

# OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

## Able Assisted

D

IF you notice that woman in gray, Diana?

Miss Sinclair moved her eyebrows as a polite recognition of the fact that she had been addressed, and continued to read.

"The one at the next table who talked all through breakfast; what do you think is the matter with her, Di?"

Diana took time for a glance at her inquiring young cousin: "She is in the New Thought, Grace."

"Yes!" broke in Peter, who was just behind his sister. "She's got the New Thought with a string around its neck."

"What is the New Thought, Diana?"

"Give it up, Honey."

"Well, I thought," said Grace, "that she talked as if you were what you thought you were." Peter bent a glance of deep admiration on his sister.

"By Jove, Grace, you're a wonder!" he murmured. "And you got all that by just listening to a conversation that wasn't meant for you. Now I think I am—"

"Keep still, Peter. Di—"

"Miss Sinclair glanced up again. 'Did I understand that you were each supplied with an apartment in this hotel?' she queried."

"But I want to find out about the New Thought," said Grace, "and, besides, my room is warm, and yours is nice and cool."

"How about the parlor?" suggested Miss Sinclair, "or the piazza, or the summer-house, or the tennis court, or the woods, or—"

"I never thought to see such inhospitality," said Peter; "but I only dropped in to say farewell."

"Well, Diana," said Grace, in a voice of determination, "you know that Mr. Gresham I introduced you to last night?"

"Certainly she knows him after you introduced him," said Peter helpfully.

"You know, Di, he is staying at the Hunting Club."

"Yes," said Diana, with polite interest.

"Well, I met him on the links before breakfast, and he thinks you are Mrs. Sinclair."

"That is no matter. You can tell him that I am not."

"But I didn't. You see, Di, he is awfully nice. I used to see him last winter at Uncle Will's; and he doesn't like old maids."

Grace at last had not only an attentive but a convulsed audience. She was standing on one foot and kicking the skirt of her dress with the other, in a manner retained from childhood for moments of embarrassment, but she eyed her cousin and her brother argumentatively, as they wiped away the tears of mirth.

"Did you call her Mrs. Sinclair?" demanded Peter. She nodded.

"But anyone can see it in the register, you silly." "Silly yourself! I put a big blot right in front of her name so that it looks like Mrs."

Peter gasped. "Do you know where you will bring up, young lady?"

"And I called you Mrs. Sinclair to the clerk, too," said Grace, who had regained her assurance now that the pews were broken, "and if you go around correcting me, Di, we'll get ourselves talked about."

"Wouldn't that jiggle you?" said Peter solemnly. "Our little Grace is a forger."

"I think, Grace," began Miss Sinclair, with sternness, and then she broke into laughter. "There is only one thing," she said, when she had got her breath, "you can keep your Mr. Gresham at a distance. I don't like widowers. I prefer the young and fair—the Jackson boy for choice."

"He isn't a widower."

"No, the Jackson boy isn't a widower," said Peter.

"Mr. Gresham isn't a widower. He is a bachelor."

"Good heavens!" said Peter. "And you are trying to put Diana off with an old bachelor. Have you no family feeling?"

"I do wish you'd keep still, Peter. He's awfully popular, Diana; he is so clever, and so handsome, and—"

Diana waved an impatient hand. "Whatever he is," she said, "don't expect me to entertain him. Why, he must be nearly forty."

"He is nothing of the kind."

"Say," broke in Peter, who had been doing some thinking, "where is Mr. Sinclair supposed to be?"

"There isn't any. She's a widow."

Indignation sat upon Peter's countenance. "I refuse right now to be a party to anything of the kind," he protested firmly. "It is taking a mean advantage just because the man isn't here. Sit and laugh heartily if you will, Diana; I am not going to have Sinclair killed off in his absence."

"You are a ridiculous pair," said Diana. "But you understand, Grace, that it is only because I do not intend to see your elderly friend—Grace sniffed indignantly—that I do not insist upon your immediately correcting your misstatements. I should advise your going away and meditating on the difference between George Washington and Sapphira."

"But, Di, if you'd only think that you are Mrs. Sinclair you see you would be."

"And to this has the New Thought led us," ejaculated Peter. "Let us shut it, my children!"

On a green bench under a spreading tree sat Diana, and before her stood Mr. Gresham. He was surveying her with interest.

"It is strange that you don't like me, Mrs. Sinclair," he said.

She looked up at him.

"Oh, by your manner," he answered, as if she had asked the question, "you refuse to have anything to do with me. How often have I observed you and Grace and Peter having an hilarious time, but no matter how stealthily my approach, how unobtrusively my attempt to share the gaiety, you invariably seek the seclusion of sphinxlike silence. Modestly, I wonder at it."

"You imagine—" she began.

"You are too honest to finish that," he said, as she paused. "Besides, why should I imagine it? My opinion would naturally be that you would be glad to have me to talk to—considering the scarcity of people. On the contrary, you never bestow a word upon me unless I hold you up for it."

"I think this time I shall refuse to be held up," with a smile to temper the decision in her voice. The more the acquaintance grew the greater the complications. She picked up her book again, deliberately.

"I will keep very still," he said. There was another green bench under the tree. He sat down on it and laid his hat beside him. He did not even look at her. When she unwillingly glanced at him, over the top of her book, he had his head thrown back and was gazing up into the green branches. He was very handsome. Miss Sinclair found this fact getting mixed up with Sidney Lanier's symphony when she returned to her book. She frowned and endeavored to concentrate her mind on the poem. Her neighbor was abnormally quiet. She closed her book and rose. Instantly he was on his feet.

"If you have finished reading I'll walk up with you," he said. There was solemnity in his tone. She smiled in spite of herself.

"I have not finished reading," she said. "I am going down by the brook."

"Then I'll walk down there with you," obligingly. "There are cows."

Frances Diana Sinclair sat down again on the seat she had just left. She did not know whether to be angry or not, and while she was making up her mind Peter's voice came plaintively across the lawn, and the panting Peter followed.

"What is it?" she inquired with some asperity, the situation getting on her nerves. "It is that woman with the bird book," explained Peter in a tone of great exhaustion. "She made me walk across three fields to listen to a Wheeler and Wilson thrush, and I caught a little sunstroke. And here was you, my appointed protector, having a nice, comfortable, cool, and happy time under a tree."

"He dropped upon the bench beside her. 'Did she ever attack you, Mr. Gresham?' he inquired."

"She never walked me across three fields," said Mr. Gresham. "She only asks me whether I've noticed the cloud effects."

"That's her," assented Peter. "I never look at the clouds any more. I inquire in the morning if there are to be any effects, and if there are I stay in. I used to be a perfect child of nature, too."

"I think you underestimate that sunstroke, Peter," said Diana.

"Perhaps I do, Mrs. Sinclair," he murmured, and Mr. Gresham noticed how she colored and then laughed. Her face was charming when she laughed, and the fact that all her laughter seemed to be against her will made it all the more alluring. She straightened out the curves in her red lips and looked at Peter severely.

"Where is Grace?" she asked.

"Off somewhere with the Jackson kid. He's been leaving ever since we came; told me he only ran up for a day's fishing."

"How many guests are there?" Mr. Gresham appreciated Peter's presence as an aid to conversation.

"Well, there's Mrs. Iverson. She reads Emerson between meals, and she says you are what you think you are."

"Isn't true," said Mr. Gresham. "I thought I was an interesting and agreeable companion, and I am not."

Diana ruthlessly interrupted Peter's demand for light on this statement. "Why, here is Grace," she said, as if she had supposed that young person to be in China.

Grace and the Jackson boy came up, smiling. Grace sat down beside Mr. Gresham and the Jackson boy dropped onto the grass.

"Caught those fish yet, Jackson?" inquired Peter.

"No," said the Jackson boy, solemnly, eyeing the sky. "I believe I'll go to-morrow. It's been miserable weather for fishing."

"We have been telling Mr. Gresham about the guests," Peter observed, after he had waited successfully for the Jackson boy to turn crimson. "We began with the New Thought woman, the one that helps you with suggestions, Grace."

"I wish some one would help you with a few in the way of manners," said Grace sharply. "You simply monopolize conversation."

"It is my one little gift. I do what I can with it. If I had your talents—"

"There are only half a dozen guests," put in Diana, with some effect of haste. She laid her hand on Peter's arm, and he subsided with a gentle grin at her. Mr. Gresham fell into a half-teasing conversation with Grace. His manner with her was charming, and such as the Jackson boy could see without a pang. Diana caught herself smiling once or twice at the badinage. He caught her, too, and smiled quizzically into her eyes. An air of peace hung over the group.

"Jove!" said Peter. "I wish William could come on for the fishing."

"William?" demanded Grace.

"Why, Mr. Sinclair, of course."

Mr. Gresham paused a little in something he was going to say. Grace gave a start and glared at Peter. Diana, who had kept her youthful propensity to laugh at the wrong time, smiled helplessly.

"If he could come on for a week and bring Willie," pursued Peter. Diana gasped. Grace tried to conceal her unwilling mirth in the face of her handkerchief. Peter sat in pleased and contemplative silence.

"I am afraid," said the Jackson boy, "that they would find it pretty poor fishing."

"Not they," said Peter promptly. "Why, it

wouldn't make any difference to Willie and his father—"

"Oh!" Diana appealed to the Jackson boy with sudden animation. "Will you come and show me where that fir balsam is?" she said. "I want to get some for a pillow." She went across the lawn with the Jackson boy. Mr. Gresham did not look up.

"Say, Diana," whispered Peter at her door that night, "he thought you were a widow. He did not say it in words, but I, Peter, could see it. He told me to say that he would not be over to-morrow; he is going to Boston."

Mr. Gresham had been gone three days. Diana had taken advantage of the uninterrupted solitude a deuce to extract from Grace and Peter a solemn promise to refrain from all allusions to any husband, departed or otherwise. Now, with a mind at ease she sat on the piazza on the afternoon of Mr. Gresham's return, and denied to herself that she found it a natural and desirable circumstance when his tall gray-clad figure appeared at the turn in the drive. He came up the steps with his ac-

"The world isn't very large after all," he said. "It is the proper preface, isn't it, for saying you've met some one that some one else knows."

Diana, forgetting her dual role, looked a pleased interrogation. "Did you meet some one that we know?" she asked.

"Yes, I met Mr. Sinclair."

Diana gave a start and stared, her face growing crimson. Peter murmured an exclamation. Grace spoke up excitedly:

"Why, you couldn't," she said and stopped.

"I happened to sit beside him on the train," he explained in answer to her contradiction, "and we got to talking about this place. He was good enough to tell me his name and say that Mrs. Sinclair was staying here. It was rather odd, wasn't it? I had supposed that Mrs. Sinclair, like you and Peter, was from the West." He had kept his eyes from Diana during this speech. Now he turned to her again. "Mr. Sinclair told me that he expected to run up over Sunday."

The open-eyed horror with which this was received was too patent to be ignored. Mr. Gresham turned to Peter, who was purple with repressed



"If you have finished reading, I'll walk up with you," he said.

customed athletic stride and shoo hands. Diana greeted him smilingly.

Grace and Peter, rackets in hand, came out from the house. "Come and have a set after you are through talking to Diana," they both urged. They were very fond of Mr. Gresham. But it seemed that Mr. Gresham was not even sitting down.

"I am on my way to the village," he said. "I didn't really mean to stop at all. Please don't count this one up against me. I am coming over later to call." Then he turned to Diana, who was looking unusually lovely in her best white gown with her head thrown against the high back of her chair.

enjoyment.

"I'll make my formal call later, then," he said easily. "It is nice to be in the hills again." He lifted his hat and went down the steps, avoiding a look at Diana. The three left behind sat in silence. It was Peter who broke it. "It's up to us, now, to do something," he said briskly.

"In my opinion," said Diana, "you have done quite enough."

"Now, see here, Diana," Peter addressed her with gripped firmness—"I'm not going to be blamed for more than I've done. I didn't put Sinclair on that train."

"Well, you insisted on his being alive," said Grace. "And now you see! It gives me the shivers."

It's like Frankenstein, or something. You started him out, and now he's going on himself."

"Your little brain is liable to turn with this, Grace," said her brother, looking at her anxiously. "You run along and play with Jackson. Leave it to mature minds to cope with this problem."

"I think," said Diana, "that I will excuse you both from further assistance."

Grace swung her racket excitedly. "Well, all I can say is, she remarked, 'that if you had let him stay dead you would have saved yourself a lot of trouble.' She started down the steps with a righteous switch of her skirts. Diana got her hat. 'May I ask where you are going?' said Peter."

"I don't know."

"I would offer to go with you," said Peter, "but—"

"It wouldn't do you any good," said Miss Sinclair. She plinned on the big white hat and gave an absent-minded touch to the lace of her high collar. Then she gathered up her skirts and departed.

Left alone, Peter devoted himself to meditation. As the man of the family it was his duty to straighten things out. He would go down by the big elm, intercept Mr. Gresham on his return, and explain matters. He gave Mr. Gresham half an hour longer to get through his errand in the village; then he put "Stalky and Co." in his pocket and strolled leisurely down through the fields to the big elm, and as he went he revolved in his mind how he and Mr. Gresham would laugh over the mistake, and how he would go back to the hotel and make Diana happy with the news that she was again at liberty to wear her thirty years in honorable spinsterhood. There was a bench under the tree. Peter laid himself down upon it and read.

A half hour later he closed the book with a reminiscent grin and raised himself upon his elbow to look around. One astonished stare he gave and fell back upon the bench. "Oh, my sacred name!" said Peter, out of Stalky and Co. Three people were approaching! Up the road from the village came Mr. Gresham. Down the road from the hotel came Diana. Across the fields came Grace!

Diana had reached the bench. She looked down upon the prostrate Peter, and her expression was such as to make that young man roll over and hide his face in his arms.

"I wish," said Diana, sharply, to his shaking back, "that it were possible to lose you for a moment."

"Have you noticed," gurgled Peter, "that Grace—"

Diana followed his pointing finger; then she sat down heavily on Peter's feet.

Grace climbed the stile in a rush, and descended upon them in a state of red-faced reproach. "Why in the world couldn't you stay away?" she demanded. "I came down here to tell Mr. Gresham—"

"Through souls with but a single thought," said Peter. "If you will remove a hundred and forty pounds of wrath and consternation from my feet, Diana, I will meet the approaching cause of all our woes."

Mr. Gresham exhibited no surprise at the sight of the three cousins on the bench. He was looking rather serious. He spoke directly to Diana.

"I, carelessly," he said, "neglected to give you something that Mr. Sinclair asked me to deliver." He proceeded with careful deliberation to look through his pockets, while varying emotions chased one another across the face of the waiting trio. "Ah, here it is." He produced and handed to her a flat package.

"Diana took it as if it were a bomb, and eyed it unhappily."

"It can't be for me," she said. "I—"

"It is for you," said Mr. Gresham, and Diana, after a helpless look at the others, opened it.

No one of the other three attempted to keep up any conversation while she slowly unwrapped the photograph that the package contained, and held it up before her. Even Mr. Gresham seemed to have forgotten that convention demanded a lack of interest in other people's packages. They were all openly watching Diana, and Diana was growing redder and redder.

It was a long time that she looked at it. Then she dropped it into her lap and two pairs of eager eyes fell upon it. The other pair smiled into Miss Sinclair's.

"Why," cried Grace, "it's you, Diana! Who is it with you?"

Mr. Gresham answered: "The other is Mrs. John Gresham, a cousin-in-law of mine."

"And you knew all the time." Reproach, relief, indignation, and much embarrassment mingled in Diana's tone; then a little hauteur crept in. "I don't understand how you got this," she said.

"There is a note with it," he answered.

Diana was a good deal longer reading the note than she had been looking at the picture. Nor did she lay it down when she had finished. It ran this way:

"Dear Bob: I am sending you this photograph you have wanted so long. I am sure Diana will not care, though I always meant to write her about your infatuation with her pictured self. By the way, I hear from the Osborns that she is going to Kearsarge for the summer. Too bad your business is taking you to Europe instead of to the mountains. Affectionately,

"HELEN."

"But how did you see Mr. Sinclair?" said Grace. Mr. Gresham laughed. "Mr. Sinclair is for you to explain," he said.

Grace's round eyes were still glued to the photograph in Diana's lap.

"I don't understand," she said, "how—"

"A natural desire to get even," explained Peter, "combined with the pernicious influence of the New Thought—"

"But I don't understand how he came to have Diana's picture."

"I believe I am beginning to—," he said; then he got slowly to his feet. "You go back and finish your game, Grace. Jackson is waiting. I am going up to the house and find the bird woman. I want to find out whether the yellow-tailed warbler eats seeds or worms." He pulled his still dazed sister after him and they departed across the fields.

Diana folded up the note and set silent, her eyes on the picture in her lap.

Robert Gresham sat down on the bench beside her.

"Do you understand, Diana?" he said.