

## The Fortune of Flora.

What was the fortune of Flora? Nobody seemed to know, and what more curious, nobody seemed to like to ask, yet it was impossible for a young couple to be more light hearted on the eve of the adventure of matrimony. Laurie, it is true, was at the golden age of twenty-three and had never allowed himself to be annoyed by a care or an unpaid debt in his jocund young life, while to mention that the bride-elect was an American of five and twenty, though she looked (and called herself) nineteen, is to say that her outlook on the world and its problems was as cheerful as is consistent with living in the twentieth century. The problem she had chiefly envisaged for the last five or six years was that of allying herself, matrimonially, with an Englishman of good family, and this ambition had been finally encompassed in the person of the Hon. Laurence Eversley, second son of Lord Worthing, met only a few weeks before on the steamer coming across. For Laurie's career at Oxford had stopped short of its final and most important stage, and it had been for painting his dean's door what he described as a "quite wonderful" shade of sealing wax red that he had been requested by the authorities to absent himself permanently from the banks of the Isis. But if Lady Worthing had been much incensed with Laurie over this untoward affair, Lord Worthing had only laughed, quoted the case of Shelley, and taken the classic course of sending his light-hearted son on a tour to America. "Perhaps they will teach him to hustle over there," he remarked, "or else he will pick up a girl with a fair piece of money."

"It would be the usual vulgar way out of our difficulties," her ladyship had said. She had never been particularly fond of her second son, all her sympathies being with her eldest, Littlehampton, who was in the army. "What, indeed, do you suppose we shall ever do with the boy? As Liberals, we have no hope of anything from the government. I do not think he knows how to work. Yes, I suppose Laurie had better marry an American heiress. After all, it has become quite a respectable profession for our sons. Look at the Warminsters. Why, the mortgage is actually off the place at last."

So when Laurie had skipped into the drawing-room again some six months later and announced his engagement to "the most exquisite creature in the world, of fabulous wealth and the most deliciously unconventional manners," his parents accepted the situation—and the prospective daughter-in-law, Miss Flora Dodge—with equanimity.

The wedding was hurried forward. Mr. Dodge, it appeared, could make but a brief stay on what he insisted on calling "this side," so the ceremony was to take place almost immediately. Lord Worthing, who had long ago had to get rid of his place in Sussex and the agricultural land appertaining thereto, occupied a gaunt and somewhat neglected house in the Cromwell Road, a region which Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge and his daughter evidently regarded as in the vortex of fashion. And in this passably forlorn mansion, which Laurie had somewhat profusely decorated with flowers for the occasion, the betrothal dinner was, at this moment, taking place.

There they sat, the two young people, side by side, radiant with their new honors and delighted to be the centre of attraction, the cynosure of all eyes. For Laurie was by no means the self-conscious young Englishman who cannot bear a fuss, and who looks down upon the preliminary ceremonies of his wedding-day with boredom and horror; on the contrary, he delighted in the prospect and took a personal interest in all the details of the coming rites.

"You can't be too careful about a wedding," declared the bridegroom, "the slightest mistake will ruin it. One should have a sense of decency, and, above all, a sense of humor. Do you remember when Warminster married that peevish Sallie Vanderboken? As they were coming up the aisle, the choir ac-

tually sang, 'Fight the good fight with all your might!' I nearly died of suppressed giggling and I was the best man."

He went into the question of the music minutely; he would not have an ugly parson. No bridesmaid was to be over sixteen, and they were to have long hair, which was to be worn floating round their young faces.

"It must be quite beautiful and quite gay," declared Laurie. "We will have a sort of bower of apple blossoms at the chancel. Your white gown should be semi-opaque and mounted on palest pink. You will look like a blossom or a shell. You will be quite delicious! We shall both look charming," he added, after a little pause. "Quite young and radiant, the ideal bride and bridegroom."

"Why, Laurie, you're just too queer for anything!" declared Miss Dodge. "Where do you get your ideas? I guess the girls in Milwaukee would stare if they could hear you."

But, indeed, they were a remarkable young pair. Laurie was slim and pale, his features and hands a trifle effeminate looking, but there was something ratlike in his tenacity and strength, both of which he was in the habit of carefully hiding under an elaborate air of dilettanteism. Once, coming out of a theatre, a cad had purposely hustled him, counting on his pensive expression and his pallor that he would not retaliate. But Laurie had not neglected the noble art at Oxford, and the fellow lay sprawling in the mud when our young gentleman had stalked imperturbably away. The girl was of a more solid build, and had all the capability of her nation and sex. Flora was the new type of American girl, tall, active and lithe. Canadian on her mother's side, she had eyes of Northern blue, an abundance of fair silky hair, and a complexion of pink and white. She was dressed to-night in palest diaphanous blue, showing the whole of her beautiful shoulders; a blue snood was twisted in her hair and she wore a priceless pearl necklace fastened round her white throat. It was impossible to look more elegant, more flowerlike, or to exhale a more subtle air of wealth. The little blue frock had cost fifty guineas, she had given at least a sovereign for the bunch of real roses she wore tucked in her belt; her hair was dressed by an artist. The outside was indeed perfection. This young girl looked like a Greuze, but she had gone through Vassar with distinction.

Laurie had seen to it that the dinner of his betrothal should be as imposing as possible. Some important people had been asked. Lady Worthing had on all the family diamonds—jewels which quite brightened up her somewhat rusty black lace frock—all the plate had been collected, and with a formidable array of wax candles and a profusion of flowers, a stranger might have thought that Lord Worthing and his family enjoyed all the freedom from anxiety which a fat rent roll confers.

There is no doubt that Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge was impressed. He sat, of course, by Lady Worthing, and gazed with paternal pride at the handsome young daughter who wags so soon to inhabit the ancestral halls of England.

The talk turned on the sort of house which the young people might take. Nothing had been settled as yet, and it had been decided that Laurie and Flora should pay a visit in the Cromwell Road after their marriage in order to "look around," and find what they wanted. There was nothing ambiguous, to be sure, in what they wanted, the comedy of the situation lay in the fact that each of these young people hoped that the other one would provide the little house in Queen Anne's Gate, which they both so ardently desired. The paternal mansion in the Cromwell Road had been painted and decorated some fifteen years ago, when London was still in the throes of the "aesthetic" movement; but time, fog and smoke had not made the yellow green pomegranates on the walls any more delectable, nor added to the meagre attractions of the sage-colored serge curtains, on which Lady

Worthing, in her bygone enthusiasm, had embroidered a kind of hybrid apple in worsted.

Flora, gazing around, inquired of her future slave whether "this was the latest style in London. She guessed she would like to have the last thing."

Laurie laughed.

"Heavens! No," he cried. "We must be gay and sane—gay and sane like they were in the eighteenth century. I will not hang autotypes of Rossetti on my walls; a few Bartolozzis, if you like, and some of the wonderful women of Romney and Reynolds. We shall have little striped papers, of course, and very shiny, crackling chintzes."

And Flora, who was staying at the Carlton, heaved a private sigh of relief. You never knew, with these aristocrats, just what was the latest style. On the whole, the young lady preferred the appearance of the famous dining-room in Pall-Mall. She would just love to have an all-white dining-room.

At the other end of the table, the voices in the little comedy had taken a more anxious tone. "Confound the man," said Laurie's anxious mother to herself, "is he never going to say what he will do for the young people? Who, I wonder, does he think is going to pay the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker? And Laurie always wants such a lot of candlesticks!"

"Our dear children," suggested Lady Worthing to Mr. Dodge, "must start delightfully, with everything pretty and in good taste."

"That's so," assented Mr. Dodge, with a paternal smile. "Though her mother and I," he continued, gazing with pride at his lovely daughter, "why, we just started on \$10 a week in Milwaukee. We boarded right in the city. And I don't know as it isn't a good plan for young folks, anyway. Makes them kind of spry." And to Lady Worthing's alarm she could get nothing definite from him what he meant to do for his daughter—and her son.

There was one guest at the dinner on whom none of this little comedy was lost, and that was Aunt Charlotte, Lady Worthing's eldest sister. Miss Mitchamore, who sat on Laurie's other hand, was an amused spectator of the whole intrigue. A spinster of original turn, with a handsome independence of her own (the two sisters had been co-heiresses, but Lady Worthing's fortune had long been swallowed up in her husband's embarrassments), Charlotte Mitchamore had been a traveller all her life. In the States she had often met the type of American who was facing her. She knew that though he would let his daughter dress at Worth's, would cover her in jewels and take suites of rooms at Ritz's in Paris and at the Carlton in London, he would, in all probability, make no sort of legal settlement on his child or her marriage. Even if he were really wealthy—and there was no evidence that he was—he would be reluctant to make any definite promises as to income. Sometimes these curious transatlantic parents were extraordinarily, fantastically generous. Sometimes they closed their pockets to prospect sons-in-laws, and coolly advised them to earn their own living. In short, you could not count on them. And Charlotte Mitchamore, who was fond of Laurie, and had, indeed, been the chief means of his taking a six months' tour in the United States, wondered what would be the outcome of this match, into which both sides seemed to be walking blindfold. She had hinted these things to her sister, but the hints had not been well received. Lady Worthing could not be brought to see the affair as it really was. For what with Littlehampton's debts and the girls fast coming out, it was most desirable, she urged, that Laurie, poor boy, should be settled somehow.

And none of these doubts, it must be owned, assailed the bridegroom-elect. In his jocund days everything had always turned out all right. Why should not his marriage be as triumphant, as delightful, as all his other experiences? And at school, at college, he had always been a favorite. Laurie, with all his airy carelessness, had almost

forgot that he had not been "sent down," or at the worst he only remembered it as an amusing episode in his career, in which a Don with a very red face and very white hair, who somehow suggested a jack-in-a-box, had got extraordinarily vexed and tried to say unpleasant things. And, after all, it had turned out charmingly, for he had spent that May and June in London, and then he had gone to the States.

"The great thing is not to be afraid of marrying!" announced Laurie, as he surveyed the formidable array of presents spread out the day before his nuptials. "Why, indeed, should one? Directly you marry the whole of society at once takes a perfervid interest in you. They begin by loading you with presents, and they will probably end by supporting you, your wife and your family. Whereas in the most exemplary bachelor or spinster society takes no interest whatever. It is better to be charming than to be good," added Laurie, pensively, "and certainly, on the whole, if it comes to solid help, it is better to be married than to be single."

The first blow fell when they were still on their honeymoon in St. Petersburg, a city which they had chosen because Lord Worthing's first cousin was ambassador there. A handsome check of Mr. Dodge's enabled them to enjoy it. They had danced at a ball in the vast, imposing saloons of the Winter Palace; they had been made the spoiled children of the British Embassy where the bride's elegance and her husband's attractive manners had made them welcome in the most select drawing-rooms of the Russian capital. Socially, the young Eversleys were a decided success. Flora, it must be owned, talked the French which is considered correct in Milwaukee; but Laurie, on the other hand, who had an uncanny gift for strange tongues, could boast a flow of quite Parisian idioms. They had sleighed and shopped in the Nevski Prospekt; Flora had laid in a formidable stock of turquoises in the bazaar, and Laurie had spent his mornings in the Hermitage and his afternoons in getting up little dinner and supper parties in the restaurants on the islands; in short, they had had, as they both avowed, a beautiful time. Nothing amused Laurie more than to watch the shaggy, red-bloused, ever-smiling moujik; custom could not stale Flora's interest in the drovsky driver's Noah's Ark costume, in his padded shoulders and waist, his long hair and his voluminous plaited pelisse. They had taken a trip to Moscow, had been pumped and banged over the cobble paved hills of the Holy City, had got their first glimpse of the Immemorial East in the sinister, haremlike rooms of the old palace in the Kremlin, had wandered astonished through those magnificent modern arcades which put anything of the same kind in Europe to the blush.

But it was when they were once more back in their pretty rooms in the Hotel de France, in St. Petersburg, that Flora found, among a little crowd of bouquets from Russian admirers, a letter from Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge, with the post-mark Milwaukee.

"My dear little girl," it ran, "I guess you will be sorry to hear that I have had real bad luck. The New Trust has done for the old man—for the present. I shall have to pay up all round and I guess you'll have to make that check I gave you last just as long as you can. Luckily, you've got some of your father's grit; I can trust my poor Flora not to sit down and cry over spilt milk. I feel as mad as a hornet; I just mean to start a new combine against the trust. You can bet the old man will hustle some. There's hardly a cent now, but we may come up smiling yet. I'm just off to Chicago on urgent business. My respects to Lord and Lady Worthing. I think you're a real lucky girl. They're nice folks and they'll look after you. Your devoted father,

"Cyrus P. Dodge."  
(To be continued.)

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