CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

BLUE-BIRD WEATHER

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Содержание

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I

It was now almost too dark to distinguish objects; duskier and vaguer became the flat world of marshes, set here and there with cypress and bounded only by far horizons; and at last land and water disappeared behind the gathered curtains of the night. There was no sound from the waste except the wind among the withered reeds and the furrowing splash of wheel and hoof over the submerged causeway.

The boy who was driving had scarcely spoken since he strapped Marche's gun cases and valise to the rear of the rickety wagon at the railroad station. Marche, too, remained silent, preoccupied with his own reflections. Wrapped in his fur-lined coat, arms folded, he sat doubled forward, feeling the Southern swamp-chill busy with his bones. Now and then he was obliged to relight his pipe, but the cold bit at his fingers, and he hurried to protect himself again with heavy gloves.

The small, rough hands of the boy who was driving were naked, and finally Marche mentioned it, asking the child if he were not cold.

"No, sir," he said, with a colorless brevity that might have

been shyness or merely the dull indifference of the very poor, accustomed to discomfort.

"Don't you feel cold at all?" persisted Marche kindly.

"No, sir."

"I suppose you are hardened to this sort of weather?"

"Yes, sir."

By the light of a flaming match, Marche glanced sideways at him as he drew his pipe into a glow once more, and for an instant the boy's gray eyes flickered toward his in the flaring light. Then darkness masked them both again.

"Are you Mr. Herold's son?" inquired the young man.

"Yes, sir," almost sullenly.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"You're a big boy, all right. I have never seen your father. He is at the clubhouse, no doubt."

"Yes, sir," scarcely audible.

"And you and he live there all alone, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir." A moment later the boy added jerkily, "And my sister," as though truth had given him a sudden nudge.

"Oh, you have a sister, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"That makes it very jolly for you, I fancy," said Marche pleasantly. There was no reply to the indirect question.

His pipe had gone out again, and he knocked the ashes from it and pocketed it. For a while they drove on in silence, then

Marche peered impatiently through the darkness, right and left, in an effort to see; and gave it up.

"You must know this road pretty well to be able to keep it," he said. "As for me, I can't see anything except a dirty little gray star up aloft."

"The horse knows the road."

"I'm glad of that. Have you any idea how near we are to the house?"

"Half a mile. That's Rattler Creek, yonder."

"How the dickens can you tell?" asked Marche curiously. "You can't see anything in the dark, can you?"

"I don't know how I can tell," said the boy indifferently.

Marche smiled. "A sixth sense, probably. What did you say your name is?"

"Jim."

"And you're eleven? You'll be old enough to have a gun very soon, Jim. How would you like to shoot a real, live wild duck?"

"I *have* shot plenty."

Marche laughed. "Good for you, Jimmy. What did the gun do to you? Kick you flat on your back?"

The boy said gravely: "Father's gun is too big for me. I have to rest it on the edge of the blind when I fire."

"Do you shoot from the blinds?"

"Yes, sir."

Marche relapsed into smiling silence. In a few moments he was thinking of other things—of this muddy island which had

once been the property of a club consisting of five carefully selected and wealthy members, and which, through death and resignation, had now reverted to him. Why he had ever bought in the shares, as one by one the other members either died or dropped out, he did not exactly know. He didn't care very much for duck shooting. In five years he had not visited the club; and why he had come here this year for a week's sport he scarcely knew, except that he had either to go somewhere for a rest or ultimately be carried, kicking, into what his slangy doctor called the "funny house."

So here he was, on a cold February night, and already nearly at his destination; for now he could make out a light across the marsh, and from dark and infinite distances the east wind bore the solemn rumor of the sea, muttering of wrecks and death along the Atlantic sands beyond the inland sounds.

"Well, Jim," he said, "I never thought I'd survive this drive, but here we are, and still alive. Are you frozen solid, you poor boy?"

The boy smiled, shyly, in negation, as they drove into the bar of light from the kitchen window and stopped. Marche got down very stiffly. The kitchen door opened at the same moment, and a woman's figure appeared in the lamplight—a young girl, slender, bare armed, drying her fingers as she came down the steps to offer a small, weather-roughened hand to Marche.

"My brother will show you to your room," she said. "Supper will be ready in a few minutes."

So he thanked her and went away with Jim, relieving the

boy of the valise and one gun-case, and presently came to the quarters prepared for him. The room was rough, with its unceiled walls of yellow pine, a chair, washstand, bed, and a nail or two for his wardrobe. It had been the affectation of the wealthy men composing the Foam Island Duck Club to exist almost primitively when on the business of duck shooting, in contradistinction to the overfed luxury of other millionaires inhabiting other more luxuriously appointed shooting-boxes along the Chesapeake.

The Foam Island Club went in heavily for simplicity, as far as the two-story shanty of a clubhouse was concerned; but their island was one of the most desirable in the entire region, and their live decoys the most perfectly trained and cared for.

Marche, washing his tingling fingers and visage in icy water, rather wished, for a moment, that the club had installed modern plumbing; but delectable odors from the kitchen put him into better humor, and presently he went off down the creaking and unpainted stairs to warm himself at a big stove until summoned to the table.

He was summoned in a few moments by the same girl who had greeted him; and she also waited on him at table,placing before him in turn his steaming soup, a platter of fried bass and smoking sweet potatoes, then the inevitable broiled canvas-back duck with rice, and finally home-made preserves—wild grapes, exquisitely fragrant in their thin, golden syrup.

Marche was that kind of a friendly young man who is naturally

gay-hearted and also a little curious—sometimes to the verge of indiscretion. For his curiosity and inquiring interest in his fellow-men was easily aroused—particularly when they were less fortunately situated than he in a world where it is a favorite fiction that all are created equal. He was, in fact, that particular species of human nuisance known as a humanitarian; but he never dreamed he was a nuisance, and certainly never meant to be.

Warmth and food and the prospects of to-morrow's shooting, and a slender, low-voiced young girl, made cheerful his recently frost-nipped soul, and he was inclined to expand and become talkative there in the lamplight.

"Has the shooting been pretty good?" he asked pleasantly, plying knife and fork in the service of a raging appetite.

"It *has* been."

"What do you think of the prospects for to-morrow?"

She said gravely: "I am afraid it will be blue-bird weather."

It was a new, but graphic, expression to him; and he often remembered it afterward, and how quaintly it fell from her lips as she stood there in the light of the kerosene lamp, slim, self-possessed, in her faded gingham gown and apron, the shapely middle finger of one little weather-tanned hand resting on the edge of the cloth.

"You are Miss Herold, I suppose?" he said, looking up at her with his pleasant smile.

"Yes."

"You are not Southern?"

"No," she said briefly. And he then remembered that the Hon. Cicero W. Gilkins, when he was president of the now defunct club, had installed a Northern man as resident chief game-protector and superintendent at the Foam Island Club House.

Marche had never even seen Herold; but, through lack of personal interest, and also because he needed somebody to look out for the property, he had continued to pay this man Herold his inconsiderable salary every year, scarcely knowing, himself, why he did not put the Foam Island shooting on the market and close up the matter for good.

"It's been five years since I was here, Miss Herold," he said, smiling. "That was in the old days of the club, when Judge Gilkins and Colonel Vyse used to come here shooting every season. But you don't remember them, I fancy."

"I remember them."

"Really! You must have been quite a child."

"I was thirteen."

"Oh, then you are eighteen, now," he said humorously.

Her grave, young lips were only slightly responsive to his smile.

"You have been here a long time," he said. "Do you find it lonely?"

"Sometimes," she admitted.

"What do you do for recreation?"

"I don't think I know what you mean, Mr. Marche."

"I mean for pleasure."

She looked at him out of her clear, gray eyes, then turned her gaze on the window. But she could not see through it; the pane only reflected her face darkly; and to her, for a moment, it seemed that way with her whole pent-up life, here in the Virginia marshes—no outlet, no outlook, and wherever she turned her wistful eyes only her own imprisoned self to confront her out of the dull obscurity.

"I suppose," he said, watching her, "that you sometimes go to Norfolk for a holiday?"

"No."

"Or to Old Point, or Baltimore, perhaps?"

She had her under lip between her teeth, now, and was looking so fixedly at the window that he thought she had not heard him.

He rose from the table, and as she turned to meet his pleasant eyes he smilingly thanked her for waiting on him.

"And now," he said, "if you will say to your father that I'd like to have a little talk with him–"

"Father is ill in bed," she said, in a low voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I hope it isn't anything serious."

"I—think not."

"Will he be able to see me to-morrow?"

"I am afraid not, Mr. Marche. He—he asked me to say to you that you might safely transact any business with me. I know all about it," she said, speaking a little hurriedly. "I keep the accounts, and I have every item and every bill ready for your

inspection; and I can tell you exactly what condition the property is in and what lumber has been cut and what repairs have been necessary. Whenever you are ready for me, I will come into the sitting room," she added, "because Jim and I have had our supper."

"Very well," he said, smiling, "I am ready now, if you are."

So she went away to rinse her hands and lay aside her apron, and in a few minutes she entered the sitting room. He rose and placed a chair for her, and she thanked him, flushing a little, and then he resumed his seat, watching her sorting over the papers in her lap.

Presently she crossed one knee over the other, and one slim, prettily shaped foot, in its shabby shoe, swung clear of its shadow on the floor. Then she handed him a sheaf of bills for his inspection, and, pencil in hand, followed the totals as he read them off aloud.

For half an hour they compared and checked off items, and he found her accounts accurate to a penny.

"Father bought three geese and a gander from Ike Helm," she said. "They were rather expensive, but two were mated, and they call very well when tied out separated. Do you think it was too expensive?" she added timidly, showing him the bill.

"No," he said, smiling. "I think it's all right. Mated decoys are what we need, and you can wing-tip a dozen before you get one that will talk at the right time."

"That is true," she said eagerly. "We try our best to keep up

the decoys and have nothing but talkers. Our geese are nearly all right, and our ducks are good, but our swans are *so* vexing! They seem to be such fools, and they usually behave like silly cygnets. You will see to-morrow."

While she was speaking, her brother came quietly into the room with an open book in his hands, and Marche, glancing at it curiously, saw that it was a Latin grammar.

"Where do you go to school, Jim?" he asked.

"Father teaches me."

Marche, rather astonished at the calibre of his superintendent, glanced from the boy to his sister in silence. The girl's head remained steadily lowered over the papers on her knee, but he saw her foot swinging in nervous rhythm, and he was conscious of her silent impatience at something or other, perhaps at the interruption in their business discussion.

"Well," he said pleasantly, "what comes next, Miss Herold?"

She handed him a list of the decoys. He read it gravely, nodded, and returned it.

"You may count them for yourself to-morrow," she said.

"Not at all. I trust you entirely," he replied laughingly.

Then they went over the remaining matters, the condition of the pine timber, the repairs to the boats and blinds and stools, items for snaps, swivels, paint, cement, wire, none of which interested Marche as much as the silent boy reading his Latin grammar by the smoky lamp interested him, or the boy's sister bending over the papers on her knee, pencil poised in her pretty,

weather-roughened hand.

"I sent the shells from New York by express," he said. "Did they arrive?"

"I left two hundred in your room," said the boy, looking up.

"Oh, thank you, Jim." And, turning to his sister, who had raised her head, inquiringly, "I suppose somebody will call me at the screech of dawn, won't they?"

"Do you know the new law?" she asked.

"No. I don't like laws, anyway," he said smilingly.

She smiled, too, gathering up her papers preparatory to departure. "Nobody is allowed," she said, "to put off from shore until the sun is above the horizon line. And the wardens are very strict." Then she rose. "Will you excuse me? I have the dishes to do."

The boy laid aside his book and stood up, but his sister said:

"Stay and study, Jim. I don't need any help."

And Jim resumed his seat with heightened color. A moment later, however, he went out to the kitchen.

"Look here, Molly," he said, "wha'd' you want to give me away for? He'll think I'm a sissy, helping you do dishes and things."

"My dear, my dear!" she exclaimed contritely, "I didn't think of it. Please forgive me, Jim. Anyway, you don't really care what this man thinks about any of us–"

"Yes, I do! Anyway, a fellow doesn't want another fellow to think he washes dishes."

"You darling! Forgive me. I wasn't thinking. It was too stupid

of me."

"It really was," said the boy, in his sweet, dignified voice, "and I'd been telling him that I'd shot ducks, too."

His sister caught him around the neck and kissed his blonde head. "I'm *so* sorry, Jim. He won't think of it again. If he does, he'll only respect a boy who is so good to his sister. And," she added, cautioning him with lifted finger, "don't talk too much to him, Jim, no matter how nice and kind he is. I know how lonely you are and how pleasant it is to talk to a man like Mr. Marche; but remember that father doesn't wish us to say anything about ourselves or about him, so we must be careful."

"Why doesn't father want us to speak about him or ourselves to Mr. Marche?" asked the boy.

His sister had gone back to her dishes. Now, looking around over her shoulder, she said seriously, "That is father's affair, dear, not ours."

"But don't you know why?"

"Shame on you, Jim! What father cares to tell us he will tell us; but it's exceedingly bad manners to ask."

"Is father really very ill?"

"I told you that to ask me such things is improper," said the girl, coloring. "He has told us that he does not feel well, and that he prefers to remain in his room for a few days. That is enough for us, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the boy thoughtfully.

II

Marche, buried under a mountain of bed clothes, dreamed that people were rapping noisily on his door, and grinned in his dream, meaning to let them rap until they tired of it. Suddenly a voice sounded through his defiant slumbers, clear and charming as a golden ray parting thick clouds. The next moment he found himself awake, bolt upright in the icy dusk of his room, listening.

"Mr. Marche! Won't you *please* wake up and answer?" came the clear, young voice again.

"I *beg* your pardon!" he cried. "I'll be down in a minute!"

He heard her going away downstairs, and for a few seconds he squatted there, huddled in coverings to the chin, and eying the darkness in a sort of despair. The feverish drive of Wall Street, late suppers, and too much good fellowship had not physically hardened Marche. He was accustomed to have his bath tempered comfortably for his particular brand of physique. Breakfast, also, was a most carefully ordered informality with him.

The bitter chill smote him. Cursing the simple life, he crawled gingerly out of bed, suffered acutely while hunting for a match, lighted the kerosene lamp with stiffened fingers, and looked about him, shivering. Then, with a suppressed anathema, he stepped into his folding tub and emptied the arctic contents of the water pitcher over himself.

Half an hour later he appeared at the breakfast table, hungrier

than he had been in years. There was nobody there to wait on him, but the dishes and coffee pot were piping hot, and he madly ate eggs and razor-back, and drank quantities of coffee, and finally set fire to a cigarette, feeling younger and happier than he had felt for ages.

Of one thing he was excitedly conscious: that dreadful and persistent dragging feeling at the nape of his neck had vanished. It didn't seem possible that it could have disappeared overnight, but it had, for the present, at least.

He went into the sitting room. Nobody was there, either, so he broke his sealed shell boxes, filled his case with sixes and fives and double B's, drew his expensive ducking gun from its case and took a look at it, buckled the straps of his hip boots to his belt, felt in the various pockets of his shooting coat to see whether matches, pipe, tobacco, vaseline, oil, shell extractor, knife, handkerchief, gloves, were in their proper places; found them so, and, lighting another cigarette, strolled contentedly around the small and almost bare room, bestowing a contented and patronizing glance upon each humble article and decoration as he passed.

Evidently this photograph, in an oval frame of old-time water gilt, was a portrait of Miss Herold's mother. What a charming face, with its delicate, high-bred nose and lips! The boy, Jim, had her mouth and nose, and his sister her eyes, slightly tilted to a slant at the outer corners—beautifully shaped eyes, he remembered.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.