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## AFTERNOON IN ARDEN

By James Branch Cabell

“THIS,” said she, “is the Forest of Arden.”

“Unquestionably,” said I, with a mental reservation as to a glimpse of the golf links which this particular nook of the forest afforded, and a red-headed caddie in search of a lost ball. But beyond these things the sun was dying out in a riot of color, and its level rays fell kindly upon the gaunt pines that were thick about us, converting them into endless aisles of dusty, palpitating gold. There was a primeval peace about; only an evening wind stirred lazily above, and the leaves whispered drowsily to one another over the waters of what my companion said was a “brawling loch,” though I had previously heard it reviled as a treacherous and vexatious hazard. Altogether, I had little doubt that we had reached the outskirts of Arden.

“And now,” quoth she, seating herself on a fallen log, “what would you do if I were your very, very *Rosalind*?”

“Don’t!” I cried, in horror. “It—it wouldn’t be proper! Remember *Orlando*!”

“Oh!” said Rosalind.

“Yes,” said I, stretching myself at her feet—which is supposed to be a picturesque attitude—“by the kindness of fate, he’s golfing!”

Rosalind frowned, dubiously.

“It’s a very ancient game,” I reassured her. Then I bit a pine-needle in two and sighed. “Foolish fellow, when he might be——”

“Admiring nature,” she suggested.

Just then an impudent breeze lifted a tendril of honey-colored hair lightly

and tossed it over a low, white brow—Rosalind’s hair has a curious, coppery glow at the roots, a nameless color that I never observed anywhere else.

“Yes,” said I; “nature.”

“Then,” queried she, after a pause, “who are you? And what do you in this forest?”

“You see,” I explained, “there are other men in Arden——”

“Who—?” murmured Rosalind, softly.

“Exactly,” said I.

“I suppose so,” sighed she, with exemplary resignation.

“You were,” I reminded her, “universally admired at your uncle’s court—equally so in the forest. And while *Orlando* is the great love of your life, still——”

“Men are so foolish!” said Rosalind, irrelevantly.

“—it does not prevent you——”

“Me!” cried she, indignant.

“—from observing,” I continued, firmly, “that *Le Beau* has remarkably expressive eyes, or from admiring *Amiens*’ dancing, or from thinking of *Oliver* as a dear, reckless fellow, whom it is the duty of some good woman to rescue from perdition.”

“Oh!” said she.

“You have such a tender heart,” I suggested, “and suffering is abhorrent to your gentle nature.”

“Jack,” asked she, doubtfully, “do you think Shakespeare was aware of these finer and more subtle shades of my character?”

“Unquestionably,” said I, “being a married man, he was; just as he also knew that a deal passed between *Desdemona* and *Cassio* which the Moor

never heard of; and that *Romeo* was not the only young man *Juliet* noticed at her début; and that *Cleopatra* had been—interested in *Cæsar* before she died for love of *Antony*."

"I don't like cynicism, sir," said she; "and inasmuch as tobacco is not yet discovered——"

"It is clearly impossible that I am smoking," finished I; "quite true."

"I don't like cheap wit, either," said Rosalind. "You," she went on, with no apparent connection, "are a forester, with a good cross-bow and an unrequited attachment—for me. You groan and hang verses and things about on the trees."

"I don't write verses," said I.

"Oh!" said she.

"Any longer," I amended; "but I can groan." And I did so.

"It sounds rather like a fog-horn," said Rosalind, critically; "but I suppose it's the proper thing. Now," she continued, brightening, "you can pretend to have an unrequited attachment for me."

"I can't," said I.

"Can't?" echoed she. It has not been mentioned previously that Rosalind is pretty.

"Pretend," I added.

She preserved a discreet silence.

"Nor," I continued, with firmness, "am I a shambling, nameless, unshaven denizen of Arden. I will no longer conceal the secret of my identity. I am *Jacques*."

"Of course," said she, puzzled.

I spelt it.

"Oh!" said she, "I thought there were two syllables."

"You can't be *Jacques*," she continued; "you're too stout."

"I am well built," I admitted, modestly; "but proper pride demands that my name should appear on the program."

"But would *Jacques* be likely to—to——?"

"Who wouldn't be?" asked I. "*Jacques* was not impervious to—temptation; and in the French version he married *Celia*."

"Minx!" said she.

"And how," queried Rosalind, presently, "came you to the Forest of Arden, good *Jacques*?"

I groaned once more. "It was a girl," said I, darkly.

"Of course," assented Rosalind, beaming as to the eyes. Then she went on, sympathetically: "Now, *Jacques*, you can tell me the whole story."

"Is it necessary?" asked I, with meaning.

"Surely," said she, with sudden interest in the structure of pine-cones; "I want to know all about *Jacques*." She said it very distinctly, in two syllables.

"It's an old story," I warned her, "perhaps the oldest of all old stories. It's the story of a man and a girl. It began with a chance meeting, and developed into a packet of old letters, which is the usual ending of this story."

Rosalind's brow protested mutely.

"Sometimes," I conceded, "it culminates in matrimony; but the ending is not necessarily tragic."

I dodged just in time, and the pine-cone splashed noisily into the hazard.

"It happened," I continued, "that they were separated for a year's time before—before things had progressed to any extent. When they did progress, it was largely by letters. That is why this story ended in such a large package."

"Letters," Rosalind confided to one of the pines, "are so unsatisfactory. They mean so little."

"To the man," said I, firmly, "they meant a great deal. They brought him everything that he most wished for—comprehension, sympathy, and, at last, comfort and strength when they were sore needed. So the man, who was at first but half in earnest, announced to himself that he had made a discovery. 'I have found,' said he, 'the great white love that poets have dreamed of. I love this woman greatly, and she, I think, loves me. God has made us for each other, and by the aid of her love I will be pure and clean and worthy of her.' You have doubtless discovered by this time," I added, in explanation, "that the man was a fool."

"Don't!" said Rosalind.

"He discovered it himself in due time. For the girl liked him, and was amused by him. So she had added him to her collection of men—quite a large one, by the way—and was, I believe, rather proud of him. It was, she said, rather a rare variety, and much prized by collectors."

"Was she a very—very horrid girl?" asked Rosalind, gently.

"She was not exactly repulsive," said I, dreamily, and looking up into the sky.

There was a pause. Then some one in the distance—a forester, probably—called "Fore!" and Rosalind awoke from her reverie.

"Then?" said she.

"Then came *Orlando*. He was a nicely washed fellow, with a sufficiency of the medieval equivalents for bonds and motor-carriages and country-places. I forgot to say that the man was poor—also that the girl had a great deal of common sense and an aunt. And so the girl talked to the man in a common-sense fashion—and after that she was never at home."

"Never?" said Rosalind.

"Only once," said I. "They talked about the weather. So the man came to his senses."

"He did it very easily," said Rosalind, resentfully.

"The novelty of the thing attracted him," I pleaded. "So he said—in a perfectly sensible way—that he had known all along that it was only a dainty game they were playing—a game in which there were no stakes. That was a lie. He had put his whole soul into the game, playing as he knew for his life's happiness; and the verses, had they been worthy of the love that caused them to be written, would have been among the great songs of the world. But while the man knew at last that he was a fool, he had a man-like reluctance to admitting it. So he laughed—and lied—and broke away, hurt, but still laughing."

"You hadn't mentioned any verses before," said Rosalind.

"I told you he was a fool," said I.

"And, after all, that's the entire story."

Then I spent several minutes in wondering what would happen next; during this time I lost none of my interest in the sky.

"The first time that the girl was not at home," Rosalind observed, impersonally, "the man had on a tan coat and a brown derby. He put on his gloves as he walked down the street. Then the girl wrote to him—a strangely sincere letter—and tore it up."

"Historical research," I murmured, "surely affords no warrant for such attire."

"You see," continued Rosalind, oblivious to interruption, "I know all about the girl—which is much more than you do."

"That," I conceded, "is more than probable."

"When she knew that she was to see the man again— Did you ever feel as if something had lifted you suddenly hundreds of feet above rainy days and cold mutton for luncheon, and the possibility of other girls wearing black evening dresses, when you wanted yours to be the only one in the room? That is the way she felt, when she saw the postmark on his letter. At first, she realized nothing beyond the fact that he was near her, and that she would see him. She didn't even plan what she would wear, or what she would say to him. In an undefined way, she was happier than she had ever been since—until the doubts and fears and knowledge that give children and fools a wide berth came to her—and she saw it all against her will, and thought it all out, and came to a conclusion."

I sat up. There was really nothing of interest occurring overhead.

"They had played at loving—lightly, it is true, but they had gone so far that they could not go backward—only forward, or not at all. She had known all along that the man was but half in earnest—believe me, a girl always knows that, even though she may not admit it to herself—and she had known that a love-affair meant to him material for a sonnet or so, and a well-turned letter or two, and nothing more.

He was coming to her, pleased, interested and a little eager—in love with the idea of loving her—willing to meet her half-way, and very willing to follow her the rest of the way—if she could draw him. What was she to do? Could she accept his gracefully insulting semblance of a love she knew he did not feel? Could they see each other a dozen times, swearing not to mention the possibility of loving—so that she might have a chance to impress him with her blondined hair—it is, you know—and small talk? And—and besides——”

“It is the duty of every young woman to consider what she owes to her family,” said I, absent-mindedly. Rosalind’s family is an aunt. The aunt is a personage; she is also a philanthropist, with wide experience as a patroness, and extreme views as to ineligibleibles.

Rosalind flushed somewhat. “And so,” said she, “she exercised her common sense, and was nervous, and said foolish things about new plays, and the probability of rain—to keep from saying still more foolish things about herself; and refused to talk personalities; and let him go, with the knowledge that he would not come back. Then she went to her room, and had a good cry. Now,” she added, after a pause, “you understand.”

“I do not,” said I, very firmly.

“A woman would,” she murmured.

This being a statement I was not prepared to contest, I waved it aside. “And so,” said I, “they laughed; and agreed it was a boy-and-girl affair; and were friends.”

“It was the best thing——” said she.

“Yes,” I assented, “for *Orlando*.”

“It was the most sensible thing.”

“Eminently.”

This seemed to exhaust the subject. I lay down once more among the pine-needles.

“And that,” said Rosalind, “was the reason that *Jacques* came to Arden?”

“Yes,” said I.

“And found it——?”

“Shall we say—Hades?”

“Oh!” murmured she, scandalized.

“It happened,” I continued, “that he was cursed with a good memory. And the zest was gone from his little successes and failures, now there was no one to share them; and nothing seemed to matter very much. And it was dreary to live among memories of the past, and his life was somewhat vexed with disapproval of his own folly and hunger for a woman who was out of his reach.”

“And *Rosalind*—I mean the girl——?”

“She married *Orlando*,” said I; “and they lived happily ever afterward.”

Rosalind pondered over this for a moment.

“Do you know——?” said she.

“Yes?” said I.

“I think——”

“Yes?”

Rosalind sighed, wearily; but about this time a dimple occurred in her cheek.

“—that *Rosalind* must have thought the play very badly named.”

“‘As You Like It’?” I queried, obtusely.

“Yes—it wasn’t—for her.”

It is unwholesome to lie on the ground after sunset.

“We were very foolish,” said Rosalind.

“I was,” I amended, with proper contrition.

“And my aunt——”

“Our aunt.”

“—will be furious; but I don’t care. And I am *not* a wilful, head-strong, infatuated girl. I long ago settled on the sensible and proper course for me to pursue—you were really insufferably complacent, sir—and decided only after mature and careful deliberation not to follow it. And that,” said Rosalind, “is what I call being truly sensible.”

“And if it isn’t sensible,” said I, “it’s something much better.”

