FRAN

BY

JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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SYNOPSIS.

Fran arrives at Hamilton Gregory's home in Littleburg, but finds him absent conducting the choir at a camp meeting. She goes thither in search of him, laughs during the service and is asked to leave. Abbott Ashton, superintendent of schools, escorts Fran from the tent. He tells her Gregory is a wealthy man, deeply interested in charity work, and a pillar of the church. Ashton becomes greatly interested in Fran and while taking leave of her, holds her hand and is seen by Sapphira Clinton, sister of Robert Clinton, chairman of the school board. Fran tells Gregory she wants a home with him. Grace Noir, Gregory's private secretary, takes a violent dislike to Fran and advises her to go away at once. Fran hints at a twenty-year-old secret, and Gregory in agitation asks Grace to leave the room. Fran relates the story of her Gregory married a young girl at Springfield while attending college and then deserted her. Fran is the child of that marriage. Gregory had married his present wife three years before the death of Fran's mother. Fran takes a liking to Mrs. Gregory. Gregory explains that Fran is the daughter of a very dear friend who is dead. Fran agrees to the story. Mrs. Gregory insists on her making her home with them and takes her to her arms. Fran declares the secretary must go. Grace backs, nagging tactics in an effort to drive Fran from the Gregory home. Abbott, while taking a walk alone at midnight, finds Fran at a bridge telling her fortune by cards. She tells Abbott that she is the famous lion tamer, Fran Nonpareil. She tired of circus life and sought a home. Grace decides to ask Bob Clinton's aid in Springfield in investigating Fran's story. Fran offers her services to Gregory as secretary during the temporary absence of Grace. The latter, hearing of Fran's purpose, returns and interrupts a touching scene between father and daughter. Grace tells Gregory she intends to marry Clinton and quit his service. He declares that he cannot continue his work without her. Carried away by passion, he takes her in his arms. Fran walks in on them, and declares that Grace must leave the house at once. To Gregory's consternation, he learns of Clinton's mission to Springfield. Clinton returns from Springfield and, at Fran's request, Abbott urges him not to discuss what he has learned. On Abbott's assurance that Grace will leave Gregory at once, Clinton agrees to keep silent. Driven into a corner by the threat of exposure, Gregory is forced to dismiss Grace. Grace is offered the job of bookkeeper in Clinton's grocery store. Gregory's infatuation leads him to seek Grace at the grocery. He finds her alone and tells her the story of his past. Grace points out that as he married the present Mrs. Gregory before the death of Fran's father, he is not now legally married. They decide to flee at once. They attempt to escape during the excitement of a street fair and are forced to enter the lion tent to avoid Clinton. Abbott wanders into the lion tent to pass the time. A young woman wearing a mask is taking the place of the regular trainer. One of the lions rebels and the trainer removes her mask revealing the features of Fran. She finally overcomes the brute. Gregory's eyes are opened to the real nature of Grace as he sees a murder in her eyes during Fran's contest with the lion. He tells her all is over between them.

CHAPTER XXIII.—Continued.

He met her eyes unfaltering. "It's already nine o'clock," he said with singular composure. "Don't forget nine-thirty."

Then he disappeared in the crowd.

Then, to her amazement, she beheld Hamilton Gregory stumbling toward her, looking neither to right nor left, seeing none but her—Hamilton Gregory at a show! Hamilton Gregory here, of all places, his eyes wide, his head thrown back, as if to bare his face to her startled gaze.

"Fran!" cried Gregory, thrusting forth his arms to take her hands. "Fran! Even now, the bars divide us.

"Up, Samson, Up!"

But oh, I am so glad, so glad—and God answered my prayer and saved you, Fran—my daughter!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Near the Sky.

It was half-past nine when Abbott met Fran, according to appointment, before the Snake Den. From her hands she had removed the color of Italy, and from her body the glittering raiment of La Gonizetti.

Fran came up to the young man from out the crowded street, all quivering excitement. In contrast with the pulsing life that ceaselessly changed her face, as from reflections of dancing light points, his composure showed almost grotesque.

"Here I am," she panted, shooting a quizzical glance at his face, "are you ready for me? Come on, then, and I'll show you the fary place for us."

Abbott inquired serenely: "Down there in the Den?"

"No," she returned, "not in the Den. You're no Daniel, if I am a Charmer. No dens for us."

"Not lion cages?" inquired Abbott, still inscrutable; "never again?"

"Never again," came her response.

Fran stopped before the Ferris Wheel.

"Let's take a ride," she said, a little tremulously. "Won't need tickets. Bill, stop the wheel; I want to go right up. This is a friend of mine—Mr. Ashton. And Abbott, this is an older friend than you—Mr. Bill Smookins."

Mr. Bill Smookins was an exceedingly hard-featured man, of no recognizable age. Externally, he was blue overalls and greasy tar.

Abbott grasped Bill's hand, and inquired about business.

"Awful pore, since Fran lef' the show," was the answer, accompanied by a grin that threatened to cut the weather-beaten face wide open.

Fran beamed. "Mr. Smookins knew my mother—didn't you, Bill? He was awful good to me when I was a kid. Mr. Smookins was a Human Nymph in those days, and he smoked and talked, he did, right down under the water—remember, Bill? That was sure-enough water—oh, he's a sure-enough Bill, let me tell you!"

Bill intimated, as he slowed down the engine, that the rheumatism he had acquired under the water, was sure-enough rheumatism—hence his change of occupation. "I was strong enough to be a Human Nymph," he explained, "but not endurable. Nobody can't last many years as a Human Nymph."

Abbott indicated his companion—"Here's one that'll last my time."

The wheel stopped. He and Fran were barred into a seat.

"And now," Fran exclaimed, "it's all ups and downs, just like a moving picture of life. Why don't you say something, Mr. Ashton? But no, you can keep still—I'm excited to death, and wouldn't hear you anyway. I want to do all the talking—I always do, after I've been in the cage. My brain is filled with air—so this is the time to be soaring up into the sky, isn't it! What is your brain filled with?—but never mind. We'll be just two balloons—my! aren't you glad we haven't any strings on us—suppose some people had hold!—I, for one, would be willing never to go down again. Where are the clouds?—Wish we could meet a few. See how I'm trembling—always do, after the lions. Now, Abbott, I'll leave a small opening for just one word—"

"Ill steady you," said Abbott, briefly, and he took her hand. She did not appear conscious of his protecting clasp.

"I never see the moon so big," she went on, breathlessly, "without thinking of that night when it rolled along the pasture as if it wanted to knock us off the foot-bridge for being where we ought'n't. I never could understand why you should stay on that bridge with a perfect stranger, when your duty was to be usher at the camp-meeting! You weren't ushering me, you know, you were holding my hand—I mean, I was holding your hand, as Miss Sapphira says I shouldn't. What a poor helpless man—as I'm holding you now, I presume! But I laughed in meeting. People ought to go outdoors to smile, and keep their religion in a house, I guess. I'm going to tell you why I laughed, for you've never guessed, and you've always been afraid to ask—"

"Afraid of you, Fran?"

"Awfully. I'm going to show you—let go, so I can show you. No, I'm in earliest—you can have me, afterwards. Remember that evangelist? There he stood, waving his hands—as I'm doing now—moving his arms with his eyes fastened upon the congregation—this way—look, Abbott."

"Fran! As if I were not already looking."

"Look—just so; not saying a word—only waving this way and that . . . And it made me thing of our hypnotizer—the man that waves people into our biggest tent—he seems to pick 'em up bodily and carry them in his arms. Well! And if the people are to be waved into a church, it won't take much of a breeze to blow them out. I don't believe in soul-waving. But that doesn't mean that I don't believe in the church—does it?—do you think?"

"You believe in convictions, Fran. And since you've come into the church, you don't have to say that you believe in it."

"Yes—there's nothing on the outside, and oh, sometimes there's so little, so little under the roof—what do you think of me, Abbott?"

"Fran, I think you are the most—"

"But do you!" she interposed, still unsteadily. "In the superlative? I don't see how you can, after that exhibition behind the bars. Anyway, I want you to talk about yourself. What made you go away from town? But that's not the worst; what made you stay away? And what were you doing off there wherever it was, while poor little girls were wondering themselves sick about you? But wait!—the wheel's going down—down—down. . . . Good thing I have you to hold to—poor Miss Sapphira, she can't come now! Listen at all the street criers, getting closer, and the whistle sounds—I wish we had whistles; the squawky kind. See my element. Ability, the air I've breathed all my life—the carnival. Here we are, just above the clouds of confetti. . . . Now we're riding through . . . pretty damp, these clouds are, don't you think! Those ribbons of electric lights have been the real world to me, Abbott—they were home. . . . No, Bill, we don't want to get out. We intend to ride until you take this wheel to pieces. And oh, by the way, Bill—just stop this wheel, every once in a while, will you?—when we're up at the very tiptop. All right—good-by."

And Abbott called gaily, "Good-by, Mr. Smookins!"

"I'm glad you did that, Abbott. You think you're somebody, when somebody else thinks so, too. Now we're rising in the world." Fran was so excited that she could not keep her body from quivering. In spite of this, she fastened her eyes upon Abbott to ask, suddenly: "'Most—what?"

"Most adorable," Abbott answered, as if he had been waiting for the prompting. "Most precious. Most bewitchingly sweet. Most unanswerably and eternally—Fran!"

"And you—" she whispered.

"And I," he told her, "am nothing but most wanting-to-be-loved."

"It's so queer," Fran said, plaintively. "You know, Abbott, how long you've fought against me. You know it, and I don't blame you, not in the least. There's nothing about me to make people. . . . But even now, how can you think you understand me, when I don't understand myself?"

"I don't," he said, promptly. "I've given up trying to understand you. Since then, I've just loved. That's easy."

"What will people think of a superintendent of public schools caring for a show-girl, even if she is Fran Nonpareil. How would it affect your career?"

"But you have promised never again to engage in a show, so you are not a show-girl."

"What about my mother who lived and died as a lion-tamer? What will you do about my life-history? I'd never speak to a man who could feel ashamed of my mother. What about my father who has never publicly acknowledged me? I'd not want to have anything to do with a man who—who could be proud of him."

"As to the past, Fran, I have only this to say: Whatever hardships it contained, whatever wrongs or wretchedness—it evolved you, you, the Fran of today—the Fran of this living hour. And it's the Fran of this living hour that I want to marry?"

Fran covered her face with her hands. For a while there was silence, then she said:

"Father was there, tonight."

"At the lion-show? Impossible! Mr Gregory go to a—a—lo—n—"

"Yes, it is possible for him even to go to a show. But to do him justice, he was forced under the tent, he had no intention of doing anything so wicked as that, he only meant to do some little thing like running away—But no, I can't speak of him with bitterness, now. Abbott, he seems all changed."

Abbott murmured, as if stupefied: "Mr. Gregory at a show!"

"Yes, and a lion-show. When it was over he came to me—he was so excited—"

"So was I," spoke up the other—"rather!"

"You didn't show it. I thought maybe you wouldn't care if I had been eaten up. . . . No, no, listen. He wanted to claim me—he called me 'daughter' right there before the people, but they thought it was just a sort of—of church name. But he was wonderfully moved. I left the tent with him, and we had a long talk—I came from him to you. I never saw anybody so changed."

"But why?"

"You see, he thought I was going to be killed right there before his eyes, and seeing it with his very own eyes made him feel responsible. He told me, afterwards, that when he found out who it was in the cage, he thought of mother in a different way—he saw how his desertion had driven her to earning her living with showmen, so I could be supported. All in all, he is a changed man."

"Then will he acknowledge you?—but no, no . . ."

"You see? He can't, on account of Mrs. Gregory. There's no future for him, or for her, except to go on living as man and wife—without the secretary. We imagines it would be a sort of reparation to present me to the world as his daughter, he thinks it would give him happiness—but it can't be. Grace Noir has found it all out—"

"Then she will tell!" Abbott exclaimed, in dismay.

"She would have told but for one thing. She doesn't dare, and it's on her own account—of course. She has been terribly—well, indiscreet. You can't think of what lengths she was willing to go—not from coldly making up her mind, but because she lost grip on herself, from always thinking she couldn't. So she went away with Bob Clinton—she'll marry him, and they'll go to Chicago, out of Littleburg history—poor Bob! Remember the night he was trying to get religion? I'm afraid he'll conclude that religion isn't what he thought it was, living so close to it from now on."

"All this interests me greatly, dear, because it interests you. Still, it doesn't bear upon the main question."

"Abbott, you don't know why I went to that show to act. You thought I was caring for a sick friend. What do you think of such deceptions?"

"I think I understand. Simon Jefferson told me of a girl falling from a trapeze; it was possibly La Gonizetti's daughter. Mrs. Jefferson told me that Mrs. Gregory is nursing some one. The same one, I imagine. And La Gonizetti was a friend of yours, and you took her place, so the mother could stay with the injured daughter."

"You're a wonder, yourself!" Fran declared, dropping her hands to stare at him. "Yes, that's it. All these show-people are friends of mine. When the mayor was trying to decide what carnival company they'd have for the street fair, I told him about this show, and that's why it's here. Poor La Gonizetti needs the money dreadfully—for they spend it as fast as it's paid in. The little darling will have to go to a hospital, and there's nothing laid by. The boys all threw in, but they didn't have much, themselves. Nobody has. Everybody's poor in this old world—except you and me. I've taken La Gonizetti's place in the cage all day to keep her from losing out; and if this wasn't the last day, I don't know whether I'd have promised you or not. . . . Samson was pretty good, but that mask annoyed him. So you see—but honestly, Abbott, doesn't all this make you feel just a wee bit different about me?"

"It makes me want to kiss you, Fran."

"It makes you"—she gasped—"want to do—that? Why, Abbott! Nothing can save you."

"I'm afraid not," he agreed.

The car was swinging at the highest reach of the wheel. The engine stopped.

She opened her eyes very wide. "I'd think you'd be afraid of such a world-famous lion-trainer," she declared, drawing back. "Some have been, I assure you."

"I'm not afraid," Abbott declared, drawing her toward him. He would have kissed her, but she covered her face with her hands and bent her head instinctively.

"Up!" cried Abbott. "Up, Samson, up!"

Fran laughed hilariously, and lifted her head. She looked at him through her fingers. Her face was a garden of blush-roses. She pretended to roar but the result was not terrifying; then she obediently held up her mouth.

"After all," said Fran, speaking somewhat indistinctly, "you haven't told why you ran away to leave poor Fran guessing where you'd gone. Do you know how I love you, Abbott?"

"I think I know."

It was a good while later that Abbott said: "As to why I left Littleburg: Bob knew of a private school that has just been indorporated as a college. A teacher's needed, one with ideas of the new education—the education that teaches us how to make books useful to life, and not life to books—the education that teaches happiness as well as words and figures; just the kind that you didn't find at my school, little rebel! Bob was an old chum of the man who owns the property so he recommended me, and I went. It's a great chance, a magnificent opening. The man was so pleased with the way I talked—he's new to the business, so that must be his excuse—that I am to be the president."

Fran's voice came rather faintly—"Hurrah! But you are to be far, far above my reach, just as I prophesied. Don't you remember what I said to you during our drive through Sure-Enough Country?"

"And that isn't all," said Abbott, looking straight before him, and pretending that he had not heard. "In that town—Tahlelah, Okla.—I discovered, out in the suburbs, a cottage—the dearest little thing—as dear as . . . as Mr. Smookins; just big enough for a girl like Fran. I rented it at once—of course, it ought'n't to be standing there idle—there's such a fragrant flower garden—I spent some time arranging the grounds as I think you'll like them. I didn't furnish the cottage, though. Women always like to select their own carpets and things, and—"

Fran's face was a dimpled sea of pink and crimson waves, with starry lights in her black eyes for signal lights. "Oh, you king of hearts!" she exclaimed. "And shall we have a church wedding, and just kill 'em?"

Abbott laughed boyishly. "No—you must remember that your connection with show-life is at an end."

"But—and then—and so," cried Fran rapturously, "I'm to have a home after all, with flower gardens and carpets and things—a sure-enough home—Abbott, a home with you! Don't you know, it's been the dream of my life to—to—"

Abbott was inexpressibly touched. "Yes, I was just thinking of what I heard you say, once—to belong to somebody."

Fran slipped her arms about his neck. "And what a somebody! To belong to you. And to know that my home is our home. . . ."

Abbott, with a sober sense of his unworthiness, embraced her silently.

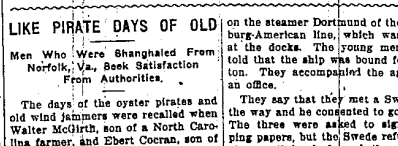
From far below came a sudden sound, making its way through the continuity of the street rumor. It was the chugging of the engine.

The wheel began to revolve.

Down they came—down—down—

Fran looked up at the moon. "Good-by," she called, gaily. "The world is good enough for me!"

(THE END.)



LIKE PIRATE DAYS OF OLD

Men Who Were Shanghaied From Norfolk, Va., Seek Satisfaction From Authorities.

The days of the oyster pirates and old wind jammers were recalled when Walter McGirth, son of a North Carolina farmer, and Ebert Cocran, son of a former Pittsburg banker, told how they had been changhaied at the point of a pistol and forced to work their way as seamen to Hamburg when they thought that they were going to ship to Boston, says the Philadelphia Times. The immigration authorities are handling the case and a deputy United States marshal, accompanied by the two men, is on the way to Norfolk to arrest the agent who shipped them.

The two young men met last November in Norfolk, Va. Both were out of employment and sought work about the docks. They were met, according to their story, by an alleged crew shipping agent, who offered to book them on the steamer Dortmund of the Hamburg-American line, which was lying at the docks. The young men were told that the ship was bound for Boston. They accompanied the agent to an office.

They say that they met a Swede on the way and he consented to go along. The three were asked to sign shipping papers, but the Swede refused to sign until he had read them. This angered the agent, who is alleged to have drawn a revolver and knocked the Swede unconscious.

The young men say that they were given about $3 worth of clothing and put aboard the ship. Then they learned that they were bound for Hamburg instead of Boston, but were forced to work. When the steamer reached the other side of the Atlantic the young men went to Consul General Skinner at Hamburg and lodged their complaint. Mr. Skinner sent them back to this country to make their complaint to the immigration authorities.

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LIGHTNING FROM FOG BANK

Captain of Pacific Coast Schooner Tells of Strange Bombardment of His Vessel.

Capt. A. Sunderberg of the steam schooner Wasp, which plies between Seattle and California ports, reports a strange experience at sea on August 7.

In a report made to the Hydrographic office Captain Sunderberg says that at 10 p. m., when six miles east by south of Point Conception, his vessel ran into a thick fog bank which hung close to the water.

Without the fog rising in the least, a violent electric storm broke out, and for one hour and 14 minutes the blanket of heavy mist was pierced continually by discharges of atmospheric electricity and vivid flashes of angular zigzag and forked lightning. At 12:15 a. m., August 8, the steel foremast of the Wasp became charged with electricity from the top down to the spring stay. Captain Sunderberg says this was not the usual display of St. Elmo fire, as the mast gave out blurred reports as if from a powerful wireless apparatus.

While the vessel was bombarded by lightning which coursed down her main mast, her officers and crew did not venture on deck.

Made Him Tired.

Robert is small, but rapidly leaving behind the baby age that tolerates sentiment. Not long since he overheard a young married couple of his acquaintance billing and cooing, not, be it noted, for the first time. The grown folk present smiled, but Robert's face remained solemn. Only, as he bent over the childish task that apparently absorbed him, he was heard to murmur, scornfully:

"Goodness! Loving again!"

One Kind.

"I love the noises of the woods."

"Then I suppose you like the bark of the dogwood."

Women never really admire each other. They are too busy admiring each other's clothes.

DIDN'T KNOW
That Coffee Was Causing Her Trouble.

So common is the use of coffee as a beverage, many do not know that it is the cause of many obscure ills which are often attributed to other things.

The easiest way to find out for oneself is to quit the coffee for a while, at least, and note results. A Virginia lady found out in this way, and also learned of a new beverage that is wholesome as well as pleasant to drink. She writes:

"I am 40 years old and all my life, up to a year and a half ago, I had been a coffee drinker.

"Dyspepsia, severe headaches and heart weakness made me feel sometimes as though I was about to die. After, drinking a cup or two of hot coffee, my heart would go like a clock without a pendulum. At other times it would almost stop and I was so nervous I did not like to be alone.

"If I took a walk for exercise, as soon as I was out of sight of the house I'd feel as if I was sinking, and this would frighten me terribly. My limbs would utterly refuse to support me, and the pity of it all was, I did not know that coffee was causing the trouble.

"Reading in the papers that many persons were relieved of such ailments by leaving off coffee and drinking Postum, I got my husband to bring home a package. We made it according to directions and I liked the first cup. Its rich, snappy flavor was delicious.

"I have been using Postum about eighteen months and to my great joy, digestion is good, my nerves and heart are all right, in fact, I am a well woman once more, thanks to Postum."

Name given by Postum Co., Battle Creek, Mich. Write for a copy of the little book, "The Road to Wellville."

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