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A FRIEND INDEED.

"The fact is," said Clarence Hathaway, taking off his large, circular, horn-rimmed spectacles and carefully wiping them with his pocket-handkerchief—"the fact is, my dear Henry, hitherto I have not paid any special regard towards young women. But Miss Webling is—"

"Different," suggested his companion a plump, well-fed man of twenty-nine whose name was Henry Fox.

"Exactly," said Clarence. "There's something about Miss Webling that raises her far, far above all other young women. Something—poetical, ethereal, transcendental."

"Oh, cut it out!" growled Henry. "Talk English."

"I know perfectly well what you mean without all those fireworks. This girl you're talking about—of course, she's different from all other girls in the world. They always are. Of course, she possesses wonderful powers of sympathy, marvellous tact, extraordinary and rare beauty of face and figure—they always do."

"Yes, but—" "Clarence," continued Henry, interrupting, "the plain truth is you're in love with the girl. Isn't that so?"

Clarence flushed.

"Well—" he began.

"Quite so," said Henry, "I understand. Say no more."

"But I want to ask your advice," said Clarence.

"Ah, so that's it. Well, carry on, my lad."

Henry Fox settled himself comfortably in his armchair, and prepared to dispense good advice. He was an easy-mannered young man of a cheerful and confident disposition. He liked Clarence, but secretly despised him. At times, he was almost inclined to pity him. He thought Clarence was soft.

There he was wrong. It is true that Clarence Hathaway did not possess the demeanour of a bold and desperate buccar. His big spectacles gave him a very mild and benevolent appearance, and he was, moreover, quiet of voice and manner. But, physically, Clarence wasn't at all soft. Like many shy and retiring people, he had a punch which upon the very rare occasions when he exerted it considerably surprised the unfortunate man who stopped it.

Again, his name told against him. A man of twenty-six who wears glasses and is afflicted with the name of Clarence is handicapped at the outset.

The two were in the sitting-room at Clarence's "digs." It was a small and unattractive room, the only decently comfortable chair being the one at the moment occupied by Henry Fox.

Clarence coughed nervously before unburdening himself.

"The trouble is, Henry," he began slowly, "that though I—er—admire Miss Webling so very much, I fear that she scarcely reciprocates my sentiments."

That was Clarence all over. He invariably talked in the language of a member of Parliament addressing an audience composed of schoolmasters. It was a standing joke amongst his friends.

Henry wondered if he talked to Miss Webling in that manner. He tried to picture the effect upon any average modern girl. It was funny, and yet almost pathetic. He began to feel quite sorry for Clarence.

"In other words, Clarence," remarked Henry, in his coarse, direct fashion, "she's been giving you the bird."

Clarence sighed.

"I try to please her," he said sadly, "but my efforts are singularly unsuccessful."

The other day whilst I was describing a recent visit of mine to the Geological Museum, she yawned and said she wasn't interested in fossils—not even human ones. I lent her a book on 'The Evolution of Tadpoles,' and she never even read it."

"You astonish me," observed Henry drily.

"So I thought, Henry, that with your wide knowledge of women you could advise me. Tell me what to do to catch Miss Webling's interest, put me right as to my correct procedure."

"My dear Clarence," said Henry, in patronising tones. "I shall be delighted. I think I can say without boasting that you couldn't have come to anyone for advice better qualified than myself. What I

don't know about girls, you can take from me isn't worth knowing. I know them from A to Z."

Clarence gazed at his friend with modest admiring eyes.

"It's quite clear," continued Henry, "you're on the wrong track altogether. You're too timid. What attracts women is boldness, resolution, and all that sort of thing. Then again, you're not sufficiently careful about your personal appearance. You're not dressy enough." Henry fingered his neat, coloured tie as he spoke.

"Now, tell me, Clarence," Henry went on, "is this lady friend of yours really pretty? I mean does everyone think so?"

"She's beautiful," murmured Clarence reverently.

"Um; Well, the best thing you can do is to take me along next time you call, and introduce me."

"Certainly."

"Then I'll just keep my eye open for any special characteristics she may possess, so that you can watch me and study my methods."

Clarence coughed.

"Is that absolutely necessary?" he asked doubtfully.

"Just as you like," replied Henry, with a haughty note in his voice.

"All right," said Clarence. "Do what you think best, Henry."

It was then arranged that Henry Fox should put in an appearance on the following evening, and accompany Clarence when the latter called on the Weblings.

Shortly afterwards Henry took his departure. As he traced his footsteps homewards, something must have amused him, for he smiled to himself several times, and once broke into a little, contemptuous laugh.

II.

Nella Webling was a tall, pretty girl with curly black hair that was cut short and "bobbed" in the prevailing fashion.

The next evening she was sitting alone in the drawing-room of her home, and it may be safely assumed that her thoughts were far away, because the book she was supposed to have been reading for the last half-hour was upside down.

But in the novel was a well-built, handsome young man with a square jaw and straight legs. He was the hero. A regular goer, too, he was. He was always "spotlessly clad" (usually in "immaculate evening dress"), and whenever he spoke his voice vibrated with passion even if he only said "It's a nice day, to-day but—his voice still went on vibrating with passion."

Nella sighed.

She was wondering why it was that young men like the hero in the novel never came her way. All the men she met seemed so ordinary, so human. About the only time their voices vibrated with passion was when they were arguing about football, or describing why it was the horse they had backed was just beaten by a short head.

In the midst of her meditation, the maid came in and announced Clarence and "a friend."

Clarence and Henry entered the room.

"This is a friend of mine, Mr Fox," explained Clarence timidly, "whom I've taken the liberty of bringing with me."

"How do you do," said Henry, looking deep into Nella's eyes with a gaze of undisguised admiration in his own.

Nella smiled sweetly, and Henry smiled sweetly. They shook hands like quite old friends. Indeed, it seemed to Clarence that they took far too long shaking hands.

The three composed themselves in arm-chairs.

The conversation which ensued was carried on almost exclusively by Nella and Henry. Clarence's share was very small. As time went on the other two seemed to forget him altogether, it was as much as he could do to get a word in at all.

It went on like this:

Henry: "Are you fond of theatres, Miss Webling?"

Nella: "I adore them. If I could I'd go every night, wouldn't you? I'm specially fond of musical pieces."

Henry: "I expect you've seen 'The Maid of the Mountains?' That's a good show, isn't it?"

Nella: "Oh, I think it's topping! I've seen it three times. I could see it again."

Henry: "They say 'Monsieur Beaucaire' is good, too. I haven't seen it myself yet, but lots of my friends have said they liked it. They tell me the music is good."

Nella: "No, I haven't seen it yet, either. I'd love to. I've got the music of it."

Henry: "Have you really? I'd like to hear you play it, awfully."

Nella (smiling): "I can't play very well."

Henry: "I refuse to believe that. Absolutely. As a matter of fact—I believe you would succeed at anything you took up."

Nella (still smiling): "Oh, you're much too kind. Besides—how do you know? Why, you've only just met me."

Henry (looking into her eyes): "I feel as though I had known you for years!"

Clarence: "Talking music, I was at a concert at the Queen's Hall the other day, when—"

Nella (to Henry): "Are you fond of reading, Mr Fox?"

Henry: "I dote on it. You've got a book there, I see."

Nella: "Yes. It's one of 'Childs Garbage's. It's called 'My Heart's Desire.' Have you read it?"

Henry: "Oh, yes. I think it's very good, don't you?"

Nella: "Topping! I've read lots by him. He's frightfully clever, don't you think?"

Henry: "I think he's one of the leading novelists of the day. I read every book he writes as soon as it is published."

Clarence: "I noticed this morning in an article in 'Science Sifting'—"

Nella (to Henry): "Do you play tennis, Mr Fox?"

Henry: "Yes, do you?"

Nella (modestly): "Oh, a little you know. I expect you're awfully good."

Henry (letting himself go rather): "Not at all. Not all. Just average. I belong to a good mixed club, though."

Clarence: "There was some very good tennis at Wimbledon last—"

Henry (to Nella): "I wonder if one day you'd care to—"

Nella: "To what?"

Henry: "To come down to my club and play a 'set' or two with me. 'Singles,' you know? What?"

Nella: "I'd love to. But do you think I should be good enough?"

Henry: "Of course. What a foolish question. Perhaps you'll come along on Saturday afternoon, will you?"

Nella (after a slight pause): "Yes, I'd like to very much."

Clarence (desperately): "Talking about tennis—"

Henry: "We shall be able to get some tea at the Club House. Topping ices they have there. There are some jolly nice people that belong to the club, too. Suppose I call for you about three. Will that suit you?"

Nella: "Yes, that will suit me very well."

After this sort of thing had been going on for about an hour, Clarence felt his spirits sinking lower and lower. He relapsed into silence, saying not a word, but just listening sadly to the animated dialogue carried on by Nella and Henry.

At length he rose to his feet in desperation.

"I'm afraid we must be going now, Miss Webling," he said, with a slight emphasis on the word "we."

"Must you go, old man?" said Henry.

"Oh, well, Good-night."

Before Clarence realised what was happening, Henry had arisen, shaken him by the hand, and dropped comfortably back again into his chair.

"Good-night, Mr Hathaway," said Nella coldly.

Clarence stumbled dazedly out of the room. A minute later he had rammed on his hat and quitted the house, deep in a fit of black despair.

III.

Several days elapsed before Clarence saw Henry again. He chanced to run against the latter in the street. Henry was rather off-hand.

"Sorry I can't stop now old man," he said, "but I've got an appointment. I'm in a hurry."

"I wanted to talk to you about Miss Webling—" began Clarence.

"Nella? Oh, yes. Well, I can't stop now. But if I were you, I'd try to forget all about her. The truth is—I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I don't—well, I don't think she likes you very much, old chap. I'd give her a miss for a bit. So long. See you in a day or two."

Henry walked quickly away and soon had disappeared out of sight.

Twice Clarence had called at Nella's home, but each time she had been out.

"She's playing tennis with Mr Fox," Nella's mother had told him. "What a charming man he is, don't you think?"

"Oo—yes," Clarence murmured, striving to hide his discomfiture, and took his departure at the first opportunity.

After meeting Henry, he once more tried his luck. This time chance favoured him. Nella was in and alone.

She greeted Clarence coldly. It occurred to her how badly he contrasted with Henry Fox. His clothes, though good, were not of the same fashionable cut. His manner was nervous and diffident, whereas Henry was self-confident and assured. She thought how much more of a man was Henry.

Clarence did not stay long. There was too much Henry in their conversation to his liking. After Nella had asked him a lot of questions concerning his friend, she treated him to a little lecture on Henry's astonishing excellence. What a good tennis player he was. How graceful. How cool and calm and collected. What an interesting talker he was. How well-read. How good-looking. Such eyes. And how distinguished.

Clarence was both good-natured and polite. He stuck it as long as he could. But there is an end to all things. Even the camel's back is not built on the everlasting principle. The longest worm has a turning.

So, after forty-five minutes, Clarence retired.

"Good-bye, Miss Webling," he said, with a trace of bitterness in his voice, and added, "I'm sorry I bore you so much."

Nella stared pensively before her when he had gone. She did not dislike Clarence. There was something genuine about him, and he was as straight as a die; her next thought was that, but, beside Henry, he was like a candle beside an electric lamp. She left sorry for Clarence.

IV.

It was Henry's idea. A quiet place in the woods, he said, would be delightful. Nella and Mrs Webling agreed enthusiastically. Then it was that they suggested that Clarence should come to complete the party. It was a brilliant scheme. He would leave Clarence to look after Mrs Webling, thus leaving Nella to himself.

They hired a motor car to run down to Popping Forest. Or, rather, Clarence did. At any rate, Clarence paid.

When they got there, they lifted their little hamper of provisions, and dispatched the car to a village a mile back along the road, where it was to wait until they picked it up later on.

They left the road and plunged into the forest. It was a charming afternoon of early autumn. Even Clarence (who was carrying the hamper) felt gay and cheerful, despite the fact that Henry and Nella displayed a tendency to become a little separated from Mrs Webling and himself. At length, they came across a delightful glade where they opened their hamper and settled themselves down to enjoy the alfresco meal.

They were a jolly party. Nella was in high spirits, whilst as for Henry, he was positively surpassing himself in the art of sparkling conversation. He made a number of extremely witty remarks at the expense of Clarence, who laughed good-naturedly.

So intent, indeed, were they that they did not observe the approach upon the scene of two strangers.

The strangers were men. And they were not at all nice men. They were large, dirty, unshaven, and vicious-looking. They were dressed in greasy clothes; and around each of their necks was knotted a filthy scarf. Incidentally, they both carried short, heavy sticks.

They slouched up to the little party.

Henry was in the midst of a jolly funny story. He was just arriving at the cream of the joke. Then he happened to look up.

Abruptly he broke off.

"Good afternoon, guv'nor," said one of the men in insolent, familiar tones.

"Er—good afternoon," said Henry turning rather pale.

Whilst his companion was speaking, the second man leered unpleasantly at Nella. Clarence, without haste, rose quietly to his feet.

"Guv'nor," continued the man to Henry, "me and my mate is starvin'."

"Years," said the other.

"And we're walking to London from Glasgow," said the other, with a laugh.

"So we'd like a bit er money to get night's lodging wiv, guv'nor."

"Er—how much do you want?"

Henry, trembling.

"All you've got, mate," said the man with a snarl. "And quick about it too."

Nella uttered a little gasp and clung to her mother. Henry began to fumble in his pockets.

Clarence took a step forward.

"Henry," he observed mildly, "you're surely not going to be so weak as to give these hooligans money?"

The two men stared at Clarence in astonishment.