

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

An English Setting for a Story which Pictures the Greatest Tragedy in which Man and Woman Ever Play Parts

By BARONESS DE BERTOUCHE

IT was evening—one of those typical November twilight with which every Englishman has been familiar all his life long. A waning moon was lying low among the clouds, and every now and then great gusts of wind came sweeping through the trees, bending them earthward with the measured sway of vassals doing homage to the night.

Such a moment might well have lent itself to the glories of an accomplished pen or brush; but somehow, with the prosaic old Vicarage in the foreground, the scheme lacked inspiration. Modernity broke out from it at every pore, coupled with that respectability in excelsis which flourishes like chickweed in every Cathedral city.

Minchester Vicarage itself, a comfortable structure of the nondescript period, occupied a pleasant site, about two miles north of the town, but even at this distance, some touch of the local spirit had managed to filter in between the smooth, drab stones of which the house was built. Not that this species of respectability was actually aggressive; it was merely the atmospheric expression of well deserved, well preserved prosperity—the whiff of moral lavender most appropriate to the home of a popular clergyman of the Established Church.

There was not a soul in Minchester who grudged its Vicar either his wealth or his popularity. Everyone, from the Bishop downward, loved and respected him, while to his poorer brethren he was the generous but just friend, with whom no liberties could be taken, yet withal a pillar of strength in times of trouble.

The only son of his mother, the Hon. and Rev. Henry Charteris at the age of fifty was still an eminently handsome man.

Only one detail in its Vicar's life did Minchester venture to criticize, and that was his marriage—an event already six years old. When the news of his engagement first reached the town, the effect it produced was prodigious. But when a few weeks later, the bride herself appeared upon the scene—beautiful as a flower, and young enough to be his daughter—the loyalty of the faithful was put to a severe test. It trembled in the balance, then by superhuman effort survived intact.

The unexpected had happened, and the man who had hitherto gone scatheless among the rocks and breakers of Love's rough sea, had suddenly succumbed to the charms of a penniless orphan, whose personal history Minchester knew nothing about. He had met her, it was said, during one of his rare holidays—they had stayed together in the same country house, and Fate, the meddler—the muddler—had done the rest.

To Henry Charteris, the poet, and dreamer, it was as though a rush of rosy morning had come to lighten the greyness of his own soul, and if the match was ill-assorted as regards age and temperament, these disparities were surely compensated by the passionate devotion which the country parson conceived—almost at first sight—for his beautiful girl-wife.

Herself, scarcely more than a child, the romance of the situation, added to the surprise of a conquest so unexpected, proved all too eloquent advocates in a cause already half won; and it needed but slight persuasion on the part of sympathetic friends to induce Millicent Graham to accept an offer, which half the women of England would have given their eyes to have received. Whether she could ever love her courtly suitor, as he loved her, she scarcely herself could have said; but certain it is, she both admired and revered what she failed fully to appreciate, and having no former loves to kill, she floated happily into the married life with a whole, though unawakened heart.

THAT a charming young wife, London born, London bred, and possessing a natural love of pleasure, could ever prove an ideal helpmate in steering the vicissitudes of a country parish, neither Minchester nor indeed its Vicar had been so foolish as to imagine. Yet, somehow, everyone—rich and poor alike—loved her. She was so beautiful, so sweet and childlike, that in spite of itself, the heart of the chilly old town warmed towards her, and in the end, voted her unanimously its queen.

As for Henry Charteris himself so long as he might worship his pretty Millicent, bask in the sunshine of her bright young beauty, he asked for nothing more; and when a year later, a baby girl was born to them, the great heart of this man overflowed with joy. It was the consummation of his happiness, and henceforth he lived only for his wife, his child and his work. Never once did it cross his guileless brain that this might prove dull and monotonous to a lively girl brought up in the more exhilarating atmosphere of social life.

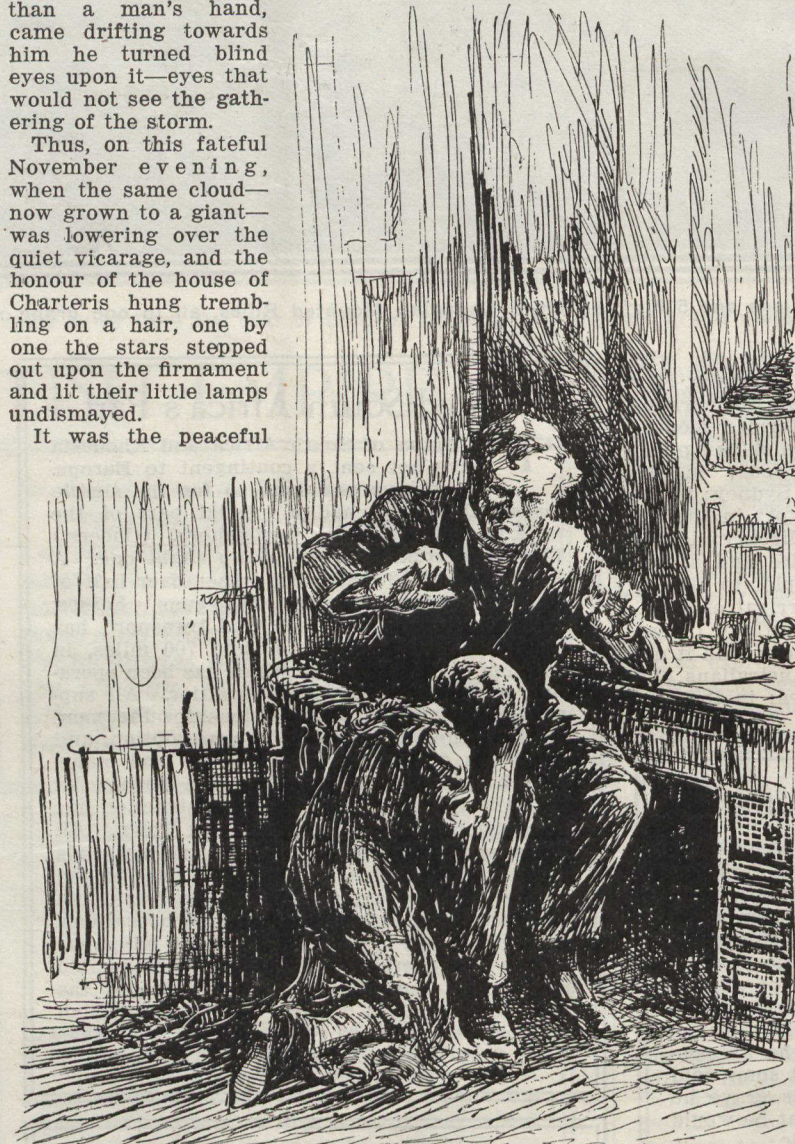
Absorbed in the depth of his own passion, he became narrowed, almost self-centred, and he who knowingly would not have harmed the lowest of God's creatures, became also cruel. It was the old story, the racial warfare between youth and age, the pathetic cry uttered by May to December, that

must go unanswered so long as this world lasts.

Yet he deemed her happy, and bent body and soul to make her so. She never complained, or seemed to prefer other companionship to his own or that of their child, and his trust in her was so implicit, that he flung her almost proudly under the wheels of the very temptations against which he was for ever warning the young and comely of his flock. In his eyes, his wife's beauty was a gift from God to himself—himself only—and he never once stayed to weigh its dangers or measure a few of its fiery possibilities. He saw only the blue serenity of the sky, the glory of the sun at high noon, and when at last, a cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, came drifting towards him he turned blind eyes upon it—eyes that would not see the gathering of the storm.

Thus, on this fateful November evening, when the same cloud—now grown to a giant—was lowering over the quiet vicarage, and the honour of the house of Charteris hung trembling on a hair, one by one the stars stepped out upon the firmament and lit their little lamps undismayed.

It was the peaceful



"Millicent!" he cried. At his voice her head was buried still lower.

twilight hour, when the Vicar was wont to take a few off moments with his books by the study fire, and his little daughter might be seen gravely putting her dolls to bed, with all the maternal solicitude of her five short years.

And Millicent! where was she? Millicent, the beloved, the beautiful! Not in the study, nor the drawing-room, nor yet in her baby's nursery! This could not be she—no, God forbid—this wild-eyed woman, locked into her chamber, penning sheet upon sheet of tragedy and blotting out the writing with her tears. Hark! What was that? An opened door, and then a footfall, and a catch of panting breaths. Someone is stirring in the stillness now, stealing along the corridor, and down the wide, oak staircase. Someone! Someone! . . . Oh, woman, loved of God and man, what ails you, that you must creep like a thief about your husband's house, crouch at his study door, and then dart away into the shadow like a thing of stealth and stain! Back! Back to his feet, his arms, that will open like a paradise of pardon at your lightest touch. Back! young wife and mother, before it is too late! You do not know the blackness of the night into which you plunge or the awakening that must kill your dream when the dawn breaks.

But already her fingers were busy with the fastenings of the heavy hall door, the magic of the moon was upon her, the breath of night in her nostrils, and in an instant she was standing on the red sweep of gravel, looking up into the windows of the home she had left behind. Then a sound reached her—a voice borne downwards through some open pane—the voice of a child, and the child laughed. Only

the sorrowing and sinning know what baby mirth can sometimes mean. A child's tears are harrowing enough, but its laughter can be even more so, oh, how infinitely more! Another moment, and with her hands clasped about her ears, she was fleeing wildly down the avenue of beeches, stumbling, halting, trembling, like a lost petal whirling before the gale.

In the self-same hour, by some strange sarcasm of fate, Henry Charteris was seated by the study fire, reading his Bishop's latest masterpiece—a meditation on the magnificent apology once offered by God to God for the sins of men and women.

"Father forgive them—they know not what they do."

Half a mile away, in a sheltered angle of the cross roads, the flaming eyes of a motor were peering through the dark, and a man might have been seen pacing to and fro, now swearing at the weather, now restlessly looking at his watch, by the light of a cigarette which he held between his teeth.

DOWN the road came the tread of flying feet. There was a sound of snapping twigs, the trailing of a garment over fallen leaves, and he had her safely in his arms, in the panting car, and they were whirling away madly into the night.

"Millicent, my darling! You are mine at last!"

It was the cry of the victor, the man in possession, and he stooped down from his wheel, to the terrified woman beside him, and kissed her once, twice, and yet thrice upon the lips. Dawn was breaking when the lights o' London came in sight and he slowed down under the gaze of those countless eyes, that have seen so much of the gladness, sadness, and madness of this many coloured life.

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"Dear Charteris,—An attack of gout has unfortunately laid me low. Will you very kindly preach in my place at the Cathedral tomorrow night? A New Year's sermon, of course—text, 'Faith, Hope and Charity,' etc. Please follow same lines. Cordial greetings (when writing) to your charming wife. I am deeply concerned to learn that she is ill enough to be obliged to pass the winter away from home. How you must miss her! In haste, yours most sincerely,
"Charles Ambrose Minchester."

His Bishop's letter—and the Vicar of Minchester turned and twisted it between his nervous fingers for at least the hundredth time. A messenger had left it at

the Vicarage early in the afternoon, and now it was almost eleven o'clock and an answer must be posted that night.

What should that answer be? This was the question he kept asking himself, pacing up and down the study, or sitting moodily in his big leather chair. It was the last day of the year, and though bitterly cold, only the ghost of a fire flickered in the grate. The whole room wore an air of neglect and self-abandonment, and through the uncurtained windows a heavy fall of snow could be seen descending in huge flakes.

ONE glance at the Vicar's face, and the most shallow of observers would have known that winter lay not only upon the earth, but in his heart also. The last six weeks had made of Henry Charteris another man, wiser, sadder, and a good deal older, too. In the first agony of his humiliation he had lain down to die—was fain even to take his own life—but the thought of his mother saved him. "I will arise and go unto my Mother, and will say unto her, 'Mother' . . ."

It was at the feet of this woman of four score years, with the brain of a man and the heart of a child that he redeemed his reason, perhaps also his life. Tenderly, but unflinchingly, she raised the mirror to his soul, showing him his pride, his weakness, and his selfishness, thus mingling wine with the oil she poured into his wounds. The ordeal was a fiery one, but when it was over, he set his teeth, and faced the future like a man. For his child's sake he must stay his hand from vengeance, for the

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