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SEPTEMBER 1919

The Wedding Jest

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL

Illustrations by Maurice L. Bower

IT is a tale which they narrate in Poictesme, telling how love began between Florian de Puyange and Adelaide de la Forêt. They tell also how young Florian had earlier fancied other women for one reason or another; but that this, he knew, was the great love of his life, and a love which would endure unchanged as long as his life lasted.

And the tale tells how the Comte de la Forêt stroked a gray beard and said:

"Well, after all, Puyange is a good fief——"

"As if that mattered!" cried his daughter, indignantly. "My father, you are a deplorably sordid person."

"My dear," replied the old gentleman, "it does matter. Fiefs last."

So he gave his consent to the match, and the two young people were married on Walburga's eve, on the last day of April.

And they narrate how Florian de Puyange was vexed by a thought that was in his mind. He did not know what this thought was. But something he had overlooked; something there was he had meant to do, and had not done: and a troubling consciousness of this lurked at the back of his mind like a small formless cloud. All day, while bustling about other matters, he had groped toward this unapprehended thought.

Now he had it: Tiburce.

The young Vicomte de Puyange stood in the doorway, looking back into the bright hall where they of Storisende were dancing at his marriage feast. His wife, for a whole half-hour his wife, was dancing with handsome Etienne de Nérac. Her glance met Florian's, and Adelaide flashed him an especial smile. Her hand went out as though to touch him; for all that the width of the hall severed them.

Florian remembered presently to smile back at her. Then he went out of the castle into a starless night that was as quiet as an unvoiced menace. A small and hard and gnarled-looking moon ruled over the dusk's secrecy. The moon this night, afloat in a luminous, gray void, somehow reminded Florian of a glistening and unripe huge apple.

The foliage about him moved at most as a sleeper breathes as Florian descended eastward through the walled gardens, and so came to the graveyard. White mists were rising, such mists as the witches of Amneran notoriously evoked in these parts on each Walburga's eve to purchase recreations which squeamishness leaves undescribed.

For five years now Tiburce d'Arnaye had lain there. Florian thought of his dead comrade and of the love which had been between them—a love more perfect and deeper and higher than commonly exists between men; and the thought came to Florian, and was petulantly thrust away, that Adelaide loved ignorantly where Tiburce d'Arnaye had loved with comprehension. Yes, he had known almost the worst of Florian de Puyange, this dear lad who, none the less, had flung himself between Black Torrismond's sword and the breast of Florian de Puyange. And it seemed to Florian unfair that all should prosper with him, and Tiburce lie there imprisoned in dirt which shut away the color and variousness of things and the drollness of things, wherein Tiburce d'Arnaye had taken such joy. And Tiburce, it seemed to Florian—for this was a strange night—was struggling futilely under all that dirt, which shut out movement, and clogged the mouth of Tiburce, and would not let him speak, and was struggling to voice a desire which was unsatisfied and hopeless.

"O comrade dear," said Florian, "you

who loved merriment, there is a feast afoot on this strange night, and my heart is sad that you are not here to share in the feasting. Come, come, Tiburce, a right trusty friend you were to me; and, living or dead, you should not fail to make merry at my wedding."

Thus he spoke. White mists were rising, and it was Walburga's eve.

So a queer thing happened, and it was that the earth upon the grave began to heave and to break in fissures, as when a mole passes through the ground. And other queer things happened after that, and presently Tiburce d'Arnaye was standing there, gray and vague in the moonlight as he stood there brushing the mold from his brows, and as he stood there blinking bright, wild eyes. And he was not greatly changed, it seemed to Florian; only the brows and nose of Tiburce cast no shadows upon his face, nor did his moving hand cast any shadow there, either, though the moon was naked overhead.

"You had forgotten the promise that was between us," said Tiburce; and his voice had not changed much, though it was smaller.

"It is true. I had forgotten. I remember now." And Florian shivered a little, not with fear, but with distaste.

"A man prefers to forget these things when he marries. It is natural enough. But are you not afraid of me who come from yonder?"

"Why should I be afraid of you, Tiburce, who gave your life for mine?"

"I do not say. But we change yonder."

"And does love change, Tiburce? For surely love is immortal."

"Living or dead, love changes. I do not say love dies in us who may hope to gain nothing more from love. Still, lying alone in the dark clay, there is nothing to do as yet save to think of what life was, and of what sunlight was, and of what we sang and whispered in dark places when we had lips; and of how young grass and murmuring waters and the high stars beget fine follies even now; and to think of how merry our loved ones still contrive to be even now with their new playfellows. Such reflections are not always conducive to philanthropy."

"Tell me," said Florian then, "and is there no way in which we who are still alive may aid you to be happier yonder?"

"Oh, but assuredly," replied Tiburce d'Arnaye, and he discoursed of curious matters; and as he talked, the mists about the graveyard thickened. "And so," Tiburce said, in concluding his tale, "it is not permitted that I make merry at your wedding after the fashion of those who are still in the warm flesh. But now that you recall our ancient compact, it is permitted I have my peculiar share in the merriment, and I drink with you to the bride's welfare."

"I drink," said Florian as he took the proffered cup, "to the welfare of my beloved Adelaide, whom alone of women I have really loved, and whom I shall love always."

"I perceive," replied the other, "that you must still be having your joke."

Then Florian drank, and after him Tiburce. And Florian said:

"But it is a strange drink, Tiburce, and now that you have tasted it, you are changed."

"You have not changed, at least," Tiburce answered, and for the first time he smiled, a little perturbingly by reason of the change in him.

"Tell me," said Florian, "of how you fare yonder."

So Tiburce told him of yet more curious matters. Now the augmenting mists had shut off all the rest of the world. Florian could see only vague, rolling graynesses and a gray and changed Tiburce sitting there, with bright, wild eyes, and discoursing in a small, chill voice. The appearance of a woman came, and sat beside him on the right. She, too, was gray, as became Eve's senior; and she made a sign which Florian remembered, and it troubled him. Tiburce said then:

"And now, young Florian, you who were once so dear to me, it is to your welfare I drink."

"I drink to yours, Tiburce."

Tiburce drank first; and Florian, having drunk in turn, cried out: "You have changed beyond recognition!"

"You have not changed," Tiburce d'Arnaye replied again. "Now let me tell you of our pastimes yonder."

With that he talked of exceedingly curious matters. And Florian began to grow dissatisfied, for Tiburce was no longer recognizable, and Tiburce whispered things uncomfortable to believe; and other eyes, as wild as his, but lit with red flarings from behind, like a beast's eyes, showed in the mists to this side and to that side, and unhappy beings were passing through the mists upon secret errands which they discharged unwillingly. Then, too, the appearance of a gray man now sat to the left of that which had been Tiburce d'Arnaye, and this new-comer was marked so that all might know who he was; and Florian's heart was troubled to note how handsome and how admirable was that desecrated face even now.

"But I must go," said Florian, "lest they miss me at Storisende and Adelaide be worried."

"Surely it will not take long to toss off a third cup. Nay, comrade, who was once so dear, let us two now drink our last toast together. Then go, in Sclaug's name, and celebrate your marriage. But before that let us drink to the continuance of human mirth-making everywhere."

Florian drank first. Then Tiburce took his turn, looking at Florian as he himself drank slowly. As he drank, Tiburce d'Arnaye was changed even more, and the shape of him altered, and the shape of him trickled as though Tiburce were builded of sliding fine white sand. So Tiburce d'Arnaye returned to his own place. The appearances that had sat to his left and to his right were no longer there to trouble Florian with memories. And Florian saw that the mists of Walburga's eve had departed, and that the sun was rising, and that the graveyard was all overgrown with nettles and tall grass.

He had not remembered the place being thus, and it seemed to him the night had passed with unnatural quickness. But he thought more of the fact that he had been beguiled into spending his wedding-night in a graveyard in such questionable company, and of what explanation he could make to Adelaide.

THE tale tells how Florian de Puy-sange came in the dawn through flower-

ing gardens, and heard young people from afar, already about their maying. Two by two he saw them from afar as they went with romping and laughter into the tall woods behind Storisende to fetch back the May-pole with dubious old rites. And as they went they sang, as was customary, that song which Raimbaut de Vaqueiras made in the ancient time in honor of May's ageless triumph.

Sang they:

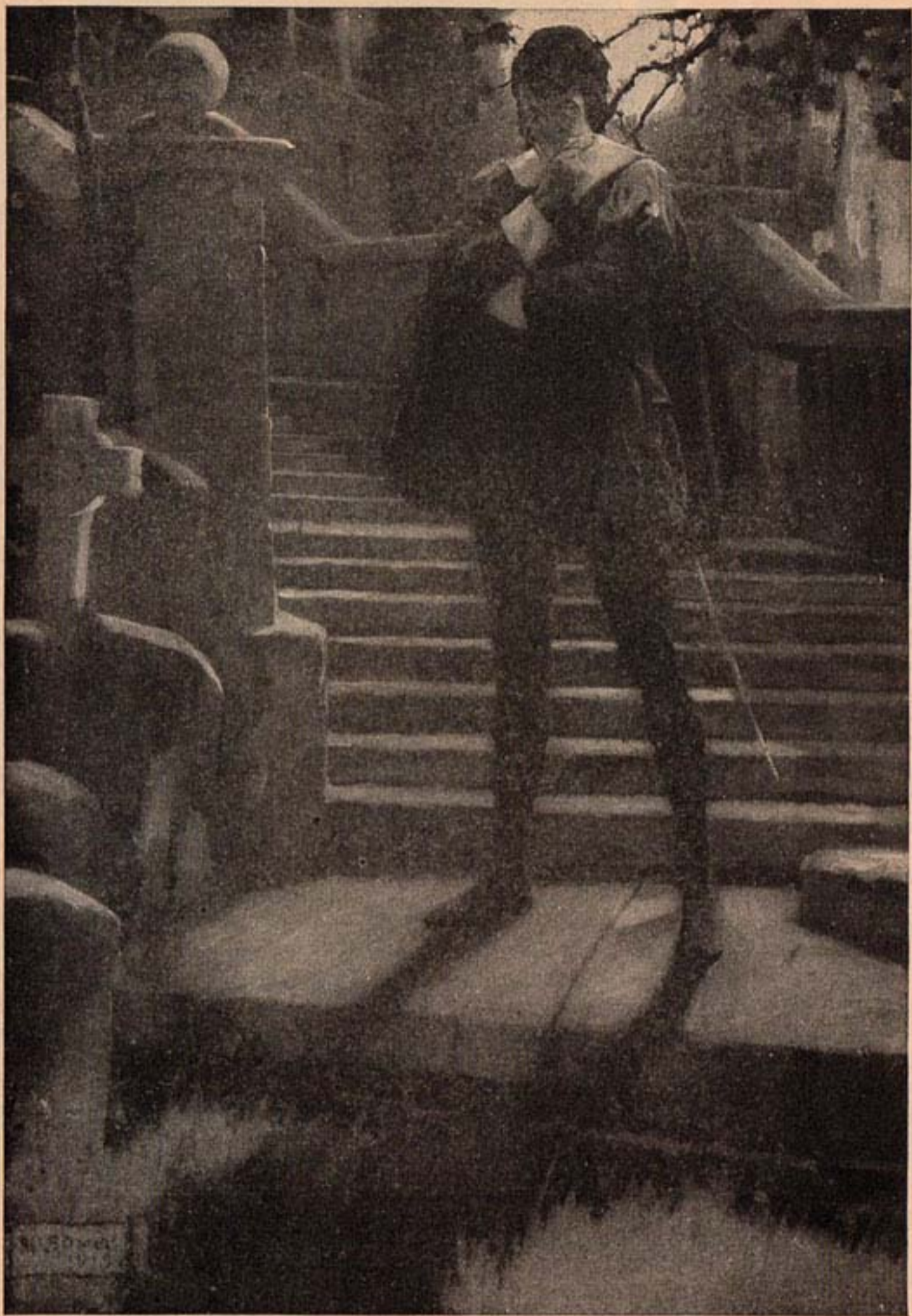
"May shows with godlike showing
To-day for each that sees
May's magic overthrowing
All musty memories
In him whom May decrees
To be love's own. He saith,
*I wear love's liveries
Until released by death.*

"Thus all we laud May's sowing,
Nor heed how harvests please
When nowhere grain worth growing
Greets autumn's questing breeze,
And garnerers garner these—
Vain words and wasted breath
And spilth and tasteless lees—
Until released by death.

"Unwillingly foreknowing
That love with May-time flees,
We take this day's bestowing,
And feed on fantasies
Such as love lends for ease
Where none but travaileth,
With lean, infrequent fees,
Until released by death."

And Florian shook his sleek, black head. "A very foolish and pessimistical old song, a superfluous song, and a song that is particularly out of place in the loveliest spot in the loveliest of all possible worlds."

Yet Florian took no inventory of the gardens. There was but a happy sense of green and gold, with blue topping all; of twinkling, fluent, tossing leaves and of the gray under side of elongated, straining leaves; a sense of pert bird-noises, and of a longer shadow than usual slanting before him, and a sense of youth and well-being everywhere. Certainly it was not a morning-wherein pessimism might hope to flourish.



"The earth upon the grave began to heave and to break in fissures"

Instead, it was of Adelaide that Florian thought: of the tall, impulsive, and yet timid, fair girl who was both shrewd and innocent, and of her tenderly colored loveliness, and of his abysmally unmerited felicity in having won her. Why, but what, he reflected, grimacing—what if he had too hastily married somebody else? For he had earlier fancied other women for one reason or another: but this, he knew, was the great love of his life, and a love which would endure unchanged as long as his life lasted.

THE tale tells how Florian de Puy-sange found Adelaide in the company of two ladies who were unknown to him. One of these was very old, the other an imposing matron in middle life. The three were pleasantly shaded by young oak-trees; beyond was a tall hedge of clipped yew. The older women were at chess, while Adelaide bent her meek, golden head to some of that fine needle-work in which the girl delighted. And beside them rippled a small sunlit stream, which babbled and gurgled with silver flashes. Florian hastily noted these things as he ran laughing to his wife.

"Heart's dearest!" he cried. And he saw, perplexed, that Adelaide had risen with a faint, wordless cry, and was gazing at him as though she were puzzled and alarmed a very little.

"Such an adventure as I have to tell you of!" said Florian then.

"But, hey, young man, who are you that would seem to know my daughter so well?" demanded the lady in middle life, and rose majestically from her chess-game.

Florian stared, as he well might.

"Your daughter, madame! But certainly you are not Dame Melicent."

At this the old, old woman raised her nodding head.

"Dame Melicent? And was it I you were seeking, sir?"

Now Florian looked from one to the other of these incomprehensible strangers, bewildered; and his eyes came back to his lovely wife, and his lips smiled irresolutely.

"Is this some jest to punish me, my dear?" But then a new and graver

trouble kindled in his face, and his eyes narrowed, for there was something odd about his wife also.

"I have been drinking in queer company," he said. "It must be that my head is not yet clear. Now certainly it seems to me that you are Adelaide de la Forêt, and certainly it seems to me that you are not Adelaide."

The girl replied:

"Why, no, messire; I am Sylvie de Nointel."

"Come, come," said the middle-aged lady, briskly, "let us have an end of this play-acting! There has been no Adelaide de la Forêt in these parts for some twenty-five years, as nobody knows better than I. Young fellow, let us have a sniff at you. No, you are not tipsy, after all. Well, I am glad of that. So let us get to the bottom of this business. What do they call you when you are at home?"

"Florian de Puy-sange," he answered, speaking meekly enough. This capable large person was to the young man rather intimidating.

"La!" said she. She looked at him very hard. She nodded gravely two or three times, so that her double chin opened and shut.

"Yes, and you favor him. How old are you?" He told her twenty-four. She said inconsequently: "So I was a fool, after all. Well, young man, you will never be as good-looking as your father, but I trust you have an honest nature. However, by-gones are by-gones. Is the old rascal still living, and was it he that had the impudence to send you to me?"

"My father, madame, was slain at the Battle of Marchfeld—"

"Some fifty years ago! And you are twenty-four. Young man, your parentage had unusual features, or else we are at cross-purposes. Let us start at the beginning of this. You tell us you are called Florian de Puy-sange and that you have been drinking in queer company. Now let us have the whole story."

Florian told of last night's happenings, with no more omissions than seemed desirable with feminine auditors.

Then the old woman said:

"I think this is a true tale, my daugh-

ter, for the witches of Amneran contrive strange things, with mists to aid them, and with Lilith and Sclaug to abet. Yes, and this fate has fallen before to men that have been over-friendly with the dead."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the stout lady.

"But, no, my daughter. Thus seven persons slept at Ephesus, from the time of Decius to the time of Theodosius—"

"Still, Mother—"

"And the proof of it is that they were called Constantine and Dionysius and John and Malchus and Marcian and Maximian and Serapion. They were duly canonized. You cannot deny that this thing happened without asserting no less than seven blessed saints to have been unprincipled liars, and that would be a very horrible heresy——"

"Yet, Mother, you know as well as I do—"

"And thus Epimenides, another excellently spoken-of saint, slept at Athens for fifty-seven years. Thus Charlemagne slept in the Untersberg, and will sleep until the ravens of Miramon Lluagor have left his mountains. Thus Rhyming Thomas in the Eildon Hills, thus Ogier in Avalon, thus Oisin——"

The old lady bade fair to go on interminably in her gentle, resolute, piping old voice, but the other interrupted.

"Well, Mother, do not excite yourself about it, for it only makes your asthma worse, and does no especial good to anybody. Things may be as you say. Certainly I intended nothing irreligious. Yet these extended naps, appropriate enough for saints and emperors, are out of place in one's own family. So, if it is not stuff and nonsense, it ought to be. And that I stick to."

"But we forget the boy, my dear," said the old lady. "Now listen, Florian de Puyange. Thirty years ago last night, to the month and the day, it was that you vanished from our knowledge, leaving my daughter a forsaken bride. For I am what the years have made of Dame Melicent, and this is my daughter Adelaide, and yonder is her daughter Sylvie de Nointel."

"La! Mother," observed the stout lady, "but are you certain it was the last of

April? I had been thinking it was some time in June. And I protest it could not have been all of thirty years. Let me see now, Sylvie, how old is your brother Richard? Twenty-eight, you say. Well, Mother, I always said you had a marvelous memory for things like that, and I often envy you. But how time does fly, to be sure!"

And Florian was perturbed.

"For this is an awkward thing, and Tiburce has played me an unworthy trick. He never did know when to leave off joking; but such posthumous frivolity is past endurance. For, see now, in what a pickle it has landed me! I have outlived my friends, I may encounter difficulty in regaining my fiefs, and certainly I have lost the fairest wife man ever had. Oh, can it be, madame, that you are indeed my Adelaide!"

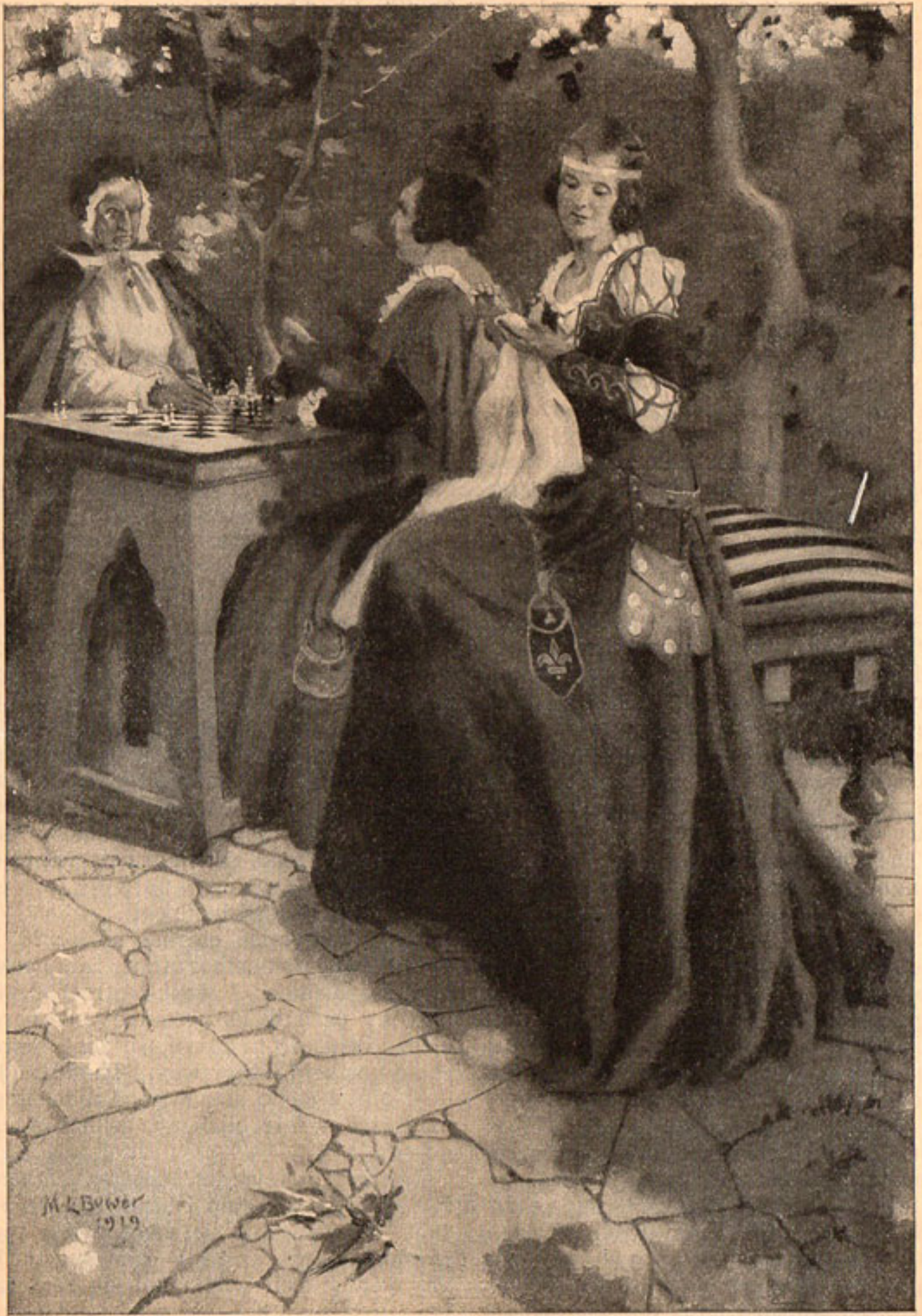
"Yes, every pound of me, poor boy, and that says much."

"And that you have been untrue to the eternal fidelity which you swore to me here by this very stream? Oh, but I cannot believe it was thirty years ago, for not a grass-blade or a pebble has been altered; and I perfectly remember the lapping of water under those lichened rocks, and that continuous file of ripples yonder, which are shaped like arrow-heads."

Adelaide rubbed her nose.

"Did I promise eternal fidelity? I can hardly remember that far back. But I remember I wept a great deal, and my parents assured me you were either dead or a rascal, so that tears could not help either way. Then Ralph de Nointel came along, good man, and made me a fair husband, as husbands go——"

"As for that stream," then said Dame Melicent, "it is often I have thought of that stream, sitting here with my grandchildren where I once sat with gay young men whom nobody remembers now save me. Yes, it is strange to think that instantly, and within the speaking of any simple word, no drop of water retains the place it held before the word was spoken; and yet the stream remains unchanged, and stays as it was when I sat here with those young men who are gone. Yes, that is a



"The older women were at chess"

strange thought, and it is a sad thought, too, for those of us who are old."

"But, Mother, of course the stream remains unchanged," agreed Dame Adelaide. "Streams always do except at high water. Everybody knows that, and I see nothing remarkable about it. As for you, Florian, if you stickle for love's being an immortal affair," she added, with a large twinkle, "I would have you know I have been a widow for three years. So the matter could be arranged."

Florian looked at her sadly. To him the situation was incongruous with the terrible archness of a fat woman.

"But, madame, you are no longer the same person."

She patted him upon the shoulder.

"Come, Florian, there is some sense in you, after all. Console yourself, lad, with the reflection that if you had stuck manfully by your wife instead of mooning about graveyards, I would still be just as I am to-day, and you would be tied to me. Your friend probably knew what he was about when he drank to our welfare, for we should never have suited each other, as you can see for yourself. Well, Mother, many things fall out queerly in this world, but with age we learn to accept what happens without flustering too much over it. What are we to do with this resurrected old lover of mine?"

It was horrible to Florian to see how prosaically these women dealt with his unusual misadventure. Here was a miracle occurring virtually before their eyes, and these women accepted it with maddening tranquillity as an affair for which they were not responsible. Florian began to reflect that elderly persons were always more or less unsympathetic and inadequate.

"First of all," said Dame Melicent, "I would give him some breakfast. He must be hungry after all these years. And you could put him in Adhelmar's room—"

"But," Florian said wildly, to Dame Adelaide, "you have committed the crime of bigamy, and you are, after all, my wife!"

She replied, herself not unworried:

"Yes; but, Mother, both the cook and the butler are somewhere in the bushes

yonder, up to some nonsense that I prefer to know nothing about. You know how servants are, particularly on holidays. I could scramble him some eggs, though, with a rasher. And Adhelmar's room it had better be, I suppose, though I had meant to have it turned out. But as for bigamy and being your wife," she concluded more cheerfully, "it seems to me the least said the soonest mended. It is to nobody's interest to rake up those foolish bygones, so far as I can see."

"Adelaide, you profane equally love, which is divine, and marriage, which is a holy sacrament."

"Florian, do you really love Adelaide de Nointel?" asked this terrible woman. "And now that I am free to listen to your proposals, do you wish to marry me?"

"Well, no," said Florian; "for, as I have just said, you are no longer the same person."

"Why, then, you see for yourself. So do you quit talking nonsense about immortality and sacraments."

"But, still," cried Florian, "love is immortal. Yes, I repeat to you, precisely as I told Tiburce, love is immortal."

Then said Dame Melicent, nodding her shriveled old head:

"When I was young, and served by nimbler senses and desires, and housed in brightly colored flesh, there were many men who loved me. Minstrels yet tell of the men that loved me, and of how many tall men were slain because of their love for me, and of how in the end it was Perion who won me. For the noblest and the most faithful of all my lovers was Perion of the Forest, and through tempestuous years he sought me with a love that conquered time and chance; and so he won me. Thereafter he made me a fair husband, as husbands go. But I might not stay the girl he had loved, nor might he remain the lad that Melicent had dreamed of, with dreams be-drugging the long years in which Demetrios held Melicent a prisoner, and youth went away from her. No, Perion and I could not do that, any more than might two drops of water there retain their place in the stream's flowing. So Perion and I grew old to-

gether, friendly enough; and our senses and desires began to serve us more drowsily, so that we did not greatly mind the falling away of youth, nor greatly mind to note what shriveled hands now moved before us, performing common tasks; and we were content enough. But of the high passion that had wedded us there was no trace, and of little senseless human bickerings there were a great many. For one thing"—and the old lady's voice was changed—"for one thing, he was foolishly particular about what he would eat and what he would not eat, and that upset my housekeeping, and I had never any patience with such nonsense."

"Well, none the less," said Florian, "it is not quite nice of you to acknowledge it."

Then said Dame Adelaide:

"That is a true word, Mother. All men get finicky about their food, and think they are the only persons to be considered, and there is no end to it if once you begin to humor them. So there has to be a stand made. Well, and indeed my poor Ralph, too, was all for kissing and pretty talk at first, and I accepted it willingly enough. You know how girls are. They like to be made much of, and it is perfectly natural. But that leads to children. And when the children began to come, I had not much time to bother with him; and Ralph had his farming and his warfaring to keep him busy. A man with a growing family cannot afford to neglect his affairs. And certainly, being no fool, he began to notice that girls here and there had brighter eyes and trimmer waists than I. I do not know what such observations may have led to when he was away from me; I never inquired into it, because in such matters all men are fools. But I put up with no nonsense at home, and he made me a fair husband, as husbands go. That much I will say for him gladly; and if any widow says more than that, Florian, do you beware of her, for she is an untruthful woman."

"Be that as it may," replied Florian, "it is not quite becoming to speak thus of your dead husband. No doubt you speak the truth; there is no telling what sort of person you may have married in

what still seems to me unseemly haste to provide me with a successor: but even so, a little charitable prevarication would be far more edifying."

He spoke with such earnestness that there fell a silence. The women seemed to pity him. And in the silence Florian heard from afar young persons returning from the woods behind Storisende, and bringing with them the May-pole. They were still singing.

Sang they:

"Unwillingly foreknowing
That love with May-time flees,
We take this day's bestowing,
And feed on fantasies."

THE tale tells how lightly and sweetly, and compassionately, too, then spoke young Sylvie de Nointel:

"Ah, but, assuredly, Messire Florian, you do not argue with my pets quite seriously. Old people always have some such queer notions. Of course love all depends upon what sort of person you are. Now, as I see it, mama and grandmama are not the sort of persons who have real love-affairs. Devoted as I am to both of them, I cannot but perceive they are lacking in real depth of sentiment. They simply do not understand such matters. They are fine, straightforward, practical persons, poor dears, and always have been, of course, for in things like that one does not change, as I have often noticed. And father, and grandfather, too, as I remember him, was kind-hearted and admirable and all that, but nobody could ever have expected him to be a satisfactory lover. Why, he was bald as an egg, the poor pet!"

And Sylvie laughed again at the preposterous notions of old people. She flashed an especial smile at Florian. Her hand went out as though to touch him, in an unforgotten gesture. "Old people do not understand," said Sylvie de Nointel in tones which took this handsome young fellow ineffably into confidence.

"Mademoiselle," said Florian, with a sigh that was part relief and all approval, "it is you who speak the truth, and your elders have fallen victims to the cynicism of a crassly material ag

Love is immortal when it is really love and one is the right sort of person. There is the love—known to how few, alas! and a passion of which I regret to find your mother incapable—that endures unchanged until the end of life.”

“I am so glad you think so, Messire Florian,” she answered demurely.

“And do you not think so, mademoiselle?”

“How should I know,” she asked him, “as yet?” He noted she had incredibly long lashes.

“Thrice happy is he that convinces you!” says Florian. And about them, who were young in the world’s recaptured youth, spring triumphed with an ageless rural pageant, and birds cried to their mates. He noted the red brevity of her lips and their probable softness.

Meanwhile the elder women regarded each other.

“It is the season of May. They are young and they are together. Poor children!” said Dame Melicent. “Youth

cries to youth for the toys of youth, and saying, ‘Lo! I cry with the voice of a great god!’ ”

“Still,” said Madame Adelaide, “Puy-sange is a good fief.”

But Florian heeded neither of them as he stood there by the sunlit stream, in which no drop of water retained its place for a moment, and which yet did not alter in appearance at all. He did not heed his elders for the excellent reason that Sylvie de Nointel was about to speak, and he preferred to listen to her. For this girl, he knew, was lovelier than any other person had ever been since Eve first raised just such admiring, innocent, and venturesome eyes to inspect what must have seemed to her the quaintest of all animals, called man. So it was with a shrug that Florian remembered how he had earlier fancied other women for one reason or another; since this, he knew, was the great love of his life, and a love which would endure unchanged as long as his life lasted.



Verona Blossomed Once

By CHARLES BRACKETT

Verona blossomed once in Juliet,
And once the Scottish land caught flower of fire
In that disastrous Mary; Herefordshire
Put forth a loveliness like mignonette
In Nell of Drury Lane, and Domremy
Bore Joan a sworded lily. These have been
Great ladies and God’s flowers, but I have seen
Our old North country bloom as marvelously.

Some blind force in the root gropes toward the flower,
Finds what is best in earth, and builds perfume
And cloudy color and thin leaves that stir
In the clear winds all day. A kindred power,
Delicate and tremendous in the womb,
Gathered her elements and fashioned her.