

The Girl of the Orchard

By HOWARD FIELDING

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TO SUBSCRIBERS

"The Girl of the Orchard" was begun in the first issue of The Evening Teller, October 26.

So many complaints were made of irregular delivery of the paper during the first week by readers of this interesting piece of fiction, and so many new subscribers placed on the list who expressed a desire to have the first installments of the story that it has been decided to republish the story in installments of six columns a day. Seven chapters have been printed. Thursday, November 5, the last of the reprinted story will appear, together with a continuation of the interesting tale.

Still more suspicious than this falsehood was the fact that he almost immediately remembered something that he had promised to do for Mrs. Witherspoon. He made this the excuse for his departure, and a few minutes later I saw him hurrying away toward the



There stood Jimmy Lamoine offering me a light.

strip of woodland that lay back of the house. He was not in search of Mrs. Witherspoon or upon any errand of hers. It did not comport with my honor to follow him, but he had directed my attention to the grove, which was more than large enough to afford room for both of us.

I had come out with the intention of going down to the lake, but the wood upon the rising ground looked very inviting, and so, taking a different course from Jimmy's and a more leisurely pace, I ascended the gentle slope. I was almost within the shadow of the fine old trees when, turning a little to the right, I came suddenly into view of a white parasol with blue polka dots. There was a girl under it, and I stopped short. Immediately Mr. Trask jumped down from the far side of the parasol, sketchbook and pencil in hand, and hailed me by name. The sunshade dropped at that moment, and I had a glimpse of a dainty white gown adorned with blue ribbons and of a very effective hat—so effective, indeed, that I nearly fell over backward at the sight of it, for beyond possibility of question it was the one I had a picture of in my pocket. This was the more certain because I saw the hat before the lady turned her head—saw it precisely as the camera had caught it.

There was but an instant of time, yet it was quite enough. Then I saw the lady's face and recognized Miss Jones of St. Jo. She looked even prettier than when I had first seen her, and the gown she wore was certainly a miracle of sweet simplicity. As she rose to greet me I perceived that she also had been sketching, and I had already seen the "subject," who was no other than our landlady's niece, looking quite picturesque in her plain gray gown and the big sunbonnet, which seemed to be her favorite headgear.

"Good morning," she said, looking up at me without moving from the "pose." Trask laughed at her in a gently teasing fashion as he took a step or two toward her and put his sketch pad into her hands.

"You're a great model, Lucy Ann," he said. "I'm ashamed to have done no better."

She looked at the sketch with an eager, childish interest and seemed to enjoy holding it in her hands.

I saw this out of the corner of my eye, my main attention being given to Miss Jones. Positively this could not be Sibyl; there was not the slightest physical resemblance. Her manner vaguely reminded me of some one I had known, but surely not Sibyl, whose habitual embarrassment in youth must have left some trace upon her, and Miss Jones was perfectly at ease. I had been pursuing a phantom. The picture I had found unquestionably represented the girl before me. She and Sibyl must be friends, and thus the picture had come into our house.

It was both a disappointment and a relief. My thought of it was a strange mass of contradictions. I would have liked to find Sibyl, though I had come to Mrs. Witherspoon's to avoid doing so. I had given myself great uneasiness for fear that Sibyl would not be pretty, and here was the prettiest girl that I had seen in five years, yet I was glad she was not Sibyl.

While we talked there was a crackling in the underbrush and suddenly Jimmy Lamoine burst forth in a great hurry. It must have been the surprise of his life when he saw me. A youth of ordinary resources would have been puzzled to account for his own presence there, and I think it was a notable triumph of his peculiar genius that he hesitated so short a time for a falsehood, scarcely long enough indeed to get his breath.

"Your aunt wants you," said he to Lucy Ann.

The girl rose with a quaint little sigh. It was pleasanter no doubt to sit there under the shade of the trees, and to be a model for a handsome young artist, pleasanter even to envy Miss Jones' beauty and pretty clothes and unattainable refinement of manner, than to tell Mrs. Witherspoon's kitchen. I pitied her with hearty sincerity, exercising therein a virtue not my own, for such merit is no more mine than is the money that I spend. I have them both from my father, and my real nature goes back to some selfish anthropoid that lived in a tree and was perfectly satisfied so long as he had coconuts enough to fill his own stomach.

"What! More cake?" exclaimed Trask, addressing Lucy Ann in a fine, cheery tone. "Really you mustn't make it so good. We eat it too fast. I advise you to make a nice soggy one this morning."

"I guess you don't know my aunt," said Lucy Ann.

"Miss Witherspoon," said I, removing my hat with reverence, "did you make the cake that we had with our ice cream last evening?"

It is a great thing to mean what you say. If I had not vitally believed that that cake was the best ever baked since the world began, I could not have pleased this poor child. She would have seen straight through me. As it was, she gave me a quick glance of gratitude.

"Yes," said she. "I made it."

"Lucy Ann makes all the cake," said Trask. "She is an incomparable artist."

"In that case," said I, "it is fitting that I should carry my hat in my hand all the way back to the house—that is, if Miss Witherspoon will let me walk with her."

Without waiting for a reply I said good morning to Miss Jones and Trask, and grinned at Jimmy so that he might know that I was deliberately withdrawing in order to give him a chance to deliver his message about the picture. It was a great and rare pleasure to observe that he was disconcerted.

"Did you ever see the like of Jimmy Lamoine?" said I to Lucy Ann when we were out of earshot.

"If you'd taught school, as I have," she replied, mentioning the occupation with a touch of pride, as I thought, "you'd have seen a good many."

(The above concludes the re-published portion of "The Girl of the Orchard." The story will now appear in regular installments each day until finished.)

"So you've been a schoolma'am," I rejoined. "Do you like it better than making cake?"

"Cake is mighty uncertain," said she, "but I guess more school pupils are spoiled in the baking. I suppose a person naturally likes to do what he can do best. I wish I could draw like Miss Jones."

"Perhaps you could," said I, "if Mr. Trask would teach you. He teaches her, doesn't he?"

"Yes," said Lucy Ann. "He teaches her all the time."

"Is she staying here?" I asked. She seemed not to have heard the question, and I was about to repeat it when she made a gesture toward the house, and at the same time shook her head.

"You'll see her around quite often, though," she said. "Ain't she pretty?"

"Indeed she is," I assented.

"Mighty pretty, I call her," said Lucy Ann, and she compressed her lips firmly after the words were out. We walked a little way in silence.

"Goodby," she said suddenly. "I've got to go in."

She nodded to me and then ran lightly toward the kitchen door, in which



She gave me a quick glance of gratitude. At that moment appeared Mrs. Witherspoon, looking, as I thought, not quite as pleasant as usual.

I glanced back toward the spot where we had left the others. All were upon their feet. Trask facing in my direction, with Miss Jones at his right hand and Jimmy at his left. By the way that Trask's head turned from side to side I knew that an animated conversation was in progress, and I could not be in doubt as to the subject. Jimmy had told his news about the photograph. Did they guess that I had supposed it to be Sibyl's? Probably. So Trask was in the secret. He knew where Sibyl was.

Well, for that matter, so did I. Beyond question she was the girl in the orchard.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEACON AND THE WRECK.

THE north wind was gaining strength as the day advanced. The orchard was a mass of tossing boughs as I looked down upon it from my window. Those trees must have been planted by an inspired geometrician, for the design was such that whatever point of observation might be selected there was always one tree, and only one, between the observer and the lodge. It seemed perfectly easy to move a little way and get a clear view, but at the precise instant when any given tree passed from the line of vision another interposed. The branches hung low, and the lodge was on a hummock, so that a waving green veil always fluttered before it.

There was no strong temptation to look that way, for Miss Scott's side of the lodge was the nearer to the house, and Miss Scott, by all accounts, was not a romantic object. Nevertheless I had acquired a habit of staring down

into the orchard, and on this particular day the high and rising wind so tossed the boughs that I had a better view than usual. I saw Miss Scott sitting by the door, and I made her out to be angular, awkward and well past her youth, yet these were guesses, for the distance was considerable and my glimpses momentary as the green billows of the orchard rose and fell.

Presently I saw Jimmy Lamoine go down the crooked path, and I was not surprised. He exchanged a few words with Miss Scott and then dodged round the corner of the house, passing beyond my vision. Half an hour later I was startled to see him coming along the carriage way that led from the road. There was, however, no mystery in his return by this route, for the "lay of the land" was such that he could have passed from the lodge to the road without being visible from any part of the house, unless perhaps the roof.

He paused just outside my window and seemed about to deliver a remark of tremendous importance; then he changed his mind and went on without saying anything. This was one of Jimmy's favorite methods of making himself obnoxious; it was a rite in his religion of mystery, and it sometimes grieved me sorely when he thus annoyed me to be reminded of his sister. As for the physical resemblance between them which Lucy Ann had mentioned, I had never been able to see it; but I was beginning to be painfully aware that there was a certain similarity in their ways.

It was grotesque—the likeness of a fearful caricature. That which was with Anna a pretty air of reticence, the veiling of some sweet fancy, a delicious riddle, appeared in Jimmy as arrant trickery. Thus will a family trait often disclose itself in varied form in the different individuals, and beyond a doubt the prudent may now and then gain valuable warnings in this way. But I did not wish to be warned; I did not believe that it was necessary, and many a time I could most willingly have laid a hand upon James not in the way of kindness when he performed before my eyes this dire mockery of his sister.

Not long after he passed the window I saw him going down into the orchard again, this time accompanying Lucy Ann and carrying in a big basket the luncheon for Miss Scott and the girl. I observed that Lucy Ann took out the portion that was Miss Scott's and that Jimmy then carried the basket around to the other side. So Lucy Ann did not serve the girl; did not see her at all. What could this mean? Obviously that the girl was some one whom Lucy Ann would recognize if she should see her at close range.

I jotted down this point for future reference. I had not yet made up my mind that the girl was Sibyl; that is, I had said so to myself, but something within me had refused belief. Really I could as easily believe that Miss Jones was Sibyl. The basis of this confusion was that elusive memory such as drives one distracted when a name dances upon the tip of the tongue for hours, even for days, and will not be uttered. The girl reminded me of somebody, and it seemed that if I could but think of that person all doubt would vanish. It did not vanish when I thought of Sibyl.

I spent the afternoon in the woods alone, "a book of verses underneath the bough," no loaf of bread, no jug of wine, no girl. Yet, though lacking the best part of old Omar's prescription, I did not waste the hours. The trees sang well in the wind, and the odors of the wood were heady as wine. They lured me away from my book; they made me walk many miles without

weariness, indeed with an access of strength for every step, and when at last I strode across the fields toward Mrs. Witherspoon's, with the western sun giving me a half mile of shadow, I viewed that part of the house which held the kitchen with a certain uneasiness. At that distance it did not look big enough.

But no man will starve at Mrs. Witherspoon's, no matter what his appetite may be. She fed us amply and well that evening, and I went forth after the meal exceedingly content. The breeze had gone down with the sun, and the lake seemed to be smooth as a mirror when I viewed it from the head of the long path. It invited me, and not in vain.

There were half a dozen boats on the strip of beach, and I chose the one that pleased me best. It was a rule at Mrs. Witherspoon's to follow one's impulses in such matters. I judged that a person whose impulses proved to be defective would be gently eliminated from this idyllic spot and that the discovery of his unfitness would be prompt. Such was my confidence in this notion that at the end of the first week I would have gone into the Witherspoon stable and saddled a horse with my eyes shut, sure that had I been the sort of fellow to take the wrong horse I should not have remained so long a guest of the house.

I paddled out into the lake. There was still a trace of color in the sky, and all the air seemed to be most delicately rose tinted. The mere eye could not see this, could not watch it fade into the faint gray of the ashes of roses, but it was none the less visible. There were whispers from all the shores. The rough hill spoke in its own way; the low ground where the willows grow had a very different story and the orchard another. I was naturally most interested in the orchard, and I propelled the boat to a favorable position, keeping my distance, however, as I had been taught.

Suddenly I became aware of a light upon the shore. The lake meanwhile had clothed itself with indistinctness that was not the dark, but scarcely more penetrable. That light had a reddish glow, and it illuminated nothing except the narrowest path upon the water. I made it out to be a fire of little sticks kindled upon the rocks that

were quite rugged at the eastern side of the orchard's sea edge near the hill.

It was so placed as to be visible over a small area only, and this I knew from having come so suddenly into the view of it. Now, what should a light be kindled for upon the shore except for the sailor who seeks a harbor? A beacon is set upon a rock as a guide to show the way. But there are false lights, of course, and the mariner must exercise great caution; he must not set all sail in a hurry.

I am a good skipper of small craft. I can paddle over the rail of a boat, and you shall neither hear nor see anything that bears a hint of propulsion. And thus I floated in toward the shore through the gray night.

Presently there came a sound as if a hand had been laid upon a stringed instrument; then there were chords very lightly struck, and at last I heard a woman's voice singing softly an air that was new to me. Considering this matter in a coldly rational fashion, it was evident that if the lady had wished me farther away she would have sung more loudly. Her voice was so wonderfully clear, even in this whisper of singing, that I felt sure she could have made the music audible across the lake. Plainly, then, this was an invitation, and upon the strength of it I cut my distance from the shore in half. Yet the song neither ceased nor grew louder.

My boat must have been visible. It might look white or black in the night, for that question is not determined by the normal color of the paint. If the firelight reached it, the skiff would show white and declare itself more plainly for what it was. I decided to be frank about it and not try to pass for the trunk of a tree. In matters of romance I believe thoroughly in honesty—if it wins. So I cut off another rod or two of distance.

The fire was now quite distinct. It seemed to be on a flat rock not much above the water level, and behind it was a curving wall, a little cliff ten feet high, but of this only the top was visible, for it was of course impossible for me to see anything that was directly behind the light.

As for the singer, she was utterly invisible. There was something mystical in this music, which seemed to proceed out of the red fire that, with the familiar habit of inanimate moving objects, assumed to the eye the rhythm of the song. I was so deeply fascinated by all this that I forgot my seamanship and let my oar strike the boat's rail with a sharp sound.

Instantly the music ceased, and I was tortured by a perfect silence. This was an emergency, and I knew it. The finger might be at that moment escaping by some secret path among the rocks. For a moment I was near to the deadly banality of addressing her, apologizing, introducing myself, committing I know not what absurdity.

Then it occurred to my mind that since there undoubtedly was a way of escape for her it might possibly be permissible for me to sing. There have been serenades in all ages, and undoubtedly at one time or another women have listened to worse voices than mine with very kind acceptance of the offering for the sake of the spirit in which it has been made. So I sang the first thing that came into my head, and it happened to be a ballad called "The Evening Star," quite trivial in every way, that I used to sing to Sibyl long ago.

In the key that I hit, for he would have found few that could sing it. I think a special dispensation must have been granted me, for I got through the first stanza like a nightingale, but I perished freely with terror. Then I waited, and by my sensations of duration it should have been 4 o'clock in the next afternoon when I heard a blessed sound from the shore. It was the guitar, and presently the lady sang again. She had chosen "Heart's Delight," a quaint little melody, and Sibyl's favorite of all as I remembered. I have strong faith in the power and the will of chance to deceive a man, but to take this for coincidence was an impossibility.

It could be only Sibyl that sang to me, and I must have been less susceptible to emotion than was the wood of the boat that bore me if I had not thought tenderly of the little girl who had wept in the dark at "Heart's Delight" in the old days.

In the voice itself there was nothing whatever that reminded me of Sibyl. It was not girlish, and of course I could not fully realize the difference that the years had made. She was still a child to me, and the voice was womanly. I would have said the singer had been taught not only by thoroughly competent masters, but by her own emotions; well taught by both, and in the school of the heart one gets no degree at 19—it is indeed an early age to be admitted.

I made no analysis at that time; I merely thought that it was strange. Therein it was the more agreeable. I did not wish to reduce this adventure to the level of the known. It was all I asked to sit there in the red ray of fire and speak the language of music with a dream girl incarnated from the June night.

There was an interval of silence. Obviously it was for me to break it, and I suddenly began to ransack my brain for a good song. That was the wrong place to investigate. If I had left my brain at Mrs. Witherspoon's it would have been better. Promptings that are worth obeying at such times arise from the deep seated, unerring region of instinct. I could not think of the right song, but if I had sung without thinking there would have been no chance of mistake.

While I hesitated, a little breeze sprang up from the south. The bow of my boat was high, and she swung upon her stern as on a pivot, pointing toward the shore and making way in that direction. I put strength upon my oar, but too late. There was a reef in the Witherspoon lake, and I struck it. The iron shoe of the boat grated upon the rocks with a singularly long and harsh sound. It seemed to me that a man-of-war might have gone aground and made less noise.

I was 50 yards from the shore, but perhaps the girl did not know it. My boat may have been quite invisible to her. Indeed, if she were directly behind the fire it must have been. If the sound of the keel upon the rock were exaggerated to her, as it was to me, she may well have believed that I was much closer to the land.

Whatever she saw or believed, the result was the worst possible. The fire



She swung upon her stern as on a pivot.

suddenly disappeared, though by what means it was thus extinguished in an instant I could not guess. A thousand sparks shot up into the air, and then all was dark. I seemed to see a gray figure moving along the face of the granite wall, but it may have been a creature of my imagination. The question was of little importance. The incident had closed with the extinction of the beacon.

Never did mariner curse the Inchcape rock—not even Sir Ralph the Rover, who cut off the bell and then foundered there for the lack of it—as I cursed the ledge in Water Witch lake. My boat had suffered no damage, but a summer night's romance had met disastrous wreck.

CHAPTER IX.

ROSES AND LILIES.

WHEN a gentleman has serenaded a lady in the evening, it is polite to send her flowers next day. Reflecting upon this matter while eating my morning meal, it came into my mind that there might be a florist's garden somewhere in that region. Indeed I seemed to remember the shining roof of a greenhouse beside the road from the city.

After breakfast I sought information of Jimmy, who was sitting in a corner of the principal Witherspoon porch and staring at nothing with the air of one who understood it perfectly, who knew why it was nothing and could create it out of something whenever the universe should run short.

"A place where you can buy flowers?" said Jimmy. "M-m-m."

He had caught this sound from Mrs. Witherspoon and had modified it in accord with his own nature. As uttered by him and accompanied by slow nodding of the head it meant: "So this

man wants to buy flowers? Well, well! This is just what I expected."

"There's two or three of them around here," said he. "I'll think which is the best. I've got to go into the house now, but I'll be right back. Will you be here?"

In an earlier stage of my acquaintance with Jimmy I should have accepted this statement at its face value; but, having gained a knowledge of his methods, I perceived the truth, which was that he had no idea where there was a florist, and was going into the house to find some one who could enlighten him. It was immaterial to me, so I sat down in the porch to wait for him. Half a dozen of the boarders came out while I was there, more indeed than I had ever encountered before in so short a space of time. Among them was the blue-eyed girl who sat in my part of the dining room, though rarely when I was there, for the Witherspoon boarders did not remarkably in their gastronomic habits. She had a shawl, a sun umbrella and a portly volume, which was the "Life and Letters" of somebody whose name my eye did not make out, probably because I had never heard of him.

In spite of her somber taste in literature, it seemed to me that the girl might yet be saved, for she gave me a very human glance out of the corners of her pretty eyes as she went past. I was vaguely wondering what that glance would have done to me if I had not been so deeply interested in two other girls, or possibly three, as Sibyl might not be the orchard nymph—four, indeed, counting Miss Jones, who was almost certainly the prettiest of all—when there was a sound of footsteps in the hall and Mrs. Witherspoon appeared with her niece.

The lady of the house did not pause, but pursued her way to the garden, carrying the enormous tin pan in which she gathered for our delectation the finest vegetables ever grown on earth. Lucy Ann, however, was not upon the same errand, and I succeeded in detaining her.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed when I had asked her about the florist. "What do you want to buy flowers for? The prettiest roses that ever you saw grow right around here."

"But you can't get American Beauties and that sort of thing," I objected.

"They're American enough to suit me," said Lucy Ann with decision, "and I'm what they call a jingo. American? Well, I should like to know who imported them, and as for their beauty you ought to see them. Of course I know that you mean a particular kind of rose, but the idea of your wanting bought flowers!"

"I think women as a rule prefer that kind," said I, "unless the posies come out of a private garden where, of course, they actually cost more."

"Oh," she said, "you're going to give them to somebody."

"I don't care much for flowers," I replied with palpable evasion. "At the academy where I fitted for college the head master was a crank on botany, and he kept us pulling flowers to pieces until we lost all respect for them; grow to hate them, in fact—and him. I'll never forgive the rascal. By forcing my inclinations he spoiled a part of my appreciation of nature. Caesar's ghost!"

The exclamation was sudden and seemingly uncalculated for, and Lucy Ann opened her gray eyes in surprise.

"I beg your pardon," said I. "Speaking of botany reminded me of something."

"It's a gentle subject, I should say," responded Lucy Ann. "I don't see anything in it to make a person swear."

"You're a Puritan," said I, "or a Quakeress. I didn't swear, though the idea was really startling. Where did you say your aunt's garden was?"

"It's way off over there," she replied, waving her hand in an indefinite fashion toward the upper end of the lake.

"About how far?" I inquired.

She gave me a quick, keen glance.

"Why do you want to know?" she queried.

"The day that I arrived," said I, "your aunt came in from the garden with a pan of peas. As a botanist, you understand, not as a boarder, I would like to see the warm corner of Michigan where peas attain that size in the middle of June."

Lucy Ann bent forward so that her face was hidden by the edge of the gray sunbonnet. I observed that her hands, which were clothed in the remarkable gloves that she had worn the first time I saw her, were somewhat tightly clenched. I began to laugh.

"You won't say anything about this," she said, looking up. "Promise me you won't."

"I cross my heart," said I.

"Well, then," she whispered, leaning forward, "my aunt hasn't any garden. What's the use? It doesn't make any difference how nice stuff one can raise in a garden, there's always somebody who can raise better—somebody who makes a profession of it. My aunt says that this is the age of specialists. Her boarders are very select; they wouldn't stand amateur vegetables. That's the way she puts it."

"But they stand amateur cake," said I, "and I will fight any three men in Michigan who dare to assert that it isn't the best in the world."

"Bless your heart!" exclaimed Lucy Ann. "I'm not an amateur. I've studied at the best cooking schools in Chicago. I can show you my diplomas."

"Nothing could add weight to your word," said I, "not even the cake itself," for that's too light. But about this garden—

(To be Continued.)

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