THE CONQUEST of CANAAN

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,

Author of "Cherry," "Monsieur Beaucaire," Etc.

(Chapter I—continued

"You ever hear that boy Joe talk politics?" asked Uncle Joe Davey, crossing a cough with a chuckle. "His head's so full of schemes for running this town, and state, too, it's a wonder it don't bust. Henry Louden told me he's see Joe set around and study by the hour how to save $3,000,000 for the state in two years."

"And the best he can do for himself," added Eskew, "is deliverin' the Daily Tocsin on a second hand Star bicycle and gamblin' with niggers and riffraff! None of the nice young folks invite him to their doin's any more."

"That's because he's got so shabby he's quit goin' with 'em," said Buckalew.

"No, it ain't," snapped Mr. Arp. "It's because he's so low down. He's no more 'n a town outcast. There ain't ary one of the girls 'll have a thing to do with him, except that rip-rarin' tomboy next door to Louden's, and the others don't have much to do with her neither, I can tell ye. That Arie Tabor"—

Colonel Flitcroft caught him surreptitiously by the arm. "Sh, Eskew!" he whispered. "Look out what you're sayin'."

"You needn't mind me," Jonas Tabor spoke up crisply. "I washed my hands of all responsibility for Roger's branch of the family long ago. Never was one of 'em had the energy or brains to make a decent livin', beginning with Roger—not one worth his salt. I set Roger's son up in business, and all the return he ever made me was to go into bankruptcy and take to drink, till he died a sot, like his wife did of shame. I done all I could when I handed him over my store, and I never expect to lift a finger for 'em again. Ariel Tabor's my grandniece, but she didn't act like it, and you can say anything you like about her for what I care. The last time I spoke to her was a year and a half ago, and I don't reckon I'll ever trouble to again."

"How was that, Jonas?" quickly inquired Mr. Davey, who, being the eldest of the party, was the most curious. "What happened?"

"She was out in the street, up on that high bicycle of Joe Louden's. He was teachin' her to ride, an' she was sittin' on it like a man does. I stopped and told her she wasn't respectable. Sixteen years old, goin' on seventeen!"

"What did she say?"

"Laughed!" said Jonas, his voice becoming louder as the recital of his wrongs renewed their sting in his soul. "Laughed!"

"What did you do?"

"I went up to her and told her she wasn't a decent girl and shook the wheel." Mr. Tabor illustrated by seizing the lapels of Joe Davey and shaking him. "I told her if her grandfather had any spunk she'd git an old fashioned hidin' for behavin' that way. And I shook the wheel again." Here Mr. Tabor, forgetting in the wrath incited by the recollection that he had not to do with an inanimate object, swung the gasping and helpless Mr. Davey rapidly back and forth in his chair. "I shook it good and hard!"

"What did she do then?" asked Peter Bradbury.

"Fell off on me," replied Jonas violently. "On purpose!"

"I wisht she'd killed ye," said Mr. Davey in a choking voice as, released, he sank back in his chair.

"On purpose!" repeated Jonas. "And smashed a straw hat I hadn't had three months! All to pieces! So it couldn't be fixed!"

"And what then?" pursued Bradbury.

"She ran," replied Jonas bitterly—"ran! And Joe Louden—Joe Louden"—He paused and gulped.

"What did he do?" Peter leaned forward in his chair eagerly.

The narrator of the outrage gulped again and opened and shut his mouth before responding.

"He said if I didn't pay for a broken spoke on his wheel he'd have to sue me!"

CHAPTER II.

MAIN street, already muffled by the snow, added to its quietude a frozen hush where the wonder bearing youth pursued his course along its white, straight way. None was there in whom impertinence overmastered astonishment or who recovered from the sight in time to jeer with effect. No "Trab's boy" gathered courage to enact in the thoroughfare a scene of mockery and of joy.

And now that expression he wore—the indulgent amusement of a man of the world—began to disintegrate and show signs of change. It became finely grave, as of a high conventionality, lofty, assured and mannered, as he approached the Pike "mansion."

It was a big, smooth stone faced house, product of the seventies, frowning under an outrageously insistent mansard, capped by a cupola and staring out of long windows overtopped with ornamental slabs. Two cast iron deer, painted death gray, twins of the same mold, stood on opposite sides of the front walk, their backs toward it and each other, their bodies in profile to the street, their necks bent, however, so that they gazed upon the passerby, yet gazed without emotion. Two large calm dogs guarded the top of the steps leading to the front door. They also were twins and of the same interesting metal, though honored beyond the deer by coats of black paint and shellac. It was to be remarked that these dogs were of no distinguishable species or breed, yet they were unmistakably dogs. The dullest must have recognized them as such at a glance, which was perhaps enough. It was a hideous house, important looking, cold, yet harshly aggressive, and it sat in the middle of its flat acre of snowy lawn like a rich, fat man enraged and sitting straight up in bed to swear.

And yet there was one charming thing about this ugly house. Some workmen were inclosing a large side porch with heavy canvas, evidently for festal purposes. Looking out from between two strips of the canvas was the rosy and delicate face of a pretty girl, smiling upon Eugene Bantry as he passed. It was an obviously pretty face, all the youth and prettiness there for your very first glance, elaborately pretty, like the splendid profusion of hair about and above it, amber colored hair, upon which so much time had been spent that a circle of large, round curls rose above the mass of it like golden bubbles tipping a coronet.

The girl's fingers were pressed thoughtfully against her chin as Eugene strode into view. Immediately her eyes widened and brightened. He swung along the fence with the handsomest appearance of unconsciousness until he reached a point nearly opposite her. Then he turned his head as if haphazardly and met her eyes. At once she threw out her hand toward him, waving him a greeting, a gesture which as her fingers had been near her lips was a little like throwing a kiss. He crooked an elbow and with a one, two, three military movement removed his small brimmed hat, extending it to full arm's length at the shoulder level, returned it to his head with life guard precision. This was also new to Canaan. He was letting Mamie Pike have it all at once.

The impression was as large as he could have desired. She remained at the opening in the canvas and watched him until he wagged his shoulders round the next corner and disappeared into a cross street. As for Eugene, he was calm with a great calm and very red.

He had not covered a great distance, however, before his gravity was replaced by his former smiling look of the landed gentleman amused by the innocent pastimes of the peasants, though there was no one in sight except a woman sweeping some snow from the front steps of a cottage, and she, not perceiving him, retired indoors without knowing her loss. He had come to a thinly built part of the town, the perfect quiet of which made the sound he heard as he opened the picket gate of his own home all the more startling. It was a scream, loud, frantic and terror stricken.

Eugene stopped, with the gate half open.

Out of the winter skeleton of a grape arbor at one side of the four square brick house a brown faced girl of seventeen precipitated herself through the air in the midst of a shower of torn cardboard which she threw before her as she leaped. She lit upon her toes and headed for the gate at top speed, pursued by a pale young man whose thin arms strove spasmodically to reach her. Scattering snow behind them, hair flying, the pair sped on like two tattered branches before a high wind, for, as they came nearer Eugene, of whom, in the density of their flight, they took no note, it was to be seen that both were so shabbily dressed as to be almost ragged.

The girl ran beautifully, but a fleeter foot was behind her and, though she dodged and evaded like a creature of the woods, the reaching hand fell upon the loose sleeve of her red blouse, nor fell lightly. She gave a wrench of frenzy. The antique fabric refused the strain, parted at the shoulder seam so thoroughly that the whole sleeve came away, but not to its owner's release, for she had been brought round by the jerk, so that, agile as she had shown herself, the pursuer threw an arm about her neck before she could twist away and held her.

There was a sharp struggle as short as it was fierce. Neither of these extraordinary wrestlers spoke. They fought. Victory hung in the balance for perhaps four seconds. Then the girl was thrown heavily upon her back in such a turmoil of snow that she seemed to be the mere nucleus of a white comet. She struggled to get up, plying knee and elbow with a very anguish of determination, but her opponent held her, pinioned both her wrists with one hand and with the other rubbed great handfuls of snow into her face, sparing neither mouth nor eyes.

"You will!" he cried. "You will tear up my pictures! A dirty trick, and you get washed for it!"

Half suffocated, choking, gasping, she still fought on, squirming, and kicking with such spirit that the pair of them appeared to the beholder like figures of mist writhing in a fountain of snow.

More violence was to mar the peace of morning. Unexpectedly attacked from the rear, the conqueror was seized by the nape of the neck and one wrist and jerked to his feet, simultaneously receiving a succession of kicks from his assailant. Prompted by an entirely natural curiosity, he essayed to turn his head to see who this might be, but a twist of his forearm and the pressure of strong fingers under his ear constrained him to remain as he was, therefore, abandoning resistance and, oddly enough, accepting without comment the indication that his captor desired to remain for the moment incognito, he resorted calmly to explanations.

"She tore up a picture of mine," he said, receiving the punishment without apparent emotion. "She seemed to think because she'd drawn it herself she had a right to."

There was a slight whimsical droop at the corner of his mouth as he spoke, which might have been thought characteristic of him. He was an odd looking boy, not ill made, though very thin and not tall. His pallor was clear and even, as though constitutional; the features were delicate, almost childlike, but they were very slightly distorted, through nervous habit, to an expression at once wistful and humorous; one eyebrow was a shade higher than the other, one side of the mouth slightly drawn down; the eyelids twitched a little, habitually; the fine, blue eyes themselves were almost comically reproachful—the look of a puppy who thinks you would not have beaten him if you had known what was in his heart. All of this was in the quality of his voice, too, as he said to his invisible captor, with an air of detachment from any personal feeling:

"What peculiar shoes you wear! I don't think I ever felt any so pointed before."

The rescuing knight took no thought of offering to help the persecuted damsel to arise; instead he tightened his grip upon the prisoner's neck until, perforce, water—not tears—started from the latter's eyes.

"You miserable little muff!" said the conqueror. "What the devil do you mean making this scene on our front lawn?"

"Why, it's Eugene!" exclaimed the helpless one. "They didn't expect you till tonight. When did you get in?"

"Just in time to give you a lesson, my buck," replied Bantry grimly. "In good time for that, my playful stepbrother."

He began to twist the other's wrist, a treatment of bone and ligament in the application of which schoolboys and even freshmen are often adept. Eugene made the torture acute and was apparently enjoying the work when, suddenly, without any manner of warning, he received an astounding blow upon the left ear, which half stunned him for the moment and sent his hat flying and himself reeling, so great was the surprise and shock of it. It was not a slap, not an open handed push—nothing like it—but a fierce, well delivered blow from a clinched fist with the shoulder behind it, and it was the girl who had given it.

"Don't you dare to touch Joe!" she cried passionately. "Don't you lay a finger on him!"

Furious and red, he staggered round to look at her.

"You wretched little wildcat, what do you mean by that?" he broke out.

"Don't you touch Joe!" she panted. "Don't you"— Her breath caught and there was a break in her voice as she faced him. She could not finish the repetition of that cry, "Don't you touch Joe!"

But there was no break in the spirit, that passion of protection which had dealt the blow. Both boys looked at her, somewhat aghast.

Eugene recovered himself. He swung round upon his heel, restored his hat to his head with precision, picked up his stick and touched his banjo case with it.

"Carry that into the house," he said indifferently to his stepbrother.

"Don't you do it!" said the girl hotly between her chattering teeth.

Eugene turned toward her, wearing the sharp edge of a smile. Not removing his eyes from her face, he produced with deliberation a flat silver box from a pocket, took therefrom a cigarette, replaced the box, extracted a smaller silver box from another pocket, shook out of it a fusee, slowly lit the cigarette—this in a splendid silence, which he finally broke to say languidly, but with particular distinctness:

"Ariel Tabor, go home!"

The girl's teeth stopped chattering, her lips remaining parted; she shook the hair out of her eyes and stared at him as if she did not understand, but Joe Louden, who had picked up the banjo case obediently, burst into cheerful laughter.

"That's it, Gene," he cried gayly. "That's the way to talk to her!"

"Stow it, you young cub," replied Eugene, not turning to him. "Do you think I'm trying to be amusing?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'stow it,'" Joe began, "but if"—

"I mean," interrupted the other, not relaxing his faintly smiling stare at the girl—"I mean that Ariel Tabor is to go home. Really we can't have this kind of thing occurring upon our front lawn!"

The flush upon her wet cheeks deepened and became dark. Even her arm grew redder as she gazed back at him. In his eyes was patent his complete realization of the figure she cut, of this bare arm, of the strewn hair, of the fallen stocking, of the ragged shoulder of her blouse, of her patched short skirt, of the whole disheveled little figure. He was the master of the house, and he was sending her home as ill behaved children are sent home by neighbors.

The immobile, amused superiority of this proprietor of silver boxes, this wearer of strange and brilliant garments, became slightly intensified as he pointed to the fallen sleeve, a rag of red and snow, lying near her feet.

"You might take that with you?" he said interrogatively.

Her gaze had not wavered in meeting his, but at this her eyelashes began to wink uncontrollably, her chin to tremble. She bent over the sleeve and picked it up before Joe Louden, who had started toward her, could do it for her. Then turning, her head still bent so that her face was hidden from both of them, she ran out of the gate.

Ariel ran along the fence until she came to the next gate, which opened upon a walk leading to a shabby, meandering old house of one story, with a very long, low porch, once painted white, running the full length of the front. Ariel sprang upon the porch and disappeared within the house.

Joe stood looking after her, his eyelashes winking as had hers. "You oughtn't to have treated her that way," he said huskily.

"Pick up that banjo case again and come on," commanded Mr. Bantry tartly. "Where's the mater?"

Joe stared at him. "Where's what?"

"The mater!" was the frowning reply.

"Oh, yes, I know!" said Joe, looking at his stepbrother curiously. "I've seen it in stories. She's upstairs. You'll be a surprise. You're wearing lots of clothes, Gene."

"I suppose it will seem so to Canaan," returned the other wearily. "Governor feeling fit?"

"I never saw him," Joe replied, then caught himself. "Oh, I see what you mean! Yes, he's all right."

They had come into the hall, and Eugene was removing the long coat, while his stepbrother looked at him thoughtfully.

"Gene," asked the latter in a softened voice, "have you seen Mamie Pike yet?"

"You will find, my young friend," responded Mr. Bantry, "if you ever go about much outside of Canaan, that ladies' names are not supposed to be mentioned indiscriminately."

"It's only," said Joe, "that I wanted to say that there's a dance at their house tonight. I suppose you'll be going?"

"Certainly. Are you?"

Both knew that the question was needless, but Joe answered gently:

"Oh, no, of course not." He leaned over and fumbled with one foot as if to fasten a loose shoestring. "She wouldn't be very likely to ask me."

"Well, what about it?"

"Only that—that Arie Tabor's going."

"Indeed!" Eugene paused on the stairs, which he had begun to ascend. "Very interesting."

"I thought," continued Joe hopefully, straightening up to look at him, "that maybe you'd dance with her. I don't believe many will ask her—I'm afraid they won't—and if you would, even only once, it would kind of make up for"—he faltered—"for out there," he finished, nodding his head in the direction of the gate.

If Eugene vouchsafed any reply it was lost in a loud, shrill cry from above, as a small, intensely nervous looking woman in blue silk ran hairway down the stairs to meet him and caught him tearfully in her arms.

"Dear old mater!" said Eugene.

Joe went out of the front door quickly.

(Continued Next Sunday.)

There's naught so sweet at love's young dream.
And it would sweeter be,
If lover's would only take
A little Rocky Mountain Tea.
—Frank Hart.