The Storyteller

A BELATED WOOING

It was a sultry afternoon of mid-summer, but through the Probate Office, in the new Municipal Building, a refreshing breeze blew from the river, and the clerks bent resignedly over their desks, knowing that the spacious room where they worked was the coolest place in Detroit.

Outside, in Cardillac Square, the stretch of green that connects the building of the courts with the City Hall was bright with flowers, but on the asphalt pavement of the Campus the sun beat down with the dazzling light that recalls to any one who has braved the Roman climate at this season the yellow glare of the Piazza Vaticano or del Popolo on a July day.

For more than two hundred years the Campus has been the common of the people. Even before the coming of the white settlers, when the place was still a forest, the red men were wont to gather here to hold their councils, to plan their fierce wars, or to smoke the pipe of peace. Here Indian lovers wandered through the trails made by the hunters and warriors of the tribes, and as the moonlight stole through the overarching branches of the trees, the gentle Ojibway maidens listened to the old, old story that yet is ever new.

But love often strolls as happily through the dust and heat of the city's streets as it ever did beneath the green boughs and rippling brooks of the woodland; and, since the world is quick to recognise a lover, among the throng of passers-by in the Campus many glances were cast at a gray-haired gentleman and a placid-faced, elderly lady, who having with some difficulty crossed the network of trolley tracks that are like a snare to entrap the unwary, took their way down the centre of the green-bordered path of the square, as though it were a royal carpet spread beneath their feet.

The man was tall, and still erect, though his years must have been at least three score. His complexion was fresh, his features clear-cut, the nose being slightly aquiline, and he carried himself in a soldierly manner. His clothes were of broadcloth, and a soft gray felt hat, set a trifle at an angle, silk gloves of the same color, and a spray of syringa blossoms in the lapel of his coat, completed his festive air.

The lady who walked contentedly beside him was not more than two or three years younger than her handsome old cavalier. She was short and a little thick-set; her hair, which she wore turned back over a high roll, had many threads of silver, but her eyes were bright and vivacious, and the smile which some comment from her escort brought to her lips revealed girlish dimples in her round cheeks. Her gown was of the color of a dove's plumage, and had a little dove-colored fichu or scarf. Of the same quiet hue was the bonnet whose silken strings she had untied because of the heat.

'Your gown is as pretty as a poem, Marie,' said the old gentleman fondly, as they walked on.

'I am glad you like it, Phil. I cut it by a fashion paper pattern, and set every stitch in it myself,' she answered with a naive pride in her own industry and skill, albeit the practised eye of a 'ladies' tailor' would at a glance have characterised the latter as hopelessly amateurish.

'You were always clever, dear,' continued her knight gallantly. 'My word, what dainty frocks you wore when you were a girl! Sometimes you looked like a rose, all in red—'

'Pink, Phil, pink!'

'Rose color, anyhow! Again you were a marigold in orange.'

'No, no, lemon color,' she objected.

'Often you were a lily-of-the-valley in green.'

'Philip, I never wore dreen in my life,' she laughed. 'I was too pale for it when I was a girl, and now it is too bright.'

'Well, it was blue then; yes, I remember, it was blue,' he went on serenely. 'And I suppose you put all those cobwebby things together too?'

'Yes, I did, Phil. I was apt with the needle in my best days.'

'Pouf, pouf!' he interrupted with affectionate protest. 'Madam, your best days are just beginning.'

She rewarded him with one of the sweetest of her dimpled smiles, and, as he glanced down at her, the delicate flush that his compliments called to her faded face reminded him of how easily she used to blush with pleasure at his praise in the long ago.

Now the congenial companions reached the Municipal Building, and mounting the broad marble steps, traversed the corridor and entered the Probate Office.

The clerks looked up from their tasks. On this dull afternoon, when even the buzzing of the flies was somniferous, a diversion was delightful.

'There is a picture,' said Tom Hackett to his neighbor, as the elderly visitors advanced up the room. 'How politely the old codger steps aside to let the lady pass first; how deferential she is to him. No doubt they have travelled the path of life together. You can see at a glance how fond they are of each other.'

'Ah, good afternoon; come to deposit your will, have you, sir?' As Tom spoke he advanced from his place and bowed to the strangers.

His inquiry, natural though it was, rather disconcerted the gentleman.

'Well, no, I was not exactly thinking of wills or last testaments to-day,' he stammered, while Tom upbraided himself as a blunderer. 'The fact is, we have come to see if this is any good at the present late date?'

So saying he took from the breast-pocket of his coat a folded paper yellow with age, and handed it to the clerk.

Tom opened and glanced over it with business-like brevity.

'Why, this is not a will,' he exclaimed; 'it is a marriage license, and, as I live, dated forty years ago! It was issued in 1861 to Philip W. Brendin, aged twenty-three, and Marie Roy, aged twenty, by Judge Jones, the first Probate Judge of this County. You have probably brought the wrong paper, sir! How did you manage to keep the license? By Jove, it has never been used!'

Raising his eyes, he stared blankly at the couple before him.

'That is all right,' said the old gentleman pleasantly. 'Is the paper any good, I asked?'

'I think so, sir; but you have made a mistake in the department,' explained Tom. 'The desk of the license clerk is in another room; I shall be happy to pilot you there. You are, I suppose, Mr. Brendin, and this is—Miss Roy?'

'Yes, yes,' replied Brendin hastily, as the lady inclined her head. 'And may I inquire your name, young man?'

'Hackett,' answered Tom.

'What, not the son of Tom Hackett, the lumberman of Alpena?'

'That is my father's name, too, and he was engaged in lumbering up north before he came to the Strait.'

Mr. Brendin grasped his new acquaintance by the hand.

'Your father was my dearest friend, boy,' he said warmly. 'Is he in good health?'

'Hale and hearty as ever in his life,' Tom responded.

'Glad to hear it!' reiterated the old gentleman.

'Tom Hackett always urged me to marry,' he continued reminiscently. I'd like him to know that I'm going to have the knot tied at last. He will be interested to hear my life-long romance, so I will tell you about it. You won't forget to repeat the story to him?'

'I will try to remember every word of it,' promised Tom, now greatly interested, for he saw that Brendin was something of a character.

'Very good. Were you ever in love, boy?'

The young fellow's countenance crimsoned to the roots of his sandy hair.

'I see; you will be wanting a license yourself soon,' went on his amiable tormentor. 'Well, about this paper. Forty years ago this lady and I were engaged to be married. She was the prettiest girl in Michigan, and lived down near Monroe. She belongs to an old French-Canadian family in these parts. A few years earlier I had come over the Alleghanies from Virginia to seek my fortune, and when I met Marie I was sure I had found it. I was right; but, you see, fortune sometimes dodges one nearly all one's life.

'The day was fixed for the wedding. Marie had all the sewing done, she said; the wedding-cake was made, the guests were invited, and I obtained the license. With all our preparations, however, until shortly before the appointed day we had never decided who should marry us. When the question came up, Marie, being a Catholic, declared that, of course, no one but a priest should perform the ceremony. I, being a hard-shell Baptist, wanted a preacher of my own way of thinking. Marie was so conscientious and I so stubborn that neither of us would yield. Thus it happened, young man, that the wedding did not take place; but I kept the license, with the hope that it might be of use some time in the future, if Marie changed her mind or I did.