

Silk Stockings and Suedes

A Complete Story

By J. J. BELL

Author of "WEE MACGREGOR"

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THE young girl stood in the unkindly glare of the two incandescents with which the ugly five-branched gasolier was fitted. Saving herself and the lights there was nothing in the room suggestive of freshness or modernity. Austerity, solidity, stolidity were everywhere, on the walls, in the furnishings, in the other occupants. The parlor was old-fashioned without any of the charm that often pertains to such an apartment; it had an air of harsh respectability; a big fire might make it uncomfortably warm, but never cosy.

The fingers of the young girl were knit in front of her slim body against the plain navy-blue skirt. Her dark eyes moved eagerly, anxiously, between the man and woman who occupied the hair-cloth armchairs on either side of the hearth, the uncle and aunt who had given her a home three years ago. Clearly she was awaiting their verdict on a matter of no little importance to herself.

A glance at the countenances of Mr. and Mrs. Brash would have satisfied you that here were honest people; which is not to say that the countenances were bright and open—rather were they inclined to dullness and aloofness. They suggested a Puritanism capable of enduring all manner of suffering for conscience's sake, and, perhaps, of causing it, too; for it is difficult to be quite so righteous as were the Brashes without being a little self-righteous also.

Mr. Brash completed his perusal of the list of local subscriptions to the Puntas Arenas Mission, in which he was deeply and practically interested, closed the pamphlet, laid it upon his knees, and took up the envelope which his wife had silently laid on the table at his elbow five minutes previously. The envelope had been opened apparently in haste.

As he withdrew its contents, a card, partly printed and partly written on, the young girl quivered, and her white teeth closed on her scarlet lip. A frown appeared on Mr. Brash's shaven face.

Just then the door was opened and a man, heavily built, hairy and grizzled, and rather shabbily clad, entered. With a glance round the room he crossed to the window and seated himself on the hair-cloth sofa, picking up as he did so the evening paper. No one in the room paid the slightest attention to the new arrival, who forthwith became immersed, apparently, in the shipping news.

Mr. Brash's frown deepened. His keen, grey eyes turned to the girl.

"Surely you do not expect your aunt and me to grant permission for you to attend this gathering, Hilda," he said.

Hilda's face relaxed for a moment, as if she would speak. Then her lips met in a straight line.

"I have already told Hilda," said Mrs. Brash, without pausing in her crocheting, "that we do not approve of dancing parties, but she insisted on having your opinion."

"It is out of the question," he said, not harshly, but very firmly. "No doubt your friends, the Bensons, mean kindly; but it would please me more were you to associate with less light-minded girls—the Smalls, for example—"

"The Smalls are awful stodges," said Hilda involuntarily—"at least"—quickly—"I don't get on with them. And Kitty Benson—"

"That is not the way to talk of the Smalls," Mrs. Brash interrupted. "Their father and mother—"

"Darned old hypocrites!" came in a grunting voice from the man behind the newspaper.

"William!" said Mrs. Brash. "Shall I leave the room, or will you?"

"Sorry," said the grunting voice. "I'll dry up. But the bare mention of those Smalls always makes me sick."

"Be good enough to hold your tongue, sir," said Mr. Brash. He returned the card to the envelope which he replaced on the table.

"Uncle Robert," cried Hilda, "why won't you let me go? I'm nearly fifteen, and it's my first dance—"

"My dear child, you must allow me to judge for you in this matter. I am willing to allow for disappointment on your part, though I must say I had hoped that by this time your aunt's views and my own on such amusements as dancing and theatre-going would have been perfectly clear to you."

"But what harm—"

"You are too young to demand explanations, but you are old enough to obey those in whose charge you are."

There was a short silence.

"My white frock would do, though it's miles too short," pleaded the girl. "Oh, Aunt Frances, couldn't you—"

"You have heard what your uncle has said, my dear," replied the lady stiffly. "Besides, what would you do at a dancing party when you cannot dance?"

"Can't dance! Why, Aunt Frances, I can dance like—like anything. I had heaps of dancing lessons when I was a little thing, and father and mother—"

She stopped short. In a vague way she had ere now gathered that many things in her parents' lives had not been "approved of" by her aunt and uncle. But though she had suffered veiled hints, she had never been straightly informed that her mother, her aunt's sister, had been "flighty and extravagant," whilst her father had quitted the world without leaving anything to his credit—as we understand the word in these practical days. "Aunt Frances, didn't you dance when you were a girl?" The question was entreating.

The woman flushed. "I had no one to show me the sin of it, as you have," she replied.

"But—but you haven't shown me the sin of it," Hilda looked from one to the other.

"That will do, Hilda, that will do," said Mr. Brash, his voice harder.

"It isn't fair," she cried, near to tears. "All the girls at school are allowed to dance—except those Smalls—fat-legged, pasty-faced, goody-goody things!"

"Hear, hear!" came from behind the newspaper.

"Leave the room; go to bed, Hilda," said Mrs. Brash, wrathfully.

"I'll go to bed," the girl returned passionately. Her eyes filled; she choked; she fled.

With something approaching horror Mr. and Mrs. Brash regarded each other. "I don't know what she is coming to," the latter said at last.

"She's comin' to what you're drivin' her to," said the man on the sofa, throwing aside his paper.

"You have not been invited to speak, William," said Mr. Brash, scowling at his brother.

"True. I'd be a dummy if I waited for invitations in this happy home. I'm not given to interferin' in your arrangements, as you know, Robert, but on this occasion I must cough it up or bust. Let Hilda go to her dancin' party. 'Tis natural for a maid to want to kick her legs—"

"Do you wish me to leave the room, William?" Mrs. Brash frigidly inquired.

"Not at all. I want you to back me up against Robert. Let Hilda say she's sorry for her tantrum—though 'twas only natural—and then tell her she can go to the party. She's growin' up. She'll soon be a woman. Why do her out o' sweet and youthful pleasures? She's not the sort to enjoy the Smalls' kind o' party, wi' its tiddley-winks and Simon-says-thumbs-up muck. I tell you she's not, and she'll eat her young heart out if you keep on rubbin' it in as you've been doin'. There, I've said my say, Robert, and I don't believe I've said so much in five years. Let her go."

It was nearly a minute ere Mr. and Mrs. Brash found their voices. William's temerity had fairly taken away their breaths. For what right had William to offer an opinion, even with all humility and diffidence? William's history may here be given in a few words: Robert's senior by a couple of years, he had been the black sheep of the family. His early manhood had been spent at sea, but an accident to his left arm, which was rendered almost powerless, had sent him ashore to waste several years in more or less riotous living. Eventually Robert, who had prospered, started him in a small business. He failed. Robert started him again, and again he failed. He was not a toper, but he had his bouts. While his manners were kindly, his speech was, to put it mildly, careless. Robert decided that he was hopeless for business, and William readily agreed. He was fit only for a sea life. Robert secured him a light job (at a light salary) in a warehouse at the docks, and on the third night he went on the spree with some old shipmates. Robert hardened his heart and closed his purse. He allotted the erring one an attic room in

his house and made him do the lighter work of the fairly large garden. He allowed him one shilling per week, deeming that he could not go far wrong on that. William really preferred tobacco to drink, so he kept sober and performed his duties fairly well. Unfortunately, with all his patience and justice, Robert could not help adopting, along with his wife, a superior and contemptuous attitude towards his brother, which went far to killing the latter's sense of gratitude. William was never permitted to forget that he was a pauper dependent on the bounty of his brother and sister-in-law, nor that he was a creature lacking alike in religion and respectability. So it had been for seven years.

"You forget yourself, William," said Mr. Brash at last, freezing.

"Maybe, Robert, I do. The little maid moved me. I thought the days for a petticoat to move me were over. Come now, forgive my roughness—impudence, if you like—but let Hilda go to the party and dance her pretty feet sore."

"Pah!" muttered Mr. Brash, and picked up the pamphlet which had fallen on the rug.

Mrs. Brash resumed her crocheting.

A couple of minutes passed. "Robert," said William softly, "you're entitled to treat me like dirt, but you've no right to treat Hilda as if she was clay. Don't think you can mould her just as you please, or you'll make a mess of the job. I know her better than you do. She wants to love you, but you won't let her."

"Silence, William!"

But William was not to be suppressed. "I haven't asked you for anything for seven years, Robert. No doubt I've had no right to ask for anything after all I owe you; still, the fact remains that I haven't asked. Now I'm askin'. Let Hilda feel you're human after all by lettin' her go to the dancin' party." He paused and sighed, feeling, perhaps, that he was getting beyond his depth, that he was not helping Hilda's case as he had hoped to do.

Mrs. Brash gave him a quick, cold glance, but her husband's eyes remained on the page.

"You're hard," said the grizzled man at last—"very, very hard, and you're drivin' me to this. Look!"

So sudden, so peremptory was the command that the husband and wife incontinently obeyed.

William had got up, and from his waistcoat pocket had drawn a piece of paper. Unfolding it, he held up, between his broad finger and thumb, a shining sovereign.

"Where did you get that?" Mr. Brash's question was involuntary. He stared at the coin.

"The savin's o' two years," said William quietly. "I was goin' to try to save another and then leave you for a week, just to see if the sea was still blue. But maybe I can put this pretty quid to a better use."

He cleared his throat, and continued: "Since I came to this little town, seven years ago, I've behaved myself pretty well. I've done nothin' to disgrace you, Robert, except be your brother and not go regular to church. But now I feel like goin' on the razzle-dazzle—skite—spree—or whatever you prefer to call it." He glanced at the clock. "Still two and a half hours till the pubs close—plenty o' time for me to paint this little place magenta. I'll guarantee to get blind, miraculous and roarin', also to get run in and have my name in the paper to-morrow. . . . Care for the advertisement, Robert?"

"If you dare," began Mr. Brash, whilst his wife gave a gasp of horrified disgust, and cried, "You shall never enter this house again."

William looked sadly from one to the other. "I'm afraid you would never be happy so long as you knew I had a fortune in my pocket. Well, would you like me to drop it into the mission box on the mantelpiece?"

They stared at him as he walked to the door, as he halted with his fingers on the handle.

Slowly and distinctly he said, "Let Hilda go to the dancin' party, and my fortune goes to the mission. Otherwise—well, I'll give you five minutes to think it over. I'll go out and have a smoke." (Smoking was not permitted in the house.) "But make up your minds, for the little maid's sake."

And he left the room.

Let us not sneer at the Brashes. Respectability knows no dread like the dread of scandal.

On his return to the parlor William found his brother alone.

"Well, Robert?"

"I have never known you tell a lie," said Robert, bitterly, "and I presume you are capable of carrying out your unseemly threat."

William nodded, but said nothing.

The other coughed once or twice. "Hilda may go to the dance on condition that she leaves at nine-thirty."

"No conditions, Robert—no conditions, please," said William gently. "I'll be just as big a sin to dance till nine-thirty as till eleven." He brought out the sovereign, stepped to the mantelpiece, and held it over the black box. "Hilda goes to the dancin' party without anything bein' said or done to spoil her pleasure in it—is that so, Robert?" Presently the gold chinked upon silver

and copper. William glanced at his brother's averted face and passed to the door.

"I'm goin' upstairs, so I'll tell Hilda she has your permission. The rest's our secret, I hope, Robert. I—I'd be mighty glad if I could do something to please you after this."

He ascended rather heavily, not so much delighted with himself or his victory after all. He tapped on the girl's door. She had not yet undressed, and she came promptly.

"You're to get to your dancin' party, Honey," he said. "Be good to your aunt and uncle."

Her arms flew round his neck. "Dear, dear Uncle Bill!" she cried.

Well, perhaps that was his reward.

II.

Not in law alone may we win our case without gaining full satisfaction. Hilda had no sooner dispatched a painfully neatly written response to the invitation than she began to worry about her raiment for the dance. Mrs. Brash (who had accepted the position neither heartily nor resentfully, but as one who simply keeps a bargain) was quite unmoved by the sighs over the shortness of the white frock.

"It is quite long enough for your age," she said at last.

"But I'm too long for my age," returned Hilda, who was certainly a tall girl. "Couldn't it be let down just one inch?" She had dreamed one night of a new long dress in apple-green silk, but about four a.m. the dream had turned into a nightmare, wherein she had seen herself condemned to play "consequences" with the Smalls for ten thousand years, garbed in a "fish-wife" costume which she had worn at the age of seven. "Just one inch, Aunt Frances."

"You are an exceedingly vain girl," was the reply. "I cannot have it altered; but I had better buy you a new pair of stockings."

With a very little encouragement Hilda would have fallen on her neck.

"And gloves," said Mrs. Brash.

"Oh!" cried the girl, her arms ready. "I'll see about them this afternoon."

And Mrs. Brash hurried away.

Afternoon school that day did not add much to Hilda's education. Visions, distracting yet delicious, of black silk (would they be openwork?) and white suede (how many buttons?) floated between her and the blackboard, her books, her very teachers. She just escaped being "kept in" for gross inattention and carelessness. She arrived home before her aunt, though she had discussed dress with friends on the way, and it was a long, long hour until Mrs. Brash appeared.

"You may put them in your drawer until required, Hilda. They are my Christmas gift to you," she said, and went out again to a Zenana tea meeting ere the trembling girl could thank her.

Up to her room flew Hilda, and tore open the flimsy parcel.

Why didn't the heavens—or, at least, the ceiling—fall when these bitter moans issued from this young creature?

"Cashmere! . . . Cotton!"

She cast them from her, and threw herself on the bed, hands clenched, eyes streaming.

Two hours later she managed to say to her aunt, "They are very nice; thank you very much." If Hilda's insincerity be unpardonable, then are we all condemned, for have not we all received Christmas presents?

Despair, utter despair was upon her. She could not go to the Benson party, where every girl would be wearing silk stockings and suede (or at worst silk) gloves. Cashmere and cotton—ugh! . . . They were impossible, especially with her short skirts and plain slippers. And yet to give up the dance—the dance on Christmas Eve, with its professional musicians, its grown-up programmes, its conservatory hung with Chinese lanterns, its nice boys who could dance properly, some of them in real dress-suits . . .

That was a bad night for Hilda in more senses than one. Age, toasting its toes at the embers of the evening fire, is apt to assume that healthy youth has no worries after ten p.m. Mrs. Brash had not sought to save money that afternoon; she had sought to discourage vanity. And she had succeeded in wounding a child's natural and proper pride to desperation point. For, after all, what we call woman's vanity is sometimes just her sense of the fitness of things. Mrs. Brash, herself, had her special pairs of boots and gloves for Sundays, and it may not be presumed that either vanity or superstition made her put them on. When you come to think of it, the question of "Sunday clothes" is one to be shirked, for it leads to so many others. And older people than Hilda have taken the parable of the wedding garment quite literally.

When Hilda had turned her damp pillow for the tenth time, she lay still, and her wits went to work.

III.

The young man at the counter deftly tied the parcel and scribbled the bill.

Hilda, who had been going pink and white for the past five minutes, opened her purse.

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