

The Love Chase of Austin.

BY JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS.



HE Lathrops never did anything half way, and so on the night of their great ball, they chartered the whole east wing of the Empire Hotel for the guests from town, and put several livery stables at their disposal. About three carloads of people came up when George Austin did, in time for a late dinner; and though he knew very few of them and spent most of his time in the smoking room, the general festivity of the thing affected him in spite of himself, so that he almost looked forward to the evening. He was not *blasé*, but he did not understand girls very well. The girls who understood him always told him that he was too downright and unromantic.

"You have all the wisdom, and good sense, and cleverness you need," Gertrude Knight often said. "What you want now is a little folly. Play, frisk, take life more humorously. Pose a little, and laugh at yourself for doing it. Make love where you don't want to marry. Quarrel without being angry. Put some excitement into things. It isn't enough to be just a man's man. You must be a girl's man, too."

He laughed at the advice, and did his best to follow it. This trip was one of Gertrude's prescriptions, and had been held out so prettily, with a "You know it's for your good, and I'm going to be there," that he had swallowed it with no stronger protest than a faint wrinkling of his forehead. He would have enjoyed a little practical coaching on the way up, but Gertrude was three deep with men who were born playful, and he did not like to interfere. Sitting next to her at dinner was a mockery, for all his outer attention was monopolized by Mrs. Hathaway, a frolicsome widowette, who had not lost her husband, but simply mislaid him, and who was bent on getting her hand in for the evening's slaughter by a little preliminary practise.

After dinner the east wing echoed for a few minutes with voices and laughter, a note or two of the hubbub being checked off with the shutting of each numbered door, till all was still again. Austin lit his gas, whistling, and opened the dress suit case standing by the table. The broad, smooth layer of white within did not look like his packing, and he lifted it in some wonder. It rapidly unfolded itself, seeming to spread yards and yards in every direction. Austin swung it around dubiously, to be confronted by a broad whirlpool of lace, flanked by smaller eddies boiling up at the end of two flimsy, bag-like sleeves. There was no doubt now of the thing's nature and sex.

"I'd like to know what you're doing in my bag," he said sternly.

Something dropped out of its folds and fell with a thump on the floor. Austin pounced with the scowl of a policeman on a disagreeable duty, and took into custody a flippant black satin slipper, of the same undesired sex.

"Well, somebody seems to have been making herself at home," he was beginning, when his eye fell on the end of the bag, which should have borne a torn brown label. It was not there, nor could he find the triangular red fragment. Both mole and strawberry mark were missing.

So it was he who was trespassing, and in the bag of some strange girl, who might be even now on his trail. He thrust back the slipper and tried to refold the long white garment, which carried on with wanton mischief under his helpless fingers, utterly refusing to go back to its sedate creases.

"If I were romantic, I suppose you'd give me very queer feelings," he reflected as he struggled to smooth into shape the lace-crowned mass of cambrie that brimmed over in every direction. "I'd probably be dead in love with you by this time, and I'd hold all that frilly business too sacred to touch. As a matter of fact, you don't affect my pulse in the least. I've seen dozens like you in the shop windows, and your getting into my room by mistake is merely a meaningless accident to me. Wouldn't that make Gertrude tired!" And he smiled to himself as he started out with the truant. In the hall he met a boy carrying a dress suit case, whose torn brown label and triangular red fragment guided him like friendly beacons.

"That is my bag you have there," he said. "This belongs to somebody else."

"Ought to have your names on them," said the boy reprovingly as they exchanged.

Austin opened his bag with some curiosity. There were no signs of feminine invasion here, but in the shadow of the table, where the first bag had stood, something long, and slender, and black suddenly caught his eye. He stooped warily and picked up between his thumb and forefinger a silk stocking.

Evidently he couldn't lose her, he thought, dismayed. And seating himself on the edge of the bed, the stocking dangling limply from his hand, he set himself to evolving a way by which the brazen intruder might be restored to its proper sphere. A considerable undertaking in view of the fact that there was no mark or name on it, nothing to betray the owner, beyond the general inference that she was a woman, and probably rich or extravagant, for the silk screamed luxuriously between his fingers. "And then there was all that expensive lace," added Austin, who would not have known Mechlin from shelf paper.

But there were many rich and extravagant women in the hotel that night. He might post some advertisement in the office, such as, "If the young lady who lost a black silk stocking" —

No, that would hardly do. She wouldn't be likely to come for it. Or he might go from door to door and measure the feminine boots put outside for a polish. Or, best of all, he could send for the boy who had restored him to his own. But some ringing and waiting brought out the fact that "Briggs, being a little feller, always got off at half past nine, and had already gone."

"I see it all," said Austin, with a sigh. "It's a dodge on the part of providence to make me romantic. I'm to wear the thing over my heart till I find the girl it belongs to, and then I'm to fall in love with her and marry her. I don't want her, and, judging by her duds, I can't afford her, but I know a straight tip when I see it. Lead on, you squirmy black thing. I'll follow till I find the right girl, and then I'll flop down, and ask for her hand, — her foot, I mean. I'll show Gertrude I can be as big a fool as any one when I have to. I don't like it, but it's fate."

All the time he was dressing, Austin planned the evening's

campaign, stopping at intervals to consider the silken nemesis that dangled from the gas fixture. It was pretty, with its filmy blackness, and its little vines of openwork up and down the instep. A man might well be stirred by its delicate femininity. "Only he isn't," admitted Austin with a sense of failure. Perhaps the girl herself would accomplish that. Though how he should find her was a problem by itself, since, little as he knew of girls, he was certain she would manage to cover her loss. He must look out for women in black, or with black points, who had come up from town on the late afternoon train. Those were his only clues.

As he drew on his patent leathers something rustled against his foot. It proved to be a folded piece of paper, with a couple of lines scrawled across it in a small, feminine hand.

"I'm sorry, but they aren't my size," he read. "If you will carry a bag exactly like mine, I wish you'd put your name on it. I do hate to label mine." There was no signature beyond a curving flourish of the pencil.

"She's a bashful little thing, this future wife of mine," commented Austin. "Still, I suppose it is what Gertrude would approve of. It's playful, and it's frisky, and it does make things exciting. I don't feel like a novel hero yet, but there is every incentive; I'm going to be sentimental if it kills me." And he kissed the note with deliberate emphasis, wrapped the silk stocking around it, and started to put both in his trousers' pocket, but decided that the inner pocket of his coat was more appropriate.

"Good-by, freedom," he said, slowly turning out the gas. "When I come back I shall be a young man in love."

The first half of the evening was a whirl of black slippers, introductions, leading questions that lead nowhere, and abrupt departures. The quest had taken hold of him like the Klondike fever, so that when he danced, the silken stocking in his pocket seemed to dance, too, and all conversation that did not turn his way was a miserable waste of time. When a plain, unattractive girl went past in black slippers his heart sank dismally, but a pretty one, similarly shod, set him on harder than ever.

"I'd only have about three hours left to fall in love in, if I found her this minute," he was reflecting, with anxious forehead,

when he found Mrs. Hathaway smiling squarely into his eyes. "Aren't you coming near me all the evening?" she said.

Austin understood widowettes even less than he did girls, but he saw, with a reeling heart, that she was all in black, and that her smile meant something. His eyes swept the room, as those of a drowning man might search the horizon before he sank the third time.

"I know what you are looking for," said the meaning voice, very close to his ear.

The waters closed over him.

"Come this way," he said, mechanically following out a plan he had made earlier in the evening, when chance had shown him a hidden corner where a dim red lamp glowed on a low red divan, heaped up and running over with red silk cushions. It had seemed to him an inspired setting for the rose-hued romance he was planning, but the unexpected shadow of a mislaid husband deepened it to sinister crimson.

So he was destined to an unhappy love affair, or else — Shades of his Puritan mother! The idea of winning a warmed-over heart did not appeal to him, but he had pledged himself to romance, and his steps must follow where the stocking led.

"It seems it was you I was looking for," he said, bending over to put another cushion behind her white shoulder. "Will you have — the talisman now?" He smiled down on her, with one hand on the breast pocket where the snaky thing lay coiled.

Her eyes doubled up with laughter.

"And I thought you were shy," she said. "No, you may keep it — for the present. But we are beginning at the wrong end. We have a great deal to go through before we get to — the talisman. You are a very impetuous person, did you know that?"

"But you see, I began about four hours ago. I have gone through the preliminaries all by myself," said Austin. The widowette gave him a look that would have set most heads spinning; but Austin's turned very hard.

"Wasn't it very unkind not to let me share them?" she said. "I love preliminaries."

"It was very stupid," said Austin, wondering if this was what Gertrude called exciting. "I never looked below your eyes, — at

least, not more than a few inches below,— so I did not realize you were in black."

Her mouth curved sorrowfully and she looked away. After an eloquent pause, "But you know my black is not mourning," she said very low, and instinct told Austin that this was the place for an expressive silence. Mrs. Hathaway told him, with a hint of a gesture, that it was also the place to take her black-gloved fingers into his own. And something else told him that he was a little amused and a good deal bored.

She was such an out and out sham; and he hated farce comedy, he was telling himself by way of apology for his laggard heart, when Mrs. Hathaway unexpectedly changed the key. "But what would your dark-eyed blonde say to this?" she asked, with a little laugh, half reprovingly. "There, no fencing. Didn't I tell you that I knew whom you were looking for? Oh, you were very nice to me at dinner, but don't you suppose I know what it means when a man is distraught, and there is a dark-eyed blonde on the other side of him?"

Austin was plainly disconcerted. The widow's heart was kind, if flighty.

"I'm not going to tease you," she said. "You're a dear boy. Come now and I'll reward you." As she rose, a buckled slipper came into sight. It was black, but even Austin's untutored eyes could see that it was no relation to the one he had held in his hand.

"She isn't the one, and I'm out of it safe and sound," he rejoiced as he silently followed her. "But what in Cain did she think I meant by the talisman?"

"I should like a tiny glass of punch," admitted Mrs. Hathaway, pausing on the edge of a small crowd.

Austin obediently worked his way in, but was blockaded by a group of girls, whose partners were on the same quest. One, whose back was to him, was talking more than audibly.

"Do you know, I'm going to be presented with a dress-suit case," were the first words that caught his attention. "A man asked me to-night how I liked the fad girls had for carrying them, and then wanted to know if I used one, all with the abstracted, conscious air people put on to ask you if you've read 'Cranford,'

when they are going to give it to you for Christmas. When I said I hadn't one, he fairly rushed away. I think he's telephoning for it now."

"Was he tall and rather good looking? Why, he asked me the same thing," cried another.

A third chimed in, with a little shriek:—

"You mean Mr. Austin, a friend of Gertrude Knight's? He led up to the very same subject with me, and then lost all interest and escaped. I wondered what I'd done. Maybe that is the only conversation he knows by heart."

At this point Austin shrank through an opening in the crowd, though too late to escape hearing himself set forth as a possible detective or a probable "agent for high-grade leather goods doing a stroke of business."

When he reached Mrs. Hathaway it was to have his attention called again to the dreaded group of girls, and thence to a couple behind them standing against the wall,—a lanky, red-haired youth and a tall girl whose face expressed shrewdness and energy rather than ancestors. Both were evidently spectators.

"He is Brewster, the *Recorder* artist, you know," his companion explained, "and he's sketching those girls. They don't know it, or, at least, each thinks the others don't know she knows it. The woman is the society reporter, and she is taking in every word they say. I watched her all the time you were gone."

For the next fifteen minutes Austin followed the widowette abstractedly through the rooms, trying to combine a polite outer conversation with her and a rude, insulting inner one with himself. At the end of that time, finding him unprofitable ground, Mrs. Hathaway effected a dexterous change of partners by which he was transferred to his "dark-eyed blonde."

"Well, it's time," said Gertrude, as Austin, struck dumb by a sight of the society reporter standing near, hurried his partner out of range of that cool, business-like scrutiny. When they were seated at a little table in a corner of the canvassed porch, with the mysteries of modern catering between them, he turned to her forlornly.

"It's no use, Gertrude. You'd better give me up. I tried to be romantic to-night, and I played, and I frisked, and I made

things exciting — for everybody but myself. And I'm a dismal failure. I can't do sentiment. It doesn't interest me. I don't belong to your race, and I'm afraid I never can learn the language."

"But you want to? It seems worth the while to you?"

"Yes, because I want to talk with you, and I can't hold you without it — hold your interest, I mean. In other women it bores me, but it attracts me in you, tremendously, and it's the only way I can seem worth while to you."

Gertrude stared at him thoughtfully over a little glass of golden wine, boiling up from hidden reefs of broken ice. With the light on her hair and her eyes in shadow she looked allegorical. One might have written above her, "Youth's First Glance at the Scythe of Time," or "Pleasure Confronted by Duty," or "The Dawn of the Soul."

"I wonder if that is true," she said. "I am afraid so. I've played with edged tools till I don't care for anything else. But then," putting down her glass with a smile that spoiled the allegory, "so long as you play with me, I don't know that I mind about the others. Why didn't you come near me all the evening?"

"I was very busy making a fool of myself, by way of education," said Austin with a frown.

An irrepressible laugh came from the other side of the table. "And you haven't guessed yet who she was! Oh, you needn't look at me like that. Do you think it's nice to steal young ladies' black silk hose?"

Austin gasped, recovered, and caught the flying end of the conversation. "And do you think it's nice to put notes in young gentlemen's patent leathers?"

Gertrude shot an inscrutable look across the table, then laughed again. "Didn't the writing tell you anything?" she asked.

"How could it? You never favor me. It was a little like your voice over the telephone, though — small, and clear, and very fast."

"Let me see," she demanded, holding out her hand.

A sudden sound of applause made them both turn towards the doorway that led into a great room, glittering like a diamond in

contrast to the cloudy, opal light of the porch. Little tables had sprung up like mushrooms under a shower of music, and all their occupants were turned towards a figure in black, that had just appeared on a high dais. A ripple of "Mariquita" spread over the room and broke in another wave of applause. The *danseuse* smiled like a delighted child, instead of bowing and languishing. Mariquita knew a thing or two about men and women.

The lights went down till the darkness of the room was pierced by a single broad tunnel of colored radiance, slanting from above, so that the misty figure looked like a fairy about to climb a rainbow. The smoke-like draperies shot up into huge bat's wings and silver stars shone in the folds, as the mysterious dance began.

Austin followed with his eyes, but his mind was still absorbed with his own affairs. So Gertrude was the end of his romance. It had never occurred to him that his Cinderella search could lead him into familiar places. Well, it was less artistic as a denouement, but it saved a great deal of trouble. He had been a little in love with Gertrude for some time. It ought not to be difficult to go the rest of the way.

Mariquita was tossing her draperies into whirling smoke wreaths tinged with fiery light. The silver crescent on her breast swayed tumultuously. A flood of colored stars swept across her filmy skirts. The humming of the hidden violins seemed to deepen the silence. Austin turned to Gertrude, and the glow within him died out as though wet sand had been flung upon it. He felt chilled and oppressed, as though he had passed from rose-colored illumination to thin daylight.

"She is a woman, and nothing else. She wouldn't satisfy you," came the verdict of that terrible, clear-sighted common sense whose mastery he had been trying to break all this long evening. Gertrude was completely absorbed in the dance, steeped in its beauty and color and motion. At a table near by the widowette was pretending to be, while the youth she was educating studied her profile unhappily, but with an absorption that Austin compared discontentedly to his own sensible stolidity.

The music swelled excitedly to its climax. Mariquita sprang forward as though breasting a high wind, a living Winged Victory outlined against tumultuous clouds. A triumphant second, and

then darkness. When the lights flashed up, the dais was empty. "Now for it," said Austin sternly to his reluctant heart. "Fate has given you a straight tip. See that you follow it up."

Through a drawn curtain he caught a glimpse of a flushed and disheveled woman, walking awkwardly in her bulky drapery, which a maid was holding up; and rebelled, as he turned away, against his perception of the ugly side of things.

"Don't let's dance," said Gertrude, as the little tables began to vanish. "It's a desecration, after that. I know a dear little red divan in a —"

But Austin, with a sinking remembrance of a recently buried past, hurried her to a pale-green and wicker affair that he protested suited her much better. "Besides," to her demur that she could "wear a red divan nicely," "I don't want to mix you up with — with a couple I saw there earlier in the evening."

"Tell me about them," said Gertrude, as she dropped down where she was bidden. "Where they *comme ca*?" She curled her middle finger around her forefinger, and held up both with a smile of mischievous meaning.

Austin inwardly shrank and wished she wouldn't. You don't mind things from girls in general, but from your future wife — Then he scowled at himself for a prig, and met her smile with the look it demanded. "You are too little to hear about such things," he said. "Besides, I want to talk about us. Why don't you take off your gloves?"

She lifted one hand lazily and let it fall across the arm of his chair. He unfastened the buttons and drew the glove off, finger by finger, deliberately, applying the bellows to his sulky heart. When the cool, fine lady hand, with its record of pampered civilization, was quite free he kissed the back of it. That was pleasant. He would gladly have repeated it very often. And yet —

"I shouldn't think she'd want to let me," ran through his mind, "She is altogether too used to things. Oh, shut up, you carping grandmother!"

"You are getting on," said Gertrude. "I don't believe there is much more for me to teach you in the art of playing. I must give you your degree and send you out to seek your fortune."

"Not if some other girl goes with it. I see all the gold I want right here," with a nod at the bright hair curving back from an innocent little white forehead. Gertrude's eyes were the only part of her that had kept pace with her inward sophistication.

"I wish it could be used as legal tender," she said, pulling a short lock down and studying it regretfully. "When I wanted to go shopping, I'd just have to take a pair of scissors. 'Three strands of dotted veiling, please, and a tress of white chiffon.'"

"Can't I do a curl's worth of something for you?"

"That is an anachronism. You didn't get it out of my lessons," she said, with severity. "Nobody wants locks of hair any more. They're entirely gone out, as keepsakes. They're jay. Why, they are as bad as souvenir spoons."

"What may I want, then?" he asked humbly. "A glove?"

"Not brand new, expensive ones," recovering hers and tucking it into her girdle. "Lace handkerchiefs are nice, though I haven't any to spare. You ought to be satisfied with a silk stocking, I should think," she added with a laugh. "That is thoroughly up to date."

"So sentiment has gone from the head to the foot," mused Austin. "That is rather significant. I wonder if it is a permanent reversal, or just a temporary somersault?"

Gertrude was not interested in the abstract. She bent forward and straightened the flower in his coat.

"Let's talk about us," she said, at dangerously close range.

A couple of hours later Austin stood at the foot of the stairs, moodily watching a dark-eyed blonde who, in voluminous wraps, was coming down a step at a time, talking over her shoulder. She was genuine where the other woman had been sham, she felt what the other acted, yet even that had failed. She could stir him for a moment, but even while his pulses were responding, his mind, sitting loftily aloof, was passing cold criticism on her ideals and standards. He had resented her delight in Mariquita simply because it was so typical of her. He had little sympathy with the passionate quest of sensations as the chief end of man, and her indifference to everything but the personal irritated him.

"I may in time lose my heart. I'll keep at it till I do," he said doggedly, "but I'm hanged if I can lose my head. I'm afraid I'm marrying into the wrong set."

The widowette passed, and he smiled at her good-humoredly and even affectionately. Her ideals did not matter. He was under no pledge to fall in love with her.

As Gertrude caught sight of him and came running down he gave a surprised exclamation. "Why, Gertrude, your slippers aren't black, — they're white!"

"Of course. What else could I wear with this gown? Well, good night. I suppose you have to go back on the early train. Thank heaven, I am not a man. Come to see me to-morrow. Oh, dear, are they waiting for me?"

Austin answered at random as he took her to her carriage. He was puzzled, and tired, and blue with a sense of failure. It was terrible to be so elderly and well balanced. When he was back in his room at the hotel he took a long look at the talisman, which once more dangled from the gas fixture.

"I wonder what kind of a girl really would bowl me over," he reflected. "Tall, and slim, and reserved, I think, with quiet brown hair and thin lips, and eyes that weren't forever telling you how fetching they were. I want a really lady girl, like — oh, I don't know. Little stocking, you're responsible for a great deal."

The early train took back a crowd of yawning, heavy-eyed men, each ready to swear off on late hours for the rest of his natural life, — mankind's invariable mood on the morning after. The feminine element was represented chiefly by Mariquita, looking grievously unfairy-like in the morning light. Austin made a strong effort to think of Gertrude in appropriate phrases, then gave it up with a yawn, and took to the morning paper.

"Say, excuse me, but aren't you Mr. Austin?" The society reporter of the *Recorder* was leaning forward from the seat behind with an air of business-like inquiry. A note-book lay on her knee. Austin admitted his identity unwillingly, with a flush at the memory of what those greedy ears, and possibly that greedy note-book, had taken in the night before.

"Well, I want to ask you about a dress-suit case —"

With colossal dignity he interrupted, "It will be a great favor to me if you will say nothing about that in the papers."

"Well, I won't, if you'll give me back my silk stocking," said the society reporter. "You see it's the only pair I ever had."

"Yours!" exclaimed Austin.

"I'm sorry about that note," she went on. "Mr. Brewster took my bag and his, and when I found that the one in my room was a gentleman's, I supposed he had shuffled them. I've known him since he was that high, you know. I gave it to a boy to take to his room."

"And I waylaid it in the hall," interposed Austin.

"I happened to hear some young ladies speaking about it, and they said you were a friend of Miss Knight's," she continued, mercifully slurring over that part, "so I asked her to point you out to me. I explained why, of course."

"I see," said Austin, handing back the fatal talisman with a smile that was amazingly cordial.

"My business isn't a popular one, so I don't generally label my baggage," said the reporter. "My husband always wants me to keep my name out of it. After this I'll have to, though!"

Austin smiled again, though he was not listening. A great big delight was growing and swelling inside of him, till it was ready to burst forth in a shout. He was under no bonds to Gertrude or any other woman. Fate had put up a trick on him, and the bargain was off. He and sentiment could keep comfortably apart till time should bring him to that really lady girl with the quiet brown hair and thin lips who should bowl him over. He drew a deep breath, as though he had come out of a heavy perfumed atmosphere into cool salt wind.

"Listen here a minute," said the reporter. "I've put Miss Knight down as charming in a costume of heavy white silk relieved by narrow pink satin stripes, and garnished with duchess lace. Can you tell me if that's right? I'd hate to make any mistake when she was so nice. She didn't feel she had to be so abnormally snippy to show that she didn't want to get in the papers."

"I know she had on white slippers, anyway," said Austin, still radiant.

