

Living Up To Lady Mary

By OWEN OLIVER

IT was the first day at office after my holiday abroad, and I was busy with papers that had accumulated; but I found a smile for Charlie Tarne, when he entered my room.

"Well, Charlie, my boy!" I said chaffingly, "have you called about the marriage settlements?"

He had become engaged to the only daughter of Lord Royton during my absence.

Charlie put his hat on the table and sat down, with his hands in his pockets, and stretched his long legs, and stared at his boots.

"Hang it all!" he complained. "I haven't been engaged a month yet."

I looked at him curiously. I had hoped that his engagement would sober him; but it seemed to have sobered him a little too much.

"Repent in haste and marry at leisure?" I suggested.

"Something like that," he agreed.

I put my papers aside and prepared for council.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She's about ten times too good for me. . . . Do you mind if I smoke a cigarette?"

I pushed the box his way, and leaned back in my chair watching him.

"I've been getting you out of scrapes ever since you left school," I observed.

"And now I want you to get me out of this."

"What scrape?" I asked.

"The engagement," he answered.

"Oh! You mean that!"

I lit a cigarette myself and smoked, still watching him. His father was the friend; and I have no son of my own; and marriage is a serious scrape.

"I don't know Lady Mary," I remarked presently; "but people seem to think a deal of her."

"I don't suppose there's anyone who thinks more of her than I do. She's good. . . . I'm not. That's where it is."

That's where it is," I sighed. "I thought you'd make a nice average between you."

"We don't add up," he stated.

"Umph! . . . When you wrote you gave me to understand that you were in love with her."

"I thought I was. In a way I think I am; as much as she'll let me be. She's so different from the girls I've known."

"Thank Heaven!"

"Look here!" He faced me for the first time. "I mean good girls. I don't think of her along with the others. See?"

"I see. . . . And she is different?"

"Well—she rather chills demonstration. I mean—I suppose a fellow might feel like it to a saint. I don't mind her being a saint; but all the family are like it. When I go there I have to be a saint too. Oh! You may laugh. You aren't."

"I've been thirty years a lawyer, Charlie! And fifty-odd a sinner. No. I don't care for men-saints; but saintliness is all right in a woman, if it isn't too obtrusive."

"It isn't that. They don't preach; and they don't cant. It's just—atmosphere. I daren't say 'cards'; and as for a flutter on a race—! They've never been on a racecourse in their lives. They're teetotalers; and they wouldn't go to a theater, unless it was grand opera. What the deuce am I to do, when I'm married?"

"You needn't let your wife's people choose your amusements."

"They wouldn't!" She would!" He nodded emphatically; and then he laughed. "It seems funny to be under the thumb of such a quiet little thing, but I am. The strange thing is that she hasn't the least notion of bossing me. In fact, she's quite ready to be bossed. She just makes me ashamed to do things. That's all. I said she was ten times too good for me. I ought to have said twenty. 'Of course,' she'll say, 'you know better than I do; and you wouldn't do anything that isn't right. . . . Well, that is my idea of you.' . . . And she'll just smile a little fraction of a smile—she always smiles like that—and I don't do it. I don't even have a row with her over it. You can't quarrel with an angel who hasn't the remotest idea of quarreling. You can't hurt her either. If I married her I should. . . . It wasn't me she accepted, but her idea of me. I can't live up to it. I don't want to."

"Then you'd better tell her so," I suggested.

He flung his cigarette into the grate.

"If I'd wanted that advice," he told me, "I'd have gone to any fool!"

"And you've come to me. . . . There are two sides to an engagement. Have you thought of her's?"

"Yes." He faced me squarely for the second time. "I've thought



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a good bit of her's. She'll be better out of it. She'll have to be out of it, if I go and tell her the truth."

"Sometimes," I said, "the truth answers as well as the other thing."

And sometimes it doesn't! If I break it off it's a fearful slight to her; to all of them. They've got a lot of pride to hurt. It's only the decent thing to let her break it off, if I can manage it." I nodded.

"Well, that's what I've come to you about."

I lit another cigarette.

"Suppose," I enquired, "she heard of certain little escapades of yours? Escapades that took place before you knew her—I suppose there isn't something since?" He shook his head decidedly. "It is certain that she would break it off?"

"Of course. If you know her, you wouldn't ask the question. You don't realize how things look to her. I tell you she's a white saint."

"A white saint," I asserted, "would forgive a black saint if she happened to be desperately in love with him."

Charlie laughed a hard laugh. Somehow that laugh made one understand the position better.

"If Mary were the desperately loving sort of saint," he asserted, "I'd possibly submit to reformation."

"Yes," I agreed. "Yes." The arms of a woman round a man's neck are good preaching. "Well, she isn't my client, and I haven't to consider her; but you have."

"And I have!" he declared stoutly. "I don't say it won't hurt her. She'll grieve for the poor black devil; shed a few tears, and pray for him. Perhaps she'll—" he moistened his lips—"even miss him a bit; but it will never occur to her to risk her saintship to cure his devilship. He'll just be pitch that she can't touch. Well, she shant. . . ."