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A YOUNG GIRL'S WOOING.

BY E. P. ROE.

Author of "His Sombre Rivals," "From Jest to Earnest," etc.

(The power that Mr. Muir had acquired mainly by practice Madge possessed by nature. As we have seen, she was quite free from that most womanly phase of stupidity—which is often due to the heart rather than the head. Some women know what is told them if it is told plainly, others look into the eyes of those around them and see what is sought to be concealed. The selfish woman is self-blinded. She often has great powers of discernment, but will not take the trouble to use them, unless prompted by her own interests. Selfishness is too short-sighted, however, to secure lasting benefits. Usually nothing is more fatal than the success of mere self-seeking. While Madge pressed unwaveringly toward the goal of her hopes, she did not do so in thoughtless or callous indifference toward those who had strong claims upon her. With her sister, she soon saw that all was well,—that she was, as before, absorbed and content with the routine of her life. She was not so sure about her brother-in-law. During her absence lines of care had appeared in his face, and there was an abstracted and sometimes a troubled look in his eyes, as if he was pursued by questions that were importunate and even threatening. The indications of perturbation were slight indeed, but from his nature they would be so in any case. Madge, as the young girl also received an impression which awakened a faint solicitude. Mr. Muir, as her guardian and the manager of her property, had been a true friend and loyal to his trust. She entertained for him much respect and a strong, quiet affection. He did not dwell in her thoughts merely as one who was useful to her, but rather as one who had been true to her, and to whom she in her place and way would be true and sympathetic, were there occasion.

Madge was wearied indeed by her long journey but not exhausted. In sensations so different from those which had followed her journey to the West she recognized her immeasurable gain. Then she had entered Mrs. Wayland's cottage helpless, hopeless, a fugitive from her own weakness. By wise endeavor she had transformed that very weakness into her strength, and had returned to the scenes from which she had fled earnest and resolute—one who had made her choice for life and would abide by it. Womanly to her very finger-tips, she was acting with the aggressive decision of a man. Sensitive and timid beyond most women, she would not lose her happiness when it might be won in paths not only hedged about by all the proprieties of her lot, but also by a reserve and pride with which her own fine nature was preeminently endowed. That she loved Graydon Muir was a truth for life. If he could learn to love her from what she had sought to be, from what she simply was, he should have the chance. Her own deep experience had taught her much and given her the clew to many things. She had studied life, not only in books, but in its actual manifestations. Mrs. Wayland was a social mine in herself, and could recall from the past, volumes of dispassionate gossip, free from malice. In two years Madge had learned to know the world better than many who are in contact with it for long periods, but who see all through the distorted medium of their own prejudices or exceptional experiences. Although she was no longer unsophisticated she was neither cynical nor optimistic. Before her hope could be fulfilled she knew she must enter society, and she studied it thoughtfully,—its whims and meannesses, as well as its laws and refinements. If she ever reached Graydon's side she meant to stand there with a knowledge and confidence as assured as his own. She soon learned that it is common enough for women to seek to win men by every allurement and coquettish device. She would employ no devices whatever. She would merely reappear above his horizon among other luminaries, and shine with her own pure unborrowed light. Then it must depend upon himself whether she ever became his own "bright particular star."

So much she felt she had a right to do, and no conventional hesitation as to her course stood in her way. Her love had become the governing impulse of her life, and its dictates were imperative until they trenched upon her sensitive, womanly pride. Then they were met as the rock meets the tide. She did not care what the world might think; it should never have occasion to think at all. Her secret was between herself and God. Graydon himself should never know it unless his name became hers.

How vividly her old haunts recalled him! There was the lounge on which he used to toss the "little wraith" after having carried her around in the semblance of a waltz. The sofa on which had taken place their strange parting still stood as of old in her room. There her head had sunk in unconsciousness upon his breast, the result of her vain, feeble struggle to escape from caresses so natural to him, but no longer to be received by her.

What way-marks in life mute, commonplace things become in the light of memory! To her vivid fancy Graydon was again present in all the positions now made memorable by deep affection. The past unrolled itself again as it had so often done before. She saw the pallid, frightened child that scarcely dared to look deprecatingly at the handsome young collegian. She saw again the kind yet mirthful eyes that beamed encouragingly upon her. She remembered that in the unworthy past they had ever looked upon her with a large, gentle, affectionate tolerance, and she now took chiefly upon herself the blame for those years of weakness. Her present radiant health and beauty proved how unnecessary they had been, and her heart sometimes sunk at the thought of what they might cost her.

Mary had accompanied her to her room, and was asked, in a careless tone, what had become of Miss Wildmere.

"I was told incidentally the other day that she was as great a belle as ever. I had hoped that she would be out of Graydon's way before this time. I have heard, however, that great belles are often slower in marrying than the homeliest girls. If all is true that is said, this Miss Wildmere has made mischief enough; but I am not anxious that our Graydon should cut short her career—that is, if marriage would cut it short. I imagine she will always be a gay society woman. Well, Madge, I suppose you must make up your mind to be a belle yourself. Why don't you cut out this 'speculator,' as my husband calls her? If Graydon had my eyes it wouldn't be a difficult task."

"Graydon hasn't your eyes or mine either," was the brusque reply. "I propose to use my own. They may see some one that I have never met. One thing at least is certain,—I don't intend to cut out Miss Wildmere or any one else. The man who wins me will have to do the seeking most emphatically, and I warn you beforehand, sister mine, that you must never let the idea of match-making enter your head. Since I have been away I have developed more will of my own than muscle. There is no necessity for me ever to marry, and if I do it will be because I wish to, not because any one else wants me to. Nothing would set me against a man more certainly than to see that his bad allies who were manœuvring in his behalf, and she concluded with a kiss that robbed her words of a point too sharp perhaps for her sister's feelings. She knew Mrs. Muir's peculiarities well enough, however, to believe that such words were needed and she had intended to speak them in some form at the earliest opportunity. Therefore she was glad that she could utter the warning so easily and naturally in their new relations. Nor was it uncalled for, since the thought of bringing Madge, and Graydon together had already entered Mrs. Muir's mind. A scheme of this character would grow in fascination every hour. Poor Madge was well aware that, with the best intentions, no one could more certainly blast her hopes than her sister, whose efforts would be unaccompanied by the nicest tact. Moreover, any such attempts might involve the disclosure of her secret.

"Well, you have changed in every respect," said Mary, looking at her wonderingly.

"For the better, I hope. My feeling in this respect, however, seems to be perfectly natural. I don't see how a self-respecting girl could endure anything except a straightforward, downright suit, with plenty of time to make up her own mind. I can do without the man who does not think me worthy of this, and could probably do without him any way. Because a man wants to marry a girl is only one reason for assent, and there may be a dozen reasons to the contrary."

"Why, Madge, how you talk! When you left us it seemed as if one might pick you up and marry you and you would not have spirit enough to say yes or no. Have you had to refuse any one at Santa Barbara? Perhaps you didn't refuse. You have told me so little of what was going on!"

"That isn't fair to me, Mary. I explained to you that I wished to give you a pleasant surprise. To plan a pleasure for you was not unsistorly, was it? I haven't Miss Wildmere's ambition for miscellaneous conquests. Why should I write about men for whom I cared nothing, and toward whom my manner should have made my spoken negative unnecessary?"

"Other girls would. Well, it seems that their suit was downright enough to satisfy you. Good gracious! How many were there?"

Madge laughed, yawned, and her sister saw that her dark eyes were full of the languor of sleep, which added to their beauty.

"Oh, not many," she drawled. "I'll gossip about them some other time when not so tired. I'll indicate them by numerals. Why should I babble their names in connection with what they called so sacred? I wonder how many like sacred affairs had occurred before. If I tell you the story of the wooing of Number One, Two, Three, and so on, that will answer just as well, won't it?"

"No indeed. I wish to know their names, family connection, and whether they were well off or not."

Madge again laughed, and began to disrobe, in order to indicate that their confidences must at least be adjourned for the present. Her sister came and felt her perfect arms and rounded, gleaming shoulders. "Why, Madge," she exclaimed, "your flesh is as white and smooth as ivory, and almost as firm to the touch! It's a wonderful transformation. I can scarcely believe, much less understand it. You have grown so beautiful that you almost turn even my head."

"There is nothing so wonderful about it, Mary. Almost any girl may win health, and therefore more or less beauty, if she has the sense and will to make the effort. You know what I was when I left home. I suggested doctors' bills more than anything else, and it was chiefly my fault;" and she sighed deeply. "When I went to work in a rational way to get strong, I succeeded. I believe this would be true with the great majority. Good-night, dear. When I am rested I'm going to help you in many ways, in return for all you did for that lazy, lackadaisical, limp little nonentity that you used to dose and coddle when you should have given her a good shaking."

"It's all a miracle," said Mrs. Muir to her husband, at the conclusion of lengthy remarks about Madge.

"As much a miracle as my fortune," was the quiet reply. "Madge has had sense enough to know what she wanted and how to get it."

CHAPTER VII.

NOT A MIRACLE.

Madge was simply fatigued from her long journey, and not oppressed with want of sleep, for in passing through uninteresting portions of the country she had given herself up to repose. The sense of weariness passed with the lions of night, and she was among the earliest stirring in the morning. Long before breakfast was ready she had her trunks partially unpacked, her mind meantime busy with plans for immediate action. At last her healthful appetite so asserted itself that she went down to the dining-room. Mr. and Mrs. Muir had not yet appeared, and she strolled into the parlor, opened the piano, and played a few runs. She found it sadly out of tune from long disuse. As this was not true of her voice, she began singing a favorite German song.

In a moment the house was full of melody. Clear, sweet, and powerful, the notes penetrated to the kitchen, where the maids were busy, and they stopped in spellbound wonder, with dish or utensil in hand. Mrs. Muir hastened with her hair-brush suspended, while methodical Mr. Muir laid down his razor, and, going to the door, set it ajar. The song poured into the room like a harmonic flood. Before the first stanza was completed, Mrs. Muir had on her dressing-gown and was stealing down stairs into the back parlor, and as Madge ceased beginning again she rushed upon her.

"Why, why," she exclaimed, "I thought Nilson or Patti had got lost and taken refuge here! Can it be you? You are nothing but a surprise from beginning to end. When will the wonders cease? Are you sure that you are Madge?"

"Yes, and equally sure that I am hungry. When will you be ready for breakfast? I've been up these two hours."

"Well, well, well, what will Graydon say? He thinks you are still little better than a ghost."

"He will say that I have been very sensible, and he will find me very substantial," and "matter-of-fact." The question now uppermost in Mrs. Muir's mind was, "Which will breakfast be ready?" cried the young girl, laughing in a childlike enjoyment of her sister's wonder, and a loving woman's anticipation of triumph over the man who had "once called her weak and lackadaisical."

She responded warmly to the embrace of Mrs. Muir, who added, "You have come back to us a princess. Why, Henry, whom nothing moves out of the even tenor of his way, paused in his shaving, and with one side of his face all lathered opened the door to listen. 'You tell him,' cried Madge, in merry vein, 'that he has given me the greatest compliment I ever received.' But compliments are not breakfast."

Mrs. Muir returned to complete her toilet, and her husband soon appeared.

"Madge," he said, greeting her kindly, "you have brought about great changes. How have you accomplished them all in so brief a time?"

"The time has not been so very brief," she replied. "I have been away over two years, remember. It's all very simple, Henry. I went to work to get well and to learn something, as you gave your mind and time to business. In the Waylands, my old German professor, and especially in the magnificent climate I had splendid allies. And you know I had nothing else to do. One can do a great deal in two years with sufficient motive and steady effort toward a few points."

"What was your motive, Madge?"

A slow, deep color stole into her face, but she looked unflinchingly into his eyes as she asked, "Was not the hope of being what I am to-day, compared with what I was, sufficient motive?"

"Yes," he replied, thoughtfully, "it was; but it appears strange to me that more girls do not show your sense. Nine tenths of the pallid creatures that I see continue half alive through their own fault."

"If they knew the pleasure of being thoroughly alive," said Madge, "they wouldn't dawdle another hour. I believe that I might have regained health long before if I had set about it."

"Well, Madge, as your guardian I wish to tell you that I am deeply gratified. You have done more for yourself than all the world could do for you. I am a plain man, you know, and not given to many words. There is only one thing that I detest more than a silly woman, and that is a heartless, speculating one. Both are sure to make trouble sooner or later. You certainly do not belong to the first type, and I don't believe you will ever make a bad use of the beauty you have won so honestly. Let me give you a bit of business experience, Madge. I have seen men falter and fail by the score down-town, and usually it was because women were playing the mischief with them,—too often women of their own households, who had no more idea of the worth of a dollar, or how it is obtained, than a kitten. The one idea is to marry for money, and then to spend it in parade. I believe you will be like your sister Mary, who has given me a home, quiet, and peace." ("If I ever give a man anything I'll give him a great deal more than that," Madge thought.) "And now," concluded Mr. Muir, "speaking of money, I wish to go over your accounts with you soon, that you may know everything and understand everything. It's absurd for women to be helpless and dependent in this respect. You should know all about your property, and the time has come when you should learn what are regarded as safe investments, and what are not. My life is as uncertain as any other man's, and I intend that you sisters shall not be like two children, who must do blindly what some trustee tells you to do;" and Mr. Muir, complacently led the way to the breakfast-room, feeling that as guardian he had done his duty both morally and financially.

It was his way to speak plainly and promptly all he desired to say, and then, according to his creed, if people had sense they would do what was wise; if they had not, the less said the better.

Mrs. Muir was voluble during the morning meal. Now that Madge had come again within the sphere of her domestic energy, she was full of plans and projects.

"Of course," she said, "you have nothing to wear. The outlandish dresses that you had made at that jumping-off place in the West won't answer. As soon as the Waylands have made their call we must go out and begin ordering your summer outfit. Perhaps Mrs. Wayland will go with us."

"Patience, Mary. We are not ready to order outfits yet."

"Why not?"

"Because we do not want to buy what interested shopmen and milliners may choose to palm off on us. You live such a domestic life that you are scarcely better informed than I as to the latest modes. We will drive in the park, use our eyes on the avenue, and visit several fashionable establishments first. Then I wish to find a dressmaker who is not an idiotic slave of fashion, and who can modify the prevailing styles by taste and appreciation of the person for whom she works. The one whom I employ must make dresses for me and under my direction, and not dresses in the abstract, as if they were for the iron-framed form on which she exhibits her wares."

"Good!" cried Mr. Muir; "Madge's head is level. Let her have her own way, and she will come out all right."

"Well," said Mrs. Muir, "I suppose it will take a little time for me to get used to all these changes. Before she went away I used to do everything for her. I'm going to have my own way in one thing, however. You must not write to Graydon a word beyond the fact that Madge is here. You have both laughed at me and my wonder, and I'm going to have the compensation of seeing him transformed into exclamation points."

Madge now turned toward Mr. Muir, and he could detect not the slightest indication of embarassment or over-consciousness, as she said, "Certainly, Henry, you must not spoil this little bit of prospective fun."

Madge did have her own way, and made her preparations with the quiet decision and thoughtfulness which now characterized her actions.

The Waylands were frequent guests at Mr. Muir's home for a time, and then departed to visit friends in the country.

Madge and her sister soon decided upon the Catskills as the place of their summer sojourn. The choice of this region, so accessible from the city, was pleasing to Mr. Muir.

"What are you reading?" he said, one evening, as he found Madge surrounded by books and pamphlets.

"Reading up on the Catskills and their vicinity. A place is far more interesting if you have associations with it, and I intend to be versed in all the stories and legends of the region. In this I have a little design upon you also. You look worn, Henry, and need rest and change. You are too much devoted to business. I'm going to 'trivil' like the rest of the girls in the evening,—dance, and all that you know, but I shall try to keep you among the hills, and inveigle you into long drives and walks by telling you exciting yarns that will take the place of the dissipations of business. You needn't think you will have to mope around the piazza, your body on a mountain and your mind in Wall Street. You are getting old and rich, and you must begin to take an interest in other things besides business."

"Now, that's thoughtful and kind of you," he said, and then he lapsed into a revery, that the contraction of his brow showed to be not altogether agreeable.

At last he said, "Madge, I half believe you are right. I am, and have been too devoted to business. It's all very well as long as you can drive it, but when it begins to drive you it is a hard taskmaster. The times are bad. Instead of making anything, one has to use all his faculties to keep from losing what he has made. It's getting to be a grind. I sometimes wish I was out of it, but suppose I shouldn't know what to do with myself."

"That's just it, Henry, you wouldn't. You must become interested in other things, and that's a process which requires time, and I'll help you."

"Oh, you," he said, laughing,—"you will soon have all you can do to keep your beaus at bay."

"Beaus in this free and enlightened land have only certain rights which a girl is bound to respect. Should there be any, and they unreasonable, you'll see," she said, with a little decisive nod. Then she added, gravely: "I don't believe you would be content out of business, but I should think there was such a thing as trying to do so much business that it would become a burden, and, perhaps, a heavy one. You may think I'm a little goose, talking of what I know nothing about; but I've read a great deal, and, of late, books worth reading. I don't believe it's a good thing to change one's habits and pursuits suddenly; and what's more, Henry, I believe that when the times are better business will be as great a source of satisfaction to you as ever. As I suggested before, you must gradually become interested in other things which can take the place of business as you grow old."

"What a wise little woman we have become!" said Mr. Muir. "Here you are giving your guardian sound advice,—you who I imagined once, would take no more thought for the morrow than a lily of the field, and a very pale one at that. This is a greater change than any that Mary exclaims about."

"Perhaps you think me very presuming," answered Madge, coloring.

"No, I do not. I think you very sensible, and I think myself very fortunate in having such women in my household as you and Mary. I was blue when I came home to-night, but it inspirits a man to talk to such a girl. You have a power of good common-sense, Madge."

"Well, I have—I had—need of it."

"The majority would say you could afford to be silly. You have a snug fortune of your own, of which not a penny can be lost, unless the bottom falls out of everything."

"I don't think any woman can afford to be silly. I know that's a sweeping word with you, and covers all feminine folly. What I mean is this: Money and every good thing in life was a mockery. I couldn't enjoy anything, and wasn't anything but a burden. I saw it all, and that I should have to throw nonsense overboard if I wished to be different. You will find that I have plenty left, however, before the summer's over. Now, let me read to you Irving's legend of poor old Rip. What if you have read it often? A little infusion of the champion sleeper's spirit is just what you need;" and with simple purity of tone and naturalness of accent she made the old story new to him.

"Madge," he said, as he kissed her good-night, "that is even better than your singing. I feel so freshened and heartened up that I'm another man, and in good trim for the fight to-morrow; for that is just what business has become,—a regular defensive fight. You didn't think two years ago that you would send me down to Wall Street with a clearer head and better courage."

"No indeed, I didn't dream of it, and I can scarcely believe it's true now. You used to seem to me like gravitation, that would always be the same to the end of time."

"Bah! A man is only a man, and he finds it out sooner or later. There's Jack crying again, and Mary hasn't had a chance to come down. I'll take the child, for his teeth make him so nervous that he won't stay with the nurse."

"I'll try my hand at him to-morrow," said the young girl, and was absorbed in her reading again.

The days passed quickly, and Madge filled them full, as before at Santa Barbara. As the time approached for Graydon's return, she felt a quiet rising excitement akin to that which inspires a soldier when a campaign is about to open; but to her brother-in-law and sister she gave only the impression of decision of character and youthful, healthful buoyancy. She was good-cheer itself in the household, and helpful in every little domestic emergency. The servants and the children welcomed her like sunshine, and she made the evenings all too short by music and reading aloud. She blossomed out in her summer costumes like a flower, so becoming to her style had been her choice of fabrics and the taste with which they had been fashioned. June was passing. In a day or two more Graydon would arrive, and the fruition or failure of her patient endeavor begin.

CHAPTER VIII.

RIVAL GIRLS.

Instead of Graydon there came a letter saying that he would be detained abroad another week. The heat was oppressive, and the family physician said that little Jack should be taken to the country at once. Therefore they packed in haste, and started for a hotel in the Catskills at which rooms had been engaged. Graydon was to join them there as soon after his return as possible.

Madge looked wistfully at the mountains, as with shadowy grandeur they loomed in the distance. There is ever a solemnity about mountain scenery, and she felt it as she passed under the lofty brows of wooded heights. To her spirit it was grateful and appropriate, for, while she would lead among them apparently the existence of a young girl bent only on enjoyment, she believed she would leave them, either a happy woman, or else facing the tragedy of a thwarted life. Their deepest shadows might even when her laugh was loudest, typify the despondency which the world hide from all.

It was Saturday, and Mr. Muir accompanied his family. He and his wife looked worn and weary, for at this time circumstances were bringing an excess of care to both. Mrs. Muir was a devoted mother, and little Jack had taxed her patience and strength to the utmost. A defensive warfare is ever the severest test of manhood, and Mr. Muir had found the past week a trying one. He had been lured into an enterprise that at the time seemed certain of success, even to his conservative mind, but unforeseen elements had entered into the problem, and it now required all his nerve, all his resources to meet the strain. Neither Madge nor his wife knew anything of this. Indeed it was not his habit to speak of his affairs to any one, unless the exigencies of the case required explanation. In this emergency he was obliged to maintain among his associates an air of absolute confidence. Now that he was out of the arena he gave evidence of the strain.

Madge saw this, and resolved that her large reserve of vitality should be drawn upon. The tired mother should be relieved and the perplexed and weary man beguiled into forgetfulness of the sources of anxiety. Jack would have indulged in a perpetual howl during the journey had not his attention been diverted by Madge's unexpected expedients, which often suspended an outcry with comical abruptness, while her remarks and questions made it impossible for Mr. Muir to toil on mentally in Wall street. By reason of the heat the majority of the passengers dozed or fretted. She heroically kept up the spirits of her little band, oblivious of the admiring eyes that often turned toward her flushed, animated face.

There are few stronger tests than unflagging good-humor during a disagreeable journey with cross children. At last the ordeal came to an end, and in the late afternoon shadows they alighted at the wide piazza of the Under-Cliff House, and were shown to airy rooms, which proved that the guests were not kept in pigeon-holes for the solo benefit of the proprietor. Our heroine employed the best magic the world has known—thoughtful helpfulness. Mr. Muir was banished. "You would be as useful as a whale," she said to him, when he offered to aid his wife in unpacking and getting settled. "Go down to the piazza and smoke in peace. I shall be worth a dozen of you as soon as I take off my travelling-dress."

She verified her words, and before they were aware of it Mrs. Muir, who was prone to fall into hopeless confusion at such times, and the nurse were acting under her direction. The elder little boy and girl were coaxed, restrained, managed, and soon sent down to their father, re-dressed and serene. Jack was lulled to sleep in Madge's room. The trunks, instead of disgorging chaos, were compelled to part with their contents in an orderly way. In little more than an hour the two rooms allotted to Mr. and Mrs. Muir, and the nurse with the children, took on a cosey, inhabitable aspect, and by supper-time the ladies, in evening costume and with unruffled brows, joined Mr. Muir.

"The idea of my ever permitting Madge to go back to Santa Barbara!" exclaimed Mrs. Muir. "This day alone has proved that I can never get on without her. Just go and look at your room, sir. One would think we had been settled here a week. You ought to pay Madge's bills, and give her a handsome surplus."

"If time is money," said Madge, "Henry will have to pay me well. He must stay and help me explore those mountains in every direction. But now let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we shall go to church."

"I've half a mind to take you down to Wall street with me next week," said Mr. Muir. "Perhaps you can straighten out things there."

"No, sir. I'm a woman's-rights girl, and one of her rights is to get things out of the way as soon as possible, so that people can have a good time. Thank heaven our affairs can be shut up in drawers and hung up in closets, and there we can leave them,—in this case for a good supper first, and a long, quiet rest on this piazza afterward. Don't you think you could find a drawer somewhere in which to tuck away your Wall street matters, Henry? You won't need them till some time next week, for you must certainly spend two or three days with us."

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