

S A M

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CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT THE PAUL JONES DID

ROSALIND had been sitting most of them out, instead of dancing them. There was not the least doubt the crowd was "mixed." Besides, after one experiment with Morton, one with the Jones boy, and a mere recollection of other dances with Reggie Williams, Rosalind found that sitting out was the nearest approach to having a good time.

Incidentally it furnished odd minutes for reflection, for it was possible to despatch her squires upon errands and thus obtain solitude. Her fertility of invention, when it came to errands, was quite astonishing; at the fact that all of the errands were useless, her conscience was pricked not at all.

She was a woman with a problem that challenged her. Back at the Witherbees' they gave her no time for cogitation; there seemed to be a universal obsession that somebody had to entertain her.

And Rosalind was a difficult person to entertain. She chose her own amusements and she resented having diversion thrust upon her.

It was not at all a matter of hardship — save to others — for Rosalind to be exceedingly untractable and unpleasant, both in manner and speech and the general loftiness and disdain of her bearing. If ever there lived a lady who needed, for the good of her soul and her conduct, to be clubbed briskly on

the head by some conscientious caveman, dragged by the hair to his domicile, and set to pounding corn between two stones, that lady was Rosalind Chalmers.

And she was beginning to wonder if some such proceeding was not actually under way. The caveman, of course, was Sam. She knew he was not a real caveman, even, perhaps, of the kind that possess a veneer of civilization; yet he behaved like one.

His manner toward her was shocking and uncouth, as well as without explanation. He had contrived to involve her — she did not admit any of the contriving to be of her own — in a series of vulgar and embarrassing events; and she felt with a keen degree of uneasiness that he proposed to capitalize her misfortunes or misadventures in a manner as yet undisclosed and therefore peculiarly to be dreaded. Who he was, what he was, even why he was, Rosalind did not know.

Had she been free to ask questions and to conduct a systematic investigation perhaps something might be learned. But necessity, by which she really meant the veiled threats of the boatman himself, bade her be cautious.

In truth, Rosalind for once in her life was timid, although she would have perished rather than acknowledge it, even to herself. It was no physical fear, awakened by a dread of something that might happen to herself. Rather it was a more or less abstract apprehension, yet none the less poignant because of that fact.

It shaped itself into the idea that in some manner, and perhaps at some remote time, something would be done or said or even whispered that would bring into ridicule the Rosalind Chalmers who was known

and recognized only by the fixed and inexorable standard of Hamersley's "Social Register." Not for all her wealth and her distinction would she be unmasked before her fellow denizens of the book!

The hotel-dance, therefore, while it forced her elbows to touch common clay, had a measure of consolation in giving her moments of solitude. She wanted to grapple with her problem. She did. It proved elusive and slippery and tireless. Worse, it grinned at her.

Yet Rosalind was game. Only once had fortitude failed her, and she blushed with hot shame when she thought of that unhappy time — the time during which she sat ten feet above the ground and yielded to the humiliating weakness of begging for release from a captivity that resulted directly from her own curiosity. That was an affair of bitter and vengeful memory; she had not even begun to pay off the smallest fraction of the score.

Tom Witherbee came to claim her. She had the bad grace to sigh as she rose. She hoped he would not step on her feet, but she was not optimistic; for the Jones boy, who would not have been picked by the casual observer as an awkward person, had displayed the appalling accomplishment of stepping on both her feet at the same time, and doing it with no apparent physical effort or acceleration of breath.

They were hurrying swiftly across the floor, Rosalind trying to decide whether Tom Witherbee danced like a frog or a rabbit, when somebody blew a shrill whistle. With an abrupt apology she found herself released by her partner.

Then something horrible happened. She was a link in an endless chain of persons who had joined

hands and were boisterously whirling in an undulating circle, like children playing "London Bridge."

Rosalind had heard of such things. In some places they called it the Paul Jones; in others it had equally undescriptive names. But by whatever term it was always the same; it meant changing partners every time a fiend blew a whistle — taking pot-luck with the crowd.

Another shrill toot sounded. The men began weaving in and out to the right, the women to the left. Rosalind was driven onward remorselessly by the necessity of saving her heels from being stepped on. She did not look like a lady who enjoyed being among the peasants and humble villagers. Her jaw was set at too grim an angle.

The whistle blew again at an instant when Rosalind's left hand was grasped firmly by one knight of the white shirt-front, while her right had just been seized by another. The signal, she knew, meant another partner. She wavered; it seemed like a chance to escape.

The captor of her left hand whirled about and stretched forth his arms. It was a fatal and short-sighted maneuver, for in doing so he released her fingers. Then with compelling force Rosalind found herself drawn into a firm grip by the person who still retained her right hand. She was dancing again.

It happened so swiftly that her half-formed intention to flee from the dance was never carried into execution. She was angry at herself, at Tom Witheree, at the whole undignified affair.

And yet — this man could dance! She knew he was a stranger, although she had not even glanced above the second button on his shirt. Beyond

doubt he was a vulgarian — one of the countless herd. But he could dance!

For the moment her irritation gave way to surprise. She had not expected this — after Morton and the Jones boy and Tom Witherbee. Here was a man who did not step on her feet, who did not employ her as a ram to batter his way through the swinging crowd, who did not crush her in a bearlike embrace, and who did not persistently fall out of time with the music.

He danced; he was neither a laggard nor a race-horse. He respected the functions of the band. To Rosalind it was like being rescued from a trampling mob and expertly piloted into a path of ease and safety and perpetual rhythm.

A common villager, perhaps; yet she yielded to the temptation. She also danced. And when Rosalind Chalmers really wanted to dance she was capable of attracting the eye and the envy of a Pavlowa. She was even conscious of a pang of regret that it would be so brief, for the fiend with the whistle would soon be playing his killjoy tune. But it was an oasis at least; one tiny, bright spot in a desert of clumsiness.

Rosalind half-closed her eyes and abandoned herself to the sway of the music. She was almost enjoying herself. He was not in her set, of course; yet there was a distinction about his dancing that seemed for the moment to lift him to that exalted plane.

She dreaded the whistle; it meant unknown terrors — perhaps even the Jones boy, who was circling near her with his arms full of a large lady in pink.

The ominous blast sounded.

"Please, if you don't mind —"

Rosalind marveled to find herself speaking, then checked her tongue and flushed.

A second later and she was marveling again, for her partner had understood. They were opposite one of the big French windows that led to the porch. As easily as if the maneuver had been rehearsed they swung through the opening and whirled away from the crowded room.

She glanced back and glimpsed another merry-go-round of couples, fated to be presently resolved into hopelessly mismated pairs. But Rosalind and the man who could truly dance went on and on, down the porch, still in the thrall of the rhythm that was so spirited and compelling.

"Thank you," she said.

He made no answer, save a quick pressure of her fingers. It was this silent acknowledgment of his gratitude that awakened Rosalind. Her fingers had, it is true, been pressed before, when she was taken unaware; but never by a stranger. She now remembered the pedestal she occupied in the world. She glanced upward.

For several seconds her vision remained fixed upon the most extraordinary necktie she had ever seen.

It was filmy and semitransparent. Also, it was ragged, frayed and rumpled. But — and this was its really amazing feature — it was marked with her own exquisitely embroidered monogram!

Her feet halted abruptly. She flung herself backward out of the arms of Sam, the boatman. He was smiling benignly.

"This — this —"

"Has been a great pleasure," he supplied, but the

bow that accompanied the words was slightly satirical.

Rosalind stood gasping and angry.

"You dared!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You deliberately planned —"

"Sure I planned it. A man's got to do some figuring in this world if he wants to get anything."

She stared at the outraged handkerchief that graced a neck about which at that moment she would willingly have passed a rope. This creature had danced with her. She had been in his arms! And she had been seen there!

"I had to break into that dance without a partner," he explained lightly. "It was the only way to get you; to horn in and take a chance. I knew there wasn't any use asking you for a dance."

Her eyes blazed. Her spirit was raging, yet her wits had not deserted her. Perhaps they had not been noticed after all. The room was crowded and most of the dancers were heavily engrossed with their own woes. Chance might have been kind; she would soon know.

Meantime it was an atrocious risk to stand there talking to him. Yet if she fled she knew not what the man might do. Probably he would follow.

"I wish to talk with you," she said with sudden resolution.

"That'll be another pleasure."

"But not here!"

"Well, there's a lot of good talking-places down on the lawn," he suggested.

She nodded grimly.

"Come along," he said cheerfully. And the

creature offered her his arm. She affected not to notice the insult.

"Better take my arm — ma'am. It's customary."

She walked beside him, but did not touch him.

"We'll look more like a regular couple if you do, ma'am."

Still she paid no heed to his advice. He halted at the top of the steps.

"If you don't take my arm," he announced, "I'll grab you and shoot you right back into that dance, ma'am."

Trembling with anger, she took it.

He led her down the veranda-steps and out among the lantern-lit trees. They walked slowly and in silence for a minute, until Rosalind felt she was safe from possible observers at the hotel.

Then she whipped her hand from his sleeve and drew a pace away from him. Carefully she measured him with a glance which rested longest upon the monogramed tie.

"Now I wish to know exactly what this means," she said sharply.

"It means just what happened," he answered, smiling.

She shook her head. She knew better than that, and she feared even more.

"Is this what you meant — in that note?"

"You mean where I said, 'Just wait'?"

"Yes."

"No, indeed; this is just a sort of extra, thrown in. When I said, 'Just wait' I meant it. Time's not up yet — just wait."

He grinned.

"Then I demand that you explain what it *does* mean."

"Why, I told you what it meant, ma'am. It meant that I wanted to dance — with you."

"Never!"

"But you're unjust to yourself. Honest, that's exactly what I came for, and it's exactly what I've done. And if you'll only let me have one more dance — a hesitation — I'll do almost anything in the world for you. Yes, I'll give you a free ride in my launch."

Rosalind shuddered.

"You came here for another purpose," she said.

"I see it's no use trying to make you believe," sighed Sam.

"You will be thrown out if the servants find you."

"That's a risk, of course. But it's worth it — for a dance, ma'am."

"You may even be arrested."

"That's possible, too — but I've had one dance anyway."

"I shall not permit you," she went on, ignoring him, "to do what you came here to do."

"Which is —"

"To rob people!"

The boatman stared at her, then broke into a laugh.

"You are here disguised — made up as a guest."

"Wrong, ma'am," he assured her. "I'm a man — made up as a gentleman."

"You came here to steal. You know it!"

"Raffles, eh? That's not a bad idea now. I

hadn't thought of it; honest I hadn't. But now you propose it —"

"I didn't!"

"But you certainly did, ma'am. You've put the idea into my head when I hadn't the least notion of it. That makes you a sort of —"

"Stop!"

He shrugged resignedly.

"You're always snapping me up with that word," he complained. "You go and hand me an idea and then when I get ready to do something with it you tell me to stop."

"Will you tell me why you persist — in annoying me?"

"Do I? Why, I didn't think you were annoyed at all, back there while we were dancing. You even asked me not to turn you back into the scramble again, but to keep on as your partner."

"I never! You —"

"That's what you started to ask anyhow, ma'am. Because you remember you thanked me for doing it."

She flushed crimson.

"But I intended to do it anyway," he added complacently. "I wasn't going to lose a chance like that. They don't come often. I knew the minute I laid eyes on you that you could dance."

She hastily changed the subject.

"My handkerchief — where did you get it?" she demanded.

"Found it in my boat; lucky of me, too. I'd forgotten a tie. How does it look?"

Rosalind was beginning to sense the futility of the interview. She was rapidly losing control of

it. Yet she was anxious to prevent the man from carrying out his very obvious purpose. Robberies among the guests might entail risks — for her. It was scarcely possible that nobody had seen her in the company of the boatman.

As she studied him, however, she admitted to herself that he might not have been recognized. He was very different in appearance now. But aside from the possibility that none save herself had paid attention to him was his evident and persistent purpose to link her misfortunes with his misdeeds. She had the sensation of a captive held for ransom, yet kept in ignorance of what the ransom might be.

"You *must* go away," she told him firmly.

"Can't, ma'am. I've got a passenger to ferry."

"You must leave the grounds; go back to your boat."

"And I was just beginning to have a good time," he said ruefully, surveying his costume.

"I will pay you if you will go away."

"I haven't asked you to. I — Here comes Reggy!"

Rosalind uttered a little cry and turned swiftly. The bulky figure of Reginald Williams was moving toward them.

"I'll hide," said the boatman cheerfully. "Try and save another dance, will you? Don't forget."

He slipped away from her and disappeared behind a thick clump of shrubbery. A moment later Reginald arrived.

"I've been looking all over for you, Rosalind," he exclaimed. "What are you doing out here?"

"I wanted some air."

"And you came alone?"

"Yes — alone."

"Tom Witherbee was looking all over for you at the end of that last dance," said Reggy petulantly. "You're not treating any of us decently to-night, Rosalind. First you won't dance, then you run away."

"I didn't wish to come in the first place."

"But you always used to dance. You used to dance with me, too. I know I'm not much good at it, but — oh, hang it, Rosalind! I'm having a rotten time. There isn't a girl in the whole crowd that'll dance with me. They all ask me to please sit down and talk to them, and they look at me as if there was something the matter with me."

"Perhaps you're not popular, Reggy," suggested Rosalind a little viciously.

"That worries me a lot so far as the rest of the crowd are concerned. But if I could only seem to be a little more popular with you —"

"Please don't start that again."

"I'm never going to stop it! Look here, Rosalind, it's not fair! Why, you won't even wear that bracelet, although you said you were crazy over it."

Rosalind bit her lip and remained silent.

"I haven't said anything about it before," continued Reggy grumblingly. "It seemed sort of childish to get sore. But you wore it once and I don't see why you can't wear it now. You don't have to be engaged to me to do that; it's not like wearing a ring. Why won't you wear it?"

"Why, I —"

Rosalind faltered in speech, then made a little gesture of annoyance.

"There's not another bracelet like it in the world," he went on. "It was just made for you."

"It was made for a mummy," corrected Rosalind.

"She wasn't a mummy — then. She was a live wire. I'll bet she wore it every day she took a walk around the pyramids. And don't forget — she was a princess, Rosalind."

"I haven't forgotten it; you won't let me. Besides, it was second hand."

That was a brutal thing for Rosalind Chalmers to say, but she was in a savage and exasperated mood. She was far more disturbed over the absence of the bracelet than Reggy himself, but she could neither betray nor explain that fact. She would have given a small slice of her ample fortune if it were only upon her arm at that moment.

"Second hand!" snorted Reggy. "Second hand because a princess wore it? That's the first time you ever pulled that stuff on me."

"Reggy!"

"Oh, well, those are my sentiments at any rate. Perhaps they're not very elegantly expressed. But honestly, Rosalind, I'm sore. I think you might wear it once in a while. Will you wear something else for me, if I get it for you? A ring?"

"Oh, don't begin again, Reggy."

"I'm just picking up where I left off. Rosalind, why won't you marry me?"

"Because I do not choose to."

"But you know I love you."

Rosalind nodded her head wearily.

"So why not?" he persisted.

"Reggy, you are positively dense," she said hope-

lessly. "Am I to marry a man just because he loves me? Suppose I do not love him."

"Well, you can come as near to loving me as you can anybody, I guess. I wouldn't expect you to love me a great deal. I don't think you're that kind."

"You mean, I suppose," she said coldly, "that I am incapable of affection."

"Oh, come; not like that, you know," broke in Reggy stumbly. "But — well — Oh, I can't put it the way it ought to be put, Rosalind. Of course you *could* love anybody, if you wanted to. But what I mean is, that — you're not apt to."

"Thank you for making it so clear, Reggy."

"And I'd be willing to get along with just — just —"

"Just toleration, I imagine."

"Yes, toleration!" he blurted. "So long as it was from you."

"Well, I'm not in a tolerant mood at present," said Rosalind. "Will you take me back to the hotel?"

"Will you dance with me?"

"I think not."

"Will you wear the bracelet then?"

"Well — perhaps."

As they moved away the boatman stepped from his hiding-place.

"Bracelet," he muttered. "That's funny now. I wonder if it could be the one."