

EVEN she had her gentle little vanities.

One was that she liked to be called "Mam'selle," although

I am certain that her dainty, shabby little foot had never touched French territory, and her knowledge of the French language was so limited that it was absolutely meagre.

She was what I might call an Educational Jobber in our little town, for besides teaching music, she instructed those who applied to her in almost anything they wished to learn, until a more competent teacher could be secured. Then she was cast aside quite as a matter of course; many of those who had employed her even made an apology for having done so, and blatantly denied any possible benefit which might have resulted from her training.

"Dora sketches quite nicely," one mother would compliment another. "Has she had any instruction?"

"Oh, no!" Dora's mother would reply. "I have not gone to the expense of having her properly taught. She has only had Mam'selle."

It might be Lucy with china painting, or Grace with tapestry; it might be Jack with wood carving, or Henry with elocution; they had had no instruction—they had had only Mam'selle.

We "had" her. At her knee we learned our A B C's, progressing through the three R's, drawing, music, needle work to domestic science, and even home nursing. There has scarcely been a day since I can remember that has not brought a gentle tap at our great knocker and some one has not cried—"Oh, it's only Mam'selle."

There were five of us to educate, and Mother discovered ages ago that "a select finishing school for young ladies" was not at all compatible with the Marchmont income, so the best she could do was—Mam'selle. When writing to our relatives in the Old Country, we always called her "our governess."

She did not live at our house. She came at various hours and stayed varying lengths of time, according to our need of her. When any of us was seriously ill, she hardly went home at all, but nursed us back to health and ingratitudes, as is the way with children; and I am certain that she was never paid for her extra service. As I look back now, it seems as though people were always anxious that some one else should do the right thing by Mam'selle; it never occurred to them to do the right thing themselves.

I remember Dad once took her to task for getting up at five o'clock to give writing lessons to a labourer.

"And is the fellow paying you adequately?" Dad stormed. "Five o'clock! What will the working classes be demanding next?"

"He is paying what I ask," she evaded, growing very pink.

Even Mother was roused to protest. Mother did not talk much to her or to us at the table. Her idea of maintaining discipline and upholding the Marchmont dignity was to ignore the children and their governess as much as possible. But on this occasion, she addressed Mam'selle directly.

"Does that mean he is not paying you at all?" she demanded. "Perfectly preposterous!"

"Oh, no!" said Mam'selle, softly. "I feel that it is a privilege to help him. You see, there is a girl whose love he is anxious to win, and his ignorance alone stands in the way. If you could see how hard he works and with what sincerity—it is as though her face were before him all the while, goading him to greater efforts."

We older children giggled. Mam'selle in a sentimental mood always convulsed us. Often, when the days were drawing to a close, we would urge her to sing to us; we clustered in a dim corner and shook with derisive laughter while her weak, thin voice played with the words, "When Other Lips," and "In the Gloaming."

SHE would sing only at twilight—another of her little vanities—making, as she must have known, a less inharmonious figure then than at any other time. She was perfectly oblivious to us and our sniggering. Her eyes rested upon us unseeing, like those of a person in a trance, for she was quite withdrawn from the Present, and we had no place in the Past, into which she gazed with eyes dimmed by tears. We were always thankful for the time between the end of a song and her return to consciousness of her surroundings, for while she was travelling the gray spaces which separated Then from Now, we were composing ourselves and preparing to—hypocritically—thank her.

Ever since I can remember, Mam'selle has spent Christmas with us. She usually came early on the morning of the twenty-fourth and stayed until late on the twenty-sixth, helping Mother during the exciting Prologue to Christmas Day and taking the burden of the tiresome Epilogue upon her own shoulders. If it had occurred to us, I suppose we should have helped her put away the extra linen and china, the ornaments and decorations which were

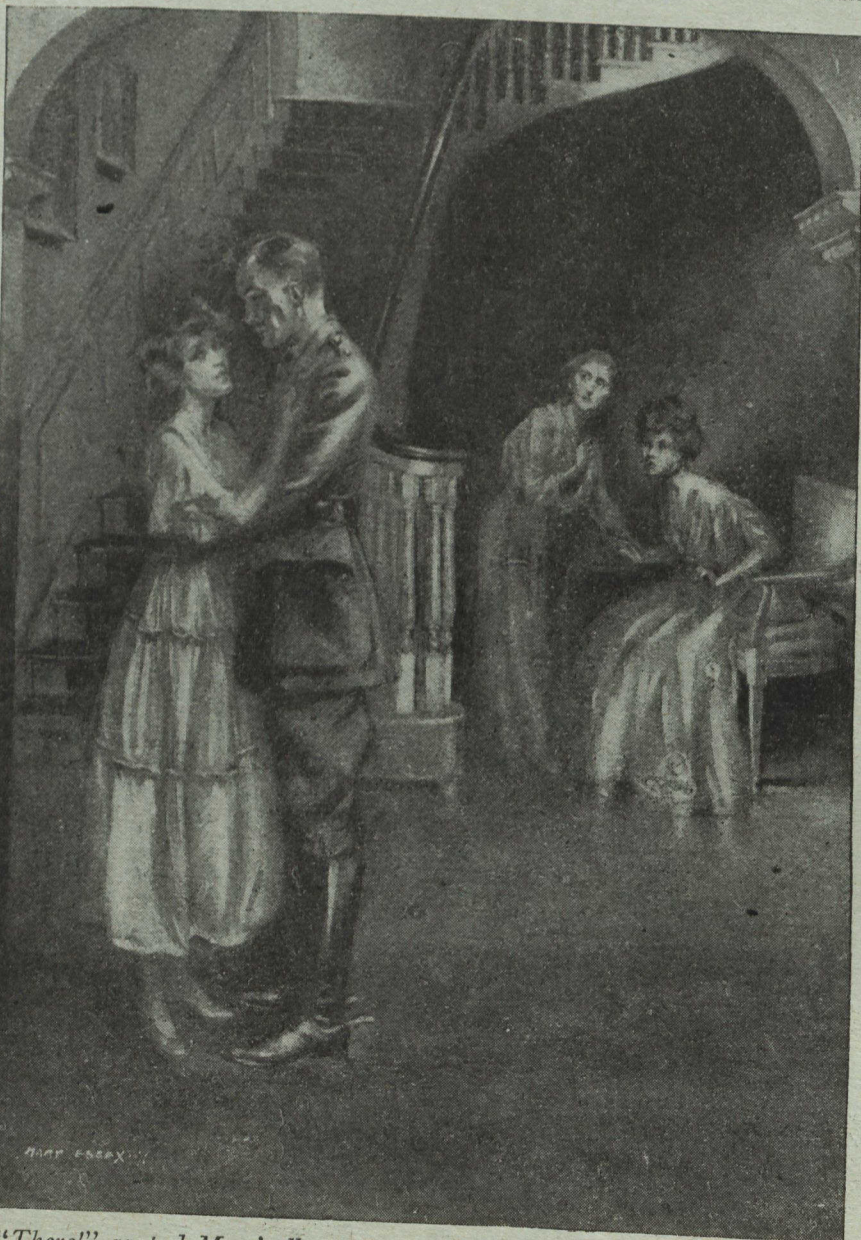
A Christmas Story MAM'SELLE By MADGE MACBETH

Illustrated by
MARY ESSEX

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this story because I believe that every woman has a "Mam'selle" in her life, and Christmas is a good time to hunt her out. I also believe, with Walpole, that it is not life that counts—it is the courage we put into it; and there is nothing which requires more courage than the forgiving of our ill-doers and the purging of our hearts of bitterness. Perhaps you do not think of Christmas in a serious vein. Then you will not like my little story.

Madge Macbeth



"There!" gasped Mam'selle, "can you equal the cool effrontery of that!"

paraded on that occasion; we should have helped put furniture in place and take up the linen carpet which was always spread down in the drawing-room for our holiday dance. But considering that we did not, it is curious how we came to look upon these three days as days of glittering brightness in Mam'selle's life, and we considered ourselves as dispensers of a virtuous Christmas Spirit.

Only last year I began to see Mam'selle in a new light, and now it has grown so dazzlingly bright, that it seems strange the rest cannot see it, too. Yet they do not, and my lips are sealed; I may not point it out to them as one would point to a beautiful star, or a rainbow, or a sunset, or any other beautiful thing in Nature, and say:

"Look, all you poor, blind, stupid people! This is the real light—you are seeing only the reflection!"

It was Christmas Eve a year ago. There had been some discussion as to whether we should ask Mam'selle. Alice and Maude were in France nursing, Laura was in Gallipoli, I was twenty-nine, and our baby, Honoria, was eighteen. What excuse had we for Christmas festivities?

"It would be such a relief," I remember Mother said, "to have no one to consider but one's self. We need not feel under obligation to do any entertaining this year, and Mam'selle can go somewhere else. The War offers compensations. Do let us seize them."

"No dance?" echoed Honoria in dismay. "And Quebec will be full of soldiers."

"Let some one else give a Christmas Dance," said Mother. "We have done our share."

"But," ventured Father mildly, "we do no other sort of entertaining, my dear. 'Noblesse oblige,' you know. Why not convert it into some kind of a shower?"

The idea rather appealed to Mother, and she grudgingly gave in. The invitations were issued as usual, except that the words "Cigarette Shower" occupied one corner. Mam'selle printed the words.

She came to the house, as was her custom, early in the morning of the day before Christmas, carrying a small hand-bag which contained her simple needs and the gifts she never failed to distribute amongst us. Magic gifts they were, looking so insignificant as they lay beside the others and proving so indispensable! There was the rubber-lined sponge bag she gave Maude and for which she received but careless thanks; yet to-day my sister can't imagine what she would have done without it in the field hospitals. And Alice has a "hussif" made by Mam'selle's hands, for which she would not exchange her dearest possession, although I blush to remember the day she offered it to me for thirty cents!

And I blush all the way into my soul when I think of the things we used to give her—any odds and ends for which we had no use, hideous things we did not want around the house, presents made us by people who held only to the letter of Christmas, and who knew nothing of the Spirit. All these we, and others like us, passed on to Mam'selle, who accepted them so graciously, reading into them the Spirit of Love which we should have put there.

AND when, confronted by some appalling monstrosity, words of conscientious praise failed her, she would murmur:

"For me? Oh, dearie, how kind of you! It is so eminently—er—suitable!"

She washed the china, got out the decorations, helped Mother tie up her gifts, and cut, buttered, iced, baked, jellied, and whipped all the day. She set the table for dinner and hooked us up, before getting into the little gray gown which was as much a part of our Christmas as was the turkey.

It was not a pretty, silver gray, like the leaves of a poplar tree, nor was it the colour of a dove's breast. It was an utility gray, lending itself to sponging and cleaning, turning and re-modelling in a manner just short of miraculous. It was the least gay little dinner dress that one could imagine, and it would have been quite sombre but for a brooch—a pulsing fire opal which Mam'selle always wore with it, and which glowed hotly from the lace in the front of her corsage.

There was a forced note about our levity during the early part of the dinner. Mother was plainly bored; Dad consequently felt uncomfortable; Honoria was disappointed in the two officers we had invited and who were frankly more interested in the meal than in her. We all missed our girls tremendously, and we missed boys with whom we had grown up, boys who were eating bully beef and hard tack "Somewhere in France" that we might still have plum pudding and turkey!

Dinner was perhaps half over when a great clatter at the front door set every one's nerves jumping. "A very impatient guest," suggested Mam'selle.

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