



The Sheridan Dramatic Club, of which Tom Bilbeck, the narrator, Maryella, the girl he cares for, and Jim Cooper, his rival, are members, start a performance of Pygmalion and Galatea at the Old Soldiers' Home, but are interrupted by a fire. During the rehearsal Tom Bilbeck is accused by the husband of one of the actors, Mr. Hemmingway, of riding away from the scene. The ill-fated play in their costumes and overcoats, the group of players is held up by two escaped convicts, one of whom is captured by Bilbeck after a struggle.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

He obeyed meekly enough. "Will you answer one question?" he asked deferentially. "Yes. What?" "Are you a ghost?" "No." "Then what are you?" "I only agreed to answer one question." "Oh!" He was obviously disappointed. "What are you going to do with me?" "Turn you over to the sheriff, I suppose."

The sound of the shot had aroused curiosity at the Old Soldiers' Home, and now half a dozen of the most nearly complete of the inmates led by Colonel Stewart came down the road in military order. They were armed with rifles and had bayonets fixed. I learned afterwards that the weapons were Spanish-American War trophies which were not loaded and had not been fired for sixteen years.

We told the Colonel what had happened and he sent one of the old men back to the Home with the ladies with instructions to telephone the sheriff. The rest of us went after the other escaped prisoner.

He had broken away from the road and gone into a patch of woods that lay alongside, as we could easily tell by his fresh tracks in the snow. It seemed as if it was going to be a comparatively simple matter to trail him.

We changed our minds, however, when the tracks led out of the comparative quiet to the timber-land to a meadow. Here they ceased abruptly. There was enough wind blowing so that the snow was kept clear in some places and drifted in others. He had evidently avoided the drifts.

We had only one lantern or we could have searched to better advantage and by spreading out might have picked up the foot-prints without much delay. As it was we worked slowly and ineffectually.

A complete circle of the field gave us no clue. The snow was falling more rapidly now and even our own tracks were filled in very soon after we made them. I was anxious to get started, too, while the roads were not badly drifted.

"I think we've done all we can to-night," I suggested to Colonel Stewart. "That fellow is going to have a hard time traveling very far in this storm and probably he'll lay low somewhere until it lets up. The sheriff can organize a big posse and pick him up after daylight."

The colonel agreed. He was anxious to get his men under cover.

We took our prisoner back to the Home. There we found the lady Greeks sitting around disconsolate with their wraps on amid a group of

having the time of their lives over the extra attraction of a thief-hunt.

There were no handcuffs in the institution, naturally, so we bound our prisoner to a chair pending the arrival of the sheriff. He looked disconsolate enough. I was suddenly sorry for him. Poor fellow, all he had done was to make a break for liberty. It was only because we were all against him that he was against us.

"Hard luck, old chap," I said to him.

He looked up at me. "It's all right," he said. "I don't mind a bit. I'm glad to stay in here overnight, where it's warm. I'm kind of worried about Julius, though, out there in the snow. I wish you'd got him, too. He's delicate, and I'm afraid he'll catch cold."



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"Well, I'm going home," I said by way of farewell. "But before I go is there anything I can do for you?"

"Not unless you're going to tell me what you are wearing those white things for. Did somebody steal your—"

"No, they didn't," I snapped, turning away.

"Ain't you going to tell me?"

"No."

I rejoined the rest of our group around the fire.

"I'll go out and start the car," I notified them, "and back up to the gate once more. When you hear me outside you can come out."

"Let me go with you," Jim Cooper offered.

I would just as soon have gone alone, but there seemed no way of declining his assistance, so we trailed out in the snow together with an oil lantern flickering unsteadily in the wind.

It was only a few hundred yards to where the automobile was standing,

but the wind, which was increasing, threw the snow into our faces in stinging blasts that made walking difficult and conversation practically impossible.

The lights of the car were still . . .

The seats were covered with snow. So was the windshield; around each wheel was a little heap.

"You can get inside if you will," I told Cooper, "and advance the spark as soon as I get an explosion."

He did as I directed. I primed the motor thoroughly. I had no particular reason to suppose that the engine would start now when it had refused to do so half an hour before, except that from long experience I had great faith in the perversity of inanimate subjects, especially internal-combustion engines. Grandmother Page had thrown me down in an emergency, but now that the immediate danger was over I had no doubt that she would start up cheerfully. There is something unmistakably feminine about a gasoline engine.

"All ready," I said as I gave the crank a sharp pull upward.

I noticed that it pulled rather hard, but I bent an extra effort and yanked it over compression.

"Bang!" responded Grandmother Page enthusiastically.

The first explosion was followed by a hideous clashing sound and then a terrifying thumping which could be heard even above the explosion of the motor.

"Cut her off!" I yelled.

When Grandmother Page had subsided Jim Cooper asked solicitously:

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you hear the racket she was making?" I asked sarcastically.

"I didn't notice anything special," Jim observed, which remark put him by unanimous vote into the Loyal Order of Henwethers. Pilk had nothing on him for saying the wrong thing.

In silent exasperation I lifted the hood and with the aid of the flickering

lantern examined Grandmother's gizzard.

One look was enough. I closed the hood once more and stood silent, communing with nature.

Something in my manner must have penetrated Jim Cooper's consciousness.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked. "There is," I announced briefly. "The pump froze while we were hunting for escaped convicts, and as soon as I started the engine she stripped her gear. She won't run again until I get some new parts from the factory."

I turned out the acetylene lights and started home. Jim Cooper followed silently.

Half way to the Home he said

"It's all for the best, Tom. Think how glad the automobile-repairmen will be."

When we entered the ladies stood up ready to go.

"I didn't hear you come," said Maryella. "The car is awfully quiet to-night, isn't it?"

"It is," I assented glumly. "And will be for several days to come."

When I had explained what had happened a cry of dismay escaped the lips of Mrs. Hemmingway.

"I promised John I would come right home as soon as the performance was over, and he will be terribly anxious," she wailed.

"I wish I had gone home in the funeral bus," bemoaned Mrs. Lillie-love.

"I wish you had," I echoed feelingly.

"It's probably all for the best," chirped Jim Cooper like a parrot. (Ornithologist's note: Parrots do not chirp.)

"Where do you find the ray of comfort in this?" I demanded sarcastically.

"That's easy," Jim explained. "For one thing I am glad that it wasn't my car. For another it will give us all a chance to spend the night in an Old Soldiers' Home, which is something most people who aren't veterans can't do."

"Spend the night here?" Mrs. Hemmingway exclaimed in dismay. "It's impossible. I have to go home!"

"How?"

"I don't know how, but you must think up some way."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "It can't be done to-night. There's no train until morning. You can call up your husband and explain it to him."

"Oh, is there a telephone?"

"Sure. There must be," said Jim Cooper. "You talk to John and tell him it's all for the best."

"I'll try," Mrs. Hemmingway said cheerfully.

The telephone was conveniently located in the living-room so that all private conversations were distinctly audible to any one in the building.

After considerable delay in getting a long-distance connection, Mrs. Hemmingway managed to get the ear of her husband, who fortunately had not left the office.

"Is that you, John?" she asked in the telephone.

Apparently it was.

"Well, listen, John dear, I can't get home to-night. I'm going to stay all night at the Old Soldiers' Home."

The rest of us tried to talk about something else so as not to appear to be listening, but we couldn't help it, and a sudden silence fell at her next remark.