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A Girl Who Couldn't.

BY RICHARD MARSH.

AM almost perfectly happy; but an unfaltering regard for the strict truth compels me to state that I am not quite. I wish I could conscientiously say that I was. But I cannot. I am aware that when a girl is engaged —especially when she is just engaged—her happiness ought to be flawless. And mine was until——

However, perhaps I had better come to the point.

It is not my fault if I cannot do everything. I can do some things. When I turn the matter over in my mind systematically, I feel justified in asserting that I can do a good many things. It is a well-known scientific fact that a Jack of all trades is master of none. Therefore it seems to me to follow as a matter of course that, because I can do the things which I can do, I cannot do the things which I cannot do. Nothing could be simpler or more obvious. We cannot all of us be Admirable Crichtons. And it is just as well that we cannot. And yet, merely on that account, I have lately suffered—well, I have suffered a good deal.

Nothing could have given me greater pleasure than the knowledge that Charlie had a mother and two sisters. When Mrs. Godwin—that is, his mother—wrote and said that Charlie had told her about the understanding he and I had come to—that she would very much like to know her dear son's future wife, so would I spend a few days with her in her cottage on the Thames, I was delighted. There was a note from each of his sisters, Bertha and Margaret, echoing their mother's words, and that also was very nice. I sat down then and there and replied to them all three, arranging to go to them on the Tuesday following. I had to go without Charlie. He was to have gone with me; and, of course, I had looked forward to our journey together in the train. But, at the last moment, he telegraphed to say that business detained him in town; would I go down without him, and he would join us on the morrow. I went without him. And on the whole I think I bore up very well, especially considering that, just as the train was starting from Paddington, a woman got into my carriage with two dogs, a parrot in a huge cage, bundles of golf clubs, hockey clubs, tennis rackets, fishing rods, and goodness only knows what besides; her belongings filled the whole of her own side of the compartment and most of mine. The last of them was being hustled in as the train was actually moving. As she was depositing them anywhere and anyhow—I never saw anyone treat her belongings with scantier ceremony—she observed:—

"I cut that rather fine. Don't believe in getting to the station before the train is ready to start; but that was a bit of a shave."

It was a "bit of a shave"; the marvel was that she succeeded in catching the train at all. I, disliking to be bustled, had been there a good twenty minutes before it started, so, although she might not have been aware of it, there was a flavour of something about her remark which was very nearly personal.

It was only after we had gone some distance that the dogs appeared—not a little to my amazement. One of them—which came out of a brown leather hand-bag—was one of those long-bodied, short-legged creatures which always look as if they were deformed. The other—a small, black animal, with curly hair—she took out of the pocket of the capacious coat which she was wearing. Directly she placed it on the floor of the carriage it flew at me as if filled with a frenzied desire to tear me to pieces. While it was doing its best to bark itself hoarse its owner removed a green cover from the parrot's cage, whereupon the bird inside commenced to make a noise upon its own account, as if with the express intention of urging that sooty fragment to wilder exertions. That compartment was like a miniature pandemonium.

"Don't let them worry you," remarked the mistress of the travelling menagerie.

But as she made not the slightest attempt to stop their worrying me I did not quite understand what she expected I was going to

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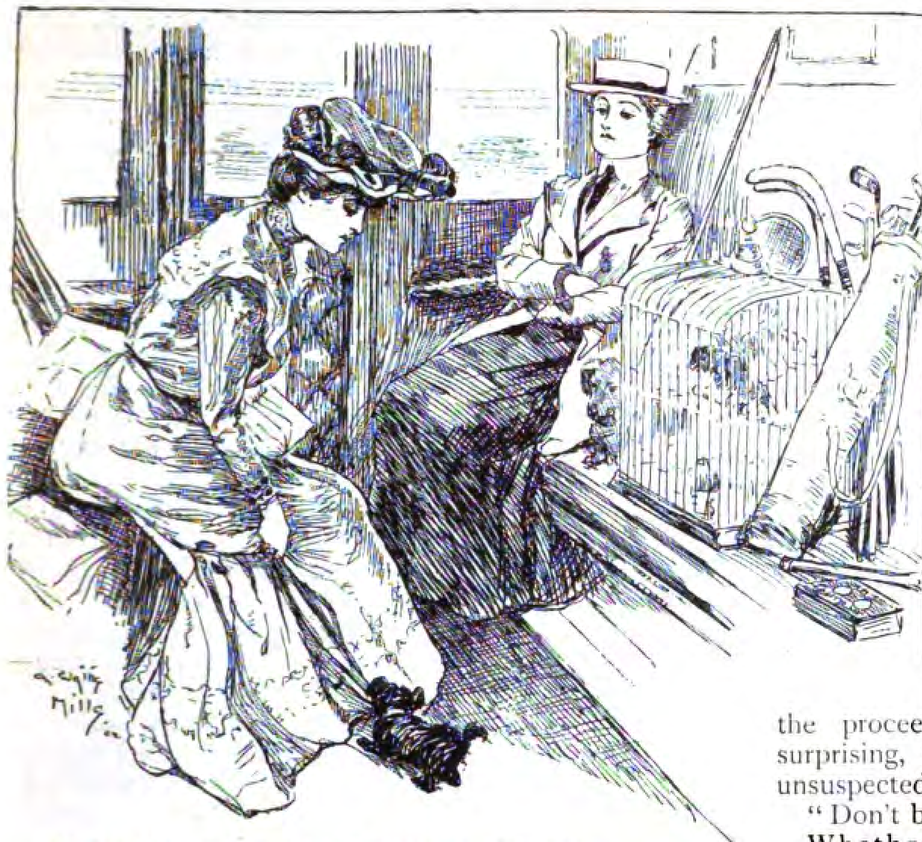

"'DON'T LET THEM WORRY YOU,' REMARKED THE MISTRESS OF THE TRAVELLING MENAGERIE."

the most take-it-for-granted air imaginable, prepared for slumber. Perceiving which the short-legged dog, descending, in its turn, to the floor of the carriage, began to prowl round and round me, sniffing at my skirts in a manner which almost suggested that there was something about me which was not altogether nice. All of a sudden the parrot, which had been taking an unconcealed interest in the proceedings, discovered a surprising, and hitherto wholly unsuspected, capacity for speech.

"Don't be a fool!" he said.

Whether the advice was addressed to me or to the short-legged dog, I could not say.

do. When the black dog got the hem of my skirt into its mouth and began to pull at it with its tiny teeth I did remonstrate.

"I'm afraid your dog will tear my dress."

"Not she! It's only her fun; she won't hurt you."

I was not afraid of the creature hurting me, but my skirt. The mistress's calmness was sublime. Suffering her minute quadruped to follow—without the smallest effort to control it—its own quaint devices, she was serenely attaching a new tip to a billiard-cue which she had taken out of a metal case. As if she felt that her proceedings might impress me with a sense of strangeness, she proffered what she perhaps meant to be an explanation.

"Always tip my own cue. I've got a cement which sticks, and I like my tip to be just so. If you want to be sure of your cue, tip it yourself."

Presently my Liliputian assailant passed from unreasonable antagonism to a warmth of friendship which was almost equally disconcerting. Springing, after one or two failures, on to the carriage seat, it deposited itself in the centre of my lap, nearly knocking my book out of my hands; and without a with your leave or by your leave, but with

But it was so unexpected, and was uttered with so much clearness, and was such an extremely uncivil thing to utter, that I quite jumped in my seat. The lady with the billiard-cue made a comment of her own:—

"That bird's a magnificent talker, and that's his favourite remark."

When we stopped at my station, a girl, coming up to the carriage door, began showering welcomes on my companion and her creatures with a degree of fluency which pointed to an intimate acquaintance with all of them.

"Halloa, Pat, so you've come! Halloa, Tar!"—this was to the small black animal. "Halloa, Stumps!"—this was to the short-legged dog. "Halloa, Lord Chesterfield!"—this was to that excessively rude parrot, who promptly acknowledged the greeting by rejoining:—

"Don't be a fool!"

Then, seeing that I was only waiting for the removal of some of the impedimenta to enable me to get out, the girl exclaimed:—

"Are you Nelly Heywood?" I admitted that I was. "I'm Bertha Godwin; awfully glad to see you. This is Miss Patricia Reeves—commonly known as Pat. Great luck your coming down together in the

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same compartment; you'll be as intimate as if you'd known each other for years."

I was not so sure of that. More, I doubted if Miss Patricia Reeves and I ever should be intimate, as I understood intimacy. Still worse, I was disposed to be dubious if Miss Reeves's bosom friend could ever be mine.

A pony phaeton was waiting outside the station with another girl in it. This proved to be Margaret Godwin. She welcomed Pat—and Pat's etceteras—with as much effusion as her sister had done. There was a discussion as to what was to happen. Since the phaeton would hold at most three, somebody would have to walk. Miss Reeves insisted on being the someone, and she and Bertha immediately set off at what struck me as being a good five miles an hour. Until then I had supposed myself to be no bad pedestrian for a mere girl, but when I saw the style in which those two were covering the ground I was glad that I had been permitted to ride.

"SHE AND BERTHA IMMEDIATELY SET OFF AT WHAT STRUCK ME AS BEING A GOOD FIVE MILES AN HOUR."

Margaret conversed on matters of which I, for the most part, knew little, and up to that moment had cared less. She talked of golf, inquiring, in an offhand sort of way, what my "handicap" was; evidently taking it for granted that, in common with the rest of the world, I had a "handicap." I do not know what I answered; because, as it happened, not only was I without that plainly desirable appurtenance, but I did not even know what she meant. Hitherto golf had not come into my life at all. But, fortunately, she chattered on at such a rate that she was able to pay no attention to what I said; so that it did not matter what I answered. It appeared that she had recently been playing a "tie," or a "match," or a "game," or a "round," or a "skittle," or something — I do not know which it was, but I am almost certain it was one or the other—with a Mrs. Chuckit—I am sure of the name because it was such an odd one—in which, it seemed, she had met with an unparalleled series of disasters. From what I could gather she had been "stymied" and "bunkered" and "up" and "down" and "holed" and "foozled" and "skied" and "approached" and "driven," and all sorts of dreadful things. At least, I believe they were dreadful things; and, indeed, from the emphatic way in which she spoke of them, I am convinced they were. One thing of which she told me I am sure must have been painful. She said that she got into a hedge—a "beast of a hedge" she called it—though how, or why, she got into it she did not explain; and that no sooner did she get out of it—"which took some doing," so it shows it must have been painful—than back she went "bang into the middle" of it again, which seemed such a singular thing for anyone to do that, had she not been speaking with such earnestness and such vigour, I should almost have suspected her of a desire to take advantage of my innocence. Then, she admitted, she had lost her temper, which was not to be wondered at. If anyone had thrown me or "got" me into a hedge anyhow, I should have lost mine right straight off. The moral of it seemed to be that "the last hole cost her seventeen"; though seventeen what—whether pounds or shillings—she did not mention, nor what manner of hole it could have been that she should have been so set on getting it at apparently any price. It was all double Dutch to me. But she rattled on at such a rate that I hoped to be able to conceal my ignorance, for I felt that if she

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discovered it I should drop in her estimation like the mercury in the thermometer which is transferred from hot water into cold. Suddenly, however, she began to ask me questions which sent cold shivers up and down my back. What cleeks had I got? Whose "mashie" did I use? Did I care for a "heelless" cleek?

I fumbled with the inquiries somehow, until she put one which I had to answer.

"Do you do much with a brassey spoon?"

She looked at me with her grey eyes, which made me feel as if I was in the witness-box and she was cross-examiner. I did not do much with a "brassey spoon." Indeed, I did nothing. I had no idea what anyone could do. In fact, until that second I had not been aware that spoons were ever made of brass. And, anyhow, what part spoons of any kind played in the game of golf I had not the dimmest notion. But I was not going to give myself away at a single bound; I was not quite so simple as that. So I thought for a moment, then I answered:—

"I suppose that I do about as much as other people."

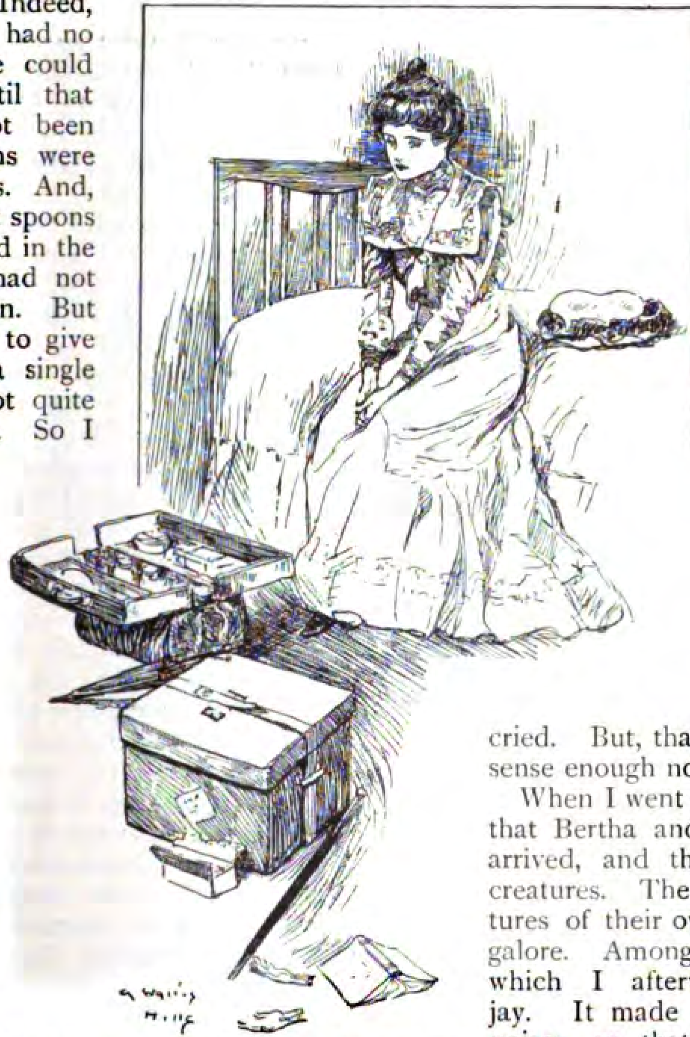
As a non-committal sort of answer I thought it rather neat; but I was not so clear in my own mind as I should have liked to have been as to what was the impression which it made upon Margaret. She looked at me in a way which made me wonder if she suspected.

Luckily, before she was able to corner me again we came to the house. In the hall a lady met us whose likeness to Charlie was so great that it affected me with something like a shock. She was his replica in petticoats. In his clothes she might easily have passed as his elder brother. It was Mrs. Godwin. She took both my hands in hers—standing in front of her relatively I was a mere mite —and looked me up and down.

"There isn't much of you, and you're ridiculously young."

"The first fault, I am afraid, is incurable. But the second I can grow out of. Many people do."

She laughed, and took me in her arms—literally lifted me off my feet—and kissed me. It was humiliating, but I did not seem to mind it from her; I had a sort of feeling she was nice. As I looked at her I understood how it was that she had two such athletic daughters. Charlie had never struck me as being particularly athletic, though he was so big and broad. But as I talked to his mother I began to realize with a sinking heart how little I knew of him after all.



"I CANNOT SAY THAT WHEN I GOT INTO MY BEDROOM I FELT VERY ECSTATIC."

I cannot say that when I got into my bedroom I felt very ecstatic. Without an unusual degree of exertion I could have cried. But, thank goodness! I had sense enough not to do that.

When I went down to tea I found that Bertha and Miss Reeves had arrived, and the luggage and the creatures. The Godwins had creatures of their own—dogs and birds galore. Among the latter was one which I afterwards learnt was a jay. It made the most ridiculous noises, so that I felt that Lord Chesterfield was justified in fixing it with his stony gaze and in observing, with serious and ceaseless reiteration:—

"Don't be a fool!"

The conversation immediately got into channels which I would much rather it had kept out of. Bertha began it.

"Nelly, you've just come in time. There's going to be a sing-song on the island to-

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night, and as I'm getting up the programme I hope you'll turn out to be a gem of the first water. What'll you do?"

I did not know what a "sing-song" was. Bertha explained: "A sing-song? Oh, a kind of a sort of a concert, informal, free and easy, don't you know. All the river people turn up on the island—they bring their own illuminations—then some of us do things to amuse them. Will you give us a banjo solo?"

"I'm afraid I don't play the banjo."

"Not play the banjo? I thought everyone could make a row on the banjo. Can't you play it enough to accompany your own singing?"

"I'm afraid I don't sing."

"Don't sing? Then what do you do?"

"I bar recitations"; this was Miss Reeves.

"I don't care what you bar," retorted Bertha. "I'm going to recite—at least, I'm going to do a sort of a sketch with George Willis."

"I don't call that reciting."

"It wouldn't make any difference if you did."

I was rapidly beginning to learn that these people had a candid way of addressing each other which, to a stranger, was a little alarming.

"The question is, Nelly, what shall I put you down for? Will you give us a dance?"

"A dance? I don't know what you mean."

"A cake-walk, or a skirt-twirl, or a few steps—anything."

"Do you mean will I dance, all by myself, in front of a lot of strangers?"

"Yes; why not? Everybody does, if they can."

"I cannot, thank you."

"Then what can you do?"

"I have no parlour tricks."

"No what?"

"I have no parlour tricks."

I ought to have been warned by the tone in which Bertha put her inquiry; but I did not notice it until it was too late. Directly I had repeated my assertion I realized that I had said something which it would, perhaps, have been better left unsaid. They all exchanged glances in that exasperating way which some people have when they wish to telegraph to each other something which is not precisely flattering to you. Miss Reeves laughed outright; Bertha drummed with her fingers on her knee; Margaret observed me with her keen grey eyes; while Mrs. Godwin spoke.

"Isn't that one of those things, Nelly, which one would rather have expressed differently? Because, hereabouts, we rather pride ourselves on our capacity for what you call parlour tricks, and were not even aware that they were 'parlour tricks' in the opprobrious sense which you seem to suggest. I have always myself tried to acquire a smattering of as many of what I fancied were the minor accomplishments as I could, and I have always endeavoured—sometimes at the cost of a good deal of money—to induce my girls to acquire them, too. I have never felt that a woman was any the worse for being able to do things for the amusement—if not for the edification—of her friends."

I had not been so snubbed since I had been long-frocked, and to think that it should have been by Charlie's mother! I fancy that I blushed in a perfectly preposterous manner, and I know that I went hot and cold all over, and I tried to wriggle out of the mess into which I had got myself.

"I only wish I could do things, but I can't. I never have been among clever people, and I'm so dreadfully stupid. Hasn't Charlie told you?"

"Charlie has told us nothing, except—you know what. But Charlie himself is a past-master of all sorts of parlour tricks. Don't you know so much of him as that?"

Of course I did; I resented the suggestion that I did not. I was commencing to get almost cross with Charlie's mother. I was perfectly aware that there was nothing which Charlie could not do, and do well, better than anyone else. But it had not occurred to me that therefore his relations, and even his acquaintances, were all-round experts also. And I was not by any means sure that I appreciated the fact now, if it was a fact. It was not pleasant to feel that in what were here plainly regarded as essentials I should show to such hideous disadvantage. I should practically be out of everything; and no girl likes to be that, especially when her lover's about. Before long Charlie would be comparing me to everybody else, and thinking nothing of me at all.

It is possible that my doleful visage—I am convinced that it had become doleful—moved Margaret to sympathy. Anyhow, she all at once jumped up, and—I have no doubt with the best will in the world—by way of making things easier for me promptly proceeded to make them worse.

"Come along, Nelly, let's have some tennis. Run upstairs and put your shoes on."

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"My shoes? What shoes?"

"Why, your tennis shoes."

"My tennis shoes? I—I'm afraid I haven't brought any tennis shoes."

"Not brought any tennis shoes? But, of course, you do play tennis?"

The question was put in such a way as to infer that if I did not then I must be a sorry specimen of humanity indeed. But, as it happened, I did play tennis; at least, after a fashion. We had what was called a tennis-lawn at home, the condition of which may be deduced from the fact that I had never imagined that it would be inadvisable to play on it in hobnailed boots if anyone so desired.

"Of course I play; but—I haven't brought any particular shoes. Won't these do?"

I protruded one of those which I had on. Margaret could not have seemed more startled if I had shown her a bare foot.

"Those! Why, they've got heels."

Miss Reeves went a good deal farther.

"And such heels! My dear girl"—fancy her calling me her dear girl! Such impertinence!—"sane people don't wear those Royal roads to deformity nowadays; they wear shoes like these."

She displayed a pair of huge, square-toed, shapeless, heelless, thick-soled monstrosities, into which nothing would ever have induced me to put my feet. I said so plainly.

"Then I'm glad that I'm not sane. Sooner than wear things like that I'd go about in my stockings. I don't believe that mine are Royal or any other roads to deformity—they fit me beautifully; but, at any rate, yours are deformities ready-made."

I did not intend to allow myself to be snubbed by Miss Reeves without a struggle. She was no relative of Charlie's. But she might just as well have been; because, with one accord, they all proceeded to take her part.

"My dear Nelly," said Margaret, speaking as if hers were the last words which could be said, "you are wrong. In shoes like yours you're a prisoner. You mayn't be conscious of it, and you won't be till you try others. Then you'll find out, and you'll be sorry that you didn't find out before. I want to be mistress of my feet; I don't want to be their servant. I wear shoes like Pat, and nothing would induce me to wear any other kind; I know better."

"And I," echoed her mother and sister.

There they were, all three displaying—with

"THEY WERE ALL THREE DISPLAYING SHOES WHICH WERE FACSIMILES OF THOSE WORN BY MISS REEVES."

actual gusto—shoes which were facsimiles of those worn by Miss Reeves. They were probably the productions of the same expert in ugliness.

"You won't be able to do anything really comfortably till you wear them too; then you'll tell yourself what a goose you were not to have gone in for them ages ago. But you'll find Charlie'll soon win you into the ways of wisdom."

Charlie would! I should like to see

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Charlie even dare to try. If I could not wear, without argument, shoes to please myself, then——

I imagine that Margaret perceived, from the expression of my countenance, that she had gone a little too far, because she said, in quite a different tone of voice :—

"Never mind about shoes. Play in those you have on, and I'll tell Jackson to give the lawn an extra roll in the morning."

If I had been wise I should have taken the reference to Jackson as a hint and slipped out of playing. But my back was a wee bit up, and I was a little off my balance, so I played. Of course, I made a frightful spectacle of myself. It did make me so wild.

Bertha and Margaret said they would play Miss Reeves and me — which I did not like, to begin with. Under the circumstances I felt that one of them might have offered to take me as a partner. They might have seen that I was commencing to regard Miss Reeves as if she were covered with prickles. Besides which, considering what I imagined I had come there for, and the position which I was shortly to occupy in the family, it did seem to me that they ought not to have paired me with a stranger. But, as they evidently preferred to play together, they plainly did not think it worth their while to study my tastes for a moment. So I was as sugary to Miss Reeves as I could be.

"I am afraid you have a very bad partner," I observed.

"I don't mind," she was kind enough to reply. "I expect you're one of those dark horses who are better than they choose to make out."

I tried to be, but I failed ignominiously. I do declare that I am not always so bad as I was then. But, as I have said, I was a little off my balance, and all I could do was to make an idiot of myself. Bertha served first; my partner suggested I should take her service. I took it; or, rather, I didn't take it. Bertha sent the balls so fast that I could scarcely see them; and then there was such a twist on them, or whatever you call the thing, that I could not have hit them anyhow. I did not hit them; not one.

"I HAD TO DODGE WHEN I SAW HER COMING."

"What horrid balls!" I murmured, when Bertha had made an end.

"You seem to find them so."

My partner spoke with such excessive dryness that I could have hit her with my racket. When it came to her turn to serve she asked me a question :—

"Won't you stand up to the net and kill their returns?"

No, I would not stand up to the net and kill their returns. I did not know what she meant; but I knew that I would not do it. And I did not. She herself played as if she had been doing nothing else all her life but play lawn-tennis. She was all over the place at once. I was only in her way, and she treated me as if I was only in her way. I had to dodge when I saw her coming or she would have sent me flying; more than once she nearly did. It was a painful fiasco so far as I was concerned; I have a dim suspicion that we scored nothing. When the game was finished she looked me up and down.

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"Bit off your game, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid I am," I muttered.

I was too cast down to do anything else but mutter. There was a look in her eyes which, unless I was mistaken, meant temper. And she was such a very stalwart person that I had a horrible feeling that, unless I was very careful, she might make nothing of shaking me.

"Perhaps you're stronger in singles. I should like to play you a single; will you?"

"Thank you; some—some other time."

"Shall we say to-morrow?"

We did not say to-morrow. I would not have said to-morrow for a good deal. Margaret came to my rescue.

"You play Bertha. Nelly and I'll look on."

We looked on, while they performed prodigies. I had never before seen such playing. The idea of my associating myself with them was preposterous. As we watched Margaret was not so loquacious as I should have desired. In her silence I seemed to read disapprobation of the exhibition of incompetence which I had given. Moreover, when she did speak her remarks took the form of criticisms of the play; approving this stroke, condemning that, with a degree of severity which made me wince. It was impossible to sit beside her for many seconds without realizing that she regarded lawn-tennis with a seriousness of which—in that connection — I had never dreamed. Obviously, with her, it was one of the serious things of life.

Suddenly she hit upon a theme which was not much more palatable to me than lawn-tennis had been —in such company.

"Let's play ping-pong—you and me?"

"Ping-pong?" My heart sank afresh. It seemed in that house that games were in the air. "Wouldn't you rather sit here and watch them playing tennis? I like to watch them."

I would rather have watched anyone play anything than play myself. But Margaret was of a different mind.

"Oh, no—what's the fun of it? One gets rusty. Let's do something. Of course, ping-pong's not a game one can take really in earnest; but there's a tournament in the school-room on Wednesday, and I ought to keep my hand in. Come along and let's have a knock up."

We went along. She did not give me a chance to refuse to go along. She led the way.

"Of course you do play?"

"Well, I have played. But I'm quite sure that I don't play in your sense."

"Oh, everyone plays ping-pong; the merest children even. I maintain that it's nothing but a children's game."

It might be. In that case she would soon discover that I was past the age of childhood.

"Have you brought your bat?" I had not. "It doesn't matter. We've got about thirty different kinds. You're sure to find your sort among them."

A ping-pong board was set up in the billiard-room. On a table at one side were enough bats to stock a shop. I took the one she recommended, and we began.

Ping-pong is a loathsome game. I have always said it, and always shall. At home we played it on the dining-room table. The

"THAT WRETCHED LITTLE CELLULOID BALL WHIZZED OVER THE NET LIKE LIGHTNING."

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boys made sport of me. They used to declare in derision that I played "pat-ball." I should have liked some of them to have played with Margaret. She would have played with them, or I err. I thought the serves had come in with disgusting swiftness at lawn-tennis: they were nothing compared to her serves at ping-pong. That wretched little celluloid ball whizzed over the net like lightning; and then, as I struck at it blindly, expecting it to come straight towards me, like a Christian thing, it flew off at an angle to the right or left, and my bat encountered nothing but the air. On the other hand, when I served, she smashed my ball back with such force that it leapt right out of my reach, or anyone's, and sometimes clean over the billiard-table. I had soon had enough of it.

"Hadn't we better stop?" I inquired, when, for the second time in succession, she had smashed my service nearly up to the ceiling. "It can't be very amusing for you to play with me."

A similar reflection seemed to occur to her. Resting her bat on the edge of the board, she regarded me in contemplative fashion.

"What is your favourite game?" she asked.

For some occult reason the question made me blush; so far, that is, as my state of heat permitted.

"AS I SURVEYED THE RESULT IN THE MIRROR MY SPIRIT BECAME CALMER."

"I'm not good at any; so I suppose I haven't a favourite game. Indeed, I don't think I'm fond of games."

"Not fond of games?" Her tone was almost melancholy, as if my admission grieved her. "That is unfortunate. We're such a gamey crowd; we are all so keen on games."

Her bearing so hinted that I had been the occasion to her of actual pain that it almost moved me to tears.

When I got up into my room to dress for dinner I was a mixture of feelings. It would not have needed much to have made me sneak down the stairs, and out of the house, and back to the station, if I had been sure of getting safely away. I could not say exactly what I had expected, but I certainly had not expected this. Charlie had always made such a fuss of me that I fear I had taken it for granted that, under the circumstances, his people would make a fuss of me too. Instead of which they had received me with a take-it-for-granted air, as if they had known me for years and years, and then had promptly proceeded to make me feel so unutterably small that I was almost inclined to wish that I had never been born.

I hated to be made to feel small. I hated games. I hated—during those moments in which I was tearing off my frock I nearly felt as if I hated everything. But just in time it was borne in to me how wicked I was. It was not their fault if I was a little donkey; it was my own. They were not to blame if I had allowed my education to be neglected, and had not properly appreciated the paramount importance of tennis and ping-pong and golf, and all the other—to my mind—somewhat exasperating exercises which came under the generic heading of "games." But as I proceeded with my toilette and surveyed the result in the mirror my spirit became calmer. At least, they none of them

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looked better than I did. I might not be such an expert, but I certainly was not uglier than they were. And that was something. Besides, I was young, and strong, and healthy, and active. If I set myself to do it, it was quite within the range of possibility that I might become a match for them even at tennis and ping-pong. I did not believe that I was such a duffer as I had seemed.

No one could have been nicer than they were when I went down into the drawing-room—Miss Reeves actually was so nice that she took my breath away. They stared as I entered; then broke into a chorus.

"Well," began Bertha, with that outspokenness which seemed a family characteristic, "one thing's sure and certain, you'll be the beauty of the family. We shall have to show you as an illustration of what we can achieve in that direction. You look a perfect picture."

"A dream of loveliness," cried Miss Reeves. "Now, if I were a man you're just the sort of girl I'd like to marry. Even as a mere girl I'd like to kiss you."

She put her hands lightly on my bare shoulders and she did kiss me—on both cheeks and on the lips—there and then. It was most bewildering. I had not looked for that sort of thing from her. But Mrs. Godwin's words warmed the very cockles of my heart:—

"If you're as delightful as you look, my dear, that boy of mine ought to be a very happy fellow."

No woman had ever spoken to me like that before. It filled me with a lovely glow—made me even bold. I went close up to her and I whispered:—

"I should like to make him happy."

Then she drew me to her and she kissed me, laughing as she did so. It was really a most peculiar position for a person to be in. But I forgave them for making such an object of me at tennis.

After dinner Mrs. Godwin said:—

"Bertha, Margaret, and I will go over to the island in the dinghy, we being on this occasion the chief exponents of parlour tricks, and responsible for all the other performers of the same; and then, Pat, you and Nelly might follow in the punt."

At Mrs. Godwin's mischievous allusion to "parlour tricks" they all looked at me and laughed; but by now I was beginning to get used to their ways. I laughed too. A little while before I should have objected to being again paired off with Miss Reeves; but my sentiments were also commencing to change towards her. Mrs. Godwin went on:—

"We shall have to see that all things are ready and in order, so that you will have fifteen or twenty minutes before you need appear."

We saw them off; the garden ran right down to the water's edge. Then Miss Reeves proposed that, since there was no need to hurry, we should get into the punt and dawdle about upon the river till it was time to join them. The idea commended itself to me, although I was regarding the punt—which was moored alongside—with some misgivings. Incredible though it may sound, I had never seen such an article before.

But then I had never before been within miles and miles of the Thames except over London Bridge, and that kind of thing. I had never been in a boat in my life, whether large or small, on sea or river. Such was my ignorance that I had not been aware that women ever rowed, especially in little weeny boats all alone by themselves. The workmanlike manner in which Bertha and Margaret had rowed off with their mother had filled me with amazement; they had gone off with nothing on their heads or shoulders, or even their hands. They had a heap of wraps in the bottom of the boat; but it had not seemed to occur to them that it was necessary to put them on. True, it was a lovely evening and delightfully warm; but there were lots of other boats about, and it did seem odd that three ladies should start off in a boat all alone by themselves in exactly the same costume in which they had just been sitting at dinner.

"Hadn't I better put something on?" I inquired of Miss Reeves, who showed symptoms of a desire to hurry me into the punt before I was ready.

"Why?" she rejoined. "It'll be hot all through the night. You don't feel chilly?"

"No; I don't feel chilly, but——"

I looked about me at the strangers in the other boats in a way which she was quick to understand. She was shrewd enough.

"My dear Miss Heywood——" she paused. "I mean, my dear Nelly—I must call you Nelly, I really must—up here one regards the Thames as one's own private river. It's the mode to do, and to dress, exactly as one pleases. In summer, on the upper reaches of the Thames, one is in Liberty Hall. Step into that punt, if it pleases you, just as you are; or, if it pleases you, smother yourself in wraps; only do step in. Are you going to pole or am I?"

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"To pole?"

She eyed me quizzically.

"Don't tell me that you don't know what to pole means."

"But I don't. How should I, when I never saw a punt before this second?"

"Dear me, how your rudiments have been neglected! Poling, you uninstructed child, with the stream and the right companion on a summer evening is the poetry of life. Jump inside that boat and I'll give you an illustration of the verb to pole."

She gave me one; a charming illustration, too. Certainly, lying on the bottom of that punt, amid a pile of cushions, while it moved smoothly over those glittering waters, under that cloudless sky, was delicious. And the ease with which she sent us along—just dipping the long pole into the stream, while the gleaming drops of water fell off the shining shaft.

"Well," she asked, "how do you like my illustration?"

"It's lovely. I could go on like this for ever, just looking at you. It shows off your figure splendidly." She laughed. "And it doesn't seem to be so difficult either."

"What doesn't seem difficult?—poling? It isn't. You only have to put it in and take it out again. Nothing could be simpler."

Of course, I knew that she was chaffing me, and that it was not quite so simple as that. But, all the same, I leaned to the opinion that it was not so very hard. And I resolved that when Charlie came, and he was there to teach me and to take a genuine interest in my education, I would try my hand. I suspected that I might look rather decent poling him along.

It was very jolly on the island. There were crowds of people, some of them gorgeous, some in simple skirts and blouses, but scarcely any of them wore hats—the men looked nicer than I had ever seen men look before. I came to the conclusion that the river costume did suit men. The "parlour tricks" were excellent; I became more and more ashamed of myself for having spoken of them as parlour tricks. Bertha and Margaret and Mrs. Godwin were splendid. I believe that the people would have liked them to have kept on doing things all night long. And no wonder. If I had only been a hundredth part as clever I should have been as proud as a peacock. Everything would have gone off perfectly, and I should have had one of the pleasantest evenings of my life, if it had not been for my stupidity.

When all was over I found myself in the punt with Margaret. She was kneeling at one end, arranging her music and things. Although it was pretty late there was a full moon in an unclouded sky, so that it was almost as light as day. All at once I discovered that we had got untied or something, and were drifting farther and farther from the land.

"We're going," I exclaimed.

"That's all right," said Margaret. "Pole her clear."

Evidently she, engrossed in affairs of her own, took it for granted that I was no novice—in that part of the world novices seemed to be things unknown. There were lots of boats about us; people were making laughing remarks about our being in the way; the pole was lying in the punt; Miss Reeves had handled it as if it were a feather. Here was an earlier opportunity to try my hand than I had anticipated; but surely until Margaret was disengaged I could act on her instructions and "pole clear." So I picked up the pole.

Two things struck me instantly: one, that it was much longer than it had seemed; and the other, that it was a very great deal heavier. But I had been so hasty that, before I realized these facts—though I realized them rapidly enough—the end of it was in the water. Down it went with a jerk to the bottom. Had I not hung on to it with sudden desperation it would all of it have gone. I wished it had! For while I clung to it I all at once perceived that, in some mysterious way, the boat was running away from underneath me. It was the most extraordinary sensation I had ever experienced, and so startling, and it all took place with such paralyzing swiftness. Before I understood what was really happening—before I had time to scream or anything—I found that I was actually pushing the punt away with my own feet—that I was standing on the edge of it—and, splash! I was in the river.

There was no water to speak of. It was quite shallow; only a foot or two deep. I was out again almost as soon as I was in. But I was soaked to the skin. And the worst of it was that I knew that not a creature there sympathized with me truly. All round me people were laughing outright—at me!—as if it were quite a joke. I could not see where the joke came in. Although Mrs. Godwin and the girls and Miss Reeves pretended to sympathize with me, I felt persuaded that even they were laughing at me

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"THE BOAT WAS RUNNING AWAY FROM UNDERNEATH ME."

in their heart of hearts. More than once I caught them in a grin.

I did feel so wild with myself when I got between the sheets! All the same, I slept like a top. I seemed to have only been asleep a minute or two when I was disturbed by a knocking at my bedroom door.

"Who's there?" I cried.

"Come for a dip!" returned Margaret's voice.

"A dip?" I shuddered; she had roused me from the loveliest dream. "Where?"

"Why, in the river, child! It's a perfect morning for a swim!"

"In the river—for a swim? But I can't swim."

"I'm coming in," she cried. And in she came, rushing across the floor, putting her strong arms underneath my shoulders, raising me from the pillow. "I don't believe you can do anything, you little goose. But you're a darling all the same."

She kissed me three or four times, then dropped me, scurried back across the floor and out of the room.

I sighed and, I believe, I turned over and went to sleep again.

When I got down to breakfast I found that they had all been about for hours. There was a letter from Charlie lying on my plate. He wrote to say that he was coming down by the first train.

"You might go and meet him," suggested Mrs. Godwin. "Can you drive?"

They all grinned, but I did not mind; not a tiny bit.

"Can I drive?" I retorted, scornfully. "Why, I've driven since I was a little thing."

"And, pray, how long ago is that? Anyhow, if you can drive you might go to meet him by yourself."

I did, in the pony phaeton; it was lovely. When Charlie came out of the station my heart jumped into my mouth; especially when he took his hat off and kissed me in front of all the people. It was so unexpected.

As I drove him back I told him what an absolute duffer I was. He declared that, as for my not being able to do things, he would show me how to do them all, and he guaranteed—but I knew there was a twinkle in his eye—that soon I would do them better than anyone else. And I should not be surprised if he does teach me how to do some things. He has taught me such a deal already.

So, as I observed at the outset, although I am not quite, I am almost perfectly happy. And, after all, that is something, particularly as I dare say I shall be quite happy before very long.

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