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A Kiss In a Coach

In the Days Before There Were Railways

By F. A. MITCHEL

I have always had a fancy for looking back into the past for items concerning those from whom I have descended. The doings of these persons who lived and moved and worked and loved and quarreled, just as others of my family are doing today, have always been of interest to me. I have before me a portrait of one of my grandfathers painted when he was the age that I am now, and one would suppose that he and I were twin brothers, instead of being two generations apart. He was young in the last century, when the railroad was coming into vogue as a mode of travel and shortly before the use of electricity in telegraphing. Among family documents, of which I have collected a great number, there is one written by this gentleman which I prize more than any of the others. I give it just as he wrote it except for a little editing where he referred to himself, for an autobiographer is always at a disadvantage in this respect. I need to say that the writer at the time of the happenings narrated was twenty-three years old and considered handsome. His narrative reads:

I started to cross the Allegheny mountains on a business trip to Cincinnati, then the principal city in the west, and expected to be gone several weeks, having planned to spend a week in Cincinnati and a week returning. We left at 6 o'clock in the morning from the Antlers' tavern, there being eight insides and four outside on the coach.

There was some shifting of passengers during the day, and at evening the positions of those inside was as follows—I give them minutely, for they are pertinent to an understanding of my narrative: I sat on the front seat, riding backward. There was one other person on the seat with me, a middle aged lady. She sat on my left. On the middle seat, facing me, but on the other side of the coach, was an elderly gentleman, eminently respectable-looking. The other two places on the middle seat were occupied by a young woman, very precise looking, whom he called Amelia, and his daughter, a girl of about eighteen. On the back seat were a man and two women. I do not describe them, for they have no part in what I am going to record.

The first night in a coach is very uncomfortable; it is only when one gets somewhat accustomed to the jolting and has met with sufficient loss of sleep to render him hungry for slumber that he can lose himself sitting straight up and continually bumped. But I on this first night ascending the mountains, having been up late several evenings preceding my departure, slept fairly well. The horses were obliged to proceed at a walk.

In the middle of the night I was awakened by a pair of arms thrown around me and a pair of lips pressed against mine. My faculties not taking in the situation at once, it did not immediately occur to me to detain who ever kissed me, and by the time I proceeded to do so it was too late. The arms about me were unlocked and the lips removed from mine.

Not only was there no light in the coach, but the night was very dark. I could not see my hand before my eyes. All I knew of the episode was by the sense of touch. There was no doubt in my mind that I had been kissed by a woman, but the principal evidence of this was that the lips that were pressed upon mine were soft and there was no beard. Had the matter occurred when my faculties were normally alive doubtless I should have lain awake the rest of the night deliberating as to who had favored me. As it was, my deliberations, assisted by the monotonous breathing, not to mention snoring, of the passengers put me to sleep.

In the morning we stopped at a tavern, and after cold water thrown over my face and a good breakfast of fried chicken, various kinds of game and buckwheat cakes, for which I expended a Spanish silver half dollar, on returning to the coach my adventure of the night came back to me, exciting not only curiosity, but other emotions. I had scarcely seated myself when I made a careful survey of those persons some one of whom might have given me the kiss.

There were three women sitting sufficiently near me to have committed the act. There was the middle aged lady beside me, whose name I do not know; there were Amelia and the young girl, her niece, whom they called Agnes. I did not doubt that one of the three was the perpetrator. I scrutinized the face of each, but could see no trace of guilt. The lady beside me and Amelia met my gaze without a quiver, but Agnes, who sat opposite me, lowered her eyes.

I made up my mind that Agnes was the culprit, partly from this bit of evidence and partly because I preferred to believe that it was her red lips that had been pressed upon mine. We had all become well acquainted, and the woman beside me was very cordial in her manner toward me, while Amelia was rather reserved. As to Agnes, she acted as any young girl would have acted toward a young man under similar circumstances. She certainly appeared to be the personification of innocence. But still waters run deep, and I am free to admit that I was influenced by this adage.

The journey was especially interesting to me, because I had a problem to solve. I reckoned that the guilty one would betray herself before we arrived at the Queen City of the West. But the only one of the three who could have kissed me who showed a special predisposition for me was Agnes, and she gave no sign of guilt. At all events, it seemed to me that I had made a very favorable impression upon her.

On arrival at Pittsburgh those of us who were going further west took a steamboat to descend the Ohio river. Among those who were aboard were the elderly gentleman, whose name by this time I had learned to be Shotwell; his sister and his daughter. In the coach, crowded together as we were, there was no opportunity for a tete-a-tete between me and Agnes, but on the steamboat was plenty. We sat together on the guards outside the ladies' cabin, and at times on deck. The Ohio was called by the early French settlers La Belle Riviere, and justly so. At the time of this journey, the autumn, her waters were clear, and the foliage on the multitude of hills on her banks was of many colors. No affair of the heart could have taken place under more propitious circumstances.

One evening, when the air was out of the south, Agnes and I went on to the hurricane deck, which is the highest deck of all. No one was there but ourselves. We stood looking out on a moonlit scene. The sounds were the throbbing of the engine below and the striking of the paddle wheels at the sides of the boat upon the water.

Now, I had not thus far regarded my affair with Agnes Shotwell as any more serious than those I had had with other girls. I had by this time made up my mind that she had given me a kiss in the dark and that her innocence was assumed. Acting upon this theory, I suddenly clasped her in my arms and rained kisses upon her cheeks and lips.

A man may sometimes kiss a girl without having declared himself and not appear disrespectful. I, having assumed that Agnes had overstepped the boundary of feminine modesty, gave her too many kisses. As soon as she could release herself she turned from me without a word, went to the steps leading below and disappeared. There was that in her manner to tell me it would be useless to follow her; that she was incensed beyond measure and if I obtained forgiveness I must wait and strive for it. Had I known her better I would not have feared that she would make it unpleasant for me with the others of her party, but my limited knowledge of her made me fear that she would.

I confess I was very much disgruntled. To have made such a mistake troubled me very much, for I was at an age when a man is especially sensitive to the good opinion or condemnation of women. I brooded over the matter during the day and lay awake thinking of it at night. I did not see her again till the afternoon of the next day, when I approached her while she was with her father and aunt. She received me neither kindly nor unkindly, there being nothing in her manner to indicate to the others that she was offended with me. But when I again met her alone she passed me without recognition.

I was now badly cut up. I knew from her manner that she was not acting a part, and it was plain to me that the kiss given me in the coach had not been imparted by her. I was in a dilemma. I must either acknowledge myself a culprit or excuse myself by telling her of the kiss in the coach, a story so improbable that it was not likely to be believed. Very soon after my offense we arrived at the landing at Cincinnati. That Mr. Shotwell did not know of anything amiss between his daughter and me was made plain by his giving me an invitation to call at his house. I looked at Agnes to note if she acquiesced, but saw no sign that I would or would not be welcome. We parted on leaving the boat, the Shotwell party driving to their home in the city, I to my hotel.

After much brooding over the matter I concluded to make the call. I had in me the consciousness of not being quite so bad as I appeared and I must bide my time for an opportunity to explain. Upon entering the Shotwell residence I received the surprise of my life. Agnes came into the drawing room alone and with a very different look on her face from any I had seen there since my transgression. It was very cordial.

I was of course relieved, but puzzled. I did not believe for a moment that Agnes had pretended to be offended with me, and yet as a sensitive girl how could she suddenly return to her former treatment of me without even an apology? I started to make one, but she checked me and went on talking about something else.

By this time I was madly in love, and love overcame curiosity. Be she good, bad or indifferent, Agnes possessed me. Instead of staying a week in Cincinnati, I remained there a month. When I left I was engaged to Agnes. After our engagement I asked her why she had forgiven me without my having asked to be forgiven. She only said, "Let that pass." But a moment later she added, "Forgive me for my part in that matter, will you?"

I forgave her and felt very content at my magnanimity. I left her to be gone till the following spring, then returned for our wedding.

Nov. 15, 1855. My wife's Aunt Amelia died a week ago. This morning Agnes came to me and told me that the change toward me without explanation or apology for my transgression was due to her aunt's having confessed to her that she had kissed me in the coach.

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State of Illinois, County of Lake, ss. CIRCUIT COURT OF LAKE COUNTY

March Term A. D. 1917. Bessie Adella Norton vs Oscar Edward Norton

In Chancery No. 8307. The requisite affidavit having been filed in the office of the Clerk of said Court.

Notice is therefore hereby given to the said Oscar Edward Norton, defendant that the above named complainant heretofore filed her bill of Complaint in said Court on the Chancery side thereof, and that a summons thereupon issued out of said Court against the above named defendant, returnable on the first day of the term of the Circuit Court of Lake County, to be held at the Court House in Waukegan in said Lake County, on the First Monday of March A. D. 1917, as is by law required, and which suit is still pending.

Lewis O. Brockway, Clerk.

Waukegan, Illinois, January 2nd, A. D. 1917. George E. Phillips, Complainant Solicitor, Room 3, State Bank Bldg., Highland Park, Ill. (45-48)

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