

Unlucky At Cards

By Mabel McElliott

The Story of a Frock, a Walking Stick and a Girl Who Thought She Didn't Like Actors.

I HAVE always been a fearful sufferer at cards. And I'm glad of it. Yes, at afternoon things where I used to be dragged occasionally the people I played with simply hated me. How they glared when I did something stupid (as I never failed to do) and how desperately uncomfortable I felt to bet "Bridge" I never even attempted it. I simply hadn't that sort of mind and that was all there was to it. Yet I'm glad. I may as well begin at the beginning and tell you all about it. It all happened because of a new frock Daphne had brought home for me. (Daphne is my older sister, in charge at Armin's you know, that terrifically smart shop on the avenue where you simply can't touch a serge frock for less than two hundred and fifty. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it's perfectly true. At least it sounds ridiculous to me, as I'm used to having my dresses "run up" after hours, when Daphne's fagged out and not caring particularly whether it looks like a Lanvin or a Cherui.)

You can't, after seeing those cats of women all day. (That isn't nice, I know, but Daphne calls them that sometimes when she's had a bad day and she's the most truthful person I know.) They come in, simply dripping with jewels, and the way they behave is simply frightful, she says. Rude's not quite the word for it. But never mind. I knew I should wander off the track of this story.

The black frock, mind you, had been a model in the window. It was just a bit crushed from handling and the tinsel ribbons had fringed over a little. Not enough for anyone to mind. I didn't. Daphne got it for a song, she said. She didn't mention the exact price, but I noticed she didn't lunch at Herbert's for weeks and weeks.

The frock was all frilly and bell-shaped, and it fitted me exactly as it had been cut to my measure. I simply adored it. I used to put it on parade before my stinky little mirror. Even Lorentine, who almost never praises anything, said: "Your arms aren't half bad in that frock!"

That, from Lorentine, was wild enthusiasm.

But it was simply no use. Daphne and I were on the very edge of things in this big town. Back home in Albemarle I should have had heaps of chances to wear it. Here there was simply not the ghost of one. We didn't know any men except the ones who kept the delicatessen across the corner, the janitor and the one who brought the milk.

We had simply run away from Albemarle a year ago when she had fallen out of love—with her handsome sister—with Robin Wheeler. They had been engaged for about a fortnight when it happened. None of us knew exactly what did happen, but Daphne came in from a dancing party one night, terribly white and silent, and the next day she said we were to pack up and go east.

I, of course, had nothing much to say about it. Besides, when she was so abominably unhappy I wanted to get away from her as fast as I could. The only thing that could have helped the least little bit. And then Daphne got this really good job, or we couldn't possibly have stayed.

But it had been a queer, rather lonely time. There are times like that with all girls, you know, when men simply don't exist for you. (I know no man will believe that, but every woman will understand what I mean.)

The last year had been that sort for us both. I used to pester about town by myself, and at night we'd go to the movies or hear some music, and I read everything in sight. Daphne, of course, was busy all the day, and most of the time when she wasn't too tired she was thrilled by the fact that she was actually earning her living. It's a very nice feeling, she says.

It was only the frock that made me realize male companionship might be a thing to be desired.

So one night when my sister telephoned me she'd be kept late and I was to have dinner without waiting for her I was simply drenched with loneliness and self-pity. After I'd got through my solitary meal I decided to amuse myself by getting "dolled" in my love of a frock.

I went through all the motions. I did my hair in my best style, and it did look rather nice as it was only three days since it had been shampooed and in the beatific state it assumes about that time. I brushed it until it was exactly like copper silk. I enjoyed an orgy in Daphne's pet powder and I had just, with some difficulty, fastened myself up (yes it can be done if one's sufficiently agile) when the bell rang.

Of course, there was no one else to answer the door. Our two rooms and kitchenette just about held us, to say nothing of a maid, which we couldn't afford if we had space for one.

I gave one rather pleased, smug glance at myself in the hall mirror and flung open the door with a flourish.

What I expected to see was the bored countenance of Lorentine or Mrs. Pelham across the way, perhaps, asking if she might telephone her brother, who lives in "Joysey."

It was neither.

It was a man. A MAN!

I suppose you think it's queer, putting that unimportant word in capitals. You must try awfully hard to remember that I hadn't spoken to a really nice one for twelve whole months.

And this one was nice.

I couldn't have told you at once just what he was like. I knew in a vague sort of way that he had crinkly, red-brown hair and eyes the same color. He was quite young—27 or 28—and the light of his dim little ball told me he was in evening clothes.

"I am so awfully sorry to disturb you," he said in a nice British voice. "I'm very much afraid I've got the

wrong door, although 6-A was the apartment number as I remember it. Does Miss Estelle Gregg still live here?"

I liked his voice so well that I let quite a full minute elapse before I answered. (The English have such a charming way of making commonplace words things of beauty, haven't they?)

Then, "It's the right apartment, I'm quite sure," I told him, "but Miss Gregg doesn't live here any more—hasn't for a whole year. My sister and I sublet this place from her."

I don't know what imp of garrulity made me go on. That was surely the place to smile with frigid politeness and shut the door on his shining boot, but I didn't.

"She's gone on tour with the 'Grey Domino' company," I chattered on. "I believe it's in Australia right now."

Gloom fell on the young man like a cloak.

"Australia," he said, in such a disappointed voice. "Oh, Lord! O, yes! What rotten luck!" he muttered, striking the innocent door frame with his wicked-looking stick.

I knew—I needed no one to tell me it was a soldier's stick. Harry, Daphne's and my very own half brother, had the same sort of one when he came home from leave from Canada. Harry—lying in an unmarked grave in France!

Something curiously sickening swept over me. It was awfully silly, but I just couldn't help it. I leaned against the door and put my hands over my eyes. What stupid! The sight of a walking stick to make me sob like a baby! idiot!

The nice young man was tremendously disturbed by the exhibition.

"I am sorry," he began in a distressed voice.

I went on, shaking and sobbing and feeling utterly miserable and a fool, when I felt a hand, smelling beautifully of some excellent tobacco, hovering over my forehead.

He said in the kindest way: "Now, if there's anything I can help possibly, please tell me, and I'll do it."

Somehow that steadied me. I felt I'd simply got to stop trembling in that nonsensical manner. I sobbed out something entirely incoherent about Harry and the sight of his stick reminding me of my brother and the lovely old days in Albemarle. I told him how frightfully Daphne and I missed him, and it was partly because of that we'd come away from the town where the three of us had grown up so happily together. You never would have thought, to hear me bleating out all my troubles in that ungrateful fashion, that I'm really a reserved sort of person—quite shy, usually.

The young man was the understanding sort, however.

He did the most astonishing thing. He reached into the pocket of that woolly ulster of his and pulled out what I've heard soldiers call their "cold meat tin"—identification disk, you know.

"I don't know whether or not this



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quite all right, my own sort—the kind I could go about with in perfect happiness and safety. Daphne, of course, would have been horrified at the bare notion. But she was not there! What was that silly phrase everyone was handing about three or four years ago? O, yes—"all dressed up and no place to go!" The two of us were in exactly that fix. It might be made—it might be made!—if I could do it! I might be made!—if I could do it! I might be made!—if I could do it!

Something of all this must have shown itself in my face in the half minute that flew by as he waited for my answer. When I said "all right" in a breathless sort of voice he remarked matter of factly "Righto. Now, if you'll just fly into your cloak taxi. Better leave a note for the absent sister, so she won't be distracted when she comes home."

And before I'd time to change that mercurial mind of mine he'd disappeared in the direction of the elevator.

I was so excited I pulled down half the things in the closet before I finally emerged triumphantly with my new frock. She was a lovely blue thing, collared in soft gray fur. And I had just time to scrawl the hastiest explanation to my sister when the bell rang and the pleasant British voice hailed up the tube.

I didn't care who said What! There was nothing to do but to go through with it.

The elevator girl, who always talks to me with the keenest interest of the weather and kindred thrilling subjects, fastened her gimlet eyes on me as I rode down with her. I could just hear her giving my sister a thorough account of how I looked as I went out "with that tall young gentleman, miss!" She would be sure to say that!

He bundled me into a cab with the air of having done nothing all his life. How miraculously those men shed their three and four years of filth and horror over there! They are marvellous, all of them, with their renewed self for life and its good things. I felt a glow and pride and genuine patriotic enthusiasm to think that I, Joyce O'Connor, should be helping this soldier to enjoy his first night of fun in a New York.

And we did have a nice time! First, it was the theater. We were a bit late, of course, but it was a good thing. I felt a glow and pride and genuine patriotic enthusiasm to think that I, Joyce O'Connor, should be helping this soldier to enjoy his first night of fun in a New York.

When we came out Captain Risdale said: "Must dance somewhere, must not we? If you think your sister will be dreadfully alarmed well stop as we go by and put her fear to rest."

I was determined not to miss one moment of that glorious evening. Besides, I had fibbed in my note to Daphne. I had said that Horace Lane, one of the boys she had gone to school with, had come to town and that we had "gone stepping" together. I knew it was no good frightening her to death by announcing I had trailed off with an utter stranger. She would have had every single policeman in the city scouring for me.

So, off-handedly, I said: "I really don't think she'll be frantic. We needn't stop."

So that was that, as Lorentine always says. (It means nothing, but it's a useful sentence to have knocking about.)

It was half past 11 by my tiny watch when I let myself in, very softly, with the latchkey I had thoughtfully taken with me. Daphne, pale and lovely in her lilac dressing gown, came down the stairs. She had a book in her hand, and she was yawning.

"Have a nice time, darling?" she said, putting her hand up to her hair, which had tumbled down a bit, showing that faint streak of white that grows, like a soft feather, amid the lovely mass of curling locks. (Daphne is not quite 26, and that peak of white is somewhat of a trial to her.)

"I did have a nice time, Daphne, my own," I told her, plumping down on the bed and kicking off one silver slipper. "Wonderful—perfect! But I've a terrible confession to make."

And I told her.

She listened, trying to look frightfully stern, and being really shocked at my indiscretion in trotting about like that with what she called, in Italian, a perfect stranger. She interrupted my recital several times with little gasps of amazement and dismay.

But when I explained about Harry she just listened without a single word, brown eyes gazed suddenly with tears.

"It was mad, of course," she said slowly, when I'd quite finished, "quite mad; but, somehow, I'm glad you did it!"

It was then that I screwed up enough courage to tell her that I'd asked him to toddle in to tea on Sunday. (That was Friday night.)

"You're sure to like him," I gabbled. "So pleasant, and a gentleman, as

Lorentine says. He's a lot of fun, too, and he does dance like an angel."

Daphne, in her orderly way, was setting right the dressing table I'd let in such chaos. "We shall see," she said, turning large eyes on me in the mirror and smiling the first real smile my sister had given me since that Robin Wheeler episode a year before. "We'll see."

He turned up promptly at 5 o'clock on Sunday, woolly ulster, quite the right hat, if you know what I mean, and the soldierly stick, proving to my satisfaction that my adventure of Friday night had not been a dream, as I had been thinking ever since I'd done the following day. (Things do look so dreadfully different in the daylight, I've noticed.)

Daphne, I could see, liked him at once. She was so pretty that afternoon, in her sleek dark blue frock, those slim hands of hers fluttering over the spirit lamp. We had the jolliest sort of time. Long after the November dusk closed around the windows of our five story apartment and Daphne had lighted the amber shaded lamp we sat there chattering. It was the most satisfactory day we had had in ages. Much like the long, pleasant Sundays at home, when people, Robin Wheeler among them, used to drop in to our great living room. There was always a fire, with Daphne smiling and happy, the center of a gay group. (Me, not so much noticed, being a flapper, joyously handing about cakes and things. We had not had any serious work like that, either of us, since we'd been in New York.)

When at half past nine he rose to go he wanted to know if we would not—both of us—be so very good as to come to the theater with him some night the following week. I was delighted, but I waited, of course, for my sister's decision. To my great joy she behaved as if it were quite all right.

"Joyce would like it very much, I know," she said in the charming voice Mr. Armin pays her \$75 a week to use on the dreadful dowagers who bear down on his shop. (She intimidates them, he says.)

"I can't be able to go with you, though," my sister continued. "I'm being busy every single night."

(Busy—O, Daphne! I thought I saw an enormous fib, but I also knew perfectly well it meant the young man, so I didn't matter. We got in just as eight pretty girls were singing some tinkling tune about love and a moon. You know—the usual thing! I hadn't seen a musical show for a long time and I loved every inch of it.)

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Daphne had been, with Lorentine, to that thrilling melodrama every one's been talking about this season and she recommended it.

"O, that!" said our caller, with evident amusement. "Old Scarborough's knocking 'em dead in it, they tell me. Your sister's probably the one with the worst kind of existence that goes with a quizzical smile."

Some demon of denial prompted me to say:

"I don't do anything of the sort. I've never even seen him. Besides, I hate men who act. It's no sort of a job for a man."

Our guest looked a bit startled.

"Come now, that's really quite harsh, you know," he began, with rather an embarrassed laugh. "I must have forgotten to mention it, but as a matter of fact that's my job. I'm angling for a part right now, and I'll be jolly lucky if I get it, having been out of things for three years."

I could have wept. I could have prayed to sink out of sight of this gallant soldier and my horrified sister. But there was nothing I could do or say to make amends.

Reaching for his hat and stick, and giving me the nicest sort of bow, he said good-night. Daphne, poor darling, could hardly answer him for trying to look as if her younger sister had not just committed an unpardonable blunder.

How I loathed myself as the door closed after his tall figure! How beastly I felt as Daphne, her arm flung over my shoulder in comforting fashion, said:

"Never mind, dear. You couldn't possibly have known. And he knows you're frightfully sorry."

I could not have known, of course; I should have said, at random, that his peacetime job was anything but that. Really, I had not thought what his ordinary man's occupation might be.

Had not thought—

That was exactly the trouble!

I never did think until after I'd spoken, blushing out things that hurt so abominably people I liked—

And I did like this new young man much more than I cared to admit, even to myself.

Perhaps that was why I had been so vehement when he suggested I might "adore" some one else. Because I hadn't meant that, really, about actors. I'd never in all my life

known one. I just had a notion, gleaned from books, probably, that they were set apart, unreal, hopelessly artificial. And now that idiotic tongue of mine had quite run away with itself—had said something to hurt the one I would not have hurt for all the world.

Do you wonder I cried my miserable self to sleep that night?

"He'll never come again," I told myself dully, after Daphne had gone the next morning. I was dusting the Dresden things on the mantelpiece when the telephone bell rang stridently.

"Hello!" said the thick-as-cream voice, which even by that time I recognized as my own. "Hello! Is that you, Miss Joyce?"

I said it was, with the sudden lightning of my heart that told me how very, very glad I was he had not forgotten that rude creature, Joyce O'Connor, existed.

"This is Oliver Risdale," he went on. (As if I needed to be told whose those honey-and-treacle tones belonged to.) "We just rung up to say I'd got seats for old Scarborough's show for Tuesday night. You said Tuesday was all right, didn't you?"

"Yes," seemed to be my only word that day, so I said it again.

"I say," went on mon capitaine cheerily, "you'll wear that sparkling black and silver thing you'd on the first night I saw you, won't you? Right? Right? I call it Righto! Good-by—"

(Astounding creature, men.) (Fancy his noticing it!)

The Scarborough expedition was only the first of many we took together, we two, and sometimes we three, for often Daphne consented to be lured forth to frivel with us.

Oliver—O, yes, we called him that by Christmas time—remarked one night: "If I may say so, your sister is a great little sportswoman."

It was apropos of nothing, but Daphne had had rather a hard day and was looking a bit fagged under all her loveliness. I suspected, too, that she'd had some news that depressed her. A letter from home, perhaps! That Robin Wheeler person! Ill wages, had gone and engaged himself to Vera Webbs. (You see, Daphne had let it out to me that there was over a girl they had quarreled, Robin had paid exaggerated court to her one night at the club and Daphne had been so hideously proud she wouldn't listen to any explanation.

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