

OSCAR AND LOUISE

By Margaret Sutton Briscoe

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LOUISE L. HEUSTIS



If you are just amusing yourself, Louise, that's all very well—it is dull for you here—but if you're at all in earnest, I shouldn't consent to it for a moment. You ought to look higher. You are entirely too pretty and clever to be throwing yourself away. When we get back to the city— You'd make the smartest little hostess, perched up behind a desk in a thrifty little French restaurant. We'd come there often to dine and bring others and make you the fashion. I'd hate to lose you, even for your good, but I'd send you back to France to-morrow, I would, indeed, if I thought there was any idea of your leaving me except to better yourself. I am in earnest, Louise."

"Yes, Madame."

"Now don't say 'Yes, Madame,' and forget all I've said as soon as you go downstairs."

"No, Madame. Does Madame wish perfume in the water?"

"Yes, just a little. You are the only maid I ever had who knew what a 'little perfume' meant. That's all I want. You may go now, Louise. Remember!"

"Yes, Madame."

Louise closed the door of her mistress's chamber noiselessly and stood outside in the hallway. Her brown eyes darkened, her pretty pink mouth puckered, her slim white forefinger, so deft to dress Madame, was thoughtfully tapping her pouting lips. From her scrap of a white cap, designed by Madame, down to her beautiful little shoes, inherited from Madame, she was Madame over again in a cheaper, no, a more serviceable, edition. Until now, Madame's will had been her only law. Had not her mistress made her? She was nothing but an ignorant little French peasant girl when her piquant beauty attracted Madame's attention, and she had not only taken the little Louise away with her, but by patient training made of her the Louise of this tale. To go back to what she had

been—no, that was now impossible! The rude French hut on the hill-side, the rough, and, alas, sometimes heavy-handed mother, the father—but the less thought of him the better. She had left them willingly. They had parted with her willingly enough. There were plenty of other children. No, she would not go back to France at any price. Monsieur Rodet had a good thriving business already—Madame was right about that. She, Louise, could make it better, and she would not perhaps look ill behind a desk at the head of that cosy room filled with little white-covered tables. If only she could always stay behind that desk! Monsieur Rodet's smiling, a little too smiling, face and his youthful but portly figure rose before her. She shook her pretty head sharply, with a little shiver. If they had never come to this abominable hole of a country, if she had never seen Oscar, then perhaps— But in her heart Louise knew well that this land of wild woods and rich clearings, of wonderfully gorgeous wild-flowers, and house-gardens radiant with bloom and heavy odors was not to her an "abominable hole" at all, but as the place where, in some mysterious way, she felt she had been born to live. From the first moment every scent and sound on the hot languid air had enchanted and enchained her, and like the flowers, she, too, had basked and opened her petals until she found herself thinking all the warm day long but one thought, seeing one face, she, who had laughed off so many, Monsieur Rodet away with the rest. No, no, she was too comfortable she had told them all. Madame was so kind. Why should she change a mistress for a master? And now this Oscar, with his big clumsy shoulders, his slow, kindly ways, his great blue eyes—why were they so blue?—had dropped on his knees before her as if out of the clear, high, wonderful sky that rose above them in this "abominable hole," and here was Louise outside Madame's door wondering why, why she had not laughed at him that morning and left



"You are entirely too pretty and clever to be throwing yourself away."—Page 436.

him and gone about her business in life, which was attending to dear Madame, who knew so much better than she what was good for her. It must have been the brightness of the blue sky that had made her head swim when she stopped even for a moment to listen. The intense blue of the eyes that had looked down upon her so beseechingly had held her longer—too long. Yes, Madame was right, of course. It was dull here, and she had been amus-

ing herself, that was all. She would now go down into the garden again and if anyone should join her there in the moonlight she could set matters right by a word. She had been wrong, of course, not to speak that word at once; but again, as Madame said, it was dull here. Down the stairs and through the servants' hall, with the quick step of one who had decided, tripped Madame's kid boots with Louise's little feet in them, bent on Madame's er-

rand. Through the hall-door that led to the colonnade that led again to the garden, came the wild odor of the grape-vines on the colonnade trellis. "Ah!" cried Louise, pausing on the threshold. She drank in a deep breath of the sweetness, another, and then——

"Louise! I almost began to think you wouldn't come!" The whisper came out of the darkness. The blue, high sky was not over her. But these grape-vines and their melting sweetness! She could not see his eyes in the dusk, but how huge he was, how strong, and how gentle his hands and his voice.

"Madame was late," gasped Louise, "and besides——" Besides what? She had forgotten.

"Is zis Monsieur Benton?"

"It is."

"Sir, I have ze honor to inform you zat your stag has bitten me now three times. I go back to-morrow, Sir, I——"

"Tut, tut, Albert. Once a week you think this must go on. You are to stay here until we are ready to go back to the city. What were you doing to the stag?"

"Nosing! I? It break its chain again, ze devil! Madame, I apologize. He has stolen the pies from ze table when zey cool and I say nosing, do nosing. He eat ze cakes, ze greens. Now he have contempt for me, and three times he have crept behind me and bitten me. Also zose ship-bells! Monsieur, when ze night come I crawl to ze bed, worn out. When I am not ringing zose eight bells, I am chasing ze stag. I *must* go home."

"Nonsense, Albert," said Mrs. Benton, severely. "Go back to the kitchen and behave yourself properly. Can't your master have a little whim gratified now and then without all this fuss? I am ashamed of you. Go back to the kitchen at once, and rest yourself if you are tired. And Albert, tell Oscar to catch the stag and tie him up again."

"Tell him to look up the white turkeys, too," added Mr. Benton. "I saw them going to roost in the wood-walk as I came home to dinner. They're straying again." The master and mistress of the house walked on upon their interrupted stroll and Albert retreated dejectedly to the kitchen.

"Well, my dear, you may talk to me

about being a tyrant to Louise," said Mrs. Benton, "but I think you might take the beam out of your own eye. Albert is perfectly right about the ship-bells. They do sound lovely, and it's poetical as possible having them in this dear old place, but the ringing of them must be a terrible task. Oscar tells me the men are wasting half their time running in from the fields to know what the hour is. What do they know about eight bells? And Louise tells me you've not only stopped the old hour-bell, but you've taken all the clocks away from the house-servants—except Albert. I suppose you thought they'd have to learn the bells then, but they won't. They're too stupid. Even your favorite, Oscar, doesn't know the bells yet. My Louise does. And then that troublesome little white stag and that flock of white turkeys you've imported, that won't ever roost at home——"

"Those are quite different things from telling a girl whom she shall and whom she sha'n't marry," interrupted Mr. Benton. "And for you of all people, Julia! Didn't we marry each other in the teeth of everybody before either of us was of age? But I tell you again, Oscar is worth three of the girl. She's nothing so remarkable. All those French girls are more or less clever and know how to do dainty things—choose colors, pour perfumes, and all that. The truth is you want her to be Madame Rodet, patronized and made the fashion by you. I see you sailing up to her desk. 'How are you getting on, Louise?' 'So nicely, Madame, thanks to you. We have something in the bank, and——' Pshaw, Julia, you know Rodet's a dirty little Frenchman, and here's this nice, clean, young Danish lad, thrifty and strong and a splendid fellow. He'll always be good to her."

"Louise can do better than get someone just to be good to her. Indeed, I meant what I said to her. If I find this affair goes on, ill as I can spare her, home she goes, at least until she comes to her senses."

"Very well, Madame," replied Mr. Benton, lazily. "Do as you please, only remember Oscar's worth three of her. Look at this plantation, everything in perfect condition. Nobody except that young Dane has done anything for it since my uncle died. I wonder why we never

thought of coming here before. It's an ideal spot. Now, my plan would be to marry Louise to Oscar and keep them here to look after things, and then we could leave a lot of the stuff here and come back every year. You know Louise could take care of your chattels and I know Oscar could look out for mine. He's a hard-working, faithful soul."

"You certainly ought to know about that," retorted Mrs. Benton. "You work him hard enough. You work them all too hard, Jack, with your ship-bells and stags and turkeys and Heaven knows what else. It's not the regular work the servants mind, it's those queer irregular things."

"That's so," said Mr. Benton, with conviction, "and the marvel to me is, why do they consent to do those things? I wouldn't. Why doesn't Albert tell me he won't ring those bells and won't have that beastly little stag around? If he wants to go back home, why doesn't he go? Why doesn't Louise tell you she'll marry as she pleases and whom she pleases? You couldn't stop her. You haven't a right over her. Why doesn't Oscar tell me he'll see me hanged before he'll go chasing white stags and rare white turkeys all over creation? I'd respect him more if he did. Upon my word, the other night, when I saw him forging in about one o'clock, all

tired out, dragging that imp of a stag by its chain and shooting the white turkey flock before him, I couldn't help laughing,

but I did feel ashamed, asking him to do such work; and of him for doing it. The fact is, most of us are *sandless*, Julia. Not you, but the rest of us. Now, do you know what everybody in this house would be doing to-night if they had any sense, and sand to back it? We'll begin with Albert. He'd be packing his trunk and getting off to New York, instead of talking about it. Passing along to Oscar, he'd be saying to Louise, 'Now, you get ready this same night, my young lady, for I'm going to run away with you, and by midnight we'll be married, or else I'll go off and you'll never see me again;' at which Louise, if she had any sense and sand (which she hasn't), would reply, 'I will marry you to-night, and Madame may whistle for someone to dress her to-morrow morning.

She's been good to me, but she don't own me.' Now my turn comes. If I had any backbone, Oscar would know he was safe to come to me and say as man to man, 'I love this girl and she loves me, but your wife, for no good reason, says I sha'n't marry her, and Louise is such a little fool she won't marry me without Madame's consent. Now, Sir, as man to man,



Thoughtfully tapping her pouting lips.—Page 436.

I ask you, is this fair ?' As man to man, I'd have to say, 'No, Oscar, it is not.' Then, in the fairy story, he'd say, 'As master of the house will you see to it that Madame gives Louise permission to marry me ?' and, in the fairy tale, very much in the fairy tale, I'd reply, 'Regard the matter as settled, Oscar.' Then I'd send for you, and I'd say, 'Julia, I find you have been interfering most unwarrantably in the affairs of your young maid and my young overseer. Now, my dear, I am very indulgent to you in all domestic matters, but I wish you to understand clearly that I draw the line sharply at acts of tyranny in the household. I therefore desire you to arrange for this marriage immediately.' And you'd reply, meekly, 'Yes, my love,' or words to that effect. What you'd actually reply would be, 'Jack ! are you quite crazy ?'"

"How can you talk so, Jack !"

"Isn't it all true ?"

"If it is, I must be a virago !"

"There, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dear. I was only joking."

"Don't ! It's bright moonlight."

"Well, there's no moonlight on that stone bench under the trees yonder. Come !"

"How can you be so foolish ? We aren't just married."

"Aren't we ? Well, come anyhow."

"It is a perfect night," said Mrs. Benton, yieldingly. "Jack ! come away quickly. There's someone sitting on the bench. They couldn't have heard us, could they ? We spoke low. The parlor-maid and the butler, I suppose. I'll be glad rather when they are married. Now that's a match I approve of. Does it shock you a little, dear, to find them sitting just where we were going to sit ? This country life is dreadfully demoralizing for the servants."

"You mean does it shock me to find the servants sitting billing and cooing just as we would be doing if they hadn't gotten there first ? You needn't blush, my dear, though it's very becoming."

"Don't be vulgar, Jack. There's another bench. Shall we rest here ?"

"Louise ! Will—will you do it ?"

"What ! Let Madame to-morrow whistle—What did Monsieur say ? No ! No ! No ! I could never have the—what did he

call it ? the *sand*—what does that mean ? to run away ? But how well he talked ! Oh, Oscar, how much he knows—more than Madame. I never knew he so much as saw any of us, except to say 'Good-morning' very kindly. Madame has made up her mind, you see. Even he could not move her. What can we do ?"

"What did Mr. Benton say we ought to do ? I had thought of it, but I was afraid you'd never consent. Now you will go when Mr. Benton says it is right. The clergyman who can marry us lives only a few miles away. He knows me well, and will do what I ask. You must be ready—when can you be ready ?"

"Not at all ! I can't do it. I have said I couldn't. Madame goes to bed at twelve always. I could never face her and then go. If I did go, it would have to be before I saw her again. But I can't go ! How well Monsieur spoke ! How does he know so much of us ?"

"How long would it take you to get ready ?"

"What were the last bells ?"

"Three, but I don't know what time that means."

"I do. Half-past nine. By half-past eleven I could be ready—if I went."

"Why not go now ?"

"With no clothes, no anything ? If I went, I should have to throw you a bundle out of the window. I couldn't carry it through the house. And you would have to be waiting for me *very promptly* at the colonnade, not a moment before or after the time. The other servants are so suspicious, and all of them jealous of me. If they should see one of us waiting for the other, and suspect, and if Madame should be warned— But why talk about it ? I couldn't do it."

"I will be at the colonnade at half-past eleven—on the stroke. Drop your bundle out of the window, close to the wall in the shadow. Then come quickly to me at the colonnade. We'll pick up the bundle as we go and——"

"Never ! I cannot !"

"It is to be the little Frenchman in New York that Madame wants you to marry ? Mr. Benton called him a——"

Louise wrung her hands. "Oh, I will come. I will come. Why did we ever come here ? Madame will never forgive

me. I cannot go, and yet— How well Monsieur talked! If you are at the colonnade at half-past eleven, on the stroke, perhaps——”

“Oscar, master desires zat you will look

off hurriedly. A few moments later the musical ship-bells chimed out the hour.

“Hark!” said Mr. Benton to his wife, as they sat together on the stone bench under the trees. “Isn’t that charming? It’s



“Now, my plan would be to marry Louise to Oscar.”—Page 439.

for zat accursed white stag, and tie him up for ze night. Ze white turkeys also are off again roosting in ze wood-walk. Was not zat Mademoiselle Louise who ran through ze bushes?”

Oscar made no reply except to take out his watch, look at it, and then turn it toward the Frenchman.

“Is that the time by your clock?” he asked. Albert glanced at the watch in the moonlight, and threw up his hands.

“Kingdom of Heaven, yes! And it is time again to ring doze bells!” He started

worth some trouble to hear those bells, but after to-morrow I think I’ll give them up. I don’t want to be a tyrant.”

“I’m not a tyrant to Louise,” asserted Mrs. Benton.

“Who said you were?” answered her husband, quizzically. “He who excuses—you know the rest.”

Oscar slipped softly past them in the shadows. He had but little to do in preparation. The overseer’s house was half a mile away from the great house. In his stable was his own horse and his buggy.

He had but to harness the one to the other, to tie the animal to the hitching-post, return to the great house, and securing his prize, bring her through the wood-road to the waiting buggy and drive her away with him to the parsonage. It all seemed strangely easy and simple. In the morning he would walk over to the great house and make full confession to Louise's Madame and Monsieur. The worst befalling, he had a tidy sum saved up, and if he must seek a new place, he was too well known as a good farmer to be anxious. Ever since the old owner had died the plantation had been as Oscar's own, for Mr. Benton, the new master, had come down and looked at the place, and, seeing all well done by Oscar, had gone away again, leaving a generous bargain behind. He had been a good master, and if he had a whim now and then, as that of the bells, the stag, and the turkeys, he was always ready to pay the piper all he owed, even a little more. Also, as Louise had said, how well and kindly he talked of them! And thinking thus of his employer, Oscar suddenly remembered the little white stag and the white turkeys. They had never been allowed to stay out all night before. If the stag once tasted of the sweets of a long liberty, he would be more than ever troublesome; the turkeys, if once mingling with others to roost, would continue to roam. Oscar looked at his watch. It was early yet. There was plenty of time before half-past eleven, both to harness the horse and corral the fugitive pets, for the last time, perhaps. But for Mr. Benton's words Louise would never have considered this final step. Mr. Benton had intrusted his pets to Oscar, and Oscar had not yet resigned from his employ. And so it



"The clergyman who can marry us lives only a few miles away."—Page 440.

chanced that as a kind of farewell and thank-offering Oscar once more herded up the white drove, finding the stag not far from the roosting white turkeys in the wood-walk. But this night of all nights the white stag chose to show his metal. He had been always difficult to lead home

from his bouts of liberty but not impossible. The flock of white turkeys seemed to recognize the situation and, scared from their pleasant wood-perch, bunched together meekly to be driven home. There was no meekness in the white stag that hour. It was all the powerful young Dane could do to hold the bounding, straining creature by the broken chain. The defiance and spirit of the sinewy little opponent first vexed, then fired the man. It wouldn't go home, eh! Well, it would. Tug and pull and leap and bound as it might, it should see whose will and muscles were the stronger. It was a fight every step of the way, and the blood of both was up. Time passes rapidly in contest, and as he at last tied the still struggling and panting animal to its stake in the garden, Os-

car started at the sound of the musical bells pealing out from the colonnade. Seven bells! What time did that mean? Was he half an hour too early or just on time? His hand moved quickly to his watch-pocket. Half of his watch-chain dangled uselessly from the buttonhole. The pocket was empty! This much of triumph was the stag's. In the struggle the chain had been snapped, the watch lost, and the only other timepiece to which Oscar had present access was in the kitchen, where, late into the hot nights, Albert nursed his grievances, clinging fast to any chance listener for sympathy. To ask him the hour, to be seen by him lingering near



"But, Jack, I did hear someone knocking."

the colonnade, would be to become his prisoner. To linger in the shadow of the trees was to wait too far from the colonnade to distinguish one passing figure from another. To know the exact hour was the whole necessity, to reach the colonnade as Louise reached it and spirit her instantly away. Seven bells! What did they mean? Why had he never troubled himself to learn their message? Oscar dropped down on the stone bench in the garden, his head hanging in despair. If to-night the way was blocked, would Louise consent again to-morrow? Oscar's heart sank in answer to the question.

"It was nothing, Julia. It's your lead."

"But, Jack, I did hear someone knocking. It was at that long garden-window too. Oh! There it is again. Now you can hear it yourself."

Mr. Benton rose from the card-table,

and, his cards still in his hand, walked out into the garden.

"Oscar," he said, "what do you want? What are you doing here?"

The young Dane stepped out from the shadow of the house so that the bright moonlight fell on his light hair and wide blue eyes.

"Will you please, sir," he said, gravely, "tell me what time it is?"

His master looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean? You didn't come here to disturb me just to know the time. You knew better than that. What has happened?" Oscar looked at him unwaveringly.

"Nothing has happened," he said, with the same gravity. "I have been stupid and didn't learn the bells. I have lost my watch and I need to know the time, and I can't go into the kitchen for a very good reason."

"Give it to me," said Mr. Benton, quickly. Oscar stood looking at him and Mr.

Benton also stepped out into the moonlight. They were eye to eye.

"As man to man," said the overseer, suddenly, "is there any reason why I should not marry Louise? I am going to run away with her to-night on the stroke of half-past eleven, and that's why I need to know the hour."

Mr. Benton stood motionless for a moment, then he took out his watch and looked at it.

"You will not run away with her to-night at eleven-thirty," he said, "for it is quarter of twelve now."

"No!" exclaimed Oscar, forgetting himself, and stepping forward as an equal would have stepped. "Then I have lost her! She will not consent again," he added, despairingly.

"Do you mean," asked Mr. Benton, in the same quiet tones and after another pause, "that the girl did consent to run away to-night with you? Where were you going to take her?"

"Five miles off to my clergyman and then home."

"Well," commented Mr. Benton, dryly, "you have saved some trouble by losing your watch, for your clergyman is inside the house now, playing cards with Mrs. Benton and me. He can marry you to Louise to-night and before you run away with her." He stepped back to the open window and called into the room, "Julia, my dear, will you come here a moment.

Here is my overseer, Oscar," he said, as Mrs. Benton, also holding her hand of cards, came out into the garden, looking wonderingly at the two figures. "Oscar," Mr. Benton went on, "has come to ask my permission to marry your maid, Louise, and I have told him to regard the matter as settled. I am very indulgent in all domestic matters, my dear, but I wish it clearly understood that I draw the line sharply at acts of tyranny. They were planning to run away together, so the sooner they are married the better. I desire you to arrange for it immediately. As we have a clergyman in the house, as the young man is here before us, and you have only to ring for your maid, the ceremony can be performed at once in the parlor, with the rest of the servants as congregation."

Mrs. Benton stood looking at her husband with dilated eyes. Her delicate draperies fell from her hand and brushed over the gravel walk as she came forward swiftly and anxiously.

"Jack," she inquired, tremulously, "are you quite crazy?"

"Exactly what I told you you'd say!" exclaimed Mr. Benton, breaking down with a laugh. Mrs. Benton started and turned quickly, then she flushed high in the moonlight and with this change turned suddenly and kindly to Oscar. "Of course—" she began

But for those who know the world and its women this story is already finished.

