

Love Before Breakfast

Frank Stockton

Table of Contents

<u>Love Before Breakfast</u>	1
<u>Frank Stockton</u>	2

Love Before Breakfast

Frank Stockton

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

I was still a young man when I came into the possession of an excellent estate. This consisted of a large country house, surrounded by lawns, groves, and gardens, and situated not far from the flourishing little town of Boynton. Being an orphan with no brothers or sisters, I set up here a bachelor's hall, in which, for two years, I lived with great satisfaction and comfort, improving my grounds and furnishing my house. When I had made all the improvements which were really needed, and feeling that I now had a most delightful home to come back to, I thought it would be an excellent thing to take a trip to Europe, give my mind a run in fresh fields, and pick up a lot of bric-a-brac and ideas for the adornment and advantage of my house and mind.

It was the custom of the residents in my neighborhood who owned houses and travelled in the summer to let their houses during their absence, and my business agent and myself agreed that this would be an excellent thing for me to do. If the house were let to a suitable family it would yield me a considerable income, and the place would not present on my return that air of retrogression and desolation which I might expect if it were left unoccupied and in charge of a caretaker.

My agent assured me that I would have no trouble whatever in letting my place, for it offered many advantages and I expected but a reasonable rent. I desired to leave everything just as it stood, house, furniture, books, horses, cows, and poultry, taking with me only my clothes and personal requisites, and I desired tenants who would come in bringing only their clothes and personal requisites, which they could quietly take away with them when their lease should expire and I should return home.

In spite, however, of the assurances of the agent, it was not easy to let my place. The house was too large for some people, too small for others, and while some applicants had more horses than I had stalls in my stable, others did not want even the horses I would leave. I had engaged my steamer passage, and the day for my departure drew near, and yet no suitable tenants had presented themselves. I had almost come to the conclusion that the whole matter would have to be left in the hands of my agent, for I had no intention whatever of giving up my projected travels, when early one afternoon some people came to look at the house. Fortunately I was at home, and I gave myself the pleasure of personally conducting them about the premises. It was a pleasure, because as soon as I comprehended the fact that these applicants desired to rent my house I wished them to have it.

The family consisted of an elderly gentleman and his wife, with a daughter of twenty or thereabout. This was a family that suited me exactly. Three in number, no children, people of intelligence and position, fond of the country, and anxious for just such a place as I offered them—what could be better?

The more I walked about and talked with these good people and showed them my possessions, the more I desired that the young lady should take my house. Of course her parents were included in this wish, but it was for her ears that all my remarks were intended, although sometimes addressed to the others, and she was the tenant I labored to obtain. I say "labored" advisedly, because I racked my brain to think of inducements which might bring them to a speedy and favorable decision.

Apart from the obvious advantages of the arrangement, it would be a positive delight to me during my summer wanderings in Europe to think that that beautiful girl would be strolling through my grounds, enjoying my flowers, and sitting with her book in the shady nooks I had made so pleasant, lying in my hammocks, spending her evening hours in my study, reading my books, writing at my desk, and perhaps musing in my easy-chair. Before these applicants appeared it had sometimes pained me to imagine strangers in my home; but no such thought crossed my mind in regard to this young lady, who, if charming in the house and on the lawn, grew positively entrancing when she saw my Jersey cows and my two horses, regarding them with an admiration which even surpassed my own.

Long before we had completed the tour of inspection I had made up my mind that this young lady should come to live in my house. If obstacles should show themselves they should be removed. I would tear down, I

Love Before Breakfast

would build, I would paper and paint, I would put in all sorts of electric bells, I would reduce the rent until it suited their notions exactly, I would have my horses' tails banded if she liked that kind of tails better than long ones—I would do anything to make them definitely decide to take the place before they left me. I trembled to think of her going elsewhere and giving other householders a chance to tempt her. She had looked at a good many country houses, but it was quite plain that none of them had pleased her so well as mine.

I left them in my library to talk the matter over by themselves, and in less than ten minutes the young lady herself came out on the lawn to tell me that her father and mother had decided to take the place and would like to speak with me.

"I am so glad," she said as we went in. "I am sure I shall enjoy every hour of our stay here. It is so different from anything we have yet seen."

When everything had been settled I wanted to take them again over the place and point out a lot of things I had omitted. I particularly wanted to show them some lovely walks in the woods. But there was no time, for they had to catch a train.

Her name was Vincent—Cora Vincent, as I discovered from her mother's remarks.

As soon as they departed I had my mare saddled and rode into town to see my agent. I went into his office exultant.

"I've let my house," I said, "and I want you to make out the lease and have everything fixed and settled as soon as possible. This is the address of my tenants."

The agent asked me a good many questions, being particularly anxious to know what rent had been agreed upon.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, when I mentioned the sum, "that is ever so much less than I told you you could get. I am in communication now with a party whom I know would pay you considerably more than these people. Have you definitely settled with them? Perhaps it is not too late to withdraw."

"Withdraw!" I cried. "Never! They are the only tenants I want. I was determined to get them, and I think I must have lowered the rent four or five times in the course of the afternoon. I took a big slice out of it before I mentioned the sum at all. You see," said I, very impressively, "these Vincents exactly suit me." And then I went on to state fully the advantages of the arrangement, omitting, however, any references to my visions of Miss Vincent swinging in my hammocks or musing in my study-chair.

It was now May 15, and my steamer would sail on the twenty-first. The intervening days I employed, not in preparing for my travels, but in making every possible arrangement for the comfort and convenience of my incoming tenants. The Vincents did not wish to take possession until June 1, and I was sorry they had not applied before I had engaged my passage, for in that case I would have selected a later date. A very good steamer sailed on June 3, and it would have suited me just as well.

Happening to be in New York one day, I went to the Vincents' city residence to consult with them in regard to some awnings which I proposed putting up at the back of the house. I found no one at home but the old gentleman, and it made no difference to him whether the awnings were black and brown or red and yellow. I cordially invited him to come out before I left, and bring his family, that they might look about the place to see if there was anything they would like to have done which had not already been attended to. It was so much better, I told him, to talk over these matters personally with the owner than with an agent in his absence. Agents were often very unwilling to make changes. Mr. Vincent was a very quiet and exceedingly pleasant elderly gentleman, and thanked me very much for my invitation, but said he did not see how he could find the time to get out to my house before I sailed. I did not like to say that it was not at all necessary for him to neglect his affairs in order to accompany his family to my place, but I assured him that if any of them wished to go out at any time before they took possession they must feel at perfect liberty to do so.

I mentioned this matter to my agent, suggesting that if he happened to be in New York he might call on the Vincents and repeat my invitation. It was not likely that the old gentleman would remember to mention it to his wife and daughter, and it was really important that everything should be made satisfactory before I left.

"It seems to me," he said, smiling a little grimly, "that the Vincents had better be kept away from your house until you have gone. If you do anything more to it you may find out that it would have been more profitable to have shut it up while you are away."

He did call, however, partly because I wished him to and partly because he was curious to see the people I was

Love Before Breakfast

so anxious to install in my home, and to whom he was to be my legal representative. He reported the next day that he had found no one at home but Miss Vincent, and that she had said that she and her mother would be very glad to come out the next week and go over the place before they took possession.

"Next week!" I exclaimed. "I shall be gone then!"

"But I shall be here," said Mr. Barker, "and I'll show them about and take their suggestions."

This did not suit me at all. It annoyed me very much to think of Barker showing Miss Vincent about my place. He was a good-looking young man and not at all backward in his manners.

"After all," said I, "I suppose that everything that ought to be done has been done. I hope you told her that."

"Of course not," said he. "That would have been running dead against your orders. Besides, it's my business to show people about places. I don't mind it."

This gave me an unpleasant and uneasy feeling. I wondered if Mr. Barker were the agent I ought to have, and if a middle-aged man with a family and more experience might not be better able to manage my affairs.

"Barker," said I, a little later, "there will be no use of your going every month to the Vincents to collect their rent. I shall write to Mr. Vincent to pay as he pleases. He can send a check monthly or at the end of the season, as it may be convenient. He is perfectly responsible, and I would much prefer to have the money in a lump when I come back."

Barker grinned. "All right," said he, "but that's not the way to do business, you know."

I may have been mistaken, but I fancied that I saw in my agent's face an expression which indicated that he intended to call on the first day of each month, on the pretext of telling Vincent that it was not necessary to pay the rent at any particular time, and that he also proposed to make many other intervening visits to inquire if repairs were needed. This might have been a good deal to get out of his expression, but I think I could have got more if I had thought longer.

On the day before that on which I was to sail, my mind was in such a disturbed condition that I could not attend to my packing or anything else. It almost enraged me to think that I was deliberately leaving the country ten days before my tenants would come to my house. There was no reason why I should do this. There were many reasons why I should not. There was Barker. I was now of the opinion that he would personally superintend the removal of the Vincents and their establishment to my home. I remembered that the only suggestion he had made about the improvement of the place had been the construction of a tennis-court. I knew that he was a champion player. Confound it! What a dreadful mistake I had made in selecting such a man for my house-agent. With my mind's eye I could already see Miss Vincent and Barker selecting a spot for tennis and planning the arrangements of the court.

I took the first train to New York and went directly to the steamboat office. It is astonishing how many obstacles can be removed from a man's path if he will make up his mind to give them a good kick. I found that my steamer was crowded. The applications for passage exceeded the accommodations, and the agent was delighted to transfer me to the steamer that sailed on June 3. I went home exultant. Barker drove over in the evening to take his last instructions, and a blank look came over his face when I told him that business had delayed my departure, and that I should not sail the next day. If I had told him that part of that business was the laying out of a tennis-court he might have looked blanker.

Of course the date of my departure did not concern the Vincents, provided the house was vacated by June 1, and I did not inform them of the change in my plans, but when the mother and daughter came out the next week they were much surprised to find me waiting to receive them instead of Barker. I hope that they were also pleased, and I am sure that they had every reason to be so. Mrs. Vincent, having discovered that I was a most complacent landlord, accommodated herself easily to my disposition and made a number of minor requirements, all of which I granted without the slightest hesitation. I was delighted at last to put her into the charge of my housekeeper, and when the two had betaken themselves to the bedrooms I invited Miss Vincent to come out with me to select a spot for a tennis-court. The invitation was accepted with alacrity, for tennis, she declared, was a passion with her.

The selection of that tennis-court took nearly an hour, for there were several good places for one and it was hard to make a selection; besides, I could not lose the opportunity of taking Miss Vincent into the woods and showing her the walks I had made and the rustic seats I had placed in pleasant nooks. Of course she would have discovered these, but it was a great deal better for her to know all about them before she came. At last Mrs. Vincent sent a maid to tell her daughter that it was time to go for the train, and the court had not been definitely

Love Before Breakfast

planned.

The next day I went to Miss Vincent's house with a plan of the grounds, and she and I talked it over until the matter was settled. It was necessary to be prompt about this, I explained, as there would be a great deal of levelling and rolling to be done.

I also had a talk with the old gentleman about books. There were several large boxes of my books in New York which I had never sent out to my country house. Many of these I thought might be interesting to him, and I offered to have them taken out and left at his disposal. When he heard the titles of some of the books in the collection he was much interested, but insisted that before he made use of them they should be catalogued, as were the rest of my effects. I hesitated a moment, wondering if I could induce Barker to come to New York and catalogue four big boxes of books, when, to my surprise, Miss Vincent incidentally remarked that if they were in any place where she could get at them she would be pleased to help catalogue them; that sort of thing was a great pleasure to her. Instantly I proposed that I should send the books to the Vincent house, that they should there be taken out so that Mr. Vincent could select those he might care to read during the summer, that I would make a list of these, and if Vincent would assist me I would be grateful for the kindness, and those that were not desired could be returned to the storehouse.

What a grand idea was this! I had been internally groaning because I could think of no possible pretence, for further interviews with Miss Vincent, and here was something better than I could have imagined. Her father declared that he could not put me to so much trouble, but I would listen to none of his words, and the next morning my books were spread over his library floor.

The selection and cataloguing of the volumes desired occupied the mornings of three days. The old gentleman's part was soon done, but there were many things in the books which were far more interesting to me than their titles, and to which I desired to draw Miss Vincent's attention. All this greatly protracted our labors. She was not only a beautiful girl, but her intelligence and intellectual grasp were wonderful. I could not help telling her what a great pleasure it would be to me to think, while wandering in foreign lands, that such an appreciative family would be enjoying my books and my place.

"You are so fond of your house and everything you have," said she, "that we shall almost feel as if we were depriving you of your rights. But I suppose that Italian lakes and the Alps will make you forget for a time even your beautiful home."

"Not if you are in it," I longed to say, but I restrained myself. I did not believe that it was possible for me to be more in love with this girl than I was at that moment, but, of course, it would be the rankest stupidity to tell her so. To her I was simply her father's landlord.

I went to that house the next day to see that the boxes were properly repacked, and I actually went the next day to see if the right boxes had gone into the country, and the others back to the storehouse. The first day I saw only the father. The second day it was the mother who assured me that everything had been properly attended to. I began to feel that if I did not wish a decided rebuff I would better not make any more pretences of business at the Vincent house.

There were affairs of my own which should have been attended to, and I ought to have gone home and attended to them, but I could not bear to do so. There was no reason to suppose she would go out there before the first of June.

Thinking over the matter many times, I came to the conclusion that if I could see her once more I would be satisfied. Then I would go away, and carry her image with me into every art-gallery, over every glacier, and under every lovely sky that I should enjoy abroad, hoping all the time that, taking my place, as it were, in my home, and making my possessions, in a measure, her own, she would indirectly become so well acquainted with me that when I returned I might speak to her without shocking her.

To obtain this final interview there was but one way. I had left my house on Saturday, the Vincents would come on the following Monday, and I would sail on Wednesday. I would go on Tuesday to inquire if they found everything to their satisfaction. This would be a very proper attention from a landlord about to leave the country.

When I reached Boynton I determined to walk to my house, for I did not wish to encumber myself with a hired vehicle. I might be asked to stay to luncheon. A very strange feeling came over me as I entered my grounds. They were not mine. For the time being they belonged to somebody else. I was merely a visitor or a trespasser if the Vincents thought proper so to consider me. If they did not like people to walk on the grass I had no right to do

Love Before Breakfast

it.

None of my servants had been left on the place, and the maid who came to the door informed me that Mr. Vincent had gone to New York that morning, and that Mrs. Vincent and her daughter were out driving. I ventured to ask if she thought they would soon return, and she answered that she did not think they would, as they had gone to Rock Lake, which, from the way they talked about it, must be a long way off.

Rock Lake! When I had driven over there with my friends, we had taken luncheon at the inn and returned in the afternoon. And what did they know of Rock Lake? Who had told them of it? That officious Barker, of course.

"Will you leave a message, sir?" said the maid, who, of course, did not know me.

"No," said I, and as I still stood gazing at the piazza floor, she remarked that if I wished to call again she would go out and speak to the coachman and ask him if anything had been said to him about the time of the party's return.

Worse and worse! Their coachman had not driven them! Some one who knew the country had been their companion. They were not acquainted in the neighborhood, and there could not be a shadow of a doubt that it was that obtrusive Barker who had indecently thrust himself upon them on the very next day after their arrival, and had thus snatched from me this last interview upon which I had counted so earnestly.

I had no right to ask any more questions. I left no message nor any name, and I had no excuse for saying I would call again.

I got back to my hotel without having met any one whom I knew, and that night I received a note from Barker, stating that he had fully intended coming to the steamer to see me off, but that an engagement would prevent him. He sent, however, his best good wishes for my safe passage, and assured me that he would keep me fully informed of the state of my affairs on this side.

"Engagement!" I exclaimed. "Is he going to drive with her again to-morrow?"

My steamer sailed at two o'clock the next day, and after an early breakfast I went to the company's office to see if I could dispose of my ticket. It had become impossible, I told the agent, for me to leave America at present. He said it was a very late hour to sell my ticket, but that he would do what he could, and if an applicant turned up he would give him my room and refund the money. He wanted me to change to another date, but I declined to do this. I was not able to say when I should sail.

I now had no plan of action. All I knew was that I could not leave America without finding out something definite about this Barker business. That is to say, if it should be made known to me that instead of attending to my business, sending a carpenter to make repairs, if such were necessary, or going personally to the plumber to make sure that that erratic personage would give his attention to any pipes in regard to which Mr. Vincent might have written, Barker should mingle in sociable relations with my tenants, and drive or play tennis with the young lady of the house, then would I immediately have done with him. I would withdraw my business from his hands and place it in those of old Mr. Poindexter. More than that, it might be my duty to warn Miss Vincent's parents against Barker. I did not doubt that he was a very good house and land-agent, but in selecting him as such I had no idea of introducing him to the Vincents in a social way. In fact, the more I thought about it the more I became convinced that if ever I mentioned Barker to my tenants it would be to warn them against him. From certain points of view he was actually a dangerous man.

This, however, I would not do until I found my agent was really culpable. To discover what Barker had done, what he was doing, and what he intended to do, was now my only business in life. Until I had satisfied myself on these points I could not think of starting out upon my travels.

Now that I had determined I would not start for Europe until I had satisfied myself that Mr. Barker was contenting himself with attending to my business, and not endeavoring to force himself into social relations with my tenants, I was anxious that the postponement of my journey should be unknown to my friends and acquaintances, and I was, therefore, very glad to see in a newspaper, published on the afternoon of the day of my intended departure, my name among the list of passengers who had sailed upon the Mnemonic. For the first time I commended the super-enterprise of a reporter who gave more attention to the timeliness of his news than to its accuracy.

I was stopping at a New York hotel, but I did not wish to stay there. Until I felt myself ready to start on my travels the neighborhood of Boynton would suit me better than anywhere else. I did not wish to go to the town itself, for Barker lived there, and I knew many of the townspeople; but there were farmhouses not far away where

Love Before Breakfast

I might spend a week. After considering the matter, I thought of something that might suit me. About three miles from my house, on an unfrequented road, was a mill which stood at the end of an extensive sheet of water, in reality a mill-pond, but commonly called a lake. The miller, an old man, had recently died, and his house near by was occupied by a newcomer whom I had never seen. If I could get accommodations there it would suit me exactly. I left the train two stations below Boynton and walked over to the mill.

The country-folk in my neighborhood are always pleased to take summer boarders if they can get them, and the miller and his wife were glad to give me a room, not imagining that I was the owner of a good house not far away. The place suited my requirements very well. It was near her, and I might live here for a time unnoticed, but what I was going to do with my opportunity I did not know. Several times the conviction forced itself upon me that I should get up at once and go to Europe by the first steamer, and so show myself that I was a man of sense.

This conviction was banished on the second afternoon of my stay at the mill. I was sitting under a tree in the orchard near the house, thinking and smoking my pipe, when along the road which ran by the side of the lake came Mr. Vincent on my black horse General and his daughter on my mare Sappho. Instinctively I pulled my straw hat over my eyes, but this precaution was not necessary. They were looking at the beautiful lake, with its hills and overhanging trees, and saw me not!

When the very tip of Sappho's tail had melted into the foliage of the road, I arose to my feet and took a deep breath of the happy air. I had seen her, and it was with her father she was riding.

I do not believe I slept a minute that night through thinking of her, and feeling glad that I was near her, and that she had been riding with her father.

When the early dawn began to break an idea brighter than the dawn broke upon me: I would get up and go nearer to her. It is amazing how much we lose by not getting up early on the long summer days. How beautiful the morning might be on this earth I never knew until I found myself wandering by the edge of my woods and over my lawn with the tender gray-blue sky above me and all the freshness of the grass and flowers and trees about me, the birds singing among the branches, and she sleeping sweetly somewhere within that house with its softly defined lights and shadows. How I wished I knew what room she occupied!

The beauties and joys of that hour were lost to every person on the place, who were all, no doubt, in their soundest sleep. I did not even see a dog. Quietly and stealthily stepping from bush to hedge, I went around the house, and as I drew near the barn I fancied I could hear from a little room adjoining it the snores of the coachman. The lazy rascal would probably not awaken for two or three hours yet, but I would run no risks, and in half an hour I had sped away.

Now I knew exactly why I was staying at the house of the miller. I was doing so in order that I might go early in the mornings to my own home, in which the girl I loved lay dreaming, and that for the rest of the day and much of the night I might think of her.

"What place in Europe," I said to myself, "could be so beautiful, so charming, and so helpful to reflection as this sequestered lake, these noble trees, these stretches of undulating meadow?"

Even if I should care to go abroad, a month or two later would answer all my purposes. Why had I ever thought of spending five months away?

There was a pretty stream which ran from the lake and wended its way through a green and shaded valley, and here, with a rod, I wandered and fished and thought. The miller had boats, and in one of these I rowed far up the lake where it narrowed into a creek, and between the high hills which shut me out from the world I would float and think.

Every morning, soon after break of day, I went to my home and wandered about my grounds. If it rained I did not mind that. I like a summer rain.

Day by day I grew bolder. Nobody in that household thought of getting up until seven o'clock. For two hours, at least, I could ramble undisturbed through my grounds, and much as I had once enjoyed these grounds, they never afforded me the pleasure they gave me now. In these happy mornings I felt all the life and spirits of a boy. I went into my little field and stroked the sleek sides of my cows as they nibbled the dewy grass. I even peeped through the barred window of Sappho's box and fed her, as I had been used to doing, with bunches of clover. I saw that the young chickens were flourishing. I went into the garden and noted the growth of the vegetables, feeling glad that she would have so many fine strawberries and tender peas.

I had not the slightest doubt that she was fond of flowers, and for her sake now, as I used to do for my own

Love Before Breakfast

sake, I visited the flower beds and borders. Not far from the house there was a cluster of old-fashioned pinks which I was sure were not doing very well. They had been there too long, perhaps, and they looked stunted and weak. In the miller's garden I had noticed great beds of these pinks, and I asked his wife if I might have some, and she, considering them as mere wild flowers, said I might have as many as I liked. She might have thought I wanted simply the blossoms, but the next morning I went over to my house with a basket filled with great matted masses of the plants taken up with the roots and plenty of earth around them, and after twenty minutes' work in my own bed of pinks, I had taken out all the old plants and filled their places with fresh, luxuriant masses of buds and leaves and blossoms. How glad she would be when she saw the fresh life that had come to that flower-bed! With light footsteps I went away, not feeling the weight of the basket filled with the old plants and roots.

The summer grew and strengthened, and the sun rose earlier, but as that had no effect upon the rising of the present inhabitants of my place, it gave me more time for my morning pursuits. Gradually I constituted myself the regular flower-gardener of the premises. How delightful the work was, and how foolish I thought I had been never to think of doing this thing for myself! but no doubt it was because I was doing it for her that I found it so pleasant.

Once again I had seen Miss Vincent. It was in the afternoon, and I had rowed myself to the upper part of the lake, where, with the high hills and the trees on each side of me, I felt as if I were alone in the world. Floating, idly along, with my thoughts about three miles away, I heard the sound of oars, and looking out on the open part of the lake, I saw a boat approaching. The miller was rowing, and in the stern sat an elderly gentleman and a young lady. I knew them in an instant: they were Mr. and Miss Vincent.

With a few vigorous strokes I shot myself into the shadows, and rowed up the stream into the narrow stretches among the lily-pads, under a bridge, and around a little wooded point, where I ran the boat ashore and sprang upon the grassy bank. Although I did not believe the miller would bring them as far as this, I went up to a higher spot and watched for half an hour; but I did not see them again. How relieved I was! It would have been terribly embarrassing had they discovered me. And how disappointed I was that the miller turned back so soon!

I now extended the supervision of my grounds. I walked through the woods, and saw how beautiful they were in the early dawn. I threw aside the fallen twigs and cut away encroaching saplings, which were beginning to encumber the paths I had made, and if I found a bough which hung too low I cut it off. There was a great beech-tree, between which and a dogwood I had the year before suspended a hammock. In passing this, one morning, I was amazed to see a hammock swinging from the hooks I had put in the two trees. This was a retreat which I had supposed no one else would fancy or even think of! In the hammock was a fan—a common Japanese fan. For fifteen minutes I stood looking at that hammock, every nerve a-tingle. Then I glanced around. The spot had been almost unfrequented since last summer. Little bushes, weeds, and vines had sprung up here and there between the two trees. There were dead twigs and limbs lying about, and the short path to the main walk was much overgrown.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to six. I had yet a good hour for work, and with nothing but my pocket-knife and my hands I began to clear away the space about that hammock. When I left it, it looked as it used to look when it was my pleasure to lie there and swing and read and reflect.

To approach this spot it was not necessary to go through my grounds, for my bit of woods adjoined a considerable stretch of forest-land, and in my morning walks from the mill I often used a path through these woods. The next morning when I took this path I was late because I had unfortunately overslept myself. When I reached the hammock it wanted fifteen minutes to seven o'clock. It was too late for me to do anything, but I was glad to be able to stay there even for a few minutes, to breathe that air, to stand on that ground, to touch that hammock. I did more than that. Why shouldn't I? I got into it. It was a better one than that I had hung there. It was delightfully comfortable. At this moment, gently swinging in that woodland solitude, with the sweet odors of the morning all about me, I felt myself nearer to her than I had ever been before.

But I knew I must not revel in this place too long. I was on the point of rising to leave when I heard approaching footsteps. My breath stopped. Was I at last to be discovered? This was what came of my reckless security. But perhaps the person, some workman most likely, would pass without noticing me. To remain quiet seemed the best course, and I lay motionless.

But the person approaching turned into the little pathway. The footsteps came nearer. I sprang from the hammock. Before me was Miss Vincent!

Love Before Breakfast

What was my aspect I know not, but I have no doubt I turned fiery red. She stopped suddenly, but she did not turn red.

"Oh, Mr. Ripley," she exclaimed, "good morning! You must excuse me. I did not know—"

That she should have had sufficient self-possession to say good morning amazed me. Her whole appearance, in fact, amazed me. There seemed to be something wanting in her manner. I endeavored to get myself into condition.

"You must be surprised," I said, "to see me here. You supposed I was in Europe, but—"

As I spoke I made a couple of steps toward her, but suddenly stopped. One of my coat buttons had caught in the meshes of the hammock. It was confoundedly awkward. I tried to loosen the button, but it was badly entangled. Then I desperately pulled at it to tear it off.

"Oh, don't do that," she said. "Let me unfasten it for you." And taking the threads of the hammock in one of her little hands and the button in the other, she quickly separated them. "I should think buttons would be very inconvenient things—at least, in hammocks," she said smiling. "You see, girls don't have any such trouble."

I could not understand her manner. She seemed to take my being there as a matter of course.

"I must beg a thousand pardons for this—this trespass," I said.

"Trespass!" said she, with a smile. "People don't trespass on their own land—"

"But it is not my land," said I. "It is your father's for the time being. I have no right here whatever. I do not know how to explain, but you must think it very strange to find me here when you supposed I had started for Europe."

"Oh! I knew you had not started for Europe," said she, "because I have seen you working in the grounds—"

"Seen me!" I interrupted. "Is it possible?"

"Oh, yes," said she. "I don't know how long you had been coming when I first saw you, but when I found that fresh bed of pinks all transplanted from somewhere, and just as lovely as they could be, instead of the old ones, I spoke to the man; but he did not know anything about it, and said he had not had time to do anything to the flowers, whereas I had been giving him credit for ever so much weeding and cleaning up. Then I supposed that Mr. Barker, who is just as kind and attentive as he can be, had done it; but I could hardly believe he was the sort of man to come early in the morning and work out of doors,"—"Oh, how I wish he had come!" I thought. "If I had caught him here working among the flowers!,"—"and when he came that afternoon to play tennis I found that he had been away for two days, and could not have planted the pinks. So I simply got up early one morning and looked out, and there I saw you, with your coat off, working just as hard as ever you could."

I stepped back, my mind for a moment a perfect blank.

"What could you have thought of me?" I exclaimed presently.

"Really, at first I did not know what to think," said she. "Of course I did not know what had detained you in this country, but I remembered that I had heard that you were a very particular person about your flowers and shrubs and grounds, and that most likely you thought they would be better taken care of if you kept an eye on them, and that when you found there was so much to do you just went to work and did it. I did not speak of this to anybody, because if you did not wish it to be known that you were taking care of the grounds it was not my business to tell people about it. But yesterday, when I found this place where I had hung my hammock so beautifully cleared up and made so nice and clean and pleasant in every way, I thought I must come down to tell you how much obliged I am, and also that you ought not to take so much trouble for us. If you think the grounds need more attention, I will persuade my father to hire another man, now and then, to work about the place. Really, Mr. Ripley, you ought not to have to—"

I was humbled, abashed. She had seen me at my morning devotions, and this was the way she interpreted them. She considered me an overnice fellow who was so desperately afraid his place would be injured that he came sneaking around every morning to see if any damage had been done and to put things to rights.

She stood for a moment as if expecting me to speak, brushed a buzzing fly from her sleeve, and then, looking at me with a gentle smile, she turned a little as if she were about to leave.

I could not let her go without telling her something. Her present opinion of me must not rest in her mind another minute. And yet, what story could I devise? How, indeed, could I devise anything with which to deceive a girl who spoke and looked at me as this girl did? I could not do it. I must rush away speechless and never see her again, or I must tell her all. I came a little nearer to her.

Love Before Breakfast

"Miss Vincent," said I, "you do not understand at all why I am here—why I have been here so much—why I did not go to Europe. The truth is, I could not leave. I do not wish to be away; I want to come here and live here always—"

"Oh, dear!" she interrupted, "of course it is natural that you should not want to tear yourself away from your lovely home. It would be very hard for us to go away now, especially for father and me, for we have grown to love this place so much. But if you want us to leave, I dare say—"

"I want you to leave!" I exclaimed. "Never! When I say that I want to live here myself, that my heart will not let me go anywhere else, I mean that I want you to live here too—you, your mother and father—that I want—"

"Oh, that would be perfectly splendid!" she said. "I have ever so often thought that it was a shame that you should be deprived of the pleasures you so much enjoy, which I see you can find here and nowhere else. Now, I have a plan which I think will work splendidly. We are a very small family. Why shouldn't you come here and live with us? There is plenty of room, and I know father and mother would be very glad, and you can pay your board, if that would please you better. You can have the room at the top of the tower for your study and your smoking den, and the room under it can be your bedroom, so you can be just as independent as you please of the rest of us, and you can be living on your own place without interfering with us in the least. In fact, it would be ever so nice, especially as I am in the habit of going away to the sea-shore with my aunt every summer for six weeks, and I was thinking how lonely it would be this year for father and mother to stay here all by themselves."

The tower and the room under it! For me! What a contemptibly little-minded and insignificant person she must think me. The words with which I strove to tell her that I wished to live here as lord, with her as my queen, would not come. She looked at me for a moment as I stood on the brink of saying something but not saying it, and then she turned suddenly toward the hammock.

"Did you see anything of a fan I left here?" she said. "I know I left it here, but when I came yesterday it was gone. Perhaps you may have noticed it somewhere—"

Now, the morning before, I had taken that fan home with me. It was an awkward thing to carry, but I had concealed it under my coat. It was a contemptible trick, but the fan had her initials on it, and as it was the only thing belonging to her of which I could possess myself, the temptation had been too great to resist. As she stood waiting for my answer there was a light in her eye which illuminated my perceptions.

"Did you see me take that fan?" I asked.

"I did," said she.

"Then you know," I exclaimed, stepping nearer to her, "why it is I did not leave this country as I intended, why it was impossible for me to tear myself away from this house, why it is that I have been here every morning, hovering around and doing the things I have been doing?"

She looked up at me, and with her eyes she said, "How could I help knowing?" She might have intended to say something with her lips, but I took my answer from her eyes, and with the quick impulse of a lover I stopped her speech.

"You have strange ways," she said presently, blushing and gently pressing back my arm. "I haven't told you a thing."

"Let us tell each other everything now," I cried, and we seated ourselves in the hammock.

It was a quarter of an hour later and we were still sitting together in the hammock.

"You may think," said she, "that, knowing what I did, it was very queer for me to come out to you this morning, but I could not help it. You were getting dreadfully careless, and were staying so late and doing things which people would have been bound to notice, especially as father is always talking about our enjoying the fresh hours of the morning, that I felt I could not let you go on any longer. And when it came to that fan business I saw plainly that you must either immediately start for Europe or—"

"Or what?" I interrupted.

"Or go to my father and regularly engage yourself as a—"

I do not know whether she was going to say "gardener" or not, but it did not matter. I stopped her.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later, and we were standing together at the edge of the woods. She wanted me to come to the house to take breakfast with them.

"Oh, I could not do that!" I said. "They would be so surprised. I should have so much to explain before I could even begin to state my case."

Love Before Breakfast

"Well, then, explain," said she. "You will find father on the front piazza. He is always there before breakfast, and there is plenty of time. After all that has been said here, I cannot go to breakfast and look commonplace while you run away."

"But suppose your father objects?" said I.

"Well, then you will have to go back and take breakfast with your miller," said she.

I never saw a family so little affected by surprises as those Vincents. When I appeared on the front piazza the old gentleman did not jump. He shook hands with me and asked me to sit down, and when I told him everything he did not even ejaculate, but simply folded his hands together and looked out over the railing.

"It seemed strange to Mrs. Vincent and myself," he said, "when we first noticed your extraordinary attachment for our daughter, but, after all, it was natural enough."

"Noticed it!" I exclaimed. "When did you do that?"

"Very soon," he said. "When you and Cora were cataloguing the books at my house in town I noticed it and spoke to Mrs. Vincent, but she said it was nothing new to her, for it was plain enough on the day when we first met you here that you were letting the house to Cora, and that she had not spoken of it to me because she was afraid I might think it wrong to accept the favorable and unusual arrangements you were making with us if I suspected the reason for them. We talked over the matter, but, of course, we could do nothing, because there was nothing to do, and Mrs. Vincent was quite sure you would write to us from Europe. But when my man Ambrose told me he had seen some one working about the place in the very early morning, and that, as it was a gentleman, he supposed it must be the landlord, for nobody else would be doing such things, Mrs. Vincent and I looked out of the window the next day, and when we found it was indeed you who were coming here every day, we felt that the matter was serious and were a good deal troubled. We found, however, that you were conducting affairs in a very honorable way,—that you were not endeavoring to see Cora, and that you did not try to have any secret correspondence with her,—and as we had no right to prevent you from coming on your grounds, we concluded to remain quiet until you should take some step which we would be authorized to notice. Later, when Mr. Barker came and told me that you had not gone to Europe, and were living with a miller not far from here—"

"Barker!" I cried. "The scoundrel!"

"You are mistaken, sir," said Mr. Vincent. "He spoke with the greatest kindness of you, and said that as it was evident you had your own reasons for wishing to stay in the neighborhood, and did not wish the fact to be known, he had spoken of it to no one but me, and he would not have done this had he not thought it would prevent embarrassment in case we should meet."

Would that everlasting Barker ever cease meddling in my affairs?

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that he imagined the reason for my staying here?"

"I do not know," said the old gentleman, "but after the questions I put to him I have no doubt he suspected it. I made many inquiries of him regarding you, your family, habits, and disposition, for this was a very vital matter to me, sir, and I am happy to inform you that he said nothing of you that was not good, so I urged him to keep the matter to himself. I determined, however, that if you continued your morning visits I should take an early opportunity of accosting you and asking an explanation."

"And you never mentioned anything of this to your daughter?" said I.

"Oh, no," he answered. "We carefully kept everything from her."

"But, my dear sir," said I, rising, "you have given me no answer. You have not told me whether or not you will accept me as a son-in-law."

He smiled. "Truly," he said, "I have not answered you; but the fact is, Mrs. Vincent and I have considered the matter so long, and having come to the conclusion that if you made an honorable and straightforward proposition, and if Cora were willing to accept you, we could see no reason to object to—"

At this moment the front door opened and Cora appeared.

"Are you going to stay to breakfast?" she asked. "Because, if you are, it is ready."

I stayed to breakfast.

I am now living in my own house, not in the two tower rooms, but in the whole mansion, of which my former tenant, Cora, is now mistress supreme. Mr. and Mrs. Vincent expect to spend the next summer here and take care of the house while we are travelling.

Mr. Barker, an excellent fellow and a most thorough business man, still manages my affairs, and there is

Love Before Breakfast

nothing on the place that flourishes so vigorously as the bed of pinks which I got from the miller's wife.

By the way, when I went back to my lodging on that eventful day, the miller's wife met me at the door.

"I kept your breakfast waitin' for you for a good while," said she, "but as you didn't come, I supposed you were takin' breakfast in your own house, and I cleared it away."

"Do you know who I am?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, sir," she said. "We did not at first, but when everybody began to talk about it we couldn't help knowin' it."

"Everybody!" I gasped. "And may I ask what you and everybody said about me?"

"I think it was the general opinion, sir," said she, "that you were suspicious of them tenants of yours, and nobody wondered at it, for when city people gets into the country and on other people's property, there's no trustin' them out of your sight for a minute."

I could not let the good woman hold this opinion of my tenants, and I briefly told her the truth. She looked at me with moist admiration in her eyes.

"I am glad to hear that, sir," said she. "I like it very much. But if I was you I wouldn't be in a hurry to tell my husband and the people in the neighborhood about it. They might be a little disappointed at first, for they had a mighty high opinion of you when they thought that you was layin' low here to keep an eye on them tenants of yours."