BEST LAID SCHEMES

BY
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

Table of Contents

“The best laid schemes o’ mice and men
Gang aft a-gley”

—ROBERT BURNS

TO

WILL H. HAYS

WHOSE FRIENDSHIP IS MORE TO BE PRIZED
THAN MUCH FINE GOLD

BEST LAID SCHEMES

THE SUSINESS OF SUSAN

I

SUSAN PARKER was twenty-six and nothing had ever happened. To speak more accurately, plenty of things had happened, but Man had never happened. As a college girl and afterward, Susie had, to be sure, known many men; but they had all passed by on the other side. A young man of literary ambitions had once directed a sonnet at Susie, but she was not without critical judgment and she knew it for a weak effort. This young man afterward became the sporting editor of a great newspaper, and but for Susie's fastidiousness in the matter of sonnets she might have shared his prosperity and fame. A professor of theology had once sent her a sermon on the strength of a chance meeting at a tea; but this, though encouraging, was hardly what might be called a thrilling incident. Still, the young professor had later been called to an important church, and a little more enthusiasm for sermons on Susie's part might have changed the current of her life.

The brother of one of Susie's Vassar classmates had evinced a deep interest in Susie for a few months, spending weekends at Poughkeepsie that might much better have been devoted to working off his conditions at New Haven; but the frail argosy of their young affections had gone to smash with incredible ease and swiftness over a careless assertion by Susie that, after all, Harvard was the greatest American university. All universities looked alike to her, and she had really been no more interested in Harvard than in the academic centers of Wyoming or Oklahoma. Now this young gentleman was launched successfully as a mining engineer

and had passed Susan by for another of his sister's classmates, who was not nearly so interesting or amusing as Susie.

Susie's mother had died while she was in college, and her father, in the year she was graduated. As he had chosen a good name rather than great riches, Susie had found it necessary to adjust herself to conditions, which she did by taking the library course at Witter Institute. In Syracuse, where Susan was born, old friends of the family had said how fortunate it was that her education made library work possible for her. And, though this was true, Susie resented their tone of condescension. In its various implications it dismissed her from the world to which she had been accustomed to another and very different sphere. It meant that if she became an attendant in the Syracuse Library she would assist at no more teas, and that gradually she would be forgotten in the compilations of lists of eligibles for such functions as illuminate the social horizon of Syracuse.

Whereupon, being a duly accredited librarian, entitled to consideration as such wherever book warehouses exist, Susan decided to try her luck in a strange land, where hours from nine to six would be less heart-breaking than in a town where every one would say how brave Susie was, or how shameful it was that her father had not at least kept up his life insurance.

The archives of Denver, Omaha and Indianapolis beckoned. She chose Indianapolis as being nearer the ocean.

In her changes of status and habitat the thing that hurt Susan most was the fact that the transition fixed her, apparently for all time, among the Susans. She had been named Susan for an aunt with money, but the money had gone to foreign missions when Susie

was six. In college she had always been Susie to those who did not call her Miss Parker. Her introduction to the library in the Hoosier capital was, of course, as Miss Parker; but she saw Miss Susan looming darkly ahead of her. She visualized herself down the gray vistas, preyed upon daily by harassed women in search of easy catercorners to club papers, who would ask at the counter for Miss Susan. And she resented, with all the strength of her healthy young soul, the thought of being Miss Susan.

Just why Sue and Susie express various shades of character and personal atmosphere not hinted in the least by Susan pertains to the psychology of names, and is not for this writing. Susie was a small human package with a great deal of yellow hair, big blue eyes, an absurdly small mouth and a determined little nose. As a child and throughout her college years she had been frolicsome and prankish. Her intimates had rejected Sue as an inappropriate diminutive for her. Sue and Susie are not interchangeable. Sue may be applied to tall, dark girls; but no one can imagine a Susie as tall or dark. In college the girls had by unanimous consent called her Susie, with an affectionate lingering upon the second syllable and a prolongation of the "e."

To get exactly the right effect, one should first bite into a tart gooseberry. In her corridor at Vassar it had been no uncommon thing to speak of her affectionately as Susie the Goosie. Another term of endearment she evoked was Susie the Syracuse Goosie, usually when she was in disgrace with the powers.

And Susie was the least bit spoiled. She had liked these plays upon her name. Her sayings and doings were much quoted and described in those good old days before she became Miss Susan Parker on a public library payroll. An admiring classmate had suggested the

writing of a book to be called the Susiness of Susie. And Susie was funny—every one admitted that she was. She left behind her at college a reputation as a past mistress of the unexpected, and a graceful skater over the thin ice of academic delinquency. She had liked the admiration of her classmates and had more or less consciously played for it. She did not mind so much being small when it was so clear that her compact figure contributed so considerably to her general Susiness.

And the manner of the way in which Susan became Susie again fell in this wise:

Last summer the newest certain rich man in Indianapolis, having builded himself a house so large that his wife took the children and went abroad to be comfortable, fell under the fascinations of a book agent, who equipped his library with four thousand of the books that are books. The capitalist really meant to read them when he got time—if he ever did; and, in order that he might the more readily avail himself of his library when leisure offered, he acted upon the agent's hint that it should be scientifically catalogued. The public librarian had suggested Miss Parker as a competent person for the task; and Logan, the owner of the unread books, having been pleased with the candidate's appearance, had suggested that she live in the house while doing the work, to be company for his wife's aunt, who was marooned there during Mrs. Logan's absence. Logan thereupon went to Alaska to look at an investment. The aunt proved agreeable and the big Logan house was, of course, a much pleasanter place than Susan's boarding house, where she had been annoyed by the efforts of one or two young gentlemen to flirt with her. Though her isolation emphasized the passing of her Susiness, she was reasonably happy, and set up her typewriter among the new books to do the

cataloguing. In the long, eventless evenings she read to the aunt or cut leaves, and felt the years of her Susihood receding.

And it was not until the very last week of her stay in the Logan house that Miss Susan Parker experienced a recrudescence of her Susiness.

II

Late one afternoon, midway of September, Susie, who had just returned from a stroll, stood on the Logan portico watching the motors flit past, and thinking a little mournfully that in a few days she must go back to her boarding house and her place behind the library counter. It was then that she observed Mr. Webster G. Burgess on his doorstep adjoining, viewing the urban landscape reflectively. He was hatless and in his hand he held a bit of yellow paper that resembled a telegram. Noting Susie's presence on the Logan veranda, he crossed the lawn in her direction. She knew from a personal item in the afternoon paper that Mr. Burgess had returned from his vacation, and that Mrs. Burgess was to follow at once, accompanied by her younger sister, Miss Wilkinson; and that she was to entertain immediately Mr. Brown Pendleton, a wealthy young American explorer and archæologist, who was coming to Indiana to deliver the dedicatory address at the opening of the new Historical Museum at the state university. Mrs. Burgess always entertained all the distinguished people who visited Indianapolis, and it had occurred to Susan that by the exercise of ordinary vigilance she might catch a glimpse of Brown Pendleton during his stay at the house next door. Webster Burgess was a banker who had inherited his bank, and he had always found life rather pleasant going. His wife diverted him a good deal, and the fact that she played at being a highbrow amused him almost more than anything

else. He had kept his figure, and at forty-two was still able to dance without fear of apoplexy. He chose his haberdashery with taste, and sometimes he sent flowers to ladies without inclosing his wife's card; but his wife said this was temperamental, which was a very good name for it.

Susie, holding her ground as Burgess advanced, composedly patted the head of one of the bronze lions that guarded the entrance to the Logan doors.

"Good evening! It's mighty nice to see you back again," said Burgess, smiling.

It was at this instant that Susan, hearing the god of adventure sounding the call to arms, became Susie again.

"I'm very glad to see you, Mr. Burgess," she replied; and ceasing to fondle the bronze lion's left ear she gave the banker her hand. "Summer is hanging on," observed Susie; "it's quite warm this evening."

"It is, indeed, and most of our neighbors seem to be staying away late; but I'm glad you're back."

Susie was glad he was back. Her superficial knowledge of Mr. Webster Burgess bore wholly upon his standing as a banker. In the year she had spent in his ancestral city she had never heard anything to justify a suspicion that he was a gentleman given to flirtations with strange young women. There was something quite cozy and neighborly in his fashion of addressing her. His attitude seemed paternal rather than otherwise. He undoubtedly mistook her for a member of the Logan household. It crossed her mind that he probably knew little of the Logan family, who had occupied the

new house only to leave it; but she knew there were several Logan girls, for she was occupying the room designed for one of them.

“This is what I call downright good luck!” Burgess continued, glancing at his watch. “Mrs. Burgess reaches town at six, with her sister—and Brown Pendleton, the explorer, and so on. We met him at Little Boar’s Head, and you know how Mrs. Burgess is—she wanted to be sure he saw this town right. A mighty interesting chap—his father left him a small mint, and he spends his income digging. He’s dug up about all the Egyptians, Babylonians and Ninevites. He’s coming out to make a speech—thinks of prying into the mound-builders; though I don’t see why any one should. Do you?”

“On the whole I think the idea rather tickles me,” said Susie. “I always thought it would be fun to try a lid-lifter on the dead past.”

Mr. Burgess took note of her anew and chuckled.

“Open up kings like sardines! I like your way of putting it.”

“A few canned kings for domestic consumption,” added Susie, thinking that he was very easy to talk to. The fact that he did not know her from a daughter of the royal house of Rameses made not the slightest difference now that the adventurous spirit of the old Susie days possessed her.

Mr. Burgess was scrutinizing the telegram again.

“I want you to dine with us this evening—as a special favor, you know. It’s rather sudden, but Mrs. Burgess has a sudden way of doing things. Just as I left my office I got this wire ordering me to produce the most presentable girl I could find for dinner. Pendleton hates big functions, but I nailed Billy Merrill at the club on my

way up, according to instructions—you can always get Billy; but I went through the telephone book without finding any unattached woman of suitable age I would dare take a shot at, knowing my wife's prejudices. And then I looked over here and saw you."

His manner conveyed, with the utmost circumspection, the idea that seeing her had brightened the world considerably.

"Certainly, Mr. Burgess," replied Susie, without the slightest hesitation or qualm. "At seven, did you say?"

"Seven-thirty we'd better say. There's my machine and I've got to go to the station to meet them."

As Susan, the thing would have been impossible; as Susie, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Burgess was backing down the steps. Every instant reduced the possibility of retreat; but the fact was, that she exulted in her sin. She was an impostor and she rejoiced shamelessly in being an impostor. And yet it did not seem altogether square to accept Mr. Burgess's invitation to dinner when it would undoubtedly involve him in difficulties with his wife, whom she had never seen in her life.

Burgess paused and wheeled round abruptly.

Her Susiness experienced a shock—the incident, in her hasty conjecture, was already closed—for he said:

"By-the-way, what is your name anyhow?"

"Susie," she said, lifting her chin Susily.

Mr. Burgess laughed, as though it were perfectly obvious that she was a Susie—as though any one at a glance ought to know that this

young person in the white flannel skirt and blue shirt-waist was a Susie, ordained to be so called from the very first hour of creation.

“Just for fun, what’s the rest of it?” he asked.

“Parker, please. I’m not even a poor relation of the Logans.”

“I didn’t suppose you were; quite and distinctly not!” he declared as though the Logans were wholly obnoxious. “I never saw you before in my life—did I?”

“Never,” said Susie, giving him the benefit of her blue eyes.

Burgess rubbed his ear reflectively.

“I think I’m in for a row,” he remarked in an agreeable tone, as though rows of the sort he had in mind were not distasteful to him.

“Of course,” said Susie with an air of making concessions, “if you really didn’t mean to ask me to dinner, or have changed your mind now that you find I’m a stranger and a person your wife would never invite to her house, we’ll call the party off.”

“Heavens, no! You can’t send regrets to a dinner at the last minute. And if you don’t show up I’m going to be in mighty bad. You see——” He gazed at Susie with the keen scrutiny he reserved for customers when they asked to have their lines of credit extended, and he carefully weighed the moral risk. “We seem to be on amazingly intimate terms, considering our short acquaintance. There’s something about you that inspires confidence.”

“I’m much uplifted by this tribute,” said Susie with a Susesque touch that escaped her so naturally, so easily, that she marveled at herself.

Burgess smiled broadly.

“I’m afraid,” he remarked, “that you don’t quite fill the bill; but you’ll do—you’ve got to do!”

He handed her the telegram he had retained in his hand and watched her face as she read:

P. is greatly taken with Floy, and we must give her every chance. Pick up an uninteresting young man and one of the least attractive of the older girls for dinner tonight. This is important Make no mistake.

“Those are my instructions. Can you ever forgive me?”

“With my hair brushed straight back, they say I’m quite homely,” observed Susie sighing.

“I shouldn’t do my worst,” said the banker, “where Nature has been so generous.”

“It seems,” observed Susie meditatively, “that I’m your deliberate choice as a foil for your sister-in-law, by sheer force of my unattractiveness.”

“I’m slightly nearsighted,” replied the banker. “It’s a frightful handicap.”

“I can see that glasses would be unbecoming to you.”

“The matter of eyes,” said the banker, stroking a lion, “is not one I should trust myself to discuss with you. Do you mind telling me what you’re doing here?”

“Cutting the leaves in the books and making a card catalogue. I use the typewriter with a dexterity that has been admired.”

“A person of education, clearly.”

“French and German were required by my college; and I speak English with only a slight Onondaga accent, as you observe.”

Her essential Susiness seemed to be communicating itself to the banker. His chauffeur loosened a raucous blast of the horn warningly.

“I fear your time is wasted. The Logans will never read those books. It’s possible that the hand of Fate guided me across the lawn to deliver you from the lions. The thought pleases me. To continue our confidences, I will say that, noble woman though my wife is, her sister has at times annoyed me. And when I left Little Boar’s Head I saw that Pendleton suspected that we were trying to kidnap him.”

“And I take it that the natural fellow-feeling of man for man would mitigate your sorrow if the gentleman whom your wife is carrying home in a birdcage should not, in fact, become your brother-in-law.”

“It would be indelicate for me to go so far as that; but Floy has always had a snippy way with me. I should like to see her have to work for the prize.”

“My dinner frock is three years old, but I’ll see what I can do to become a natural hazard. You’d better move upon the station—the blasts of that horn are not soothing to the nerves.”

III

Brown Pendleton, Ph.D., L.H.D., F.R.G.S., frowned as he adjusted his white tie before the mirror of the Burgesses' best guest-room. He was a vigorous, healthy American of thirty, quite capable of taking care of himself; and yet he had been dragged submissively across the continent by a lady who was animated by an ambition to marry him to her sister, toward whom his feelings, in the most minute self-analysis, were only those of polite indifference. And the mound-builders, now that he thought of it, were rather tame after Egypt and Babylon. As he surveyed his tanned face above his snowy shirt bosom he wished that he had never consented to deliver the address at the opening of the new Historical Museum at Indiana University, which was the ostensible reason for this Western flight. As for Miss Floy Wilkinson, she was a perfectly conventional person, who had—not to be more explicit—arrived at a time of life when people say of a girl that she is holding her own well. And she was. She was indubitably handsome, but not exciting. She was the sort of girl who makes an ideal house guest, and she had walked down church aisles ahead of one after the other of her old school friends all the way from Duluth to Bangor. Mrs. Burgess had become anxious as to Floy's future, and in convoying Pendleton to Indianapolis and planting him in her best guest-chamber she was playing her cards with desperation.

Mrs. Burgess ran upstairs to dress after a hasty cross-examination of the cook, to make sure her telegraphic order for dinner had been understood, and found her husband shaking himself into his dress coat.

She presented her back to be unhooked and talked on in a way she had.