

The Bridal Pair

By Robert W. Chambers

"If I were you," said the elder man, "I should take three months' solid rest."

"A month is enough," said the younger man. "Ozone will do it; the first brace of grouse I bag will do it—" He broke off abruptly, staring at the line of dimly lighted cars, where negro porters stood by the vestibuled sleepers, directing passengers to staterooms and berths.

"Dog all right, doctor?" inquired the elder man pleasantly. "All right, doctor," replied the younger; "I spoke to the baggage master, There was a silence; the elder man chewed an unlighted cigar reflectively, watching his companion with keen narrowing eyes.

The younger physician stood full in the white electric light, lean head lowered, apparently preoccupied with a study of his own shadow swimming and quivering on the asphalt at his feet.

"So you fear I may break down?" he observed, without raising his head.

"I think you're tired out," said the other.

"That's a more agreeable way of expressing it," said the young fellow. "I hear"—he hesitated, with a faint trace of irritation—I understand that Forbes Stanly thinks me mentally unsound."

"He probably suspects what you're up to," said the elder man soberly.

"Well, what will he do when I announce my germ theory? Put me in a strait-jacket?"

"He'll say you're mad, until you prove it; every physician will agree with him—until your radium test shows us the microbe of insanity."

"Doctor," said the young man abruptly, "I'm going to admit something—to *you*."

"All right; go ahead and admit it."

"Well, I *am* a bit worried about my own condition."

"It's time you were," observed the other.

"Yes—it's about time. Doctor, I am seriously affected."

The elder man looked up sharply.

"Yes, I'm—in love."

"Ah!" muttered the elder physician, amused and a trifle disgusted; "so that's your malady, is it?"

"A malady—yes; not explainable by our germ theory—not affected by radio-activity. Doctor, I'm speaking lightly enough, but there's no happiness in it."

"Never is," commented the other, striking a match and lighting his ragged cigar. After a puff or two the cigar went out. "All I have to say," he added, "is, don't do it just now. Show me a scale of pure radium and I'll give you leave to marry every spinster in New York. In the mean time go and shoot a few dozen harmless, happy grouse; they can't shoot back. But let love alone. . . . By the way, who is she?"

"I don't know."

"You know her name, I suppose?"

The young fellow shook his head. "I don't even know where she lives," he said finally.

After a pause the elder man took him gently by the arm: "Are you subject to this sort of thing? Are you susceptible?"

"No, not at all."

"Ever before in love?"

"Yes—once."

“When?”

“When I was about ten years old. Her name was Rosamund—aged eight. I never had the courage to speak to her. She died recently, I believe.”

The reply was so quietly serious, so destitute of any suspicion of humor, that the elder man’s smile faded; and again he cast one of his swift, keen glances at his companion.

“Won’t you stay away three months?” he asked patiently.

But the other only shook his head, tracing with the point of his walking stick the outline of his own shadow on the asphalt.

A moment later he glanced at his watch, closed it with a snap, silently shook hands with his equally silent friend, and stepped aboard the sleeping car.

Neither had noticed the name of the sleeping car.

It happened to be the *Rosamund*.

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Loungers and passengers on Wildwood station drew back from the platform’s edge as the towering locomotive shot by them, stunning their ears with the clangor of its melancholy bell.

Slower, slower glided the dusty train, then stopped, jolting; eddying circles of humanity closed around the cars, through which descending passengers pushed.

“Wildwood! Wildwood!” cried the trainmen; trunks tumbling out of the forward car descended with a bang!—a yelping, wagging setter dog landed on the platform, hysterically grateful to be free; and at the same moment a young fellow in tweed shooting clothes, carrying gripsack and gun case, made his way forward toward the baggage master, who was being jerked all over the platform by the frantic dog.

“Much obliged; I’ll take the dog,” he said, slipping a bit of silver into the official’s hand, and receiving the dog’s chain in return.

“Hope you’ll have good sport,” replied the baggage master. “There’s a lot o’ birds in this country, they tell me. You’ve got a good dog there.”

The young man smiled and nodded, released the chain from his dog’s collar, and started off up the dusty village street, followed by an urchin carrying his luggage.

The landlord of the Wildwood Inn stood on the veranda, prepared to receive guests. When a young man, a white setter dog, and a small boy loomed up, his speculative eyes became suffused with benevolence.

“How-de-so, sir?” he said cordially. “Guess you was with us three year since—stayed to supper. Ain’t that so?”

“It certainly is,” said his guest cheerfully. “I am surprised that you remember me.”

“Be ye?” rejoined the landlord, gratified. “Say! I can tell the name of every man, woman, an child that has ever set down to eat with us. You was here with a pair o’ red bird dawgs; shot a mess o’ birds before dark, come back pegged out, an’ took the ten-thirty to Noo York. Hey? Yaas, an’ you was cussin’ round because you couldn’t stay an’ shoot for a month.”

“I had to work hard in those days,” laughed the young man. “You are right; it was three years ago this month.”

“Time’s a flyer; it’s fitted with triple screws these days,” said the landlord. “Come right in an’ make yourself to home. Ed! O Ed! Take this bag to 13! We’re all full, sir. You ain’t scared at No. 13, be ye? Say! if I ain’t a liar you had 13 three years ago! Waal, now!—ain’t that the dumbdest— But you can have what you want Monday. How long was you calkerlatin’ to stay?”

“A month—if the shooting is good.”

“It’s all right. Orrin Plummet come in last night with a mess o’ pa’tridges. He says the woodcock is droppin’ in to the birches south o’ Sweetbrier Hill.”

The young man nodded, and began to remove his gun from the service-worn case of sole leather.

“Ain’t startin’ right off, be ye?” inquired his host, laughing.

“I can’t begin too quickly,” said the young man, busy locking barrels to stock, while the dog looked on, thumping the veranda floor with his plummy tail.

The landlord admired the slim, polished weapon. “That’s the instrooment!” he observed. “That there’s a slick bird dawg, too. Guess I’d better fill my ice box. Your limit’s thirty of each—cock an’ parridge. After that there’s ducks.”

“It’s a good, sane law,” said the young man, dropping his gun under one arm.

The landlord scratched his ear reflectively. “Lemme see,” he mused; “wasn’t you a doctor? I heard tell that you made up pieces for the papers about the idjits an’ loonyticks of Rome an’ Roosia an’ furrin climes.”

“I have written a little on European and Asiatic insanity,” replied the doctor good-humoredly.

“Was you over to them parts?”

“For three years.” He whistled the dog in from the road, where several yellow curs were walking round and round him, every hair on end.

The landlord said: “You look a little peaked yourself. Take it easy the fust, is my advice.”

His guest nodded abstractedly, lingering on the veranda, preoccupied with the beauty of the village street, which stretched away westward under tall elms. Autumn-tinted hills closed the vista; beyond them spread the blue sky.

“The cemetery lies that way, does it not?” inquired the young man.

“Straight ahead,” said the landlord. “Take the road to the Holler.”

“Do you”—the doctor hesitated—“do you recall a funeral there three years ago?”

“Whose?” asked his host bluntly.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll ask my woman; she saves them funeral pieces an’ makes a album.”

“Friend o’ yours buried there?”

“No.”

The landlord sauntered toward the barroom, where two fellow taxpayers stood shuffling their feet impatiently.

“Waal, good luck, Doc,” he said, without intentional offense; “supper’s at six. We’ll try an’ make you comfortable.”

“Thank you,” replied the doctor, stepping out into the road, and motioning the white setter to heel.

“I remember now,” he muttered, as he turned northward, where the road forked; “the cemetery lies to the westward; there should be a lane at the next turning—”

He hesitated and stopped, then resumed his course, mumbling to himself: “I can pass the cemetery later; she would not be there; I don’t think I shall ever see her again. . . . I—I wonder whether I am—perfectly—well—”

The words were suddenly lost in a sharp indrawn breath; his heart ceased beating, fluttered, then throbbed on violently; and he shook from head to foot.

There was a glimmer of a summer gown under the trees; a figure passed from shadow to sunshine, and again into the cool dusk of a leafy lane.

The pallor of the young fellow's face changed; a heavy flush spread from forehead to neck; he strode forward, dazed, deafened by the tumult of his drumming pulses. The dog, alert, suspicious, led the way, wheeling into the bramble-bordered lane, only to halt, turn back, and fall in behind his master again.

In the lane ahead the light summer gown fluttered under the foliage, bright in the sunlight, almost lost in the shadows. Then he saw her on the hill's breezy crest, poised for a moment against the sky.

When at length he reached the hill, he found her seated in the shade of a pine. She looked up serenely, as though she had expected him, and they faced each other. A moment later his dog left him, sneaking away without a sound.

When he strove to speak, his voice had an unknown tone to him. Her upturned face was his only answer. The breeze in the pinetops, which had been stirring lazily and monotonously, ceased.

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Her delicate face was like a blossom lifted in the still air; her upward glance chained him to silence. The first breeze broke the spell: he spoke a word, then speech died on his lips; he stood twisting his shooting cap, confused, not daring to continue.

The girl leaned back, supporting her weight on one arm, fingers almost buried in the deep green moss.

"It is three years to-day," he said, in the dull voice of one who dreams; "three years to-day. May I not speak?"

In her lowered head and eyes he read acquiescence; in her silence, consent.

"Three years ago to-day," he repeated; "the anniversary has given me courage to speak to you. Surely you will not take offense; we have traveled so far together!—from the end of the world to the end of it, and back again, here—to this place of all places in the world! And now to find you here on this day of all days—here within a step of our first meeting place—three years ago to-day! And all the world we have traveled over since never speaking, yet ever passing on paths parallel—paths which for thousands of miles ran almost within arms distance—"

She raised her head slowly, looking out from the shadows of the pines into the sunshine. Her dreamy eyes rested on acres of golden-rod and hillside brambles quivering in the September heat; on fern-choked gullies edged with alder; on brown and purple grasses; on pine thickets where slim silver birches glimmered.

"Will you speak to me?" he asked. "I have never even heard the sound of your voice."

She turned and looked at him, touching with idle fingers the soft hair curling on her temples. Then she bent her head once more, the faintest shadow of a smile in her eyes.

"Because," he said humbly, "these long years of silent recognition count for something! And then the strangeness of it!—the fate of it—the quiet destiny that ruled our lives—that rules them now—now as I am speaking, weighting every second with its tiny burden of fate."

She straightened up, lifting her half-buried hand from the moss; and he saw the imprint there where the palm and fingers had rested.

"Three years that end to-day—end with the new moon," he said. "Do you remember?"

"Yes," she said.

He quivered at the sound of her voice. "You were there, just beyond those oaks," he said eagerly; "we can see them from here. The road turns there—"

“Turns by the cemetery,” she murmured.

“Yes, yes, by the cemetery! You had been there, I think.”

“Do you remember that?” she asked.

“I have never forgotten—never!” he repeated, striving to hold her eyes to his own; “it was not twilight; there was a glimmer of day in the west, but the woods were darkening, and the new moon lay in the sky, and the evening was very clear and still.”

Impulsively he dropped on one knee beside her to see her face; and as he spoke, curbing his emotion and impatience with that subtle deference which is inbred in men or never acquired, she stole a glance at him; and his worn visage brightened as though touched with sunlight.

“The second time I saw you was in New York,” he said—“only a glimpse of your face in the crowd—but I knew you.”

“I saw you,” she mused.

“Did you?” he cried, enchanted. “I dared not believe that you recognized me.”

“Yes, I knew you.... Tell me more.”

The thrilling voice set him aflame; faint danger signals tinted her face and neck.

“In December,” he went on unsteadily, “I saw you in Paris—I saw only you amid the thousand faces in the candlelight of Notre Dame.”

“And I saw you.... And then?”

“And then two months of darkness.... And at last a light—moonlight—and you on the terrace at Amara.”

“There was only a flower bed—a few spikes of white hyacinths between us,” she said dreamily.

He strove to speak coolly. “Day and night have built many a wall between us; was that you who passed me in the starlight, so close that our shoulders, touched, in that narrow street in Samarkand? And the dark figure with you—”

“Yes, it was I and my attendant.”

“And . . . you, there in the fog—”

“At Archangel? Yes, it was I.”

“On the Goryn?”

“It was I.... And I am here at last—with you. It is our destiny.”

* * *

So, kneeling there beside her in the shadow of the pines, she absolved him in their dim confessional, holding him guiltless under the destiny that awaits us all.

Again that illumination touched his haggard face as though brightened by a sun ray stealing through the still foliage above. He grew younger under the level beauty of her gaze; care fell from him like a mask; the shadows that had haunted his eyes faded; youth awoke, transfiguring him and all his eyes beheld.

Made prisoner by love, adoring her, fearing her, he knelt beside her, knowing already that she had surrendered, though fearful yet by word or gesture or a glance to claim what destiny was holding for him holding securely, inexorably, for him alone.

He spoke of her kindness in understanding him, and of his gratitude; of her generosity, of his wonder that she had ever noticed him on his way through the world.

“I cannot believe that we have never before spoken to each other,” he said; “that I do not even know your name. Surely there was once a corner in the land of childhood where we sat together

when the world was younger.”

She said, dreamily: “Have you forgotten?”

“Forgotten?”

“That sunny corner in the land of childhood.”

“Had you been there, I should not have forgotten,” he replied, troubled.

“Look at me,” she said. Her lovely eyes met his; under the penetrating sweetness of her gaze his heart quickened and grew restless and his uneasy soul stirred, awaking memories.

“There was a child,” she said, “years ago; a child at school. You sometimes looked at her, you never spoke. Do you remember?”

He rose to his feet, staring down at her.

“Do you remember?” she asked again.

“Rosamund! Do you mean Rosamund? How should you know that?” he faltered.

The struggle for memory focused all his groping senses; his eyes seemed to look her through and through.

“How can you know?” he repeated unsteadily. “You are not Rosamund. . . . Are you? . . . She is dead. I heard that she was dead. . . . *Are you Rosamund?*”

“Do you not know?”

“Yes; you are not Rosamund.... What do you know of her?”

“I think she loved you.”

“Is she dead?”

The girl looked up at him, smiling, following with delicate perception the sequence of his thoughts; and already his thoughts were far from the child Rosamund, a sweetheart of a day long since immortal; already he had forgotten his question, though the question was of life or death.

Sadness and unrest and the passing of souls concerned not him; she knew that all his thoughts were centered on her; that he was already living over once more the last three years, with all their mystery and charm, savoring their fragrance anew in the exquisite enchantment of her presence.

Through the autumn silence the pines began to sway in a wind unfelt below. She raised her eyes and saw their green crests shimmering and swimming in a cool current; a thrilling sound stole out, and with it floated the pine perfume, exhaling in the sunshine. He heard the dreamy harmony above, looked up; then, troubled, somber, moved by he knew not what, he knelt once more in the shadow beside her—close beside her.

She did not stir. Their destiny was close upon them. It came in the guise of love.

He bent nearer. “I love you,” he said. “I loved you from the first. And shall forever. You knew it long ago.”

She did not move.

“You knew I loved you?”

“Yes, I knew it.”

The emotion in her voice, in every delicate contour of her face, pleaded for mercy. He gave her none, and she bent her head in silence, clasped hands tightening.

And when at last he had had his say, the burning words still rang in her ears through the silence. A curious faintness stole upon her, coming stealthily like a hateful thing. She strove to put it from her, to listen, to remember and understand the words he had spoken, but the dull confusion grew with the sound of the pines.

“Will you love me? Will you try to love me?”

“I love you,” she said; “I have loved you so many, many years; I—I am Rosamund—”

She bowed her head and covered her face with both hands.

“Rosamund! Rosamund!” he breathed, enraptured.

She dropped her hands with a little cry; the frightened sweetness of her eyes held back his outstretched arms. “Do not touch me,” she whispered; “you will not touch me, will you?—not yet—not now. Wait till I understand!” She pressed her hands to her eyes, then again let them fall, staring straight at him. “I loved you so!” she whispered. “Why did you wait?”

“Rosamund! Rosamund!” he cried sorrowfully, “what are you saying? I do not understand; I can understand nothing save that I worship you. May I not touch you?—touch your hand, Rosamund? I love you so.”

“And I love you. I beg you not to touch me—nor yet. There is something—some reason why—”

“Tell me, sweetheart.”

“Do you not know?”

“By Heaven, I do not!” he said, troubled and amazed.

She cast one desperate, unhappy glance at him, then rose to her full height, gazing out over the hazy valleys to where the mountains began, piled up like dim sun-tipped clouds in the north.

The hill wind stirred her hair and fluttered the white ribbons at waist and shoulder. The golden-rod swayed in the sunshine. Below, amid yellow treetops, the roofs and chimneys of the village glimmered.

“Dear, do you not understand?” she said. “How can I make you understand that I love you—too late?”

“Give yourself to me, Rosamund; let me touch you—let me take you—”

“Will you love me always?”

“In life, in death, which cannot part us. Will you marry me, Rosamund?”

She looked straight into his eyes. “Dear, do you not understand? Have you forgotten? I died three years ago to-day.”

The unearthly sweetness of her white face startled him. A terrible light broke in on him; his heart stood still.

In his dull brain words were sounding—his own words, written years ago: “When God takes the mind and leaves the body alive, there grows in it, sometimes, a beauty almost supernatural.”

He had seen it in his practice. A thrill of fright penetrated him, piercing every vein with its chill. He strove to speak; his lips seemed frozen; he stood there before her, a ghastly smile stamped on his face, and in his heart, terror.

“What do you mean, Rosamund?” he said at last.

“That I am dead, dear. Did you not understand that? I—I thought you knew it—when you first saw me at the cemetery, after all those years since childhood. . . . Did you not know it?” she asked wistfully. “I must wait for my bridal.”

Misery whitened his face as he raised his head and looked out across the sunlit world. Something had smeared and marred the fair earth; the sun grew gray as he stared.

Stupefied by the crash, the ruins of life around him, he stood mute, erect, facing the west.

She whispered, “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he said; “we will wed later. You have been ill, dear; but it is all right now—and will always be—God help us! Love is stronger than all—stronger than death.”

“I know it is stronger than death,” she said, looking out dreamily over the misty valley.

He followed her gaze, calmly, serenely reviewing all that he must renounce, the happiness of wedlock, children—all that a man desires.

Suddenly instinct stirred, awaking man’s only friend—hope. A lifetime for the battle!—for a

cure! Hopeless? He laughed in his excitement. Despair?—when the cure lay almost within his grasp! the work he had given his life to! A month more in the laboratory—two months—three—perhaps a year. What of it? It must surely come—how could he fail when the work of his life meant all in life for her?

The light of exaltation slowly faded from his face; ominous, foreboding thoughts crept in; fear laid a shaky hand on his head which fell heavily forward on his breast.

Science and man's cunning and the wisdom of the world!

"O God," he groaned, "for Him who cured by laying on His hands!"

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Now that he had learned her name, and that her father was alive, he stood mutely beside her, staring steadily at the chimneys and stately dormered roof almost hidden behind the crimson maple foliage across the valley—her home.

She had seated herself once more upon the moss, hands clasped upon one knee, looking out into the west with dreamy eyes.

"I shall not be long," he said gently. "Will you wait here for me? I will bring your father with me."

"I will wait for you. But you must come before the new moon. Will you? I must go when the new moon lies in the west."

"Go, dearest? Where?"

"I may not tell you," she sighed, "but you will know very soon—very soon now. And there will be no more sorrow, I think," she added timidly.

"There will be no more sorrow," he repeated quietly.

"For the former things are passing away," she said.

He broke a heavy spray of golden-rod and laid it across her knees; she held out a blossom to him—a blind gentain, blue as her eyes. He kissed it.

"Be with me when the new moon comes," she whispered. "It will be so sweet. I will teach you how divine is death, if you will come."

"You shall reach me the sweetness of life," he said tremulously.

"Yes—life. I did not know you called it by its truest name."

So he went away, trudging sturdily down the lane, gun glistening on his shoulder.

Where the lane joins the shadowy village street his dog skulked up to him, sniffing at his heels.

A mill whistle was sounding; through the red rays of the setting sun people were passing. Along the row of village shops loungers followed him with vacant eyes. He saw nothing, heard nothing, though a kindly voice called after him, and a young girl smiled at him on her short journey through the world.

The landlord of the Wildwood Inn sat sunning himself in the red evening glow.

"Well, doctor," he said, "you look tired to death. Eh? What's that you say?"

The young man repeated his question in a low voice. The landlord shook his head.

"No, sir. The big house on the hill is empty—been empty these three years. No, sir, there ain't no family there now. The old gentleman moved away three years ago."

"You are mistaken," said the doctor; "his daughter tells me he lives there."

"His—his daughter?" repeated the landlord. "Why, doctor, she's dead." He turned to his wife, who sat sewing by the open window: "Ain't it three years, Marthy?"

"Three years to-day," said the woman, biting off her thread. "She's buried in the family vault

over the hill. She was a right pretty little thing, too.”

“Turned nineteen,” mused the landlord, folding his newspaper reflectively.

* * *

The great gray house on the hill was closed, windows and doors boarded over, lawn, shrubbery, and hedges tangled with weeds. A few scarlet poppies glimmered above the brown grass. Save for these, and clumps of tall wild phlox, there were no blossoms among the weeds.

His dog, which had sneaked after him, cowered as he turned northward across the fields. Swifter and swifter he strode; and as he stumbled on, the long sunset clouds faded, the golden light in the west died out, leaving a calm, clear sky tinged with the faintest green.

Pines hid the west as he crept toward the hill where she awaited him. As he climbed through dusky purple grasses, higher, higher, he saw the new moon’s crescent tipping above the hills; and he crushed back the deathly fright that clutched at him and staggered on.

“Rosamund!”

The pines answered him.

“Rosamund!”

The pines replied, answering together. Then the wind died away, and there was no answer when he called.

East and south the darkening thickets, swaying, grew still. He saw the slim silver birches glimmering like the ghosts of young trees dead; he saw on the moss at his feet a broken stalk of golden-rod.

The new moon had drawn a veil across her face; sky and earth were very still.

While the moon lasted he lay, eyes open, listening, his face pillowed on the moss. It was long after sunrise when his dog came to him; later still when men came.

And at first they thought he was asleep.