

## "Love's Labor's Lost"

The Prefect of Discipline had just finished his breakfast.

"Aa-hem!" he sighed, as he pushed his cup away from him.

"Aa-hem!" he sighed again; but this time his sigh was not one of contentment, but of doubt. True, the Prefect had breakfasted well; the empty plate before him testified to that. No; it was not the porridge, nor yet the bacon which had disturbed him; it was Nicodemus.

"This is Thursday," the Prefect mused, "I wonder if he can keep out of trouble today. I hardly think so. My heavens! that Nicodemus will be the death of me yet."

But Nicodemus, walking on the Campus with Fat, was not worried; he was happy. He had been happy since the evening before. Nick was usually at peace with the world; but very rarely was he so radiantly happy as he was this morning. Fat was curious to find out why.

"You seem to have a terrible burden on your chest this morning, Nick, old man," said Fat. "Don't you know that the best way to get rid of sorrow is to share it with someone? That's one of the reasons you feel so good after you've been to confession."

"Sorrow!" gasped Nick, falling an easy victim to Fat's finesse. "Why, man, I'm as happy as a lark, I am. And why shouldn't I be? Last night I gotta—".

Nick stopped short. He had almost let the secret out. But Fat was not to be denied.

"Happy?" he said scornfully. "You've got no more reason to be happy than I have. We're both in this same College, we've both got rooms, I smoke and you don't,—in fact, I've better reason to be happy than you. Then I'm

a waiter, and you're not. So I got a better breakfast this morning than you did."

"But I got a letter from my girl last night—now-now, look here, Fat—I didn't mean to tell anybody about that, but it jest kinda slipped outa my mouth before I could stop it—"

Fat could restrain himself no longer. He whooped.

"A letter!" he cried. "A letter from your girl!" and he laughed till his sides shook.

Nick was red with embarrassment.

"Now look here, Fat," he said seriously, shaking him. "this-this is no laughing matter at all. Man, it's-it's the cry of a broken heart for—"

Fat went into convulsions. Nick became desperate,

"Fat," he said, "Fat, you think I'm tryin' to fool you, don't you? Well, here's the letter to prove every danged word I've told you," and he produced an envelope from his inner coat-pocket.

The realization that he might miss something sobered Fat. He took the envelope, opened it, and succeeded very well in his attempt to keep a straight face while he read it through. Then he folded it carefully and handed it back to Nick; but before he could comment on it, the College bell summoned them to study. Nick had just time enough to pledge Fat to secrecy and to arrange a meeting with him during the next recreation.

When the bell rang at the end of study, Fat hurried over to the Campus in search of Nick. He turned the corner of the Main Building just in time to see one fellow drop on his hands and knees behind Nick, who was talking to another. A quick shove—and Nick's heels left the ground, his hands clutched aimlessly for support; the next moment he was flat on his back. As the other two made off, Fat rushed to sympathize with him.

Nick rose painfully, brushed his hat and rearranged his spectacles.

"Gosh! To think that *her* brother did it," he sighed to Fat.

"Never mind," counseled Fat. Then, changing the subject, "You're going to see her this afternoon, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, Fat, I am," answered Nick. "Why, man, it's my duty, my bounden duty, to go in and see that poor, broken-hearted girl. She-she wouldn't have wrote to me unless she wanted to see me. She says in that letter," here he patted his coat pocket, "that she was staying at the Convent and that she saw me and my brother passing the Convent last Thursday and that she was awful lonely with nobody to talk to of a Thursday afternoon but her brother, and that she-er-, that she-, well, gosh dang it!" Nick blushed and took the plunge, "she fell in love with me. But you know all about that! You read the letter. So you can advise me what to do. I think that I had oughter go in and cheer her up, 'cause when I was talkin' to her brother before he pushed me, he told me that he wasn't goin' to town today. As I see it, it's my duty to go in and see that girl. What do you think of it?"

Fat did not dare open his mouth. He merely nodded in reply.

"Come to think of it, Fat, old kid," Nick went on excitedly, "I can interest her in my experiences. I can tell Mabel all about my travels, my life in the lumber-camps where the folks say 'punk' for 'bread', and 'salve' for 'butter.' I could tell about my 'ax-hanging', an' all about that big city of British Columbia, couldn't I, Fat?"

Fat nodded again.

"Well, Fat, I guess I'll go in and get dressed up a bit now," said Nick. "Mabel will kinda be expectin' it of me, won't she, Fat?"

Fat bravely kept a straight face.

"Yes, Nick, you had better go in and fix up. You have to be pretty particular when you go calling on girls, you

know, especially when you go to a Convent to see one."

They separated, Fat to have his laugh, and Nick to tidy up against the afternoon in the Convent.

"Aa-hem!" sighed the Prefect of Discipline, when he had given all the boys permission for town after dinner. "Aa-hem! Nicodemus was unusually dressy today. What *can* that mean? However, if he's not careful while he's in town, somebody will be kidnapping him, one of these days."

With this, he dismissed the subject. But Nick had no intention of loitering around town. He headed straight for the Convent and mounted the steps to its main entrance. Overlooking, in his nervousness, the push-bell, he knocked timidly, waited for a while, then knocked again. No answer.

"Mabel can't be expecting me to visit her so soon after receiving her letter," Nick muttered. He shifted his hat to the back of his head, knocked more loudly, and leaned against the door-post to wait. In doing so, he rang the bell.

The bell was still ringing when the Sister hurried to the door. When she opened the door, Nick gulped. Nuns hadn't entered into his calculations at all. Mabel should have been the first to greet him.

The Sister pursed her lips and looked at Nick over her spectacles, waiting for him to state his business. At loss for a word, Nick stared dumbly back. Finally the Sister became impatient.

"Whom do you wish to see, sir?" she asked.

Nick fiddled with the buttons of his coat.

"M-Mabel—er-Miss-Miss McLaughtney," he blurted out at last.

"Please step this way," the Sister said, holding the door open for him.

"Th-thanks, but I'd just as soon wait here." Nick had begun to think that he had bitten off more than he could chew.

"Just come right into the parlor, please," was the insis-

tent reply, so Nick reluctantly followed. The Sister, noticing that he still wore his hat, inquired if she might take it from him. Nick clutched it tightly.

"N-no, thanks," he said "I-I'll be needing it when I go out again."

The Sister thought it wiser not to provoke him to possible violence by paying undue attention to him, so she led him to the parlor in silence. The sight of two more Saints there talking to their sisters restored much of his shaken self-confidence. He hung his hat on the back of his chair and sat down to wait.

In a few minutes Mabel entered the parlor and looked eagerly around, expecting to see her brother. The Sister had not told her who was waiting for her. But her brother was not there. The only one in the room who seemed to be expecting somebody was a person whom she did not know, sitting about three feet from her and staring very rudely at her. As for Nick, he was overwhelmed by her beauty. His fondest dreams of Mabel had not made her more perfect than she really was, and he completely lost his heart to her in a moment.

Nick came to his senses when she turned to leave the parlor. He rose and strode over to her with a hearty "And how are you, Mabel McLaughtney? Sure I thought you were never coming, Mabel. Come over here and sit down till we have a chat." Nick clapped her kindly on the back, and led her to the chair. Mabel wondered, and sat down wondering, who this very familiar person could be. Nick resumed his seat beside her, crossed his legs, leaned back in his chair and in doing so, knocked his hat down. He replaced it, but it fell again. Nick grew impatient and jammed it on his head. At least it would stay there. One's head was the only place for a hat anyway, thought Nick. These proceedings made Mabel wonder the more.

Nick coughed and hemmed, and grew more embarrassed

with each passing minute. At last he broke the ice.

"Mabel," he began, "I came in answer to your epistle—"

"My-my *what*?" asked Mabel in surprise.

"That letter you wrote me—"

"What letter are you talking about? I *didn't* write you any letter," Mabel interrupted indignantly.

Nick, somewhat taken aback, drew out the letter, "This letter," he continued, "that you wrote to me, asking me—"

Mabel rose, her head high and her cheeks blazing. "I *didn't* write you *any* letter, How *dare* you accuse me of writing to you, a total stranger?" and with that she swept haughtily out of the parlor.

To say the least, Nick was dumfounded, shocked and cruelly hurt, but not for long. The desire for an explanation predominated, so stuffing the letter back into his pocket, he gave chase, regardless of consequences.

As he came through the parlor door, he thought that he heard footsteps going down a stairway on the opposite side of the corridor, so he followed. Down the stairs he went, and forgetting for the moment his environment, was so intently looking for tracks on the hardwood floor as he ran that he was not aware of anybody else's presence till a chorus of high-pitched screams stopped him short. He looked—and beheld a group of frightened girls in front of him; he turned—more girls. He made a dash in the opposite direction—girls there too. And they were all screaming now.

Nick lost all sense of direction. He saw a stairway, and made for it; but his retreat was cut off there too. A Sister, attracted by the commotion, arrived on the scene and started towards him to shoo him out of the rec. hall. Nick saw her coming and groaned. There was only one avenue of escape visible to him and he took it on the run—a closed door in the wall that might lead somewhere.

It did—down three steps into the furnace-room. Nick saw the steps, but not in time to go down them one at a time.

So when the Sister ran to the door to see if he had hurt himself, he thought that she was still chasing him, and he picked himself up and ran again.

Down came coal-shovels, pokers, cleaning-brushes and stoking rods behind him to betray his line of flight, but the din seemed to lend Nick wings. Up a long flight of stairs at the other end of the cellar he flashed. There were four or five turns in them that bewildered him still more. He was lost—lost in the Convent.

"I should ha' blazed my trail when I started down there," he moaned, as he paused for breath near the head of the stair-case, which was terminated by an open door and a heavy portiere. Then he held his breath. Somebody in the corridor was talking—nuns, probably, and Nick shuddered at the thought.

"He acted so queerly," she was saying "I thought that he was an escaped—"

Nick waited to hear no more. He brushed aside the portiere and started down the hall as fast as he could. They thought he was "escaped" eh? and they were going to capture him. Well, he'd show them.

The Sisters shrieked at the sight of the pale, coal-flecked, bespectacled apparition, but to Nick's hunted ears the shriek was the "tally-ho" of the chase resumed when the scent has been caught again. They were going to capture him, eh? He blamed himself for having ever allowed himself to come within the reach of "them nuns."

He doubled through an empty dormitory, leaving havoc in his wake. Where he had passed, counterpanes and pillow-slips were smeared with coal-dust and scored by hob-nails. He looked out through a window, and decided that it was too high a jump. But he was not captured yet.

By this time the Convent was in an uproar. Sisters were rushing to see what had so rudely disturbed their peace. Somebody was insistently ringing a bell to summon the

janitor. One of the Sisters happened to look into the dormitory and discovered Nick at its far end, with his back against the wall. She shrieked for the Directress.

This was the last straw. Lowering his head between his shoulders, and vowing that they should not capture him alive, Nick charged the door. That he met with no resistance surprised him, but he did not dare stop to analyse the fact. Down another flight of stairs he tore, and cried out with joy when he recognized the door by which he had first entered the fatal building. He opened it and dashed out—but alas! his hopes had been too quickly founded. He was on the little balcony immediately over the main entrance.

Gone from his mind were all thoughts of Mabel; nothing remained but the persistent thought of his impending "capture."

"I can't go back," he cried in desperation, "they're too hot on my trail. I've gotta get off this balcony!"

He leaped over the edge and spied the supporting columns. "Ah!" he sighed with relief, as he clambered over the railing and slid down one of the columns to the steps below, "but it was an awful narrow escape."

He did not stop when he reached the ground, nor did he stop within the next two blocks. Then, however, he wiped the perspiration off his face, and remembered the letter. Taking it from his pocket he sadly read it over once more, and not even then did he realize that it was written in a poorly disguised masculine hand. Deliberately he tore it up and threw it from him.

"As I thrun that paper to the four winds of Heaven," he swore, "I'll never take no stock in a love-letter again!"