



*The Elk*

*by Saki*



**T**ERESA, MRS THROPPESTANCE, was the richest and most intractable old woman in the county of Woldshire. In her dealings with the world in general her manner suggested a blend between a Mistress of the Robes and a Master of Foxhounds, with the vocabulary of both. In her domestic circle she comported herself in the arbitrary style that one attributes, probably without the least justification, to an American political Boss in the bosom of his caucus. The late Theodore Thropplestance had left her, some thirty-five years ago, in absolute possession of a considerable fortune, a large landed property, and a gallery full of valuable pictures. In those intervening years she had outlived her son and quarrelled with her elder grandson, who had married without her consent or approval. Bertie Thropplestance, her younger grandson, was the heir-designate to her property, and as such he was a centre of interest and concern to some half-hundred ambitious mothers with daughters of marriageable age. Bertie was an amiable, easy-going young man, who was quite ready to marry anyone who was favourably recommended to his notice, but he was not going to waste his time in falling in love with anyone who would come under his grandmother's veto. The favourable recommendation would have to come from Mrs Thropplestance.

Teresa's house-parties were always rounded off with a plentiful garnishing of presentable young women and alert, attendant mothers, but the old lady was emphatically discouraging whenever any one of her girl guests became at all likely to outbid the others as a possible granddaughter-in-law. It was the inheritance of her fortune and estate that was in question, and she was evidently disposed to exercise and enjoy her powers of selection and rejection to the utmost. Bertie's preferences did not greatly matter; he was of the sort who can be stolidly happy with any kind of wife; he had cheerfully put up with his grandmother all his life, so was not likely to fret and fume over anything that might befall him in the way of a helpmate.

The party that gathered under Teresa's roof in Christmas week of the year nineteen-hundred-and-something was of smaller proportions than usual, and Mrs Yonelet, who formed one of the party, was inclined to deduce hopeful augury from this circumstance. Dora Yonelet and Bertie were so obviously made for one another, she confided to the vicar's wife, and if the old lady were accustomed to seeing them about a lot together she might adopt the view that they would make a suitable married couple.

"People soon get used to an idea if it is dangled constantly before their eyes," said Mrs Yonelet hopefully, "and the more often Teresa sees those young people together, happy in each other's company, the more she will get to take a kindly interest in Dora as a possible and desirable wife for Bertie."

"My dear," said the vicar's wife resignedly, "my own Sybil was thrown together with Bertie under the most romantic circumstances — I'll tell you about it some day — but it made no impression whatever on Teresa; she put her foot down in the most uncompromising fashion, and Sybil married an Indian civilian."

"Quite right of her," said Mrs Yonelet with vague approval; "it's what any girl of spirit would have done. Still, that was a year or two ago, I believe; Bertie is older now, and so is Teresa. Naturally she must be anxious to see him settled."

The vicar's wife reflected that Teresa seemed to be the one person who showed no immediate anxiety to supply Bertie with a wife, but she kept the thought to herself.

Mrs Yonelet was a woman of resourceful energy and generalship; she involved the other members of the house-party, the deadweight, so to speak, in all manner of exercises and occupations that segregated them from Bertie and Dora, who were left to their own devisings – that is to say, to Dora's devisings and Bertie's accommodating acquiescence. Dora helped in the Christmas decorations of the parish church, and Bertie helped her to help. Together they fed the swans, till the birds went on a dyspepsia-strike, together they played billiards, together they photographed the village almshouses, and, at a respectful distance, the tame elk that browsed in solitary aloofness in the park. It was "tame" in the sense that it had long ago discarded the least vestige of fear of the human race; nothing in its record encouraged its human neighbours to feel a reciprocal confidence.

Whatever sport or exercise or occupation Bertie and Dora indulged in together was unfailingly chronicled and advertised by Mrs Yonelet for the due enlightenment of Bertie's grandmother.

"Those two inseparables have just come in from a bicycle ride," she would announce; "quite a picture they make, so fresh and glowing after their spin."

"A picture needing words," would be Teresa's private comment, and as far as Bertie was concerned she was determined that the words should remain unspoken.

On the afternoon after Christmas Day Mrs Yonelet dashed into the drawing-room, where her hostess was sitting amid a circle of guests and teacups and muffin-dishes. Fate had placed what seemed like a trump-card in the hands of the patiently-manoeuvring mother. With eyes blazing with excitement and a voice heavily escorted with exclamation marks she made a dramatic announcement.

"Bertie has saved Dora from the elk!"

In swift, excited sentences, broken with maternal emotion, she gave supplementary information as to how the treacherous animal had ambushed Dora as she was hunting for a strayed golf ball, and how Bertie had dashed to her rescue with a stable fork and driven the beast off in the nick of time.

"It was touch and go! She threw her niblick at it, but that didn't stop it. In another moment she would have been crushed beneath its hoofs," panted Mrs Yonelet.

"The animal is not safe," said Teresa, handing her agitated guest a cup of tea. "I forget if you take sugar. I suppose the solitary life it leads has soured its temper. There are muffins in the grate. It's not my fault; I've tried to get it a mate for ever so long. You don't know of anyone with a lady elk for sale or exchange, do you?" she asked the company generally.

But Mrs Yonelet was in no humour to listen to talk of elk marriages. The mating of two human beings was the subject uppermost in her mind, and the opportunity for advancing her pet project was too valuable to be neglected.

"Teresa," she exclaimed impressively, "after those two young people have been thrown together so dramatically, nothing can be quite the same again between them. Bertie has done more than save Dora's life; he has earned her affection. One cannot help feeling that Fate has consecrated them for one another."

"Exactly what the vicar's wife said when Bertie saved Sybil from the elk a year or two ago," observed Teresa placidly; "I pointed out to her that he had rescued Mirabel Hicks from the same predicament a few months previously, and that priority really belonged to the gardener's boy, who had been rescued in the January of that year. There is a good deal of sameness in country life, you know."

"It seems to be a very dangerous animal," said one of the guests.

"That's what the mother of the gardener's boy said," remarked Teresa; "she wanted me to have it destroyed, but I pointed out to her that she had eleven children and I had only one elk. I also gave her a black silk skirt; she said that though there hadn't been a funeral in her family she felt as if there had been. Anyhow, we parted friends. I can't offer you a silk skirt, Emily, but you may have another cup of tea. As I have already remarked, there are muffins in the grate."

Teresa closed the discussion, having deftly conveyed the impression that she considered the mother of the gardener's boy had shown a far more reasonable spirit than the parents of other elk-assaulted victims.

"Teresa is devoid of feeling," said Mrs Yonelet afterwards to the vicar's wife; "to sit there, talking of muffins, with an appalling tragedy only narrowly averted—"

"Of course you know whom she really intends Bertie to marry?" asked the vicar's wife; "I've noticed it for some time. The Bickelbys' German governess."

"A German governess! What an idea!" gasped Mrs Yonelet.

"She's of quite good family, I believe," said the vicar's wife, "and not at all the mouse-in-the-background sort of person that governesses are usually supposed to be. In fact, next to Teresa, she's about the most assertive and combative personality in the neighbourhood. She's pointed out to my husband all sorts of errors in his sermons, and she gave Sir Laurence a public lecture on how he ought to handle the hounds. You know how sensitive Sir Laurence is about any criticism of his Mastership, and to have a governess laying down the law to him nearly drove him into a fit. She's behaved like that to every one, except, of course, Teresa, and every one has been defensively rude to her in return. The Bickelbys are simply too afraid of her to get rid of her. Now isn't that exactly the sort of woman whom Teresa would take a delight in installing as her successor? Imagine the discomfort and awkwardness in the county if we suddenly found that she was to be the future hostess at the Hall. Teresa's only regret will be that she won't be alive to see it."

"But," objected Mrs Yonelet, "surely Bertie hasn't shown the least sign of being attracted in that quarter?"

"Oh, she's quite nice-looking in a way, and dresses well, and plays a good game of tennis. She often comes across the park with messages from the Bickelby mansion,

and one of these days Bertie will rescue her from the elk, which has become almost a habit with him, and Teresa will say that Fate has consecrated them to one another. Bertie might not be disposed to pay much attention to the consecrations of Fate, but he would not dream of opposing his grandmother."

The vicar's wife spoke with the quiet authority of one who has intuitive knowledge, and in her heart of hearts Mrs Yonelet believed her.

Six months later the elk had to be destroyed. In a fit of exceptional moroseness it had killed the Bickelbys' German governess. It was an irony of its fate that it should achieve popularity in the last moments of its career; at any rate, it established the record of being the only living thing that had permanently thwarted Teresa Throplestance's plans.

Dora Yonelet broke off her engagement with an Indian civilian, and married Bertie three months after his grandmother's death — Teresa did not long survive the German governess fiasco. At Christmas time every year young Mrs Throplestance hangs an extra large festoon of evergreens on the elk horns that decorate the hall.

"It was a fearsome beast," she observes to Bertie, "but I always feel that it was instrumental in bringing us together."

Which, of course, was true.