

THE DELUDED FEMALE

An Amusing Story of Mr. Redhorn and a Charming Widow

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THE little village of Fairport-on-Clyde was in a ferment of speculative gossip. Since the taking fire of the local police constable's chimney (which event had, appropriately enough, coincided with the local celebrations of the great Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee) nothing had occurred to stir to such an extent popular excitement. The arrest of a tinker on a charge of bigamy, the stranding of a dead whale, two parliamentary elections, the marriage of the minister, the long-continued fog of the year 1905, the week-end visit of a golf champion in the following year, the birth of a three-legged chicken—these events had in their times given rise to considerable and even heated discussions; but never during the last decade had tongues wagged as they were wagging now.

The Grey House had found a tenant at last! Perhaps one ought to say that a tenant had found the Grey House; but for years the latter, with its many blank windows and big, neglected garden, had seemed to be looking for the former. The Grey House was a good house—so everybody in Fairport declared—but it would take much money to put it in habitable condition. And Fairport was wondering, among other things, how far Fairport would benefit materially. The baker, the butcher, and Peter Danks, the fish merchant (he objected to "monger"), were inclined to be optimistic, whereas the grocer shook his head and quoted numerous instances of "swells" getting all their provisions from the city in order to save sevenpence-ha-penny or thereabouts; and whilst the joiner and plumber professed themselves hopeful, Joseph Redhorn, the painter, expressed the gloomy opinion that all Fairport would get out of the job would be the profits on board and lodging supplied to the small army of tradesmen certain to be imported from Greenock or Glasgow.

"Na, na," said Mr. Redhorn, on being rallied by some of his neighbours, "it's no' dypepsia this time. It's a presentiment, or forebodin', which ye'll see realised in due season."

"He's been at the dictionary again," the piermaster flippantly remarked, winking at the other members of the group, and Mr. Redhorn smiled sadly—nature had provided him with a notably melancholy visage—but not ill-humouredly.

"But," put in the slater, whose hopes fluctuated hourly, "but d'ye no' think it's a guid sign that she's comin, to stop in Clover Cottage till the big hoose is ready for her? It looks as if she was for superintendin' the wark hersel' instead o' puttin' it into the charge o' some o' thae big firms in the toon. Eh?"

"To me," replied the painter, "that has nae signefiance whatsoever. The probabeelity is that she's wantin' to get to Fairport as quick as possible for her health's sake."

"Her health's fine," said the butcher. "When she was here thon day last week, I jist said to the wife: 'Whaever she is, she's nae vegetarian.'"

"She didna appear to me to be a great eater," the plumber observed, and spat gracefully over the pier rail.

"That's the advantage o' a meat diet," returned the butcher, who weighed fifteen stone eleven pounds, warming to his pet subject of debate. "A curious thing about vegetarians is that they seem to keep on hankerin' for meat. They ca' some o' their messes by meat names. Ye can get vegetarian steaks an' chops. I yinst tasted a chop . . . I think it was made o' beans an' turmits an' nits an' ile."

"Spare ma feelin's, man!" cried the painter. "Has ony o' ye had ony conversation wi' the ledgy?"

"I had," said the piermaster. "An' rale nice-spoken she was. We was arrangin' about her luggage for when she arrives on Thursday. She's comin' wi' the three-ten boat. It's a peety she's a weedow, but she'll maybe no' be lang in that condection."

"She's a lovely creature," observed the young baker, who wrote poems modelled on those of Burns. "A lovely creature!" he repeated, unabashed by the snigger of Mr. Danks.

"We'll ha'e to tell yer maw about this," said the piermaster. "Yer rolls ha'ena been up to the mark the last few mornin's, ma lad."

At this juncture the postmaster joined the group.

"Still at it!" he cried jocularly. "Still discussin' the prospects o' future wark an' neglectin' the present opportunities—as Ridhorn might say.

Weel, I've got a bit news for ye. Did ye notice a young man wi' a bicycle, a wee while back? He was sendin' a telegram, an' him an' me got on the crack. He gi'ed me some information about Mrs. Methven."

"Did he? What did he tell ye?"

The postmaster enjoyed the curiosity which he had aroused.

"Hurry up, man! Tell us what he said. What is she? Whaur does she come frae?" came a shower of questions.

"She comes frae some place near Edinburgh," he said at last. "She's been a weedow five year. She writes books, but pits a different name on them."

The faces of several of the men fell.

"Writes books!" said one. "I doot that'll no' bring siller to Fairport."

"It'll maybe tak' siller oot o' Fairport," said another. "D'ye mind the man that rented Edengrove? He wrote books. You'll mind him, Ridhorn?"

"Five pound three an' nine," the painter replied with a reminiscent sigh.

"Aw, ye needna be feart about the cash in this case," the postmaster resumed. "She's a weedow wi' a fortune. She writes nouvelles for fun. But that's no' a' about her."

"What else is there?"

"She's been in jile," said the postmaster. He waited till the exclamations were exhausted, and added: "She's a female suffragette, if ye ken what that means."

"Oh, criftens!" murmured Mr. Redhorn, while the others expressed themselves more loudly in varied fashion. "Ma worst forebodin' is aboot to be realised!"

"Havers, Ridhorn!" said the piermaster. "Ye never foreboded onything like this. Ye never kent she had been in jile. Dinna pretend ye did. An' what difference is it gaun to mak' to Fairport?"

"Difference!" cried Mr. Redhorn in his high voice. "I tell ye," he said solemnly, "it'll shake Fairport to its vera foundations!" And without another word he turned his back on the astounded group and walked rapidly away.

HAD Mrs. Methven been a criminal of the deepest dye, her arrival at Fairport, on that fine spring afternoon, could scarcely have attracted more attention. The attention, however, was of a furtive sort, and might have escaped the notice of a less acute person than Mrs. Methven.

"They evidently regard us as wild beasts," she remarked to her companion, an elderly lady, as they passed down the pier; and to the piermaster, a minute later, she said sweetly: "I am sorry to see you have so many unemployed in Fairport." Whereat the piermaster grinned sheepishly and dropped a threepenny bit.

The local cab was in attendance, and when Mrs. Methven and her companion had driven off, down the loch, to Clover Cottage, at which two maids and the luggage had arrived by the morning steamer, the piermaster took care to repeat the observation just made to him. Which created considerable indignation among those who had peered from windows, spied from doorways, peeped round corners, or pretended to be discussing matters of supreme importance in the vicinity of the pier.

"We wasna lookin' at her," they declared almost unanimously; the chief exceptions being the butcher who had reassured himself as to the absence of any striking indications of vegetarianism; and the young baker who, having reasserted his opinion that she was "a lovely creature," rushed into his shop and committed sundry lines to the blank side of a paper bag what time twelve two-penny mutton pies in the oven below were rendered unsaleable.

Amongst the few inhabitants of Fairport who did not witness the arrival was Mr. Joseph Redhorn. At three o'clock (prompt) he had resumed his work upon a garden railing, a furlong from the pier, up the loch. He was determined to behave precisely as if nothing had happened—or, to be exact, was happening. But while he refused to look at the steamer as it approached the pier, he could not help hearing the chunk of paddles; and it must be recorded that he dealt with several of the ornamental tops of the railing less methodically than was his wont.

At twenty-five minutes past three his youthful

apprentice joined him, panting, and, after a glance at him, took up pot and brush.

"What like time is this to come back to yer wark?" Mr. Redhorn demanded sternly. "If ye canna eat yer dinner in an' oor, ye best get oot o' the pentin' business—an' become an artist. I'm no' gaun to pander to yer luxurious notions—mind that!"

Willie was not unused to reproofs, but the severity of his master's tone on this occasion fairly took him aback.

"I wasna eatin' a' the time," he replied; "I—I was watchin' the boat comin' in."

"Ha'e ye never seen a boat comin' in afore? The boy dipped his brush and slopped it on a rail.

"See here, ma lad," Mr. Redhorn cried, "pent costs money, an' the grass is green enough."

Thus admonished the boy painted carefully for the space of five minutes. He was fond of his master, and, after the feeling of resentment had passed, put down the latter's crustiness to the score of dyspepsia, for which, by the way, Mr. Redhorn was famed in Fairport, and which seemed to the boy a much superior complaint to the more popular one of indigestion. As a matter of fact, the painter was year by year becoming more and more immune from the trouble, but in a place like Fairport reputations, however quickly they may be made, are not lost in a day. At the end of the five minutes Willie very casually remarked—

"I seen her."

"Did ye?—what are ye talkin' aboot laddie?" The second query came fast on the heels of the first.

"The ledgy was in jile."

Mr. Redhorn frowned, but said nothing.

"Ye should ha'e been at the pier," said Willie.

"I had neither the curiosity nor the ambection to see the deluded female ye refer to," Mr. Redhorn coldly returned. "Pey attention to yer pentin', or ye'll never live to taste the sweets o' success."

"What's a deluded female, Maister Ridhorn?"

"I'm tellin' ye to pey attention to yer pentin'."

"I'm peyin' attention! . . . What for did she get the jile?"

"Haud yer tongue, laddie!"

For awhile the work went on in silence. At last—

"D'ye think we'll get the job at the Grey Hoose?" inquired the apprentice.

"That," said Mr. Redhorn, "is a question, but it's no' the question I wud ask—the burnin' question, to quote a famous poet—"

"What's burnin' aboot it?"

Mr. Redhorn waved aside the impertinence with his brush.

"The burnin' question is," he said ponderously, "whether I could accep' the job at the Grey Hoose, supposin' it was offered to me on a silver salver by a flunkey on his bended knees. That's the burnin' question!"

"D'ye think she wudna pay her accout?" Willie asked after a short pause.

"Criftens!" exclaimed the painter impatiently, "did ye never hear tell o' principles—high moral principles?"

"Ay, I've heard ye gassin'—I mean speakin'—aboot them, but I didna ken what ye was drivin' at. What wey wud ye no' tak' the job, if ye got the chance?"

Mr. Redhorn sighed. "I doot ye're ower young to understaun', Willie," he said; "but when ye're as auld as me ye'll ken what principles is—an' likewise hoo easy it is to part wi' them for cash. There's lots o' talk nooadays aboot business principles, but to mony a man, includin' masel', alas! the first business principle seems to consist in no' permittin' ony principles to interfere wi' business. There ha'e been times when I've worked for folk that I could ha'e kicked with supreme satisfaction—if ma moral principles had got the better o' me. But ye see, they didna. I mind paperin' a room in a certain man's hoose, an' hearin' him ill-treatin' his wife in the next room. But I completed the job, an' was gled to get the cash later on—"

"I daur say ye was," said Willie, who was finding the conversation rather dull. "Ye wud ha'e wantit to kick him if he hadna peyed ye."

"Ay," continued the painter, ignoring the interruption, "I've aye sold ma principles for cash—an' whiles made a bad debt . . . But think what a gran' thing it wud be to refuse the Grey Hoose job—I wudna be surprised if there was a couple o' hunner pound in it—on principle! What