

## The Fortune of Flora.

(Continued from last week)

Young Mrs. Eversley folded this characteristic letter carefully, put it away, and then communicated the contents to her youthful partner in the adventure of matrimony. Two years older than her husband, she felt an almost maternal, or at least an elder sisterly feeling toward the joyous and irresponsible youth whom she had undertaken to love, honor and obey. And Laurie, as she afterward told Miss Mitchamore, had behaved like a "perfect angel." He was knocking the top off an egg at breakfast, and his wife was eyeing this characteristically British performance with awe and admiration, when she summoned up courage to tell him that from now onward she would have to look to him and to his family for her maintenance. Fortunately, as she had told herself, a peer of the realm in England must be rich enough to support his children, a theory which showed our young lady's meagre acquaintance with European family arrangements.

There was just enough of the check left to take them back to London, and one windy and rainy night in February found a four-wheeled cab loaded with trunks and containing the happy pair drawing up at the Worthing mansion in the Cromwell Road.

But this again proved no abiding place for this much-tried young couple. Two of the younger children had developed scarlatina; the house bristled with starched hospital nurses, the doctor's brougham stood at the door and Laurie and his bride had to take refuge in a neighboring hotel. Next morning Lady Worthing appeared. She had only the worst of news to bring. Lord Littlehampton, it appeared, in the lightness of his heart, had entangled himself in some promise to a chorus girl, and this young person, an Amazon of gigantic proportions and vivid coloring, proposed to resign her claim to his coronet only on payment of a substantial sum. At all costs, Lady Worthing announced her intention of raising the money. As for herself and the children, they might go to some cheap spot in Normandy or the Ardennes, and for Laurie, she was convinced that Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge would provide.

To say that our poor hero was astounded at the astonishing turn which things had taken is to convey but a faint impression of his feelings. Here he was, the gayest, the most insouciant of created beings, at twenty-three, a married man, with a penniless, opulent-looking bride, and at the odious necessity of finding the wherewithal to live. Could Fate have played him a more cruel trick? There sat his Flora, a lovely, sumptuous vision in a negligee of Mechlin lace, eating candy and reading a French novel, while downstairs, in the dingy bureau, the manager was adding up a bill which Laurie saw no immediate prospect of paying.

But he was not easily depressed, nor did he ever forget his charming manners. Taking up his hat and cane, he kissed his wife's fingers and remarked carelessly.

"I think I shall go and see Aunt Charlotte. She always has ideas. She is quite a wonderful woman!" He slipped out, and, for the first time in his life—for Laurie had heretofore spent most of his time in hansoms—walked from South Kensington to the little house at the back of Knightsbridge, where Miss Mitchamore occasionally planted her weary feet. He found his aunt in a pince-nez, smoking cigarettes in her morning-room and reading a new work on Uganda, a country which she proposed to visit as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made. Already she had travelled a good deal in West Africa, and was understood to be on the friendliest terms with one or two dusky kings. Charlotte Mitchamore had something of the outward appearance of an Oxford High Church curate, and as on her travels she usually wore a manly coat and skimpy skirt of drab tweed, it is possible that these black potentates had not yet realized that she belonged to the inferior sex.

Aunt Charlotte was sympathetic. She was fond—though not foolishly

fond—of Laurie, and she detested Littlehampton. Also she thought her sister a fool.

"What is to be done?" asked Laurie. "Do, like a dear, have one of your ideas. You see," he added, "I'm only a half-educated boy! I've got taste, of course, but taste is only a drawback unless you've capital to indulge it. That strange beast—the British Public—is always distrustful of any one who doesn't like what it likes."

"True," said Aunt Charlotte. "The only thing for you to do," she added, after a pause, in which she rather deliberately lighted another cigarette, "is to get some work."

"Some work!" ejaculated Laurie, with naive surprise, "how curious that sounds. Yet I have heard that work is quite delightful—a sort of tonic—when once you get used to it! Shall I have to go in the Two-penny Tube every day, at a quarter to nine and lunch at the A B C shop?"

"Rubbish!" said Aunt Charlotte. "You're not going to be made a martyr of. I have forseen something of this kind," she went on. "I didn't like your marrying without any settlements, so I've just kept my weather eye open. Take that armchair, help yourself to a cigarette and listen."

The conference lasted an hour. Laurie stayed to luncheon, and at 3 o'clock he was whisked away in a closed coupe by his aunt toward Piccadilly.

Meanwhile, at home in the South Kensington hotel, the Honorable Mrs. Eversley was holding a conference with a person in whom she had cultivated confidence—and that was herself. Seeing the whole situation at a glance, she had no illusions left about peers of the realm and their capability of supporting the various members of their family.

The girl had thrown away her French novel on Laurie's departure and, pushing back her fair hair from her capable looking forehead with a gesture which recalled her father, she marched up and down the shabbily carpeted room, thinking hard. Half an hour later she dressed herself quietly in black, drove to the American Consul General and got the information which she desired.

When the young husband and wife met that night they both looked as pleased as if they had come into a fortune, though each was somewhat reticent.

"My child," said Laurie, helping his wife to hock, "figure to yourself that our cares are temporarily at an end. I have got something to do—a kind of business which I think I can manage. How charming you look. You must always wear heliotrope and pink when we dine alone."

They went into lodgings next day, lodgings where Laurie insisted on pulling down all the oleographs and hanging the walls with a striped, flowery cretonne. He also brought his Oxford Chippendale furniture, his prints and books, and a number of white fur rugs. With a pink azalea bush in full bloom in one corner the place looked pretty enough. And here they began married life.

The little comedy which ensued was sufficiently diverting. Laurie, who had remained quite vague on the subject of his "work" used to leave the house about 9.30 every morning. Directly he had turned the corner of the street Flora put on her hat and ran to catch the omnibus. When they met at dinner she was becomingly arrayed in one of her beautiful trousseau gowns, and had assumed an air of elaborate repose.

Before Miss Charlotte Mitchamore left for Uganda she had had many private interviews with her niece by marriage, of whom, as she announced to all and sundry, she now thoroughly approved.

Meanwhile Laurie's devotion was complete—for he was a kind of being who, when he once takes up an idea, waxes more and more enthusiastic, even if that idea is marriage. Yet one wet day, as she was running along Dover street under an umbrella, she caught, to her amazement, a glimpse of her husband in the vestibule of Froufrou's, the famous milliner's. A handsome woman, in summer finery, was

eagerly talking to him, and she saw him come down with her to the door of the little brougham, which was waiting. Yes, there he stood, laughing and chatting at the carriage window, as if he were loath to tear himself away, while the fine rain beat down on his handsome head. What could it mean? Laurie professed to be hard at work all day—and certainly the boy looked tired enough, when they both sat down, dressed, to their lodging-house dinner. Flora certainly never imagined that he had leisure to attend dames of high degree to their dressmakers in Dover street. For the first time since their marriage she felt uncertain of Laurie.

Young Mrs. Eversley was too fine, as well as too proud, to discuss this curious affair with her husband. She determined to be perfectly amiable, as usual, to hide her time, and to see what would happen next. Laurie was just as gratefully affectionate as of old, his charming manners had never altered with their adverse fortunes, and what especially made her profoundly grateful to him was the fact that he never, by word, look or tone, reproached her with the failure of Cyrus P. Dodge to provide her with a jointure. Flora had heard so much of the avariciousness of Englishmen in respect to dollars that she was agreeably surprised and wrote the most flattering accounts of the youthful Laurie home to Milwaukee. Mr. Cyrus P. Dodge was too much occupied in fighting his particular trust to remember to send any more checks to the lodgings occupied by his daughter and son-in-law.

Six months had gone by, and it was now high summer. With the beginning of July London was feverish with dissipation. The town seemed speckled with striped awnings and blatant with red blaze; all night there was a ceaseless whirl of cabs, carriages and motor broughams, and through the open windows of drawing-rooms came the monotonous sound of string bands playing the valse of the hour. All this, however, affected the young Eversleys very little. They accepted no invitations, for they had determined not to go out while their prospects remained so uncertain. It was much remarked that Flora even refused to be presented at court, although Lady Worthing (now sojourning with her numerous family at Parame) had several times suggested a suitable personage to introduce her daughter-in-law.

It was a sultry evening and Laurie had not yet returned from his work. Flora herself was tired out, but the bedroom looked untidy—Laurie had a way of throwing his clothes about which was most exasperating—so she set about collecting the scattered garments, folding them up and putting them away in the chest of drawers. The little note which falls out of the marital pocket on such occasions did not fail now. It was small; it had an earl's coronet upon it, and it contained a few agitated phrases, many of the words being heavily underlined. I do not claim for my heroine that she was more than human. Flora picked it up and read it.

"Dear Laurie,—How could you disappoint me? Why did you not come? I counted on you absolutely. It is cruel of you, and besides, this is not the first time it has happened. Unless you can give me a satisfactory explanation (for I am not accustomed to be treated like this) I shall go there no more."

"Gertrude Gorleston."

The note slipped from her fingers and she stood, absolutely bewildered, as if frozen to the ground. Gertrude Gorleston—the famous Lady Gorleston, a beauty whose reputation was world wide, and whose face was almost as familiar in Milwaukee as in London. Was this her rival? How could she hope to compete with such a personage? In a flash she remembered that it was indeed the countess whom she had seen that day in Dover street, with Laurie's sleek head half in, half out of her carriage door. Was this how he spent his superfluous time? And then the difficulties of her situation began to dawn upon her. She was quite alone in Lon-

don; owing to their peculiar circumstances she had made no friends; there was no one whose advice she could ask. If Charlotte Mitchamore had been in England she would indeed have gone for her advice, but Miss Mitchamore by now was in Uganda.

Meanwhile, the latchkey was heard in the door, and the sound of Laurie's footstep was audible coming up the stair. She must decide and quickly. If there was anything of which this astute young person disapproved of it was having a "scene" with a man, or appearing to upbraid him. For herself, she was determined always to assume the beau role. To appear in the light of a nagging, jealous wife was odious to her. She would have left him for good if it were necessary, but reproaches she held were feminine and absolutely futile. She thrust the note back into the pocket of the morning jacket from which it had fallen, slipped into her prettiest lace tea gown and awaited her erring spouse.

"Why, you look real scared, Laurie," she cried, "I guess you're just too tired for anything. Why, you're as white as a sheet."

"I've had a shock, dear," he said, slipping into the nearest chair, his lips twitching as he spoke. "Aunt Charlotte—there—there is very bad news."

"She died of fever a week after she landed in Africa," said Laurie, sorrowfully.

Flora burst into tears. "She was the best and kindest woman I ever knew," she cried, "my only friend on this side. It's just too dreadful for anything. Oh, my, oh, my." And these two young people, who were both sincerely attached to Miss Mitchamore, were drawn closely together in their grief.

Yet Flora could not altogether forget Lady Gorleston's letter, and as they sat by the open window, in the summer dusk, after dinner, she said, as if with a sudden impulse.

"Laurie, what do you do all day?"

Her husband looked surprised, but he answered simply and with perfect courtesy, "I 'create' gowns and superintend the trying-on at Froufrou's, in Dover street. It was poor Aunt Charlotte's quite wonderful inspiration."

Laurie, to this day, never can understand why his wife threw her arms round his neck and gave him what she was wont to call "an American hug." "Oh, you dear. You're just too perfect for anything. My! Fancy your settling down to that. And say," she added, as a new light seemed to illuminate her brain, "doesn't—er—Lady Gorleston dress entirely at Froufrou's?"

"She does," replied Laurie, without any enthusiasm in his voice, "and a confounded nuisance she is. Always fussing, always having alterations. She has got it into her head now that I must be at every fitting. If not, there's a devil of a row."

"I see," said Flora, profoundly, with the memory of a certain note in her mind.

"I counted on you absolutely. I shall go there no more." Well, thank goodness, she was not a jealous woman. Meanwhile, she felt in the mood for confidences.

"Well, Laurie, I'm going to tell you something. You thought that we weren't going to have any holiday this summer, because—well, you know why. Now, I want to tell you that I've not been idle, either. I've just been keeping the books and seeing customer's at a photographer's in Baker street, and here's my half year's salary, £75. I never shall forget poor Aunt Charlotte's delight when I told her I'd got a situation. Why, she just hugged me. Isn't it just too delightful for anything?"

"You are a wonderful woman!" declared Laurie, with conviction, "a quite wonderful woman!"

But there were more surprises in store for our young couple. When Miss Mitchamore's will was opened, it was found that with the exception of some legacies for scientific researches, she had left the whole of her comfortable fortune to her dear nephew Laurence and his wife Flora, because they are plucky young people, who know how to face ill luck, who are not afraid to work, and who don't go about whining."

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The house in Queen Anne's Gate is theirs now with all its gay and sane appurtenances. And Flora, who firmly believes in Cyrus P. Dodge and his ability to circumvent the trust, exhibits a pathetic belief—not shared by Laurie, who has, however, hopes of succeeding to the title—that she will still come into her phantom fortune.—From the Lady's Pictorial.