

"Do you know how old she is? Just eighteen. Her sisters are all past twenty. It scarcely seems right that Maggie should marry over their heads. If it had been Matilda now, or Geraldine, I should have given my consent without hesitation."

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Brotherton, it is not Matilda, and it is not Geraldine, but it is Maggie whom I love. Facts are stubborn things."

"Well, Captain Falconer, all I can say is, there's no accounting for taste."

"I am very sorry to have disappointed you," returned Keith, with perfect good humor. "Were I in your place, and the mother of five daughters no doubt I should also wish to see the eldest settled before the youngest. But there is a fatality about these affairs, and the only way I can account for it in my own case is, that Maggie and I are affinities."

"Geraldine is much prettier," murmured Mrs. Brotherton, protestingly. "Possibly, but I like Maggie best, and anyway she is quite pretty enough for me."

After sundry conversations, similar in nature, Mrs. Brotherton at length came to the conclusion that Captain Falconer was quite decided, and could not be induced to change his mind and select the right daughter instead of the wrong. Her pleasure, however, at getting one of them married, was considerably damped. Maggie was the youngest and most amiable of her children, and by far the easiest to get on with. She would not have minded keeping her for four or five years more. And yet here she was engaged! actually engaged!

It was a regular case of the ugly duckling over again.

But if Mrs. Brotherton was disappointed, Geraldine was a thousand times more so. Indeed, she could hardly conceal her mortification, and said many bitter, sarcastic things to Maggie, who felt too happy to resent them. For when she thought of the prize she had drawn, she could fully sympathize with her sister's ill-humor. Anyone would naturally feel upset who had received attentions from a Keith, and found them suddenly straying in a different channel. She herself would have died of jealousy under the circumstances. So she bore Geraldine's tart speeches and unkind innuendoes in silence, and mentally resolved to find her a nice young man directly she got the chance.

Jack, when informed of Maggie's engagement, sent his favourite sister a characteristic telegram of congratulation.

It was brief, but served as a good index to the feelings of the writer.

"Bravo! dear old Mag!" he said. "I always knew you could give 'em a seven-pound beating."

Who the "em" referred to never transpired, for Maggie made a great mystery of this telegram, and refused to show it to any of her sisters, or even to Keith.

They were married in the Spring, when the birds twittered in the hedgerows, the buds burst into life, and all the earth was decked in vernal green. After the ceremony Keith bore his happy bride away to Paris where they spent a portion of the honeymoon, and where he insisted upon buying her some very fine dresses. In short, what between well-fitting frocks and jackets, a new style of hair-dressing, good boots and gloves, he smartened Maggie up to such a degree, that when she returned to the Manor House on a short visit, as the Honourable Mrs. Keith Falconer, the girls stared at her in amazement, and Geraldine exclaimed:

"Why, Maggie, you don't look like the same creature. What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

Maggie laughed, and Keith said, "I've been taking care of her, that's all. She's a terrible young person, and wants a lot of looking after."

No doubt a clever milliner had something to do with the young bride's improved appearance; but perfect happiness and content had more. Her great love cast a kind of halo, and although she possessed few claims to positive beauty, Keith, as the years went by, was both very fond and very proud of his little wife. She proved a complete success. Everybody liked her, and wherever she went she won hearts. She never was known to say an unkind word, or to do a disagreeable action. Keith's male friends all envied him his good fortune, and were unanimous in speaking of Mrs. Keith as "a dear little thing."

Anyhow, her blind worship and engrossing affection contrived to make him very happy, and he never had cause to regret what some people may consider his unwise, unfashionable, and unworldly choice. If—in society—language—he had thrown himself away, by not marrying an heiress, or a lady of high rank, he had, at all events, obtained a true, good, tender, woman, who thought no human being could compare with her Keith. Lucky Keith! in spite of what mercenary match-makers may say, and in spite of having linked his lot with that of a horsey, slangy, hunting girl!

THE END.

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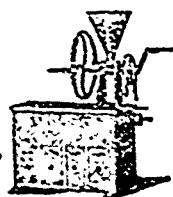
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