

CONFIRMED SPINSTER

BY ARNOLD GOLSWORTHY

People in Bankford wondered why Marion Brett had never married, but only Marion herself knew the reason why. She was tall, and something more than handsome, while her devotion to the poorer folk of the village was evidence of the sweetness of her disposition. Yet she lived with her mother in the little red-bricked cottage at the end of the village, and rarely accepted invitations out.

She had not remained single from any other choice than her own, for she had many opportunities of marrying, and, as she was now only six-and-twenty, there was every chance that she would have many more yet.

When the new rector came to Bankford, the gossips declared that they could see at once which way the wind was blowing, and to some extent they were correct. The rector, the Rev. Lionel Kinton, was a comparatively young man of thirty-five or so, tall and athletic, and well endowed with the goods of this world. He received embroidered slippers and tobacco pouches from almost every single lady of his congregation, but not from Marion. Perhaps it was for that reason that he became the more determined to make her acquaintance.

He called upon her mother, and left flowers from his garden and grapes from his hot-houses, and, with all the ingenuity of the ardent wooer, he found opportunities of waylaying Marion on her errands of mercy in the village, so that he might carry her parcels or lighten for her in other ways the burden of her self-imposed labors.

That Marion appreciated these attentions was clear, and gaining encouragement from her repeated professions of smiling gratitude, Kinton began to think of her as already his. One evening, in her mother's garden, in the shadow of the tall bush of rhododendrons which she loved, he spoke to her of his hopes. The words seemed to come as a shock to Marion. She pleaded that she had no idea that he had been thinking of her in that way. She was very sorry, but she had received never to marry for reasons she could not explain—reasons that were sacred. She admitted that Kinton's friendship had been precious to her, and she could only hope that it might continue in spite of her refusal. And Kinton accepted the terms offered, always in the hope that he might one day succeed in breaking her strange resolve.

He learned from her mother that Marion had lost her heart to another man when she had been only eighteen, and although eight years is a long time in such matters, it would seem as if she had not yet forgotten the man she had once loved so well.

Mrs. Brett protested that she never knew why the two young people had parted, and, indeed, Marion had never told her. Since it was necessary for Marion to have to admit that she had acted foolishly, there was no reason why the admission should be made to anyone but herself. She had repented often of having sent John Paxley away, but her repentance had never brought him back.

John had been her affianced husband, and for that reason she had to him she objected to the marked attentions he seemed to be paying to Janet Wadham, one of her friends. The quarrel had been of the usual trivial nature to begin with, but it was not until John had positively attempted to justify his action that the matter had become serious.

The proud young girl of eighteen would have no suggestion of a divided allegiance, but her mention of her suspicions had cut the young man to the quick. After he had returned to his business in London, he wrote explaining the circumstances, and asking forgiveness; but with the wisdom of eighteen Marion had decided that his contrition was not adequately expressed, and she never answered his letter.

Shortly afterwards Marion received a shock. For reasons that no one seemed able to understand, John had thrown up a good position in the City and had gone to America. She heard of him once through his "people," to whom he had written saying he was going ranching in Texas, and needed a little money to start. Since then all had been silence.

Yet Marion had never ceased to think of John Paxley, and to remember him in her prayers. She had been thinking of him this morning, as she came from a round in the village, carrying a rather heavy load of basins which she had taken out that morning full of soup for her invalid poor. Mr. Kinton had helped her to carry her burden then, and she found herself regretting that he was not by her side now, once more to give his welcome assistance.

Thoughts of John Paxley, the man whose life she had ruined by her caprice, sharpened the temper of even Lady Bountiful, and when she reached her mother's cottage, and saw a tramp-like beggar slouching out of the side entrance with a newspaper parcel of broken food, she hurried in doors and spoke sharply to the maid about it.

"I've told you often enough, Mary," she said, as she took off her gloves impatiently and flung them on the table, "that you're not to give to beggars at the door."

"Yes, miss," replied the maid contently. "I shouldn't have done it but the poor fellow pleaded so hard, and as he asked to see you I thought, perhaps, it might be one of your own cases."

"They all ask to see me. You ought to know that by this time, Mary," returned Marion. "Don't let it occur again."

The girl went away muttering, and Marion, finding that her depressed state of mind was not improved by remaining indoors, called to her mother that she should take a turn in the garden, and then go for a brisk walk. She had hardly been in the garden a minute when the rector appeared at the gate. She almost ran to him in her pleasure at meeting him again.

"Do say you've come to ask me to take a walk with you," she said. "I've been down in the village this morning, and have got horribly mopeish. I suppose the atmosphere of the sick-room is not conducive to high spirits."

"But the consciousness of good work done should be," replied Kinton, with a smile. "As it happens, you have guessed the purpose of my errand rightly. I came to ask you to walk over to the White House with me. They're getting the place ready for the new owner, and the gardeners are putting some superb rhododendrons in the grounds leading to the house. As I know they are your favorite flowers, I thought you'd like to come and see them at the first opportunity."

Marion, her spirits returning at the prospect, clapped her hands, and after calling to her mother to say she would be back in an hour or so, set out with the rector for the White House, the name of a somewhat imposing building situated at the far end of the village. The late owner had quite recently died abroad, and there was naturally a certain amount of unhealthy curiosity in Bankford to learn something of the new-comer.

The head gardener at the White House, in response to the rector's request as to whether he and the lady might look at the gardens, was quite effusive in his welcome. He seemed to take their visit as a compliment to his professional skill, and became garrulous at once.

"This way, sir; this way, miss," he said, walking a little in front of them, and turning as he talked. "Some of the finest plants I've seen, so they are, and we're hoping they'll bloom this year in spite of our putting 'em in a bit late. The new gentleman that's coming, Mr. Paxley—"

"Mr. Paxley?" interrupted Marion, turning pale.

"Yes, miss," the man went on. "Mr. John Paxley. They say he comes from America, though he's English right enough, same as me and you. He was the old gentleman's nephew, and has come into the property, there bein' nobody else 'n between, as you might say. He must ha' paid a lot for these 'ere plants; but he's very keen on havin' them this year, 'cause, he told me, he thought they'd please his wife to see 'em there."

Marion clutched Kinton's arm for support, hardly knowing what she did. There could be no doubt that this man was the lover she had sent away; and, while she thought that he might have remembered her as she had remembered him, it was clear that he had not been for long inconsolable. Was it possible that after all he had cared for Janet Wadham, who had caused all the trouble between them, and that he had married her?

Marion, still clinging to Kinton's arm, walked as if in a dream. She heard the talkative old gardener discoursing at length on the merits of his plants, and even arguing with the rector as to whether they needed a special soil for their growth, or whether they could be grown anywhere. But their talk meant nothing to her. She was realizing only one thing. That was that she would no longer be able to stay in Bankford when John had come back there to live. Her position would be intolerable. Her thoughts were interrupted as she caught the old gardener's mention once more of Paxley's name.

"They do say," the old fellow went on, "that Mr. Paxley had a pretty rough time in America, and that this 'ere inheritance came to him quite as a Godsend, as you might say. I have only seen him once myself, and that was when he came down from London the other day in his motor-car."

"Mr. Paxley been here lately?" queried Marion, making a strong effort to control her excitement.

"Only once, as far as I know, miss," replied the old man. "Some says that he's been here several times lately, but I never saw him myself."

He had been so near her several times, and had never called!

She leaned heavily on Kinton's arm as they walked, grateful for the support he lent her. Once she almost wished he would propose to her again there and then, he seemed so gentle and so sympathetic, and sympathy was what she needed most at the moment. There was something hysterical in her laugh as she said with an attempt at gaiety:—

"How quiet and grave you are this morning. Please don't worry about me. I am quite all right again now. I wish you would talk to me. You must make the most of me to-day because I am going away soon."

"Going away?" he echoed. "Why?"

"I meant to have told you about that," she said, as she turned red at the thought of her deception. "I have arranged to go to my aunt at Bournemouth for a rather long stay, and we shall have to find someone to take my place with our invalids."

Kinton had doubts in his mind as to whether Marion was being entirely frank with him or not; but at the same time he felt satisfied that she had said all she had decided to say upon the matter.

A week later, a cab from the station stood at the door of the red-bricked cottage waiting to drive Marion away. The cabman was making a tremendous effort to drag the three large trunks that formed Marion's luggage, down the garden path, and observing to nobody in particular that he did not see how he was going to

get the things on top of the cab without assistance.

Marion came out just at that moment. She had been taking a tender leave of her mother, and her eyes were a little misty in consequence, but through the mists she could dimly discern at the garden gate the greatly unwashed tramp who had been the recipient of her charity a day or two previously.

"Here, my man," she cried. "Come and help with this luggage. You had much better do a little work for your money than come round begging. I'll give you a shilling when the work is done."

The tramp hurried to the cabman's side, but he did not take his eyes from Marion until she had disappeared again into the house. Then a reminder from the impatient cabman recalled him to himself, and he threw himself into the work with unusual vigor for one of his class. Just before lifting the trunks on the cab he stopped and seemed to be taking a great interest in the address on the labels.

"Don't you bother about that," said the cabman, "You've got no chance of getting the job of unloading, if that's what you want. We're going too far away for that."

Once at Bournemouth, Marion felt that she could breathe freely again. She had been able to reply that she missed the village quite as much. At the same time, she was unable to fix a date for her return. It did not seem possible that she would ever be able to go back and take up the old life again after all that had happened.

It was on the fourth day after her arrival that her aunt said to her at the breakfast-table:—

"I am obliged to go out this morning, my dear, and I shall not be home till lunch. If a gentleman should call to see me, perhaps, you will tell him how sorry I am to have missed him. I forget his name for the moment—I am so bad at remembering names—but I wrote to him asking him to call this morning, and now I am unfortunately prevented from meeting him after all."

Marion replied a little listlessly that she would convey her aunt's apologies as desired. A little later in the morning the maid came into the drawing-room where Marion was writing, and without preliminaries of any kind announced the gentleman in question. Marion jumped up from her seat with a cry and then stood back as she recognized her aunt's visitor. Eight years had made very little difference in John Paxley. At thirty he was as handsome as he had been at twenty-two, though time had left a deeper line here and there than is usual at so young an age.

"I hope you will forgive this intrusion," he said quietly.

"How do you do, Mr. Paxley?" she said, controlling her emotion with some success. "Will you sit down? Did my aunt know that it was you I was to meet?"

"Yes," he said quietly; "she quite understands. I told her as much as it was necessary for her to know, in order that I might have her permission to call. You see, I have just come back from the States, and—"

"Oh, yes," replied Marion, racking her brain for some topic of conversation that would relieve the torturing tension of the moment. "I heard of your return. I understand we have to congratulate you on having succeeded to the White House property."

"Eh?" he asked, with a slight start. "Who could have spread the news abroad? I was trying to keep it quiet till I had seen you. But you came away from Bankford in such a hurry four days ago."

"It is my turn to be curious now," she said, with a perplexed smile. "How could you have found that out?"

"I will tell you," he said. "I am afraid you will be angry, but I want to throw myself on your mercy. As they say, to know all is to forgive all. You remember that tramp to whom your servant gave some broken scraps and who helped to load your cab? That was myself."

"Mr. Paxley!" she cried, starting to her feet.

"You see," he went on, as if prepared for some such outburst of emotion. "I wanted to see you again"—she was about to interrupt, but he held up his hand appealingly—"and I knew no one in the village of whom I could make inquiries without seeming impudent. The disguise was an easy one for me—Heaven knows I have had to assume it in grim reality often enough in my wanderings—and it helped me to learn what I wanted to know—that you were still free, and it might be, would be willing to hear me if I spoke again. I arranged this meeting with your aunt, without your knowledge, for fear you should refuse to see me, and—I was afraid of that. I have many things to ask your forgiveness for."

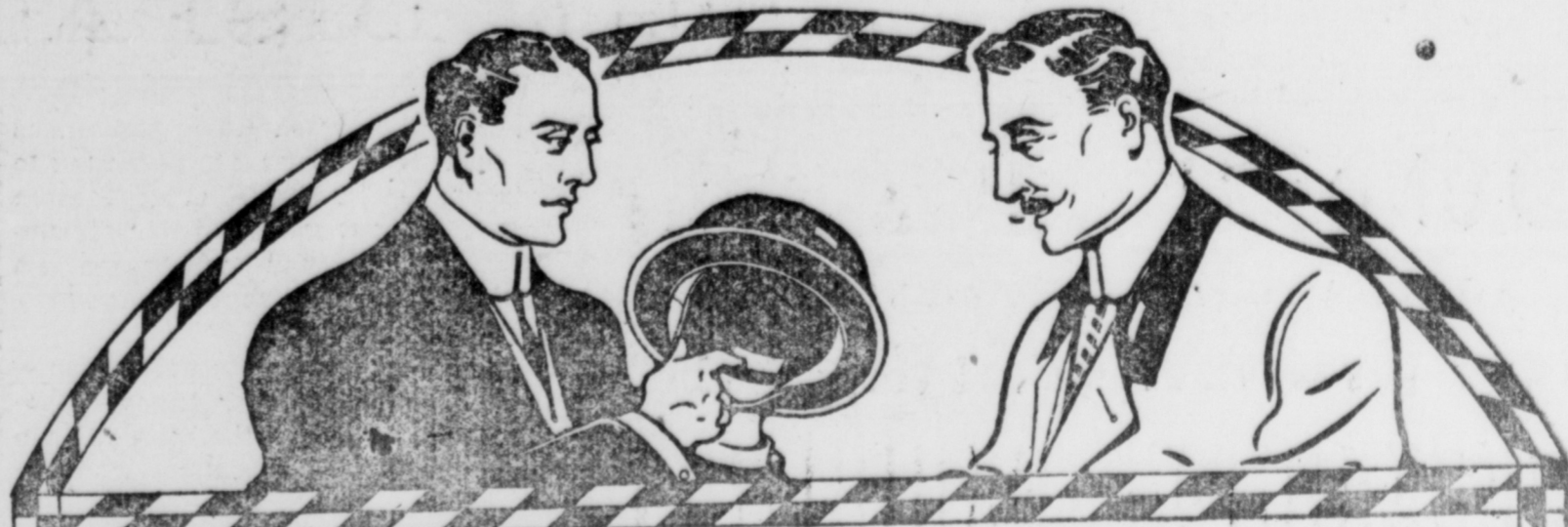
Marion had not intended to listen so long, but she found she had grown interested in spite of herself.

"Of course, I am very pleased to see you again, Mr. Paxley," she said, "and your adventures rather amuse me than make me angry. But I do not understand why you have taken the trouble to do all this. Does Mrs. Paxley—"

"Mrs. Paxley?" he echoed, stepping close to her.

"Yes," she replied, haltingly. "I went to the White House a few days ago, and the gardener showed me the beautiful rhododendrons that you have planted because your wife is so fond of—"

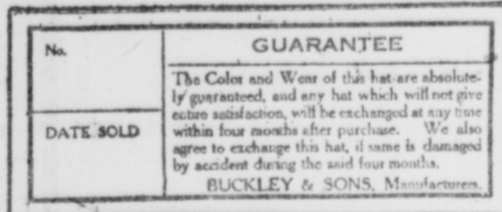
"Dear, dear!" he said. "Don't you understand, Marion? I have no wife,



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BUCKLEY HATS

Heaven knows, I have never been in a position to keep myself until now, let alone a wife. When I came into this property and was making arrangements, I told the gardener I wanted the rhododendrons because I hoped they would please my wife. I was hoping then, as I am hoping now, that I should marry the only woman I have ever loved. Won't you tell me that I was right in planting them there for—you?"

He held out his hands as he spoke. Marion raised her own as if to take them, and then, telling him he must not mind her foolish tears, buried her face on his shoulder instead.

OBLIGING

In the scramble that followed a premature discharge of dynamite in a building a stout man lost a scarf-pin. After he began to search for it he noticed another man poking around in the dust and debris. He immediately grew suspicious, and at last spoke.

"I do not wish to give offence," he said, "but I must ask you to refrain from assisting me in this search. I appreciate your willingness to help, but as a means of self-protection I long ago made it a rule never to allow strangers to assist me in a search for a lost article."

"Oh, very well," said the stranger. "You have no objection to my looking on, I suppose?"

He sat down on the kerbstone and watched the stout man sift dust and overturn stones. After twenty minutes of painful stooping the stout man found a scarf-pin.

"But it is not my pin," he said dejectedly.

"No; it's mine," said the other man. "I heard it strike somewhere hereabouts. That was what I set out to look for, but when I saw how anxious you were for the job I let you go ahead. Your own scarf-pin, if you want to know, is sticking to the flap of your left coat-pocket."

NO WONDER HE LAUGHED

The minister cleared his throat, as the small child was brought forward to be baptized.

"Beloved hearers," he said, "no one can foretell the future of this tiny mortal. He may rise to the highest points of fame. He may become a great scientist, a great astronomer, or even become the Prime Minister of England."

There was a loud snicker from one of his hearers at this juncture.

"Ah, friend," said the minister, "you do wrong to scoff. Again I say this child may become Prime Minister of England. Now, what is to be the name of this child?"

"Mary Ann," said the mother, meekly.