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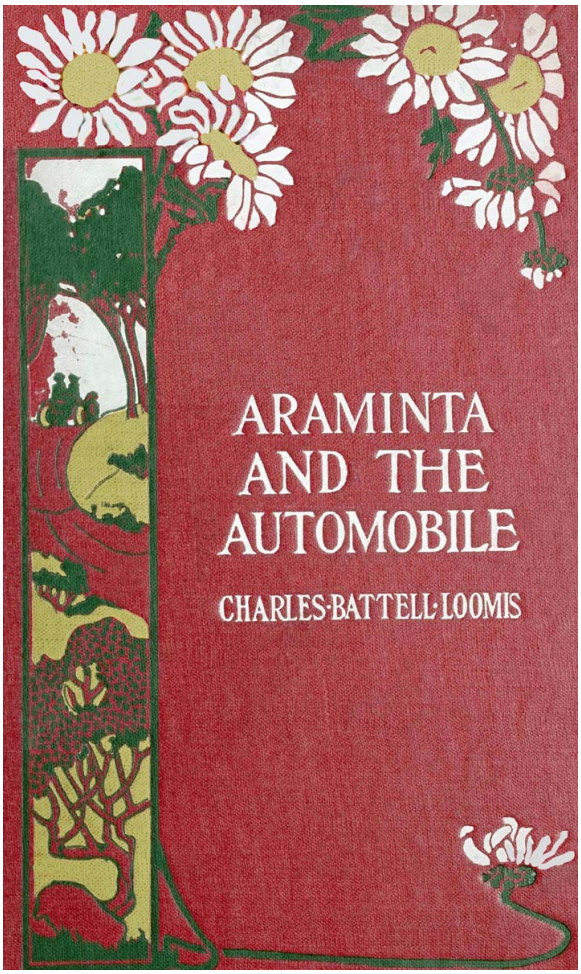

ARAMINTA AND THE AUTOMOBILE

Thornton, gesticulating wildly, disappeared round the corner

ARAMINTA
AND THE AUTOMOBILE

BY

CHARLES BATTELL LOOMIS

With Illustrations by

OTTO LANG

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Mr. Reviewer and My Dear Readers,

I have been asked to say a few words to you before you get busy with my little book that is filled with “Cheerful Americans” going out for automobile rides.

A generation or two ago, there was a poor writer (I mean poor in this world’s goods, of course) and he saw people riding about in automobiles as if they owned them, and it made him wish he could ride about in one as if he owned it. But he lacked the nerve, so he had to be content with trolleys.

After a while he made believe that he had bought an automobile, and he rode around in it with “Araminta,” and enjoyed the motion so much that he set others to riding in automobiles that he made himself in his study, and he was much pleased at the way they “went.”

After a while he made a collection of these stories and they went some more, and now they are off for a cross country trip that will undoubtedly result in the critics saying of the writer, “He has the pen of a Charles Dickens;” or “he reminds one of Robert Louis Stevenson at his best;” or “he succeeds, as no man since Sir Walter Scott has succeeded, in writing automobile stories that cause the helpless and fascinated reader to sit up all night regardless of anything save the flight of the machine;” or perhaps they will say “the mantle of Bret Harte has fallen upon him, and with the possible exception of Nathaniel Hawthorne no one has written such tales of the clutch and brake and sparker.”

Readers, need I tell you who that poor writer was? The poor boy who in 1865 had never even seen an automobile stands before you, and his name is

CHARLES BATTELL LOOMIS.

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SOME persons spend their surplus on works of art; some spend it on Italian gardens and pergolas; there are those who sink it in golf, and I have heard of those who expended it on charity.

None of these forms of getting away with money appealed to Araminta and myself. As soon as it was ascertained that the automobile was practicable and would not cost a king's ransom, I determined to devote my savings to the purchase of one.

Araminta and I live in a suburban town; she because she loves Nature, and I because I love Araminta. We have been married for five years. [12]

I am a bank clerk in New York, and morning and night I go through the monotony of railway travel, and for one who is forbidden to use his eyes on the train and who does not play cards it *is* monotony, for in the morning my friends are either playing cards or else reading their papers, and one does not like to urge the claims of conversation on one who is deep in politics or the next play of his antagonist; so my getting to business and coming back are in the nature of purgatory. I therefore hailed the automobile as a Heaven-sent means of swift motion with an agreeable companion, and with no danger of encountering either newspapers or cards. I have seen neither reading nor card-playing [13] going on in any automobile.

The community in which I live is not progressive, and when I said that I expected to buy an automobile as soon as my ship came in I was frowned upon by my neighbors. Several of them have horses, and all, or nearly all, have feet. The horsemen were not more opposed to my proposed ownership than the footmen—I should say pedestrians. They all thought automobiles dangerous and a menace to public peace, but of course I pooh-poohed their fears and, being a person of a good deal of stability of purpose, I went on saving my money, and in course of time I bought an automobile of the electric sort.

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“Young man, experience teaches more in half an hour than books or precepts do in a year”

Araminta is plucky, and I am perfectly fearless. When the automobile was brought home and housed in the little barn that is on our property, the man who had backed it in told me that he had orders to stay and show me how it worked, but I laughed at him—good-naturedly yet firmly. I said, “Young man, experience teaches more in half an hour than books or precepts do in a year. A would-be newspaper man does not go to a school of journalism if he is wise; he gets a position on a newspaper and learns for himself, and through his mistakes. I know that one of these levers is to steer by, that another lets loose the power, and that there is a foot-brake. I also know that the machine is charged, and I need to know no more. Good-day.” [15]

Thus did I speak to the young man, and he saw that I was a person of force and discretion, and he withdrew to the train and I never saw him again.

Araminta had been to Passaic shopping, but she came back while I was out in the barn looking at my new purchase, and she joined me there. I looked at her lovingly, and she returned the look. Our joint ambition was realized; we were the owners of an automobile, and we were going out that afternoon.

Why is it that cheap barns are so flimsily built? I know that our barn is cheap because the rent for house and barn is less than what many a clerk, city pent, pays for a cramped flat; but again I ask, why are they flimsily built? I have no complaint to make. If my barn had been built of good stout oak I might to-day be in a hospital. [16]

It happened this way. Araminta said, “Let me get in, and we will take just a little ride to see how it goes,” and I out of my love for her said, “Wait just a few minutes, dearest, until I get the hang of the thing. I want to see how much go she has and just how she works.”

Araminta has learned to obey my slightest word, knowing that love is at the bottom of all my commands, and she stepped to one side while I entered the gayly painted vehicle and tried to move out of the barn. I moved out. But I backed. Oh, blessed, cheaply built barn. [17] My way was not restricted to any appreciable extent. I shot gayly through the barn into the hen yard, and the sound of the ripping clapboards frightened the silly hens who were enjoying a dust-bath, and they fled in more directions than there were fowls.

I had not intended entering the hen yard, and I did not wish to stay there, so I kept on out, the wire netting not being what an automobile would call an obstruction. I never lose my head, and when I heard Araminta screaming in the barn, I called out cheerily to her, “I’ll be back in a minute, dear, but I’m coming another way.”

And I did come another way. I came all sorts of ways. I really don’t know what got into [18] the machine, but she now turned to the left and made for the road, and then she ran along on her two left wheels for a moment, and then seemed about to turn a somersault, but changed her mind, and, still veering to the left, kept on up the road, passing my house at a furious speed, and making for the open country. With as much calmness as I could summon I steered her, but I think I steered her a little too much, for she turned toward my house.

I reached one end of the front piazza at the same time that Araminta reached the other end of it. I had the right of way, and she deferred to me just in time. I removed the [19] vestibule storm door. It was late in March, and I did not think we should have any more use for it that season. And we didn’t.

I had ordered a strongly built machine, and I was now glad of it, because a light and weak affair that was merely meant to run along on a level and unobstructed road would not have stood the assault on my piazza. Why, my piazza did not stand it. It caved in, and made work for an already overworked local carpenter who was behind-hand with his orders. After I had passed through the vestibule, I applied the brake and it worked. The path is not a cinder one, as I think them untidy, so I was not more than muddied. I was up in an instant, and looked at the still enthusiastic machine with admiration. [20]

“Have you got the hang of it?” said Araminta.

Now that’s one thing I like about Araminta. She does not waste words over non-essentials. The point was not that I had damaged the piazza. I needed a new one, anyway. The main thing was that I was trying to get the hang of the machine, and she recognized that fact instantly.

I told her that I thought I had, and that if I had pushed the lever in the right way at first, I should have come out of the barn in a more conventional way.

She again asked me to let her ride, and as I now felt that I could better cope with the curves of the machine I allowed her to get in. [21]

“Don’t lose your head,” said I.

“I hope I sha’n’t,” said she, dryly.

“Well, if you have occasion to leave me, drop over the back. Never jump ahead. That is a fundamental rule in runaways of all kinds.”

Then we started, and I ran the motor along for upward of half a mile after I had reached the highway, which I did by a short cut through a field at the side of our house. There is only a slight rail fence surrounding it, and my machine made little of that. It really seemed to delight in what some people would have called danger.

“Araminta, are you glad that I saved up for this?”

"I am mad with joy," said the dear thing, her face flushed with excitement mixed with [22]
expectancy. Nor were her expectations to be disappointed. We still had a good deal to do before we should have ended our first ride.

So far I had damaged property to a certain extent, but I had no one but myself to reckon with, and I was providing work for people. I always have claimed that he who makes work for two men where there was only work for one before, is a public benefactor, and that day I was the friend of carpenters and other mechanics.

Along the highway we flew, our hearts beating high, but never in our mouths, and at last we saw a team approaching us. By "a team" I mean a horse and buggy. I was raised in [23]
Connecticut, where a team is anything you choose to call one.

The teamster saw us. Well, perhaps I should not call him a teamster (although he was one logically): he was our doctor, and, as I say, he saw us.

Now I think it would have been friendly in him, seeing that I was more or less of a novice at the art of automobiling, to have turned to the left when he saw that I was inadvertently turning to the left, but the practice of forty years added to a certain native obstinacy made him turn to the right, and he met me at the same time that I met him.

The horse was not hurt, for which I am truly glad, and the doctor joined us, and continued [24]
with us for a season, but his buggy was demolished.

Of course I am always prepared to pay for my pleasure, and though it was not, strictly speaking, my pleasure to deprive my physician of his turn-out, yet if he *had* turned out it wouldn't have happened—and, as I say, I was prepared to get him a new vehicle. But he was very unreasonable; so much so that, as he was crowding us—for the seat was not built for more than two, and he is stout—I at last told him that I intended to turn around and carry him home, as we were out for pleasure, and he was giving us pain.

I will confess that the events of the last few minutes had rattled me somewhat, and I did [25]
not feel like turning just then, as the road was narrow. I knew that the road turned of its own accord a half-mile farther on, and so I determined to wait.

"I want to get out," said the doctor tartly, and just as he said so Araminta stepped on the brake, accidentally. The doctor got out—in front. With great presence of mind I reversed, and so we did not run over him. But he was furious and sulphurous, and that is why I have changed to homeopathy. He was the only allopathic doctor in Brantford.

I suppose that if I had stopped and apologized, he would have made up with me, and I would not have got angry with him; but I couldn't stop. The machine was now going as [26]
she had done when I left the barn, and we were backing into town.

Through it all I did not lose my coolness. I said: "Araminta, look out behind, which is ahead for us, and if you have occasion to jump now, do it in front, which is behind," and Araminta understood me.

She sat sideways, so that she could see what was going on, but that might have been seen from any point of view, for we were the only things going on—or backing.

Pretty soon we passed the wreck of the buggy, and then we saw the horse grazing on dead grass by the roadside, and at last we came on a few of our townfolk who had seen us [27]
start, and were now come out to welcome us home. But I did not go home just then. I should have done so if the machine had minded me and turned in at our driveway, but it did not.

Across the way from us there is a fine lawn leading up to a beautiful greenhouse full of rare orchids and other plants. It is the pride of my very good neighbor, Jacob Rawlinson.

The machine, as if moved by *malice prepense*, turned just as we came to the lawn, and began to back at railroad speed.

I told Araminta that if she was tired of riding, now was the best time to stop; that she ought not to overdo it, and that I was going to get out myself as soon as I had seen her [28]
off.

I saw her off.

Then after one ineffectual jab at the brake, I left the machine hurriedly, and as I sat down on the sposhy lawn I heard a tremendous but not unmusical sound of falling glass....

I tell Araminta that it isn’t the running of an automobile that is expensive. It is the stopping of it.

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THE DECEPTION OF MARTHA TUCKER

AN AUTOMOBILE EXTRAVAGANZA

[30]

THE DECEPTION OF MARTHA TUCKER
AN AUTOMOBILE EXTRAVAGANZA

[31]

IT was not that Martha Tucker was particularly fond of horses so much as that she was afraid of automobiles of every sort, kind, or description. That was why she said that she would never consent to her husband's purchasing a motor carriage.

"Horses were good enough for my father, and I guess that horses will do for me as long as I live and John is able to keep them," said she to various friends on numerous occasions.

[32] But if she was ridiculously old-fashioned in her notions, John was not, and he cast about in his mind for some way to circumvent Martha without her knowing it. The thing would have been easy to do if it had not been for the fact that they were a very loving couple. John seldom went anywhere without taking his wife along, and as his business was of such a nature that he carried it on under his roof-tree, he was unable to speed along in happy loneliness on a locomobile or electric motor. Besides all this, John Tucker's conscience was such a peculiar affair that if he hoodwinked Martha it must be in her sight.

[33] The Tuckers always spent their summers at Arlinberg, the roads around which were famous for driving; and almost their only out-door recreation, aside from wandering afoot in the fields, was found in riding behind any one or two of his half-dozen horses. The fact that he was abundantly able to maintain the most expensive automobile extant made it doubly hard for John to abstain from the use of one.

"I gave up smoking to please Martha when we first married, but I do not intend to give up the idea of running an automobile of my own, just because she has the old-fogy notions of the Hiltons in her blood. Her father never rode in a steam-car, although the road passed by his back door, and all the Hiltons are old-fogyish—which sums up their faults."

[34] John said this to an old school-mate who was spending a Sunday at his house.

"Wouldn't she try one of your neighbor's automobiles, and see how she likes it?"

"No, sir; her no is a no. But I mean to ride in one with her sometime, if I have to blindfold her and tell her it's a baby-carriage."

[35] It may have been a week after this conversation that John and Martha wandered in the woods picking wild flowers, and Mrs. Tucker was inoculated with ivy-poisoning that settled in her eyes, so that for several days she was confined to her room, and when she came out she was told by her doctor to wear smoked glasses for a week or two, her eyes still being inflamed and very painful. "Keep outdoors; go riding as much as you can, but don't take off the glasses until the inflammation has entirely subsided," said he.

John was sincerely sorry for his wife's misfortune, but when he heard that she would see through a glass darkly for the matter of a week or two, he made up his mind to act and act quickly.

They went out for a ride that he might test her vision. The horse he was driving was a gray, Roanoke by name.

"My dear," said Mr. Tucker, "don't you think that the gait of this black horse is very like that of Roanoke?"

[36] "I'm sure I can't tell," said Martha. "With these dismal glasses on I'm not quite sure whether it's a horse or a cow in the harness. I get a hazy outline of some animal, but no color and little form. Don't ever touch poison-ivy if you value your sight."

"Well, the doctor says you'll be all right in a week or two. By the way, Martha, I'm going to run down to New York to-morrow on business. I'll be back in the evening. If your eyes were all right you might come along, but as it is, I guess you'd better not go down."

"No; driving around with James will do me more good than a stuffy train. Come home as soon as you can, dear, and—" She hesitated. "I hate the old things, but if you are so set on trying one of those automobiles, why don't you do it to-morrow, when you are in New York?" [37]

"Why, I believe I will, my dear. I wish I could overcome your prejudice against them."

"But you can't, dear, so don't try."

When Mr. Tucker reached New York, the first thing that he did was to visit an automobile repository.

"Would it be possible for you to let me have an automobile that could be operated from behind, so that my wife and I could sit in front and simply enjoy the ride?"

"Why, certainly," said the man. "We have every style known to the most advanced makers."

"And could I have shafts attached to it, so that if it broke down I could call in the services of some horse?" [38]

"But, sir, our machines never break down. That is why we are selling one every minute in the working-day. Our agents are located in every known city of the earth, and our factories are running day and night, and in spite of it we are falling behind in our orders in a rapidly increasing ratio."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Tucker, turning to leave the store. "Then I'm afraid I'll have to go elsewhere, as I wanted one shipped to me to-morrow or next day. A birthday present for my wife, you understand."

"Oh, I suppose," said the wily salesman, "that I *could* let you in ahead of your turn if the payment were cash." [39]

"Of course the payment will be cash. That's the only way I ever pay."

A half-hour from that time John Tucker was being propelled through New York's busy streets in a smoothly running, almost noiseless, automobile worked from behind, and its way led down to a harness store in Chambers Street. As yet there were no shafts, but he had provided for a pair.

Mr. Tucker went into the harness-store. "Good-day," said he. "I want to buy a wooden horse like the one out in front, only covered with horse-skin."

"Well, sir," said the clerk, "we don't manufacture them ourselves but we can order one for you. Going into the harness business?" [40]

"No, but I want to try an experiment. Would it be possible for me to have a mechanical horse built that would move its legs in a passable imitation of trotting?"

"Nowadays everything is possible," said the salesman; "but it would be very expensive."

"Well, I'll tell you just what I want it for," said Mr. Tucker, and entered into details concerning Mrs. Tucker's aversion to automobiles, her ivy-poisoning, and his scheme. The clerk seemed interested.

"If the lady's eyes are as inflamed as all that," said he, "she would not notice the lack of natural motion, and it would be easy to place a contrivance inside of the figure that would imitate the sound of trotting, and your wife's imagination would do the rest. But I think that your idea of having the horse on a platform like the one out front is not a good one. If the platform struck a rock in the road it would knock the whole thing to smithereens. Better place smallish wheels on the inner side of the ankles, fix the hind legs so they will be jointed at the thighs, and then you can run up hill and down dale with no trouble." [41]

Mr. Tucker clapped his hands like a boy. “That’s fine! My wife will get thoroughly used to an automobile without knowing she is riding in one, and then when she recovers the use of her eyes I’ll give the wooden horse a well-earned rest. Call up that factory on the [42] ’phone, and I’ll order my hobby-horse at once. You think that I can get it in a day or two?”

“It’s only a question of expense, sir, and you say that is nothing.”

“Of course it’s nothing. Nothing is anything if I can take my wife out automobiling without her knowing it.”

Three days later Mr. Tucker said to his wife at luncheon:

“My dear, as this is your birthday, I have given myself the pleasure of buying you a new horse and wagon, and it will be ready for us to go out in half an hour.”

“Oh, you dear, thoughtful man!” said Mrs. Tucker, beaming as well as she was able to through her smoked glasses. Then she rose and gave him a kiss that made him feel that he [43] was a guilty wretch to be meditating the deception of such a lovable wife. But he had gone too far to retrace his steps now, and he eased his feelings with the thought that the end would justify the means.

“You are always doing things to please me,” said she.

“No such thing,” he replied. “You may not like this horse as well as you like Roanoke or Charley, but it is quite a swagger turn-out, and I’ve decided to have James go with us and sit behind on the rumble.”

“Oh, but, my dear, we will not be driving alone if he is with us.”

“Nonsense! We’ve been married twenty years, and anyhow James is a graven image. He [44] will not know we are along.” (“He will be too busy running the thing,” added Mr. Tucker mentally.)

She approached the horse's head to pet him

A half-hour later Mr. Tucker announced to his wife that he was ready, and she put a few finishing touches to her toilet, bathed her eyes with witch-hazel, adjusted her smoked glasses, and went out to the porte-cochère.

She dimly discerned the horse, the wagon, the groom at the horse's head, and her husband. There was an indescribably swagger look about the equipage, and she wished that she could take off her glasses and gloat over her new possession, but the doctor's orders had been imperative. She did, however, approach the horse's head to pet him, but [45] her husband said: "Don't, dear. He may not like women. Wait until he is used to us before you try to coddle him."

They stepped to their seats; the groom left the horse's head and handed the reins to Mr. Tucker, mounted the rumble, and off they started.

"Why, it's like sailing," said Mrs. Tucker.

"Pneumatic tires, my dear," answered her husband glibly.

"And how rhythmical the horse's hoof-beats are!"

"An evidence of blood, my darling. I know this horse's pedigree: by Carpenter out of Chestnut—"

"Oh, don't. I never cared for those long genealogies. Whether he has blood or not, he is [46] certainly the smoothest traveller I ever saw."

They had been skilfully guided along the winding path that led to the highway by the chauffeur, who, although he was a James, was not the James who generally worked in the stable, but a James hired at the office of the company in order that he might break in the *local* James.

After they reached the road the way for a mile or more was clear and straight, and they met with no teams. The horse was wonderfully lifelike, except in his action, or rather lack of action, for his forefeet were eternally in an attitude of rest. The hind legs rose and fell [47] with the inequalities of the road, and his mane and tail waved in the breeze like the real horsehair that they were.

"This is the poetry of motion," said Mrs. Tucker. "I don't believe you'll ever find an automobile that can run like this."

"I'll admit that I wouldn't wish one to go better. Are you all right back there, James?"

"All right, sir."

"Why, how queer James' voice sounds! I never noticed that squeak in it before."

"It's the exhilarating effect of our fast driving. Do you think that you could stand a faster pace?"

"Why, if you're not afraid of tiring the horse. He seems to be going like the wind now."

"Oh, he won't mind. Faster, James." [48]

"Why do you say that to James? Did you think *he* was driving, you absent-minded dear, you?"

"I did, for the moment."

James was *sure* he was driving, and at this command from his employer he put on almost the full force of the electricity. The wagon gave a leap forward, and turning into a macadamized road at this point, they went along at the rate of twenty miles an hour.

Mrs. Tucker clutched her husband's arm. "John, his speed is uncanny. We seem to be going like an express-train!"

"It's the smoothness of the road and his perfect breeding, my dear. Do you notice that this furious gait does not seem to affect his wind at all?" [49]

"No, I hadn't noticed it; but isn't it queer how regular his hoof-beats are? and they do not seem to quicken their rate at all."

John had noticed this, too, and he had regretted not having told the manufacturer to arrange the mechanism so that the hoof-beats would become more or less rapid according to the gait; but he answered quickly:

"That, my dear, is because he reaches farther and farther. You know some breeds of horses gain speed by quickening their gait. This horse gains it by a lengthened reach. He is a remarkable animal. Actually, my dear, we are overtaking a locomobile."

"Oh, John, is he used to these horrid steam-wagons?" [50]

"Nothing will frighten this horse, Martha. You can rest assured of that."

A minute later they passed the locomobile. If Mrs. Tucker could have seen the codfish eyes of the occupant of the vehicle when he saw a hobby-horse going by at the rate of twenty miles an hour, she would have questioned his sanity. If she could have seen the scared looks and the scared horse of the people in the approaching buggy she would have begun to wonder what possessed her new possession. But her goggles saved her from present worry, and the buggy was passed in a flash.

"Oh, I do wish I could take off my glasses for a minute so that I could enjoy this rapid motion to the full! How the trees must be spinning by!" [51]

"Don't touch your glasses," said Mr. Tucker, hurriedly. "If a speck of dust or a pebble were to get into your eye, you might become permanently blind. Positively, you are like a child with a new rocking-horse. This turn-out will keep until your eyes are fully recovered, and I hope we may enjoy many a spin in this easy carriage, with or without this horse."

"Never without him, dear. After the delight of this swift motion I never would go back to lazy Roanoke or skittish Charley. I have never ridden in any carriage that pleased me like this one." [52]

"She's a convert already without knowing it," said her husband to himself, but her next remark dispelled his illusion.

"How can any one like a noisy automobile better than this? You can't improve on nature. By the way, I forgot to ask you if you rode in one the other day in New York."

"To be sure. I *didn't* tell you, did I? It was really almost as nice as this, although the traffic impeded us some. Oh, James, look out!"

This interruption was involuntary on the part of Mr. Tucker, and his words were not noticed by his wife in the confusion of that which followed. They were going down a hill at a fearful rate, when the off foreleg of the wooden horse became a veritable off foreleg, for it hit a log of wood that had dropped from a teamster's cart not five minutes before, and broke off at the knee. The jar almost threw Mrs. Tucker out; she grasped the dashboard to save herself, and caught a momentary glimpse of the oddly working haunches of the imitation beast. [53]

"Oh, John, he's running away!"

Now, this was not quite accurate, for he was being pushed away by a runaway automobile. Mr. Tucker noticed the increased speed and turned to admonish James.

James had left. [54]

The departure of James was coincident with the collision, and he was at that moment extricating himself from a sapling into which he had been pitched. He yelled directions to Mr. Tucker which lacked carrying power.

The vehicle had now come to a turn in the road, and not receiving any impulse to the contrary, it made for a stone wall that lay before it. Mr. Tucker knew nothing about the working of the machine, but with admirable presence of mind he seized a projecting rod, and the wagon turned to the left with prompt obedience, but so suddenly that it ran upon two wheels and nearly upset.

So far so good, but now what should he do? To get over to the back seat was either to give the whole thing away, or else make Mrs. Tucker question his courage. [55]

He was too obstinate to disclose his secret until he should be forced to, so he sat still and awaited developments. Developments do not keep you waiting long when you are in a runaway automobile, and in just one minute by his watch, although he did not time it, the end came.

Too late to do any good, John Tucker jumped over the back of the seat, because he saw the wooden horse again approaching a stonewall beyond which lay a frog pond.

He pulled the lever as before, but he could not have pulled it hard enough, for the next moment there was a shock, and then Mrs. Tucker sailed like a sprite through the air and landed in the water like a nymph, while some kindling wood in a horsehair skin was all that was left of Mr. Tucker's thoroughbred. [56]

Mr. Tucker was not hurt by the impact, for he had grasped an overhanging bough and saved himself. He dropped to earth, vaulted a stone wall, and rescued the fainting figure of his wife. The kindly services of a farmer procured her the shelter of a neighboring farm-house.

Mr. Tucker knew from past experiences that his wife was an easy fainter, and after assuring himself that no bones were broken he left her for a few minutes that he might run out to seek for James, who might be at death's door. [57]

He found him gazing upon the ruins of the wooden horse.

Upon learning that the man was uninjured he drew a bill from his pocket and said: "My boy, here's money for your expenses and your wages, and if there is any go in this machine, run her to New York and tell your people that they can have her as a gift. I am through with automobiles."

But a half-hour later Mrs. Tucker, fully conscious but somewhat weak, sat up on the bed in the farmer's best chamber and said:

"John, I think that if it had been a horseless automobile it wouldn't have been so bad."

Whereupon John overtook James just setting out for New York, and gave him an order for one horseless automobile. [58]

And now John is convinced that his wife is a thoroughbred.

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[59]

WHILE THE AUTOMOBILE RAN DOWN

A CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA

[60]

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A CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA

[61]

IT was a letter to encourage a hesitating lover, and certainly Orville Thornton, author of "Thoughts for Non-Thinkers," came under that head. He received it on a Tuesday, and immediately made up his mind to declare his intentions to Miss Annette Badeau that evening.

But perhaps the contents of the letter will help the reader to a better understanding of the case.

> DEAR ORVILLE: Miss Badeau sails unexpectedly for Paris on the day after Christmas, her aunt Madge having cabled her to come and visit her. Won't you come to Christmas dinner? I've invited the Joe Burtons, and of course Mr. Marten will be there, but no others—except Miss Badeau. [62]
>
> Dinner will be at sharp seven. Don't be late, although I know you won't, you human time-table.
>
> I do hope that Annette will not fall in love in Paris. I wish that she would marry some nice New Yorker and settle near me.
>
> I've always thought that you have neglected marriage shamefully.
>
> Remember to-morrow night, and Annette sails on Thursday. Wishing you a Merry Christmas, I am,
>
> Your old friend,
>
> HENRIETTA MARTEN.

Annette Badeau had come across the line of Orville's vision three months before. She was Mrs. Marten's niece, and had come from the West to live with her aunt at just about the time that the success of Thornton's book made him think of marriage. [63]

She was pretty and bright and expansive in a Western way, and when Thornton met her at one of the few afternoon teas that he ever attended he fell in love with her. When he learned that she was the niece of his lifelong friend, Mrs. Marten, he suddenly discovered various reasons why he should call at the Marten house once or twice a week.

But a strange habit he had of putting off delightful moments in order to enjoy anticipation to its fullest extent had caused him to refrain from disclosing the state of his heart to Miss Badeau, and so that young woman, who had fallen in love with him even before she knew that he was the gifted author of "Thoughts for Non-Thinkers," often wished to herself that she could in some way give him a hint of the state of *her* heart. [64]

Orville received Mrs. Marten's letter on Christmas Eve, and its contents made him plan a schedule for the next evening's running. No power on earth could keep him away from that dinner, and he immediately sent a telegram of regret to the Bell-wether of the Wolves' Club, although he had been anticipating the Christmas gorge for a month.

He also sent a messenger with a note of acceptance to Mrs. Marten....

Then he joined the crowd of persons who always wait until Christmas Eve before buying the presents that stern and unpleasant duty makes it necessary to get. [65]

It would impart a characteristic Christmas flavor if it were possible to cover the ground with snow, and to make the air merry with the sound of flashing belts of silvery sleighbells on prancing horses; but although Christmases in stories are always snowy and frosty and sparkling with ice-crystals, Christmases in real life are apt to be damp and humid. Let us be thankful that this Christmas was merely such a one as would not give a

ghost of a reason for a trip to Florida. The mercury stood at 58, and even light overcoats were not things to be put on without thought.

Orville knew what he wished to get and where it was sold, and so he had an advantage [66] over ninety-nine out of a hundred of the anxious-looking shoppers who were scuttling from shop to shop, burdened with bundles, and making the evening the worst in the year for tired sales-girls and -men.

Orville's present was not exactly Christmassy, but he hoped that Miss Badeau would like it, and it was certainly the finest one on the velvet tray. Orville, it will be seen, was of a sanguine disposition.

He did not hang up his stocking; he had not done that for several years; but he did dream that Santa Claus brought him a beautiful doll from Paris, and just as he was saying, "There must be some mistake," the doll turned into Miss Badeau and said: "No, I'm for [67] you. Merry Christmas!" Then he woke up and thought how foolish and yet how fascinating dreams are.

Christmas morning was spent in polishing up an old essay on "The Value of the Summer as an Invigorator." It had long been a habit of his to work over old stuff on his holidays, and if he was about to marry he would need to sell everything he had—of a literary-marketable nature. But this morning a vision of a lovely girl who on the morrow was going to sail thousands of miles away came between him and the page, and at last he tossed the manuscript into a drawer and went out for a walk.

It was the draggiest Christmas he had ever known, and the warmest. He dropped in at the [68] club, but there was hardly any one there; still, he did manage to play a few games of billiards, and at last the clock announced that it was time to go home and dress for the Christmas dinner.

It was half-past live when he left the club. It was twenty minutes to six when he slipped on a piece of orange-peel, and measured his length on the sidewalk. He was able to rise and hobble up the steps on one foot, but the hall-boy had to help him to the elevator and thence to his room. He dropped upon his bed, feeling white about the gills.

Orville was a most methodical man. He planned his doings days ahead and seldom [69] changed his schedule. But it seemed likely that unless he was built of sterner stuff than most of the machines called men, he would not run out of the round-house to-night. His fall had given his foot a nasty wrench.

Some engineers, to change the simile, would have argued that the engine was off the track, and that therefore the train was not in running condition; but Orville merely changed engines. His own steam having been cut off, he ordered an automobile for twenty minutes to seven; and after he had bathed and bandaged his ankle he determined, with a grit worthy of the cause that brought it forth, to attend that dinner even if he paid [70] for it in the hospital, with Annette as special nurse.

Old Mr. Nickerson, who lived across the hall, had heard of his misfortune, and called to proffer his services.

"Shall I help you get to bed?" said he.

"I am not due in bed, Mr. Nickerson, for many hours; but if you will give me a few fingers of your excellent old Scotch with the bouquet of smoked herring, I will go on dressing for dinner."

"Dear boy," said the old gentleman almost tearfully, "it is impossible for you to venture on your foot with such a sprain. It is badly swollen."

"Mr. Nickerson, my heart has received a worse wrench than my foot has, therefore I go [71] out to dine." At sound of which enigmatical declaration Mr. Nickerson hurried off for the old Scotch, and in a few minutes Orville's faintness had passed off, and with help from the amiable old man he got into his evening clothes—with the exception of his left foot, which was encased in a flowered slipper of sunset red.

"Now, my dear Mr. Nickerson, I'm a thousand times obliged to you, and if I can get you to help me hop downstairs I will wait for the automobile on the front stoop." (Orville had been born in Brooklyn, where they still have "stoops.") "I'm on time so far."

But if Orville was on time, the automobile was not, the driver not being a methodical man; and when it did come, it was all the motor-man could do to stop it. It seemed restive. [72]

"You ought to shut off on the oats," said Orville gayly, from his seat on the lowest step of the "stoop."

The picture of a gentleman in immaculate evening clothes with the exception of a somewhat rococo carpet slipper, seemed to amuse some street children who were passing. If they could have followed the "auto" they would have been even more diverted, but such was not to be their fortune. Mr. Nickerson helped his friend into the vehicle, and the driver started at a lively rate for Fifth Avenue.

Orville lived in Seventeenth Street, near Fifth Avenue; Mrs. Marten lived on Fifth Avenue, near Fortieth Street. Thirty-eighth Street and Thirty-ninth Street were reached and passed without further incident than the fact that Orville's ankle pained him almost beyond the bearing-point; but, as it is not the history of a sprained ankle that I am writing, if the vehicle had stopped at Mrs. Marten's my pen would not have been set to paper. [73]

But the motor-wagon did not even pause. It kept on as if the Harlem River were to be its next stop.

Orville had stated the number of his destination with distinctness, and he now rang the annunciator and asked the driver why he did not stop. [74]

Calmly, in the even tones that clear-headed persons use when they wish to inspire confidence, the chauffeur said: "Don't be alarmed, sir, but I can't stop. There's something out of kilter, and I may have to run some time before I can get the hang of it. There's no danger as long as I can steer."

"Can't you slacken up in front of the house, so that I can jump?"

"With that foot, sir? Impossible, and, anyway, I can't slacken up. I think we'll stop soon. I don't know when it was charged, but a gentleman had it before I was sent out with it. It won't be long, I think. I'll run around the block, and maybe I can stop the next time." [75]

Orville groaned for a twofold reason: his ankle was jumping with pain, and he would lose the pleasure of taking Miss Badeau in to dinner, for it was a minute past seven.

He sat and gazed at his carpet slipper, and thought of the daintily shod feet of the adorable Annette, as the horseless carriage wound around the block. As they approached the house again, Orville imagined that they were slackening up, and he opened the door to be ready. It was now three minutes past seven, and dinner had begun beyond a doubt. The driver saw the door swing open, and said: "Don't jump, sir. I can't stop yet. I'm afraid there's a good deal of run in the machine." [76]

Orville looked up at the brownstone front of the house with an agonized stare, as if he would pull Mrs. Marten to the window by the power of his eyes. But Mrs. Marten was not in the habit of pressing her nose against the pane in an anxious search for tardy guests. In fact, it may be asserted with confidence that it is not a Fifth Avenue custom.

At that moment the purée was being served to Mrs. Marten's guests, and to pretty Annette Badeau, who really looked disconsolate with the vacant chair beside her.

"Something has happened to Orville," said Mrs. Marten, looking over her shoulder toward the hall door, "for he is punctuality itself." [77]

Mr. Joe Burton was a short, red-faced little man, with black mutton-chop whiskers of the style of '76, and a way of looking in the most cheerful manner upon the dark side of things. "Dessay he's been run over," said he choppily. "Wonder anyone escapes. Steam-, gasoline-, electric-, horseflesh-, man-propelled juggernauts. Ought to be prohibited."

Annette could not repress a shudder. Her aunt saw it and said: “Orville will never be run over. He’s too wide-awake. But it is very singular.”

“He may have been detained by an order for a story,” said Mr. Marten, also with the [78] amiable purpose of consoling Annette, for both of the Martens knew how she felt toward Mr. Thornton.

“Maybe he’s lying on the front sidewalk, hit by a sign or bitten by a dog. Dogs ought not to be allowed in the city; they only add to the dangers of metropolitan existence,” jerked out Mr. Burton, in blithe tones, totally unaware that his remarks might worry Annette.

“Dear me! I wish you’d send some one out to see, Aunt Henrietta.”

“Nonsense, Annette. Mr. Burton is always an alarmist. But, Marie, you might step to the front door and look down the avenue. Mr. Thornton is always so punctual that it is peculiar.”

Marie went to the front door and looked down the street just as Thornton, gesticulating [79] wildly, disappeared around the corner of Fortieth Street.

“Oh, why didn’t she come sooner!” said he aloud to himself. “At least they would know why I’m late. And she’ll be gone before I come round again. Was there ever such luck? Oh for a good old horse that could stop, a dear old nag that would pause and not go round and round like a blamed carrousel! Say, driver, isn’t there any way of stopping this cursed thing? Can’t you run it into a fence or a house? I’ll take the risk.”

“But *I* won’t, sir. These automobiles are very powerful, and one of them turned over a [80] news-stand not long since and upset the stove in it, and nearly burned up the newsman. But there’s a plenty of time for it to stop. I don’t have to hurry back.”

“That’s lucky,” said Orville. “I thought maybe you’d have to leave me alone with the thing. But, say, she may run all night. Here I am due at a dinner. I’m tired of riding. This is no way to spend Christmas. Slacken up, and I’ll jump when I get around there again.”

“I tell you I can’t slacken up, and she’s going ten miles an hour. You’ll break your leg if you jump, and then where’ll you be?”

“I might be on their sidewalk, and then you could ring their bell, and they’d take me in.” [81]

“And have you suing the company for damages? Oh, no, sir. I’m sorry, but it can’t be helped. The company won’t charge you for the extra time.”

“No, I don’t think it will,” said Thornton savagely, the more so as his foot gave a twinge of pain just then.

“There was no one in sight, ma’am,” said Marie, when she returned.

“Probably he had an order for a story and got absorbed in it and forgot us,” said Mr. Marten; but this conjecture did not seem to suit Annette, for it did not fit what she knew of his character.

“Possibly he was dropped in an elevator,” said Mr. Burton. “Strain on elevators, [82] particularly these electrical ones, is tremendous. Some of ’em have got to drop. And a dropping elevator is no respecter of persons. You and I may be in one when it drops. Probably he was. Sure, I hope not, but as he is known to be the soul of punctuality, we must put forward some accident to account for his lateness. People aren’t always killed in elevator accidents. Are they, my dear?”

“Mr. Burton,” said his wife, “I wish you would give your morbid thoughts a rest. Don’t you see that Annette is sensitive?”

“Sensitive—with some one dying every minute? It’s merely because she happens to [83] know Orville that his death would be unpleasant. If a man in the Klondike were to read of it in the paper he wouldn’t remember it five minutes. But I don’t say he was in an

elevator. Maybe some one sent him an infernal machine for a Christmas present. May have been blown up in a manhole or jumped from his window to avoid flames. Why, there are a million ways to account for his absence."

Marie had opened the parlor windows a moment before, as the house was warm, and now there came the humming of a rapidly moving automobile. Mingled with it they heard distinctly, although faintly, "Mr. Marten, here I go."

It gave them all an uncanny feeling. The fish was left untouched, and for a moment [84] silence reigned. Then Mr. Marten sprang from the table and ran to the front door. He got there just in time to see an automobile dashing around a corner and to hear a distinctly articulated imprecation in the well-known voice of Orville Thornton.

In evening clothes and bare-headed, Mr. Marten ran to Fortieth Street, and saw the vehicle approaching Sixth Avenue, its occupant still hurling strong language upon the evening air. Mr. Marten is something of a sprinter, although he has passed the fifty mark, and he resolved to solve the mystery. But before he had covered a third of the block in Fortieth Street he saw that he could not hope to overtake the runaway automobile, so he [85] turned and ran back to the house, rightly surmising that the driver would circle the block.

When he reached his own doorstep, badly winded, he saw the automobile coming full tilt up the avenue from Thirty-ninth Street.

The rest of the diners were on the steps. "I think he's coming," he panted. "The driver must be intoxicated."

A moment later they were treated to the spectacle of Orville, still hurling imprecations as he wildly gesticulated with both arms. Several boys were trying to keep up with the vehicle, but the pace was too swift. No policeman had yet discovered its rotary course.

As Orville came near the Marten mansion he cried "Ah-h-h!" in the relieved tones of one [86] who has been falling for half an hour and at last sees ground in sight.

"What's the matter?" shouted Mr. Marten wonderingly, as the carriage, instead of stopping, sped along the roadway.

"Sprained foot. Can't walk. Auto out of order. Can't stop. Good-by till I come round again. Awful hungry. Merry Christmas!"

"Ah ha!" said Joe Burton. "I told you that it was an accident. Sprained his foot and lost power over vehicle. I don't see the connection, but let us be thankful that he isn't under the wheels, with a broken neck, or winding round and round the axle."

"But what's to be done?" said Mrs. Marten. "He says he's hungry." [87]

"Tell you what!" said Mr. Burton, in his explosive way. "Put some food on a plate, and when the carriage comes round again I'll jump aboard, and he can eat as he travels."

"He loves purée of celery," said Mrs. Marten.

"Very well. Put some in a clean lard-pail or a milk-pail. Little out of the ordinary, but so is the accident, and he can't help his hunger. Hunger is no disgrace. I didn't think he'd ever eat soup again, to tell the truth. I was making up my mind whether a wreath or a harp would be better."

"Oh, you are so morbid, Mr. Burton," said his wife, while Mrs. Marten told the maid to [88] get a pail and put some purée into it.

He dropped upon his bed, feeling white about the gills

When Thornton came around again he met Mr. Marten near Thirty-ninth Street.

"Open the door, Orville, and Joe Burton will get aboard with some soup. You must be starved."

"There's nothing like exercise for getting up an appetite. I'll be ready for Burton," said Orville, "Awfully sorry I can't stop and talk; but I'll see you again in a minute or two."

He opened the door as he spoke, and then, to the great delight of at least a score of people who had realized that the automobile was running away, the rubicund and stout Joe Burton, a pail of purée in one hand and some table cutlery and silverware and a napkin in the other, made a dash at the vehicle, and with help from Orville effected an entrance. [89]

"Merry Christmas!" said Orville.

"Merry Christmas! Awfully sorry, old man, but it might be worse. Better drink it out of the pail. They gave me a knife and fork, but they neglected to put in a spoon or a dish. I thought that you were probably killed, but I never imagined this. Miss Badeau was terribly worked up. I think that she had decided on white carnations. Nice girl. You could easily jump, old man, if you hadn't sprained your foot. Hurt much?"

"Like the devil; but I'm glad it worried Miss Badeau. No, I don't mean that. But you know." [90]

"Yes, I know," said Burton, with a sociable smile. "Mrs. Marten told me. Nice girl. Let her in next time. Unusual thing, you know. People are very apt to jump *from* a runaway vehicle, but it seldom takes up passengers. Let her get in, and you can explain matters to her. You see, she sails early in the morning, and you haven't much time. You can tell her what a nice fellow you are, you know, and I'm sure you'll have Mrs. Marten's blessing. Here's where I get out."

With an agility admirable in one of his stoutness, Mr. Burton leaped to the street and ran up the steps to speak to Miss Badeau. Orville could see her blush, but there was no time [91] for her to become a passenger that trip, and the young man once more made the circuit of the block, quite alone, but strangely happy. He had never ridden with Annette, except once on the elevated road, and then both Mr. and Mrs. Marten were of the company.

Round sped the motor, and when the Martens' appeared in sight, Annette was on the sidewalk with a covered dish in her hand and a look of excited expectancy on her face that added a hundredfold to its charms.

"Here you are—only ten cents a ride. Merry Christmas!" shouted Orville gayly, and leaned half out of the automobile to catch her. It was a daring, almost an impossible [92] jump, yet Annette made it without accident, and, flushed and excited, sat down in front of Mr. Thornton without spilling her burden, which proved to be sweetbreads.

"Miss Badeau—Annette, I hadn't expected it to turn out this way, but of course your aunt doesn't care, or she wouldn't have let you come. We're really in no danger. This driver has had more experience dodging teams in this last hour than he'd get in an ordinary year. They tell me you're going to Europe early to-morrow to leave all your friends. Now, I've something very important to say to you before you go. No, thanks, I don't want anything more. That purée was very filling. I've sprained my ankle, and I need to be very quiet for a week or two, perhaps until this machine runs down, but at the end of that time [93] would you—"

Orville hesitated, and Annette blushed sweetly. She set the sweetbreads down upon the seat beside her. Orville had never looked so handsome before to her eyes.

He hesitated. "Go on," said she.

"Would you be willing to go to Paris on a bridal trip?"

Annette's answer was drowned in the hurrah of the driver as the automobile, gradually slackening, came to a full stop in front of the Martens'.

But Orville read her lips, and as he handed his untouched sweetbreads to Mrs. Burton, and his sweetheart to her uncle, his face wore a seraphically happy expression; and when [94] Mr. Marten and the driver helped him up the steps at precisely eight o'clock, Annette's hand sought his, and it was a jolly party that sat down to a big though somewhat dried-up Rhode Island turkey.

"Marriage also is an accident," said Mr. Burton.

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TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE:

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in hyphenation have been standardized.

An incorrect page reference in the List of Illustrations has been corrected.

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