The Trappings of Life.

I.

"Will you come up, please?"

The words were spoken by a small pageboy in the hall of the Hotel Metropole, London.

I felt decidedly nervous as I followed him into the lift. Being only twenty at the time and left recently an orphan, I must have looked rather pitiful, dressed in deep mourning, with pale cheeks and an anxious expression.

I was shown into a private sitting-room, where a strange lady greeted me. She was dark, and small, with very bright eyes and almost unnaturally red lips. Her fingers were heavily jewelled and felt cold to the touch.

"You are Miss Edgell, I suppose?" she said, motioning me to a chair, "I have your letter here."

Mrs. Michael took up a black-edged sheet as she spoke, and glanced at the writing.

"Yes."

"Have you been out as a governess before?"

"No. My mother only died a month ago, and now I have to earn my own living."

"Poor girl!"

She fixed her keen, dark eyes upon me as if reading me through and through.

"You don't look much of a blue stocking, but that does not matter to me. You only wanted very youthful pupils, I understood, or I should not have placed myself in communication with you. I have one small boy, and he is very good, I can do anything with him. I have been trying to find a nice, pleasant young person who would be more of a companion for Archie. I don't think children ought to be crammed with learning."

A sigh of relief escaped me. I had so dreaded being questioned as to my capabilities.

Never having contemplated the role of governess, and with a natural antipathy to lesson books, I felt like a masquerader as the interview opened. Now I breathed more freely, while hope rose in my heart.

"Would you mind going abroad with us? You see, though my husband is English, I am a Russian, and we spend a good deal of our time at Petersburg."

The idea charmed me. I told her I had always longed to travel.

"I was afraid I might have some difficulty in getting an English girl to accompany us just now. There has been so much talk lately about the disturbed state of Russia. For myself, I never pay any heed to these commotions."

I remember, though it is many, many years ago, the strange thrill of excitement I felt at her words. I had inwardly rebelled against the deadly monotony and routine of my fate. Here was a chance in a thousand, an opportunity of seeing the world, and escaping from the old country, that held only sad associations for me.

"I am not in the least frightened," I said.

I fancied I detected a half smile flit over her face.

"Perhaps you have not read the papers lately since your trouble. It is sometimes like that; people lose interest in outside things."

I confessed I could think of nothing but plans for my own future, when the necessity for action arose.

"It's these secret societies," she exclaimed, "that are a perfect terror to the country! They have agents who murder everyone desirable to remove. What with the assassinations of state officers, and whole towns being set on fire——"

"Oh, yes, I know of that," I said, eager to disown my supposed ignorance. "But surely things have quieted down by now."

"To a certain extent—because the people are continually bullied by the police and crushed by officials. They can hardly bear the treatment, so rigorous has it become. Scarcely a mouse can move in a Russian town today without a written permit. But I must not drift on to the subject, or I shall get carried away; and we Russians have to be very careful of our tongues."

So saying, she talked about terms, and various duties in regard to Archie, which shall not be chronicled here.

Suffice it to add, that when I left the hotel I was no longer a free agent, but engaged as Archie's governess, and partial companion to his foreign mother.

II.

It certainly seemed a delightful situation, and as the bustle and excitement of foreign travel was entirely new to me, I appreciated my good fortune accordingly.

We journeyed in most luxurious fashion, Mr. and Mrs. Michael, a cousin of his, Harcourt Scott, myself, and the small boy, an independent little fellow, with his mother's bright eyes.

Mr. Scott was a man of about thirty, with a short pointed beard, and well moulded features. I liked his kind, low voice, as he conversed in the train.

He told me stories of Russia, and kept Archie quiet when I grew sleepy and tired with talking.

To a girl who has never been further than Cornwall for a summer holiday, a journey of three or four days seems an eternity.

I felt as if my kind employers and Mr. Scott were quite old friends by the time we reached Petersburg.

"You must be glad to see your native land again," I said to Mrs. Michael.

A queer look came in her dark eyes.

"My husband has business here," she replied. "I needs must come. I have no love for this great city, though I was born in it. All my people are dead, killed, frozen, by their country's cold heart. But it is a long story. My father did much for the state, yet received no gratitude or recompense. It is often the case with great public benefactors. I despise and hate ingratitude, the crying sin of the age."

Her words came sharply. She looked a woman capable of revenge.

"How sad for you!" I murmured.

She smiled—a bitter flickering smile.

I had always heard her speak lightly, and the sudden change of tone surprised me. I felt there were depths in her character that a mere outsider like myself could never probe. From the first I had a vague suspicion of something queer, inexplicable, uncanny, about this woman. I often could not look her in the eyes without feeling dizzy. Their brightness dazzled me. Archie simply worshipped his mother, and would crawl into her arms, falling asleep while she crooned a little song. I had never seen him disobey her, through all the fatigues of the journey, though he contradicted me flatly on several occasions, for which indiscretion Mr. Scott severely reprimanded him.

As soon as we were settled in Petersburg I began my daily task of instilling knowledge into my young charge. The lesson hours were short, and we spent the best part of our day out walking.

There was so much to amaze and interest me in this magnificent city on the banks of the Neva, the splendor of which all but took my breath away at times.

I noticed that Mrs. Michael hardly ever left the house, and wondered at such apathy in so young a woman. She talked seldom, and her brow was perpetually furrowed as if from thought, or some hidden anxiety.

Mr. Michael and his cousin were not often at home, so she consequently spent the greater part of her time in solitude.

"Are you unwell?" I said one day.

"No," she replied quickly. "Why do you ask?"

"I thought you were not quite yourself. Forgive me; but you look pale, and very thin."

"Perhaps I am bored, it is the wrong time of year for this place. You cannot imagine what a gay sight the river will be in a few months' time, with people skating and the sleighs. There are so many ways of amusing oneself then. The iceboats are grand, glorious fitted up with sails just like yachts and the ice-hills or flying mountains make splendid going. We glide down them on sleighs at a tremendous pace, and the force carries us up another."

I could see, as she talked, that her thoughts were far away from the scenes she was describing.

"Is Archie in your room?" I queried; "it is time we went out for a walk."

"Yes; I will fetch him. Poor little fellow, he fell asleep on my sofa; he is such a sleepy child."

"It is rather unnatural," I said; "boys of his age don't, as a rule, get tired in the daytime."

"Unnatural!" she said, fretfully. "Really Miss Edgell, I wish you would not suggest that Archie is different to other children."

I felt snubbed, and resorted to silence; but I noticed my pupil seemed singularly dazed and stupid as I dressed him for our walk.

Before we started, Mrs. Michael joined us, carrying a little knapsack of Archie's in her hand, which she strapped over the boy's shoulder.

"In case you should get hungry before lunch, I've put up some biscuits for you, darling," she said, kissing him. "But don't eat them till you turn to come back, for it isn't very long since breakfast." Then she added to me in a whisper: "Don't let him open it too soon, as I've put some sweets in for a surprise. You can't know your way about yet, Miss Edgell, but Archie is as good as a guide. He has so many favorite walks."

With these words she watched us go.

Hand in hand we walked down the Nevskoi Prospekt, the finest street in the city, planted with great trees, and 130 feet broad—a street of enormous palaces, churches, government buildings, and shops.

My pupil led me along at a sharp pace. I wanted to pause and look at the queer lights and shadows on the Nikolayevski Bridge, which joins the English quay to the other shore. This great bridge is unique, being built of granite, while the rest are only boats. Archie seemed to fear I was going in that direction, and tugged my arm.

"This way," he said, "this way; such a pretty walk."

I allowed myself to be guided, in consequence of Mrs. Michael's advice; but when eventually Archie turned into a lovely "prospekt," street, with a deadly dull outlook, I grew uneasy and protested.

"I don't want to walk here," I said; "it isn't pleasant. We may lose ourselves."

Archie was stubborn, and, regardless of the remark, stumped on.

I grew angry, turning sharply round.

"How dare you disobey me—didn't you hear what I said? Really, Archie, if you can't do what you are told——"

But before I could finish the sentence, he had slipped his hand out of mine, and hurried ahead, running at a slow trot.

I followed hastily, unaccountably frightened; I knew not why.

"Will you stop, Archie!" I panted peremptorily.

I was upon him, when a tall figure in the ordinary dress of a Russian peasant came between us. The costume is very simple—a hat without a brim, a sheepskin coat, and coarse, baggy trousers tucked into large boots. But even in that moment I guessed he was not a moujik. He was hardly dirty enough, and his beard was not quite uncombed as the beards of these peasants. He caught hold of Archie, laying one hand on his shoulder and thrusting the other into his satchel, from which he seized a packet. I tried to interfere, but a second later the man had vanished.

"He has stolen my biscuits, he must have been awfully hungry," said Archie.

"How dreadful!" I cried. "Come home at once."

I was shaking with fear, and hurried into the more frequented thoroughfares, holding the boy tightly by the wrist.

A number of grey-coated soldiers passed us, going for exercise in the Champ de Mars. The sight of them somewhat calmed my feelings, but, still too frightened to walk, I hailed a "drojki," Russian cab, and drove back to the house. The driver, or "iss 'vosch," as he is called, was a mere bundle of rags.

"Why wouldn't you obey me, Archie?" I said, as we rattled along. "I can't bring you out again if you behave like that."

The boy looked up at me with quivering lips.

"I don't know! I don't know!" he said, and burst into tears.

I put my arm round my refractory charge, and drew him nearer. Somehow I felt sorry for the child.

When we got in, I told Mrs. Michael exactly what had happened. She put off the subject lightly.

"Some of these wretched moujiks are always starving!" she said. "They would do anything for food—even robbing a child."

She did not scold Archie for his disobedience to me, but petted him more than usual. She put him to bed herself that evening, kissing him many times.

After dinner, Mrs. Michael went to her room to write letters—her husband was dining out—so I found myself left alone in the drawing-room with Mr. Scott.

As usual, he drew me into conversation, asking me what I had done during the day, and whether I was tiring of Petersburg. I told him the incident of the morning, watching his face rather more shrewdly than usual. It grew strangely anxious as I detailed the adventure.

"I'm very glad you told me," he said, "very glad."

"Why?" I queried. "There was nothing in it, after all—a hungry moujik, after biscuits."

"Child," he said, addressing me for the first time in this familiar tone, "don't believe that; it was only Vera's story. The thing is not easy to explain, but I feel as if something were brewing in the air. I think it would be as well if you went back to England."

I stared at him amazed.

"I—can't—go!" I stammered.

"If it is only a matter of money," he urged, "let me help you."

I felt the color rise to my face.

"Oh, no, no! Why should I go?"

He paused before replying.

The Trappings of Life

"I will speak plainly, and Heaven forgive me if I am wronging my cousin's wife. He, poor fellow, is taken up with his own affairs; he does not know what these Russians are—the women especially—when they chafe under a grievance. Vera considers her family have been wronged by the state; even to speak of this skeleton in her cupboard turns her livid with passion. Spirits such as hers make for anarchism."

The very word chilled my blood.

"My suspicions have been aroused seriously of late," he continued; "but I have said nothing. What happened to-day confirms my suspicions. In this country any latters are liable to be opened by officials; nothing secret can go safely through the post. The passing of papers of importance becomes a science, and it looks as if Vera were carrying it to an unheard-of extent. She confessed to me once that she frequently mesmerises her child in order to have him entirely under her influence. Her will power doubtlessly guided him to-day, and Heaven knows what the supposed packet of biscuits contained. "Vera must have been in league with the man or she would have been furious at a stranger laying hands on her boy."

"But surely," I gasped, "Mrs. Michael wouldn't—"

"Don't trust her an inch," added the man; "believe her to be thoroughly unscrupulous—a woman who would not spare a young girl like you. That is why I advise—no, I beg of you to go."

I shook my head. I think I never felt more brave more determined, than at this moment.

"Whatever happens, I shall remain," I replied. "But I thank you for your warning, and only hope it may prove groundless."

III.

Some days after this event, towards evening, I was seated alone with Mrs. Michael. Archie had gone to tea with some small friends, accompanied by a maid.

We were quite by ourselves in the house, except for the servants. Imagine then, our astonishment when a perfect stranger was ushered into our presence—not a gentleman!

When the door closed behind him, he stated his business shortly in broken English.

His statement seemed to paralyze Mrs. Michael

The house, he told us, had fallen under suspicion, and he was in authority to search the premises and its inmates.

At first she indignantly denied any such authority, but our alarming visitor politely informed us he came from the head of the police, quietly, in order to cause no scandal should their suspicions prove unfounded. He then produced official papers, before which the unfortunate woman blanched to a deathly hue. I shall never forget the look of desperation in her face, nor the sudden cunning born of distraction, which crept into her eyes.

She sidled nearer to me, as if seeking protection. I felt her clinging to my dress, while I watched the man rummaging in her desk, turning out drawers and private boxes.

Suddenly she advanced a step forward, saying something to him in Russian.

He turned quickly, addressing me in English harshly.

His demand seemed reasonable enough, merely a request that I would turn out my pockets.

With the haste of innocence I proceeded to obey.

I thought as I felt my gown that I must have placed a copy-book of Archie's there. Pulling out the contents—something new to me—a plan drawn in red ink with queer signs at the corners, fell on the floor.

The man seized it eagerly, while a cry of righteous horror escaped Mrs. Michael.

"So you are the traitor—the spy!" she exclaimed, turning to me with a look of withering scorn. It is through you that an honest house has fallen into disrepute."

I was too taken back to utter a word for I saw through her trick plainly. To save herself she had passed the danger on to me. I knew now why she clung about my dress before speaking to the detective in Russian.

"If you will come with me quietly," said the man, showing a pair of handcuffs, "I'll not use these."

I shudderingly assented by a gesture of my head, already picturing the horrors of Siberia. My cloak and hat lay on the sofa, just where I had thrown them when coming in an hour since. I put them on mechanically, and followed the man.

A cab was waiting outside, into which he hustled me, and we drove away in the dark together.

IV.

My escort remained silent till the driver pulled up outside a large building which looked like a hotel. Then he bade me follow him through a side door up a staircase.

A moment later I found myself alone locked into a cheerful room where a fire blazed, for it was already getting cold.

I stood petrified, staring at the dancing flames, with the terror of this great calamity turning me faint and sick.

Presently the door opened again—a cry of joyful wonder escaped my lips and rushed forward to greet my friend and counsellor, Harcourt Scott. He was holding the fatal plan in his hand and smiling reassuringly.

"You've had a narrow escape," he said, "and I've caught my lady with her own weapons! Poor child, don't look so frightened. I think I have saved both you and her."

"What does it all mean?" I asked bewildered.

He drew a chair forward, into which I gladly sank.

In a few brief words he explained the mystery.

"I scented the danger," he said, "and determined to step in before the authorities. I happened to know that the police have the Michael's house under their supervision, and propose to raid it to-night, ransacking every corner from roof to basement. I guessed Vera would make you her victim—that the papers would probably be discovered in your boxes. She is bad enough even for that! I have risked my life to ascertain her secret; made myself a partial confederate with her allies. This plan in red was all the police had to find. I say all,' but it is enough to send her to Siberia."

As he spoke he dropped the thing into the heart of the great fire, watching it burn.

"And the man," I asked, "who arrested me?"

"He is my old and faithful servant, bless him! A fellow of strong courage, tact, and a consummate actor. I was forced to leave that part of the matter entirely in his hands. He has gone back now, to take a written explanation from me to my cousin, who, I fancy, will bring his wife out of Russia immediately. She has done harm enough already."

What I said, how I thanked him for my deliverance, had better be left to the reader's imagination, for I cannot remember now what words I used. It is more than twenty years ago.

"You must own at last," he said, smiling, "that I know best, and let me take you back to England."

What could I do? I was stranded alone in Russia without money, ignorant of the language, and with my only woman friend turned to an enemy—so I gladly accepted his kindly escort, the "faithful servant" fetched my luggage, and together we journeyed back to safer shores.

If propriety is shocked at the conclusion of my story, I am very sorry. Perhaps my readers will be interested to hear I am now Mrs. Harcourt Scott.

I sometimes meet my cousin Vera Michael in London, but we don't bow. This is Harcourt's wish.

VIEW FROM CASA BIANCA, SAN JUAN, PORTO RICO.

LIMPING MAY BE THE FAD.

We May Look For It as a Logical Successor of the Alexandra Limp.

If fate should decide against the recovery of the Prince of Wales—if he remains to the end of his life a cripple, lame in one leg—is it at all possible that a complimentary but counterfeit limp will become the fashionable fad among his associates and thence spread to the snobs and anglomaniacs everywhere?

These questions are not put in jest. They are asked in all seriousness. History shows by an infinitude of examples that fashions of the absurdest sort have sprung from the physical imperfections of the great, whether they were the result of birth or of accident.

Analogous cases to this suggested possibility may be found in the Prince's own family history.

The long trains which were so popular and so offensive a feature of the fashions of the early seventies grew out of the fact that Queen Victoria, owing to a painful swelling, had been obliged to wear bandages on her foot. To conceal the bandages she lengthened her skirts. Her dutiful subjects straightway lengthened their skirts also, and in a literal sense they went through the streets, carrying dust and garbage and potential disease into parlors and drawing rooms.

THE ALEXANDRA LIMP.

But the exact analogy is furnished by the fad or fashion which sprang up in aristocratic female circles in 1874, and was known as the Alexandra limp. In that year the Princess of Wales was afflicted with a lameness in one of her knees. Only a slight limp was the result, but this limp was caught up and imitated by the ladies of the court, and then by all the fool women of England.

Will an Albert Edward limp be the fin de siecle follower of the Alexandra limp?

History is full of similar anecdotes. Alexander the Great had a twist in his neck. It was therefore fashionable for every one in that monarch's court to carry his neck awry. One day Francis I. of France was struck on the chin with a piece of tile. To hide the resultant scar he allowed his beard to grow. His courtiers all followed his example. Thus beards came back into fashion, after having been out for nearly a century.

Charles VII. of France had a pair of ill made legs. He wore a long coat to conceal them. Result, everybody else wore long coats.

The peruke is said to be due to the misfortune of Philip, Duke of Bergundy. His hair fell out, and his physicians advised him to cover his head with artificial hair, which he did, and thus set the fashion.

At the battle of Steinkirk, which took place on the morning of August 3, 1692, the French nobles were surprised in their sleep, and hastily rushing out of their tents arranged their lace cravats in the most careless manner. The French were victorious and to commemorate their victory it became the fashion after this to wear the neck cloth in a negligee manner. Hence the origin of the Steinkirk cravat.

SIMILAR FADS.

During the reign of George III. his Royal Highness the Duke of York had a duel with Colonel Lennox, and the worthy colonel succeeded in shooting away one of the Duke's curls. Hence it became the correct thing to wear a curl on one side of the temple only.

When Fox, the first of Quakers, was sitting in church and the preacher said anything which he didn't like he moved solemnly, put on his hat and kept it on until the disagreeable remarks concluded. Hence arose the Quaker custom of wearing hats in church.

FOR CANINE PETS.

Dogs belonging to some fashionable women are now made to wear shoes. These shoes are made of chamois, and have light leather soles. The idea of the inventor was to protect polished floors, but the women who have adopted the shoes for their pets say they have done so to protect, not their floors, but the tender feet of the dogs from cold, heat and rough weather generally.