# The Simple Case of Susan

By JACQUES FUTRELLE

XI.

ON Wednesday afternoon Mr. Wilbur took the plunge. He dropped in at Mr. Stanwood's office downtown, and in a few chaste, unemotional words, asked permission to pay his attentions to Miss Stanwood. He was quite calm and plain spoken and frank about it. He pointed out that he loved her more than all the world et cetera, et cetera; that his regard for her had come upon him entirely unawares, and that his life's happiness would not be complete without her, et cetera, et cetera.

Mr. Stanwood didn't seem to be surprised. It was an old story to him. He swung around in his swivel chair and faced Mr. Wilbur and thoughtfully looked him over. Mr. Wilbur submitted to the scrutiny gracefully, duly conscious that no eye, however discriminating, could detect a flaw in him. As a matter of fact, Mr. Stanwood rather liked Mr. Wilbur. He had known him for several years, and in all his wide acquaintance he didn't recall one individual whose coat set so well in the back. He would be a distinct addition to any family, would Mr. Wilbur.

"You haven't said anything to Marjorie about your—your regard for her, I assume?" Mr. Stanwood inquired at last.

"Nothing, of course," said Mr. Wilbur. "I didn't care to offer myself in a quarter where I might be objectionable."

"Quite right," commented Mr. Stanwood. "Lack of consideration for their elders is one of the besetting evils of the younger generation." There was a pause. "Have you any reason to believe that my daughter cares for you?" he asked at last.

Mr. Wilbur considered the matter thoughtfully in detail.

"I have dared to hope that I was not distasteful to her," he remarked at last. "My regard for her is such that I— I hope I can make her care for me."

"You know this thing of arbitrarily taking a young girl's happiness in hand is, I believe, a mistake in a great many cases," Mr. Stanwood observed, didactically. "Don't you personally think it better to ascertain her wishes and desires before undertaking to guide them toward any one object?"

"Yes, of course," Mr. Wilbur agreed. "I'm asking for permission to pay my attentions to your daughter. If I find I am not acceptable to her, except as a friend, I shall withdraw, of course."

A faint luminous twinkle was in Mr. Stanwood's eyes.

"And if I say you may," he said after a moment, "I assume you are prepared to fight your own way with her? I am not to be called upon as arbiter. I shall neither employ coercion nor do anything to injure your chances. Personally, you are acceptable to me, I'll say that. She has the last choice, of course."

Mr. Wilbur arose, and in a burst of enthusiasm shook hands with Mr. Stanwood. There was a faint quaver of emotion in his voice when he spoke.

"Thank you, Mr. Stanwood," he said with an effort. "It's an honour that I scarcely dared to hope for."

Mr. Stanwood waved his gratitude aside.

"Don't thank me," he remarked. "You know you've got to settle with her yet. And now, Dan, how are you fixed financially? One must always have an eye on these things when one's own daughter is involved.

Mr. Wilbur told him candidly, went into the possibilities of revamping the old family house in Eighty-first Street, and mentioned the chance of getting Belknap cottage at Newport. Mr. Stanwood listened silently.

"Of course, all that's of no consequence," he said at the end. "Understand Dan, that it is my daughter's happiness that is to be always considered." He was silent a little while. "And mere money isn't happiness, Dan," he said at last slowly. "No man knows that better than I do." He shook off a sudden mood and came back to business again. "Dan, if you were left absolutely penniless could you earn a living for your wife?" he asked. "After all, that is the main point."

"Really, Mr. Stanwood, the matter had never occurred to me in just that light before," Mr. Wilbur confessed falteringly. "I dare say I could, although there seems not even a remote possibility that I would ever have to do so."

"How could you, for instance?"

"Well—er—er—I should say I'd choose Wall Street."

"It takes money to start there," said Mr. Stanwood.

"Of course—I hadn't thought of that," Mr. Wilbur mused. "Well, there's a great deal to be made with a racing string, say?" he went on, hopefully.

Mr. Stanwood shook his head.

"More money to start," he said.

"Or—or——" and Mr. Wilbur was desperate, "I tell you," he burst out suddenly, "I could write a—a—book, say, I've been everywhere, done everything, and seen everything, and they tell me some of those author chaps turn quite a penny at writing books."

Mr. Stanwood arose. It was a signal that the interview was at an end.

"Talk it over with Marjorie," he suggested kindly. "As I say, you're agreeable to me personally, but I shall use no influence either for or against. You understand?"

And while this was happening Lieutenant Faulkner was holding Marjorie Stanwood's hand and telling her that her heart-line showed that she would marry only once, that she would love her husband devotedly—almost as much as he loved her—and that she would live to a ripe old age in perfect happiness.

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XII.

Crabbed, crusty science tells us, encyclopædically, that electricity is our most potent force; wherefore it would appear that science is a musty, drivelling, moth-eaten old dumbbead who never sat opposite a pair of brown eyes seeking potency. Electricity merely moves machinery, bridges illimitable space and cures sciatica; while the power that lies in a woman's eyes makes the merry old world go round. It overturns empires, mocks at monarchs, bedevils diplomacy and otherwise snarls things up through sheer lightness of heart. This is its amusement.

All the powers of earth lie in the eyes of woman. It's a science in itself, inexact if you please, and unfettered by known rules. But some day some chap will come along and make a serious study of it, and then, after five, or ten, or fifteen thousand years he will be competent to write a brief preface apologising for scant information and general inaccuracies. All this power is there—particularly in brown eyes. They flicker and fleer, and promise and provoke, and flash and flame, and smoulder and smother. Blue eyes are only brilliant, grey eyes are only gracious, black eyes are only bewitching, but brown eyes! Brown eyes are dangerous, — you please —yes, that's the word—dangerous!

It may be that that was the quality in Marjorie Stanwood's eyes which appealed to Lieutenant Faulkner. Danger! There is some popular tradition to the effect that the soldier delights in danger, and Lieutenant Faulkner was a soldier. All of which leads to the general conclusion that that fortune-telling episode may fairly be classed as an auspicious occasion. Holding a lady's hand for thirty-five minutes, and unfolding the unknown, with only an occasional hint of the obvious, is an achievement, for young hearts beat fast and ruddy blood leaps easily. Dan Wilbur would have considered it an impertinence; so would Marjorie Stanwood if Dan Wilbur had tried it.

Accustomed to material dangers, and unawed by the intangible, Lieutenant Faulkner romped on the edge of the abyss and was smiling daringly into the brown eyes when, finally, Marjorie withdrew her hand.

"Yes, a long life, and lots of happiness," he assured herglibly. "You'll never marry but once, and your husband will be just crazy about you. He'll be a good fellow, your husband. I might even conjecture as to his—to his profession, if you are interested?"

Marjorie bit her red lips until they were redder than ever. And red lips, be it known, are just as dangerous as brown eyes—perhaps more so.

"Naturally, I am interested," she said with a slight smile.

Lieutenant Faulkner drew a long breath, and ceased smiling.

"You'll marry a—a—" and he paused. "I think you'd better let me examine your hand again." He reached for it.

Marjorie primly placed both hands behind her back.

"No," she said. "You've seen enough."

"But I can—I can do so much better when I'm looking at it," protested the Lieutenant.

"I daresay," remarked Marjorie, but she didn't move her hands.

"Well," and the Lieutenant thoughtfully stroked his chin. "I think, if I remember the lines of your hand well enough, I think, perhaps, you'll marry a—a—so—so— solemn-looking chap with chin whiskers," he concluded desperately. "Really, you'd better let me look again," he blurted.

Marjorie shook her head and laughed outrageously for an instant—just an instant—while the red blood tingled in Lieutenant Faulkner's face. For the first time in his life he knew he was a coward—a quitter. He grinned sheepishly to cover his shame and went over to inspect some orchids on the table. Finally he thrust an inquisitive nose into the brilliant, vapid blossoms, while Marjorie, with pensive eyes, critically examined the palm of her left hand. Neither had anything to say for a long time, and then:

"Who taught you to tell fortunes?" she asked.

"A Spanish woman in the Philippines," he replied absently, without looking around. "She lived in a little 'dobe hut on the outskirts of Cavite, a couple of miles from our camp."

"Young and pretty, I dare say?" she taunted.

"No, old, old, a regular old witch, who looked as if she might have kept a stable of broomsticks," returned the Lieutenant. He was still staring at the orchids. "She had a dog named Alfonso XIII., so naturally all the Americans liked her; and she could almost cook a chicken a la Maryland," he added irrelevantly. "She was a bully old sport."

A faint suggestion of a smile curled the corners of Marjorie's red mouth. She was quite certain that no other man of her acquaintance would have stated the case just that way.

"And, of course, she told your fortune?" she inquired.

"Yes, lots of times," the Lieutenant confessed. And he turned to face her with a singular gravity in his eyes. "And every time she married me off to a different princess of Europe. You know she thought the United States was just south of Switzerland, a sort of high C in the European Concert." He was leaning against the table, watching her smile. "I like the Philippines," he added suddenly. "I've been thinking some of going back there—pretty soon?"

It was a question. The Lieutenant was staring into brown eyes which met his unwaveringly; there came not one change in the curve of the scarlet lips; there was only the idlest interest in her manner. The Lieutenant's eyes narrowed a little.

"She doesn't seem to have been very accurate in telling your fortune," Marjorie remarked carelessly. "At least, I daresay, you haven't married your princess yet?"

"Well, no," he confessed.

"And if she taught you, then your system can't be very good?"

"No, I suppose not," very slowly.

Marjorie smoothed her skirt with one slender hand.

"I'm awfully glad," she said at last, with a little sigh.

Lieutenant Faulkner took one impulsive step forward. "Why?" he demanded eagerly—"Why?"

"I hate to think that I should ever have to marry a solemn-looking chap with chin whiskers," replied Marjorie demurely. Then she laughed.

Lieutenant Faulkner didn't smile—the thing was past the smiling stage now — only stood looking at her with hands tightly clenched and infinite adoration in his eyes.

"I didn't dare say what I wanted to," he remarked steadily. "You know what I meant?" And he took another impulsive step forward. "It was——"

"Tell me something about the Philippines," interrupted Marjorie in a cooling, placid little voice. "I've never been there. Why do you want to go back?"

It was as good as a shower-bath. The Lieutenant stood tensely for an instant, then the fingers loosened their grip on his palms, and the declaration in his eyes was temporarily withdrawn. He sat down. He might just as well begin right now to educate her up to the army!

"Have you ever been to West Point?" he inquired.

"No."