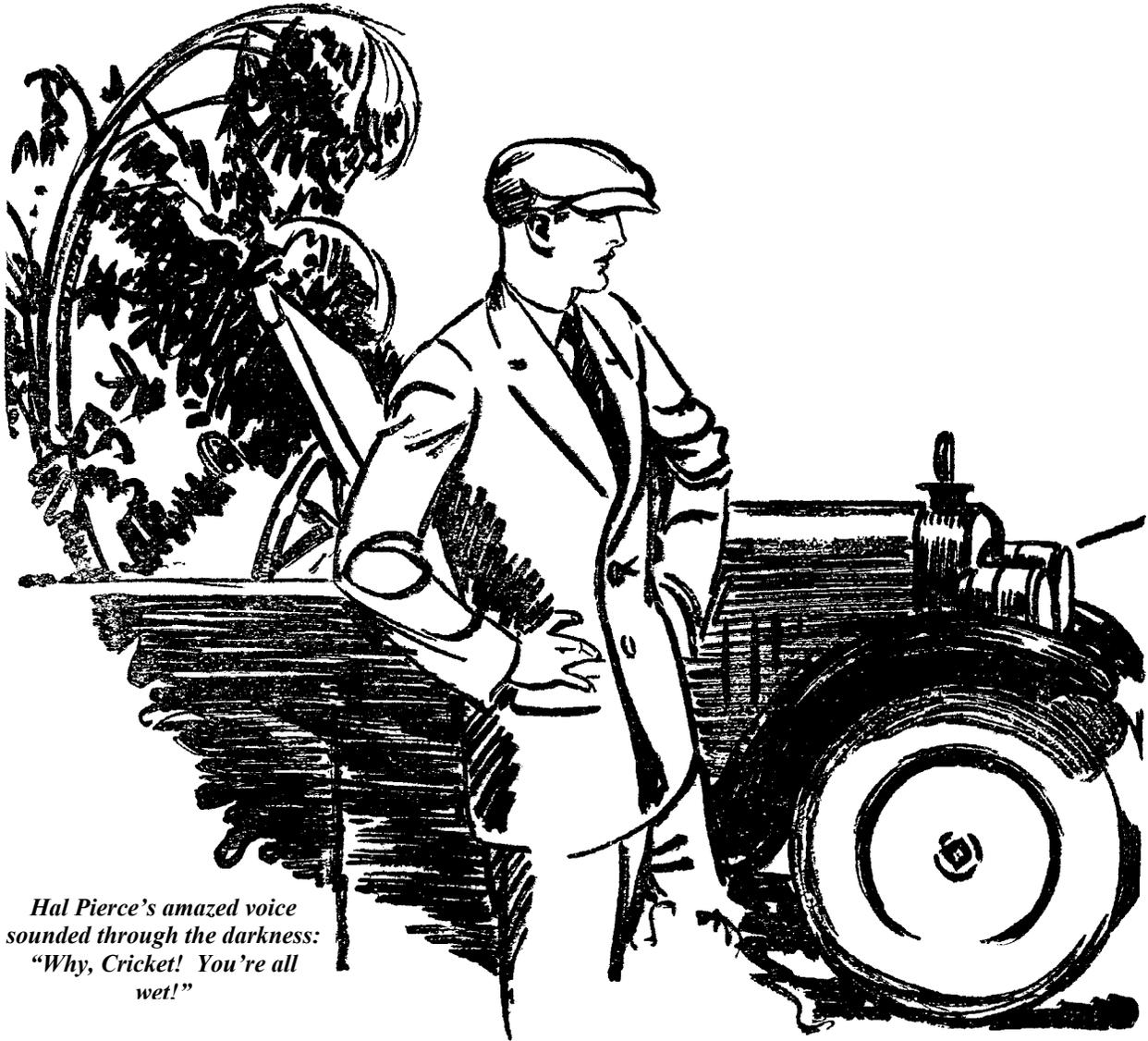


Cricket's Last Hop

By. C. S. Montanye

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Cricket's Last Hop



*Hal Pierce's amazed voice
sounded through the darkness:
"Why, Cricket! You're all
wet!"*

CONSTANCE'S room was forty steps down the hall. Cricket Hamilton counted each one. Sometimes her older sister locked the door from the inside but when Cricket turned the knob it opened and she marched into a room made fragrant by a fresh sea breeze and the more alluring scent of perfume.

"I wish," Constance said from the vanity, with all the dignity of the four years of her seniorship, "you'd knock before you come bursting in here."

"Never knock—always boost!" Cricket

chirped blithely. "For goodness' sake don't be an old maid before your time, Connie. Where do you hide the almond paste now? I'll eat a piece while I curl up here on the window seat for a moment or two."

She drew herself up on the bright chintz cushions, tilted her head back and rested an elbow on the sill where the morning sun lay so warm and golden. Constance continued with her dressing and Cricket gave her an envious glance.

Her sister was so radiant, perfect—to Cricket's way of thinking. All gold and snow. Her

By C. S. Montanye

*A
Gay Adventure
On
the High Seas
of
Romance*



“Oh, Hal, what’s the use,” she cried miserably. “I’ve pulled another bone, and I’m tired and cold and miserable. I’ll unfold the whole dizzy narrative in return for a ride home!”

complexion, the statuesque lines of her lithe figure. Cricket stole a surreptitious glance at herself in one of the triple mirrors of the vanity and sighed dolefully.

She was ever so small. She saw the tousled darkness of her curly head, her little, pointed face, her dark blue eyes, like violets hiding in purple shadows but the eyes were set slightly aslant and her red lips were restless. She felt, secretly, she could never hope to compare with the brilliant, candle-flame of her older sister.

“Just what did you want to see me about?” Constance inquired, between the pats of a powder puff.

“I want to know,” Cricket said directly,

“what the big idea is.”

“Idea?”

“Why you’re breaking another date with that nice Hal Pierce. This makes the third one in seven days. It isn’t fair to Hal, Connie, and you know it. Imagine dashing off to go crabbing with Gerald Evarts and leaving Hal behind. Why it’s laughable. Particularly when you stop to figure that Jerry Evarts is a crab himself!”

Constance, slipping on a coat sweater of a color that blended perfectly with the yellow luster of her hair, swung around.

“What right have you to criticize me?” Constance asked furiously. “The idea! I never heard of anything so utterly preposterous! You

with all your admirers—with the way you've treated dozens of poor defenseless fellows—having the audacity to march in here and call me to account.”

“I can't help it,” Cricket informed her grimly. “I think Hal is a peach and I think you're dizzy to chuck him aside for Jerry. Fair play has always been my watchword, I'm not speaking for myself. I'm thinking only of Pierce.”

A slow, thoughtful smile haunted her sister's down-curved lips. She leisurely selected a small felt hat with a feather in it and pulled it rakishly on before she let her serene eyes drift over to the window seat.

“Are you sure you're speaking only for Hal?” she inquired amiably. “It seems to me you've been rallying to his support for some time now. Rather strange, don't you think, in view of the fact Hal Pierce is a comparative stranger here at Wildbracken?”

TO her annoyance Cricket felt a warm tide of color creep into her suntanned cheeks. She stared defiantly back, unable to grasp the proper words or to find them in the quick confusion that beset her. It always seemed to be that way, too. Constance with her cool, aloof poise and her ready retorts. And herself—making such a valiant start but retreating in such disorder once her sister's verbal guns were trained upon her.

“I do like Hal. If I didn't like him I wouldn't stand up for him. I like him and I hate to see him mistreated.”

Constance inspected herself in the three mirrors, leaned to knot the buckskin lace of her sport oxford and laughed under her breath.

“I must say that you have courage when you try to call the turn. You—nicknamed that silly Cricket because you're so constantly hopping around. You with more broken dates and broken hearts in one short summer than I could achieve in a decade. You with every Tom, Dick and Harry in tow! If that isn't an over abundance of courage will you kindly tell me what is?”

The accusation and Constance's withering way of putting it made Cricket wince. It was all too true. She had played the summer role of seashore siren, singing a Lorelei for any pair of masculine ears to hear and heed. She had been the Cricket—hopping carelessly about, making a little

fool of herself with her light-hearted nonsense. And, now that she reflected, she did have a nerve to say what she had said to Constance. At least, her sister had never lost her poise.

“You're in love with this Hal Pierce,” Constance remarked coolly. “I know the symptoms.”

The hot color in Cricket's face deepened. She stretched out her beige silk legs, lowered the touseled crown of her head and looked at the tips of her slippers. What her sister had said echoed in her ears. Was she in love with the mistreated Hal Pierce or had her warm, sympathetic nature tricked her? That was the trouble. So long as she could remember the underdog had always aroused her keenest solicitation.

“Don't be so ridiculous, Connie. Why, I've hardly spoken twelve words to Hal.”

Constance laughed again and turned toward the door. From the drive below came the crunching sound of fat balloon tires, the mellow notes of the European fish-horn Gerald Evarts had placed on the dash of his open touring car. Cricket glanced out and made a grimace. Gerald was fat and fatuous, an egotistical youth she personally could not bear.

“You needn't waste any sympathy on Hal,” Constance remarked from the doorway. “And if you should bump into him you don't have to go into explanations. I've told Mary what to say and—that will be sufficient. By-by. Try to keep out of mischief.”

The door shut. A moment later the tires crunched again on the driveway below.

“Date breaker!” Cricket said between set teeth.

She jumped up and went over to the vanity. Constance always hid her candy under her French handkerchief case. Cricket helped herself to a bonbon, chewed it pensively and listened.

There was no one at home except Grandma Hamilton who was probably dozing in the sun-room below. Duncan Hamilton, Senior, was in town on business and her mother had gone to a luncheon and bridge. The house seemed curiously quiet. Cricket carried the candy box back to the bright window seat and meditated.

Why, she asked herself, should she think of Hal Pierce at all? Why had the sight of him oddly disturbed her? He was a quiet, methodical sort of

a person, and, as long as she remembered, Cricket had always liked her cavaliers to be peppy and on the go. Probably, she reflected, that was why there was some reason for Constance's accusation.

The summers had been exciting spans for her. There was a lot of zest in having a half dozen affairs at the same time and trying to keep each from coming into contact with the other. It had been rather pleasant to have been made love to in a dozen different ways. And it had been stimulating to enjoy popularity. What did it matter that when the summer waned she went back to town heart whole and fancy free again? Summers, Cricket had always told herself, were made for happy-go-lucky romances.

But did she care for Hal Pierce? On the face of it the assumption was absurd. How could anyone care for someone they didn't really know? Besides, she and Hal had nothing in common. He was studying to be an architect and he was as staid as a man of forty. The more she thought of it the more bitter toward Constance she felt.

"Anyway," Cricket assured herself, "I've never made an appointment and heartlessly broken it."

SOMETIME later she went down on the broad veranda. Out through the trees the sea was an agate mirror. Far in the distance the Long Island Sound was fringed with a vague, opposite shoreline. Cricket curled up in one corner of the gliding porch swing and closed her eyes. Bees hummed and the vagabond breezes sang a soothing lullaby.

"I beg your pardon—"

The words seemed to steal through the enchanted glades of slumber. Cricket heard them as if from miles away.

"I beg your pardon—"

She opened her eyes, closed them, opened them again and sat up with a quick, confused start. A youth balanced himself against the rail near the porch steps. He was a tall, well built individual with closely-cropped sandy hair, a whimsical mouth and a pair of expressive brown eyes. He wore tan tweed and fingered a blackened pipe. More to the point Cricket felt his steady gaze amusedly on her.

She ran a slim hand through the tangle of her curls, lowered her feet hastily and flashed a smile

across at him.

"Sleeping beauty and the beast," he said, in a low, pleasant voice. "Sorry to disturb you but I've been ringing for the last ten minutes without any reply."

"I guess Mary is in the garage," Cricket explained.

"But where's Constance?" Hal Pierce asked. "I had a date to play eighteen holes of golf with her this afternoon."

Cricket thought hard. The faithful Mary had her instructions but when Mary was around Tom, one of the chauffeurs, time lost its importance for her and instructions were forgotten.

"Connie stood you up," Cricket told him in the next breath. "You might as well know it now as any other time. She's gone crabbing with Jerry Evarts and she won't be back until five or six o'clock. No use procrastinating. I don't know what's gotten into her lately. She never used to be like this."

Hal's attractive face grew shadowed for an instant. Then it cleared and he nodded.

"I get you. Another busted date to hang on the calendar. Well, it doesn't matter. I'm getting sort of acclimated as it were. I only came over to ask something more important than golf. Too hot for that anyway. I was wondering if Constance would like to go over to Blinky Corbin's birthday party tomorrow night."

"I can answer that for you," Cricket declared slowly. "She can't. At least, she's going down to the Seafoam Club with Jerry. I heard her telephone him."

HAL cupped his disreputable pipe in one hand and considered it with narrowed eyes. He was the best looking thing. For no good reason Cricket knew an inner stirring. Impulsively she leaned forward, her dark blue eyes intent and serious upon him.

"Tell you what. If you want somebody to go over to Blinky's, I'll be glad to take the job."

Hal looked up quickly.

"You?" It was plain he thought she was jesting. "You're not serious, of course?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, for one thing Corbin's birthday party is apt to be rather tame. I don't mind admitting Constance has told me things. As I understand it

you don't like peaceful, pokey parties. Besides, think of what people would say."

"What do I care what people say! Let them say on and on and the more they say the more I'll give them to talk about. Gossips!"

"Just the same," Hal went on in his provokingly slow fashion, "I wouldn't want it to get around—that you had caught one of Constance's discarded suitors on the rebound—that it was the best you could do. That sort of thing."

"I've stood worse than that," Cricket laughed coldly. "Don't consider me. I've weathered dozens of storms before."

"I'm afraid it's no go," Hal informed her. "It's nice of you to volunteer but—"

A bright lance of sunshine had crept through the pickets in the rail and lay in a burnished puddle at Cricket's feet.

"I'd like awfully to go with you," she said hesitantly. "Look here. Let's put our cards face up on the table. You take me and I won't even listen to any talk that goes around. You weren't engaged to Connie so you could hardly be spoken of as a discarded suitor or a jilted sweetheart. If you don't want to take me simply say so and it'll be all right. Personally, I can understand your reasons for refusal. I'm not a prize beauty, you know."

The youth at the rail smiled. Cricket liked the way it lighted up his rather serious but good-looking face. Like a lamp being kindled in a dim cathedral, she thought. He stuffed the pipe in a jacket, crossed to the swing and sat down on its edge.

"That's a dear. Sweet of you to suggest it. See here." He twisted around and appraised her gravely. "You can't be the much vaunted heart-breaker of Wildbracken. You're really not half what I've been told you are—"

"I'm afraid I am," Cricket confessed softly. "But that's no reason why I shouldn't turn over a new leaf. The trouble with me is that I'm a younger sister. A younger sister always tries to outdo an older one. I've been handicapped by Connie's four years and I'm trying to make up for lost time. I have done a lot of silly things. I can't say I'm sorry for them because they were harmless but I guess now it's about time I cut them out. You take me over to Blinky's and I'll throw a pail of water on the flaming youth thing. I

won't cut up or raise the dickens. That's a promise."

He laughed under his breath.

"All right. Suppose I wander over around eight o'clock. Are you going to tell Constance?"

"I'll say I'm going to tell her! At eight then. I'll be ready. If you don't want to come up you can whistle from the drive. Whistle twice and I'll come dashing out. Don't forget."

"I won't," he promised, taking himself off.

AS the night was warm and clear the Corbins had elected to hold their affair outdoors. Lanterns had been strung from tree to tree and a couple of busy carpenters had laid a wooden platform for both dancing and the five-piece orchestra that had been hired in Bridgeport. Cricket Hamilton, dancing with Hal Pierce, looked the crowd over retrospectively. They were all people she knew—friends of the last three summers. She wondered if they were talking about her escort, for it was true that Hal Pierce had given Constance something of a rush during the past month. But she didn't care. She had never cared about opinion and she felt a deep satisfaction and contentment.

Hal looked splendid in his white flannel trousers and dinner coat. So much nicer and more interesting than the boys she had trailed around with through the hot July days and the first August nights. Constant repartee, practical joking and the fling of high spirits were all very well at times but no one could exist, Cricket assured herself, on a continual diet of hilarity. Life was a serious thing at times. And there was something about Hal that was so solid and substantial it made her think of the Rock of Gibraltar, pictured on the life insurance calendar Mary had hung over the white stove in her well-ordered kitchen.

He was an excellent dancer too. College proms had done much for his stepping around ability. Cricket, who adored dancing, had little difficulty in following his tricky leads. When she was foisted off on her host she felt a twinge of disappointment.

BLINKY CORBIN was a perpetually grinning youth who looked at the world through enormous, tortoise-rimmed spectacles. He was the only son and heir of the man who had developed

Wildbracken and he had been pampered and petted and idolized to such an extent that he made Cricket think of Jerry Evarts. Only Blinky had a graceless sense of boisterous humor that she had found inspiring in the past when her spirits lagged and she felt so enervated and low that she could

chance and look the gifts over, Cricket. I've hauled in so many pipes and boxes of cigarettes that I'll resemble a smoked herring before Labor Day. And don't fail to notice the shirtstuds that are blinding me with their brilliancy. Genuine platinum and real diamonds. The governor presented them to me as a token of his esteem and affection. Nothing to it, eh?"

"Nifty," Cricket replied, trying to keep him from tramping on her silken ankles. "Now if somebody had only given you a course in dancing the evening would have been perfect, wouldn't it, Blinky, dear?"

He grinned vapidly down at her.



"As long as I live, I'll remember tonight," said Cricket softly. "I'll never stand on my hands and point my feet at the sky again. I'll be ever so sensible, Hal, because you want me to be!"

have, by her own admission, walked under a well on stilts.

Blinky whirled her off into a fox-trot with careless clumsiness.

"Behold the young prince in the full glory of his twenty-second year! Stop in when you get a

"Still harping on the old foot and ankle stuff? Have a heart. And you might tell me something. What's the idea of coming here with Hal? I thought Constance had her talons on him."

"You're always thinking something and you don't want to do that. Some day some bright idea

will have a head-on collision with some other twenty-dollar thought and then you'll be in an awful jam, Blinky, old dear."

"But isn't it a fact?"

"Isn't what a fact?"

"That Hal has been rushing Constance."

"You'll have to ask her," Cricket said sweetly. "Don't let's delve into personalities and questions, It sort of takes your mind off your dancing and that'll never, never do."

"You know," he said suddenly, "I'm fond of you myself. You're the zippiest girl that ever came down to this benighted seashore resort. We've had a lot of fun in the past. This summer I haven't had much of a chance to see you, but the season isn't over yet. How about a lot of dates?"

Cricket raised her eyes and smiled dreamily.

"I don't think you'd want to make them or have me keep 'em, Blinky. I'll tell you why if you prepare yourself for a shock—"

"You're engaged!"

"No, not yet. This is worse. I've decided to soft pedal all my clowning and cut out the capers. No more turning corners at seventy miles an hour or being the life and death of every party. I've reformed. I mean, I'm about to reform."

"*You*—what a chance!" Blinky scoffed. "Just as well expect a fish to quit swimming."

"Well, I've always been a fish—a poor one—and I mean every word I say whether you think so or not."

It was plain that he didn't. He continued grinning and making humorous comments until the dance ended. Then he caught Cricket's wrist and gave her an intense look.

"Meet me after the next chase on the upper porch. I've a lot of things I want to tell you. Game, Cricket?"

"We'll see," she murmured, knowing perfectly well she had no intention of fulfilling the request.

IT was her dance with Hal Pierce. She found him near a cluster of lanterns and sauntered leisurely up, making a revolver of her thumb and forefinger and covering him with it adroitly.

"Ours, I believe, Mr. Pierce."

"I've been wondering if you'd rather sit it out—"

Something flared up within Cricket.

"You can read my mind like an open book, Hal, dear. I know the very place. Put your rubber-heels in motion and follow me."

She led the way across the light-stained turf, passing a huge, mysterious, canvas-covered object that was at least fifty feet long. It reposed in the semi-gloom near the house. Cricket gave it only a casual look as she continued on in and up to the balcony.

It was a very nice balcony. A grass rug crackled under foot. Wicker furniture loomed up ghostly and somewhere close at hand a bird in an ornamental lacquered cage made quiet sounds. A battalion of tall trees was a screen through which the moonlight filtered wanly.

A match flared for Hal's cigarette. He dropped down beside her and they listened to the music that laughed its way up from the festival of the lanterns below them.

I gotta baby

Oh, whatta baby—

I gotta baby now...

It was a silly sort of melody but it had a haunting lilt to it. Cricket hummed the tune under her breath. She looked over at Hal. He sat immovable, his presence marked by the glowing eye of his cigarette. A breeze began to sigh in the ivy that climbed to the balcony and in the house a soft-footed servant moved past them. Came the tinkle of glasses, ice being chipped and the creak of a tea-cart.

Cricket snuggled further back in the cretonne depths of her wicker chair. The silence between them was like a burning wall. She stared across at Hal. Her mind was full of strange, sweet thoughts and her heart hurt with an odd longing. Again the questions of yesterday came swing up in a solid phalanx.

If she really intended to cut out the old days and the old ways she must really be in love. Or was it just a touch of her old summer moon infatuation? She and Hal were so entirely different but then true love never distinguished between temperaments or personalities. It simply came without rhyme or reason.

"Why don't you say something?"

Hal stirred.

"It's pleasant just to sit here and listen to the

music and smoke in the dark and to know you're near." Again the burning wall between them. "Do you really mean that?" Cricket asked in a strained voice.

"Mean what?"

"That you like to have me near you?"

"Why, yes—of course." He purposely seemed to overlook the husky significance of her question. "Why shouldn't I? You're a nice child even if you have been raising the dickens all over the lot."

"Are you in love with Constance?" Cricket asked after another pause, one not half as satisfactory as the first had been.

"I don't know," Hal replied crisply. "That isn't exactly the truth. I do know but I won't make any admissions. Constance is so different. And I—" he laughed, "—I haven't the chance of the celebrated snowball."

"I could be like Constance—if I wanted—if I tried."

He snapped the remnants of his cigarette away.

"Why don't you try?" Cricket opened and closed her hands quickly.

"Principally because I haven't any good reason. If somebody liked me a lot and wanted me to calm down and put on the high hat—I'd do it. Only they'd have to like me heaps."

SHE sensed rather than saw Hal get up and move toward her. Down below the orchestra was playing an encore by popular demand. Once more the foolish, empty melody came to them.

*I gotta baby
Oh, whatta baby—
I gotta baby now...*

Cricket felt Hal leaning to her. A tiny sense of suffocation aroused by the quick clamor of her heart frightened her with its sweetness and poignancy. She dared not move lest the dream born of the dark and their closeness flee away.

"Would you do it for me?"

His own voice was not entirely steady. With an effort Cricket forced a response.

"But you don't like me heaps, Hal!"

"If—I did?"

The darkness seemed alive with the fragrant

memories of romance that had lived in the same murmuring witchery of other nights. Cricket closed her eyes. This, she assured herself, was nothing like her other "affairs." No one had ever stirred her so or awakened something that had slumbered heavily and deeply within her heart. This was no light, careless summertime flirtation which, like the kisses that went with it, would be only half-remembered in a week.

"But you don't." She spoke in a tremulous, uncertain tone. "Do you?" something made her whisper.

He was so close that the black silk of his dinner coat lapels was a shade darker than the encompassing gloom.

"I—I should tell you something, Cricket. But—I can't. Don't ask. Something—"

He stopped speaking abruptly. Somehow in the darkness Cricket found his hands and closed her own over them. Was it bold to wish to cling to him? Was it wrong to touch him? It was futile to attempt aloofness with the hurt longing in her heart and the strange, sweet thought that kept on singing in her mind.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't wish to. Only let me tell you this, Hal...only this...I don't know how it was. That first time I saw you—when Constance brought you up from the Club. It might—"

"That wasn't the first time," he interrupted. "I saw you days before then."

"W-where?"

"On the beach one morning. You were," he explained precisely, "standing on your hands with your feet pointed to the high heavens."

Cricket remembered all of a sudden.

"Were you there?" she gasped. "We were playing circus in our bathing suits and I—as usual—was giving an impression of Toto the clown. What did you think? Were you shocked horribly at such conduct?"

Hal didn't answer for a minute but she felt his fingers move beneath her own. She had the impression he was on the verge of a confession, that he wanted to blurt out what he had started to say before he had cheeked himself.

"It doesn't matter—what I thought then. It—it's what I think now and now—"

CRICKET knew he was going to kiss her seconds before he took her in his arms. She gave him the sweetness of her lips joyously, sinking into his embrace with a deep sigh of content. Her arms went naturally about his broad shoulders and the wonder of it filled her with a silent awe.

*I gotta baby
Oh, whatta baby—
I gotta baby now...*

Out of the magic haze that enfolded them Cricket eventually spoke:

“As long as I live I’ll remember that foolish, foolish song—just as we’re hearing it now. Sweetheart, you must love me! Oh, you don’t have to worry a bit. I’ll never stand on my hands and point my feet at the sky again. I—when you kissed me I grew up all of a sudden—like *that!* And I’ll be terribly sensible and everything because I know you want me to be.”

His breath was warm in the soft hollows of her neck where he had laid his last kiss. Again he leaned, one hand wandering the tousled tangle of her dark curls. Simultaneously from the house came the rush of impetuous feet and voices.

“On to the balcony!”

“Put out your hand—you’re going around a curve!”

“Curses! There’s somebody out there!”

It was shattered beyond all repair. A quartette of girls and young men tumbled out to take possession of the balcony.

In some fashion Cricket found herself downstairs. The magic of the kisses in the dark lingered, weaving a web about her. There was a little crowd grouped about the canvas-covered object they had passed. Cricket saw a florid gentleman making some sort of an address and glimpsed Blinky Corbin hovering expectantly at his elbow.

Then, and she and Hal had hardly joined the group, the Corbin gardener began stripping away the canvas wrappings and a murmur sounded.

“I say, Uncle Ed—what a birthday present *this* is!”

Cricket crowded closer, standing on tiptoe. Revealed was the sharp mahogany prow of a cruising motorboat, a low-built, rakish affair with

bright brass trimmings. To her own surprise she read the plates on either side of the bow and deciphered her own name—*Cricket*.

Then, and what a part this same craft was destined to play in her life, unknown and unguessed, she found Corbin beside her and heard his explanation.

“I told Uncle Ed if I ever got hold of a decent boat I’d name her after you ...I had no idea he would even remember it.... I want you to christen her for me, Cricket...”

She said something vague and turned to Hal, but he wasn’t beside her and after an instant her searching eyes glimpsed him down near the platform where the musicians were taking their intermission.

“Don’t forget, Cricket.”

“No, I won’t.”

She escaped and started down the lawn but Hal wasn’t waiting. As she started after him he continued on through the opening in the boxwood hedge and vanished in the night outside.

Cricket stopped and looked after him.

“Like a dream,” she heard herself whispering.

IN the clear summer sunshine the episode on the Corbin balcony took varied forms which puzzled Cricket greatly. To begin with, the suddenness of it was disconcerting. Two short days past she had told Constance honestly that it was ridiculous to imagine she was in love with Hal when she had hardly spoken twelve words to him. And it had been ridiculous because then she had not really known or suspected. There was a great gulf between liking a person and loving him.

Then, too, remembrance made Cricket’s frown thoughtful. Hal had played the role of tender lover but there had been something strangely lacking in the drama. Other youths in the past, those who had fascinated her for the moment, had made love a great deal more completely. The very things Hal left unsaid loomed up in the form of curious question marks. If he really loved her and if he was her last adventure and she his, why hadn’t he spoken of an engagement, of their combined futures? Why had he quite suddenly decided not to tell her that which must have been of importance? What lay behind the quick up-flare that had made her creep so eagerly

into the shelter of his arms and give him the tempting sweetness of her mouth?

Was it, Cricket wondered, inspired merely by the glamor of the starlit darkness, their closeness and her forwardness? She was wistfully pretty, she had a naïve charm and she invariably appealed to young Romeos. Hal might be different in appearance and mannerism but under his staid veneer he was the same courtier at the Fête of Love who tried to reach out and clasp to him his ardent dreams. Had he forgotten now?

A week elapsed without incident. Constance, sharing the greater portion of her time with Jerry Evarts, made no further reference to the one she had treated so thoughtlessly. Hal came over twice during the week to take Cricket to the country club for a round of golf. On both occasions she knew a shadowy sense of irritation. Hal appeared to have gone into a morose decline. He was preoccupied, taciturn and moody. Cricket looking forward to being with him, was furious after their second twosome.

"Might as well have been playing by myself," she thought. "I wonder if he regrets those kisses—if he still is crazy about Connie. Love's a funny proposition."

She grew more resentful when she passed up two parties that promised an explosion of her old exuberance. Secretly, she knew that if she started out with the old crowd and there were high jinks she would have to rid herself of the resentment by clowning again. And she had promised herself that there would be no more monkey shines.

TOWARD the end of the second week an occurrence transpired to change many things. When Cricket came up from the beach at Wildbracken she found Hal lingering on the veranda steps with Constance. Both seemed a trifle uneasy at her sudden appearance. Cricket swung out of her Shantung beach robe and considered them narrowly.

"Well, stop over when you're in this neighborhood again," her sister said to Hal. "You'd better get downstairs in the shower room," she added to Cricket before she vanished through the front door.

"Looking for me?"

Hal's gaze wavered before her own.

"I just stopped in," he said laconically.

"Then," Cricket resumed, "you weren't looking for me."

"I told you I just dropped in."

"You dropped in to see Connie," she said in a tensely vibrant voice. "Let's get this thing straightened out. You're sorry about the other night. I can see that. Well, I'm sorry too for that matter. So let's forget it. I don't blame you for wanting to make up with Connie. She's so—so wonderful and I'm so—"

"Cricket! You don't understand."

"That's the trouble—I do understand. What do you think I don't understand?"

Once more Hal started to say something, shut his lips resolutely and gave her a hurt look. She ignored it, dull anger creeping through her stealthily.

"I thought you did like me—a little bit." Her tone was melancholy and tearful. "And I've been trying so hard to be worthy of you."

"Cricket!" He came down the last two of the porch steps but she evaded him, backing to the edge of the walk where the shrubbery bulked.

"Don't! I think you're contemptible! Kissing me and loving some one else all the time! Never you mind. It takes two to make a contract and bind a bargain!"

"Will you let me tell you something?" he said, so desperately that for an uncertain moment she was undecided. "I can't tell you here. Meet me tonight—later. There's a bridge at the club. We'll have the whole veranda to ourselves—"

Cricket laughed.

"Oh, will we? Well, I'm very sorry but I'm christening my namesake tonight. Blinky's new motorboat. Anything you want to tell me can be said here and now. You don't have to wait until tonight to think up something plausible. Say it and let me hear it."

There was a shadow across his handsome face. Cricket waited—a minute—two—three. She ended the silence with another jeering snatch of laughter.

"You can't for the reason that you haven't anything to say. Now," she whirled around, "I'm going down to change, so you needn't detain me any longer."

B LINKY CORBIN had said something about christening the mahogany speed boat.

Enough to give Cricket an excuse to go over after dinner. The other Cricket reposed in the inlet where the terraces ended and was securely moored to a damp wharf. Blinky, who had a half dozen in for dinner, hailed Cricket's arrival with gusto.

"Just in time, youngster. I'd almost decided we'd have to have an understudy to break a bottle of champagne over the boat's bow. I really thought," he continued confidentially, "you'd been living up to what you told me the night of my birthday party. I mean, about cutting out all the zippy stuff and settling down to a life of knitting needles, tabby cats and rheumatics. You know the others, I guess."

Cricket did. Eileen Rainess. "Red" Thomas, who was an ex-Cornell coxswain, Stanley Barrow with his high, chuckling laugh, Delphia Dragnell, as petite and colorful as a fashion illustration—others who visited Wildbracken briefly and who lived in a world that was hilarious and inconsequential.

The ceremony proceeded with mock impressiveness. They all trooped solemnly down to the wharf, the Corbin butler bringing up the rear with a silver bucket from which protruded the golden neck of a bottle of ginger ale.

"Now Horace," Blinky told the servant, "stand here. The rest of you form in a semi-circle. Say, I wonder if we haven't got some skyrockets or something up at the house. We ought to put a little pep into these baptismal rites. Somebody go and dig up some noise-makers."

The matter was attended to presently and in a shrieking bedlam of laughter and noise made by some ancient New Year's Eve souvenirs and lighted by fireworks stored in the cellar after a jubilant Fourth of July, Cricket smashed the gilt-foiled bottle Horace presented her with over the rakish bow of the motorboat.

"All aboard now!" Blinky shouted. "Pile up wherever you can find some room and I'll show you how this baby can travel!"

Cricket found herself wedged in the stern, the noise-makers rattling above the silky drone of the deep-throated motor.

"Fastest thing that ever hit these waters," Blinky exulted, when the mooring line was cast off and they were out of the inlet and into the sea. "Hang on now while I make her step!"

"You ought to use it to run out to the rum boats," Thomas suggested. "Pick up a lot of spare change bringing stuff in."

"There's a schooner about four miles out," the Dragnell girl cut in. "Jerry Evarts said she anchored out there early this week. You can see her through binoculars faintly on a very clear day."

"Let's go out and look her over," Eileen Rainess said impetuously. "I've never seen a real rum boat!"

"Say, that's an idea," Cricket heard some one else chime in. "Think of those poor men out there with no company to call on them except the kind they don't want to see. Must be a terrible existence. Water, water everywhere and the case goods on the decks!"

THE last of the sunset, lengthened by the Daylight Savings system, was smouldering out in the western sky. Beyond, the darkening sea lay dim and sinister. A chilly wind created by the forward flight of the speed boat made Cricket shiver under the thinly knit sweater she had pulled over her silken dress. It blew her tousled curls across her little pointed face and it served to remind her that the summer was slowly but surely marching its bright hosts into the grim castle of the season that stood ahead of them.

In the general enthusiasm stirred up by Blinky Corbin's immediate agreement to run out to the pirate vessel and look her over, Cricket felt a little sad. Hal and the balcony and the music below them and her singing heart and his kiss on her lips—

With a start she realized exactly how much she had changed. Last week, last month, this would have been a lark, a high adventure with just a bit of danger to give it a piquant flavor. She would have been making as much noise as any of the others about her, lifting her voice in the chorus of voices. Yesterday, last week—

The sea slipped past them, an ominous green-black. Thousands of miles away a huge circular moon tore itself from the clinging couch of the ocean and began a weary climb into the vault of the heavens. Lights unveiled themselves briefly—red, yellow and green. The windblown echoes of a siren drifted back to them and a searchlight sliced the horizon like a steel sword in the hands of a



“Get your calling cards ready,” said Blinky. “We’ll go aboard and see what a real rum skipper looks like in all his dubious glory! What ‘ho!”

temple dancer.

Every once in a while the swing of the sea showered them with its fine, stinging spray. On such occasions there was a great scrambling and medley of laughter. The throaty pant of the powerful engine deepened to a bee-like hum. Cricket, hunched in the stern where she rubbed one arm that had gone to sleep from the pressure of Delphia Dragnell beside her, found herself wishing she had never allowed herself to be pushed aboard. How much better, she decided, to have gone down to the club with Hal Pierce—to have listened to whatever he wanted to tell her—

The eerie twang of a ukelele sounded. Stanley Barrow unleashed a powerful baritone in a gay, empty tune the others promptly caught up.

*I gotta baby
Oh, whatta baby—
I gotta baby now...*

Within Cricket something stirred and started. She closed her eyes involuntarily. The glamor of that one night came back to her across the restless waste of waters. It was a sacrilege to sing that one song of all other songs—a taunting reproach in itself.

On her inner vision she saw Hal in the gloom. The moonlight filtered through the screen of trees, not half as colorful as the swaying lanterns on the lawn. He had snapped his cigarette away—he had come to her—she had found his hands in the darkness—she was giving him her lips—

“Ahoy, mates! Hard on the starboard bow! There she blows!”

The uke was plunged into silence. There was a craning of necks. Thomas jumped up so quickly he nearly went overboard. Cricket peered ahead with the rest and then, after a moment of eyestrain, saw the object toward which they hastened.

A three-masted schooner stood out in sharp silhouette against the silver ring of the moon. It resembled an etching. Stark against the empty sky, alone and isolated in the giant hand of the sea, each spar stood out in bold relief. And yet its very solitude gave it an appearance of evil—an indefinable air that Cricket couldn't find an exact term for.

Blinky Corbin cut down the speed.

“Get your calling cards ready, girls and boys. We'll go aboard and see what a real rum skipper looks like in all his dubious glory. What ho!”

“We'll do nothing of the sort!” Delphia Dragnell exclaimed. “If you have any regard for me, Blinky, you'll turn around and take us home.”

“Somebody's getting extremely chilly feet,” Blinky laughed. “Who wanted to come out here anyway?”

“Now we're out and have seen it,” Eileen Rainess put in quickly, “you can run us back.”

“What do you say, Red?”

“Makes no never mind to me. If the girls want a mast for a souvenir, break out a saw and I'll oblige.”

THE *Cricket* had come nearly upon the motionless schooner. The sea lapped against its low-riding flanks and its waist was very deep. Blinky gave the automobile wheel a turn and the speed boat, under reduced power, glided alongside while those on it appraised the nefarious vessel with curious intentness.

Cricket was glad they had reached their destination. Now they would turn about and go back to Wildbracken. Solemnly she registered an emphatic vow, half raising her right hand to stress it.

“Never again!” she whispered to herself.

Hard astern and almost under the lee counter, Stanley Barrow lifted his deep voice.

“Ahoy, the schooner!”

There was no answer, no sign of life or activity on the deck above them. They drifted around the barnacled rudder-post, made out the name *Agnes Merriweather—Jamaica* and edged along the port rail again Barrow facetiously raised his voice and this time with reward. Suddenly out of the wind-sighing silence above them a coarse, rude voice snarled a reply.

“What you want?”

A head appeared at the rail. Cricket saw a knitted stocking cap with a tassel on it and then the most villainous face she had ever beheld off the photoplay screen. In the moonlight the face was swarthy, hoop-earrings dangled from the mans' ears, his mouth was a toothless gash and his huge, bulbous nose divided a pair of small, deep-set, piercing eyes. Delphia Dragnell gasped

audibly. Red Thomas laughed gustily.

"Wow, there's the real thing for you! Hey, Funny Face, where's your skipper? We want his autograph."

The man rested thick arms on the rail and scowled ferociously.

"You'll get something else if you don't shove off!" he retorted. "Something you don't expect!"

"Is that any way to treat callers?" Barrow asked with hurt indignation. "We'd like to come aboard and see how you conduct your business."

"I'll show you!"

He disappeared and out of the brief pause Eileen Rainess spoke tremulously.

"Do you suppose he's going to get a gangplank? I wish you would start back, Blinky. I'm frightened simply stiff."

Thomas' voice sounded in quick alarm.

"Look out—"

The warning came in time. The man on the schooner had come back to the rail. Cricket saw his thick arms uplifted and glimpsed the object supported in his hands. Came a swish as Blinky accelerated the motor and over their heads shot an empty cask that struck the water with a great splash.

"Ill-mannered beggar!" The speed boat leapt forward. "Good thing you noticed he was about to pitch barrels at us, Red. Guess we'd better get back home."

Relief crept through Cricket but it was relief that lingered only momentarily for they had hardly turned tail on the rum boat when Barrow gave vent to an exclamation.

"Look back, Blinky! What the dickens—"

FROM somewhere out of the plain of the sea drifted the staccato drumfire of another engine. Cricket turned and glanced back over her shoulder. A possible half mile distant she was able to distinguish the outline of a cruising boat somewhat longer than their own craft. On its wireless mast hung two red and a white and yellow light. And, as she peered across the path of the moon, a searchlight was suddenly brought into play and began to inquisitively seek them out.

"Government scow!" Corbin flung at them. "She's been prowling off there watching the schooner. Probably thinks we stood by to load up."

On the heels of his statement came the sharp blast of the other boat's siren. It was a weird, unearthly wail that made Cricket's heart sink.

"Better wait and let them give us a clean bill of health," she heard Red advising Blinky.

"Not a chance! They might jug us on general principles. Can't tell about these Revenue birds. Nix! We'll go right on about our business and race them in."

"They might fire if we don't come about!" Barrow stated in a strained, husky tone.

"Let 'em!"

Blinky threw the throttle over and once more the stinging spray came aboard. They dashed in toward the distant shore, the searchlight groping for them like an avid, ghostly hand. Still the siren commanded their stopping but Cricket saw they had gained in their flight.

She hunched over to avoid as much of the spray shipped as possible and she felt very, very low. What a climax to a silly evening! Suppose they were trapped and cornered? Suppose they were lined up, arrested and marched off to the jail? They were all representatives of socially prominent families at Wildbracken and the affair would make a stir in the newspapers.

Hal Pierce, Cricket reflected miserably, would read the sensational details. If he wasn't lost to her now he would be then for what man could care for a criminal, a law-breaker? Terror, aroused by the thought of Hal, cooled her hot, turbulent blood. She looked back again and found the pursuing craft hanging with grim resolution to their foamy wake.

"More speed, Blinky!" she implored.

"Don't worry!" Corbin's assurance was delivered cheerfully. "We'll lose her when we get inshore!"

Minutes, tense and melodramatic, were marked off by Cricket's racing pulses. Last week, last month the chase would have had a terrific kick in it. Eileen's panic-stricken face and Delphia Dragnell's whimpering pleas for greater haste would have filled her with amusement. But tonight things were different. The eyes of Hal rode beside her. In fancy he leaned to her and his expression, as she mentally visualized it, was one of sadness.

"She's faster than I imagined. We'll have a job to slip her up."

Another look showed Cricket that slowly but surely they were being overtaken. Yet the welcoming lights of the Wildbracken beach were not far distant. They were near shoal water and among the tiny islands that dotted the coast. Instead of making for the inlet Blinky began twisting a precarious way in and around the islands. It was a ruse to outwit their pursuer but instead of working to their advantage it brought the other still closer to them.

"No go!" Stanley Barrow groaned. "Put out your little wrists and get ready for the Government jewelry, children!"

"We simply can't be arrested!" Eileen Harness wailed. "I'm only on probation now. If my dad hears about this it'll be all up with me!"

"Same here," Delphia Dragnell confessed tearfully. "I've made and broken a hundred promises. This will be the end of a perfect day for me!"

CRICKET only half heard their excited comments. Of a sudden a brilliant idea came to her. Arrest! Notoriety! Scandal! And—Hal! They were not out a great distance from the shore. Probably a quarter of a mile at best. What was to prevent her diving overboard and swimming for it? Often she had swam out to the islands and thought nothing of it. And what she wore would never hamper her.

She cast one look back, they had circled the final island and were about to double on their tracks. Coming around, Cricket saw the ominous red, white and yellow lights dangerously near.

Delphia Dragnell was standing, crouching forward. The others were intent upon the open water before them. No one was paying the least attention to her and Cricket saw that it was indubitably her one and only opportunity. She left the drenched wicker chair and clambered over onto the smooth mahogany stern. It was the height of folly to risk a dive where the propeller churned, so she faced the shore, braced herself and leaped from the side—overboard and into the cold embrace of the night waters.

Cricket used her powerful overhand stroke and picked out a distant landing spot. There was just enough moonlight to illumine the way. After her first immersion she trod water and listened. Remote sounds signified both boats were over on

the far side of the last island. She smiled faintly and struck quickly out for the shore.

When she lowered her feet presently Cricket felt shifting sand beneath them. She waded in, mounted the beach and came directly upon the roadway that skirted it. Her bump of locality told her she had come in two miles or so beyond her house. She shivered, stooping to squeeze salt water from her slinky silken skirt and then was half blinded by the headlights of a motor car that swung around a curve in the road.

"Keep moving!" Cricket said under her breath. "This is one night when I don't want a lift. One night when I'll walk home from the party all by my lonesome!"

But her request remained ungranted. The car stopped, the lights still upon her, some one climbed out and before she could move or turn to dart away, a shadowy figure had come down the beach. There was an interlude of perhaps ten seconds.

Then Hal Pierce's voice sounded close beside her.

"Why, Cricket, you're all wet!"

SHE tried to laugh but made a failure of it. The swim in had been made for the sole purpose of concealing the evening's episode from the very person who now confronted her. "Oh, what's the use? Take me home, Hal, before I'm a solid block of ice and you'll have to get a pair of tongs to move me. I've pulled another bone and I'm sorry and cold and miserable and everything!"

"Poor Cricket!"

His arm, warm and comforting, slipped around her waist. She gave a start of real amazement.

"What! You can still sympathize? Hal, the only reason I jumped off the *Cricket* was to escape being arrested and what you would think. Listen. I'll unfold the whole dizzy narrative in return for a ride home."

On the way up to the car and when she was in the front seat Cricket briefly explained in detail. Hal said nothing until she had finished. Then, in the dim light of the instrument board, he turned his good-looking face toward her, threw back his head and laughed. It was boisterous laughter that shook the roof of the car and Cricket's restless red lips parted. "I'm sure," she cried stiffly, "I don't

see anything so very funny about it!"

"Naturally you wouldn't. Two red, a white and a yellow light? Also a searchlight? You've been deceived, Cricket. That was no Government chaser after you."

"How—"

"How do I know? I'll tell you. The boat pursuing you happened to be the *South Wind*, the sixty-five foot cruiser Jerry Evarts is entering in the regatta on Labor Day. She just came up from Shippan Point this afternoon. Jerry and Constance and Mrs. Evarts and some others were trying her out. I was on board just before they left and I saw the lights and the siren and all the rest. In fact, Jerry said he was going out beyond the schooner which, as it happens, isn't a rum boat after all. It's just an auxiliary with a set of engines that broke down out there. Jerry probably was signaling for you to stop so he could race you in or do something equally as tricky."

CRICKET blinked. Once more the grotesque side of it assailed her. She looked at her sweater, shrinking visibly and she looked into Hal's face and shook her head sadly.

"Please take me home like a dear. I can't stand much more of this. Everything's topsy-turvy and I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my feet."

"As you were that morning when I first saw you." Instead of putting the car in motion, Hal took her little cold hand in his. "I want to tell you something. I've tried it twice but was cut off both times. Cricket, honesty compels me to own up and tell the truth. You've been framed, to use an inelegant expression."

"Framed?"

"I mean I've never been in love with Constance. It was you from the very first moment when I saw you down on the beach with your toes directed at the clouds. You and nobody else, Cricket!"

"B-but—"

"Then Jerry introduced me to your sister. I didn't make any secret of it. I'd fallen in love with you and I didn't care who knew it. I guess Connie took pity on me. Anyway, she told me your reputation, how many hearts you had shattered gayly, how many summertime romances you had figured in—"

"Connie would tell you that," Cricket breathed. "Go on. I might as well hear the rest of it."

"Consider my feelings. I loved you but I didn't know you. Oh, I imagined myself in love before. This time it was the real thing and I didn't want to muff it. I wanted to make absolutely sure there would be no slip-up and Constance very kindly agreed to help. She told me what a sympathetic nature you have and how you always champion the poor, lowly underdog. She said if I'd pretend to be one of her suitors, mistreated and neglected, you'd be sure to take an immediate interest. It worked out exactly according to specifications."

Cricket said nothing when he halted but her heart had begun to sing again.

"What else?" she asked weakly.

"That night at Blinky's party. I was on the point of blurting it out, telling you. But I was checked. Then the other day when Constance and I were on the veranda steps and you came along. She'd just been telling me she was sure you cared in the right way and that you'd cut out your—your hopping around. I was about to tell you then but something made me suppress it. I had to be sure of you—sure this wasn't any light, inconsequential affair that would be forgotten when you left Wildbracken. Cricket, now I'm certain—positive at last!"

"Why—why should you be, Hal?"

"If you didn't care that way," he told her, "you wouldn't have bothered to dive off Blinky's boat and risk going to Davey Jones' locker. You wouldn't have done that and you know it. Cricket, look up at me."

SHE lifted her gaze, the old longing ache creeping craftily through her.

"I am looking, Hal."

"I love you, Cricket."

"And I," she faltered, "love you. That's been the whole trouble right along. I started loving you days ago and I'm going to keep on loving you when there are silver threads among the gold—"

He took her other hand and folded the fingers back.

"I want you to be my little Cricket on our little hearth. Later, we'll discuss the most important date in the world's history, where we'll

honeymoon and all that. First—”

His kiss found her lips and she let her damp tousled head droop to his shoulder. Some time elapsed before she opened her dreamy eyes and stirred.

“A stern chase and a long one, a night's swim, a waiting sweetheart and a proposal of marriage.” Cricket smiled into his eyes. “You know, dearest, a thing of this kind happens only once.... Once in a blue moon!”

