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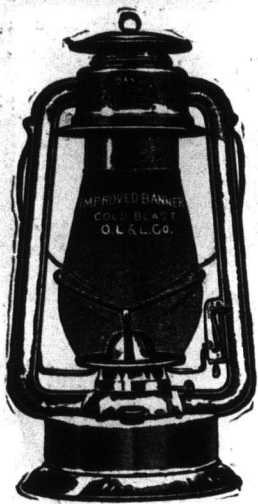
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"Her father would take Leigh into the firm and that would do both Leigh and the firm good."

"Leigh is determined to fight his own way up, and he'd never get along with her father. Wait a minute."

She nibbled the pencil thoughtfully, held up two pink fingers, then four, wrote something on the paper scratched it out and wrote it all over again. Finally she held the paper out to Freddy.

"There," she said, "that's it."

"All settled?" he inquired.

"Just as soon as I can get them under one roof so they can really get acquainted. I'm not going to have any love-making either, Freddy, I'm going to frown on it—so must you. I'm going to keep everybody busy—busy—and they will have to sneak on me. And they will sneak—well rather. They will know their minds, too, when they come back to town."

"Back to town?" he echoed.

"We're going down to Waverley for a real old-fashioned Christmas house party."

"Are we?" he asked.

"Ar'n't we?" she asked in return.

He consulted the cigar again.

"It isn't built for winter," he said.

"We'll freeze."

"All the better—" She stopped suddenly and reviewed the situation.

"Freddy, don't you see the possibilities?"

"Yes—of freezing."

"It will be awfully jolly. Log-fires going everywhere, and a real Christmas tree—we'll cut it ourselves. They must be kept busy you see, and allow no time for love-making. The almanac says there will be a moon, so if a kind Providence will send us snow—Freddy, are you with me?"

Freddy arose, bowed low over her hand with a courtly gesture, and pressed it to his lips.

"To the last ditch," he said.

Mrs. Freddy and her house party had arrived. She put her foot out of the carriage into an icy drizzle, and drew it back with an exclamation. Then she put it out again.

"Now, this is something like," said John as he came forward to help her. He slipped, slid a yard or two, stood perilously for one breathless instant on his left toe and righted himself with a jerk. "Real Christmas weather," he finished cheerfully.

"Glad you think so," said Marion, with a touch of sarcasm. She smiled upon the firm hand held out to her. "No thank you. I'll do it alone. It would be too ridiculous for us to go down together."

He extended the hand to Eleanor, and she allowed him to deposit her on the ground.

"I simply adore this weather," she exclaimed. "Do you know I actually have a pair of rubber boots!"

Mrs. Freddy threw a glance at her husband, with her head in the air as much as her uncertain footing permitted. She hoped with all her might John would take the hint. He did.

"Great!" said John. "We'll go tramping."

"Sliding, you mean," put in Sidney, who was making an undignified way to the door.

Mrs. Freddy glared at him suddenly, and as quickly recovered herself. Sidney didn't know. Of course not. And she had designs upon Sidney, too. Then she decided that the slippery walk of a country place in the middle of December was not the place for match-making.

An hour later she came down the stairs with a book under one arm and a roll of music under the other.

"Not really going?" she exclaimed to John and Eleanor, who really were.

"You haven't any objection?" said Eleanor, surveying the boots with effusive pride.

Mrs. Freddy took fright, and tacked beautifully.

"Take good care of yourselves," she said. She dismissed them with a look that was a benediction.

Freddy stood gallantly aside to let her sweep majestically past into the sitting-room, where after a hasty look around, she sneaked the book in among several others on a table. Then she tried to look as if it had been there all the time.

"Traps all set?" he asked.

"Oh, baiting them," she returned with a smile. Then, gaining courage, she

pulled the book out and placed it conspicuously on top. "I never knew," she remarked, "that you were sufficiently interested in horses to buy that," indicating the book. "Marion thinks it a splendid authority, full of pedigrees and things," she added for Freddy's enlightenment.

Leigh doesn't like it," replied Freddy.

"I know. I've heard them arguing it."

Mrs. Freddy reached quickly for the book, picked it up, then changed her mind, and put it back again.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed.

"And have them fighting—for two weeks," he remonstrated.

"They will merely discuss several equine questions of moment," she replied sweetly. When she reached the threshold she paused. "What's the matter with Sir Walter?" she asked. "He seems a trifle lame. Hadn't we better ask Leigh? He knows so much about such things."

"He did seem lame—since you mentioned it," replied Freddy.

"You might ask Marion, too, if she noticed it," Mrs. Freddy suggested. Then she giggled suddenly into the roll of music and passed on.

Five minutes later, as Freddy marched bravely into action he heard the soft ripple of the latest song, and bumped into Sidney coming pell-mell around a turn in the hallway.

"What is that thing?" demanded Sidney in passing. Then he turned to call "Pardon!" over his shoulder and disappeared into the music-room.

Freddy extracted a slip of paper from his pocket and consulted it. Then he glanced into the music-room. Jane was playing, and Mrs. Freddy and Sidney were enthusiastically humming a lively chorus. That song completed, Mrs. Freddy unrolled another.

"You really don't mind playing this sort of thing, do you?" she asked.

"Between me and you, I like this sort of thing," Jane replied, candidly, "but I never seem to have time for it. I have started out to do something with music you know."

She turned on the stool and looked rather wistfully at them.

"Concert work?" Sidney asked, with quick interest.

Jane nodded.

"Then I'll guarantee to fill the house at your first one," he assured her.

"I'll remember that," she promised, laughingly.

When Mrs. Freddy had them fairly interested in each other, a servant very properly appeared with an urgent summons from Freddy, and the campaign was on.

"I'll be back in five minutes," she said. "Do wait for me."

So Sidney tucked the untried music under his arm, and Jane fell to playing dreamy little airs that were quite different to anything Sidney had ever heard her play before. They discussed things in general, and some things in particular. They found that they liked the same books, admired the same flowers, condemned the same plays, and she found herself telling him of hopes that she had never told anyone else—not even Mrs. Freddy. And he understood and sympathized and instead of the casual acquaintances that had existed between them all their lives they seemed to have become close friends.

Mrs. Freddy was gone for an hour, but they didn't notice it. She finally burst in upon their tete-a-tete and insisted on taking Jane off to see a gown that had just been sent down from town.

"You'll find Freddy and John playing billiards," she told Sidney.

He held up the untried music as a visible token of his disappointment.

"Oh, just leave it there," said Mrs. Freddy; "we'll try it some other time."

Then she linked her arm through Jane's and they went out, leaving Sidney feeling unwarrantably deserted.

Mrs. Freddy came upon two dark heads very close together in a nook that was secluded and romantic. Freddy had it rigged up the first summer they were married. The two heads were bent over a book—the book—and four eyes were eagerly scanning its pages.

"Really!" said Mrs. Freddy to herself. She was about to smile her approval when she remembered that she was to frown upon love-making—at the proper moment—and swooped down upon.



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