

THE REAL AGATHA

BY EDITH HUNTINGTON MASON

PICTURES BY WELLS WALTERS FREY CAMPBELL ALESHIRE WILSON

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—Lord Wilfred Vincent and Archibald Ferguson are introduced at the opening of the story in England, the latter relating the tale. She put on an outgoing miss their train and set out on a recreation visit to the Honorable Agatha Wyckhoff, whose hand he had sought after, because of her wealth. On visiting the Wyckhoff castle they are introduced to two other girls, both known as Agatha Wyckhoff.

CHAPTER II.—At dinner three other Agatha Wyckhoffs are introduced and the plot revealed. The deceased step-father, in an eccentric moment, made Mrs. Will so that the real Agatha, heiress to his fortune and the castle at New England, might wed her only son. Thus Mrs. Armistead, chaperon, was in duty bound to keep the real Agatha's identity unknown and visitors were invited to try to find the hand of the heiress. An attempt by Terhune to gather a clue from the chaperon fails.

"I thought as much," I said. "I thought they seemed more like American than English girls. And how long has your niece been here?"

I asked the last question because I was afraid the conversation was going to stop and I felt that in another moment Mrs. Armistead might inadvertently drop a hint as to the identity of the real Agatha. It was very exciting.

"Nearly a year. This is the last six weeks of the second year of mourning, and the first of the two years she is to spend with her girl companions at the castle. You know my brother-in-law disapproved of girls 'coming out,' as they call it, and placing themselves on the marriage market. He'd rather have the young men come to see them in their own homes, so he put off my niece's presentation as long as he could, hoping she'd be married before that time, I think."

"And have you entertained many young men as yet?"

"My dear man! I should think we had, nearly two dozen at least. And they were too funny, unobtrusively trying to discover which was the girl with the money, although that is really against the spirit of the whole thing, as it is contrary to the object of the will."

At this point I grew rather thoughtful.

"Dear, dear!" she went on, "how cautiously they did go about their courtships! They were all after the money, I fear. This is a mercenary world! All the girls have received offers, but none of them has accepted."

"What hard-hearted misses they must be!" I exclaimed. "Are they all like that in America, I wonder?" And I couldn't help thinking of that girl I met last summer.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Mrs. Armistead. "It's not like English girls. They're always ready and willing to marry off whenever their mammae have provided eligible parties for them. But I can understand it in this case. No one of the Agathas is more than 22 years old, and it's great fun for them, this care-free life at Castle Wyckhoff. They have everything they can possibly want that money can buy—not one of them has ever been in England before, and they are all devoted friends. What wonder that the charms and novelty of their somewhat unusual life have not yet worn off. Really it isn't strange to me that no one of them has been able to make up her mind to leave the enchanted castle—though, to be sure, I think that young Murray Branchepeth very nearly carried off one of our Agathas. She seems to fancy him, and between ourselves I think he'll win her yet."

"And if he does he'll win the twenty millions with her, I suppose?"

I said this coolly, in a matter-of-fact tone, and waited for her denial or acquiescence, successfully concealing my interest in the reply.

But she gave me neither; she began to say something, but checked herself suddenly and looked at me admiringly.

"You're a clever man," she said, instead, "but you can't get any information out of me. Lots of them have tried, but it's no use. Besides, it isn't fair."

CHAPTER III.

Disappointed and somewhat chagrined at Mrs. Armistead's answer, I rose to my feet and prepared to join the young ladies in the drawing room. I had been so interested in discussing Fletcher Boyd's will with Mrs. Armistead that I had completely forgotten Vincent. At first I thought he had already left the room, but in a moment I heard him laugh and discovered him actually sitting on the floor before the fire, playing a species of mumble-thump with the secretary. Extremely unbecoming conduct for both of them, I thought, and Mrs. Armistead thought so, too, for she spoke sharply to the secretary, who left the room with reddened cheeks. Vincent, however, was unabashed, and, after holding the door open for her, he followed me to the drawing room, without heeding my remonstrances. He seldom does heed them, I may say.

It was on the third day of our stay when Vincent and I had begun to feel thoroughly at home at Castle Wyckhoff, and when Vincent had begun to feel more than thoroughly at home with Agatha First, that I made an important discovery. The morning

was rainy, and after breakfast there was nothing to do but to read—that is, until Agatha Sixth came downstairs. I had found her to be an unusually well-educated girl and had given her all my attention during the three days I have mentioned. So I wandered into the library and began to explore the tall bookshelves to find something that interested me. And I found it, though it wasn't exactly for what I had been looking. On the lowest shelf I discovered three heavy but new-looking albums. From idle curiosity to look at what I supposed were pictures of the dead barons of Wyckhoff I dusted the first of the big books and began to turn the leaves. I found it full of photographic reproductions of oil paintings depicting the ladies of the family, and on the last page of the book I came upon a picture which thoroughly startled me. It was a copy of a full-length portrait of the last Baroness Wyckhoff, whose second husband had been Fletcher Boyd. The picture showed a slender little lady, with straight dark hair, an aquiline nose, and a dark complexion, the living image of Agatha Sixth!

Stunned by the importance of my find I closed the book, put back the albums where I had found them and stole from the room. I had a guilty feeling, almost as if I had done something wrong, yet it had been an accident for which no one could really blame me. Full of excitement, I went to find Vincent to acquaint him with my good news, and discovered him in the morning room playing chess with Agatha First, or rather, he was showing her how to play, for he was hanging over the back of her chair and moving her hand with his hand whenever it was her move.

I called as I entered, and frowned. I am always frowning at Vincent these

days, and I should like to tell him and put a formidable rival into the field? Not that I'm afraid of Vincent exactly, for I have always found that when the girls tire of his fun they are very glad to fall back upon an experienced man like myself, who has seen the world and is acquainted with Shakespeare and the musical glasses. Nevertheless, it seemed a pity to invite Vincent to enter the lists against me, for I had fully made up my mind to win Agatha Sixth. Not that I am mercenary—not at all. But it had been some time since I seriously considered marrying, and, after all, I thought, why not consider it now, and, as long as I was selecting a wife, why not pick out one of these six girls? They were all beautiful and accomplished. "And why not," I asked myself, "while I am about it, make it that one of the Agathas, whose title was the honorable, with twenty millions?" Twenty millions, when you think of it, ought to keep a careful man comfortable for life, and Vincent was smart enough—let him look out for himself. And thus I decided not to tell him of my discovery.

We spent the evening of that day each according to his fancy—Vincent playing tag and blind-man's buff with four of the girls, while the fifth, sitting on the piano, and in the next room reading Edmund Burke's speeches aloud, while my adored Agatha Sixth did fancy-work. She really did everything very well. Finally Vincent and I took our leave, and when we were in our own rooms and Vincent had wrapped himself in my favorite bathrobe and appropriated my armchair, I was almost tempted to tell him all about it. Just as I was about to begin he spoke.

"Arch, my boy," he said—a disrespectful method of address, by-the-way, but I let him proceed—"Arch, my boy, do you know I like that girl, Agatha First? She's a true sport, and that plump little one with the blue eyes is a pace-setter."

"Agatha Third, you mean?" I asked. "I was not aware that you had got any further than our introduction with her."

"Oh, yes," said Vincent, as though it were the easiest thing in the world; "I told fortunes with her all afternoon and played tag with her most of the evening yesterday."

"Really, Vincent," I said sarcastically, "that fortune-telling game of yours

his pipe had more than—I really do like red hair best."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said, indignantly—"but, Vincent, I want to tell you something. I've made a discovery."

"What is it?" he said, without the slightest interest, and I changed my mind again.

"Nothing," I said. "I've forgotten what it was."

Vincent rose, and, stretching himself mightily, went toward his own room. At the door he turned and smiled one of the smiles he does not often give to men, and I felt that this one was not meant for me.

"I've made a discovery, too, Arch," he said.

I stared at him in amazement, wondering what was coming.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I've discovered that Miss Marsh's eyes are gray, as gray as stars," he said, only half aloud, and disappeared into his room.

"Poppycock!" I shouted as the door closed behind him. Vincent's vagaries are hard to follow at times—stars certainly are not gray. That I knew to be absurd.

My new knowledge, while it robbed the affair of its piquant mystery—for I had decided that Agatha Sixth was in truth the real Honorable Agatha—made my game even more exciting, now that the stakes were assured. I read with Agatha Sixth, walked with her, talked with her, and played chess with her all the first week; and as nearly as I could make out Vincent's program ran something like this: Before breakfast he took a horseback ride with Agatha Fifth; after breakfast he played golf with Agatha First; tennis with Agatha Third; and took Agatha Second out sketching. In the afternoon Agatha Fourth played Chopin to him by the hour. Agatha Sixth he had not approached, fearing me, as was natural. In the evening he played games with them all or retired into the library with Agatha Fifth, who seemed to have lost her head over him completely.

This program he repeated day after day with reckless lack of generalship and yet every now and then, to my surprise and disgust, I caught him deep in his unfortunate flirtation with Mrs. Armistead's secretary. It wasn't fair to the poor girl, and I told Vincent so plainly. We were sitting on the low stone balustrade of the castle—Vincent in riding clothes and looking as fine a lad as any in old England. He was waiting for Agatha Fifth to go riding with him, although it was later than usual, all of us having breakfasted. For myself, I wore my tennis things, which become me greatly, if I do say it, for I intended to play a set with those tennis fanatics, Agatha Second and Agatha Third, as the aristocratic Agatha Sixth was a late riser and had not yet come downstairs.

"No, Vincent," I said, "it won't do. Flirt with all the Agathas, if you must, but when it comes to the secretary, let her alone. To say nothing of what is due her, think of the time you're wasting. We have only six weeks—think of it—six weeks to make a try for twenty millions of dollars!"

"You forget to say that a wife goes along with the filthy lucre," he said, and somehow I felt uncomfortable. Vincent has a faculty for making one feel uncomfortable. It makes me quite angry—he's no better than the rest of us, but he's so confoundingly innocent about some things.

I was going to explain to him that he needn't speak as if he thought that I were the sort of a man to marry a girl merely for her money—when his face lighted and he spoke more rationally.

"Gad," he said, "what a rare lark it would be to toss up a coin and take a chance at it. Six to one only—you'd have a good show to win out!"

"How foolish you are, Vincent!" I responded. "Suppose you took a chance at it, as you say, and just proposed to any one of them, when you had made no attempt to win her—wouldn't she know you were fortune-hunting? And if it should happen to be the real Agatha she'd refuse you on that account because it would defeat the object of her father's will; and if it were not the real Agatha she'd refuse you, too, because she'd know she had no fortune to give you."

"Of course," said Vincent, sighing, "you're right about that. But I tell you, Archibald, I'm not flirting with Miss Marsh. She's an awfully sensible little girl, and I go to her for advice about the course I'm pursuing with the Agathas. I need encouragement, you know; it's all such a beastly mess. One doesn't know with which one of the attractive young ladies to fall in love. It's so difficult to decide with that twenty millions hovering in the background. Just think, Arch, what the governor would say if his penniless younger son should bring that amount into the family. And the daughter of a baroness, too, it would be such a match! I can just see how tickled he'd be to have his youngest so well provided for. The dear old governor!"

And Vincent's eyes moistened. "So you see," he went on hurriedly, "Miss Marsh's attitude toward me is entirely friendly. She is merely the confidante of my difficulties of the heart, and her taste, I find, is excellent."

"It is also changeable," I said dryly. "If the course you have been pursuing is through advice of hers."

Vincent smiled. "And then you know," he went on, ignoring my thrust, "she's writing a very interesting book, the history of the barons of Wyckhoff, and I'm helping her. I'm awfully interested in genealogy, y' know."

(To be continued next week)

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GENERAL HARDWARE



AGATHA THIRD.

says, it seems to me, but I really have to. He needs a little restraint.

"Good-morning, Miss Agatha," I said, pleasantly; "how does the game progress? Is Lord Wilfred an efficient teacher?"

"Very," replied the young lady, shortly, and both of them looked at me with such insolent hostility that I was obliged to leave the room, murmuring apologies for intruding.

I was rather vexed with Vincent about this; he doesn't show me quite the respect due an older man from a boy of his age. Not that I am old, or anywhere near middle age, but still I am Vincent's senior, and this lack of respect is not to be

is a little old. Can't you find something new?"

"What's the use, so long as it works?" he replied, watching the smoke from that nasty pipe of his curl upward to the ceiling. "But I tell you what," he pursued, reflectively, "that girl with the fair hair who played the piano, Agatha Fourth, she's a stunner."

"Upon my word, Vincent," I expostulated, "where do you find time for so many of them at once? Doesn't Agatha First feel neglected?"

"I suppose so," replied the young insolent, "but I can't help that. I'm going to give them all a whirl—but Archibald—he was getting sleepy and