

**ДЖИН
УЭБСТЕР**

MUCH ADO
ABOUT PETER

Джин Уэбстер

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Содержание

I	5
II	11
III	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

Jean Webster

Much Ado About Peter

I

GERVIE ZAME, GERVIE DOOR

Peter and Billy, the two upper grooms at Willowbrook, were polishing the sides of the tall mail phaeton with chamois-skin rubbers and whistling, each a different tune, as they worked. So intent were they upon this musical controversy that they were not aware of Mrs. Carter's approach until her shadow darkened the carriage-house doorway. She gathered up her skirts in both hands and gingerly stepped inside. Peter had been swashing water about with a liberal hand, and the carriage-house floor was damp.

"Where is Joe?" she inquired.

"He's out in the runway, ma'am, jumpin' Blue Gipsy. Shall I call him, ma'am?" Billy answered, as the question appeared to be addressed to him.

"No matter," said Mrs. Carter, "one of you will do as well."

She advanced into the room, walking as nearly as possible on her heels. It was something of a feat; Mrs. Carter was not so light as she had been twenty-five years before. Peter followed her movements with a shade of speculative wonder in his eye; should she slip it would be an undignified exhibition. There was even a shade of hope beneath his respectful gaze.

"Why do you use so much water, Peter? Is it necessary to get the floor so wet?"

"It runs off, ma'am."

"It is very unpleasant to walk in."

Peter winked at Billy with his off eye, and stood at attention until she should have finished her examination of the newly washed phaeton.

"The cushions are dripping wet," she observed.

"I washed 'em on purpose, ma'am. They was spattered thick with mud."

"There is danger of spoiling the leather if you put on too much water."

She turned to an inspection of the rest of the room, sniffing dubiously in the corner where the harness greasing was carried on, and lifting her skirts a trifle higher.

"It's disgustingly dirty," she commented, "but I suppose you can't help it."

"Axle grease *is* sort o' black," Peter agreed graciously.

"Well," she resumed, returning to her errand with an appearance of reluctance, "I want you, William—or Peter either, it doesn't matter which—to drive into the village this evening to meet the eight-fifteen train from the city. I am expecting a new maid. Take Trixy and the buckboard and bring her trunk out with you. Eight-fifteen, remember," she added as she turned toward the doorway. "Be sure to be on time, for she won't know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am," said Peter and Billy in chorus.

They watched in silence her gradual retreat to the house. She stopped once or twice to examine critically a clipped shrub or a freshly spaded flower-bed, but she finally passed out of hearing. Billy uttered an eloquent grunt; while Peter hitched up his trousers in both hands and commenced a tour of the room on his heels.

"William," he squeaked in a high falsetto, "you've spilt a great deal more water than is necessary on this here floor. You'd ought to be more careful; it will warp the boards."

"Yes, ma'am," said Billy with a grin.

"An' goodness me! What is this horrid stuff in this box?" He sniffed daintily at the harness grease. "How many times must I tell you, William, that I don't want anything like that on *my* harnesses? I want them washed in nice, clean soap an' water, with a little dash of *ee-oo-dee cologne*."

Billy applauded with appreciation.

"An' now, Peter," Peter resumed, addressing an imaginary self, "I am expectin' a new maid to-night—a pretty little French maid just like Annette. I am sure that she will like you better than any o' the other men, so I wish you to meet her at the eight-fifteen train. Be sure to be on time, for the poor little thing won't know what to do."

"No, you don't," interrupted Billy. "She told me to meet her."

"She didn't either," said Peter, quickly reassuming his proper person. "She said either of us, which ever was most convenient, an' I've got to go into town anyway on an errand for Miss Ethel."

"She said me," maintained Billy, "an' I'm goin' to."

"Aw, are you?" jeered Peter. "You'll walk, then. I'm takin' Trixy with me."

"Hey, Joe," called Billy, as the coachman's steps were heard approaching down the length of the stable, "Mrs. Carter come out here an' said I was to meet a new maid to-night, an' Pete says he's goin' to. Just come an' tell him to mind 'is own business."

Joe appeared in the doorway, with a cap cocked on the side of his head, and a short bull-dog pipe in his mouth. It was strictly against the rules to smoke in the stables, but Joe had been autocrat so long that he made his own rules. He could trust himself—but woe to the groom who so much as scratched a safety-match within his domain.

"A new maid is it?" he inquired, as a grin of comprehension leisurely spread itself across his good-natured rubicund face. "I s'pose you're thinking it's pretty near your turn, hey, Billy?"

"I don't care nothin' about new maids," said Billy, sulkily, "but Mrs. Carter said me."

"You're awful particular all of a sudden about obeying orders," said Joe. "I don't care which one of you fetches out the new maid," he added. "I s'pose if Pete wants to, he's got the first say."

The Carter stables were ruled by a hierarchy with Joe at the head, the order of precedence being based upon a union of seniority and merit. Joe had ruled for twelve years. He had held the position so long that he had insidiously come to believe in the divine right of coachmen. Nothing short of a revolution could have dislodged him against his will; in a year or so, however, he was planning to abdicate in order to start a livery stable of his own. The money was even now waiting in the bank. Peter, who had commenced as stable-boy ten years before, was heir-presumptive to the place, and the shadow of his future greatness was already upon him. Billy, who had served but a few meagre months at Willowbrook, did not realize that the highest honours are obtained only after a painful novitiate. He saw no reason why he should not be coachman another year just as much as Peter; in fact, he saw several reasons why he should be. He drove as well, he was better looking—he told himself—and he was infinitely larger. To Billy's simple understanding it was quantity, not quality, that makes the man. He resented Peter's assumption of superiority, and he intended, when opportunity should present itself, to take it out of Peter.

"I don't care about fetchin' out the new maid any more than Billy," Peter nonchalantly threw off after a prolonged pause, "only I've got to take a note to the Holidays for Miss Ethel, and I'd just as lief stop at the station; it won't be much out o' me way."

"All right," said Joe. "Suit yourself."

Peter smiled slightly as he fell to work again, humming under his breath a song that was peculiarly aggravating to Billy. "*Je vous aime, je vous adore*," it ran. Peter trilled it, "*Gervie zame, gervie door*," but it answered the purpose quite as well as if it had been pronounced with the best Parisian accent.

The last maid—the one who had left four days before—had been French, and during her three weeks' reign at Willowbrook she had stirred to its foundations every unattached masculine heart on the premises. Even Simpkins, the elderly English butler, had unbent and smiled foolishly when she

coquettishly chucked him under the chin in passing through the hall. Mary, the chambermaid, had been a witness to this tender passage, and poor Simpkins's dignity ever since had walked on shaky ground. But Annette's charms had conquered more than Simpkins. Tom, the gardener, had spent the entire three weeks of her stay in puttering about the shrubs that grew in the vicinity of the house; while the stablemen had frankly prostrated themselves—with the exception of Joe, who was married and not open to Gallic allurements. It was evident from the first, however, that Peter and Billy were the favoured ones. For two weeks the race between them had been even, and then Peter had slowly, but perceptibly, pulled ahead.

He had returned one morning from an errand to the house with a new song upon his lips. It was in the French language. He sang it through several times with insistent and tender emphasis. Billy maintained a proud silence as long as curiosity would permit; finally he inquired gruffly:

"What's that you're givin' us?"

"It's a song," said Peter, modestly. "Annette taught it to me," and he hummed it through again.

"What does it mean?"

Peter's rendering was free.

"It means," he said, "I don't love no one but you, me dear."

This episode was the beginning of strained relations between the two. There is no telling how far their differences would have gone, had the firebrand not been suddenly removed.

One morning Joe was kept waiting under the *porte-cochère* unusually long for Mrs. Carter to start on her daily progress to the village, but instead of Mrs. Carter, finally, his passenger was Annette—bound to the station with her belongings piled about her. Joe had a wife of his own, and it was none of his affair what happened to Annette, but he had observed the signs of the weather among his underlings, and he was interested on their account to know the wherefore of the business. Annette, however—for a French woman—was undemonstrative. All that Joe gathered in return for his sympathetic questions (they were sympathetic; Joe was human even if he was married) was a series of indignant sniffs, and the assertion that she was going because she wanted to go. She wouldn't work any longer in a place like that; Mrs. Carter was an old cat, and Miss Ethel was a young one. She finished with some idiomatic French, the context of which Joe did not gather.

Billy received the news of the departure with unaffected delight, and Peter with philosophy. After all, Annette had only had three weeks in which to do her work, and three weeks was too short a space for even the most fetching of French maids to stamp a very deep impression upon Peter's roving fancy. Four days had passed and his wound was nearly healed. He was able to sit up and look about again by the time that Mrs. Carter ordered the meeting of the second maid. Ordinarily the grooms would not have been so eager to receive the assignment of an unallotted task, but the memory of Annette still rankled, and it was felt between them that the long drive from the station was a golden opportunity for gaining a solid start in the newcomer's affections.

The stablemen did not eat with the house servants; Joe's wife furnished their meals in the coachman's cottage. That evening Peter scrambled through his supper in evident haste. He had an important engagement, he explained, with a meaning glance toward Billy. He did take time between mouthfuls, however, to remark on the fact that it was going to be a beautiful moonlight night, just a "foin" time for a drive.

An hour later, Billy having somewhat sulkily hitched Trixy to the buckboard under Joe's direction, Peter swaggered in with pink and white freshly shaven face, smelling of bay-rum and the barber's, with shining top-hat and boots, and spotless white breeches, looking as immaculate a groom as could be found within a hundred miles of New York. He jauntily took his seat, waved his whip toward Billy and Joe, and touched up Trixy with a grin of farewell.

Later in the evening the men were lounging in a clump of laurels at one side of the carriage-house, where a hammock and several battered veranda chairs had drifted out from the house for the use of the stable hands. Simpkins, who occasionally unbent sufficiently to join them, was with the

party to-night, and he heard the story of Peter's latest perfidy. Simpkins could sympathize with Billy; his own sensibilities had been sadly lacerated in the matter of Annette. Joe leaned back and smoked comfortably, lending his voice occasionally to the extent of a grunt. The grooms' differences were nothing to him, but they served their purpose as amusement.

Presently the roll of wheels sounded on the gravel, and they all strained forward with alert interest. The driveway leading to the back door swerved broadly past the laurels, and—as Peter had remarked—it was a bright moonlight night. The cart came into view, bowling fast, Peter as stiff as a ramrod staring straight ahead, while beside him sat a brawny Negro woman twice his size, with rolling black eyes and gleaming white teeth. An explosion sounded from the laurels, and Peter, who knew what it meant, cut Trixy viciously.

He dumped his passenger's box upon the back veranda with a thud, and drove on to the stables where he unhitched poor patient little Trixy in a most unsympathetic fashion. Billy strolled in while he was still engaged with her harness. Peter affected not to notice him. Billy commenced to hum, "*Je vous aime, je vous adore.*" He was no French scholar; he had not had Peter's advantages, but the tune alone was sufficiently suggestive.

"Aw, dry up," said Peter.

"Pleasant moonlight night," said Billy.

Peter threw the harness on to the hook with a vicious turn that landed the most of it on the floor, and stumped upstairs to his room over the carriage-house.

For the next few days Peter's life was rendered a burden. Billy and Joe and Simpkins and Tom, even good-natured Nora in the kitchen, never met him without covert allusions to the affair. The gardener at Jasper Place, next door, called over the hedge one morning to inquire if they didn't have a new maid at their house. On the third day after the arrival the matter reached its logical conclusion.

"Hey, Pete," Billy called up to him in the loft where he was pitching down hay for the horses. "Come down here quick; there's some one wants to see you."

Peter clambered down wearing an expectant look, and was confronted by the three grinning faces of Billy, Tom, and David McKenna, the gardener from Jasper Place.

"It was Miss Johnsing," said Billy. "She was in a hurry an' said she couldn't wait, but she'd like to have you meet her on the back stoop. She's got a new song she wants to teach you."

Peter took off his coat and looked Billy over for a soft spot on which to begin. Billy took off his coat and accepted the challenge, while David, who was a true Scotchman in his love of war, delightedly suggested that they withdraw to a more secluded spot. The four trooped in silence to a clump of willow trees in the lower pasture, Peter grimly marching ahead.

Billy was a huge, loose-jointed fellow who looked as if he could have picked up little Peter and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. Peter was slight and wiry and quick. He had once intended to be a jockey, but in spite of an anxious avoidance of potatoes and other fattening food-stuffs, he had steadily grown away from it. When he finally reached one hundred and sixty-six pounds he relinquished his ambition forever. Those one hundred and sixty-six pounds were so beautifully distributed, however, that the casual observer would never have guessed their presence, and many a weightier man had found to his sorrow that Peter did not belong to the class he looked.

The hostilities opened with Billy's good-natured remark: "I don't want to hurt you, Petey. I just want to teach you manners."

Ten minutes later Peter had taught him manners, and was striding across the fields to work off his surplus energy, while Billy, whose florid face had taken on a livelier tinge, was comforting a fast-swelling eye at the drinking trough.

It was the last that Peter heard of the maid, except for a mild lecture from Joe. "See here, Pete," he was greeted upon his return, "I'm given to understand that you've been fighting for your lady-love. I just want you to remember one thing, young man, and that is that I won't have no fighting about these premises in business hours. You've laid up Billy for the day, and you can go and do his work."

Three weeks rolled over the head of "Miss Johnsing," and then she, too, departed. It developed that a husband had returned from a vacation on "the island" and wished to settle down to family life again. A week passed at Willowbrook without a parlour-maid, and then one day, as Peter returned from the lower meadow where he had been trying to entice a reluctant colt into putting its head into the halter, he was hailed by Joe with:

"Say, Pete, Mrs. Carter sent out word that you're to go to the station to-night and fetch out a new maid."

"Aw, go on," said Peter.

"That's straight."

"If there's a new maid comin' Billy can get her. I ain't interested in maids."

"Them's orders," said Joe. "'Tell Peter,' she says, 'that he's to drive in with the buckboard and meet the eight-fifteen train from the city. I'm expectin' a new maid,' she says, but she neglected to mention what colour she was expectin' her to be."

Peter grunted by way of answer, and Joe chuckled audibly as he hitched up his trousers and rolled off toward his own house to tell his wife the joke. The subject was covertly alluded to at supper that night, with various speculations as to the colour, nationality, and possible size of the newcomer. Peter emphatically stated his intention of not going near the blame station. When the train hour approached, however, the stables were conspicuously empty, and there was nothing for him to do but swallow his assertion and meet the maid.

As he drove down the hill toward the station he saw that the eight-fifteen train was already in, but he noted the fact without emotion. He was not going to hurry himself for all the maids in creation; she could just wait until he got there. He drew up beside the platform and sat surveying the people with mild curiosity until such time as the maid chose to search him out. But his pulses suddenly quickened as he heard a clear voice, with an adorable suggestion of brogue behind it, inquire of the station-master:

"Will you tell me, sor, how I'll be gettin' to Mr. Jerome B. Carter's?"

"Here's one of the Carter rigs now," said the man.

The girl turned quickly and faced Peter, and all his confused senses told him that she was pretty—prettier than Annette—pretty beyond all precedent. Her eyes were blue, and her hair was black and her colour was the colour that comes from a childhood spent out of doors in County Cork.

He hastily scrambled out of his seat and touched his hat. "Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, are ye the new maid? Mrs. Carter sent me to fetch ye out. If ye'll gi' me yer check, ma'am, I'll get yer trunk."

The girl gave up her check silently, quite abashed by this very dressy young groom. She had served during the two years of her American experience as "second girl" in a brown-stone house in a side street, and though she had often watched men of Peter's kind from a bench by the park driveway, she had never in her life come so near to one as this. While he was searching for her trunk, she hastily climbed into the cart and moved to the extreme end of the left side of the seat, lest the apparition should return and offer assistance. She sat up very stiffly, wondering meanwhile, with a beating heart, if he would talk or just stare straight ahead the way they did in the park.

Peter helped the baggage-man lift in her trunk, and as he did it he paused to take a good square look. "Gee, but Billy will want to kick himself!" was his delighted inward comment as he clambered up beside her and gathered the reins in his hands. They drove up the hill without speaking, but once Peter shot a sidewise glance at her at the same moment that she looked at him, and they both turned pink. This was embarrassing, but reassuring. He was, then, nothing but a man in spite of his clothes, and with a man she knew how to deal.

A full moon was rising above the trees and the twilight was fading into dusk. As Billy had justly observed at the supper table, it was a fine night in which to get acquainted. The four miles between the station and Willowbrook suddenly dwindled into insignificance in Peter's sight, and at the top of the hill he turned Trixy's head in exactly the wrong direction.

"If ye have no objections," he observed, "we'll drive the long way by the beach because the roads is better."

The new maid had no objections, or at least she did not voice any, and they rolled along between the fragrant hedgerows in silence. Peter was laboriously framing to himself an opening remark, and he found nothing ludicrous in the situation; but to the girl, whose Irish sense of humour was inordinately developed, it appeared very funny to be riding alone beside a live, breathing groom, in top-hat and shining boots, who turned red when you looked at him.

She suddenly broke into a laugh—a low, clear, bubbling laugh that lodged itself in Peter's receptive heart. He looked around a moment with a slightly startled air, and then, as his eyes met hers, he too laughed. It instantly cleared the atmosphere. He pulled Trixy to a walk and faced her. His laborious introductory speech was forgotten; he went to the point with a sigh of relief.

"I guess we're goin' to like each other—you an' me," he said softly.

The moon was shining and the hawthorn flowers were sweet. Annie's eyes looked back at him rather shyly, and her dimples trembled just below the surface. Peter hastily turned his eyes away lest he look too long.

"Me name's Peter," he said, "Peter Malone. Tell me yours, so we'll be feelin' acquainted."

"Annie O'Reilly."

"Annie O'Reilly," he repeated. "There's the right swing to it. 'Tis better than Annette."

"Annette?" inquired Annie.

She had perceived that he was a man; he now perceived that she was a woman, and that Annette's name might better not have been mentioned.

"Ah, Annette," he said carelessly, "a parlour-maid we had a while ago; an' mighty glad we was to be rid of her," he added cannily.

"Why?" asked Annie.

"She was French; she had a temper."

"I'm Irish; I have a temper—will ye be glad to be rid o' me?"

"Oh, an' I'm Irish meself," laughed Peter, with a broader brogue than usual. "'Tis not Irish tempers I'm fearin'. Thim I c'n manage."

When they turned in at the gates of Willowbrook—some half an hour later than they were due, owing to Peter's extemporaneous route by the beach—he slowed Trixy to a walk that he might point out to his companion the interesting features of her new home. As they passed the laurels they were deeply engaged in converse, and a heavy and respectful silence hung about the region.

"Good night, Mr. Malone," said Annie, as he deposited her trunk on the back veranda. "'Tis obliged to ye I am for bringin' me out."

"Oh, drop the Mister Malone!" he grinned. "Peter's me name. Good night, Annie. I hope as ye'll like it. It won't be my fault if ye don't."

He touched his hat, and swinging himself to the seat, drove whistling to the stables. He unhitched Trixy and gave her a handful of salt. "Here, old girl, what are ye tryin' to do?" he asked as she rubbed her nose against his shoulder, and he started her toward her stall with a friendly whack on the back. As he was putting away her harness, Billy lounged in, bent on no errand in particular. Peter threw him a careless nod, and breaking off his whistling in the middle of a bar, he fell to humming softly a familiar tune. "*Gervie zame, gervie door,*" was the song that he sang.

II

THE RUFFLED FROCK

It was the Fourth of July, and Annie was hurrying with her work in order to get out and celebrate. She had no particular form of celebration in view, but she had a strong feeling that holidays, particularly Fourth of July, ought to be celebrated; and she was revolving in her mind several possible projects, in all of which Peter figured largely. Aside from its being the Fourth of July, it was Thursday, and Thursday was Peter's afternoon off. She put away the last of the dishes with a gay little burst of song as she glanced through the window at the beckoning outside world. It was a bright sunshiny day with a refreshing breeze blowing from the sea. The blue waters of the bay, sparkling at the foot of the lower meadow, were dotted over with white sailboats.

"Do ye want anything more of me, Nora?" she asked.

"No, be off with you, child," said Nora, good-naturedly. "I'll finish puttin' to rights meself," and she gathered up the dish-towels and carried them into the laundry.

Annie paused by the screen door leading on to the back veranda, and stood regarding the stables speculatively. She was wondering what would be the most diplomatic way of approaching Peter. Her speculations were suddenly interrupted by the appearance in the kitchen of Miss Ethel, with a very beruffled white muslin frock in her arms.

"Annie," she said, "you'll have to wash this dress. I forgot to have Kate do it yesterday, and I want to wear it to-night. Have it ready by five o'clock and be careful about the lace."

She threw the frock across the back of a chair, and ran on out of doors to join a laughing crowd of young people about the tennis-court. Annie stood in the middle of the floor and watched her with a fast-clouding brow.

"An' never so much as said please!" she muttered to herself. She walked over and picked up the frock. It was very elaborate with ruffles and tucks and lace insertion; its ironing meant a good two hours' work. Ironing muslin gowns on a Fourth of July was not Annie's business. She turned it about slowly and her eyes filled with tears—not of sorrow for the lost afternoon, but of anger at the injustice of demanding such work from her on such a day.

Presently Nora came in again. She paused in the doorway, her arms akimbo, and regarded Annie.

"What's that you've got?" she inquired.

Then the floodgates of Annie's wrath were opened and she poured out her tale.

"Don't you mind it, Annie darlin'," said Nora, trying to comfort her. "Miss Ethel didn't mean nothin'. She was in a hurry, likely, an' she didn't stop to think."

"Didn't think! Why can't she wear some other dress? She's got a whole room just full o' dresses, an' she has to have that special one ironed at a minute's notice. An' Kate comin' three days in the week! It isn't my place to wash—that isn't what Mrs. Carter engaged me for—I wouldn't 'a' minded so much if she'd asked it as a favour, but she just ordered me as if washin' was me work. On Fourth o' July, too, an' Mrs. Carter tellin' me I could have the afternoon off—an' all those ruffles—'have it done by five o'clock,' she says, an' goes out to play."

Annie threw the dress in a fluffy pile in the middle of the floor.

"I shan't do it! I won't be ordered about that way by Miss Ethel or anybody else."

"I'd do it for you meself, Annie, but I couldn't iron that waist no more 'n a kangaroo. But you just get to work on it; you iron beautiful and it won't take you long when you once begin."

"Won't take me long? It'll take me the whole afternoon; it'll take me forever. I shan't touch it!"

Annie's eyes wandered out of doors again. The sunshine seemed brighter, the songs of the birds louder, the glimpse of the bay more enticing. And, as she looked, Peter came sauntering out from

the stables—Peter in his town clothes, freshly shaven, with a new red necktie and a flower in his buttonhole. He was coming toward the kitchen.

Annie's lips trembled and she kicked the dress spitefully.

Peter appeared in the doorway. He, too, had been revolving projects for the fitting celebration of the day, and he wished tentatively to broach them to Annie.

"What's up?" he inquired, looking from Annie's flushed cheeks to Nora's troubled eyes.

Annie repeated the story, growing more and more aggrieved as she dwelt upon her wrongs. "An' never so much as said please," she finished.

"That's nothin'—ye mustn't mind it, Annie. Miss Ethel ain't used to sayin' please." Peter was gropingly endeavouring to soothe her. "I remember times when she was a little girl she'd be so sassy, that, Lor', me fingers was itchin' to shake her! But I knowed she didn't mean nothin', so I just touches me hat an' swallows it. She's used to orderin', Annie, an' ye mustn't mind her."

"Well, I ain't used to takin' orders like that, an' what's more, I won't! 'Have it done by five o'clock,' she says, an' it's half past two, now. An' all them ruffles! I hate ruffles, an' I won't touch it after the way she talked. Not if she goes down on her knees to me, I won't."

"Aw, Annie," remonstrated Peter, "what's the use in kickin' up a fuss? Miss Ethel's awful kind hearted when she thinks about it."

"Kind hearted!" Annie sniffed. "I guess she can afford to be kind hearted, havin' people wait on her from mornin' to night an' never doin' a thing she doesn't want to do. I wish she had to iron once, an' she could just see how she likes it."

"She gave you a bran' new dress last week," reminded Nora.

"Yes, an' why? 'Cause when I was dustin' her room she happened to be tryin' it on an' it didn't fit, an' she threw it down on the floor an' said: 'I won't wear that thing! You can have it, Annie.'"

"The time you burned your hand with her chafing-dish she 'most cried when she saw how blistered it was, an' wrapped it up herself, an' brought you some stuff in a silver box to put on it."

For a moment Annie showed signs of relenting, but as her glance fell upon the dress again, she hardened. "She tipped the alcohol over me herself an' she'd ought to be sorry. I'd be willin' to do her a favour, but I *won't* be ordered around. She just pokes it at me as if I was an ironing machine. An' this the Fourth o' July, an' Mrs. Carter tellin' me I could go out. She has enough dresses to last from now till she's gray, an' I just won't touch it!"

"You won't touch what?" asked Mrs. Carter, appearing in the doorway. She glanced from the girl's angry face to the rumpled frock upon the floor. They told their own story. "What's the meaning of this, Annie?" she asked sharply.

Annie looked sulky. She stared at the floor a moment without answering, while Peter's and Nora's eyes anxiously scanned Mrs. Carter's face. Finally she replied:

"You said I could go out this afternoon, ma'am, an' just as I was gettin' ready, Miss Ethel came in an' said I was to wash that dress before five o'clock."

"I am sorry about your afternoon," said Mrs. Carter. "Miss Ethel didn't know about it, but you may go to-morrow afternoon instead."

"I was wantin' to go to-day," said Annie. "I'm willin' enough to do me own work, ma'am, but it isn't me place to wash."

Mrs. Carter's mouth became a straight line.

"Annie, I never allow my servants to dictate as to what is their work and what is not. When I engage you, I expect you to do whatever you are asked. This is a very easy place; you are allowed to go out a great deal, and you have very little work to do. But when something extra comes up outside your regular work, I expect you to do it willingly and as a matter of course. Miss Ethel has been very kind to you; you can do her a favour in return."

"I wouldn't mind doin' it as a favour, but she just walks in an' orders it as if it was me regular place to wash."

"And I order it also," said Mrs. Carter. "You may wash that dress and have it done by five o'clock, or else you may pack your trunk and go." She turned with a firm tread and walked out of the room.

Annie looked after her with flashing eyes.

"She orders it too, does she? Well, I won't do it, an' I won't, an' I *won't!*" She dropped down in a chair at one end of the table and hid her head in her arms.

Peter cast an anxious glance at Nora; he did not know how to deal with Annie's case. Had she been an obstinate stable-boy, he would have taken her out behind the barn and thrashed reason into her with a leather strap. He awkwardly laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Aw, Annie, wash the dress; there's a good girl. It won't take ye very long, an' then we'll go down t' the beach to-night to see the fireworks. Miss Ethel didn't mean nothin'. What's the use o' makin' trouble?"

"It's no more my place to wash than it is Simpkins's," she sobbed. "Why didn't she ask him to do it? I won't stay in a place like this where they order you around like a dog. I'll pack me trunk, I will."

Nora and Peter regarded each other helplessly. They furtively sympathized with Annie, but they did not dare to do it openly, as sympathy only fanned the flames, and they both knew that Mrs. Carter, having pronounced her ultimatum, would stand by it. Annie must wash that dress before five o'clock, or Annie must go. At the thought of her going, Peter fetched a deep sigh, and two frowning lines appeared on his brow. She had been there only four weeks, but Willowbrook would never again be Willowbrook without her. Presently the silence was broken by the sound of generous footsteps flapping across the back veranda, and Ellen, the cook at Mr. Jasper's, appeared in the doorway.

"Good afternoon to ye, Nora, an' I wants to borrow a drop o' vanilla. I ardered it two days ago, an' that fool of a grocer's b'y—what's the matter wit' Annie?" she asked, her good-natured laughing face taking on a look of concern as she gazed at the tableau before her.

Nora and Peter between them explained. Annie, meanwhile, paid no attention to the recital of her wrongs; only her heaving shoulders were eloquent. Ellen hearkened to the story with ready sympathy.

"Oh, it's a shame, it is, an' on Fort' o' July! We all has our troubles in this world." She sighed heavily and winked at Peter and Nora while she pushed them toward the door. "Get out wit' ye, the two of yez, an' lave her to me," she whispered.

Ellen reached down and picked up the dress. "'Tis somethin' awful the things people will be puttin' on ye, if ye give 'em the chance. 'Tis a shame to ask any human bein' to wash a dress like that wit' all them ruffles an' lace fixin's. I think it's bad enough to have to wash Mr. Harry's shirts, but if he took to havin' lace set in 'em, I'd be leavin' pretty quick. An' ye not trained to laundry work either! I don't see how Miss Ethel had the nerve to ask it. She must be awful over-reachin'. She'll be settin' ye to play the piano next for her to dance by."

Annie raised a tear-stained face.

"I could do it," she said sulkily. "I can wash as good as Kate; Miss Ethel said I could. It's not the work I'm mindin' if she'd ask me decent. But she just throws it at me with never so much as please."

"I don't blame ye for leavin'; I would, too." Ellen suddenly had an inspiration, and she plumped down in a chair at the opposite end of the table. "I'm goin' to leave meself!" she announced. "I won't be put upon either. An' what do ye think Mr. Jasper is after telephonin' out this afternoon? He's bringin' company to dinner—three strange min I niver set eyes on before—an' he's sint a fish home by Patrick, a blue fish he's after catchin'. It's in the ice-box now an' we're to have it for dinner, he says, an' I wit' me dinner all planned. I don't mind havin' soup, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert, but I *won't* have soup, *an' fish*, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert. If there was as many to do the work at our house as there is over here, I wouldn't say nothin', but wit' only me an' George—an' him not so much as touchin' a thing but the silver an' the glasses—it's too much, it is. George 'ud see me buried under a mountain o' dishes before he'd lift a finger to help."

Ellen paused with a pathetic snivel while she wiped her eyes on a corner of her apron. Annie raised her head and regarded her sympathetically.

"Soup, an' fish, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert, an' three strange min into the bargain, an' all the dishes to wash, an' the fish not even cleaned. True it is that troubles niver come single; they're married an' has children. Ivery siparate scale o' that blue fish did I take off wit' me own hands, an' not a word o' thanks do I get. I slaves for those two min till me fingers is worn to the bone, an' not a sign do they give; but just let the meat be too done, or the bottles not cold, an' then I hears quick enough! 'Tis the way wit' min; they're an ungrateful set. Ye can work an' work till ye're like to drop, an' they swallows it all an' niver blinks. It ud be different if there was a woman around. I've often wished as Mr. Harry had a wife like Miss Ethel, so smilin' an' pretty 't is a pleasure to watch her. Oh, an' I wouldn't mind workin' a little extra now an' then for her—but five courses an' no one but me to do the dishes! It's goin' I am. I'll give notice to-night."

Ellen broke down and wept into her apron while Annie attempted some feeble consolation.

"I've worked there thirteen years!" Ellen sobbed. "Since before Mrs. Jasper died, when Mr. Harry was only a b'y. 'Tis the only home I've got, an' I don't want to leave."

"Then what makes you?" Annie asked.

"Because I won't be put upon—soup, an' fish, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert is too much to ask of any human bein'. The dishes won't be done till ten o'clock, an' it's Fort' o' Ju-l-y-y." Ellen's voice trailed into a wail. Her imagination was vivid; by this time she fully believed in her wrongs. They cried in unison a few minutes, Ellen murmuring brokenly: "Soup, an' fish, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert, an' it's all the home I've got."

"You don't have company very often," said Annie consolingly.

"That we don't!" cried Ellen. "An' the house is so lonesome an' shut up 'tis like a tomb to live in. If there was dancin' an' singin' an' laughin' the way there is over here I'd be glad enough. Wit' Mr. Jasper an' Mr. Harry so quiet an' frownin' an' never sayin' a word—Oh, if I had someone like Miss Ethel to do for 'tis willin' enough I'd be to iron her dresses. That night she had her party an' I come over to help, an' you an' Pete was dancin' in the kitchen to the music, an' after the guests was served we had a table set out on the back veranda—'tis then I was wishin' I lived in a place like this. An' Miss Ethel come out when we was eatin' an' asked was we tired an' said thank you for sittin' up so late, an' she was glad if we was havin' a good time, too."

Annie sighed, and her eyes wandered somewhat guiltily to the dress on the floor.

"Mrs. Carter orders me around just as if I was a machine," she reiterated, in a tone of self-defence.

"An' it's orderin' around ye've got to learn to take in this world," said Ellen. "If ye occasionally get a 'thank ye,' thrown in, ye can think yourself lucky—it's more 'n I get. I've darned Mr. Harry's socks for eleven years, an' never a word o' notice does he take—I'm doubtin' he even knows they're darned. 'Tis a thankless world, Annie dear. Thirteen years I've worked for the Jaspers, an' on top o' that to ask me for soup, an' fish, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert on a Fort' o' July night!"

Ellen showed signs of breaking down again and Annie hastily interposed.

"Don't cry about it, Ellen; it's too bad, it is, but Mr. Jasper likely didn't think what a lot o' trouble he was makin'. He ain't never washed no dishes an' he don't know what it's like. I'll come over an' help you do them."

"But ye won't be here. Ye're goin' yerself," Ellen blubbered.

Annie was silent.

"Thirteen years an' 'tis the only home I've got."

"Don't go, Ellen," Annie begged.

"Soup, an' fish, an' roast—"

"I'll stay if you will!"

Ellen heaved a final shuddering sigh and wiped her eyes.

"Ye'll have to hurry, Annie, if ye're goin' to get that dress done by five o'clock. Come on!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "I'll help ye. Ye take the waist and I'll take the skirt, an' we'll see which one gets done first. It just needs a little rubbin' out an' we'll iron it damp."

Five minutes later, Peter and Nora, who had been sitting on the back steps, waiting patiently for Ellen's diplomacy to bear fruit, returned to the laundry. They found Ellen at one tub and Annie at another—up to her elbows in the soap suds, her cheeks still flushed, but a smile beginning to break through.

"Ellen's helpin' me," she said in rather sheepish explanation.

"An' she's comin' over to wash the dishes for me to-night," Ellen chimed in. "We're havin' soup, an' fish, an' roast, an'—"

Peter clapped his hand over his mouth and Nora cast him a warning look.

"You're goin' to the beach with Pete to see the fireworks, that's where you're goin' to-night," she said. "I'll help Ellen with her dishes."

"Thank ye, Nora," said Ellen. "'Tis a kind heart ye've got, an' that's more 'n I can say for Mr. Jasper, for all I've worked for 'im thirteen years. 'Tis soup, an' fish, an' roast, an' salad, an' dessert the man's after wantin' for dinner to-night, an' no one but me to wash a kettle. If it wasn't for Annie, I'd be leavin', I would." Ellen wrung the skirt out and splashed it up and down in the rinsing water. "An' now while this dress is dryin' ready to iron, I'll just run home an' stir up a bit o' puddin' for dessert, if ye'll be lendin' me some vanilla, Nora dear. That fool of a grocery b'y—"

"Oh, take your vanilla an' get along wit' you! We've had all we wants o' your soup an' your fish an' the rest o' your fixin's."

Nora dived into the pantry after the bottle, while the attention of the others was attracted by a gay laugh outside the window. Annie's face clouded at the sound, and they all looked out.

Miss Ethel was coming across the lawn on her way to the bay. Mr. Lane, who was visiting at Willowbrook, strolled at her side, dressed in white boating flannels with some oars over his shoulder. A little way behind walked Mr. Harry, a second pair of oars over his shoulder, and his eyes somewhat surlily bent on the ground. Miss Ethel, pretty and smiling in her light summer gown, was talking vivaciously to Mr. Lane, apparently having forgotten that Mr. Harry existed.

"I'd show her pretty quick if I was Mr. Harry!" Ellen muttered vindictively.

Miss Ethel paused and shaded her eyes with her hand.

"It's awfully sunny!" she complained. "I'm afraid I want a hat." She glanced back over her shoulder. "Harry," she called, "run back and get my hat. I think I left it on the front veranda, or maybe at the tennis-court. We'll wait for you at the landing."

For a moment Mr. Harry looked black at this peremptory dismissal; but he bowed politely, and whirling about strode back to the house while Miss Ethel and Mr. Lane went on laughing down the hill.

"An' she never so much as said please!" whispered Annie.

"I'll be darned if I'd do it," said Peter.

III

THEIR INNOCENT DIVERSIONS

"We got three kids visitin' to our house, and there won't be nothin' left o' Willowbrook by the time they goes away. Hold up, Trixy! What are ye tryin' to do?"

Peter paused to hook the line out from under Trixy's tail, and then re-cocking his hat at a comfortable angle and crossing his legs, he settled himself for conversation. Peter loved to talk and he loved an audience; he was essentially a social animal. His listeners were two brother coachmen and a bandy-legged young groom, who were waiting, like himself, for "ladies' morning" to draw to its usual placid termination—sandwiches and lemonade on the club veranda after a not too heated putting contest on the first green.

"Yes, we got three visitin' kids; with Master Bobby it makes four, and I ain't drawed an easy breath since the mornin' they arrived. They keep up such an everlastin' racket that the people in the house can't stand them, an' we've had them in the stables most o' the time. Mrs. Brainard, that's their mother, is Mr. Carter's sister, and I can tell ye she makes herself to home.

"That's her over there with the lavender dress and the parasol"—he jerked his head in the direction of a gaily dressed group of ladies trailing across the links in the direction of the first green. "She's mournin' for her husband—light mournin', that is; he's dead two years."

"She picked me the first day to look after the la-ads. 'Peter,' she says, 'me dear boys are crazy to play in the stables, but I can't help worryin' for fear they'll get under the horses' feet. I have perfect confidence in you,' she says, 'and I'll put them under yer special care. Just keep yer eye on the la-ads an' see that they don't get hur-rt.'

"'Thank ye, ma'am,' says I, flattered by the attention, I'll do the best I can.' I hadn't made the acquaintance o' the little darlin's yet, or I would 'a' chucked me job on the spot.

"Master Augustus—he's the youngest—has gold curls an' blue eyes and a smile as innocent as honey. He's the kind the ladies stops an' kisses, and asks, 'Whose little boy is you?' At the first glance ye'd think to see a couple o' wings sproutin' out behind, but when ye knowed him intimately, ye'd look for the horns an' tail. I've pulled that little divvil three times out o' the duck pond, and I've fished him out from the grain chute with a boat hook. I couldn't tell ye the number o' trees he's climbed after birds' eggs and got stuck in the top of; we keeps a groom an' ladder on tap, so to speak. One afternoon I caught the four o' them smokin' cigarettes made o' dried corn silk up in the hay loft as comfortable as ye please—'tis many a stable-boy as has been bounced for less. Between them they finished up the dope the vet'rinary surgeon left when Blue Gypsy had the heaves, thinkin' it was whisky—an' serves them right, I say. I didn't tell on 'em, though, when the doctor asked what I thought the trouble was; I said I guessed it was green apples.

"But them's only the minor divarsions that occupy their leisure; they're nothin' to the things they think of when they really get down to business. The first thing they done was to pretend the victoria was a pirate ship; an' they scratched the paint all up a-tryin' to board her. Joe turned 'em out o' doors to play, an' they dug up the whole o' the strawberry bed huntin' for hidden treasure. Their next move was to take off their shoes an' stockin's, turn their clothes wrong side out, an' dirty up their faces with huckleberry juice—ye would have sworn they was a lot o' jabberin' Dagoes. They went beggin' in all the houses o' the neighbourhood, includin' Willowbrook, an' Nora never knew them an' give them some cold potatoes.

"One day last week they nearly broke their blame young necks slidin' down the waggon-shed roof on a greased tea-tray. There's a pile o' straw at the bottom that kind of acted as a buffer, but Master Augustus didn't steer straight an' went over the edge. 'Twas only a drop o' four feet, but he come up lookin' damaged.

"That ain't the worst though. Last Sunday afternoon they frightened the cow into hysterics playin' she was a bull, an' they was matydoors or torydoors, or whatever ye call them. They stuck pins into her with paper windmills on the end, and she ain't give more 'n six quarts at any milkin' since. I was mad, I was, an' I marched 'em to the house an' tole their mother.

"It grieves me,' she says, 'to think that me boys should be so troublesome; but they didn't mean to be cruel to the poor dumb brute. They're spirited la-ads,' she says, 'an' their imaginations run away wid them. What they needs is intelligent direction. Ye should try,' she says, 'to enter into the spirit o' their innocint divarsions; an' when ye see them doin' somethin' dangerous, gintly turn their thoughts into another channel. Their grattytood,' she says, 'will pay ye for yer trouble.'

"Wery well, ma'am,' says I, not too enthusiastic, 'I'll do the best I can,' and I bows meself out. I've been superintendin' their innocint divarsions ever since, and if there's any one as wants the job, I'll turn it over to him quick."

Peter paused to back his horses farther into the shade; then having climbed down and taken a drink at a near-by hydrant, he resumed his seat and the conversation.

"But ye should have seen them this mornin' when I drove off! They was a sight if there ever was one. Joe's away with Mr. Carter and I'm takin' charge for the day. When I went into the carriage-house to give Billy orders about hitchin' up, what should I find but them precious little lambkins gambolin' around in stri-ped bathin' trunks, an' not another stitch. They was further engaged in paintin' their skins where the trunks left off—an' that was the most o' them—with a copper colour foundation and a trimmin' o' black stripes.

"Holy Saint Patrick!' says I. 'What the divvil are ye up to now?'

"Whoop!' says Master Bobby. 'We'll scalp ye and eat yer heart. We're Comanche braves,' he says, 'an' we're gettin' ready for the war-path.'

"Ye look more like zebras,' says I, 'escaped from a menagerie.'

"Wait till we get our feathers on,' he says, 'an' Pete,' he adds, 'will you do me back? There's a place in the middle that I can't reach.'

"Wid that he turns a pink an' white surface a yawnin' for decoration, an' presses a can o' axle grease in me hands. And I'll be darned if them young imps hadn't covered their skins with axle grease and red brass polish, an' for variety, a touch o' bluing they'd got off Nora in the kitchen. An' they smelt—Gee! they smelt like a triple extract harness shop. I tole them I thought they'd be havin' trouble when they was ready to return to the haunts o' the pale-face; but Master Bobby said their clothes would cover it up.

"I done the job. I don't set up to be a mural artist, and I ain't braggin', but I will say as Master Bobby's back beat any signboard ye ever see when I finished the decoratin'. I fastened some chicken feathers in their hair, and I hunted out some tomahawks in the lumber room, an' they let out a war-whoop that raised the roof, an' scalped me out o' grattytood.

"Now see here,' says I to Master Bobby, 'in return for helpin' along yer innocint amusements, will ye promise to do yer scalpin' in the paddock, an' not come near the stables? 'Cause me floor is clean,' I says, 'and I don't want no blood spattered on it. 'Tis hard to wash up,' I says. I was, ye'll observe, gintly turnin' their thoughts into another channel, like their mother recommended. An' they promised sweet as cherubs. She was right; they're spirited la-ads, an' they won't be driven. 'Tis best to use diplomacy.

"I left them crawlin' on all fours through the bushes by the duck pond, shootin' arrers in the air as innocint as ye please. I dunno, though, how long 'twill last. I tole Billy to keep an eye on them, and I s'pose when I get back, I'll find his head decoratin' the hitchin'-post an' his hair danglin' from their belts."

A movement of farewell on the club veranda brought the men back to their official selves. Peter straightened his hat, stiffened his back, and gathered up the reins.

"So long, Mike," he remarked as he backed into the driveway. "I'll see ye to-morrow at the Daughters o' the Revolution; and if ye hear of anyone," he added, "as is wantin' a combination coachman an' first class nursemaid, give them my address. I'm lookin' for an easier place."

"Peter," said Mrs. Carter, as they trotted out of the club-house gateway and swung on to the smooth macadam of the homeward road, "I meant to ask you what the children were doing this morning. Have they been amusing themselves?"

"Yes, they've been amusin' themselves. They was playin' Indian, ma'am, with chicken feathers in their heads." He wisely suppressed the remainder of the costume. "I found them some tomahawks in the lumber room, an' the last I see o' them they was in the paddock scalpin' each other as happy as ye please."

"Those delicious boys!" murmured their mother. "I never know what they will think of next. It is such a relief to get them into the country, where they can have plenty of room to play and I can be sure they are not in mischief. They are so exuberant, that when we are stopping in a summer hotel I am always uneasy for fear they may disturb the guests."

The carriage had turned into the Willowbrook grounds, and was decorously rolling along between the smooth green lawns bordered by coloured foliage, the two ladies reclining against the cushions in placid contemplation of the summer noonday, when suddenly an ebullition of shouting and crying burst out across the shrubbery in the direction of the stables. It was not the mere joyous effervescence of animal spirits that had been gladdening Willowbrook for the past two weeks. There was an unmistakable note of alarm, a hoarser undertone, as of men joining in the tocsin. Peter pulled the horses sharply to their haunches and cocked his head to listen, while the ladies leaned forward in a flutter of dismay.

"Something has happened to my precious boys! Drive on quick, Peter," Mrs. Brainard gasped.

Peter used his whip and they approached the house at a gallop. The trouble was evident by now. Heavy clouds of smoke were curling up from among the willow trees while the cry of "Fire! Fire!" filled the air.

"Thank heaven it ain't the stables!" ejaculated Peter, as his eye anxiously studied the direction. "'Tis the waggon-shed—an' the buckboard's in it an' all the farmin' tools."

People were running from every side. Two men from Jasper Place came puffing through the hole in the hedge, dragging a garden hose behind them, while the house servants, bare-headed and excited, swarmed out from the back veranda.

"Annie! Annie!" called Mrs. Carter as the panting horses were dragged to a standstill, "turn on the fire alarm. Go to the telephone and call the engine house."

"Simpkins has done it, ma'am," called Annie over her shoulder, as she hurried on. "Ow! What's that?" she added with a scream of astonished terror, as a red and black striped figure, with a row of ragged feathers waving in a fringe about its ears, burst from the shrubbery and butted plump against her.

"Bobby!" gasped his mother, as after a moment of shocked hesitation she recognized her son. Bobby waved his arms and set up a howl. An expression of terror was plainly visible struggling through the war-paint.

"Pete, Billy, Patrick! Quick! Quick! We can't untie him and he's burning! We didn't mean to burn him," he added quickly. "It's an accident."

"Burn what?" cried Mrs. Carter.

"Augustus," Bobby sobbed.

And to the horror-stricken group was borne a shrill falsetto wail: "Help! H-e-l-p! They're burning me at the s-t-a-k-e!"—a wail apparently of mortal anguish, though an unexcited listener would have detected in the tones more of anger than of pain.

Mrs. Brainard, with a frenzied shriek, threw away her lavender parasol and dashed in the direction of the sounds. Peter jumped from the box and overtook her. He was first upon the spot. The

waggon-shed roof was a blazing mass; the straw pile beneath it was sending up a stifling cloud of blue smoke, and the dry surrounding grass was crackling in a swiftly widening circle. But in the centre of the conflagration there still remained a little oasis of green, where a young willow sapling rose defiantly from the flames. And as the smoke blew momentarily to one side, the writhing figure of Augustus came to view lashed firmly to the tree trunk, his hands above his head. With the arrival of spectators he finished struggling and assumed an expression of stoicism that would have done credit to a true Comanche.

"My boy! My boy!" shrieked Mrs. Brainard, running forward with outstretched arms, as the smoke again closed around him.

Peter caught her. "Stand back, ma'am. For heaven's sake, stand back! Ye'll ketch yer dress. He ain't hurt none; the fire ain't reached him. I'll save him," and whipping out his knife, Peter dashed into the smoke. He returned three minutes later, a mass of stripes and mingled grease kicking in his arms.

Mrs. Brainard, who had closed her eyes preparing to faint, opened them again and looked at Augustus. He was a muddy copper colour with here and there a vivid touch of blue, and he exuded a peculiarly blent odour of brass polish and smoke.

"Is—is he dead?" she gasped.

"He's quite lively, ma'am," said Peter, grimly struggling to hold him.

She opened her arms with a sob of relief, and received the boy, grease and smoke and all; while the three remaining braves modestly tried to efface themselves.

"Robert," said Mrs. Carter, laying a detaining hand on her son's tri-coloured shoulder, "what is the meaning of this outrageous affair?"

Bobby dug his eyes with his greasy fists and whimpered.

"We just tied him to the stake and pretended to burn him. And then we sat down to smoke a pipe of peace, and I guess maybe the straw caught fire."

"It did—apparently," said his mother; her tone carried a suggestion of worse to come.

Peter, having hastily organized a fire brigade, succeeded in saving the buckboard and a few of the farming tools, but the building itself was beyond salvation. The wood was dry and thoroughly seasoned, and the feeble stream of water from the garden hose served to increase the smoke rather than to lessen the flames. The men finally fell back in a panting circle and watched it burn.

"Gee!" ejaculated Peter, "I'm glad it was the waggon-shed. It might have been the stables."

"Or the house," added Mrs. Carter.

"Or Augustus!" breathed Mrs. Brainard.

The roof fell in with a crash, and the flames leaped up to surround it. A mild cheer broke from the spectators; since there was nothing more to be done, they might as well enjoy the bonfire. The cheer was echoed by an answering shout at the end of the avenue, and a moment later the Sea Garth volunteer hook and ladder company dashed into sight, drawn by two foam-covered horses, the firemen still struggling into belated uniforms.

They came to a stand; half a dozen men tore off the nearest ladder and dragged it to the burning building. There, they hesitated dubiously. It was clearly an impossible feat to lean a thirty-foot ladder against a one-story waggon-shed whose roof had fallen in. Their chief, an impressive figure in a scarlet shirt and a rubber helmet, advanced to take command. He grasped the painful situation, and for a moment he looked dashed. The next moment, however, he had regained his poise, and announced, in a tone of triumph; "We'll save the stables!"

Mrs. Carter stepped forward with a voice of protest.

"Oh, no, I beg of you! It isn't necessary. The sparks are flying in the other direction. My own men have fortunately been able to cope with the fire, and while I am very much obliged for your trouble, there is no necessity for further aid."

"Madam," said the chief, "the wind is likely to change at any moment, and a single spark falling on that shingle roof would sweep away every building on the place. I am sorry to be disobliging, but

it is my duty to protect your property." He waved her aside and issued his orders. For the first time in her life Mrs. Carter found that she was not master on her own place.

Five minutes later half a dozen ladders were resting against the main edifice of the stables, while the bucket brigade was happily splashing the contents of the duck pond over the shingle roof.

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