

Queen Anne's Lace
By Frances Parkinson Keyes
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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—In a mood of disappointment, through her inability, due to the selfishness of her family, to put finishing touches to her costume for a long-anticipated country dance, Anne Chamberlain is irritated by the stolidity and lack of imagination displayed by her escort, George Hildreth (points he shares with most of her acquaintances). A visitor in the community, Neal Conrad, young lawyer, is to be the "sensational" of the evening, and Hildreth is vaguely jealous.

It was only a minute, of course, before the man spoke to her. But in that minute she became crowdingly conscious of a number of strange sensations. He was so startlingly different from any of the men whom she knew. His hair-cut was different, and his collar, and his tie, the shape of his blue serge coat, the texture of his spotless white trousers. He had a square jaw and square shoulders; and he held her so easily, yet so firmly—so closely. He did not seem in the least concerned because they had never met, or at a loss to know how to talk to her.

"What fun this kind of a dance is! Gets every one acquainted, the very first thing—I'm Neal Conrad, a friend of Roy Griffin's—I'm visiting him."

"I—I thought you must be Neal Conrad. I've known Roy a long time. He promised to introduce me to you."

"Well, I should hope so! I'd be terribly disappointed if he didn't!"

"But there wasn't time before the party began." Anne went on, completing her sentence as she had intended before this astonishing person interrupted her.

"We must make up for lost time now then—darn it! There goes that whistle!"

"You said this kind of a dance was great fun!" exclaimed Anne, laughing lightly.

"Well, I've changed my mind. It's a darned poor kind of a dance. We were just getting nicely started—but I'll see you later."

The grand right and left had already begun again. They took their places in it tardily, and Anne, at least, self-consciously. It was accounted nothing short of a crime to hold it up, and she knew it. George, as she approached him, showed a face as black as a thunder cloud. When the "Paul Jones" ended, she admitted that she was thirsty and turned with him to the lemonade table.

Neal Conrad meanwhile had sought out his host without delay, and taken him impudently aside.

"Who's that girl I danced with the first time the whistle blew? I didn't even have time to get her name. She says she'd known you a long time and that you had promised to present me. I wish you'd hurry up and do it."

"I've known all the girls here a long time, and I've promised all of them that I'd introduce you to them. You're the event of the evening."

"This girl," continued Neal, "had on an awful pink dress trimmed with black velvet bows and she'd been using cheap perfume. But she danced like a featherweight angel, and she was a raving, tearing beauty. Now, do you know whom I mean?"

"I've known whom you meant all along," lisped Roy, enjoying his little joke. "It's Anne Chamberlain. She's over there by the table now, drinking lemonade."

"Come on," said Neal briefly.

The necessary formalities consumed very little time. At the end of them Neal asked to see Anne's program.

"I'm awfully sorry. It's all filled." "Nonsense!"

"It is really," she said, blushing. "Anne's program is always filled," her partner corroborated.

"But I wish it wasn't," she added, blushing more deeply still.

There was not the slightest doubt of her sincerity. Neal regarded her with amusement.

"What shall we do about it?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, I do. I'm going to ask the band to add two more extras. And they're both to be mine. Don't forget."

"I shan't," said Anne ecstatically. "What do you usually do during the intermission?"

"Why—I wait for it to be over."

"Of course. But where?"

"Right here," she replied with growing bewilderment.

"The worst place you could think of. Why don't you come and sit it out with me in my motor?"

"Where?"

"In my motor. The horseless carriage, you know."

Anne hesitated. Such a suggestion had certainly never been made in Hamstead before, because it was the first time that anyone had stopped there with a horseless carriage. Therefore she had no precedent for either accepting or declining the invitation. But she knew perfectly well that local etiquette demanded she should refuse.

"Fine," said Neal heartily, quite as if she had given him a swiftly affirmative answer. "I'll come for you. Now I must speak to the band."

The first of the extras, which, without the slightest apparent difficulty, he succeeded in persuading the band to interpolate, came just before the intermission. It was a waltz—"The Beautiful Blue Danube." Anne had never heard it before, and when she asked Neal its name he looked at her again in unconcealed amusement as he told her.

"It was written by quite a famous Austrian composer—Strauss. The best thing he ever did. Listen to it, don't talk, and dance it. If you've never waltzed to it before, you don't know what dancing can be."

She had never known before what dancing could be! That was true enough, whatever the music was, far truer than he guessed. Or did he guess? She hoped he did not—feared he did—then longed to tell him so herself. But she was speechless. A silence no less insidious than the sensuous strains of the singing melody bound her. She could not break it, not even when, at the last lingering bars, his encircling arm tightened for an instant and then relaxed its hold, and she felt his fingers on her bare elbow, guiding her lightly.

"Out this way. To the left, under those maple trees. Let me help you. The seat is rather high."

(What was the magic of those strong, white hands, so different from any hands that had ever touched her before?)

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No."

"Possibly you'll join me?"

"Oh, no!"

"That wasn't fair. I knew you wouldn't. I only wanted to hear you say it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But I like your voice. Where did you learn to use it so well?"

"I never learned at all. I've just kept trying—I've thought about it, I mean, and practiced by myself. And I love beautiful English. But I've never heard much."

"Where did you go to school?"

"In West Hamstead, at the district school until I was old enough to go to high school. I teach the district school myself now."

"And you went to high school?"

"Here in Hamstead. I lived with Mummer's Aunt Sarah. She was an old lady, a cripple. She was awfully good to me. She let me come and live with her and work for my board and go to school. If she hadn't I'd have had to go out as hired help when I was thirteen."

"Are—are your parents dead?"

"Oh, no. But they've never seemed to prosper. Pupper's had hard luck always and Mummer isn't strong." Anne hesitated a moment, and then continued, in a burst of confidence, "I'm afraid you won't say anything about loving to hear me talk again, after hearing me call them Mummer and Pupper. But I did when I was a little girl and when I learned that I ought to say Mamma and Papa, they wouldn't let me change. They thought I was trying to put on airs."

"I see—so you've never been away from Hamstead?"

"Well, of course I go to Wallacetown, on errands. And once in a while to a show."

"Wouldn't you like to go further away than that?"

"Wouldn't I like to? What do you suppose?"

"Well, I suppose you would. So why don't you? Why don't you let me come and take you for a nice long drive up through the mountains in my automobile?"

Anne was speechless. It was impossible and yet it had happened. For the first time in nearly an hour, she remembered the existence of George. And only because it would be such a satisfaction to tell him that his jeering prediction had come true. Then her heart smote her. George would be hurt, terribly hurt, by the mere knowledge that the invitation had been extended. If she accepted it he would be stricken.

"I could come for you right after breakfast," Neal went on, "then we could stop in Wallacetown and pick up Mrs. Griffin and Roy. We could have lunch at some hotel. We could go a long way in a day, you've no idea. Then I'd bring you back in the evening."

"Oh, I can't. You have no idea how much work there is for me to do at home. And there's extra washing to do this week."

"We could go on Sunday."

"On Sunday? I don't believe you understand our ways. We never go anywhere on Sunday."

"Well, couldn't you, for once?"

"No—even if I thought it was right. I have to play the organ in church and teach my Sunday school class, and—"

"Wouldn't somebody else do that for you, just once?"

"No one ever has."

"That's no sign no one ever would. You might ask."

She tried to shake herself free from the lure of his suggestion.

"I—George wouldn't like it at all if I did."

"Who is George?"

"George Hildreth. He lives on the next farm to ours."

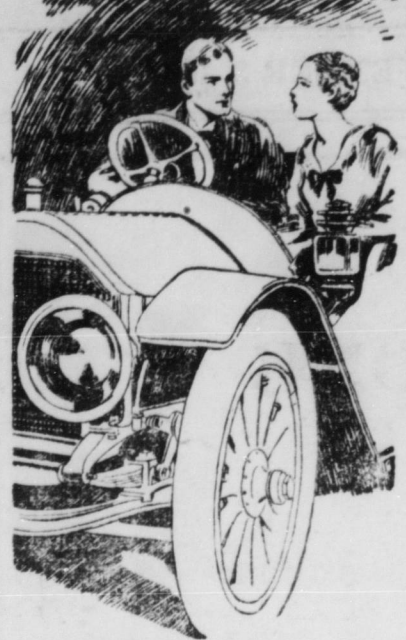
"I see. You are engaged to him?"

"No, but—"

"But he wants to be?"

"Yes. I've known him for years. He brought me here tonight."

"Three cheers for George!" said Neal heartily. "I don't believe you town."



"I Don't Believe You Really Intend to Marry Him, Though, Do You?"

really intend to marry him though, do you?"

"No, but—"

"Then wouldn't it be a real kindness, in the end, to let him find that out right away?"

"Perhaps, but—"

"Do you know how many times you've said 'but' to me tonight?"

"No, but—"

They both laughed. It seemed, somehow, very easy for Anne to laugh with Neal Conrad. And in the course of her laugh she recovered herself somewhat.

"I may as well tell you, I couldn't possibly go with you to one of those big hotels. I haven't anything to wear."

She was afraid, then, that he was going to laugh at her instead of with her. But he did nothing of the sort. He regarded her with less amusement than before, and something very like tenderness.

"You don't need to dress up, you know. Haven't you a simple little serge suit of some sort? It's cool, motoring is."

"No."

"And you couldn't get one?"

"No, I couldn't afford to buy one. And anyway, I wouldn't know what was suitable."

Neal saw that he was facing real heartbreak, frankly confessed. He veered away from it with consummate tact.

"Well, we could take a picnic lunch and eat it by the road." He then you could wear anything you happen to have. What you'd wear to church, as long as we're going on a Sunday. How would that do?"

"I don't believe it would do at all."

"Why not?"

"It just wouldn't."

A scraping and booming sound began to float through the open windows of the town hall. Clearly, the band was preparing to recommence its ministrations. Neal's time was growing short. He leaned over and took Anne's hand, which somehow she could not seem to withdraw, and spoke very earnestly.

"Look here—you're not refusing because you think I'm trying to be fresh, asking you to do this when I've never met you before?"

"No-o-o."

"For I'm not. If you'd rather, we won't say anything more about the ride until I've called on you several times, and all that. This is Thursday. I could come twice before Sunday, anyway. Tomorrow evening and Saturday evening. You're willing I should call, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"The only trouble is, I can only stay here a few days. I'm on my vacation, but it's got to be a pretty short one. I'm a lawyer, you know, anything you'd like to know about me, I'm doing pretty well—quite well. But this is the first vacation I've ever taken, and I can't afford to leave my office too long now. I mustn't take any chances. I've worked too hard, building up my practice, to let it slide. You see that, don't you?"

Anne's heart had bounded from her fluttering breast to her throat. She couldn't answer him. Inside the hall the leader of the band was beginning to call the numbers of the Portland Fancy. Thomas Gray would be hunting for her, and George—

"Won't you please say you'll take that drive?"

It was no use. She could not struggle against her own longing. Somehow she found her voice.

"All right," she said breathlessly. It was barely more than a whisper, but Neal, hearing it, knew that she would not change her mind. "Yes, I'll go."

CHAPTER III

THE motor party took place, not without violent opposition from some quarters than one. Neal broached the subject to his friend on the way home from the dance, and Roy objected to it with more vigor than Neal would have supposed him capable of displaying in regard to any subject.

"You asked Anne Chamberlain to go up to the mountains with you? Good Heavens, Neal, you don't know anything about the girl at all!"

"Well, she's come a long way, then. You don't call her worthless, do you?"

"No, I rather like Anne. Good! I like her very much; and she's darned attractive."

"You must have seen plenty of good-looking girls."

"I have. And plenty of bright girls. And plenty of girls with lots of go to them. But I never saw one that combined all those qualities so thoroughly in one and the same person. I got her to tell me a little about herself. She said her father had had hard luck, and her mother wasn't strong."

"Hard luck! The kind of hard luck that comes from never doing any hard work! As for Anne's mother being delicate—well, she weighs about three hundred and fifty pounds, and she may have heart disease or kidney trouble. I should not be at all surprised. If Anne hadn't worked her fingers to the bone and taught school besides these last two years, I don't know how they'd have lived."

"And you think a girl with that much spunk isn't worth knowing?"

Roy stared at his friend with growing astonishment. Neal had not only been swiftly hit. He had been hit hard.

"I didn't say that she wasn't worth knowing. But—why, she doesn't even know how to dress!"

"She knows that she doesn't know. And that being the case, she'll learn. Give her time. She can't be much over twenty."

"She isn't quite that."

"Then you just wait and see what she'll look like by the time she's thirty! You don't object if I at least ask your mother to go with us?"

"You can ask her. But I know she'll refuse."

"Surely she wouldn't expect me to insult the girl by inviting her to go off on an all-day trip with me without a chaperone?"

"Good Lord, Neal! You don't need to invite her at all."

"But I have. And she's accepted."

"Then you both ought to be willing to take the consequences."

"Look here, Roy, I thought you were a friend of mine. You're not acting much like one."

Roy felt a pang of contrition. He was a gentle creature.

"I'm sorry, Neal. I shouldn't have spoken as I did. Anne's a nice girl. Every one admits that. I'd be as sorry as anyone to see her get into trouble."

"It's inconceivable that she should get into trouble," said Neal icily.

"Yes, of course. What I meant was to go ahead and ask Mother. I'll say what I can for her too."

"Thank you," said Neal, still icily.

Because of his repentant spirit, Roy said even more to his mother than he had intended. But in spite of this intension, Neal found her adamant when he first approached her.

"I couldn't think of it, Neal. It could make talk, going on a Sunday."

"It's the only day the poor girl can go. She works like a dog all the rest of the time."

"And I don't know her at all. It wouldn't seem natural starting off that way with a stranger."

"Why, I should think you'd like to get acquainted with her. She and Roy are such good friends."

"Of course not. I think you're awfully vulgar and—and insulting. I don't believe he even thought of such a thing."

"You know darned well he did."

"Well, then, it's all the more credit to him because he didn't do it! It's more than you would have done, with the same chance!"

"You ain't comparin' me an' him, are you?"

"I am not. There's no comparison possible."

They were actually quarreling. The evening on which George had counted so much was turning out worse than a failure.

"I think you've acted real mean," he mumbled.

"I don't care if you do. If you say another word, finding fault, I'll jump out of this buggy and walk home!"

She meant what she said, and George knew it. There was nothing to do but relapse into sullen silence. Not another word was spoken during the six-mile drive. They even parted without saying goodnight.

It was after two when Anne slipped into bed. An hour later before she fell asleep. But she was up again at five, and by seven the "extra wash" was on the line, and she had started picking the beans. While they were cooking, she ironed. And when the dinner dishes were dried and stacked away, she asked her father if he might take the team and drive to Wallacetown.

"Land sakes, Anne, can't you never be still? Wal, go ahead, ef yer so set on it."

She escaped before he could change his mind, without even waiting to put on a fresh dress. It was half-past one already, and it would take her until nearly three to reach Wallacetown. The bank closed at that hour, and the bank was her first objective. She reached it barely in time.

"I want to draw some money out of my savings bank account," she said breathlessly.

The cashier, who had known her a long time, looked at her dumfounded.

"You don't mean to say you're going to cut into that money your Aunt Sarah left you?" he asked.

"That's exactly what I mean. I want fifty dollars. If I don't spend it all, I'll bring part of it back."

"Why, Anne Chamberlain, you don't mean to tell me you're going to take it out and spend it! When you haven't but three hundred altogether, counting interest?"

"Oh, Tad, please hurry!"

Still protesting, he counted the notes into her hand—five crisp, new bills. She had never seen so much money, at once, in all her life before. She tucked it into her shabby little purse, thrilling at the crackling sound which it made. Then she sped down the street to Mr. Goldenburg's store, stopping to look into the window as she reached it. There three headless "dummies" stood draped with white muslin dresses.

A white muslin dress had not been included in her calculations. But, as she looked at these, she suddenly saw herself clad in one, when Neal came to call that evening and the next—if he really did come. It was the kind of thing a girl ought to wear, under such circumstances, she saw instinctively, sheer and snowy. The ermine color of her pink dress, the heaviness of the black bows that adorned it, seemed hopelessly hideous to her all at once. If she bought a white all dress, it would mean buying white shoes and stockings, too, and the right kind of a slip, but she felt too reckless to care—if necessary, she could draw out more money. She unlatched the shop door, and walked in. By good luck she encountered the proprietor himself, a kindly Jew who had been in Wallacetown only a few years, and who had prospered there.

"Vel, vel, if it ain't my little front Anne Chamberlain! Vat can I do for you, my dear?"

"Oh, Mr. Goldenburg, I want to buy such a lot of things! I've just drawn fifty dollars out of the bank, and I'm afraid it isn't enough. If I run short, will you trust me until I can go back and draw some more?" The bank's closed for the day now."

"Vel, now, I think I could. But you shouldn't take out your money, just to spend like this. You goin' to get married, hein? To dot fat-faced Poy?"

"Of course not. Mrs. Griffin and Roy are going, too."

"Wal, you went outside an' set with 'em quite a spell. I noticed 'em."

"You goin' just to get even with me?"

It would have been welcome tidings, she knew, if she had said she was. But she was so honest.

"Partly—a little. But mostly because I want to. I've never been to the mountains."

"Are you goin' off alone with this feller?"

"Of course not. Mrs. Griffin and Roy are going, too."

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"No—It isn't like that at all." She hesitated, blushed, and finally decided to confide in the merchant.

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