

Miss Mix, Kidnaper

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Illustrated by Bess Bethell



ELL, he has done it now, confound his nerve!" said Anthony Fox Sr. in a tone of almost triumphant fury. He spread the loosely written sheets of a long letter on the breakfast table.

"Here I am, just out of a sick bed!" he pursued fretfully; "just home from a month's idling abroad, and now I'll have to go away out to California to lick some sense into that young fool!"

"For heaven's sake, Tony, don't get yourself all worked up!" said handsome, stately Mrs. Fox, much more concerned for father than for son.

"Of course I always knew some woman would get hold of him," said Anthony Sr., fumbling blindly for his mouth with a bit of toast, his eyes still on the letter; "but, by George, this sounds like Charlie Ross!"

"Woman!" repeated Mrs. Fox with a relieved laugh. "Buddy's in love, is he? Don't worry, Tony; it won't last! Of all boys in the world he's the least likely to be foolish that way!"

"Of all boys in the world he's the kind that is easiest taken in!" said his father dryly, securing the toast at last with a savage snap. "H-m—she's his landlady! Keeps fancy fowls and takes boarders—ha! Says they rather hope to be married in June. This has quite a settled tone to it, for Buddy. I don't like the look of it!"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Fox with dawning uneasiness. "You don't mean to say he considers himself seriously engaged? At 20! And to his landlady, too—I never heard such nonsense! Buddy's in no position to marry. Who is the girl, anyway?"

"Girl is good!" said the reader bitterly. "She's 32!"

Mrs. Fox, her hand hovering over a finger bowl, grew rigid.

"Thirty-two!" she choked blankly. Then, sharply: "Anthony, do you think you can stop it?"

"I'll do what I can, believe me!" he assured her grimly. "Yes, sir, she's 32! By the way, Fanny, this letter's already a month old. Why haven't I had it before?"

"You told them to hold only the office mail while you were traveling, you know," Mrs. Fox reminded him. "That one evidently has been following you, Anthony, can Tony marry without your consent?"

"No-o, but of course he's of age in five months, and if she's got her hooks deep enough into him, she—oh, confound such a complication, anyway!"

"Oh, he'll surely get over it," said Mrs. Fox uncertainly.

"He may, but you can bet she won't! Not before they're married, anyway. No, Bud's the sort that gets it hard, when he does get it!" his father said. "There's a final tone about the whole thing that I don't like. Listen to this!" He quoted from the letter with a rueful shake of the head. "I don't know what the darling girl sees in me, dad, but she has turned down enough other fellows to know her own mind. At last I realize what Mrs. Brown's wonderful sonnets—"

"He doesn't say that?" ejaculated the listener incredulously.

"She doesn't know I am writing you," Mr. Fox read on grimly, "because I don't want her to worry about your objecting. But you won't object when you know her. She doesn't care anything about money, and says she will stick by me if we have to begin on an \$80 job. You don't know how I love her, dad; it has changed my whole life. It's not just because she's beautiful, and all that. You will say that I am pretty young, but I know I can count on you for some sort of job to begin with, and things will work out all right!"

"H-m!" said Mrs. Fox. "Yes, you're right, Tony. This is serious!"

"All worked out, you see," said the man gloomily as he drummed absently on the letter.

"Oh, Anthony, I can't help thinking of the Page boy, and that awful woman! Anthony, shall I go? Could I do any good if I went?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "No, I'll go myself. Don't worry, Fanny, there's still time. Isn't it a curious thing that it's a quiet little fellow like Bud that—well, we'll see what can be done. I'll talk to this woman. She may think he has money of his own, you know. I'll buy her off if I can. Perhaps things can be delayed; perhaps I can get him to go somewhere with me for a trip. I'll see. Barker can look me up a train and things here will have to wait. You'll see about my things, will you, Fanny—have 'em packed? Oh, and here's the letter—pretty sick reading you'll find it!"

"Be gentle with him!" said Mrs. Fox, deep in the boy's letter. "Thirty-two! Why, she might be his mother—in some countries she might, anyway. Anthony!"—her voice stopped him at the door—"is her name Sally Mix?"

"Apparently," he said. "Can you beat it? Sounds like a drink!"

"Well," said Mrs. Fox firmly, as if the same clenched matter, "it must be

stopped, that's all! Sally Mix! I hope she's white!"

Just a week later, in California, Anthony Fox slammed the gate of Miss Mix's garden loudly behind him and eyed the Mix homestead with disapproval.

"Mr. Fox won't be here until noon," said the maid in answer to his question. "Does Miss—could I see Miss Mix?" substituted Anthony after a moment's thought.

He took a porch chair while she departed to find out.

"If you please," said the maid, suddenly reappearing, "Miss Mix is setting a Plymouth, and will you step right down?"

Anthony eyed her suspiciously, but there was evidently nothing concealed behind her innocence of manner. Finally he followed the path she indicated as leading to Miss Mix. He followed it past the house, past clothes drying on lines, past scattered apple trees with white-washed trunks, and down a board walk to the chicken yard.

No one was in sight. Anthony rattled the gate tentatively. A slim, neat, black Minorca fowl made an insulting remark about him to another hen. Both chuckled.

"Come in—come in and shut it!" called a clear voice from the interior of the chicken-house.

Anthony's jaw stiffened. "May I speak to you?" he called with as much dignity as a person shouting at an utter stranger across an unfamiliar yard may command.

"Certainly! Come right in!" called the voice briskly.

Seeing nothing else to do, Anthony unwillingly crossed the yard and stepped into the pleasant, whitewashed gloom of the chicken-house. Loose chaff was scattered on the floor and whitewashed boxes lined the walls. An adjoining shed held the roosts, which a few murmuring fowls were looping with heavy flights.

As he entered, a young woman in blue linen shut a gray hen into a box and turned a pleasantly inquiring glance upon him.

"Good morning!" she said, smiling. "I knew you would want to see the thing sooner or later, so I asked Statia to show you right down here. Now, there's the trap—she indicated a mass of loose chains and metal teeth on the floor—"and here's the key; but it simply won't work!"

Anthony was not following. He was staring at her. She was extremely pretty; that he had expected. But he had not expected that she—she—well, he was not prepared for this sort of a woman at all! He must go slow here. He—she—Bud—

"I beg your pardon," he interrupted himself to stammer apologetically. "I didn't catch—you were saying—"

"The trap!" she said, smiling. "Ah, the trap!" repeated Anthony inanely.

"Certainly!" she said, with a hint of impatience. Then, as he still stared, she added quickly: "You're the man from Petaluma? You came to fix it, didn't you?"

"Not at all," said Anthony, smiling. "I came from New York."

Light dawned in the girl's eyes. She gave a horrified laugh. "Well, how stupid of me!" she ejaculated. "Of course, I thought you were. I'm expecting a man to fix the trap, any day, and you sent no name. I bought this affair a week ago; there's a coon, or a fox, or something, that's been coming down from the hills after my pullets; but it won't work."

"I don't know anything about traps," said Anthony.

He was wondering how he had best introduce himself. The vague campaign that he had outlined on those restless nights in the train would be useless here, he had decided. As he spoke he absently touched the tangled chains and bolts with his foot.

"Don't do that!" screamed Miss Mix. At the same second there was a victorious convulsion of metal teeth, and Anthony found himself frantically jerking at his foot, which was fast in the trap.

"Oh, you're caught! You are caught!" cried the girl distressedly.

Her eyes, full of concern and sympathy, met his for a second; then, suddenly, she broke into laughter.

"Why, confound the thing!" said Anthony in pained surprise, as he struggled and twisted. "How does it open?"

"It doesn't!" choked Miss Mix, her mirth quite beyond control, as she gave various futile little tugs and twitches at the trap. "That's the trouble! The key never has had the slightest effect. Oh, I will not laugh this way!" she upbraided herself sternly. "Bu—bu—but you did look so—" She abruptly turned her back upon him for a moment, facing him again with perfect calm, although with lashes still wet and suspicious little dimples about her mouth. "Now I'll get you out of it immediately," she assured him gravely; "and meanwhile I can't tell you how sorry I am that—just sit on this box; you'll be more comfortable. I'll run and telephone a plumber, or some one."

She paused in the doorway. "But I don't know your name?"

"Appropriately enough, it's Fox," said he briefly; "Anthony Fox."

Miss Mix gasped, opened her mouth, shut it without speaking, and gasped again. Then she sat down heavily on a box.

"Of New York—I see!" said she, but more as if speaking to herself than to him. "Tony's father; he's written to you, and you've come all the way from New York to break it off. I see!"

"Are you Miss Mix?" said Anthony feebly.

"I am." She nodded impatiently. "Sarah Mix."

"Then you and my son—" Anthony pursued patiently. "Didn't he write? Aren't you—"

"Engaged? Certainly we are," admitted the lady with dignity. "And it would be more than serve you right if we got

wardly, "I don't really know how to thank you—"

"Oh, nonsense!" she said lightly. "You forget how fond I am of him! Now I'll go up to the house and—" Her confident voice faltered, and Anthony was astonished to see a look of dismay cross her face. "Oh, my goodness gracious heavenly day!" she ejaculated softly. "Whatever shall we do now? Now we never can get you out!"

"Then I'll stay in," laughed Anthony philosophically.

Miss Mix echoed his laugh nervously. She glanced across the yard.

"It's that disgusting newspaper contest!" she said.

"That what?"

"Please don't shout that way!" she

from the chickens, and by voices and footsteps coming and going on the side of the chicken-house where the street lay. Anthony, his back against the rough wall, his hands in his pockets, had fallen into a smiling reverie when Miss Mix suddenly returned. She carried a plate of luncheon, and two flies.

"We are safe!" she reassured him. "The boys think I am playing bridge, and I've locked the gate on the inside. Now, flies on parade!"

She tucked the filmy skirts of her white frock about her, sat down on a box, and began to grate away his bonds without an instant's delay. Her warm, smooth hands he found very charming to watch. Loose strands of hair fell across her flushed, smooth cheek. Anthony at-

"I did think so, but now I don't see how we can. Sally sees that, too. I can't get married until I have a good job, and I've got another year here. We don't want to tell every one and then have to wait two or three years, do we, sir?"

"H-m!" said his father. "And yet you don't want to ask me to support you and your wife for indefinite years, Bud?"

Bud squeezed his father's hand.

"I'll never ask you to do that!" he promised promptly.

On the evening of a certain glorious day, to young Anthony, sitting in silence on the porch steps, came Sally, who seated herself beside him.

"Tony," said she firmly, "what have we decided about our engagement?"

Young Anthony eyed her expectantly. "We must either announce it or not announce it, Tony!"

"Why, you see, Sally," said Anthony after a pause, "I wanted to, a while back, but—"

"I know you did," she said heartily, to his great relief.

"But now," he pursued slowly, "it would look pretty funny to the Rogerses, and the Peppers, and all, you know. Just now, I mean. I've been up there all the time, right in things, and I've never said a word—"

"Well, well!" said a voice behind them; and to the unspeakable confusion of both, Jerry Billings rose from a porch chair and came down to them.

"I couldn't help hearing," explained that gentleman jocosely. "I was there first. I wish you joy, children. Miss Sally, here's my best wishes! I never dreamed you two—and yet I knew something had brought father all the way from New York. But I never dreamed of this! This ought to land me the Star job, all right!"

"Look here, Jerry," began Sally and Anthony together; "look here—"

"You mean you don't want it announced?" said Mr. Billings blankly.

"We don't wish it announced yet," said Sally feebly, as Anthony was silent.

"I call that pretty mean!" ejaculated Mr. Billings after a pause. "It's true," he went on aggrievedly. "I landed it—every old woman in town will be on to it in a few weeks—it's a corking job for me—every one's wondering what Mr. Fox is doing here—and now you two hang back, just because you've not had time to tell your friends!"

"Oh, take your scoop!" half groaned young Anthony Fox.

Sally began to laugh, but it was curiously shaken laughter. Mr. Billings wisely seized this moment for a rapid departure. Mr. Fox, coming to the door a moment later, found the others silent on the steps.

"Now we are in for it!" said Sally ruefully, as they made room for him between them. "What shall we do? Jerry's got it for the Star—we couldn't lie about it! And oh, we can't have it in print tomorrow! Can you—can't you stop it?"

"Too late now!" said young Anthony.

"Tell me what happened," said his father.

The recent developments were rapidly reviewed, and then Sally, removing herself and her wide-spreading ruffles to young Anthony's side of the steps, so that she might from time to time give his hand an affectionate and enlightening squeeze, confessed the deception of her engagement to him, and, with her blue eyes very close to his, asked him meekly to forgive her.

Young Anthony's forgiveness was a compound of boyish hurt and undisguised relief.

"But—there's Jerry!" said Sally suddenly, smitten with unpleasant recollection in the midst of this harmonious readjustment. "He—he heard, you know."

"I have been thinking," said the other Anthony slowly, "that I see a way out of this. I hope I see one! I'd like—I'd like to discuss it with Miss Sally. If you'll just step down to the—chicken yard, Bud, for five minutes, say. We'll call you. And it's just possible that we can—can arrange matters."

Half an hour later Jerry Billings, who was reveling in the overheated, smoky atmosphere of the newspaper's local-room, approached the city editor's desk.

"Say, about that engagement of young Fox, Mr. Watts," he began, grinning.

"Well, what's the matter with it?" said the editor sharply.

"Nothing's the matter with it," said Jerry, "only it's better than I thought! It's—it's old Fox that Miss Mix is going to marry! Old A. F. himself!"

The editor eyed him fixedly, with no change of expression.

"This is no jolly, Billings? It's Associated Press stuff if it's true, you know."

"Oh, it's true enough," said Jerry, trying not to leap into space. "He just telephoned me the whole thing himself!"

"Well, we've got his picture—look it up!" said Mr. Watts calmly; but before Jerry turned away that infatuated reporter heard his superior take his telephone to call the make-up man.

"Hello, Frank!" said Watts gently. "Tell Williams to run that suffragette stuff on the third page. I've got a big story. I want a double cut and a column on the front!"



And then Sally removed herself to young Anthony's side of the steps.

married, after all!" she added, with a sudden smile.

Anthony liked the smile. He smiled broadly in return.

"If you got married! Do you mean you don't intend to?"

"I see I'll have to tell you," said Miss Mix, suddenly casting hesitation to the winds. "Then we can talk. Yes, we're engaged, Mr. Fox. What else could I do? Anthony's 20; one can't treat him quite as if he were 6. He's absolutely unable to take care of himself; and I've always liked him—always! How could I see a girl like Mollie Temple—but of course you don't know her. She's with the 'Giddy Middy' company, playing in San Francisco now."

"No, I don't know her," said Mr. Fox stiffly.

"Well," continued Miss Mix, "her mother lives here in Palo Alto, and Mollie came home for September. Tony was just what she was looking for. A secret marriage, a sensational divorce, and alimony—Mollie asks nothing more of fate! She made him her slave."

"Lord!" said Anthony.

"Every one was talking about it," continued Miss Mix; "but I never dreamed of interfering until Thanksgiving, when the Temples planned a week's house party in Mill Valley, and asked Tony to go. That would have settled it; so I managed to see Tony, and from that day on I may say, I never let go of him. I took him about, I accompanied him when he sang—just big-sistered him generally! I'm 32, you know, and I never dreamed he would—but he did. New Year's night, Mr. Fox."

"I see," said Anthony huskily.

"Meanwhile," pursued Miss Mix, glowing delightedly in the sympathy of her listener, "I introduced him to the Rogerses and the Peppers, and lots of joyful people, who are doing him a world of good. He goes about—his developing. And now, just as I began to hope that the time had come when we could quietly break off our engagement, here you are, to make him feel in honor bound to stick to it!"

"Well, I am—" Anthony left it unfinished. "What can I do?" he asked meekly.

"We'll find a plan somehow," said Miss Mix approvingly. "But you must be got out first!"

"And meanwhile," said Anthony awk-

begged, sitting down on her box again.

"I'll explain. You see, the editor of the best newspaper here, the Star, has offered a really fine position of the staff to the college man who brings in the best newspaper story between now and the last of May—that's less than ten days. Of course, all the boys have gone crazy over it: It's a job that a man could easily hold down with his regular class work, and it might lead to a permanent position. And then there's the experience. About ten boys are working furiously for it, and all their friends are working for them. Tony's helping Jerry Billings, and Jerry has already taken in a couple of good stories, and has a good chance. This, of course, would land it!"

"What would?"

"Why, this!" She was laughing again. "Can't you see? Think of the headlines! Even your New York papers would give it half a column. Think of the chance to get funny! 'Old Fox in Trap.' 'Goes to Bed With the Chickens.' 'Iron King Plays Chantecler!'"

"Thunder!" said Anthony.

"There'd be no end of it, for you or me," said Miss Mix. "I know this town."

"Yes, you're right!" agreed Anthony. "The idea is for me to sit here until after the last of May, eh?" he continued uncertainly.

Her eyes danced.

"Oh, we may think of some other way!"

"Tony's not to be trusted, you think?"

"No-o! I wouldn't dare. He's simply mad to have Jerry win. He'd let it out involuntarily."

"The maid can go for a plumber?"

"Statia? She's working for Joe Bates. And both the boys in the plumber's shop are in college, anyway."

"You might telephone for another plumber?" suggested Anthony, after thought.

"Yes, I could do that." Miss Mix brightened. "No, I can't, either," she lamented. "Elsie White, the long distance operator, is working for Joe Bates, too."

"With a gesture for silence, she sprang to the door. Outside, some one shouted: "Miss Sally!"

"Hello, Tony!" she called hardily, in answer. "Lunch, is it? No, don't come down! I'm just coming up!"

A long hour followed, the silence broken only by occasional low comment

tacked his lunch with sudden gaiety.

"How much we have to talk about!" he said, observing contentedly that five minutes' filing made almost no impression upon his chains. She colored suddenly, but met his eyes with charming gravity. "Haven't we, though?" she assented simply. . . .

"Why, no, it won't break his heart, Mr. Fox. I think he'll even be a little relieved to be able to go on serenely with the Peppers and the Rogerses. He's having lovely times there!" . . .

"Oh, if his mother had lived, of course I should have written to her; but I knew you were a very busy man, Mr. Fox. Tony hardly ever speaks of his Aunt Fanny. She's a great club woman, I know. So I had to do the best I could." . . .

"Why, I didn't think much about it, I suppose. But I certainly should have said that Tony's father was more than 45!" . . .

"Ye-es, I suppose it might. But—but what a funny subject for us to get on! I suppose—look at that white hen coming in, Mr. Fox! She's my prize winner. Isn't she a beauty?" . . .

. . . .

Just after dinner, as Miss Mix and her youthful fiancé were sitting on the porch in the spring twilight, a visitor entered the garden from the street. At sight of him the boy sprang to his feet with a cry of "Dad!"

Miss Mix was introduced, and to young Tony's delight, she and his father chatted as comfortably as old friends. Presently, when Jerry Billings appeared with an invitation for the lady to accompany him to the postoffice for possible mail, father and son were left alone together.

Young Anthony beamed at his father's praise of his choice, but his comments seemed to come more easily on other matters. He told his father of the Rogers boys, of the Pepper girls, and of tennis and theatricals, and spoke hopefully of a possible camping trip with these friends.

"When did you think of announcing your engagement, Bud?"

The boy shifted in his chair and laughed uneasily.

"Sally doesn't want to," he temporized, adding shyly, after a minute's silence, "and I didn't think you'd be in any hurry, dad!"

"But look here, son, you wrote that you planned being married in June!"