

A CLEFT STICK.

No, there was no doubt about it; I had drunk a great deal more than was good for me, as my aching head and parched mouth only too painfully proved. It was not the lobster salad—I scorned the deception; it was the champagne. I had always maintained that picnics were a mistake, and now I was certain of it.

Do not misunderstand me when I say picnics are a mistake. Your real, rural, half-impromptu picnic with a few intimate friends in some pleasant spot away from the busy humdrum of every-day life is pleasant enough; but what I inveigh against is that set feast of luxuries, conveyed in a perfectly appointed luncheon basket to some hackneyed feasting-place by "pampered menials," and in which the only variety from every-day luncheon consists in that it is eaten in an uncomfortable position, instead of the orthodox comfortable one. And this had been the case yesterday. Besides, the company had not been to my taste. Imagine a single man, or, indeed, any man, picnicking with three engaged couples. Could the most contented of mortals have been happy under such circumstances?

True, there had been a few odd middle-aged outsiders, but what of that? Ah! what indeed? And as my memory began to collect its scattered particles, I had more cause than ever to curse that picnic.

We had been up the river, a party of twelve—yes, that was it—and finding that no blandishments on my part could distract the course of true love of any one of the three engaged misses from their faithful swains, I had e'en been obliged to fall back upon one of the "odd" members of the party. Urged on my wild career by desperation and frequent glasses of champagne, I had made violent love to a maiden lady of—well of a certain age. She had been too agreeable; that was her own fault. What might I not have committed myself to in my efforts to drown ennui! Who knows! Perhaps I had proposed to her. Well, she had been very charming, why not? Great heavens! she was 40 if she was a day, and perhaps she—bah!—perhaps she was "made up." At least, I remember she appeared to possess a certain amount of good looks, but how was I to know that those dark lashes were not the result of antimony, than laughing glances bella donna; that complexion, arsenic; those delicate white hands, bismuth? And now, too, I remembered that I had promised to call on her. She lived at Kensington. Happy thought; perhaps I had mislaid her address. I jumped off my chair with more alacrity than I had thought possible, and rummaged in my pockets for the card she had given me. She said, with a bewitching smile, that she was quite sure I should forget the address unless I had that card.

No such luck, there it was, only too palpable to the naked eye. I sat down again to the pretext of breakfast I had been making during these reveries. An unwelcome knock at the door, followed by a more unwelcome intruder, put an abrupt end to them.

"Hello, Charlie, old man," exclaimed my hated visitor, "how are you? Look seedy; been up all night, or what?"

"Oh, go to the deuce," I answered testily.

"Thanks; you always were a hospitable kind of fellow, but I had hardly expected so warm a reception as this?"

(I should add that the spokesman was my cousin, which may account, perhaps, for the lack of ceremony between us.)

"Well, I tell you what it is, Ralph, I am awfully down on my luck, and don't want any of your chaff this morning."

"Oh, if it's a matter of a fever or so, why didn't you say so before? You know you may always count on me to oblige you at a pinch."

"Bosh, my dear fellow, it's not that. I am a little off color, that's all. Don't you see—"

"Whew—w, I think I do see now! A woman in the case, of course. What an awful duffer I must have been not to have seen it at first!"

(How I hate the familiarity of relationship which seems to arrogate to itself the right to pry into and expose all one's personal affairs. Believe me, relations are a great mistake. I felt at this moment that I would gladly have attended the execution of one and all of mine. There was the governor, dear old man!—he always took a savage delight in telling me that I should live to make a fool of myself one day, and there is generally a half truth in what that old man observes; but the suspicion that disagreeable home-truths are true does not make them any more palatable to the recipient of them, does it?)

"Look here, Ralph," I said, "I am not in the humor for humbug this morning, so let us drop the subject of my appearance and its cause altogether. Have you seen the gov?"

"Yes, saw him just as he was going out for his morning constitutional. He looked 'fit' enough."

I winced at this overt dig at my tender spot.

"Well, suppose you go downstairs and smoke while I finish breakfast, and then we'll see how to pass an hour or two."

My tormenter was gone at last, thank goodness, but what was the torment of his presence to that of my own mind?

There was no getting out of it. I must call upon my elderly charmer, and that without delay. The longer matters were put off the worse they would appear.

I went downstairs and found Ralph smoking. Bah! I could not have smoked this morning to have saved my life.

"I suppose you have nothing to do up till luncheon time, Ralph? Will

you come for a drive? I have a morning-call to pay."

"Thought so; but why wouldn't you speak the truth at once? Who is she?"

"Time enough for you to know when you've seen her," I answered surlily.

"Will you come? I shall have to leave you outside."

"All right, old man; anything to further the interest of a friend. I don't mind playing Leporello to your Don Juan for once."

We drove to Kensington. The brilliant sun seemed to mock my gloomy thoughts, and my spirits fell to zero as we approached the house.

"Was Miss Damian at home?"

"Yes, Miss Damian was at home."

My last loophole of escape was closed. I entered the house, and had not been seated five minutes when the door opened, and a perfect vision of loveliness greeted my astonished gaze.

Picture to yourself the most beautiful creature your eyes ever rested on, or your imagination conjured up in the form of a woman, and apply the result to the present case.

Her eyes, her complexion, her figure! But I will not attempt to describe them for fear they should clash with your individual ideal of beauty, and so destroy the illusion.

She could not have been more than 19 or 20. Was this my "elderly charmer" of yesterday? No, there must be some mistake.

The vision came forward with a seraphic smile of ill-disguised amusement on my evident astonishment.

"Miss Damian?" I stammered.

"I am Miss Damian, Miss Ethel Damian, in my aunt's house, and my aunt desires me to express her regret at being unable to see you this morning. She caught a slight cold on the river yesterday, but she hopes you will call again very soon."

That voice! What can I liken it to in order to convey an idea of its mellifluous sound? All the old similes of nightingales and running water pale before such perfection.

"I am deli—I mean I am distressed beyond measure—er—what an extremely warm day!"

"You appear to find it so; I had thought it rather cool."

"What I meant to say was"—(I was becoming confused, and stumbling deeper into difficulties at every step)—"what I meant to say was that I ought to be indebted to almost any accident which was the means of introducing me to Miss Damian's niece, although I had no idea of expressing anything but regret at Miss Damian's illness."

"Qui s'excuse, s'accuse, so no more compliments to me at my aunt's expense, if you please. How did the picnic go off? I was prevented from going unfortunately."

"It was delightful!" (Heaven forgive me for the falsehood!) "Indeed, I am indebted to your aunt for all the pleasure I extracted from it. Without her it would have been dull enough."

"Ah, my Aunt Barbara has been adding yet another victim to her train of admirers, I see!"

"What do you mean? Surely—"

"Yes, it is my painful duty to state that Aunt Barbara is a confirmed flirt. Papa used to say that his sister Barbara would flirt with a pair of tongs for lack of anything better, and she has gone on practicing her amiable weakness all through life. Indeed, I always tell her that my time is spent in following her about like a sheep dog to play propriety. Do not be alarmed, she means nothing serious. It is her only foible. We are very much attached to one another, and she is always in all things my very dear Aunt Barbara."

The charm of the speaker's manner entirely carried off any sense of brusquerie that this unconventional declaration might have otherwise impressed me with.

The ice once being broken, I sat on, talking with my vision, quite oblivious to the throes of impatience that Ralph might be feeling seated outside in his hansom.

At last it was time to go. "I may call again, may I not?"

"I hope so, or Aunt Barbara will feel greatly disappointed at your lack of fealty to her."

I left the house, over head and heels in love. I had been in love many times before—in fact, I had always been falling in love ever since I was 15, but this time there was no doubt about it.

"No need to ask what luck, Charlie," exclaimed Ralph, as I bounded into the hansom, "for 'Accepted' is written in huge capitals all over your face."

"Ralph, she is an angel!"

"Ah! the most of them are, I notice, until they are married."

I deigned no reply to this insulting remark, but drove back in silent ecstasy, leaving Ralph to his own meditations.

But every sweet has its accompanying bitter, and the reaction of my miserable position upon the last blissful hour was harder to bear than before.

Why, it was ever so much worse! Here was I pledged, perhaps, to the aunt, while I was desperately in love with the niece. I recalled the words that my vision had uttered regarding her aunt's foible, as she termed it, but even this could not offer any strong solace to me. How could she know to what extent matters had gone? There was no help for it, I must go to the governor like the returned prodigal, and confess my dilemma even at the risk of being called every epithet expressive of the plain and ugly word "fool" in his extensive vocabulary.

He was sitting in the library. I felt an intolerably sneaky sensation creeping over me, and an inexpressible desire to get behind myself as I opened the door and walked, or rather edged, myself into the room. All my courage was oozing out at my finger-tips like Bob Acres'. The sooner the matter

was over the better for me, however, so I broke headlong into my confession.

At first, of course, the old man was furious. "I always had been a fool, and now I was going to commit the greatest folly of all, and tie myself up to some woman old enough to be my mother, of whom nobody knew anything, and who, for all we could guess, might not even be respectable," and so forth, in the usual manner of irate fathers, when they have got the whip-hand of their erring sons.

I bore it all meekly enough, and at last calmed the explosion by throwing myself upon his mercy and asking him to help me out of the fix. The ruse was successful.

"We must see my elderly charmer together; we had better call to-morrow. No? Well, then, the next day, and he would see what there was to be done."

And so ended the interview between governor and myself. I felt relieved, but I could not feel at rest until this tired dreading call was over.

The governor was very good all that day. He generally did turn up trumps at a real crisis.

The next day after lunch he proposed a stroll in the Row, as he said, to distract my attention from the painful and absorbing topic that engrossed it.

We had been walking up and down, stopping now and again to greet some passing friend, when I suddenly saw my vision before me. It could be no other; there was not a face among all the beauties present that could have compared with, or be mistaken for, hers. She was sitting under the shade of one of the great elms, daintily dressed in some diaphanous, creamy-white material, and looking more bewitching than ever. And that lady sitting beside her—why, that, of course, was she to whom I believed myself engaged, my elderly charmer.

In my self-accusing hour of remorse I had done her an injustice. There was no "make-up" there. She was dressed in good taste, and as became her age; any disinterested person would have pronounced her a decidedly elegant woman, well preserved for 40, if indeed she were so much, and with no small pretensions to good looks.

I started involuntarily, and the governor observed it.

"Well, Charlie, what's amiss now?"

"Why," I answered, growing suddenly scarlet all over, "there she is."

"Where?"

"Over there, sitting under that tree and talking to that lovely girl in white."

"Now for it, my boy; introduce me."

I walked forward and raised my hat.

"Miss Damian—"

"Ah, so we have met sooner than we expected, Mr. Carew; accept my apologies for having a cold yesterday when you called, yet I can hardly blame the cold, for it was caught at the picnic and is now gone, and had it not been for the picnic we should not have met, and you would not have called at all. I dare say my niece did the honors for me better than I should have done them myself."

All the answer that I could make to this was to look rapturously at Ethel and mumble inarticulately to Miss Damian.

There was certainly a touch of coquetry in Aunt Barbara's speech, but it was the permissible coquetry of a lady who knew her position and could maintain it.

I introduced the governor by way of hiding my idiotic confusion, and the conversation became general, or rather broke up into twos, for I seized the vacant chair next to Ethel, and left the governor to Miss Damian altogether.

You may not believe me, but it is perfectly true that I forgot all about my dilemma from the moment I plunged into that heavenly tete-a-tete with Ethel, and was oblivious of all surroundings.

At last my trance was broken. Miss Damian leaned forward and pointedly addressed me.

"I am telling your father, Mr. Carew, that he must change places with you and give me a chance of renewing our pleasant acquaintance of the day before yesterday."

The governor did not seem to have exerted himself much in my cause; he was beaming all over with an expression of gratified vanity, evidently not the result of a battle fought in my favor.

I tore myself away from Ethel's side and changed seats.

"Do you think that I am going to let my preux chevalier of the picnic imagine he is going to shelve me in that easy fashion to-day? Had you a very bad headache yesterday morning, Mr. Carew? I know you attacked that champagne a great deal too severely, nasty as it was, but no matter, compliments aside, confess that you were indordinately bored at the feast, and that you only fell back upon me as a pis aller, pour passer le temps. Engaged lovers are the most selfish creature in the world, certainly. No, you won't—well, then, I shall keep you to every word that you uttered to me on that occasion." (Good heavens, now it was coming; then I had proposed to her!)

"Do you remember all that passed as vividly as I do? If so, your head is a stronger one than most young men's of your age."

What in the world was she driving at, I wondered—had I proposed to her or not? If so, why did she adopt this material tone toward me (I was 25); and if not, what did this occasional coquetry of manner portend?

"Do you know, Mr. Carew, that although I have directed several remarks to you, and asked you at least two plain questions within the last five minutes, you have remained absolutely mute?"

What had been the use of my introducing the governor if this was the

quagmire of embarrassment in which he had left me? He had not even smoothed the way for an explanation.

I collected my senses—there was no escape. "Miss Damian," I began seriously, "believe any ill of me that you please, perhaps the champagne was not very good (I had not stopped to consider its quality at the time), but my memory is not so faulty as you imagine, and at least accept my assurance that anything I uttered to you the day before yesterday I am prepared to stand by now, and if the devotion of a life can—"

She interrupted me with an incomprehensible smile. "Ah, that is what you all say, but how can I place any dependence on such expressions when you seize the first opportunity to leave me for the society of my niece?"

"Miss Damian, believe me—"

"Mr. Carew, I will believe nothing now, but see, your father is going, and it is time for Ethel to be returning with me. Good-by for the present, and if you and your father care for our society, come and lunch with us one day next week." Here the governor came up in time for the invitation, which he accepted with a positive chuckle of delight.

So I had committed myself and could not now retract. Farewell, Ethel, my vision of light, farewell to all my hopes and dreams for the future, henceforth.

"Father," I exclaimed, with a dignified sneer, as soon as we were left alone, "permit me to express my gratitude for the able manner in which you have helped me upon the most trying occasion of my life."

"Why, you young cub; you don't know when you are well off. Miss Damian is a perfectly charming woman. I had no idea from your description that she could be such a delightful creature. 'Made-up,' indeed, you puppies of moderns seem to think that no woman who has outgrown the follies of the school-room can retain a vestige of natural beauty."

"Thank you," I replied, sullenly, "but whatever Miss Damian's preservative qualities may be, I have no wish to marry a woman old enough to be my mother."

"You have only yourself to thank in the matter, and must abide by the consequences. Don't blame me. As it happens, you have done by accident perhaps the wisest action in your life, and selected a wife in every way fitted to enhance your position, and keep you out of mischief."

I clearly saw it was no use to go on arguing with the governor while he was in this mood, so with a half-smoothed ejaculation, which was not a blessing, I let the matter drop for the time.

For several days after this I went about with a hang-dog expression which seemed to cause no little amusement to my cousin Ralph, who was forever popping in upon me and rallying me upon my appearance in a manner which he, no doubt, thought very witty. I wonder I did not kill Ralph when I looked back at that time. He richly deserved it.

The governor and I had accepted Miss Damian's invitation to lunch for the following Wednesday. I was rather at a loss to understand his evident impatience for the starting hour to arrive as soon as the day came round.

He had disappeared unusually early to make his toilet, I thought, as I sat smoking in the library and feeling far from comfortable at the prospect of this luncheon with my elderly betrothed.

While I was engaged in this manner the governor entered, dressed to a state of discomfort that almost looked like anticipating the wedding.

"Why, Dad," I exclaimed, "I never saw you look so young before! You seem to have cast off twenty years of your life with your old coat, just like a snake. Where did you get that gardenia from?"

"Nonsense, my boy, nonsense, there is nothing unusual, I suppose in making one's self look respectable; but what are you doing here, Charlie at this hour? You ought to be ready to start, and for goodness sake throw away that filthy cigar. I don't want to go to Miss Damian's reeking of tobacco." (The Governor never used to object to tobacco at any time of his life; he was an inveterate smoker himself.)

"It wants more than half an hour to the time," I replied, nonchalantly—"no hurry, we shall be quite soon enough."

"There, that's just the way with all you modern young men; you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. When I was young it was considered an atrocious breach of good manners to keep a lady waiting, but you youngsters are all so stuck up in your own conceit that I believe it is a part of your religion to go late everywhere for the satisfaction of creating an excitement, just like a parcel of young misses, but I don't intend any of these degenerate habits to influence me. Go and make yourself presentable at once, and for heaven's sake use some eau de Cologne to banish that disgraceful odor of smoke, sir—Miss Damian's is not a pot-house."

I slunk upstairs without further parley and made the necessary alterations in my dress, then we drove off together to Kensington.

Who shall say that acting is only acquired by practice? I believe Charles Mathews himself could not have schooled his natural instincts to affect a greater air of polite embarrassment than I managed to infuse into my greeting to Miss Damian.

And Ethel—I was obliged to command my feelings still more severely with her, perhaps not quite so successfully, for I felt her tell-tale blush mount to my face, and my hand trembled visibly as I clasped her dainty fingers for the space of the orthodox few seconds.

Luncheon was over. It had not gone off so badly as I had anticipated, all things considered. The governor had been more animated than I ever remember having seen him, and he most considerably monopolized nearly all Miss Damian's attention during the meal. Now he had, apparently with some reluctance, given up his seat next Miss Damian to me. We were sitting half-shaded by a screen, and Ethel was making conversation in her graceful manner with the governor.

"And so I am really to believe that you hold to the declaration you made to me up the river last week, Mr. Carew?"

"Can you doubt me? Did I not repeat it to you in all earnestness in the Row only a few days ago, Miss Damian?"

"You are a very chivalrous young man, the apt pupil of a chivalrous father—I wonder if you mean all you say, and still more I wonder if you distinctly remember what you really did say at the picnic. I have always had my doubts on that subject."

"Miss Damian, do you wish me to repeat it now?"

"Certainly not, for I am sure you could not if you tried; but to relieve you of all further anxiety on the subject I will tell you, not all that you said, for that would be to repeat too much good-humored nonsense, but the one important declaration which evidently weighs so heavily upon your conscience."

"I am all attention."

"Well, you confided to me, of course, in the strictest secrecy, that you never could marry any woman if you thought she were capable of consuming as much lobster salad as any one of those three young ladies did, against whom you seemed to bear such a grudge for refusing to flirt with you in the very presence of their fiancés. There, I thought you would feel relieved, but it is a very bad compliment to me to let it be so apparent."

Good heavens! and was this all? Had I been making myself miserable and objectionable to all my friends for the past week, and for nothing? Even my habitual self-control failed me now, and the expression of delight on my countenance no doubt deservedly called forth Miss Damian's reproof.

I was a free man again, yet honor forbade me to jump at the position too eagerly.

"You cannot think," I said, "that this little misunderstanding can alter the relations between us?"

"Relations! what relations? I don't understand you, Mr. Carew."

"Surely, you could not have mistaken the nature of my offer to you the other day in the Row?"

She burst into a little fit of laughter. "You foolish boy, do you take me for an ogress? Could you not see that I was only amusing myself? I value the freedom of my maidenhood a great deal too much to part with it so easily. An old maid I am, and an old maid I mean to be to the end of the chapter. Besides, do you think I have no eyes? I am far too experienced in reading 'the signs of love' not to have observed where your heart is fixed, perhaps not without good grounds," and she looked expressively across the room to where Ethel was sitting. "Love at first sight is no such uncommon occurrence after all, is it, Mr. Carew?"

I raised her taper hand and reverently kissed it. "Miss Damian, you have taught me a most gracious lesson, and I should be most ungrateful not to profit by it. Believe me this time when I assert that my allegiance to you is, in another form, stronger than ever."

"That is well, and now go and talk to Ethel and leave me to amuse your father; that is more in the fitness of things."

And I was in a delirium of delight for the rest of the afternoon. What need to say how often I called at the house in Kensington after this? Indeed, I could not if I attempted. Enough that I at last "screwed my courage to the sticking-place," and obtained the one word from Ethel that was wanting to make my happiness complete.

Our wedding took place in the following month, with the usual orange blossoms, white lace, fees, and frippery. That abominable Ralph was my groomsman. The laugh was all on my side now, and he has never to this day suspected the real facts of the case when he drove with me to Kensington that morning after the picnic, and waited outside the house in a hansom.

"Oh! Charlie," exclaimed my Ethel as we started for Paris on our wedding trip, "what a good thing it is you married me, for now I shall make such an excellent chaperone for Aunt Barbara."

When we returned to London, the old governor was the first to greet us.

I could not make out what had come over him, he seemed embarrassed, and anxious to avoid meeting my eye, and turned the conversation whenever it touched upon home topics.

At last when we were alone he came up to me and put his hand shyly upon my shoulder. "Charlie, my dear boy, don't call your father an old fool, but you see the house was lonely after you left it, and I had no companion to amuse me in your absence, and so, and so—fact, Charlie, Miss Damian is now Mrs. Carew, and your stepmother."

"Bravo, governor!" I exclaimed, "and a charming stepmother, too; accept my best wishes?"

So, you see, Aunt Barbara did not require Ethel for a chaperone after all.

—[Temple Bar.

A clerk at a Pittsburgh stockyard appropriately refers to his salary as a "stympered."—[Pittsburgh Telegraph.

The ordinary restaurant waiter measures all his customers from tip to tip.—[N. Y. News.