

**The Absurdity Is -  
Just That It Should  
Be Absurd**

The Absurdity Is - Just That It Should Be Absurd

By Henry Kitchell Webster

TAKEN FROM "MCCLURE'S MAGAZINE," VOLUME 44, NOVEMBER 1914 - APRIL 1915

There was no very logical reason why she should feel annoyed at the young man's taking the vacant seat beside her in the car. So far as she could see, there was nowhere else for him to sit. He was a perfectly presentable young man—slender, straight, intelligent-looking, perfectly well dressed without being a bit "dressed up." and, from her point of view, just the right age to make him interesting—three or four years older than she was, for a guess, which would make him twenty-three or -four years old.

His manner, too, would have satisfied the strictest martinet among the teachers at the extremely fastidious finishing school which, last June, had guaranteed her to be a finished product. He made her a very slight bow,—obviously an entirely impersonal concession to civility,—and then, taking no more room than was absolutely necessary, sat down and paid no further attention to her.

That was not why she was annoyed, however. Heaven knew, the last thing she wanted, this morning, was a silly quasi-flirtation with a good-looking stranger who might, conceivably, have tried to begin with a show of somewhat warmer concern over having to disturb her, and then, by lowering the window or adjusting the blind for her, pave the way for the beginning of a conversation. It was lucky for the young man that these had not been his tactics.

But the notion that stuck in her mind with such burr-like and irritating persistency was that six months ago, or three, or perhaps even one, she would have been silly enough to like that sort of thing and to hope that it might happen. Nothing like it ever had happened; but she was perfectly aware that, up to not very long ago, she had kept a decorously adventurous eye open for just such an encounter.

It was in an indignant and rather exasperated protest against this memory that she drew herself up a trifle straighter and sat as tight as she could against the side of the car.

But the memory, once awake, would show her no mercy. She couldn't stop recalling how she had used to regard the world as merely a vast treasure-house

of romance, rapturous and heart-suffocating thrills, and mysteriously half understood possibilities—a treasure-house she was denied the key to only by school regulations, chaperons, grown-up authority generally. When she herself should be grown up—

What a lot of lies they had told her, to be sure, those representatives of authority! Her whole education had been a sort of pious fraud. Ever since she could remember, she had been learning little lessons, practising little accomplishments, upon the tacit understanding that the world was simply a Christmas tree, and that if you were obedient and “nice” (it helped—though this was still more tacit—if you were pretty) your present would be handed down to you in good time, a really splendid sugar-plum by way of a reward. Like Gentle Jane in “Patience”:

Gentle Jane was as good as gold;

She always did as she was told;

And when she grew up she was given in marriage

To a first-class Earl who keeps his carriage.

Everything she had read, excluding, of course, text-books such as algebra and Julius Caesar and “The Ancient Mariner” and Latin prose—all the carefully supervised fiction she had read had supported this Christmas-tree theory.

There was, as a rule, some little difficulty about getting the present—just enough to make things interesting. It might not be recognized, for example, by the familiar blind companions of your youth that you were really pretty. You might be scorned and jeered at, like Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling. But eventually, under more benign influences, your true beauty of person and of soul would appear—and then you’d go back and show them.

Or perhaps—this had been rather a favorite plot of hers—you were so beautiful and so clever that you were considered heartless. You fell in love with a very noble and serious young man, who at first believed you to be only a frivolous-minded society girl. But at last, when by chance he found out how kind you were to the poor, he passionately begged your forgiveness for having so cruelly wronged you. You did forgive him, of course. And lived happily ever after.

She could see now that her belief in the Christmas tree had begun to get shaky a

good while ago. But it had needed last night's storm to blow it down. The storm had raged for two hours in her father's library, beginning, naturally enough, with the question of her allowance. Her allowance was ten dollars a month—just pin-money, of course. All her clothes and hats and things went indistinguishably into the monthly bills. But the ten dollars had proved painfully inadequate even as a lubricant. She had got further and further behind, drawing upon him or her mother, whichever had seemed more promising, to make up her deficiency.

Now, out of a clear sky, her father had taxed her with gross extravagance. Any sort of rebuke from him would have cut deep enough; the thing was so unprecedented as to be almost paralyzing. But to be accused of extravagance, when she all the while had been pluming herself upon the nobility of a hundred little economical sacrifices, was more than she could bear. She didn't begin to keep up her end with other girls—her former school friends. Why, one little *matinée* party, or a downtown luncheon for three or four of them, would take a whole month's allowance. She was a victim, a hitherto uncomplaining victim, of her father's parsimony!

Naturally, he hadn't liked that. He had whipped a sheaf of bills out of a pigeonhole in his desk, and come down to cases in a staggering, really a horrifying, way. He told her what his income was,—she had never known that before,—and showed her what a disproportionate amount of it she had been spending. He reminded her that he was sending one of her brothers through college, and that the younger one would be ready for that expensive process presently. He had cheerfully undergone the burden of sending her to one of the best and most expensive schools in the country. But, now that her education was finished, he had hoped she was ready to cease being a burden and begin being a help. Not financially, of course; but in other ways.

The scene between them had not gone in this orderly, rational fashion. It had been in a high degree acrimonious and recriminatory. They both had said, no doubt, rather more than they had meant. She knew she had. But the upshot of it lay in a question which, out of the depths of woe, she had asked and he had had to leave unanswered. What was she to do?

She had passionately renounced all the pleasures of life, all her friendships, all her allowance. She'd never spend another cent, if she could help it, so long as he felt like that. (His answer to this had been to layout a fresh ten-dollar bill, her October allowance, as the symbol of a clean slate; and she had loftily ignored it.)

But what was she to do? Her suggestion of a department store or an office he had denounced as nonsense. She might be a real help to her mother, he thought.

But her mother was an admirable housekeeper—she didn't want any help; and the last cook had left as a direct result of her culinary experiments in the line of desserts. She could count the laundry, but that was only twice a week. They could dismiss the second maid, of course, and let her sweep and wash dishes—things like that.

This suggestion, too, had been vetoed—brushed aside as something not to be considered. But, with her final iteration of the question: “Well, then, what can I do?”—she had seen a look in her father's face that made her forget her anger against him: a sudden, almost tragic misgiving. A train dispatcher who realized that he had sent a train out on the wrong track might look like that. \_ \_

That look, somehow, lifted the thing out of the plane of a personal quarrel. She had got up, and thanked him for the ten-dollar bill, and kissed him good night, and gone to a miserable, sleepless bed.

What had happened this morning, though regrettable, had been natural enough. She had got off to sleep just before daylight, and had come down very late and very hollow-eyed to breakfast. And, at an ill-judged joke by her irreverent kid brother about her grand lady ways, she had gone upstairs again, breakfastless, for a change into street clothes. Then, with the ten-dollar bill wadded inside her glove, she had gone storming out of the house, determined not to come back until, somehow or other, she had managed to solve the problem with which she had posed her father the night before. The sight of the inter-urban station, as she hurried along, suggested the notion that somewhere along the unsettled part of the Lake Shore would be a good place in which to do her thinking. With no more definite idea than that, she had taken the first train.

And then, when the only possible purpose it could serve was the exasperating one of reminding her what a silly, romantic little fool she had been, this perfectly satisfactory young man came down the aisle and took the vacant seat beside her, just as she had, long ago, planned that he should.

Well, she could ignore him, of course. By way of doing it thoroughly, she turned a little and began looking out of the window—looked out with her right shoulder as well as with her face at the singularly uninteresting landscape the inter-urban,

just as it was leaving town, traversed.

The trouble was that he didn't seem to mind being ignored. She couldn't even be sure that he knew she was doing it. He sat quite rigidly still, staring straight ahead, his lips a little compressed, his eyes apparently nowhere.

The process of ignoring him actively, vigorously, like that, left her no leisure in thinking about her problem. Even when some people across the aisle got off presently at a station, and the young man moved over to the vacant seat, it didn't help much. There he went on sitting, just as he had sat beside her, perfectly upright, staring straight ahead, without even a glance out of the window or at the other passengers. He was posing, that was what he was doing! Why didn't he open up a newspaper and read it? Why didn't he (she could see the bulge of a pipe in his pocket) go up forward and smoke?

The situation got more unpleasant and artificial and preposterous as the passengers, stopping the car every little way and getting off, thinned out. If it got down to the point where they two were left absolutely stark alone there, sitting across the aisle from each other like a pair of images, she'd—well, she'd be about ready to scream.

She could get off the car, though. That was an idea that hadn't occurred to her. Of course, it was awfully lonely hereabouts. Well, wasn't loneliness what she wanted? She got up and signaled the conductor to stop the car.

Overhead it was as fine a day as October knows how to produce. But part of the sparkling brilliancy of the sky, and the frost-stained leaves, and the yellow goldenrod that banked the sides of the road, was due to a heavy rain that had fallen the night before. And what she found herself standing in, after the car had rolled away, was just a deeply rutted track across the clayey loam—a flat road, whose only sanction for existence was the decree of the, county surveyor.

As you have been told, when she dashed upstairs without her breakfast she had changed from her house negligee to street clothes. But, not having foreseen an excursion into the country, the shoes she had put on were just a pair of walking-pumps. They were very pretty on the Boulevard, but distinctly not fitted to cope with the\_\_ tenacity of wet clay.

She took one step as cautiously as she could; but when she picked up her foot for the next one, the pump stayed behind.

Intrinsically, it was not the sort of calamity for a grown-up girl to cry about; but, as the last taunt of a mocking world, it proved too much for her. She stood there for a minute on one leg, like a ridiculous stork, the tears of helpless exasperation dribbling down her flushed cheeks. Should she scramble across to the other side of the tracks and take the next car back?

No, she wouldn't. She'd go on anyway. If she could get over the ditch and up the bank where the massed goldenrod and the tall grasses were, she could walk without sticking in the mud. She'd get wet to the knees, of course, and spoil the looks of her smartly tailored skirt perhaps irretrievably, and she'd probably take a dreadful cold. But who cared if she did?

Her family had cared once, she took a melancholy pleasure in reflecting, after she had put the plan into execution and begun wading along toward the lake, turning her slim ankles over hidden humps and hollows, getting tripped and scratched by treacherous rain-laden growing things.

They had all treated her exactly, now she came to think of it, as she, for a week or two, had always treated her new Christmas doll. They had listened wonderingly when she said "da-da" or "ma-ma," and had watched with rapture the way she closed her eyes when they laid her down. And now, naturally, they had just got tired of her—flung her into a corner and gone off about their regular affairs.

But, arrived at the lake, she wiped her eyes, laughed at herself, and started along the beach. Pretty soon, as soon as she'd quieted down a little, she'd begin the serious business of the day—what she had, temper aside, left home for: namely, deciding what she was going to do about it—making the plan which, when carried out, would enable her to return home again in triumph.

A big smooth boulder, dry and warm-looking in the sun and under the lee of a break-water, looked like a good place to think in. So she settled herself there, spread out her skirt to dry, and took off her soggy shoes. Then she leaned back slackly against the wave-worn planks of the break-water, and drew a long breath. She had the whole world to herself now. She was ready.

But just then—just about exactly then—she heard the thump of feet above her, saw something dark and sprawling between her and the sky, and there, having narrowly missed coming down fairly on top of her when he vaulted off the

break-water, stood the young man again—the young man who had been the passive and unconscious cause of so much of her annoyance on the car.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he said.

She pulled her feet up under the shelter of her skirt.

He backed away awkwardly, and stumbled over one of her shoes.

All her former exasperation against him came back threefold. Giving her a start like that just as she was comfortably settled, leaping before he looked! And then, surprising her in that grotesquely awkward attitude, her stockinged feet stuck straight up in front of her!

She didn't say anything, but she could feel the blood flaming in her cheeks.

“I hope you'll believe,” he said, with a ceremonious tone and air in themselves subtly infuriating—“I hope you will believe that my coming upon you like this is not the result of precalculation on my part.”

She hadn't thought of that—hadn't had time. But it was true that the encounter might almost have been calculated upon by one who had stopped the car at the next cross-road, gone to the beach, and turned south, which was evidently what he had done.

“I can't imagine its being of the smallest importance to you,” she said, “whether I believe it or not.”

She knew it was a snippy school-girl sort of thing to say, but it expressed perfectly the feeling of the moment.

“That is as you wish, of course,” he said.

He bowed, took another step back, and stumbled again over the same shoe.

“Damn!” he said in concentrated fury, and kicked the thing into the water. Then he looked at her, aghast.

“I—I,” he stammered—“I don't know how in the world I—”

“Oh, please don’t stop for that!” she cried. “Get the shoe!”

There it was, floating away, ridiculously right side up, like one of the Columbus caravels.

He had to go out rather more than knee-deep to get it, and he came dripping back with it, in a state of utterly abject contrition.

He emptied the water out of the shoe, then took out a handkerchief and began trying to dry it with that. He wasn’t looking at her, which gave her an opportunity to look at him pretty closely. He seemed a little dazed, somehow, or at least like a man coming slowly out of such a state.

“If there’s anything in the world I can do—” he began.

He wasn’t accomplishing much with the handkerchief, that was plain. A look into her face might have cheered him somewhat, if it had been quick enough to trap her smile. But he didn’t try it.

“If you will let me build a little fire,” he began again, “perhaps I can dry it out.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” she said. “It’s not much wetter than I am.”

But the friendlier note in her voice caught his ear, and now he looked at her. “Well, the fire would dry you out, too,” he said. And then, in a sort of outburst, he went on: “I—I simply can’t account for it at all. It was a horrible thing to do. But—well, I got up this morning in a perfectly vile temper, and, as long as I had a holiday, I thought I’d go off in the country somewhere by myself and try to work it off and—and think. And seeing you there on the car, somehow, made me all the madder—”

She gasped out a little “Oh” which demoralized him still further.

“I don’t mean you personally,” he hurried on, in an agonized attempt to set things right. “Just any awfully—pretty girl—oh, please don’t mind! Thinking what a cinch it must be to be like that.”

She said “Oh!” again, but by now he was beyond interruption.

“I didn’t want to see anybody, you see; anybody I knew or who—looked as if I

wished I knew them. And then, when I came stumbling over you here, and I knew you must think I'd followed you and done it on purpose, why—And when I fell over your shoe the second time, I just burst.”

After a rather breathless pause, he looked at her. She was staring meditatively at her other shoe, and he saw her draw a long breath and then let it go.

“That’s funny,” she mused. “It’s awfully funny—really.”

However he may have expected his apology to be taken, it was evident he hadn’t expected it to be taken like this.

“It isn’t so awfully funny to me,” he said rather blankly.

“Oh. I didn’t mean what you did,” she explained; but she broke off with the air of deferring the elucidation of what she did mean till a more favorable occasion. “I think it would be awfully nice if you did build that fire,” she concluded, looking up at him with an air unreservedly friendly.

“Thank you,” he said gravely. And, with no more than a rather ceremonious inclination of the head, which she liked, he went away and set about it.

She sat up, her unshod feet still tucked away under her wet skirt, and watched him, a little surprised at the capable, efficient way in which he worked. He collected the sticks from the drift about the beach, whittled three or four of them into a brush of easily combustible slivers, and presently, with a single match, had a cheerful little blaze started under the lee of the rock she was sitting on. She could feel the pleasant warmth of it without moving at all.

“There!” he said tentatively, when the job was, beyond disguise, done.

She hesitated, too, for a minute. Then she said:

“Won’t you sit down and—dry out too? I—I mean, if you want to.”

“Thank you,” he said. But he didn’t immediately do it. “I don’t see,” he went on, “why—why you should be so nice and—friendly about it—after I’d made such a holy show of myself!”

“Well, it was a good show,” she said good-humoredly; “and, of course, if you—

blow up sometimes yourself, it's—well—satisfactory to see somebody else do it too.”

He smiled rather ruefully over her candor. But, apparently, it did away with the last of his scruples about sharing the fire with her.

He sat down on the edge of the boulder, where he could keep his eye on it. He set up her shoes where they'd get the drying effect of the blaze, and, after noting that the shoe that had not gone on a sea-voyage was about as wet as the one that had, he suggested, rather brusquely, that she'd get dry quicker if she stuck her feet out.

She looked at him curiously. Now that he had atoned for his own outrageous part of the performance, he seemed very little concerned about hers. He sat there, where he couldn't see her at all without twisting clear around, and, with no sign of resistance, let his former mood, which his kicking of her shoe into the lake had roused him out of, envelop him again.

On the whole, she was rather glad he did. If he had taken her invitation as he might well have done—began showing a tenderly masculine solicitude about how wet she was and an ardent masculine appreciation of how pretty she was (he had observed that she was pretty, you will remember)—he might have made things uncomfortable.

As it was, she was safe in smiling a little over the way he had advised her to stick her feet out if she wanted to get dry. Her younger brother would have made the suggestion in much the same terms.

“I should think,” she said at last, “that a holiday was a funny day to choose for going off and feeling like that. Unless you have so many of them —”

“Many!” His accent was derisive. “Fourth of July. Christmas—the fewest the law allows, you can be sure.”

“Well, but to-day?”

“To-day is Charles Porterfield's funeral.”

“Oh.” she said, rather mystified. “He was a great man, wasn't he?”

“Oh, I suppose so. Yes, of course. But, you see. I worked for him—I and about fifteen thousand other people. I never saw him—never knew anything about him, except what I read in the papers. His name—the Porterfield Electric Company—was on our pay-checks and on our stationery. If he’d lived twenty years more, and I’d gone on that long working for him. I might never have seen him.

“And so, to get a holiday just because he happens to have died and this is the day of his funeral, the—the swagger of stopping every wheel in every one of those big plants all over the country makes you feel”—he twisted round now for a look at her—“as if he’d owned you. Does it sound silly? In the old days, when a big chief died, they used to kill and bury a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of slaves with him—just to show they didn’t mind the expense. Well, of course they didn’t kill any of us. Gave us a holiday instead.”

She might have got his idea more clearly, though it was perhaps a little fanciful, if her attention had not got focused on something else he said—that he might have gone on working for Charles Porterfield twenty years longer without ever seeing him.

“Why,” she said. “I thought people worked up and got to be presidents themselves in twenty years.”

The odd coincidence that was in his answer startled her again. “They do in story books. ‘Work hard,’ they tell you. ‘Work your fool head off, and you will come out ahead of everybody else.’ They tell it to everybody. But an eight-year-old school-boy could see what a lie it was, if he stopped to think. There aren’t fifty really good executive jobs in the whole business; and there’s fifteen thousand of us. Figure the chances for yourself.”

“Yes,” she protested; “but that fifteen thousand takes in—the—workmen, doesn’t it? You’re not—”

“No, worse luck!” he said, with a short laugh. “I’m not a workman. I’m an electrical engineer with an expensive technical education.”

He jumped to his feet and faced the girl. He wasn’t consciously talking her—to her as a person. that is. For the moment she was just a pair of ears—something alive that would listen to him.

“I have worked there for three years—worked like a dog. I began at less pay than a laborer gets—ten hours’ work at a dollar and a half a day. Now I’m getting up in the world; I make four fifths as much in day as a good carpenter. A carpenter gets five dollars for an eight-hour day. I get twelve hundred dollars a year, which means four dollars a day. And I am supposed to be in luck.

“And I am in luck, too. There are thousands of men just as well equipped as I am, older and more experienced, lots of them, who’d grab my job in a minute, if they could get it. And all I have to do is to make two or three bad breaks, and one of them will get it.”

He pulled up there with an abruptness that made her look up at him. From the expression she saw in his face, she thought he was going to swear again. But he apologized instead.

“This is my Jonah day, all right. If I don’t make a fool of myself one way, I do in another. I beg your pardon.”

She asked what for, but not entirely in good faith. She knew what he meant well enough.

“Oh, for the lecture,” he said. “For taking an innocent stranger who couldn’t get away till her shoes got dry, and inflicting my biography on her.”

“I hoped you would,” she said. “That’s why I asked you to stay’ and dry out at the fire. I wanted to find out what somebody else had to be blue about. And it’s—sort of cheered me up.”

“You! he said; and then, not very tactfully, he laughed.

She flushed.

“Of course,” she said, “it’s such a—cinch to be a girl.”

He looked at her closely for a moment, then came round and sat down on the boulder again.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” he said. “And of course I didn’t mean that a girl’s necessarily happy just because she’s a girl. If you’re blue too, I’m sorry. All I meant was that being an awfully—pretty, well-bred girl, with a father and

mother and home and all that, looked easier to me than being what I am.

“I don’t see much of girls any more. You see, I have to live up here at Porterfield where the plant is. On Saturday nights, when I’m not going to work Sunday, I go home to town. Sometimes I go to call on a girl and take her to a dance or the theater. And it always seemed to me that they had a pretty soft thing. Most of the ones I know have been off to the mountains or the sea-shore for the summer; and the rest of the year, from what they talk about, dancing’s about the hardest thing they do.”

Evidently he perceived something ominous in the way she straightened up at that, and in the way the lines of her brows and lips grew firm; for he hurriedly hedged a little:

“I’ve had a sort of grudge against girls—nice girls, you know—lately, and perhaps I haven’t been quite fair.”

She looked at him quickly at that, and as quickly looked away again. And he, interpreting the surmise that was in her face—indeed, why should one have a grudge against nice girls unless one of them had treated him badly?—drew in his breath for a disclaimer. But the question that was neither asked nor answered, during the instant it occupied the consciousness of both, made a sudden change in their attitude. They became, all at once, personal to each other. Though, for a while, the only way you would have told it was in the inflection and the timbre of their lowered voices.

“If you were like that,” she asked, “do you think you’d like it? If dancing were the hardest thing you did, simply because there was nothing else you could do? If it were your job to dance and dress well, and have nice manners, and never do anything—adventurous or indiscreet, and you had no other job at all? Do you think you’d like that?”

“There must be a lot of things, though,” he objected, “that a girl can find to do.”

She pounced almost angrily on the phrase. “‘Find to do’! No end of things. She gets terribly busy, flies from one thing to another like mad. And then she gets worn out and nervous, and they call in the doctor, and he says ‘absolute rest.’ And she stops—and it doesn’t make a bit of difference to anybody. She might better never have started and saved the doctors, for anything she had really done.”

That held him thoughtfully silent for a full minute.

“Of course, there are real jobs for women,” he observed at last.

“Yes—for women who are trained for them. But suppose—suppose I went to town today and started looking for a job—answering advertisements, going to the stores. What could I get? If I found anything at all, it wouldn’t be even your dollar and a half a day. Just because I am not worth it!”

“That’s preposterous, of course,” he said a little uneasily, but with so little conviction\_ \_that she didn’t even bother to contradict.

“They take no end of pains with a girl,” she said bitterly. “They begin being careful whom you play with, and about your speech and manners, when you’re ever so little. And when you’re old enough, they send you to the most expensive school they can possibly afford, so that you will get to know the nicest girls. And when you come home at last, they’re terribly proud of you. You walk so nicely and dress so well, you’ve got such a bright little lot of parlor conversation, they think it’s perfectly great. You’re as proud of yourself as they are\_ \_

“And then—well, everybody else goes to work, and you’ve got nothing to do. You’re about as much good to anybody as a—as a marble bust on an onyx pedestal. You have cost a lot of money, and you’ve got to be handled carefully or you’ll break.”

She tried a laugh there, by way of brightening things up a little. But it was not successful. She went on with sudden passion:

“And it isn’t your fault! You didn’t know that everything was going to just—stop. That’s what happens. You’re just\_ \_given a number and told to wait. Dress nicely, and dance well, and not do anything to—spoil yourself until somebody comes along who wants you to —”

Her voice, which had been drawing tighter and tighter in its concentration of disgust and anger and utterly helpless revolt, broke\_ \_there in good earnest—broke and stranded itself on a dry sob that this time couldn’t be disguised as a laugh.

“I’m sorry,” he said, in an embarrassed, inadequate sort of way. “I’m most awfully sorry.”

And then something happened to him that he didn't understand. The realization of the futility of his words was the detonating-cap, perhaps, that fired the mine.

"It's a rotten world'" he said furiously, with an ineffectual gesture at the broad loveliness of the lake and the serenely smiling sky. "You and I could make a better one with a basin of mud and a few sticks."

The girl had her face buried in her hands. She wasn't making any noise, but she was shuddering.

He reached out and gripped her shoulder. "Don't'" he said sharply. "Don't!"

And then, without knowing how it had happened, he found himself holding her tight in the grip of both arms. Once more, feeling how her relaxed body was quivering, he cried out almost savagely:

"Don't!"

She drew in a long, shaky breath, and at that he let go of her and drew himself back against the wall of the break-water, so that he wasn't touching her at all.

Very slowly she straightened up, dried her eyes, and sat at last staring out blankly toward the horizon.

"You misunderstood one thing I said," he began, when he thought his voice would work properly. "About my having a grudge against nice girls. I suppose you thought I meant on account of one girl. It wasn't that. I have never known any girl well. That was what the grudge was about, really. They always seemed to be waiting, as you said, for somebody to come along. But somebody not like me. They used me to—fill in with; but what they were looking for was, naturally, a man who could support them as well and give them as good a home as their fathers did—with a twenty-five or thirty years' start on me. I knew, myself, I couldn't ask a girl to marry me—there wasn't any special one I wanted to ask, to be sure—on twelve hundred a year.

"My grudge wasn't so very reasonable, you see, because I knew it was no more their fault than mine. Only it seemed that all the—burden, you know, of waiting fell on me—all the back-breaking work and the disappointment. On me, I mean, and the hundreds and thousands of other men who were in my fix; while the girls just danced with us, and went to the theaters with us, and had a good time,

waiting to see which of us came through. I never saw their side of it.”

He had been talking along, not at all sure that she was paying any attention to him, on the instinct that silence just now would be unbearable. That unforeseen, flaming moment while he had held her in his arms mustn't be looked at yet—not until it had got farther away.

“I guess my shoes must be nearly dry by this time,” she said presently.

It wasn't much of a contribution to the soul-racking problem they had been discussing. But it told him a good deal—told him that she wasn't angry or afraid.

He got up briskly from the boulder and made an examination.

“Yes,” he said, “they are.” And he handed them to her, and walked down to the water's edge and skipped flat stones for a minute or two. And presently he found her standing beside him. That meant more than that she wasn't angry or afraid.

He turned and faced her.

“I don't know that we've changed the world much,” he said, and it surprised him to find that he had to clench his teeth tight to keep them from chattering. His voice sounded queer, too—to his own ears, at least. “But it's been good to get it talked out and understood. Hasn't it?”

She nodded.

“And it makes us—friends, doesn't it?” he went on.

Once more a nod was all her answer. And, somehow, the fact that she didn't even faintly smile, nor hold out a hand to ratify the treaty, added to rather than lessened the significance of it.

She turned and looked out over the lake. “Do you suppose it would be possible,” she asked, “to get a drink of that? I'm terribly thirsty.”

“That's not safe to drink,” he told her. “You mustn't think of it.”

There was a proprietary quality in his curt speech that made her smile. He saw the smile and understood it, and colored a little; and at that she flushed up, too.

It didn't matter much, you see, what they said or did. The thing that had caught them used it for its own purposes. As yet, they hadn't begun to be afraid.

"You must get me a drink somehow," she said.

He laughed and said, "Come along," and held out a hand to her. .. There must be a cottage of some sort up there in the woods where they'll do that much for us— even in a rotten world like this."

Both of them laughed at that. It didn't need pointing out that in the last few minutes the world had improved enormously as a place of habitation.

Getting up the steep bank was a good deal of a scramble. Indeed, if one considered how inappropriately the girl was dressed for that sort of exercise, it might be regarded as a feat. She lost each of her shoes, at one time or another. Could she be the same girl who had cried over that same calamity earlier this morning? They both felt rather riotous by the time they had reached the top.

The discouragement and rebellion of half an hour ago was not forgotten by either of them. It was a part, indeed, of their present mood. But it was as if the cold light of a badly adjusted economic world had become, by some agency they didn't understand, refracted into a spectrum. The bands of blue and indigo were there, of course; but, just for the moment, they were looking at the gold and rose.

They floundered along through the rain-laden undergrowth, the girl so often entangled and in need of a helping hand that it was hardly worth while letting go between-times. And, when they emerged at last into a sort of lane drifted deep in fallen leaves, this manner of progress had become the normal one. Neither of them was quite unconscious about it. But so long as each could manage to believe that the other was—

"This must lead somewhere," the boy said.

"To something or from something," the girl said. "The question is, which?"

It didn't matter much, they decided, and they turned to the right.

Perhaps, in the long run, it didn't matter. But you may be inclined to think, when I have finished telling you about it, that it mattered enormously: that unless they had gone the way they did and found exactly what they found—

At any rate, they did find, after following the lane a quarter mile perhaps, a little house almost buried in bushes and low-hanging trees. And, after a careful reconnaissance with reference to a possible dog, they walked up bravely and knocked at the back door, that being the direction from which they had approached it.

“It sounds empty,” said the boy; “but let’s go around in front.”

From the front also it looked empty. The tattered blinds drawn down over the uncurtained windows, the drift of leaves on the little veranda, the gaps in the board walk leading up to the steps where loose planks had been taken away, probably for fire-wood, gave it a pathetic air of desolation. It wasn’t such a bad little house, either.

“Well,” said the girl, but without moving away, “we’ll have to go somewhere else to get my drink.”

The boy caught her arm and pointed to a wind-battered sign-board that was nailed up on a tree.

“For sale or rent,” it read in letters obviously home-made and now half effaced. “For sale or rent. Apply within.”

“Shall we?” he asked. “Apply within, you know?”

“But we can’t! It’s locked!”

“I guess one of my keys would open something,” he said. “Or even a hair-pin.”

Her eyes widened a little. “That’s against the law, isn’t it? Burglary or something?”

He admitted that it might be so, technically. “But that doesn’t matter. If we wanted to buy it or rent it,”—he wasn’t looking at her now,—“if we were a young married couple out house-hunting—”

The inflection he had tried to give his voice was a miserable failure. He shouldn’t have let it tremble like that over a lighthearted little joke.

There was a silence which lasted quite a while.

“Perhaps we can get a drink, anyway,” she said at last.

She hoped it had sounded to him like the casual remark she had tried for.

He walked swiftly around to the back of the house, and, making good his prophecy that it wouldn't be hard to get into, in another minute opened the front door for her.

“Come in,” he said.

She stopped in the doorway with an almost voiceless “Oh!” Then, very deliberately and gently, but not at all as if she were hesitating, she stepped inside and carefully closed the door after her.

“It's a real little house,” the boy was saying. “You see, this one room is the whole cottage, except the little kitchen at the back. That's a jolly fireplace, isn't it? He must have brought those cobble-stones up from the beach. The whole place looks as if the chap had built it himself—the same one who lettered that sign outside. I wonder if this was all the furniture he had, or just what he left behind when he went away.”

All that the word “furniture” seemed applicable to was a rickety deal table, a couple of wooden kitchen chairs, and a decrepit rocker. Over in the corner was what looked like an immense shallow packing-case without the lid. The boy went curiously over to see what it might be.

“This must have been his bed,” he announced. “It's corded across the bottom, the way they used to do for springs, and there's an empty ticking here. I suppose he ripped the straw out for packing when he moved away—if he had anything to pack. The thing”—he hesitated, and walked back to the fireplace and stood staring at it, his back to her when he went on—“the thing's practically complete, you see, for living in. Because there are some old pots and pans in the kitchen; and a pump and a sink, and a rusty little stove on three legs.”

He broke off there, realizing that, save for that one breathless “Oh!” as she stood in the doorway, she had not yet spoken a word.

She stood by one of the windows, looking out through its dusty panes at a blaze of scarlet sumac just outside. For a moment the boy stood looking at her face. Then, abruptly, he turned away and went out into the kitchen. Presently she

heard the pump going, and then the creak of the back door.

When he came back into the room three or four minutes later, with a battered tin tea-kettle in one hand and some sticks that would serve for fire-wood in the other, he found her just as he had left her.

She spoke to him in the voice of one half out of a dream:

“What are you going to do with those?”

“Build a fire and boil the water for you to drink,” he said. “I’m not sure the kitchen stove will draw, so I’m going to build it here. And, besides —”

By now she was far enough out of her dream to smile.

“That’s perfectly silly,” she said. “Let me drink it as it is.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” he said curtly. “Heaven knows what may be in it. But it will be safe enough boiled.”

She made no further protest—stood there watching him in a sort of smiling reverie for a minute, then roused herself and crossed the room to him.

“Let me help,” she demanded. “Show me how to build a fire.”

He got the empty ticking and spread it down in front of the hearth, so that the dusty planks of the floor shouldn’t soil her skirt. Then he showed her how to build the fire, and they put the kettle on, and sat down, side by side, to watch it.

“I wonder,” she said at last, “how long it will be before the three bears come home and drive us away.”

Leaning suddenly forward, staring intently into the blaze, he clasped his hands tight around one knee.

“Shall I tell you a fairy story?” he asked. “One you haven’t heard? It’s wild, of course, but—Shall I tell it to you?”

The girl leaned forward, too.

“Yes,” she said shakily; “tell it.”

“There was a young man, once, who spent a great many years getting a very expensive education. When he had got it, they told him it wasn’t any good without experience. He could work for them for next to nothing while he was getting it. By the time he was forty, perhaps, he’d be able to afford a good house and servants and an automobile, and could begin looking for some girl to marry him. He told them by that time he probably wouldn’t care so much about getting married, and that the girl he asked would probably refuse him because she liked somebody younger better, or else she’d take him because of the automobile and the servants and the rest.

“But they told him if he didn’t like the bargain there were plenty more who did, so he took it.

“But he met a girl, one day, who had had an expensive education, too; only it hadn’t educated her to do anything. And they had told her she might wait around until some man or other, who had got to be forty—

“Weil, they met each other, these two. They happened to meet one morning, and they found a little empty house that the man’s little salary was enough for, and they decided they wouldn’t wait. And they got married then and there, and settled down in the little house. And before the man went off to his work every morning, which wasn’t but four or five miles away, he chopped fire-wood, and maybe milked the cow, and worked in the garden, or shoveled the snow. And every night, when his work was over, instead of going to a boardinghouse with a lot of other men who didn’t know what to do with themselves, he came back to his own little house and fireplace and table, and found his own—wife there waiting for him.

“She had been working all day, too, doing the sort of things her grandmother used to do—cooking and sewing and mending, and feeding the chickens, and scrubbing and cleaning—hard things that spoiled her hands and made her back ache. But she liked it better than wearing pretty clothes and—waiting, and feeling in the way. Because she knew she was necessary to somebody; that there was one man it made all the difference in the world to whether she was there or not—knew she was what he worked for and hoped for and lived for, just as she was working and living and hoping for him.

“And what they had, ever after, was a sort of happiness, though there was lots of pain in it, and discouragement, and sometimes fear. And whether the man ever

got rich enough or not for the automobile and the big house and the servants, and the rest of it, they knew they had really lived, those two, together. And maybe that's the best kind of happiness there is."

At the end of a long minute of silence:

"And didn't the three bears ever come back and try to drive them out?" asked the girl softly.

"They came back, sure enough," he said. "Did you ever hear what their names are? Respectability and Conformity and Conventionality; all one family, you see. And the young people in the little house said they cared nothing whatever about any of them. And the bears were scandalized, and went back to the Zoo in town where they really belonged. They were only dangerous to people who were afraid of them."

The girl sat there beside him, curiously still, curiously quiet, breathing softly between parted lips. The silence that had followed the telling of the fairy tale did not distress her at all.

But its effect upon the boy was different. He stirred restlessly, looked at the girl, and looked away. And, finally, it was he again who spoke.

"Well, did you like the story?" he asked in a voice plainly out of control. "It's—frantically impossible, of course. Just a piece of wild, romantic absurdity. And yet, the real absurdity is that it should be absurd. What does the fool world think it's trying to do? The results it wants are what those two people got. But it puts such a lot of barriers in its own way, and wastes so many good lives trying to get around them, that what they did—the ones in that story—looks crazy."

His wave of vehemence left him. He was trembling all over, and he clasped his arms around his drawn-up knees.

"But then, probability isn't what you ask in a fairy tale. If it just seemed wonderful enough—"

"Is that all you meant it for?" asked the girl quietly. "For a fairy story to pass the time—and then be forgotten?"

He caught his breath in a gasp, and stared at her with widening eyes.

“You don’t mean—?” he said slowly, for it was with difficulty that his trembling lips could frame the words at all.

“You can’t possibly mean—”

“I asked what you meant,” said the girl. She looked pale, even with the firelight on her face. But her voice was steady and her eyes were resolute. “I asked if it was a story you wished were true—wished could come true. Do—do you want it to be true?”

He got unsteadily to his feet and stood there before her, clutching the dusty wooden mantel-shelf with both hands.

“I want it to be true so much,” he said almost voicelessly, “that I daren’t think of it—except as a—dream.”

“But if two people have the same dream—”

She had begun speaking in the same steady, resolute voice that had before contrasted so sharply with his. But on the word “dream” it died. She sat most tensely still, as white, there in the firelight, as a lily in the flush of a pink dawn. And then she bent and broke, and buried her face in her folded arms, trembling. But when she felt his arms tighten around her she drew a long breath of content.

They stood, presently, facing each other, flushed and wondering.

“Are you sure you know what it means?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I can’t even guess more than half.”

Then he asked her if she weren’t afraid, and she nodded.

“Aren’t you afraid too?” she asked.

And when, very soberly, he admitted it, she reached out and caught him in her arms.

“Then we must be quick,” she said. “Is there time—time for us to be married to-day? And to get back here to our little house to-night? Before the three bears—”