



MUCH ADO
ABOUT PETER

JEAN WEBSTER

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I. GERVIE ZAME, GERVIE DOOR

Peter and Billy, the two upper grooms at Willowbrook, were polishing the sides of the tall mail phaeton with chamois-skin rubbers and whistling, each a different tune, as they worked. So intent were they upon this musical controversy that they were not aware of Mrs. Carter's approach until her shadow darkened the carriage-house doorway. She gathered up her skirts in both hands and gingerly stepped inside. Peter had been swashing water about with a liberal hand, and the carriage-house floor was damp.

"Where is Joe?" she inquired.

"He's out in the runway, ma'am, jumpin' Blue Gipsy. Shall I call him, ma'am?" Billy answered, as the question appeared to be addressed to him.

"No matter," said Mrs. Carter, "one of you will do as well."

She advanced into the room, walking as nearly as possible on her heels. It was something of a feat; Mrs. Carter was not so light as she had been twenty-five years before. Peter followed her movements with a shade of speculative wonder in his eye; should she slip it would be an undignified exhibition. There was even a shade of hope beneath his respectful gaze.

"Why do you use so much water, Peter? Is it necessary to get the floor so wet?"

"It runs off, ma'am."

"It is very unpleasant to walk in."

Peter winked at Billy with his off eye, and stood at attention until she should have finished her examination of the newly washed phaeton.

"The cushions are dripping wet," she observed.

"I washed 'em on purpose, ma'am. They was spattered thick with mud."

"There is danger of spoiling the leather if you put on too much water."

She turned to an inspection of the rest of the room, sniffing dubiously in the corner where the harness greasing was carried on, and lifting her skirts a trifle higher.

"It's disgustingly dirty," she commented, "but I suppose you can't help it."

"Axle grease *is* sort o' black," Peter agreed graciously.

"Well," she resumed, returning to her errand with an appearance of reluctance, "I want you, William—or Peter either, it doesn't matter which—to drive into the village this evening to meet the eight-fifteen train from the city. I am expecting a new maid. Take Trixy and the buckboard and bring her trunk out with you. Eight-fifteen, remember," she added as she turned toward the doorway. "Be sure to be on time, for she won't know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am," said Peter and Billy in chorus.

They watched in silence her gradual retreat to the house. She stopped once or twice to examine critically a clipped shrub or a freshly spaded flower-bed, but she finally passed out of hearing. Billy uttered an eloquent grunt; while Peter hitched up his trousers in both hands and commenced a tour of the room on his heels.

"William," he squeaked in a high falsetto, "you've spilt a great deal more water than is necessary on this here floor. You'd ought to be more careful; it will warp the boards."

"Yes, ma'am," said Billy with a grin.

"An' goodness me! What is this horrid stuff in this box?" He sniffed daintily at the harness grease. "How many times must I tell you, William, that I don't want anything like that on *my* harnesses? I want them washed in nice, clean soap an' water, with a little dash of *ee-oo-dee cologne*."

Billy applauded with appreciation.

"An' now, Peter," Peter resumed, addressing an imaginary self, "I am expectin' a new maid to-night—a pretty little French maid just like Annette. I am sure that she will like you better than any o' the other men, so I wish you to meet her at the eight-fifteen train. Be sure to be on time, for the poor little thing won't know what to do."

"No, you don't," interrupted Billy. "She told me to meet her."

"She didn't either," said Peter, quickly reassuming his proper person. "She said either of us, which ever was most convenient, an' I've got to go into town anyway on an errand for Miss Ethel."

"She said me," maintained Billy, "an' I'm goin' to."

"Aw, are you?" jeered Peter. "You'll walk, then. I'm takin' Trixy with me."

"Hey, Joe," called Billy, as the coachman's steps were heard approaching down the length of the stable, "Mrs. Carter come out here an' said I was to meet a new maid to-night, an' Pete says he's goin' to. Just come an' tell him to mind 'is own business."

Joe appeared in the doorway, with a cap cocked on the side of his head, and a short bull-dog pipe in his mouth. It was strictly against the rules to smoke in the stables, but Joe had been autocrat so long that he made his own rules. He could trust himself—but woe to the groom who so much as scratched a safety-match within his domain.

"A new maid is it?" he inquired, as a grin of comprehension leisurely spread itself across his good-natured rubicund face. "I s'pose you're thinking it's pretty near your turn, hey, Billy?"

"I don't care nothin' about new maids," said Billy, sulkily, "but Mrs. Carter said me."

"You're awful particular all of a sudden about obeying orders," said Joe. "I don't care which one of you fetches out the new maid," he added. "I s'pose if Pete wants to, he's got the first say."

The Carter stables were ruled by a hierarchy with Joe at the head, the order of precedence being based upon a union of seniority and merit. Joe had ruled for twelve years. He had held the position so long that he had insidiously come to believe in the divine right of coachmen. Nothing short of a revolution could have dislodged him against his will; in a year or so, however, he was planning to abdicate in order to start a livery stable of his own. The money was even now waiting in the bank. Peter, who had commenced as stable-boy ten years before, was heir-presumptive to the place, and the shadow of his future greatness was already upon him. Billy, who had served but a few meagre months at Willowbrook, did not realize that the highest honours are obtained only after a painful novitiate. He saw no reason why he should not be coachman another year just as much as Peter; in fact, he saw several reasons why he should be. He drove as well, he was better looking—he told himself—and he was infinitely larger. To Billy's simple understanding it was quantity, not quality, that makes the man. He resented Peter's assumption of superiority, and he intended, when opportunity should present itself, to take it out of Peter.

"I don't care about fetchin' out the new maid any more than Billy," Peter nonchalantly threw off after a prolonged pause, "only I've got to take a note to the Holidays for Miss Ethel, and I'd just as lief stop at the station; it won't be much out o' me way."

"All right," said Joe. "Suit yourself."

Peter smiled slightly as he fell to work again, humming under his breath a song that was peculiarly aggravating to Billy. "*Je vous aime, je vous adore,*" it ran. Peter trilled it, "*Gervie zame, gervie door,*" but it answered the purpose quite as well as if it had been pronounced with the best Parisian accent.

The last maid—the one who had left four days before—had been French, and during her three weeks' reign at

Willowbrook she had stirred to its foundations every unattached masculine heart on the premises. Even Simpkins, the elderly English butler, had unbent and smiled foolishly when she coquettishly chucked him under the chin in passing through the hall. Mary, the chambermaid, had been a witness to this tender passage, and poor Simpkins's dignity ever since had walked on shaky ground. But Annette's charms had conquered more than Simpkins. Tom, the gardener, had spent the entire three weeks of her stay in puttering about the shrubs that grew in the vicinity of the house; while the stablemen had frankly prostrated themselves—with the exception of Joe, who was married and not open to Gallic allurements. It was evident from the first, however, that Peter and Billy were the favoured ones. For two weeks the race between them had been even, and then Peter had slowly, but perceptibly, pulled ahead.

He had returned one morning from an errand to the house with a new song upon his lips. It was in the French language. He sang it through several times with insistent and tender emphasis. Billy maintained a proud silence as long as curiosity would permit; finally he inquired gruffly:

"What's that you're givin' us?"

"It's a song," said Peter, modestly. "Annette taught it to me," and he hummed it through again.

"What does it mean?"

Peter's rendering was free.

"It means," he said, "I don't love no one but you, me dear."

This episode was the beginning of strained relations between the two. There is no telling how far their differences would have gone, had the firebrand not been suddenly removed.

One morning Joe was kept waiting under the *porte-cochère* unusually long for Mrs. Carter to start on her daily progress to the village, but instead of Mrs. Carter, finally, his passenger was Annette—bound to the station with her

belongings piled about her. Joe had a wife of his own, and it was none of his affair what happened to Annette, but he had observed the signs of the weather among his underlings, and he was interested on their account to know the wherefore of the business. Annette, however—for a French woman—was undemonstrative. All that Joe gathered in return for his sympathetic questions (they were sympathetic; Joe was human even if he was married) was a series of indignant sniffs, and the assertion that she was going because she wanted to go. She wouldn't work any longer in a place like that; Mrs. Carter was an old cat, and Miss Ethel was a young one. She finished with some idiomatic French, the context of which Joe did not gather.

Billy received the news of the departure with unaffected delight, and Peter with philosophy. After all, Annette had only had three weeks in which to do her work, and three weeks was too short a space for even the most fetching of French maids to stamp a very deep impression upon Peter's roving fancy. Four days had passed and his wound was nearly healed. He was able to sit up and look about again by the time that Mrs. Carter ordered the meeting of the second maid. Ordinarily the grooms would not have been so eager to receive the assignment of an unallotted task, but the memory of Annette still rankled, and it was felt between them that the long drive from the station was a golden opportunity for gaining a solid start in the newcomer's affections.

The stablemen did not eat with the house servants; Joe's wife furnished their meals in the coachman's cottage. That evening Peter scrambled through his supper in evident haste. He had an important engagement, he explained, with a meaning glance toward Billy. He did take time between mouthfuls, however, to remark on the fact that it was going to be a beautiful moonlight night, just a "foin" time for a drive.

An hour later, Billy having somewhat sulkily hitched Trixy to the buckboard under Joe's direction, Peter swaggered in with pink and white freshly shaven face, smelling of bay-rum and the barber's, with shining top-hat and boots, and spotless white breeches, looking as immaculate a groom as could be found within a hundred miles of New York. He jauntily took his seat, waved his whip toward Billy and Joe, and touched up Trixy with a grin of farewell.

Later in the evening the men were lounging in a clump of laurels at one side of the carriage-house, where a hammock and several battered veranda chairs had drifted out from the house for the use of the stable hands. Simpkins, who occasionally unbent sufficiently to join them, was with the party to-night, and he heard the story of Peter's latest perfidy. Simpkins could sympathize with Billy; his own sensibilities had been sadly lacerated in the matter of Annette. Joe leaned back and smoked comfortably, lending his voice occasionally to the extent of a grunt. The grooms' differences were nothing to him, but they served their purpose as amusement.

Presently the roll of wheels sounded on the gravel, and they all strained forward with alert interest. The driveway leading to the back door swerved broadly past the laurels, and—as Peter had remarked—it was a bright moonlight night. The cart came into view, bowling fast, Peter as stiff as a ramrod staring straight ahead, while beside him sat a brawny Negro woman twice his size, with rolling black eyes and gleaming white teeth. An explosion sounded from the laurels, and Peter, who knew what it meant, cut Trixy viciously.

He dumped his passenger's box upon the back veranda with a thud, and drove on to the stables where he unhitched poor patient little Trixy in a most unsympathetic fashion. Billy strolled in while he was still engaged with her harness. Peter affected not to notice him. Billy commenced to hum, "*Je vous aime, je vous adore.*" He was no French

scholar; he had not had Peter's advantages, but the tune alone was sufficiently suggestive.

"Aw, dry up," said Peter.

"Pleasant moonlight night," said Billy.

Peter threw the harness on to the hook with a vicious turn that landed the most of it on the floor, and stumped upstairs to his room over the carriage-house.

For the next few days Peter's life was rendered a burden. Billy and Joe and Simpkins and Tom, even good-natured Nora in the kitchen, never met him without covert allusions to the affair. The gardener at Jasper Place, next door, called over the hedge one morning to inquire if they didn't have a new maid at their house. On the third day after the arrival the matter reached its logical conclusion.

"Hey, Pete," Billy called up to him in the loft where he was pitching down hay for the horses. "Come down here quick; there's some one wants to see you."

Peter clambered down wearing an expectant look, and was confronted by the three grinning faces of Billy, Tom, and David McKenna, the gardener from Jasper Place.

"It was Miss Johnsing," said Billy. "She was in a hurry an' said she couldn't wait, but she'd like to have you meet her on the back stoop. She's got a new song she wants to teach you."

Peter took off his coat and looked Billy over for a soft spot on which to begin. Billy took off his coat and accepted the challenge, while David, who was a true Scotchman in his love of war, delightedly suggested that they withdraw to a more secluded spot. The four trooped in silence to a clump of willow trees in the lower pasture, Peter grimly marching ahead.

Billy was a huge, loose-jointed fellow who looked as if he could have picked up little Peter and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. Peter was slight and wiry and quick. He had once intended to be a jockey, but in spite of an anxious avoidance of potatoes and other fattening food-

stuffs, he had steadily grown away from it. When he finally reached one hundred and sixty-six pounds he relinquished his ambition forever. Those one hundred and sixty-six pounds were so beautifully distributed, however, that the casual observer would never have guessed their presence, and many a weightier man had found to his sorrow that Peter did not belong to the class he looked.

The hostilities opened with Billy's good-natured remark: "I don't want to hurt you, Petey. I just want to teach you manners."

Ten minutes later Peter had taught him manners, and was striding across the fields to work off his surplus energy, while Billy, whose florid face had taken on a livelier tinge, was comforting a fast-swelling eye at the drinking trough.

It was the last that Peter heard of the maid, except for a mild lecture from Joe. "See here, Pete," he was greeted upon his return, "I'm given to understand that you've been fighting for your lady-love. I just want you to remember one thing, young man, and that is that I won't have no fighting about these premises in business hours. You've laid up Billy for the day, and you can go and do his work."

Three weeks rolled over the head of "Miss Johnsing," and then she, too, departed. It developed that a husband had returned from a vacation on "the island" and wished to settle down to family life again. A week passed at Willowbrook without a parlour-maid, and then one day, as Peter returned from the lower meadow where he had been trying to entice a reluctant colt into putting its head into the halter, he was hailed by Joe with:

"Say, Pete, Mrs. Carter sent out word that you're to go to the station to-night and fetch out a new maid."

"Aw, go on," said Peter.

"That's straight."

"If there's a new maid comin' Billy can get her. I ain't interested in maids."

"Them's orders," said Joe. "'Tell Peter,' she says, 'that he's to drive in with the buckboard and meet the eight-fifteen train from the city. I'm expectin' a new maid,' she says, but she neglected to mention what colour she was expectin' her to be."

Peter grunted by way of answer, and Joe chuckled audibly as he hitched up his trousers and rolled off toward his own house to tell his wife the joke. The subject was covertly alluded to at supper that night, with various speculations as to the colour, nationality, and possible size of the newcomer. Peter emphatically stated his intention of not going near the blame station. When the train hour approached, however, the stables were conspicuously empty, and there was nothing for him to do but swallow his assertion and meet the maid.

As he drove down the hill toward the station he saw that the eight-fifteen train was already in, but he noted the fact without emotion. He was not going to hurry himself for all the maids in creation; she could just wait until he got there. He drew up beside the platform and sat surveying the people with mild curiosity until such time as the maid chose to search him out. But his pulses suddenly quickened as he heard a clear voice, with an adorable suggestion of brogue behind it, inquire of the station-master:

"Will you tell me, sor, how I'll be gettin' to Mr. Jerome B. Carter's?"

"Here's one of the Carter rigs now," said the man.

The girl turned quickly and faced Peter, and all his confused senses told him that she was pretty—prettier than Annette—pretty beyond all precedent. Her eyes were blue, and her hair was black and her colour was the colour that comes from a childhood spent out of doors in County Cork.

He hastily scrambled out of his seat and touched his hat. "Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, are ye the new maid? Mrs. Carter sent me to fetch ye out. If ye'll gi' me yer check, ma'am, I'll get yer trunk."