

Moon Lady

Isabel Ecclestone
Mackay

Illustrated by

F. R. Gruger

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MOON LADY

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY F. R. GRUGER

There's no telling what would have happened had the rector of St. Margaret's not failed to fathom the mystery shrouding the lovely woman who sought his aid at two o'clock of a moonlit morning, but, even as it was, she found the weapon that pierced ecclesiastical formalism.

The rector of St. Margaret's leaned above his vestry desk in an absorbed and scholarly position. He had fallen asleep that way and it was probably a last despairing effort of the subconscious to maintain so suitable an attitude that liberated a muscular spasm and caused the paperweight to descend upon his toe.

"Dear me," thought the rector after attending to the toe, "I fear I must have slumbered."

This fear he substantiated by a glance at his black-fobbed watch. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"Dear me!" thought the rector again deprecatingly. He hardly knew whether to be annoyed or obscurely pleased. Two o'clock is an unseemly hour for rectors to be abroad. Yet the inside of one's own vestry cannot, strictly speaking, be termed abroad. And a vestry light still burning at that hour may well betoken a zeal all too rare in a lax generation.

"Our evening's meeting," thought the rector, "must have been exhausting—more exhausting than I realized." His thoughts, you perceive, were well-trained. Not for a moment would he have permitted them to use the word "tiresome," though tiresome was undoubtedly what they meant. There had been, for instance, that speech by his ministerial brother of Knox Presbyterian Church. Ah, well, one must not be critical. These brotherly conferences were undoubtedly a great advance, a great advance. Still, it was fortunate that the paperweight had fallen, otherwise his involuntary reaction

might have lasted much longer. Two o'clock was, he felt, the utmost limit of indulgence even in the matter of ecclesiastical zeal.

Working the toe gently and finding it quite recovered, he arose and, after a glance to see that all was in order, lifted his hat from its peg, turned out the light and emerged into the flood of moonshine which, like a rising silver tide, had enveloped St. Margaret's while he slept.

The rector took off the hat which he had just put on. It was an impulse purely pagan. He realized it as such when, upon passing through the St. Margaret's wrought iron gates to the secular pavement beyond, he saw that he was not entirely alone with the night. A figure, female, was rapidly approaching from the right. The rector, replacing the hat, hoped that, if the figure was that of a parishioner, its impulsive absence had not been noted.

But the approaching lady was not a parishioner. The rector had never seen her before. He couldn't see very much of her now, for the moon cast shadows, but he knew that if he had ever seen even that much he would not have forgotten it. She, too, wore no hat and there was something peculiar about her cloak—in his growing surprise he couldn't say just what.

For it was surprising, in the chaste neighborhood of St. Margaret's, to meet a strange young woman, with a queer cloak and a face of remarkable loveliness, alone at two o'clock in the morning. And the surprise grew when the apparition showed every sign of speaking to him.

"Oh," began the vision in a charming voice which a suspicion of hesitation rendered still more charming. "You are a clergyman, aren't you?"

The Reverend Cyril Braithwaite, who for a moment had actually forgotten who he was, realized that his being a clergyman made all the difference. He hastened to admit it.

"You see—I'm lost," said the girl—he saw that she was a girl—"not tragically lost, just stupidly lost. I am staying at—I seem to have forgotten the name of the place. But it is a big one, and it is somewhere near the river—quite near, I think."

"Then it would probably be 'The Flamborough'?" decided the rector. "Does 'Flamborough' sound familiar? It is right beside the river."

"That is it," said the girl, "'The Flamborough.'"

"But that," said the rector, "is a very long way from here."



Natalie leaned against the wrought iron gates and gazed dreamily at the moon.

“I am sure it is,” said the girl. She did not seem to mind at all. She leaned against the wrought iron gates and gazed dreamily at the moon. The rector, seeing the soft light full upon her face, caught his breath.

“I might,” said he, after he had swallowed the catch, “I might return to my vestry and summon a taxi-cab—”

“Oh—no,” said the girl. She said it, not hastily, but with great decision. And she continued to lean against the gates, observing the moon.

“Any directions which I might give,” went on the rector, “would, I fear, prove somewhat complicated. For a stranger to follow them undeviatingly would be difficult. And, besides, at this time of night—in fact, I think that if you object to my calling a taxi-cab, the only alternative is for me to accompany you myself—if—if I may be permitted?”

“Do come,” invited the girl kindly. “It is a wonderful moon. You won’t talk, will you?” She added this last as if the prey of sudden doubt.

The Reverend Braithwaite was, for once, incapable of talking. He was shocked into silence. But there is a kind of silence which cries to heaven.

“I am sure, as a clergyman, you must be so tired of it,” explained the girl hastily. “Look at the moon!”

“Come along!” said the rector sternly. (He couldn’t remember ever to have told a young lady to “come along” before. “Shall we proceed,” was his nearest). He set out at a brisk pace.

“Oh—slower,” said the girl. “I want to make it last. I think it’s safe to make it last—a little.”

“I do not follow you,” said her companion coldly.

“Well, you see, I don’t—I don’t get lost every night. You can’t get properly lost unless you’re alone. And I am never alone, never!” There was a curious, poignant note in the “never.”

The rector swallowed another caught breath and some of his hurt pride with it.

“At this time of night—” he began.

“No, not even at night,” said the girl. Her hands, without gloves and very white under the moon, made an enveloping gesture. And then he noticed what it was that was wrong about her cloak. It wasn’t a cloak at all, properly, it was a gown—a graduate’s gown. Most odd! “Really,” thought the rector, “very, very odd—”

“You are looking at my gown,” said the girl with an instant understanding. “It was in a trunk. It was the only thing I could get. All my evening cloaks were locked up, of course.”

“Locked up!” It wasn’t a question, only an exclamation. At least the rector tried to think of it as an exclamation. Good taste demanded that it should not be a question since, of course, the custody of a lady’s evening garments was in no possible way his business. Yet the girl’s reply was an answer and stupefyingly simple.

“So that I couldn’t come out.” She seemed amused at his obtuseness.

“Ah!” The rector cleared his throat and took a fresh hold on himself. It was all very ordinary, after all. A phase, in fact, of one of our present day problems. He knew, none better, the difficulties which our younger generation presents to its older, and wiser, guardians. Had not mothers come to him with tears in their eyes? Had not fathers sworn in his hearing that

they'd be—apologetically—damned if they knew what our boys and girls were coming to? He had urged, he remembered, a tact, patience, and a firm though quiet restraint—certainly restraint. But surely the locking up of evening cloaks was crude? Decidedly crude. The spirit of youthful rebellion flourishes upon methods such as this. Nevertheless—

“My dear young lady,” he began.

“You said you wouldn't talk,” she reminded him wistfully.

“I said nothing of the sort. Besides, I have been talking. And so have you.”

“Not *talking*,” said the girl. “Look at the moon. I suppose if people didn't see the moon so often they would sit up all night to look at it. Can't we go down the nice long street where the trees look like silver lace?”

“It would be entirely out of our way.”

“Wouldn't we get there if we went that way?”

“Eventually, yes. But—”

The girl had already turned and he, perforce, followed her.

The street had been deserted, but at that moment a smart closed car swung rapidly around the nearest corner. It passed them in a flash, but not before the rector, with a qualm, had recognized it as the car of Miss Georgia Belmont, one of the most prominent—and most feminine—of the pillars of St. Margaret's.

“Oh, dear!” thought the rector. He thought “Oh, dear,” no matter what it was that he meant; words, after all, are very elastic. Had Miss Belmont seen him? Of course she had. He foresaw an embarrassing moment—a question which would not seem to be exactly a question and which would have to be answered by an explanation which would not admit that there was anything to explain. Difficult. Had he been alone . . . some light reference to a weary brain and the beauty of the night . . . but . . . his companion? He turned again to his companion and immediately forgot Miss Belmont.

She was walking very closely and demurely beside him. Was it fancy, or had the passing of the car disturbed her, too? She seemed, or did she seem, a little startled? She had certainly come nearer to him as if—almost—inviting the protection of his larger shadow. The impression passed so quickly that he

couldn't be sure that he had had it. The girl's face, turned moonward, expressed a dreamy vagueness, nothing more.

But her pace had quickened.

"It is you who are wasting the moon, now," he told her, smiling.

Her quick, light step did not slacken.

"Yes," she said simply, "I think I had forgotten. They will be looking for me."

"You are a runaway, then?" He tried to make his tone only gently chiding. No sense in being unduly severe over a girlish prank. "Didn't it occur to you that a young lady alone——"

"Yes, it did," said she with admirable frankness as he paused. "That was why I was so glad to see you. They will be looking for a girl alone, of course. With you I am not a girl alone. I am a young lady properly escorted. In fact, I am invisible. If we meet anyone I shall take your arm."

This was not exactly what the Rev. Mr. Braithwaite had meant. Still——

"And your being a clergyman makes it so much safer," she went on, contentedly. "They have brought so many clergymen to see me and I have had to be so rude to them. The last time I pretended I was deaf. Isn't it funny how people can never talk to a deaf person without saying the most absurd things? He did. He got quite red presently and went away."

"I should think he would," said the rector scandalized.

"I did listen at first, though," the wistful note crept into her voice again. "Because I thought they might be able to help. The thing I wanted to know seemed so reasonable and so——so much the kind of thing that clergymen might understand. I thought that, even if they did not know, they would be as keen as I to find out. But they weren't. They were worse than anyone."

"Worse than anyone? Clergymen?" The rector hoped that he sounded merely amused. "I do not follow you. What was it that you wished to find out? In anything pertaining to cultural education, the church, I am sure, need give place to none. On some technical matters, of course——"

He waited, but the girl seemed to have forgotten the subject of conversation.

"What was it that you wanted to know?" He asked again patiently.

“It will do no good to talk of it.” The girl was, apparently, confiding this to the moon.

“I fear I shall insist,” Mr. Braithwaite had found this tone very effective with his younger flock—mild and kindly, but firm, very firm.

His companion brought her eyes down from the moon and flashed them into his. They were very lovely eyes. And now, for the first time he got an impression of strain—of an almost unbearable expectation. But the girl’s voice was almost weary.

“I only wanted to know where we are going,” she said. “Surely anyone can see that everything depends on that? I have wanted to know ever since I can remember. When I was a little child I believed I would find out when I grew up. I saw grown-up people going on every day, day after day, and I felt that, of course, they must know. I thought that they wouldn’t tell me because I was little. There were so many things that they said it was unsuitable for children to know. So I made myself wait . . .

“At school and college I worked very hard. I saw plainly that no one was going to tell me and that I should have to find out for myself. Besides I began to be afraid . . . either people who knew didn’t want me to find out . . . or they didn’t know . . . I began to be horribly afraid they didn’t know! . . . There were no answers . . . They said I was working too hard. They wanted me to give up study, to play, to dance and motor and act just as if I knew all about it . . . or as if not knowing didn’t matter. But how could I? For if we don’t know where we are going what difference can it make what we do? I had to make things mean something, didn’t I? Surely it is sensible to do that?”

“Certainly it is,” said the rector. He was uncomfortably startled. His brain did not seem to function properly. To have a young and lovely girl whom one has suspected of nothing worse than a mild truancy, begin to seriously propound the Ultimate Riddle—at two o’clock in the morning—is eminently disturbing. True, he had known young people to display a tendency to discuss religious matters in more or less emotional states. He knew quite well the value of it and what to do with such. But this was different—oh, very different. And disturbing. He repeated, “It certainly is,” vaguely.

“That’s what they all say at first,” sighed the girl. “But when I am logical, when I say: ‘Very well, then, I can’t wait any longer!’ what do they do? They lock me up.”

“Lock you up?” The rector’s voice was positively shaken. “How quite preposterous . . . how—how mediaeval! My dear young friend, surely you exaggerate? However unorthodox your opinions may be, such methods can only horrify any broadminded person. Coercion in the matter of religion belongs to a vanished age . . . nothing can excuse it . . . To what particular church or creed do your—er—guardians wish you to conform?”

Apparently this heated tribute to liberty of conscience had been wasted on the night. The girl’s quiet voice went on as if he had been silent.

“The trouble is that even now I can never be quite sure whether they do know and will not tell or whether they just do not know and will not say so. But I have given up asking. That is why it is so unfair. I do not bother them any more. I do not ask them for anything. I want to find out for myself. All I need is opportunity. Somehow they guessed this and from that time opportunity has been shut out too. But I knew it would come some day. I must find out. I will!”

The intensity of this was such that the rector was jostled clean out of his armor of words. For once he found himself meeting an issue squarely in the lists. Of all the things which might have been said he said only: “How?”

Instantly the girl’s manner changed. Her unbearably expectant eyes returned to the moon. The hand which had lain involuntarily upon his arm dropped to her side. Reticence fell about her like a veil. She was once more only a lovely young runaway in an absurd cloak. And, as she changed, so did he. His momentary panic of questioning, his sense of nakedness in an arena where usually he rode full armed seemed suddenly as absurd as her cloak. His pulse, which had been pounding, dropped again to normal. What had been the matter with him? To what had he been listening? Merely to a young girl’s opinions on the Hereafter. A mistake, of course, to take those flights of youth too seriously. As for the rest, she had probably exaggerated the locking up part. A difference of religious opinions possibly. Faults on both sides. From what she had said herself concerning her treatment of visiting clergymen, undoubtedly faults on both sides. Still, a word in season—

“I suppose,” he began mildly, when they had walked half a block in silence, “I suppose we all answer the great question in various ways. And ultimately, yes, undoubtedly ultimately, we must, as you so sensibly say, answer it for ourselves. The matter is personal. I agree, too, that the importance of a sanely grounded belief cannot be overestimated.”

“Do you?” asked the girl. There was doubt and weariness in her voice. “Do you feel it so strongly that you can’t be or do anything but must just turn round like a squirrel in a cage—until someone leaves the door open?” Her white hand fluttered in a startlingly vivid gesture of escape.

“N—o,” said Mr. Braithwaite. “That is to say, such exaggeration of feeling would unfit one for useful work. Besides, one does know, you see. Speaking generally, as it were, one does know, not in detail, not concretely, not, perhaps, even demonstratably, but—er—none the less surely for all that. Continuation there must be, most of us agree upon that. Change, sudden and drastic, is possible. I myself favor a continuity, a going on where one leaves off. But whatever—”

“Always ‘whatever’,” interrupted the girl softly. “Never ‘this’ or ‘that’. Nobody knows—nobody!”

The sobbing note of the repeated “nobody” affected Mr. Braithwaite peculiarly. It was as if some inner door had opened through which a chill came suddenly. But he was not going to lose his grip again.

“Nonsense,” he declared sturdily, closing the inner door with a cheerful bang. “How can anyone absolutely know an end—or a beginning—until one gets to it?”

“One can’t,” said the girl. “I see that. I have seen it ever since—for some time.”

“Well then?” The rector felt the complacency of one who has made a point. At the same time there was something in her tone—he didn’t quite like her tone. Too final.

“The point is—patience.” He thought this over. It seemed all right. So he repeated it. “Yes, patience. We must wait. ‘All the days of my appointed time’—you believe, I trust, that there is a time appointed?”

Again he might have spoken to the night for all the response she gave. She had followed her own thoughts, not his.

“It can’t be that God doesn’t want us to know,” she went on. “Because the way of finding out is so simple. And no one can keep it from us—nobody.”

This time the “nobody” held a triumphant challenge. Certainly this girl was original. Such a curious and dramatic way of stating that death must come to all. But hardly healthy, perhaps. The rector feared that it was hardly healthy.

“In time,” he assented cheerfully. “In time, doubtless. When we have learned all that life has to teach us.”

“But it doesn’t teach us—that. It’s all a lesson without a meaning—unless one knows.”

Her eyes were on him again—distressful eyes. He perceived that their argument had completed a circle. How would a little raillery do?

“Ah, now,” said he, raising an admonishing finger, “I see you are a young person who looks at the last page first! Most unfair to an author, I always think.” He laughed gently.

This time he had caught her attention. “Why, yes, I do,” she admitted. “That is, I did. But there never was any—any end, I mean. I kept hoping, and looking, but there never was. Once I asked a man who wrote books how he could bear to do it—all those unended people, you know! And he said—oh, I forgot, he told me not to repeat what he said. It would never do, he said, for the secret to get out. I wanted to go on talking to him because I felt he might be able to help. But Aunt Eva came and took me away.”

Her quick, light steps were almost racing now. The rector who prided himself on being a good walker, in more measured fashion, felt unduly hurried. At the same time he could hardly object to a haste which was probably the result of awakened concern for the anxiety of relatives. His young runaway had realized that her prank might cause considerable uneasiness—a thoroughly sweet nature, he felt sure. An unusual nature, possibly, but sound at the core. Interesting, too. He had never felt quite this quality of interest in the young girls who giggled under his ministrations in St. Margaret’s and who, too often, seemed—outside of his professional care, of course—empty and boring.

“We are nearly there now,” he assured her. “Don’t overtire yourself.”

The girl gave a long sigh. A sigh of exquisite relief—it seemed. And, for the first time that night, she smiled. The smile was a wonderful thing, a revelation. It was so young, so glad. He realized now that, for all her serenity, she had seemed unnaturally burdened for one of her age. But the smile was the one thing needed to give her back to exquisite youth.

They turned the last corner. The moonlight glinted on the fair columns of the exclusive “Flamborough” and lay with softer light upon the river just beyond. He heard his companion draw a sharp breath—a breath which

fluttered out like an escaping bird. Had she been more nervous than he had known?

A merry party was driving up to the big apartment. The night responded to laughing words and gay "good-nights." The girl's hand touched his sleeve. "Wait!" she whispered. He smiled a little at her belated solicitude. Unconventional though she was, she evidently wished her escapade to escape comment. He waited, feeling her fingers on his sleeve, while the good-nights lasted and until the emptied car had driven away.

"If you will ring the bell which communicates with your suite," said he, "I will remain until I see you safely in."

"Oh—no." The tone held the same unhesitating negative which had declined the taxi-cab.

"But—" he began.

"Good-by," said the girl, softly. "You have come with me as far as you can."

"In that case—" said Mr. Braithwaite. He said it stiffly. He lifted his hat. He was not used to being rebuffed. And surely she should have had the sense to see what modesty forbade his pointing out—the value of a return under unimpeachable escort!

The girl, who had taken a step forward, paused. Not for the first time that night did she seem to divine his thought.

"You have been so kind," she said. It was not a conventional acknowledgment of service. Real gratitude warmed the words. The rector's pride wilted under them. His pique vanished.

"I wish I might have done more." His sentiment was as sincere as hers.

"I could not have found my way alone." She held out her hand.

Raising his hat again, he left her—on the border of the moonlight—and the yellow glare from lighted portico. The earnestness of her parting words remained as a pleasurable thrill. The impetus of her handclasp carried him complacently for a block or two and then a certain drag became perceptible in his step. Why had he allowed himself to be dismissed like that? Had he quite fulfilled his duty in the matter? After all, he ought to have insisted upon seeing her safely inside the building. What if some unforeseen complication had arisen—if her people had been out—looking for her, perhaps—might there not have been some difficulty? Very unlikely, of

course. Still, he wished he had waited—and promptly, on the wish, he turned and went back hurriedly.

It was all right! She had gone in. Neither on the steps nor in the pool of light under the portico was there any sign of her. The street, clear to the river, was empty of everything save the moon.

In the morning, the Rev. Mr. Braithwaite rested somewhat longer than usual. He knew that he might safely do so. His orders were that his breakfast bacon should never be broiled before his step was heard upon the stairs, and the toast was always direct from the electric toaster. Nothing would be spoiled.

And he was really tired. Besides when one gets up, one faces a new day and the Reverend Cyril did not feel like facing a new day. The day he had to face seemed dull and unprofitable to a degree. He really must get to bed at decent hours. He looked at the sunlight, broad and level outside his open window, and turned on his pillow fretfully. Somehow so much light seemed garish.

His mind was full of long streets drenched in moonshine.

He remembered that he had a Y.M.C.A. luncheon that day. And instantly he hated luncheons. He remembered that he had promised to send Miss Flora Simpson a list of books suitable for lenten reading. He hated lists of books. Besides he knew perfectly well that Miss Flora Simpson never read anything. He remembered that he had promised to address the Second Saturday Club on “The New Freedom”—

“Oh, dear!” sighed the Reverend Cyril and he punched his pillow into a ball.

It was indeed the “oh-deariness” of his feeling with regard to the Second Saturday Club which brought him, as it were, up standing. He knew too well that feelings like this can not be given an inch. The ells they might take are too devastating.

Very firmly he flattened down the pillow, arose, felt for his bedroom slippers and threw up the blind.

“A beautiful morning—delightful!” said he audibly.

While he was brushing his hair—difficult to get the proper sleekness always—he thought: What shall I say to Miss Georgia Belmont? He thought of several things which he might say, all having to do with “A young friend

—a stranger—passing through.” But there was something wrong with all of them. Besides he felt strongly that it was none of Miss Georgia Belmont’s business. Ah! Why not attack it along this line? After all, it *was* none of Miss Belmont’s business. Why not allow Miss Belmont to feel this—delicately? Why answer her question—he took the question for granted—at all? That is to say, directly? With a curious hardening of his resolution he decided that he would do this. He would say nothing—of any consequence. A feeling of elation came with the decision. It was as if he had, somewhat belatedly, decided to lay claim to his own soul.

At breakfast he met the solicitude of his sister, who kept house for him, with an absent smile. Yes, he had come in somewhat late. No, he had not been sent for to old Mrs. Stobbings. Yes, he was quite rested, thanks. He waited, politely, until Alicia had finished her breakfast and then picked up the morning paper.

He saw it almost at once. His subconscious mind must have picked it out instantly from all the miscellany of news. The head line was small, the position not conspicuous—some influence doing its best to tone down the publicity—but the Reverend Braithwaite’s eyes leapt to it and saw nothing else.

The paragraph was short and headed “Sad Accident.” From its cautious journalese one gathered that the accident concerned Miss Natalie Trevor, the charming young niece of Mrs. Bertram Trevor who, with her aunt, had been spending a few days with Mrs. W. L. Bowman of this city before proceeding to Green Hills where Miss Trevor expected to rest and recuperate after a severe nervous breakdown due to overstudy. Mrs. Trevor was prostrate with shock and could give no details, but it was learned that Miss Natalie had gone out alone from Mrs. Bowman’s residence last evening, tempted no doubt by the beauty of the night, and in her ignorance of the city had wandered down to the river. Somewhere in the neighborhood of “The Flamborough” she had evidently been attacked by faintness and, in some way not understood, must have fallen unobserved from the esplanade into the swift current. The search made by her distracted friends had resulted in the body being found very shortly after the accident. But not before life was extinct.

Mr. Braithwaite laid the paper aside softly.

“Not much news this morning,” said Miss Alicia apologetically—(she apologized for everything)—“only about that poor Trevor girl. So terrible for Mrs. Bowman—most unfortunate—that it should have happened from

her house. If they could only have got the poor thing safely to Green Hills! But they say people like that are so clever. ‘Overwork’ they called it, but I understand that this isn’t the first case in the Trevor family—a little more coffee, Cyril?—They had a nurse, of course, and watched her every minute, but it just shows—how she could have found her way from Bowman’s to the river is the real mystery—did you say more coffee, dear?”

The rector said he would have no more coffee.

“Is your collar too tight, Cyril?”

The Reverend Cyril removed his hand from his collar—which had in fact seemed a trifle tight.

“I did not tell you until you had finished breakfast, but there is a man in the study waiting for you.”

There was a tiny pause.

“A man?” asked the rector.

“Yes. About the pulpit alterations. He is not sure whether you said two steps or three.”

“Two, I think,” said the rector.

He went in at once to see the man.

It was following the Second Saturday Club that he met Miss Georgia Belmont.

“Ah!” said Miss Belmont shaking a gay finger at him. “Don’t talk to me about ungodly hours ever again! But I’ll admit the excuse was perfect. When shall we see the charming stranger? Soon, I hope?”

The Reverend Mr. Braithwaite looked at her somewhat vaguely and made no reply.

“That means it’s none of my business,” chirped Miss Belmont. “Gracious, I know that! But in this dull place—I had only the merest glimpse, of course, but that was enough to tell me that she didn’t belong here.”

“A stranger—passing through,” murmured Mr. Braithwaite.

He moved away.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Moon Lady* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]