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THE EAGLE'S SHADOW

By James Branch Cabell



BUT THE VISION WAS PEEPING OVER THE
BANISTERS AT HIM

XIV

REGRET to confess that Mr. Woods did not toss feverishly about his bed all through the silent watches of the night. He was very miserable, but he was also twenty-six. That is an age when the blind bow-god deals no fatal wounds. It is an age to suffer poignantly, if you will; an age wherein to aspire to the dearest woman on earth, to write her halting verses, to lose her, to affect the *clichés* of cynicism, to hear the chimes at midnight—and, after it all, to sleep like a top.

So Billy slept. And kind Hypnos loosed a dream through the gates of ivory that lifted him to a delectable land where Peggy was nineteen, and had never heard of Kennaston, and was unbelievably sweet and dear and beautiful. But presently they and the Colonel put forth to sea—on a great carved writing-desk—fishing for sharks, which the Colonel said were very plentiful in those waters; and Frederick R. Woods climbed up out of the sea, and said Billy was a fool and must go to college; and Peggy said that was impossible, as seventeen hundred and fifty thousand children had to be given an education apiece, and they couldn't spare one for Billy; and a missionary from Zambesi Land came out of one of the secret drawers and said Billy must give him both of his feet, as he needed them for his working-girls' classes, and thereupon the sharks poked their heads out of the water and began, in a deafening chorus, to cry, "Feet, feet, feet!" And then Billy woke with a start, and found it was only the birds chattering in the dawn outside.

Then he was miserable.

He tossed, and groaned, and dozed, and smoked cigarettes until he could stand it no longer. He got up and dressed, in sheer desperation, and went for a walk in the gardens.

The day was clear as a new-minted coin. It was not yet wholly aired, not wholly free from the damp savor of night, but low in the east the sun was taking heart. A mile-long shadow footed it with Billy Woods in his pacings through the amber-checked gardens. Actæon-like, he surprised the world at its toilet, and its fleeting grace fortified his spirits.

But his thoughts pestered him like gnats. The things he said to the roses it is not necessary to set down.

XV

AFTER a vituperative half-hour or so Mr. Woods was hungry. He came back toward Selwoode; and upon the terrace in front of the house he found Kathleen Saumarez.

During the warm weather one corner of the terrace had been converted, by means of gay red-and-white awnings, into

a sort of living-room. There were chairs, tables, sofa-cushions, bowls of roses and any number of bright-colored rugs. Altogether, it was a cozy place, and the glowing hues of its furnishings were very becoming to Mrs. Saumarez, who sat there writing industriously.

It was a thought embarrassing. They had avoided one another yesterday—rather obviously—both striving to put off a necessarily awkward meeting. Now it had come. And now, somehow, their eyes met for a moment, and they laughed frankly, and the awkwardness was gone.

"Kathleen," said Mr. Woods with conviction, "you're a dear."

"You broke my heart," said she demurely, "but I'm going to forgive you."

Mrs. Saumarez was not striving to be clever now. And, Heavens (thought Billy), how much nicer she was like this! It wasn't the same woman: her thin cheeks flushed arbutus-like, and her rather metallic voice was grown low and gentle. Billy brought memories with him, you see, and, for the moment, she was Kathleen Eppes again—Kathleen Eppes in the first flush of youth, eager, trustful and joyous-hearted, as he had known her long ago. Since then the poor woman had eaten of the bread of dependence and had found it salt enough; she had paid for it daily, enduring a thousand petty slights, a thousand petty insults, and smiling under them as only women can. But she had forgotten now that shrewd Kathleen Saumarez, who must earn her livelihood as best she might. She smiled frankly—a purely unprofessional smile.

"I was sorry when I heard you were coming," she said irrelevantly; "but I'm glad now."

Mr. Woods—I grieve to relate it—was still holding her hand in his. There stirred in his pulses the thrill Kathleen Eppes had always awakened—a thrill of memory now, a mere wraith of emotion. He was thinking of a certain pink-cheeked girl with crinkly black-brown hair and eyes that he had likened to chrysoberyls—and he wondered whimsically what had become of her. This was not she. This was assuredly not Kathleen, for this woman had a large mouth—a humorous and kindly mouth, it was true, but undeniably a large one—whereas Kathleen's mouth had been quite perfect and rather diminutive than otherwise. Hadn't he rhymed it often enough to know?

They stood gazing at one another for a long time; and in the back of Billy's brain lines of his old verses sang themselves to a sad little tune—the verses that reproved the idiocy of all other poets, who had very foolishly written their sonnets to other women: and yet, as the jingle pointed out,

Had these poets ever strayed
In thy path, they had not made
Random rhymes of Arabella,
Songs of Dolly, hymns of Stella,
Lays of Lalage or Chloris—
Not of Daphne nor of Doris,
Florimel nor Amaryllis,
Nor of Phyllida nor Phyllis,
Were their wanton melodies:
But all of these—
All their melodies had been
Of thee, Kathleen.

Would they have been? Billy thought it improbable. The verses were very silly; and, recalling the big, blundering boy who had written them, Billy began to wonder—somewhat forlornly—whither he, too, had vanished. He and the girl he had gone mad for both seemed rather mythical—legendary as King Pepin.

"Yes," said Mrs. Saumarez—and, oh, she startled him—"I fancy they're both quite dead by now. Billy," she cried earnestly; "don't laugh at them!—don't laugh at those dear, foolish children! I—somehow, I couldn't bear that, Billy."

"Kathleen," said Mr. Woods in admiration, "you're a witch. I wasn't laughing, though, my dear. I was developing quite a twilight mood over them—a plaintive, old-lettery sort of mood, you know."

She sighed a little. "Yes—I know." Then her eyelids flickered in a parody of Kathleen's glance, that Billy noted with a queer tenderness. "Come and talk to me, Billy," she commanded. "I'm an early bird this morning, and entitled to the very biggest and best-looking worm I can find. You're only a worm, you know—we're all worms. Mr. Jukesbury told me so last night—making an exception in my favor, for it appears I'm an angel. He was amorously inclined last night, the tipsy, old fraud! It's shameful, Billy, the amount of money he gets out of Miss Hugonin—for the deserving poor. Do you know, I rather fancy he classes himself under that head? And I grant you, he's poor enough—but deserving!" Mrs. Saumarez snapped her fingers eloquently.

"Eh?—shark, eh?" queried Mr. Woods in some discomfort.

She nodded. "He is as bad as Sarah Haggage," she informed him, "and everybody knows what a bloodsucker she is. The Haggage is a disease, Billy, that all rich women are exposed to—more easily caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad." Depend upon it, Billy, those two will have every penny they can get out of your uncle's money."

"Peggy's so generous," he pleaded. "She wants to make everybody happy—bring about a general millennium, you know."

"She pays dearly enough for her fancies," said Mrs. Saumarez in a hard voice. Then, after a little, she cried suddenly: "Oh, Billy, Billy, it shames me to think of how we lie to her and toady to her, and lead her on from one mad scheme to another!—all for the sake of the money we can pilfer incidentally! We're all arrant hypocrites, you know; I'm no better than the others, Billy—not a bit better. But my husband left me so poor, and I had always been accustomed to the pretty things of life, and I couldn't—I couldn't give them up, Billy. I love them too dearly. So I lie and toady and write driveling talks about things I don't understand, for driveling women to listen to, and I still have the creature comforts of life. I pawn my self-respect for them—that's all. Such a little price to pay, isn't it, Billy?"

She spoke in a sort of frenzy. I dare say that at the outset she wanted Mr. Woods to know the worst of her, knowing he could not fail to discover it in time. Billy brought memories with him, you see; and this shrewd, hard woman wanted, somehow, more than anything else in the world, that he should think well of her. So she babbled out the whole pitiful story, waiting in a sort of terror to see contempt and disgust awaken in his eyes.

But he merely said, "I see—I see," very slowly, and his eyes were kindly. He couldn't be angry with her, somehow; that pink-cheeked, crinkly-haired girl stood between them and shielded her. He was only very, very sorry.

"And Kennaston?" he asked, after a little.

Mrs. Saumarez flushed. "Mr. Kennaston is a man of great genius," she said quickly. "Of course, Miss Hugonin is glad to assist him in publishing his books—it's an honor to her that he permits it. They have to be published privately, you know, as the general public isn't capable of appreciating such dainty little masterpieces. Oh, don't make any mistake, Billy—Mr. Kennaston is a very wonderful and very admirable man."

"H'm, yes; he struck me as being an unusually nice chap," said Mr. Woods untruthfully. "I dare say they'll be very happy."

"Who?" Mrs. Saumarez demanded.

"Why—er—I don't suppose they'll make any secret of it," Billy stammered, in tardy repentance of his hasty speaking. "Peggy told me last night she had accepted him."



SO SHE BABBLER OUT THE WHOLE PITIFUL STORY

Mrs. Saumarez turned to rearrange a bowl of roses. She seemed to have some difficulty over it.

"Billy," she spoke, inconsequently, and with averted head, "an honest man is the noblest work of God—and the rarest."

Billy groaned.

"Do you know," said he, "I've just been telling the roses in the gardens yonder the same thing about women? I'm a misogynist this morning. I've decided no woman is worthy of being loved."

"That is quite true," she assented; "but, on the other hand, no man is worthy of loving."

Billy smiled.

"I've likewise come to the conclusion," said he, "that a man's love is like his hat, in that any peg will do to hang it on; also, in that the proper and best place for it is on his own head. Oh, I assure you, I vented any number of cheap cynicisms on the helpless roses! And yet—will you believe it, Kathleen?—it doesn't seem to make me feel a bit better—no, not a bit."

"It's very like his hat," she declared, "in that he has a new one every year." Then she rested her hand on his in a half-maternal fashion. "What's the matter, boy?" she asked softly. "You're always so fresh and wholesome. I don't like to see you like this. Better leave phrase-making to us phrase-mongers."

Her voice rang true—true and compassionate and tender, and all that a woman's voice should be. Billy could not but trust her.

"I've been an ass," said he, rather tragically. "Oh, not an unusual ass, Kathleen—just the sort men are always making of themselves. You see, before I went to France there was a girl I—cared for. And I let a quarrel come between us—a foolish, trifling, idle little quarrel, Kathleen, that we might have made up in a half-hour. But I was too proud, you see—no, I wasn't proud, either," Mr. Woods amended bitterly; "I was simply pig-headed and mulish. So I went away. And yesterday I saw her again and realized that I—still cared. That's all, Kathleen. It isn't an unusual story." And Mr. Woods laughed mirthlessly and took a turn on the terrace.

Mrs. Saumarez was regarding him intently. Her cheeks were of a deeper, more attractive pink, and her breath came and went quickly.

"I—I don't understand," she said, in a rather queer voice.

"Oh, it's simple enough," Billy assured her. "You see, she—well, I think she would have married me once. Yes, she cared for me once. And I quarreled with her. I, conceited young ass that I was, actually presumed to dictate to the dearest, sweetest, most lovable woman on earth, and tell her what she must do and what she mustn't. I!—good Lord, I, who wasn't worthy to sweep a crossing clean for her!—who wasn't worthy to breathe the same air with her!—who wasn't worthy to exist in the same world she honored by living in! Oh, I was an ass! But I've paid for it. Oh, yes, Kathleen, I've paid dearly for it, and I'll pay more dearly yet before I've done. I tried to avoid her yesterday—you must have seen that. And I couldn't—I give you my word, I could no more have kept away from her than I could have spread a pair of wings and flown away. She doesn't care a bit for me now; but I can no more give up loving her than I can give up eating my dinner. That isn't a pretty simile, Kathleen, but it expresses the way I feel toward her. It isn't merely that I want her; it's more than that—oh, far more than that. I simply can't do without her. Don't you understand, Kathleen?" he asked desperately.

"Yes—I think I understand," she said, when he had ended. "I—oh, Billy, I am almost sorry. It's dear of you, Billy, to care for me still, but—but I'm almost sorry you care so much. I'm not worth it, boy dear. And I—I really don't know what to say. You must let me think."

Mr. Woods gave an inarticulate sound. The face she turned to him was perplexed, half-sad, fond, a little pleased and strangely compassionate. It was Kathleen Eppes who sat beside him; the six years were as utterly forgotten as the name of Magdalen's first lover. She was a girl again, listening—with a heart that fluttered, I dare say—to the wild talk, the mad dithyrambs of a big, blundering boy.

The ludicrous horror of it stunned Mr. Woods. He could no more have told her of her mistake than he could have struck her in the face.

"Kathleen!" said he vaguely.

"Let me think—ah, let me think, Billy!" she pleaded, in a flutter of joy and amazement. "Go away, boy dear—go away for a little and let me think! I'm not an emotional woman, but I'm on the verge of hysterics now for—for several

reasons. Go in to breakfast, Billy! I—I want to be alone. You've made me very proud and—and sorry, I think—and—oh, I don't know, boy dear. But please go now—please!"

Billy went.

In the living-hall he paused to inspect a picture with peculiar interest. Since Kathleen cared for him, he thought, rather forlornly, he must perjure himself in as plausible a manner as might be possible; please God, having done what he had done, he would lie to her like a gentleman and try to make her happy.

A vision in incredible violet ruffles, coming down to breakfast, saw him, and paused on the stairway, and flushed and laughed deliciously.

Poor Billy stared at her; and his heart gave a great bound and then appeared to stop for an indefinite time.



"YOU SEE, SHE—WELL, I THINK SHE WOULD HAVE MARRIED ME ONCE"

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Woods in his soul. "And I thought I was an ass last night! Why, last night, in comparison, I displayed intelligence that was almost human! Oh, Peggy, Peggy! if I only dared tell you what I think of you I believe I would gladly die afterward—yes, I'm sure I would. You really haven't any right to be so beautiful—it isn't fair to us, Peggy!"

But the vision was peeping over the banisters at him, and the vision's eyes were sparkling with a lucent mischief, and a wonderful, half-hushed contralto was demanding of him:

"Oh, where have you been, Billy boy, Billy boy? Oh, where have you been, charming Billy?"

And Billy's barytone answered her:

"I've been to seek a wife——"

and broke off in a groan.

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Woods.

XVI

BREAKFAST Margaret enjoyed hugely. I regret to confess that the fact that every one of her guests was more or less miserable moved this hard-hearted young woman to untimely and excessive mirth. Kennaston she pitied a little; but his bearing toward her ranged ludicrously from that of proprietorship to that of supplication, and, moreover, she was furious with him for having hinted at various times that Billy was a fortune-hunter.

Margaret was quite confident by this that she had never believed him—"not really, you know"—having argued the point out at some length the night before, and reaching her conclusion by a course of reasoning peculiar to herself.

Mr. Woods, as you may readily conceive, was sunk in the Slough of Despond deeper than ever plummet sounded. Margaret thought this very nice of him; it was a delicate tribute to her that he ate nothing; and the fact that Hugh Van Orden and Petheridge Jukesbury—as she believed—acted in precisely the same way, for precisely the same reason, merely demonstrated, of course, their overwhelming conceit and presumption.

So, sitting in the great Eagle's shadow, she ate a quantity of marmalade—she was wont to begin the day in this ungodly English fashion—and gossiped like a brook trotting over sunlit pebbles. She had planned a pulverizing surprise for the house-party; and, in due time, she intended to explode it, and subsequently Billy was to apologize for his conduct, and then they were to live happily ever afterward.

She had not yet decided what he was to apologize for; that was his affair. His conscience ought to have told him, by this, wherein he had offended; and if his conscience hadn't, why, then, of course, he would have to apologize for his lack of proper sensibility.

After breakfast she went, according to her usual custom, to her father's rooms, for, as I think I have told you, the old gentleman was never visible until noon. She had astonishing news for him.

What time she divulged it, the others sat on the terrace, and Mr. Kennaston read to them, as he had promised, from his *Defense of Ignorance*. It proved a welcome diversion to more than one of the party. Mr. Woods, especially, esteemed it a godsend; it staved off misfortune for, at least, a little; so he sat at Kathleen's side in silence, trying desperately to be happy, trying desperately not to see the tiny wrinkles, the faint crow's-feet Time had sketched in her face as a memorandum of the work he meant to do shortly.

Billy consoled himself with the reflection that he was very fond of her; but, oh! what worship, what adoration he could accord this woman if she would only decline—positively—to have anything whatever to do with him!

I think we ought not to miss hearing Mr. Kennaston's discourse. It is generally conceded that his style is wonderfully clever; and I have no doubt that his detractors—who complain that this style is mere word-twisting, a mere inversion of the most ancient truisms—are actuated by the very basest jealousy. But Billy was little interested in questions of style and had no answer when Mr. Kennaston asked, "Is it any cause for wonder that, under this cheerless influence, our poetry is either silent or unsold? The true poet must be ignorant, for information is the thief of rhyme. And it is only in dealing with——"

Kennaston paused. Margaret had appeared in the vestibule, and behind her stood her father, looking very grave.

"We have made a most interesting discovery," Miss Hugonin airily announced to the world at large. "It appears that Uncle Fred left all his property to Mr. Woods here. We found the will only last night. I'm sure you'll all be interested to learn I'm a pauper now,

and intend to support myself by plain sewing. Any work of this nature you may choose to favor me with, ladies and gentlemen, will receive my most earnest attention."

She dropped a courtesy. The scene appealed to her taste for the dramatic.

Billy came toward her quickly.

"Peggy," he demanded of her, in the semi-privacy of the vestibule, "will you kindly elucidate the meaning of this da—this absurd foolishness?"

"Why, this," she explained easily, and exhibited a folded paper. "I found it in the grate last night."

He inspected it with large eyes. "That's absurd," he said at length. "You know perfectly well this will isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"My dear sir," she informed him coldly, "you are vastly mistaken. You see, I've burned the other one." She pushed by him. "Mr. Kennaston, are you ready for our walk?—we'll finish the paper some other time. Wasn't it the strangest thing in the world——?" Her dear, deep, mellow voice died away as she and Kennaston disappeared in the gardens.

Billy gasped.

But meanwhile Colonel Hugonin had given the members of his daughter's house-party some inkling as to the present posture of affairs. They were gazing at Billy Woods rather curiously. He stood in the vestibule of Selwoode, staring after Margaret Hugonin; but they stared at him, and over his curly head, sculptured above the doorway, they saw the Eagle—the symbol of the crude, incalculable power of wealth.

Mr. Woods stood in the vestibule of his own house.

(TO BE CONTINUED)