

The Ideal Idol

(Two stories in one, but with only one moral.)

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Reggie Van Rensesslaer was 42 and a bachelor. For just half his life he had been looking for a wife, and he had turned down a thousand promising opportunities, just because he was Particular. He was handsome and distinguished above all men; he had a nice little fortune in copper and the control of one of the biggest banks in New York. His manners were superfine triple X, formed in the best universities, and later in those foreign courts whither he had gone as a diplomatist. He was crazy to marry, and had had his pick of Europe and America. But he had not found his ideal. He wished a woman of birth, breeding, and fortune comparable to his own; she must be beautiful and brilliant, yet modest and domesticated; and there were various other points, hardly worth discussion on this page, yet vitally important to the happiness of our gay and gallant hero. There had been several near-engagements; but sooner or later something had always turned up to prevent the wedding bells from ringing. It was by pure accident that Reggie discovered that the Marquise de Vaudeville had a bunion on the third toe of her left foot; the Gräfin von Solingen was barred by an unfortunate habit of lipping; the Princess Politzsky had once smoked a cigarette; Lady Viola Vere de Vere failed to laugh at one of Reggie's puns; Señorita de Sota had a question mark on part of her escutcheon in the earlier half of the twelfth century — there was always something.

But in the winter of 1916 the ideal idol came to Washington. This time there could be no doubt. Flossie Russell was of the most aristocratic of all the families

that came over in the Mayflower; through her mother she was allied with the royal families of half the countries of Europe; her father controlled most of the railroads and shipping and mines in the United States, owned two of the largest packing houses in Chicago, and was one of the biggest men in the Corn Trust. Incidentally, he had used his leisure hours in making an immense fortune in munitions. It would endanger the reason of the printer were I to describe her beauty; and as for her manners, it would endanger my own reason to attempt the task in detail. I will only say, in a word, they were American manners.

It was at White Sulphur that she and Reggie met. Swift but thorough investigation on his part assured him that at last he had found his destined bride. To avoid precipitation, he determined to take a long motor ride by moonlight — alone. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he failed to notice an old woman who was crossing the road with a bundle of sticks in her arm. He knocked her down and broke her leg. The automobile swerved violently, and he was obliged to pull up in order to avoid running into a tree which might have damaged the machine. It struck him that his number might have been seen, and with admirable prudence got out of the car and returned to where the old woman was lying, intending to compensate her for her crushed limb with some small change which he was wont to carry on his person precisely in view of such emergencies as this. The old woman thanked him profusely. "I see," said she, "that you are one of Nature's noblemen! Chivalrous as you are handsome, you should also be fortunate. Take this black stone — for I am a witch! And if ever you should be in despair, dash it upon the ground; then you shall have your heart's desire." Reggie, charmed with her courtesy, was seized with an impulse of mad generosity, added a dollar bill to his already noble largesse, and even promised to stop at the next village, and tell some one of the accident.

The next morning dawned sunny and glorious; all nature seemed to conspire to aid our hero in his suit. After lunch he sought the fair Flossie; together in the exhilarating air they rode for many miles. They stopped on a great height to admire the view. He saw the mood of his beloved melt to romance; he seized the moment. "Will you be mine?" he murmured. "Well," answered Flossie, brightly, "I guess not. You're about twenty years too old."

Words cannot depict the rage and horror of our hero. Like a madman he thrust in the clutch; the auto leapt forward; he never stopped until — the following morning — he found himself held up in 42d Street by the wreck of a Fifth Avenue stage and a lorry. At that moment he realized what despair was. As in a dream, he pulled out the black stone and dashed it on the ground.

When he raised his eyes, wonder of wonders! They fell upon the ideal idol of his dreams. It was another Flossie, but a Flossie raised in every point to the twenty-seventh power. Her name — as the event showed — was Nina Yolande de Montmorency de Carbajal y Calvados. This time there was no hitch. The most rigid investigation proved her as pure as she was fair, as rich as she was well born; in short, she was IT. Even her modesty could not withstand even for an hour the impetuous advances of our hero; and when he said, only a fortnight after their first meeting, "Let us be married next week in the Cathedral," she replied, blushing divinely and with downcast eyes, "Why not this afternoon, at the City Hall?" No sooner said than done. A sumptuous banquet succeeded the ceremony; intoxicated with champagne and with delight, the happy couple retired to their luxurious suite in the Hotel Evangeline. Reggie Van Rensselaer locked the door.

As it happened, however, the Hotel Evangeline was an unusually family hotel, and on the dressing table was a copy of the Holy Scriptures, placed there by the Gideons, whoever they may be.

Instantly that her eyes fell upon the book, the bride uttered a piercing scream. A moment later, and she had disappeared. In her place, smiling and bowing, stood Mephistopheles himself, complete to a hoof; and not forgetting the sulphur!

"Young man!" he said to the astounded Reggie, "learn that humanity implies imperfection; those who, not content with the ordinary limitations of life, demand perfection, are liable to find the ideal idol an illusion created by the Devil. However, you have willed it; so if you would be so kind as to throw that book out of the window, I will turn back into Nina Yolande (and all the rest of it) and we can get to bed. It has been a tiring day."

Reggie's answer has not been recorded; but six months later we hear of him on his honeymoon. The happy lady was a mulatto widow of forty-eight, with three children, a slight spinal curvature, a cast in her remaining eye, six gold teeth, and the manners of a dock laborer. And a jolly good wife she makes him!