

THE LAGGARD LETTERSLUCKE

BY
WILL PHILIP HOOPER

HO could resist adoring him!" Beatrice thought, as she gazed on his far-away-looking eyes, his poetically long, wavy hair, and his, as she called it, "Raphael-like" face. Then, too, his name was so full of romantic suggestion,—Francisco Wolfe-Browne.

But frequent letters kept up the interest in Beatrice's sentimental mind.

To be sure, Bob was always around, wearing her out with his practical ideas and prosaic views; but then he was so convenient as an escort to social festivities that he had to



To be sure, her brother, who was always teasing, insisted upon it that formerly the name was Frank W. Brown, and that the hyphen and other accessories, the long hair and imitation-of-Irving expression first appeared on his return from abroad.

Beatrice, or, as her brother would insist upon calling her, Bet, notwithstanding that she possessed a remarkably good constitution and the attractiveness which generally accompanies it, had an uncontrollable thirst for romance; and this æsthetic-poetical youth impressed her like an unopened volume of ancient legends in a most fascinating binding.

She was well content to play lawn tennis, and row and ride with her brother and his friend Bob in the mornings, but what a rest in the afternoons when Francisco called, to wander with him through the spring garden, discussing ancient chivalry, reading modern poets, and looking for roses without thorns! And then his singing of old love-songs!

To be sure his voice was not strong, but such feeling!—"Yes, always feeling for the high notes which are beyond his grasp," her brother said; he also added a criticism on the singer, to the effect that it was a good voice for calling chickens! Beatrice's only regret was, that he accompanied himself on the banjo; it would have been so much more æsthetic to have played the light guitar or the Spanish mandolin.

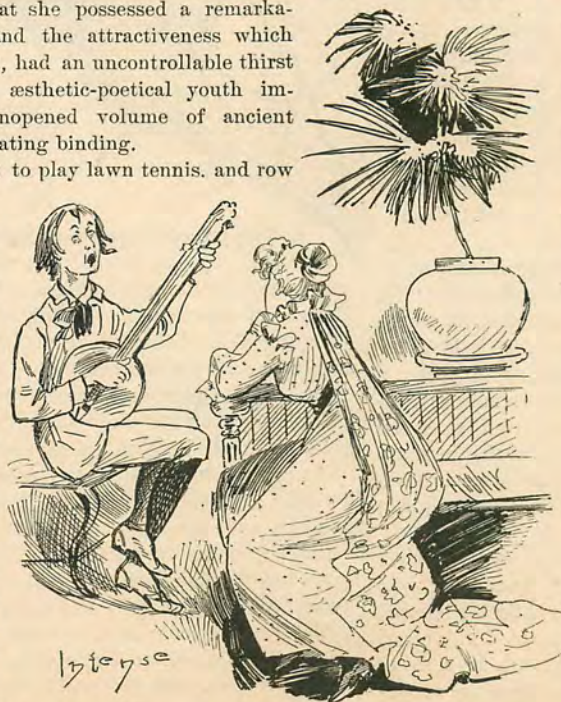
During the summer, Francisco sailed for foreign shores to seek inspiration among the artistic ruins for his idyllic poem.

be tolerated, and, after all, admiration is enjoyable even from an "every-day young man."

Mr. Francisco Wolfe-Browne returned with the birds in the spring, and Beatrice's afternoons were again the bright spots in her romantic calendar.

One day, just as the setting sun was concealing itself in a varied vestment of vermilion vapor, and from the silvery stream came stealthily creeping up the malaria-laden mist, Francisco gently took Beatrice's pink fingers in his fervid grasp, and in sublime language poured out his tale of unquenchable love.

Now Beatrice might then and there have settled his fate, but her romantic nature could not be curbed. To have



murmured "yes" right on the spot, would have been entirely too prosaic; so, gracefully, half-reluctantly gathering herself to-



gether, she whispered that in the morning his answer he should find in the hollow tree.

Now it so happened there was no hollow tree on the place, and Beatrice knew it perfectly well, but she hoped against hope that she might discover one; and that night, after inditing a favorable reply bubbling with poetical effusions, she vainly sought for some

gnarled and knotty oak. But their modern three-acres contained nothing but painfully young and upright trees, and at last, in a fit of despair, she resolved to utilize an old tin watering-can which hung on a branch of a convenient sapling; so after some manipulation and manœuvering, with the aid of a garden-bench and a box, her love-letter was deposited.

How endless the night seemed! How eagerly she longed to hear the music of a light guitar and a silvery voice singing a touching melody under her latticed window!

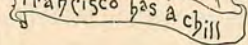
As for Francisco, he was otherwise engaged, keeping an appointment with a chill, and in the quiet seclusion of his cheerful chamber he was busily shaking.

It rather detracted from the romance of the affair, to be compelled, the next morning, to go herself and point out the location of the concealed missive.

All, however, would have doubtless passed off serenely, but for the fact that she had been espied by her brother while depositing the letter, and he afterward, in a quiet, unostentatious way, innocently arranged things, so that when Francisco, after climbing upon the boxes, proceeded to reach for the can, his crane-like neck received a large gallon of the wettest kind of water.

Unfortunately, Beatrice, being human, could not entirely repress a slight smile at the peculiar appearance Mr. Wolfe-Browne presented on gathering himself up out of the mud.

This might have passed unnoticed in the excitement; but when her horrid brother put in an appearance, and commented on the fact that it was April First, this was too much for Francisco, and with a look of concentrated wetness he stalked into the dim future.



* * * *

Weeks passed. Mr. Francisco Wolfe-Browne no more appeared, while Beatrice's misery made her supremely happy. Here was real romance! She knew they loved each other devotedly, but true love always did run roughly, and this estrangement was simply a proof

of their affection. To be sure, she was not deserted: her brother's friend Bob was always at hand for tennis, riding, or to take her canoeing in search of sketchable spots, while rumor reached her ears that Francisco was touching the light banjo at the feet of another shrine; and the summer birds and the new-mown hay filled the air with song and perfume.

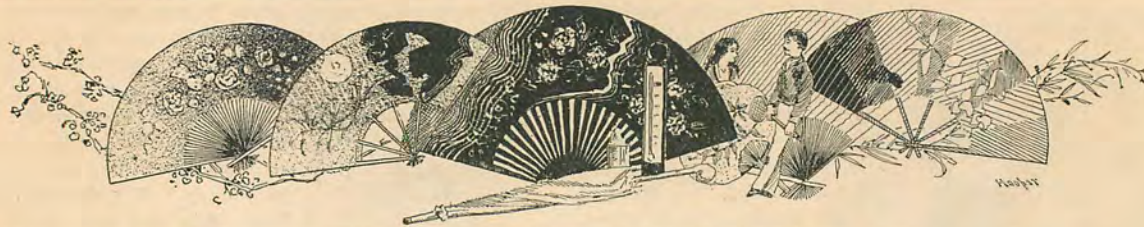
She had no doubt that Francisco's misery was equal to her own, and that simply out of sheer pique he was



pretending to interest himself in another divinity.

But what a contrast to his finely strung, poetical temperament was the matter-of-fact, almost jarring, practical mind of Bob! And how she disliked that name of Bob! (His real name was Roberto, but he obstinately refused to answer to it.)





While canoeing one day, a common Japanese fan that she carried was blown into the water. Now any man, she thought, of a chivalrous nature, any man but a practical, nineteenth-century creature, would have regained his lady's fan at all cost. To be sure, the canoe might have been upset; but then, what a romantic opportunity to save her life!

Instead of taking any of these chances, Roberto calmly watched the fan disappear, asked one or two questions about its value and history, and, as it vanished, quietly expressed his regrets.

The rest of the trip was marked by distinct coolness on her part.

How she longed for Francisco, with his chivalrous poetical instincts!

To be sure, the next day she received a box containing five beautiful fans; but that was small balm to her sentimental nature.

As they were going to the tennis-ground one morning, Bob picked up, among the rose-bushes, what seemed to be a letter. Yes, she saw at a glance, it was her unfortunately placed letter, intended for Francisco; and seizing it she was prompted by her romantic soul to save it, with the feeling that it would yet make Mr. Wolfe-Browne the happiest of men. (Luckily no personal names were mentioned in it, so if it had been perused by strange eyes, no one would have been the wiser in regard to the writer.)

Sure enough, Beatrice and Francisco soon met again, at a rehearsal for private theatricals, and, after some explanations, she pressed—as she thought



—the battered, weather-stained letter into his hands, and, giving him a glance full of tenderest love, she fled.

What was her horror that night on discovering the letter still in her possession!

What could she have given him? A terrible suspicion came across her tender soul. Could it have been that bill from the hair-store, for her new bangs? No! that missing memorandum re-appeared.



But she failed to find one of the slips of paper on which was copied the speech she was to deliver in the play, when politely rejecting an unworthy suitor in these well-chosen words:

"Thou drivelling knave, marry thee? Of a truth, if thou wast the only knight in the kingdom, never would I thee marry!"

There were other lines, all tending to prove that the knight's proposal did not entirely meet the lady's approval.

A dozen times she began an explanatory letter to him, and twelve times she abandoned the idea.

Finally the date for the next rehearsal arrived, and with a palpitating heart Beatrice hastened to the meet.

The usual restfulness, quietness, and peaceful order

prevailed which characterize amateur theatricals on the first dress-rehearsal, and the costumes gave the customary satisfaction.

At last Beatrice espied the wavy locks of Francisco in a dim corner; evidently he was buried in reverie.

In the din and confusion she stole quietly up behind him, and laying her pink fingers over his eyes, whispered, "Guess."

In a second, her little hands were seized and covered with kisses, intermixed with a declaration of love in a torrent of eloquence. She suddenly realized it was not Francisco! No, it was Bob! in his stage

wig and costume. Without one word she took to flight; her head whirled; her surprise at the proposal was even exceeded by her amazement at such sentimental eloquence from the matter-of-fact Roberto.

As for Francisco, that evening he pointedly avoided her; evidently the note he had received by mistake gave mortal offence.

There was one part in the play they were rehearsing, where she, as the beautiful Princess in the tower, passed a missive through her prison bars to a noble knight, for which rôle Francisco was cast.

This time her romantic mind again came to the front, and she conceived the idea of handing him the old, weather-stained, non-delivered letter of watering-pot fame. It was still legible, and how romantic it would be to have the faded epistle finally bring her love to her! And it did. She added a postscript, "I shall be in the conservatory after the rehearsal."

The scenes and accessories were as complete as is usual in amateur theatricals, but in trying the prison scene she found the barred window was so high she could only see the waving plumes of her trusty knight, who was supposed to steal silently by the casement, seize the note, and fly. But with it all, he found time to give her delicate finger-tips a warm, thrilling pressure, and though she could not see





series of eccentric flashes ; and as she entered, snap!—and with a dull, heavy thud, total darkness fell. She had time to simply catch one glimpse of a stalwart knight crowned with waving plumes, and the next moment she was comfortably



nestled in his protecting arms, and almost before a word was spoken, a ring was slipped on the third finger of her left hand. Then, snap!—and up flashed the electric light, for one instant only ; but what a revelation it was! In that one second she saw in a palm-sheltered nook, a "knight of ye olden time" on his bended knee, pressing the lily-white hand of a "ladye faire" to his lips, and the light shone full on his imitation-Irving features. It was Francisco ! She then also recognized that the shoulder on which she had nestled, and the protecting arms by which she was surrounded, belonged to Roberto !

She was glad darkness followed ; it gave an opportunity to conceal, to a certain extent, her conflicting emotions.

She felt mortified at herself for not fainting, but instead of that it seemed as if she did a year's thinking in one moment ; and she resolved that Roberto, for it was his ring that she

his face, she felt that Francisco had relented, and love had triumphed.

In her picturesque garb of the imprisoned Princess, as soon as the scene was over, she hastened to the conservatory.

It so happened that the electric light, by which the rendezvous was illuminated, was that evening going through a

series of eccentric flashes ; and as she entered, snap!—and with a dull, heavy thud, total darkness fell. She had time to simply catch one glimpse of a stalwart knight crowned with waving plumes, and the next moment she was comfortably nestled in his protecting arms, and almost before a word was spoken, a ring was slipped on the third finger of her left hand. Then, snap!—and up flashed the electric light, for one instant only ; but what a revelation it was! In that one second she saw in a palm-sheltered nook, a "knight of ye olden time" on his bended knee, pressing the lily-white hand of a "ladye faire" to his lips, and the light shone full on his imitation-Irving features. It was Francisco ! She then also recognized that the shoulder on which she had nestled,

was now wearing, should never be undeceived.—And after all, the consoling thought came, it was awfully romantic !

She afterward learned that all this "Comedy of Errors" had arisen from the fact that a sudden change had been made in the cast, and Roberto had been assigned Mr. Wolfe-Browne's part in the prison scene, thereby receiving the weather-stained letter of acceptance.

Beatrice planned an exquisitely æsthetic wedding, and it must be confessed that, for a matter-of-fact young man, Roberto submitted to the rehearsing and costuming angelically. For once the imitation-Irving Francisco was outdone. The fair damsel who had undertaken to rekindle his dampened affections was most unromantically stout. That much was triumph !

But, alas ! having at last secured his sentimental darling, Roberto became recalcitrant, and, so to speak, kicked over



the æsthetic traces. In spite of all his bride's efforts to induce him to give the Italian pronunciation to her name,—*Ba-a-tree-cha*,—he would persist in calling her "Betty dear !"

