

Deland Margaret Wade Campbell

An Encore



Margaret Deland

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ACCORDING to Old Chester, to be romantic was just one shade less reprehensible than to put on airs. Captain Alfred Price, in all his seventy years, had never been guilty of putting on airs, but certainly he had something to answer for in the way of romance.

However, in the days when we children used to see him pounding up the street from the post-office, reading, as he walked, a newspaper held at arm's-length in front of him, he was far enough from romance. He was seventy years old, he weighed over two hundred pounds, his big head was covered with a shock of grizzled red hair; his pleasures consisted in polishing his old sextant and playing on a small mouth-harmonicon. As to his vices, it was no secret that he kept a fat black bottle in the chimney-closet in his own room, and occasionally he swore strange oaths about his grandmother's nightcap. "He used to blaspheme," his daughter-in-law said; "but I said, 'Not in my presence, if you please!' So now he just says this foolish thing about a nightcap." Mrs. Drayton said that this reform would be one of the jewels in Mrs. Cyrus Price's crown; and added that she prayed that some day the Captain would give up tobacco and *rum*. "I am a poor, feeble creature," said Mrs. Drayton; "I cannot do much for my fellow-men in active mission-work, – but I give my prayers." However, neither Mrs. Drayton's prayers nor Mrs. Cyrus's active mission-work had done more than mitigate the blasphemy; the "rum" (which was good Monongahela whiskey) was still on hand; and as for tobacco, except when sleeping, eating, playing on his harmonicon, or dozing through one of Dr. Lavendar's sermons, the Captain smoked every moment, the ashes of his pipe or cigar falling unheeded on a vast and wrinkled expanse of waistcoat.

No; he was not a romantic object. But we girls, watching him stump past the school-room window to the post-office, used to whisper to one another, "Just think! *he eloped.*"

There was romance for you!

To be sure, the elopement had not quite come off, but except for the very end, it was all as perfect as a story. Indeed, the failure at the end made it all the better: angry parents, broken hearts – only, the worst of it was, the hearts did not stay broken! He went and married somebody else; and so did she. You would have supposed she would have died. I am sure, in her place, any one of us would have died. And yet, as Lydia Wright said, "How could a young lady die for a young gentleman with ashes all over his waistcoat?"

But when Alfred Price fell in love with Miss Letty Morris, he was not indifferent to his waistcoat, nor did he weigh two hundred pounds. He was slender and ruddy-cheeked, with tossing red-brown curls. If he swore, it was not by his grandmother nor her nightcap; if he drank, it was hard cider (which can often accomplish as much as "rum"); if he smoked it was in secret, behind the stable. He wore a stock, and (on Sunday) a ruffled shirt; a high-waisted coat with two brass buttons behind, and very tight pantaloons. At that time he attended the Seminary for Youths in Upper Chester. Upper Chester was then, as in our time, the seat of learning in the township, the Female Academy being there, too. Both were boarding-schools, but the young people came home to spend Sunday; and their weekly returns, all together in the stage, were responsible for more than one Old Chester match...

"The air," says Miss, sniffing genteelly as the coach jolts past the blossoming May orchards, "is most agreeably perfumed. And how fair is the prospect from this hill-top!"

"Fair indeed!" responds her companion, staring boldly.

Miss bridles and bites her lip.

"I was not observing the landscape," the young gentleman hastens to explain.

In those days (Miss Letty was born in 1804, and was eighteen when she and the ruddy Alfred sat on the back seat of the coach) – in those days the conversation of Old Chester youth was more elegant than in our time. We, who went to Miss Bailey’s school, were sad degenerates in the way of manners and language; at least so our elders told us. When Lydia Wright said, “Oh my, what an awful snow-storm!” dear Miss Ellen was displeased. “Lydia,” said she, “is there anything ‘awe’-inspiring in this display of the elements?”

“No, ’m,” faltered poor Lydia.

“Then,” said Miss Bailey, gravely, “your statement that the storm is ‘awful’ is a falsehood. I do not suppose, my dear, that you intentionally told an untruth; it was an exaggeration. But an exaggeration, though not perhaps a falsehood, is unladylike, and should be avoided by persons of refinement.” Just here the question arises: what would Miss Ellen (now in heaven) say if she could hear Lydia’s Lydia, just home from college, remark – But no: Miss Ellen’s precepts shall protect these pages.

But in the days when Letty Morris looked out of the coach window, and young Alfred murmured that the prospect was fair indeed, conversation was perfectly correct. And it was still decorous even when it got beyond the coach period and reached a point where Old Chester began to take notice. At first it was young Old Chester which giggled. Later old Old Chester made some comments; it was then that Alfred’s mother mentioned the matter to Alfred’s father. “He is young, and, of course, foolish,” Mrs. Price explained. And Mr. Price said that though folly was incidental to Alfred’s years, it must be checked.

“Just check it,” said Mr. Price.

Then Miss Letty’s mother awoke to the situation, and said, “Fy, fy, Letitia! let me hear no more of this foolishness.”

So it was that these two young persons were plunged in grief. Oh, glorious grief of thwarted love! When they met now, they did not talk of the landscape. Their conversation, though no doubt as genteel as before, was all of broken hearts. But again Letty’s mother found out, and went in wrath to call on Alfred’s family. It was decided between them that the young man should be sent away from home. “To save him,” says the father. “To protect my daughter,” says Mrs. Morris.

But Alfred and Letty had something to say... It was in December; there was a snow-storm – a storm which Lydia Wright would certainly have called “awful”; but it did not interfere with true love; these two children met in the graveyard to swear undying constancy. Alfred’s lantern came twinkling through the flakes, as he threaded his way across the hill-side among the tombstones, and found Letty just inside the entrance, standing with her black serving-woman under a tulip-tree. The negress, chattering with cold and fright, kept plucking at the girl’s pelisse to hurry her; but once Alfred was at her side, Letty was indifferent to storm and ghosts. As for Alfred, he was too cast down to think of them.

“Letty, they will part us.”

“No, my dear Alfred, no!”

“Yes. Yes, they will. Oh, if you were only mine!”

Miss Letty sighed.

“Will you be true to me, Letty? I am to go on a sailing-vessel to China, to be gone two years. Will you wait for me?”

Letty gave a little cry; two years! Her black woman twitched her sleeve.

“Miss Let, it’s gittin’ cole, honey.”

“(Don’t, Flora.) – Alfred, *two years!* Oh, Alfred, that is an eternity. Why, I should be – I should be twenty!”

The lantern, set on a tombstone beside them, blinked in a snowy gust. Alfred covered his face with his hands – he was shaken to his soul; the little, gay creature beside him thrilled at a sound from behind those hands.

“Alfred,” – she said, faintly; then she hid her face against his arm; “my dear Alfred, I will, if you desire it – fly with you!”

Alfred, with a gasp, lifted his head and stared at her. His slower mind had seen nothing but separation and despair; but the moment the word was said he was aflame. What! Would she? Could she? Adorable creature!

“Miss Let, my feet done git cole – ”

“(Flora, be still!) – Yes, Alfred, yes. I am thine.”

The boy caught her in his arms. “But I am to be sent away on Monday! My angel, could you – fly, to-morrow?”

And Letty, her face still hidden against his, shoulder, nodded.

Then, while the shivering Flora stamped, and beat her arms, and the lantern flared and sizzled, Alfred made their plans, which were simple to the point of childishness. “My own!” he said, when it was all arranged; then he held the lantern up and looked into her face, blushing and determined, with snowflakes gleaming on the curls that pushed out from under her big hood. “You will meet me at the minister’s?” he said, passionately. “You will not fail me?”

“I will not fail you!” she said; and laughed joyously; but the young man’s face was white.

She kept her word; and with the assistance of Flora, romantic again when her feet were warm, all went as they planned. Clothes were packed, savings-banks opened, and a chaise abstracted from the Price stable.

“It is my intention,” said the youth, “to return to my father the value of the vehicle and nag, as soon as I can secure a position which will enable me to support my Letty in comfort and fashion.”

On the night of the elopement the two children met at the minister’s house. (Yes, the very old Rectory to which we Old Chester children went every Saturday afternoon to Dr. Lavendar’s Collect class. But of course there was no Dr. Lavendar there in those days).

Well; Alfred requested this minister to pronounce them man and wife; but he coughed and poked the fire. “I am of age,” Alfred insisted; “I am twenty-two.” Then Mr. Smith said he must first go and put on his bands and surplice; and Alfred said, “If you please, sir.” And off went Mr. Smith —*and sent a note to Alfred’s father and Letty’s mother!*

We girls used to wonder what the lovers talked about while they waited for the return of the surpliced traitor. Ellen Dale always said they were foolish to wait. “Why didn’t they go right off?” said Ellen. “If *I* were going to elope, I shouldn’t bother to get married. But, oh, think of how they felt when in walked those cruel parents!”

The story was that they were torn weeping from each other’s arms; that Letty was sent to bed for two days on bread and water; that Alfred was packed off to Philadelphia the very next morning, and sailed in less than a week. They did not see each other again.

But the end of the story was not romantic at all. Letty, although she crept about for a while in deep disgrace, and brooded upon death – that interesting impossibility, so dear to youth —*married*, if you please! when she was twenty, somebody called North, – and went away to live. When Alfred came back, seven years later, he got married, too. He married a Miss Barkley. He used to go away on long voyages, so perhaps he wasn’t really fond of her. We tried to think so, for we liked Captain Price.

In our day Captain Price was a widower. He had given up the sea, and settled down to live in Old Chester; his son, Cyrus, lived with him, and his languid daughter-in-law – a young lady of dominant feebleness, who ruled the two men with that most powerful domestic rod, foolish weakness. This combination in a woman will cause a mountain (a masculine mountain) to fly from its firm base; while kindness, justice, and good sense leave it upon unshaken foundations of selfishness. Mrs. Cyrus was a Goliath of silliness; when billowing black clouds heaped themselves in the west on a hot afternoon, she turned pale with apprehension, and the Captain and Cyrus ran for four tumblers, into which they put the legs of her bed, where, cowering among the feathers, she lay cold with fear and perspiration. Every night the Captain screwed down all the windows on the lower floor; in the

morning Cyrus pulled the screws out. Cyrus had a pretty taste in horseflesh, but Gussie cried so when he once bought a trotter that he had long ago resigned himself to a friendly beast of twenty-seven years, who could not go much out of a walk because he had string-halt in both hind legs.

But one must not be too hard on Mrs. Cyrus. In the first place, she was not born in Old Chester. But, added to that, just think of her name! The effect of names upon character is not considered as it should be. If one is called Gussie for thirty years, it is almost impossible not to become gussie after a while. Mrs. Cyrus could not be Augusta; few women can; but it was easy to be gussie – irresponsible, silly, selfish. She had a vague, flat laugh, she ate a great deal of candy, and she was afraid of – But one cannot catalogue Mrs. Cyrus's fears. They were as the sands of the sea for number. And these two men were governed by them. Only when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed will it be understood why a man loves a fool; but why he obeys her is obvious enough: Fear is the greatest power in the world; Gussie was afraid of thunder-storms, or what not; but the Captain and Cyrus were afraid of Gussie! A hint of tears in her pale eyes, and her husband would sigh with anxiety and Captain Price slip his pipe into his pocket and sneak out of the room. Doubtless Cyrus would often have been glad to follow him, but the old gentleman glared when his son showed a desire for his company.

“Want to come and smoke with me? ‘Your granny was Murray!’ – you’re sojering. You’re first mate; you belong on the bridge in storms. I’m before the mast. Tend to your business!”

It was forty-eight years before Letty and Alfred saw each other again – or at least before persons calling themselves by those old names saw each other. Were they Letty and Alfred – this tousled, tangled, good-humored old man, ruddy and cowed, and this small, bright-eyed old lady, Mrs. North, led about by a devoted daughter? Certainly these two persons bore no resemblance to the boy and girl torn from each other’s arms that cold December night. Alfred had been mild and slow; Captain Price (except when his daughter-in-law raised her finger) was a pleasant old roaring lion. Letty had been a gay, high-spirited little creature, not as retiring, perhaps, as a young female should be, and certainly self-willed; Mrs. North was completely under the thumb of her daughter Mary. Not that “under the thumb” means unhappiness; Mary North desired only her mother’s welfare, and lived fiercely for that single purpose. From morning until night (and, indeed, until morning again, for she rose often from her bed to see that there was no draught from the crack of the open window), all through the twenty-four hours she was on duty.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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