

An Amateur Adventure

By ROSE GARDNER

BARBARA was late. Not yet so late as to convince me that something must have prevented her coming, but late enough to force me reluctantly to the conclusion that, in the matter of appointments, Barbara was even as other women. As a further five minutes passed I grew less and less pleased with this fresh proof of Barbara's essential femininity. Plenty of other people pushed open the swinging doors, stared round and went away again, or hurried through the opposite door, or strolled across as if they had come in for no particular reason. Dim faces peered through the glass, but not the face I looked for. At last I got up and went out. I thought I might see her as she came in through the gates.

Just opposite the door as I came out into the station yard something was happening. A hansom was drawn up by the edge of the pavement. A woman in a wonderful blue dress—but I shouldn't have noticed her dress if she had not been standing with her back to me—was just paying the man. Her hair was yellow. What is there about a back view of yellow hair that always makes a man want to see the face it frames?

The red-faced, rather dirty cabby was looking in a bleary way at what she had given him. He threw a sharp glance to either side as if to see that the porters were out of earshot. Then, "What d'yer call that?" he said.

"I beg your pardon," I heard her say in a rather frightened voice.

"I said, what d'yer call that? My fare?"

"Oh, isn't that right? It's not more than four miles, is it?"

"Right miss! Do you think I've got nothing to do but drive young ladies about for charity?"

She looked round for help, and I saw two appealing eyes. They were darker than I had expected from her hair and the effect was striking. Her face was that of a mere girl. She was manifestly not used to dealing with cabmen. I came forward.

"Can I help you in any way? How far have you come?"

"From Down street," she said, and gratitude was in her voice. I noticed that the accent was not quite English.

The cabman eyed me with doubt. He was leaning over to show the two shillings and a sixpence that lay in his hand. Before he had time to recover his balance I had taken the sixpence and one of the shillings.

"That's your fare," I said.

He turned his horse and went off with a face of foolishness and without a word.

She said, "Thank you so much. It is very kind of you."

I said, "Don't mention it," and we parted. She went into the station. I stood and waited for Barbara, who was not in sight. My annoyance ceased as I began to be afraid that something had happened.

Barbara's mother objected extremely to Barbara's having anything to do with me. I had no particular prospects. On the other hand Barbara and I were quite sure that we wanted to have a good deal to do with each other. That is why we were meeting at Charing Cross.

I went back to the waiting room to see if she had by chance come in the other way. She was not there. The girl with the yellow hair was there, in a seat near the window. I took one opposite and watched alternately the clock and the people. The room was unusually dull. Most of the occupants were of the drabish kind that wait there for trains. The girl with yellow hair and myself seemed the only ones who had come to keep appointments. For it was not long before I saw that it was an appointment that was the reason of her being there, and an appointment, I was sure, about which she was rather nervous.

She did not fidget her hands and work her mouth as some women do when they are waiting, but she occasionally tapped her foot very gently and frowned a little at the clock. She had a pretty frown. I could not help looking. And it seemed curiously to happen that whenever I looked at her she looked at me. Each time we both hurriedly turned our eyes in another direction.

Still Barbara did not come. I thought sadly of the carefully arranged little lunch I had ordered in a small restaurant in Soho, the name of which I will never reveal. There is a little room on the third floor, with two or three tables in it always ready for customers who never occupy them. Either they have not seen it, or they prefer the noise and bustle in the big rooms below. I marvelled that I seemed to be the only man in London who had discovered it.

The yellow-haired girl had walked to the window and was watching the arriving cabs. After a minute she went back to her seat. We both waited again.

I determined to give Barbara up. Whatever the reason, she certainly was not coming. Even Barbara could not be half an hour late. To get out of the waiting room I had to go past the girl. As I came opposite to her she gave a small smile and a bow. I hesitated a second, then decided to risk a snub.

"Can I do anything more for you?" I said.

She graciously replied, "You are very good. No, thank you. I am waiting for someone." There was no need to tell me that, but I was glad she had. Her suggestion of a foreign accent was charming. I ventured to go on.

"I was waiting for someone too. But she hasn't come."

She was sympathetic at once. "Oh, hasn't she? I am so sorry." She added, after a pause, "The person I was waiting for is late, too. He should have been here long ago."

"Is it anyone I can go and slay for you?" I asked, firmly grasping my umbrella.

She gave me a delightful little ripple of a laugh.

"He's not worth it." So it was a man.

"Besides you wouldn't know him."

"I could crouch behind the door, and fall upon him when you gave the word."

She laughed again at the picture. Then she became grave.

"I think I shall go back again."

"A man who doesn't keep an appointment with a woman to the second is a dog who is not worth waiting for," I said, and I sat down beside her. Until this minute what we had exchanged had seemed to me merely a few light sentences in passing. She looked, it struck me, a little ruefully out of the window.

"I suppose I shall just have to go back again." She turned round eyes towards me, as if speaking my view. Then the idea came to me.

"Don't," I said. "The girl I was going to have lunch with has failed me—the man you were going, I suppose, to have lunch with has failed you. Let's make up for it by having lunch together."

She looked at me doubtfully for a minute, considering. Then she clasped her hands with a little foreign gesture.

"Oh! it would be lovely, and so right!"

I thought, too, that it might be rather jolly if not quite so right.

I HELD the door open for her. As she passed out in front of me I saw her start. We met a man who was coming in. He was tall, smart, good looking in a way, but there was something heavy and rather coarse about his mouth. He looked from her to me and then back at her. She bowed slightly. He drew aside, smiled with a lift of his eyebrows that made me want to kick him, and elaborately raised his hat. She passed him, very erect, with me at her side.

When we reached the outer door I asked if that were the man. She nodded, biting her lip.

"Now he's come, hadn't I better go?" I suggested.

"Oh! no, no—please don't go." She appeared more upset than the occasion seemed to warrant. "I—I think perhaps I'd better go home." She stood irresolute, then gave a little stamp, "No—I won't go home."

I took her at her word, and called a hansom. By the time we were spinning round by St. Martin's church and up Charing Cross road she had recovered herself. As for me, the situation was rapidly intriguing me. There was more in it, I felt, than jumped to the eye.

For instance, I was puzzled by the extravagance of her pleasure at what were to me the most ordinary things. Her eyes shone as I helped her out of the cab on the rather dirty pavement before my little restaurant, and when we reached the top of the narrow stairs and the waiter threw open the door of the room with a flourish, she cried,

"Oh! this is lovely—this is lovely!"

I had always thought it jolly, but never in any way lovely. It was really rather an ugly room, with cheap lace curtains, and little more in it, by way of furniture, than three tables laid for lunch, a couch and a sufficiency of chairs. Its ceiling was elaborately covered with stencil designs, and two large imitation Worcester vases on the mantelpiece held stalks of pampas grass.

I chose a table by the window and I was glad, when the waiter took my hat, that I had called to have it ironed on my way to the station. The table was narrow, and I could look close into her face as she sat opposite to me. The light shone on her hair at the side, and on her big blue hat, with its heavy feather imprisoned in the folds of the veil she had carelessly thrown back. The face was delicate, and I noticed the beautiful modelling of her chin. I am an artist by trade.

I had time to see all this as she looked about her, with red lips parted in a smile of pleasure. She drew back the curtain, and took in the dull, dirty faces of the houses opposite. Out of one window hung a frowsy woman signing to someone in the street; on others were the trade letters of tailors, of makers of many things. Men and women sat at them, sewing, close up to get as much light as possible. It all seemed to interest her.

A thing about her that struck me was that, although she had accepted with little hesitation an invitation to lunch with a perfect stranger, she had an air that forbade familiarity.

The waiter brought the wine list and I went the whole hog with a bottle of Heidsieck—in ice. Then the hors d'oeuvres came in. If she was pleased with so many little things, I fancied she would be enraptured with the lunch. I flatter myself that I know how to choose a lunch. I may as well say that my van-



As his eyes passed from me to the wall behind me, his face changed. It showed shocked dismay. Then I remembered there was a looking glass.