

POKER AND A WEDDING.

STRANGE WAY IN WHICH A MARRIAGE BECAME KNOWN.

The Landlady's Unsuspected Weakness—Mistaken Intentions of a Clergyman—Devil of two Young People—Result not so Bad as it Might have Been.

I have often been told that gambling could cause a man trouble, and I realized that once to my sorrow. Poker nearly caused my ruin then, although I have never touched a card in my life. I nearly lost my wife by a little game of poker, in fact. Could anything more than that happen to a man?

It was the unanimous sentiment of the party that the question was oratorical and nobody attempted an answer.

A party of strangers played the game that worried me, he went on. 'I did not even know their names. They were a mixed lot, men and women, who were stopping at a summer resort in the Virginia Mountains. They were Southerners, and used to play every night in one of the houses that made up what was called the hotel. It was a ramshackle place built before the war, and different houses had been built or brought as its popularity increased. The place was cool, there was more fried chickens than such places usually supply, and the cost of living there by the week was not much more than it costs for a day in an Eastern resort. So the old place was always crowded, and there were few weeks in the summer that didn't find every rickety wooden house occupied by Southerners of a very good class. I didn't meet many of 'em the summer I was there, because the girl I was engaged to was down there. Does a man need anybody else in the summer time to enjoy himself?

The listeners were not moved by this obvious attempt to keep up their interest. None of them made any pretence at a reply. They felt they were showing interest enough in the commutier's sentimental affairs by merely listening.

'Things were not going so smoothly though as they might have in that direction,' he went on. 'The girl was all right, and there was no question about our determination to put the thing through whatever opposition we might have. We'd had plenty of it. Her people simply would not bear of me. They never got a chance to see many of what I think are my best qualities, for whenever I came around they froze up so that they lost the sense of sight and hearing and made me feel that I was making about as much impression on them as an oil stove on an iceberg. My girl and I had met while she was visiting in the North, and anything we didn't settle then was attended to afterward by correspondence. Her folks had no use for me. I was rejected with out a trial. I was a Yankee, and a poor Yankee at that; so there was no excuse for my living, especially with two or three rich Southerners in the offing doing all they could, with the support of the family about equally divided among them. This took me down to the Southern springs, where my girl was stopping with friends. I was sure enough of her, but I thought it would do no harm to be on the spot, particularly as she wrote me that one or two of the other fellows were coming up for a few days to see her. I wasn't exactly afraid, but I know how attractive Southern men can make themselves, and I decided to go down there. It was in the summer, and I was the only man left in the office to look after business; but I flew the coop one Friday, and on Sunday morning I dropped in to find the most dangerous man of the lot up from Richmond to stay over from Saturday to Monday. She was there with her aunt, and it that fellow talked to anybody but her aunt while he was there it was at meal times when we all sat together.

Everything seemed all right. The aunt was not frozen so tight as the rest of the family, but there was a glassy look in her eye that made me suspicious in spite of her friendliness of manner. My girl and I were together the whole time and we'd settled every detail. It was to take place the next winter whatever the family did. She was going to write them that as soon as I went back to New York and I was to come down in the fall and make another attempt to thaw 'em out. Whether it failed or not, though, we were going to see the thing to a finish. She wanted me to stay on a while longer, because she was suspicious of the aunt's geniality as I was. The old lady favored the man that was there when I arrived, and never missed a chance to cap his game. The girl wanted the moral support of my presence for a while and I was willing to give it to her, especially as I was having the time of my life.

'Late one afternoon a negro boy came up from the village drug store and told me I was wanted at the telephone. The place was six miles away from the railroad and there was no telegraph. My message from New York woke me up. I was to

come back right away. There was no getting out of it. I had made myself think that the office would be able to get along without anybody in charge at the busiest time; but the news from New York knocked the idea out of my head with a bump. I knew the thing was settled. I hurried back to the hotel to report to headquarters; but headquarters was upstairs dressing for supper. I went to my room and packed my trunk as much as I could in time for the Eastern train the next morning. This stage left at 6 o'clock. When I came down I saw that something had happened. She was the usual, filmy combination that Southern girls can make themselves in the evening. There were signs that she had been crying, and there were tears in her eyes when she said to me:

'What do you suppose Aunt Helen's done? She's written you are here, mama, and papa are furious with me, and I have got the most awful letter from them. Auntie and I are going to leave to-morrow afternoon and we're going to visit Charlie Hixton's mother.'

'Hixton was the chap I found down there. This news was more than mine. I told mine, but swore that I'd go with her in the opposite direction from New York even if my firm went to pot. I said I'd never leave her. For an hour we walked around a pine grove near the hotel, as miserable as two people could be. She wouldn't hear of my travelling with her and her aunt and said that would make things worse than ever. I realized that it might, and we talked over twenty plans of getting ahead of the old people before we hit on one that seemed likely to succeed.

That one was mine. It took a lot of persuasion, but it went in the end. I talked hard for it and won after the hardest twenty minutes of talking I ever did.

'The only other man in the place besides myself who was not a Southerner had arrived that morning. He was a clergyman from Boston. His wife who belonged in Virginia, had brought him down there. That man fascinated me the moment I laid eyes on him. It seemed to me that if he could just give us his professional services for a quarter of an hour the hardest problem in my life would be settled. The thought of that made the man seem a superior being to me. Marriage that night before I went away would make everything easy. Relatives and Southern beaux might go hang after that. And it was only putting forward a few months what we had decided should take place whatever happened. These were some of the arguments I used with her. It was hard to persuade her, but after a while she said she was willing to call in the clergyman in case I thought it was best. She left it all to my judgement, she said, and cried as if we were both going to be buried alive instead of doing just the thing we were looking forward to as the event make us happier than anything else in the world.

I tackled the clergyman and found him willing to undertake the job. Mary was of age and could do what she wanted. The old fellow was rather sentimental, and I think the idea appealed to him. I told him most of the facts and I think from his alacrity in consenting that he must have had some troubles of his own in the same situation. Everything had to be done hurriedly, and he said he knew his wife would act as one of the witnesses. We wanted two. Mary had decided who the other should be. She wanted the landlady and would hear of nobody else. This landlady was a woman of refinement, more like a hostess than the proprietor of a boarding house to the people that came there every year. We had to ask her for permission to get married in her house, as neither of us had mentioned anything of that kind when we engaged rooms. So long as she had to know of it, it was decided she might as well be one of the witnesses and keep the news from spreading too far. The ceremony was to take place in the parlour as soon as auntie went to bed. She was to know nothing of it until the rest of the family heard the news at the time we thought it convenient to tell them. Everything looked all right. The clergyman was to break the news to the landlady, as it would look better to have it come from such a dignified source. Mary and I were to sit around as usual until the coast was clear. Then the five of us were to meet and fix up matters. I saw that she had gone upstairs and put on white ribbons where she had worn blue before the ceremony was decided on. That was our only apparent preparation. We were both nervous that night at supper. Auntie probably attributed that to the parting the next day. She made some sugary references and looked really bland. But we didn't care how she looked or felt so long as she got upstairs soon enough. Mary was anxious that she should go to sleep early, too, for their rooms adjoined, and she she didn't want to answer any more questions than necessary when she went upstairs.

'The landlady was the best woman in the

world we could have had, and Mary knew that. She had great sympathy with young people and always came to their assistance. But there was one notable weakness of her character that we did not make allowance for. She did like a game of poker. She was one of the regular attendants at a game that was held every night in one of the buildings of the hotel. There a party of five or six men and women would meet to play a ten-cent-limit game that kept them usually at the table until 12 or 1 o'clock. She was there as soon as her duties at the hotel were over. It happened that the clergyman had rooms in this house. I had afterward that there was a great discussion that night as to whether the game ought to go on with him in the house. Respect to his cloth seemed to suggest that it had better be called off. But the habit was too strong for them, and the game started. Before he got an opportunity to speak to the landlady she was seated and the game was under way. He hovered around trying to get an opportunity to tell her of the important event in which she was to figure that night, but he couldn't.

'Mary and I were across on the piazza of the main building wondering what in the world could have happened to him. She decided he had backed out and wanted the whole thing called off. So I went over to interview him. He explained the situation and I told him to wait until the game broke up. It was after 11 o'clock then, and it probably wouldn't last much longer. I went back to cheer up Mary, and the clergyman remained on guard to catch the landlady at the first sign of a break-up in the party. In a little while it shattered. Even then the clergyman was a little too hurried. He stopped the landlady before all her associates had got away and talked to her with an air of importance for several moments. Then she was left alone and walked over to where we were waiting. She was all right. We had not made a mistake. We then went to the parlour to wait for the clergyman. He came over with his wife in a few moments and began the ceremony. It was only when he was nearing the end that the accident came.

The listeners had begun to wonder vaguely when the poker game was going to show its influence. They had looked up with encouragement when the game was first mentioned. They had not expected so much sentiment. The tired-looking commutier had never seemed a possible hero of romance to them under any circumstances.

'The hitch that came at the end of the ceremony was all due to the company's solicitude about the landlady and the clergyman,' he went on. 'They concluded that he was talking to her about the evils of gambling when he spoke to her after the game. They thought that was bad enough, and when they saw what followed they were indignant. Two of the women were living in the cottage where the game took place, and saw him start for the main house with a prayer book under his arm, which they mistook for a Bible. That was too much for the two women. They thought they ought to stand as much of the blame for the poker game as the one that has been picked out by the clergyman. So they set out for the hotel to find the landlady, and the did find her. Just as we had reached the last words of the ceremony the door flew open and in rushed one of the women. She gave one look around and then disappeared as quickly as she had entered. Until that time not a soul in the house outside the five in the room had suspected what was going on; but I knew that one was enough. The story would be all around the place the next day, if the intruder hadn't already worked up the town to tell the news. I knew the jig was up and almost regretted that I had urged the step.

'When I went to my room I heard behind various doors suspicious whisperings that told me the story was already on its travels. My wife came down to breakfast the next morning and told me that auntie was still in ignorance. She had not croaked and was apparently asleep. Nobody but a few servants was up at that hour, but I thought I noticed a rather significant smile on the face of the colored waiter. He said a few words to the stage driver, who suddenly took a new interest in me. I hated to leave my wife alone to face the outbreak of gossip but she was not afraid of it and I had to get to New York.

'That day by 10 o'clock everybody knew it. Auntie had to hear it, and she raged like a storm. Then she grew calm and wouldn't speak a word for the rest of the journey home. The people in the hotel gossiped and cackled interminably; but they all liked my wife, and the talk was good natured. The woman who had come into the room was profuse in her apologies but nobody blamed her. She had come in by accident, and the story was too good to keep. Nothing that happened there was equal to the storm that started from the parental home. They never had thought much of me. I knew that; but I didn't realize how much they could say until I got their letters. They were nearly as hard on the clergyman but he was too far away to feel it. They swore the marriage was illegal were going

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to have it set aside, and declared that if their daughter had so far forgotten herself as to want to marry a miserable creature like me they wanted to make the best of the disaster and do it in a proper way. My wife was troubled, but I was calm. I was sorry for her sake that the affair had turned out as it did; but I knew we had 'em. They realized that after a while and began to calm down. Two weeks afterward I went down to Virginia and brought my wife back. Since that time we've got along very well with everybody but auntie. She never would come around. But that's not the only thing that makes me realize how dangerous gambling can be sometimes.

BIRDS AT THE BROOKSIDE.

Cries Full of Significance to be Heard, Though the Song Time is Past.

It all the birds grew from infancy to mature birdhood between mid-April and the first of August their conduct in spring and in mid-summer could scarcely present more striking contrasts than it now does. It is the difference between the happy carelessness of childhood and the busy pre-occupation of manhood. All the gay troubadours of spring and early summer are transformed into sober birds of business whose activities are directed toward strictly utilitarian ends.

There is no better place to observe the birds in midsummer than a brookside edging a woodland. Water seems almost as essential to the non-aquatic birds as to the web-footed kinds, and a woodland that seems deserted of birds in its highest parts, as the woodlands often seem in mid-summer, will be found to swarm with them along the watercourses. Seated for an hour within clear sight of the brook, the observer may be sure of seeing many forms of bird activity. His ear will be gladdened with little true bird music. The wren may occasionally pipe up, for the wrens driven away by the sparrows are gradually returning to these parts. The observer may fancy that he hears the robin, but it is more than likely that he will have been deceived by the counterfeit song of that little gray warbler, whose notes have a superficial resemblance to those of the robin.

Birds seem to like for bathing a sunny bit of running stream edged with a little beach of sand. Some merely touch the water, shower it over themselves and come out to preen their feathers. The birds seem to know which streams are perennial and which dry up in droughts of midsummer, and to choose the former as their special haunts.

It will sometimes happen to the watcher that the humming bird, that spirit of the air, will come whizzing on invisible wings above his head to alight on a bough and smooth his splendid breast with a beak awkwardly long for such service. Perhaps, if the watcher has especially keen eyes and especially good luck, he may come upon the nest of the humming bird, looking like a lichen knot on a small dead limb, a deep, narrow cup, exquisitely soft within, but small, one must think, for even its tiny tenant. The humming bird, it will be noted, has an odd way of approaching the bough it means to light upon as if ready to thrust its bill into the heart of an imaginary blossom. The sight of the bird actually exploring a large blossom that of the trumpet vine, for example, is one of the fascinating incidents of bird conduct. While the swift wings make a mist about the bird's body, the tiny creature poises itself motionlessly until the head is pointed fair for the trumpet's mouth, and then thrusts in bill and head while the wings still fan the air.

Despite the lack of song, there is much bird conversation along the brookside, and

some of it, by reason of its expressiveness and piquancy, if less beautiful, is perhaps more interesting than song itself. As a revelation of bird character, the cries and call notes designed to be part or any song are full of significance. Even the town world is familiar with the perpetual twittering of the sparrows, whose loving twittering begins in February and seems hardly to cease with the autumn frosts. The robins, late poets now gourmands, have a variety of cries to express vexation to signal danger, to guide and admonish the young and not one of these fails to convey the peculiar jauntiness of the bird. Persistently tuneless, the robins rise in small flocks from the edge of the woodland with lively warning cries at the approach of an intruder. The scolding chatter of the wren is one of the liveliest sounds of the brookside. It usually proclaims some impudent inausurion of the English Sparrows. A characteristic mid-summer of the catbird it that which gives its name. Balancing on a light bough with tail now up, now down, the catbird scolds at all intruders, redoubling the intensity of its call as the obnoxious approach the nest. As to the wood thrush, lone musician of midsummer, even its call of alarm is musical, and the mo-he-berd sign's her young with a cry in which one fancies something like human tenderness.

Varied and interesting as are the mid-summer calls of the birds, they are all suggestive portents of a time not far distant when the woodlands and hedgerows shall be silent save for the chirp of the sparrow and the caw of the crow. When the brook runs clear and sunny beneath thinning but brilliant foliage, and the woodland paths are choked with falling leaves, and the sunshine falls mellow upon unaccustomed spots then comes a silence as of death upon the woodland, only less oppressive than that of the bare multitudinous trunks rising gray from the snow covered ground of midwinter.

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