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THE LITTLE GOD FROM THE MACHINE.

By

Eugene Manlove Rhodes.

"And this," said Morris, in mock grandiloquence, "is my particular domain. Elsewhere we may be oppressed by chaste art and architecture, elegant simplicity, the quiet subdued taste everywhere apparent - the best dad could hire. Here I brook no officious interference. I have given free rein to all the instincts of the newly rich."

He flourished his hand toward the summerhouse.

"Behold yon ivy-covered bower strictly speaking, it's Maderia vine and climbing roses, but ivy sounds better. Here everything is given over to lavish profusion and glittering ostentation: Within--billiards, cards, ping-pong, boxing-gloves, foils, books, rockers, guitars, banjos, window-seats, cosy-corners; without--golf, tennis, archery, green grass--strictly to be walked on--hammocks, all manner of insidious trees, sheltered walks, shady nooks, babbling--"

"Fools?" suggested Jack.

"- brooks--babbling brooks. Don't throw me out of my stride. Do you want to do all the talking? In this sylvan retreat, far from the madding crowd at Brooklyn Bridge, we may hold high commune with Nature--assisted and expurgated by an invisible corps of landscape-gardeners - forgetting the

Colonial Dames, Pilgrim Fathers, Soap and Steel, the Cavaliers, and Daughters of the Revolution, Standard Oil and Elevated, or whatever your particular cross may be. We may smoke, sing, dance, read; play blackman or pussy-wants-a-corner; sleep if you want to; do just exactly as we jolly well please. You will observe that we are hidden from the house by the bosky dell - don't know exactly what a 'dell' is, but let it go at that. Servants intruding on these precincts are punished by death and forfeiture of tips."

"But-" began Jack.

"I've thought of that, said Morris, forstalling objection."All the chaperones are of the Dolly Mickleham variety, and I've invited enough carters to keep one on duty continually. Dew will be provided for Kneipp curists; robins from four to six; bobolinks at intervals, as desired; swallows dart to and fro in the sunshine, and beer in the refrigerator. Automobiles and launches when you're tired of resting."

"There is no moon, grumbled Jack. "There ought to be a moon."

"Forget it!" You never think of anything but girls," said Morris, sulkily. "I suppose I'll have to order a moon. Anyway, I wanted to see you a little myself and talk over old times." He prodded the turf with his stick. "I say, Jack, do you remember the Arizona moons? That was something like."

"We used to ride to Verde of nights," said Jack, brightening, "singing all the way, horses prancing, long, black shadows dancing on ahead of us, the night-wind in our faces,

fresh and cool. Good old desert looking just as it did the day Ulysses lit out for Troy town. That was living! Funny no Habanas ever taste as good as black pipes of sheep-herder's delight, or brown paper cigarets."

"'Member how we used to play croquet with those nice, flaxy haired Danish girls at the Memphis mine?" queried Morris, dreamily, eyeing a carefully trimmed and balanced tree unjustifiable interest. "Ground so steep and sandy we couldn't play but one way; had to pick up the balls and go back when we got to the half-way stake. Those were the days!"

"Boys used to drop in to the tunnel. Saturday nights, sometimes," continued Jack, with enthusiasm. "Then we'd have a time: roast venison, hot from the Dutch oven; chili and beans, bully sour dough bread, coffee and the little tin cow. Sherry's can never put up a spread to equal that. Couple of candles stuck in the wall; seven-up on a saddle-blanket. And here we are, making pleasure the whole business of life, and bored to extinction."

"Pretty, guest you are!" said Morris

"Pretty host, you are!" rejoined Jack, savagely. "How do you expect me to amuse myself with your gilt gingerbread gimcracks now, Sam Morris?"

Sam looked apprehensively behind, to left and right. "Let's run away!" he whispered under a cautious hand.

Jack shook his head sorrowfully. "No good - not unless we could go flat-broke, really. It'd only be a dreary make-believe like this. Tell me, does Amy --"

"Ask her yourself," returned Sam, with asperity. "How do you expect me to know anything about a woman? She seems satisfied and happy, so I suppose she's not. Chuck it, will you? Come along, I've got something to show you. Its a phonograph - a daisy - extra size. Shut up, will you! We're going to make records, not listen to 'em."

He led the way into the summerhouse.

"Here she is. I keep it behind this curtain. Get 'em to singing and we'll slip the curtain a little and get a record. You see, there's no furniture to break the sound-waves. The machine's almost noiseless, and it's dark in this corner, so they wont catch on. We'll tell 'em it's to be a music-room later and we want to try its acoustic qualities. Coax 'em to sing, and then I'll slip in from the next room and start her up unbeknownst - or you can just throw this lever over and slip back. Let her run down. It wont do any harm. When the blanks get just so full it doesn't take the record any longer."

"But why all this gum-shoeing and stealthy cunning ? " inquired Jack. "I don't see the point. Why not fetch 'em in and have them sing into the receiver, without all this piffle ?"

Sam explained.

"If they knew we were taking a record, they'd be self-conscious and spoil it all. Just like posing for a photograph, exactly. we want to snap-shot 'em."

"Don't the records have to be touched up ?" said Jack.

interested. "Seems to me they had to have gold records made.

"Oh, that's the master-record. That's for business - so they can reproduce thousands of records and have 'em all just alike. we're doing this for fun. Here's the way it works. This recording point - it's a sapphire - "

"Martha! Amy! Sadie!" cried a gay, young voice at the door. "come up here a minute!"

"It's Agnes," said Sam, straightening up. "Let's join 'em. I don't want 'em to know about this."

"They probably wont want us," objected Jack. "That sounded mysterious and confidential. Why, they're coming here."

He would have stepped out in front of the curtain, but Sam plucked him back by the sleeve.

"S-sh! Hear that!"

"Jack Hollister is the subject of my song," said Agnes, ushering the girls into the room. "He is entirely too indiscriminate in his love-making, too miscellaneous, promiscuous what is the word ? Too impartial-comprehensive- "

"All embracing ?" suggested Sadie.

"Too desultory !" announced Agnes, triumphantly. "He always makes love to me in a vague, elusive, meaningless, butterfly fashion - "

"Me too," volunteered Martha.

"Sadie has already given her testimony - by implication," said Agnes severely, "though his methods seem not to have been so intangible in this case. Amy ?"

Amy colored painfully. "He - used to -" she faltered, guiltily.

"Now we are all together," pursued Agnes, "and it is due to ourselves and to our absent sisters to make him a Terrible Example. Let's each of us lead him on, extort some semblance of a declaration from him, and -"

"All accept him! Heavenly!" said Martha, ecstatically. "Agnes, you're a genius. "

"I've always said so," Agnes said modestly.

"What a dog's life we'll lead him. He'll be scared out Of his poor wits!" This was Sadie's contribution.

Jack nudged his host's ribs viciously.

"You're eavesdropping!" he hissed, in a horrified whisper.

I'd scorn such an act! said Sam sibilantly, virtuously indignant.

He adjusted the lever of the phonograph, opened the door softly, and they fled, choking.

"Golly !" ejaculated Hollister, sinking to the grass, when they were safely out of sight beyond a mass of shrubbery.

"Well, rather!" said Sam heartlessly, and gave way to hilarity. "'Oh Shun that lovely snare !' No - don't. There's no escape. Summon your energies for the ordeal. For the credit of our defenseless sex you must make this conspiracy recoil on the heads of these designing creatures who would prey upon your innocence. How rare a sport it is to see an engineer hoist with his own thing-gum-a-bob. Rise up, get you an adjustable engagement-ring, and 'quit you like a man.'"

"Oh, shut up! " snapped Jack irritably. "It's all very well for you to talk. You don't have to be -"

"Think of the awful spectacle you would have been, save

for the manifest favor of high heaven." exhorted Sam, bombastically. "To arms !"

"Oh woman, woman !" sighed Jack, reproachfully,
 'Oh woman, in our hours of ease,
 Uncertain, coy, and hard to please;
 But seen too oft, familiar with thy face,
 We first endure, then pity, then embrace !"

Look here, Sam, do you have to do any tinkering with that infernal machine to get it ready for the holocaust ?"

"The record? I'll fix it all right as soon as the girls leave," said Sam gleefully. "D'ye want to hear it?"

"Not any," responded Jack gloomily. "I've got the general idea, all right. You get it all ready so I can spring it on 'em when it will hurt most."

The prospect cheered him mightily. Nursing his knee, he regarded his toe from various angles with a meditative eye, and declaimed impressively, with deliberate and thoughtful approval:

"'Said the Shah of Teheran,
 "Now, tell me, if you can,
 Why a man his life encumbers
 With wives in plural numbers
 When it takes but one, small wife
 To make a man's whole life
 A source of endless strife ?"
 Then he swore - the worthy man.'"

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In the summerhouse the four girls, heads close together, were deep in consultation.

"He'll be wary after he's been snapped up a couple of times," said Sadie. "I'll never be able to catch him after he's on his guard. I claim the first chance at him."

"Second." said Martha, promptly. "Don't let a chance escape you. Weep, if nothing else will do. I'm going to fall into his arms, myself. It wont be immodest - not for me. I intend to marry him after you girls get him properly educated."

"What do you think I'm doing this for - for fun ?" demanded Agnes, indignantly. "I'll marry him myself. if you please. I'm managing this. My turn comes first, Martha next, then Sadie, and Amy last - if he gets to her. It'll tax his strategy to prevent an explosion. You girls fall in with all his devices, unsuspectingly. And let each one of us have a clear field, unmolested by the others. I go in search of my Victim."

But Amy lingered behind on some pretext. As the others tripped down the steps she buried her face in her hands.

"I'm caught between the horns of a dilemma," she said, for she had the bad habit of thinking aloud. "If I back out, the girls will suspect me. I've tried to shut my eyes, but he's more worthless and idle every day. He was so brave and manly - once, And I - I can't help it - I do love him so!"

II

"Amy, Amy - let me in !"

As Amy opened the door, Agnes, limp and tear-stained, dragged herself in and dropped weakly into a chair.

"Amy - what shall I do ?" she demanded miserably. "I'm the most miserable girl on earth. He - Oh Amy, he means it! He - he loves me! What shall I do, what shall I do ? I

thought he was only fl - flirting !"

"Did he - did you accept him ?"

Amy was slightly pale, but Agnes attributed this to the disastrous consequences of their practical joke.

"I - I had to," she sobbed. "I led him on -- I fairly flung myself at his head."

"And he caught you ? Well, you'll just have to marry him now," said Amy, bravely by way of condolence.

"I can't! I wont. I'm going to m-marry J-Jim," moaned Agnes. "That is, if he ever forgives m-me when he hears of this. Oh, let me go to my room. Get Sadie or Martha to tell Jack - You tell him. I'll never dare look him in the face again. I'm going to lock myself up."

She departed, weeping.

Amy went dully on her way. So, she had lost him. It was Agnes that he loved.

Vainly she searched for her fellow conspirators: inquired at links, tennis-court, and house. Nor was Hollister to be seen. At last she waylaid Sam.

"Martha? Let me see. Why, Martha and Jack went upstream in a canoe a couple of hours ago."

And he winked prodigiously at his sister's retreating form as she turned riverwards.

She found Martha sitting alone on a bench near the boathouse, in an attitude of frozen grief. On Amy's approach Martha rolled her eyes dismally upward, otherwise preserving her stony rigidity. Amy inferred that she had heard of the catastrophe.

There was a moment of dignified silence.

"Well," said Amy, "don't sit there like a petrified siph. What are you going to do?"

"You behold before you," said Martha firmly, "the most appalling disaster of modern times."

"Agnes will have to do the explaining herself," said Amy, misunderstanding. "She feels it terribly."

"She feels!" said Martha, in icy calm, "What are her feelings to mine? She isn't engaged to a man she doesn't care two straws about! She hasn't got the responsibility for ruining a man's whole life. Explain? Explain to the man who loves me devotedly that I deliberately broke his heart for amusement! I'll marry him first."

"Why - what!" stammered Amy. "Did Jack - does he?"

"I thought he had told you," said Martha dejectedly. "He was so pathetically happy, poor fellow; he said he was going to tell you and have it announced at once. You could have knocked me down with a feather. Amy, he is dreadfully in earnest. He was so happy the tears were actually rolling down his cheeks when he went away to hunt you up. Don't stare at me like that! How do you suppose I feel?"

"I know exactly how you are going to feel," predicted Amy with calm accuracy. "Martha French, I just left Agnes crying her eyes out because Jack Hollister loves her. He has had his life ruined twice today by heartless deception. That's what I call unlucky."

Martha stood up, deliberately snapped her eye-glasses

in two, flung one piece to right and one to left.

"The wretch!" Her face was a crimson fire. "How dared he ?"

"Did you fall into his arms ? queried Amy, with cruel shrewdness. Women are unkind at times.

"He's - he's probably laying his young affections at Sadie's feet by now," gasped Martha. "She'll be around bewailing her fate presently."

"Maybe we'll be in time - " Amy began.

But Martha cut her short.

"Let her suffer - as I did. It's good for self-conceit."

"Let's go and tell Agnes, then."

"Let her bawl !" said Martha heartlessly. "She got us into this."

Then she broke down and went off into uncontrollable laughter.

"We might as well tell her the glad tidings," she said, relenting.

"We'll cheer her up," said Amy with malicious intent.

#

"You Poor, dear girl !" said Martha, as Agnes sobbed out her grief and remorse on the bosom of that accomplished hypocrite. "I know exactly how you feel !" (Which was true, but misleading.) "Who ever could have foreseen such a thing as this ! There - there, now ! We'll see you through." She stroked the coils of lustrous bronze gently and gloated over

the ignominious spectacle. "He'll get over it. 'Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not one of them for love.'" she said consolingly.

Amy interfered, to spare Agnes further humiliation.

"If it will make you feel any better," she said dryly, "I might as well tell you that the victim of your wiles is engaged to Martha, too. He loves her with all the tender devotion of an honest heart. Martha told me so. She was looking over the comparative advantages of cord and chloroform when I found her. He's engaged to Sadie by now."

"What !" shrieked Agnes. She sprang up with flashing eyes. "The abandoned ruffian !"

"The double-eyed villian," echoed Martha, in sepulchral tones.

"The black-hearted traitor !" chanted Amy, serenely. "The clever scoundrel - to pay us off in our own coin - the monster ! I'm sure your sorrow and remorse do you great credit." She assumed a mushy-mouthed, stagey accent, and spread her arms in an attitude, head thrown back. "Think of his bright young life, untimely blighted, his happiness cut short ! There - bathe your eyes, remove the traces of your generous emotion, and we'll go and find the young person Sadie."

But as they rose to go, the young person Sadie burst into the room precipitately.

"I've got to go home by the next train," she announced in breathless agitation. "I'm going to get a wire - father

injured in an automobile - small-pox - lost at sea - anything."

She dabbed furtively at her eyes with a damp and wadded handkerchief.

"What is the matter ?" said the three in startled chorus. Sadie sank into a chair.

"Matter !" she repeated in a solemn whisper. "Matter ! Girls, I'm engaged - to Jack Hollister."

"Oh you dear thing !" gurgled Martha, with a Judas-Kiss, "I'm so glad !"

"We thought all along you liked him," explained Agnes, comfortingly, curling up at Sadie's feet and squeezing her hand with a seraphic smile. "And so we - Oh you lucky girl !"

"We were sure he was fond of you," said Amy sweetly, standing behind her. "But you've treated him so badly. we knew if you only gave him a chance - Isn't it lovely ?" she cooed. She slid her hand round under Sophie's chin and tilted her head back." We all congratulate you, darling !"

"Yes, indeed;" said Martha, beaming. "Indeed we do !"

"It's an ideal match - you were made for each other," purred Agnes, patting the captive hand.

"Oh, will you never understand ?" protested Sadie, squirming loose and facing her tormentors. "I can't marry him. I don't care for him at all. I never dreamed he cared. Oh, was there ever a girl so wretched as I ?"

Blank silence.

"We were so sure," said Amy with a quivering lip.

"We're so sorry. I'm sure we meant it for the best,"

said Martha soothingly.

"You'll have to keep up the engagement a while," commented Agnes, judicially. "You can carry on with some one else. And we'll all poison his mind against you. Then you can quarrel and break it off."

"I'll - I'll run away," sobbed Sadie. "No, I'll not. I'll go to him right now and tell him I've been a bad, wicked girl. I'll go down on my knees to him and beg him to forgive me. Why - are you all mad?"

For the three girls had fallen to the floor, twined in mutual embrace, howling in frantic and unseemly mirth. Painfully, word by word, they made the situation clear.

Sadie took it with easy Pllilosophy.

"Better fool than knave, she observed, sententiously. "Besides, it us not so lonely." And she hummed cheerfully:

'All nautical pride,
We laid aside,
And ran the ship ashore.' " [handwritten correction to "vessel"]

#

At twilight, Amy, sltting alone and disconsolate in the summerhouse with a forlorn chin in her palm, heard a cheerful voice without;

'Starlight, star bright,
First star I've seen tonight.
Wish I may, wish I might
Get the wish I wish tonight !'"

Entered then Mr. Jack Hollister.

"Hello ! Amy - that you ? come and wish. There's just one star you can see from this window."

Amy obeyed the summons, but at the window she drew back

rebelliously.

"Oh, what's the use?" she queried, wearily. "There's nothing new and nothing true, and it doesn't signify."

"I wish we were back on the Mangas - Just you and I and old Sam," ventured Jack hopefully. "You wish so , too, just this once - and see what 'll happen."

Amy felt her face flush hotly. How ignoble, how contemptible of him, to drag up the memory of those old days - now.

"Yes," she scoffed, bitterly. "You'd look well in Arizona, wouldn't you ? What a tenderfoot you'd be !" She laughed disagreeably.

"I used to give a fair imitation of a man," said Jack gloomily. "Who was it that brought back. your saddle-horse from the Trans-Colorado country when he was stolen, I'd like to know ? Any one who can go through No Man's Land and back with a whole skin is no tenderfoot, I can tell you."

"I'd like to see you do it. now," jeered. Amy. "You'd need a valet, a barber, a tailor, a chauffeur, a doctor, and a cavalry escort."

Both had forgotten their parts for the moment, under the potent sorcery of awakened memories.

"Who dragged himself from White Rock to Jackson's with a broken leg ?" demanded Jack, in a white heat of anger.

"Oh, you were a man once - nobody's denying that," returned Amy, bitterly. "More shame to you. What a pity a little gold had power to change your whole nature."

"Copper," corrected Jack, mildly, recollecting himself.
"Copper oxide and silicates."

Amy ignored the flippancy.

"Of all the aimless, useless, butterfly lah-de-dahs !" She brought out the words with vicious emphasis. "What does the future mean to you ? Dressing, eating, calls, dances, flirting -"

The words recalled her to the present, and she took up her role.

"Utterly without principle, lost to shame! Look at your day's work ! Oh you may well start !" Jack averted his face. "Here are three of the sweetest girls I know, heart-broken, humiliated, crushed with shame and despair by your cowardly, infamous duplicity."

Hollister's shoulders heaved with emotion before this savage onslaught. He passed a hand over his brow. She took up her tirade victoriously.

"No wonder you dare not look me in the face. You didn't think your treachery would be discovered. Doubtless you have grown overconfident with your impunity in the past. But you haven't brains enough to be a scoundrel. If this were known, your name would become a hissing and a byword !"

"Amy," he implored.

"Don't 'Amy' me ! Don't dare speak to me ! There will be no exposure, for the sake of those poor girls. You are my guest, but if you have any shreds of conscience left, you will slink away and hide your infamy !"

"You'll be sorry for this," Jack warned her.

"You - you lady killer !" said Amy, tasting all the sweets of revenge. "A flirt !" she stormed. "A vain, heartless, male flirt ! Of all the cruel, contemptible-"

"Amy !"

" - despicable -"

"Amy !"

" - base -"

"Oh, very well !" said Jack, resignedly. "I meant to let you down easy, but you will have it."

He turned on the light, drew back the curtain, and touched the phonograph lever. Amy followed him. He turned to confront her.

"Whir-r-r-r-r" purred the phonograph. Then it giggled. "E-a-a-a-s-i-o- times. I'll c-c-catch him e-e-'s on his guard. I claim the first chance at him," it buzzed, in high, metallic squeaky tones. "Second !"

"-objects under the sun," continued Amy, unheeding, "a liar and a deceiver of the worst -"

The Phonograph wheezed on unintelligibly. Then it had a lucid interval.

"I'm going to fall into his arms, myself!" it proclaimed calmly—and the voice was the voice of Martha. "It wont be immodest - not for me. I intend to marry him after you girls get him properly educated--"

Amy caught the thin, brazen tones, took a step forward, her eyes opening in startled comprehension. A wave of color swept from neck to brow. Through the window came a breath

of the perfumed night, a bird's inquiring call, rustle of crisp leaves in undertone.

"Eavesdropper !" she hissed, crouching forward, her hands clenched.

"Conspirator !" retorted Jack, sternly.

The mellow voice of a distant singer floated to them brokenly,

"'Could ye come back to me, Douglas, Douglas,
In the old likeness that I knew -'"

" -o-o-o-s-s for fun ?" questioned the phonograph, fatuously. "I'll marry him myself, if you please. I'm managing
_"

"Stop it !" wailed Amy, and flung herself desperately at the machine.

Jack caught her.

"Be still - I haven't heard this yet," he said. "Hush !"

The girl struggled desperately. The plaintive old song tremoled through the whispering dusk.

'"O to call back the days that are not !'"

"-next, then Sadie, and Amy last-" observed the machine casually.

"Let me go !" begged Amy, scuffling fiercely. "Jack, stop it - Oh stop it! Let me go! Jack, dear Jack ! Please, Oh, don't listen ! I hate you - Oh, if you claim to be a man! I despise you !"

"And I love you, I always have - I always will," said Jack, holding her fast, while the machine droned unheeded.

Jack went on: "There is no one --"

" - in search of my victim !" announced the phonograph in gay nonchalance.

"- else - there has never been. I have loved you -"

"A-e-a-a" said the steel monster steadily, "horns of a dilemma. If I back out now, the girls -" The tones were low and wobbly, but unmistakably Amy's.

" - all my life. Amy, will you marry me ?" said Jack.

The machine ground on relentlessly.

"Yes ! O yes ! shrieked Amy, "anything !"

Jack threw the lever "Amy ! Sweetheart !"

"Jack !"

The song swelled in tender cadence, borne by a wandering wind.

"'Now all men else are to me like Shadows,
Douglas ! Douglas ! Tender and true !"

"Don't kiss me! Don't dare!" the girl panted. "Jack - upon your honor - how much did you hear ?"

"Upon my honor - only a little. Sam and I were in here and heard the outlines of your, little plan. Sam turned the machine an as we sneaked out. Honor bright ! I fully intended to come and put it through its paces, but - I've been busy !"

"I should think so," said Amy hysterically. "They were scared almost to death, Jack - Oh Jack, are you punishing me, too ?"

He drew her closer. What she saw in his eyes answered her. Their lips met.

The rich, quivering voice throbbed to them through the pulsing night.

"'Stretch out your hands to me,
Douglas, Douglas !
Drop forgiveness from heaven like dew.'"

"Jack, wont you break the record all to little tiny pieces ?" inquired a smothered little voice.

"It's smashed all to smithereens now," said Jack complacently. "Done smashed, if you will allow me to employ the useful and expressive Texas aorist. Solomon in all his glory, or Brigham Young at his palmiest, may have held over me in some respects; but when it comes to engagements, lap-and-tap, gun-crack, Play-or-pay -"

"Meany !" She wrinkled her nose scornfully. Then she turned the other cheek. "John Hollister, are you going to destroy that tattle-tale record for me ?" Her voice had that strange muffled sound again.

"Oh, that ? certainly.

'Its tongue shall be slit,
And every dog in the town
Shall have a little bit,'"

he quoted liltingly.

She reached out groping fingers, and started the phonograph.

"Whir-r-r-r! I've tried to shut my eyes," said the intelligent machine, uncertainly, "but he's more worthless and idle every day."

Amy's arms tightened their clasp.

"He was so brave and manly-once. And I - I can't help it. I do love him so!" [last line handwritten and followed by (The End)]