The Girl That Peter Brought

By Margaret Sutton Briscoe, Author of "The Sporting Chance," "His Mother-at-Heart," etc.

DRAWN BY ANNA GARRETT

ENTER Sylvine.

It was our old friend Peter de Koven who first introduced her to us, appearing late one evening at our seaside cottage with Sylvine by his side.

He presented to us this apparition from the darkness as his cousin, and told us—I credited the story, why not?—that he was escorting her on her journey; but as a traveling accident had caused the loss of a connection she had expected to make he had taken the liberty of bringing her to us for the night. Needless to say they were welcomed. It did occur to me that this easy-tempered, athletic-looking girl, distinctly handsome though she might be, was not exactly the order of young woman who is escorted from relay to relay.

The first impression of Sylvine's personal appearance, as she shone in on us from the gloom that night, was its wholesomeness. She was beautifully formed, on the model of an athlete, with that supple gait, the clear frankness of eyes, the fresh skin and bright hair of a champion in perfect training. There was almost an effulgence about her face, with its glow of brilliant health, of high animal spirits. Her easy motions, those certain, swift gestures that are born of strength alone, were a joy to me to watch. But the next morning, when we were to see Sylvine in what I could only feel was her native element—the salt water—this impression of physical prowess faded before her growing beauty.

Quick and graceful as the girl was on earth, in the water all her motions underwent a subtle change to the very fishes' curved, languorous grace or darting swiftness. Her color softened, her eyes deepened, her very laugh gained music and freedom. I had never, as it seemed to me, seen any human being swim before—not as Sylvine could swim.

Peter and my husband stood, like two women, up to their knees in water, gaping at her. I had lent her my bathing suit. I felt that I could never wear it again; the contrast was too little in my favor.

"What have you brought us?" I whispered to Peter. "Is your cousin a Nixie?"

"I—don't know," answered Peter soberly. "If either, Nixie or Neckan, I should say the latter."

When, a moment later, Sylvine joined us—dripping, laughing, glowing—her strong, bare arms, her water-freshened skin and hair, her look of splendid strength, all bore out her carelessly-dropped testimony that, through missing her train connection, she had been thrown out of the opportunity of winning one more medal, which she had hoped to swim for that morning.

A few questions—and we understood. Unawares, we were entertaining the champion young woman swimmer of our coast; an amateur, to be sure, but with the chance of an international reputation already staring her in her handsome face.

I don't know what told me, something in Peter's astonished gaze upon her—but a sudden suspicion leaped into my mind, and a few moments after my flash of inspiration I drew Peter aside. "Your cousin," I said. "She interests me, Peter——"

"She's not my cousin," said Peter. "I don't know who she is. I never saw her before last night. You don't mean your husband hasn't told you? I gave him the tale as soon as we got here. Perhaps he thought you'd rather not know until she had gone. She goes at noon."

Then he told me all that had happened, from the moment when, on his way to visit us, he had stepped into the little flag station where every summer we kill interminable hours awaiting the convenience of the country railroad that takes us to a steamboat, which in turn pokes its leisurely way along the coves, finally landing us somewhere within a long driving distance of our Island Camp. There never was a lovelier, a lonelier, a more complicated small journey.

Standing under the smoky light of the waiting-room lamp Peter had found Sylvine, and overheard her talking to the agent. She had mistaken this flag station for one farther along the line, and, with no luggage, it was before her to spend the night in that not too savory little town. It was proper that Peter should step forward and offer his services, eminently suitable that he should have brought her to us for shelter; but why on earth had he presented her to us as his cousin?—and how had he induced the girl to take that intricate journey in the company of a perfect stranger?

"I told her," he said. "She knew what she had to do—the train—the steamboat—that drive across the island—I painted it all, honestly, as black and as bad as it was. She had half an hour to think it over before our train came. I paced up and down under the lamplight where she could see me for a villain—or trust me. She came over to me, ten minutes before the train was due, and accepted my offer to bring her here to you, on the condition that I'd give you to understand she was my cousin. You can see for yourself she was not the kind to consent to throwing herself on any woman's mercy."

He was right. There was nothing of the suppliant about Sylvine.

"You aren't angry?" said Peter.

"No-o," I answered. "I don't see how you could have managed otherwise. There was the girl—a willful one—there were you, and here were we; but—I wonder how many girls would have taken that journey with you?"

"Few," said Peter briefly.

Plainly, she was only adventurous; but, Heavens! how adventurous she was.

Sylvine left us that day at noon, Peter escorting her, still presumably his cousin, to the flag station whence he had rescued her the night before. I supposed, and with a real regret which I had not known I should feel, that I had seen the last I should ever behold of our Nixie.

Not at all.

The next winter, visiting in another and distant city, I beheld—her handsome head up, that same magnificent gait—Sylvine, entering the drawing-room where I was receiving with my hostess. No myth, no Nixie, she proved to be a young woman of fashion, connected, and by close, earthly ties, with my hostess.

The girl had, I discovered, been offered the freedom of every advantage in life, nibbled at each, and tossed it aside. She had managed, somehow, to graduate from a college; had traveled; seen all the social life they could persuade her to embark upon; and now, at some twenty-five years of age, regarded with satisfaction, as a final life accomplishment, her fair chance of becoming the champion young woman swimmer of the world.

I met Sylvine quite often in my visit to her city. I never was close enough to her to feel that I knew her; but I grew to want to understand her. If she had no heart why was I always wondering when it would be found, whose hands—whose heart—would be warmed at its warmth? There was ever for me an impression of sleeping woman here, an underlying something in the girl which I felt would repay awakening.

Otherwise, I could hardly have invited her to visit me. One does not quite use hospitality as a mere means of academic research.

It was just one year later than when Sylvine first made her dramatic entrance in our midst, and we were at our Island Camp again, when she came to stay with me.

"Who lives everywhere lives nowhere." Sylvine has no home that I can discover. Once she remarked to me that she thought she had a better time than almost any girl she knew. "I'm hardly home at all," she said, as if that summed up the total of any woman's happiness. When she is not hurrying about the country—"lifting," as she expresses it, cups and medals—she is taking what she seems to regard as a well-earned rest, visiting her friends.

I asked Sylvine to the Island in the absence of all my family except our small boys; but she knew exactly what she was coming to, for I told her—the utter quiet, no diversions, nothing but the salt waters, the green trees and my society all the long, lovely days. Yet she accepted delightedly. I had felt that I ought to know her by this means, if she could be known.

Having thus taken all possible pains to arrange for a date when I thought no one would interrupt us it was not then a welcome sound to me, on the second night after Sylvine's arrival, to hear a murmuring on the wind, too instantly recognized. Peter de Koven has the mellowest whistle, and it is his habit, as he drives in, to whistle his way up the road to our camp.

He must, I knew, have walked across the Island, for he had not notified us to have the team meet him at the steamer landing. If he had done so I should certainly have telegraphed to him to stay away.

I met Peter at the door of the cottage, and, whispering, told him who was with me. "I never heard your whistle so out of tune," I said frankly. "Why did you run in tonight? I wanted Sylvine all to myself."

"Why did you invite her here?" asked Peter.

The question made me pause a moment before I replied. "I asked her," I said, "I asked her—because she interests me so, Peter!"

"She interests *me* so," said Peter.

As he stood there under the light of the hallway lamp, laughing down at me, I knew whom he had come to see.

"But who told you she was here?" I cried.

"She did," said Peter.

I put it to any impartial judge: was I not progressing a little rapidly in that knowledge of Sylvine which I desired to gain?

I learned later that these two had corresponded, in a desultory sort of way, ever since that first accidental meeting. There was, of course, no reason why Sylvine in her letters to Peter should have refrained from a casual mention of the fact that she was coming to visit me.

"I only meant to stay this one night," coaxed Peter. "I shall go away again tomorrow—early."

I did not contradict him, not then; but the next morning, such is the contrariety of childhood, one of my small boys seized this opportunity to drop out of a tree, and what with the fright, and the hot-water treatments on the very sore knee of a very small boy, I found myself imploring Peter to remain with us for a few days and take Sylvine's entertainment off my hands, which he seemed most willing to agree to do.

A pending crisis came and went, suddenly. It was all like a dream to me, and it happened, too, in that strangely simple and swift way, as things heap up and up in dreams.

Sylvine was rowing in our dory, alone, near the break-water sandbar. She was inside the bar when we had last glanced toward her.

Peter de Koven and I were sitting on the beach, talking together of Sylvine, as it happened.

"You don't understand her, not at all," Peter was saying. "The trouble is you won't accept her as what she claims to be—a boy. A boy she is. You can't judge her by your standards——"

He broke off suddenly and sprang to his feet. Before I quite knew what the danger was, in part it had been met. I saw Peter, in our lightest tender, rowing like mad, wind and tide with him, following Sylvine. How her dory had become so small suddenly, so far away beyond the bar, I could not understand. When Peter reached the dory he made a spring and landed, his oars in his hands, in the boat beside Sylvine. The empty little tender rocked and floated, unheeded, out of sight. Not very much later the dory followed the tender, though I watched the dip, dip, dip of the four steady oars in Peter's and Sylvine's hands. The bow of the dory was still pointing toward our camp, the oars still moved, yet they drifted remorselessly backward. Pulled out to sea by the racing tide, swept out by the wind, wrapped in a quickly-falling darkness—they vanished.

I turned and looked back at the land. Two wood-lots met in a kind of fork beyond our cottage, and in that angle rested the summer hurricane. It seemed to be caught there, as if in a crevice, but every moment it was swelling into a blacker and heavier cloud-bank. We had been sitting under a rock and seen nothing of this gathering danger. I rose and ran toward the cottage. The wind struck me full in the face. It strangled me. In five minutes a gale was blowing off land.

"No, you don't quite yet understand her," said Peter. "I doubt if you ever could." He settled deeper into his comfortable chair before the fire. I nodded, agreeing.

"She's what I told you—a boy," said Peter. "I ought to know. No, she's not a Nixie—she's a Neckan; but she's all right."

"Yes," I said, "I don't understand her; but if you do, Peter, it is all right."

"She gave me no trouble, she behaved magnificently tonight," said Peter. "Sylvine is all right," he repeated with emphasis, and again I agreed, as I would have to agree to anything on earth he had that night promulgated as to Sylvine.

He had saved her life, there was small doubt of that—and more. He had brought her in by the sheer will of a man, as it seemed to me, fighting all the elements.

Those hours up to midnight—while I paced the floor, pausing only to heap wood on the huge fire playing on the hearth, to heat blankets, to keep water boiling, waiting in what agony every such watcher knows—I shall never forget.

How will Peter, how will Sylvine remember them?

He had made shore farther along down the Island, taking advantage of some backward swirl of these tides with which he is familiar, and they had battled their way home against the gale, almost as fierce on land as at sea, and burst in on me to laugh and laugh at my heroic preparations. How unnecessary they were!

Sylvine looked—I can see her now—those eyes, her wet, hot, beautiful face; her hair wind-blown and tossed. She was mockingly, vividly alive, awake from head to foot, as if she were imperishable.

No, she wasn't tired, not wet enough to count, not anything that mattered. Bed? She never was less sleepy! She was never before so bewilderingly lovely, so strong, as she sat there by the fire, the water streaming, unheeded, from her garments—and I don't remember that I was ever more wretched than while I tended the two wanderers, feeding them, warming them, listening to their story. There was little to tell, the old, old tale of the right man in the right—or was it the wrong?—place.

"He was wonderful," whispered Sylvine. "I didn't know it was in him. He has such sleepy eyes, such—such—elaborate features. You know what I mean."

Yes, I knew what she meant. I got her to bed at last by sheer hostess's privilege of authority. I think she would have stayed up all night. She was wild with excitement, and—what else, I hardly knew.

Then I sat with Peter over the fire and we looked at each other, and he stated what I have recorded, although I had said nothing. He was not excited, not one particle.

"No, you don't understand her," he said. "It was nothing to her whether we made land or not—or when; this week, next—it was all one to her. She doesn't know what fear is, fear of anything, of any kind. It might as well have been another woman, or, she a man, so far as she was concerned."

I sat and looked at him across the hearth—blind, satisfied Peter!—and said not one word. I believe he thought I agreed with him.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked presently; and Peter looked up at me. He seemed then to half understand.

"You are warning me. Why? For her sake—or mine?" he asked.

"Hers," I answered carefully. "You tell me I fail to understand her. You ask me to believe the girl is no woman at all. Could any woman go through—all you and she went through tonight, and feel—not even gratitude? You have placed her, at the least, under some little obligation to you——"

And then a sudden impulse seized me. "Why don't you marry her, Peter?" I cried. "You've saved her from any real obligation to you. You can honorably ask her. You could make her happy: it's in you to make any woman so happy. With such a good excuse as gratitude, such a plausible reason to give herself, I feel she might say—yes. I don't mean she's in love with you, I don't mean that, but you have—caught her attention. She charms you. Ask her. I think—she won't say—no."

A long silence, then ——

"There is one insurmountable obstacle," said Peter. "Not that I agree she might have me—she wouldn't. I don't want to marry her."

"Why?" I cried. "You admire her. You've been through such danger together, and there's nothing like that—it's almost inevitable—unless a man loves greatly elsewhere—to ——"

Peter rose quickly. "I don't know what you mean to do," he said. "I'm going to bed. I'm getting too old and stiff for these knight-errant expeditions. Good-night."

CONCLUDED ON PAGE 87

HUSBAND AND WIFE SKETCHES

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

"They—and something else," said the Philosopher gently.

The Cashier looked at him. He nodded. "Yes—and something else," he agreed.

We came away rather late. The Philosopher looked up at the house as the door closed upon the warm farewells which had sent us out into the night. "It's a wee bit of a house, isn't it?" he commented.

I looked up, too—at the nursery windows where the faintest of night-lights showed. "Yes, it's very small," I agreed. "Yet quite big enough, although it holds so much."

"One would hardly have said, four years ago, that anything smaller than the biggest musical auditorium in the city would have been big enough to hold Azalea's voice," he mused.

"If you could have heard her sing her lullaby to those babies," I replied, as we walked slowly on, "you would have said her voice would be wasted on a concert audience."

"It seems a pleasant home."

"It *is* one."

"Somehow one distrusts the ability of musical prodigies to make pleasant homes."

"I wonder why. Shouldn't the knowledge of any art make one appreciative of other arts?"

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"It took some time for a certain exhibition of the domestic art to strike in, at your home, that summer," said the Philosopher. "But I believe Azalea came to envy our Hepatica at the last."

"Indeed she did. And she's never got over envying her her accomplishments. She asked me ever so many questions today about Hepatica's housekeeping. I wish I had had a chance before I went to tell her that I was sure her will to succeed would make her home as dear a one as even Hepatica's could be."

"One thing is sure—as long as she lets the Cashier do the singing in the limelight, while she looks after the babies, there'll be no occasion for their friends to demand more music of an evening than is good for her pride of spirit," chuckled the Philosopher. "What—are we at our station already? I say—let's not make a quick trip by train—let's make a slow one, by cab."

"By cab! It would take two hours! No, no—here comes our train."

"This is the first time we've gone anywhere since you've been here without two alert chaperons—younger than myself," grumbled the Philosopher.

"The more reason, then, that we should give them no anxiety on my account."

"I'd like to walk the whole way," said he.

I laughed as I obeyed the signal of an impatient guard and rushed upon the train. "Now talk to me," said I, as we took our seats.

"My lungs weren't built for the 'Toreador' song," said he.

NOTE—The fourth sketch in this series will appear in the next issue of The Journal (for April).

THE GIRL THAT PETER BROUGHT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

And then I could have bitten my tongue out.

A great love—a love that protects him from all invasions—for whom? He is no longer young; it is, perhaps, some buried vision of the past that holds him. So tonight—but there was tomorrow, tomorrow when he must again meet Sylvine. A dream rival—what chance had she, if Peter could once be brought to understand this breathing, vital creature! A boy, indeed!

"Peter," I ventured softly. "Wait one moment. It's you—you who won't understand Sylvine. If you would only forget this preconceived notion you have of her—I have watched her for days—she—she is yours, Peter, if you will only take her. I don't know how you have done it. I don't know how I know it. I don't think she quite understands it is so; but—Peter, you could make, oh, everything of her! Your lightest word would be law to her."

Peter turned and looked at me. "If I thought you were right ——" he began deliberately; "but, my friend, you aren't. Wait until the morning. You'll see how she meets me then. It will be as a Neckan, a boy. Good-night."

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The next morning, before any of us came downstairs, Sylvine had gone. The note she left for me was short and plain-spoken. She had "troubled me long enough," she wrote; "this was the best way."

As I stood there, reading, rereading, her letter, all my old belief in Sylvine came rushing back to me, strengthened, deepened; belief in that underlying something—tenderer, far more womanly, than she had ever confessed to any one—least of all to herself.

Awake through the watches of that night—alone—face to face, at last, with that Sylvine to whom I believed I had long since dimly penetrated—what had the girl's thoughts been—what the struggle that led to this unselfish flight? Yet for the first time since I had known her I felt no uneasiness whatever about Sylvine, only a sense of abiding relief concerning her.

Suffer in this renunciation she must; but how self-contained, how strong, how fine, above all how honorably delicate she was, at test, proving herself! The silence was left to Peter—to break or to maintain, as he should choose.

To fly temptation, leaving a cup untasted—many have that strength. To taste, to feel in every vein, to fly (her flight was confession), longing the while to feel again what we have felt—have many that power? It was Sylvine's, or so I read her letter.

I gave the note, in silence, to Peter; and, breathless, watched him while he read. Would he—if he wished to do so there was no reason on earth to prevent him—would he follow her?

He looked up at me—and I knew he was still blind, satisfied. "What did I tell you?" he said; but he spoke with feeling.

There was no message for him in the letter. He was left as free as air. Sylvine's strong hand—the hand of a sensitive woman, at last—had closed the door on this episode.