stunned quiet had succeeded the peal of thunder. It was followed by several moments of incessant lightning that played along the road and the fields. From that intolerable brightness he turned his head and saw, standing against the fence, five feet away, a man, leaning over the top rail and looking at him.

The same flash swept brilliantly before Helen's eyes as she crouched against the back steps of the brick house. It revealed a picture like a marine of big waves, the tossing tops of the orchard trees, for in that second the full fury of the storm was loosed, wind and rain and hail. It drove her against the kitchen door with cruel force. The latch lifted, the door blew open violently, and she struggled to close it in vain. The house seemed to rock. A candle flickered toward her from the inner doorway and was blown out.

"Helen! Helen!" came Minnie's voice anxiously. "Is that you? We were coming to look for you. Did you get wet?"

Mr. Willetts threw his weight against the door and managed to close it. Then Minnie found her friend's hand and led her through the dark hall to the parlor, where the judge sat placidly reading by a student lamp.

Lige chuckled as they left the kitchen. "I guess you didn't try too hard to shut that door, Harkless," he said, and then when they came into the lighted room, "Why, where is Harkless?" he asked. "Didn't he come with us from the kitchen?"

"No," answered Helen faintly. "He's gone." She sank upon the sofa and put her hand over her eyes as if to shade them from too sudden light.

"Gone!" The judge dropped his book and sat staring across the table at the girl. "Gone! When?"

"Ten minutes—five—half an hour—I don't know. Before the storm commenced."

"Oh!" The old gentleman appeared to be reassured. "Probably he had work to do and wanted to get in before the rain."

But Lige Willetts was turning pale. "Which way did he go? He didn't come around the house. We were out there till the storm broke."

"He went by the orchard gate. When he got to the road he turned that way." She pointed to the west.

"He must have been crazy!" exclaimed the judge. "What possessed the fellow?"

"I couldn't stop him. I didn't know how." She looked at her three companions, slowly and with growing terror, from one face to another. Minnie's eyes were wide, and she had unconsciously grasped Lige's arm. The young man was staring straight before him. The judge got up and walked nervously back and forth. Helen rose to her feet and went toward the old man, her hands pressed to her bosom.

"Ah," she cried out, "I had forgotten that! You don't think they—you don't think he"—

"I know what I think," Lige broke in. "I think I'd ought to be hanged for letting him out of my sight. Maybe it's all right. Maybe he turned and started right back for town—and got there. But I had no business to leave him, and if I can I'll catch up with him yet." He went to the front door and, opening it, let in a tornado of wind and flood of water that beat him back. Sheets of rain blew in horizontally in spite of the porch beyond.

Briscoe followed him. "Don't be a fool, Lige," he said. "You hardly expect to go out in that." Lige shook his head. It needed them both to get the door closed. The young man leaned his back against it and passed his sleeve across his wet brow. "I hadn't ought to have left him."

"Don't scare the girls," whispered the other; then in a louder tone: "All I'm afraid of is that he'll get blown to pieces or catch his death of cold. That's all there is to worry about. They wouldn't try it again so soon after last night. I'm not bothering about that; not at all. That needn't worry anybody."

"But this morning"—

"Pshaw! He's likely home and dry by this time. All foolishness. Don't be an old woman."

The two men re-entered the room and found Helen clinging to Minnie's hand on the sofa. She looked up at them quickly.

"Do you think—do you—what do you"—

Her voice shook so that she could not go on.

The judge pinched her cheek and patted it. "I think he's home and dry, but I think he got wet first. That's what I think. Never you fear. He's a good hand at taking care of himself. Sit down, Lige. You can't go for awhile." Nor could he. It was a long, long while before he could venture out. The storm raged and roared without abatement. It was Carlow's worst since '51, the old gentleman said. They heard the great limbs crack and break outside, while the thunder pealed and boomed, and the wind ripped at the eaves till it seemed as if the roof must go. Meanwhile the judge, after some apology, lit his pipe and told long stories of the storms of early days and of odd freaks of the wind. He talked on calmly, the picture of repose, and blew rings above his head, but Helen saw that one of his big slippers beat an unceasing little tattoo on the carpet. She sat with fixed eyes, in silence, holding Minnie's hand tightly, and her face was colorless, growing whiter as the slow hours dragged by.

Every moment Mr. Willetts became more restless. He assured the ladies he had no anxiety regarding Mr. Harkless. It was only his own dereliction of duty that he regretted. The boys would have the laugh on him, he said. But he visibly chafed more and more under the judge's stories and constantly rose to peer out of the window into the wrack and turmoil, and once or twice he struck his hands together with muttered ejaculations. At last there was a lull in the fury without, and as soon as it was perceptible he announced his intention of making his way into town. He "had ought to have went before," he declared apprehensively, and then, with immediate amendment, of course he would find the editor at work in the Herald office. There wasn't the slightest doubt of that, he agreed with the judge, but he better see about it. He would return early in the morning and bid Miss Sherwood goodby. Hoped she'd come back some day; hoped it wasn't her last visit to Plattville. They gave him an umbrella, and he plunged into the night, and as they stood for a moment at the door, the old man calling after him cheery good nights and laughing messages to Harkless, they could see him fight with his umbrella when he got out into the road.

Helen's room was over the porch, the windows facing north, looking out upon the pike and across the fields. "Please don't light the lamp, Minnie," she said when they had gone upstairs. "I don't need it." Miss Briscoe was flitting about the room hunting for matches. In the darkness she came to her friend and laid a kind, large hand on Helen's eyes, and the hand became wet. She drew Helen's head down on her shoulder and sat beside her on the bed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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