

Hildreth and Local Color

By Mary Mullett

NOT a breath of air was stirring. In the writing-room of the St. Louis Club it was stiflingly hot, and for the twentieth time Hildreth mopped the perspiration from his face.

For the twentieth time, also, he glanced at a letter, lying open before him. The occasion of his perplexity lay in this open letter, which ran thus:

DEAR FRED: I'm writing a detective yarn which calls for a scene on the St. Louis levee. As I haven't even been in the city, I'm decidedly shy on local color. Send me a few points, like the good old chap you always were, and I shall be—

Your eternally grateful

WICKS.

Hildreth's reply began blithely enough, like this:

DEAR WICKS: What in thunder do you think I know about the levee? As for its local color—

But there he stuck. In vain he prodded the ink-well till it danced. It was only after much mopping that he proceeded:

—an unprejudiced observer might call it pretty black.

And there he stuck again. He was still prodding, mopping and muttering when Danforth looked in. "Oh, it's you, is it?" drawled the newcomer. "Thought I smelled something frying."

Hildreth smiled the lack-luster smile of the man who looks funny to others.

"If you want to save my reason, Danforth," he begged, "tell me something about the levee."

"The levee! What in thunder—"

"I've said that. And that it's dirty. What next?"

"Why—I don't know. But," brightening up, "I'll bet Tolman does."

"Who's Tolman?"

"A friend of mine from up North. He's brought a party down here on a house-boat and I'm going down with him to dine on board as soon as he finishes telephoning. Come out here and I'll introduce you as a seeker after truth about the levee. He weighs two hundred and it's most all heart, so maybe he'll ask you to go along."

And it was even so. After feeble protests from Hildreth, into which he vainly endeavored to put some backbone, Tolman led the way to his touring car which was waiting outside.

"Perhaps I'd better own up," he said as they were about to start; "I intended to do the bold buccaneer act and surprise Danforth by carrying him off; but I won't treat you so unceremoniously, Mr. Hildreth. I've just telephoned the wharf-boat to have my crew get up steam. We'll go up the river this evening and be back here by nine or ten in the morning. If either of you want to send word to anybody, you can telephone from the Planters' on the way down."

Danforth closed his eyes and leaned carefully back. "Don't wake me!" he whispered. "It's the first pleasant dream I've had this summer."

"And you?" laughed Tolman, turning to Hildreth.

"It's too late to lose me!" was the firm reply.

"I've had a lifelong yearning to be carried off by pirates."

So it was settled; and as the auto stemmed the tide of homeward traffic, Hildreth idly wondered what sort of an experience was in store for him.

At the hotel, Danforth disappeared in the telephone booth, from which he shortly emerged, breathing malediction.

"I told you not to let me wake up!" he groaned. "Here I've got to go to Chicago to-night!"

Afterward, when Hildreth tried to account for the contretemps at which he arrived, Danforth's failure to go with them that night loomed big as the beginning of it all.

Half-way down, Tolman pointed to two dazlingly white boats, the house-boat in front, the steamboat snuggling close behind it. Screen awnings, cool green and white, were dropped on the sunny shoreward side and a little breeze was lazily worrying a long pennant. Hildreth drew a deep breath of pleasant anticipation.

"This being carried off by pirates is all my fancy painted in!" he remarked as they ran up a grooved gang-plank and nosed in between several other autos on the forecastle of the steamboat.

"The staterooms over on the house-boat are full," said Tolman, as he led the way upstairs; "but here's a room and a bath where you can make the best of your captivity. I'll send a boy to see what you need, and I'll come after you in time for dinner."

Hildreth emitted the usual inarticulate mumbles as, in hospitable Western fashion, he was presented to person after person. When he finally took the place beside his host, he retained but two facts out of the medley of introductions. The small boy was his host's little son Harold. That fact was not particularly interesting, but at the thought of the other he shot a satisfied glance toward the opposite end of the table.

It was the place where one would naturally expect to find the wife of one's host; but Hildreth recalled with satisfaction the words of their introduction in Tolman's hearty voice:

"Dolly, here's a prisoner I captured at the club. Mr. Hildreth, my cousin, Miss Neville."

It went over and over in his mind. "My cousin, Miss Neville. My cousin, Miss Neville." Just then her brown eyes flashed him a smile and Hildreth felt a little thrill explore every corner of his being.

That afternoon, when he was struggling vainly to define the local color of the levee, somebody had hinted that inside of two hours he would be going into a tremor at a glance from a girl's laughing eyes, he would have scorned the prophecy.

Of course, the idea of love at first sight had sweet-

ened his salad days. Youth is prone to sugar its lettuce, but he had long ago abandoned such immaturity. Yet here he was, beaming upon his host and laying himself out to be engaging to his host's small boy, all because "Cousin" Dolly smiled at him from the other end of the table.

Hildreth was not one to scorn a means to an end; and before dinner was half over small Harold was his slave, a victim to an invitation to an Indian encampment. When Tolman himself confessed to a weakness for Indians, and suggested that they all go together, Hildreth tried to look as if his heart was not turning piteous somersaults within him. But it was.

Meanwhile the two boats had slipped away from the levee and headed up-stream, bringing a cool rush of air in at the windows.

"Ah-h-h-h!" said Tolman. "Now we begin to live! Dolly, what would you say to dessert on deck?"

"I'd say, 'What a nice place to meet you!'" and promptly pushing back her chair, Miss Neville led the way upstairs.

From the steamboat behind them came the faint pulsations of the engine; but the house-boat itself moved as silently as if it were a great swan. Out of the tail of his eye, Hildreth observed the best-looking man of the crowd maneuver Miss Neville into a sort of pocket among the deck furnishings, which pocket the man immediately closed by seating himself at the

entry. Hildreth, however, merely sighed contentedly as he took the vacant chair.

"Judging from my sensations," he remarked, "I fear Mr. Jenks is consigning me to depths I have always considered—well, beneath me. I can generally gauge the depth I am sent to," he continued, "by the height to which my spirits rise; and from the way they are climbing now, I think it must be the nethermost limbo this time."

"Oh, your spirit barometer is out of order," said Miss Neville, with candor. "Mr. Jenks and Cousin George have been fussing all day about that auto. I tell them that when they are not in an automobile and swearing by it, they are under one and swearing at it."

"Then I'm to regard myself as a ministering angel?" chuckled Hildreth. "A relief column, allowing Mr. Jenks to gratify a consuming desire to go down and swear at the auto?" I don't doubt the swearing, but—" he shook his head. "By the way, Miss Neville, I may as well break it to you that I contemplate becoming a connection of yours. There is talk of your small cousin Harold's acquiring me by purchase."

"If that's so," laughed Miss Neville, "I may as well accept you at once as a member of the family."

"It might save time," was the thoughtful reply. Hildreth planned all manner of possible and impossible things as he lay in his berth that night. And he surprised Dame Destiny by actually carrying out some

Even in the elysium in which he had lived for the past week, he had met occasional anxious fears, but not one of them had so much as whispered the name of Tolman! He had been too much absorbed by his own hope of happiness to give more than a passing thought to Tolman's bereavement or possible consolation.

He wondered if he were the only one in the party to whom it was not an open secret. There was Jenks. Could it be that to Jenks, too, Harold's remarks had been a revelation? Or had his supposed rival been in the secret all the time? Hildreth looked at him, but, either from delicacy or from embarrassment, Jenks had turned away.

As they started back to the boat, Hildreth—trying not to be too precipitate—managed to pronounce a question:

"How long since Tolman lost his wife?"

"Oh, not very long," said Jenks, after a moment.

"The boy"—Hildreth indicated Harold, who was flattening his already sufficiently snub nose against a shop window—"the boy says Miss Neville is to be his—his second mamma."

"Yes, I believe that's all settled," laughed Jenks. Then, with unexpected consideration, he changed the subject and finally made an excuse to go back to the fair, taking Harold with him.

Hildreth, glad of any respite, struck blindly off into

"He is over on the steamboat, I think. But—I hope you won't have to leave us."

"Humph!" mused Hildreth bitterly. "I suppose she is politely suggesting that here is a chance to remove myself."

Aloud he said: "I'm very much afraid that is just what I must do. I think I'll hunt up Mr. Tolman and find out where I can get a train."

Whatever doubts he might have had about Miss Neville's unwillingness to part with him, there was no question about his host's reluctance.

But Hildreth insisted upon the necessity of his reaching St. Louis more speedily than the boat could. So it was arranged that he should be landed at Beardstown.

After he had been landed at the Beardstown levee he looked around for some one to carry his luggage to the station.

"How can I get these things to the train?" he asked of the usual group of levee loungers.

"Mebbe you can get Haley's back," one of the loungers observed, indicating a rickety landau reeling down the street toward the levee.

Almost before it had stopped a woman jumped out and ran down to the water's edge, frantically waving her handkerchief—though without result—at the two boats which, after merely slowing down to let Hildreth make a quick landing, had gone rapidly on until they were now well down the stream where, ten miles below, they were to tie up.

"Didn't those boats land here?" she demanded.

"Just slowed up to let this gentleman ashore."

Hildreth lifted his hat as the woman turned toward him.

"You"—she seemed to be taking a rapid and somewhat puzzled survey of him—"you were—one of the pilots?"

"No," Hildreth shook his head. "A mere guest."

"Oh, of course"—with an embarrassed laugh. "I think you must be Mr. Hildreth. 'I was on my way to catch the boat at Peoria,' she went on, 'my husband wrote that he would be there to-night, and I thought I would surprise him.'"

"We were to have been there," said Hildreth, "but the plans were changed."

"Oh, that's it! Well, as my train was coming into town here I had a glimpse of the boat and—well, I doubt if the porter has caught his breath yet!"

She laughed, but made a rueful grimace in the direction of the boats.

"George Tolman, aren't you ashamed to run off that way and leave your wife in this predicament!" she exclaimed.

Hildreth jumped. Then he thought that his ears must have deceived him.

"May I know," he asked feebly, "whom I have the pleasure of—of wanting to serve?"

"Why"—with a look of surprise, almost of suspicion—"why, I—I thought you were my husband's guest."

"I was Mr. Tolman's guest," Hildreth replied.

"Well—Mr. Tolman is my husband."

"Your—"

Hildreth swallowed and tried again.

"Your—husband? Then—you are—Mrs. Tolman?"

"A not unnatural inference," was the ironical reply.

"Then you're—you're not dead?"

"N—not yet"—regarding him in evident alarm and moving closer to the group of loungers.

"Mrs. Tolman," Hildreth said hurriedly in a low tone, "I can see that you think I belong in an asylum, and I don't blame you. But will you please tell me once more—are you Mrs. George Tolman, the wife of the owner of those boats and—" he clinched the matter—"the mother of little Harold?"

"I am!" remarked the lady stiffly.

"Well," said Hildreth, "I don't pretend to understand it, but I assure you I'm delighted to find that you are the kind of an angel you are instead of the kind I thought you were." He turned to the deeply interested spectators. "Those boats are to tie up about ten miles below here, and I want a good team to take this lady and myself down there."

It was with some difficulty that Hildreth reassured Mrs. Tolman as to his identity and his sanity, but when, in the course of their ride, he had given her—under the seal of secrecy—an account of the comedy of errors which had shipwrecked him on the Beardstown levee, she regarded him with the sympathy with which a woman always rewards a man for whom she has no sentimental use herself when he lets her into the secret of his romantic intentions.

"I wonder," she said, with a shrewd smile, "whether Mr. Jenks will feel that you deserve a reward for finding the 'lost' Mrs. Tolman?"

"Oh," protested Hildreth, "Jenks misunderstood me, of course."

Later, Hildreth contented himself with discovering, by indirect tactics that the baldish young gentleman who had called Tolman a "widdy man," used the phrase of a figure of speech for any husband whose wife was not present, whether due to her actual absence or, as in the case of Mrs. Tolman, to the sudden illness of a dear sister.

As for Harold's declaration that his cousin Dolly was to be his "second mamma," that was a flattering recognition of Miss Neville's extreme desirability that Hildreth forgave its share in his discomfiture.

It was not until he was back in St. Louis, rapturously dividing his time between the house-boat and the jeweler who was making the engagement ring to order, that Hildreth found in his pocket the telegram which had acquired and lost importance with such extraordinary suddenness. At first he tried to write a reply but tore up the feeble attempt, and finally wired the long-suffering Wicks as follows:

Local color of levee extremely variable. Generally black, but rose-color at present. Particulars later. FRED.



FRANTICALLY WAVING HER HANDKERCHIEF AT THE TWO BOATS WHICH HAD GONE ON DOWN THE STREAM.

entrance. There was a moment when Hildreth might have defeated the maneuver, but he stuck grimly to his host's vicinity. It would be daylight for a good hour yet!

So, letting the man make the most of his little triumph, Hildreth took a hint out of Shakespeare and attached young Harold—and therefore young Harold's papa—to his side with hooks of steel by telling tales of his Nebraska ranch. Gradually the slowly drifting panorama of the shores grew dim. And having extracted a reluctant good-night from the rapt Harold, Tolman disappeared with him down the gangway.

"Don't forget his prayers!" called a baldish young man who had joined the group. And to Hildreth he added, "Makes a model 'widdy man,' doesn't he? Always has the little chap next to him at the table, puts him to bed, and hardly lets him out of his sight. By the way, speaking of ranches, did you ever run across any of the Bar Circle outfits?"

The two men were still deep in ranch talk when Tolman came back.

"You don't happen to be for sale, do you?" he said, smiling down at Hildreth. "The way that boy of mine covets you makes me tremble for the rest of the commandments when he gets around to them."

Hildreth experienced the pious satisfaction of the chess player who has made a good opening.

"I'm his to command," he laughed. "I'm afraid I shall by no means stand so high, though, in Miss Neville's opinion," he added. "I'd like very much to 'make my manners' to her, but—the situation reminds one of the coking of Santiago harbor, and a non-combatant feels a natural hesitation about trying to lift the blockade."

"Humph!" said Tolman, peering through the dusk. "I guess I'm enough of a combatant to take a hand. You come with me."

The house-boat's Apollo—his name turned out to be Jenks—glanced up at their approach, and when Tolman asked him to take a look at one of the autos he professed a willingness which was abnormally cheerful. But there was a lingering quality about his departure which would have stirred almost anybody to

of these plans during the next few days. Perhaps his audacity rather pleased her, for she gave him such a lift as he had not dared dream of.

"Is that you?" the voice of Tolman called over the telephone one day. "If your yearning for a piratical career is still unsatisfied, we want you to go off with us for a little trip. Can you go?"

"Can I?" Hildreth replied in tones which made the telephone buzz. "If you go without me, I'll come after you, if I have to swim."

As the boats meandered up the Mississippi and along the byways of the Illinois, Hildreth would listen with a very good imitation of attention to Tolman's bits of information, but the only geographical fact which really penetrated his consciousness was his nearness to Miss Neville. Occasionally also, he was made aware of Apollo Jenks' proximity by the rather ill-concealed animosity of that individual.

When they had landed at Peoria, Jenks was invited to join Harold and Hildreth in making the rounds of a street fair. He proved to be a good deal of a death's head at the feast, but Harold made up for that by moving in a trance of rapture.

"My!" he exclaimed, when he came face to face with the glories of the shooting gallery, "I wish Cousin Dolly was here!"

Hildreth's heart warmed to the boy.

"You're pretty fond of your cousin, aren't you?" he said with a benignant smile.

"Yep!" was the succinct reply. "She's goin' to be my second mamma."

"What!" Hildreth exclaimed before he could stop himself.

"She's goin' to be my second mamma," calmly repeated Harold before losing himself in the joy of sighting along a rifle barrel held by the suddenly assiduous Jenks.

Of course, there is no such phenomenon in nature as that a man's mind should sit down in a chair. Nevertheless, Hildreth felt as if his had been on the point of achieving that act and, at the critical moment, some one had jerked the chair away. He was incredibly jarred.

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Next Week: A Spoiled Dinner

By Harriet Whitney Durbin