

# **THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING**

**BY  
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**“NOW WE’RE IN FOR IT!” SAID NAN  
UNCOMFORTABLY**

TO  
CARLETON B. McCULLOCH

# CHAPTER I

## A YOUNG LADY OF MOODS

It was three o'clock, but the luncheon the Kinneys were giving at the Country Club had survived the passing of less leisurely patrons and now dominated the house. The negro waiters, having served all the food and drink prescribed, perched on the railing of the veranda outside the dining-room, ready to offer further liquids if they should be demanded. Such demands had not been infrequent during the two hours that had intervened since the party sat down, as a row of empty champagne bottles in the club pantry testified. The negroes watched with discreet grins the antics of a girl of twenty-two who seemed to be the center of interest. She had been entertaining the company with a variety of impersonations of local characters, rising and moving about for the better display of her powers of mimicry. Hand-clapping and cries of "Go on!" followed each of these performances.

She concluded an imitation of the head waiter—a pompous individual who had viewed this impiety with mixed emotions—and sank exhausted into her chair amid boisterous laughter. The flush in her cheeks was not wholly attributable to the heat of the June day, and the eagerness with which she gulped a glass of champagne one of the men handed her suggested a familiar acquaintance with that beverage.

"Now, Nan, give us Daddy Farley. Do old Uncle Tim cussing the doctor—put it all in—that's a good little Nan!"

"Go to it, Nan; we've got to have it!" cried Mrs. Kinney.

“I think it will kill me to hear it again,” protested Billy Copeland, who was refilling the girl’s glass; “but I’d be glad to die laughing. It’s the funniest stunt you ever did.”

The girl’s arms hung limp, and she sat, a crumpled, dejected figure, glancing about frowningly with dull eyes.

“I’m all in; there’s nothing doing,” she replied tamely.

“Oh, come along, Nan. We’ll go for a spin in the country right afterwards,” said Mrs. Kinney—who had just confided to a guest from Pittsburg, for whom the party was given, that Nan’s imitation of Daddy Farley abusing his doctor was the killingest thing ever, and that she just must hear it.

Their importunities were renewed to the accompaniment of much thumping of the table, and suddenly the girl sprang to her feet. She seemed immediately transformed as she began a minute representation of the gait and speech of an old man.

“You ignorant blackguard! you common, low piece of swine-meat! How dare you come day after day to torture me with your filthy nostrums! You’ve poured enough dope into me to float a battleship and given me pills enough to sink it, and here I am limpin’ around like a spavined horse, and no more chance o’gettin’ out o’ here again than I have of goin’ to heaven! What’s that! You got the cheek to offer to give up the case! Just like you to want to turn me over to some other pirate and keep me movin’ till the undertaker comes along and hangs out the crape! There’s been a dozen o’ you flutterin’ in here like hungry sparrows lookin’ for worms. You don’t see anything in my old carcass but worm-food! Hi, you! What you up to now? Oh, Lord, don’t leave me! Come back here; come back here, I say! Oh, my damned legs! How long you say I’d

better take that poison you sent up here yesterday? Well, all right”—meekly—“I guess I’ll try it. Where’s that nurse gone? You better tell her again about the treatment. She forgets it half the time; tell her to double the dose. If I’ve got to die, I want to die full o’ poison to make it easier for the embalmer. I guess you’re all right, doc; but you’re slow, mighty damned slow. Hi, Nan, you grinnin’ little fool, who told you to come in here? Oh, Lord! Oh, my poor legs! Oh, for God’s sake, doctor, do something for me—do something for me!”

She tottered toward her chair, imaginably the bed from which the old man had risen, and glanced at her audience indifferently, as they broke into hilarious applause. The vulgarity of the exhibition was mitigated somewhat by her amazing success in sinking herself in another personality. They all knew that the man she was imitating was her foster-father and benefactor; that he had rescued her from obscure, hopeless poverty, educated her and given her his name; and that but for his benevolence they never would have known or heard of her; but this clearly was not a company that was fastidious in such matters. The exhibition of her cleverness had been highly diverting. They waved their napkins and demanded more.

She continued to survey them coldly, standing by her chair and absently biting her lip. Then she turned with an air of disdain and moved among the tables to the nearest door with languid deliberation. They watched her dully, mystified. This possibly was a prelude to some further contribution to the hour’s entertainment, and they craned their necks to follow her, expecting that at any moment she would turn back.



The screen door banged harshly upon her exit. She crossed the veranda, ran down the steps toward the canal that lay a little below the clubhouse, and hurried away as though anxious to escape pursuit or questioning. She came presently to the river, pressed through a tangle of briars and threw herself down on the bank under a majestic sycamore.

A woodpecker drummed upon a dead limb of the tree, and a kingfisher looked down at her wonderingly. She lay perfectly quiet with her face buried in the grass. Hers was not a happy frame of mind. Torn with contrition, she yielded herself to the luxury of self-scorn. She had no intention of returning immediately to the clubhouse, and she was infinitely relieved that none of her late companions had followed her. She wished that she might never see them again. Then her mood changed and she sat up, flung aside her hat, dipped her handkerchief in the river and held it to her burning face.

“You little fool, you silly little fool!” she said, addressing her reflection in the water. She spoke as though quoting, which was indeed exactly what she was doing. It was just such endearing terms that her foster-father applied to her in his frequent fits of anger.

Then she stretched herself at ease with her hands clasped under her head and stared at the sky. Beneath the cloud of loosened black hair that her various exertions had shaken free, her violet eyes were fine and expressive. Her face was slender, with dimples near the corners of her mouth: a sensitive face, still fresh and girlish. Her fairness was that of her type—a type markedly Irish. The wet handkerchief that had brought away a faint blotch of scarlet from her rather full lips had left them still red with the sufficient color of

youthful health. Lying relaxed for half an hour, watching the lazily drifting white clouds, she became tranquillized. Her eyes lost their restlessness as she gazed dreamily at the heavens.

The soft splash of oars caused her to lift her head guardedly and glance out upon the river. A young man was deftly urging a cedar skiff toward a huge elm that had been uprooted by a spring storm and lay with half its trunk submerged. He jumped out and tied the skiff to a convenient limb and then, standing on the trunk, adjusted a rod and line and began amusing himself by dropping a brilliant fly here and there on the rippling surface. It was inconceivable that any one should imagine that fish were to be wooed and won in this part of the stream; even Nan knew better than that. But failures apparently did not diminish the pleasure the fisherman found in his occupation.

He was small and compactly made and wore white flannel trousers, canvas shoes, and a pink shirt with a four-in-hand to match. He moved about freely on the log to give variety to his experiments; he was indeed much nimbler with his feet than with his hands, for his whipping of the stream lacked the sophistication of skilled fly-casting. He lighted a cigarette without abating his efforts, and commented audibly upon his stupidity when a too-vigorous twist of the wrist sent the fly into a sapling, from which he extricated it with the greatest difficulty.

He was not of her world, Nan reflected, peering at him through the fringing willows. She knew most of the young gentlemen who attended dances or played tennis and golf at the Country Club, and he was not of their species. Once in making a long cast his foot slipped, and he capered wildly while regaining his balance, fell astraddle of the log, and one shoe shipped water. He glanced about

to make sure this misfortune had not been observed, shook the water out of his shoe and lighted a fresh cigarette.

She admired the dexterity with which he held the rod under his arm, manipulated the “makings” and had the little cylinder burning in a jiffy and hanging to his lip—a fashion of carrying a cigarette not affected by the young gentlemen she knew. It was just a little rakish; but he was, she surmised, a rather rakish young man. A gray cap tilted over one ear exaggerated his youthful appearance; his countenance was still round and boyish, though she judged him to be older than herself.

The patience and industry with which he plied the rod were admirable: though there was not the slightest probability that a fish would snap at the fly, he continued his futile casting with the utmost zeal and good humor. His sinewy arms were white—which, being interpreted, meant that their exposure to the sun had not been as constant as might be expected of one who was lord of his own time and devoted to athletics. She was wondering whether he intended to continue his exercise indefinitely, when his efforts to extricate the fly from a tangle of water-grass freed it unexpectedly, and the line described a semicircle and caught a limb of the sycamore under which she was lying.

His vigorous tugs only tightened it the more, and she began speculating as to whether she should rise and loosen it or await his own solution of the difficulty. If it became necessary for him to leave the fallen tree to effect a rescue, he must find her hiding-place; and her dignity, she argued, would suffer if she allowed him to discover that she had been watching him. He now began moving toward the bank with the becoming air of determination that had attended his practice with the rod. She rose quickly, jumped up and

caught the bough that held the fly, and tore it loose with a handful of leaves.

“Lordy!” he exclaimed, staring hard. “Did you buy a ticket for this show, or did you stroll in on a rain-check?”

“Oh, I was here first; but it isn’t my river!” she replied easily. “They don’t seem to be biting very well,” she added consolingly.

“Biting? Well, I should say not! There hasn’t been a minnow in this river since the Indians left. I’m just practicing.”

“You’ve done a lot of it,” said Nan, looking about for her hat and picking it up as an earnest of her immediate departure.

He dropped his rod and walked toward her guardedly and with an assumed carelessness, his hands in his pockets.

“That’s one good thing about fly-fishing,” he observed detainingly; “you don’t need to bother about the fish so long as there’s plenty of water.”

He noted the handkerchief that she had spread on a bush to dry, and eyed her with appreciation as she thrust the pins through her hat.

“Country Club?” he asked casually.

She nodded affirmatively, glancing toward the red roof of the clubhouse, and brushed the bits of bark and earth from her skirt. If he meant to annoy her with further conversation, it might be just as well to make it clear that the club afforded an easily accessible refuge.

“Excuse me, but you’re Miss Farley,—yes? It’s kind o’ funny,” he continued, still lounging toward her, “but I remember you away back when we were both kids—my name being Amidon—Jeremiah A., late of good old Perry County on La Belle Rivière—and I’ve seen you lots o’ times downtown. I’m connected in a minor capacity with the well-known house of Copeland-Farley Company, drugs, wholesale only—naturally sort o’ take an interest in the family.”

It was still wholly possible for her to walk away without replying; and yet his slangy speech amused her, and his manner was deferential. She remembered the Amidons from her childhood at Belleville, on the Ohio, and she even vaguely remembered the boy this young man must have been. Within three yards of her he paused, as though to reassure her that he was not disposed to presume upon an acquaintance that rested flimsily upon knowledge that might have awakened unwelcome memories; and seeing that she hesitated, he remarked:—

“A good deal has happened since you sat in front of me in the public school down there. I guess a good deal has happened to both of us.”

This was too intimate for immediate acceptance; but she would at least show him that whatever changes might have taken place in their affairs, she was not a snob.

“You are Jerry; the other Amidon boy was Obadiah. I remember him because the name always seemed so funny.”

“You’re playing safe! Obey died when he was ten—poor little kid! Scarlet fever. That was right after the flood you floated away on.”

She murmured her regret at the death of his brother. It was, however, still a delicate question just how much weight should be given to these slight ties of their common youth.

The disagreeable connotations of his introduction—the southward-looking vista that led back to the poverty and squalor to which she was born—were rather rosily obscured by the atmosphere of assured blitheness he exhaled. He seemed to imply that both had put Belleville behind them and that there was nothing surprising in this meeting under happier conditions. He was a clean-cut, well-knit, resolute young fellow. His brownish hair was combed back from his forehead with an onion-skin smoothness; indeed, he imparted a general impression of smoothness. His gray eyes expressed a juvenile innocence; his occasional smile was a slow, reluctant grin that disclosed white, even teeth. A self-confident young fellow, a trifle fresh, and yet with an unobtrusive freshness that was not displeasing, Nan thought, as she continued to observe and appraise him.

“I broke away from the home-plate when I was sixteen,” he went on, “about four years after you pulled out; and I’ve been engaged in commercial pursuits in this very town ever since. Arrived in a freight-car,” he amplified cheerfully, as though she were entitled to all the facts. “Got a job with the aforesaid well-known jobbing house. Began by sweeping out, and now I swing a sample-case down the lower Wabash. Oh, not vulgarly rich! but I manage to get my laundry out every Saturday night.”

“You travel for the house, do you?” she asked with a frown of perplexity.

“That’s calling it by a large name; but I can’t deny that your words give me pleasure. They’re just trying me out; it’s up to me to make good. I’ve seen you in the office now and then; but you never knew me.”

“If I ever saw you, I didn’t know you, of course,” she said with unaffected sincerity; “if I had, I should have spoken to you.”

“Oh, I never worried about that! But of course it would be all right if you didn’t want to remember me. I was an ugly little one-gallus kid with a frowzy head and freckled face. I shouldn’t expect you to remember me for my youthful beauty; but you saved me from starvation once; I sat on your fence and watched you eat a large red apple, and traded you my only agate—it was an imitation—for the core.”

She laughed, declaring that she could never have been so grasping, and he decided that she was a good fellow. Her manner of ignoring the social chasm that yawned between members of the fashionable Country Club and the Little Ripple Club farther down the river, to which young men who invaded the lower Wabash with sample-cases were acceptable, was wholly in her favor. Her parents had been much poorer than his own: his father had been a teamster; hers had been a common day laborer and a poor stick at that. And recurring to the maternal line, her mother had without shame added to the uncertain family income by taking in washing. His mother, on the other hand, had canned her own fruit and been active in the affairs of the First M.E. Church, serving on committees with the wives of men who owned stores and were therefore of Belleville’s aristocracy; she had even been invited to the parsonage to supper.

If Nan Corrigan's parents had not perished in an Ohio River flood, and if Timothy Farley, serving on a flood sufferers' relief committee, had not rescued her from a shanty that was about to topple over by the angry waters, Nan Farley would not be standing there in expensive raiment talking to Jerry Amidon. These facts were not to be ignored and she was conscious of no wish to ignore them.

"I've been fortunate, of course," she said, as though condensing an answer to many questions.

"I guess there's a good deal in luck," he replied easily. "If one of our best tie-hoppers hadn't got killed in a trolley smash-up, I might never have got a chance to try the road. I'd probably have been doing Old Masters with the marking-pot around the shipping-room to the end of time."

His way of putting things amused her, and her smile heightened his admiration of her dimples.

"I suppose you're going fishing when you learn how to manage the fly?" she asked, willing to prolong the talk now that they had disposed of the past.

"You never spoke truer words! It's this way," he continued confidentially: "When I see a fellow doing something I don't know how to do, my heart-action isn't good till I learn the trick. It used to make me sick to have to watch 'em marking boxes at the store, and I began getting down at six A.M. to practice, so when a chance came along I'd be ready to handle the brush. And camping once over Sunday a few miles down this romantic stretch of sandbars, I saw a chap hook a bass with a hand-made fly instead of a worm, and I've been waiting until returning prosperity gave me the price



of a box of those toys to try it myself. And here you've caught me in the act. But don't give me away to the sports up there." He indicated the clubhouse with a jerk of the head. "It might injure my credit on the street."

"Oh, I'll not give you away!" she replied in his own key. "But did the man you saw catch the fish that time ever enter more fully into your life? I should think he ought to have known how highly you approved of him."

"Well, I got acquainted with him after that, and he's taken quite a shine to me, if I may say it which shouldn't. The name being Eaton—John Cecil—lawyer by trade."

Her face expressed surprise; then she laughed merrily.

"He's never taken a shine to me; I think he disapproves of me. If he doesn't"—she frowned—"he ought to!"

"Oh, nothing like that!" he declared with his peculiar slangy intonation. "He isn't half as frosty as he looks; he's the greatest ever; says he believes he could have made something out of me if he'd caught me sooner. He works at it occasionally, anyway; trying to purify my grammar—a hard job; says my slang is picturesque and useful for commercial purposes, but little adapted to the politer demands of the drawing-room. You know how Cecil talks? He's a grand talker—sort o' guys you, and you can't get mad."

"I've noticed that," said Nan, with a rueful smile. "You ought to be proud that he takes an interest in you. I suppose it's your sense of humor; he's strong for that."

This compliment, ventured cautiously, clearly pleased Amidon. He stooped, picked up a pebble and sent it skimming over the water.

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