

The Emancipation Of the Chaperons.

By ALICE LOUISE LEE.

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"HULL!" Merriwether stretched his legs out luxuriously in front of the grate and pulled at his pipe. "A Christmas house party at The Pines." Then after a pause, "Who are invited?"

His nephew leaned against the mantelpiece and stuffed his hands into his pockets as he enumerated the guests, the uncle keeping up a running and caustic comment:

"Engaged—going to be—introduced for matrimonial purposes—engaged—the same." The enumeration ceased. "Yes, I see myself helping to chaperon your house party. I stroll into the reception room and stumble over an engaged couple. I sneak into the library and am frowned out again by a newly introduced couple. I hang in to the music room and overhear a proposal. No, thank you, Roy; I shall spend Christmas in peace and my own room."

Roy picked up his hat and moved toward the door. "Modern house parties are not conducted along the lines you've laid down, uncle. Change your mind and judge for yourself." He turned the knob. "By the way, I didn't mention the other chaperon, did I? It's Mrs. Angell, Bertha's widowed aunt, you know." With this parting shot, which he knew was effective, Roy discreetly retreated.

After he had gone Merriwether sat an hour staring at the fire and pulling away at a smokeless pipe. Then he arose and looked earnestly at himself in the mantel mirror. "We're apt to run down," he apostrophized his reflection; "apt to run to seed, we bachelors. Now, this tie—let's see, it's six months out of style, and Gertrude used to be—hum." He stepped to the phone and called up his tailor, realizing that his mind had already undergone the change Roy hoped for.

Ten days later he arrived at The Pines just in time to dress for dinner. He was accompanied by a man and a smart lot of luggage, accessories which made so marked a change in his appearance that when at 6 o'clock he descended to the lower hall Bertha Monroe, awaiting her aunt at the foot of the stairs, surveyed him in delighted amazement.

"Why, Uncle Bruce," she exclaimed, "you look so fine I scarcely knew you!" Bertha was his nephew's fiancée and already claimed relationship in private to the uncle. "I'd make Roy wear evening clothes in the morning if he had such a splendid figure—so fitted out, you know."

Merriwether, following her into the living room, laughed grimly at the doubtful compliment. "Oh, he'll tip the scales at 220 soon enough, don't worry?"

"You surely don't look that stout," began Bertha and, turning abruptly toward the entrance, finished with, "Does he, auntie?"

Gertrude Angell swept past her niece and met Merriwether's outstretched hand cordially. "Look? Why, he looks surprisingly like the Bruce Merriwether I used to know so well."

"Fifteen years ago," was on the end of Merriwether's tongue, but he checked himself just in time. Gertrude probably ignored lapses in time as women have a habit of doing, he thought. But surely hers was a face, a form, a bearing, which had so successfully withstood time as to entitle her to the appellation of youth. Her brown hair had not lost its luster, nor had her blue eyes lost aught of their sparkling interest in life, while she carried herself with her old-time spring and vivacity.

Merriwether noted all these things as he sat opposite her at dinner. His memory flashed picture after picture before him—the primary days in their old home school, their grammar room betrothal, the warm friendship of later years, which had meant something more to him; then her marriage and life abroad. As he looked at her he had the uncomfortable feeling that, although her birth had antedated his by one year, she was many years his junior.

He was just characterizing himself as "old" when his nephew's voice aroused him and added point to his reflection. "Tomorrow morning we skate," announced Roy joyfully. "I've had the pond back here cleared for action, and the ice is O. K." Then he added carelessly, "By the way, Uncle Bruce, I forgot to tell you to bring skates along, but I can easily provide you with a pair."

Merriwether quaked inwardly, but made no reply until after dinner, when he backed his nephew into a corner and addressed him privately and forcefully. "I've not been on skates for ten years, and I don't intend to make a spectacle of myself now by any means."

"Why, uncle—er—you know, that makes things rather awkward, for Mrs. Angell does all those things so well, and—er—we don't want her to feel bored here."

"Oh!" groaned Merriwether. "In that case I'll try, but watch out for a re-

duction of a chapter in the "Pierwick Papers!" and he turned abruptly into the ballroom.

"Are you looking over the scene of former triumphs?" asked a gay voice beside him. And Mrs. Angell moved across the room to straighten a candle in one of the candelabra.

Merriwether noted with admiration her free, light step. She was a superb specimen of womanhood, but he fervently wished she had appeared older. "Why is it," he asked impulsively, ignoring her question, "that women retain their youth so much longer than men?"

She paused with her hand on the candle and looked back. "I think," she replied thoughtfully, "it's because they insist on doing youthful things."

"There it is again!" he thought, with an internal groan. He would be obliged to skate and dance and do all the other uncomfortable things which forty years and 220 pounds shrink from. Still as he watched her move about the room the burden of it did not seem so onerous after all.

Therefore he danced not badly, but laboriously, all the while admiring the graceful ease of Gertrude Angell's motions.

"At least," he determined resolutely, "I'll not be caught skating, as I was dancing, without a bit of practice." It was 1 a. m. when he made this resolution and issued the command to his man, "Peter, get me up at 7—unless," in sudden inspiration, "it should be storming."

Promptly at 7 he was awakened in a rebellious frame of mind. "Stiff as a cart horse," he grumbled. "I hope it's snowing like blazes."

The man raised the shade and looked out. "Sky clear as a whistle, sir."

So, with his sleep cut short two hours at both ends of the night, Merriwether dragged himself and the pair of skates, produced by his thoughtful nephew, out to the pond behind the hill. For an hour he skinned his knees, bumped his head and disturbed the equanimity of his temper before he was able to move alone with moderate speed and keep his feet under him.

When he went in to breakfast he was thankful for a few moments alone in front of a glowing grate fire. He stretched his aching legs toward the heat and rubbed the back of his head where a bump was appearing which is not laid down in phrenological charts and pains from which were darting in every direction. He listened idly to voices in the hall until his attention was chained by two comments made just outside the door.

"Isn't she a perfect delight of a chaperon? And so young too! She can't be thirty."

The reply was given in a doubtful tone. "Why—e—e, yes, she must be all of thirty."

"Forty-one," muttered the listener doggedly, the light of his new resolve shining again in his eyes.

At 10 o'clock the entire party went out to the pond, and Merriwether skated and skated and skated until his teeth were clinched in desperation and his forehead knitted in his efforts to hold out as long as Mrs. Angell did.

That he was becoming a man of one idea he acknowledged to himself that afternoon on the sleigh ride. "What Gertrude dares, I dare," he told himself in feeble jest. "That sleighing party was a nightmare to him for days afterward. The drifts were deep, and the sleigh was overturned again and again, generally with Merriwether at the bottom of the heap, owing to the fact that sleighs incline readily in the direction of 220 pounds. Then, to vary the monotony of the tip-overs, there were miles of hillslides with a southerly exposure where the sun had melted the snow and obliged the party to walk."

Merriwether toiled up the slopes, huddling his wind by maintaining silence, watching Gertrude's elastic steps nimbly and feeling his resolutions in respect to youthfulness ooze from his chilled finger tips.

"All out for our last climb?" cried Roy as the horses stopped at the foot of a steep rise. "This is our last hill!"

"Thank the Lord!" said Merriwether devoutly behind his mustache. He watched his chance when the attention of the others, especially Gertrude, was directed elsewhere, and then, assisting his pedal extremities laboriously over the side of the sleigh, he fell on them heavily, trusting to luck rather than to his tired legs to keep him upright.

Near the end of their climb he remarked to Mrs. Angell, with all the nonchalance he could command, "I should think you ladies would be a bit tired."

A light laugh put him to shame, and a pair of dancing blue eyes met his in a glance which stripped him of fifteen years and led him back to the days when he had walked beside her with never a thought of fatigue. "Tired?" she returned carelessly. "And by such a little trip as this?"

That reply, coupled with the day's unparalleled exertions, turned the tide of Merriwether's resolutions. In his room before dinner he eased his aching bones in a Morris chair and determined to return to the city early next morning. He would be old and sensible and comfortable once more. He would forget Gertrude as long as he could not keep up with her youthfulness.

But alas for his determination! He nearly forgot his bruises and strains

that evening in the church or in Gertrude's presence, and he noticed, with a pang of something very like jealousy, that Briggs, the youngest man in the party, occupied his spare moments looking in her direction.

"I'll see what the weather promises for tomorrow," was his irresolute comment as he reached his room at midnight and noted that Peter had obediently packed his things ready for the 9:10 train. "If it should storm, maybe"—was his last conscious thought, and then he drifted off into a land where Gertrude spent her Christmases with him beside a quiet hearthstone and chaperoned house parties no more.

Next morning, when he awoke, the snow was driving against the window, while the wind whistled savagely through the trees. Merriwether turned over with a deep grunt of satisfaction. There could be no sleighing no skating, no tobogganning, such a day as this, and that night was Christmas eve and the Christmas tree. He had purchased an exquisite copy of "Maud" for Mrs. Angell. It was a poem they had once read together, and he wondered if his memory of the fact would touch her. With these thoughts he drifted back into sleep, and the morning train went thundering cityward without him.



She paused and looked back.

But his triumph over the state of the weather was short lived. At the breakfast table his nephew curdled his blood by the announcement of the plans for the Christmas trees, which yet stood in the forest a mile across lots. "Two of the men are sick this morning, fellows, so we'll have to fall into line and fetch the trees," Roy proclaimed, with a relish born of twenty-three years and warm blood.

The "fellows," including Merriwether, worked in the storm until noon before the trees were properly cut, trimmed, cleaned and set up in the ballroom ready for the decorations and gifts. The ladies had the decorations in charge, but Merriwether found there was no rest for the weary. He balanced himself perilously by the hour on the top of stepadders, which swayed and creaked ominously under his weight; he climbed stairs to fetch packages from the billiard room; he searched for lost hammers and knelt on his laid tacks until he relegated Christmas and house parties to the lower regions.

At last the trees were decorated, and Roy called the party into the music room to practice Christmas anthems. Merriwether saw his fellow workers safely into the music room; then he dragged himself upstairs for a relaxing smoke, only to find his fire out and his chamber cheerless.

Shoving his aching feet into slippers, he got himself into a smoking jacket, lit his pipe and descended to the library. The library lay back of the living room, far from the music, and it contained an inviting couch, at which Merriwether had looked longingly, but had not found time so far to occupy.

He pushed aside the curtains at the entrance with a broad sweep of his hand and stepped within. Then he stopped abruptly. The couch was occupied. "I beg your pardon, Gertrude, I thought you were singing."

"Singing?" she responded crossly, struggling into a sitting posture. "Why, I've not a shred of voice left to sing with!" She did not smile, but passed her hand across her eyes in a gesture which caused a great light to break in on Merriwether.

"You're tired?" he accused in a ringing voice of triumph.

She leaned back, resting her head against the wall. "Tired?" she repeated in an intense voice. "I'm half dead with the awful pace of these two days. If I were a big healthy man now," glancing resentfully at the proportions of the man before her, "I might be able to endure everything and yet feel fresh, but, being a woman and forty-one—"

"Gertrude," interrupted Merriwether in a tone of solemn joy, "are you forty-one?"

"Of course I am," she responded almost irritably. "You know that I am." "Ye-es," he replied vaguely, coming nearer, "but I didn't know that you knew it!"

"I have every reason to know it!"

the tears were "when skating, tism, and d that sleigh hands out in can't endure home tomorrow leave you to fire you." lashes, and

Merriwether invited. "Gertrude," he voice in which rang a satisfaction of harmony with his announcement. "the exertion attendant on chaperoning this house party and keeping up with you has given me the rheumatism in every joint and muscle, and not only the headache—the effect has penetrated to my disposition, which is—"

A door opened somewhere, and a burst of music interrupted him. "Peace on earth, good will to men."

The door closed, and silence reigned in the library. A realization of the spirit of the words came to Merriwether. His light manner dropped from him. He leaned over and laid his hand on Gertrude's. "Let's be old and peaceful together, dear. Don't go back tomorrow. Spend Christmas here—with me."

The firelight played softly over the woman's face. She glanced up with a smile which was tremulous in spite of her mocking words. "Now that I think of it, Bruce, I haven't bought my ticket yet, and—it is more comfortable to be old!"

Dodging Thirteen.

"When I lived in New York," writes a former New Yorker from Berlin, "there was a house near Central park which should have borne the number 13, but because of the superstition of the occupant permission was secured to place the number 11a or 15a over the door. I spoke of the circumstance a few days ago and learned that the thirteen superstition was more clearly marked here. In the instance mentioned by me an individual was concerned. Here it was the most important corporation in Wiesbaden. There is no No. 13 bathroom in any of the bathhouses, no No. 13 room in any hotel and no No. 13 place at any table d'hotel. At Langenschwalbach the baths, under government control, also have bath cells No. 12a where they should be numbered 13."—New York Tribune.

A Worthy Antagonist.

"Did you visit any of the old caves when you were up in Scotland?" Jorkins was asked by a friend.

"Yes," replied Jorkins reminiscently, "and, by gum, we had to forebly pull Martin out of one cave."

"Good gracious! She was fascinated by its beauty, I suppose."

"No, it wasn't beauty. You see, there is a wonderful echo in the cave, and Maria couldn't bear to think of the echo having the last word."—Liverpool Mercury.

His Eminence.

A French cardinal, being small of stature and hunchbacked at that, always gave the keenest repartee when addressed with "highness" and "eminence." "My highness is five feet two inches, and the eminence I carry on my back."

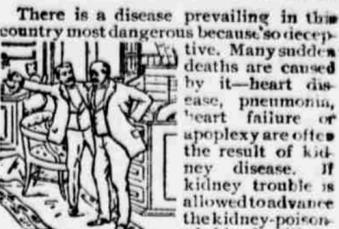
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