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Huntley & Palmers, Ltd., Reading, Eng.

The Bread and Butter Miss.

PART III.

The girl's face grew strangely still and intent, yet with a wistful look in the eyes telling of feeling not to be easily read. It was as if she were listening in spite of herself, for something she still vaguely hoped she was mistaken in expecting.

"Indeed," she began to say, but he interrupted her.

"No," he said, "do not speak till you have heard me. I had made up my mind to tell you before I met you just now. I was just wondering how and when it could be. But now that this opportunity has come so quickly I will not lose it. I love you—I have loved you for longer than I know myself, than I would own to myself."

"From the very first, from that evening at Mrs. Englewood's?" she said, and but for his intense preoccupation he would have been startled by her tone.

"Yes," he said simply, yet with a strain of retrospection in his eyes, as if determined to control himself and speak nothing but the exaggerated truth—yes, I almost think it began that first evening, rude, brutally rude as I was to you. I would not own it—I struggled against it, for I did not want to marry. I had not thought of it. I am selfish, very selfish, I fear, and I preferred to keep clear of all ties and responsibilities, which too often become terribly galling on small means. I am no hero—but now—you will forgive my hesitation and reluctance, will you not? You are generous I know, and my frankness will not injure me with you, will it? You will believe that I loved you almost from the first, though I could

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"You have a right to refuse me, to despise my weakness if you choose—whether it is generous to take advantage of my misplaced confidence; in you in having told you all—yes, all is another matter. But one thing you shall not accuse me of, and that is, of lying to you. I have not said one untruthful word. I did—yes, I did love you, Mary Floride—what I feel to you now is something more like—"

He hesitated.

"Hate, I suppose," she suggested mockingly. "All the better. It cannot be a pleasant feeling to hate any one, and I do not wish you anything pleasant. If I could believe, I went on slowly, "if I could believe you had loved me, I think I should be glad, for it would be what you deserve. I would have liked to make you love me from that very first evening if I could—just to—but unluckily I am not the sort of woman to succeed in anything of that kind. However—"

She stopped; steps approaching them were heard through the stillness. Maisie turned. "I have nothing more to say, and I do not suppose you wish to continue this conversation. Good-bye, Mr. Norreys."

And almost before he knew she had gone, she had quite disappeared.

Despard was a strong man, but for a moment or two he really thought he was going to faint. He had grown deathly white while Maisie's hard, bitter words rained down upon him like hailstones; now that she had left him he grew so giddy that, had he not suddenly caught hold of a tree, he would have fallen.

"It feels like a sunstroke," he said vaguely to himself, as he realized that his senses were deserting him, not knowing that he spoke aloud.

He did not know either that some one had seen him stagger, and almost fall. A slight uneasy feeling had made Maisie stop as she hurried off and glance back, herself unobserved.

"He looked so fearfully white," she said; "do—do men always look like that when girls refuse them, I wonder?"

For Maisie's experience of such things actually coming to the point, was, as should be the case with all true women, but small.

"I thought—I used to think I would enjoy seeing him humbled. But he did seem in earnest."

And then came the glimpse of the young fellow's physical disfigurement. Maisie was horribly frightened; throwing all considerations but those of humanity to the winds she rushed back again.

"Perhaps he has heart-disease, though he looks so strong, she thought, "and if so—oh, perhaps I have killed him."

She was beside him in an instant. A rustic bench, which Despard was too dizzy to see, stood near. The girl seized hold of his arm and drew it round her shoulder. He let her do so unresistingly.

"Try to walk a step or two, Mr. Norreys," she said, "I am very strong. There, now," as he obeyed her mechanically, "here is a seat," and she somehow half pushed, half drew him on to it. "Please smell this," and she took out a little silver vinaigrette, of strong and pungent contents, "I am never without this, for papa is so delicate, you know."

Despard tried to open his eyes, tried to speak, but the attempt was not very successful. Maisie held the vinaigrette close to his nose; he started back, the strong essence revived him almost at once. He took it into his own hand and smelt it again. Then his face grew crimson.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times. I am most ashamed, utterly ashamed of myself," he began.

But Maisie was too practically interested in his recovery to feel embarrassed.

"Keep sniffing at that thing," she said, "you will soon be all right. Only just tell me—" she added anxiously, "there isn't anything wrong with your heart, is there?"

"For if so," she added to herself, "I must at all costs run and see if there is a doctor to be had."

Despard smiled—a successfully bitter smile.

"No, thank you," he said, "I am surprised that you credit me with posses-

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sing one," he could not resist adding. The real cause of this absurd faintness was a very prosaic one, I fancy. I went for a long walk in the hot sun this morning.

"Oh, indeed, that quite explains it," said Maisie, slightly nettled. "Good-bye again then," and for the second time she ran off.

"All the same, I will get Conrad or somebody to come round that way," she said to herself. "I will just say I saw a man looking as if he was fainting. He won't be likely to tell."

And Despard sat there looking at the little silver toy in his hands. "I did not think her," he said to himself. "I suppose I should have done so, though she would have done as much, or more, for a starving tramp on the road."

Then he heard again steps coming nearer like those which had started Maisie away.

They had apparently turned off elsewhere the first time—this time they came steadily on.

PART IV.

As Despard heard the steps coming nearer he looked round uneasily, with a vague idea of hurrying off so as to escape observation. But when he tried to stand up and walk, he found that anything like quick movement was beyond him still. So he sat down again, endeavouring to look as if nothing were the matter, and that he was merely resting.

Another moment or two, and a young man appeared, coming hastily along the path by which Despard had himself made his way into the shrubbery. He was quite young, two or three and twenty at most, fair, slight and boyish-looking. He passed by Mr. Norreys with but the slightest glance in his direction, but just as Despard was congratulating himself on this, the new-comer stopped short, hesitated, and then, turning round and lifting his hat, came up to him.

"Excuse me," he said, "do you know Lady Margaret—by sight? Has she passed this way?"

He spoke quickly, and Mr. Norreys did not catch the surname.

"No," he replied, "I have not the honour of the lady's acquaintance."

"I beg your pardon," said the other. "I've been sent to look for her, and I can't find her anywhere." Then he turned, but again hesitated.

"There's nothing the matter, is there? You've not hurt yourself—or anything? You look rather—as if a cricket ball had hit you, you know."

Mr. Norreys smiled.

"Thank you," he said, "I have got a frightful pain in the head. I was out too long in the sun this morning."

The boyish-looking man shook his head.

"Touch of sunstroke—eh? Stupid thing to do, standing in this weather. Should take a parasol; I always do. Then I can't be of any service?"

(To be continued.)

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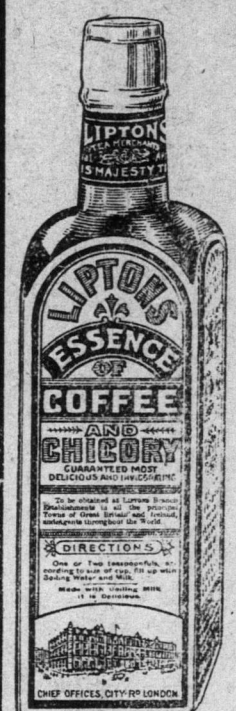
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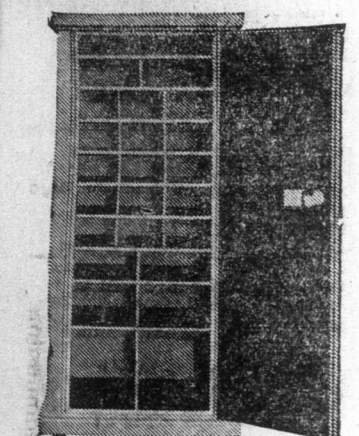
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