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CHAPTER XVII

The Firt-nighers

A good deal of interest had been created in the profession on account of the cruel way in which Viola Fancourt had thrown Madox over and left him in the lurch, but he had bound the members to secrecy, and even Viola, who had remained in town for the first night in spite of doctor's orders, did not know the identity of the leading lady.

Carlotta was early at the Russell Square Hotel, and before ten o'clock, Claude had wired to say he would arrive at five. That seemed to relieve Carlotta, and she was very gay all the morning, which they spent in shopping.

"I wish you could persuade your father and mother to come to Cambridge, Carlotta," said Judy coaxingly. "Just think how jolly it would be for us if you were there!"

"But probably you will only be there for a year, and then we should be left lamenting. It is quite possible, however, that we may all come to London. We are thinking about it. By Monday I shall know."

That interested Judy immensely, and they had a great deal to say to one another about the best residential parts of London, and at last Judy agreed that perhaps Carlotta was right in asserting that the old, dignified squares in Bloomsbury were hard to beat.

They both met Claude at King's Cross, but Carlotta said good-bye almost immediately, and intimated that they might meet after the theatre if it was not too late.

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man in the stalls looked as if they had done something out of the common. As a matter of fact, a good many of them were well known, both in the world of literature and art, and in Society, for Graham Madox was a general favorite, and his exceptional gifts were fully realized.

Then, too, the treatment he had received at the hands of Viola Fancourt undoubtedly had awakened a good deal of sympathy for him. No one knew that she was in the house, and obtrusively attired in outdoor costume with a thick veil over her face, mingling with the crowd in the pit—a whimsical act on her capricious part which, she confessed, amused her immensely.

She now regretted what she had done, and felt considerable pique as well as surprise that Graham Madox had "taken it lying down," as the expression is, without so much as attempting to get her to change her mind.

For this reason she devoutly hoped that he would be punished for his dereliction. In spite of much effort, she had been unable to discover anything about the woman, he had secured to take her place, and it was sheer unadulterated curiosity which was at the bottom of the escape of her presence in the pit.

There was no tantalizing delay such as sometimes happens on first night. Punctually at 8.15 the call bell rang and the curtain went up. It is unnecessary here to give the story of the play, which was a domestic drama of a rather high order, an attempt to teach by a sort of allegory certain great truths of considerable import to humanity. The first scene presided Madox as the hero, John Tendenton, sitting in the library of his country house, torn with anxiety and doubt regarding the wife whom he adored.

Judy was sitting forward with eyes for nothing but the stage when the door in the wings was suddenly opened, and Margaret Tendenton, the wife, entered. She was in evening dress, in which she looked superbly beautiful, and every movement was the embodiment of grace.

But it was when she spoke that the exquisite tones of her voice, never raised, but so clearly modulated, so perfectly enunciated, that it carried to the remotest corner of the crowded house, prepared the way for her triumph.

Judy gazed deathly white, however, and reaching out, gripped her brother's hand.

"Why, Claude, it's Carlotta! You see! Don't you?"

"Yes, of course. Be quiet, Ju. We can't do anything—it's great!"

They had no room for resentment at having been kept in the dark; nay, they realized as the play went on

that silence had been perfectly within Carlotta's right, and that she had even been wise, for now they had brought to the theatre perfectly unprejudiced minds, and were free from the slightest trace of personal anxiety or feeling. It certainly gave her a better chance. Immediately, with the rest of the house, they were in the thrall of that poignant human drama, which marched inevitably, and with dignity and majesty, to a close.

It was a sad story, and thus more true to life, of which so much is sad. But it was relieved by so much genuine humor, so much happy play of quite natural feeling that even those who were experienced in the singular feeling of refreshment which is only born of something really fine and great.

Madox was obviously and distinctly nervous, but Carlotta threw herself so completely into the part of the misunderstood and misguided wife that she simply carried the audience, breathless, with her. Every act was a success. It could not fail to be, because each was a corollary of the other, and so perfectly acted that even the most carping could detect no flaw.

When the curtain fell at last upon what the audience was oddly and humanly pleased to find was a happy if somewhat unusual ending, the thunder of applause was tribute enough. So vociferous were they, so hearty, so genuinely affectionate and appreciative, that tears came into Carlotta's eyes. But when she came on, radiant by Madox's side, a woman in the pit rose, grinding her teeth, and clapped her hands without the smallest regard for the disapproval of those about her. She had seen more—much more—than she desired.

"Author! Speech! Author! Speech! Speech!" Came in a deafening roar; and Madox at length was prevailed upon to say the few necessary words which revealed to the delighted audience that he was responsible both for the writing of the play and the production.

"You have rallied around me in a difficult crisis, but the accomplishment of this evening is largely if not altogether due to the accomplished lady, who came to my relief and rescue at the eleventh hour. When the time comes for me to write 'Finis' across my life-work, one of my proudest memories will be that I have had the honor to present Miss Margaret Tendenton to the British public. That she has already won your hearts is easy to see, and I pray that the tie forged between you and her may last through many happy years."

Carlotta, now trembling and in tears, bowed her acknowledgments, and hurried off the stage, but not before she had stooped to pick up a little bunch of violets, tossed from the left-hand box, which she had given Claude for his button-hole. These she put to her lips and suddenly burst into tears.

"Don't be silly, Judy. There isn't anything to cry about!" said Claude in an undertone which betrayed that he himself was moved in no small degree.

"I can't help it," answered Judy as she dropped into a chair at the back of the box, where she was secure

from observation. "That glorious being is too far removed from us ever to be any good to Stair!"

"Oh, come, it's only Carlotta after all. And she was simply ripping this afternoon," said Claude in his boyish way. "You can't say she put on one bit of side!"

"No, no. But how are we going to keep her, and how is Alan—away across that horrible Atlantic, with heaven knows what in front of him—ever to hold her to her promise?"

Tat's what's troubling me, Claude! Why, the whole world will be after her simply, and I don't just see how we can have the presumption to expect her to belong to us."

Claude had no convenient answer ready. It certainly was a puzzling problem.

"You'd better get on your cloak, and let us get back to the hotel then," he said practically; but at the moment there was a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of one of the theatre attendants.

"Please, Miss Tendenton wishes you to come to her dressing room now. If you will follow me I will take you."

She was standing in the open doorway of the dressing room, and she drew them in and closed it on those who were waiting outside.

It was Judy's face her glowing eyes were fixed with keen scrutiny which she made no attempt to hide.

"You are not angry or vexed with me dear, for not telling you? I tried to yesterday and again this afternoon, but I simply couldn't. I decided it would be better to leave it, and let you judge for yourself. Did I do well?"

"Well! Oh, don't ask us," murmured Judy. "We are quite overwhelmed! Of course we are proud of you! But you are coming with us now back to the hotel until we can talk things over."

Carlotta shook her head.

"I'm sorry I can't. I have to go to supper with Mr. Madox. He has asked some people to meet me. But we can spend all to-morrow together. Good night, Judy dear. Try to suspend judgement until I explain. Good night, dear Claude, and thank you for my little posey. I shall put it away to-night beside a little stuffed black cat my mother sent me for a mascot."

(To be Continued.)

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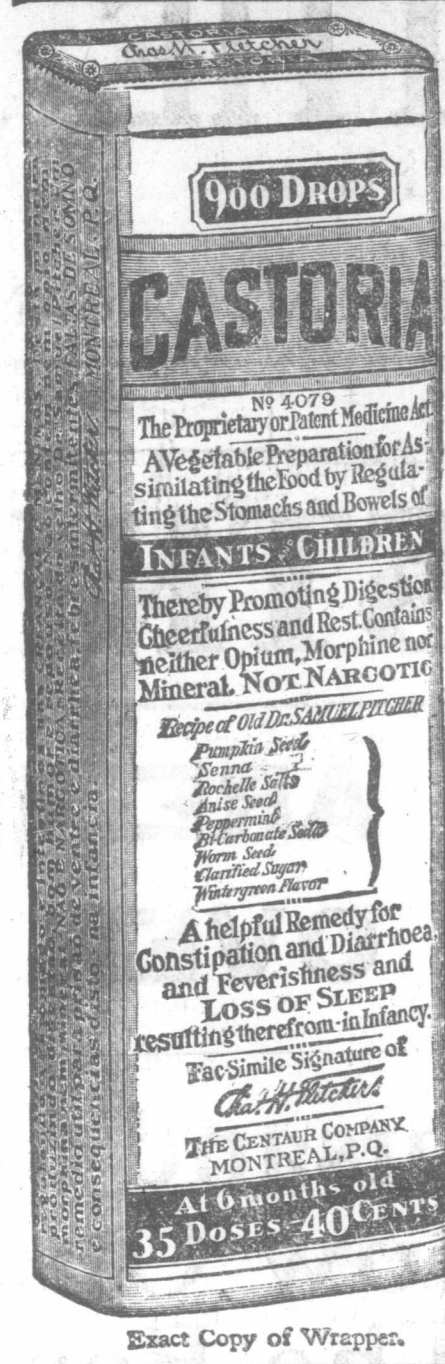
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