

THE MAUVE LADY

The Adventures of an Unconventional Chauffeur

By WINIFRED GRAHAM



SIR ROBERT ROSSE had played many strange pranks in his life, but still his thirst for adventure appeared unquenched. He was just in the humour to try some new experience, when his friend, Frank Richardson, made a suggestion.

They were looking out at the long row of motor cabs

reaching to Hyde Park Corner from their hotel window.

"I've often thought," said Frank, "it would be rather amusing to change places with one of those men, and drive for fares. A little bribery would do the trick."

Sir Robert, young, impetuous, and ever ready for a joke, seized the idea as something new. He felt sure that Frank, the originator of the thought, would be far too much in awe of his somewhat conventional wife to risk carrying out such a plan, but Bobby Rosse was a bachelor, and had no one to consult but himself.

"Will you hire me if I take it on?" he asked. "I shouldn't care to wait about doing nothing."

"Yes," replied Frank, "if you don't get a fare in ten minutes."

It was a bargain, and Sir Robert appeared ready for immediate action.

London, the great centre of life, wore her most smiling summer dress on this sunny May morning. The park gay with flowers, the roads busy with passengers, all proclaimed that the season had begun in good earnest.

"Don't forget," said Frank, "you dine with us to-night to meet Miss Louisa Richmond, a great heiress, as well as a great beauty. Her mother, a wealthy American, married General Richmond's son, and this is the only child of the marriage."

"I hope, my dear fellow, you have no designs on my freedom at this early stage of my career?" laughed Bobby.

"Well, you never know. Anyway, she will interest you, whether you fall in love with her or not. You can tell her your experiences as a cabman; she is American enough to enjoy anything 'freakish'."

Sir Robert had a happy knack in life of getting his own way, and the golden key seldom failed to make his whims feasible.

Having adopted the cabman's coat and cap under cover of the shelter, and being personally known to the motor car driver, it was no very difficult matter to accomplish his object.

As he waited for Frank to appear, a tall, girlish figure, dressed in a graceful gown of palest mauve, suddenly stepped into his cab. With a thrill of unexpected excitement Bobby bent forward to ask her destination. Just for a moment their eyes met, and he noted the baffling light and mystery beneath her long lashes. Never before had he seen a face that so entirely bewitched him. It sparkled like a sunbeam, yet the mouth and chin were just a trifle proud. The tilt of the head might have been called haughty, but for the dimple in the cheek. He admired the long neck in its well-fitting lace collar, round which the gleam of amethysts shone, the curling brown hair in tender little puffs beneath the brim of a picture hat, every detail of dainty toilette, every pearl of nature's setting, flashed upon him like a revelation. He laughed inwardly to think that Frank could suspect him of falling in love with Louisa Richmond. Here was the one face and form in the world for him, his ideal of womanhood. Only for a moment could his hurried glance appreciate her daintiness and charm. In a low, pretty voice she gave her orders, and he was obliged to return to the driver's seat. A glorious sense of exhilaration seized him at the thought that he and the fair stranger were alone in the same vehicle. He liked the sensation of being of use to her, and blushed at the memory that she would hand him money when the drive ended. He was trying to divine some scheme by which he could find out her name, or possibly avoid accepting payment. She certainly seemed a busy young person, for he drove her to numerous shops and addresses, where she speedily transacted her affairs. He was not slow to note the grace with which she stepped from the car, and the curious glances of pedestrians as they followed the radiant figure with their eyes. Finally she alighted at a white house in a fashionable locality,

and, telling him to wait, vanished through a green door. He longed to follow her, and know what drew her to that particular house. He began to feel jealous of the inmates, to picture events which might be taking place under the roof. He watched the windows, but caught no sign of the mauve hat. At first the novelty of his position made the waiting bearable, but as time dragged on he became impatient.

"I'll give it three-quarters of an hour, and not a moment longer," he decided.

He tried to pass the time by conjuring up a vision of his fair passenger. Her soft, clear skin, her tall, slender figure, and exquisitely modelled throat, the whole type of quiet, refined elegance, appealed strongly to his senses. He was impatient to hear his voice again, to be whirling her once more through the crowded streets. When the allotted time had elapsed, he rang the bell, and also knocked peremptorily. A man-servant answered the summons.

"Would you ask the young lady I drove here how long she will be, as I have another engagement?"

Sir Robert involuntarily addressed the footman in the tone of one accustomed to respect.

"Do you mean the lady in mauve?"

"Yes."

"She left the house more than a quarter of an hour ago; asked me to let her out through the gate at the back, as it was a short cut to her house."

Sir Robert listened in dumb amazement.

How was it possible that a young and beautiful woman, with such an air of cultivation, with that soft voice and graceful manner, could stoop to such a mean action? He recalled his horror of accepting her money, and smiled bitterly to himself to think how he had been tricked.

Making no remark to his informant, Sir Robert turned away, and opening the door of the cab glowered in, to see if by chance his passenger had left anything. Something bright on the seat caught his eye. He picked up a small gold bangle, with a single violet in deep purple enamel inlaid on the surface. He held it a moment, with a strange sensation knocking at his heart. If only her face and manner had impressed him less, he could have laughed over the ridiculous ending to his adventure. He decided to keep the bangle, and never rest until he should restore it to her with his own hands.

Driving swiftly back to the stand, he delivered the car to its lawful owner, and returned to his hotel in an exceedingly grey humour. He determined to say nothing to Frank of his experience with the mauve lady.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Richardson, who were staying in the same hotel, wore an expression of marked amusement as they greeted him that evening, a few minutes before their dinner hour. Already several guests had mustered in the private sitting-room, but none of them were conspicuous for any great beauty, such as his friend attributed to Miss Louisa Richmond.

His host and hostess eagerly questioned him as to the result of his morning's escapade. Sir Robert appeared disinclined to speak of the matter.

"Not much fun in it! Altogether a silly affair," he replied, quickly changing the subject.

"We are waiting for Mrs. and Miss Richmond," Frank remarked to an elderly titled dowager, working a restless, vigorous fan.

"Such a charming girl," she murmured. "I am going to ask her to join our Ascot party."

Even as she spoke the door opened—Mrs. Richmond and her daughter were announced.

A tall, glistening figure followed in the wake of an aristocratic grey-haired lady. A silver-robed girl, with nut-brown hair, wearing a huge bunch of violets clasped at her breast by a wonderful enamel brooch, representing a single violet, with diamond dew-drops on its leaves. Sir Robert caught his breath, he felt the hot blood mounting to his temples, and drew back to postpone the introduction, in order to regain his self-possession.

Suddenly life was full of interest and mystery, for there stood the woman who had dealt him that severe blow of disillusionment—the mauve lady of the drive, the heiress of a rich American mother. In the shimmer of her white and silver garments, she looked even sweeter and more winning than when she entered the hired conveyance of the morning.

Would she recognise him? He asked himself the question nervously, as Frank Richardson turned to murmur words of introduction.

Miss Richmond smiled divinely; it was evident no qualms of conscience, no uneasy sense of having seen his face before, clouded her mind. He began to wonder if this could be the old story of a double, but while the thought darted to his brain, his eye fell on a bangle she wore on her left wrist, the exact duplicate of the one he held in his possession.

They had only time to exchange a few remarks, before he found himself sitting next to her at the dinner table; then she had plenty to say in her musically low voice. Curiosity and mistrust rankled in his breast, combined with an unconquerable admiration for her physical attractions.

Momentarily he dreaded lest his escapade as a motor-cab driver should be alluded to, but fortunately his manner earlier in the evening prevented the subject being mentioned again.

"I have been noticing that pretty bangle of yours," he said, with an effort to appear casual. "You seem very fond of violets."

"My favourite flower as well as my favourite colour," she said. "I nearly always wear violets. I had a pair of these bangles. I call them my mascots—they were given to me for luck."

"And where is the other?"

"That is just what I want to know. I lost it to-day. I only hope it may be found by some honest person."

Sir Robert could hardly veil a sneer at the word from her lips.

"There are so few honest people in London," he replied.

"Oh, don't say that." A pained expression stole into her eyes, and she accompanied the words with an appealing gesture.

"But surely you know it is true. Where do you think you dropped the bracelet? What have you been doing to-day?"

"I went to a house in Hanson Street, to consult a fortune-teller; perhaps it may be found in her room."

He thought of the white house in Hanson Street, at the door of which he had waited so patiently. She smiled to herself, evidently at the remembrance of something that had happened within.

"Did the fortune-teller give you satisfaction?"

"Yes, indeed. A perfectly ideal future. I wish you would go to her—ask for Madame Farr. I am sure she would be delighted to receive you to-morrow. I'll ring her up on the telephone to say you are coming."

Now, Sir Robert held fortune-tellers in high disdain, but the thought of a conversation with Madame Farr appealed to him. From her he might glean some clue to the mystery of Louisa Richmond's conduct, and for the time being he determined not to identify himself with the cabman this heiress had so skilfully tricked. The bracelet should be held over for a day or two at least. He wondered not a little that Miss Richmond dared communicate with Madame Farr, at whose door an ordinary cabman would have made much disturbance, if left unpaid.

"Thank you," he said simply. "Do you think she would receive me between half-past twelve and one?"

"I will make the appointment, and I hope she will give you as nice a character as she gave me."

He could not help noticing how frequently the spirit of fun bubbled up in Louisa, now dancing in her eyes, now escaping in some little plaisanterie, the very mind of appeal to his own, but for the grave knowledge of what she really was. Despite everything, he became her shadow for the evening. The bewildering beauty of the girl lured him on to the mild indiscretion of friendliness. He determined that after to-night he would try never to see her again. It would be easy to obtain her address from the Richardsons, and return the bangle with a note of explanation. He pictured how the soft cheek would flush when she read the few guarded words, revealing the delicate situation. At least, he could promise never to betray her, though, in all fairness, he thought he might ask why, with her wealth, she should wish to trick a poor man working for his living.

"We are sure to meet again," she said, as she bade him good-night. "Mother and I have only

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