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MARGARETS

A Little Story of Toronto

BY MARION HADJOW

Mr. "Flint" Fergus tried his number for the second time. "Main 9642!" Such a stupid, silly Central! Here he was, late for his appointment at best, and now—"Hello! Main 964—Hello! Central!"

The voice that came over the wire was not Central's. It was a soft, clear, slightly childish voice—"And thanks so much, dear, for the lovely, lovely roses!"

Mr. Fergus should have hung up the receiver, he felt that, but he hesitated a moment. Now a male voice, a deep voice, (where had he heard that voice?) came back over the wire.

"And I don't have to work on your birthday night after all! But it isn't very early, Margaret—too late for down town. We might go to the 'Alhambra,' I heard a fellow say it's a good show there." And again the sweet clear tones, "That will be beautiful. I'll be ready in ten—"

Mr. Fergus hastily hung up the receiver, with the unpleasant feeling that he had been an eavesdropper.

Then, with a sigh and a frown, he tried once more. "Main 9642, please!" But his party had just that minute gone out. No, Mr. Brown would not be in again this evening. Was there any message? No! There wasn't any message. Confound the man, couldn't he have waited ten minutes longer? The matter was important—and now, here he was, with a whole empty evening before him.

Mr. Fergus sighed, and frowned again. A whole empty evening. Friday evening. Friday evening, November—What was the date? November twenty-sixth? What should he remember about the twenty-sixth. Why, of course, his birthday! He was sixty-two years old. Well! Well! His birthday was of no account. He had no one who cared a snap of their fingers how old he was or when he was born. He didn't himself.

But there had been a time. Ah, yes,—he found himself recalling—there had been a time when some one never forgot his birthday. Now he was old, and people, he was aware, counted him a hard, cold man; but there had been a time when he was young, and some one had cared. Margaret! That was what that chap had called the girl over the 'phone. Another Margaret! Were they all alike, these Margarets? Would this one prove as fickle, as cruel, as his Margaret had been? And yet, perhaps the fault had not been all on her side. They say it takes two to make a quarrel. But these two young things were happy now—you could hear the ring of happiness in their voices—and it was Margaret's birthday and they were going to a motion picture theatre.

Well, it was his birthday, too. Suppose he went to the movies? He smiled to himself at the idea. True, he had only been there upon two previous occasions in his life—but why should he not go now? There was nothing in the wide world to prevent him. He would go to the movies. He would go—where would he go? He would go to the Alhambra. Margaret had said it would be beautiful to go there.

Mr. Fergus rose stiffly from his chair, went to the hall for his coat and hat, summoned his housekeeper informed her that he would be out for the evening.

"Will you leave your 'phone number, Mr. Fergus?" enquired the housekeeper.

"No 'phone number," replied he, briefly; "I shall be back in two hours. Good night!"

Arrived at the Alhambra, Mr. Fergus stumbled blindly after the usher down the dim aisle, and fumbled himself into a seat.

Mr. Fergus was old for his years and grizzly grey of hair and beard. His life had been severe and lonely. In business he had been successful but he was poor in human love and

friendship. His childhood had been lonely; in his one love affair he had been thwarted, and after that he had shut up inside himself and refused to come out of his shell.

Fortunately for Mr. Fergus the picture was neither a hackneyed modern problem play nor a tale of adventures in the wild West, but a simple love story of the 18th century, prettily and effectively screened. He found himself becoming rather interested as the plot unfolded.

Suddenly something intervened in his line of vision. It annoyed him. It was somebody's head—a man's head—the side of a man's head. Why wasn't it the back of his head? He couldn't be looking at the picture, he must be looking at the opposite wall. But, no, upon closer observation, it wasn't the wall—he was looking at a girl beside him.

And then Mr. Fergus roused himself with a jerk. That head belonged to James Mitchell, and James Mitchell was one of his own men, in his own office. In fact he was the young cub who had had the nerve to ask for a raise the day before yesterday. Well, he hadn't given him one. These young whipper-snappers expected too much nowadays.

Of course he was a good worker, he must admit that, a really promising chap. A fine face too, he acknowledged, as he studied, in the dim light, the clear cut profile before him with its straight nose and strong square chin. James Mitchell—at the movies, not at all engrossed in the picture, but in a mass of fluffy black hair beside him.

All at once Mr. Fergus grasped the arms of his seat. Then he pulled out his handkerchief, mopped his brow, briskly polished his glasses and set them back on his nose.

Somehow he felt that he had lost his identity as Frederick A. Fergus, that he had been lifted bodily out of the rut in which he had plodded along for so many years, and that now on this, his 62nd birthday, in the Alhambra Theatre, Bloor street, he was launched upon a great adventure. He almost chuckled to himself.

Now he knew why that voice had sounded familiar over the 'phone. It was James Mitchell's voice! The young scoundrel! He had never thought of him apart from the business before. So he had a girl, a Margaret. Yes, a Margaret with fluffy black hair.

Oh, what an opportunity was before him! Here was another young fellow such as he had been once, with another Margaret, perhaps such as she had been once. And here was he, perhaps holding their destinies in his hand. Oh, if he could, if only it should be in his power to help them realize their castle of dreams, to have it not come tumbling in ruins, as his had done.

Mr. Fergus, trembling with emotion and excitement, grasped his hat and groped his way out of the theatre.

Three weeks went by. On a crisp December evening, according to his custom, Mr. Fergus was walking home from down town. He was feeling happier these days, happier than he had felt for many a year, and the fine glow he felt within him was reflected in his face.

With an unusual elasticity in his step and quite oblivious to the traffic, he was going over, in his mind, the events of the past weeks. Such a strange satisfaction had come to him over raising young Mitchell's salary that, a few days later, he had promoted him as well. The young rascal had deserved it—but what a shock it gave him! He chuckled to himself now as he recalled the look of amazement on the boys face.

But to-day, to-day had brought the crowning delight, when Mitchell had come and asked for two days' holidays.

"You see sir," he had said hesitatingly, and then with a rush, "you see, I have a girl and we want to get married. So if it isn't asking too much—"

Then Mr. Fergus had frowned and looked at him over his glasses. "So you think you'll add a wife to your expenses in these hard times, do you?" And here he shook his finger. "I think that any man who deliberately marries these days—but it's your own affair of course. Take two weeks holiday, with full pay

Jim Mitchell had gasped inarticulate thanks. He had been almost speechless. Yes, undoubtedly that had been the best moment of all. Unheeding of motors and street cars, Mr. Fergus stepped blithely on. Never, he thought, had he experienced anything quite so fine as those minutes—

"Honk! Honk! Honk!" went a motor horn; and "Hi! Look out!" yelled a frantic chauffeur. But just too late, for Mr. Fergus, stepping off the curb, remembered no more as the powerful car hurled him down.

The following day found James Mitchell in the midst of hurried preparations. He and Margaret were to be married to-morrow and were going to Kirkfield for their honeymoon. "Good old Flint sure did come out on top. He's a trump!—Hang that 'phone!"

The Toronto General Hospital was calling Mr. James Mitchell, a matter of life and death. Mr. F. A. Fergus had met with an accident last evening. Recovered consciousness this morning and kept asking for James Mitchell. Would he please come at once.

James hesitated a fraction of a second, then he phoned Margaret. "You come with me, dear. We owe a lot to him. I'll be right over!" Bang went up the receiver, and then down again as he ordered a taxi to come immediately to Margaret's address.

In a darkened room at the hospital, Mr. Fergus lay in strange delirium.

"It's not my fault this time, Margaret. I've done everything I could for him. Mitchell, where are you? Tell her I fixed things all right. I did, didn't I Mitchell?" Then, raising himself on his elbow. "I can't rest another minute till I've given that boy a raise. He deserves it! Do you hear me? I tell you he ought to have it!"

Margaret and James came softly into the room. "He hasn't been sane a minute since he recovered consciousness," said the nurse. "Perhaps you might speak to him, Mr. Mitchell."

James stepped to the bedside, followed by Margaret. "I'm here, sir. It's Mitchell. Is there something you want?"

But Mr. Fergus stared at him with unseeing eyes. "He deserves it I tell you and he's going to get it!" His eyes wandered from James' face to Margaret. Margaret in her haste had simply thrown over her head a scarf which now, slipping back upon her shoulders, revealed her wavy black hair in becoming disorder about her face. Her wide gray eyes, brimming with compassion, looked down into those of Mr. Fergus, and held them!

For age-long seconds the sick man's eyes remained blank, then slowly a light of recognition dawned in them. With an eager tremble in his voice Mr. Fergus weakly stretched out his arms. "Margaret," he cried, "Margaret Harcourt! Oh, my Margaret! I knew some day you would understand and come back."

With a sob Margaret flung herself down by the bed and pressed the feeble hands against her cheek.

"My mother," she whispered. "You loved my mother!" Then, as she gazed into the white, drawn face of Mr. Fergus, with a woman's intuition, she realized that this must be the one of whom her mother had told her—that dear lover of her early youth who had believed her unfaithful, and who, it was said, had broken his heart. She kissed away the tears that fell from her eyes on his hands and glanced up at the nurse. Mr. Fergus had fallen back on the pillows with his eyes closed.

"Leave him now," said the nurse. "His mind is at rest, and I will call you when he stirs. Evidently you had a better effect on him than anything else in the world. I will let you know if the doctor gives any hope."

Three years have passed by since that eventful morning. Almost any sunny afternoon now that you walk along Spadina Road you will meet a white-haired man of about sixty-five with a cane in one hand and a diminutive boy of uncertain "footing" by the other. The child, if questioned, will tell you his name is "Fergeth Mitchell," and that he is out walking "wiv gampaw."

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