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Old Hagar's Secret

BY MRS. M. J. HOLMES

Author of "For a Woman's Sake," "Love's Triumph," "Purified by Suffering," "A Grass Widow," "Woman Against Woman," Etc.

"I can manage it," she said, smoothing the long silken tresses which lay in disorder upon her lap. "Richland postoffice is only four miles from here; I can walk double that distance easy. Your grandmother never thinks of going there, neither am I known to any one in that neighborhood. Write your letter to Henry Warner, and before the sun goes down it shall be safe in the letter-box. He can write to the same place, but he had better direct to me, as your name might excite suspicion."

This plan seemed perfectly feasible; but it struck Maggie unpleasantly. She had never attempted to deceive in her life, and she shrank from the first deception. But this was her grandmother's consent. And she found impossible. Madam Conway was determined, and would not listen.

"It grieved her sorely," she said, "thus to cross her favorite child, whom she loved better than her life; but 'twas for her good, and must be done."

So she wrote a cold and rather insulting letter to Henry Warner, bidding him, as she had once done before, "let her granddaughter alone," and saying "it was useless for him to attempt anything secret, for Maggie would be closely watched the moment there were indications of a clandestine correspondence."

This letter, which was read to Margaret, destroyed all hope; and still she wavered, uncertain whether it would be right to deceive her grandmother. But while she was yet undecided, Hagar's fingers, of late unused to the pen, traced a few lines to Henry Warner, who, acting at once upon her suggestion, wrote to Margaret a letter, which he directed to "Hagar Warren, Richland."

In it he urged so many reasons while Maggie should avail herself of this opportunity for communicating with him, that she yielded at last; and regularly each week old Hagar toiled through sunshine and through storm to the Richland postoffice, feeling amply repaid for her trouble when she saw the bright, expectant face which almost always greeted her return. Occasionally, by way of lulling the suspicions of Madam Conway, Henry would direct a letter to Hillsdale, knowing full well, it would never meet the eyes of Margaret, over whom, for the time being, a spy had been set, in the person of Anna Jeffrey.

This young lady, though but little connected with our story, may perhaps deserve a brief notice. Older than either Theo or Margaret, she was neither remarkable for beauty or talent. Dark haired, dark eyed, dark browed, and as the servants said, "dark in her disposition," she was naturally envious of those whose rank in life entitled them to more attention than she herself was accustomed to receive. For this reason, Maggie Miller, had from the first been to her an object of dislike, and she was well pleased when Madam Conway, after enjoining upon her the strictest secrecy, appointed her to watch that young lady, and see that no letter was ever carried by her to the postoffice which Madam Conway had not first examined. In the snaky eyes Anna Jeffrey promised to be faithful to her trust, and for a time she became literally Maggie Miller's shadow, following her everywhere, until Maggie complained so bitterly of the annoyance that Ma-

dam Conway, at last, feeling tolerably sure that no counterplot was intended, revoked her orders, and gave her the free rein she pleased.

Thus relieved from espionage, Maggie became a little more like herself, though a sense of the injustice done her by her grandmother, together with the deception she knew she was practicing, wore upon her; and the servants at their work listened in vain for the merry laugh they had loved so well to hear. In the present state of Margaret's feelings, Madam Conway deemed it prudent to say nothing of Arthur Carrollton, whose name was never mentioned, save by Theo and Anna, the latter of whom had seen him in England, and was never so well pleased as when talking of his fine country seat, his splendid park, his hazy some horses, and last, but not least, of himself. "He was," she said, "without exception, the most elegant and aristocratic young man she had ever seen," and then for more than an hour she would entertain Theo with a repetition of the many agreeable things he had said to her during the one day she had spent at his house while Madam Conway was visiting there.

In perfect indifference, Maggie, who was frequently present, would listen to these stories, sometimes listlessly turning the leaves of a book, and again smiling scornfully, as she thought how impossible it was that the fastidious Arthur Carrollton should have been at all pleased with a girl like Anna Jeffrey; and sometimes she would look up at Theo, who was sitting beside her, and she would feel a very slight degree of interest in him. "At least," she would like to know how he looked; and one day when her grandmother and Theo were riding, she stole cautiously to the box where she knew his picture lay, and, taking it out, looked to see "if he was so very fine-looking."

"Yes," he was," Maggie acknowledged that, and sure that she hated him terribly, she lingered long over that picture, admiring the classically-shaped head, the finely-cut mouth, and more than all, the dark eyes which seemed so full of goodness and truth. "Pshaw!" she exclaimed, at last, restoring the picture to its place. "If Henry were only a little taller, and had as handsome eyes, he'd be a great deal better looking. Anyway, I like him, and I like Arthur Carrollton, who I know is doing in, and would try to make me mind. He has asked for my daguer-type, grandma says—one which looks as I do now. I'll send it, too," and she burst into a loud laugh at the novel idea which had crossed her mind.

That day when Madam Conway returned from her drive, she was surprised at Maggie's proposing that Theo and herself should have their likenesses taken for Arthur Carrollton.

"If he wants my picture," said she, "I am willing he shall have it. It is all he'll ever get."

Delighted at this unexpected concession, Madam Conway gave her consent, and the next afternoon found Theo and Maggie at the daguerrean gallery in Hillsdale, where the latter astonished both her sister and the artist by declaring her intention of not only sitting with her bonnet and shawl on, but also of turning her back to the instrument! It was in vain that Theo remonstrated! "That position or none," she said; and the picture was accordingly taken, presenting a very correct likeness when finished of a plump, well and a shawl, beneath which Maggie Miller was supposed to be.

Strange as it may seem, this freak struck Madam Conway favorably. Arthur Carrollton thought that Maggie was unlike any other person, and the joke, she thought, would increase rather than diminish the interest he already felt in her. So she made no objection, and in a few days it was its way to England, together with a lock of Hagar's snow-white hair, which Maggie had combed from the old lady, and, unknown to her grandmother, placed in the casing at the last moment.

Several weeks passed away, and then there came an answer—a letter full of wit and humor that Maggie confessed to herself that he must be very clever to write so many shrewd things, and be without so perfectly refined. Accompanying the package was a small rosewood box, containing a most exquisite little pin made of Hagar's frosty hair and richly ornamented with gold. Not a word was written concerning it, and as Maggie kept her own counsel, both Theo and her grandmother marvelled greatly, admiring its beauty and wondering for whom it was intended.

"For me, of course," said Madam Conway. "The hair is Lady Carrollton's, Arthur's grandmother. I know it by its soft, silky look. She has sent it as a token of respect, for she was always fond of me," and, going to the glass, she very complacently ornamented her Honiton collar with Hagar's hair, while Maggie, bursting with fun, beat a hasty retreat from the room lest she should betray herself.

Thus the winter passed away, and early in the spring George Douglas, to whom Madam Conway had long ago sent a favorable answer, long to visit his betrothed, bringing to Maggie a note from Rose, who had once or twice sent messages in Hen-

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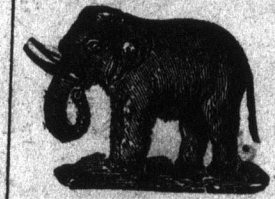
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