

## ANNABEL'S

## VEIL

By ETHELWYN WETHERALD

ANNABEL HARLOWE was born a reformer. The desire to better things and persons—especially persons—showed itself at so early an age that her immediate family circle began to pay deference to her criticisms and conclusions before she had reached the age of nine. Yet she was not an unattractive child. One felt that her craving for the unusual, for what she considered the only right, was to be reckoned with and allowed for in her as the artistic temperament exacts certain immunities from unfortunate non-possessors. Having passed through various phases of mental healing, theosophy, socialism and dress reform, she became at the age of sixteen a pronounced vegetarian, thoroughly imbued with the belief that all life is "sacred." At that time her father had a stable boy—George, by name—who had just been dismissed for careless driving. Annabel disliked the boy; partly because he called her Miss Hannibal, partly because he treated her suggestions as to the care and training of horses with a fathomless silence that seemed to betoken a contempt as profound. Nevertheless, as she entered the kitchen one evening to request the cook to drive all flies from the door with flappers, instead of yielding to the inhuman impulse to destroy them by poison or sticky paper, she was suddenly struck by the reflection that George, whose life was probably worth much more in the scale of things than many flies, was about to leave her home, and, by so doing, depart outside the circle of her influence. Annabel had a very high regard for her own powers of persuasion. She had not lived long enough to learn that personal influence has as much chance to make itself felt as a grain of wheat has to grow. The grain may fall on a rock, on iron or wood, paper or plush; or it may fall on the right kind of soil under favouring conditions.

However, at sixteen, Annabel was full of youth and high emprise. She saw before her a gawky young fellow eating his last meal at her parents' kitchen table—gobbling it down with an expression of mingled defiance and contempt and sending scarcely a glance in her direction. He had the air of one who is saying, "Well, I am done with your folks, and, thank heaven, I am done with you, too!" Annabel observed that in manner and appearance he had not improved a particle since he came to them several months previous, and her zeal for reform began to simmer.

"Good evening, George," said she, sweetly, striving to transfix him with a starry gaze.

"Evenin'," returned George, slouching over his supper rather more than usual, by way of refusing to be transfixed. This was a direct insult, not only to herself, but to her costume, which chanced to be particularly becoming. Annabel was an artist as well as a reformer, and nowhere did she show her good taste to effectively as in the gowns that revealed the charm of her flexile figure and blonde hair. The uncouth boy, looking up in spite of himself, was surprised to catch a look of appeal in the generally cool, blue eyes.

"You leave us to-night, don't you, George?"

"Yes'm." Then with a touch of superiority, "I got a good offer and I mean to take it at once."

"A good offer?" The fair brows puckered.

"Yes. Assistant in a butcher shop. I'm going into the butcher business."

ANNABEL was plainly horrified. "Oh, George, don't—don't think of such a thing."

"No?" The boy paused in his gobbling with a look of amused toleration. "Well, I guess yes. It's a good paying business."

"Oh, but George, you couldn't—you really couldn't bring yourself to kill a poor little lamb."

"That's true enough." George leaned back in his chair and stirred his tea judiciously. "I couldn't kill a poor little lamb—there wouldn't be enough meat on it; I'd wait till it was a good fat sheep." His laugh was hilarious, as of one who had made a good point. Tears of vexation and disgust rose to Annabel's eyes. She put up her handkerchief. In that moment George felt the virtue of his resolution ooze away from him. Instinctively he rose, and his tone was absolutely respectful. "Very well, Miss Harlowe, I'll not do this as a steady job, as you don't wish it. I'll look out for something else."

It was a moment of triumph. Annabel dashed away the tears and smiled again. "Good!" she exclaimed, and withdrew, feeling that after all there is no limit to the delights of personal influence if the subject is approached in the right way. Three



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Illustrations by A. Clark.

weeks later she received a letter which decidedly modified this opinion. It was as follows:

"Deer Miss

i am now in a pozishun to offer you my hand and hert wich i wud of dun sooner if id node your feelings tore me. Ples let me heer from you at wunst. remember annabel i gave up the boocher bussyness for you am now agent for pilow sham holders and wil soon hav enuf to marry on. Trooly your luvving George."

Annabel experienced a half hour of acute hysteria; then in the inevitable reaction she bethought herself of the kind of letter that a person troubled with this form of idiocy was most in need of. The result was a communication based upon the highest philanthropic motives—full of a large commiseration for the unimagined folly of which he had been guilty and a compassionate wish to spare him the pain he so amply merited. Annabel was telepathic enough to feel, a few days later, that her epistolary shot had hit the mark; the young man had been made to measure in some degree his own gross presumption. At the same time an ungoverned sense of humour in Annabel's makeup made her realize that George would forever execrate her as the means of getting him out of the profitable "boocher bussyness."

FOR a few years Annabel limited her desire to reform her acquaintances to those of her own sex. As a hobby it seemed to bring poor returns. Older women had a material habit of smiling indulgently when she strove to show them how their children should be brought up and why they should not be vaccinated, and the society of girls of her own age was to her wholly insipid. At last Destiny smiled on her in the person of her mother's laundress—a woman who came to the house every wash-day when she did not happen to be incapacitated by strong drink. Annabel paid her a visit in her cheerless home and returned with the encouraging report that she had left Mrs. Porter in tears. "I am sure she regrets the error of her ways," continued Annabel. "I mean to stand right by her and help her reform."

Annabel's brother, Harold, confronted her with a skeptical eye. "What's the sense, Ann?" he inquired. "Joe Porter drinks as hard as his wife does. They are a thoroughly congenial pair; two souls with but a single thought—to get as drunk as possible. Why disturb a domestic felicity so harmonious, so rare and so complete?"

Annabel wasted no time in defence or explanation of her motives. She took up Mrs. Porter with characteristic enthusiasm and energy, and results justified her confidence in her own powers. The poor woman had not reached the sodden stage of her trouble. She was susceptible and responsive to sympathetic human interest. There was something captivating in finding a friend who treated her weakness as a disease to be medicined by sanitary living, sun-

shine, fresh air, digestible food and right thinking. Mrs. Porter was also sustained and soothed by the consciousness that she was not condescended to. Annabel petted her and fussed over her, praised her when she kept her pledge and mingled very genuine tears of grief with hers when she failed to do so. She was to Annabel a fascinating subject of interest.

When Mrs. Porter's reformation was seemingly complete—that is, when she had maintained uninterrupted sobriety for the space of six months—a new difficulty arose. It was put into words by Mrs. Porter herself, on an evening when she was waiting the return of her liege lord. "You see, Miss, it makes it all the harder for me, not being a drinking woman no more, when it comes to dealing with a man like Joe. He comes in of a night and hits me a clout over the head, and me with not a drop of whiskey in me to give me strength to hit him back again. My, there was many a grand fight me and Joe used to pull off in the old days, but that's all past! I'm as weak as water now."

"NO, you're not, Mrs. Porter," declared the valiant young reformer. "You're stronger than ever. The thing to do now is to reform your husband."

"Reform the Old Nick," retorted the woman, with sour brevity; "you don't know Joe."

The opportunity of making his acquaintance was at hand, as he thumped in at that moment. With a black eye, a cut on his brow which ensanguined the dirty handkerchief bound about it, a visage half fierce, half defiant, and a breath which forced Miss Harlowe temporarily to cease from breathing, he was as ideal a subject for reform as the heart of the most ardent philanthropist could desire. Annabel felt an instantaneous quickening of her most cherished impulses. She acknowledged the introduction by extending her hand. "I am so glad you have come, Mr. Porter," she said, quite as if he were an intimate friend; "I should have gone home before this, and now it is dark, and I don't quite like to go through the village alone. Perhaps you would be kind enough to accompany me."

She said it in exactly the right way. No hint of condescension, no trace of consciousness that she was not addressing a social equal. Mr. Porter was Irish enough to adapt himself instantly to the unexpected circumstances. "Don't care if I do," he



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