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A YOUNG GIRL'S WOOING.

BY E. P. ROE,

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

A few moments later Mr. Muir walked into the parlor the picture of serene confidence, and smiling pleasure at meeting his wife, who sprung up, exclaiming: "I declare, I was so enjoying myself that I did no realize it was time for you to be here. Come, I've ordered a splendid supper for you."

"I shall reward your thoughtfulness abundantly," he replied, "for I am ravenous." He then greeted Mrs. Muir's friends cordially, said some pleasant words, and to all bowed, when retiring, very politely, to Mrs. Wildmere, who in her meek, deprecating way sat near the door.

Two or three gentlemen sought Madge's hand for the next dance, and she was out upon the floor again, her absence not having been commented upon.

Not a feature of this by-play had been lost on Miss Wildmere, and she smiled satirically. "They thought to dupe me with delusions about Mr. Muir. He has no more idea about failing than I have, and before long he shall be Brother Henry to me as well as to Madge Alden."

At last Mr. Muir rose from the table, and Mrs. Muir said, "I will go and have a look at the children, and then join you on the piazza."

"Very well, Mary. I'll be there soon. I've sat so long in the cars that I want to walk a little for a change, so don't hasten or worry if I'm gone a little longer than usual. Come, Madge, you'd walk all day if you had a chance."

Mrs. Muir thought the idea very sensible. Mr. Muir and Madge passed out through a side door. The former lighted his cigar leisurely, and then strolled away as if for no other purpose than to enjoy the warm evening. The storm had not come, but clouds were flying wildly across the disk of the moon, and the hurry-skurry in the sky was akin to the thoughts of the quiet saunterers.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"Not far away. There is an open talk where we could see any one approach us."

"Now, Madge," Mr. Muir began, after reaching the spot, "I have followed suggestions, for I have great confidence in your good sense. Your words worried me exceedingly."

"There is reason for it, Henry, even though there is probably no truth in what has been said about your financial ruin."

"Great God!" he exclaimed starting, "is that subject talked about?"

"Do you owe money to Mr. Arnault?"

"Yes, with a groan.

"Would it hurt you should he demand it to-morrow?"

"O Madge, this is dreadful!" and she saw that he was trembling.

"Now, Henry, take heart, and be your cool, brave self."

"Give me a Bastiletime, Madge. I've been suffering a heavy load, but thought the worst was over. I believe things have touched bottom, and I was beginning to see my way to safety in a short time. Even now the tide is turning, and I can realize on some things in a few days. But if this money is demanded to-morrow—Saturday, too, when nearly all my friends are out of town—it is very doubtful whether I could raise it."

"Would it cause your failure?"

"Yes, yes indeed. A man may be worth a million, but if he can't get hold of ready money at the moment it is needed, everything may be swept away. O Madge, this is cruel! With just a little more time I could be made safe and rich."

"Why have you not told us this?"

"Because I wouldn't touch your money or Mary's under any circumstances, and I know you both would have given me no peace, though trying to persuade me to borrow from you."

"That's just like you, Henry. How much do you owe Mr. Arnault?"

"Madge, I'm not going to borrow your money."

"Of course not, Henry. Please tell me."

"You will take no action without my consent?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, the paltry sum of thirty thousand if demanded to-morrow, may involve the loss of my fortune. Of course I could not pay this at once all the rest would be down on me. How in the world did you gain knowledge of this affair?"

"Thank God, and take courage. I see good is going to come out of evil, and I believe you will think so when you have heard my story;" he told him everything.

And Graydon has to all intents and purposes engaged himself to this—shabby—said Mr. Muir, grinding his teeth.

"He's no brother of mine if he does not break with her; and, as it is, I'm as if I could never trust him with my affairs again."

Mr. Muir was a man not easily moved, but now his concentrated passion was terrible to witness. His words were convulsively; his respiration quick and irregular. His business and his commercial standing were at stake, and to think that a selfish, designing girl had caused the jeopardy of his fortune by her own petty ambition, and that his brother should be one of the foremost to have engaged him beyond measure. His lip fairly hissed, "I understand now the insidious scamp offered to endorse my paper. He and his confederates have been watching and bided their time. I had to be ruined in order to bring that speculator's affairs to a decision, and Graydon is doing his level best to further his schemes."

"Now, Henry, do be calm. Your are excited, and shall not be."

"There is no use, Madge; I'm foully caught in their devilish toils."

She grasped his arm with a force that compelled his attention.

"Listen, Mr. Muir," she said, in low and intense tones, "you shall listen to me. I am an ignorant girl as I am, I know right and I demand that you meet emergency, not in impotent anger, but with your whole manhood. I demand it for the sake of my sister and children, for your own sake and my own. You explained to me before I left town that I had sixty thousand dollars in United States bonds, a mortgage, and other good securities. You also explained that by the terms of my father's will I had control of this money after I was eighteen. Have been so scrupulous that you have not even thought of asking for the use of it, but I demand of you, as an honest man, what right have you to prevent me from doing what I please with it?"

"You cannot make me take it, Madge."

"I can and will. I shall go to the city with you by the earliest train, and when Arnault asks for his money you shall quietly give it to him, and no one but ourselves shall know anything about the matter. If you pay this money promptly, will it not help your credit at once?"

"Certainly, Madge, but—"

"O Henry," she cried, "why will you cloud all our lives by scruples that are now not only absurd but almost criminal? Think of the loss you will inflict on Graydon, your children, and your wife, by such senseless refusal. Have you not said that a little time will insure safety and fortune? And there is my money lying idle, when with to-morrow's sun it could buy me more happiness than could millions at another time. I trust to your business judgment fully." She stood aloof and faced him proudly, as she continued: "Do not imagine I fear poverty. Believe me, Henry Muir, I have brain and muscle to take care of myself and others too if need be." Then, in swift alternation of mood, she clasped her hands caressingly upon his arm, and added: "But I have a woman's heart, and there are troubles worse than poverty. To see you lose the results of your life-work, and to see Graydon's prospects blighted, would be more than I could bear. You can give me all the security you wish, if that will satisfy you better; but if you deny me now, I shall lose confidence in you, and feel that you have failed me in the most desperate emergency of my life."

"The most desperate emergency of *your* life, Madge?"

"Yes; of *my* life," she replied, her voice choking with sobs, for the strain was growing too great for her nerve-force to resist. "You give way to senseless anger; you weigh against Graydon, when he has only acted honorably, and has been deceived; you refuse to do the one simple, rational thing that will avert this trouble and bring safety to us all."

"Why, Madge, if I fail, this speculator will drop Graydon at once. Scott! this fact alone would be large compensation."

"If you were cool—if you were yourself—you could save Graydon in every way. I want to see him go on in life, prosperous and happy, not thwarted and disheartened almost at its beginning. Oh, why won't you? Why won't you?" and she wrung her hands in distress.

"Is Graydon so very much to you, Madge?" he asked, in a wondering tone.

"Hush!" she said, imperiously; "there are things which no man or woman shall know or appear to know unless I reveal them. It's enough that I am trying to save you all, and my own peace of mind. Henry Muir, I will not be denied. There are moments when a woman feels and knows what is right, while a man, with his narrow cast-iron rules, would ruin everything. You must carry out my wish, and Graydon must know nothing about it. O God! that I were a man!"

"Thank God, you are a woman! Child as you are, compared with my years and experience, you shall have your own way. I will this once put my lifelong principle under my feet, and if the future house of Muir & Brother is saved, you shall save it."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Henry! Now see how happy I am. I have but one stipulation,—the 'brother' must not know it. We shall go on the first train, shall we not?"

"Yes. You can say you want to do some shopping. Come, we have been away from Mary too long already. O Madge, Madge, would that there were more girls like you!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHECKMATE.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Muir, when they appeared at last; "I thought you and Madge had eloped!"

"We are going to to-morrow by the first train," said the young girl. "Henry says he must return to town for the day, and I will accompany him to do some shopping."

"Now, Henry, this is too bad, and I've scarcely seen you this evening."

"I'm truly sorry, Mary; I did look forward to a good quiet day with you, but there is an important matter which I neglected to see to to-day, and which must be attended to. Graydon will soon be ready to relieve me of a great deal."

"Well, I shall be glad when he can do something besides waiting on Mr. Arnault's convenience for the privilege of seeing Miss Wildmere. It will be a terribly long, fatiguing day for you, Madge,—for you both, indeed!"

"Oh, I sha'n't mind it in the least! It won't be half so fatigning as one of my long rides. You spoke of wanting some things, and I can shop for you, too."

Madge retired early to prepare for her journey. Mrs. Muir soon followed, and her husband remarked that he would merely remain down long enough to write a note to Graydon. This missive was brief, but was charged with dynamite.

On the morrow, long before Miss Wildmere waked from the golden dream which that day should realize, Madge and Mr. Muir were on their way to the city. The young girl had said: "Don't let us do anything by halves. I have read that in the crisis of a battle timid measures are often fatal. Let me give you everything that you can use as collateral. How much is there?"

"Sixty thousand available at once. As I have said, you shall have your own way."

"Well, for once a woman is wiser than Solomon."

They went immediately to the trust company, which had her property in keeping, and, having complied with the forms, obtained the entire sum, then parted on Broadway, to rendezvous at the train. Mr. Muir gave the radiant girl a look which she valued more than the money. He then went to his bank. The official whom he accosted had been rather cold and shy of late, but when he received the securities he grew perceptibly urbane.

On reaching his office Mr. Muir found that a transaction which had been greatly delayed was now consummated, and that another ten thousand in cash was available. This also was sent to the bank at once. Several business men were present when a confidential clerk from Arnault appeared, and asked for a private interview.

"Well, really you must excuse me to-day. I'm very busy, and expect to leave town in an hour or two. Please state what you have to say in few words, or else I will see you next week."

"Mr. Arnault," began the clerk, in a metallic tone, "says he is compelled to call in the loan he recently made you."

"Oh, certainly, certainly! Have you the securities I gave him as collateral?"

"No, sir, but I can get them," said the man.

"Do so, and I will give you my check. Thank Mr. Arnault for the accommodation, and say that I have thirty or forty thousand to spare should he be hard pressed. Be quick."

The Wall street men present looked at one another significantly, and one of them remarked, "You are forehanded for these times, Muir."

"If this absurd lack of confidence would only pass," was the careless reply, "I should have more money on hand than I could invest profitably;" and then he appeared absorbed in other matters.

Arnault received the message from his clerk with something like dismay, and turning on Mr. Wildmere, who was present, he said, almost savagely, "You have been 'misleading me.'"

"Indeed I have not, sir,—not intentionally. I can't understand it."

"Well, I can. Muir is an old fox in business. I was a fool to think that a paltry thirty thousand would trouble him. Well, there is nothing to do but to close the matter up."

"What, in regard to my daughter?" said Mr. Wildmere, inadvertently.

"Oh, no; confound it! What has she got to do with this affair?" replied Arnault, with an irritation that he could not disguise. "I certainly have made Miss Wildmere a fair offer; some would regard it as more. I shall go up tonight and receive her answer, as I promised. I am one who never fails in a promise to man or woman, and I am ready to make good all that I have authorized you to say to your daughter, and more."

Mr. Muir met Madge at the depot and was quietly jubilant. Both laughed heartily over the experiences of the day.

"You are a blessed little woman, Madge. I was never so off my balance before in my life as I was last night. When confused and upset, it is one of my impulses to stick to some principle of right, like a mule. Bless you, I think I have secured you twice over! I have given you a lien on property worth two hundred thousand in ordinary times."

"You have taught me to lean on you once more, Henry, and that is worth more than all your other liens."

Mr. Arnault now appeared, and came affably forward, saying, "I am glad my enforced action did not incommode you to-day."

"Thank you. I trust you are not in trouble, Mr. Arnault;" and there was a world of quiet satire in the remark.

"Oh, no—only a temporary need, I assure you," was the hasty reply.

"So I supposed;" and as Arnault turned away, the speaker gave Madge a humorous glance, which made her look of demure innocence difficult to maintain.

* * * * *

Graydon had enjoyed fair success in fishing, and yet had not been supremely happy. He found, with the venerated Izaak Walton, that the "gentle art" was conducive to contemplation. As he followed the trout-stream amid the solitudes of nature, the artificial and conventional in life grew less attractive. In spite of his efforts to the contrary, Miss Wildmere seemed to represent these phases. The apparent self-sacrifice for her father, which he had so unequivocally condemned, was after all, about the best thing he knew of her. The glamour of her beauty had been upon his eyes, and he had credited her with corresponding graces of heart and mind. What evidence had he of their existence?

The more he thought of it, the more his pride, also, rebelled at the ignominious position in the background that he was compelled to take while the it? Wall Street diplomacy was prolonged. At last, in anger and disgust, he resolved that, if he found Arnault in his old position by Stella's side, he would withdraw at once and forever.

After all, although he was as yet unconscious of it, the secret of his clarified vision was the influence of Madge upon his mind. She seemed in harmony with every beautiful aspect of nature,—true and satisfying, while ever changing. Madge was right: the mountains, streams, rocks, and trees became her allies, suggesting her and not Miss Wildmere. He would have returned, for the pleasure of her society, but for his purpose not to appear again until Arnault should have time to arrive from the city and resume his attentions. If they were received as in the past, he would write to Miss Wildmere his withdrawal of further claims upon her thoughts.

It was with something like bitter cynicism that he saw his illusions in regard to Miss Wildmere fade, and when he drove up to the hotel after nightfall on Saturday, he was not sure that he cared much what her answer might be, so apathetic had he become. Without pausing to analyze the reason of his eagerness to see Madge and hear of her welfare, he ran up at once to Mrs. Muir's room.

"Madge went to New York!" he echoed, in surprise at Mrs. Muir's information.

"Yes; why not? She went to do some shopping for herself and me. Mrs. Wildmere's here, and for a wonder, Mr. Arnault is not. What more could you ask?"

"Hang Mr. Arnault—!" He had come near mentioning both in his irritation.

"When will Madge and Henry arrive?"

"Soon now,—on the nine o'clock train. Oh by the way, Henry left a note for you!"

"Very well. I'll go to my room, dress, and meet them.

"He is asking after Madge rather often, it seems to me. She doesn't compare so very unfavorably with the speculator, after all, even in his eyes."

On reaching his room he threw himself wearily into a chair, and carelessly tore open his brother's note. Instantly he bounded to his feet, approached the light more closely, and saw in his brother's unmistakable hand the following significant words:

"Read this letter carefully and thoughtfully; then destroy it. Show your knowledge of its contents by neither word nor sign. Be on your guard, and permit no one to suspect financial anxiety. Arnault and Wildmere have struck me a heavy blow! The former has lent me money. I must raise a large sum in town, but I think I can do it, even in the brief time permitted. If I cannot we lose everything. If I don't have to suspend to-morrow Miss Wildmere will accept you in the evening. She has been waiting till those precious confederates, her father and Arnault, did their worst, so that she could go over to the winning side. You are of course your own master, but permit me, as your brother, affectionately and solemnly to warn you. Stella Wildmere will never bring you a day's happiness or peace. She loves herself infinitely more than you, her father, or any one else. Be true to me, and you shall share my fortunes. If you follow some insane notion of being true to her, you will soon find that you have been false to yourself. Again I warn you. Speak to no one of all this, and give no sign of your knowledge.

"HENRY."

Graydon read this twice, then crushed the paper in his hand as he muttered, "Fool, dupe, idiot! Now at last I understand her game and allusions. She was made to fear that Henry was about to fail, and she would not accept me until satisfied on this point. Great God! my infatuation for her has been inciting Arnault in these critical times to break my brother down, and her father has been aiding and abetting, in order that I might be removed out of the way. She was so false herself that she suspected her own father, also Arnault, of deceiving her, and so kept putting me off, that she might learn the truth of their predictions or the result of their efforts. How clear it all becomes, now that I have the key! Well, I should be worse than a heathen if I did not thank God for such an escape."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MADGE IS MATTER-OF-FACT.

"Well, I have come back to civilization and all its miseries," thought Graydon. "I was among scenes that know not Wildmeres and Arnaults. O my prophetic soul! I felt that there was something wrong, in spite of her superb acting. Sweet Madge, dear sister Madge, as you ever will be to me, the more I think of it the more clearly I see that you are the one who first began to shatter my delusion. Since that morning when I brought you home from your long vigil, and you revealed to me your true, brave heart, Stella Wildmere has never appeared the same, and the revolt of my nature has been growing ever since."

His wish now was to avoid seeing every one until he had met his brother. While the thought of his escape was uppermost in his mind, he was consumed with anxiety to learn the result of Henry's efforts in town. His commercial instincts were also very strong, and the thought of what might happen fairly made him tremble.

He slipped down a back stairway and bent his steps to the depot. Remembering that excited pacing up and down there would not be very intelligent obedience to his brother's injunctions, he started down a country road in the direction from which the train would come, and paced to and fro in his strong excitement. At last the train arrived, and his first glimpse of Henry's face and Madge's was reassuring. The moment the former saw him he called out, "Hello, Graydon! Have you a trout supper for us?"

"Yes," was the hearty response; and he hastened forward and shook hands cordially, saying, in an aside, "O Madge, I am so glad to see you again!"

"You are! Tell that to the marines. The length of your stay proves it to be a fish story."

"Here, Madge, we'll put you in the stage. I'll rest myself by walking to the house with Graydon."

"Henry, you are all right?" said Graydon, eagerly, as soon as they were out of ear-shot.

"Yes," was the quiet reply; "I raised the money, paid Arnault in full, and have a good surplus in the bank."

"Thank Heaven! How did you raise it?" How was all this knowledge reached—"

"Patience, Graydon, patience. As soon as you are in the firm I shall have no secrets from you. Until you are, you must let me manage in my old way."

"I have indeed little claim on your confidence. I have been deceived, and have acted like a fool. But it's all over now. Henry, you may not believe me, but my nonsense would have ended to-night if I hadn't received your letter, and all this had not occurred. I had been disgusted with this Arnault business for some time, and had let Miss Wildmere know my views. As I thought it over while away it all grew so detestable to me that I resolved if Arnault appeared again and renewed his attentions I would never renew mine. He's here again, as you may have seen."

"Oh, yes; and I have talked with him. Please show no resentment. I obtained my information in a way unknown to him, and there is nothing unusual in our transaction on its face. How was it that you began to grow critical towards Miss Wildmere?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you. There was not a ring of truth or stamp of nobility about her words and manner, and I have been associating with a girl who is truth itself and twice as clever and accomplished. Miss Wildmere was growing commonplace in contrast. I learned to love Madge as a sister before she went away, and now no man ever admired and loved a sister more."

Mr. Muir smiled broadly to himself in the darkness, and said: "Truly, Graydon, you are giving satisfactory proofs of returning sanity. We may as well conclude with the old saying, 'All's well that ends well.'"

"I think I had better go to town on Monday and resume business. It's time I did something to retrieve myself."

"No, Graydon, not yet. I have everything in hand now, and I believe the tide has turned. I realized ten thousand to-day on a transaction that I will tell you about. I am not doing much business now, only watching things and waiting. It was the suddenness of Arnault's demand that worried me,—on Saturday too, you know. He had about the same as said that I might have the money as long as I wanted it, and I should not have needed it much longer. In ordinary times I wouldn't have given it a thought.

"You can help me more up-hence. After what has occurred I don't wish Mary and Madge to meet these wilderness any longer, so I propose that you and Madge go to the Katerskill Hotel on Monday and explore. If you like the place, then you can take Mary and the children there. I have had a little scare in town, and propose to realize on some more property and make myself perfectly safe. By going to a higher-priced hotel we increase our credit also, and add to the impression I made today, that we are in no danger."

As the stage drew near the piazza Graydon hastened forward to help Madge out. In doing so he saw Miss Wildmere greeting Arnault cordially. As he passed up the steps with Madge, he caught Stella's swift, appealing look at him. He only bowed politely and passed on. It was Madge's triumphal entry now by the same door at which she had seen him enter with Miss Wildmere but a few weeks before. How complete her triumph was, even Madge herself did not yet know. While she went to her room he sought the office and ordered some of the trout he had caught to be prepared for supper. As he stood there Miss Wildmere left Arnault's side, and said, "Mr. Muir, are you not going to shake hands with me?"

"Why, certainly, Miss Wildmere;" but there was little more than politeness in his tone and manner. As there were many coming and going, she drew away with a reproachful glance. "So long as Arnault is with me, he will not be cordial," was her thought.

The supper-room was again occupied by the late comers, many of whom were a companied by their families and friends. Mr. Muir's quiet eyes fairly beamed over the group gathered at his table, and he felt that but few moments of his life compared with those now passing. Twenty-four hours before he had seen himself drifting hopelessly on a lee shore, but a little hand had taken the helm when he had been paralyzed, and now he saw clear sea-room stretching away indefinitely, with a turning tide and favoring gales. The terrible evils threatening him and his had been averted. The results of his life-work would not be swept away, his idolized commercial standing could now be maintained, his wife's brow remain unclouded by care, his children be amply provided for. Graydon saved from a worse fate than financial disaster, and, last but not least, the young fellow would be cured by Madge of all future tendencies toward the Wildmere type. He never could think of this here without smiling to himself. He had at last obtained the explanation of Madge's effort and success. By the superb result he measured the strength of the love which had led to it. "Great Scott!"—his favourite expletive,—he had thought; "what a compass there is in her nature! I had long suspected her secret, but when I touched upon it last night she made my blood tingle by her magnificent resentment. I would sooner have trifled with an enraged empress. Look at her now, smiling, serene, and, although not the least artful, keeping all her secrets with consummate art. Who would imagine that she was capable of such a volcanic outburst? If Graydon does not lay siege to her now, the name of the future firm should be Henry Muir and idiot."

That sagacious young man did not appear at all blighted by the wreck of the hope he had cherished. He turned no wistful glances toward the girl who had so long satisfied his eyes, and, as he had believed, his heart. Her very beauty, with its false promise, had become hateful to him.

"She is indeed a speculator," he thought, "and I'm a little curious to see how she will continue her game." It afforded him vindictive amusement that she often, yet furtively, turned her eyes toward him as if he were still a factor in it.

She never looked once in Graydon's direction but that Arnault was aware of the act. There was no longer any menace in his deportment toward her,—he was as devoted as the place and time would permit,—but in his eyes dwelt a vigilance and a resolution which should have given her warning.

After supper Mr. and Mrs. Muir found a comfortable nook on the piazza, and the banker smoked his cigar with ineffable content.

"Do you feel too tired for a waltz, Madge?" Graydon asked.

"The idea! when I've rested in the cars half a day."

"O Madge!" he whispered; "dear, sweet little friend,—you know I mean sister, only I dare not say it,—I'm so glad to be with you again! What makes you look so radiant to-night? You look as though you had a world of happy thoughts behind those sparkling eyes."

"Nonsense, Graydon! You are always imagining things. I have youth, good health, have had my supper,—a trout supper, too,—and I like to dance, just as a bird enjoys flying."

"You seem a bird-of-paradise. Happy the man that coaxes you into his cage! Brother or not, when your beaux become too attentive they will find me a perfect dragon of a critic."

"When I meet my ideal, you shall have nothing to say."

"I suppose not. I am at a loss to know where you will find him."

"I sha'n't find him; he must find me."

"He will be an idiot if he doesn't. Pardon me if I don't dance any more to-night. I have had a long tramp over mountain paths, and have a very important act to perform before I sleep. As a proof of my fraternal—I mean friendly—confidence, I will tell you what it is, if you wish."

"I don't propose to fail in any friendly obligations Graydon," she replied, laughing, as they strolled out into the summer night, followed by Miss Wildmere's half desperate eyes.

As they walked down a path, Graydon said, "Take my arm: the pavement is a little rough. Dear Madge, you look divine to-night. Every time I see you my wonder increases at what you accomplished out on the Pacific coast. That great, boundless, sparkling ocean has given you something of its own nature."

"Graydon, you must be more sensible. When a fellow takes your arm you don't squeeze it against your side and say, 'Dear Tom,' 'Sweet Dick,' or 'Divine Harry,' no matter how good friends they may be. Friends don't indulge in sentimental, far-fetched compliments."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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