The Dandelion Girl

Robert F. Young

The girl on the hill made Mark think of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Perhaps it was because of the way she was standing there in the afternoon sun, her dandelion-hued hair dancing in the wind; perhaps it was because of the way her old-fashioned white dress was swirling around her long and slender legs. In any event, he got the definite impression that she had somehow stepped out of the past and into the present; and that was odd, because as things turned out, it wasn't the past she had stepped out of, but the future.

He paused some distance behind her, breathing hard from the climb. She had not seen him yet, and he wondered how he could apprise her of his presence without alarming her. While he was trying to make up his mind, he took out his pipe and filled and lighted it, cupping his hands over the bowl and puffing till the tobacco came to glowing life. When he looked at her again, she had turned around and was regarding him curiously.

He walked toward her slowly, keenly aware of the nearness of the sky, enjoying the feel of the wind against his face. He should go hiking more often, he told himself. He had been tramping through woods when he came to the hill, and now the woods lay behind and far below him, burning gently with the first pale fires of fall, and beyond the woods lay the little lake with its complement of cabin and fishing pier. When his wife had been unexpectedly summoned for jury duty, he had been forced to spend alone the two weeks he had saved out of his summer vacation and he had been leading a lonely existence, fishing off the pier by day and reading the cool evenings away before the big fireplace in the raftered living room; and after two days the routine had caught up to him, and he had taken off into the woods without purpose or direction and finally he had come to the hill and had climbed it and seen the girl.

Her eyes were blue, he saw when he came up to her—as blue as the sky that framed her slender silhouette. Her face was oval and young and soft and sweet. It evoked a déjà vu so poignant that he had to resist an impulse to reach out and touch her wind-kissed cheek; and even though his hand did not leave his side, he felt his fingertips tingle.

Why, I'm forty-four, he thought wonderingly, and she's hardly more than twenty. What in heaven's name has come over me? "Are you enjoying the view?" he asked aloud.

"Oh, yes," she said and turned and swept her arm in an enthusiastic semicircle. "Isn't it simply marvelous!"

He followed her gaze. "Yes," he said, "it is." Below them the woods began again, then spread out over the lowlands in warm September colors, embracing a small hamlet several miles away, finally bowing out before the first outposts of the suburban frontier. In the far distance, haze softened the serrated silhouette of Cove City, lending it the aspect of a sprawling medieval castle, making it less of a reality than a dream. "Are you from the city too?" he asked.

"In a way I am," she said. She smiled at him. "I'm from the Cove City of two hundred and forty years from now."

The smile told him that she didn't really expect him to believe her, but it implied that it would be nice if he would pretend. He smiled back. "That would be A.D. twenty-two hundred and one, wouldn't it?" he said. "I imagine the place has grown enormously by then."

"Oh, it has," she said. "It's part of a megalopolis now and extends all the way to there." She pointed to the fringe of the forest at their feet. "Two Thousand and Fortieth Street runs straight through that grove of sugar maples," she went on, "and do you see that stand of locusts over there?"

"Yes," he said, "I see them."

"That's where the new plaza is. Its supermarket is so big that it takes half a day to go through it, and you can buy almost anything in it from aspirins to aerocars. And next to the supermarket, where that grove of beeches stands, is a big dress shop just bursting with the latest creations of the leading couturiers. I bought this dress I'm wearing there this very morning. Isn't it simply beautiful?"

If it was, it was because she made it so. However, he looked at it politely. It had been cut from a material he was unfamiliar with, a material seemingly compounded of cotton candy, sea foam, and snow. There was no limit any more to the syntheses that could be created by the miracle-fiber manufacturers—nor, apparently, to the tall tales that could be created by young girls. "I suppose you traveled here by time machine," he said.

"Yes. My father invented one."

He looked at her closely. He had never seen such a guileless countenance. "And do you come here often?"

"Oh, yes. This is my favorite space-time coordinate. I stand here for hours sometimes and look and look and look. Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you."

"But how can there be a yesterday," Mark asked, "if you always return to the same point in time?"

"Oh, I see what you mean," she said. "The reason is because the machine is affected by the passage of time the same as anything else, and you have to set it back every twenty-four hours if you want to maintain exactly the same co-ordinate. I never do because I much prefer a different day each time I come back."

"Doesn't your father ever come with you?"

Overhead, a V of geese was drifting lazily by, and she watched it for some time before she spoke. "My father is an invalid now," she said finally. "He'd like very much to come if he

only could. But I tell him all about what I see," she added hurriedly, "and it's almost the same as if he really came. Wouldn't you say it was?"

There was an eagerness about the way she was looking at him that touched his heart. "I'm sure it is," he said—then, "It must be wonderful to own a time machine."

She nodded solemnly. "They're a boon to people who like to stand on pleasant leas. In the twenty-third century there aren't very many pleasant leas left."

He smiled. "There aren't very many of them left in the twentieth. I guess you could say that this one is sort of a collector's item. I'll have to visit it more often."

"Do you live near here?" she asked.

"I'm staying in a cabin about three miles back. I'm supposed to be on vacation, but it's not much of one. My wife was called to jury duty and couldn't come with me, and since I couldn't postpone it, I've ended up being a sort of reluctant Thoreau. My name is Mark Randolph."

"I'm Julie," she said. "Julie Danvers."

The name suited her. The same way the white dress suited her—the way the blue sky suited her, and the hill and the September wind. Probably she lived in the little hamlet in the woods, but it did not really matter. If she wanted to pretend she was from the future, it was all right with him. All that really mattered was the way he had felt when he had first seen her, and the tenderness that came over him every time he gazed upon her gentle face. "What kind of work do you do, Julie?" he asked. "Or are you still in school?"

"I'm studying to be a secretary," she said. She took a half step and made a pretty pirouette and clasped her hands before her. "I shall just love to be a secretary," she went on. "It must be simply marvelous working in a big important office and taking down what important people say. Would you like me to be your secretary, Mr. Randolph?"

"I'd like it very much," he said. "My wife was my secretary once—before the war. That's how we happened to meet." Now, why had he said that? he wondered.

"Was she a good secretary?"

"The very best. I was sorry to lose her; but then when I lost her in one sense, I gained her in another, so I guess you could hardly call that losing her."

"No, I guess you couldn't. Well, I must be getting back now, Mr. Randolph. Dad will be wanting to hear about all the things I saw, and I've got to fix his supper."

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

"Probably. I've been coming here every day. Good-bye now, Mr. Randolph."

"Good-bye, Julie," he said.

He watched her run lightly down the hill and disappear into the grove of sugar maples where, two hundred and forty years hence, Two Thousand and Fortieth Street would be. He smiled. What a charming child, he thought. It must be thrilling to have such an irrepressible sense of wonder, such an enthusiasm for life. He could appreciate the two qualities all the more fully because he had been denied them. At twenty he had been a solemn young man working his way through law school; at twenty-four he had had his own practice, and small though it had been, it had occupied him completely—well, not quite completely. When he had married Anne, there had been a brief interim during which making a living had lost some of its immediacy. And then, when the war had come along, there had been another interim—a much longer one this time—when making a living had seemed a remote and sometimes even a contemptible pursuit. After his return to civilian life, though, the immediacy had returned with a vengeance, the more so because he now had a son as well as a wife to support, and he had been occupied ever since, except for the four vacation weeks he had recently been allowing himself each year, two of which he spent with Anne and Jeff at a resort of their choosing and two of which he spent with Anne, after Jeff returned to college, in their cabin by the lake. This year, though, he was spending the second two alone. Well, perhaps not quite alone.

His pipe had gone out some time ago, and he had not even noticed. He lighted it again, drawing deeply to thwart the wind, then he descended the hill and started back through the woods toward the cabin. The autumnal equinox had come and the days were appreciably shorter. This one was very nearly done, and the dampness of evening had already begun to pervade the hazy air.

He walked slowly, and the sun had set by the time he reached the lake. It was a small lake, but a deep one, and the trees came down to its edge. The cabin stood some distance back from the shore in a stand of pines, and a winding path connected it with the pier. Behind it a gravel drive led to a dirt road that gave access to the highway. His station wagon stood by the back door, ready to whisk him back to civilization at a moment's notice.

He prepared and ate a simple supper in the kitchen, then went into the living room to read. The generator in the shed hummed on and off, but otherwise the evening was unsullied by the usual sounds the ears of modern man are heir to. Selecting an anthology of American poetry from the well-stocked bookcase by the fireplace, he sat down and thumbed through it to Afternoon on a Hill. He read the treasured poem three times, and each time he read it he saw her standing there in the sun, her hair dancing in the wind, her dress swirling like gentle snow around her long and lovely legs; and a lump came into his throat, and he could not swallow.

He returned the book to the shelf and went out and stood on the rustic porch and filled and lighted his pipe. He forced himself to think of Anne, and presently her face came into focus—the firm but gentle chin, the warm and compassionate eyes with that odd hint of fear in them that he had never been able to analyze, the still-soft cheeks, the gentle smile—and each attribute was made more compelling by the memory of her vibrant light brown hair and her tall, lithe gracefulness. As was always the case when he thought of her, he found himself marveling at

her agelessness, marveling how she could have continued down through the years as lovely as she had been that long-ago morning when he had looked up, startled, and seen her standing timidly before his desk. It was inconceivable that a mere twenty years later he could be looking forward eagerly to a tryst with an overimaginative girl who was young enough to be his daughter. Well, he wasn't—not really. He had been momentarily swayed—that was all. For a moment his emotional equilibrium had deserted him, and he had staggered. Now his feet were back under him where they belonged, and the world had returned to its sane and sensible orbit.

He tapped out his pipe and went back inside. In his bedroom he undressed and slipped between the sheets and turned out the light. Sleep should have come readily, but it did not; and when it finally did come, it came in fragments interspersed with tantalizing dreams.

"Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit," she had said, "and yesterday a deer, and today, you."

On the second afternoon she was wearing a blue dress, and there was a little blue ribbon to match tied in her dandelion-colored hair. After breasting the hill, he stood for some time, not moving, waiting till the tightness of his throat went away; then he walked over and stood beside her in the wind. But the soft curve of her throat and chin brought the tightness back, and when she turned and said, "Hello, I didn't think you'd come," it was a long while before he was able to answer.

"But I did," he finally said, "and so did you."

"Yes," she said. "I'm glad."

A nearby outcropping of granite formed a bench of sorts, and they sat down on it and looked out over the land. He filled his pipe and lighted it and blew smoke into the wind. "My father smokes a pipe too," she said, "and when he lights it, he cups his hands the same way you do, even when there isn't any wind. You and he are alike in lots of ways."

"Tell me about your father," he said. "Tell me about yourself too."

And she did, saying that she was twenty-one, that her father was a retired government physicist, that they lived in a small apartment on Two Thousand and Fortieth Street, and that she had been keeping house for him ever since her mother had died four years ago. Afterward he told her about himself and Anne and Jeff—about how he intended to take Jeff into partnership with him someday, about Anne's phobia about cameras and how she had refused to have her picture taken on their wedding day and had gone on refusing ever since, about the grand time the three of them had had on the camping trip they'd gone on last summer.

When he had finished, she said, "What a wonderful family life you have. Nineteen-sixty-one must be a marvelous year in which to live!"

"With a time machine at your disposal, you can move here any time you like."

"It's not quite that easy. Even aside from the fact that I wouldn't dream of deserting my father, there's the time police to take into consideration. You see, time travel is limited to the members of government-sponsored historical expeditions and is out of bounds to the general public."

You seem to have managed all right."

"That's because my father invented his own machine, and the time police don't know about it."

"But you're still breaking the law."

She nodded. "But only in their eyes, only in the light of their concept of time. My father has his own concept."

It was so pleasant hearing her talk that it did not matter really what she talked about, and he wanted her to ramble on, no matter how farfetched her subject. "Tell me about it," he said.

"First I'll tell you about the official concept. Those who endorse it say that no one from the future should participate physically in anything that occurred in the past, because his very presence would constitute a paradox, and future events would have to be altered in order for the paradox to be assimilated. Consequently the Department of Time Travel makes sure that only authorized personnel have access to its time machines, and maintains a police force to apprehend the would-be generation-jumpers who yearn for a simpler way of life and who keep disguising themselves as historians so they can return permanently to a different era.

"But according to my father's concept, the book of time has already been written. From a macrocosmic viewpoint, my father says, everything that is going to happen has already happened. Therefore, if a person from the future participates in a past event, he becomes a part of that event—for the simple reason that he was a part of it in the first place—and a paradox cannot possibly arise."

Mark took a deep drag on his pipe. He needed it. "Your father sounds like quite a remarkable person," he said.

"Oh, he is!" Enthusiasm deepened the pinkness of her cheeks, brightened the blueness of her eyes. "You wouldn't believe all the books he's read, Mr. Randolph. Why, our apartment is bursting with them! Hegel and Kant and Hume; Einstein and Newton and Weizsäcker. I've—I've even read some of them myself."

"I gathered as much. As a matter of fact, so have I."

She gazed raptly up into his face. "How wonderful, Mr. Randolph," she said. "I'll bet we've got just scads of mutual interests!"

The conversation that ensued proved conclusively that they did have—though the transcendental esthetic, Berkeleianism and relativity were rather incongruous subjects for a man and a girl to be discussing on a September hilltop, he reflected presently, even when the man was forty-four and the girl was twenty-one. But happily there were compensations—their animated discussion of the transcendental esthetic did more than elicit a priori and a posteriori conclusions, it also elicited microcosmic stars in her eyes; their breakdown of Berkeley did more than point up the inherent weaknesses in the good bishop's theory, it also pointed up the pinkness of her cheeks; and their review of relativity did more than demonstrate that E invariably equals mc2; it also demonstrated that far from being an impediment, knowledge is an asset to feminine charm.

The mood of the moment lingered far longer than it had any right to, and it was still with him when he went to bed. This time he didn't even try to think of Anne; he knew it would do no good. Instead he lay there in the darkness and played host to whatever random thoughts came along—and all of them concerned a September hilltop and a girl with dandelion-colored hair.

Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.

Next morning he drove over to the hamlet and checked at the post office to see if he had any mail. There was none. He was not surprised. Jeff disliked writing letters as much as he did, and Anne, at the moment, was probably incommunicado. As for his practice, he had forbidden his secretary to bother him with any but the most urgent of matters.

He debated on whether to ask the wizened postmaster if there was a family named Danvers living in the area. He decided not to. To have done so would have been to undermine the elaborate make-believe structure which Julie had built, and even though he did not believe in the structure's validity, he could not find it in his heart to send it toppling.

That afternoon she was wearing a yellow dress the same shade as her hair, and again his throat tightened when he saw her, and again he could not speak. But when the first moment passed and words came, it was all right, and their thoughts flowed together like two effervescent brooks and coursed gaily through the arroyo of the afternoon. This time when they parted, it was she who asked, "Will you be here tomorrow?"—though only because she stole the question from his lips—and the words sang in his ears all the way back through the woods to the cabin and lulled him to sleep after an evening spent with his pipe on the porch.

Next afternoon when he climbed the hill it was empty. At first his disappointment numbed him, and then he thought, “She's late, that's all”. She'll probably show up any minute. And he sat down on the granite bench to wait. But she did not come. The minutes passed—the hours. Shadows crept out of the woods and climbed partway up the hill. The air grew colder. He gave up, finally, and headed miserably back toward the cabin.

The next afternoon she did not show up either. Nor the next. He could neither eat nor sleep. Fishing palled on him. He could no longer read. And all the while, he hated himself—hated himself for behaving like a lovesick schoolboy, for reacting just like any other fool in his forties to a pretty face and a pair of pretty legs. Up until a few days ago he had never even so

much as looked at another woman, and here in the space of less than a week he had not only looked at one but had fallen in love with her.

Hope was dead in him when he climbed the hill on the fourth day—and then suddenly alive again when he saw her standing in the sun. She was wearing a black dress this time, and he should have guessed the reason for her absence; but he didn't—not till he came up to her and saw the tears start from her eyes and the telltale trembling of her lip. "Julie, what's the matter?"

She clung to him, her shoulders shaking, and pressed her face against his coat. "My father died," she said, and somehow he knew that these were her first tears, that she had sat tearless through the wake and funeral and had not broken down till now.

He put his arms around her gently. He had never kissed her, and he did not kiss her now, not really. His lips brushed her forehead and briefly touched her hair—that was all. "I'm sorry, Julie," he said. "I know how much he meant to you."

"He knew he was dying all along," she said. "He must have known it ever since the strontium 90 experiment he conducted at the laboratory. But he never told anyone—he never even told me … I don't want to live. Without him there's nothing left to live for—nothing, nothing, nothing!"

He held her tightly. "You'll find something, Julie. Someone. You're young yet. You're still a child, really."

Her head jerked back, and she raised suddenly tearless eyes to his. "I'm not a child! Don't you dare call me a child!"

Startled, he released her and stepped back. He had never seen her angry before. "I didn't mean—" he began.

Her anger was as evanescent as it had been abrupt. "I know you didn't mean to hurt my feelings, Mr. Randolph. But I'm not a child, honest I'm not. Promise me you'll never call me one again."

"All right," he said. "I promise."

"And now I must go," she said. "I have a thousand things to do."

"Will—will you be here tomorrow?"

She looked at him for a long time. A mist, like the aftermath of a summer shower, made her blue eyes glisten. "Time machines run down," she said. "They have parts that need to be replaced—and I don't know how to replace them. Ours—mine may be good for one more trip, but I'm not sure."

"But you'll try to come, won't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'll try. And Mr. Randolph?"

"Yes, Julie?"

"In case I don't make it—and for the record—I love you."

She was gone then; running lightly down the hill, and a moment later she disappeared into the grove of sugar maples. His hands were trembling when he lighted his pipe, and the match burned his fingers. Afterward he could not remember returning to the cabin or fixing supper or going to bed, and yet he must have done all of those things, because he awoke in his own room, and when he went into the kitchen, there were supper dishes standing on the drainboard.

He washed the dishes and made coffee. He spent the morning fishing off the pier, keeping his mind blank. He would face reality later. Right now it was enough for him to know that she loved him, that in a few short hours he would see her again. Surely even a run-down time machine should have no trouble transporting her from the hamlet to the hill.

He arrived there early and sat down on the granite bench and waited for her to come out of the woods and climb the slope. He could feel the hammering of his heart and he knew that his hands were trembling. *Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.*

He waited and he waited, but she did not come. She did not come the next day either. When the shadows began to lengthen and the air grow chill, he descended the hill and entered the grove of sugar maples. Presently he found a path, and he followed it into the forest proper and through the forest to the hamlet. He stopped at the small post office and checked to see if he had any mail. After the wizened postmaster told him there was none, he lingered for a moment. "Is—is there a family by the name of Danvers living anywhere around here?" he blurted.

The postmaster shook his head. "Never heard of them."

"Has there been a funeral in town recently?"

"Not for nigh onto a year."

After that, although he visited the hill every afternoon till his vacation ran out, he knew in his heart that she would not return, that she was lost to him as utterly as if she had never been. Evenings he haunted the hamlet, hoping desperately that the postmaster had been mistaken; but he saw no sign of Julie, and the description he gave of her to the passersby evoked only negative responses.

Early in October he returned to the city. He did his best to act toward Anne as though nothing had changed between them; but she seemed to know the minute she saw him that something had changed. And although she asked no questions, she grew quieter and quieter as

the weeks went by, and the fear in her eyes that had puzzled him before became more and more pronounced.

He began driving into the country Sunday afternoons and visiting the hilltop. The woods were golden now, and the sky was even bluer than it had been a month ago. For hours he sat on the granite bench, staring at the spot where she had disappeared. *Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.*

Then, on a rainy night in mid-November, he found the suitcase. It was Anne's, and he found it quite by accident. She had gone into town to play bingo, and he had the house to himself; and after spending two hours watching four jaded TV programs, he remembered the jigsaw puzzles he had stored away the previous winter.

Desperate for something—anything at all—to take his mind off Julie, he went up to the attic to get them. The suitcase fell from a shelf while he was rummaging through the various boxes piled beside it, and it sprang open when it struck the floor.

He bent over to pick it up. It was the same suitcase she had brought with her to the little apartment they had rented after their marriage, and he remembered how she had always kept it locked and remembered her telling him laughingly that there were some things a wife had to keep a secret even from her husband. The lock had rusted over the years, and the fall had broken it.

He started to close the lid, paused when he saw the protruding hem of a white dress. The material was vaguely familiar. He had seen material similar to it not very long ago—material that brought to mind cotton candy and sea foam and snow.

He raised the lid and picked up the dress with trembling fingers. He held it by the shoulders and let it unfold itself, and it hung there in the room like gently falling snow. He looked at it for a long time, his throat tight. Then, tenderly, he folded it again and replaced it in the suitcase and closed the lid. He returned the suitcase to its niche under the eaves. *Day before yesterday I saw a rabbit, and yesterday a deer, and today, you.*

Rain thrummed on the roof. The tightness of his throat was so acute now that he thought for a moment that he was going to cry. Slowly he descended the attic stairs. He went down the spiral stairway into the living room. The clock on the mantel said ten-fourteen. In just a few minutes the bingo bus would let her off at the corner, and she would come walking down the street and up the walk to the front door. Anne would … Julie would. Julianne?

Was that her full name? Probably. People invariably retained part of their original names when adopting aliases; and having completely altered her last name, she had probably thought it safe to take liberties with her first. She must have done other things, too, in addition to changing her name, to elude the time police. No wonder she had never wanted her picture taken! And how terrified she must have been on that long-ago day when she had stepped timidly into his office to apply for a job! All alone in a strange generation, not knowing for sure whether her father's concept of time was valid, not knowing for sure whether the man who would love her in his

forties would feel the same way toward her in his twenties. She had come back all right, just as she had said she would.

Twenty years, he thought wonderingly, *and all the while she must have known that one day I'd climb a September hill and see her standing, young and lovely, in the sun, and fall in love with her all over again. She had to know because the moment was as much a part of her past as it was a part of my future. But why didn't she tell me? Why doesn't she tell me now?*

Suddenly he understood.

He found it hard to breathe, and he went into the hall and donned his raincoat and stepped out into the rain. He walked down the walk in the rain, and the rain pelted his face and ran in drops down his cheeks, and some of the drops were raindrops, and some of them were tears. How could anyone as agelessly beautiful as Anne—as Julie—was, be afraid of growing old? Didn't she realize that in his eyes she couldn't grow old—that to him she hadn't aged a day since the moment he had looked up from his desk and seen her standing there in the tiny office and simultaneously fallen in love with her? Couldn't she understand that that was why the girl on the hill had seemed a stranger to him?

He had reached the street and was walking down it toward the corner. He was almost there when the bingo bus pulled up and stopped, and the girl in the white trench coat got out. The tightness of his throat grew knife-sharp, and he could not breathe at all. The dandelion-hued hair was darker now, and the girlish charm was gone; but the gentle loveliness still resided in her gentle face, and the long and slender legs had a grace and symmetry in the pale glow of the November street light that they had never known in the golden radiance of the September sun.

She came forward to meet him, and he saw the familiar fear in her eyes—a fear poignant now beyond enduring because he understood its cause. She blurred before his eyes, and he walked toward her blindly. When he came up to her, his eyes cleared, and he reached out across the years and touched her rain-wet cheek. She knew it was all right then, and the fear went away forever, and they walked home hand in hand in the rain.

The End