

Nicotine  
and  
Cambric

Jeffery Farnol

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# NICOTINE AND CAMBRIC

By Jeffery Farnol

Ruth laughed; not one of those low, musical laughs most heroines indulge in, but a good, round peal, warranted to carry from where we stood to the farthest confines of the coppice beyond.

I felt annoyed, for, knowing girls as I do, I had been careful to work the affair upon the accepted lines, from the light mood of laughing raillery to seriousness, from seriousness to earnestness, and had almost reached the point where I should have clasped her hand with a "strong yet gentle pressure," when she brought me up short with the laugh as aforesaid.

As I saw the mischief brimming in her eyes—blue eyes they are, by the way—I felt rather glad on the whole that I had not reached the hand-clasping stage; as it was, the situation was decidedly trying. However, I assumed an easy,

unembarrassed attitude upon the gate, and flatter myself I did not show it.

"The situation seems rather to amuse you," I said, quite sarcastically for me, after a somewhat lengthy pause.

"I am so sorry I interrupted you," she answered, twisting a lace handkerchief of ridiculous proportions; "do go on, please."

I felt for my pipe, and knocking out the ashes upon the gate-post, shook my head. "Under the circumstances I don't think I will, although it seems to have caused you no end of enjoyment," I said, bitterly; "but, then, I suppose you are used to such—incidents.

"As for me," I continued, and here I grew impressive again—"as for me, the whole affair has been fraught with much pain—with great pain, and—and—I give you my word it has. Good afternoon, Miss Brangwyn."

So saying, I raised my hat, and left her. She seemed rather surprised at my sudden departure, I thought, and for that matter so was I, but I had a feeling that my last speech, which should have been more than ordinarily affecting, had somehow or other "tailed off" ignominiously—hence my flight. That is the worst of me; I can usually carry everything before me, until I make a slip, and then I lose my head completely.

I walked away slowly, with a certain pensive droop of the head which I felt was eloquent of dead hopes and shattered

aspirations. More than once, I had an almost overmastering desire to turn my head to see if she was watching, but checked the impulse—I am singularly strong-willed sometimes—and continued my melancholy way, until, having to climb a stile, I took advantage to glance furtively back. Ruth had disappeared. I sighed—heavily, I remember, and, sitting down, felt for my pipe—it was gone.

A feeling of loneliness and desolation took possession of me. I got down from the stile, and felt through my pockets—carelessly at first, then more slowly, and finally ended by turning out all their contents in a heap; but my search was vain. I remembered knocking my pipe out upon the gate-post—I must have left it behind in my hurry.

I had visions of it lying desolate in the wet grass beneath a night-black sky, abandoned, forgotten—but I would return and find it again at all costs. Acting on this determination, I already had one leg across the stile when I caught the distant flutter of a skirt, and saw Ruth coming slowly down the path toward me. I paused, feeling totally incapable of facing her just then and running the gantlet of her mischievous eyes, with any chance of success.

The path was overshadowed by a tall hedge, just now pink with dog-roses, on the other side of which was a ploughed field. Without a moment's hesitation, I leaped the stile and began retracing my steps, safely screened from view behind this friendly hedge. Presently, I paused to disengage my coat from a thorn, and, as I did so, heard a voice approach, singing.

Was it possible, I asked myself, as I peered cautiously through the brambles, that Ruth could be singing, actually singing, after what has passed so recently? It was possible. I felt pained and annoyed. I lay still, however, and it was well I did so, for she stopped almost directly opposite me, and reached up for a spray of roses, which—in a manner peculiar to the species—immediately swung up gently out of reach. I felt pleased, somehow.

"Bother!" exclaimed Ruth, and stood up on tip-toe. I was lying in a dry ditch, and Ruth was wearing a walking-skirt, so that I could see she was standing on tip-toe.

"You've got to come, you know," Ruth said, addressing the refractory blossoms through clenched teeth; "you've got to come;" whereupon she jumped, the first time unsuccessfully, and the second, but at the third attempt I heard a little cry of triumph, and saw her stand a moment to smooth the petals of the captured blooms with light, caressing fingers ere she went singing upon her way once more.

"That girl," I said to myself, as I sat in the ditch, rolling a cigarette, "that girl has the most wonderful ankles in the world," and I lay back smoking dreamily, until, with a sudden pang, I remembered my lost pipe. By the time I had reached the coppice-gate, I was once more lost in a reverie.

"What was it," I asked myself, as I sat swinging my legs thoughtfully, "what was it about me that she always found so inextinguishably funny?"

I turned myself over, mentally, as it were, and viewed myself with a cold, impartial eye, but for the life of me failed to see it. Becoming aware that my cigarette was out, I pitched it away, and, the action reminding me why I was there, I got down upon my hands and knees, and began a careful search among the long grass.

I had sought vainly for about fifteen minutes, when I saw something white beneath the gate, and, raking it out, I beheld Ruth's handkerchief.

I spread it upon the palm of my hand and laughed. It was a ridiculous affair, as I have said, measuring about four inches square, surrounded by a deep fall of lace.

And yet there was something about it that forbade my laughter. A subtle fragrance, a faint, illusory sweetness, always associated with her, came to me, so that, glancing about me guiltily, I brushed it against my lips, and thrust it into my pocket.

I continued to seek my errant pipe with undiminished ardor and no success, until I at length uncovered a rabbit-burrow, and at once was seized with the idea that here, could I only get deep enough, was the end of my search, and the more I thought over it, the more likely it seemed.

Forthwith, I removed my coat, and, rolling up my sleeve, lay down, and thrust in my hand.

Deeper and deeper I went, and still with no success, and all the while I had tantalizing visions of my pipe lying within

an inch of my fingers.

I was kicking furiously in my endeavors to gain that other inch when I was interrupted by a startled exclamation above me. Screwing round my head, I glanced up and beheld—Ruth. Somehow, I felt at a disadvantage.

"A-ah—you'll excuse me," I began.

"Oh, whatever is the matter?" she broke in, and I fancied there was a note of real agitation in her voice. "Are you caught in a man-trap?"

"Thank you, no," I answered, making one last supreme effort for that "other inch;" "it isn't a man-trap."

"Why, then, what is it?" she cried, retreating precipitately, and eying me in unfeigned alarm.

"Merely looking for my pipe," I answered, giving up all hope of finding it, and endeavoring to withdraw my arm.

"Looking for your pipe?" she repeated, with a suspicious tremor in her voice.

"Yes," I answered; "I lost it down a rabbit-burrow, you know."

Of course, I may have looked rather a fool wriggling there, trying to free my arm, but I don't think so; anyhow she had no cause, and certainly no right, to go off into such a peal of laughter, especially that laugh of hers that always makes me feel so confoundedly "out of it."

"But how do you know it's there—down the rabbit-burrow?" she asked, as I resumed my coat, watching me with a laugh still in her eyes.

"Well, you see, I have examined every blade of grass hereabouts," I answered, rather stiffly for me; "and, for another thing, because I am morally certain that it is down there; a rabbit-burrow is just the kind of place a pipe of mine would choose to hide in."

"What do you intend to do about it?" she went on, more seriously.

"Borrow a spade, and dig him up!" I answered, promptly.

"But you can buy another," she demurred.

"Exactly! that's so like a woman," I said, smiling a superior smile. "I could buy another, of course, but you see a pipe doesn't happen to be a soulless thing like a—bonnet, for instance, that one can cherish for a day and forget the next.

"Besides," I continued, more pointedly, "it is a very prominent trait in my character that I am faithful—faithful even to such an undemonstrative thing as a pipe. How much more so then——?"

"Oh, I forgot," she broke in—"my handkerchief! I lost it this afternoon."

"Anything like this?" I inquired, maliciously, pulling out my own.

"Oh, no," she laughed; "quite different; besides it had lace at the edges and an 'R' embroidered in one corner."

"Lace," I repeated; "oh, then, of course—" and I crammed mine back into my pocket.

"And rather valuable," put in Ruth, beginning to search among the brambles.

I seated myself upon the gate and, rolling a cigarette, watched her. Her hair had become loosened, and hung low upon her cheeks—dark, glossy hair, somewhere between brown and black—and, as the smoke floated up from my cigarette, I busied myself trying to find the right word to describe it.

"I think you are horrid!" she said, turning upon me suddenly, her cheeks flushed with stooping.

"'Misty' is the word," I exclaimed, with my eyes upon her hair.

"I said 'horrid,' and so you are, to sit there sneering while I grope about and scratch myself horribly among these—these beastly brambles," and she stamped her foot at them.

"Pardon me," I replied, "I can't sneer; that is the worst of me, I often want to, but I can't."

"Well, then, why don't you get down and help me?"

"Most happy, if you really wish it," I said, rising and throwing away my cigarette; "I was only waiting to be

asked."

Forthwith I fell to work, peering under bushes while she held up the trailing branches, and all the while the humor of it—and I have a keen sense of humor—seethed and bubbled within me, so that it was as well she could not see my face.

"You say it was a small handkerchief?" I asked, pausing after the vain investigation of a blackberry-bush.

"Yes, rather small," she replied.

"With a monogram in one corner?"

"With a monogram in one corner," she repeated, quite pettishly.

"Then the chances are, it has blown clean away," I said. "After all, you know, a handkerchief is not much to lose; such trifles are not worth while worrying over."

Ruth looked at me with a whole world of indignation in her eyes.

"Only a little while ago," she said, "I found a man writhing himself into the most frightful contortions, with his arm down a rabbit-burrow, and all on account of a pipe, if you please, and a most obnoxious thing at that."

As she spoke, I could not refrain from thrusting my hand into my pocket, and as my fingers closed upon a certain dainty fragment of cambric and lace, I smiled, perhaps a trifle exultantly.

"Ah, but there is a certain indefinable something about a pipe, that is beyond even the best woman's comprehension. Try and think of it lying out there somewhere in the black night, desolate, abandoned, and let it share your pity."

Ruth looked away from me across the meadow.

"And what of my handkerchief?"

"Small, I think you said it was?"

"Small, with an 'R' embroidered in one corner, and edged with lace," she said, ticking off each item upon her fingers with exaggerated deliberation.

"Valuable lace?" I asked.

"Old point," she sighed, pushing aside a stray bramble with her shoe; "I did so treasure that handkerchief!"

"I'm very sorry, of course," I said, at the same time experiencing a strange exhilaration as my fingers wantoned with it in the secrecy of my pocket. "Yes, very sorry, but I'm afraid you must give it up."

Somehow, at this juncture, the situation struck me as so peculiarly humorous that I felt I was going to laugh, so I turned away and coughed instead, rather an odd-sounding cough, I thought, but it passed Ruth, who only sighed again.

"I suppose I must," she said, with a last lingering glance toward the blackberry-bushes, "but I would have given anything to have found it."

At her words, a sudden idea occurred to me. If I could manage to find it who knew what might happen? Involuntarily, I drew my hand from my pocket. As I did so, Ruth uttered a little cry, and next moment had disentangled something that fluttered from the button of my sleeve—it was her handkerchief. I was horrified, and, for a moment, my presence of mind deserted me, then I tried to look surprised.

"By Jove!" I began, but the flash of her eyes rendered me speechless again.

"How dared you?" she cried, facing me in hot anger; "how dared you?"

I felt uneasy; a wild longing came upon me to clear the gate at one terrific bound, and vanish in the woods beyond.

"Oh, how could you?" she cried again. "To let me search and search and scratch myself, and—and—oh, it was cruel!"

I really thought she was going to cry. I took a step nearer, murmuring something about its being an accident.

There were tears in her eyes, and I felt for all the world like some cold-blooded murderer—my utter depravity appalled me.

"I'm awfully sorry, you know," I stammered, venturing a step nearer yet. But she retreated before me hastily, drawing her skirts tight about her.

"Sorry!" she repeated, and whole volumes could not have expressed all the scorn she contrived to put into the single

word.

"Please don't cry," I began, "because——"

"Cry!" she repeated, in the same way, and, upon my soul, when I came to look again, her eyes were as tearless as my own. I felt utterly at a loss.

"Go!" she continued; "and never, never dare to speak to me again."

She was wearing one of those short, tailor-made coats that fit close to the figure—Zouave I think they are called, but I won't be sure—and I watched her unbutton it and thrust the unlucky handkerchief out of sight, with a sense of utter desolation upon me.

Then, all at once, I saw something peeping at me from her bosom—something that, as I watched, slipped from its sweet resting-place, and fell at my feet. I stooped and picked up my errant pipe. I gasped with wonder, and turned it over in my hand, scarcely believing my eyes.

"Ruth," I said, softly.

She did not answer, but a wave of rich color crept up from chin to brow, and, for a moment, I hesitated, wondering; but, seeing how her lashes drooped, and how sweetly her mouth quivered, my hesitation vanished—and I understood.

[The end of *Nicotine and Cambric* by Jeffery Farnol]