

# Country Love<sup>\*</sup>

A STAGE GIRL'S STRUGGLE AGAINST FAME AND FORTUNE

By Hulbert Footner

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ILLUSTRATED BY W. K. STARRETT

WHEN Eve Allinson learns that her rise to stardom in musical comedy is due to Brutus Tawney's financial power, and that she is generally considered to be the mistress of her plutocratic admirer—whom she has regarded as her "guardian"—her horror is so great that she resolves to quit New York. Under the assumed name of Merridy Lee, she answers an advertisement and is engaged by a kindly old gentleman named Jolley for his floating theater, which plays small towns and villages along Chesapeake Bay and the rivers thereabouts.

Tawney is enraged on finding that Eve has disappeared, and believes that she has fled with a young man named Clough, who was dancing with her the night before. He orders Taylor, his financial agent, and Gibbon, manager of his theatrical interests, to trace her, and engages McVeagh, a famous detective, to direct the search.

In Travis County, Maryland—an isolated district almost cut off from the mainland by the Chesapeake and its wide estuaries—a young man named Page Brookins, a scion of an old Southern family once possessed of a large estate, is making valiant efforts to improve his remaining acres and to restore the fallen fortunes of his house. He attends a performance of Mr. Jolley's company at Absolom's Island, hears Merridy sing, and falls head over ears in love with her. He contrives to meet her, thereby arousing the enmity of another admirer, Ralph Horry, and there is a somewhat sensational affair at a local dance, where Horry and his friends threaten Page with violence, but lose their courage when young Brookins displays a revolver.

## X

EARLY next morning the telephone-bells began to ring, and the most exciting piece of news that Travis County had enjoyed in many a long day began to travel up and down the wires. Everybody listened in, of course. Since there was no telephone at Brookins Hill, Miss Molly's peace of mind was spared for the moment; but it was a safe bet that she would have lady callers during the day.

After breakfast young Ellick Sutor came over, driving his flivver at breakneck speed, to obtain private verification from Page. He got Page behind the barn.

"Good Lawd, boy! What you been up to? What's this I hear? Is it true?"

"Oh, hell!" muttered Page. "I suppose people are making a regular sensation out of it."

"Sensation? I reckon!" said Ellick dryly. "Did you think you could shoot up a dance without causing a sensation?"

"I didn't shoot," said Page hotly. "I only drew."

"Well, drew, then," said Ellick. He was even taller than Page, but of a more gangly habit and a pink and blue fairness. His years were the same, but in spirit he was still delightfully schoolboyish. He almost wept now to think of what he had missed. "Peggy, why didn't you tell me? Was that kind? Was that cousinly? Why didn't you let me round up our gang and go down there and do them up proper?"

"This was my own affair," said Page stiffly. "I didn't need any help."

"Just say the word, and I'll get the boys together to-day."

"The matter is ended," Page told him.

"How did it start?" asked Ellick.

"There was something about a girl—"

Page turned white.

"Who said that?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know they always say that," replied Ellick. "Give me the straight dope, and I'll see that you're put right."

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Page shook his head.

"Sorry—can't talk about it, Ellick. You'll hear enough different versions of the story, I expect. Take your choice; or add 'em all together, divide 'em by four, and believe ten per cent of the remainder. You know county gossip."

"You won't be able to go down to the island again," said Ellick. "They're laying for you."

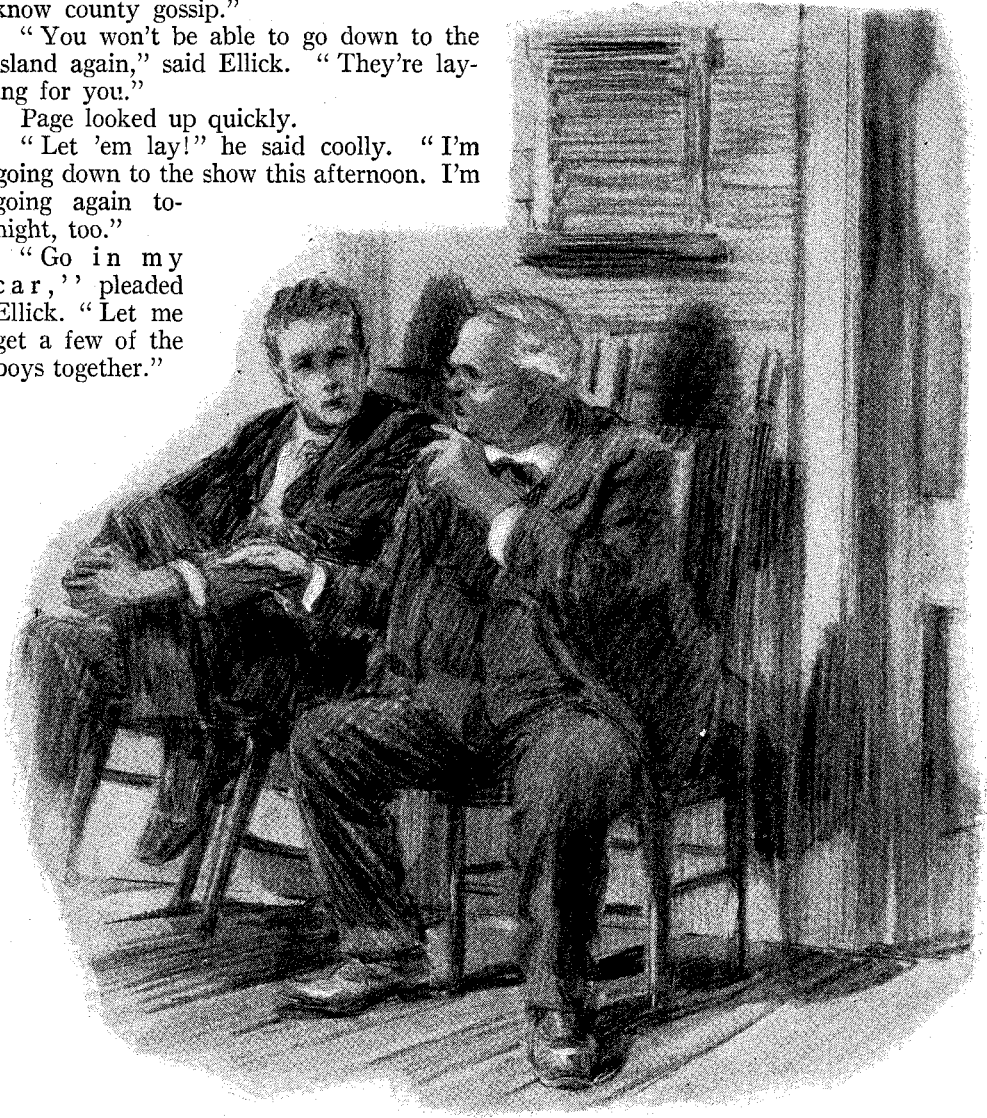
Page looked up quickly.

"Let 'em lay!" he said coolly. "I'm going down to the show this afternoon. I'm going again to-night, too."

"Go in my car," pleaded Ellick. "Let me get a few of the boys together."

George carried the news on board the Thespi at lunch-time.

"Here's a note!" he cried to the assembled tableful. "After we left the dance last night, Merridy's young man held up



MR. JOLLEY WAS TERRIFIED BY THE CRITICISM OF HIS WIFE. "EASY! EASY!" HE STAMMERED.  
"MRS. JOLLEY IS A WONDERFUL DIRECTRESS"

Page shook his head.

"That would look as if they had me scared. The truth is I threw a scare into them. There's not the slightest danger. I'm going alone in my own car."

"They'll wreck your car. You know that crowd!"

"I take care to leave it in a safe place."

the whole caboodle with a gun! Didn't I tell you that young fellow was dangerous?"

They gaped at him. Merridy turned as white as paper.

"What nonsense is this?" said Mrs. Jolley. "What do you mean by 'held up'?"

"Well, it seems there was some trouble there," said George. "The fellows on the

island — that red-faced Horry was at the head of it—they warned Brookins that they'd do him up if he came to their dance; but Merridy was going, so he came, of course. Put a ladder against one of the windows, they say, and slipped in that way while they were watching for him at the door. Well, they let him stay until after we left; then they rushed him, and he stood off the whole crowd with a gun, walked out as cool as you please, and—wait! Here's the richest part of it. He turned the key on them and bade them a pleasant good night. They had to break down the door before they could get out. By that time he was well on the road home. Some boy that! I saw it in his eye."

"Huh!" said Rollo, none too well pleased by this praise of one whom he looked upon as a rival. "That 'll be the last we'll see of him, then. He won't dare to come to the show this afternoon."

"Well, I got a dollar to bet that he comes," said George.

"Take you!"

"And I got another dollar to put on him," added Mortimer.

"I'll take your dollar," said Mr. Henry Hendricks.

"Emily, I betcha a quarter he comes," said Luella.

"Much obliged," said Emily. "You want a sure thing, don't you?"

Rollo's manly pride was touched.

"I'll take both you girls," he said with a bored air.

"Mr. Jolley, are we conducting a dramatic company or a gambling-house?" queried Mrs. Jolley severely.

Merridy said never a word. As soon as she could escape from the table without exciting remark, she ran down to her own little room and locked herself in. Afraid above all to look in the mirror, she cast herself down on her bunk and hid her face. The surprising shock she had experienced upon hearing of Page's escapade made the real state of her feelings clear to her. Little shivers chased themselves over her. She didn't know whether she was glad or sorry, but she was greatly afraid.

"I'm in love with him!" she whispered to herself. "What will become of me?"

Since it was George's job to sell tickets at the door, it was up to him to decide the bets. Very much astonished was Page to have his half-dollar thrust back at him.

"You go in on me to-day," said George, grinning.

"I can't let you do that," began Page.

"Go on, boy! Go on!" cried George. "I'm makin' money off o' you." A sinewy and none too clean hand was thrust out impulsively through the little hole in the glass. "Put it there, young fella! You're all to the good!"

Page obeyed, half pleased, half embarrassed. He liked the irreverent, energetic George. It was strange what a lot of people wanted to shake hands with him to-day. As a matter of fact, there was something in the story of the previous night's happenings that appealed to the sense of poetic justice in men. The better element on the island was just as strong for Page as his own people up the county.

During the first intermission George passed up the aisle and through the little door in the box that led to the stage. Merridy was singing out front. Within, Mrs. Jolley, with her back to the curtain, was silently directing the setting of the stage, Mr. Jolley and Rollo being the scene-shifters. Hendricks and Mortimer were standing about, waiting for the curtain.

"Mortimer, you and I win," whispered George. "He's out there!"

They shook hands, grinning widely. It was the confirmation of Page's gameness, not the winning of a dollar, that pleased them.

Mrs. Jolley's attention was attracted.

"What is it?" she asked.

"They couldn't keep Brookins away from the show," George told her.

"H-m!" said Mrs. Jolley. "You might ask this prodigious young man to supper, with my compliments. I'd like to have a look at him—that is, if it wouldn't be bad for business for us to seem to take sides in a local quarrel," she added prudently.

"No fear!" said George. "We pack 'em in anyhow Saturday nights, and we're gone to-morrow."

He returned to the front of the house. During the pause between the conclusion of Merridy's turn and the rise of the curtain, he whispered the invitation to Page, where he sat. Page, who at that very moment was racking his brains for some expedient whereby he might get to see Merridy, simply beamed. This seemed almost too good to be true.

"That's very kind!" he murmured. "Happy to come!"

"Just sit where you are when the house lets out," said George.

When the little auditorium emptied itself after the show, the curtain was raised again, and on the stage the usual amusing metamorphosis from the library of a mansion to a cottage kitchen took place before Page's wondering eyes. The practicable oil-stove was brought in and lighted; Mrs. Jolley, Emily, and Luella appeared in their every-day clothes and set to work. Page looked hungrily for Merridy, but she was keeping herself very carefully out of his way.

Mr. Jolley came down and joined him.

"Mrs. Jolley begs you to excuse her until she gets the supper on," he said. "Let's go out on deck and smoke while we're waiting."

Outside, they tipped their chairs back comfortably against the wall and surveyed the panorama of oyster-shells ashore.

"Wasn't that a pretty song about roses that Merridy sang?" remarked Mr. Jolley.

Now Page was full of this very subject. Like every resolute and capable young man, he had his ideas and liked to air them—that is, when he was not in fear of being misunderstood. He felt that he was safe with this simple little man.

"I didn't care so much for the song," he said; "but I think Miss Lee has the makings of a great artist."

Page's tone was entirely disinterested and unconcerned, of course, as one man to another.

"That's what I say," agreed Mr. Jolley.

Page's breast warmed toward him. He was encouraged to go on.

"But something's the matter. She doesn't make the hit that she's entitled to. On the stage she is not herself. Anybody can see it. It appears to me as if she'd been badly trained, somehow."

Mr. Jolley was terrified by these bold words. He involuntarily glanced over his shoulder through the open door.

"Easy! Easy!" he stammered. "Mrs. Jolley, you know—a wonderful directress! Wonderful!"

"Certainly," agreed Page. "Mrs. Jolley is a very fine actress, too."

Mr. Jolley looked grateful.

"But she's a big, powerful, commanding sort of woman," Page went on; "and Miss Lee is—well, you know—so young and slender. To try to fit Mrs. Jolley's style

to Miss Lee is like—why, it's like putting harness on a blooded horse."

Mr. Jolley tittered nervously.

"I'm not saying you're not right," he said. "I'm not saying I haven't thought the same thing myself; but you understand my position. Mrs. Jolley works so hard—such an admirable woman in every respect—any criticism—quite out of the question! The relations between husband and wife are so delicate; but why don't you speak to Mrs. Jolley about it?"

Page looked dubious.

"That is, if you're not afraid," Mr. Jolley added cunningly.

Page bristled.

"Afraid? If I don't speak to Mrs. Jolley it will not be because I am afraid, but because I doubt if I am qualified."

"But, as you say, it's something anybody can see," said Mr. Jolley.

"Very well, I will speak to her."

"Don't quote me, I beg," Mr. Jolley nervously suggested.

"I understand you're going to show up at Rhettsboro all next week," said Page.

"Yes, we pull out of here at eight o'clock to-morrow. I have engaged Captain Hastie's launch. It will be an all-day journey up the river. Towing by launch is so slow. I hope we'll see you up there next week."

"I'll try to run up once or twice," said Page carelessly. "It's a forty-mile drive."

Mrs. Jolley welcomed Page to the stage as impressively as if it had been a baronial hall she was bidding him to enter. Under her grand airs there was real warmth, too, for the artist's imagination had been touched by the story of Page at the dance. She seated him at her right hand.

The meal that followed was a novel experience for Page. The noisy, friendly crowd, ceaselessly jollying one another and jumping up and down to get things—they were just folks, nothing strange about them; but the surroundings, half real, half painted, with the dim auditorium yawning beside them, were strange indeed. Page could not but marvel at the ingenuity which stowed so much in such a little space. The stage of the Thespis was like a conjurer's hat; everything under the sun came out of it, from a play to a meal.

His enjoyment of the affair was considerably dashed by Merridy's attitude toward him. She sat opposite, and attended strictly to her plate.



MERRIDY APPLIED HER EYE TO THE PEEP-HOLE. THE HOUSE WAS EMPTY. HE HAD GONE!

"She's offended with me," Page thought sorely. "Somebody has been filling her up with lies about last night. She thinks I'm just a common brawler. How can I

set myself right with her, when I can't talk about it?"

Everybody else vied in friendliness.

"Hey, Page! Got a job for you after supper!" cried George.

"Can you solder a round terminal on a copper wire?"

"I can make a stab at it."

"Mr. Brookins, why don't you take a week off and travel with us?" suggested Mr. Jolley.

"We could keep you busy."

"Excellent idea!" boomed Mrs. Jolley.

Page, blushing furiously, explained that he would be delighted, but he was just in the middle of the planting season.

"Mr. Brookins, have you ever considered taking up the stage as a profession?" asked Mr. Henry Hendricks in his heavy style.

Page allowed that he had not.

"One can see that you have the natural qualifications," said Mr. Hendricks.

The tousle-haired Emily gave a little squeal.

"Oh, don't tell the poor boy to his face that he's simply the handsomest thing!" she cried, with a languishing glance.

Page writhed—but of course he could stand it. George whistled piercingly. Merridy viciously stabbed a piece of meat.

"Really, Emily ought to be restrained!" she thought.

"Yes, he reminds me of what I was at his age," said Mr. Hendricks, with a shake of the greasy curls.

A great laugh greeted this.

They were busy folk. Immediately after the meal they distributed themselves, like ants, about the multifarious preparations for the evening performance. Page went with George to his stuffy workshop in the hold, where they fixed the terminals together, made some col-

ored slides for the spot-light, and prepared a snow-storm.

Later Page found himself outside the curtain, and the theater beginning to fill;

and still he had not had a chance for a word alone with Merridy. He was sore.

"She might at least have given me a chance to put her right about last night!" he thought.

Merridy was sorer still. That perverse girl was raging against him in her mind for not breaking down the barriers she had herself erected.

"Never spoke to me!" she said to the stormy reflection that faced her in the mirror. "My last day here! When everybody is coupling our names together, he went out of his way to show them he didn't give a pin about me! Surely he'll come back after the show to say good night. What shall I do if he doesn't?"

Young Ellick Sutor, arriving at the theater, caught sight of Page already seated, and took the seat next him.

"Have any trouble?" he said offhand.

"No, indeed!" replied Page scornfully.

"Where's your car?"

"At Brinsley Stocker's."

"Well, I'm going to carry you up as far as that, anyhow."

"All right," said Page.

After the first curtain, when Merridy came out to sing, Page was uncomfortably aware that his cousin's bright eyes were glancing at him. He made his face as wooden as possible. When she had gone, Ellick clapped him affectionately on the knee and whispered:

"Old boy, you're in luck!"

Page scowled like a pirate.

"You don't know what you're talking about! She's a great artist—not for the likes of any of us!"

Ellick grinned to himself, but had the wit to hold his tongue.

Later Page asked very casually:

"Going to see a girl to-morrow night?"

"Reckon so," said Ellick. "Why?"

"Who?"

"Reckon I might go up to King's Green and have supper at Mary Hall's. They have waffles Sunday nights."

"How long will you be staying there?"

"Till I'm thrown out," said Ellick.

"Say eleven o'clock," suggested Page, unsmiling. "Would you be willing to drive on to Stribling's Hall to pick me up? It's twenty miles farther."

"What the deuce—" began Ellick.

"Don't question me," said Page, scowling. "Just yes or no."

"Why sure, old boy!" said Ellick. "I'd go twice as far for you."

"Thanks," replied Page laconically. "Meet you there at midnight."

"Go on!" said Ellick, instantly jealous for the reputation of his flivver. "Won't take me an hour to drive twenty miles. My car isn't Madeleine."

"Go on!" said Page. "Madeleine can run round your abandoned tin-works in circles!"

Thus they concealed their real feelings. Young Ellick's arm had a tendency to steal around Page's shoulders—which embarrassed the latter very much, though he liked it, too.

After the show, Page made no attempt to see his friends behind the curtain. He was diffident about making his way up on the stage; he was afraid of outstaying his welcome. Besides, it was not the last night to him. He had plans of which Merridy knew nothing.

To Merridy it was a tragic matter. After the curtain went down, she hung about the stage, hoping against hope. For a while pride kept her away from the curtain; but she succumbed at last, and applied her eye to the peep-hole.

The house was quite empty. He had gone! Gone without a word on her last night! Her heart could scarcely credit it. Despair settled down on her like a pall. She ran down-stairs, singing blithely, as girls do, and, locking herself in her room, wept as if her heart would break.

Searching around in her mind for some explanation of his conduct, a new thought turned her breast cold.

"Could anybody have told him about me?"

There was to be little sleep for her that night.

## XI

SUNDAY morning broke gloriously fair, as summer Sundays ought always to do. Page sprang out of bed light-hearted, in spite of himself.

"No work to do, and the sun shining like all possessed! What a day for the river!" his thoughts ran.

Miss Molly was waiting for him down-stairs with a stormy face. As forecast, callers the day before had informed her of Page's exploit on Friday night—no doubt with many embroidered details.

"Give me that revolver!" she said.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Page. "Am I never to hear the end of that?"

He tried to silence her with a kiss, but she would have none of his blandishments now.

"Give me that revolver, you wild and headstrong boy, or you'll disgrace us all!"

"Now, come, mother," Page pleaded. "I didn't lose my head. Indeed, I pretty well kept it on me. Be fair! You're fed up with a lot of old women's tales. You don't even know what happened."

"You would never tell me," she protested passionately.

"I can't talk about it," he said, scowling. "Your own good sense ought to tell you to discount Cousin Ella Smallwood's yarns."

Miss Molly changed her mode of attack.

"Give me the revolver to keep," she said cajolingly; "or I'll never be able to sleep when you're out at night."

Page set his jaw.

"I can't do it, mother," he said. "It served me a good turn the other night, and I might need it again some time; but I'll tell you what I'll do," he added with a twinkle. "I'll promise you not to go down to Absolom's Island again this summer."

She was obliged to be content with that.

While breakfast was making, Page was busy for an unconscionable time in the garden. As a matter of fact, he was picking half a bushel of spinach, four quarts of strawberries, and half a dozen heads of lettuce. He carried it over the brow of the hill, and, caching it, returned to the house with an innocent air.

After breakfast he said very casually:

"Will you sell me four chickens, mother?"

Miss Molly stared.

"Oh, I just thought I'd go for a little picnic to-day," Page explained. "The weather is so pleasant."

"Your appetite is good," she said dryly. "Help yourself. They were raised on your corn."

"No. I'll weigh them up and pay you market price," Page told her, departing to catch the birds.

Every few minutes he went out to the brow of the hill and searched down the river with Mr. Jimmy's brass-bound binoculars. Shortly before nine o'clock he saw the clumsy hulk of the Thespis come crawling around Eagle Tree Point, and his heart began to thump hard against his ribs,

though she was still five miles off. He hung around the house for a quarter of an hour longer in horrible uneasiness, then said abruptly:

"Well, I'm off! Don't expect me till you see me."

"Come here and kiss me," said Miss Molly peremptorily.

He submitted sheepishly. She flung her arms passionately around his neck.

"I will have a kiss, though I have to beg for it!" she said. "Now be off with you, you plague of Egypt!"

Page, with his baskets, went careering down the hill, over the fences, and across the flat fields to the creek shore. Here he loaded up the little skiff in which Mr. Jimmy was accustomed to go fishing, and pulled out into the middle of the river. So energetic were his strokes that he was out in the channel long before the Thespis reached this point. He lay on his oars and waited.

On board the floating theater, this Sunday morning, all was peace. Mrs. Jolley had decreed a real day of rest. Mr. Jolley was up in the pilot-house, steering the clumsy craft; Mrs. Jolley was in the stage kitchen, making the first moves toward breakfast; and everybody else was still asleep.

That is to say, they were still in their rooms; but Merridy, for one, was not asleep. In her night-dress, and with her crinkly bright hair hanging loose, she was looking out of her window. The little window was close under the ceiling of her room; the sill just permitted her to rest her forearms upon it, and her chin on her arms.

She was gazing at the green shore half a mile distant, wondering which of the little white houses that crowned the different eminences might be Page's house. She knew it was somewhere along here. The sharpness of her pain was past now; she just felt dull. She felt as if she had a flat-iron on her breast crushing down all feeling. Let the sun shine ever so gloriously on the river, life had no savor; Page did not love her; she would never see him again.

A little scraping sound along the outside of the barge caused her to draw back in alarm. Suddenly he who filled her thoughts swam squarely into her field of vision, so close that she could have touched him. Merridy stared as if she saw a ghost there

in the sunshine. Page was standing up in his skiff, clinging to the larger vessel, and letting himself slide back alongside, hand over hand.

"Page!" gasped Merridy, and a lovely rosy color flooded her. "Page — Brookins!" she hastily added, to save her face. "What are you doing here?"

Page blushed, too, and his eyes clung to hers in the way that stirred her so deeply.

"I just pulled out to tell you good morning," he said. "Our place is in here, you know."

Merridy, searching his soul through his eyes, said to herself:

"Everything is all right!" And her heart sang; but in the suddenness of the reaction her voice began to shake treacherously. "And I thought—I thought—"

"What?" asked Page eagerly.

With a great effort she mastered that treacherous quiver.

"Never mind," she replied quickly. "Are you going right back?"

"Well, if Mrs. Jolley should ask me aboard, I have a way of getting back from Rhettsboro to-night," he said diffidently.

As a matter of fact, of course, the prevaricator had not the slightest intention of returning home before night.

"Oh!" said Merridy.

Speech failed her again. They gazed at each other in a sort of divine and happy clownishness.

Suddenly Merridy recollected the night-dress and the flowing hair. She knew that she looked lovely so; still, it was rather overwhelming not to have recollected her state sooner. What would he think of her? With a little cry she sank out of sight.

For a moment Page stood looking at the place where she had been with rapt eyes. She needn't have been worrying about what he might think of the night-dress. Then, with a sigh, he continued letting himself back alongside the barge, and under the stern.

Mrs. Jolley was sitting on the narrow stern deck, peeling potatoes. She was not in the least discomposed by Page's sudden appearance.

"Good morning, Page Brookins!" she boomed. "Oh, my prophetic soul! It told me we should see you to-day!"

Page blushed.

"I couldn't let you pass," he said.

"Come aboard," she told him. "This is Sunday. Even farmers have a day off

on Sunday, I suppose. I hope you'll sail up to Rhettsboro with us?"

"If you'll have me," said Page.

"Have you? There is nobody who would be more welcome!"

"I brought you a little garden truck," Page remarked, passing up his baskets.

"What? Chickens! Spinach! Lettuce! Strawberries!" she cried. "This is indeed a princely offering!"

Page, following the provender up on deck, made the skiff fast.

"I thought fresh food might be hard to get while you were traveling," he explained deprecatingly.

"Hard?" said Mrs. Jolley. "We haven't had chicken since the ides of March!" Then she looked at the birds in sudden alarm. "God bless my soul! They're alive, aren't they? In my old age I have been obliged to play many and divers parts, but that of executioner—"

"I'll attend to that," Page volunteered. "Just lend me a hatchet."

She brought him the desired implement and beat a hasty retreat inside.

Later they sat side by side, picking the birds. The feathers flew astern in a shower.

"One great thing about keeping house afloat—you don't need any garbage-can," Page observed.

"True," said Mrs. Jolley. "On the other hand, you lack a clothes-line."

"She's in a grand humor," thought Page. "This is my chance to tackle her about Merridy's songs. If I could only think of a beginning!"

After a couple of false starts, he said:

"You have some clever people in your little company, Mrs. Jolley."

"They work hard," she replied.

"I think Miss Lee has the makings of a great artist," continued Page, attending very closely to his chicken.

Mrs. Jolley glanced at his lowered head in grim humor.

"Um!" she said. "It has always been my opinion that Merridy was too sweet a girl to make a first-class success on the stage."

"Why shouldn't sweetness make good on the stage, as well as anywhere?" asked Page.

"Not with modern audiences," Mrs. Jolley told him. "They favor the grosser qualities."

"Well, of course my experience has been

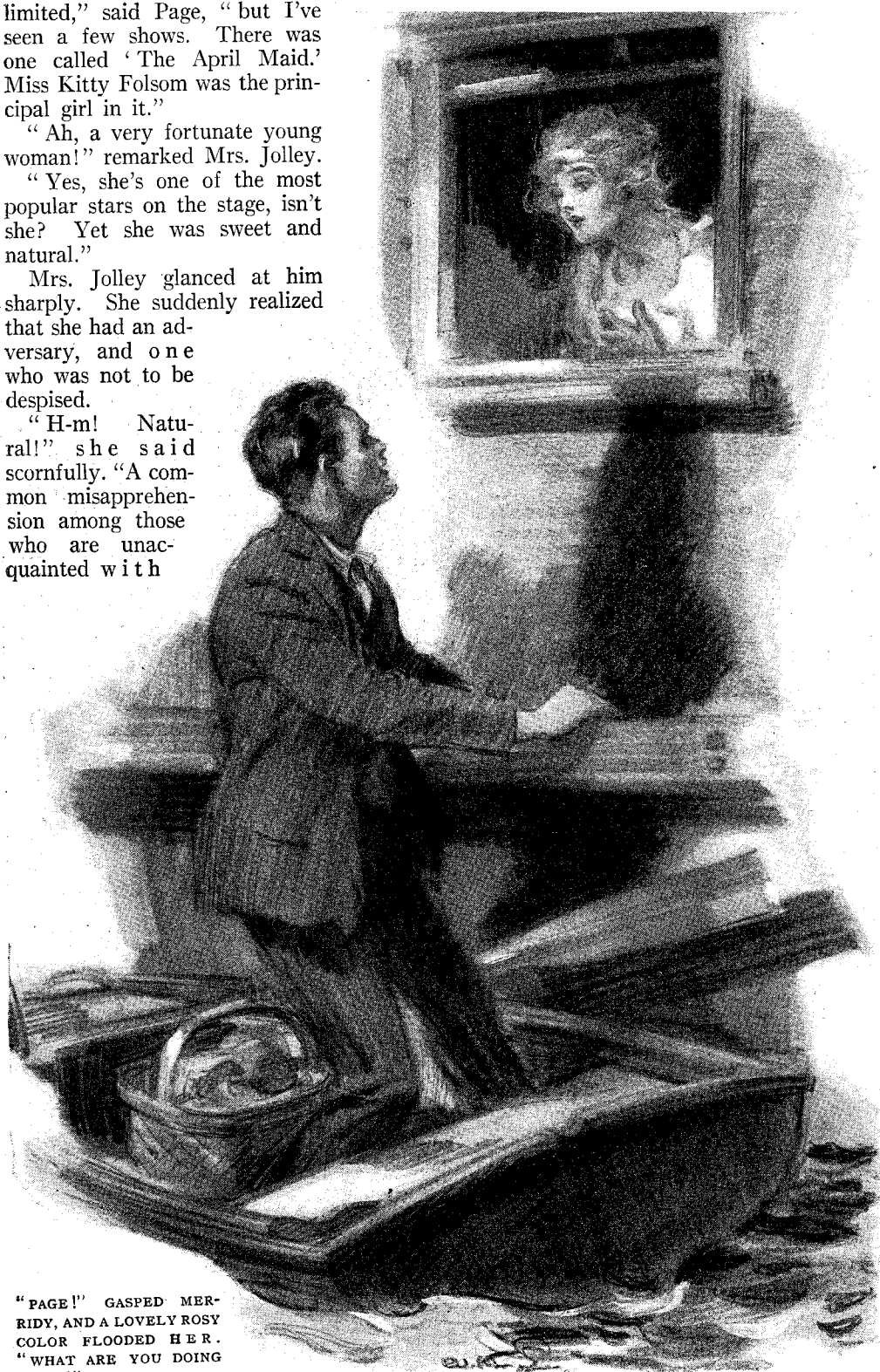
limited," said Page, "but I've seen a few shows. There was one called 'The April Maid.' Miss Kitty Folsom was the principal girl in it."

"Ah, a very fortunate young woman!" remarked Mrs. Jolley.

"Yes, she's one of the most popular stars on the stage, isn't she? Yet she was sweet and natural."

Mrs. Jolley glanced at him sharply. She suddenly realized that she had an adversary, and one who was not to be despised.

"H-m! Natural!" she said scornfully. "A common misapprehension among those who are unacquainted with



"PAGE!" GASPED MERRIDY, AND A LOVELY ROSY COLOR FLOODED HER. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

the stage! You cannot *be* natural on the stage; you have to learn to *act* natural!"

"I suppose so," said Page. "She acted natural."

"She had the advantage of appearing before cultivated city audiences," retorted Mrs. Jolley.

"But aren't audiences much the same everywhere?" asked Page. "I mean that I can't see much difference between audiences in town and down here. Of course, they laugh and applaud a lot of foolishness, but a touch of real sentiment always gets them, and they get a new joke quick as a flash; and it's the artists who give them the real stuff that make the greatest reputation."

"Pretty good for a farmer!" thought Mrs. Jolley grimly. Aloud she said tartly: "What's all this got to do with Merridy?"

"She's not natural at all," Page boldly declared.

"Um!" said Mrs. Jolley ominously.

Page plunged desperately ahead.

"We can all see how sweet she is in herself; but as soon as she goes out on the stage she ceases to be herself; she is just mechanical."

"Have you talked this over with her?" demanded Mrs. Jolley.

"No, indeed," said Page quickly. "I wouldn't presume so far."

"Um!" said Mrs. Jolley. "Do you know who taught her those songs?"

"Why, no," said Page with an innocent air.

"I did," Mrs. Jolley told him, with an air as much as to say: "What are you going to do about it?"

But Page refused to be intimidated.

"You don't mean to tell me she sings them just the way you'd like to see her sing them," he said.

He had her there.

"No," she admitted. "She lacks force."

"Well, wouldn't you back sweetness against force any day?" queried Page.

Mrs. Jolley had the sensation of being backed slowly into a corner. Being but human, she put on a high, authoritative air to set this upstart in his place.

"My dear young man, you are confusing two entirely different things. Force isn't noise, violence; force is power. You have to have force to put over your sweetness or anything else."

"I see that," said Page; "but Miss Lee's sweetness has been squelched."

"Well, did I squelch it?" demanded Mrs. Jolley toweringly.

"Yes, I think you did," replied Page, gathering up all his courage.

Mrs. Jolley stopped picking the chicken and stared. Not in many years had she been bearded like this—and by a mere lad! Page, bracing himself, waited for the lightning to strike; but in the end Mrs. Jolley only laughed queerly. Perhaps she enjoyed the novel sensation of being called down; perhaps she had already secretly come to the same conclusion about Merridy, and was honest enough to confess it; perhaps she was not so old a woman but that she could still be sensible of Page's charm for the sex; perhaps all these reasons had a part in it. At any rate she laughed—chuckled, rather—just one note. Page relaxed at the sound.

"If Merridy was a great artist," she said quite mildly, "neither I nor anybody else could squelch her."

"I don't think you're quite fair to her there," Page suggested. "She's so young. And of course she has the greatest respect for your opinion."

"Well, what do you propose to do about it?" asked Mrs. Jolley dryly.

Page was wise enough not to betray any elation.

"Well, of course, having learned to sing those songs in one way, she can't very well relearn them," he said.

"Wonderful perspicacity!" murmured Mrs. Jolley.

"She must have some new songs—better ones."

"Where will we get them down here?"

"I have a friend in New York," said Page, "secretary to a big hotel man. He's on to all the ropes. I'll write to him for some songs."

It seemed more diplomatic not to mention that he had already written.

"And when they come, who will teach her to sing them?" queried Mrs. Jolley. "I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks, much less teach them."

Once more Page dared greatly.

"With your permission, I will."

She looked at him over her glasses.

"Don't laugh," said Page. "I'm well aware that I know nothing about acting, or about stage business; but I know her from having watched her. Perhaps I could help her a little to be herself. Then you could put on the finishing touches."

"Do you think you could trust me?" she said.

Page didn't mind her sarcasm, so he got his own way.

"That's only your joke," he replied. "Of course we could do nothing without your help."

"Um!" said Mrs. Jolley.

"You will let me try, won't you?" urged Page. "Just one song to begin with, and one trial! If it should fail, nobody will be any the worse off; but it will not fail. I will guarantee you that wherever you try it out it will make an instant success."

"Well, go ahead, and let me see what you can do, Mr. Impresario," she said mockingly.

"I have actually brought the old lady around!" Page thought incredulously.

After breakfast all morning long, and again all afternoon, Page and Merridy sat up on the roof of the Thespis, talking, Merridy shielded from the sun by an umbrella. It was the happiest day of their lives. Everybody has one such day to look back upon, or else he has been very unlucky. The river scenery slipped lazily past them unheeded; they had eyes only for each other. They never touched but their eyes embraced, and in the warmth of those glances they could have no doubts. There was no word of love spoken, but they fell fathoms deeper in love merely through gazing. Their talk was not very wise nor very witty, but for them every word was charged with significance.

It was mostly about themselves, of course. Merridy talked quite freely about herself, saving only that one little year and a half of her life. Page did not consciously doubt her; nevertheless his subconsciousness was dimly aware of an unexplained hiatus in her story, and the questions came involuntarily.

"And did you never have a chance in New York to show anybody what you could do?"

She shook her head.

"There were so many girls!"

"Not like you!" Page's eyes said. "How did you happen to come down here?" he asked.

"A chorus girl's salary isn't sufficient to carry you through the summer without work. I answered Mr. Jolley's advertisement."

"What a lucky chance!" said Page's

eloquent eyes. Aloud he asked: "What has become of the lady you went to New York with?"

"She's still there," said Merridy, rather uneasily.

"Don't you hear from her?"

"Why, of course!"

"But Luella said—"

"She was only joking." Poor Merridy thought: "Oh, why does he force me to lie to him? I don't want to lie to him!"

Page had much to say about Merridy's future career.

"I don't see how you could have shown yourself even in the back row of the chorus without somebody's having discovered you," he said. "They must have been blind!"

Merridy dimpled.

"You will be discovered soon, though," he went on; "and with your beauty and youth and cleverness there will be no stopping you then."

He could say such things to her in this indirect fashion.

"Nonsense!" said Merridy.

She loved his praise, but the pictured career left her cold; indeed, his talk of it troubled her at first.

"Does he want to send me away from him?" she thought; but seeing his eyes warm and luminous with love, she was reassured. "It's only a young man's dreamy nonsense," she told herself. "So long as he loves me, what he says doesn't matter!"

Page told her of his conversation with Mrs. Jolley. She opened her eyes very wide, and laughed delightedly.

"You told her that? To her face?"

To Merridy this seemed as brave a thing as holding up the crowd on Absalom's Island. On board the Thespis, Mrs. Jolley was the oracle who might not be barked at.

She entered into Page's plans for her simply to humor him. Her nightly songs had become a habit by now, and the false style that Mrs. Jolley had imposed on her no longer irked. In Merridy's breast art, never very firmly entrenched, had now been completely overthrown by love. But it would be sweet to have Page teach her new songs—or to think he was teaching her; a lot he knew about it, the darling! She was willing to sing in Choctaw or Chinese if it would please him.

Sometimes Page showed an insight that frightened her, as when he said:

"In my mind's eye I can see you singing

in an immense theater, carrying along all those hundreds of people with you, making them laugh or cry just with the feeling in your voice!"

"But that's just nonsense," she protested nervously.

"No," he said. "I'm not a fanciful kind of person. This is a picture that keeps coming back." He laughed. "Maybe you were a singer in some previous life, and I was your manager."

Merridy shivered delicately.

"If only I can make him love me hard!" she thought. "If only I can bind him to me with many chains of love before he finds out!"

## XII

RHETTSBORO, in the adjoining county of Humber, was a larger place than any of the villages in Travis County. It was the seat of the Rhetttsboro Military Academy, where Page had completed his education; consequently he was well known in the place. He had had no difficulty getting a lift over to Stribling's Hall, on the State road, where Ellick Sutor was waiting for him at midnight.

In the mail next morning the songs arrived from New York—quite a goodly sheaf to choose from. The accompanying letter said:

According to your instructions, I got the most melodious and refined of the latest songs for soprano voice. These are the class among recent publications. You can depend on it, because I got expert advice in picking them out. Say, old fel, I don't want to be curious, but who's the soprano? If it was any of the other fellows, I wouldn't think anything of it; but you don't fall so easily, and when you do fall I suppose you'll fall hard. You can depend on me to keep my head shut.

Page was on fire to try the songs. Though he didn't know a note of music, he gravely studied the black dots meandering up and down the staves singly and in bunches, as if he would force them to yield up their melody by sheer determination. Fortunately for his peace of mind, the weather remained clear and warm, and planting had to stop until they got another "season"—that is, more rain.

Immediately after dinner Page started to grease up Madeleine again. Mr. Jimmy was aggrieved and sarcastic, but Miss Molly contrived to sidetrack him.

At three o'clock Page was back in Rhetttsboro. Getting hold of Merridy and

Emily, he dragged them up to the village hotel, where he was known, and they took possession of the moldy little parlor. Page could do anything with Emily; and her affection was certainly disinterested, for she knew that he was head over heels in love with Merridy, though he might not know it himself.

The piano had not been tuned in half a year, but they discounted that; the one aboard the Thespis was not much better. In order to save time they concentrated on one song at a time. The first one they chose—Merridy chose it—was called "Love Me." The preliminary trials were rather discouraging, for neither of the girls was exactly a first-rate musician. Finally Merridy said to Page:

"You go out and walk for an hour, and give us a chance to get our notes. Then we'll be ready for criticism."

Page walked the streets of Rhetttsboro with his watch in his hand. When he got back, they were ready for him.

"You sit over there," said Merridy, pointing to the back of the room.

"But the window is behind you," objected Page. "I can't see your face well."

"You can see well enough," replied Merridy demurely.

She could see *his* face very clearly. Poor Emily, at the piano, could not see either of them.

They began rather inauspiciously with a fumble, but the upward tilt of Page's head, the rapt fire of his dark eyes, his parted lips, thrilled Merridy through and through. She soon got into the swing of it. She sang that song, "Love Me," as it had probably never been sung—as perhaps the composer had not even heard it in his dreams. It was her chance to tell Page something that she could not tell him in any other way.

"This must open his eyes!" she thought.

She sang it direct to his eyes with passion, with tenderness, and with humor, too, because that was her nature. She had to smile when she was most wistful.

Page still told himself it was all art—just a song. It overwhelmed him. When she came to the end, he could not speak; neither did Emily immediately turn around on the stool. Poor Emily understood the little comedy she was assisting at, and her heart was rather sore.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Merridy demanded.

"Great!" mumbled Page gruffly.

Merridy made believe to be aggrieved. Though as a matter of fact she could scarcely have asked for a finer tribute.

"Is *that* all you have to say?"

"I said it was great," replied Page, almost crossly. "Don't change a thing."

Merridy could not resist the temptation to tease him a little.

"But I thought you were going to teach me—to make suggestions, and so on."

"I was a fool to think I could," muttered Page. "Just sing it again like that to-night."

"I'm not sure that I can," said Merridy, lowering her eyes. "Before a crowd of people, I mean. You see, I was specially on my mettle, because I wanted to win your approval."

"He can't miss the meaning of that!" thought Emily.

But he did.

"I shall be there to-night, too," he said simply.

Merridy raised her eyes to his with a reproach that he did not understand. She threw it off with a shrug.

"I'll do my best," she said gaily. "You must run away, now, because we've both got to memorize this firmly before night."

"Couldn't I just sit here and listen?" pleaded Page.

She shook her head firmly.

"No, indeed! I'm not going to have you see the works."

Page dined that night at the school, as was the custom of old boys upon visiting Rhetttsboro.

The head master placed him at his right hand and made much of him. Page had left a more vivid impression behind him than the run of boys.

At the end of the meal the master suggested:

"Would you like to say a few words of greeting to the boys?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Page, blushing. "I'm no speaker." In his confusion his wits did not desert him, for he quickly added: "Tell you what they'd like better than that, sir, to sort of commemorate my visit."

"What's that, Brookins?"

"Give them permission to go to the floating theater to-night."

The idea was received with favor. The head master arose and made the announce-

ment, adding that it was "at Mr. Page Brookins's request." Page got a great cheer then.

Thus the wily impresario packed his house with the finest kind of an audience.

Page went early to the theater and sought out Mrs. Jolley on the stage.

"Miss Russell and Miss Lee have been practising a new song all afternoon," he told her with a casual air. "Sounds pretty good to me. Do you mind if they try it out between the first and second acts to-night? Monday's always an off night."

Mrs. Jolley looked at him hard.

"H-m! You didn't lose any time, did you?" she said.

However, she gave her permission.

It was nearly two o'clock before Page got home that night, but sleep was still far from his eyes. Instead of going to bed, he sat down in his room to write a letter. It will be perceived that, like most young men, he strove to conceal his feelings under a very matter-of-fact style; and it will further be perceived that he did not altogether succeed.

DEAR HOWE:

It certainly was decent of you to answer my letter so promptly. The songs came all right to-day. I've only heard one of them so far—the one called "Love Me." It's a crackerjack! Much obliged for your trouble, old man.

It's not at all what you think about these songs, Howe. I'll tell you who I wanted them for now. Not for any of the girls down here. Our girls are not much on the prima donna business. They're still beating out "Dreaming" on the ivories. This is a stranger. Her name is Miss Merridy Lee.

Do you remember Jolley's Floating Theater, or did it never come in here when you were home? Well, it showed at Absolom's Island all last week, and this week it's up at Rhetttsboro. Miss Lee is a member of the company. You mustn't jump to any conclusions from that. I don't know what actresses mean to you, but this one is a lady—none finer. She's the most beautiful girl I ever saw, Howe. You know how every fellow once in his life longs to see a girl who is absolutely beautiful in all ways. Well, that is what Miss Lee is.

You mustn't think by this that I've just lost my head, like any silly fool. I know exactly what I'm doing. You always used to call me a cool head, you remember. Well, I'm just as cool this minute as I ever was. Perhaps I ought to say right here that I'm not in love with Miss Lee. She's going to be a great artist, and such a one is not for the likes of me, of course. A great artist belongs to the public.

I'm not much of a hand at writing letters, Howe. Everything crowds into my mind together, and I simply get balled up; but please remember that I don't fly off the handle every time I see a girl. I tell you this girl is a won-

der. The minute you lay eyes on her, you feel that she is different from the common run. She would stand out in any company, anywhere. How she got lost in this insignificant little troupe down here I can't tell you; but I'm going to get her out of it. That's my only object in writing this to you. I wish to be her friend and give her a helping hand—that's all. So please don't think any more about any common girl-and-fellow business. I don't like it.

When I first saw her, I was so struck with her appearance that I didn't pay much attention to her singing. Later I saw that it wasn't much—just mechanical. You see, I'm perfectly able to see her faults, too. At the same time something told me that she had it in her to make a great artist. Call it a hunch or hocus, if you like, but I know I can't be mistaken. When I got to know her, and to know the other people in the company—a nice, decent lot all of them, but very different from her—well, I began to see what the matter was. The old lady who runs the troupe is pretty strong-minded, and she had taught her badly. The songs were N. G., too; so I wrote to you for more, and I got the old lady to agree to let her sing them in her own way.

Seems as if I'd never get to the end of my story. Well, she and the girl who plays for her practised "Love Me" all afternoon, and to-night they put it on. I previously got old Dapple to let the R. M. A. boys go to the theater in a body. Monday is pretty near the worst night of the week, and I wanted to make sure of some enthusiasm. With the other people that came, they simply packed them in. The worst of it was the boys got on to the fact that Miss Lee was a friend of mine. I suppose some of them had seen us on the street together. Say, it's fierce the way nobody can think of anything but that! Made me damned uncomfortable.

She sang it between the first and second acts of their play. You can imagine how I felt, after getting the whole thing up, and with all those kids grinning at me and joshing. Say, it was hell to have to be there at all! But I had promised her to sit where she could see me—just to give her courage, you know; so I had to hold myself down.

Well, it needs a better pen than mine to describe it, old boy. She sang that song in a way that made every fellow in the house feel as if she were singing it to him specially. That was her art, you know. And did it go? My God, Howe, they like to split the roof on the old shanty-boat! The clapping was like music in my ears. They cheered, too. None of those people had ever seen such an artist before, and they certainly didn't expect to find one in a little floating theater; but they recognized the real thing when they saw it. They made her repeat the song twice. There was a Baltimore drummer there; he said Kitty Folsom was nowhere alongside of Merridy Lee. I thought the same thing myself, but then maybe I'm prejudiced.

The old lady who runs the show was a good sport, too. She shook us both by the hand—me, too, though I hadn't done anything. She wouldn't let Miss Lee go on again, because she had only learned the one new song, and the old lady wouldn't let her risk spoiling the effect by singing one of the old ones after it. She's a sarcastic old bird, but she's all right.

Now, Howe, can't you help me out in New

York somehow? You must know the right people there. What can you do to interest them in Miss Lee? I forgot to tell you that she sang for a couple of seasons in the chorus there. I wouldn't mention that. It might lower her in their eyes. I leave it to you how to proceed. In a couple of weeks, when I get my crop in the ground, I could run up to New York for a day or two, if you think best; but I'm sure you could handle it better for me. I don't know if you could get any manager to come all the way down here to see her; but I read how they're always on the lookout for new talent, and how they'll spend any amount to secure it. I'll guarantee you that if any manager does come, it'll be worth his while, I don't care who he is. Maybe he'd send a young fellow out of his office; I'd pay his expenses. I leave it all to you.

I'm enclosing a picture that Miss Lee gave me for myself. It's only a snap-shot, but it shows something. For God's sake don't let it get away from you! It means a great deal to me, for it will be all I have when she's gone. Try to get somebody to come down here, Howe. It wouldn't be nearly so good to have Miss Lee sing for a manager in his office. What we want to show him is the way an audience rises to her. It's wonderful! The old lady said it would be too good for a rube audience, but I knew!

Well, Howe, the dawn is breaking. This is the longest letter I ever wrote, old boy. I know I can depend on you not to say anything to anybody down this way. It's fierce the way they gossip!

Well, so-long, Howe.

PAGE.

P. S.—Be damn careful of my photograph. Don't let it out of your possession. Register it when you return it.

The floating theater goes to Cupplestone next week—fifteen miles below Rhett'sboro.

Miss Lee doesn't know that I'm writing this to you.

### XIII

THE event of the social year in Travis County, the tournament at King's Green, was at hand. This year, preoccupied as he had been, Page had not been able to give it as much thought as usual; but it was always present in the back of his mind. He had not ceased to harbor a certain design in relation to the tournament and Merridy.

On Tuesday and Wednesday nights, with additional new songs, she repeated her triumph in the floating theater. As a result of her success both Merridy and Page enjoyed increased consideration behind the scenes. He gave himself no credit for bringing it about, but of course, as an astute young man, he did not scruple to use it in order to further his design.

On Wednesday he made bold to ask Mrs. Jolley for a night off for Merridy on Thursday.

"We have our annual tournament tomorrow," he said. "It would be a great

privilege if I could take Miss Lee, and ride for her."

Mrs. Jolley reflected that since the company still had several weeks to play in the neighborhood, the publicity thus gained might not be a bad thing for their lovely

home in the morning; but as the rain still held off, his conscience was the easier about leaving the farm. Cousin Tom Sutor was



BROOKINS'S FEAT WAS ALMOST AN UNPRECEDENTED ONE, AND THE ENTHUSIASM KNEW—

young singer, who had suddenly become such an asset to the show. She graciously consented.

In order to get Merridy back to the tournament field in time for the opening, at half past two, Page was obliged to leave

to bring Miss Molly up in his car. Mr. Jimmy affected to scorn the affair.

Merridy looked most blossomy. She was gradually acquiring a wardrobe, as pretty girls will under the most adverse circumstances. By Page's instructions, she

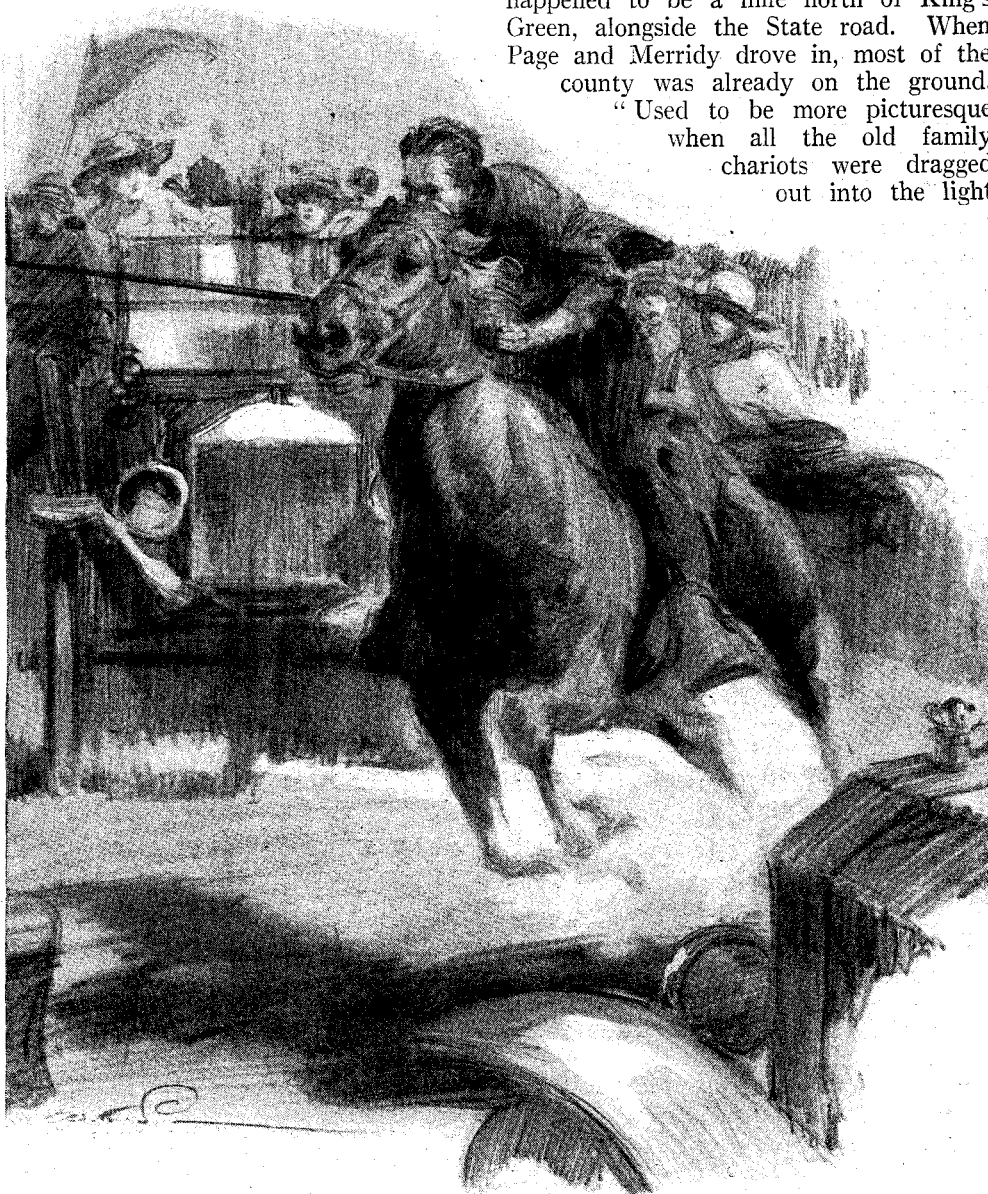
brought with her one of her simple evening dresses.

She had only the vaguest idea of the nature of the affair; but as she had discovered that it disconcerted Page to be ques-

it was clearly a highly important occasion, and she was prepared to do it all honor.

With Merridy on the seat, the dilapidated Madeleine seemed almost to renew her youth. The tournament was held on the nearest available flat pasture field, which happened to be a mile north of King's Green, alongside the State road. When Page and Merridy drove in, most of the county was already on the ground.

"Used to be more picturesque when all the old family chariots were dragged out into the light



—NO BOUNDS. IF THERE WERE SOME DISAPPOINTED HEARTS, THEIR OWNERS HID THEM

tioned, she made up her mind to wait and see. Under other circumstances Merridy might have smiled at the simple country show, but she had come to the state of mind of Ruth—"thy people shall be my people, and thy ways my ways." To Page

of day," Page said. "Some of them dated from 'befo' the wah.' When they got here, they would take the horses out for the knights to ride. Nowadays everybody has an automobile—mostly flivvers."

It was true that the few who still came

in buggies tied their horses, for very shame, in remote parts of the field.

Down the middle of the ground a long alley was roped off, and three tall posts were set up in it at regular intervals, each with a cross-piece like a gallows; but instead of a highwayman or sheep-stealer, there hung from each gallows only a swinging iron rod, with a ring about an inch and a half in diameter loosely affixed to the end.

The automobiles were parked closely together down each side of the alley, and facing the middle of it was a little stand built of fresh pine boards. This was for the judges, the orator of the day, and the band. It is always customary to import a band from the distant city at great expense for these affairs, though for fear of scaring the horses it can never play more than a muffled *bla-bla-bla*, and a *rum-ti-tum-ti-tum* when the successful knights are led up. Down at the far end of the alley was a picturesque huddle of horses, knights, and negro grooms.

Page found a point of vantage for the flivver among the cars, and remained long enough to point out some of the celebrities to Merridy. These included the herald, Cousin Tom Sutor, who was young Ellick's father, and who was himself an incorrigible boy, with his blond curls and his grin. He cantered up and down the alley mounted on a fine bay, his wife's best purple willow plume flying in the breeze.

A still more striking figure was old John Camaleer, who came out of retirement on these occasions. He was the marshal, and he wore an embossed green velvet parlor lambrequin with tassels across his breast, and a whole cascade of particolored feathers in his battered felt hat. This barbaric head-piece rose with quaint effect above his grim, seamed face, but he was not conscious of any incongruity. He sat his horse like a marshal, indeed.

"You get the idea?" said Page. "We try to catch the rings on the points of our lances. The knight who gets most rings crowns the queen of love and beauty"—this with a sidelong glance at his blossomy companion. "The next six in order crown the queen's maids. There are money prizes offered, too, but generally only outsiders take those."

Presently a mounted youth came tearing through the alley with his lance couched. His legs and body were wrapped in strips of red, white, and blue bunting. He did

not much resemble a knight of fable, perhaps, but at least the fixed, stern gaze and the resolute young lips were in the old spirit. That never changes.

The boy missed all three rings, and was guilty of a gesture of chagrin. He was very young.

"Formerly all the fellows used to dress up," said Page; "but it's gradually gone out. Only the kids do it now."

"That's a pity," commented Merridy.

"Oh, I don't know. Fellows hate to be laughed at."

"But the riding has commenced," said Merridy. "You'll be late!"

"It takes nearly an hour to ride a round," said Page. "There's plenty of time for me to get in it."

Miss Molly now joined them, so that Merridy would not be left alone while Page was riding. There was continual visiting among the automobiles, and there was seldom a moment when Page's flivver was not the center of a little circle. Miss Molly was a popular matron, and Merridy was the object of no little curiosity.

Page went to make his entry and to get ready. He was one of the best riders of the younger generation, but on this occasion, for a good reason, he had not been able to ride a single trial. He was to ride one of Tom Sutor's horses, which had been led up with the other by Ellick. Ellick was waiting for Page now with a long face.

"Ralph Horry, of Absolom's Island, is riding," he said.

"What of it?" replied Page coolly. "There are a dozen of our fellows can beat him."

"I don't know," said Ellick. "He's never ridden at a tournament, so far as I know, but he's a horseman. He always had a good horse to ride until his dad bought him a car."

"I'm not worrying about Ralph Horry," declared Page, looking to the girths of his saddle.

"Wait till I tell you," Ellick went on. "Horry had three posts set up on the point, down at the island, and for four days he's been practising—all day long, mind you. He's got nothing else to do. Think what that means in training for the horse as well as the man! You haven't been astride a horse in a month; and your horse, Bess here, is too fresh. I've been riding her around for you as much as I could, but she's still full of the devil."

Page's face turned grim.

"Sorry," he said, "but I can't be in two places at once."

"In case Horry should win the queen's crown, you'd better warn Miss Lee not to accept it from him."

"He sha'n't win it!" muttered Page.

"He's got a damn good chance, if you ask me," said Ellick.

Page studied the ground with a scowl. Finally he shook his head.

"No! If he wins the crown he can give it to her. After bringing her here, I wouldn't have her put off with an ornery maid's crown."

Ellick stared.

"Well, you're a funny one," he said. "If it was me—"

"Anyhow, Horry hasn't won it yet," added Page, setting his jaw.

When he caught sight of Ralph Horry mounted, a scornful glint appeared in Page's eyes. Horry was riding a big, quiet, well-fed black.

"Plow-horse!" said Page.

"That's all right," said Ellick. "We can have our own opinion of a fellow who rides tournament on a hobby-horse, but it doesn't disqualify him. He can take his time picking off the rings."

The band played a fanfare, and the herald cried, with delightful unconsciousness of mixing his metaphors:

"Knight of Absolom's Island on deck!"

Ralph Horry trotted down to the lower end of the track and took up his position.

"Knight of Absolom's Island prepares to charge! Charge, sir knight!"

Horry lowered the point of his lance and urged his horse forward. His round head was sunk between his shoulders, his prominent eyes were fixed on the rings in sullen determination. Horse and rider were alike too fat. They went lolloping through. Click! Click! Click!

The sharpest eyes can scarcely see the point of the lance go through the ring, but if it does not fly to the ground the knight must have it. At the lower end of the track Horry raised his lance in triumph, and the three white rings were clearly seen upon it.

There was perfunctory applause. The band played its unrecognizable three bars. The successful knight was led back to the stand between the herald and the marshal, where he delivered the rings to the judges. His triumph was considerably dashed, on

the way, by the cool look that he received from his intended queen. Merridy did not intend rudeness; she had forgotten him.

Some time later the herald cried:

"Knight of Brookins Hill on deck!"

Ellick waved his hand to Page, who was cantering up and down a distant part of the field, talking to his mare, to put her in a good humor. Page rode back to the starting-point.

"Knight of Brookins Hill prepare to charge!"

A silence fell on the crowd, and there was a deal of craning of necks. To tell the truth, there were more than the young girls present whose imaginations were struck by the sight of the tall, slender Page with his falcon gaze and his plummy black hair. He had put off his coat, his hat, and also his necktie, that it might not fly in his face, and with an unconscious touch of vanity he had unbuttoned the collar of his soft shirt, revealing a throat like a chiseled column.

His horse was a rangy sorrel who had a thoroughbred in her ancestry not too far back. She was a luxury to her owner, and had never yet known the degradation of harness.

"Charge, sir knight!"

Page touched heels to Bess's ribs. She came down the course true as an arrow. He took the first ring with almost a disdainful air; but between the first and the second posts Bess took a fright at a flowing scarf, and shied across the track. Page lowered his lance.

Under the rules he was permitted to try again for the two rings; but the devil had Bess now. She came down the track arching her pretty neck and side-stepping. It was impossible for Page to get either ring. He accepted his ill-luck doggedly.

"Try again! Try again!" the crowd shouted, but Page would have held it unsportsmanlike to accept a third trial.

The loss of the two rings was a crushing handicap. Ellick was waiting for him with a face full of wo. To cheer his friend, the faithful lad said:

"I took three rings on the first round. If I get the queen's crown, I'll trade with you."

It must be confessed that such traffick-ing in crowns is not unknown at tournaments. Indeed, it has been scandalously rumored that they sometimes change hands for a money consideration.

Page shook his head.

"Much obliged," he said curtly. "If you win the queen's crown, you crown the queen yourself."

Ellick did not mind his curtness.

Tournaments are rather long-drawn-out affairs, and likely to pall on any spectator who has not a special concern in the result; but at King's Green everybody had, so there was no visible falling off in the enthusiasm as the afternoon waned. Quite the reverse, in fact; for as with a well-constructed drama, the excitement mounted higher and higher as the contestants were gradually eliminated.

When it came to Ralph Horry's turn to ride again, out of an excess of confidence he missed a ring.

Page spent the whole of the intervening time in training and soothing his horse. Ellick meanwhile had made it his business to see that the offending scarf was tucked away; and when the word to charge was given, Bess held to the course as steady as a wild swan in flight. Page took all three rings, and was rewarded with a great cheer. It was worth the waiting to see that lithe figure of youth astride a spirited horse.

On the third round Ralph Horry, his confidence a little shaken now, again missed a ring; whereas Page, riding in his old nonchalant form, took all three. This tied them. Page was led back to the stand showing his white teeth. The smile in that dark face, being so rare, was surprisingly effective. Merridy had eyes for none but him.

Three rounds completed the regular contest. To-day seven rings was the highest score, and no less than eight knights were credited with that number. Consequently they had to ride off for the crowns.

This was the point at which the real excitement began. Eight girls among the on-lookers sat forward on the seats of their automobiles, crushing their handkerchiefs in their little hands—or seven, to be exact, for two of the knights had fixed upon the same girl.

On the first round of the ride-off, Page, Ellick Sutor, Ralph Horry, and a contestant who called himself the Knight of Young America each took three rings, while the other four tailed off two, one, one, and none respectively. This eliminated the last man, and gave the last three crowns to the next three in order. The four leaders rode again.

It took two more rounds to eliminate Ellick and Young America. The third and fourth crowns went to them respectively. After that Page and Ralph Horry rode three times without either missing a ring, and the excitement in the crowd was breathless.

Somehow it became known that the two were disputing the honor of crowning the same girl, and she the stranger, the *actress*! Some of the ladies affected to be scandalized, and some were sore. None could find any fault with the appearance of the girl, though; she was modest, she was not even too well dressed.

Small bets began to be offered on Page, but there were few takers. Page was cool, whereas the knight of Absolom's Island showed signs of nervousness. Moreover, the men were for Page to a man, for was he not their own lad? And if there were some of the ladies who for very human reasons would not have been sorry to see the actress fall to Absolom's Island, they were not showing their hands, of course. It will be conceded that these ladies were in a difficult position; their feelings were mixed.

Ralph Horry had a crop hanging from his saddle, though no one had seen him use it on his lolling steed. He and Page were still tied and awaiting the call for the next charge. In the press of riders and grooms down at the end of the track, at a moment when nobody happened to be looking, he suddenly gave Page's horse a sharp cut across the withers. The nervous animal sprang away, almost unseating Page, and bowling over a negro helper.

Bess was at the boundary fence when Page got her under control. When he came back, he found a violent argument in progress. Ellick Sutor was indignantly demanding that Ralph Horry should be disqualified, while Horry noisily defended himself, claiming that Page had purposely cramped him.

The herald scratched his curly poll, in a quandary. He had no reason to doubt his son's account of the affair, but it would look bad, he felt, to disqualify the stranger in favor of his own kin. When Page rode up, Tom Sutor appealed to him mutely.

"Let him ride," said Page curtly. "I don't want it by default. I'll beat him!"

"Good!" said the herald. Raising his voice, he cried: "Put up the small rings!"

The small rings were always saved to break a deadlock, and this was the high

point of every tournament. Ralph Horry, who was not familiar with the rules, thought they were trying to put something over on him, and said so. He got scant sympathy.

"Ride or shut up!" said the herald. "You're lucky you're still on the field!"

To take the small rings, of course, requires a hundred per cent greater skill. Ralph Horry came riding through with exaggerated caution. The big black was scarcely ambling, and laughter greeted the exhibition. With all his prudence, Horry's arm shook, and he took but one ring.

When they were hung up again, Page came breezing through with the offhand air under which he chose to hide a white-hot determination. They heard the three little clicks, but it was impossible to be sure whether he really had the rings until, at the end of the course, he proudly held his lance aloft with the three tiny circlets impaled on the point.

It was almost an unprecedented feat, and the enthusiasm knew no bounds. If there were some disappointed hearts, their owners hid them.

The successful knights dismounted and led their ladies up to the judges' stand. The couples ranged themselves in a semi-circle in the track, and everybody else crowded up behind as close as possible. Page and the smiling Merridy had the place of honor at the left end of the row. Only the sullen Ralph Horry had no girl. He stood next to Merridy, but did not look at her.

The orator of the day now arose. Minor politicians are much in demand at these affairs. The speakers change, but the speech never. There is a rigid convention, and the auditors would feel cheated did they not hear the looked-for phrases.

"Fair women and brave men! The days of chivalry may have passed, but the spirit lives on! My friends, as long as the red blood runs in young men's veins, they will contend with every ounce of their strength for the smiles of the favored fair. Fair women and brave men! Nowhere in this broad land—God's country, if I may so call it—nowhere, I say, is the banner of chivalry lifted higher than in old Travis, God bless her! Those who were unsuccessful deserve to be remembered, too, for they did their best. Fair women and brave men, my friends!"

Finally the speaker came to the actual

presentation of crowns, each with appropriate remarks.

"I have the honor to award the queen's crown to Mr. Page Brookins, who crowns Miss Merridy Lee the queen of love and beauty." (Great applause). "I express the sentiments of all, I am sure, when I say that we are especially pleased thus to honor the stranger within our gates."

The orator handed a little square pasteboard box to Page, who in turn offered it to Merridy with his stiff bow from the waist. Merridy accepted the simple trophy with more emotion than she had experienced at her greatest triumphs.

When the speaker turned to Ralph Horry, the latter said with sullen bravado: "I'll take the money prize."

A five-dollar bill was silently handed him, and he walked away without waiting for the conclusion of the ceremony.

This incident necessitated a hurried rearrangement of the whole line. Each of the knights below Page moved up one, and he who had been last eliminated was quickly found and brought up with his girl, the pair of them overjoyed by their sudden turn of fortune.

When the last pasteboard box was handed out, everybody hastened to the cars, and a grand free-for-all race down the State road was on, the object being to secure seats at the supper-tables. These were spread on trestles under the trees behind the town hall. Of course, there were not enough seats to accommodate everybody at once, and it was rather agonizing, after a long afternoon on the field, to have to stand around for three-quarters of an hour and watch your luckier neighbors gorge.

In the background the colored cooks "patted" oysters and fried them on stoves set up in the open air. In Maryland a fried oyster contains within its skin two or three of the original bivalve. The ladies of the village waited on the tables, for the proceeds were to be devoted to the church. Merridy was naturally the object of general regard, warm on the part of the men, cooler from the ladies—at any rate the younger ones. She sat between Page and Miss Molly, and pronounced the food good.

After supper there was an interval of circulating and visiting; then the girls gradually vanished, to dress at various houses in the neighborhood for the ball.

Miss Molly still piloted Merridy. By half past eight the last vestiges of the supper paraphernalia had disappeared, and all was ready for the dance on the second floor of the town hall.

The band, now with real work ahead of it, was waiting on the stage, and the company crowded about the walls. The wait was always a long one, for custom ordained that none might dance until after the "royal set," and the queen and her maids were sure to be late. Who could blame them? They say it takes a good half-hour to properly adjust a crown.

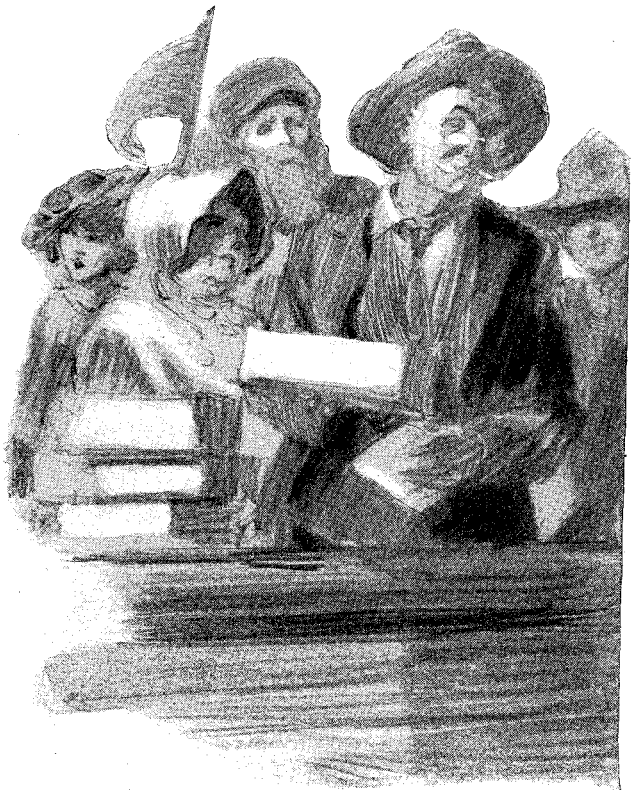
But at last, on the arms of their knights, they entered, doubly charming in their evening dresses, and proud under the crowns. The crowns were more properly tiaras made of little wax flowers and leaves cunningly intertwined, and vastly becoming alike to blond tresses and to sable. The couples lined up before the stage, for there was still the orator of the evening to be heard before the fun began. Everybody prayed that he might be brief. His speech differed from that of the afternoon no more than one pea from another.

"My friends, as I look about on the fair women and brave men—"

He made his bow, and at last the music was free to start. Only the successful knights and their ladies might dance the first number, which was still called the "royal set," though square dances had long since disappeared. Nowadays the royal set is a fox-trot, as like as not. Fortunately the shimmy went out of style before it got down as far as Travis County.

Page and Merridy were now able to dance together sufficiently well not to attract attention, but they did not get the joy out of it that they had a right to expect. It was agonizing to Page to be obliged to keep his mind on their course, while he was dizzyingly conscious of the touch of her hand on his shoulder and of the fragrance of her hair.

The boys crowded up to be introduced. Miss Molly saw to it, too, that the girls were not permitted to ignore Merridy.



THE SPECTATORS CROWDED UP BEHIND AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE

They greeted her according to their natures, coolly, kindly, or wistfully. Among the boys, however, there was perfect unanimity on the subject of Merridy. Her smiling simplicity put them entirely at their ease. Page reserved every third dance for himself, and the rest she distributed impartially.

To tell the truth, Merridy had the time of her life. She would not have exchanged this party for a dozen of Brutus Tawney's splendid affairs. What though these boys had not a dress suit among them? Their eyes had a warmth and candor that thrilled her, and they spoke their hearts.

They danced until dawn—the tournament having then lasted more than thirteen hours. Miss Molly sat it out to the last. According to prearrangement, Page and she took Merridy home with them. Miss Molly and Merridy were to enjoy a good visit the next day, and Page was to drive the girl back to Rhetttsboro in the afternoon.

At noon the next day, when Page went out to the road to look in the rural delivery

box, he found the following letter from New York:

DEAR PAGE:

I expect you'll be surprised to get an answer to your letter so soon; but sometimes things

winter. It occurred to me that Eve Allinson's manager, Maurice Gibbon, might be a good one to tackle first. My idea was that he might want your friend as a possible understudy for Allinson.

I started out on his trail yesterday afternoon, but it was this afternoon before I located him at his office. My boss's name got me a hearing.



MERRIDY AC-  
CEPTED THE  
SIMPLE TROPHY  
WITH MORE  
EMOTION THAN  
SHE HAD  
EXPERIENCED AT  
HER GREATEST  
TRIUMPHS

happen quickly in this burg. When I looked at the photograph you sent me, I was struck by Miss Lee's resemblance to the published photographs of Eve Allinson, the famous musical-comedy star, who had all New York talking last

Gibbon's not a bad sort of fellow, more polished than some of them. He's a newcomer in the managerial field, but is said to have made a pot of money out of Allinson. There's a bit of a foreign look about him—extremely well-dressed and all that, smooth as velvet, impossible to tell what he's thinking about. He has a trick of showing the whites of his eyes, like a horse whose temper is uncertain, or as if he had a sudden twinge inside him somewhere.

Well, I gave him my song and dance, to which he listened with an absolutely expressionless face. That's how these fellows try to cow you. Finally I showed him the photograph. I swear he acted queerly at the sight of it—turned pale and breathed hard. Dog-goned if I know whether it was the photograph, or if he did have a twinge in his insides. Anyhow, he excused himself and left the room for a minute. When he came back, he was his usual smooth self.

He asked me many questions about Miss Lee, but of course I couldn't give him any more than you gave me in your letter. When he saw that he had got all he could out of me, he made believe to be very indifferent again.

"The young lady is pretty," he said, "but of course you know I'm simply bombarded with applications."

He said he'd think it over, and told me to come back next week. Page, I believe that was a stall, for he had previously asked me a dozen questions about Rhettsboro—where it was, how to get there, *et cetera*. Looks to me as if he meant to go down there, maybe to-morrow. Before I left he said in his patronizing way:

"This young lady attracts me somewhat, but you shouldn't say anything to your friend until I see you again. No use raising false hopes."

I made out to agree with him, but you're my friend, not he, so I'm writing to put you wise. If

he turns up at Rhettsboro, don't let him put anything over on you. If he's sufficiently attracted by Miss Lee's photograph to go all that way, he'll be glad to pay a good sum to get her. Don't be afraid to strike for a big figure. Two hundred a week is not much nowadays. Above all, if Miss Lee has the goods, warn her not to tie herself up to Gibbon by a long-term contract. He has a reputation for doing that sort of thing. They say he only paid Allinson a hundred and fifty a week when she was making thousands for him.

I'm free to confess it looks funny that a mere snap-shot should get him going like that. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I misread the man entirely. So don't be too much disappointed, old boy, if he doesn't turn up. Just the same, I felt that I ought to warn you to be on the lookout. Stranger things have happened.

Let me know what happens. I'll keep you posted from here.

Yours in haste,

HOWE.

Page read this letter twice over with a fast-beating heart, and put it in his pocket. It was characteristic of him that he said not a word about it to Merridy or to Miss Molly.

(To be concluded in the November number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

### BALLADE OF A KISS

In vain, beloved, your speech denies  
The truth your lips, another way,  
Told me last night in Paradise!  
It is too late now to gainsay  
The love you gave me yesterday,  
When I at last had greatly dared,  
And you no longer said me nay;  
I take your kiss, but not your word.

Nor could you have it otherwise;  
Or shall I deem we kissed as they,  
The common lovers we despise?  
'Twere an ill compliment to pay  
The Lord of Love, whom we obey!  
Be sure, beloved, not unheard  
Of him that silent plighting—yea,  
I take your kiss, but not your word.

My heart your morning blush defies,  
For, when my lips upon yours lay,  
I gave you faith that never dies;  
All that I am, all that I may,  
All that to be I nightly pray,  
Blent with the sacrament we shared—  
All the divine in this poor clay;  
I take your kiss, but not your word.

### ENVOI

Princess, 'tis not for us to play  
Profanely, like the amorous herd;  
Words cannot take that kiss away.  
I take your kiss, but not your word!

Nicholas Breton