

The Courtship of Mr. Stubbins

BY ALICE HIGAN RICH.

[The following episode is from the new book Lovey Mary, by the author of Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch. Lovey Mary, an orphan, has run away from an asylum and taken refuge with an old maid, Miss Hazy, of the Cabbage Patch. One evening she comes home with a "blue letter" addressed to Miss Hazy. To fear lest it concern her she gives up the letter. Mrs. Wiggs, who is present, reads it. Justice to the author demands that it be stated that the selection has been necessarily condensed.]

"Miss Hazy:

Dear Miss (Mrs. Wiggs read from the large type-written sheet before her): Why not study the planets and the heavens therein? In casting your future, I find that thou wilt have an active and successful year for business, but beware of the law. You are prudent and amiable and have a lively imagination. You will have many enemies; but fear not; for in love you will be faithful and sincere, and are fitted well for married life.

"They surely ain't meanin' me?" asked Miss Hazy, in great perturbation.

"Yes, ma'am," said Mrs. Wiggs emphatically, "it's you, plain as day. Let's go on:

"Your star foretells you a great many lucky events. You are destined to a brilliant success, but you will have to earn it by good conduct. Let wise men lead you. Your midness against the wretched will bring you the friendship of everybody. Enclosed you will find a spirit picture of your future partner. If you will send twenty-five cents with the enclosed card, which you will fill out, we will put you in direct correspondence with the gentleman, and the degree ordained by the planets will thus be fulfilled. Please show this circular to your friends, and oblige

"Astrologer."

As the reading proceeded, Lovey Mary's fears gradually diminished, and with a sigh of relief she applied herself to her lunch. But if the letter had proved of no consequence to her, such was not the case with the two women standing at the window. Miss Hazy was re-reading the letter, vainly trying to master the contents.

"Mary," she said, "git up an' see if you can find my other pair of lookin'-glasses. Seems like I can't get the sense of it."

Mrs. Wiggs meanwhile was excitedly commenting on the charms of the "spirit picture."

"My, but he's stylish! Looks fer all the world like a insurance agent. Looks like he might be a little tall to his size, but I like statute men better 'n dumpy ones. I bet he's got a lot of nice manners. Ain't his smile pleasant?"

Miss Hazy seized the small picture with trembling fingers. "I don't seem to git on to what it's all about, Mis' Wiggs. Ain't they made a mistake or somethin'?"

"No, indeed; there's no mistake at all," declared Mrs. Wiggs. "Yer name's on the back, an' it's meant fer you. Some way yer name's got out as bein' single and needin' takin' keer of, an' I reckon this here 'strologer, or conjurer, or whatever he is, seen your good fortune in the stars, an' jes' wanted to let you know 'bout it."

"Does he want to get married with her?" asked Lovey Mary, beginning to realize the grave importance of the subject under discussion.

"Well, it may lead to that," answered Mrs. Wiggs hopefully.

Miss Hazy herself uttered faint protests and expostulations, but in spite of herself she was becoming influenced by Mrs. Wiggs's enthusiasm.

"Oh, shoo!" she repeated again and again. "I ain't never had no thought of marryin'."

"Course you ain't," said Mrs. Wiggs. "Good enough reason: you ain't had a show before. Seems to me you'd be flying straight in the face of providence to refuse a

stylish, sweet-smilin' man like that."

"He is fine-lookin'," acknowledged Miss Hazy, trying not to appear too pleased; "only I wisht his years didn't stick out so much."

Mrs. Wiggs was exasperated.

"Lawsee! Miss Hazy, what do you think he'll think of yer figger? Have you got so much to brag on, that you kin go to pickin' him to pieces? Do you suppose I'd 'a' dared to judge Mr. Wiggs that away? Why, Mr. Wiggs's nose was as long as a clothespin; but I would no more 'a' thought of his nose without him than I would 'a' thought of him without the nose."

"Well, what do you think I'd order do 'bout it?" asked Miss Hazy.

"I ain't quite made up my mind," said her mentor. "I'll talk it over with the neighbors. But I 'spect, if we kin skeer up a quarter, that you'll answer by the mornin's mail."

If the cabbage patch had pinned its faith upon the efficiency of the matrimonial agency in regard to the disposal of Miss Hazy, it was doomed to disappointment. The events that led up to the final catastrophe were unique in that they cast no shadows before.

Miss Hazy's letters, dictated by Mrs. Wiggs and penned by Lovey Mary were promptly and satisfactorily answered. The original of the spirit picture proved to be one Mr. Stebbins, "a prominent citizen of Bagdad Junction who desired to marry someone in the city. The lady must be of good character and without incumbrances."

The wooing had been ideally simple. Mr. Stubbins, with the impetuosity of a new lover, demanded an early meeting. It was a critical time, and the cabbage patch realized the necessity of making the first impression a favorable one. Mrs. Wiggs took pictures from her walls and chairs from her parlor to beautify the house of Miss Hazy. Old Mrs. Shultz, who was confined to her bed, sent over her black silk dress for Miss Hazy to wear. Mrs. Eichorn, with deep insight into the nature of man, gave a pound cake and a pumpkin pie. Lovey Mary scrubbed and dusted, and cleaned, and superintended the toilet of the bride-elect.

The important day had arrived, and with it Mr. Stubbins. To the many eyes that surveyed him from behind shutters and half-open doors he was something of a disappointment. Mrs. Wiggs's rosy anticipations had invested him with the charms of an Apollo, while Mr. Stubbins, in reality, was far from godlike.

"My land, he's lanker'n a bean-pole!" exclaimed Mrs. Eichorn, in disgust.

Taking everything into consideration, the prospects had been most flattering. Mr. Stubbins, sitting in Mrs. Wiggs's most comfortable chair, with a large slice of pumpkin pie in his hand, and with Miss Hazy opposite arrayed in Mrs. Shultz's black silk, had declared himself ready to marry at once. And Mrs. Wiggs, believing that a groom in the hand is worth two in the bush, promptly precipitated the courtship into a wedding.

The affair proved the sensation of the hour. For one brief week the honeymoon shed its beguiling light on the neighborhood, then it suffered a sudden and ignominious eclipse.

The groom got drunk.

Mary was clearing away the supper dishes when she was startled by a cry from Miss Hazy.

"My sakes! Lovey Mary! Look at Mr. Stubbins a-comin' up the street! Do you s'pose he's had a stroke?"

Lovey Mary ran to the window and beheld the "prominent citizen

of Bagdad Junction" in a state of unmistakable intoxication. He was bareheaded and hilarious, and used the fence as a life-preserver. Miss Hazy wrung her hands and wept.

"Oh, what'll I do?" she wailed. "I do b'lieve he's had somethin' to drink. I ain't goin' to stay an' meet him, Mary; I'm goin' to hide. I always was skeered of drunken men."

"I'm not," said Mary, stoutly. "You go on up in my room and lock the door; I'm going to stay here and keep him from messing up this kitchen. I just hate that man! I believe you do, too, Miss Hazy."

Miss Hazy wept afresh. "Well, he ain't my kind, Mary. I know I'd hadn't order marry him, but it 'pears like ever' woman sorter wants to try gittin' married onct anyways. I never would 'a' done it, though, if Mrs. Wiggs hadn't 'a' sicked me on."

By this time Mr. Stubbins had reached the yard, and Miss Hazy fled. Lovey Mary barricaded Tommy in a corner with his playthings, and met the delinquent at the door. This modern David had no stone and sling to slay her Goliath; she only had a vocabulary full of stinging words, which she hurled forth with indignation and scorn. Mr. Stubbins had evidently been abused before, for he paid no attention to the girl's wrath. He passed jauntily to the stove and tried to pour a cup of coffee; the hot liquid missed the cup and streamed over his wrist and hand. Howling with pain and swearing vociferously, he flung the coffee-pot out of the window, kicked a chair across the room, then turned upon Tommy, who was adding shrieks of terror to the general uproar. "Stop that infernal yelling!" he cried savagely, as he struck the child full in the face with his heavy hand.

Lovey Mary sprang forward and seized the poker. All the passion of her wild little nature was roused. She stole up behind him as he knelt before Tommy, and lifted the poker to strike. A pair of terrified blue eyes arrested her. Tommy forgot to cry, in sheer amazement at what she was about to do. Ashamed of herself, she threw the poker aside, and taking advantage of Mr. Stubbins's crouching position, she thrust him suddenly backward into the closet. The maneuver was a brilliant one, for while Mr. Stubbins was unsteadily separating himself from the debris into which he had been cast, Lovey Mary slammed the door and locked it. Then she picked up Tommy and fled out of the house and across the yard.

Mrs. Wiggs was sitting on her back porch pretending to knit, but in truth absorbed in a wild game of tag which the children were having on the commons. But when she caught sight of Mary's white, distressed face and Tommy's streaming eyes, she dropped her work and held out her arms. When Mary had finished her story Mrs. Wiggs burst forth:

"An' to think I run her up ag'in this! Ain't men deceivin'? Now I'd 'a' risked Mr. Stubbins myself for the askin'. It's true he was a widower, an' ma allays uster say, 'Don't fool with widowers, grass nor sod.' But Mr. Stubbins was so slick-tongued!"

"But, Mrs. Wiggs, what must we do?" asked Lovey Mary, too absorbed in the present to be interested in the past.

"Do? Why, we got to git Miss Hazy out of this here hole. It ain't no use consultin' her; I allays have said talkin' to Miss Hazy was like pullin' out bastin' threads: you jes' take out what you put in. Me an' you has got to think out a plan right here af' now, then go to work an' carry it out."

Couldn't we get the agency to take him back?" suggested Mary.

"No, indeed; they couldn't afford to do that. Lemme see, lemme see—" For five minutes Mrs. Wiggs rocked meditatively, soothing Tommy to sleep as she rocked. When she spoke again it was with inspiration:

"I've got it! It looks sometime, Lovey Mary, 's if I'd sorter caught some of Mr. Wiggs's brains in thinkin' things out. They ain't but one thing to do with Miss Hazy's husband."

"What, Mrs. Wiggs? What is it?" asked Lovey Mary, eagerly.

"Why, to lose him, of course! We'll wait till Mr. Stubbins is dead asleep; you know men allays have to sleep off a jag like this. I've seen Mr. Wiggs—I mean I've heard 'em say so many a time. Well, when Mr. Stubbins is sound asleep you an' me an' Billy will drag him out to the railroad."

Mrs. Wiggs's voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper, and her eyes looked fierce in the twilight.

Lovey Mary shuddered.

"You ain't goin' to let the train run over him, are you?" she asked.

"Lor', child, I ain't a 'sassinator! No; we'll wait till the midnight freight comes along, an' when it stops fer water we'll 'a'ist Mr. Stubbins into one of them empty cars. The train goes 'way out West some-

wheres, an' by the time Mr. Stubbins wakes up, he'll be so far away from home he won't have no money to git back."

"What'll Miss Hazy say?" asked Mary, giggling in nervous excitement.

"Miss Hazy ain't got a thing to do with it," replied Mrs. Wiggs, conclusively.

At midnight, by the dark of the moon, the unconscious groom was borne out of the Hazy cottage. Mrs. Wiggs carried his head, while Billy Wiggs and Mary and Asia and Chris officiated at his arms and legs. The bride surveyed the scene from the chinks of the up-stairs shutters.

Silently the little group waited until the lumbering freight train slowed up to take water, then with a concerted effort they lifted the heavy burden into an empty car.

The engine whistled, and the train moved thunderously away, bearing an unconscious passenger, who, as far as the cabbage patch was concerned, was henceforth submerged in the darkness of oblivion.—Century.

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