HENRY KITCHELL WEBSTER

THE REAL ADVENTURE

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EAN 8596547305682

DigiCat, 2022
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CHAPTER I

A POINT OF DEPARTURE

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"Indeed," continued the professor, glancing demurely down at his notes, "if one were the editor of a column of—er advice to young girls, such as I believe is to be found, along with the household hints and the dress patterns, on the ladies' page of most of our newspapers—if one were the editor of such a column, he might crystallize the remarks I have been making this morning into a warning—never marry a man with a passion for principles."

It drew a laugh, of course. Professorial jokes never miss fire. But *the* girl didn't laugh. She came to with a start—she had been staring out the window—and wrote, apparently, the fool thing down in her note-book. It was the only note she had made in thirty-five minutes.

All of his brilliant exposition of the paradox of Rousseau and Robespierre (he was giving a course on the French Revolution), the strange and yet inevitable fact that the softest, most sentimental, rose-scented religion ever invented, should have produced, through its most thoroughly infatuated disciple, the ghastliest reign of terror that ever shocked the world; his masterly character study of the "sea-green incorruptible," too humane to swat a fly, yet capable of sending half of France to the guillotine in order

that the half that was left might believe unanimously in the rights of man; all this the girl had let go by unheard, in favor, apparently, of the drone of a street piano, which came in through the open window on the prematurely warm March wind. Of all his philosophizing, there was not a pen-track to mar the virginity of the page she had opened her note-book to when the lecture began.

And then, with a perfectly serious face, she had written down his silly little joke about advice to young girls.

There was no reason in the world why she should be The Girl. There were fifteen or twenty of them in the class along with about as many men. And, partly because there was no reason for his paying any special attention to her, it annoyed him frightfully that he did.

She was good-looking, of course—a rather boyishly splendid young creature of somewhere about twenty, with a heap of hair that had, in spite of its rather commonplace chestnut color, a sort of electric vitality about it. She was slightly prognathous, which gave a humorous lift to her otherwise sensible nose. She had good straight-looking, expressive eyes, too, and a big, wide, really beautiful mouth, with square white teeth in it, which, when she smiled or yawned—and she yawned more luxuriously than any girl who had ever sat in his classes—exerted a sort of hypnotic effect on him. All that, however, left unexplained the quality she had of making you, whatever she did, irresistibly aware of her. And, conversely, unaware of every one else about her. A bit of campus slang occurred to him as quite literally applicable to her. She had all the rest of them faded.

It wasn't, apparently, an effect she tried for. He had to acquit her of that. Not even, perhaps, one that she was conscious of. When she came early to one of his lectures—it didn't happen often—the men, showed a practical unanimity in trying to choose seats near by, or at least where they could see her. But while this didn't distress her at all—they were welcome to look if they liked—she struck no attitudes for their benefit. A sort of breezy indifference—he selected that phrase finally as the best description of her attitude toward all of them, including himself. When she was late, as she usually was, she slid unostentatiously into the back row—if possible at the end where she could look out the window. But for three minutes after she had come in, he knew he might as well have stopped his lecture and begun reciting the Greek alphabet. She was, in the professor's mind, the final argument against coeducation. Her name was Rosalind Stanton, but his impression was that they called her Rose.

The bell rang out in the corridor. He dismissed the class and began stacking up his notes. Then:

"Miss Stanton," he said.

She detached herself from the stream that was moving toward the door, and with a good-humored look of inquiry about her very expressive eyebrows, came toward him. And then he wished he hadn't called her. She had spoiled his lecture—a perfectly good lecture—and his impulse had been to remonstrate with her. But the moment he saw her coming, he knew he wasn't going to be able to do it. It wasn't her fault that her teeth had hypnotized him, and her hair tangled his ideas.

"This is an idiotic question," he said, as she paused before his desk, "but did you get anything at all out of my lecture except my bit of facetious advice to young girls about to marry?"

She flushed a little (a girl like that hadn't any right to flush; it ought to be against the college regulations), drew her brows together in a puzzled sort of way, and then, with her wide, boyish, good-humored mouth, she smiled.

"I didn't know it was facetious," she said. "It struck me as pretty good. But—I'm awfully sorry if you thought me inattentive. You see, mother brought us all up on the Social Contract and The Age of Reason, things like that, and I didn't put it down because ..."

"I see," he said. "I beg your pardon."

She smiled, cheerfully begged his and assured him she'd try to do better.

Another girl who'd been waiting to speak to the professor, perceiving that their conversation was at an end, came and stood beside her at the desk—a scrawny girl with an eager voice, and a question she wanted to ask about Robespierre; and for some reason or other, Rosalind Stanton's valedictory smile seemed to include a consciousness of this other girl—a consciousness of a contrast. It might not have been any more than that, but somehow, it left the professor feeling that he had given himself away.

He was particularly polite to the other girl, because his impulse was to act so very differently.

There is nothing cloistral about the University of Chicago except its architecture. The presence of a fat abbot, or a

lady prioress in the corridor outside the recitation room would have fitted in admirably with the look of the warm gray walls and the carven pointed arches of the window and door casements, the blackened oak of the doors themselves.

On the other hand, the appearance of the person whom Rose found waiting for her out there, afforded the piquant effect of contrast. Or would have done so, had the spectacle of him in that very occupation not been so familiar.

He was a varsity half-back, a gigantic blond young man in a blue serge suit. He said, "Hello, Rose," and she said, "Hello, Harry." And he heaved himself erect from the wall he had been leaning against and reached out an immense hand to absorb the little stack of note-books she carried. She ignored the gesture, and when he asked for them said she'd carry them herself. There was a sort of strategic advantage in having your own note-books under your own arm—a fact which no one appreciated better than the half-back himself.

He looked a little hurt. "Sore about something?" he asked.

She smiled widely and said, "Not a bit."

"I didn't mean at me necessarily," he explained, and referred to the fact that the professor had detained her after he had dismissed the class. "What'd he try to do—call you down?"

There was indignation in the young man's voice—a hint of the protector aroused—of possible retribution.

She grinned again. "Oh, you needn't go back and kill him," she said.

He blushed to the ears. "I'm sorry," he observed stiltedly, "if I appear ridiculous." But she went on smiling.

"Don't you care," she said. "Everybody's ridiculous in March. You're ridiculous, I'm ridiculous, he"—she nodded along the corridor—"he's plumb ridiculous."

He wasn't wholly appeased. It was rather with an air of resignation that he held the door for her to go out by. They strolled along in silence until they rounded the corner of the building. Here, ceremoniously, he fell back, walked around behind her and came up on the outside. She glanced up and asked him, incomprehensibly, to walk on the other side, the way they had been. He wanted to know why. This was where he belonged.

"You don't belong there," she told him, "if I want you the other way. And I do."

He heaved a sigh, and said "Women!" under his breath. *Mutabile semper*! No matter how much you knew about them, they remained incomprehensible. Their whims passed explanation. He was getting downright sulky.

As a matter of fact, he did her an injustice. There was a valid reason for her wanting him to walk on the other side. What gave the appearance of pure caprice to her request was just her womanly dislike of hurting his feelings. There was a small boil on the left side of his neck and when he walked at her left hand, it didn't show.

"Oh, don't be fussy," she said. "It's such a dandy day."

But the half-back refused to be comforted. And he was right about that. A woman never tells you to cheer up in that brisk unfeeling way if she really cares a cotton hat about your troubles. And a candid deliberate self-

examination would have convinced Rose that she didn't, in spite of the sentimentally warm March wind that was blowing her hair about. She was less moved by the half-back's sorrows this morning than at any time during the last six months. She'd hardly have minded the boil before to-day.

Six months ago, he had been a very wonderful person to her. There had been a succession of pleasant—of really thrilling discoveries. First, that he'd rather dance with her than with any other girl in the university. (You're not to forget that he was a celebrity. During the football season, his name was on the sporting page of the Chicago papers every day—generally in the head-lines when there was a game to write about, and Walter Camp had devoted a whole paragraph to explaining why he didn't put him on the first all-American eleven but on the second instead—a gross injustice which she had bitterly resented.)

There was a thrill, then, in the discovery that he liked her better than other girls, and a greater thrill in the subsequent discovery that she had become the basis of his whole orientation. It was her occupations that left him leisure for his own; his leisure was hers to dispose of as she liked; his energy, including his really prodigious physical prowess, to be directed toward any object she thought laudable. Six months ago she would not have laughed—not in that derisive way at least—at the notion of his going back and beating up the professor.

There had been a thrill, too, in their more sentimental passages. But at this point, there developed a most perplexing phenomenon. The idea that he wanted to make

love to her, really moved and excited her; set her imagination to exploring all sorts of roseate mysteries. The first time he had ever held her hand—it was inside her muff, one icy December day when he hadn't any gloves on—the memory of the feel of that big hand, and of the timbre of his voice, left her starry-eyed with a new wonder. She dreamed of other caresses; of wonderful things that he should say to her and she should say to him.

But here arose the perplexity. It was her imagination of the thing that she enjoyed rather than the thing itself. The wonderful scenes that her own mind projected never came true. The ones that happened were disappointing—irritating, and eventually and unescapably, downright disagreeable to her. There was no getting away from it, the ideal lover of her dreams, whose tenderness and chivalry and devotion were so highly desirable, although he might wear the half-back's clothes and bear his face and name, was not the half-back. She might dote on his absence, but his presence was another matter.

The realization of this fact had been gradual. She wasn't fully conscious of it, even on this March morning. But something had happened this morning that made a difference. If she'd been ascending an imperceptible gradient for the last three months, to-day she had come to a recognizable step up and taken it. Oddly enough, the thing had happened back there in the class-room as she stood before the professor's desk and caught his eye wavering between herself and the scrawny girl who wanted to ask a question about Robespierre. There had been more than

blank helpless exasperation in that look of his, and it had taught her something. She couldn't have explained what.

To the half-back she attributed it to the month of March. "You're ridiculous, I'm ridiculous, he's ridiculous." That was about as well as she could put it.

She and the half-back had walked about a hundred yards in silence. Now they were arriving at a point where the path forked.

"You're elegant company this morning, I must say," he commented resentfully.

Again she smiled. "I'm elegant company for myself," she said, and held out her hand. "Which way do *you* go?" she asked.

A minute later she was swinging along alone, her shoulders back, confronting the warm March wind, drawing into her good deep chest, long breaths. She had just had, psychically speaking, a birthday.

She played a wonderful game of basket-ball that afternoon.

CHAPTER II

BEGINNING AN ADVENTURE

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It was after five o'clock when, at the conclusion of the game and a cold shower, a rub and a somewhat casual resumption of her clothes, she emerged from the gymnasium. High time that she took the quickest way of getting home, unless she wanted to be late for dinner.

But the exhilaration of the day persisted. She felt like doing something out of the regular routine. Even a preliminary walk of a mile or so before she should cross over and take the elevated, would serve to satisfy her mild hunger for adventure. And, really, she liked to be a little late for dinner. It was always pleasanter to come breezing in after things had come to a focus, than to idle about for half an hour in that no-man's-land of the day, when the imminence of dinner made it impossible to do anything but wait for it.

So, with her note-books under her arm and her sweater-jacket unfastened, at a good four-mile swing, she started north. In the purlieus of the university she was frequently hailed by friends of her own sex or the other. But though she waved cheerful responses to their greetings, she made her stride purposeful enough to discourage offers of company. They all seemed young to her to-day. All her student activities seemed young. As if, somehow, she had outgrown them. The feeling was none the less real after she had laughed at herself for entertaining it.

She noticed presently that it was a good deal darker than it had any right to be at this hour, and the sudden fall of the breeze and a persistent shimmer of lightning supplied her with the explanation. When she reached Forty-seventh Street, the break of the storm was obviously a matter of

minutes, so she decided to ride across to the elevated—it was another mile, perhaps—rather than walk across as she had meant to do. She didn't in the least mind getting wet, providing she could keep on moving until she could change her clothes. But a ten-mile ride in the elevated, with water squashing around in her boots and dripping out of her hair, wasn't an alluring prospect.

She found quite a group of people waiting on the corner for a car, and the car itself, when it came along, was crowded. So she handed her nickel to the conductor over somebody's shoulder, and moved back to the corner of the vestibule. It was frightfully stuffy inside and most of the newly received passengers seemed to agree with her that the platform was a pleasanter place to stay; which did very well until the next stop, where half a dozen more prospective passengers were waiting. They were in a hurry, too, since it had begun in very downright fashion to rain.

The conductor had been chanting, "Up in the car, please," in a perfunctory cry all along. But at this crisis, his voice got a new urgency. "Come on, now," he proclaimed, "you'll have to get inside!"

From the step the new arrivals pushed, the conductor pushed, and finally he was able to give the signal for starting the car. The obvious necessity of making room for those who'd be waiting at the next corner, kept him at the task of herding them inside and the sheep-like docility of an American crowd helped him.

Regretfully, with the rest, Rose made her way to the door.

"Fare, please," he said sharply as she came along.

She told him she had paid her fare, but for some reason, perhaps because he was tired at the end of a long run, perhaps because he saw some one else he suspected of being a spotter, he elected not to believe her.

"When did you pay it?" he demanded.

"A block back," she said, "when all those other people got on."

"You didn't pay it to me," he said truculently. "Come along! Pay your fare or get off the car."

"I paid it once," she said quietly, "and I'm not going to pay it again." With that she started forward toward the door.

He reached out across his little rail and caught her by the arm. It was a natural act enough—not polite, to be sure, by no means chivalrous. Still, he probably put into his grip no more strength than he thought necessary to prevent her walking by into the car.

But it had a surprising result—a result that normally would not have happened. Yet, on this particular day, it could not have happened differently. It had been a red-letter day from the beginning, from no assignable cause an exciting joyous day, and the thrill of the hard fast game, the shower, the rub, the walk, had brought her up to what engineers speak of as a "peak."

Well, the conductor didn't know that. If he had, he would either have let the girl go by, or have put a good deal more force into his attempt to stop her. And the first thing he knew, he found both his wrists pinned in the grip of her two hands; found himself staring stupidly into a pair of great blazing blue eyes—it's a wrathful color, blue, when you light

it up—and listening uncomprehendingly to a voice that said, "Don't dare touch me like that!"

The episode might have ended right there, for the conductor's consternation was complete. If she could have walked straight into the car, he would not have pursued her. But her note-books were scattered everywhere and had to be gathered up, and there were two or three of the passengers who thought the situation was funny, and laughed, which did not improve the conductor's temper.

Rose was aware, as she gathered up her note-books, of another hand that was helping her—a gloved masculine hand. She took the books it held out to her as she straightened up, and said, "Thank you," but without looking around for the face that went with it. The conductor's intentions were still at the focal point of her mind. They were, apparently, unaltered. He had jerked the bell while she was collecting her note-books and the car was grinding down to a stop.

"You pay your fare," he repeated, "or you get off the car right here."

"Right here" was in the middle of what looked like a lake, and the rain was pouring down with a roar.

She didn't hesitate long, but before she could answer a voice spoke—a voice which, with intuitive certainty, she associated with the gloved hand that had helped gather up her note-books—a very crisp, finely modulated voice.

"That's perfectly outrageous," it said. "The young lady has paid her fare."

"Did you see her pay it?" demanded the conductor.

"Naturally not," said the voice. "I got on at the last corner. She was here then. But if she said she did, she did."

It seemed to relieve the conductor to have some one of his own sex to quarrel with. He delivered a stream of admonition somewhat sulphurously phrased, to the general effect that any one whose concern the present affair was not, could, at his option, close his jaw or have his block knocked off.

Rose hadn't, as yet, looked round at her champion. But she now became aware that inside a shaggy gray sleeve which hung beside her, there was a sudden tension of big muscles; the gloved hand that had helped gather up her note-books, clenched itself into a formidable fist. The thought of the sort of thud that fist might make against the over-active jaw of the conductor was pleasant. Still, the thing mustn't be allowed to happen.

She spoke quickly and decisively. "I won't pay another fare, but of course you may put me off the car."

"All right," said the conductor.

The girl smiled over the very gingerly way in which he reached out for her elbow to guide her around the rail and toward the step. Technically, the action constituted putting her off the car. She heard the crisp voice once more, this time repeating a number, "twenty-two-naught-five," or something like that, just as she splashed down into the two-inch lake that covered the hollow in the pavement. The bell rang twice, the car started with a jerk, there was another splash, and a big gray-clad figure alighted in the lake beside her.

"I've got his number," the crisp voice said triumphantly.

"But," gasped the girl, "but what in the world did you get off the car for?"

It wasn't raining. It was doing an imitation of Niagara Falls, and the roar of it almost drowned their voices.

"What did I get off the car for!" he shouted. "Why, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was immense! It's so confounded seldom," he went on, "that you find anybody with backbone enough to stick up for a principle ..."

He heard a brief, deep-throated little laugh and pulled up short with a, "What's the joke?"

"I laughed," she said, "because you have been deceived." And she added quickly, "I don't believe it's quite so deep on the sidewalk, is it?" With that she waded away toward the curb.

He followed, then led the way to a lee-wall that offered, comparatively speaking, shelter.

Then, "Where's the deception?" he asked.

On any other day, it's probable she'd have acted differently; would have paid some heed, though a bit contemptuously, perhaps, to the precepts of ladylike behavior, in which she'd been admirably grounded. The case for reticence and discretion was a strong one. The night was dark; the rain-lashed street deserted; the man an utterly casual stranger—why, she hadn't even had a straight look into his face. His motive in getting off the car was at least dubitable. Even if not sinister, it could easily be unpleasantly gallant. A man might not contemplate doing her bodily harm, and still be capable of trying to collect some sort of sentimental reward for the ducking he had submitted himself to.

Her instinct rejected all that. The sound of his voice, the general—atmosphere of him had been exactly right. And then, he'd left undone the things he ought not to have done. He hadn't tried to take hold of her arm as they had splashed along through the lake to the curb. He hadn't exhibited any tenderly chivalrous concern over how wet she was. And, to-day being to-day, she consigned ladylike considerations to the inventor of them, and gave instinct its head.

She laughed again as she answered his question. "The deception was that I pretended to do it from principle. The real reason why I wouldn't pay another fare, is because I had only one more nickel."

"Good lord!" said the man.

"And," she went on, "that nickel will pay my fare home on the elevated. It's only about half a mile to the station, but from there home it's ten. So you see I'd rather walk this than that."

"But that's dreadful," he cried. "Isn't there ... Couldn't you let me ..."

"Oh," she said, "it isn't so bad as that. It's just one of the silly things that happen to you sometimes, you know. I didn't have very much money when I started, it being Friday. And then I paid my subscription to *The Maroon*...." She didn't laugh audibly, but without seeing her face, he knew she smiled, the quality of her voice enriching itself somehow.... "And I ate a bigger lunch than usual, and that brought me down to ten cents. I could have got more of course from anybody, but ten cents, except for that conductor, would have been enough."

"You will make a complaint about that, won't you?" he urged. "Even if it wasn't on principle that you refused to pay another fare? And let me back you up in it. I've his number, you know."

"You deserve that, I suppose," she said, "because you did get off the car on principle. But—well, really, unless we could prove that I did pay my fare, by some other passenger, you know, they'd probably think the conductor did exactly right. Of course he took hold of me, but that was because I was going right by him. And then, think what I did to him!"

He grumbled that this was nonsense—the man had been guilty at least of excessive zeal—but he didn't urge her, any further, to complain.

"There's another car coming," he now announced, peering around the end of the wall. "You will let me pay your fare on it, won't you?"

She hesitated. The rain was thinning. "I would," she said, "if I honestly wouldn't rather walk. I'm wet through now, and it'll be pleasanter to—walk a little of it off than to squeeze into that car. Thanks, really very, very much, though. Don't *you* miss it." She thrust out her hand. "Good-by!"

"I can't pretend to think you need an escort to the elevated," he said. "I saw what you did to the conductor. I haven't the least doubt you could have thrown him off the car. But I'd—really like it very much if you would let me walk along with you."

"Why," she said, "of course! I'd like it too. Come along."

CHAPTER III

FREDERICA'S PLAN AND WHAT HAPPENED TO IT

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At twenty minutes after seven that evening, Frederica Whitney was about as nearly dressed as she usually was ten minutes before the hour at which she had invited guests to dinner—not quite near enough dressed to prevent a feeling that she had to hurry.

Ordinarily, though, she didn't mind. She'd been an acknowledged beauty for ten years and the fact had ceased to be exciting. She took it rather easily for granted, and knowing what she could do if she chose, didn't distress herself over being lighted up, on occasions, to something a good deal less than her full candle-power. To Frederica at thirty—or thereabout—the job of being a radiantly delightful object of regard lacked the sporting interest of uncertainty; was almost too simple a matter to bother about.

But to-night the tenseness of her movements and the faint trace of a wire edge in the tone in which she addressed the maid, revealed the fact that she wished she'd started half an hour earlier. Even her husband discovered it. He brought in a cigarette, left the door open behind him and stood smiling down at her with the peculiarly complacent