A Portia of South Webster

BY NIXOLA GREELEY-SMITH.

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If there had been two of them it would have been easy. In that case Miss Kirkland felt that, with due deference to the presiding fates, she might have tossed a coppers. But when three men, all eligible, want to marry you, the consultation of the great American Sphinx, the impenetrable Indian head which adorns the nation's smallest circulating medium, will hardly answer.

To be sure, she might take the suitors two at a time and by a gradual process of elimination find the one that the Goddess of Chance elects to favor. But Miss Kirkland had found copper-tossing a very unsatisfactory method of settling what she thought was a very unsettled frame of mind, for the coppers invariably said John Blair, and John Blair was the least eligible of the three.

And what was there in John Blair? the young woman asked herself impatiently. Just a well-built, clean-shaven bachelor of 30, with a fair law practice and not the remotest prospect of becoming a millionaire, for which personage she always felt herself to be predestined.

Seth Rodman, on the contrary, was the wealthiest citizen of South Webster, the president of its largest bank, and had but recently finished his third term as mayor. If he was not already a millionaire, he would certainly become one in the next few years. But—and the little conjunction capitalized itself in Miss Kirkland's mind—he was a widower with five children. And what romantically inclined girl of 23 could face such a prospect with equanimity?

Then there was Dick Thistlewaite, fresh from college, enthusiastic and evidently, though perhaps too cheerfully, very much in love. But Dick was so young, and so dreadfully pink and white! After all, could a self-respecting woman marry a man whose complexion was better than her own?

The average girl may smile over the vacillations of Cynthia Kirkland and murmur that pleasing platitude that if she did not know which of the three men she loved she did not love any one of them. But she did know which man she loved. She belonged to the large class of women who like to pretend to themselves that they are still wavering, even when they walk in limp obedience to the decree of fate.

It was while she was playing in this comedy of bogus doubt, to herself and a rather uncomfortable audience of two men, that Ethel Moore came back from a visit to Indianapolis and brought with her the plans for the Shakespeare club.

It was just an ordinary club where women meet and talk and read papers and have rows over the election of officers. It was to contain as many members as there were heroines of Shakespeare's plays, and each member was to study the part of one of those fortunate or ill-starred dames of romance, and give the club the benefit of her interpretation of the character at one of its weekly meetings.

The names of the Shakespeare galaxy were written on slips of paper and drawn from the pot pourri jar which Ethel Moore had impetuously emptied of its crumbling rose leaves a moment before. And though there was some dissatisfaction over the fact that the much coveted role of Juliet went to Miss Moore, Cynthia Kirkland was not numbered among the grumblers, for, by quite unaccountable appropriateness, the role of Portia had fallen to her.

It chanced that Cynthia had never seen "The Merchant of Venice" played, and her knowledge of the great bard's dramas was almost entirely confined to those she had witnessed upon the stage.

Full fledged member of a Shakespeare club that she was she was neither very literary nor very wise, save in the wisdom of softly crinkling hair and sweet up-curling lips, and blue eyes, in which the myriad sparkles rose and blended with one another as they do the middle of a champagne glass. But with the reading of the casket scene, in which the fair Portia is made to select that one of her suitors who chooses the leaden casket containing her portrait, came Cynthia Kirkland's great idea. Why should not she, the acknowledged belle of South Webster, do likewise? To be sure, no stern parental decree stood between her and the unhampered choice of the man she loved. But was she not young, beautiful as the fair lady of Belmont, and troubled with a similar embarrassment of suitors?

Thus did the infertile South Webster brain adapt the casket idea to modern conditions. Cynthia Kirkland had read the casket scene in the morning. Noon found her parading jauntily through the street clad in the freshest of white shirtwaist suits, on picture frames intent.

Seth Rodman, issuing from the swinging doors of the South Webster Bank of Commerce, his mind set with middle-aged intentness on the question as to whether he would let the Iroquois hotel have $5,000 on second mortgage, let his thoughts slip momentarily from lucre to love at sight of the beatific vision.

"Where are you going, my pretty maid?" he asked ponderously. He had asked it in just that tone of every pretty woman he had met since it had seemed to make a hit with the first Mrs. Rodman some thirty years before. He thought it a most graceful way of opening the conversation. And in the more select circles of South Webster conversations were "opened" and "closed" with as much formality as the Sunday church service or the Monday shop shutters.

"I am going up to Brownson's to look at photograph frames. Will you—won't you come with me and help me select?"

Distinctly flattered, the banker said he would, and right in the middle of the next block he took occasion to renew his proposal of marriage.

"You know, Miss Kirkland, how much I think of you," he said with slow, deliberate, impressive utterance. "I mentioned that in our conversation of, I believe, Monday, the 17th. You said at that time that you were still in doubt as to how much you were prepared to think of me, but that you would reflect and give me an answer soon."

"Yes," interrupted the up-to-date Portia, briskly, but bewilderingly, "and I am going to do it. I am buying the picture frame now—you know," she confided in explanation, "I am studying the role of Portia for tomorrow's meeting of our Shakespeare club. Suppose you come up this evening and help me rehearse." As she spoke they had reached Brownson's. "Do come," she added. "But, after all, I don't want you to help me choose the picture frame. I don't think it would be quite fair to the others." Then, in response to the look of dazed inquiry, "Never mind what I mean now, come at half-past 8."

The selection of the picture frames was no easy matter. How could one choose offhand between the oval of gilt leaves and the square one made to imitate ribbon, with the bow knots at top and bottom? And the oxidized frames? And the wooden ones? Portia had selected wood in lieu of the classic lead casket, for she was not a blind classicist, and she had made up her mind to place the portrait in the silver, because she knew that all three suitors were familiar with the play and would probably choose the wooden one offhand. But the selection was finally made, and when she reached home she called up John Blair and Dick Thistlewaite by telephone and asked them to call—Blair at 8 and Thistlewaite at 9. She felt that half an hour would be ample for each man to make his choice, provided, of course (oh, new and unsuspected terror!), they didn't all choose the same one. What would Portia have done, she wondered, in such a dire catastrophe?

Eight o'clock found Miss Kirkland clad in her prettiest evening frock, a bright light burning in the front parlor where, one by one, she would explain the situation to her three suitors. A dim Japanese lamp shed its tinted rays through the gloom of the back parlor where, face downward, lay the three picture frames, instruments of fate.

Eight o'clock meant John Blair! And what would John Blair mean? Just the strong, brave, rather matter-of-fact friend he had always meant, or something new, strange and sweet that the queer, birdlike fluttering of Cynthia's heart portended?

The five minutes that elapsed between the faint chiming of the French clock on the mantelpiece and the louder alarm of the front door bell were the longest of all her life. Her face flushed and her small hands closed and unclosed with nervous, automatic movements, as the stalwart figure of John Blair made its appearance in the doorway. She wondered if Portia had felt like this.

"Oh, John," she exclaimed impulsively, "I'm so glad you've come!" And unconsciously the hand she extended to him fluttered in his with a slight, caressing movement.

Blair's face lighted with the unexpected warmth of her welcome. But it turned serious again as she continued: "I want you to help me rehearse. You know I'm going to appear as Portia before the Shakespeare club. I've selected the casket scene to appear in, the one in which she has to choose from all her suitors, you know."

Her birdlike treble was interrupted by the sudden jingle of the telephone bell in the back room.

With eyes full of admiration Blair watched her part the heavy hangings that separated the two rooms, and, crossing to the telephone, stand on tiptoe, her little head tilted carefully to one side and the receiver against her ear. And this is what he heard:

"Hello, Dick."

"You didn't get my message till now?"

"Why didn't you?"

"No, tomorrow won't do."

"Why can't you come tonight?"

"What engagement?"

"Estelle Moore?"

"You are going to rehearse 'Romeo and Juliet' with her?"

"Well, upon my word!"

"No, I won't see you tomorrow!"

"If you don't come tonight you needn't come at all—ever again. Do you hear me?" And Blair wondered if the man likewise heard the emphatic stamp of her slippered foot as she hung up the receiver without waiting for a reply.

Her eyes fell on the three picture frames. She would never speak to Dick Thistlewaite again. So there were but two to choose from now. Which would it be, Blair or Rodman? Not Rodman; oh, never Rodman—and yet—

Five minutes later she joined Blair in the drawing room, her eyes shining through suppressed tears like dewladen flowers in the sunshine of early morning. She had a volume of Shakespeare in her hand. Silently she extended this to Blair. "You are going to hear me my part," she said, "and read the replies. Yes, you are. And then you are going to choose a casket and if you choose the right one, why—why it will—it will all end as it does in the play." And at the possibility of such an ending Cynthia blushed.

"You mean," said John Blair incredulously—"Cynthia, you don't mean!"

"Yes," she nodded brightly, emphatically. "Yes, I do mean—just—exactly—that."

"You would make my happiness or unhappiness the result of chance?" said Blair slowly, "make your love the reward of a gamble? If that's what your love is like, I don't want it. I think—I think I'd better go."

Cynthia stared at him helplessly, incredulously. He was going, actually going. And there would be no one but Seth Rodman left. Strange, none of Portia's lovers had declined her terms.

Blair had walked to the center table for his hat. But before taking it up he turned. "Do you really mean that, Cynthia?" he asked. And then something in her desolate but steadfast pose moved him to cross toward her.

Did she move likewise? Blair hardly knew, but the next moment his arms were about her and her head rested on his shoulder.

"Cynthia, do you really mean it?" he repeated.

And then through her tears she smiled again.

"Won't you come and look at them and see what I mean?"

She drew him toward the center table, where the frames lay exposed for choice.

"Choose the gold one," said Miss Kirkland; "turn it over."

Blair did, and the face of the pretty girl at his side was revealed.

"No, you must not; not yet. Now the silver one."

Obediently Blair revealed another photograph of Miss Kirkland.

"Now, the other one," and to Blair's wonderment a third photograph of the modern Portia smiled into his eyes.

"You see," she said, talking rapidly and fending him away from her as he turned. "You see, I was afraid after you came that maybe you wouldn't choose the right one, and so while you were waiting—when I was at the telephone—I fixed them so you couldn't make a mistake. Do—do—you mind?"

"Do I mind?" echoed Blair. "Do I mind?" But apparently he realized that there were other things than mere words with which to answer such an inquiry. Stooping, he kissed her flushed cheeks, her sweet blue eyes, her lips.

And it was upon this tableau that Seth Rodman entered, unannounced!

AND IT WAS UPON THIS TABLEAU THAT SETH ROBINSON ENTERED UNANNOUNCED.

OPERATIONS NOT ALWAYS NECESSARY

Doctors Frequently Mistaken.

"I suffered untold agony with piles for over three years. Two doctors told me nothing but an operation would cure me. I tried different remedies, but nothing did me any good until I used Pyramid Pile Cure. I bought six fifty cent boxes at the drug store, and now I can do my work and go out, where before I spent most of my time lying down. I thank God for giving the discoverer the knowledge to make such a cure. I recommend it to all my friends, and if I ever have piles again will certainly use this remarkable remedy. You can use this in any way you wish to make known the wonderful merit of Pyramid Pile Cure." Mrs. Wm. Mucky, 81 Marshall Street, Elizabeth, N. J.

The experience of this lady is that of thousands of others who have been assured that nothing short of an operation would rid them of this distressing complaint. On the face of it, it appears as if too many surgeons operate in order that they may keep their hand in, and lose no portion of their skill; then, again, too many surgeons are anxious to experiment (like the scientific man in Mark Twain's pathetic story of the dog and her little puppy), and do not have proper regard for a patient's physical welfare or condition.

We advise every sufferer to think twice before submitting to an operation for piles, and suggest that those interested write to the Pyramid Drug Co., Marshall, Mich., for their little book on the causes and cure for piles, which is sent free for the asking.

FROM OUR LETTER BOX

Judge Sears on the Revenue Law.

OMAHA, Oct. 7.—To the Editor of The Bee: Asking your columns for such a purpose, I desire to say to the people of the state a few words with reference to the revenue bill passed at the last session of the legislature, both as to why it was passed and as to the law itself.

The prior law had proved inadequate as to furnishing sufficient income to meet the appropriations of the then past sessions. As a result, Nebraska, with a constitutional limitation of $100,000 as to its floating debt, found itself face to face with approximately $2,300,000 of such debt; and we of the legislative body knew that by the end of the session proper items of appropriation would swell this great indebtedness still further. So it will be seen that the most urgent question confronting the late session was our revenue system.

From every quarter of the house—and this might be said of the senate as well—from republican, democrat and populist, came urgency on this question. The session being unhampered by the ordinary senatorial contest, and which free condition occurs but once in six years, we also knew that if remedial legislation was not effected then it would not be had for many years to come. There was no thought of party advantage in the minds of those who framed the new law, only that this state, great in population, resources and actual wealth, should be placed in the same category as its prosperous citizens were already placed in this, that it should be allowed to take such portion of its property—such as its officers charged with that duty should conclude on—and meet its obligations, past, present and to be incurred in the future. Any intelligent, prosperous citizen assumes such attitude, and only foolish individuals and communities refuse to assume such attitude.

Undertaking to act in the matter of revenue legislation only because of the urgency of the situation, a special committee from the house met with the regular committee from the senate jointly.

At first the intention only was that certain amendments should be made to the law as then existing, the joint committee realizing the magnitude of the task, and fearing that there was not sufficient time for the entirely new bill, or revision, even if desirable. Afterwards by reason of the fact that the work of amendments was found to be more than slow, with the whole of the joint committee around one table, and from which members were being called to other duties, and on their return necessitating reiteration of work gone over in their absence, so that progress proved lame indeed; and the further fact that amendments to a complicated measure are always dangerous and further, that the thought had grown on the committee, it could in the time allotted prepare a new and more complete measure; and also believing that with our then effort, revenue legislation would cease for many years, the committee, concluded to prepare a new bill. At such time it was concluded to take what was known as the Kansas bill as a basis measure. This was solely because of what was considered a better and more orderly arrangement of the several parts, making it easier to organize for work, and more satisfactory as a working law, we hoped.

The basis of the Kansas bill had been the revenue law of the state of Indiana. At a meeting of the taxing officers, of a large number of states, held at Indianapolis during the labors of the Kansas commission, and attended by them, as part of the memberships preparation for work on their own bill, part was reported by its representatives, as having the most satisfactory revenue law of any of the states represented. The only feature the delegates from that state reported, as lacking in their system, and which they intended to recommend to their own legislature for adoption, was that of county assessor. The Kansas bill was the result of a commissions work, provided for by the legislature of Kansas, and at an expense of $10,000.

All revenue laws must have much in common, and there was much in common between the Kansas bill and our own law in force at that time. Where no improvement was found or what we believed to be improvement, we kept our old in preference to what we found in the basic bill. At the time it was agreed to prepare the new bill Pemberton of Gage county and Loomis of Dodge county were selected to divide the joint committee into four parts, and the basic bill into a like number of parts and to assign to each of the subcommittees a subportion of the basic bill. This was done, and I believe each member of the joint committee will bear witness to his neighbors that within two hours after the subarrangement more real progress had been made than in all of our days before.

During the time that followed in framing the new bill I do not think men could work more harmoniously or diligently, or with better intentions for the public welfare, than did those there associated. There was no division on party lines and there was only manifest a desire to prepare a constitutional bill that would be as complete as possible, as fair as possible to all on whom it should rest, and that that all taxable property should be reached by it that was within our jurisdiction. If such might be considered any measure of diligence as public servants it might be said that the members of the committee averaged, I believe, fifteen hours a day for several weeks.

After the bill was reported to the house efforts were made to change the manner of taxing railroads from that of their full value as going concerns to that of value as represented by the market value of stocks and bonds. The same question had been considered by the joint committee and the conclusion reached that the stock and bond theory was unconstitutional as a sole basis. We had understood that there were lines of road in the state that were simple assets of other roads and against which there were neither stocks or bonds issued. In the committee we determined to require extra information from the roads to the state taxing board as to that called for by the old law and to require the roads as well as other property to be assessed at their full value. In the house an additional feature was added and going to the limit of constitutionality and requiring the state board to consider the value of the stocks and bonds in arriving at the value for assessment.

I make no pretense that the law is a perfect one. During the time that has elapsed since its passage I have concluded that several changes would be advisable. However, they are all minor to the great necessity that I believe is met by the provisions that are present and that I would not change. I have never valued the measure as highly as I do now. As its result we have, I believe, the best revenue system of any of our western states and as good as any. I know that no partisan or undue influence, no hypnotic suggestion, so to speak, swayed the committee in the bill's preparation, and I have yet to hear from any man who has become acquainted with the law's provisions a statement otherwise than, if it is properly enforced, all taxpayers will bear their just share severally of the public burden and the state will be furnished sufficient revenue for the several demands upon its treasury.

If this statement is true no higher words of our present law, considered as a general one, can be spoken of any revenue law than that. I hope that such amendments as are desirable will be considered calmly and in the spirit of the state's best interests. It was in that spirit that the bill was drawn and passed. It has been many years since the governors of the state commenced calling attention to this needed legislation. One serious attempt was made several years ago to meet the then newer emergency, but all prior efforts failed. Republican and fusion incumbents of the governor's office have at different sessions called attention in their messages to the matter, but never till the last session, when the floating debt became too great for further ignoring, was the question given major importance and pushed to a successful conclusion.

The best efforts of the late session were exerted on the present revenue law. Every provision of it was carefully scrutinized and weighed. It has met the moral as well as the judicial approval of the supreme court, so that the first stages of trial have been passed. It has placed on the tax rolls a great deal of property that has not heretofore borne its share of taxation. I suggest and sincerely hope that prejudgment be withheld and that the law be given at least till the next session after the coming one for reasonable trial at the hands of those charged with its enforcement, having full confidence that it will more than amply reward the people of Nebraska for their patience.

W. G. SEARS.

GOVERNMENT FEARS BRANDY

May Not Use Liquor Left by Carthusian Monks When Driven from France.

PARIS, Oct. 8.—(Special Cablegram to The Bee.)—The official receiver appointed to manage the estate of the Carthusian monks, recently expelled from the Grande Chartreuse monastery has decided to continue to distil the famous liquor.

A well known scientist has been commissioned to analyze the liquor and to inspect and report upon the distilling plant of the monastery.

The basis of the liquor is very old Cognac brandy, of which large quantities have been found in the distillery since the expulsion of the monks.

The official receiver intended to make use of it, but he now hesitates to do so after receiving a letter from the abbot of the Carthusian order, in which he says that the brandy is his private property and that before leaving the monastery he "dealt with it as he thought fit."

It is supposed that the monks have rendered the brandy unfit for drinking by mixing it with various chemicals. If the official receiver persists in using it very disagreeable results may follow.

SCANDINAVIA IS SEARCHED

Russian Agents Scan Harbors in Search of Japanese Submarine Ships.

COPENHAGEN, Oct. 8.—(Special Cablegram to The Bee.)—Great excitement prevails in the Scandinavian coast towns, where hired steamers with Russian agents on board are making investigations.

It is no secret that rumors of Japanese submarines cruising in the Baltic and the North sea have reached St. Petersburg, making the Russian government highly nervous.

How much truth there is in these rumors it is difficult to say, but reports of this kind are current every day, especially from the Swedish coast.

It is unquestionable that many Russians are making sharp investigations at Danish and Swedish ports for the information of their government. Russian consuls who have been interviewed by press representatives refuse denial or confirmation of these statements.

Lady Curzon is Better.

WALMER CASTLE, Oct. 8.—A bulletin was issued today by the physicians attending Lady Curzon. It said:

Her ladyship passed a fair night and her condition causes slightly less anxiety.

A third London specialist arrived at Walmer Castle this morning.

Big Wheat Crop in Russia.

SARATOFF, Russia, Oct. 8.—The railroad officials here are unable to handle the enormous accumulation of grain from the big harvest in the southeast of Russia.

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