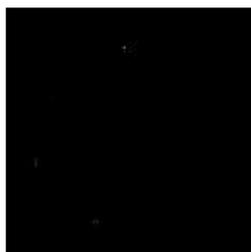


“We raced along a clear road, the Etang shimmering blue before us”

the
MOTOR MAID

By C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON



With Four Illustrations in Color
By F. M. Du MOND and F. LOWENHEIM

TO THE
THREE GERTRUDES

ILLUSTRATIONS

"We raced along a clear road, the Etang shimmering blue before us"

"While I wrestled ... with a bodice as snug as the head of a drum, the lord of all it contained appeared in the doorway"

"It took half an hour to dig the car out, and push her up from the hollow where the snow lay thickest"

"Jack's hand, inside Mr. Stokes's beautiful, tall collar, shook Bertie back and forth till his teeth chattered like castanets"

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CHAPTER I

One hears of people whose hair turned white in a single night. Last night I thought mine was turning. I had a creepy feeling in the roots, which seemed to crawl all the way down inside each separate hair, wriggling as it went. I suppose you couldn't have nervous prostration of the hair? I worried dreadfully, it kept on so long; and my hair is so fair it would be almost a temptation for it, in an emergency, to take the one short step from gold to silver. I didn't dare switch on the light in the *wagon-lit* and peep at my pocket-book mirror (which reflects one's features in sections of a square inch, giving the survey of one's whole face quite a panorama effect) for fear I might wake up the Bull Dog.

I've spelt him with capitals, after mature deliberation, because it would be nothing less than *lèse majesté* to fob him off with little letters about the size of his two lower eye-tusks, or chin-molars, or whatever one ought to call them.

He was on the floor, you see, keeping guard over his mistress's shoes; and he might have been misguided enough to think I had designs on them—though what I could have used them for, unless I'd been going to Venice and wanting a private team of gondolas, I can't imagine.

I being in the upper berth, you might (if you hadn't seen[Pg 4] him) have fancied me safe; but already he had once padded half-way up the step-ladder, and sniffed at me speculatively, as if I were a piece of meat on the top shelf of a larder; and if half-way up, why not all the way up? *Il était capable du tout.*

I tried to distract my mind and focus it hard on other things, as Christian Scientists tell you to do when you have a pin sticking into your body for which *les convenances* forbid you to make an exhaustive search.

I lay on my back with my eyes shut, trying not to hear any of the sounds in the *wagon-lit* (and they were not confined to the snoring of His Majesty), thinking desperately. "I will concentrate all my

mentality," said I to myself, "on thoughts beginning with P, for instance. My Past. Paris. Pamela."

Just for a few minutes it was comparatively easy. "Dear Past!" I sighed, with a great sigh which for divers reasons I was sure couldn't be heard beyond my own berth. (And though I try always even to *think* in English, I find sometimes that the words group themselves in my head in the old patterns— according to French idioms.) "Dear Past, how thou wert kind and sweet! How it is brutalizing to turn my back upon thee and thy charms forever!"

"Oh, my goodness, I shall certainly die!" squeaked a voice in the berth underneath; and then there was a sound of wallowing.

She (my stable-companion, shall I call her?) had been giving vent to all sorts of strange noises at intervals, for a long time, so that it would have been hopeless to try and drown my sorrows in sleep.

[Pg 5]Away went the Gentle Past with a bump, as if it had knocked against a snag in the current of my thoughts.

Paris or Pamela instead, then! or both together, since they seem inseparable, even when Pamela is at her most American, and tells me to "talk United States."

It was all natural to think of Pamela, because it was she who gave me the ticket for the *train de luxe*, and my berth in the *wagon-lit*. If it hadn't been for Pamela I should at this moment have been crawling slowly, cheaply, down Riviera-ward in a second-class train, sitting bolt upright in a second-class carriage with smudges on my nose, while perhaps some second-class child shed jammy crumbs on my frock, and its second-class baby sister howled.

"Oh, why did I leave my peaceful home?" wailed the lady in the lower berth.

Heaven alone (unless it were the dog) knew why she had, and knew how heartily I wished she hadn't. A good thing Cerberus was on guard, or I might have dropped a pillow accidentally on her head!

Just then I wasn't thanking Pamela for her generosity. The second-class baby's mamma would have given it a bottle to keep it still; but there was nothing I could give the fat old lady; and she had

already resorted to the bottle (something in the way of patent medicine) without any good result. Yet, *was* there nothing I could give her?

"Oh, I'm dying, I *know* I'm dying, and nobody cares! I shall choke to death!" she gurgled.

It was too much. I could stand it and the terrible atmosphere no longer. I suppose, if I had been an early Christian martyr, waiting for my turn to be devoured [Pg 6] might have so got on my nerves eventually that I would have thrown myself into the arena out of sheer spite at the lions, and then tried my best to disagree with them.

Anyway, Bull Dog or no Bull Dog, having made a light, I slid down from my berth—no thanks to the step-ladder—dangled a few wild seconds in the air, and then offering—yes, offering my stockinged feet to the Minotaur, I poked my head into the lower berth.

"What are you going to do?" gasped its occupant, *la grosse femme* whose fault it would be if my hair did change from the gold of a louis to the silver of a mere franc.

"You say you're stifling," I reminded her, politely but firmly, and my tone was like the lull before a storm.

"Yes, but— —" We were staring into each other's eyes, and—could I believe my sense of touch, or was it mercifully blunted? It seemed that the monster on the floor was gently licking my toes with a tongue like a huge slice of pink ham, instead of chewing them to the bone. But there are creatures which do that to their victims, I've heard, by way of making it easier to swallow them, later.

"You also said no one cared," I went on, courageously. "I care—for myself as well as for you. As for what I'm going to do—I'm going to do several things. First, open the window, and then—*then I'm going to undress you.*"

"You must be mad!" gasped the lady, who was English. Oh, but more English than any one else I ever saw in my life.

[Pg 7]"Not yet," said I, as I darted at the thick blind she had drawn down over the window, and let it fly up with a snap. I then opened the window itself, a few inches, and in floated a perfumed

breath of the soft April air for which our bereaved lungs had been longing. The breeze fluttered round my head like a benediction until I felt that the ebbing tide of gold had turned, and was flowing into my back hair again.

"No wonder you're dying, madam," I exclaimed, switching the heat-lever to "Froid." "So was I, but being merely an Upper Berth, with no rights, I was suffering in silence. I watched you turn the heat full on, and shut the window tight. I saw you go to bed in *all* your clothes, which looked terribly thick, and cover yourself up with both your blankets; but I said nothing, because you were a Lower Berth, and older than I am. I thought maybe you *wanted* a Turkish Bath. But since you don't—I'll try and save you from apoplexy, if it isn't too late."

I fumbled with brooches and buttons, with hooks and eyes. It was even worse than I'd supposed. The creature's conception of a travelling costume *en route* for the South of France consisted of a heavy tweed dress, two gray knitted stay-bodices, one pink Jaeger chemise, and a couple of red flannel petticoats. My investigations went no further; but, encouraged in my rescue work by spasmodic gestures on the part of the patient, and forbearance on the part of the dog, I removed several superfluous layers of wool. One blanket went to the floor, where it was accepted in the light of a gift by His Majesty, and the other was returned to its owner.

"Now are you better, madam?" I asked, panting with [Pg 8]long and well-earned breaths. She reposed on an elbow, gazing up at me as at a surgeon who has performed a painful but successful operation; and she was an object *pour faire rire*, the poor lady!

She wore an old-fashioned false front of hair, "sunning over with curls" (brown ones, of a brown never seen on land or sea), and a pair of spectacles, pushed up in an absent-minded moment, were entangled in its waves. Her face, which was large, with a knot of tiny features in the middle, shone red with heat and excitement. She would have had the look of an elderly child, if it hadn't been for her bright, shrewd little eyes, which twinkled observantly—and might sparkle with temper. Nobody who was not rich and important would dare to dress as badly as she did. Altogether she was a figure of fun. Indeed, I couldn't help feeling what quaint mantelpiece or-

naments she and her dog would make. Yet, for some reason, I didn't feel inclined to laugh, and I eyed her as solemnly as she eyed me. As for His Majesty, I began to see that I had misunderstood him. After all, he had never, from the first, regarded me as an eatable.

"Yes, I *am* better," replied His Majesty's mistress. "People have always told me it came on treacherously cold at night in France, so I prepared accordingly. I suppose I ought to thank you. In fact, I do thank you."

"I acted for myself as much as for you," I confessed. "It was so hot, and you were suffering out loud."

"I have never travelled at night before," the lady defended herself. "Indeed, I've made a point of travelling as little as possible, except by carriage. I don't [Pg 9]consider trains a means of conveyance for gentlefolk. They seem well enough for cattle who may not mind being herded together."

"Or for dogs," I suggested.

"Nothing is too good for Beau—my *only* Beau!" (at this I did not wonder). "But I wouldn't have moved without him. He's as necessary to me as my conscience. I was afraid the guard was going to make a fuss about him, which would have been awkward, as I can't speak a word of French, or any other silly language into which Latin has degenerated. But luckily English gold doesn't need to be translated."

"It loses in translation," said I, amused. I sat down on my bag as I spoke, and timorously invited Beau (never was name less appropriate) to be patted. He arose from the blanket and accepted my overtures with an expression which may have been intended for a smile, or a threat of the most appalling character. I have seen such legs as his on old-fashioned silver teapots; and the crook in his tail would have made it useful as a door-knocker.

"I don't think I ever saw him take so to a stranger," exclaimed his mistress, suddenly beaming.

"I wonder you risked him with me in such close quarters then," said I. "Wouldn't it have been safer if you'd had your maid in the compartment with you — —"

"My maid? My tyrant!" snorted the old lady. "She's the one creature on earth I am afraid of, and she knows it. When we got to Dover, and she saw the Channel wobbling about a little, she said it was a great nasty wet thing, and she wouldn't go on it. When I [Pg 10]insisted, she showed symptoms of seasickness; and in consequence she is waiting for me in Dover till I finish the business that's taking me to Italy. I had no more experience than she, but I had *courage*. It's perhaps a question of class. Servants consider only themselves. You, too, I see, have courage. I was inclined to think poorly of you when you first came in, and to wish I'd been extravagant enough to take the two beds for myself, because I thought you were afraid of Beau. Yet now you're patting him."

"I *was* rather afraid at first," I admitted. "I never met an English bull dog socially before."

"They're more angels than dogs. Their one interest in life is love—for their friends; and they wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Larger game would be more in their way, I should think," said I. "But I'm glad he likes me. I like to be liked. It makes me feel more at home in life."

"H'm! That's a funny idea!" remarked the old lady. "At home in life! You've made yourself pretty well at home in this *wagon-lit*, anyhow, taking off all your clothes and putting on your nightgown. I should never have thought of that. It seems hardly decent. Suppose we should be killed."

"Most people do try to die in their nightgowns, when you come to think of it," said I.

"Well, you have a quaint way of putting things. There's something very original about you, my dear young woman. I thought you were mysterious at first, but I believe it's only the effect of originality."

"I don't know which I'd rather be," I said, "original [Pg 11]or mysterious, if I couldn't afford both. But I'm not a young woman."

"Goodness!" exclaimed the old lady, wrinkling up her eyes to stare at me. "I may be pretty blind, but it can't be make-up."