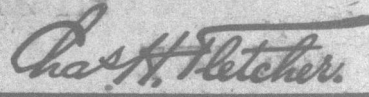


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The Countess of Landon.

CHAPTER XXI

The maid only permitted herself to express surprise once, and that was at the moment she let Madge's hair fall showering over the white shoulders; then with a kind of gasp, she said:

"Oh, ma'am!"

"What—what is the matter?" asked poor Madge.

The maid colored and bit her lip. She had been guilty of what the countess would have considered a crime, familiarity with her superior.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; it was your hair."

"My hair," said Madge; "is—anything wrong with it? I—I wish you would tell me. I do not do it up properly, perhaps. Is that what you mean?"

"Oh, no, no, ma'am; though I think, if you will allow me, I could arrange it more suitably; I mean, more fashionably. It wasn't that, but the length and the color. I never—I beg your pardon, ma'am—I never saw anything like it; never, never!"

Madge breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought something was wrong in the way I had done it. Oh, yes, arrange it as you like it. What—what is your name?"

"Marion, ma'am," said the girl.

"It is a pretty name," said poor Madge.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Marion. Swiftly yet smoothly she did up the wonderful hair and put on the new dress. "Have you—in the jewel-case in the box, ma'am?" she asked.

"Jewels!" Madge stared at her. "I have no jewels."

Marion colored and hurried to something else.

"Yes, ma'am, I will get a flower for your hair—a white flower," and she hurried away.

Madge got up from her chair and went to the door of the next room.

"Jack!"

Royce came out. He was fully dressed, and he started at sight of her; a passionate, loving admiration sprung into his eyes.

"Madge! Why—"

She fell on his breast, her heart beating against his.

"Keep near me, Jack," she panted. "Hush!"

Marion had returned with the flower, and she fixed it in Madge's hair. As she did so, she glanced up at Royce, as if challenging him respectfully, and Royce nodded.

"Beautiful!" he breathed.

"Yes, sir," said Marion in a low voice and with heightened color.

A bell—no, a shrill bell, but the deep, resonant tones of an antique gong—rang heavily through the air. Madge started.

"It is the dinner-bell," said Royce; "are you quite ready, Madge?"

made her hot. And she was her daughter-in-law, her son's wife!

Royce and Seymour stood talking together, in the forced and unnatural manner in which men talk who, though closely related, dislike and distrust each other; but Royce glanced now and again at the two women, and his heart ached for his beautiful Madge. He knew that she was suffering.

At last the countess spoke. "I suppose you have been travelling a great deal?" she said.

Madge looked up, and the countess felt a spasm of reluctant admiration shoot through her as the dark, pure eyes, with their sad timidity, met her own proudly cold ones.

"No, madame," said Madge, "we have not travelled much. We have only been in London."

Another silence. The countess noticed the "madame," and the clear, bell-like voice; but neither the title of respect nor the sweetness of the tone in which it was uttered softened her heart.

"Royce has coached her," she thought, bitterly. "London is very empty just now, I suppose?" she said.

Madge's eyes opened wide. "Oh, no; it is quite full. The crowd was so great that sometimes Jack and I could scarcely make our way along the streets."

The countess frowned. "Jack?" she said, haughtily. Madge's face crimsoned, then resumed its paleness.

"I—I mean Royce," she said. The countess inclined her head slightly.

"I did not know," she said, icily. "It is the name he gave me—" She stopped.

"Pray call your husband what you please," said the countess, with a fine blending of courtesy and contempt which passed over Madge like a cold wind.

But her eyes dropped meekly. This was her first lesson, and she would not forget it.

"Did you like London?" asked the countess.

Madge looked up. "I thought it was wonderful," she said in a low voice. "I had never been there before. But I should not like to live there. It's too big and too noisy. One feels as if one were quite alone there."

The countess looked at her with a faint curiosity. "You had never been to London?" she said.

"No," said Madge. "Our people—" She stopped, the blood rushed to her face, the room swam before her.

The countess drew herself up and turned away from her, palpably to the men.

"Is it not dinner-time, Seymour?" she said.

"Yes, madame," he replied, looking at her watch; "but we are waiting for Irene, I imagine."

"She had a headache, and went to lie down," said the countess.

Madge remembered Irene, and started slightly at the sound of her name. She looked round the room. She had not only never seen such a place, but had never read of one. The vaulted ceiling, picked out with olive and dull gold, the painted walls, the pictures, the marble statues, the great marble and ormolu fire-place, the Venetian mirrors and fish silk hangings filled her with a sense of wonder which oppressed her.

Then she glanced at the countess and sighed. She seemed to Madge to belong to a different species to herself. She had seen ladies as they drove past the string of caravans on the road, and had sometimes spoken to them—asked them to permit her to tell their fortunes—at races meetings, but never until now did she understand the vast difference between them and herself. And she had married the son of one of the proudest and haughtiest of these "gentry."

Her heart sunk. She longed for Royce—no longer Jack, alas!—to come near her and encourage her with a word, or a smile, or a pressure of the hand. A sense of loneliness fell upon her like a chilly cloud. The vaulted ceiling, with its painted flowers and birds, seemed to be crushing down upon her.

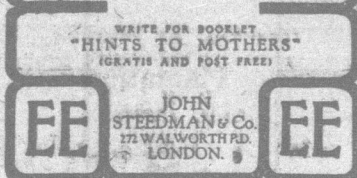
And then the door opened, a figure in white stood for a moment in the opening, and glided toward her.

It was Irene, all in white, with a pale mauve orchid in her golden hair. (To be continued.)

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Just Folks. By EDGAR A. GUEST

ONCE WE HAD A LITTLE CHILD.

Once we had a little child, Life was radiant when she smiled. In that happy long ago to know. Every charm was ours to give. Swiftly by the glad years went. Filled with hope and merriment. Then one night the angels came. To her bed and spoke her name. Came and whispered: "Marjorie! God has sent us down for thee."

Oh, the bitter tears which fell! Oh, the hurt we cannot tell. And the lonely days and bleak. While we vainly tried to seek. Reason for that cruel blow. Oh, we cried: "Why! never know. Why this sorrow had to be! God has taken Marjorie. Called away our lovely child, Leaving us unconsoled."

Now we talk of her again, Free from every worldly pain: Now we see her at her play. Age has come to us, but she is the child she used to be. Neither sin nor hurt nor care. Now can mar her beauty there, Marjorie will always be. Innocent and fair to see.

She is safe from every woe. Hurt and pain she'll never know. She was ours, though brief her stay. Time can never take away. Change or stain her memory. Lovely that will always be. We shall know her, young and fair. She shall smile, as once she smiled, Always as our lovely child.

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In BROWN CALF BLUCHER—Rubber heel. Sizes 9 to 15, 3.75; sizes 1 to 5, 4.50.

In BROWN CALF BLUCHER—Leather heel. Sizes 9 to 13, 3.50; sizes 1 to 5, 4.00.

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MEN'S BROWN CALF BLUCHER BOOTS 4.50

MEN'S BLACK KID BLUCHER—With rubber heel 5.00

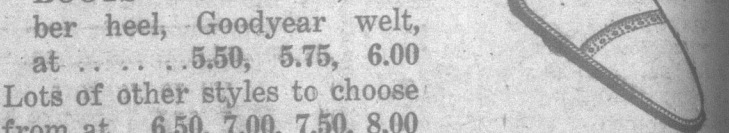
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