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THE JOY OF BATTLE

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HE was one of those small, fragile-looking men whose appearance inspires every woman with a yearning to watch over them, to see that they have their meals regularly and that their clothes are properly looked after. When he volunteered for South Africa, all the matrons of his acquaintance cried simultaneously that it was a sin and a shame to send that poor dear brave fellow where there was no one to take care of him, and when he was invalided home with enteric before he had seen a shot fired, they remarked unanimously that it was a mercy it had happened so soon. This was not at all his view of the case, and to soothe his wounded feelings they conspired to treat him as a conquering hero covered with glory, and made his life a burden to him, for he was a modest man, by overwhelming him with kind attentions.

Things being as they are, it was only natural that during his convalescence he should fall in love with the tallest and strongest girl in his neighbourhood—a girl who was out in the open air all day, and never knew an ache or a pain, who rode, bicycled, played hockey and golf, and was altogether a being as unlike a ministering angel as the mind of man could conceive. Her name was Gladys which for some mysterious reason is generally the name of this particular kind of girl—and she cherished the belief that she was unhappy at home—also a not uncommon misfortune. With singular blindness, her family persisted in imagining that it was Gladys who made home uncomfortable for them. Her mother existed in an attitude of disapproval, and her brother in one of protest, but because they were peace-loving people, and Gladys pleased was easier to live with than Gladys crossed, it was usual for Gladys to have her own way. They both liked her lover, but they welcomed him into the family without enthusiasm, even with veiled compassion.

"I had always had a sneaking hope that Gladys would marry a man big enough to thrash her," lamented the brother to the mother in a confidential moment, and the mother sighed heavily, and said, "Poor Geoffrey!" Nor did she ever refer to her future son-in-law by any other epithet.

Gladys herself was radiant. She always got what she wanted, but this was a thing she had wanted very much indeed. In the days when she was not certain whether Geoffrey really liked her, she had even lost a whole hour's sleep one night, so anxious was she lest she had made him walk too far that afternoon, and now she found complete satisfaction in the thought that she should always be able to take care of him. It did not strike her that Geoffrey hated being taken care of, and had she been told so, she would have opened her eyes wide in surprise. It gave her real pleasure to discover that she was developing a helpfulness, a consideration, quite new to her character, in her intercourse with him. By nature Gladys was not gifted with tact, and no one would have confessed this more readily than herself, but Geoffrey had found her honest bluntness very refreshing. Now, however, she began to see things from what she imagined to be her lover's point of view, and in her anxiety, to be tactful and sympathetic she rode roughshod over his feelings almost

hourly. He could have laughed with her quite happily when she made fun of people who were short, or delicate, or who caught cold easily, but when she would break off suddenly, with a crimson face, and turn remorseful eyes upon him, he found her contrition hard to bear. He suffered many things at her hands, nearly all springing from this misplaced tenderness for his weakness, and he began to feel that life would be unendurable if Gladys remained faithful to the idea that she had a mission to make things easy for him. Their future course lay very clearly before her. She would plan, and arrange, and direct, and Geoffrey would have no trouble, no responsibility, so that all would go as smoothly as it would have done at home if only other people's obstinacy had allowed it. The unfortunate thing was that her plans were made for her actual self, but for a wholly imaginary Geoffrey, and Geoffrey realised that he was sailing under false colours. As an honest man, it was necessary for him to declare himself, and he prepared to do so without any of the trepidation that was generally felt by Gladys's nearest and dearest at the prospect of a contest with her. It was not easy to disturb her ideas, he knew, but it was clear that it had to be done, and she was an opponent worthy of his steel. Perhaps he took an unfair advantage in thus making ready for battle without giving her warning, but he threw away this superiority recklessly by meeting Gladys on her own ground instead of awaiting an attack.

Calling one day to take her for a walk, he perceived that the domestic atmosphere was disturbed. Gladys's mother wore an air of having abundance to say if opportunity offered, and Gladys herself strode out of the house with a lowering brow. He had not long to wait for an explanation.

"Mother has been going on about the Bowman-Bells' dance," grumbled Gladys, with her hands thrust deep into the pockets of her coat. "Cora has promised to take me—Cora was a skittish married cousin—and we mean to have an awfully good time. And she says they're not nice!"

"Well, they are rather bouncers, aren't they?"

"I think they're awfully jolly," said Gladys crushingly. "Why don't you say at once you don't want me to go?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I can see in your face that you don't."

"Then it's hardly necessary for me to say so, is it?"

"It's all because of you—" Gladys had harked back to her original grievance. "Mother says she doesn't see how I can care to go where you're not asked. As if we were living fifty years ago!"

"And of course it'll be quite easy for you to get me an invitation." He knew very well that his presence was not desired, but Gladys found herself confronted with the necessity of telling him so.

"Oh, I don't think you'd care for it," she began.

"But if it's to be so frightfully good? Everybody says that the Bowman-Bells do you thoroughly well."

"But—Oh, you won't understand! Well, they're not your sort of people at all."

"But if they're your sort they must be mine, surely?"

"They're not my sort either. You ought to know that."

"All the more reason I should go, then."

"Whatever for?" throwing grammar to the winds in her astonishment.

"To take care of you."

"You take care of me? Why, I could take care of you better. Oh, I didn't mean to say that. I mean—Cora will be there, of course."

"Judging from what I have seen of her, she'll have her hands full with her own affairs."

"Well, and what then? Can't I take care of myself? I do believe," with terrific scorn, "that you're jealous—of Bertie Bowman-Bell!"

"Oughtn't you to feel flattered if I am?"

"I don't, a bit. It's mean and horrid to be jealous."

"Then you ought to know that I couldn't be jealous if I tried."

Gladys scathed him with a glance. "I despise a man who gets cross if a girl looks at anyone but himself."

"So do I, I assure you. At least, I should if I knew one. Do you know any man like that?"

"You know you would be perfectly atrociously enraged if I danced with Bertie all evening."

"And you would rather I didn't mind whether you did or not! Well, there's no accounting for tastes. Look here, to show that I don't grudge you the little pleasures that come in your way, let's make a bargain. You get me an invitation, and while you devote yourself to the fascinating Bertie, I'll hang about that fetching sister of his all the evening."

"You won't do anything of the kind! I wonder you're not ashamed to suggest such a thing. There isn't a girl I know who's such bad form as that Migaon Bowman-Bell." She caught his smile—perhaps not quite an involuntary one, and her tone changed. "I believe you think I'm jealous!"

"Never mind. I didn't say that jealousy was mean and horrid," he said soothingly.

"I suppose you would like to feel that I was jealous about you? But if you think," with a rapid change of front, "that it's playing the game to accept the hospitality of people you call bouncers, I don't."

"Nor do I. Nothing but a sense of duty would make me do it."

"You might have the grace to say that it would be a pleasure to go with me, at any rate."

"But it wouldn't. If you are going to dance with young Bertie all the evening, well, you might enjoy it, and, of course, he would, but I really don't see how you could expect it to be a pleasure to me, and I don't care, as you say, to accept the hospitality of people I should prefer to cut."

"I suppose you mean that when we are married you'll insist on my dropping them?"

"If I said that was my fixed intention, what would happen?"

"I should say our engagement was off."

"Then you may be quite sure that I shouldn't do anything so foolish."

Gladys turned and glared at him, and he met her angry eyes with a cheerful

and innocent smile. She tramped on again.

"I think you are perfectly horrid to-day!" she declared frankly. "You take mother's side and talk against my friends, and you have said every single nasty thing you could think of since we started—trying to have the last word and make me feel small—"

"Oh no, impossible!" he said quickly. "I beg your pardon; oughtn't I to have said that?" with a very fair imitation of Gladys's own manner when she imagined that his feelings must be hurt, "I knew you hated my being tall!" she cried. "And it's wretched of you when I'm always trying to make you forget it."

"I don't want to forget it; I'm too proud of you. If only you could forget it, I should be perfectly happy."

"How can I forget it? Seeing you and talking to you makes me remember it continually."

"If only you didn't feel obliged to remind me of it, then!"

"Why, I told you just this minute that I was always trying to forget it. And you said you didn't want to forget it, you were proud of it. I never knew such a contradictory creature in all my life."

"I'm sorry," he said sadly. "Nothing that I say seems to please you this afternoon, somehow. Shall we talk about something else?"

"What would be the good, when we should both be thinking all the time that you don't want me to go where I mean to go?" was the unanswerable reply.

"But if I don't say what I want, and you don't do it, my wishes won't trouble you at all, surely?"

"I suppose you think you have said it often enough already?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't think I have said it at all."

"Why, you have talked of nothing else since we came out!" she cried, in justifiable anger.

"I beg your pardon; you said you could see my wishes in my face. After that it hardly seems necessary to put them into words, whatever they may be."

Gladys reviewed the conversation swiftly, accepted the temporary check, and changed her ground with lightning speed. "Then you've been trying to make me do what you want without actually saying it, which is mean. You've been trying to manage me, and you ought to know that there's nothing a woman hates more. I should have respected you ten times as much if you had just put your foot down and said, 'Gladys, I won't have you go to the Bowman-Bells' dance.'"

"But," he objected mildly, "I thought if I said that sort of thing you meant to throw me over?"

"There you are—putting the blame on me, of course! I said I should break off our engagement, and I should. But I should think far more of you for saying it."

"Doesn't it seem a little hard to throw me over the minute you have learnt to respect me? Are you bound to despise me if we stay engaged?"

"It would be your own fault if I broke it off; and besides, of course, we might make it up again—if you were very, very penitent."

"It would be too late then."