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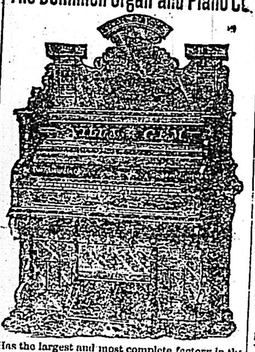
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A YOUNG GIRL'S WOOING.

BY E. P. ROE,
Author of "His Sombre Rivals," "From Jest to Earnest," &c., &c.

As the time for the gentlemen to arrive approached, Mrs. Muir showed more restless interest than Madge. The one anticipated a bit of amusement over Graydon's surprise; the other looked forward to meeting her fate. Mrs. Muir was garrulous; Madge was comparatively silent, and maintained the semblance of interest in a book so naturally that her sister exclaimed, "I expect you will die with a book in your hand! I could no more read now than preach a sermon. Come, it's time to make your toilet. Let me help you, and I want you to get yourself up 'perfectly regardless.' You must outshine them all at the hop this evening."

"Nonsense, Mary! They won't be here for an hour and a half. I'm going to lie down;" and she went to her room. When her sister sought admittance half an hour later the door was locked and all was quiet. At last, in her impatience, she knocked and cried, "Wake up. They will be here soon."

"I'm not asleep, and it will not take me long to dress."

"Well you are the coolest young woman I ever knew," Mrs. Muir called out, feeling that admittance was denied her.

Madge had determined to spend the final hour of her long separation alone. Her nature had become too deep and strong to seek trivial diversion from the suspense that weighed upon her spirit. As she thought of the possibility of failure, and its results, her courage faltered a little, and a few tears would come. At last, with a glance heavenward which proved that there was nothing in her heart to keep her from looking thither for sanction, she left her room, serene and resolute. She had taken her woman's destiny into her own hand, to mould it in her own way, but in no arrogant and unbelieving spirit.

Mrs. Muir uttered a disappointed protest. "O Madge, how plainly you are dressed!"

"I knew you wouldn't like it at first," was the quiet reply. By the time they had reached the parlor door opposite the office, near which they proposed to wait for the travellers, momentarily expected, Mrs. Muir was compelled to acknowledge the correctness of Madge's taste. Her costume no more distracted attention from herself than would the infolding calyx of a rosebud. In its exquisite proportions her fine figure was outlined by close white drapery, which made her appear taller than she really was. A single half-open Jacqueminot rose, like the one she had sent to Graydon at their parting over two years since, was fastened on her bosom. Her dark eyes burned with a suppressed excitement. Her complexion, if not so white as that of Miss Wildmere, was pure, and had a richer hue of health. But she was pale now. Her red lips half destroyed their exquisite curves in firm compression. The moment had not quite come for action, when those red lips must be true to herself, true to her purpose, even while they spoke words which might be misleading to others.

Mrs. Muir, with triumph, saw the glances of strong admiration turned toward her sister from every side. Madge saw them also, but only to read in them the verdict she hoped to obtain from the kind blue eyes for whose coming she waited.

Standing with Mrs. Muir, facing the long hall down which Graydon must advance, she know she would see him before he could recognize her. How much of longing, of breathless interest, would be concentrated in those moments of waiting, she herself had never imagined till they were passing.

The stages began to arrive, with consequent bustle, and the hasty advance toward the office of men seeking to register their names early, in order to secure a choice of rooms. At last she saw Graydon's tall form and laughing face, and for a second something approaching to faintness caused her to close her eyes. When she opened them again they rested upon Miss Wildmere.

This young lady understood the art of making an impressive and almost triumphal entry on new scenes. Therefore she had been in no haste. Indeed, haste had no place among her attributes: it was ungraceful and usually not effective. When, therefore, the crowd had passed on, and there was a comparative clear space in the hall, she advanced down it at Graydon's side as if her mind was wholly engrossed with their lively chat. Never for a moment was she unconscious of the attention they attracted. Graydon was one at whom even men would turn and look as he passed, and she believed that there was none other who could keep step with him like herself. So thought the self-appointed committee of reception who always regard curiously the new-comers at a summer resort, and there were whispered notes of admiration as the two paused for a moment before the register and looked back. Then it was seen that a meek-looking little lady and a nurse and child were straggling after them, while Mr. Muir brought up the rear. Graydon had some light wraps thrown gracefully over his arm, but the merchant carried the less ornamental *impedimenta* of the party, for the earlier guests had already overladen the office-boys. He now handed the valise—a sort of tender upon the baby—to a porter, and rather grimly acknowledged Mrs. Wildmere's mingled thanks and feeble protestations.

"Please register for us," said Miss Wildmere, glancing carelessly yet observantly around. An intervening group had partially hidden Madge and her sister. It was also evident that Graydon was too much occupied with his fair companion to look far away. He complied, thinking, meantime, "Some day I may register for her again, and then my name will suffice for us both." The smile which followed the thought brought out the best lines of his handsome profile to poor Madge, who permitted no phase of expression on that face to escape her scrutiny. So true was the clairvoyance of her intense interest that she guessed the thought which was so agreeable to him, and she grew paler still.

Mr. Muir hastened to greet his wife, and then Graydon recognized her. He came at once and kissed her in his accustomed hearty way. Madge stood near, unnoted, unrecognized.

"Where's Madge? Isn't she well enough to come down?" he asked, his eyes following Miss Wildmere, who had entered the parlor, which she must cross to reach her room beyond. Mrs. Muir began to laugh immoderately, and Mr. Muir followed his brother's eyes with vexation. Graydon was on the *qui vive* instantly, and Madge drew a step nearer and began to smile. For once the punctilious and elegant Graydon forgot his courtesy, and looked at Madge in utter astonishment,—an expression, however, which passed swiftly into admiration and delight.

"Madge!" he exclaimed, seizing both her hands. "I couldn't have believed it. I wouldn't have believed it now but for your eyes;" and before she could prevent him he had placed a kiss upon her lips.

Miss Wildmere had seen the unknown beauty as she passed, had inventoried her with woman's instantaneous perception, had paused on the distant threshold and seen the greeting, then had vanished with a vindictive flash in her grey eyes.

Graydon's impetuous words and salute had produced smiles and envious glances, and the family party withdrew into a retired corner of the apartment, Madge's cheeks, meanwhile, vying, in spite of herself, with the rose on her breast. Graydon would not relinquish her hand, and, as Mrs. Muir had predicted, indulged in little more than exclamation points.

"There now, be rational," cried the young girl, laughing, her heart for the moment full of gladness and triumph. He was indeed bending upon her looks of admiration, delight, and affection.

"Why have I been kept in the dark about all this?" he at last asked, incoherently.

"For the same reason that we were. Madge meant to give us a surprise, and succeeded. I couldn't get over it, and they were always laughing at me, so I determined that I should have my laugh at you. Oh, wasn't it rich? To think of the elegant and refined society man standing there staring with his eyes and mouth wide open!"

"I don't think it was quite so bad as that, but if it was there's good reason for it. Tell me, Madge, how this miracle was wrought!"

"There, that's just what I called it," cried Mrs. Muir, "and it's nothing less than one, in spite of all that Madge and Henry can say."

"When you are ready for supper I will show you one phase of the miracle," said Madge, laughing, with glad music in her voice. "Come, I'm not an escaped member of a menagerie, and there's no occasion for you to stare any longer."

"Yes, come along," added Mr. Muir; "I've had no roast beef to-day and a surfeit of sentiment."

The young fellow colored slightly, but said brusquely: "Men's tastes change with age. I suppose you did not find a little sentiment amiss once upon a time. Well, Madge, you are not a bit of a ghost now, yet I fear you are an illusion."

"Illusions will vanish when you come to help me at supper. We will wait for you on the piazza."

As she paced its wide extent, her illusions also vanished. Graydon had greeted her as a brother, and a brother only. When the tumult at her heart subsided, this truth stood out most clearly. His kiss still tingled upon her lips. It must be the last, unless followed by a kiss of love. Their brotherly and sisterly relations must be shattered at once. No such relations existed for her, and only as she destroyed such regard on his part could a tenderer affection take its place. With her as his sister he would be content; he might not readily think of her in another light, and meantime might drift swiftly into an engagement with Miss Wildmere.

CHAPTER X.

OLD TIES BROKEN.

"Madge," said Graydon rejoining her on the piazza, and giving her his arm while Mrs. Muir sat down to wait for her husband, "you wear a rose like the one you sent me when we parted so long ago. Oh, but my heart was heavy then! Did you make this choice tonight by chance?"

"You have a good memory."

"You have not answered me."

"I shall admit nothing that will increase your vanity."

"You will now of necessity make my pride overweening."

"How is that? I hope to have a better influence over you."

"As I look at you I regard my pride as most pardonable and natural. My old thoughts and hopes are realized beyond even imagination, although, looking at your eyes, in old times, I always had a high ideal of your capabilities. I should be a clod indeed if I were not proud of such a sister to champion in society."

Madge's hearty laugh was a little forced as she said, "You have a delightfully cool way of taking things for granted. I'm no longer a little sick girl, but to vary Peggotty's exultant statement, a young lady 'growed.' You forgot yourself, sir, in your greeting; but that was pardonable in your paroxysm of surprise."

"What, Madge! Will you not permit me to be your brother?"

"What an absurd question!" she answered, still laughing. "You are not my brother. Can I permit water to run up hill? You were like a brother, though, when I was a sick child in the queer old times,—kinder than most brothers, I think. But, Graydon, I am grown up. See, my head comes above your shoulder."

"Well, you are changed."

"For the better, in some respects, I hope you will find."

"I don't at all like the change you suggest in our relations, and am not sure I will submit to it. It seems absurd to me."

"It will not seem so when you come to think of it," she replied, gravely and gently. "You think of me still as little Madge; I am no longer little Madge, even to myself. A woman's instincts are usually right, Graydon."

"Oh, thank you! I am glad I am still Graydon. Why do you not call me 'Mr. Muir?'"

"Because I am perfectly rational. Because I regard you as almost the best friend I have."

"Break up that confabulation," cried Mr. Muir to the young people, who had paused and were confronting each other at the farther end of the piazza. "If you think Madge can explain herself in a moment or a week you are mistaken. Come to supper."

"My brother is right,—you are indeed an enigma," he said, discontentedly.

"An enigma, am I?" she responded, smiling. "Please remember that most of the world's enigmas were slowly found out because so simple."

As they passed from the dusky piazza to the large, brilliantly lighted supper-room, with nearly all its tables occupied, he was curious to observe how she would meet the many critical eyes turned toward her. Again he was puzzled as well as surprised. She walked at his side as though the room were empty. There was no affectation of indifference, no trace of embarrassed or of pleased self-consciousness. From the friendly glances and smiles that she received it was also apparent that she had already made acquaintances. She moved with the easy, graceful step of perfect good breeding and assured confidence, and was as self-possessed as himself. Was this the little ghost who had once been afraid of her own shadow, which was scarcely less substantial than herself?

They had been seated but a moment when Miss Wildmere entered alone. To Graydon this appeared pathetic. He did not know that her mother was so worn out from the journey, and so embarrassed by unaided efforts to get settled while still caring for her half-sick child, that she had decided to make a slight and hasty repast in her own room. Miss Wildmere cared little for what took place behind the scenes, but was usually superb before the footlights. Nothing could have been more charming or better calculated to win general good-will than her advance down the long room. Her external beauty she was more striking at first than Madge. She did not in the least regret that she must enter alone, for she was not proud of her mother, and nothing drew attention from herself. She assumed, however, a slight and charming trace of embarrassment and perplexity, which to Graydon was perfectly irresistible, and he mentally resolved that she should not much longer want a devoted escort. Madge saw his glance of sympathy and strong admiration, his smile and low bow as she passed, ushered forward by the obsequious head-waiter, and her heart sunk. In spite of all she had attempted and achieved, the old cynical assurance came back to her,—"You are nothing to Graydon, and never can be anything to him." She was pale enough now, but her eyes burned with the resolution not to yield until all hope was slain. She talked freely, and was most friendly toward Graydon, but there was a slight constraint in his manner. The beautiful and self-possessed girl who sat opposite him was not little Madge whom it had been his pleasure to pet and humor. She evidently no longer regarded herself as his sister, but rather as a charming young woman abundantly able to take care of herself. She had indeed changed marvellously in more respects than one, and he felt aggrieved that he had been kept in ignorance of her progress. He believed that she had grown away from him and the past, as well as grown up, according to her declaration. He recalled her apparent disinclination for correspondence, and now thought it due to indifference, rather than an indolent shrinking from effort. The surprise she had given him seemed a little thing—an act due possibly to vanity—compared with the sisterly accounts she might have written of her improvement. She had achieved the wonder without aid from him, and so of course had not felt the need of his help in any way. In remembrance of the past he felt that he had not deserved to be so ignored. Her profession of friendship was all well enough,—there could scarcely be less than that,—but the Madge he had looked forward to meeting again as of old no longer existed. Oh yes, she should have admiration and exclamation points to her heart's content, but he had come home from his long exile hungry for something more and better than young lady friends. He had long since had a surfeit of these semi-Platonic affinities. The girl who apparently had been refusing scores of men for his sake was more to his taste. His brother's repugnance only irritated and incited him, and he thought, "I'll carry out his business policy to the utmost, but away from the office I am my own man."

As these thoughts passed through his mind, they began to impart to his manner a tinge of gallantry, the beginning of a departure from his old fraternal and affectionate ways. He was too well-bred to show pique openly, or to reveal a sense of injury during the first hours of reunion, but already felt absolved from being very attentive to a girl who not only had proved so conclusively that she could manage admirably for herself, but who also had been so indifferent that she had not needed his sympathy in her efforts or thought it worth while to gladden him with a knowledge of her progress. He had loved her as a sister, and had given ample proof of this. He had maintained his affection for the Madge that he remembered. "But I have been told," he thought, bitterly, "that the young lady before me is a 'friend.' She has been a rather distant friend, if the logic of events counts for anything. Not satisfied with the thousands of miles that separated us, she has also withheld her confidence in regard to changes that would have interested even a casual acquaintance."

Madge soon detected the changing expression of his eyes, the lessening of simple, loving truth in his words, and while she was pained she feared that all this and more would necessarily result from the breaking up of their old relations. Her task was a difficult one at best,—perhaps it was impossible,—nor had she set about it in calculating policy. Their old relations could not be maintained on her part. Even the touch of his hand had the mysterious power to send a thrill to her very heart. Therefore she must surround herself at once with the viewless yet impassable barriers which a woman can interpose even by a glance.

As they rose, Graydon remarked, "I have helped you at supper, and yet one of my illusions has not vanished. The air at Santa Barbara must have been very nourishing if your appetite was no better there than here. Your strange 'sea-change' on that distant coast is still marvellous to me."

"Mary can tell you how ravenous I usually am. I do not meet friends every day from whom I have been separated so long."

"It is a very ordinary thing for me to meet 'friends,'" he replied, *sotto voce*, "for I have many. I had hopes that I should meet one who would be far more than a friend. I'm half inclined to go out to Santa Barbara and see if my little sister Madge is not still there."

"Do you think me a fraud?"

"Oh no, only so changed that I scarcely know how to get acquainted with you."

"Even if I granted so much, which I from it the greatest wonder of them all."

to not, I might suggest that one must be uninteresting indeed if she inspires no desire for acquaintance. But such talk is absurd between us, Graydon."

"Of course it is. You are so changed for the better that I can scarcely believe my eyes or ears, and my heart not at all. Of course your wishes shall be my law, and my wishes will lead me to seek your acquaintance with deep and undisguised interest. You see, the trouble with me is that I have not changed, and is will require a little time for me to adapt myself to the new order of things. I am now somewhat stunned and paralyzed. In this imbecile state I am both stupid and selfish. I ought to congratulate you, and so I do with all the shattered forces of my mind and reason. You have improved amazingly. You are destined to become a belle *par excellence*, and probably are one now,—I know so little of what has occurred since we parted."

"You are changed also, Graydon. You used to be kind in the old days;" and she spoke sadly.

"In some respects I am changed," he said, earnestly; "and my affection for you is of such long standing and so deep that it prompts me to make another protest." (They had strolled out upon the grounds and were now alone.) "I have changed in this respect: I am no longer so young as I was, and am losing my zest for general society. I was weary of residence abroad, where I could have scarcely the semblance of a home, and, while I had many acquaintances and friends, I had no kindred. I'm sorry to say that the word 'friend,' in its reference to young ladies, does not mean very much to me; or, rather, I have learned from experience just what it does mean. A few years since I was proud of my host of young lady friends, and some I thought would continue to be such through life. Bah! They are nearly all married or engaged; their lives have drifted completely away from mine, as it was natural and inevitable that they should. We are good friends still, but what does it amount to? I rarely think of them; they never of me, I imagine. We exert no influence on each other's lives, and add nothing to them. I never had a sister, but I had learned to love you as if you were one, and when I heard that you were to be of our family again, the resumption of our old relations, was one of my dearest expectations. It hurt me cruelly, Madge, when you laughed at the idea as preposterous, and told me that I had forgotten myself when following the most natural impulse of my heart. It seemed to me the result of prudishness, rather than womanly delicacy, unless you have changed in heart as greatly as in externals. You could be so much to me as a sister. It is a relationship that I have always craved,—a sister not far removed from me in age; and such a tie, it appears to me, might form the basis of a sympathy and confidence that would be frank as unselfish and helpful. That is what I looked forward to in you, Madge. Why on earth can it not be?"

She was painfully embarrassed, and was glad that his words were spoken under the cover of night. She trembled, for his question probed deep. How could she explain that what was natural for him was impossible for her? He mistook her hesitation for a sign of acquiescence, and continued: "Wherein have I failed to act like a brother? During the years we were together was I not reasonably kind and considerate? You did not think of yourself then as one of my young lady friends. Why should you now? I have not changed, and, as I have said, I have returned hungry for kindred and the quieter pleasures of home. It is time that I was considering the more serious questions of life, and of course the supreme question with a man of my years is that of a home of his own. I have never been able to think of such a home and not associate you with it. I can invite my sister to it and make her a part of it, but I cannot invite young lady friends. A sister can be such a help to a fellow; and it seems to me that I could be of no little aid to you. I know the world and the men you will meet in society. Unless you seclude yourself, you will be as great a belle as Miss Wildmere. You also have a fine property of your own. Will it be nothing to have a brother at your side to whom you can speak frankly of those who seek your favor? Come, Madge, be simple and rational. I have not changed; my frank words and pleadings prove that I have not. If we do not go back to the hotel brother and sister it will be because you have changed;" and he attempted to put his arm around her and draw her to him.

She sprang aloof. "Well, then, I have changed," she said, in a low, concentrated voice. "Think me a prude if you will. I know I am not. You are unjust to me, for you give me, in effect, no alternative. You say, 'Think of me as a brother; feel and act as if you were my sister.' It's like declaring there is nothing in blood,—that such relations are questions of choice and will. I said in downright sincerity that I regarded you as almost the best friend I had, and I have not so many friends that the word means nothing to me. I do remember all your kindness in the past,—when have I forgotten it for an hour?—but that does not change the essential instincts of my womanhood, and since we parted I've grown to womanhood. You in one sense have not changed, and I still am in your mind the invalid child you used to indulge and fondle. It is not just to me now to ask that I act and feel as if there were a natural tie between us. The fact ever remains that there is not. Why should I deceive you by pretending to what is impossible? Nature is stronger than even your wishes, Graydon, and cannot be ignored."

She spoke hesitatingly, feeling her way across most difficult and dangerous ground, but her decision was unmistakable, and he said, quietly, "I am answered. See, we have wandered far from the house. Had we not better return?"

After a few moments of silence she asked: "Are you so rich in friends that you have no place for me?"

"Why, certainly, Madge," he replied, in cordial, off-hand tones; "we are friends. There's nothing else for us to be. I don't pretend to understand your scruples. Even if a woman refused to be my wife I should be none the less friendly, unless she had trifled with me. To my man's reason a natural tie does not count for; so much as the years we spent together. I remember what you were to me then, and what I seemed to you. I tried to keep up the old feeling by correspondence. The West is a world of wonders, and you have come

"I hope I shall not prove to you a monstrosity, Graydon. I will try not to be one if you will give me a chance."

"Oh no, indeed; you promise to be one of the most charming young ladies I ever met."

"I don't promise anything of the kind," she replied, with a laugh that was chiefly the expression of her intense nervous tension. It jarred upon his feelings, and confirmed him in the belief that their long separation had broken up their old relations completely, and that she, in the new career which her beauty opened before her, wished for no embarrassing relations of any kind.

"Well," he said, with an answering laugh, "I suppose I must take you for what you are and propose to be,—that is, if ever I find out."

In a few moments more, after some light badinage, he left her with Mr. and Mrs. Muir on the piazza, and went to claim his waltz with Miss Wildmere.

CHAPTER XI.

"I FEAR I SHALL FAIL."

The band had been discoursing lively strains for some time, and Miss Wildmere had at last dragged her mother down for a chaperon—the only available one as yet. The anxious mother was eager to return to her fretting child, and her daughter was much inclined to resent Graydon's prolonged absence. "If it were politic, and I had other acquaintances, I would punish him," she thought. It was a new experience for her to sit in a corner of the parlor, apparently neglected, while others were dancing. There were plenty who looked wistfully toward her; but there was no one to introduce her, and Graydon's absence left the ice unbroken.

She ignored the inevitable isolation of a new-comer, however, and when he appeared she took her finger at him as she said, "Here I am, constancy itself, waiting to give you my first dance, as I promised."

"I shall try to prove worthy," he said, earnestly. "You must remember, in extenuation, that I have not seen the ladies of our family for a long time."

"You use the plural, and are not at all singular in your prolonged absence with the charming Miss Alden. You certainly cannot look upon her as an invalid any longer, however else you may regard her," she added, with an arch look.

"You shall now have my entire regard as long as you will permit it."

"That will depend a little upon yourself. Mamma is tired, and I'm of no account compared with that infant upstairs; therefore I can't keep her as chaperon this evening, and I will go to my room as soon as you are tired of me."

"Not till then?"

"Not unless I go before."

"At some time, in the indefinite future, Mrs. Wildmere, you may hope to see your daughter again."

The poor lady smiled encouragingly, and gratefully. She would be most happy to have Graydon take the brilliant creature for better or worse as soon as possible. She liked him, as did all women, for she saw that he had a large, kindly nature. She now stole meekly away, while he with his fair partner glided out upon the floor. All eyes followed them, and even the veterans of society remarked that they had never seen more graceful dancing.

From her seat on the piazza Madge also watched the couple. The struggle to which she had looked forward so long had indeed begun, and most inauspiciously. Her rival had every advantage. The mood in which Graydon had returned predisposed him to prompt action, while she had lost her influence for the present by a course that seemed to him so unnatural as to be prudish. Miss Wildmere's manner gave all the encouragement that a man could wish for, and it was hard to view with charity, the smiling, triumphant belle. Madge suddenly became conscious that Mr. Muir was observing her, and she remarked, quietly: "I never saw better dancing than that. It's grace itself. Miss Wildmere waltzes superbly."

"Not better than you, Miss Alden," said Mr. Henderson, a young man who prided himself on his skill in the accomplishment under consideration, and with whom she had danced several times. "I've been looking for you, in the hope that you would favor me this evening."

She rose and passed with him through the open window. The waltz was drawing to a close; the majority had grown weary and sat down; and soon Madge and Miss Wildmere were the only ladies on the floor. Opinion was divided, some declaring that the former was the more graceful and lovely, while perhaps a larger number gave their verdict for the latter.

The strains ceased and left the couples near each other. Graydon immediately introduced Miss Wildmere. The girls bowed a little too profoundly to indicate cordiality. Madge also presented Mr. Henderson, hoping that he might become a partner for Miss Wildmere, and give Graydon an opportunity to dance with her. He resolved to break the ice at once so far as his relatives were concerned, and the confusion of Miss Wildmere to Mrs. Muir, and gave her a seat beside that lady. The girl of his choice should have not only a gallant, for the evening, but also a chaperon. He was not one to enter on timid, half-way measures; and he determined that his brother's prejudice should count for nothing in this case. His preference was entitled to respect, and must be respected. Of course the group chatted courteously, as well-bred people do in public, but Miss Wildmere felt that the atmosphere was chilly. She was much too politic to permit the slightest tinge of coldness in her manner toward those with whom she meditated such close relations should the barring "if" melt out of the way.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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