



***DON
MARQUIS***

***THE REVOLT
OF THE OYSTER***

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The Revolt of the Oyster

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"Our remote ancestor was probably arboreal."—Eminent scientist.

From his hut in the tree-top Probably Arboreal looked lazily down a broad vista, still strewn with fallen timber as the result of a whirlwind that had once played havoc in that part of the forest, toward the sea. Beyond the beach of hard white sand the water lay blue and vast and scarcely ruffled by the light morning wind. All the world and his wife were out fishing this fine day. Probably Arboreal could see dozens of people from where he crouched, splashing in the water or moving about the beach; and even hear their cries borne faintly to him on the breeze. They fished, for the most part, with their hands; and when one caught a fish it was his custom to eat it where he caught it, standing in the sea.

In Probably Arboreal's circle, one often bathed and breakfasted simultaneously; if a shark or saurian were too quick for one, one sometimes was breakfasted upon as one bathed.

In the hut next to Probably Arboreal, his neighbour, Slightly Simian, was having an argument with Mrs. Slightly, as usual. And, as usual, it concerned the proper manner of bringing up the children. Probably listened with the bored distaste of a bachelor.

"I *will* slap his feet every time he picks things up with them!" screamed Slightly Simian's wife, an accredited shrew, in her shrill falsetto..

"It's *natural* for a child to use his feet that way," insisted the good-natured Slightly, "and I don't intend to have the boy punished for what's natural." Probably Arboreal grinned; he could fancy the expression on Old Sim's face as his friend made this characteristically plebeian plea.

"You can understand once for all, Slightly," said that gentleman's wife in a tone of finality, "that I intend to supervise the bringing-up of these children. Just because your people had neither birth nor breeding nor manners ——"

"Mrs. S.!" broke in Slightly, with a warning in his voice. "Don't you work around to anything caudal, now, Mrs. S.! Or there'll be trouble. You get me?"

On one occasion Mrs. Slightly had twitted her spouse with the fact that his grandfather had a tail five inches long; she had never done so again. Slightly Simian himself, in his moments of excitement, picked things up with his feet, but like many other men of humble origin who have become personages in their maturity, he did not relish having such faults commented upon.

"Poor old Sim," mused Probably Arboreal, as he slid down the tree and ambled toward the beach, to be out of range of the family quarrel. "She married him for his property, and now she's sore on him because there isn't more of it."

Nevertheless, in spite of the unpleasant effect of the quarrel, Probably found his mind dwelling upon matrimony that morning. A girl with bright red hair, into which she had tastefully braided a number of green parrot feathers, hit him coquettishly between the shoulder blades with a handful of wet sand and gravel as he went into the water. Ordinarily he

would either have taken no notice at all of her, or else would have broken her wrist in a slow, dignified, manly sort of way. But this morning he grabbed her tenderly by the hair and sentimentally ducked her. When she was nearly drowned he released her. She came out of the water squealing with rage like a wild-cat and bit him on the shoulder.

“Parrot Feathers,” he said to her, with an unwonted softness in his eyes, as he clutched her by the throat and squeezed, “beware how you trifle with a man's affections—some day I may take you seriously!”

He let the girl squirm loose, and she scrambled out upon the beach and threw shells and jagged pieces of flint at him, with an affectation of coyness. He chased her, caught her by the hair again, and scored the wet skin on her arms with a sharp stone, until she screamed with the pain, and as he did it he hummed an old love tune, for to-day there was an April gladness in his heart.

“Probably! Probably Arboreal!” He spun around to face the girl's father, Crooked Nose, who was contentedly munching a mullet.

“Probably,” said Crooked Nose, “you are flirting with my daughter!”

“Father!” breathed the girl, ashamed of her parent's tactlessness. “How can you say that!”

“I want to know,” said Crooked Nose, as sternly as a man can who is masticating mullet, “whether your intentions are serious and honourable.”

“Oh, father!” said Parrot Feathers again. And putting her hands in front of her face to hide her blushes she ran off. Nevertheless, she paused when a dozen feet away and

threw a piece of drift-wood at Probably Arboreal. It hit him on the shin, and as he rubbed the spot, watching her disappear into the forest, he murmured aloud, "Now, I wonder what she means by that!"

"Means," said Crooked Nose. "Don't be an ass, Probably! Don't pretend to *me* you don't know what the child means. You made her love you. You have exercised your arts of fascination on an innocent young girl, and now you have the nerve to wonder what she means. What'll you give me for her?"

"See here, Crooked Nose," said Probably, "don't bluster with me." His finer sensibilities were outraged. He did not intend to be *coerced* into matrimony by any father, even though he were pleased with that father's daughter. "I'm not buying any wives to-day, Crooked Nose."

"You have hurt her market value," said Crooked Nose, dropping his domineering air, and affecting a willingness to reason. "Those marks on her arms will not come off for weeks. And what man wants to marry a scarred-up woman unless he has made the scars himself?"

"Crooked Nose," said Probably Arboreal, angry at the whole world because what might have been a youthful romance had been given such a sordid turn by this disgusting father, "if you don't go away I will scar every daughter you've got in your part of the woods. Do you get me?"

"I wish you'd look them over," said Crooked Nose. "You might do worse than marry all of them."

"I'll marry none of them!" cried Probably, in a rage, and turned to go into the sea again.

A heavy boulder hurtled past his head. He whirled about and discovered Crooked Nose in the act of recovering his balance after having flung it. He caught the old man half way between the beach and the edge of the forest. The clan, including Crooked Nose's four daughters, gathered round in a ring to watch the fight.

It was not much of a combat. When it was over, and the girls took hold of what remained of their late parent to drag him into the woods, Probably Arboreal stepped up to Parrot Feathers and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Feathers," he said, "now that there can be no question of coercion, will you and your sisters marry me?"

She turned toward him with a sobered face. Grief had turned her from a girl into a woman.

"Probably," she said, "you are only making this offer out of generosity. It is not love that prompts it. I cannot accept. As for my sisters, they must speak for themselves."

"You are angry with me, Feathers?"

The girl turned sadly away. Probably watched the funeral cortège winding into the woods, and then went moodily back to the ocean. Now that she had refused him, he desired her above all things. But how to win her? He saw clearly that it could be no question of brute force. It had gone beyond that. If he used force with her, it must infallibly remind her of the unfortunate affair with her father. Some heroic action might attract her to him again. Probably resolved to be a hero at the very earliest opportunity.

In the meantime he would breakfast. Breakfast had already been long delayed; and it was as true then, far back in the dim dawn of time, as it is now, that he who does not

breakfast at some time during the day must go hungry to bed at night. Once more Probably Arboreal stepped into the ocean—stepped in without any premonition that he was to be a hero indeed; that he was chosen by Fate, by Destiny, by the Presiding Genius of this planet, by whatever force or intelligence you will, to champion the cause of all Mankind in a crucial struggle for human supremacy.

He waded into the water up to his waist, and bent forward with his arms beneath the surface, patiently waiting. It was thus that our remote ancestors fished. Fish ran larger in those days, as a rule. In the deeper waters they were monstrous. The smaller fish therefore sought the shallows where the big ones, greedy cannibals, could not follow them. A man seldom stood in the sea as Probably Arboreal was doing more than ten minutes without a fish brushing against him either accidentally or because the fish thought the man was something good to eat. As soon as a fish touched him, the man would grab for it. If he were clumsy and missed too many fish, he starved to death. Experts survived because they *were* expert; by a natural process of weeding out the awkward it had come about that men were marvellously adept. A bear who stands by the edge of a river watching for salmon at the time of the year when they run up stream to spawn, and scoops them from the water with a deft twitch of his paw, was not more quick or skillful than Probably Arboreal.

Suddenly he pitched forward, struggling; he gave a gurgling shout, and his head disappeared beneath the water.

When it came up again, he twisted toward the shore, with lashing arms and something like panic on his face, and shouted:

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” he cried. “Something has me by the foot!”

Twenty or thirty men and women who heard the cry stopped fishing and straightened up to look at him.

“Help! Help!” he shouted again. “It is pulling me out to sea!”

A knock-kneed old veteran, with long intelligent-looking mobile toes, broke from the surf and scurried to the safety of the beach, raising the cry:

“A god! A god! A water-god has caught Probably Arboreal!”

“More likely a devil!” cried Slightly Simian, who had followed Probably to the water.

And all his neighbours plunged to land and left Probably Arboreal to his fate, whatever his fate was to be. But since spectacles are always interesting, they sat down comfortably on the beach to see how long it would be before Probably Arboreal disappeared. Gods and devils, sharks and octopi, were forever grabbing one of their number and making off to deep water with him to devour him at their leisure. If the thing that dragged the man were seen, if it showed itself to be a shark or an octopus, a shark or an octopus it was; if it were unseen, it got the credit of being a god or a devil.

“Help me!” begged Probably Arboreal, who was now holding his own, although he was not able to pull himself into shallower water. “It is not a god or a devil. It doesn't feel like one. And it isn't a shark, because it hasn't any

teeth. It is an animal like a cleft stick, and my foot is in the cleft."

But they did not help him. Instead, Big Mouth, a seer and *vers libre* poet of the day, smitten suddenly with an idea, raised a chant, and presently all the others joined in. The chant went like this:

"Probably, he killed Crooked Nose,
He killed him with his fists.
And Crooked Nose, he sent his ghost to sea
To catch his slayer by the foot!
The ghost of Crooked Nose will drown his
slayer,
Drown, drown, drown his slayer,
The ghost of Crooked Nose will drown his
slayer,
Drown his slayer in the sea!"

"You are a liar, Big Mouth!" spluttered Probably Arboreal, hopping on one foot and thrashing the water with his arms. "It is not a ghost; it is an animal."

But the chant kept up, growing louder and louder:

"The ghost of Crooked Nose will drown his
slayer!
Drown, drown, drown his slayer,
Drown his slayer in the sea!"

Out of the woods came running more and more people at the noise of the chant. And as they caught what was going

on, they took up the burden of it, until hundreds and thousands of them were singing it.

But, with a mighty turn and struggle, Probably Arboreal went under again, as to his head and body; his feet for an instant swished into the air, and everyone but Probably Arboreal himself saw what was hanging on to one of them.

It was neither ghost, shark, god, nor devil. It was a monstrous oyster; a bull oyster, evidently. All oysters were much larger in those days than they are now, but this oyster was a giant, a mastodon, a mammoth among oysters, even for those days.

"It is an oyster, an oyster, an oyster!" cried the crowd, as Probably Arboreal's head and shoulders came out of the water again.

Big Mouth, the poet, naturally chagrined, and hating to yield up his dramatic idea, tried to raise another chant:

"The ghost of Crooked Nose went into an
oyster,
The oyster caught his slayer by the foot
To drown, drown, drown him in the sea!"

But it didn't work. The world had seen that oyster, and had recognized it for an oyster.

"Oyster! Oyster! Oyster!" cried the crowd sternly at Big Mouth.

The bard tried to persevere, but Slightly Simian, feeling the crowd with him, advanced menacingly and said:

"See here, Big Mouth, we know a ghost when we see one, and we know an oyster! Yon animal is an oyster! You

sing that it is an oyster, or shut up!”

“*Ghost, ghost, ghost,*” chanted Big Mouth, tentatively. But he got no farther. Slightly Simian killed him with a club, and the matter was settled. Literary criticism was direct, straightforward, and effective in those days.

“But, oh, ye gods of the water, *what* an oyster!” cried Mrs. Slightly Simian.

And as the thought took them all, a silence fell over the multitude. They looked at the struggling man in a new community of idea. Oysters they had seen before, but never an oyster like this. Oysters they knew not as food; but they had always regarded them as rather ineffectual and harmless creatures. Yet this bold oyster was actually giving battle, and on equal terms, to a man! Were oysters henceforth to be added to the number of man's enemies? Were oysters about to attempt to conquer mankind? This oyster, was he the champion of the sea, sent up out of its depths, to grapple with mankind for supremacy?

Dimly, vaguely, as they watched the man attempt to pull the oyster ashore, and the oyster attempt to pull the man out to sea, some sense of the importance of this struggle was felt by mankind. Over forest, beach, and ocean hung the sense of momentous things. A haze passed across the face of the bright morning sun; the breeze died down; it was as if all nature held her breath at this struggle. And if mankind upon the land was interested, the sea was no less concerned. For, of sudden, and as if by preconcerted signal, a hundred thousand oysters poked their heads above the surface of the waters and turned their eyes—they had small fiery opalescent eyes in those days—upon the combat.

At this appearance, mankind drew back with a gasp, but no word was uttered. The visible universe, perturbed earth and bending heavens alike, was tense and dumb. On their part, the oysters made no attempt to go to the assistance of their champion. Nor did mankind leap to the rescue of Probably Arboreal. Tacitly, each side, in a spirit of fair play, agreed not to interfere; agreed to leave the combat to the champions; agreed to abide by the issue.

But while they were stirred and held by the sense of tremendous things impending, neither men nor oysters could be expected to understand definitely what almost infinite things depended upon this battle. There were no Darwins then. Evolution had not yet evolved the individual able to catch her at it.

But she was on her way. This very struggle was one of the crucial moments in the history of evolution. There have always been these critical periods when the two highest species in the world were about equal in intelligence, and it was touch and go as to which would survive and carry on the torch, and which species would lose the lead and become subservient. There have always been exact instants when the spirit of progress hesitated as between the forms of life, doubtful as to which one to make its representative.

Briefly, if the oyster conquered the man, more and more oysters, emboldened by this success, would prey upon men. Man, in the course of a few hundred thousand years, would become the creature of the oyster; the oyster's slave and food. Then the highest type of life on the planet would dwell in the sea. The civilization which was not yet would be a marine growth when it did come; the intellectual and

spiritual and physical supremacy held by the biped would pass over to the bivalve.

Thought could not frame this concept then; neither shellfish nor tree-dweller uttered it. But both the species felt it; they watched Probably Arboreal and the oyster with a strangling emotion, with a quivering intentness, that was none the less poignant because there was no Huxley or Spencer present to interpret it for them; they thrilled and sweat and shivered with the shaken universe, and the red sun through its haze peered down unwinking like the vast bloodshot eye of life.

An hour had passed by in silence except for the sound of the battle, more and more men and more and more oysters had gathered about the scene of the struggle; the strain was telling on both champions. Probably Arboreal had succeeded in dragging the beast some ten feet nearer the shore, but the exertion had told upon him; he was growing tired; he was breathing with difficulty; he had swallowed a great deal of salt water. He too was dimly conscious of the importance of this frightful combat; he felt himself the representative of the human race. He was desperate but cool; he saved his breath; he opposed to the brute force of the oyster the cunning of a man. But he was growing weaker; he felt it.

If only those for whom he was fighting would fling him some word of encouragement! He was too proud to ask it, but he felt bitterly that he was not supported, for he could not realize what emotion had smitten dumb his fellow men. He had got to the place where a word of spiritual comfort

and encouragement would have meant as much as fifty pounds of weight in his favour.

He had, in fact, arrived at the Psychological Moment. There were no professing psychologists then; but there was psychology; and it worked itself up into moments even as it does to-day.

Probably Arboreal's head went under the water, tears and salt ocean mingled nauseatingly in his mouth.

"I am lost," he gurgled.

But at that instant a shout went up—the shrill, high cry of a woman. Even in his agony he recognized that voice—the voice of Parrot Feathers! With a splendid rally he turned his face toward the shore.

She was struggling through the crowd, fighting her way to the front rank with the fury of a wildcat. She had just buried her father, and the earth was still dark and damp upon her hands, but the magnificent creature had only one thought now. She thought only of her lover, her heroic lover; in her nobility of soul she had been able to rise above the pettiness of spirit which another woman might have felt; she knew no pique or spite. Her lover was in trouble, and her place was nigh him; so she flung a false maidenly modesty to the winds and acknowledged him and cheered him on, careless of what the assembled world might think.

She arrived at the Psychological Moment.

"Probably! Probably!" she cried. "Don't give up! Don't give up! For my sake!"

For her sake! The words were like fire in the veins of the struggling hero. He made another bursting effort, and gained a yard. But the rally had weakened him; the next

instant his head went under the water once more. Would it ever appear again? There was a long, long moment, while all mankind strangled and gasped in sympathetic unison, and then our hero's dripping head did emerge. It had hit a stone under water, and it was bleeding, but it emerged. One eye was nearly closed. 4 +

"Watch him! Watch him!" shouted Parrot Feathers. "Don't let him do that again! When he has you under water he whacks your eye with his tail. He's trying to blind you!"

And, indeed, these seemed to be the desperate oyster's tactics. If he could once destroy our hero's sight, the end would soon come.

"Probably—do you hear me?"

He nodded his head; he was beyond speech.

"Take a long breath and dive! Do you get me? Dive! Dive at your own feet! Grab your feet in your hands and roll under water in a bunch! Roll toward the beach!"

It was a desperate manœuvre, especially for a man who had already been under water so much that morning. But the situation was critical and called for the taking of big chances. It would either succeed—or fail. And death was no surer if it failed than if he waited. Probably Arboreal ceased to think; he yielded up his reasoning powers to the noble and courageous woman on the sand; he dived and grabbed his feet and rolled.

"Again! Again!" she cried. "Another long breath and roll again!"

Her bosom heaved, as if she were actually breathing for him. To Probably Arboreal, now all but drowned, and almost impervious to feeling, it also seemed as if he were breathing

with her lungs; and yet he hardly dared to dive and roll again. He struggled in the water and stared at her stupidly.

She sent her unusual and electric personality thrilling into him across the intervening distance; she held him with her eyes, and filled him with her spirit.

“Roll!” she commanded. “Probably! Roll!”

And under the lash of her courage, he rolled again. Three more times he rolled... and then... unconscious, but still breathing, he was in her arms.

As he reached the land half a million oysters sank into the sea in the silence of defeat and despair, while from the beaches rose a mighty shout.

The sun, as if it gestured, flung the mists from its face, and beamed benignly.

“Back! Back! Give him air!” cried Parrot Feathers, as she addressed herself to the task of removing the oyster from his foot.

The giant beast was dying, and its jaws were locked in the rigour of its suffering. There was no way to remove it gently. Parrot Feathers laid her unconscious hero's foot upon one rock, and broke the oyster loose with another.

Incidentally she smashed Probably Arboreal's toe.

He sat up in pained surprise. Unthinkingly, as you or I would put a hurt finger into our mouths, he put his crushed toe into his mouth. At that period of man's history the trick was not difficult. And then——

A beatific smile spread over his face!

Man had tasted the oyster!

In half an hour, mankind was plunging into the waves searching for oysters. The oyster's doom was sealed. His

monstrous pretension that he belonged in the van of evolutionary progress was killed forever. He had been tasted, and found food. He would never again battle for supremacy. Meekly he yielded to his fate. He is food to this day.

Parrot Feathers and Probably Arboreal were married after breakfast. On the toes of their first child were ten cunning, diminutive oyster shells. Mankind, up to that time, had had sharp toenails like the claws of birds. But the flat, shell-like toenails, the symbols of man's triumph over, and trampling down of, the oyster were inherited from the children of this happy couple.

They persist to this day.

“IF WE COULD ONLY SEE”

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Lunch finished, Mr. Ferdinand Wimple, the poet, sullenly removed his coat and sulkily carried the dishes to the kitchen sink. He swore in a melodious murmur, as a cat purrs, as he turned the hot

water on to the plates, and he splashed profanely with a wet dishcloth.

"I'm going to do the dishes to-day, Ferd," announced his wife, pleasantly enough. She was a not unpleasant-looking woman; she gave the impression that she might, indeed, be a distinctly pleasant-looking woman, if she could avoid seeming hurried. She would have been a pretty woman, in fact, if she had been able to give the time to it.

When she said that she would do the dishes herself, Mr. Wimple immediately let the dishcloth drop without another word, profane or otherwise, and began to dry his hands, preparatory to putting on his coat again. But she continued:

"I want you to do the twins' wash."

"What?" cried Mr. Wimple, outraged. He ran one of his plump hands through his thick tawny hair and stared at his wife with latent hatred in his brown eyes... those eyes of which so many women had remarked: "Aren't Mr. Wimple's eyes wonderful; just simply *wonderful*! So magnetic, if you get what I mean!" Mr. Wimple's head, by many of his female admirers, was spoken of as "leonine." His detractors—for who has them not?—dwelt rather upon the physical reminder of Mr. Wimple, which was more suggestive of the ox.

"I said I wanted you to do the twins' wash for me," repeated Mrs. Wimple, awed neither by the lion's visage nor the bovine torso. Mrs. Wimple's own hair was red; and in a quietly red-haired sort of way she looked as if she expected her words to be heeded.

"H——!" said the poet, in a round baritone which enriched the ear as if a harpist had plucked the lovely string

of G. “H——!” But there was more music than resolution in the sound. It floated somewhat tentatively upon the air. Mr. Wimple was not in revolt. He was wondering if he had the courage to revolt.

Mrs. Wimple lifted the cover of the laundry tub, which stood beside the sink, threw in the babies' “things,” turned on the hot water, and said:

“Better shave some laundry soap and throw it in, Ferd.”

“Heavens!” declared Mr. Wimple. “To expect a man of my temperament to do that!” But still he did not say that he would not do it.

“Someone has to do it,” contributed his wife.

“I never kicked on the dishes, Nell,” said Mr. Wimple. “But this, *this* is too much!”

“I have been doing it for ten days, ever since the maid left. I'm feeling rotten to-day, and you can take a turn at it, Ferd. My back hurts.” Still Mrs. Wimple was not unpleasant; but she was obviously determined.

“Your back!” sang Mr. Wimple, the minstrel, and shook his mane. “Your *back* hurts you! My *soul* hurts *me*! How could I go direct from that—that damnable occupation—that most repulsive of domestic occupations—that bourgeois occupation—to Mrs. Watson's tea this afternoon and deliver my message?”

A shimmer of heat (perhaps from her hair) suddenly dried up whatever dew of pleasantness remained in Mrs. Wimple's manner. “They're just as much your twins as they are mine,” she began... but just then one of them cried.

A fraction of a second later the other one cried.