

# **CAUGHT ON THE EBB-TIDE**

E. P. Roe

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The August morning was bright and fair, but Herbert Scofield's brow was clouded. He had wandered off to a remote part of the grounds of a summer hotel on the Hudson, and seated in the shade of a tree, had lapsed into such deep thought that his cigar had gone out and the birds were becoming bold in the vicinity of his motionless figure.

It was his vacation time and he had come to the country ostensibly for rest. As the result, he found himself in the worst state of unrest that he had ever known. Minnie Madison, a young lady he had long admired, was the magnet that had drawn him hither. Her arrival had preceded his by several weeks; and she had smiled a little consciously when in looking at the hotel register late one afternoon his bold chirography met her eye.

"There are so many other places to which he might have gone," she murmured.

Her smile, however, was a doubtful one, not expressive of gladness and entire satisfaction. In mirthful, saucy fashion her thoughts ran on: "The time has come when he might have a respite from business. Does he still mean business by coming here? I'm not sure that I do, although the popular idea seems to be that a girl should have no vacation in the daily effort to find a husband. I continually disappoint the good people by insisting that the husband must find me. I have a presentiment that Mr. Scofield is looking for me; but there are some kinds of property which cannot be picked up and carried off, nolens volens, when found."

Scofield had been animated by no such clearly defined purpose as he was credited with when he sought the summer resort graced by Miss Madison. His action seemed to him tentative, his motive ill-defined even in his own consciousness, yet it had been strong enough to prevent any hesitancy. He knew he was weary from a long year's work. He purposed to rest and take life very leisurely, and he had mentally congratulated himself that he was doing a wise thing in securing proximity to Miss Madison. She had evoked his admiration in New York, excited more than a passing interest, but he felt that he did not know her very well. In the unconventional life now in prospect he could see her daily and permit his interest to be dissipated or deepened, as the case might be, while he remained, in the strictest sense of the world, uncommitted. It was a very prudent scheme and not a bad one. He reasoned justly: "This selecting a wife is no bagatelle. A man wishes to know something more about a woman than he can learn in a drawing-room or at a theatre party."

But now he was in trouble. He had been unable to maintain this judicial aspect. He had been made to understand at the outset that Miss Madison did not regard herself as a proper subject for deliberate investigation, and that she was not inclined to aid in his researches. So far from meeting him with engaging frankness and revealing her innermost soul for his inspection, he found her as elusive as only a woman of tact can be when so minded, even at a place where people meet daily. It was plain to him from the first that he was not the only man who favored her with admiring glances; and he soon discovered that young Merriweather and his friend Hackley had passed beyond the neutral ground of non-committal. He set himself the task of learning how far these suitors had progressed in her good graces; he would not be guilty of the folly of giving chase to a prize already virtually captured. This too had proved a failure. Clearly, would he know what Mr. Merriweather and Mr. Hackley were to Miss Madison he must acquire the power of mind reading. Each certainly appeared to be a very good friend of hers a much better friend than he could claim to be, for in his case she maintained a certain unapproachableness

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which perplexed and nettled him.

After a week of rest, observation, and rather futile effort to secure a reasonable share of Miss Madison's society and attention, he became assured that he was making no progress whatever so far as she was concerned, but very decided progress in a condition of mind and heart anything but agreeable should the affair continue so one-sided. He had hoped to see her daily, and was not disappointed. He had intended to permit his mind to receive such impressions as he should choose; and now his mind asked no permission whatever, but without volition occupied itself with her image perpetually. He was not sure whether she satisfied his preconceived ideals of what a wife should be or not, for she maintained such a firm reticence in regard to herself that he could put his finger on no affinities. She left no doubt as to her intelligence, but beyond that she would not reveal herself to him. He was almost satisfied that she discouraged him utterly and that it would be wiser to depart before his feelings became more deeply involved. At any rate he had better do this or else make love in dead earnest. Which course should he adopt?

There came a day which brought him to a decision.

A party had been made up for an excursion into the Highlands, Miss Madison being one of the number. She was a good pedestrian and rarely missed a chance for a ramble among the hills. Scofield's two rivals occasionally got astray with her in the perplexing wood-roads, but he never succeeded in securing such good-fortune. On this occasion, as they approached a woodchopper's cottage (or rather, hovel), there were sounds of acute distress within the piercing cries of a child evidently in great pain. There was a moment of hesitancy in the party, and then Miss Madison's graceful indifference vanished utterly. As she ran hastily to the cabin, Scofield felt that now probably was a chance for more than mere observation, and he kept beside her. An ugly cur sought to bar entrance; but his vigorous kick sent it howling away. She gave him a quick pleased look as they entered. A slatternly woman was trying to soothe a little boy, who at all her attempts only writhed and shrieked the more. "I dunno what ails the young one," she said. "I found him a moment ago yellin' at the foot of a tree. Suthin's the matter with his leg."

"Yes," cried Miss Madison, delicately feeling of the member an operation which, even under her gentle touch, caused increased outcry, "it is evidently broken. Let me take him on my lap;" and Scofield saw that her face had softened into the tenderest pity.

"I will bring a surgeon at the earliest possible moment," exclaimed Scofield, turning to go.

Again she gave him an approving glance which warmed his heart. "The ice is broken between us now," he thought, as he broke through the group gathering at the open door.

Never before had he made such time down a mountain, for he had a certain kind of consciousness that he was not only going after the doctor, but also after the girl. Securing a stout horse and wagon at the hotel, he drove furiously for the surgeon, explained the urgency, and then, with the rural healer at his side, almost killed the horse in returning.

He found his two rivals at the cabin door, the rest of the party having gone on. Miss Madison came out quickly. An evanescent smile flitted across her face as she saw his kindled eyes and the reeking horse, which stood trembling and with bowed head. His ardor was a little dampened when she went directly to the poor beast and said, "This horse is a rather severe indictment against you, Mr. Scofield. There was need of haste, but " and she paused significantly.

"Yes," added the doctor, springing out, "I never saw such driving! It's lucky our necks are not broken"

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"You are all right, Doctor, and ready for your work," Scofield remarked brusquely. "As for the horse, I'll soon bring him around;" and he rapidly began to unhitch the over-driven animal.

"What are you going to do?" Miss Madison asked curiously.

"Rub him into as good shape as when he started."

She turned away to hide a smile as she thought, "He has waked up at last."

The boy was rendered unconscious, and his leg speedily put in the way of restoration. "He will do very well now if my directions are carried out strictly," the physician was saying when Scofield entered.

Mr. Merriweather and Mr. Hackley stood rather helplessly in the background and were evidently giving more thought to the fair nurse than to the patient. The mother was alternating between lamentations and invocations of good on the "young leddy's" head. Finding that he would come in for a share of the latter, Scofield retreated again. Miss Madison walked quietly out, and looking critically at the horse, remarked, "You have kept your word very well, Mr. Scofield. The poor creature does look much improved." She evidently intended to continue her walk with the two men in waiting, for she said demurely with an air of dismissal, "You will have the happy consciousness of having done a good deed this morning."

"Yes," replied Scofield, in significant undertone; "you, of all others, Miss Madison, know how inordinately happy I shall be in riding back to the village with the doctor."

She raised her eyebrows in a little well-feigned surprise at his words, then turned away.

During the remainder of the day he was unable to see her alone for a moment, or to obtain any further reason to believe that the ice was in reality broken between them. But his course was no longer noncommittal, even to the most careless observer. The other guests of the house smiled; and Mr. Merriweather and Mr. Hackley looked askance at one who threw their assiduous attentions quite into the shade. Miss Madison maintained her composure, was oblivious as far as possible, and sometimes when she could not appear blind, looked a little surprised and even offended.

He had determined to cast prudence and circumlocution to the winds. On the morning following the episode in the mountains he was waiting to meet her when she came down to breakfast. "I've seen that boy, Miss Madison, and he's doing well."

"What! so early? You are a very kind-hearted man, Mr. Scofield."

"About as they average. That you are kind-hearted I know at least to every one except me for I saw your expression as you examined the little fellow's injury yesterday. You thought only of the child "

"I hope you did also, Mr. Scofield," she replied with an exasperating look of surprise.

"You know well I did not," he answered bluntly. "I thought it would be well worth while to have my leg broken if you would look at me in the same way."

"Truly, Mr. Scofield, I fear you are not as kind-hearted as I supposed you to be;" and then she turned to greet Mr. Merriweather.

"Won't you let me drive you up to see the boy?" interposed Scofield, boldly.

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"I'm sorry, but I promised to go up with the doctor this morning."

And so affairs went on. He thought at times her color quickened a little when he approached suddenly; he fancied that he occasionally surprised a half-wistful, half-mirthful glance, but was not sure. He knew that she was as well aware of his intentions and wishes as if he had proclaimed them through a speaking-trumpet. His only assured ground of comfort was that neither Mr. Merriweather nor Mr. Hackley had yet won the coveted prize, though they evidently were receiving far greater opportunities to push their suit than he had been favored with.

At last his vacation was virtually at an end. But two more days would elapse before he must be at his desk again in the city. And now we will go back to the time when we found him that early morning brooding over his prospects, remote from observation. What should he do propose by letter? "No," he said after much cogitation. "I can see that little affected look of surprise with which she would read my plain declaration of what she knows so well. Shall I force a private interview with her? The very word 'force,' which I have unconsciously used, teaches me the folly of this course. She doesn't care a rap for me, and I should have recognized the truth long ago. I'll go back to the hotel and act toward her precisely as she has acted toward me. I can then at least take back to town a little shred of dignity."

He appeared not to see her when she came down to breakfast. After the meal was over he sat on the piazza engrossed in the morning paper. An excursion party for the mountains was forming. He merely bowed politely as she passed him to join it, but he ground his teeth as he saw Merriweather and Hackley escorting her away. When they were out of sight he tossed the paper aside and went down to the river, purposing to row the fever out of his blood. He was already satisfied how difficult his tactics would be should he continue to see her, and he determined to be absent all day, to so tire himself out that exhaustion would bring early sleep on his return.

Weary and leaden-spirited enough he was, as late in the afternoon he made his way back, but firm in sudden resolve to depart on an early train in the morning and never voluntarily to see the obdurate lady of his affections again.

Just as the sun was about sinking he approached a small wooded island about half a mile from the boat-house, and was surprised to notice a rowboat high and dry upon the beach. "Some one has forgotten that the tide is going out," he thought, as he passed; but it was no affair of his.

A voice called faintly, "Mr. Scofield!"

He started at the familiar tones, and looked again. Surely that was Miss Madison standing by the prow of the stranded skiff! He knew well indeed it was she; and he put his boat about with an energy not in keeping with his former languid strokes. Then, recollecting himself, he became pale with the self-control he purposed to maintain, "She is in a scrape," he thought; "and calls upon me as she would upon any one else to get her out of it."

Weariness and discouragement inclined him to be somewhat reckless and brusque in his words and manner. Under the compulsion of circumstances she who would never graciously accord him opportunities must now be alone with him; but as a gentleman, he could not take advantage of her helplessness, to plead his cause, and he felt a sort of rage that he should be mocked with an apparent chance which was in fact no chance at all.

His boat stranded several yards from the shore. Throwing down his oars, he rose and faced her. Was it the last rays of the setting sun which made her face so rosy, or was it embarrassment?

"I'm in a dilemma, Mr. Scofield," Miss Madison began hesitatingly.

"And you would rather be in your boat," he added.

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"That would not help me any, seeing where my boat is. I have done such a stupid thing! I stole away here to finish a book, and well I didn't notice that the tide was running out. I'm sure I don't know what I'm going to do."

Scofield put his shoulder to an oar and tried to push his craft to what deserved the name of shore, but could make little headway. He was glad to learn by the effort, however, that the black mud was not unfathomable in depth. Hastily reversing his action, he began pushing his boat back in the water.

"Surely, Mr. Scofield, you do not intend to leave me," began Miss Madison.

"Surely not," he replied; "but then, since you are so averse to my company, I must make sure that my boat does not become as fast as yours on this ebb-tide, otherwise we should both have to wait till the flood."

"Oh, beg pardon! I now understand. But how can you reach me?"

"Wade," he replied coolly, proceeding to take off his shoes and stockings.

"What! through that horrid black mud?"

"I couldn't leap that distance, Miss Madison."

"It's too bad! I'm so provoked with myself! The mud may be very deep, or there may be a quicksand or something."

"In which case I should merely disappear a little earlier;" and he sprang overboard up to his knees, dragged the boat till it was sufficiently fast in the ooze to be stationary, then he waded ashore.

"Well," she said with a little deprecatory laugh, "it's a comfort not to be alone on a desert island."

"Indeed! Can I be welcome under any circumstances?"

"Truly, Mr. Scofield, you know that you were never more welcome. It's very kind of you."

"Any man would be glad to come to your aid. It is merely your misfortune that I happen to be the one."

"I'm not sure that I regard it as a very great misfortune. You proved in the case of that little boy that you can act very energetically."

"And get lectured for my intemperate zeal. Well, Miss Madison, I cannot make a very pleasing spectacle with blackamoor legs, and it's time I put my superfluous energy to some use. Suppose you get in your boat, and I'll try to push it off"

She complied with a troubled look in her face. He pushed till the veins knotted on his forehead. At this she sprang out, exclaiming, "You'll burst a blood-vessel."

"That's only a phase of a ruptured heart, and you are used to such phenomena."

"It's too bad for you to talk in that way," she cried.

"It certainly is. I will now attend strictly to business."

"I don't see what you can do."

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"Carry you out to my boat that is all I can do."

"Oh, Mr. Scofield!"

"Can you suggest anything else?"

She looked dubiously at the intervening black mud, and was silent.

"I could go up to the hotel and bring Mr. Merriweather and Mr. Hackley."

She turned away to hide her tears.

"Or I could go after a brawny boatman; but delay is serious, for the tide is running out fast and the stretch of mud growing wider. Can you not imagine me Mike or Tim, or some fellow of that sort."

"No, I can't."

"Then perhaps you wish me to go for Mike or Tim?"

"But the tide is running out so fast, you said."

"Yes, and it will soon be dark."

"Oh, dear!" and there was distress in her tones.

He now said kindly, "Miss Madison, I wish that like Sir Walter Raleigh I had a mantle large enough for you to walk over. You can at least imagine that I am a gentleman, that you may soon be at the hotel, and no one ever be any the wiser that you had to choose between me and the deep ah, well mud."

"There is no reason for such an allusion, Mr. Scofield."

"Well, then, that you had no other choice."

"That's better. But how in the world can you manage it?"

"You will have to put your arm around my neck."

"Oh!"

"You would put your arm around a post, wouldn't you?" he asked with more than his old brusqueness.

"Yes-s; but "

"But the tide is going out. My own boat will soon be fast. Dinner will grow cold at the hotel, and you are only the longer in dispensing with me. You must consider the other dire alternatives."

"Ob, I forgot that you were in danger of losing a warm dinner."

"You know I have lost too much to think of that or much else. But there is no need of satire, Miss Madison. I will do whatever you wish. That truly is carte blanche enough even for this occasion."



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"I didn't mean to be satirical. I I Well, have your own way."

"Not if you prefer some other way."

"You have shown that practically there isn't any other way. I'm sorry that my misfortune, or fault rather, should also be your misfortune. You don't know how heavy "

"I soon will, and you must endure it all with such grace as you can. Put your arm round my neck, so oh, that will never do! Well, you'll hold tight enough when I'm floundering in the mud."

Without further ado he picked her up, and started rapidly for his boat. Stepping on a smooth stone he nearly fell, and her arm did tighten decidedly.

"If you try to go so fast," she said, "you will fall."

"I was only seeking to shorten your ordeal, but for obvious reasons must go slowly;" and he began feeling his way.

"Mr. Scofield, am I not very heavy?" she asked softly.

"Not as heavy as my heart, and you know it."

"I'm sure I "

"No, you are not to blame. Moths have scorched their wings before now, and will always continue to do so."

Her head rested slightly against his shoulder; her breath fanned his cheek; her eyes, soft and lustrous, sought his. But he looked away gloomy and defiant, and she felt his grasp tighten vise-like around her. "I shall not affect any concealment of the feelings which she has recognized so often, nor shall I ask any favors," he thought. "There," he said, as he placed her in his boat, "you are safe enough now. Now go aft while I push off."

When she was seated he exerted himself almost as greatly as before, and the boat gradually slid into the water. He sprang in and took the oars.

"Aren't you going to put on your shoes and stockings?"

"Certainly, when I put you ashore."

"Won't that be a pretty certain way of revealing the plight in which you found me?"

"Pardon my stupidity; I was preoccupied with the thought of relieving you from the society which you have hitherto avoided so successfully;" and bending over his shoes he tied them almost savagely.

There was a wonderful degree of mirth and tenderness in her eyes as she watched him. They had floated by a little point; and as he raised his head he saw a form which he recognized as Mr. Merriweather rowing toward them. "There comes one of your shadows," he said mockingly. "Be careful how you exchange boats when he comes along-side. I will give you no help in such a case."

She looked hastily over her shoulder at the approaching oarsman. "I think it will be safer to remain in your boat," she said.

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"Oh, it will be entirely safe," he replied bitterly.

"Mr. Merriweather must have seen you carrying me."

"That's another thing which I can't help."

"Mr. Scofield," she began softly.

He arrested his oars, and turned wondering eyes to hers. They were sparkling with mirth as she continued, "Are you satisfied that a certain young woman whom you once watched very narrowly is entirely to your mind?"

He caught her mirthful glance and misunderstood her. With dignity he answered, "I'm not the first man who blundered to his cost, though probably it would have made no difference. You must do me the justice, however, to admit that I did not maintain the role of observer very long that I wooed you so openly that every one was aware of my suit. Is it not a trifle cruel to taunt me after I had made such ample amends?"

"I was thinking of Mr. Merriweather "

"Undoubtedly"

"Since he has seen me with my arm around your neck you know I couldn't help it perhaps he might row the other way if it were well, if he saw you what shall I say sitting over here by me or Somehow I don't feel very hungry, and I wouldn't mind spending another hour "

Scofield nearly upset the boat in his precipitous effort to gain a seat beside her and Mr. Merriweather did row another way.