

"What's this all about?" (I may have been a shade testy myself.) "It's that Dicky thought it fitting to engage himself as the Griffiths' chauffeur." Geoffrey brought it out with the air of one who regretfully delivers the blow which will bring his relative's old gray hairs to the dust. The minute I had said it I was sorry I replied in a relieved tone: "Oh, is that all?" I may even have smiled, I hope not, however. But, "All!" echoed Geoffrey. "All!" He washed his hands of us both; that was certain. "You can't fraze Uncle Geoff's crowd, Dick. 'He's gone!' " "How did it happen?" natural curiosity led me to ask. "I lost my job," Dicky explained with all simplicity. "So I got another. You didn't think I was going to come howling 'Vaal!' every time I lost a job, did you?" "He lost his job through some of his sickening funny business," said the disgusted Geoffrey. "I like this job better, anyway—good pay, exercise, short hours, walk with the Lord and eat with the servants," Geoffrey shivered. I may here explain that the Griffiths are two very rich and "exclusive" maiden ladies of very good family. They are pious and humane, and have recently taken to a motor car through extreme regard for their aged horses. "The old girls don't know who I am, Gee, won't it jolt 'em when they do?" Geoffrey arose from the table. Disgust oozed from him. The way he said: "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to call on the Van Buskirks," subtly conveyed reproach to me for taking so light-mindedly the family disgrace. "Break it gently to Mrs. Van Buskirk," Dicky called after his outraged cousin. Edith Geoffrey had vanished with a snort. From all I could judge at my end of the line, the little drama of Dolly's betrothal and marriage seemed disposed to march as Edith had planned. And the more I thought of it the less I liked it. All that there was of independence in me revolted. Let the girls, thought I, choose their own husbands, even if they don't choose good ones. Or let the mothers confer with their daughters. If I'm going to marry to please my mother, I want to know it. I want to walk with eyes open. I don't want to be managed into any marriage, however suitable, and I imagined Dolly felt as I did. I got quite morbid over it. Every time I saw Dolly I wanted to warn her: "Run, my dear, run for your life. They're trying to marry you off. They're making you think you want to. But it's not you at all, it's themselves you're pleasing. Don't do it. Don't let them move you like a pawn in a chess game." I found myself watching Geoffrey with a critical eye. Would he, I wondered, make such a good husband, after all? Wasn't twelve years too great a distance between them? And it was in this dissatisfied frame of mind that I waited upon Edith one day when her house party was in full swing. "How is your plan prospering?" was what I wanted to know. "He's immensely taken with her," Edith confided. "He'll sit with me an hour at a time talking about her." "And Dolly?" "Oh, Dolly'll be easy enough to manage! I told you before, I'm counting on the fact that a girl almost always falls in love, or thinks she does, with the first man who makes love to her," said Edith lightly. "You're very sure of yourself," I suggested. "I'm very sure of Geoffrey," she corrected. "It seems to me a little like kidnapping," I went on. "He'll make an excellent husband." "He's out out for it," I agreed. "He'd make any woman an excellent husband." "What more do you want, then?" she demanded. "A little more romance, a trifle more glamour." I was foolish enough to say, "Yes, and get her heart broken in the scramble." "There are more ways than one of breaking a heart," I reminded Edith. "He may never even touch it." "I want Dolly to have a happy life," cried her mother. "By all means," I said. "But, come, would you care to have any man, even Geoffrey, foisted off on you as a husband?" My shot told. "She's not got to marry him if she don't want to," she cried, blushing.

"I'm not forcing her into it, but I believe in girls getting married early." "And often?" I asked politely. But now Edith turned on me. "I believe you don't think Dolly's good enough for your precious Geoffrey!" she cried, and I was about to answer with some temper, for the more I thought of it the less I liked Edith's acting the role of the hand of fate, and Geoffrey certainly seemed ready to play the part she had designed for him in the little drama; but my attention was taken up by Dolly, who approached accompanied by Dicky. They were talking, it seemed to me, earnestly. There was about them the atmosphere of those who understand one another perfectly and who are perfectly happy in each other's company. And I had a moment of unreasoning pity. They both looked so fresh, so young. Youth and Spring they seemed to me—Dicky and Dolly—Dolly and Dicky. I'd never thought of the two together before. I shot a glance at Edith which she was quick to interpret. At sight of our young people, her irritation had vanished, too. "Oh, I've thought of it, naturally, since I've seen them together. But, dear friend, it's husbands we're talking about, and what kind of a husband would Dicky make?" "An absurd one, no doubt," I replied. "But still—." "Dear Uncle Geoff, you're a sweet, sentimental old thing, and I dare say I seem calculating and horrid." When Edith takes me that way it's all up with me. "Besides," she went on gaily, "I've warned Dicky. He knows how I'm fixed." "He knows?" I echoed. "I thought it was fairer to tell him." Edith had a virtuous air. "Dolly's so attractive, and young men are so impulsive. And since he's such a hero and all—." "A hero!" I wondered. "About the automobile, you know. All the girls are wild about him. It's so fine and independent of him." I burst out laughing. Did you ever hear of anything like that? I longed to get at Geoffrey with this story, just for the sake of seeing his chops fall. "Instead of making a fool of himself, here was our Dicky, something of a hero." "He's made the whole town roar," Edith went on. "And every one's conspiring to keep it from the Griffiths—who he is, you know. And so I thought it might work on Dolly's imagination—he's such a way with him—so I just had a little talk with him." "Do you think it was wise," I asked Edith, "to give Dicky a dare—to set him on, so to speak?" "Oh, he didn't take it that way at all! He took it beautifully," Edith hastened to assure me. "Oh! he took it beautifully did he?" I mused. "Well, let me urge you to bring Geoffrey to the scratch as soon as you can." She pointed at this. "You put it so hatefully," she protested. "No need of being a brute because I'm doing my duty. And we had such a lovely time the other day, when we just talked it up." But I was asking myself if, after all, Dicky would take a dare. The next two weeks brought me no answer, except that which I could gather from Geoffrey, who, ever since the house party, seemed distraught and dreary. He made flimsy excuses about errands in the village when he transparently was on his way to the Van Buskirks. So I inferred that he at least was marching in the way Edith had marked out for him. One afternoon I called at Edith's and found her radiant. "Has he?" I naturally asked her. "No, not yet," she answered; "but he's here now. He asked last night in the most pointed way to see Dolly." "Oh!" thought I. "I'm in at the death, it seems." "I've been expecting it," Edith went on. "He's spent more and more time at the house, and has tried in every way to propitiate me. There've been times when I've wanted to say: 'Goose, you don't need to spend so much time on me. I'm on your side, anyway.'" I looked out of the window. Geoffrey and Dolly were walking across the lawn; at their heels was Gum-drops, lately returned from winning ribbons at some polite dog show. "Come," Edith suggested, "let us play chess on the little piazza." Chess is my weakness, so I readily consented, though I well knew that Edith wanted to get both of us out of the way.

Now, see what happened. Listen to the guile of innocence. We were no sooner at play than I heard Dolly's voice at the other side of the piazza. Edith looked at me sharply. I raised my eyebrows. For Dolly had seen us as we made our way to the secluded little piazza, and she had led Geoffrey to a spot where every word they said would be distinctly audible to us. "What does it mean?" Edith telegraphed me. "I can't imagine," I telegraphed back. Meantime, before any retreat was possible, I heard Geoffrey's voice: "I've come to speak to you about something very important—," and then came: "Gr-r-r-r!"—the long-drawn-out growl of a bulldog who has been irritated to the last point of endurance. "Be quiet, Gums," said Dolly's sweet, innocent little voice. "Is he ill-tempered?" asked Geoffrey. "Look at him," said Dolly. "Gr-r-r-r," Gums resumed, the warning emphasised. I looked at Edith; she was wincing her little handkerchief into bits and frowning. "Dogs generally like me," Geoffrey went on. "I must make friends with the famous Gum-drops. Here, Gums, old man!" "Gr-r-r-r," Gums replied, and his growl was like the rumbling of distant thunder. "Oh! don't touch him," came Dolly's voice, in real alarm. "I wouldn't have him bite you for the world." "Would he really bite?" asked Geoffrey, and there was a wee bit of nervousness in his voice. "Bulldogs never let go," answered Dolly. "Then Geoffrey made another desperate try for the goal. "What I wanted to say was—" But "Gr-r-r-r!" rumbled Gum-drops. "Come here, Gummy! I'll hold him by the collar," cried Dolly, and again came the low, fearsome growl of Gummy. "I'll stand no more of this," Edith whispered to me, and, sailing forward, she broke into the uncomfortable tete-a-tete. Other callers arrived, but yet I stayed to learn the answer to it all. When they had gone, Geoffrey with the rest, and Dolly, in the sweetest and most affectionate way, had asked our permission to go to the garden. "Well!" I asked. "Well!" returned Edith. "Did you ever see anything like it? Brought up as she's been, too!" "Like a flower," I agreed. "If thought you said Gum-drops was a dog of an engaging temper." "He's a spring lamb!" cried Edith. "He never growls except some one steps on his tail." "And Dolly, then—" "Did it on purpose, the bad little thing. Stepped on the poor angel's tail, simply to head off Geoffrey. Did it where she knew we'd both hear it. Put her defiance of us wishes plainly before me, and in a way that I can't take any notice of without showing too plainly where I stand." And then I ran the risk of forfeiting Edith's favour forever, for I burst out into uncontrollable laughter. "But can't you imagine it? Can't you see Geoffrey dressed in his proposal dress, full as he would be of the loftiest sentiments suitable to the occasion, sitting opposite that grinning bulldog? Can't you see him nerved up to the point, only to be greeted by Gum-drops' rumbling thunder? Can't you hear Dolly—"I'd hate to have him set his teeth in you!" Fancy having teeth set in you while you were asking the girl of your choice to marry you. Humour is a brutal thing, so I laughed at the tragic aspect of Geoffrey. "She'll have to meet him at the dance to-night. She's afraid of him—of what she'll answer if he asks her. He can be persuasive, you know." Edith ignored my untimely mirth. But I didn't answer, for I was occupied with the thought of how Dicky would have nuzzled Gum-drops had he been in Geoffrey's place. I spent the evening in my library, revolving the afternoon's scene in my mind. It grew late. I was thinking of bed, when the chuff-chuff-pluff of a motor-car greeted my ears, and Dicky in evening dress appeared before me. His face was strained and white. "You've got to come with me, Uncle Geoff," said he. "Is there something wrong?" I asked apprehensively.

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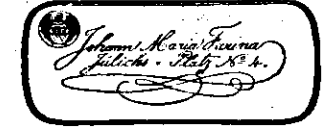
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