

MARCIA'S MADONNA.

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(Continued.)

WHAT aggravated him, too was the feeling that it was all his fault. He was conscious of the effort he was making to switch their errand observations off the conventional side tracks. A sense of dulness and vacuity in his head, of confusion and clumsiness in his speech, of awkwardness even in the disproval of his yellow boots which seemed to him uncommonly conspicuous and big and shapeless, was goading him to desperation. He began to think he would not mind Miss Evelyn half so much, for he could laugh with her even at himself, but this calm, imperturbable demi-goddess looking down at him from the inaccessible heights of her perfect self-possession made him feel small enough to withdraw through a chink in the window-screen—if he could contrive to get rid of his boots.

The ride to C— was never so short withal, and he was both glad and sorry when the station was called. He laid very avid hands upon Miss Marcia's furs, and adjusted them with an almost tender reverence. He wanted very much to say something which might extract an invitation to go and see her as before, but his social vocabulary had suffered a total eclipse and he could not think of a decent phrase. So he piloted her mutely through the darkness and confusion, consuming his own fumes in brave silence—like the well-equipped modern achievement that he was. When they were on the platform Miss Marcia looked uneasily around.

"I do not see anyone here to meet me!" she said a little indignantly.

"There may be someone farther up," he answered dryly.

The snow was still falling, and both their heads were bowed against the wind. They

had a goodly stretch between them and the waiting-room.

"I am glad we shall have white roofs for Christmas," the girl broke in after a moment's silence.

"Yes, white roofs are nice," Mr. Walton said down in his fur collar, and Miss Marcia laughed.

This was the last straw. Mr. Walton made a dive at her and pushed his gloved hand under her arm.

"Oh hang it, Marcia, this won't do!" he blurted out in a tone between a sob and a guffaw. "What is the matter? What has come between us? We were not like this before. You know we weren't."

"Well, unless Her Majesty's Parliament has made any change in you, Mr. Walton, I think we meet pretty much as we parted!" and she drew herself away and quickened her pace perceptibly. He winced in the darkness; her thrust told. But for that season in Parliament, he could have taken her up eagerly upon the old pleasant terms; he knew he could!

Before either of them spoke again, Marcia's father called to her from the shelter of the station-house. He was a sickly man who never went out of doors at night, and his daughter was amazed to see him.

"Why, papa, is this you?" she asked in astonishment, throwing her hands about his neck and kissing him with a sort of pathetic tenderness. Marcia's father having put his daughter aside, came towards Mr. Walton with a rather solemn mien.

"Mr. Walton," he said, "I have got to greet you with some unpleasant news. We have had a disastrous fire up in the town to-day, and you are one of the unlucky victims of it."

Mr. Walton shot a quick, curious glance at Marcia before he put the stern question: "Is it the office?"

"No," said Marcia's father, "it is your residence, and it is badly burned."