

A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

(Continued.)

He came of a chivalrous line, and the blood of his ancestors flowed in his veins.

"Hang it all," he said to himself. "I can't muffle myself up and let that plucky little girl get wet to the skin. She looks like a drowned rat already."

The eldest son of a nobleman, good-looking, comfortably off, and possessing a voice and manner which had a peculiar fascination for women. Captain Falconer, during the years he had dangled about town, had been a good deal petted and run after. Mothers knew his worth, and married ladies counted it a feather in their caps for him to be seen in their train.

He was smiled on, fêted and encouraged, and exposed to numerous temptations.

But whatever his faults might be, he was a thorough gentleman, and when divested of the artificial veneer with which Society had coated him, a brave, honest, upright fellow. There was no especial reason why he should give up his waterproof to Maggie. Dozens of other men surrounded him, who looked indifferently at the dripping girl, and into whose heads it never entered to sacrifice themselves for her sake. If she got wet, she got wet, that had nothing to do with them.

But Keith Falconer was made of rather finer elements, and he could not see a woman suffer without offering every assistance in his power. Call him a fool, or Quixotic if you like, but this was the secret of his great social success, and why he was simply adored by the opposite sex.

Taking the white waterproof coat, which his groom tendered him, he went straight up to Maggie, and lifting his hat, as if she had been a young princess, said:

"Forgive me if I introduce myself to you, Miss Brotherton, as your mother's tenant, but you are getting most horribly wet, and I want you to oblige me by putting this on."

Maggie was very cold. Her lips were blue, her teeth chattered, and she was just beginning to feel the odious sensation of icy water slowly invading her innermost garments. But as she listened to this courteous and unexpected address, in spite of her illness the warm blood suddenly leapt in one hot wave of color to her cheeks.

It was a novel sensation, anybody wanting to give up a thing for her. She was not accustomed to it, and it roused a curious tumult of emotion in her girlish breast.

She glanced at him shyly with two, soft grey-green eyes of kittenish hue. "Thanks, you are very kind, but I—I'm afraid you mistake me for some one else."

"Indeed! Are you not a Miss Brotherton?"

"Yes; but I'm only Maggie."

"Only Maggie!" he exclaimed, struck by the unconscious pathos of her tone. "What difference does that make? Have you not as good a right to be considered as your sister?"

"I—I don't know. You see I'm never supposed to count."

"Do you mean because you're so young still, Miss Brotherton?"

"Perhaps; I'm not quite sure; but please don't call me Miss Brotherton. Nobody does."

"What am I to call you then?"

"Maggie. It's so much less formal, and I don't feel as if I could answer to Miss Brotherton."

"Well then, Maggie—since you give me leave to call you so—it distresses me to see you getting so wet."

"That's very funny."

"Why funny?" he retorted, a little piqued by the observation.

"Because nobody else cares twopence whether I'm soaked to the skin or not."

"Well, consider I am not like anybody else, and that I do care."

He lowered his voice persuasively, and it sounded very, very soft in Maggie's ears.

"Really, Captain Falconer," she said, with growing embarrassment, for, after all, she was only a child, who knew nothing of the world and its ways, "I'm quite used to it."

"Used to what?"

"The rain," ducking her head as she spoke, so as to allow a small stream to trickle from the brim of her hat to the ground.

"H'm! That's a shocking bad reason. No reason at all, in fact. Come, Maggie. I hope you and I may be friends, but I'm a very autocratic person, and I like to be obeyed. So put on this coat, there's a good girl, and don't make any more fuss."

She stared at him in astonishment, whilst an uncomfortable moisture, of which she felt heartily ashamed, rose to her eyes. Luckily the rain washed it away before he could possibly detect it, which was a mercy ever to be thankful for. It would have killed her with shame to let him see her crying like a baby, just because he had spoken a few kind words to her. What a miserable idiot she would have appeared.

"I—I don't wish to seem rude or ungrateful," she answered in a curiously subdued, and rather unsteady voice. "But really I can't put on your coat. It's—taking it from you."

"Won't you do me so very slight a favor?" he said, with the caressing look of his blue eyes which so many women had found dangerously compelling ere now. Maggie made no attempt to meet their gaze. A strange tremor passed through her frame, and all of a sudden her heart felt as if it were several sizes too large for her body.

Before she knew what she was about, she found herself struggling into

the sleeves of his mackintosh, whilst he leant forward in the saddle and helped her.

"There! Isn't that ever so much better?" he said cheerily.

"Yes, if you had a coat too, but it makes me feel so selfish."

"Indeed! Didn't I see you performing a similar act for your sister a short time ago?"

Maggie colored.

"Yes, but that's different."

"In what way?"

"Geraldine has a delicate chest and requires care."

"You may have one too for all you know, for you scarcely give your lungs fair play."

She laughed outright. A clear, merry laugh, good to hear in its freshness and joyousness.

"Not I. I am as strong as a horse. Woa, Poiecat," as the mare began to fidget, and kept throwing up her head impatiently. "Stand still if you can."

"That's hardly a lady's horse you're riding, is it?" he said.

"It depends on what you call a lady's horse," replied Maggie mischievously, for she was beginning to recover from those strange sensations that for a few seconds had made her feel so very unlike herself. "Most people consider when they have got some poor, worn-out, old screw in the stables that it is the very thing to mount their female belongings upon."

"You're mare isn't a screw," he responded with an amused smile, for this ugly little girl's chatter was infinitely fresh and artless, like a draught of pure water after high spiced wines. "She looks like a young 'un."

"That's what she is," said Maggie, whose tongue could wag fast enough whenever horse-flesh became the topic of conversation. "She's one of Jack's."

"Oh! indeed, and who might Jack be, pray?"

"Haven't you heard of Jack? But I forgot you're a stranger. He's my brother, the only one I've got, and—and" tremulously, "I miss him terribly."

"Are you and he such great friends then?"

"Oh! yes," and her face lit up in a way which somehow made Captain Falconer wish he had a sister to be as fond of him as Maggie evidently was of this brother of hers. "I can't tell how miserable I have been since Jack left. There's nobody to talk to."

"You have your sisters. Can't you talk to them?"

"Yes, but that's not the same thing. They don't care to lark about as Jack and I do."

"Oh! you lark, do you?" asked Captain Falconer, immensely amused.

"Yes, tremendously. We have no end of fun."

"And I suppose Master Jack teaches you to talk slang, eh! Maggie?"

Her little wet face turned scarlet at this reproof, good-humored as it was. She hung her head and made no reply. Only she wished perhaps for the first time in her innocent life, that she was more like what a well brought up young lady should be. The deficiencies of her manners and appearance were painfully borne in upon her.

"And where has Jack gone to?" enquired Captain Falconer, after a somewhat prolonged pause, sorry to have caused her so much distress, and resolving to guard against it in future.

"He went to Australia. He had some friends over there, and he said he might never get such a good opportunity of seeing the world again. He is coming back in a year, and as soon as the girls are all married, and have found good husbands, I'm to live with him as his housekeeper."

"And have you no thoughts of finding a husband also?" he asked, smiling broadly.

She made a grimace and shrugged her shoulders in a deprecating manner.

"No-o-o, I don't see what would be the use."

"Why not?"

"For a very simple reason. Because no one would have me."

"You seem to entertain a singularly modest opinion of yourself, Maggie."

"How is it possible for me to entertain any other? I'm ugly, and I know it. The girls are always telling me so, and even Jack, who loves me as dearly as I do him, says the same. It is absurd trying to ignore the truth because it is not pleasant. No, Geraldine, Lily and Rose are sure to marry, and perhaps even Matilda, but I never shall." And she looked him straight in the face, with a pair of honest, slightly wistful eyes.

Oddly enough he would have given a ten pound note to have been able to disprove the statement. Why, he could not tell, but that was his impulse. He had a kind of instinct that when the poor little soul spoke so openly of her ugliness it would have afforded her infinite comfort to find the point disputed. With nine women out of ten he would have had no hesitation in doing so, but there was a childish simplicity about the girl, accompanied by a rare straightforwardness, which rendered the slightest deviation from truth impossible. He thought her plain, and he could not frame his lips to assure her she was not. And yet the longer they conversed the less he considered it. Her absolute unconsciousness, humility and freedom from vanity had all the greater charm for him, because in his intercourse with women he had but seldom met with these qualities. He began to regard her more attentively. After all there was nothing repulsive about her ugliness, and that was the great point. You could sum her up in two words, plain but pleasant. Thus thinking, and with the recollection of his latest experiences still vivid in his mind, he said gravely:

"Don't trouble about your looks, Maggie. Beauty is not everything, and on the contrary often proves a fatal gift, which women abuse sadly; and many derive neither happiness nor profit from it."

"So they say," she retorted. "Yet every woman would like to possess