

Fifty-Seven Minutes

Madge Macbeth

Illustrated by

Roy Fisher

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FIFTY-SEVEN MINUTES

By MADGE MACBETH

ILLUSTRATED BY ROY FISHER

Have you ever picked up a bright coin and found it was a copper, or rubbed the verdigris from a moldy one and found that it was gold? No? Then you should read this story to get the flavor of the unexpected.

A doggy little green roadster touched the curb of the Croesus Club. It had probably arrived in the manner of all well-conditioned motors, and it would probably depart like one. Meanwhile, it poised rather than stood. It suggested a mammoth butterfly about to take wing, or a brilliant dirigible fettered, on a windy day; or the quivering of a spirited horse.

The roadster was furnished with one complete girl. She wore, in deference to the "probs," a bright green slicker and a rakish green rubber hat. Her eyes were green, too; deep and clear, and usually very cool. At the moment, however, they were shot with wicked little darts that might have been born in a fierce, green flame.

Her lips, red as a geranium, were innocent of those sweet and docile curves so admirable in a woman. But they were none the less provocative for their sternness. Set tight and straight, they barely hinted at the foolish dimple that might at the slightest sign of relaxation, break from the smooth, pink cheek and chase annoyance back into the remote limbo whence it had come.

Altogether, she was a fair girl, extremely good to look upon. So the man-in-the-street stopped and stared quite frankly at her, and others, merely male or female, passed with covert glances varying from admiration to disapproval, and both were distasteful to the girl who knew that nothing so conspicuous and feminine should be waiting outside the very masculine Croesus Club.

Finally, the door opened, and a slender young man appeared on the threshold. The girl in the car leaned forward and beckoned him, imperiously.

"Do hurry," she cried. "Come along!"

The young gentleman hesitated the fraction of a second, and then proceeded down the steps with less haste than the occasion seemed to warrant. Hat in hand, he slowly approached the car.

“An emissary from St. Patrick, I presume?” His lips were smiling, but his eyes were fixed on the girl as though trying to remember something.

“No, St. George,” she answered, gaily. “I thought I’d run down a couple of dragons.”

“Serpents or dragons, a trifling difference. If in either capacity I can serve—”

“Get in, please,” commanded the girl. “The horses are feeling their oats.”

“And I am feeling my bran,” he said, seating himself beside her. “Have you tried the brunette muffins that have almost superseded that renowned delicacy known as the Maryland biscuit?”

She shook her head, giving attention to the wheel, and shooting across the intersection just as the signal flashed to hold up the traffic.

“Good driving, that!” complimented her companion. “Leap before you look was ever a strong man’s motto.”

They had started on again, when the door of the Croesus Club opened a second time; opened in great haste, and on the steps there appeared another young gentleman, not quite so slender as the first—a fattish young gentleman, who held his hand before his face in an attitude of defense. But actually, there was no danger. He was only consulting the dial of his very expensive watch.

“The devil,” he muttered, distinctly, looking to the right and then to the left. He found what he sought—the bright green roadster, nipping briskly up the crowded thoroughfare. There was only one green car that could get, like that, through the traffic.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he remarked, with considerable heat.

“Not the slightest doubt of it, old chap,” agreed his recent partner in bridge, who happened to overhear the observation. “Condolences, of course, and all that sort of rot.”

The car shot round a corner and into a less crowded district. Houses and people flashed dizzily past.

“Where shall we go?” asked the girl.

There was a perceptible change in her manner. Gone was the gaiety that had characterized her greeting. She was abrupt, business-like, austere,

almost grim. The upper part of her face was hidden, but the young man could imagine the level coolness of her eyes.

“I’ve always wanted to explore the end of the world,” he ventured. “If you are free this afternoon—”

“I’m serious.”

“Obviously. Almost sombre.”

“Please tell me where to take you.”

“I should like to drive on the Medford Highway.”

“What?” She was surprised. “The Bootleggers’ Boulevard? But why?”

“The spirit of adventure stirs,” he told her carelessly. “Besides, Nature in her sunny mood . . .”

But she had divined his subterfuge. “I’ll take you a little way,” she said. “It is necessary for me to be home early.”

“Oh, please—”

“I have no intention of going all the way to Medford. It’s forty miles.”

“It only seemed like that with the last man,” he returned. “Twenty at most, with me. Ever so many women have said so. And then the Inn—”

“I’m not going to the Inn with you,” she declared, and he knew that she wouldn’t.

He sighed. “Evidently, you’ve never suffered an unappeased passion for fried chicken and frog’s legs. Else, as our poets say, you could ne’er be so crool.”

“I can’t talk and drive at the same time,” she said, haughtily.

“Drive then, by all means,” he replied, most unexpectedly. “That is, if the choice is left with me.”

There was a long silence. They gained the Highway, and the little green car skimmed over the road. It purred with satisfaction.

The young man did not seem ill pleased, either. He lolled back in his seat and inhaled draughts of the keen fresh air. His manner expressed utter contentment, but like many persons more accustomed to driving than being driven, his eyes continually swept the road, as though the responsibility of making a safe journey lay upon him.

He was by no means oblivious to his companion, however. He examined her with a critical, impersonal air usually reserved for art exhibitions or microscopic, biological study.

The girl was aware of his scrutiny, but untroubled by it. He liked her indifference, her self-confidence, her independence. Although he shared with other men the conviction that no woman is capable of taking care of herself in all circumstances, he loved the way in which this certain woman produced the illusion that she could. In a word, he found himself bending the knee before those fine and diminishing attributes that differentiate Woman from women, quality from mere characteristics.

Please, teacher, could we talk a little?" he asked, in a hideous falsetto.

"Is there anything particular you want to say?"

"Of course! I want to know what type of girl you think you are?"

She protested that type wasn't a happy word to associate with a girl. She said it suggested twelve point . . . or double face.

"Smear'd with printer's ink, you are," he said. "And you looked so sweet!"

She turned and faced him squarely. He was almost startled at the lovely determination of her, and at once he became discontented with the glimpse she had allowed him—just the tip of her nose, half of her mouth and a bit of her chin.

"Look here," she began, and his obedience was such that she flushed scarlet.

"I mean . . ." she made another attempt.

"What you *ought* to mean," he interrupted, "is something intensely unpleasant. You wear at the moment, an ugly nonconformist expression. . . . Most unbecoming, really—if you won't think me ungallant for mentioning it. Now, if I were a writer—"

"Are you sure you're not?"

"Quite! But if I were, I should scrap everything disagreeable, like duty, and remorse, and an unfortunate disposition, and make something wonderfully happy out of this adventure. I should do it in the best style of Michael Arlen. By the way, what would you read if you wanted to write like Arlen?" he demanded.

“Why, Arlen, I should think,” she answered, demurely.

“Humph! I ask for advice and get a sneer. Aren’t you being just a shade unnecessarily clever this afternoon?”

She laughed, liking the little crinkles around his eyes.

“Not at all. It’s no trouble for me to be clever, and this is simply my ordinary line of repartee.”

It was his turn to jeer.

“Lord, child, that isn’t repartee! Repartee is the clever things you say to yourself, going home from the party.” And he looked suspiciously into the thicket at the side of the road.

It was almost deserted that afternoon. High-jackers had worried the bootleggers, and provincial police had made it unpleasant for both. Furthermore, the general public, betraying that splendid spirit of independence which germinated the Dominion, took its drives, latterly, through districts free from the tyranny of the Law. The general public soon discovers unpoliced roads, for it is irked at being held up and searched; it protests against fines, and its spiritual feelings are wounded when its innocent goods are confiscated because a uniformed dolt refuses to believe said goods are carried solely for medicinal and restorative purposes.

“You have irresistible hands and feet,” he said, suddenly.

“Thank you.” Her tone announced that she did not care for personal remarks.

“Do you mind if I sing?” he enquired, courteously.

“I don’t know. What kind of a voice have you?”

He feared it was nearly bass, if not quite.

“Oh, it can’t be so bad as that,” she protested, kindly. “Is there anything you’d particularly like to sing?”

“The Shirt Scene, from ‘The Tales of Hoffman’,” he told her, grinning.

At that, she threatened to take him home, but his contrition was so genuine that she relented, and promised to go on a few miles. Then he spun her a colorful tale of his experiences in a wicked Brazilian city, and before she had recovered he leaped nimbly to Rhodesia, and next recalled a summer spent on the Mackenzie River with a couple of Royal Canadian Mounted,

and that reminded him of the time he tried to make the perilous passage from Alaska to the Siberian coast. At this point, the girl rudely interrupted him.

“You’re an awful liar,” she accused him.

“Oh! I thought I was doing it so well!”

“Have you really been to all those places?”

But he turned sulky and wouldn’t answer.

Suddenly, she slowed down, and nodded at the curve ahead.

“Sister Anne . . . Sister Anne, what do you see on the road?”

“Damn!”

In surprise, she looked at him. There was a note in his voice that startled her, but his manner was even more puzzling. Whatever the reason, it was manifest that this young man had no wish to make the closer acquaintance of the officer on the road.

“Shall we turn back?” There was a shade too much solicitude in her query.

“Oh, by no means!” He pulled himself up with a jerk and spoke more naturally. “It may be only a speed cop.”

But of course it wasn’t. It was a provincial policeman who halted them and proceeded glibly to put them through the manual of the Prohibition Code.

The girl closed her lips and forced her companion to do most of the talking. She listened in wonderment that merged into contempt. What extraordinary thing had happened to the man? It was only too evident that he had something to conceal—her thoughts hovered around the word “dope”—but even so, could he not meet Nemesis with a gay demeanor and courageous smile? Must he snivel and crawl when the odds were against him? Was there no punch in his metaphorical fist? His manner was a travesty of the boldness and daring which had sparkled through his reminiscences and which, but a moment since, had so pleasantly intrigued her.

“Get out,” barked the officer. “You gotta be searched.”

And she sat back, smiling; enjoying his discomfiture.

He produced three small flasks. These passed into the hands of the officer's assistant, who appeared from the bush quite like a genii, with a car.

"Leave the lady to me," said the officer, as though conferring a favor upon his colleague, "and you see if there's anything in the back!"

The doggy little roadster being acquitted of anything that could be classed as a misdemeanor, the officer turned again to the nervous young gentleman.

"Get into the bus ahead, there," he said. "I'll ride with the lady."

"Wh-what do you mean?" asked the young man, gulping.

"You gotta go back to town—under arrest," explained the officer, impatiently.

"But not—not the lady . . . She had nothing to do with it. She didn't even know I had anything on me."

"She was drivin' the car, wasn't she? Accordin' to the law, she was helpin' you get away with it. Hop in!"

Then the young man appeared to be stunned by an idea. A timely recovery enabled him to put it into execution. Very earnestly, he explained that this was his first offence. With equal ardor, he promised that it would be his last. He wasn't a drinker, himself. He had taken the stuff to oblige a temporarily embarrassed friend. His firm was nuts on prohibition, and it would go ill with him, were it discovered that he had been arrested for carrying liquor. Wouldn't the officer accept the three flasks as a tribute to his fidelity to duty, and count the unfortunate incident closed?

The officer pondered this proposition while the young gentleman scratched around in his wallet. The hundreds of bills he seemed to expect to find, resolved themselves into about twelve dollars. Shamefacedly, he appealed to the girl, who had calmly seated herself in the car and was watching him.

"I'm afraid I've left my money in the hotel," he stammered. "Do you happen to have any change with you? I'd like to send a trifle home to the officer's kiddies, for," he continued, fatuously, "'course, he's a married man. He couldn't escape—a fine, upstanding fellow like him."

"Look-a-here . . ." began the defender of temperance, indignantly.

"I may have a few bills," said the girl, screwing around to explore the upholstering.

The eyes of the two officers followed her, interestedly. She was the sort of girl, they saw, to whom “a few bills” might mean anything up to fifty. She found her bag and poured its contents into her lap.

“Hold up your hands!” rapped out the young man.

“Heavens!” cried the girl.

The men obeyed him.



"I can't see much point in all this gun-play," she said. "If you're a bandit aren't you laying it on a bit thick, holding up these officers?"

He was lounging against the side of the car, an ugly-looking revolver in his hand. Where it had come from, none of the trio knew. Of the three, the girl was the most surprised.

"If there's a camera man working in the vicinity," she said, "I suppose I might as well oblige. Otherwise, I can't see much point in all this rough,

gun-play stuff. May I suggest, however, if you are merely a bandit of sorts, that you're laying it on a bit thick, holding up these officers?"

The young man's eyes crinkled at the corners, but their expression was hard and steady. He didn't look at the girl, although his words were addressed to her.

"They're fakes, my dear; plain, darn high-jackers. You'll find my badge—a real one, not counterfeit like theirs—inside my waistcoat. Please look at it and satisfy yourself that I'm genuine, and then use the bracelets that I stuffed under the seat, where they will do the most good. We'll take these birds home with us to a comfortable little cage."

She handcuffed the men without difficulty. In fact, she was rather enjoying herself. True, she expected every moment someone to appear and announce: "Rotten! We'll do that scene over again!" But she performed her task none the less efficiently for that.

"What next?" she enquired, as though accustomed to taking a couple of prisoners each morning before breakfast.

The young man relaxed his vigilance enough to laugh.

"You're a marvel," he said. "Sister Anne . . . Sister Anne . . . do you see anything on the road?"

She ran to the bend, and discovered a big touring car bearing down on them.

"Quite a coincidence," she called back.

"Coincidence nothing! I hope it's the chap who was to have brought me out here, to hunt this big game." He indicated their prisoners. "But when you came along, with a more attractive offer—Hello, Quinby!" The car had drawn up beside them. "I thought it might be you. Followed me out, did you? Good! There they are . . . Will you look after 'em? I'll just see this young lady home."

They drove a considerable distance without speaking. The young man lolled back in his seat in an attitude of utter contentment. His gaze no longer swept the bush at the side of the road, but was concentrated pretty steadily on his companion. She was, of course, aware of his scrutiny and horribly disgusted because she could not appear indifferent to it. "I'm blushing," she said to herself. "In half a minute, I believe I'll simper! Imbecile!"

"You were—are—you ever will be perfectly adorable," said the young man, so suddenly that she started.

“If I helped you in any way—”

He accepted the rebuff philosophically, apologized and started afresh. “You see, it was this way—”

“I think,” cut in the girl, “I understand everything but your manner when we set out. It was more than rude. It was crude. You treated me as if I were a naughty child who should be taught a lesson.”

“Your penetration delights me. You *were* a naughty child, and I *did* want to teach you a lesson. The idea of sitting outside the Croesus Club and picking up a perfectly strange chap—”

It was her turn to make an explanation.

The devil tempted me. The devil by the way, is Lewis Purnell. You may know him if you’re a member of the Croesus. Twice, lately, he’s kept me waiting when I’ve called for him. To-day, he swore he’d be on the steps ready. He said I wouldn’t even have to stop. Like a fool I believed him, and when you came out I’d been waiting three—”

“Not hours?”

“N-no, minutes, but wasn’t that bad enough?”

“Quite. He’s a fathead, is Purnell.”

“Not only his head . . . poor boy.”

“Have you known him long?”

“Yahs . . . and yahs . . . Our families, you know. . . .”

“Oh! One of those childhood romances!” The young man obviously thought that no good could come of such affairs. “Do you like him?”

“Er—I’m sort of used to him,” answered the girl, candidly. “It amounts to about the same thing after twenty or thirty years.”

There was another pause. They nosed their way into the city streets, driving slowly.

The young man sighed. He felt a sense of intimacy with this girl quite different from the intimacy he felt towards other girls. The discovery was pleasant in the extreme.

The girl turned to him and enquired:

“Where would you like me to leave you?”

He thought a long time. “Hopeless,” he said at last. “There isn’t such a place on the map.”

“You can get a sub. right here,” she suggested.

“I can get a snub farther on,” he retorted. “*Couldn’t* you spare time for tea?”

“How late is it?”

He told her.

“Is that all? I’ve known you exactly fifty-seven minutes, and . . . No, I won’t finish that bromide. Do you realize, however, that I don’t even know your name?”

“Baird—Ernest Baird. Dalhousie was my college. Heaven is my home. What’s your name?”

“Eloise—”

“Thanks. That’s enough. I know the rest of it.”

“But you couldn’t,” she cried, in surprise.

“Well, I know what it’s *going* to be,” he insisted. “Rein in the steed. Let’s go in and drink to our golden wedding!”

THE END

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.

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[The end of *Fifty-Seven Minutes* by Madge Macbeth]