

Boarding House Romance

New arrivals were expected at the Sea View Boarding House, and the occupants of that attractive "home from home" were in a state of unusually excited interest, for not only was there the hope of their bringing new vitality into the very torpid life there, but rumor had it—a rumor which was vouched for as correct, too—that one of the new arrivals was an heiress, and quite young. The very idea of it put the household in a perfect flutter.

It was an unusually dull time of the year at Littleseason. Many of the rooms at the Sea View Boarding House were empty, and the few boarders who were there were, as the factious gentleman of the party observed, as dull as the season and as empty as the house.

So the prospect of newcomers, probably gay and festive in their tastes, was hailed with delight by several of the boarders, and even greater delight by Mrs. Murphy, the proprietress, who had been in dread lest the dullness of the one half of her guests should drive away the other half. And it was with real pleasure that she announced at breakfast one morning that the heiress, Miss Gregory, and her chaperone, Mrs. Vine, would arrive in time for dinner that evening. In an instant the gloom of the meals looking up with interest. Miss Moberg, an elderly young lady, who divided her days amongst "hydros" and boarding houses—and was, as she proudly boasted, up to all the ways of such places—ceased to speculate as to which she should complain about first, the bacon, the toast, or the way her bed had been made, and looked archly across at Mr. Jessop, the factious man.

"A chag loce you," she said with a giggle. "A chance to settle in life." Mr. Jessop was supposed to admire her, and this was intended to pique him. She studiously avoided making the remark to, or looking at, the handsome, bored-looking man at the far end of the table, on whom all other eyes were turned.

"Now, Mr. Thurston," said Mrs. Murphy, turning to him in a way which to those versed in the ways of boarding houses and their managers showed that he was a distinct favorite. "It is fate which is bringing her here, I am sure. We shall be pleased to know to see you happily settled with a rich wife."

There was a general titter round the table. Mr. Thurston smiled a tolerant, superior smile. "Is she young and pretty?" he asked, in an offhand manner.

"She is young, I know; I don't know if she is pretty, for I haven't seen her yet, but you know," meaningly, and with a nod of her head, "heiresses are all pretty."

"Not all," responded Mr. Thurston carelessly.

"Fine feathers make fine birds, I suppose you mean," said the elder Miss Jenkins, tartly.

"Well, dress does make a difference doesn't it," Mrs. Murphy answered hastily, in a friendly, confidential tone. "I should say, knowing one's style and how to dress to suit it make the difference. Now you, Miss Jenkins, you have divined the secret. No style could suit you better than the one you adopt."

Miss Jenkins was appeased, and began to contemplate a new evening blouse wherewith to rival the charms of the newcomer. A vast amount of refurbishing and making of new blouses was got through during that day, and the dinner table presented quite a cheerful and revived aspect that night. The newcomers were a moment or two late, but by common consent the usual instantaneous dash at their soup was postponed by all, and they sat waiting in pleased expectation, examining each other's new finery while.

And then, with the hesitating steps of persons in new surroundings, "the heiress," as she was then and always called, preceded by her chaperone, came into the room. Perhaps Mrs. Murphy was the least pleased of all those present at the appearance of the newcomers. The stately, self-possessed air of the elder lady, a certain something about her which stamped her as of the class so many of her boarders posed as belonging to, but without deceiving anyone, made her uneasy and nervous. She felt doubtful as to the good taste of Mr. Jessop's jokes, and devoutly hoped he would keep quiet, and devoutly hoped Mrs. Wiggins' venomous vulgarity made her grieve. The appearance of "the heiress" was not pleasing to her either, only in another way.

She certainly seems to admire him," said the younger Miss Jenkins. "Not more than Miss Gregory does," put in Mrs. Wiggins. "I see her peering round Mrs. Vine at him, drinking in every word he says, just as though he were Solomon himself, and it's nothing but about a lot of dirty common people, and looking after them, and providing houses for them. I am sure she can't be interested a bit, really. But she is like all young girls, wants to have the attention of all the men, can't bear any to be paid to us elderly people."

"Perhaps," snapped Miss Jenkins. "Anyone can see Miss Gregory is mad about Mr. Thurston, and he, like all men, is only ready to marry for money, in spite of her plainness." This was intended as a "tit-for-tat" for Mrs. Moberg, who had lately professed for Mr. Thurston had been the aced-just-of-the-lady members of that establishment for some time.

But in spite of the certainty with which she spoke as to the feelings of "the heiress" and her immediate neighbors at table, they really knew very little, for, except at meals, they saw nothing of each other. Eleanor Gregory and her chaperone had a private sitting-room where they sat and read and wrote a good deal; and so they went for long, rambling walks in all directions, an amusement unknown to the other ladies at Sea View, who confined themselves to a stroll on "the Prom," as they called it. And it happened that they did not know that on those long walks Mr. Moyle often joined the two ladies but even more often accompanied the younger lady alone, Mrs. Vine being

generally unequal to the long distances they could go. Nor did they know anything of the impatience with which "the heiress" listened sometimes to Mr. Thurston's well-meant but frivolous remarks, longing all the while to hear what was falling from Robert Moyle's lips. They none of them ever connected in their minds the young girl with the grave, almost grey-haired man, who looked so much older than he really was. He was only thirty-five really, ten years older than "the heiress," and ten years younger than her chaperone.

It did not occur to the chaperone either to think of any possible danger to the peace of mind of either of them. They were interested in the same subjects, deeply interested, and widely read man, so refined, so gentle, so wide in his range of interests, was good for a girl who had such great responsibilities devolving upon her. It never occurred to Mrs. Vine that love might add yet another interest to Mr. Moyle's wide range. She, too, fell into the mistake of thinking him a much older man than he was. And when at last he came one day to her with a troubled face, more than usually grave, and yet with a look on it which in anyone else she would have thought shyness or embarrassment, and asked her for an interview, she never dreamed what it was he had to say to her.

"I have come," he said, sitting down and falling into his usual attitude, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his face on his hands, his eyes gazing wistfully before him. "To tell you—that I love Miss Gregory."

"He spoke quite shyly but quite frankly."

"What do you say?" cried Mrs. Vine, astonished beyond expression.

"I love Miss Gregory. It is not astonishing, seeing what she is, and I am not really old, you know I am only thirty-five."

Mrs. Vine groaned. She was perplexed and troubled, he saw. "Don't be alarmed," he said gently. "I have not told her. I thought I had better tell you first, and if, as if probable, you think it better for her, that I should not speak, I will go away—somewhere, and she need never know. I want to save her all pain."

Mrs. Vine was touched and terribly sorry for him. "She is very wealthy," she said lamely. "It is such a responsibility for me." She did not mean to wound him, and he knew it, but his color rose. "I am not a poor man," he said quietly. "I have quite a thousand a year. It is not wealth, but it would have been more than enough if she had not been so rich. If it were not that she will make such good use of her money, I could sincerely wish she had none," he added, after a pause.

Mrs. Vine grew more and more uneasy. If she had but to follow her own impulses, she would have given him permission there and then to speak to Eleanor, and have wished him success, but the very fact of her feelings being so strong in his favor made her doubt her own judgment.

"Have you any idea what Eleanor's feelings towards you are?" she asked.

"No, none whatever. I hope they are favorable. There is nothing in me to attract a girl—or indeed anyone. Oh, no, if I had had any idea that her feelings were involved—I am afraid I might have spoken first to her," and he looked up at his judge with a smile half deprecating, half wistful, "but," with a sigh, "as it is—nobody but myself will suffer."

"I shall be very grieved for you, if you have—to suffer," she said, kindly. And then the door opened, and Eleanor herself came in, her eyes bright, and her cheeks glowing. "Will you allow me time to think the matter over?" asked Mrs. Vine hurriedly.

"As long as you like," he answered a little unsteadily, the sight of the girl had made him less sure of himself. "Till tomorrow," said Mrs. Vine.

"What are you so grave about?" asked Eleanor, gaily. "What is to happen tomorrow? Oh, you are not going," she cried, her face falling. But their visitor quietly insisted. When she had gone she sank into a chair, silent, thoughtful, all trace of her gaiety vanished.

At dinner that night Mr. Thurston found his neighbor, unusually difficult to interest, in fact, he failed utterly, even the unusual embarrassment of his manner being lost on her. She was the only person at the table, perhaps, on whom it was lost; certainly he failed to arouse at least some feeling. She was, he saw, either utterly absorbed in thought, or in listening to what fell from Robert Moyle's lips.

When she retired to her bedroom Eleanor was still lost in thought. She vaguely recalled and frightened. She did not feel jealous of Mrs. Vine. Certainly the few sentences she had heard, the gravity of their faces, all struck her as strange, and full of some meaning she could not fathom, and she was hurt that she was kept out of their confidence. She was frightened by a revelation which had come to her suddenly, the revelation of the strength of her feeling for this kind, grave man, and by what he would be for her, if—when they left this place, and him. Letting her mind take off her gown, she bade her brush her hair quickly and leave her, but she did not go to bed. She sat on the edge of her dressing-gown, thinking. She rose at last, and, going to the window, leaned far out. The sea was near, she could hear the boom and the roar. The sound so filled her ears, and he thoughts her mind, that

she did not notice the hours striking, nor anything else. And it was long before the small which filled the house attracted her.

"Burning," she cried at last, with a sudden recollection of having left the candles alight on the dressing table. But though her room was full of the haze of the smoke, there was no fire there. "There must be fire somewhere," she cried, and ran to her door. Smoke was creeping in under and around it. She threw it open, and was met by a thick white cloud which drove her backwards, blinded, choking. "I must rouse the house," she cried in an agony of dread, and shutting the door, and rushing to the bell, she pulled it violently, but, remembering at the same moment that the servants were in their beds, she rushed to the door once more, only pausing to wind a wet towel about her mouth. This time she heard sounds in another part of the house. The others were already roused. Thank heaven she had only Mrs. Vine and herself to save. Their rooms were at the end of a long passage apart from the rest of the household, and the other rooms on either side of the passage were empty. It would be puzzling to find Mrs. Vine's room in that smoke, she knew. She stooped down and tried to creep forward on her hands and knees, but she was choked and blinded. Then she heard footsteps rushing up the stairs and towards her. A fireman's helmet caught her eye. "In there, in there," she cried, "there is a lady in the end room. She will be suffocated." How they endured the smoke she could not tell, they were gasping. But with marvellous swiftness the man found the door, and in a moment came out with an unconscious burden in his arms, and dashed away.

"There is another lady down there," he said to someone he met at the top of the stairs.

"God help us," ejaculated the newcomer. The smoke in the passage was so dense he had to crawl along it, even then a less determined man would have been daunted. Eleanor heard him coming, and tried to speak, but she was almost choked, and her voice failed her. She tried to move, but was helpless. All she could do was to wait until she felt his groping hands, but he had heard her gasping breathing, and was guided by the sound, and as soon as he felt the touch of her skirts, sprang to his feet, seized her in his arms, and made one desperate rush out of the place.

Neither could speak, but each knew well who the other was. He tore down the stairs and on until he came to a small room away from the burning part of the house. How he managed to get so far was a miracle, but it was all he could do. As he reached the door he staggered, and Eleanor, quickly slipping to her feet, was only just in time to save him from falling headlong on the floor. Supporting him, more dead than alive herself, she got him to a couch, on which they both sank exhausted, gasping, unstrung. For moments it took Robert Moyle all his determination and strength to fight off the overpowering faintness which numbed his senses. Eleanor looked at him with eyes dilated with fear, and another look in them, too, of which she was utterly unconscious, but which made her heart leap with joy. Her face, even her lips, was ashy white, and full of a great absorbing anxiety. In his agitation and happiness, in the reaction from the anguish of the past moments, he lost his usual calm control, and leaning forward he seized her little trembling hand in his.

"My darling, my darling," he cried in a voice vibrating with love. He saw her face change in a moment, he saw the anguish die away, and love, hope, happiness irradiate every feature, while the deadly whiteness gave way to a glorious blush.

"Am I?" she said simply in a tone of questioning surprise. "Am I—are you—do you?"

He drew her towards him, unresisting. "You are more," he cried, "if that is possible. You are all the world to me, more precious than life. Does it make any difference to you that I love you? Do you care, can you give me hope—anything in return?"

"Only my heart, my whole love, myself," she answered fervently. "Care," she cried; "does it make any difference?" repeating his words. "It makes all the difference in the world to me." For the next few moments the fire, their late danger, everything, was forgotten, everything but each other and the golden future. Then there came a sound of scuffling in the passage, a struggling and banging, and in another instant Mr. Thurston staggered into the room, carrying a female figure with a shawl enveloped head.

At sight of Eleanor he stopped dead as though turned to stone, his arms slackened until the figure in them almost fell to the floor. With a wild cry she slipped from him, and collapsed on a handy chair, while he gazed in speechless amazement from Eleanor to his late burthen, and back again. "You—you—" he gasped brokenly, "I thought—" Then he turned and fled.

He had rescued Miss Moberg in mistake for "the heiress," had proposed to her, while laboring under the delusion, and had been accepted.


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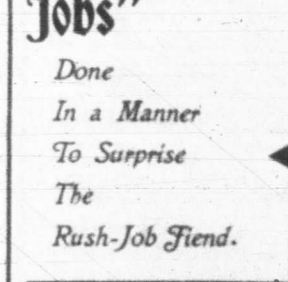
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