

MAN is not the creature of circumstances. Circumstances are the creatures of men.—Disraeli.

A Slip of the Tongue

By M. GIBSON

(New England Homestead)

MRS. HOPTON stopped short in the interminable rows of tucks and delivered herself with asperity: "I'm that tired of this sewing, I'd like to do something desperate. Sew all summer half dead with the heat in this coop, and then turn around and sew all winter with a draught on my back. And all to keep a roof over our heads—boilin' hot tin roof at that—hardly enough to eat and a rag or two to our backs. Not a cent ahead or a show of ever stopping. I'm gettin' reckless, 'Manda. I declare, if I got half a chance, I'd marry anybody that asked me—anybody provided he had a steady job! I wouldn't care if he deserted me inside a year; I'd go back to work and thank him for giving me, and Nellie a whole year's holiday."

Mrs. Hopton came to an abrupt pause and mopped her face with a moist handkerchief. Outside the thermometer registered 98 degrees in the shade, and here in the close little room under the tin roof, it pointed humbly to 100 degrees. Several factories in town had shut down for the afternoon, because the hands were on the verge of heat prostration; but Mrs. Hopton and her assistant still sewed because perforce they must sew. Customers were clamoring for these cool, filmy gowns, and this was daily bread. Men throughout the country were striking for higher wages and shorter hours; but Mrs. Hopton sewed by daylight and lamp-light, cold weather and hot, and gave thanks—somewhat grimly—that she had work to do.

"Well then, marry. You ain't old, Miss Hopton, nor ugly either." Miss 'Manda's suggestions were always brief and practical. Long years of warring with the world had taught her the futility of losing her temper on a hot day.

"Who'd you think I'd marry?" demanded Mrs. Hopton, with a scornful sniff. There was a grim smile pulling at the corners of her mouth, for it was seldom that she was lost to the humorous side of a situation. "Mercy sakes, 'Manda, if I was dying to marry, I couldn't. What with working day and night, seven days out of a week, I don't at such as get sight of a man, let alone keeping company!"

Mrs. Hopton peeked out of the window for a breath of air and jerked back again, a vexed flush creeping over her face. Then she cautiously peered out again, taking a critical survey of the man, who had stopped directly beneath the sewing room window. He was looking over some papers and glanced thoughtfully from the street numbers, evidently a stranger in this section of the town. He was a large man, with hair lightly

touched with grey, and from his profile view, Mrs. Hopton decided that he was quite good-looking. She sighed in relief as he folded up his papers and went his way, and then she bent with renewed energy to her work, laughing at her own discomfort.

"There, Hester Hopton!" she said emphatically, "I hope that will be a lesson to you—making such crazy speeches. If that had been anybody



A Companion After Her Own Heart

I knew, I should just have crawled under the sofa and died. It must have sounded just awful!"

As Mrs. Hopton seemed to be addressing these remarks to the buzzing whirr of her machine, Miss 'Manda paid no attention, and did not look up again until steps came tolling up the narrow stairs, and a slim girl of ten came in with a pitcher and two glasses.

"Here's some lemonade I made for you," she announced proudly, hovering over the two women with her glasses. "I thought it would cool you off."

"Nellie, you dear little mother-hen!" Mrs. Hopton laid her hot cheek against Nellie's arm as the child presented her offering. The lemonade might have been cooler, as drinks go, and it was thin to the point of emaciation; Nellie was too thrifty a housekeeper to waste lemons when water was so cheap. Nellie was thin, too, and while in more robust health she would have been pretty, she was young to assume the duties of a household, and the work and heat had left their cruel mark on her. Mrs. Hopton followed her out of the room with worried eyes.

"Poor little thing. It's a shame, 'Manda; she ought to be out in the country, running loose and getting fat, and I have to keep her cooking and washing dishes like a little old woman. Look how pale and bent over

she is! I spend every Sunday like a heathen, baking and sweeping to help her out for the week, but still it's almost breaking her little back. You needn't wonder that I talk reckless sometimes."

Miss 'Manda nodded sympathetically, but her answer was far from the subject, and as usual most practical.

"There's a shower comin' up, Miss Hopton. Hadn't we better shut the windows before the blow comes?"

The shower came with a rush, blackening the blazing sky and sweeping through the contracted little streets like a cyclone. Shutters banged and windows rattled on all sides, dust and scraps of paper were swept by in whirling clouds. Mrs. Hopton and Nellie were struggling with the parlor windows and flinching before a sharp flash, when a man dashed breathlessly by. He hesitated as he saw the two at the windows, cast a swift glance at the heavy clouds and already swift raindrops, smiled a little and raised his hat.

"Will you give me shelter?" he shouted over a crash of thunder, and Mrs. Hopton staring at him, abruptly nodded her head. He was without an umbrella and already half drenched, and in a second more he stood in the stuffy little parlor apologizing for his intrusion. Another crash of

"Nellie is my little housekeeper," interposed Mrs. Hopton hastily, her brown eyes very bright and her uplifted head denying pity. She had been subjecting the stranger to a searching scrutiny, and the two pink spots that had stained her cheeks on his sudden entrance had died out. Nellie slipped quickly out of the room and her mother wondered why.

"She must be a very capable young person," the stranger observed helplessly, evidently disconcerted to hear that this misfit of a child kept house while the thin mite of a mother sewed her fingers off. He was used to more comfortable ways of living. Then the bright spots came back to Mrs. Hopton's cheeks, for in the doorway appeared Nellie—poor Nellie—bent on dispensing hospitality, and bearing a wondrously polished tumbler and the remains of the attenuated lemonade. Mrs. Hopton smothered a hysterical desire to laugh, although for a second it seemed more a cause for weeping.

"Wouldn't you like some?" Nellie queried solicitously, and he took it with the politest gravity in the world, tasting it with the air of a connoisseur, and then fun which for years had been crushed down in little Mrs. Hopton by poverty and hard work, rose again to the surface, and twitched the corners of her mouth as she watched him. If he had smiled she would have hated him for ridiculing the child's efforts; as it was, he stood the test nobly, and she watched him and softly patted Nellie's thin arm, enjoying the situation. He took the last drop without a grimace, and arose, thanking them both.

"I guess the worst is over; but it looks as though it had settled into a steady rain for the rest of the afternoon, so I won't trouble you any longer. It was very kind of you to take me in."

"I'll lend you an umbrella," said Mrs. Hopton quickly, too innately hospitable to send even an uninvited guest away without one, yet secretly wondering whether she was not crazy to risk the only one she owned with a stranger, who might forget it the next day. He accepted with alacrity and relief.

"Thank you; I'll return it to-morrow."

As he went away the stranger laughed to himself.

"Independent little woman; she didn't want her poverty aided. Poor things; they look worked to death, and thin as rails. I'd like to take that poor kid out in the country and show it one good time. And that awful lemonade! Whew!"

Mrs. Hopton went back upstairs to her sewing and the expected 'Manda and laughed until the moist handkerchief had to be called into service.

"Oh, 'Manda, I felt so flat! There was a man caught in the rain, and he asked if he might come in. Who do you think it was? That selfsame man that stood out there when I made that ridiculous speech! Oh, dear, if I thought he really heard it I'd be mortified to death."

"Humph!" Miss 'Manda's eyes twinkled behind her spectacles, and she bit off a thread with a decisive click. "I don't see how he could help hearin', 'less he's deaf. Did he do the obligin' thing and ask you to marry him?"

"No," said Mrs. Hopton tersely, starting her machine buzzing again. "Funny, seeing that I look so plump and well-dressed and handsome; but he didn't. I'll be thankful if he remembers to bring back the only umbrella we own."

(Continued next week)

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