

Messiter's Sister

The Strange Experience of a London Editor with a Psychic Contributor.

By HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL, Author of "Her Son," "A Face of Clay," and "The Hill."

I.
"MISS MESSITER wishes to see you, sir."
"Miss—Messiter?"
"The sister of the late Mr. John Messiter, sir. She asked me to mention that."
"Oh! Show Miss Messiter in."

"Yes, sir."
The office boy vanished. Adrian Steele stared at the ceiling. In his mind's eye was John Messiter, that queer youth whose wares he, as literary purveyor, had offered to the British public. In more senses than one young Messiter had proved an unknown quantity. And now his sister was coming upstairs to ask, perhaps, for money, or help of some sort. Adrian wondered what Messiter's sister would be like.

When he looked down she was standing before him. So quietly had she entered, that he was unaware how long she had stood in front of his desk. He rose, offering a chair and an apology. "I beg your pardon for startling you," she said.

He flushed slightly, for she had startled him—an experience so novel as to be embarrassing. He withdrew his eyes from a face which remained vividly impressed upon his mind. As he had expected, Messiter's sister was no common type. She presented the always remarkable contrast of soft light hair surmounting dark eyes and brows and lashes. Adrian often boasted that he could read faces, but this face was undecipherable. One might hazard a guess that the owner of it had suffered either in mind or body, possibly in both. Serenity informed the mouth; the voice had soothing inflections; no trepidation betrayed the suppliant. At the same time, Messiter's sister wore shabby clothes, although they became her vastly well. Her gloves were darned; her veil had been carefully mended; her hat could not have cost more than a few shillings.

"What can I do for you?" said Adrian.

"I have brought a manuscript."

"Of your own?" Unconsciously he assumed the editorial tone.

"Of my brother's."

"I should like to see it very much. Your brother, Miss Messiter, did good work; it had quality. Had he lived, he would have made an enduring mark." She bowed quietly, holding out the manuscript, which Adrian took. Then, with a certain hesitation alien to him, he said:

"Have you offered this elsewhere?"

"No; he wished me to offer it to you first."

"But—pray pardon me!—Mr. Messiter died more than six months ago, and—"

"I could not bring it before."

Adrian turned over the first page. The title of the manuscript, a short story, arrested his attention. Messiter had the knack of finding arresting titles. He turned another page. Yes, yes; this was a piece of Messiter's work—he recognised the brand immediately.

"I'm sure to want this," he said pleasantly. "And in view of the fact that this is your brother's last piece of work—"

"There may be more," said Miss Messiter, displaying for the first time an unmistakable nervousness.

"Indeed! You have come upon a bundle of manuscripts—eh? I hope you will give us the first refusal of all of them." Again his tone became professional. "Would you let me see everything? I'm not prepared to say now what terms we could offer, but if you will trust me—"

"John said I could trust you."

Adrian's keen eyes softened.

"I'll read this at once and write to

you. Will you send me the other manuscripts?"

"I'll bring them—later. Could you—would you"—her voice for the first time quavered—"p—p—pay for this on acceptance? It's not customary, I know, but—"

"You shall have a cheque to-morrow if it proves available. It is almost sure to prove available."

Miss Messiter gave an address in Bloomsbury, and then took her leave. Adrian had a thousand matters clamouring for attention, but he fell into a reverie, staring at the manuscript on his desk. Presently, he picked it up and read it through with ever-increasing interest. He told himself it was the best thing poor Messiter had done—a sort of swan song. Yet the sister had spoken of others. He seized his pen, filled in a cheque, and despatched it by a special messenger.

"She might be in distress," he murmured. "If Messiter knew that—"

With an effort he dismissed from his mind such speculation. Men said that Adrian was hard-headed; hard-hearted also, added the women. Undeniably, he had proved himself a shrewd and able editor of a famous magazine. Life seemed to him a simple affair, because so far he had made no serious mistakes in it. He had worked; he made others work. He had educated a younger brother, who was doing well at the bar. His friends were workers; men with definite aims and ambitions, who measured success with the world's footrule. For the rest, he was generous, honourable, fearless, and an uncompromising enemy of humbug.

During the next twenty-four hours his thoughts turned with exasperating frequency to Messiter and Messiter's sister. He was sensible of an inordinate curiosity. He had talked with Messiter several times without getting below the surface. The man whom he had wished to know more intimately, revealed himself in his work as an Idealist. His stories, for instance, as Adrian had pointed out in a short obituary notice, were distinguished by an aerial delicacy of tint and texture. Messiter soared—that was the word—into an empyrean beyond the clouds. Adrian had never left the solid earth.

Miss Messiter acknowledged the receipt of the

cheque, but she made no mention of her brother's other MSS.—an omission which Adrian resented. When the proof was sent to her, the editor asked for an interview; the proof, carefully revised, reached him next day in an envelope which contained nothing else. Adrian told himself that he felt "cheap." None the less, in the interests of his magazine, he must try to secure Messiter's unpublished stuff. He called upon the sister at the address she gave him. Miss Messiter, as a slattern of a servant informed him, was "not at home." The hussy had her tongue in her cheek and an insolent grin on her face. Adrian walked away thoroughly out of temper, because hitherto he had run on no fools' errands.

The story, when published, challenged controversy. A famous divine wrote to "The Times." A man of science answered his letter; other letters followed. But, inevitably, interest in Messiter and in Messiter's ideas waned and vanished.

Six months passed. And then, one afternoon, Messiter's sister called again at the office. Adrian greeted her coldly. Indeed, he told himself that only a strong sense of duty to his employer justified him in seeing a woman who had treated him so cavalierly. Her appearance, however, thawed resentment. The poor lady looked thin and ill; the lines upon her face had perceptibly deepened.

"Why did you not come before?" said Adrian.

"I had nothing to bring," she faltered.

As Adrian was staring at her, she held out another manuscript about the same size as the first. Adrian took it with a smile, curiously compounded of derision, amusement, and sympathy.

"They kept it six months, did they—and then returned it?"

Miss Messiter raised a pair of large, perplexed eyes to his.

"Who kept it?" she demanded.

"Confess," he said, lightly, "that you sent this to some other editor. I dare say you thought our cheque was not quite large enough—eh? But it was larger than any your brother received in his lifetime—"

"The cheque was for a sum much larger than I expected," she interrupted. "I have not sent this anywhere. I brought it to you first."

Adrian tried—very unsuccessfully—to conceal his impatience.

"My dear Miss Messiter, I beg pardon, but, on my soul, your—your procrastination is no ha'penny matter. You must know that your brother's work excited a demand for more—a demand only sustained and increased by supply. That is the A B C of success in letters. Commercially speaking, this manuscript—which, mark you, I've not looked at yet—would have been worth just twice as much to us four months ago. Be frank with me. Why did you not answer my notes?"

"I had nothing to bring," she repeated, in the same faltering tone.

"This must have been in your possession then?"

She made no answer.

"I regret that I saw so little of your brother. What I did see interested me profoundly. He told you to trust me. Why do you not do so?"

"I—I couldn't. You musn't ask me questions."

Adrian bit his lip. The face opposite was piteous in its expression of entreaty; and yet who could doubt that this woman needed a friend? Who could resist the temptation to help a creature so young, so forlorn, so unfitted to withstand the buffets of the world? Adrian walked to the window. When he turned his voice



"I am sure to want this," he said pleasantly.

Drawn by C. W. Jefferys.

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