



Sixth Installment

WHAT HAPPENED SO FAR

The Sheridan Dramatic Club, of which Tom Bibbeck, the narrator, Maryella, the girl he cares for, and Jim Cooper, his rival, are members, are to give Pygmalion and Galatea at the Old Soldiers' Home. Mr. Hemmingway, husband of one of the actresses, thinks Bibbeck is in love with his wife. The escape of prisoners from the local penitentiary keeps Bibbeck busy at his newspaper work, so that he gets away from the dramatic group. But Maryella summons him, and starts telling the story of "Dollyanna" who believes that everything that happens turns out to be for the best.

The players arrive at the Old Soldiers' Home, being greeted royally and meeting Pink Henwether and others. The play at the Old Soldiers' Home is interrupted because of a fire, the players and veterans escaping.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"Then it's all for the best," piped Jim Cooper cheerfully. It is easier to be optimistic when you are warm.

"Maybe we had better start home," I suggested, thinking apprehensively of those thirty long miles to town. "With the snow falling fast it may get too deep for traction pretty soon."

"You're right," conceded Jim. "Let's hurry. We can take off our make-up after we get home."

By great good luck we had left our outer wraps in the main building. Therefore we were able to bundle up warmly enough. I had a long, heavy, fur-lined driving-coat that covered me from head to heels.

The Lillilove bus got away first, although Mrs. Lillilove herself elected to return with us. I had no non-freezing solution in my radiator so I had let the water out as soon as we arrived, and now had to fill it up before I could start.

Grandmother responded nobly to the first turn of the crank. I mentally thanked her for not misbehaving on an occasion which seemed almost too good for a balky motor to miss.

The old soldiers crowded to the doors to see us off. Without the opposition of the band Grandmother Page did herself proud. We started off amid a riot of sounds similar to those made by a terrier hunting for a rat in a pile of rusty stove-pipes. From that I could tell that the engine was working perfectly.

I don't quite understand how the drivers of these up-to-date, silent cars can locate trouble. Everything is so thoroughly muffled that as far as I am concerned it is impossible to tell how many cylinders are firing. With Grandmother Page there is no room for doubt.

If she fox-trots I know that only three charges are being exploded; if she does a buck and wing it is alternately two and three; but if the racket is practically constant it can rest easy in the knowledge that she is doing her very best on all four.

Above the noise of the motor could be heard only the farewell of Comrade Plik Henwether. He probably had not heard the sham battle going on beneath Grandmother's hood.

"Good-bye," he yelled with his excellent lungs and highly trained vocal organs. "Don't feel bad about the fire, because it was a lot better than the show!"

That man just radiated fact. It's too bad he could not have been in on the diplomatic courtesies that preceded the European War. The trouble could have been so easily averted by having the representatives of the powers draw lots to see which would kill him!

It was a beautiful night even if the snow was falling so thickly that it was impossible to see thirty feet ahead of the car. There is no peace like that of a snow storm, a purity like that of the earth in a fresh white blanket. It seemed a shame to put tracks in the clean glistening expanse.

Maryella, snugly wrapped in warm robes, sat beside me; the car was running smoothly, and there was a long drive ahead of us. What more could I ask? It was all for the best.

In the midst of such pleasant ruminations I noted hastily a dark object in the road. I turned quickly to avoid it and my lights illuminated another object directly in our path. I put on the brakes and stopped just in time to escape running down a man who stood immovable.

CHAPTER VII. More Trouble

What was the matter with him? The answer flashed upon me when I noticed that in either hand he held a revolver. It was a hold-up!

I gasped with surprise. So did Grandmother Page. I had forgotten to feed her gasoline enough, and the motor stopped.

"Get out," directed the man with the guns briefly. Needless to say we did, and lined up in the customary attitude before him and his fellow highwayman with our hands elevated above our heads.

Instead of going through us as we expected, one of the men climbed into the front seat and adjusted the spark preparatory to starting.

Then I knew who they were and why they had stopped us. They were escaped convicts from the penitentiary, and they wanted the car to get away!

It was a good scheme. They would leave tracks hard to distinguish, and could out-distance local pursuit.

"Cuss!" exclaimed the highwayman who was in the car. "What's the trouble, Bill?" the other one queried—without, however taking his eye or the muzzle of his gun away from us.

"There ain't any electric starter on this car."

Jim Cooper laughed. "You'll have to get a new car, Tom. When even highwaymen criticize it you have to admit it's getting out of date."

"Shut up," commanded our guard. I mentally applauded him.

"Can't you start her anyway, Bill?"

"Sure, I can start her all right," Bill stated confidently. It is grand to approach a motor in that frame of mind, especially in cold weather. If there is anything in this theory of the superiority of mind over matter it is certainly correct to hold a hopeful thought when about to crank a car.

Bill grumbled a little though at having to turn the engine over by hand. He went out in front of the car and grasped the handle firmly. "When I get her going, Julius," Bill said before cranking, "you make a quick jump for the car and we'll be off before anybody can start anything."

"All right," assented Julius. All arrangements for the getaway completed, Bill cranked the car. He cranked it several times, in fact, without any definite results. Grandmother Page was behaving like a brick—like a load of bricks, one might almost say. She would respond to none but the hand of her master, and to the ministrations of another she only gurgled.

"What's the matter, Bill? Can't you start her?" questioned Jim Cooper sympathetically. "Probably it is all for the best, Bill. This will teach you to be patient and will likewise develop the muscles. If you would devote the same amount of energy to the pursuit of an upright and noble life you would doubtless become President of the United States some day. Think, Bill, of how this life of crime has aged your poor old mother. Think of your mother, Bill!"

Bill exploded at last.

"If that guy lets out another chirp, Julius, plug him!"

Jim subsided, but from time to time thereafter he writhed with eagerness to offer suggestions and comments. He just naturally cannot keep from lending a helping hand in everyone else's business.

He means well, too. I do not doubt but that Jim Cooper is one of the best hearted men in the world; but by the time he has helped half a dozen times in something you want to do by yourself you get to dread his appearance on the scene.

Bill's temper had not been improved any by Jim's earnest advice. He twisted the crank savagely and then delivered a violent kick on the radiator.

"Who owns this piece of junk anyway?" he demanded, at last approaching our group. "Is it yours?" He pointed at Jim.

"It is not," Jim disclaimed hastily. "You couldn't give it to me on a bet."

I made a mental resolve to square up with him sometime for his scornful comment. No man likes to have the things that he owns ridiculed. Grandmother might not have all the modern attachments, but I love every bolt in her body.

"Then you must be the guy," Bill said, indicating me. "You come here and start your car."

Now, I had no particular desire to have Grandmother Page kidnapped. It seemed simple enough to make a perfunctory effort and tell them it would not go. So I monkeyed with the levers aimlessly and cranked a couple of times. I did not prime the cylinders with gasoline and stuff a glove in the air-intake, as I knew I would have to do to get her to respond.

"She won't start," I announced. Bill swore.

Jim Cooper smothered a strident laugh. "What are you laughing at?" Bill demanded harshly.

"Because," Jim returned, "Tom says he can start that car in any kind of weather when no one else can."

How cheerfully I could have throttled Jim for that asinine repetition of my footless boast! "So you've been boasting, have you?"

Bill turned upon me savagely. "Now you start her; understand? No monkey business! If she's running in two minutes we may not blow your brains out."

Something in his tone convinced me that Bill was in earnest. I lifted

ed the hood, primed the cylinders stuffed my glove in the intake and turned her over.

Grandmother responded feebly: "Phut!"

"The batteries are a little weak," I commented. "They don't give a very good spark when it's cold."

I adjusted the spark-coil to operate on less current and tried cranking. There was no explosion whatever.

I was beginning to get a little worried. Bill, who stood over me with a gun, seemed a thriffler impatient. I could see that he did not believe that I was making an honest effort to start.

"Try it on the magneto," suggested Jim Cooper.

"She never starts on the magneto," I replied.

"Try it anyway," Bill commented briefly. "And hustle."

So I did. As you may know, starting a motor on the magneto involves spinning the flywheel rapidly for several times before enough electricity is generated to make a spark. It is one of the most heart-breaking exercises I know of, especially when the motor has excellent compression such as Grandmother Page boasted.

The perspiration dripped from my brow and my arm seemed like a leaden weight that was about to drop off.

I paused for breath. "Now you quit your kidding," snarled the highwayman, showing the muzzle of the revolver under my nose. "Take off that coat and make her go. Take it off, I say!"

I obeyed. Neither of us was prepared for what followed. I had forgotten the white tights, which were all I wore beneath my overcoat, and he of course was not expecting me to look as pale as I did.

His jaw fell and his arm dropped limp at his side.

"W-w-hat are you?" he asked. It was probably the only opportunity that I would have, and I made the most of it. As the muzzle of the gun dropped I jumped for him and pinned his arms to his sides.

We rolled over and over in the snow, the revolver exploding as we fell. Sometimes weight is an advantage. This was a case in point. In

two minutes I was sitting on his chest and had taken his weapons away from him.

Finger on trigger, ready to fire, I looked around for the other bandit.

"Where is he?" I asked. "Gone," replied Maryella. "He ran away when he saw you were winning."

"It's all for the best," Jim asserted. "You couldn't fight him and sit on this other gentleman at the same time anyway."

I rose from my seat. "Get up!" I ordered my prisoner.

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