EDITOR'S DRAWER

A GOOSE-CHASE.

BY MARGARET SUTTON BRISCOE.

"LOOK up, Martin Pope," I said. "Well met. How is Lydia the Fair? and what in the name of all goose-chases are you about now?"

Martin and I understand each other. Neither of us ever evinces surprise on finding that he has been followed by the other; but though I had often sought and found my friend in strange places and most strangely occupied, I had never before seen him quite so curiously employed as when I stood on that green bank overhanging a dusty highway and looked down on Martin skilfully driving a flock of geese before him by aid of a long willow switch.

I thought the creatures were geese, though I could not be sure, as each of the queer waddling objects was swathed in a gray jacket, close-fitting, and patterned somewhat after the blankets worn by lapdogs.

Beyond a welcoming wave of his switch, Martin made no reply to me until he had carefully driven his charges into the rich pasture of the fence corner behind us.

"Sit down," he said, hospitably waving me to the grass, as one might offer a drawing-room chair; so we sat on the turf together, and without further greeting Martin began: "I suppose, as usual, you want to hear the whole story, from the moment I left town to now."

"Usually I do prefer your stories begun at the beginning," I answered, "but in this case, my dear boy, I shall have to ask you first what those creatures in the fence corner may be, and what you have to do with them?"

"They are geese," said Martin—"dressed geese; but they are the very end of my story, and as it's the best tale you or I have ever yet lived—and we've lived some pretty good ones, eh?—I'd rather take things as they come."

"Then do so," I answered. "The last I saw of you was when you boarded the train which followed Lydia into this wilderness, and the last I have heard is a single rhapsodical letter, written chiefly concerning the veins on Lydia's temple, and the beauties of the homestead where you had secured lodgings near your charmer."

"She lives just a little way up that road." Martin pointed up the highway to a point where the road forked. "The right-hand road leads to Lydia," he said, "and the left to my present home—and Peachy."

"Who's Peachy?" I asked. "You did not mention her in your letter."

"Because she was then away visiting a neighbor. Her father, a primitive degenerate, whose ancestors once owned about all of the country about here, is a lazy farmer, who adds to his cash by now and then taking in a stray artist boarder or a wandering fisherman, or a loafer like me. He sent for Peachy as soon as I arrived. As I was eating my breakfast one morning I heard a cooing voice on the porch outside the dining-room window. These were the first words I heard Peachy speak:

"'You Joey, I thought I told you I wouldn't have potatoes planted there. You thought I was away, did you? Well, I'm home now, and you can just dig them right up. The first thing I plant in my own garden is my own foot, and I want you to remember it.'

"I had heard a resolute stamp from the member referred to, and I rose and looked out to see Peachy. Oh, my poor heart!"

"What! that old thing?" I said, crossly. "Don't ask sympathy from me for your battered heart, Martin. I believe you're inventing all this, anyway."

More than once, when there was no story to tell, Martin had invented one with which to meet me; though, in truth, the actual experiences he managed to fall into were generally stranger than his fiction.

"This time it's all true," said Martin. "You can ask Lydia."

"Does Lydia know of Peachy's existence?"

Martin's eyes twinkled. "I am coming to that. The first morning after meeting Peachy I helped her to pick the currants in her garden. I spent the afternoon with Lydia. The next day I spent the morning with Lydia and the afternoon with Peachy. So the week passed, and by the time Sunday came the donkey between two bundles of hay wasn't a circumstance to me. I lost pounds running around that fork yonder, going from one house to the other and back again. You see, whenever I was with one, I was afraid I wanted to be with the other.

"On Sunday, after long doubt, I decided that it was Lydia I wanted to take to the country church, and, as luck would have it, there sat Peachy in the pew before us. A white muslin a little open at the neck, a string of White River shells about the whitest throat, and little gold curls about the nape of her neck to creep into the shells!

"That was Peachy. Lydia gave a gasp of delight at the vision—there's nothing mean about Lydia; she has her faults, but she's not mean. No man could have sat behind Peachy that morning with any safety if she hadn't worn something else. You've seen those ghastly imitation-gold daggers shop-girls stick in their hair? Well, Peachy wore one,

and that same dagger was my salvation. I riveted my eyes on it as a counter-charm, and in a fatal moment Lydia's glance followed mine. From that moment her fingers began to twitch in her lap. You know how an inartistic effect hurts Lydia. That dagger was to her as a discordant note perpetually sounded. It hurt her.

"'I can't stand it,' I heard her murmur; and then she swiftly dealt with the dagger as she does with you or me, or whatever offends her. I pledge you my word, she coolly plucked it out—leaned forward and drew it from Peachy's hair. My blood ran cold as I sat there. It didn't make matters any better that she smiled and nodded into Peachy's astonished face, nor that she replaced the dagger with a shell pin from her own hair. That dagger was the only thing which had protected me. When that was gone, it was good-by, Martin Pope. That night Peachy cried for an hour on a bench in the arbor, while I argued with her through the vines. She wouldn't let me in. The next day I took Lydia's shell pin back to her, and I brought back to Peachy her own hideous dagger, with one of those charming notes which Lydia alone can write. Lydia laughed as only Lydia can laugh when I explained to her that the family were not mountain folk exactly, but decayed gentlefolk, and then she explained to me how she *had* to take out the dagger—explained it so that I admired her more than ever. I don't know how she managed it, but she did. Lydia can explain anything on earth."

"Martin, can Lydia explain you?" said I. "Are you lingering here for the sake of Lydia or Peachy?"

"The Lord knows!" said Martin. "I wish I did—but then," he added, becomingly, "both Peachy and Lydia may refuse me."

"Oh, Martin," I groaned, with a spasm of truth, "well do we all know that Lydia could never bring herself to refuse you and what is yours. She may play with you for a time, but she'll marry you in the end."

"If Peachy doesn't marry me first," said Martin, placidly, "and I pledge you my honor I'm not sure she would. Which road do you advise me to try, old friend — the left to Peachy, or the right to Lydia?"

I looked at Martin, and saw that for one of the few times in his scatter-brained life he was in earnest. For my own good reasons, which are no man's affairs, I did not reply at once. Martin laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Honestly," he said — "you have always been my mentor—which is best for me?"

"Lydia," I burst out. "Lydia, of course, unless you've been breaking a country heart. Lydia is the only wife for you; she's as irresponsible as yourself. You have the money and she has the brains. You were made for each other. She doesn't love you; I won't pretend she does; but she'll make you perfectly happy. On the other hand, if you don't marry her, she'll put up contentedly with some one of us, and make that one and herself equally happy. How matters stand with Peachy I don't know, of course, but you've got to decide it one way or another, Martin."

"I'm going to decide to-day," said Martin. "In fact, I've got to decide this hour. That flock of geese represents the crisis."

"So we have come to them at last, have we?" said I, with a glance towards the fence corner, where the ridiculous flock still fed.

"A week ago to-day," said Martin—"and don't interrupt me again, for the story runs right on from this—I helped Peachy to clean the cellar. In these weeks I've learned how to clean a house from top to bottom, and to work a garden from potatoes to pease. Well, turning over the rubbish, I stumbled on a stray bottle of rum, that had lain there since the days when the place was a wine-cellar, I suppose. I knew the old man had never found it.

"'Don't tell father,' said Peachy; 'he'd sell it' (the old man would sell his soul for a dollar). 'Don't tell father. Let's make a rum punch, after my great-great-grandmother's receipt.'

"Peachy has all the tastes that prove an inheritance from gouty generations. It appeared that part of the rum-punch receipt called for setting the mixture in the hot sun for half a day, so Peachy and I busily made punch, leaving the punch-bowl on the hot grass, ourselves sitting in the cool arbor. So nearly as I recollect, the punch-making ran like this:

"I: 'Why do they call you Peachy? That's not a name.'

"Peachy: 'Some of father's nonsense—because my face is all red and white, he says. I'm sure I wish it wasn't. It makes me look like a doll-baby. I'd like to have proud features and mournful big eyes, and dark hair and an oval face. I've done everything to make myself look like that. I've visited rich people and taught in Sunday-school, but I keep on looking just the same frivolous doll-baby.'

"I, with a start: 'But if you looked like that, you'd be—you'd be Lydia, and then what would I do?'

"Peachy, innocently: 'Does Lydia teach in Sunday-schools and visit sick people?'

"I, quickly: 'On the contrary.'

"Peachy, vehemently: 'I hate her! I do hate her, and I hate her because she's more beautiful than I, and better dressed, and knows more, and because my dagger was hideous and she knew it and I didn't. I know it's hideous now: don't you see I never wear it? Did you think it hideous? Tell me the truth.'

"I, reluctantly: 'Yes, I did.'

"Peachy: 'I knew you did. Of course I hate her.'

"Here Peachy thrust her hand in her pocket and drew out a package of dress samples. 'I want you to choose my winter gown for me,' she said; 'you know all about these things—

no, you needn't match the samples against my hair.'

"So we continued to make punch.

"'But I can't buy my winter gown,' said Peachy, 'until I sell my flock of geese. My poultry-yard buys me all my clothes. Now my flock of geese ought to bring me—'

"As if answering to its name, a large goose, one of the flock, staggered to the arbor door, turned round in its tracks, cackled feebly once or twice, then fell gasping on its side. Peachy rushed out from the arbor, and I heard a cry. I followed quickly. On the grass before us, in various stages of reeling or collapse, we beheld all the promising flock of geese. The punch-bowl, empty and upset, told the story. What represented Peachy's winter gown lay all about us, tipsy as any ancestor of the house on the old rum. Peachy lifted her voice and wept aloud, while I dashed water over the fainting fowls. In vain—they one by one twirled over on their backs and lay motionless, claws up.

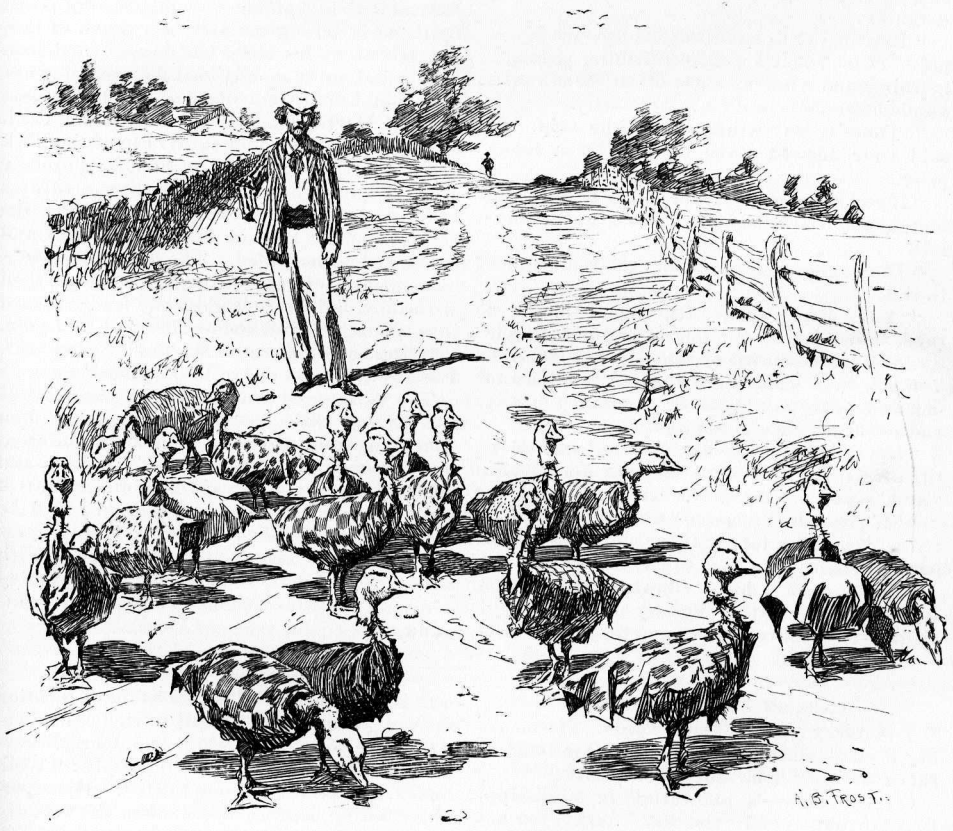
"'It's no use,' sobbed Peachy. 'They are all dead or dying; and I was so fond of them!' Then, practical in her grief, 'Go tell Joey to pick them before they get cold; at least I'll sell the feathers.'

"There and then I would have thrown myself at her feet, offering myself and any number of wardrobes, but—and I was grateful to her for it—Peachy fled to the house, sobbing as if her heart were broken.

"I called Joey, and together we plucked those geese. When Peachy at last returned, we had quite a consolatory heap of feathers to show her.

"'But they won't buy a whole gown,' she said, sorrowfully; 'and, Joey, these geese won't be fit to eat either. You can bury all of them in the bottom of the garden.'

"Joey got a wheelbarrow, and packing the bodies within, wheeled them away, Peachy's eyes following the hearse, filled with tears. Suppose we go to the funeral, I suggested, as distraction. But when Peachy and I arrived at what was to have been the graveyard, we found there was to be no funeral. Terror-stricken Joey was backing away from the wheelbarrow, where a poor stripped goose was quacking feebly, stiffly yet unmistakably moving its bare legs and wings. Soon the whole



"ALL DECENTLY CLOTHED."

pile was in motion. They had only been boozy, after all, and the long cool drive had refreshed them, as it would any other gentlemen in like condition. The scene was indescribable as the denuded fowls disengaged themselves from each other and flapped from the wheelbarrow to the ground. Peachy laughed and wept alternately, but a brilliant idea came to me.

"Behind you, in this fence corner, my friend, you see the result of applied literature. I led Peachy to the house, where I selected Cranford from the old bookcase and read aloud those immortal pages where the clothing of the singed cow is described. A hint is enough for Peachy. By nightfall the shamelessly naked flock were as good as ever for market purposes, and all decently clothed in the gray uniform in which you now see them browsing."

I looked at the feeding geese, and ridiculous enough they were; but again, for my own reasons, my face was grave.

"When I told this story of the dressed geese to Lydia, she didn't sit on the grass and blink on me solemnly. Not at all," said Martin.

"'I'd give anything I possess for that flock of geese,' said Lydia when she could speak for laughing.

"That ought to have warned me, but it did not. Peachy and I went out fishing the next morning, and when we came home the old man handed twenty-five dollars to Peachy.

"'There's your winter gown,' he said. 'I sold your dressed geese for you for a fancy price.'

"If you believe me, Lydia had been over and bought the whole flock and driven it away herself.

"The dagger episode wasn't a circumstance to this.

"'You,' said Peachy, turning to me in a rage, 'must have told her of my geese; she couldn't have known of them unless you did. You can take back this twenty-five dollars to her and bring my geese, or you can go away and never let me see you again.'

"Here's the twenty-five dollars," said Martin, drawing a roll of notes from his pocket, "and, as you see, here's the crisis.

"'If you take my geese away from me,' says Lydia, 'you may follow them and never come back to me.'

"For a week I have vibrated around this fence corner. Neither Peachy nor Lydia will yield. They have made it a test case. It's under which king—speak or die? And then to-day, if I didn't meet the geese free and browsing on the road-side! They have escaped from Lydia's keeping and are in my hands. So now, old friend, whom shall I take them to? Shall I drive them up the right-hand road to Lydia, or the left to Peachy? I leave it to you. This must settle Martin Pope."

I looked at Martin and I looked at the grotesque geese, and I looked into my own soul.

"Why don't you settle your fate for yourself?" I said, angrily.

"Because you've always done it for me," said Martin, and I looked again desperately at the geese.

A brilliant thought suddenly seized me. "Why not let them decide?" I said. "They've been fed for a week at Lydia's—the chance is as good that they'll return there as that they'll go to Peachy. Drive them to the fork and let them lead you."

"I will," said Martin. He started to his feet and herded the noisy geese into the roadway. "Stand there and watch," he shouted. "It's the corner of my life. Shoo—shoo!"

I stood on the bank watching him. I am older than Martin, and I have known him for years. I can never tell, however, how much is earnest with him and how much jest, how much truth he is telling me and how much of lies, but, foolish as his story had been, I had seen that it hid an unusually real feeling, for what or whom I could not decide. My heart beat hard as Martin reached the fork of the road. I wondered if he would subtly direct the flock one way or the other; but no, he was rigorously just, keeping the absurd cackling creatures well in the midst of the highway. At the crucial moment he even dropped his stick and stood with arms folded. The geese browsed a moment at the grass on the fork's wedge, then with slow, deliberate waddle the leader turned into the right-hand road—the road by Lydia.

"Stop that!" shouted Martin. "Stop that, I tell you! Shoo out of that—shoo!"

The willow rod came down on the back of the leader with a whack that drove him squeaking into the left-hand road, followed by the brood. With shouts of laughter, and one mischievous backward look at me, Martin drove them mercilessly before him. Had he always meant to take that road? Did he guess something? I did not stop to wonder. With a spring I leaped up from the bank and walked —no, ran—on my own goose-chase up the right-hand road.

ENGLISH AS SHE IS SPOKE.

THE darky is fond of long words. The meaning doesn't matter, so the words are long, as this absolutely true story will testify:

On the M——'s plantation in Mississippi lives an old "before the war" darky, too old to do any work harder than throwing feed to the poultry. She has known no other home, and is a character. Visitors to the plantation always go to her cabin, and to their question, "How are you this morning, Aunt Chris?" never fail to receive the following reply: "Well, honey, I'm kinder oncomplicated. De superfluity ob de mornin' done taken de vivosity outen de air and left me de consequence ob comprehenshon."