

MAN, CHAPERON AND MAID

By Anna S. Richardson

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"You are entirely too young and attractive to chaperon Ruth," observed Mrs. Cuscadden, surveying her companion with a cool, critical glance. "But she fairly has hysterics when I suggest her going home with me. And really the dear child has seen nothing of Paris, and she wants another week or so in London. If you could, my dear Leslie—"

Mrs. Leslie Burns instantly replied that she could and she would—with pleasure. So it happened that Mrs. Rogers Cuscadden sailed alone for New York to settle some vexed questions regarding the new house. Her parting warning to Mrs. Burns was:

"Now remember, Leslie, no international entanglements for Ruth. You know how Mr. Rogers feels on the subject. Besides I want to bring her out this season heart whole. A love affair is always a handicap for a debutante."

Never did chaperon use more graceful tact in executing her trust. Without making enemies she warded off the many admirers attracted to the vivacious young heiress until George Hackett appeared on the scene, dropping from some unheard of point in the orient. Well bred, well groomed, well tailored, breezy and alert, he was diplomacy proof.

Attaching himself to their party of two, he proved distressingly convenient and desirable. He knew his Paris by heart and steered his countrywomen from boredom with a skillful hand. Ruth boldly espoused his cause and informed Mrs. Burns that she was having a much jollier time since Mr. Hackett's arrival, whereupon Mrs. Burns read her charge the first long lecture of their companionship. Not that it would do any good, she argued, for how could any heart whole girl withstand George Hackett?

When the stay in Paris drew to a close, Mrs. Burns heard with dismay that Mr. Hackett was accompanying them as far as London. And London was but Paris repeated. Mr. Hackett knew just what points of interest Ruth would enjoy and what she should avoid. He was more useful than Baedeker and infinitely better company.

But when the day for sailing from Southampton was set and Mrs. Burns learned that the ubiquitous Mr. Hackett had taken passage on the same boat despite filled her soul. To the experienced chaperon no episode is more heavily charged with danger than an ocean voyage. At first she had been as rude as her gentle nature would permit, but the more chilly her reception the more assiduously would he devote himself to Ruth. If she occasionally resented and treated him with gracious tolerance, Mr. Hackett showed eager appreciation of her favor and waxed brilliant.

She was thinking it all over tonight as she sat alone on the deck. In less than twenty-four hours, the captain had said, they would be in New York harbor. Then must come the accounting to Mrs. Cuscadden. No doubt at this very moment, under the cover of moon songs in the saloon, Mr. Hackett was whispering into the ears of Ruth those tender words which he should not be permitted to whisper.

The traitorous chaperon felt a sudden twitching at her heartstrings. Should she defy fate in the form of Mrs. Cuscadden? For herself it would mean but a broken friendship; for George Hackett it meant happiness for life. Strangely enough she did not seem to consider Ruth's happiness. She was thinking only of her girlhood, when Hackett's friendship had been such a very dear thing; when she would have given him—promised him—anything he might ask, but he had not asked.

The coon singer had finished, and the softer strains of a popular waltz floated out on the night air. A great wave of tenderness swept over Leslie Burns. Why should she stand between the man she had loved and the happiness he now craved?

Alas for the confiding, complacent Mrs. Cuscadden and her maternal pains!

Mrs. Burns drew her cape more closely and shivered slightly. A shadow fell across the bar of light streaming from the gangway. A voice clear, but not loud, broke the silence brooding on the deck.

"May I have my cigar out here with you, Mrs. Burns?" Then as he dropped into the chair at her side: "What a bare one's traveling companions become directly land is sighted! I don't blame you for getting off to yourself."

"Oh, it wasn't that exactly," murmured Mrs. Burns. Then, with the air of trying to fill in an awkward pause, she added: "But there is a subtle joy in feeling that tomorrow night we shall see the New York harbor lights gleaming. There's no place in the world just like New York to us."

"Still you stop in town?" queried Hackett.

"Just a day or so. I've a week promised to Mrs. Davenport at Tuxedo."

"Glad to hear that. I shall be in Tuxedo next week. Harry's taken a box down there for the rest of the season."

"But the Cuscaddens will be at the hot springs until their new place is finished." The remark sounded strangely flat to Mrs. Burns, and instantly she

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wished she had not given vent to her thought. Again she covered an awkward pause. "Dear me, I wonder where Ruth is this very minute."

"When I saw her last, dancing with young Ransome. A harmless youth, I assure you," he added whimsically as Mrs. Burns made a motion to rise. "Don't go, please, until— I have something I must tell you before we land."

It was coming. The guilty chaperon closed her eyes figuratively and prepared to take the plunge. She would pledge her aid and give it.

"Leslie!"

She started. Five years had passed since she had heard that name from his lips. Vaguely she wished he had commenced some other way.

"Do you remember when father sent me abroad? I was fresh from college, not much more than a boy. I knew little of life—women least of all. My experiences abroad with fellows I liked first bewildered and then fascinated me, and when father wrote I might make another year of it I was wild with delight."

"But you remember I wrote to you regularly. I supposed you understood. When I read of your coming out, I was tremendously proud. I think I ordered lilies of the valley for you by cable. I remember, too, thinking that when you'd had a season of that sort of thing and I'd finished my jaunt we'd settle down and be—very happy. I never dreamed that you were waiting for me to say so. I thought so clever a girl as you could read between the lines of my letters, and somehow I wanted to hear a certain little word from your own lips."

The woman at his side started to speak, but he waved her aside. The crimson glow of his cigar had turned to gray ashes, but he still clutched it between his fingers.

"The letter announcing your engagement reached me in Madrid. I've never been in the God forsaken hole since. When I reached America, you and your husband had gone abroad. For a year I tried life on the street, but I could not

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stand for it. Then I tried shooting lions in Africa and tigers in India. That went better than fleeing lambs in Wall street. I was visiting with a mighty good fellow on Curzon's staff when I heard—quite by accident—that you were—free. Two days later I turned my face westward. I did not intend to stop in Paris—but you were there. I thought—great heavens, how I hoped—you'd be glad to see me, but you were not. And, Leslie," his tone was actually commanding, "I want to know why?"

The woman had been listening with bowed head, but with a strangely happy light gleaming in her eyes. Hesitatingly, incoherently, she explained her conduct in Paris, in London and aboard ship. Before she finished Hackett, possessing himself of both her hands, exclaimed:

"And you really thought it was that child! Oh, Leslie, Leslie, couldn't you read the truth in my eyes?"

Mrs. Burns suddenly recalled her duties as chaperon. She withdrew her hands from his masterful grasp.

"How could I look you in the eye when I knew I was unfaithful to the trust imposed on me by Mrs. Cuscadden?"

The old piquant humor rang in her voice. She had risen. From the saloon came the tinnabulation of light music. The deck was free from promenaders. They were alone for the first time in five years.

"Oh, what will Mrs. Cuscadden say?" Hackett bent over her to gather up her wraps.

"I really don't see that she has anything to do with our little affair, provided you return her daughter heart whole and free from international entanglements," he answered joyously.

A shadow fell across the bar of light, then another, and the figure of a girl was silhouetted against the brilliant interior of the ship.

"Mrs. Burns, where are you? We're to have a good old fashioned Virginia reel to celebrate our last night on board. Do hurry up! We have a partner waiting for you!"

Then as Hackett's dark figure suddenly loomed up behind Mrs. Burns he glanced mischievously at Ruth and exclaimed, with a happy ring of ownership in his voice:

"Won't I do for her partner? I rather think this dance is mine!"

Delicate Tact.

I watched them on the street car—the little mother and her manly boy of nine or ten.

Before them was seated a white haired man, whose almost entirely sightless eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark glasses. The man was trusting to instinct or intuition, whichever one may call it, more than to sight to tell him when he had reached his particular corner. Closely he bent his face to the glass and hesitatingly reached his hand toward the bell.

"Mother," whispered the manly boy, "may I not ask him where he wants to get off and help him too?"

One glance at the proud, pale face, and the little mother answered:

"No, son; I don't believe he would like to be made feel dependent."

Then as quick as thought she said in a loud tone:

"See, son; the next corner is Seventh street, then Sixth and Broadway. The hotel is on Broadway. Don't let mother miss it."

Promptly the man's hand went to the bell. Seventh was evidently the street he wanted.

I fancy that when that boy has grown to be a man any expression of the fine charity that is now latent in his heart will be accompanied by tact in action and that in looking back over the years he will remember the lessons; that they were good ones; that his mother taught him.—St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

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