



MISS LESTER'S COMPANION.

Miss Lester was an old lady of seventy-two and she had begun to think she must have a companion. It was just fifty-four years since she, then a pretty young girl, had left her home and gone to be governess to the baby Earl of Charlwood, a delicate, ailing orphan-child whose young mother had died at his birth. His anxious guardians, two maiden aunts, thought that, being a doctor's daughter and the eldest of a large family, Miss Lester would know better than any one else how to manage a fretful, troublesome child. Their choice proved a wise one, for Miss Lester did her duty well and conscientiously, and under her care the little Earl grew strong both mentally and physically. When at twelve years old he was sent to school, he was not found by his masters to be at all backward for his age—in fact, some of them would scarcely believe that up to that time he had been taught solely by a woman.

His aunts were so grateful to Miss Lester and recommended her so strongly that from this time she went from one home to another, always making herself beloved and respected by those with whom she came into contact. All her pupils were boys, and she loved and was loved by them all; but her first pupil, the delicate little Earl, now a gray-haired father of a grown-up family, occupied the tenderest spot in her heart; and yet it was years since she had seen him, since he had brought his first little daughter to see his old friend. His wife was not the sort of woman to encourage her husband in keeping up sentimental relations with old people who could be of no possible use, and, besides, he had been abroad for years as ambassador. So little by little the remembrance of his old governess faded, and with it the thought that he should like to go one day and see her again.

Still he did not absolutely forget her, for every year, as Christmas came round, a handsome present arrived at Laurel Cottage, rejoicing the kind old heart as it would scarcely have done had Miss Lester known that she owed it to the fact that her name was down on a list which his Lordship's steward was in the habit of reading aloud to the Earl each Christmas, in order to know to what persons the Earl desired presents of game, etc., to be sent.

One day Lady Mary, the third daughter of the house, happened to be present when the list was read over. Lady Mary was a young lady of a lively frame of mind, her father's favorite, the eldest unmarried girl, and decidedly fond of having a finger in every pie.

"Who is Miss Lester, papa?" she asked.

"My old governess, Molly," and then, for once in a way, not being particularly busy, the Earl of Charlwood told his daughter about his dull childhood, of his maiden aunts, and of the bright young governess.

Half an hour afterwards the Earl had forgotten all about the matter; but Lady Mary, on her way to afternoon tea in her mother's boudoir, stopped on the stairs and, taking out a dainty little note-book, carefully wrote down, "Miss Lester, Laurel Cottage, Richmond."

When, after nearly forty years of teaching, the old governess had finally decided that she was past work, she made up her mind to settle somewhere near London, and selected Richmond as a place to which she would like to go. "Boys" could easily find their way. She had no relatives with whom she cared to live; being of an independent turn of mind, she preferred a home of her own. She was well off too, having, with what she had saved out of her handsome salaries and her share of the family property, a nice little income.

No sooner did she announce her intention of retiring and setting up in a house of her own, than presents flowed in from all her friends and pupils; and one of her latest "boys," Sir Arthur Kennard, a young baronet who had but lately succeeded his father, one of the richest men in the country in which Miss Lester had worked so long, bought and presented to her a long lease of the little Richmond cottage, thus enabling her to live rent free for the rest of her life. So Miss Lester settled herself comfortably in her new home, and very soon made many friends amongst rich and poor, owing herself to them by her natural kindness and benevolence.

For five years she lived in great content; then one winter she had a long and bad illness, which left her weak and low all the summer. Friends and neighbors were very kind; but, as autumn and the long evenings came on, she began to dread the many solitary hours when she would be alone. Her dress was a head that she might possibly find some one who for the sake of a comfortable home and a small salary, would like to live in a cheerful place like Richmond and help her in the works of charity to which she devoted most of her time.

So she put an advertisement in the Times, and, to her horror and amazement, not many hours after it appeared answer after answer poured in, until a heap of over fifty lay on the table before which she sat in hopeless embarrassment, not knowing which to open first.

She was sitting with one letter in her hand, dreading to open it, when a child at the gate of the little front garden roused her, and she looked up to see a girl come quickly up the path and ring the door-bell with a sharp pull. Two minutes afterwards Martha announced:

"A lady to see you, Miss."

The visitor advanced quietly towards Miss Lester, holding out her hand and then suddenly withdrawing it and blushing crimson. She was rather tall and slim, with a round face, a slightly retroussé nose, a determined little knob of a chin, dark hair curling in thick rings on her forehead, and deep gray eyes—innocent-looking eyes, out of which she seemed to find it difficult to keep a certain twinkle of fun. Her dress was a rather odd mixture, but Miss Lester could not see quite so well as in her younger days, so she did not notice the incongruity of the black dress, which, though made plainly enough, was of the finest cashmere and evidently the work of a first-rate dressmaker, the very shabby and servant-like jacket and hat, and the long tan-colored Snede gloves of the very best make.

The old lady rose nervously, rather at a loss as to what to say, for she guessed that this must be a personal applicant for the situation. The girl, however, took matters into her own hands at once, saying eagerly:

"You are Miss Lester, are you not? And you said you wanted a companion? Don't you think I should do?"

She put her hand upon Miss Lester's arm as she spoke and looked at her imploringly, yet with a suspicion of a smile about the corners of her pretty little mouth; and as she looked—What was it? Surely something in the face, in the clear gray eyes, touched some answering chord in the old lady's memory!

"What is your name, my dear?" "Mary Smith."

No, the name was not familiar. Miss Lester's pupils and their relatives had mostly possessed far more aristocratic surnames; nevertheless, he was not a bad name for a companion, and the fair face into which she was looking surely could not belong to an impostor; and yet—

"Have you been out before? I can't take you without references, you know."

The girl hung her head a little and her voice quavered, but she spoke up bravely.

"I have never been out before, but I do so want to go away from home for a time! I will vow, if you like, that it is nothing wrong!"

Miss Lester shook her head ever so little at this, but the pleading voice went on and the gray eyes filled with tears.

"I am so unhappy at home just now, and if you will only let me come for a little while I shall be so very grateful, and you needn't pay me any wages at all!"

Then the tears fell fast, and proved quite too much for Miss Lester's tender old heart. She took the girl's hand and patted it softly.

"Don't cry, my dear, and I will see what I can do."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" cried Mary Smith. "And I will do everything you want—work for you and read to you, and—she glanced round the room and caught sight of the heap of letters lying on the desk—"answer all those letters for you!"

After that Miss Lester gave in. The mere idea of having those terrible letters opened, read, and answered for her was a great relief.

The next moment Mary Smith had tossed her hat and jacket upon a chair and drawn off her long gloves. Seating herself at the desk, after having established Miss Lester in her arm-chair, she took up the first letter.

"Are you all answers? Why?" with a little cry of amazement—"you haven't opened one yet!"

Miss Lester shook her head.

"There were too many," she said, feebly.

Mary Smith's eyes twinkled more than ever.

"Shall I open them and read them to you?"

Miss Lester nodded.

"I am sure they are none of them half so nice as I shall be!" the girl murmured loud enough for the old lady to hear. Then she proceeded with the opening of the letters, commenting on each and finding some insuperable objection to the writer, while Miss Lester listened and laughed, fascinated by the girl's sweet young voice and pretty manner, and feeling every moment less and less inclination to insist on references. Finally, when she found that Mary Smith required only an hour or two to tell her friends and pack her box, the old lady gave in altogether, and agreed to grant the girl a month's trial, at any rate.

While she hesitated before actually saying "Yes," Mary Smith turned very pale for a moment, and then, when at last Miss Lester looked up and said, "Very well, my dear," the girl fell upon her knees by her side, and taking the old lady's hand in both hers, kissed it passionately with trembling lips, saying earnestly:

"Thank you, dear Miss Lester; I promise you shall never be sorry for having trusted me."

Five minutes afterwards she went off, after having again donned the shabby hat and jacket and the long gloves. But no sooner was she out of sight of Laurel Cottage than she took off her hat and examined the inside carefully; then she ran her fingers through the soft curls on her forehead, after which she put on her hat again, pressing it rather low over her eyes and hiding all the little curls with it; next she took from her pocket and put on, first a pair of spectacles, then a rather thick gray gauze veil; and the disguise was so complete that her own mother might easily have passed without knowing her. She walked on rapidly until she reached the well-known "maid-of-honor" shop; there she regaled herself with sand-wiches and ginger beer, paying for them from a purse on which were two silver initials decidedly not "M. S."; and then, having bought some of the famous little "maids," she betook herself to the Terrace, where, seating herself comfortably, she produced a book from her pocket, and read, ate her cakes and sat musing for about two hours. Then she rose and wended her way slowly down the hill again to the railway station, where she went to the cloak-room, and, producing a check, claimed a modest-looking black box, had it placed on a cab, and directed the man to drive to Laurel Cottage.

That was how Mary Smith went home and told her friends.

One morning, some ten days later, a gentleman knocked at Miss Lester's door—a gentleman of about twenty-eight, tall and manly-looking, though by no means handsome—who was received by Martha with an exclamation of pleasure, and ushered in the little sitting-room.

"Here is Sir Arthur, Miss!"

Miss Lester's "boys," many of whom rejoiced in a title of some kind, were a source of great delight to Martha, and this one happened to be a particular favorite.

To Sir Arthur's great astonishment, Miss Lester was not to be seen, but a very pretty girl was sitting at a table arranging flowers rose, her face flushing a little, and bowed. Then, seeing the amazement depicted on the young man's face, she gave a sweet little gurgling laugh and said, with an attempt at dignity:

"I am Miss Lester's companion. Miss Lester is not down yet; she was very tired last night, so I persuaded her to have her breakfast in bed."

"What a companion! Good gracious! Where on earth had his old governess picked up this girl—a lady, evidently, and so charmingly pretty?"

"Won't you sit down?" continued Mary Smith. "She will be here soon."

Sir Arthur, still too much astonished to speak, drew a chair up to the table and watched the girl silently as she went slowly down the stairs, her face flushing a little, and bowed. After a few minutes the door opened, and in came Miss Lester, much excited.

"My dear boy, I am so glad to see you!"

The Baronet rose and, taking both the old lady's hands, kissed her affectionately.

Mary Smith glanced at the two very kindly, but a moment later the queer little twinkle that was so often in her gray eyes when she had a private joke appeared again as Miss Lester said:

"This is Sir Arthur Kennard, Miss Smith, one of my 'boys.' You have heard me speak of him, I dare say."

"I am sure she has," said Sir Arthur, noting a mischievous smile on the girl's face. "I only hope, Miss Smith, that Miss Lester told you at the same time that I am the best of all the 'boys,' and on the strength of that I trust you will shake hands with me." And Mary Smith, looking frankly into the manly, honest face, put her hand into the one he held out as he spoke, and let him shake it heartily.

"Miss Lester, I have come down here for a few days," Sir Arthur went on, "and it is such a lovely morning that I have set my heart on taking you for a drive. I came for that, so won't you and Miss Smith get ready, and I will fetch a carriage meanwhile?"

"My dear boy, that is good of you! Shall we go, Molly, my dear?"

Miss Smith hesitated a little and a pink flush came into her face, but at last she said she would like very much to go, and left the room with her flowers. After she was gone, Sir Arthur turned eagerly to the old lady.

"Who is she, Miss Lester? Where did you find her?"

The old governess told him how Miss Smith had arrived on the scene, and the young man could only express his feelings by a long low whistle.

"Well, you are a confiding old lady, and no mistake!" he said. "How about the spoons?"

But Miss Lester would not listen. The pretty, bright young girl had won her heart, and she loved her too well to care to allow that, after all, she might turn out an impostor.

Half an hour afterwards, when Sir Arthur returned with a comfortable open carriage, he found both ladies ready. Mary Smith's gray gauze veil was tied over her face, as usual. The sun caught her face so soon, she said.

The sun in October! That seemed a little ridiculous. Sir Arthur looked at her curiously. She met his gaze defiantly for a moment and her face flushed a little, then came again the odd little twinkle and the soft, gurgling laugh.

No one could laugh like that and be doing anything very seriously wrong, thought the young man; and he set to work to make the drive as pleasant as possible, succeeding so well that, after a while, Mary Smith took off her veil; they were well out of Richmond by that time, driving along quiet country roads—and did her full share of talking and laughing, making merry little jokes, alternately petting and teasing Miss Lester, and meeting Sir Arthur Kennard's gaze as steadily as though she had known him for years. Long before the drive was over,

her pretty bright ways, her evident pleasure, her charming face, and, above all, the gray eyes sparkling with mischief, and yet now and then darkening with a slight touch of wistfulness, had completely fascinated the young man and lulled to rest all suspicion.

After driving a good many miles, they stopped at a pretty little inn not far from the river. Sir Arthur had the carriage put up, and ordered dinner. While it was being got ready, they strolled about the garden and stood watching the dear old river shining in the sunlight.

Sir Arthur made Miss Lester take his arm, and devoted himself to her, talking in the way he knew she loved about the old times when he was a small boy and used to tease her with his wild spirits. He, like her first pupil, the delicate little Earl, had been an only child and motherless.

Mary Smith meanwhile wandered off by herself, stationing herself by a low wall at the end of the garden, gazing at the river with its fringe of many-colored leaves and tall grass. Now and then a boat would come past, and she would draw back out of sight of any one, or turn round to look, with eyes that for the moment were misty with unshed tears, at the old woman and the young man talking so happily.

"I like him!" she thought. "I wonder if he is as good as he looks? His face is so honest and true; he surely could never try to make a girl marry him whether she liked him or not? And yet—"

Apparently Mary Smith's experience of lovers had not been a happy one.

"It seems as though he really cared for dear old Miss Lester. I wonder if he is engaged? Supposing he is not, he might take it into his head to fall in love with me, who am only Miss Lester's companion?"

At this idea she laughed; and then, as Sir Arthur, hearing the soft little sound, looked at her with a smile, she turned away blushing hotly.

After dinner, Miss Lester, who was not accustomed to such dissipation, grew very sleepy; so Sir Arthur suggested a little nap for her while he took Miss Smith for a walk; and, having settled the old lady comfortably on the sofa and left directions that tea was to be ready in an hour, the two young people started. Instinctively they strolled toward the river.

"Shall we take a boat?" asked Sir Arthur.

Miss Smith hesitated for a moment, but finally said "Yes."

While he was choosing a boat, the gauze veil was put on again; and this time it could not be as a protection from the sun, for the sky had clouded over while they were at dinner.

Sir Arthur once more began to feel a little uncomfortable. Why was she so anxious to hide her face? Perhaps something in his manner or the tone of his voice betrayed his suspicions, for all the sunny brightness of the morning seemed to leave the girl. She sat quite still, only answering when he asked if he might smoke or when he made remarks about the beauty of the scene. At last, after a long silence, during which Sir Arthur was slowly making up his mind, he suddenly pulled the boat under the overhanging branches of a large chestnut-tree, and said—

"I am sadly out of training, Miss Smith; besides, it is warm for the time of year, and I find pulling after dinner rather hard work. Do you mind if I rest for a bit?"

The girl nodded, and, as she did so, he caught the glitter of tears in her eyes. In a moment his mind was made up. He took the pipe from his mouth, laid it aside, and, leaning towards his companion, said, in a tone that, though quiet enough, had yet a certain determination in it:

"Miss Smith, I want you to do me a kindness. Will you please take off that veil? I have something to say to you, something serious—to ask you to treat me as a friend—and I can't talk if I don't see your face."

There was a moment's pause; then the girl quietly took off the piece of gauze and met the young man's gaze frankly, though the color rose in her face and a tear still glistened in each eye. Then Sir Arthur spoke again, and she listened gravely, meeting his gaze boldly all the time.

"I think you must know, Miss Smith, that it is not usual for ladies to engage companions without references of some sort. Miss Lester tells me you could give her none. Of course she is free to do as she pleases in such a matter; but others—I, at any rate, Miss Smith—have laid a little emphasis on the name—'am quite convinced that there is some mystery—that in some way or other you are taking her in. I am very fond of her—for years she was almost a mother to me—and I will not let her be made unhappy if I can help it. You are young and a lady, I can see. She has already learned to love you and trust you. I can see that you are good to her, that you make her happy. I do not want to hurt you in any way; but, Miss Smith, will you tell me—will you give me your word of honor that your secret, whatever it is, will do my dear old friend no harm? Will you put your hand in mine and tell me honestly that I may trust you? And I, on my part, will promise to take you at your word and believe you implicitly."

As the girl listened to the speech—the words of an honest, true-hearted English gentleman—her face flushed, and her eyes were fixed on his all the while. Now they were shining brightly as, without a second's hesitation, she put her hand into his, which he held out as he spoke, and with all her strength gave a responsive clasp.

"I will, I will indeed!" she cried. "I will swear to you, if you like! It is true, quite true! I have a secret, and my name is not 'Smith'; but it cannot possibly hurt Miss Lester in any way. I love her too—she is so kind—and I would not harm her for worlds! There was a little quiver in her voice, and the tears rushed to her eyes once more.

"I will trust you then entirely, Miss Smith, and for the future we will be friends." As he spoke, Sir Arthur raised to his lips the hand he still held.

The row back was much more lively. All Mary Smith's gaiety had returned, and the two talked till they felt quite like old acquaintances.

They found Miss Lester just waking up, and after a cup of tea they started for home.

When they reached Laurel Cottage, Sir Arthur was easily persuaded to go in to supper, afterwards staying till Martha appeared with the bed-room candles, as a gentle hint that it was time for him to depart.

After that, very few days passed on which Sir Arthur Kennard did not find his way to Laurel Cottage on one pretext or another. He was fond of gardening, and knew a good deal about it. In his own big gardens at Castle Kennard he had little chance of any practical work of the kind—it would have hurt the feelings of his dignified head-gardener a great deal too much—but Miss Lester's little strip was just the very thing. So day after day Sir Arthur, aided by Miss Smith, took up plants, made cuttings, gathered seeds, and so forth, till the little conservatory was crammed with pots from top to bottom.

Day by day, too, as the girl followed his directions with quick and clever though unskilled hands, did the gray eyes deepen in expression; and, when the two ladies were alone and Miss Lester dined in her chair, her companion would sit with idle hands clasped in her lap and a happy smile on her face.

And during all this time no letter had come to Mary Smith, no friends had called to see her, never did any allusion to relatives cross her lips. "Molly darling," as Miss Lester called her, might have dropped from the clouds for all either she or Sir Arthur knew of the girl; and yet both the old woman and the young man had fallen hopelessly and irretrievably in love with her.

It was some time before Miss Lester realized the state of affairs between her companion and her "boy"; but at last her eyes were opened by Martha, the old and privileged servant, who remarked to her mistress one day, when she was discovered standing on a chair, from which elevated position she could see through a high window into the conservatory—

"Law, mum, ain't it lovely to see them young things a-enjoying themselves like that! Won't Miss Molly make a lovely bride?"

For a moment Miss Lester was taken aback; she did not answer Martha, but, passing on straight up stairs, went to the conservatory door and looked in. With her back to the door

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