

'Gustus Frederick

[by Elizabeth Robins]

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"Good-bye, babies," she called out from the gate. She waved the end of her boa to the group of curly-headed children crowding at the open door. The pony cart was waiting to take my Lady Bountiful on her weekly round. "Jump in," she said to her sister. The two settled themselves, and the elder took up the reins. She glanced behind to see that the well-filled basket was not forgotten, nor the bundle of cast-off clothes.

"Goo'-bye, mammy," the four-year-old Chrissie called out from the door. "Good-by, my angel," Mrs. Wiloughby said, smiling over her shoulder. Then to her sister, while the groom tightened a strap in the harness: "Just look at those blessed babies, Mary. Did you ever see such darlings?"

Mary Hayward had been watching the children. She turned to look at her sister, smiling a little enigmatically at the radiant satisfaction that illumined the proud mother's face. The non-committal smile was not lost on Constance Wiloughby. "Right," she said briskly to the groom, and the pony started off as though he too were of a charitable nature, eager, impatient even, to visit the haunts of poverty with his burden of good cheer.

"You think I'm foolish about the children?" Mrs. Wiloughby said, good-humouredly. "I suppose the ecstasies of an adoring mother are a little trying to a--"

"To an old-maid aunt," said Mary Hayward.

"Don't be silly; a girl of twenty-seven isn't an old maid in these days."

"You had three children when you were my age," said the younger woman.

"Yes, and so might you, if only you had been a little reasonable."

Mary Hayward glanced back at the groom, but that small person had jumped down and was running on before to open a gate.

"This is a new short cut," said Mrs. Wiloughby, pointing down a road marked "Private." "I mustn't be out long, I've promised to get back and read to

Willie."

"How is his throat this afternoon?"

"Oh, nearly well. The doctor said he could get up to tea, but I was afraid to let him. I've promised to come back early and amuse him."

"What a baby you make of that great boy!"

"I suppose I do," answered the mother contentedly. "I can't bear to think of my children getting to the stage when they won't need me. I'd like them always to be little."

"Well, you can't pretend that young giant of yours is *little* any longer."

"You mean Willie?"

"Yes; he's fourteen, isn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose he is," she sighed.

"But still you have the others," Mary Hayward said. "It will be a long time before all five of them are—"

"Yes, yes, thank Heaven. And besides—"

"Yes?"

The elder woman smiled and looked away. There was such a light of gladness in the half-averted face that Mary stared. The usual alert, rather cynical expression of her sister was softened and changed. Ah, yes, it was something about the children. That look of tenderness and gentle brooding—*that* was the mother-look! It was a stranger to the keen humorous face unless it was bent over one of her children, or at times when the intimate, personal sense of motherhood was abroad in her blood. They drove on in silence. They were near another semi-private lane, and again the little groom ran on before.

"You are making a great mistake, Mary," said the elder woman.

"A new one?"

"Yes, it's old and it's new. As I've told you before, there is nothing so well worth having in the world as a child. There is nothing else very important in a woman's life. *Any* marriage is better than none, just on that account.

"I sometimes think you're right. It's a pity that marriage is the condition."

"Well, it *is* the condition," said Mrs. Wiloughby. "And—and I can't bear to see you throwing away your life. If you know what it felt like to have a little tender helpless baby in your arms, your own—your very own—" She looked across the fields with a vague soft smile.

"You see," said the younger woman, "you have that instinct very strongly developed; many people are without it."

"So I've heard childless woman say," said Mrs. Wiloughby, as the little groom caught up with the cart again.

On the outskirts of the village they stopped at old Mrs. Hill's. Mrs. Wiloughby went round to the back of the cart and took out a parcel. The old woman looked out of her window and hobbled to the tiny front door. She stood there with curtsies and toothless smiles, raining blessings, and giving a harrowing description of the last attack of "rheumatics." Her visitors allowed themselves to be taken into her stuffy little front room, and Mrs. Wiloughby inquired about the grandson out in Australia, and the cow out in the paddock—both of whom had been ill. She recognised, with a delicate comprehension all her own, that the old dame's real anxiety was about the cow. Accordingly she promised a visit from the vet. Then they went to see a sick child, and here Mrs. Wiloughby's tact and kindness came out in fair colours.

"How well you know what to say to these people," said Mary. "I haven't been with you on one of these expeditions for so long that I'm filled with a fresh admiration."

"Nonsense. It's easy enough."

"I shouldn't find it so."

"Why not?"

"Do you want me to say why?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, I should feel it was such an impertinence."

"Oh on, you wouldn't!" laughed the other. "Not if you took them tea and petticoats."

"Yes, particularly if I took them tea and petticoats."

"Would you?"

"Yes; I should feel it so ridiculous that I should be given so much more tea than I could drink and so many more petticoats than I could wear, that I could take a cartload of things and dole them out from door to door as gifts. *Gifts!* And all their blessings and hideous little curtsies—their loathsome gratitude, too! — No, I always say you do this thing to perfection since it has to be done."

"You're just as mad as ever, Mary. I'm not sure you haven't got worse in

the year I've been away."

"I'm not sure, either."

"I'm afraid Willie will be restless, before I can get back," said the anxious mother, looking at her watch as they drove on, "but I must just go over to Moltons Hill and see Mrs. Bunce. I haven't been there for ages—not since I got back from abroad. She lives out of my beaten track, too, and she's such an old—"

"Isn't she the woman who had those three pretty daughters?"

"Yes. Anne went as housemaid to one of Algy's aunts in Hertfordshire."

"You mean Lady Henry Morland? We met one of her boys, you know, at Torquay last year. Don't you remember I wrote you?"

"Oh yes, that was Wilfred. But you can't go anywhere without meeting a Morland. They're as the sands of the sea."

"Yes; he was always mentioning a brother or sister I hadn't heard of before."

"Yes; there's a round dozen of them—twelve *living*. I think we'll walk this steep bit," Mrs. Wiloughby said; and they both got out and trudged. "If it weren't for this hill, I believe I'd come here oftener, in spite of that rude old Bunce woman. Rather one's duty, you know." She stopped a moment, breathing a little heavily, and turned to look back at the cart and, for a fraction of a moment, abroad over the wide, undulating country, where for miles and miles as far as she could see, the land was, and had been for many a long year, Wiloughby property. As the cart caught up with them, she went on with her silent companion towards the Bunce cottage.

"Lady Henry used to say Anne Bunce was the pearl of parlour-maids. She so fired Maud Aylward, you know, with stories of Anne's abilities that the Aylwards want me to get Maria to come to them in town. Maria's the eldest girl. Always been at home. But I'm afraid Anne's not so high in favour as she used to be."

"Oh! Turned out badly after all?"

"Well, you see, she'd gone on for seven years there at the Morlands'. They were all used to her and liked her, and then, all of a sudden, she took it into her head nothing would do but she must marry the butler. It was frightfully upsetting."

"To the butler?"

"No; to my aunt and the whole family."

"Oh, I see!"

"Such a good servant, too!"

"But I don't understand. Was the butler obdurate?"

"Absolutely. Wouldn't listen to a word my aunt said."

"Your aunt? I thought it was Anne—"

"It was Anne who wanted to marry him, stupid!"

"But you said he was obdurate."

"Yes—wouldn't listen to reason at all. Wanted to throw up his place, and marry the girl, and set up shop, or something foolish. And he'd been with Lady Henry over *fifteen years!*"

"Oh! — "

"Still, I suppose people like that *do* want to marry each other; there's no accounting for tastes!" And Mrs. Wiloughby laughed in her light satiric way. "Stop! we'll drive this little bit," she called to the groom.

"And so they gave up their good situations?" said Mary Hayward, following Mrs. Wiloughby into the cart.

"No. My aunt gave in at last, when she found how pig-headed they were—and kept them both in her service. Run on and knock," she said to the groom.

"Oh! then it all ended happily?"

"No, it didn't altogether. They weren't content with being married; they must needs go and have a child."

"That was very inconsiderate."

Mrs. Wiloughby laughed too, with the same hard, bright ring. "Yes; servants in such quarters oughtn't to make themselves troublesome. However, Lady Henry was an angel to the girl; supplied her place while she was disabled, and took her back the moment she was fit to work. And how do you think she repaid Lady Henry?"

"Can't imagine."

"By having another child just as quickly as ever she could manage it!" She flicked the pony with an indignant whip, and the cart rattled smartly along. "I should think their patience was about exhausted," she went on. "I understand that when Lady Henry said something to the girl about it, the creature was quite uppish: said she didn't mean to have as many as some folks or something of the kind. You can imagine how angry Lady Henry was—the impudence of the creature! Here we are."

"Bunce got hurt down at the mines a month or two ago," Mrs. Wiloughby whispered as she drew up. "That's why I must go and see how they're getting on. The youngest girl has been nursemaid to the Hopkinson children for three or four years. Very honest people—only the mother is an old bear. You never get any 'loathsome gratitude' out of *her!*" And Mrs. Wiloughby got slowly out of the cart, laughing the while as at some vivid recollection.

The Bunce cottage was very decent, and the place wore a prosperous air. The front door was open. A woman was on her knees scrubbing the steps. As the visitors came up the little path the kneeling figure turned. It was the eldest Bunce girl. She got up, threw her cloth into the bucket, and dried her hands on her apron, while she curtsied.

"Oh, is that you, Maria?" said Mrs. Wiloughby, kindly. "I haven't seen you for a long time. You never seemed to be about when I called before I went away." The girl laughed in a pleasant, stupid way, and went on rubbing her fingers. "How is your father?"

"He's 'bout the same, thank ye."

"Oh! what a fine baby!" said Mrs. Wiloughby, glancing into the entry, where a fat, sturdy little fellow was pulling himself up on his podgy bare legs with the help of a chair.

"Ye-es," giggled the large young woman, looking at him with interest.

"What's his name?" inquired Mrs. Wiloughby, genially.

"Gustus Frederick."

"Oh!" Mrs. Wiloughby shot an amused glance at her sister. "Is that the name of Anne's husband?" "No'm!" the young woman said, looking surprised. "Well, you're a very nice baby, 'Gustus Frederick," said Lady Bountiful, with a shade of resentment in her voice; thinking, doubtless, with a proper family concern, of the inconvenience 'Gustus Frederick had been to Algy's aunt in Hertfordshire.

"Mariar!" someone called from inside. It was a harsh voice, and resonant of authority. The girl moved aside the bucket of soapy water. "That's mooter," she said; "won't ye coom in?"

The two ladies followed her. Mrs. Bunce stood at the kitchen door. "Give me the child," she said, looking past the visitors. "Will ye coom in?" she added, with scant hospitality.

"Oh! I'm afraid you're busy," began Mrs. Wiloughby.

"Yes, on wash-days we find soomthin' to do." She pulled down her rolled-up sleeves and kept her eye on the baby. 'Gustus Frederick was kicking and wriggling in the strong arms of "Mariar."

"I called to see how Mr. Bunce was doing."

"He's verra bad. He'll never be the same agin." She held out her arms for the baby, and "Mariar" brought him nearer, clucking and crowing and beating the air with his doubled fists. "I'll mind him now. You git on with the scroobbin'," the old woman said to her daughter, and she led the way into the kitchen. Mrs. Wiloughby followed composedly; she was used to Mrs. Bunce's cordiality. It crossed her mind that in the good cause of her husband's Hertfordshire aunt, she might beard the old lioness in her den. She would intimate that Anne was endangering her good situation.

"That's a remarkably fine child of Anne's!" she began, by way of mollification, helping herself to a chair.

"'Tain't Anne's!" said the woman, dandling the child with a dogged air.

"No? Whose is it?"

"It's Mariar's."

"Oh, indeed! I hadn't heard Maria was married."

"No more she is."

"Not married?" There was an awkward pause. Mrs. Wiloughby exchanged looks with Mary. "Who is the father?" she asked at length. Mary made an impulsive gesture, but Mrs. Wiloughby waited calmly for her answer. Mary got up and looked out of the window.

"He's a soldier," said Mrs. Bunce, discreetly.

"Is he hereabouts?"

"Naa."

"Couldn't he be made to marry her?" Mary's fingers tightened on the window-frame. She could hear the sound of Mariar's scrubbing-brush outside. "Don't you think he could be got to?" insisted Mrs. Wiloughby.

The old woman trotted the baby on her knee, with a wooden expression. "He's gone to the Cape," she said briefly, while 'Gustus Frederick cooed and waved his hands, like one who signals a scoffing farewell.

"Isn't Maria very unhappy about it?"

"Naa, I doan't think so."

"Don't you think she ought to be?" said the righteous matron.

"Naa, I doan't—rightly speakin'. Ye see, he warn't good for mooch, an' she's got rid of him."

"But she's got the child on her hands," said Prudence, through the mouth of the great lady.

"Ay!" said the woman with a harsh gladness grating through her voice. "Ay! *she's got the child!*" And she settled her square shoulders back, and seemed to take a firmer hold on the baby.

"Poor little man!" said Mrs. Wiloughby, rising. "I'm very sorry."

"Oh! the child's all right! Ain't never been a finer baby hereabouts."

"Goo! goo!" the infant remarked with an air of indecent triumph. Mrs. Wiloughby looked disconcerted. She drew her mantle about her shoulders, and took a step towards the door. "I can only repeat I'm very sorry. If there is anything I can do for your husband you must let me know. This must be a great blow to him."

"It ain't *that* blow that's knocked him over—it's what happened down yonder." She jerked her head towards the mines.

Mrs. Wiloughby hastened to add: "Yes, we were all terribly sorry. I hope he'll soon be better," and turning to go, she fixed her eye for a moment's cold contemplation on the baby. 'Gustus Frederick gave a derisive gurgle and lolled his tongue. "Good morning!" she said, and hurried out. Mary Hayward followed, bending backward glances upon the insolent and cheerful young person who sprawled at his ease in his grandmother's lap. He returned the girl's look with the wide, self-possessed "who-are-you?" stare of healthy babyhood. And the girl smiled and nodded surreptitiously, as she hurried after her sister.

"Mariar" was standing outside near the door, talking and laughing with a neighbour. "Shameless creature," observed Mrs. Wiloughby under her breath. "I really shall have to say something to her, I suppose."

"No, don't," whispered Mary, clutching the other's arm.

"I really must. If they think this sort of thing isn't frowned on, there'll soon be an end of all decency, to say nothing of law and order." She went forward with a grave face. "Good morning, Mrs. Black. Maria, I would like to say a few words to you." The girl came towards her, and Mary Hayward walked away with lowered eyes. Her attention was arrested by Mrs. Bunce's voice from the cottage door, and

the sound of the child's crying. She hurried back, drawn to the commonplace little drama more strongly than she fully understood.

"My cousin, Mrs. Aylward," Mrs. Wiloughby was saying, "spoke to me when I was in town last about sending for you in the spring, but of course now—"

"Doan't ye hear me tellin' ye to take the child," said the old woman harshly, from the doorway.

"Mariar" held out her arms, and the baby curled with delight. The stout young woman's dull face brightened and flushed. She took him into her arms, and he rubbed his round face against her generous breast. She turned away to go indoors, with one hand at the buttons of her print gown. "No," she said, "I can't leave home now, thank ye, ma'am." But there was no sorrow in her face.

"No," said Mrs. Wiloughby significantly. "You can't go to Mrs. Aylward *now*. Come, Mary," and she went rapidly towards the cart. "Take that basket to Mrs. Harding," she said to the groom, "I can't wait." She took her place and gathered up the reins. "Never in my life saw anything so cool!" she said, when they had driven on some distance. "This is the third event of the kind in and about Northley within a year or two."

"You see," said Mary, in the pause, "there are others besides you who think there's nothing so well worth having as a child."

Mrs. Wiloughby looked sharply at the girl and touched the pony with the whip. "You know as well as I do that you're talking nonsense."

"I am only quoting you."

"I didn't mean a child was worth having at that price."

"I see. It's when you've counted the cost and made sure of its being a good investment—it's then that it's worth while!"

"My dear, you and I can't reconstruct society," said Mrs. Wiloughby a little sharply. "As the world is constituted it *isn't* worth while—except under approved conditions."

"I wonder," said the girl under her breath.

"Good heavens, Mary Hayward, are you mad?" The keen eyes flashed their search-light into the girl's face. "I hope you don't let other people hear you saying such things."

"Why?"

"Well, it's excessively bad taste, for one thing; and it might come to Arthur's

ears."

"And what then?" said the girl, but she flushed uncomfortably.

"Well, even his patience might find that a little too—"

"I wish I'd had the courage to say as much to him long ago," the girl interrupted. Constance Wiloughby compressed her lips, and held the pony in as he sidled down hill. "If long ago"—the girl went on with quiet self-scorn—"If *long* ago I'd said, 'My good Arthur, I don't love you and I never shall love you. But if you keep for ever tormenting me, I don't promise I won't end by marrying you, just because—just because—'"

"Well?"

Mary laughed uncertainly. "But you see *he* mightn't go to the Cape—and then where'd I be!"

They were rounding a bend in the road, and before her sister had time to answer, a high T-cart dashed into view. "Why, it's Algy and Arthur," said Mrs. Wiloughby, signalling with her whip. Her husband, sitting very high, and looking rather like an overfed coachman, was driving the new greys—driving recklessly, it might seem to one ignorant of his skill. As the cart dashed by, almost grazing their wheel, two billycock hats flew off in a kind of spasmodic greeting. "Can't stop!" called out the man who was driving— "got to meet the 5.10—Baldwin's coming!" and the T-cart vanished in a cloud of dust.

"How alike those two brothers are growing," said Mary.

"Oh, do you think so? Arthur is much more like what Algy was years and years ago."

"Was Algy like *that* when you married him?" said the girl absently. The unconscious criticism in her tone was not lost.

"Yes," said Mrs. Wiloughby. "They're excellent specimens of the burly Briton. Not very romantic, perhaps, but men of substance." She smiled and looked abroad over her lord and master's lands. "Men who live well, ride hard, sleep o' nights, and make good husbands and fathers. I only wish you might have such a man to stand between you and the world, my little sister." Her voice was very kind. The girl sat silent. "If you don't make up your mind soon to marry Arthur," Constance began again, the softness leaving her manner—

"Tell me," Mary interrupted, "tell me honestly, which do you care for most, your husband or Willie?"

Mrs. Wiloughby looked far down the straight brown road.

"If you had to give up one or other of them," insisted the girl, "which would it be?"

"I couldn't give up Willie." The mother's face showed the quick anguish of the thought.

"And you *could* live, and you know you could live, without your husband? But, why do I ask you? Don't I know quite well you could? Algy has come to be *the children's father* in more senses than one."

"Come, come, let us get out of the clouds, you impossible person! Don't make the mistake of supposing I'm a disappointed woman. I'm much fonder of Algy than I was when I married him, and my life has been altogether delightful. He would say the same of his. It's because I've *proved* the wisdom of what I'm advising you, that I go back to it again and again. You are wasting your youth, waiting for an unimportant and even embarrassing detail. Marry some good man. The rest will come." The girl said nothing. "No woman," the elder went on after a moment, in a lower tone, "not one of us can find out what life means till she holds her child in her arms." The whimsical look faded utterly out of the high-bred features, and the old brooding settled softly in Constance Wiloughby's face. "Mary—"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you can stay with us so long this year."

"So am I, dear," said the other wearily.

"I want you to be here when—when—about Christmas." And her shadowed look followed the roadside, as they hurried past.

"You don't mean—" said the girl, rousing herself with a start. They turned and met each other's eyes.

"Yes," said the older woman, smiling a little.

The girl sat up and caught her breath in ever so slightly. "And yet you grudged that girl her 'Gustus Frederick!'" she said.

"That girl! You're not comparing!—" The look of delicate scorn rounded the sentence eloquently.

"And *she* didn't have a son of fourteen, either," the girl went on a little incoherently, "nor many another good thing that's fallen to you. And yet you grudged her 'Gustus Frederick!'" She smiled a little fiercely. "You mean to *punish* her too, for *having* 'Gustus Frederick; most of all for not being ashamed of him!"

And yet *you*—there's Willie looking out of the play-room window!"

"Oh! he'll catch his death!"

"No, he's dressed. What a man he looks! What are you going to do about Willie?"

"About Willie?"

"Yes; when—when— I don't think I'll stay for Christmas, after all."

"Why not, for Heaven's sake?"

"It makes me feel a little shy—doesn't it you?" she said hurriedly, with an upward glance at the play-room window. "Almost ashamed—"

"It makes me quite ashamed to have such a crack-brained sister. I think you'll develop into a hopeless crank unless you can induce some sensible man to marry you."

"Perhaps!" said the girl, jumping out of the cart with a bound.

"It's a little discouraging," Mrs. Wiloughby observed, following her cautiously. "This is such an old bone of contention between us— But you seem to forget there's this to be said in Arthur's favour—"

"My dear!" said the girl, turning suddenly and facing her sister as they stood together on the bottom step. "Listen to me. I'm not going to marry Arthur—but for all that—"

"Well?" said the elder woman, cocking her head humorously and smiling again.

"For all that—I envy Mariar her 'Gustus Frederick."

"You're a disgrace to your family," Mrs. Wiloughby observed without much concern, as she opened the door.

"A disgrace to my family?" the girl repeated, smiling vaguely, as she followed her sister. "I knew there was a bond of some sort between 'Gustus Frederick and me."

C. E. RAIMOND

[This early short story was reprinted in the anthology of 1896, *Below the Salt and Other Stories*, also credited to ER's pseudonym, C. E. Raimond. The American edition of this collection, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty and Oher Stories*, did not reprint this nor one other story, "A Lucky Sixpence." As Sue Thomas in her bibliography entry

(Number 139) notes, "Gustus Frederick" was also reprinted in 1981 in *Rediscovery: 300 Years of Stories by and about Women* (edited by Betzy Dinesen, London: Women's Press, 1981, pp. 116-127; US Paperback by Avon Books, ISBN 0-380-60756-5). Each of the three printings has been consulted, with only slight variations of style, for instance in hyphenation and punctuation.

The author's phonetic spelling of the vernacular is noticeable in this collection of stories, and Robins would use regional American dialects, in the style popularized by *Huck Finn*, in her next novels, *The Open Question*, 1898, and *The Magnetic North*, 1904.

This transcription for the Robins Web at Jacksonville State University preserves original English spelling. Robins would later return to themes of women bearing or adopting and then raising children outside the structure of marriage.

So far as is known, Robins, writing under a pseudonym, made no comment on the similarity between the name of this story and its infant child with the artist August Friedrich Schenck, whose paintings "The Orphan" (c. 1885) and "Anguish" (c. 1878) depict the emotional connections between a sheep and lamb, one dead, the other living. See the Wiki article on Schenck.]