

Mr. Willard carefully placed the letter in his breast-pocket.

"That's right, old man," said the millionaire huskily, reaching forward and grasping Rusty's hand. "Now, to get down to business; where do you live when you're not in disguise, Mr. Peters?"

"First Avenoo," responded Rusty promptly.

"Any parents?"

"Nope; I live with me aunt."

"What's your favorite disguise, Mr. Peters?"

Rusty pondered deeply, and then turned a quizzical eye upon his inquisitor.

"Dis is de one I take de oftenest," he admitted sheepishly.

"How would you like to take a case where you could be disguised as an office-boy for several years?"

"You bet!" Rusty's enthusiasm died down as he glanced over his tattered clothing. "I ain't never worn dat disguise yet, so I ain't got it," he confessed despondently.

"We'll fix that all right by and by. Now, excuse me, please." The man picked up the telephone and gave a number in a low tone. "I wish to talk with Miss Forsythe," he said. Then, a moment later: "Mildred, I have your letter—no, I won't let you recall the invitation—I will be with you at half past seven, as you say—how did I get it? Why, the great detective, Mr. Rusty Peters, brought it—oh, yes, I shall come at half past seven—good-by!"

Rusty was blushing with mingled pride and embarrassment. As Willard turned toward him, he said shyly:

"Say, you're de stuff, Mr. Willard!"

"Let's go out and get something to eat, Rusty; I must celebrate in some way," said the young man, putting on his hat.

"I hope you don't mind me disguise," remarked Rusty apologetically, as they waited for the elevator.

"It's the best ever!" returned Willard heartily.

## The Best-Laid Plans—

BY THOMAS L. MASSON

**B**ILLY CRANMER was on his way to see his best girl.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was half past two. There was just time, before his visit, to go around to the bank and attend to a matter of importance and interest.

This, indeed, was a great day for Billy—a day to which he had looked forward for two years. It marked the end of a long series of economies.

Two years before he had become greatly interested in Grace Trayne. A cautious temperament, however, had held him in check until he could feel that he was able to start his married life on a proper financial basis. He had mentally determined this basis to be the sum of three thousand dollars, and he was now about to deposit the last fifty dollars. With a cheerful heart, therefore, he started up his little automobile and chugged down the street toward the bank.

This auto of Billy's had come to be considered almost as a landmark. He

had originally bought it at second hand, and had kept it alive and going by dint of constant tinkering. He had become strongly attached to the car. Every rattle and wheeze in its ramshackle little chassis seemed almost a part of him.

It was a beautiful day, and as Billy chortled along his mind was full of roseate visions. He knew a quiet road not three miles from the village, where there was "a shady glen, a babbling brook." Here, sitting on the tufted bank, he would speak to Grace the word that he proudly felt he had earned the right to say. Almost unconsciously, as he thought of it, he hurried the little machine up, until he was going at its maximum speed of fifteen miles an hour.

In a few moments he had made his deposit in the bank, and in a few moments more he had arrived in front of Grace's cottage.

"Come," he said, his eyes bright with anticipation. "I want you to go out for a ride. It's just the day for a spin."

Grace looked at him strangely. They had often gone out in his machine before, so his request was nothing new.

"Would you mind," she said, "if I didn't go to-day?"

Billy's voice fell.

"Have you another engagement?" he asked.

"Yes. Have you seen Tom Berton's new car?"

"The Ajax—yes."

"Well, he asked me out to ride in it. He and his aunt are coming for me."

There was a silence. Billy tried to recover his composure, but it was hard. It never occurred to him that Grace would have another engagement, as matters between them were tacitly understood, and his whole mind had been given up to his plan.

"I've never ridden in a four-cylinder machine," said Grace. "and I'm just crazy to go. They say it's fine. It glides up the hills beautifully, and—"

"Yes. I know all about it," impatiently broke in Billy. "Of course, it's not like my little old bag of bones. Well, don't let it turn your head."

At this moment there was a whirl outside. Tom Berton, the mayor's son, had arrived in his Ajax. Billy's battered little car, standing in front of it, was a sorry spectacle.

Grace ran and got her veil, all excitement.

"Good-by!" she cried. "I mustn't keep them waiting!"

"Good-by!" said Billy disconsolately. "Shall I come to-morrow?"

"Yes—of course."

In a moment the great car, with its delighted new passenger, had vanished, while Billy sorrowfully clanked his way homeward.

The next day, at the same hour, however, he was on hand again, nothing daunted.

"How was it?" he asked, with an attempt to be cheery.

Grace's face flushed with the recollection.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it was simply too lovely for anything! I never had such a sensation!"

"Um! Shall we go out to-day where I was going to take you yesterday?"

Grace looked out of the window at

Billy's machine, almost leaning, as it seemed, against the curb.

"Let's wait," she said impulsively, "and go some other time."

Billy had a reasonable amount of patience, but his machine had occasioned laughter before on the part of his friends; and while ordinarily he was not oversensitive, his anger began to rise.

"Now or never!" he exclaimed.

"But, Billy—"

There came a familiar whirring sound. Tom Berton in his Ajax was coming along. This time he jumped out of his machine and ran up to the cottage.

"Oh, Miss Trayne," he called, as he saw them through the half-open door, "don't you want to take a little spin—just around the reservoir?"

Grace jumped up and clasped her hands together.

"Thank you ever so much," she said. "If you will excuse me," she added to Billy.

"Certainly," replied Billy.

"And will you come to-morrow?"

"Maybe."

They were off before anything more could be said, and once more Billy chugged home.

The next day he failed to appear.

Thus a week passed. One day, however, he received a note from Grace.

"I'm sorry if I have done anything to offend you," she wrote. "Won't you come and see me?"

Billy went. It was precisely at three o'clock that he alighted from his iron steed—to be chivalric in a modern way.

"You sent for me," he said.

"Yes. You are not angry with me, are you?"

Billy looked down at her.

"Let me ask you something," he said.

"Will you take a ride with me to-day?"

She looked at him appealingly.

"Wouldn't you," she replied, "just as soon sit here and talk?"

"Then you won't come out in my machine?"

Grace put her hand on his coat-sleeve.

"Please don't think," she said, "it's because I don't want to be with you, but—I couldn't. That other machine is so perfectly lovely that really I couldn't go back to this one. It's awful of me, I know, but it would be torture, and—"

Billy got up and looked at her. He was a man of few words; but he always knew where he stood.

"Grace," he said, "I was going to ask you to marry me the other day. That was what I came for. But I have one little peculiarity. I'm fond of that little old engine of mine, and the girl I marry has got to ride around in it, even if it hurts her back, jounces up and down, crawls up hills, breaks down every ten miles, never goes more than fifteen miles an hour, and looks like the last rose of summer. That's the alternative. What do you say?"

Grace got up and faced him.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't do it. I know I couldn't make myself happy in that machine."

## II

It was two weeks later. A big Ajax car stood in front of Grace's cottage. A

young man got out, and, walking up the steps, rang the bell. Grace met him at the door.

"Billy!"

"You sent for me."

She clasped her hands on his arm.

"Oh, Billy, I learned yesterday that you had bought an Ajax. Won't you—can you ever forgive me?"

He smiled grimly.

"Sure," he said.

"And will you let things be just as they were before, when you wanted to marry me?"

"I'm sorry, but it's too late."

"Why too late? I don't understand you."

He looked down at her sternly.

"I had saved three thousand dollars," he said shortly. "I was going to marry you on it; but now I've spent it for this machine. I couldn't possibly do both things, you know."

# A Step Down

BY FLORENCE C. MALLON

THERE was just the usual Wednesday-night supper, Bertha noted with hurt surprise. Her mother still wore the faded old dress that she had put on in the morning, and she ate her supper and talked of indifferent matters as if this were merely one more in the long procession of uneventful days. The girl saw, at last, that there would be no opportunity of her mother's making, so she summoned her courage and laid aside all pretense of eating.

"Mother, aren't you coming to see me married?" she asked in a strained voice.

She had feared that baffling deafness which Mrs. Peck sometimes feigned, but the answer came readily enough.

"No, I'm not coming," said the elder woman, beginning to scrape off the dishes. "It's a good deal of a step down for a Peck to have to go to a priest to get married, and I guess I don't care to see it."

Bertha was not deceived by the quietness of her mother's tone. She knew the decision was final, and, although she had been trying to prepare herself for it, she

was stung to the quick. It seemed monstrous that Mrs. Peck could not lay aside her prejudice sufficiently to go and see her only child married. It was not as if there were anything against Jim Wiley, the girl told herself; it was nothing but senseless, wicked pride. Saddened, she went up-stairs to finish her packing.

After a while some one came in at the front door and went up to Bertha's room. Mrs. Peck, washing dishes in the kitchen, heard the step, and knew that it was Ella Snyder, come to help Bertha into her wedding-dress. She could hear the girls talking up-stairs. It made her feel very forlorn and lonely.

By and by she heard the carriage driving up, and Bertha's voice calling out from the window that she would be right down. Then she heard her daughter's step on the stairs. It paused at the dining-room door, and next moment the girl ran into the kitchen, where Mrs. Peck stood at the sink, with both hands deep in the dish-water. She seized her mother and kissed her convulsively.

"Look out! Look out!" warned Mrs.