

Just Like Any Married Man By LUCIAN CARY

Being the Sprightly Adventure of a Suburban Siren and a Citizen Without a Vice.

SPARBOROUGH is one of those immensely respectable suburbs in Westchester, between the Bronx and White Plains. It is literally a town without a slum. Hurlbut was one of the immensely respectable citizens of Sparborough. He was literally a man without a vice.

Hurlbut was in charge of the credit department of a great wholesale house, and what is more reputable than a credit man? Being a credit man is like being something in a bank. Hurlbut was so correct that he reflected a kind of righteousness on the credit man's job instead of the job's reflecting it on him. He was so correct that nobody called him Bill, although his first name was William. He was often pointed out as a model to other husbands.

The Hurlbuts had lived in Sparborough for five years. William was chairman of the greens committee of the Sparborough Country club and Margaret was president of the Sparborough Improvement association. They had twins, a white house in the Colonial manner, and a Rankin sedan. There is something as inherently respectable in twins as there is in a Rankin sedan—so well made, so economical, and not in the least sporting.

Margaret Hurlbut was a Bryn Mawr girl. All Bryn Mawr girls are nice, but Margaret was extremely nice. She was extremely patient also. She did not believe in corporal punishment and she had brought up her twin boys to the age of 5 without once spanking either of them.

Now there is probably no reason in the nature of things why William Hurlbut should not have gone on exemplifying all the virtues to the very end of a long and useful life. But the fact is, he didn't.

On the last Saturday in April, William Hurlbut took his friend, Arthur Tompson, to Sparborough for the week-end. Arthur was a bachelor, who expected soon to be married, and he was earnestly considering the purchase of a house in the suburbs. William had volunteered, after the fashion of suburbanites, to show him Sparborough.

After lunch at the Hurlbut's—one should, of course, say luncheon in speaking of the Hurlbut's—they visited the Sparborough Country club. They were standing on the veranda of the club house, from which one has almost a birdseye view of the course, when Maisee Blaze drove up in the yellow speedster she affected. Maisee parked the car and nodded to William as she walked into the club.

"Who's that?" Arthur asked. Men who didn't know Maisee Blaze invariably asked "Who's that?" when she went by. Maisee was slim, dark, and full of the elan vital.

"That's Mrs. Blaisdell—otherwise Maisee Blaze," William said.

"Yes?" said Arthur, raising his eyebrows after the fashion of a man who wants more information and doesn't want to ask for it in so many words.

"She's the local siren," William explained. He did not mean to be insinuating; his tone quite unconsciously expressed his disapproval of Maisee Blaze. She was rather the leader of the younger set in the town and in the club. This set irritated William, though it would have puzzled him to say precisely why. If pressed he would have said that they were irresponsible, or that they lived only for a good time, or something equally damning and equally general.

"What d'ye mean, siren?" Arthur asked.

"O, she's perfectly nice," William answered.

"But she's just like any young widow—looking or trouble."

Such a speech was really not like William Hurlbut. He was a little astonished at himself for making it. And when he turned to show Arthur the club cups and saw that Maisee Blaze had stopped almost in the doorway and was standing there talking to Mrs. Green, he was a little worried for fear she might have overheard. He would not have liked her to overhear a remark so unkind. But William immediately reflected that Maisee had been at least a dozen feet away when he had made the remark and that he had spoken in rather a low tone, and that it wasn't in reason to suppose that she could have overheard. William was entirely governed by what was in reason, or so he believed.

William showed Arthur the cups, and played a round with him, and introduced him to the people he ought to know. Arthur spent Sunday with a real estate dealer and went in with William on Monday morning quite completely sold to Sparborough. William was pleased to see that Arthur would make a solid addition to Sparborough. He was the sort of man William sometimes wished there were more of—a man of 30, a business man, a man who wasn't light minded. Sparborough was, he would have admitted, chiefly populated by sold, respectable citizens. But there were people like Maisee Blaze and her crowd—the Greens and the Medways and Phil Barker and Ann Follett—who were perhaps too young to be sold, but whose life and people like Mr. and Mrs. Bronson, who, though mature, had the frivolity that sometimes accompanies inherited money.

On Monday evening when William Hurlbut got off the 5:15, which regularly dropped him at the Sparborough platform at 5:50, he saw the yellow speedster of Maisee Blaze drawn up beside the walk in defiance of the parking rules. William experienced a strange, for the moment, and inexplicable, desire to turn his head the other way as he walked past. But just before he reached the speedster he remembered the remark he had made about Maisee Blaze and knew why he wished to avoid speaking to her. It was part of William's character that he instantly turned toward the speedster instead of away from it. Maisee Blaze was standing beside it watching the passengers coming down the platform with an expectant eye.

"How do you do, Mr. Hurlbut," she said.

"Hello, Mrs. Blaisdell," William said cordially. "Expecting someone?"

"Yes," said Maisee Blaze. "I'm expecting Mrs. Walker out from town for dinner, but I'm afraid she hasn't come."

William turned to survey the platform. The last half dozen commuters were hurrying toward the ramp. The train was moving out of the station.

"No," William said. "She didn't come."

He hesitated. He wanted to be on his way, yet he wanted to say something pleasantly hopeful to the disappointed Maisee. "She may be on the 6:10," he added.

Maisee Blaze slipped into the seat of her low car, in which one did not so much sit as lie.

"In the meantime," she said to William, "I'll take you home."

William was in the habit of walking to and from the Sparborough station. It was just a mile, and he felt that a mile walk morning and evening was the least he could allow himself, even if he did play golf every Saturday afternoon during the season, and take a stroll every Sunday afternoon when the weather permitted.

"Jump in," said Maisee Blaze. She started the engine.

"O, I wish you wouldn't trouble yourself," said William.

"I shan't. I'd much rather drive you over than sit here waiting. It's chilly, and besides I never did like walking."

William rather awkwardly took the seat beside her. He felt exposed in the low car, without the enclosing sides of his Rankin sedan, without a top, without even a windshield. He did not approve of speedsters. He did not approve of Maisee Blaze. He instinctively recoiled from permitting her to drive him home.

But, after all, there was no harm in it and



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Blue Ribbon Fiction

there was no getting out of it, either. He hoped she wouldn't drive as fast as she usually did. She had been arrested once for speeding.

But Maisee Blaze did not speed. The large 90-mile speedometer under the cowl gave a preliminary quiver or two and settled at a point just beyond 10. Indeed, the car moved so slowly through the streets of Sparborough that William was uncomfortable. He felt that as long as they were going so slowly he ought to talk and he did not want to talk to Maisee Blaze; he could not think of anything to say to Maisee Blaze.

She said nothing. She seemed to be thinking. Or did such a woman ever think?

William was mildly occupied with this question, when Maisee Blaze turned her head and smiled at him. William felt a curious and incredible thrill when she smiled at him. It was a slow smile, and yet a smile that somehow lighted up her whole face: her eyes positively sparkled when she smiled. William was aware of the scientific fact that eyes do not and cannot sparkle. But he observed that Maisee Blaze's eyes did sparkle—there were little points of light in their brown depths when she smiled.

"You know, Mr. Hurlbut," said Maisee Blaze, "I have an odd feeling about you."

William was more than a little surprised. He had not been aware that Maisee Blaze had any feeling about him. Also, he was curious. He could not imagine what was coming. There was no precedent in his experience for such a remark. He turned expectantly to Maisee Blaze.

She seemed to be completely engaged in driving her car. They were within a block of the Hurlbut house. In another moment he would be getting out of the speedster and going into the house.

"Well?" he said.

Maisee Blaze drove her car the remaining 100 yards and stopped it beside William's front door. But naturally she turned to Maisee Blaze.

"You mind my being quite frank?" she asked.

And as she spoke she looked straight into his eyes. The little points of light were gone now; her eyes were velvet; it occurred to William that Maisee Blaze was not, perhaps, an altogether happy woman, even if she was frivolous.

"I should be glad to have you speak frankly," William said.

"Well," said Maisee Blaze, and dropped her gaze, "it's an odd thing to say—but I have sometimes felt that you didn't approve of me."

"Why?" William began. "Why—?" He really didn't know what to say. The truth was, of course, that he didn't approve of her. Margaret didn't approve of her. But William could hardly say as much. Besides, he didn't seriously disapprove of Maisee Blaze. It was only—

"Not that you've ever said anything—I mean snubbed me," Maisee Blaze continued. "It's just a feeling I've had. Perhaps there's nothing in it. But you see how it is, Mr. Hurlbut. You're one of the best known men in Sparborough and I have a tremendous respect for you—everybody has. And—well, it's just that you look at me when I speak to you—in passing. It makes me feel as if I were a naughty little girl."

"Why—why?" said William. "I don't think anything of the sort."

"I'm glad," said Maisee Blaze simply. "I was afraid you'd. And of course I'm not a very useful citizen—or anything."

William held out his hand. He couldn't quite assure Maisee Blaze that she was a useful citizen and yet he wished suddenly to assure her of something.

Maisee took his hand and pressed it. William felt that she had a nice hand. Indeed, William felt that she was a nice girl—a surprisingly nice girl.

"Thank you," said Maisee Blaze. "It's good of you to understand. I knew I could trust you."

William lifted his hat and smiled and Maisee smiled back—that slow smile which lighted up her face and made the little points of light sparkle in her eyes and gave William a curious and incredible thrill.

Margaret met him in the hall.

"Well," said William judiciously, "she has seemed rather flirtatious."

"Rather," said Margaret.

William, with a gulp that he did not know he possessed, changed the subject abruptly with an inquiry about the twins.

He did not see Maisee Blaze for several days after their chance meeting at the railway station. He found himself strangely expectant of meeting her. He intended to be just as friendly as he could be when he did meet her. He found himself remembering her smile and those lights in her eyes. It was pleasant to remember them. It would be even pleasanter to experience them again.

He experienced them again at the country club on Saturday. He was going through the club on his way out after playing 19 holes when he ran plump into Maisee Blaze.

"O, Mr. Hurlbut, do come and have tea with me," said Maisee Blaze.

"I'd be delighted," William said.

He was an hour late for dinner and Margaret was inclined to be peevish about it.

"I wish you had telephoned," she said.

"I hadn't any idea it was so late," William protested.

"But it isn't like you to forget?" Margaret countered. "What were you doing, talking to Mrs. Blaisdell?"

William knew it was a chance shot, but it wasn't any easier to meet for being that. He felt his face grow red. He felt that he must look guilty.

"Why, yes," William said. "I was."

He hoped his voice sounded matter of fact.

"Well," Margaret said. It was one of those noncommittal "Wells" which promise nothing except a "to be continued."

"I'm perfectly serious," Margaret replied.

"Mrs. Blaisdell is a dangerous woman—and you've been with her twice in the last week."

"Just chance," William said. "I probably shan't so much as meet her on the street while you're away."

"Well," Margaret said, "I really think you ought to be circumspect in my absence. You know what a gossip place Sparborough is."

"My dear Margaret," said William testily, "are you seriously considering the possibility that I might be gossiped about?"

"Very seriously," Margaret said slowly. "I think, for instance, that you oughtn't to call on Mrs. Blaisdell while I'm away."

William rose to his feet and strode across the floor.

"Good God, Margaret," he cried, "have I ever called on Mrs. Blaisdell while you were here?"

"No," Margaret admitted; "that's why it would be so pointed if you called while I was away."

"But who said I was going to call on her while you were away," William roared.

"You needn't shout," Margaret said sweetly.

William opened his mouth to speak, thought many barrels of his well's puttins' out per day. You're picturin' Love as a hummin' bird that's got to be caught with a grain of salt, and all the time it's as simple and tame a proposition as a hungry peck pigeon ready to eat out of your hand. Get me?"

"No," she admits, "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"Well, girly, I mean just this: Money and brilliance are the right bait for admiration and popularity, the world over, but they aren't always the right bait for love. A costly little trotter surly on the Avenue might get you an invitation to lunch, but a little blue organ die in the firelight is just as apt to get you a proposal."

"Do you really think," she asks still unconvinced, "that love is as easy to bait as that? Do you think men really care for such simple things, as rosebud dresses and old-fashioned sofas and pink shaded lamps?"

"It's my firm belief, dearie," I answers, "I've got a theory that more women have been proposed to by the firelight than by cabaret light, and more men have been inoculated with love fever over a chainin' dish out on the kitchen table than over all the lobster Newburgs ever dished out by a head waiter down in the bright light zones!"

"It's the background, dearie, that counts! Make the scene simple and sweet and homelike, for the masculine mind is open to suggestions. He plays up to the right background—'Yesterday, today and forever!'"

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"I hope, William," she said lightly, "that Mrs. Blaisdell won't occupy all of your attention while I'm gone."

"What nonsense!" William said.

"I'm awfully glad to hear it," Margaret said.

William spent the first evening of Margaret's absence reading a new book on business management. It occurred to him that it would be pleasant to call on Maisee Blaze. He caught the idea in the very act of occurring to him. He was shocked at himself for entertaining it. He went so far as to realize that he might actually have called her up on the telephone if it had not been for what Margaret had said. He might even have gone to see her.

The next evening passed in a similar fashion, except that he was now being used to this astounding impulse of his. Maisee Blaze, he rather enjoyed the way she could not act on it. He resolutely put the idea out of his mind five evenings in succession and then on the sixth evening, the last one before Margaret's return, Maisee Blaze called him on the telephone.

"O, Mr. Hurlbut," Maisee said, "I'm so glad you're in. It's Phil Barker's birthday—and we've just discovered it. We're going to celebrate and we want you to help. Can we call for you in half an hour?"

"Why—why?" there was certainly no harm in joining a birthday party at which Maisee happened to be a member; even Margaret could not object to that, "why—I'd be delighted," William concluded.

"Good for you," said Maisee Blaze. "We'll be round in 20 minutes, or half an hour at most. We're going to the club and dance."

William hastened into his dinner clothes. He had no means of knowing what the others were wearing. But dinner clothes could hardly be out of place at an informal party. He was dressed in 15 minutes, except for his tie. Maisee always tied his bow ties. But he managed in 15 minutes more to do a passable bow. It was another 15 minutes before they drove up.

There were three cars besides Maisee's and William was simultaneously invited to enter all of them.

"You're coming with me," said Maisee Blaze. "I haven't room for more than one and you're chosen."

"I'm flattered," William said to her.

"We're going around to pick up the Greens," Maisee explained.

"It's 10 o'clock now," William said. "And it's eight miles to the club."

"It won't take long," Maisee assured him.

They arrived at the club at 11 and then William discovered that the party consisted of the Greens and the Medways and Ann Follett and Gertrude Barker and Gertrude Barker and Phil. It was precisely the crowd he had always felt to be irritatingly irresponsible. For a moment, William wished he hadn't come. But he did want to dance with Maisee Blaze.

William found it a curiously upsetting experience. He had danced with anyone for a long time. He had supposed that putting one's arm around a girl in dancing was a formal convention, like shaking hands. But he was curiously embarrassed in putting his arm around Maisee Blaze. He wanted to and he was afraid to. He danced a dozen times with Maisee Blaze. He suddenly realized it was late.

"Maisee!" he said.

"Yes—Bill," said Maisee.

William colored. He had not meant to call her Maisee. He never had called her anything but Mrs. Blaisdell. But he had got to thinking of her as Maisee.

"It's—it's—" he stammered.

"It's what?" asked Maisee Blaze.

"It's 10 o'clock," he said.

"O," Maisee said, "it's time for us to go. We've got two bottles of champagne."

It was half-past two when the supper was over and the party began to break up. Maisee couldn't find the key to her car. And when she did, the battery refused to turn over the engine. The track had gone ahead. William dug the crank out of the tool box and started the engine.

"It's raining," Maisee said, as the car moved off.

"Yes," William agreed.

"I'm afraid we're in for a wetting."

"No harm done if we are," William said lightly. He was sitting beside Maisee Blaze, his shoulder just touching hers, and he cared nothing whatever for a bit of rain.

Maisee stepped on the throttle and the low car shot out of the club drive into the road to Sparborough.

The rain was coming hard now and the speedster was splashing mud over the hood and into their faces.

"There's a marshy piece just below Bronson's," William warned her.

"I know it," Maisee answered. "We'll stick to the middle of the road."

But she didn't. She ran off a yard or so as they passed the Bronson house.

"Look out!" William cried.

It was too late. The car slowed down sickeningly, slowing in the mud and stopped.

"We're stuck," said Maisee Blaze.

William got down to see. They were stuck. One rear wheel had buried itself to the hub in the mud. The lower side of the engine pan was resting in the mud.

"I wonder if it would do any good to put on the chains?" William asked.

"I think we'd better wake up the Bronson's chauffeur and get him to pull us out," Maisee said.

"Let's try the chains."

"It's an awfully dirty job."

"I'm game," said William.

The mud seemed bottomless, but William knocked a board off the Bronson's fence to rest the jack on and got the wheel up. He had to stand in mud up to his knees, to dig mud away with his hands, to wallow in mud, but he did it.

"Don't you suppose we could run out on a board?" Maisee asked.

William got another board, but after two tries they gave that up. Each time the car ran off the board he had to jack the car up again. He was beginning to tire and he was plastered with mud to the eyes. He finally got a chain on.

The motor spun the wheel. William tried pushing from the rear, but still the wheel spun.

"There's nothing for it but to wake up the Bronson's chauffeur," Maisee said. "It's nearly 5 o'clock now."

"Why don't we leave the car here and walk in?" William suggested. He did not like the idea of waking up the Bronson's chauffeur. There was no reason to advertise their predicament. And the Bronson's would think it was a good story. William didn't want to be a good story.

"It's six miles," Maisee said. "I'd rather sleep in the car."

"Well," said William, "I'll go and see what I can do."

"I'll go with you," said Maisee Blaze.

"You stay there," said William. "I can do it."

"But I don't want to stay here all alone in the dark while you go away to the Bronson's."

"All right," William said. He took her hand and started up the road. It was sloppy going.

"Let's be very quiet," he whispered to Maisee as they entered the Bronson's gate.

"We don't want to wake up the whole family."

"I shan't say a word," Maisee whispered.

In that moment the air was split by a fierce bark. Instinctively they leaned against each other. The bark was the signal for a volley of barks, barks that rose in one vast crashing crescendo.

"It's that damn kennel of his," William said. "He's raising police dogs."

"I hope none of them are loose," said Maisee.

"If any of them were loose, wouldn't be here," said William grimly.

They stole toward it, giggling, over which the chauffeur had his gun. The dogs continued to bark like mad things.

William and Maisee crept forward like a pair of burglars. They had reached the chauffeur's door when the night suddenly blazed with light.

"Hands up," said a voice behind them.

William and Maisee turned and faced the voice. Bronson was standing in a second story window with a shot gun in his hands.

"It's us," wailed Maisee Blaze.

Bronson slowly lowered his gun.

"Why, it's Hurlbut and Maisee Blaze," he said. "Wait a minute and I'll be down."

"Now we are in for it," said Maisee Blaze.

William made no comment. He knew it would make little difference whether Margaret was at home or not if she was going to hear about it anyway.

Bronson beckoned to them from the kitchen door.

"What on earth are you two up to. Lord, but you're a sight, Hurlbut—what have you been doing?"

"We're stuck in the mud," Hurlbut explained with dignity. "We were going to wake up your chauffeur and get him to pull us out."

Bronson began to laugh. When he laughed he shook. And when he shook he laughed harder.

"Isn't it funny to us, Bob?" interposed Maisee Blaze.

"I'm sorry," Bronson apologized. "I'm awfully sorry. But do you know what time it is? It's nearly 5 o'clock. You'd better let me put you up for the night and you can get the car tomorrow."

"We'd like to get it out tonight," William said.

"Well," said Bronson thoughtfully, "perhaps you'd better."

Bronson waked up the chauffeur and, at the earnest solicitation of William, returned himself to bed. The chauffeur was irritable. But he got out of a big car and dragged the speedster out of the mud.

It was 6 o'clock when William got the mud out of his hair and turned in, and he had to get up at 7:30 in order to be in the office by 9. William never missed a day at the office.

In the morning William snatched time to put his dinner clothes and his overcoat and his hat and his shoes in a suit-case. He thought they were still good, but he intended to drop them at the cleaners on his way to the station; they were not the kind of things one leaves about the house.

He decided, in the interstices of a somewhat crowded day at the office, that it would be best to tell Margaret about his experience in coming. He could describe it briefly and humorously and without too much insistence on the hour when he got home.

But when he was face to face with Margaret at dinner that evening, he began to consider the possibility of not telling Margaret.

He had neither the skill nor the control to give Margaret the true picture—to sketch in the casualness of the occasion, to show the utter foolishness of his misadventure, and to suggest firmly the triviality of the whole business.

Margaret's mind would be certain to seize upon the more outstanding facts, instead of on the significant ones. Margaret would note the hour at which they had left the club, the hour at which they had awakened Mr. Bronson, the hour at which he had got to bed. Above all Margaret would insist on the fact that he had been alone with Maisee Blaze. How could he make her see that time really had nothing to do with it? Or that his being with Maisee Blaze was the merest chance. It might have been any other woman. That, in fact, it might conceivably have been some other woman.

He wished he could consult Maisee Blaze. He wanted to talk to Maisee Blaze. Half the fun of a thing like that was in talking it over afterwards. But he couldn't have that half, unless he met Maisee by chance.

William arrived at the station the next morning five minutes early. He opened the morning paper, as he stood waiting on the platform. But he did not read. He was suddenly aware that one of three men standing in a group behind him had mentioned his name.

"There's Hurlbut," one of them said.

"Extraordinary chap," another remarked.

William was aware that they were talking in much louder tones than necessary, that indeed they were talking for his ears.

"Regular old mud turtle," said the third member of the group.

"Yes," said the first man, "they say he likes to get out and slosh in the mud."

"Just buries himself in it."

"Any time of the day or night."