

Literature. THE FOUR QUEENS.

The Ladies of the Round Table.

I knew nothing of cannon in those days so could not make the comparison which Beppo I would have fired the biggest stone wall or the stiffest gate, or with my own arms the river in winter flood, rather than my father in the library. I was courageous even to foolhardiness in ally bodily danger, but at that moment I would have welcomed an earthquake as an escape from Sir Humphrey.

I dared not neglect his command, I feared him too much to delay even for a moment; so throwing my spattered train habit over my arm and hastily thrusting my dishevelled hair behind my ears, I ran along the passage, and with flushed face and throbbing heart entered the library, and confronting my father, who stood with his back to the fireplace in his customary spotless irreproachable attire.

"No, stay where you are. Can you read?" I stammered an affirmative. He took up a newspaper and flung it carelessly towards me. "Take that, and read to me,—read whatever comes first. Come nearer: that is,—now read."

"Well," asked he, with an air of mock deference, "and what is your opinion of the subject so ably treated in the leader you have favored me by reading so admirably?" I felt so thoroughly ashamed of myself that I could not reply, and as I saw the evident satisfaction with which he viewed my confusion, I had to tear myself down my sabbatic cheeks.

"You do not understand it?" "No, sir." "You probably know your alphabet well enough to read 'Trespassers Beware' in white capitals on a black board; you may be able to scrawl some hieroglyphics to the veterinary surgeon, which he interprets as a desire to buy a horse, or your pony; and that done, your arithmetic may be sufficiently far advanced to enable you to check the simple addition of his bill. I congratulate you on your attainments."

too short for me, and ill-fitting beside, and with my rebellious hair, indifferent to the furious brushing it had received, escaping in stray locks and curls in every direction, I felt as if I were a second Mrs. Treavor, for the first time in my life, that shame which is begotten of conscious inferiority.

I never envied old Lady Portcullis her brocade, her lace, or even her diamonds, and Mrs. D'Aubigny's crimson velvet train invariably excited my mirth; but there was something in the governess's simple elegance which struck me once, and I asked myself half a dozen times in the length of the terrace, "Why can't I look like she does?" and then the thought came across me, "If she will only teach me how to look like her, she needn't bother with the stupid old spelling and the silly potboilers."

CHAPTER II. I learnt a great deal from my governess and that, too, very quickly. Besides A, B, C, D, I learnt that nature, in the form of a symmetry could be taken off at night, and put in a box; and furthermore, that the sole end and aim of the spinster should be the enslaving and capture of the thoughtless wealthy male in the matrimonial net.

In truth, Lydia Treavor practised what she preached, for she made a dead set at Sir Humphrey—much to his amusement—and professed a veneration for our old original freebooter and cattle-lifter, that filled me with astonishment—till I came to know her better.

To this day I do not believe there was any real harm in Lydia. She was poor, she had been pretty, she lived only for admiration, and was essentially "a gentleman's lady." She was clever, too, that is, she had a kind of meretricious sharpness, and in men's society was not wanting. She was well—she was not—certainly she was straightened; and now, when I look back on her thoughts far away—far away in that happy future to which she aspired, and had aspired for twenty years, a brilliant marriage.

He had a knapsack on his back; he looked like a gentleman, and was undoubtedly a stranger. Prior to Mrs. Treavor's advent I should have entered my head without a second thought; but thanks to my father, I knew better now; so restraining Beppo's headlong homeward speed, I came up with him in the oak copse just before we reached the bridge.

The falling leaves were rich in their autumn glory, and the red afternoon sun shone bright on the gnarled and twisted trunks, while through an opening in the wood the old bridge with its cool grey stone, half covered by an overgrowth of lichen and small-leaved ivy, went to form as perfect a picture as ever gladdened the artist's eye.

"An I trespassing?" he asked: "I hope not. They told me at the inn this path would lead me to the house." "Do you wish to see my father?" I asked, taking it for granted that he must be the son of the man who had been so kind to me in the inn, and forgetting that as a stranger he would hardly identify me as Sibyl Haughton.

"Sir Humphrey Haughton—is he your father? I am so glad—I am your cousin Douglas." "And with a frank smile he put out his hand." And now at the very time when I thought I had practised Lydia's coquetries I forgot all about them. Love at first sight is, I suppose the chimera of poets and novelists; but as our glances met, I read admiration in his eyes—what did he read in mine?

He walked by my pony's side, his hand upon his mane, Beppo unaccustomed to the restraint imposed upon him, clanked and fretted for his usual mad gallop across the stretch of moorland, the leap over the park fence, and the merry career across the smooth road to the stables; but this day, for I believe the first time since I reined him in to a walk, and found more pleasure in the cheery careless talk of the handsome young fellow who hailed me as cousin than in the rattle of the wheels, or the air on my flushed cheeks, or the exhilaration of Beppo's stride.

As luck would have it, my father was upon the terrace, pacing leisurely to and fro as we arrived together before the moss-grown steps, and consequently I devolved upon me to introduce my new found cousin.

Lydia also was there, walking by my father's side with her noiseless steps, purring soft compliments into his ear after her customary manner. Though she appeared to have her eyes bent downwards, I could see she was taking careful stock of my companion from beneath her drooping lids. As for my father, there was a kind of latent amusement in his eyes as he awaited our approach.

"This," said I, not heeding the ordinary forms of introduction, "this is our cousin Douglas, who has been on his way here in the oak copse." "So this is cousin Douglas?" said my father, with something of a malicious look, and without offering his hand. "And our cousin Douglas has come to look upon his fair inheritance, and speculate upon the day when he will be lord of Haughton Towers." "Sir Humphrey," answered Douglas proudly, "you cannot think so meanly of me as that. I, too, am a Haughton, though a poor one."

"To a mistake," replied cousin Douglas proudly; "to the foot of an unimpaired man that it was his duty to pay respect to the head of the house of which he is a son. I apologize for my intrusion, and take my leave." "Will you not offer Mr. Douglas Haughton hospitality for the night?" asked Lydia Treavor in an audible aside; and my father, Douglas's governess remains me of my duty," said he sarcastically. "Will you remain with us—till the morning—cousin Douglas?"

"Do stay," cried I, laying a detaining hand upon his coat-sleeve. "His answer was addressed to me, not to my father." "I fear that is impossible; I value my respect too highly," and raising his hat, his eyes lingering on mine, he added "I wish it might have been." Then quickly turning his back upon the old house, he trudged across the lawn to the carriage, and, without a backward glance, retracing his steps to the village inn, Sir Humphrey laughed a little harshly, dry, unpleasant chuckling laugh, which was one of his peculiarities.

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