
Poor Max

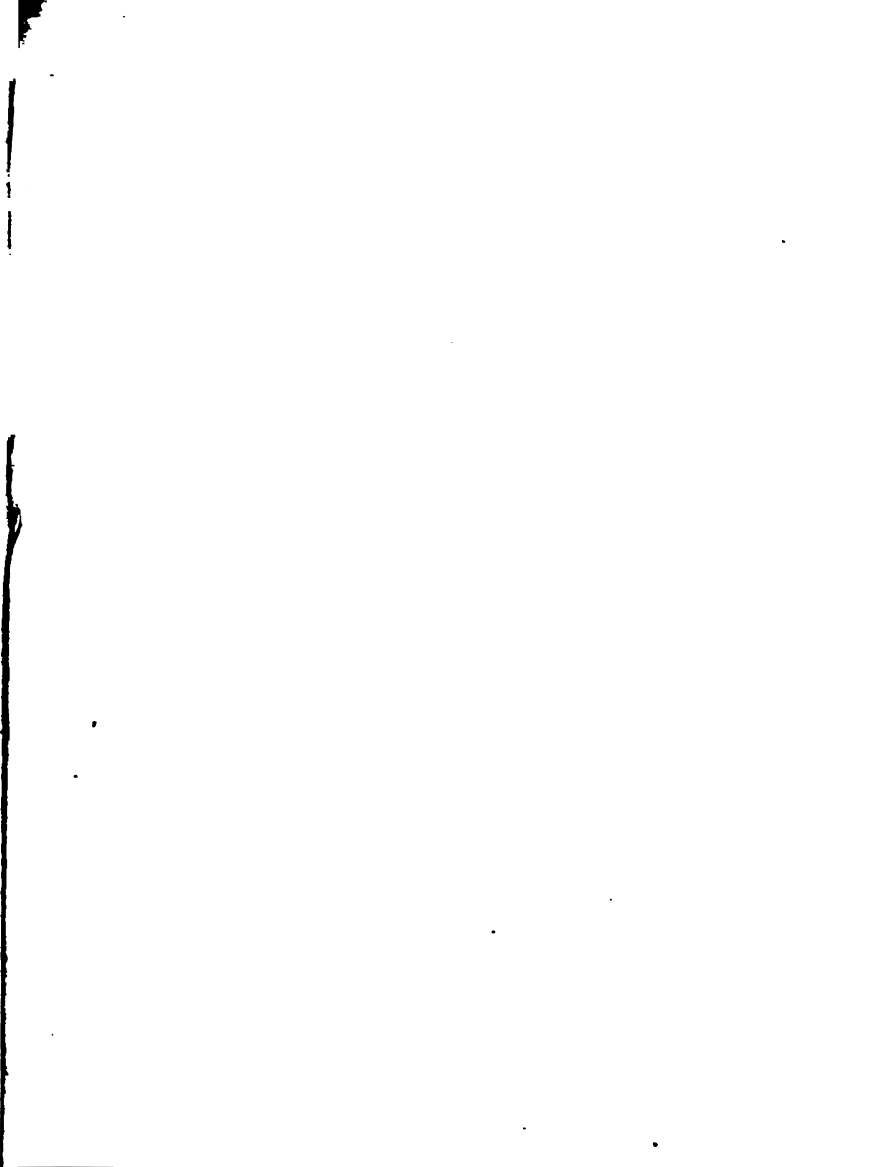
Iota

Title: Poor Max

Author: Iota

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POOR MAX



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BY IOTA, AUTHOR OF
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POOR MAX.

CHAPTER I.

MISS BECHER was slowly dressing. An abstracted frown crumpled her forehead, a frown better fitted to a fluffy fringe, with, behind it for brain, a simmer of blurred and complex emotions, than to that high serene brow of a past age, making heavenward.

The thoughts that beat and pressed upon the lady this spring morning were vague, disturbing, and singularly intricate, blending but grudgingly with the accustomed sounds of the early day—the intermittent cackle of the hens, the feeding-screams of the peacocks, the stamping of the horses in their cobbled stables, the deep mellow complainings of the toothless blood-hound in his kennel, the raucous bawl of the tow-headed crow-boy, the padding of soft hoofs towards the far pasture field.

Miss Becher—after a most unaccustomed fashion—felt vanity and austerity alternately warring together in her members.

To counteract this unseemly zigzagging of the sensations, finding prayer inadequate, she subsided into the pages of an old book that lay on the little spider-legged table beside the east window.

Miss Becher liked to face towards the east when she said her prayers or read this book. It had been compiled by her grandmother, and was filled with tags concerning the mercy of God and the goodness of women, with various awed and timorous mention of less obvious matters, the bewildering changes in the ages, for example, with the fine immutability of man. Always himself, constant to his inconstancy from one generation to another let æons whirl as they may, with his dazzling alternations of light and shade, his sublime flashes of divinity, his incomprehensible plunges among the fiends, the fleeting quality in his loves, his unalterable and ever-enduring devotion to a good dinner.

Having regard to this latter peculiarity, the margins of the book were strewn thick with ancient and notable recipes for the dressing of meats, the preserving of fruits, the brewing of cunning and comforting cordials.

In the midst of a flower-scented rhyme, Miss Becher, through an audacious buffet from a too wide-awake sunbeam, became aware, all at once, that she must hasten. She closed her book regretfully and arranged her cap in the old blue enamelled oval glass on her dressing-table, with care and circumspection, then with an air of most sprightly stateliness, a legacy from her pleasant youth, she descended the low broad staircase. When she reached the last step she paused, a look of somewhat surprised expectancy upon her fine straight-featured face, and the next second a door to the right of her was thrown open precipitately, and the counterpart of herself, in all but size and strength and sex, stepped forth with outstretched hands.

"Pardon me, Alethea," he cried, "I believe—I—"

really believe that I had—almost forgotten! Have you slept well, my dear?"

By force of habit she had begun the return formula, but the inveterate truth within her snapped the words off sharp. It were mere foolish speaking to presume that Daniel had slept well, with eyes like boiled gooseberries, and for the first time in fifteen years he had forgotten her morning greeting. Surely chaos was abroad!

"It is a beautiful day," she said nervously, as they went to the breakfast-room.

"Oh, the day is right enough, but I have a touch of incipient gout; I think I'll walk about a bit while you make the coffee."

Miss Becher went about her duties in a leisurely way and watched Daniel. He was walking up and down the room, a trace of disorderly jerkiness in his discreet soldierly tread most distressing to behold. There was, besides, a touch of vagrancy in his calm eyes. They wandered restlessly across the moving blue waters to the quiet hills, and he had forgotten to pronounce a blessing on the meal. This was embarrassing. To proceed with even the preparations of things of the flesh untempered by any touch of the Spirit hurt the mind of Alethea Becher.

"It's that Huguenot blood working in poor Daniel," she mused, grasping the cream-jug and regarding the captain concernedly. "It's a loyal strain, so he says—I detest foreign products myself—and—religious, he also maintains; dear Daniel is obstinate—but it's wild and vain and light—light enough surely when the mere fact of the coming of this girl can set up gout symptoms in him! Gout symptoms indeed! A love more than a quarter of a century old to send

a man rampaging about the floor like that! Dear me! At any rate, it's rather too old a love," thought she with unconscious irony, "to warm and nourish an elderly man, and the trout will be ruined. I—I'll not remind the poor boy of his omission—it might hurt his mind; and, after all, in this state he's hardly accountable for his actions."

"H—hem! Here are trout, brother, from the hill-stream. They're importunate creatures, demanding immediate attention."

He started, sighed, and sat down.

"Trout, and your cream sauce! There's a taste of youth in the combination. It is a curious circumstance," he went on, while he helped the trout, "that it is always trifles which occur to us in all the more important crises of our lives. Even in the first moment of action it's not greatness or glory or your soul that troubles you. Unless it occurs to a fellow to think of the safety of his own miserable skin, it's some little ridiculous memory that strikes up in him. In that affair in Burmah, the last thing of which I can remember thinking was trout and cream sauce, and it was of these I raved afterwards in my delirium."

Alethea looked at him.

"That was twenty-five years ago," said Miss Becher aloud, and to herself she added, "The month Dorothea was married. He has not spoken of it all these years, and it was trout and cream sauce of which he raved! Under some circumstances I am inclined to think it might be rather agreeable to be a man. To be a woman and not to babble is somewhat difficult."

"Daniel, you are ready for coffee?"

"And so Dorothea's daughter comes to us to-day," he said, presently.

"The only one left of four and the youngest," remarked Miss Becher. "And she is eighteen."

"And she has no mother," pursued the captain slowly, making as though he meant to eat another trout. "Virtually she never had one. A mother for four days hardly counts. And she has lived her life in German schools, and taken instructive walking tours during the holidays, personally conducted by governesses. It's a curious beginning to a life. It will be interesting——"

"Daniel!" said Miss Becher rather faintly, and standing up hurriedly. "Daniel, here she——"

"I—I thought——"

"She has come by the night mail. Brother, come with me."

He arose courteously and followed her, his heart thumping under his old shooting jacket in a fashion that was youthful, indiscriminating, and exceedingly discomposing. When they had reached the door their visitor had already jumped off the outside car that stood awaiting orders, laden with her luggage, strewn with her parcels.

She was now standing on the steps hesitating before she rang.

All that they had time to notice about her was that she was tall and, for a slender creature, deep bosomed, that her eyes were purple and extraordinarily bright.

"Cousin Alethea," she cried breathlessly, "Cousin Daniel!"

With that she threw her arms around Miss Becher and kissed her on either cheek, and, without a misgiving or a qualm she fell upon Captain Becher, who had now composed himself, and held in readiness for