

THE NOOSE MATRIMONIAL

By Edgar Saltus

“MR. JONES, mem, is down stairs, and your aunt and your father. Your father, mem, he has been here three times.”

It was Harriet, Marie's maid, talking vainly through the door.

Marie turned on a pillow and carefully, as though engaged in a matter of great importance, made with a hairpin little punctures in it. The room was big and bright. From without there mounted the rumble of Fifth avenue.

The puncturing of the pillow continued. There was a square, quite even, which she completed, and into which she stuck, one by one, a row of dots. In the middle she planted the hairpin, left it there and turned again.

Because of the silks with which the bed was covered it looked like a garden, and in it the girl resembled a flower, a rose chimerically fair. Her purple eyes were sultry, her scarlet mouth was moist, the red tangles of her hair made a burnous of flame, her fingers glowed and her wrists were such as those on which, in days gone by, falcons alighted and kisses fell.

She patted a yawn and interrogated a clock. It was not yet noon, but she had fancied it earlier. Pushing the silks aside, she got from the bed to the bath. Before the latter was a mirror. For a moment, the point of her tongue just visible, she looked herself up and down. Then absently, her thoughts on other things, she perfumed the water and hid herself there.

The chill aroused her. Presently, without haste, she began to dress. The ceremony was one which she always accomplished alone. The

presence of her maid annoyed her exceedingly, and, though this morning differed from all others, it was not until she had her bonnet on that she opened a door and called:

“Harriet!”

“Yes, mem.” The maid entered, prim as a Puritan Sunday. “They are waiting for you, mem. Your father——”

Marie interrupted her. “Put those things in the bag and give it to Harris with the boxes. Are they packed? How do I look? Go down and tell Mr. Usher I am coming. When did my father get here? This morning?”

“Yes, mem.” The woman nodded and turned.

Marie went back to the mirror. Her dress was of cloth, light violet. It had fur effects that were repeated on the bonnet. In spite of her coloring, or, perhaps, because of it, it became her. And now, as she looked, she bent forward and kissed herself in the glass.

“Good-bye, Marie.”

She looked about the room. On a mantel were some photographs.

“Good-bye, everybody.”

Her voice was contralto. As she spoke she smiled and showed her teeth. They were small, slightly uneven and semi-transparent.

On the stair beyond was a man. He looked as though he had seen worse days and never intended to see them again.

“I was coming for you,” he began. “I must speak to you.”

Marie interrupted him as she had her maid. “I expected you last night. How do you like my hat? Have you seen Paul?”

From an adjoining room a clergyman issued. He was in full canonicals. The girl went back a step, stretched a hand, showed her teeth and the point of her tongue.

"I am Miss Mermex."

"For but a brief while now," the clergyman answered.

"This is my father," she added.

"I am just in town," Mr. Mermex announced. "I got here an hour ago from San Francisco. I——"

Marie interrupted him again. She gave him a slight shove, which he obeyed, and down the stair all three went.

In the wide hall below people straggled from the drawing-room to greet her. There was her aunt, Mrs. Metuchen, a little old frump. There was her immediate husband, Paul Usher. There was Mrs. Usher, his mother. There were the Enevers, society folk of the toppest notch. There was also Alphabet Jones, a man of polite letters.

Mrs. Usher's costume indicated mourning, Mrs. Metuchen's the Flood and Mrs. Enever's the Rue de la Paix. Marie, fair as an angel, yet, of course, much better dressed, beamed on them all.

Usher took her hand and kissed it. Had he not been a broker you would have suspected him of it. Marie, smiling still, showed again the point of her tongue. It was like a little piece of watermelon. Meanwhile, everybody was talking to her; Mrs. Metuchen very shrilly. Mrs. Usher approached, gratified her with a frosty caress, and stepped gingerly away.

"Many happy returns," Jones murmured, seductively.

"Gracious!" Mrs. Enever exclaimed. "Gracious!" she repeated, delightedly. "What a congratulation to a bride!"

"She reminds me," Mrs. Usher whispered, "of a beautiful animal. But I have found it well not to be too precipitate."

"Gracious! I should hope so!"

"Marie," began Mr. Mermex. He had got near his daughter again, but

Mrs. Enever's husband was talking to her. The girl interrupted them both.

"Suppose we go in."

The group parted. Through it, into the drawing-room, the girl passed, the clergyman following, the others at his heels. At one end, between the windows, two cushions had been placed. The clergyman got behind them, his back to the wall, and, fumbling in his skirt, produced a book. Then at once he assumed an attitude that was amiably austere.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here—" Before him the bride and groom were standing. The others, distributed as for a photograph, seemed reverently disposed. Mr. Mermex alone was restless, and, in a moment, as the opening exordium concluded with the mandate, "If any man can show just cause why these two persons may not be lawfully joined," he raised a hand, his mouth opened, something trembled on his tongue. But, save Marie, who turned, smiling still, no one noticed.

"I require and charge you both, as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment——"

Marie had turned again. She was listening now devoutly. Into her sultry eyes there had entered an expression almost saint-like. From her moist mouth the smile had gone.

"Paul, wilt thou take this woman——"

The questions continued. At the demand, "Who giveth," Mr. Mermex made a gesture. Though vague, it sufficed. The promises were exchanged. The troth was plighted. Bride and groom knelt down and rose again.

"Those whom God hath joined," the cleric continued, and, mumbling the phrases that follow, concluded with the finishing "Amen."

"Let me congratulate you, Mrs. Usher."

Abruptly the man of God had disappeared. It was the man of the world who was speaking now. Then, extending his hand to the husband, he was about to ask for the paper

which the Bureau of Vital Statistics exacts, but Mr. Mermex gave him no time. He had the groom by the sleeve.

"I want to speak to you."

"What about?" Usher asked.

"Come from here and I'll tell you."

With a hand still on that sleeve the father led the son-in-law from the room. In a moment the clergyman rustled and vanished. Marie had seated herself, Enever on one side, Mrs. Metuchen on the other.

Across the room Mrs. Usher *mère* had also seated herself. Mrs. Enever and Jones were sharing the charm of her talk.

"It is incredible," she was announcing to both from behind a fan, "but I am not sure that anyone knows my son's wife, that anyone knows her father, either."

"Gracious!" Mrs. Enever exclaimed. "That is, such an advantage, isn't it? Just look at the Mene-mons! When they first appeared I heard people saying, 'Shall we receive them?' In no time those very same people were asking, 'Will they receive us?'"

"It may be that I am censorious," the groom's mother continued, expansively. "It may be, though it is a fault which I try to guard against. But I am not precipitate, and that, I fear, Paul is. You will not believe me when I tell you that he has not known his wife eight weeks."

"Gracious! I thought they had made mud pies together. Perhaps they will. Matrimony, don't you think, is just full of adventure?"

"And I need not tell you," Mrs. Usher added, "how grateful I am to the dispensation of Providence which, in putting me in mourning, relieved me of asking people here to-day. So, while there is that for which I am thankful, there is also that which perturbs. Do you not agree with me, Mr. Jones?"

"Entirely, Mrs. Usher. Every silver lining has its cloud." The novelist was about to add further novelties, but Marie beckoned to him. He crossed the room.

"Where is Paul?" the girl asked.

"Playing billiards with your father, I fancy. In Latin countries it is customary for a bride to be taken aside by her mother. Here it is becoming fashionable for a father to disappear with the groom. But don't let it worry you. Disappearances are deceptive."

In the doorway a servant loomed out of livery.

"Harris," the bride called, "is the carriage here? Fetch me a cup of bouillon." She turned to the others. "It is after one. The ship sails at two. But you will all stop and lunch with my father, won't you? Mr. Jones, would you mind very much telling Paul that the carriage is here?"

"It is so unusual," said Mrs. Usher *mère*, "for young people to sail for the tropics on their wedding day. Does it not seem unusual to you, also, dear Mrs. Metuchen?"

"Gracious!" Mrs. Enever exclaimed. "When I was married I took my husband to Iceland."

The butler reappeared, preceding a footman who carried a tray, on which there were little cups.

Marie took one. So also did the dowager. As the servants were leaving, Jones, followed by Usher, reentered the room.

"Before we go, Paul, don't you want some bouillon?" Marie asked.

But either he did not hear or else he did not heed. "Mother," he said, "bring Mrs. Enever and come."

Mrs. Usher, who was drinking, lowered her cup. "We are to lunch here after you and Marie are gone."

"Marie and I are not going anywhere."

As he spoke he looked at his bride, and as he looked the cup which she held fell from her hand, spilling over her dress, and then to the floor, where it broke, musically, after the fashion of Sèvres.

Her eyes followed it meditatively. When, presently, she lifted them, the front door had opened and closed. Usher had gone.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the dowager. She turned

to Mrs. Metuchen, from her to Mrs. Enever, then to Jones.

"What is the meaning of this?" she repeated. This time she addressed the girl.

Marie nodded, tried to smile, tried, perhaps, to speak. The effort, though, must have been too great. She dropped forward on her face.

Mrs. Metuchen made a dive at the girl. But almost immediately the latter straightened herself.

From without there came a ring.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Enever. "It is like a scene in a play."

Jones blinked appreciatively. "It is better. This is real drama in real life."

"But, gracious! what do you suppose—?"

Jones, however, had no time to waste on Mrs. Enever. The groom's mother, with the air of a Gorgon, was promenading toward the door. She seemed smitten by that disease which pathology catalogues as *noli me tangere*. Her eyes were open to their widest extent, her mouth shut very tight. But Jones was not afraid.

"You'd best wait a moment, Mrs. Usher; there is a newspaper man in the hall."

But the lady herself was not afraid. Her promenade across the room continued, rigidly, almost mechanically, perhaps pleasurably. In a moment she, too, had gone.

Jones turned to the bride. Apparently now she had wholly recovered. She looked precisely as she had five minutes before, as pretty as she could stick, a Venus in her teens. Mrs. Metuchen, talking as though the tongue would fall from her mouth, was standing on one side of her. Mrs. Enever, doing her best to get a word in edgewise, was standing on the other. Though the one was old and the other young, conjointly they set her off.

Jones was not permitted to stare at her undisturbed. Enever had him by the arm.

"If you love Mammon and abhor righteousness," the latter was muttering, "and even if you don't," he in-

terrupted himself to add, "tell me what all this mystery is about."

There are men who can't say "I don't know." It sounds too flat. Jones was one of them. Pontifically, in his deepest note, he replied, "Mystery, dear boy, exists only in the dictionary. There is no such thing. But there is ignorance, and that is very fertile. The less we know the more we believe. Now, if you want a guess—" and drawing Enever nearer he whispered in his ear.

Enever shook him off. "Nonsense!" he sputtered.

"Well, perhaps," Jones, with silken sweetness, answered, "perhaps it is nonsense; but then, you see, we have been exchanging ideas."

The shot might have told, yet it lacked the time. Before it could hit, there was Mr. Mermex.

"Archibald," clucked Mrs. Metuchen, "look at your work! You have killed your daughter, you—"

Marie interrupted her. She had risen. "You might better have stayed in 'Frisco, I think. Don't you?" she added, longly. As she spoke, she smiled. "And just look at my dress! I am dripping with soup."

Brushing her father aside, leisurely, without haste, smiling still, she crossed the room and left it.

"There goes a dream in lilac," Jones confided to Enever.

"One from which Usher appears to have awaked."

"The more fool he, then."

Enever had no chance to reply. His wife sailed up to him and sailed him away.

Mrs. Metuchen had evaporated. Jones and Mr. Mermex were alone.

The latter coughed. "You are a literary man, I believe?"

"Oh, no. I write little things for the magazines. There is nothing literary in that."

To this Mr. Mermex assented, but absently. It was evident that he was sparring for wind. "At least, you are a friend of these people, a friend also of my daughter; and here I have few. Will you give me a moment?"

"The plot thickens," Jones reflected. "He is going to use me for a sewer."

"Now," Mr. Mermex continued, "when you met my daughter last Summer, did it occur to you to ask her where she had been?"

"But, my dear sir, a man of sense never asks a lady where she has been. He asks where she is going."

"No doubt. Even otherwise Marie would not have told. Explanations are not her weakness. But that is a detail. She had just left Sioux Falls."

"Ah!" In the rug which Jones had been studying abruptly understanding dawned. An entire panorama unrolled—the cat, the bag, the key to the whole situation. "Was that what you told Usher?" he asked.

Mr. Mermex nodded.

"But permit me, why, of all other moments, did you choose the one which you took?"

"Why, indeed! I had to take what I could get. I only reached here an hour ago."

"Of course. Then, too, postage is dear and telegraphing expensive; yet I can't help thinking, since the matter appears to have weighed on your conscience, that a little extravagance——"

The father coughed again. "There is the point. Marie wrote me that she was to marry Usher. I wrote her to go ahead. On the train this morning I met the beast from whom I thought she was free. He told me that he had never been served, that the divorce was invalid, that he intended to rip it up—all of which I had to tell Usher, and when I did, you saw what occurred. He reasoned, I suppose, that if Number One got at him he would be in for damages, and heavy ones, too. Don't you think so?"

"Really, the processes of Usher's reasoning exceed my powers of imagination. If your supposition be correct, certainly his commercial instinct is beautifully developed. But personally I regard it as a great mistake to neglect pleasure for business."

"Now," said Mr. Mermex, "there is a reporter out there. What shall I

say to him? There is no use keeping him waiting."

"None at all. Particularly as in all probability he enjoys it. Tell him the reverse. Tell him it is a great mistake to neglect business for pleasure."

"Quite so."

The door-bell rang again.

"There is another of them, I suppose, and that reminds me; you will stop, won't you, and have lunch with us?"

"No, thanks very much; but you might say to your daughter, with my compliments, that divorce is the mother-in-law of invention, and that I wish her again many happy returns."

"You are very thoughtful of others," a lady in lilac called from the adjoining room, "yet in the circumstances a trifle cynical, too."

Jones picked up his hat. "I dare say, but then, you see, it is in thoughtfulness of others that cynicism begins."

"Yes, indeed," said a voice from the doorway, "let us think of ourselves. There," Usher continued, as he entered where they stood, "I have been off reconnoitring. The divorce is all right. The forces centripetal and centrifugal couldn't touch it. Marie, where are you?"

From the adjoining room the bride strolled leisurely. Her eyes were pools of purple, her mouth a scarlet thread.

With a look cannibalistic in its longing to eat her, Usher added, "My dear, we have lost the boat."

The girl's moist lips, parting in a smile, disclosed the point of her tongue. "Then can't we," she inquired, with an air of innocence which was simply seraphic, "can't we manage to find a train?"

"Any port in a honeymoon," Usher answered. "Let's be off at once."

"My blessing on you both," cried Mr. Mermex.

"'Twas ever thus," said Jones. "Woman proposes and a poor devil accepts. For such is the noose matrimonial."

THE CUP OF JOY

LET us mix a cup of Joy,
That the wretched may employ,
Whom the fates have made their toy.

Who have given brain and heart
To the thankless world of art,
And from fame have won no part.

Who have labored long at thought;
Starved and toiled, and all for nought;
Sought and found not what they sought.

Let the goblet be the skull
Of a fool the wise deemed dull,
Once of madcap fancies full.

First in it we'll pour the light
Of soft dreams, and next the might
Of sweet follies of the night.

Let these be the must wherefrom,
In due time, the mettlesome
Care-destroying drink shall come.

These the liquid; next mix in
Laughter of a child of sin,
And the red of mouth and chin.

These shall give the tang thereto,
Effervescence and rich hue
That to all good wine are due.

Next into the cup we press
The wild kiss of wantonness
And the glance that says no less.

Sparkles both that give a fine
Lustre to the drink divine,
Necessary to good wine.

Next into the goblet goes
First a love-song, then a rose
Warmed upon her breast's repose.

These are last; they give due measure
Of bouquet to that we treasure—
Lift the cup and drink to Pleasure!

MADISON CAWEIN.