

Lynde Francis

A Romance in Transit



Francis Lynde

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Содержание

I	5
II	9
III	11
IV	14
V	16
VI	18
VII	20
VIII	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

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I

P. P. C. ARIADNE

Train Number Three, the "Flying Kestrel," vestibuled, had crossed the yellow Rubicon of the West and was mounting toward the Occident up the gentle acclivities of the Great Plain. The morning was perfect, as early autumn mornings are wont to be in the trans-Missouri region; the train was on time; and the through passengers in the Pullman sleeping-car "Ariadne" had settled themselves, each according to his gifts, to enjoy or endure the day-long run.

There was a sun-browned ranchman in lower eleven, homeward bound from the Chicago stockyards; a pair of school-teachers, finishing their vacation journey, in ten; a Mormon elder, smug in ready-made black and narrow-brimmed hat, *vis-à-vis* in lower five with two hundred pounds of good-natured, comfort-loving Catholic priesthood in lower six. Two removes from the elder, a Denver banker lounged corner-wise in his section, oblivious to everything save the figures in the financial column of the morning paper; and diagonally across from the banker were the inevitable newly married ones, advertising themselves as such with all the unconscious *naïveté* of their kind.

Burton and his wife had lower three. They were homing from the passenger agents' meeting in Chicago; and having gone breakfastless at the Missouri River terminal by reason of a belated train, were waiting for the porter to serve them with eggs and coffee from the buffet. The narrow table was between them, and Burton, who was an exact man with an eye to symmetrical detail, raised the spring clips and carefully smoothed the wrinkles out of the table-cloth as he talked. A private car had been attached to the train at the Missouri River, and its freightage was of moment to the couple in section three.

"Are you sure it's the President?" asked the wife, leaning back to give the cloth-laying a fair field. "I thought the Naught-fifty was General Manager Cadogan's car."

"So it is; but President Vennor always borrows it for his annual inspection trip. And I'm quite sure, because I saw Miss Vennor on the platform when the car was coupled on."

"Then we'll get home just in time to go on dress-parade," said the little lady, flippantly. "Colorado and Utah Division, fall in! 'Shun, company! Eyes right! The President is upon you!" and she went through a minimized manual of arms with the table-knife.

The general agent frowned and stroked his beard. "Your anarchistic leanings will get us into trouble some time, Emily. Mr. Vennor is not a man to be trifled with, and you mustn't forget that he is the President of the Colorado and Utah Railway Company, whose bread you eat."

"Whose bread I should like to eat, if that slow-poke in the buffet would ever bring it," retorted the wife. "And it is you who forget. You are a man, and Mr. Vennor is a man; these are the primal facts, and the business relation is merely incidental. He doesn't think any more of you for standing in awe of him."

"I don't stand in awe of him," Burton began; but the opportune arrival of the buffet porter with the breakfast saved him the trouble of elaborating his defence.

Half way through the frugal meal the swing-door of the farther vestibule gave back, and a young man came down the aisle with the sure step of an accustomed traveller. He stopped to chat a moment with the school-teachers, and the ranchman in section eleven, looking him over with an appreciative eye, pronounced him a "man's man," and the terse epithet fitted. He was a vigorous young fellow, clean-limbed and well put together, and good-looking enough to tolerate mirrors in

their proper places. While he chatted with the two young women, he pushed his hat back with a quick gesture which was an index to his character. Open-hearted frankness looked out of the brown eyes, and healthy optimism gave an upward tilt to the curling mustache. A young man with a record clean enough to permit him to look an accusative world in the face without abashment, one would say.

When he reached the breakfasting pair in three, he stopped again and held out a hand to each.

"Well, well; you two!" he said. "I didn't see you when I went forward. Where did you get on?"

"At the river," replied Mrs. Burton, making room for him in the seat beside her. "Won't you sit down and break bread with us? literally, you know; there isn't anything else to break unless you'll wait for the shell of an egg that is not yet cooked."

"No, thank you; I had my breakfast a good two hours ago. Where have you been? and where are you going?"

"We have been at the passenger meeting in Chicago, and we are on the way home," said the general agent.

"Yes, running a race with the President," cut in Mrs. Burton. "John is dreadfully afraid we sha'n't get to Salt Lake in time to be keel-hauled with the rest of the force."

The young man sat back on the arm of the opposite seat with the light of inquiry in his eyes. "What President?" he asked.

"Vennor, of our company. Didn't you know he was in the Naught-fifty?" said Burton.

"No. They coupled it on just as we were leaving the river, and I thought – I took it for granted that our General Manager was aboard. It's Mr. Cadogan's car."

"I know; but President Vennor always borrows it for his annual trip."

"Are you sure? Have you seen him?"

"Quite sure. I saw Miss Vennor on the platform with some other young people whom I don't know. It's Mr. Vennor's party."

The young man pushed his hat back, and the look of frankness became introspective. "Do you know the Vennors? personally, I mean."

The little lady made answer:

"Yes. We met them at Manitou last summer. Do you know them?"

The young man seemed unaccountably embarrassed. "I – I've met Miss Gertrude – that was last summer, too," he stammered. "Did you – did you like her, Mrs. Burton?"

"Very much, indeed; she is as sweet and lovable as her father is odious. *Do* have a cup of coffee, won't you?"

"No, thank you. Then you didn't admire the President?"

"Indeed I didn't; no one could. He is one of the cool, contemptuous kind of people; always looking you over as if he had half a mind to buy you. He was barely civil to me, and he was positively rude to John."

"Oh, no; not quite that, Emily," amended the husband. "I'm only one of a good many employees to him."

"Draws the money-line sharp and clear, does he?" said the young man, who appeared to be more deeply interested than a merely casual topic would account for.

The little lady nodded vigorously. "That's it, exactly. You can fairly hear the double eagles clink when he speaks."

The general agent deprecated disloyalty, and was fain to change the subject.

"What are you doing so far away from your territory, Fred?" he asked.

"I'm in charge of the party of old people and invalids in the Tadmor. They'd a mind to be 'personally conducted,' and they threaten to take me all the way across to the Coast."

"Good!" exclaimed the small person. "Then you can stop over and visit us in Salt Lake."

The passenger agent shook his head. "I sha'n't get that far. I must break away at Denver, by all means."

"Would nothing tempt you to go on?"

"I'm afraid not; that is – I – er – " the young man's embarrassment suddenly returned, and he stopped helplessly.

Mrs. Burton's curiosity was instantly on the alert. "Then there *is* something? Do tell me what it is," she pleaded.

"It's nothing; in fact, it's much less than nothing. I hesitated because I – because your way of putting it is very – that is, it covers a great deal of ground," he stammered.

"Don't make him quibble any more than he has to," said Burton, with mock severity. "You see it's quite impossible for him to tell the truth."

The young man laughed good-naturedly. "That's the fact. I've been in the passenger service so long that I can't always be sure of recognizing the verities when I meet them. But to get back to the original sheep; I mustn't go on – not beyond Denver. It would have been better for all concerned if I had cut it short at the river."

"For all concerned? for yourself and the invalids, you mean?" queried the curious one.

"Yes, and perhaps for some others. But speaking of the invalids, I'll have to be getting back to them; they'll think I've deserted them. I'll be in again later in the day."

Mrs. Burton waited until the swing-door of the vestibule had winged itself to rest behind him. Then she arched her eyebrows at her husband and said, "I wonder if Fred isn't the least little bit *épris* with Gertrude Vennor?"

To which the general agent replied, with proper masculine contumely, "I believe you would infer a whole railroad from a single cross-tie. Of course he isn't. Brockway is a good fellow, and a rising young man, but he knows his place."

None the less it was the arrow of the woman's intuition, and not that of the man's reason, that pierced the truth. In the vestibule the passenger agent suddenly changed his mind about rejoining his party in the Tadmor, turning aside into the deserted smoking-room of the Ariadne to burn a reflective cigar, and to piece out reminiscence with present fact.

Notwithstanding his expressed reluctance, he had intended going on to the Pacific Coast with the party in the Tadmor; had, in effect, more than half promised so to do. It was the time of year when he could best be spared from his district; and the members of the party had made a point of it. But the knowledge that Miss Gertrude Vennor was a passenger on the train opened up a new field wherein prudence and reawakened passion fought for the mastery, to the utter disregarding of the mere business point of view.

They had met in Colorado the previous summer – the passenger agent and the President's daughter – and Brockway had lost his heart to the sweet-faced young woman from the farther East before he had so much as learned her name. He was convoying a train-load of school-teachers across the continent; and then, as now, she was a member of a party in her father's private car. Their meeting was at Silver Plume, where she had become separated from her father's party, and had boarded the excursion train, mistaking it for the regular which was to follow Brockway's special as second section. The obvious thing for Brockway to have done was to put her off at Georgetown, where the following section would have picked her up in a few minutes. But he did no such unselfish thing. Before the excursion train had doubled the final curve of the Loop he was ready to purchase her continued presence at a price.

This he accomplished by omitting to mention the obvious expedient. Leaving a message with the Georgetown operator, notifying the President that his daughter was on the excursion train, Brockway went on his way rejoicing; and, by a judicious conspiracy with his own conductor and engineer, managed to keep the special well ahead of the regular all the way to Denver.

That was the beginning of it, and fate, kindly or unkindly, had added yet other meetings; at Manitou, at Leadville, and again at Salt Lake City, where the President's daughter had voluntarily joined Brockway's sight-seeing party on the strength of an acquaintance with two of the Boston

school-mistresses. The temporary chaperons were kind, and the friendship had burgeoned into something quite like intimacy before the "Mormon day" was overpast. But there it had ended. Since that day he had neither seen her nor heard from her; and when he had come to look the matter squarely in the face in the light of sober afterthought, he was minded to put his infatuation under foot, and to try honestly to be glad that their lives had gone apart. For he had learned that Mr. Francis Vennor was a multi-millionnaire, and that his daughter was an heiress in her own right; and no poor gentleman was ever more fiercely jealous of his poverty rights than was this shrewd young soldier in the unnumbered army of the dispossessed.

But the intervention of half a continent of space is one thing, and that of a mere car-length is another. Now that he had to walk but the length of the Tadmor to be with her again, the eager passion which he had fondly believed to be safely dead and buried rose up in its might and threatened to put poverty-pride, and all other calmly considered springs of action to the sword; did presently run them through, for when Brockway left the smoking-room of the Ariadne and crossed the jarring platforms to the door of the Tadmor, he was flogging his wits to devise some pretext which would excuse an invasion of the private car.

II

THE "PERSONALLY CONDUCTED"

In view of the certain proximity of Miss Gertrude Vennor, Brockway wanted nothing so much as a quiet opportunity to think his mind clear in the matter of his love-affair, but time and place were both denied him. Lying in wait for him at the very door of the Tadmor was a thin old gentleman, with hock-bottle shoulders and penthoused eyes. His voice was high-pitched and rasping; and his speech was petulance grown old and unreasoning.

"Mr. ah – Brockway, I protest! Do you consider it fair to us, your patrons, to absent yourself for the ah – better part of the morning? Here I've been waiting for you more than an hour, sir, and – "

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jordan; I'm sorry," Brockway cut in. "What can I do for you?"

"You can attend to your ah – business a little closer, for one thing, Mr. ah – Brockway," quavered the aggrieved one, taking a yard-long coupon ticket from his breast-pocket; "and for another, you can give me the sixty days going limit on this ticket that I ah – stipulated for when I bought it, sir."

Brockway glanced at the ticket and called attention to the conditions in the contract. "The going limit of thirty days is plainly stated here, Mr. Jordan. Didn't you read the contract before signing it?"

"Don't make any difference, sir; I ah – stipulated for sixty days, and I require you to make the stipulation ah – good, sir."

"But, my dear sir, I can't. No representative of any one of the lines interested is authorized to change these conditions."

"Very well, sir; v-e-r-y well." The irascible one folded the ticket with tremulous fingers and sought to replace it in his pocket-book. "I shall know what road to ah – patronize next time, and it won't be yours, Mr. ah – Brockway; you may depend upon that, sir."

The passenger agent's forte was placability. "Don't worry about your ticket, Mr. Jordan," he said. "We'll take good care of you, and if you should happen to be more than thirty days in reaching Los Angeles – "

"Thirty days!" gasped the objector. "Great ah – heavens, sir, you told us you could put us there in ah – four days and a half!"

"So I did, and so we shall, barring the stop-overs the party may wish to make; but in that case I don't see why you should require a sixty-day limit," said Brockway, with an affable smile.

By this time quite a little group had gathered around them, and anxious queries began to beat thick and fast upon Brockway's ears.

"What's that about our tickets?"

"Thirty days, did you say?"

"Can't have stop-overs?"

Brockway got upon his feet. "One moment, if you please," he protested. "There is nothing wrong – nothing different. Mr. Jordan and I were merely discussing the question of an extra limit on his own ticket; that was all."

"Oh."

"Ah."

"Where do we get dinner?"

"What time do we reach Denver?"

"Is there a dining-car on this train?"

Brockway answered the inquiries in sequence, and when the norm of quiet was restored, a soft-spoken little gentleman in a grass-cloth duster and a velvet skull-cap drew him away to the smoking-compartment.

"Let's go and smoke," he said; and Brockway went willingly, inasmuch as the little gentleman with the womanish face and the ready cigar-case was the only person in the party who seemed to be capable of travelling without a guardian.

"Worry the life out of you, don't they, my boy," said the comforter, when his cigar was alight.

"Oh, no; I'm well used to it."

"I presume you are, in a way. Still, some of the complaints are so ridiculous. I suppose you've heard the latest?"

"Nothing later than Mr. Jordan's demand for sixty days in which to complete a week's journey."

"Oh, it isn't that; that's an individual grievance. The other involves the entire party. Of course, you are aware that the Tadmor is no longer the rear car in the train?"

"Oh, Lord! are they going to fight about that?"

"Unquestionably. Didn't you promise some of them that this particular chariot should be at the tail-end of the trans-continental procession?"

"No. It was merely an answer to a question. I said that extra cars were usually put on behind. Are they going to demand it as a right?"

"Yes; I believe the deputation is waiting for you now."

"Heavens – what a lot of cranks!" said Brockway, despairingly. "The thing can't be done, but I may as well go and fight it out."

The deputation was in section six, and one of the committee rose and gave him a seat.

"There is a little matter we should like to have adjusted," began the courteous one; but Brockway interrupted.

"Mr. Somers was just telling me about it. I hope you are not going to insist – "

There were two elderly ladies on the committee, and they protested as one person.

"Now, Mr. Brockway! You know we made it a positive condition – so we could go out on the platform and see the scenery."

"But, my dear madam, let me explain – "

"There is nothing to explain; it was an explicit promise, and we insist on its fulfilment."

"Just one word," Brockway pleaded. "The car behind us is our General Manager's private car, lent to President Vennor, of the Colorado and Utah. If we should put it ahead of this, Mr. Vennor's party would be continually disturbed by the passengers and train-men going back and forth. Don't you see – "

The fourth member of the deputation put in his word at this.

"How long has it been since the railway companies began to put the convenience of their guests before the rights of their patrons, Mr. Brockway? Answer me that, if you please."

"I should like to know!" declared one of the ladies. "We have paid for our accommodations."

The courteous one summed up the matter in set phrase.

"It's no use, Mr. Brockway, as you see. If you don't carry out your part of the agreement, I'm afraid we shall have to telegraph to your superiors."

For a moment Brockway was tempted to answer four fools according to their folly. Then he bethought him that he had but now been seeking a pretext which would open the door of the private car. Here was a makeshift; a poor one, to be sure, but better than none. Wherefore, instead of quarrelling with the deputation, he rose with placatory phrases in his mouth.

"Very well; I'll see what can be done. But you must give me a little time; the scenery – " pointing to the monotonous landscape circling slowly with the onward sweep of the train – "is not exactly of the rear-platform variety yet."

After which he retreated to the rear vestibule of the Tadmor and stood looking out through the glass panel in the door at the hamper-laden front platform of the Naught-fifty, trying to muster courage to take the chilling plunge. For he knew that the year ago episode was not altogether pleasing to the father of Miss Gertrude Vennor.

III

THE PRIVATE CAR

"Yes, sah; mighty sorry, sah; but we cayn't cook you-all's dinner, no-how, sah. Wateh-pipe's done bu'sted in de range."

President Vennor turned and regarded the big-bodied cook of the Naught-fifty with the eye-sweep of appraisal which Mrs. Burton had found so annoying.

"No dinner, you say? That's bad. Why did you burst the pipe?"

"I – I didn't bu'sted it, sah; hit des bu'sted hitse'f – 'deed it did, sah!"

"Well, can't you serve us a cold lunch?"

"Might do dat – yes, sah; ef dat'll do."

"What is that, papa; no luncheon to-day?" asked a young woman, coming down the compartment to stand beside the President's chair.

There was a family resemblance, but in the daughter the magic of femineity had softened the severer characteristics until they became winsome and good to look upon. The cool gray eyes of the father were Gertrude's inheritance, also; but in the eyes of the daughter the calculating stare became the steady gaze of clean-hearted guilelessness; and in her even-tinted complexion there was only a suggestion of the sallow olive of the father's clean-shaven face. For face and figure, Gertrude owed much to birth and breeding, and it was small wonder that Frederick Brockway had lost his heart to her in time-honored and romantic fashion.

The President answered his daughter's query without taking his eyes from the big-bodied cook.

"No; there is something the matter with the range. Ask the others if they would prefer a cold luncheon in the car to the *table d'hôte* at the dinner station."

Gertrude went to the other end of the compartment and stated the case to Mrs. Dunham, the chaperon of the party; to Priscilla and Hannah Beaswicke, two young women of the Annex; to Chester Fleetwell, A.B., Harvard, by the skin of his teeth, but the ablest oarsman of his class by a very safe majority; and to Mr. Harold Quatremain, the President's secretary.

The dinner station carried it unanimously, and Gertrude announced the vote.

"We're all agreed upon the *table d'hôte*," she said; and the Falstaffian negro shook himself free and backed into the vestibule. "What is its name? and when do we arrive?"

"I'll have to inquire," Mr. Vennor replied. "I'll go forward and have the conductor wire ahead for a separate table."

But Gertrude said: "Please don't; let's go with the crowd for once. I'm so tired of being always specialized."

The President's smile was suggestive of the metallic smirk on the face of a George-the-Fourth penny. "Just as you please," he rejoined; "but I'll go and find out when and where."

Now it chanced that at this precise moment Brockway had laid his hand on the Tadmor's door-knob preparatory to taking the plunge; and when he opened the door he found himself face to face with the President. Whereupon he fell back and lost the power of speech, while the incomer appraised him with his eyes and tried to remember where he had seen him before. Recognition brought with it a small frown of annoyance.

"Your name is Brockway, I believe," the President said.

"Ye-yes," Brockway stammered, being by no means so sure of it at the moment.

"H-m; and, if I remember correctly, you are an employee of this line?"

"I am." The passenger agent was beginning a little to recover his scattered store of self-possession.

"Very good. Possibly you can tell me what I want to know. What is the dinner station, and when do we reach it?"

"Moreno – twelve-ten. Shall I wire ahead for a private table?" Brockway asked, eager to preface his unwelcome purpose with some small token of service.

"By no means; we are no better than the patrons of your company. What is good enough for them ought to suffice for us."

"Of course, if you don't wish it," Brockway began; and then the plunge: "I am in charge of the excursionists in this car, and they want it placed behind yours. If you will kindly consent to humor their whim – " He stopped in deference to the frown of displeasure which was gradually overspreading the President's brow.

"And so make our private car a thoroughfare for everybody," said he, indignantly; then, with a sudden turn which confused Brockway until he saw its drift, "But you are quite right; the patrons of your company should always be considered first. We are only guests. By all means, make the change at the first opportunity."

"Please don't misunderstand me," Brockway said, courageously. "I didn't propose it. If you object, just say so, and I'll see them all hanged first."

The President shook his head reprovingly, and Brockway fancied he could feel the cold gray eyes pinning him against the partition.

"Certainly not; I am afraid you don't sufficiently consider your duty to your employers. I not only authorize the change – I desire it. I shall request it if you do not."

Brockway winced under the patronizing tone, but he was determined not to let pride stand in the way of better things. So he said, "Thank you for helping me out. I'll have the change made at the dinner station, and we'll try not to annoy you any more than we can help."

That ended it, and he was no nearer the penetralia of car Naught-fifty than before. Mr. Vennor turned to go, but at the door he bethought him of the crippled range.

"A water-pipe has burst in our kitchen range," said he. "Can we get it repaired this side of Denver?"

Brockway considered it for a moment. Back of his passenger department service there was an apprenticeship in mechanics, and he was weighing the scanty furnishings of the engineer's tool-box against the probable askings of the undertaking. It was a chance to show his good-will, and he concluded to risk it.

"Hardly. We don't stop long enough at the division station. Is it a very bad break?"

"Indeed, I know nothing about it. The cook tells me he can't use the range."

"May I go in and look at it?" Brockway asked.

Now President Vennor, upon recognizing Gertrude's acquaintance of the previous summer, had determined to prevent a renewal of the intimacy at whatever cost; but he abhorred *tables d'hôte* and railway eating-stations, and was willing to make some concessions to avoid them. So he gave the coveted permission, and a minute later they were in the kitchen of the private car, inspecting the disabled range.

"It isn't as bad as it might be," Brockway announced, finally. "I think I can stop the leak with what tools I can find in the engineer's box."

"You?"

"Yes; I'm a machinist by trade, you know. I earned my living at it awhile, before I went into the passenger department." Brockway found a certain measure of satisfaction in running counter to the presumed anti-craftsman prejudice of the man of inherited wealth.

"I'm sure it is very good of you to offer, but I couldn't think of troubling you," the President said, sparring to gain time in which to perfect a little plan which had just suggested itself.

"Oh, it's no trouble; I shall be glad enough to help you out."

"Very well, then – if you wish to try. I will make it worth your while."

Brockway straightened up and met the appraising eyes unflinchingly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Vennor, but you've mistaken your man this time," he said, steadily. "I'll gladly do it as a kindness – not otherwise."

The President smiled. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Brockway," he apologized, with the faintest possible emphasis on the prefix; "we shall be most grateful if you will come to our rescue upon your own terms. I presume you won't have time before noon?"

"N – no," said Brockway, glancing at his watch and generously burying his pique with the provocation; "but I'll attack it as soon as we leave Moreno. It won't take long."

Mr. Vennor bowed, and saw his newly pledged servitor safely out upon the hamper-laden platform. He cherished a little theory of his own respecting the discouraging of youthful and sentimental intimacies, and it was based upon conditions which Brockway's proposed undertaking might easily fulfil. Gertrude had been distinctly pleased with the young man the preceding summer. Other things had happened since, and, fortunately, Fleetwell was along to look after his own interests. None the less, it might be well for them to meet under conditions which would make it impossible for the passenger agent to pose as Gertrude's social equal. Accordingly, the President sought out the porter and gave him his instructions.

"William, that young man will come in this afternoon to repair the range. When he is well at work, I want you to come and tell me."

IV THE DINNER STATION

The railway company's hotel at Moreno is a pretentious Queen Anne cockle-shell, confronted by a broad platform flowing in an unrippled tide of planking between the veranda and the track, with tributary wooden streams paralleling the rails.

Brockway knew this platform by length and by breadth; and when the "Flying Kestrel" ranged alongside he meant to project himself into the procession of dinner-seekers what time Miss Vennor should be passing the Tadmor. But *l'homme propose, et la femme*—

"Oh, Mr. Brockway; *will* you help me find my satchel? the one with the monogram, you know. I can't find it anywhere." Thus one of the unescorted ladies whose major weakness was a hopeless inability to keep in touch with her numerous belongings.

The train was already at a stand, but Brockway smothered his impatience and joined the search for the missing hand-bag, contenting himself with a glimpse of the President's daughter as she passed the windows of the Tadmor. Fleeting as it was, the glimpse fired his heart anew. The year had brought her added largesse of beauty and winsomeness. The wind was blowing free and riotous, caressing the soft brown hair under the dainty travelling hat, and twisting the modest gray gown into clinging draperies as she breasted it. Brockway gazed and worshipped afresh, and prudence and poverty-pride vanished when he observed that she was leaning upon the arm of an athletic young man, whose attitude was sufficiently lover-like to make the passenger agent abjure wisdom and curse common sense.

"That's what I get for playing the finical idiot!" he groaned. "A year ago I might have had it all my own way if I hadn't been a pride-ridden fool. Confound the money, anyway; it's enough to make a man wish it were all at the bottom of the sea!"

With which anarchistic reflection he went out to arrange for transferring the Tadmor, and, incidentally, to get his own dinner. When the first was done there was scant time for the second, and he was at the lunch counter when the President's party went back to the Naught-fifty.

"Why, they've taken on another car," said Gertrude, noticing the change.

"No," her father rejoined, shortly; "we have a passenger agent on board, and he has seen fit to put his excursionists' car in the rear."

At the word, Gertrude's thoughts went back to a certain afternoon filled with a swift rush down a precipitous canyon, with a brawling stream at the track-side, and a simple-hearted young man, knowing naught of the artificialities and much of the things that are, at her elbow.

The train of reflection paused when they reached the sitting-room of the private car, but it went on again when the President's daughter had curled herself into the depths of a great wicker sleepy-hollow to watch the unending procession of stubble-fields slipping past the car window. How artlessly devoted he had been, this earnest young private in the great business army; so different from – well, from Chester Fleetwell, for example. Chester's were the manners of a later day; a day in which the purely social distinctions of sex are much ignored. That, too, was pleasant, in its way. And yet there was something very charming in the elder fashion.

And Mr. Brockway knew his rôle and played it well – if, indeed, it were a rôle, which she very much doubted. Old school manners are not to be put on and off like a garment, nor is sincerity to be aped as a fad. Just here reflection became speculative. What had become of Mr. Brockway since their "Mormon day"? Had he gone on with his school-mistresses and ended by marrying one of them? There was something repellent in the thought of his marrying any one, but when reason demanded a reason, Gertrude's father had joined her.

"I hope we shall be able to have dinner in the car," the President said, drawing up a chair. "I stumbled upon a young mechanic when I went forward to inquire about the eating-station, and he agreed to repair the range this afternoon."

"How fortunate!"

"Yes," the President rejoined; and then he began to debate with himself as to the strict truth of the affirmative, and the conversation languished.

Meanwhile, Brockway had hastened out to the engine at the cry of "All aboard!" The 828 was sobbing for the start when he climbed to the foot-board, and the engineer, who knew him, grinned knavishly.

"Better get you some overclothes if you're goin' to ride up here," he suggested.

"I'm not going to stay. Lend me a pair of overalls, and a jumper, and a pair of pipe-tongs, and a hammer, and a few other things, will you?"

"Sure thing," said the man at the throttle. "What's up? One o' your tourists broke a side-rod?"

Brockway laughed and dropped easily into the technical figure of speech.

"No; crown-sheet's down in the Naught-fifty's cook-stove, and I'm going to jack it up."

"Good man," commented the engineer, who rejoiced in Brockway's happy lack of departmental pride. "Help yourself to anything you can find."

Brockway found a grimy suit of overclothes and took off his coat.

"Goin' to put 'em on here and go through the train in uniform?" laughed the engineer.

"Why not?" Brockway demanded. "I'm not ashamed of the blue denim yet. Wore it too long."

He donned the craftsman's uniform. The garments were a trifle short at the extremities, but they more than made up for the lack equatorially.

"How's that for a lightning change?" he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the din and clangor of the engine. "Just hang on to my coat and hat till I get back, and I'll swap with you again." And gathering up the handful of tools, he climbed back over the coal and disappeared through the door of the mail car.

V AT THE MEETING-POINT

Brockway made his way unrecognized through the train, and found the Falstaffian cook awaiting him in the kitchen of the Naught-fifty. Five minutes later, he was hard at work on the disabled stove, quite reckless of soot and grime, and intent only upon making a workmanlike job of the repairs. The narrow compartment was none too well ventilated, and he was soon working in an atmosphere rivalling that of the hot-room in a Turkish bath. Wherefore he wrought arduously, and in due time the leaky joint was made whole.

After turning the water on and satisfying himself of the fact, Brockway crawled out from behind the range and got upon his feet with a sigh of relief. Just then the portway into the waiter's pantry filled with faces like the arch of a proscenium-box in a theatre. Brockway wheeled quickly at the sound of voices and saw the President, one young woman with eye-glasses and another without, a clean-faced young man with uncut hair, and – Miss Vennor.

"Ha!" said the President, with the King George Fourth smile and his coldest stare; "we caught you fairly in the midst of it, didn't we, Mr. Brockway? Do you still assert that we shall dine at our own table this evening?"

The effect of Mr. Vennor's dramatic little surprise was varied and not altogether as he had prefigured. As for the person most deeply concerned, no one was ever less ashamed of a craftsman's insignia than was Brockway; but when he saw that the President had permitted him to do a service for the sole purpose of making him appear ridiculous, his heart was hot in just proportion to the magnitude of the affront.

As for Gertrude, she could have wept with pity and indignation. This was the "young mechanic" her father had found and used, only to make him a laughing-stock! The light of a sudden purpose flashed in the steady gray eyes, and she spoke quickly, before Brockway could reply to her father's gibe.

"Why, Mr. Brockway! where did you come from? It really seems that you are fated to be our good angel. Have you actually got it repaired?" The winsome face disappeared from the portway, and before Brockway could open his lips she was standing beside him. "Show me what was the matter with it," she said.

He obeyed, with proper verbal circumstance, gaining a little self-possession with every added phrase. Gertrude led him on, laughing and chatting and dragging the others into the rescue until Brockway quite forgot that he was supposed to be a laughing-stock for gods and men.

"I'm very glad to meet you, I'm sure," he said, bowing gravely to the Misses Beaswicke, when Gertrude had actually gone the length of introducing him; "Mr. Fleetwell, I've heard of you – and that's probably more than you can say of me. Mr. Vennor, I think you may safely count upon having your dinner in the Naught-fifty."

"Yes, thanks to you," said Gertrude, quickly. "Have you – will your other engagements let you join us?"

Brockway was of four different minds in as many seconds. Here was a chance to defeat Mr. Vennor at his own game; and love added its word. But he could not consent to break unwelcome bread, and was about to excuse himself when the President, in answer to an imperative signal flying in Gertrude's eyes, seconded the invitation.

"Yes, come in and join us, Mr. Brockway; we shall be glad to have you, I'm sure." The stony stare which accompanied the words was anything but hospitable, but the President felt that he had done his whole duty and something over and above.

Brockway hesitated a moment, glanced at Gertrude, and accepted. Then he began to gather up the tools. Gertrude caught up her skirts and stepped into the vestibule to give him room.

"You'll not disappoint us, will you?" she said, by way of leave-taking. "You may come as early as you please. I want you to meet Cousin Jeannette."

The portway proscenium-box was empty by this time, and Brockway dropped his tools and spoke his mind.

"Miss Vennor, I know, and you know, that I ought not to come at all. It was awfully good of you to ask me, but – "

"But what?" she said, encouragingly.

"I think you must understand what I want to say and can't," he went on. "You saw that I was like to be overtaken by a fit of very foolish self-consciousness, and you were kind enough to come to my rescue. I appreciate it, but I don't want to take undue advantage of it."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she laughed. "We shall look for you between six and seven. And you'll come, because I'm going to run away now, before you have a chance to retract. Good-by – till this evening."

VI REGARDLESS ORDERS

Ten hours' westing from the Missouri River takes a moderately fast train well into the great grazing region whose name is Length and Breadth, and whose horizon is like that of the sea. Since leaving Antelope Springs, however, the "Flying Kestrel" had been lagging a little. For this cause, the supper station was still more than an hour away when Brockway deserted his ancients and invalids and crossed the platforms to the rear door of the private car.

The admission that he dreaded the ordeal is not to be set down to his discredit. His life had been an arduous struggle, for an education and the necessities first, and for advancement afterward. In such a conflict, utility speedily becomes the watchword, and if the passenger agent were less of a workaday drudge than his fellows, he was modestly unaware of the fact.

In the course of the afternoon all the reasons why he should manage to get himself left behind at some convenient station were given a hearing, but love finally triumphed, and half-past six o'clock found him at the door of the Naught-fifty. Fortunately for his introduction, the occupants of the sitting-room were well scattered; and Gertrude came forward at once to welcome him.

"Thank you for coming," she said, putting her hand in his with the cordiality of an old friend; "I was afraid you might forget us, after all. Let me introduce you to my cousin, Mrs. Dunham; Cousin Jeannette, this is Mr. Brockway."

Brockway bent low in the direction of an elderly lady with a motherly face; bowed to the Misses Beaswicke and to Fleetwell, and acknowledged the President's nod.

"I'm only too happy to be permitted to come," he said to Gertrude, drawing up a chair to make a group of three with the chaperon. "The social side of a business man's life is so nearly a minus quantity that your thoughtfulness takes rank as an act of Christian charity."

Gertrude laughed softly. "Tell me how a business man finds time to acquire the art of turning compliments," she said; but Mrs. Dunham came to his rescue.

"I suppose your occupation keeps you away from home a great deal, doesn't it?" she asked.

"It certainly would if I had a home," Brockway replied.

"Do you have to travel all the time?"

"Rather more than nine-tenths of it, I should say."

"How dreadfully tiresome it must become! Of course, when one is seeing things for the first time it is very interesting; but I should imagine the car-window point of view would become hackneyed in a very little while."

"It does; and it is pathetically unsatisfying if one care for anything more than a glimpse of things. I have gone up and down in my district for four years, and yet I know nothing of the country or the people outside of a narrow ribbon here and there with a railway line in the centre."

"That is a good thought," Gertrude said. "I have often boasted of having seen the West, but I believe I have only threaded it back and forth a few times."

"That is all any of us do," Brockway asserted. "Our knowledge of the people outside of the railway towns is very limited. I once made a horseback trip through the back counties of East Tennessee, and it was a revelation to me. I never understood until then the truth of the assertion that people who live within sight of a railway all have the 'railway diathesis'."

"Meaning that they lose in originality what they gain in sophistication?" said Gertrude.

"Just that. They become a part of the moving world; and as the railway civilizing process is much the same the country over, they lose their identity as sectional types."

Mrs. Dunham leaned back in her chair and began to make mental notes with queries after them. Mr. Vennor had given her to understand that they were to have a *rara avis*, served underdone, for

dinner; and, in the kindness of her heart, she had determined to see that the "young artisan," as her cousin had called him, was not led on to his own undoing. Now, however, she began to suspect that some one had made a mistake. This young man seemed to be abundantly able to fight his own battles.

"I presume you are very familiar with this part of the country – along your own line, Mr. Brockway," she said, when the waiter came in to lay the plates.

"In the way that I have just indicated, yes. I know so much of its face as you can see from this window. But my knowledge doesn't go much beyond the visible horizon."

"Neither does mine, but I can imagine," Gertrude said.

"Ah, yes; but imagination isn't knowledge."

"No; it's often better."

"Pleasanter, you mean; I grant you that."

"No, I meant more accurate."

"For instance?"

Gertrude smiled. "You are quite merciless, aren't you? But if I must defend myself I should say that imagination paints a composite picture, out of drawing as to details, perhaps, but typically true."

Brockway objected. "Being unimaginative, I can't quite accept that."

"Can't you? That is what Priscilla Beaswicke would call the disadvantage of being Occidentalized."

"I suppose I am that," Brockway admitted cheerfully. "I can always breathe freer out here between these wide horizons; and the majesty of this Great Flatness appeals to me even more than that of the mountains."

They followed his gesture. The sun was dipping to the western edge of the bare plain, and the air was filled with ambient gold. The tawny earth, naked and limitless, melted so remotely into the dusty glow of the sky as to leave no line of demarcation. The lack of shadows and the absence of landmarks confused the senses until the flying train seemed to stand with ungripping wheels in the midst of a slowly revolving disk of yellow flatness, through which the telegraph-poles and mile-posts darted with sentient and uncanny swiftness.

"I can feel its sublimity," Gertrude said, softly, answering his thought; "but its solemn unchangeableness depresses me. I love nature's moods and tenses, and it seems flippant to mention such things in the presence of so much fixity."

Brockway smiled. "The prairie has its moods, too. A little later in the year we should be running between lines of fire, and those big balls of tumbleweed would be racing ahead of the wind like small meteors. Later still, when the snows come, it has its savage mood, when anything with blood in its veins may not go abroad and live."

"I suppose you have been out here in a blizzard, haven't you?" said the chaperon; but when he would have replied there was a general stir, and the waiter announced:

"Dinner is served."

VII

A DINNER ON WHEELS

When the President's party gathered about the table, Mrs. Dunham placed Brockway at her right, with Gertrude beside him. Mr. Vennor disapproved of the arrangement, but he hoped that Priscilla Beaswicke, who was Brockway's *vis-à-vis*, might be depended upon to divert the passenger agent's attention. Miss Beaswicke confirmed the hope with her second spoonful of soup by asking Brockway what he thought of Tourguénief.

Now, to the passenger agent, the great Russian novelist was as yet no more than a name, and he said so frankly and took no shame therefore. Whereupon Mr. Vennor:

"Oh, come, Priscilla; you mustn't begin on Mr. Brockway like that. I fancy he has had scant time to dabble in your little intellectual fads."

Gertrude looked up quickly, and the keen sense of justice began to assert itself. Having escaped the pillory in his character of artisan, the passenger agent was to be held up to ridicule in his proper person. Not if she could help it, Gertrude promised herself; and she turned suddenly upon the collegian.

"What do you think of Tourguénief, Cousin Chester?" she asked, amiably.

"A good bit less than nothing," answered the athlete, with his eyes in his plate. "What is there about him that we ought to know and don't?"

"Tell us, Priscilla," said Gertrude, passing the query along.

But the elder Miss Beaswicke refused to enlighten anyone. "Go and get his book and read it, as I did," she said.

"I sha'n't for one," Fleetwell declared. "I can't read the original, and I won't read a translation."

"Have you read him in the original, Priscilla?" Gertrude inquired, determined to push the subject so far afield that it could never get back.

"Oh, hush!" said the elder Miss Beaswicke. "What is the matter with you two. I refuse positively to be quarrelled with."

That ended the Russian divagation, and it had the effect of making the table-talk impersonal. This was precisely what Mr. Vennor desired. What he meant to do was to set a conversational pace which would show Gertrude that Brockway was hopelessly out of his element in her own social sphere.

The plan succeeded admirably. So far as the social aspect of the meal was concerned, the passenger agent might as well have been dining at the table of the Olympians. Art, literature, Daudet's latest book, and Henriette Ronner's latest group of cats, the decorative designs in the Boston Public Library, and the renaissance of Buddhism in the nineteenth century – before these topics Brockway went hopelessly dumb. And not once during the hour was Mrs. Dunham or Gertrude permitted to help him, though they both tried with charitable and praiseworthy perseverance, as thus:

Mrs. Dunham, in a desperate effort to ignore the Public Library: "I'm afraid all this doesn't interest you very much, Mr. Brockway. It's so fatally easy – "

Fleetwell, whose opinion touching a portion of the design has been contravened by Mr. Vennor: "I say, Cousin Jeannette, isn't the Sargent decoration for the staircase hall – " *et sequentia*, until Brockway sinks back into oblivion to come to the surface ten minutes later at a summons from the other side.

Gertrude, purposely losing the thread of Priscilla Beaswicke's remarks on the claims of theosophy to an unprejudiced hearing: "What makes you so quiet, Mr. Brockway? Tell me about your other adventures with the school-teachers – after you left Salt Lake City, you know."

Brockway, catching at the friendly straw with hope once more reviving: "Then you haven't forgotten – excuse me; Miss Beaswicke is speaking to you." And the door shuts in his face and leaves him again in outer darkness.

In the nature of things mundane, even the most leisurely dinner cannot last forever. Brockway's ordeal came to an end with the black coffee, and when he was free he would have vanished quickly if Gertrude had not detained him.

"You are not going to leave us at once, are you?" she protested.

"I – I think I'd better go back to my 'ancients and invalids,' if you'll excuse me."

Gertrude was conscience-stricken, and her hospitable angel upbraided her for having given her guest an unthankful meal. Wherefore she sought to make amends.

"Don't go just yet unless you are obliged to," she pleaded. "Sit down and tell me about the schoolma'ams. How far did you go with them?"

"I had to make the whole blessed circuit," he said, tarrying willingly enough.

"Do you often have such deliciously irresponsible people to convoy?"

"Not often; but the regular people usually make up for it in – well, in cantankerousness; that's about the only word that will fit it." Brockway was thinking of the exacting majority in the Tadmor.

"And yet it doesn't make you misanthropic? I should think it would. What place is this we are coming to?"

"Carvalho – the supper station."

Gertrude saw her father coming toward them; she guessed his purpose and resented it. If she chose to make kindly amends to the passenger agent for his sorry dinner, she would not be prevented.

"We stop here a little while, don't we?" she asked of Brockway.

"Yes; twenty minutes or more. Would you like to go out for a breath of fresh air?" She had risen and caught up her wrap and hat.

"I should; it is just what I was going to propose. Cousin Jeannette, I'm going to walk on the platform with Mr. Brockway. Come," she said; and they escaped before Mr. Vennor could overtake them.

Once outside, they paced up and down under the windows of the train, chatting reminiscently of four bright days a year ago, and shunning the intervening period as two people will whose lives have met and touched and gone apart again. At the second turn, they met Mrs. Dunham and Fleetwell; and at the third, the President, sandwiched between Hannah and Priscilla Beaswicke. Whereupon Brockway, scenting espionage, drew Gertrude away toward the engine.

The great, black bulk of the heavy ten-wheeler loomed portentous, and the smoky flare of the engineer's torch, as he thrust it into the machinery to guide the snout of his oil-can, threw the overhanging mass of iron and steel into sombre relief.

Brockway shaded his eyes under his hand and peered up at the number beneath the cab window. "The new 926," he said; "we'll get back some of our lost time behind her."

"Do you know them all by name?" Gertrude queried.

"Oh, no; not all."

"I suppose you've ridden on them many times?"

Brockway laughed. "I should say I had – on both sides, as the enginemen say."

"What does that mean?"

"It's slang for firing and driving; I've done a little of both, you know."

"I didn't know it. Isn't it terribly dangerous? When anything happens, the men on the engine are almost always killed, aren't they?"

"When they are it's because they haven't time to save themselves. It's all nonsense – newspaper nonsense, mostly – about the engineer sticking to his post like the boy on the burning deck. A man can do whatever there is to be done toward stopping his train while you could count ten, and no amount of heroism could accomplish any more."

"I have often thought I should like to ride on an engine," Gertrude said.

"I wish I had known it earlier in the day; your wish might have been gratified very easily."

"Might it? I suppose they never let any one ride on the night engines, do they?"

Brockway caught his breath. "Do you mean – would you trust me to take you on the engine to-night?" he asked, wondering if he had heard aright.

"Why not?" she said, with sweet gravity.

The engineer had oiled his way around to their side, and Brockway spoke to him.

"Good-evening, Mac," he said; and the man turned and held up his torch.

"Hello, Fred," he began; and then, seeing Gertrude: "Excuse *me*, I didn't see the lady."

At a sign from Gertrude, Brockway introduced the engineer. "Miss Vennor, this is Mr. Maclure – one of our oldest runners."

"I'm very glad to know you, Mr. Maclure," said Gertrude, sweetly; and the man of machinery scraped his feet and salaamed.

"Mac, Miss Vennor thinks she would like to take a night spin on the 926. May we ride a little way with you?"

"Well, I should say!" assented Maclure. "Just pile in and make yourselves at home; and excuse *me* – I hain't quite got through oilin' 'round yet."

"Thank you," said Brockway; then to Gertrude: "We must find your father or Mrs. Dunham quick; we haven't more than a minute or two."

They ran back and fortunately came upon Mrs. Dunham and the collegian.

"Cousin Jeannette, I'm going to ride on the engine with Mr. Brockway," Gertrude explained, breathlessly. "Don't say I sha'n't, for I will. It's the chance of a lifetime. Good-by; and don't sit up for me."

"I'll take good care of her," Brockway put in; and before the astonished lady could expostulate or approve, they were scudding forward to the 926.

VIII

THE CAB OF THE TEN-WHEELER

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