

Mr. Charles, Floor Walker.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

'Sign, please!'

The pretty assistant raised coquettish eyes as the new shop-walker slowly responded to her summons.

The business day was young, the shop was unpatronized, except for this one early customer; so the assistant left her place behind the counter, and stood as close as she could get to the man who checked her account.

'Thank you, madam.'

The shopwalker turned to look at the customer, who happened to be the first he had had occasion to address as an employee of Richmond and Price. She was evidently a lady, simply dressed, her age anything between twenty five and thirty-five, and tolerably good looking.

An amused expression danced in the eyes which she, in her turn, raised to the shop-walker's face.

His voice suggested a greater measure of culture than usually falls to the lot of a man who is destined to pass his days in the near vicinity of counters.

His personality was as surprising as his voice.

He was tall, and he carried himself well. There was a distinct suggestion of military training about his well-squared shoulders and noticeably straight legs.

Lady Rosamund Loftus forgot to feel any longer amused at the presumed flirtation between him and the pretty assistant.

She was asking herself what there was familiar about the handsome eyes which met her own so coolly, and in the refined, but slightly dissipated looking face.

She left the shop, dismissed by his bow—a bow not easily to be bettered by any man of her acquaintance—and returned to the hotel where she was staying with her father, the Earl of Barenians, who had come to the quaint old town of Crossways, ostensibly for the air, which was supposed to be good for gout, but in reality to retrench for a few months.

He and his daughter had travelled down in the same train as Messrs. Richmond and Price's new shopwalker, the evening before; and the earl, tired after his long journey, was sleeping late this morning, and only appeared in the coffee room as Lady Rosamund came in from her shopping.

'Been out?' he asked, with the languor which characterised most things he said or did.

'Yes; I have bought two pairs of gloves.'

'Only two? Glad you are learning to be economical.'

Lord Barenians then gave his undivided attention to his breakfast, leaving his daughter free to do likewise, if she chose. She did choose. Her walk had made her hungry, and she knew she had a busy morning before her.

Hers was the responsibility of choosing rooms likely to satisfy her father, which must be ready for them by nightfall, the earl having announced that he could only afford one night at an hotel.

She managed it, as she contrived to manage most things required of her by her exacting parent, who excused his harshness by a perpetual mental reminder of her folly in having lost so many excellent matrimonial chances.

His elder daughter had married, at eighteen, a wealthy commoner, one Threadwin Lisle, of Manchester.

'Lisle Thread' was Lady Rosamund's name for him—a rather appropriate one, for you would not meet anything thinner in a walk form Charing Cross to St. Paul's at mid day than the natty little man who was so outwardly proud of 'my wife, Lady Sophie,' and so inwardly weary of her.

Rosamund had refused again and again to be disposed of in a similar fashion.

Frequently glimpses behind the scenes of the 'Lisle Thread' message had satisfied her that it was far better to put up with the ill she had, her aristocratic father in particular, than to fly to others which might prove far more difficult to bear.

For she had her freedom in a way. She was free to flirt, for one thing, and flirting was with her a necessity, in spite of her noble birth.

She often declared that the reason she could not like any one man enough to marry him, was because she had divided all the heart she had ever possessed amongst the entire race of men presentable who had chanced to cross her path.

Her father's reply to this declaration was that there was no urgent need for her to love her husband; but Lady Rosamund had an old-fashioned fancy that she would like to do so, if she married at all, and this was how it came to pass that she was with in measurable distance of thirty, and still signed herself Rosamund Loftus—Loftus being the family name of the Earls of Barenians.

Sometimes she looked her age, sometimes she looked years older than she was, and sometimes years younger; it depended, of course, a great deal on how she was dressed, and a great deal on how she felt, and something on her father's temper at the time.

He was unusually amiable for fully a week after their arrival at Crossways. The rooms Rosamund had selected pleased him; the situation was all that could be desired in its vicinity to the County Club, which was delighted to enroll my Lord of Barenians amongst its members.

Lady Rosamund found Crossways exceedingly 'slow.' Men were very scarce, and amongst those whom her father got to know and would bring in for lunch or dinner, there was not one to compare with 'Mr. Charles,' the new shopwalker at Richmond and Price's, where this 'daughter of a hundred earls'—or thereabout—found an unconscionable lot of things she required and could not possibly do without, despite her very limited pocket money.

'Mr. Charles' interested her, and the pretty assistant's persistent flirtation with him irritated her.

There was something familiar about the man.

Rosamund felt sure that he was in a false position, and she determined to amuse herself and relieve the present monotony of her existence by getting at the truth concerning him.

Strangely enough, it was a letter from Lady Sophie that gave her her first clue.

There was little love lost between the sisters, but they managed to write tolerably interesting letters to each other at rare intervals.

In this particular letter Lady Sophie Lisle vigorously criticised a few of her fellow victims at a particularly crowded 'rush' given by an eminent personage well known in the literary and artistic world.

'The Archibald Curzons were there,' she wrote. 'Mrs. Archie wore one of her new gowns, and I felt sorry for her, but not quite, because I had intended Archie for a cousin of Threadwin's, who is really presentable; wholly different from the rest of the Lisle batch.'

'The Carlos girls were more sensible. They appeared in last year's frocks, which, however, failed to mark their wearers as anything out of date. Ida Carlos told me that your old flame, Hugh, is engaged to a Chicago heiress. Don't you feel flattered at having such a successor? I often wish you had married Lord Hugh. I fancy he will outlive Carstairs and come in for the dukedom some day. The third one, Durham, has gone under once more; permanently this time, so Ida declares; her present escapade being too disgraceful for even her to put her name to.'

The letter fluttered to the floor as Rosamund sprang to her feet, with a mental shout of 'Eureka!'

'What the deuce is the matter now?' drawled her father, looking up from his newspaper.

'Only that it has stopped raining; so I can go out,' was the mendacious reply.

'Then, by all means, go,' said the earl. 'But, for Heaven's sake, try and move like a lady, and not bounce about as if you were a milkmaid.'

Lady Rosamund smiled as she crept from the room on tiptoe.

What did she care for ill-humour, or rain either?

She had discovered who 'Mr. Charles' was, and she was about to make use of that discovery.

She forgot that it was early closing day until she reached High street, and found the principal shops shut.

This upset her plans for the afternoon, but it had little effect on her spirits, which were unusually high.

She felt in no mood to return and put up with her father's companionship until dinner-time, though the rain had by no means stopped.

She was dressed for the weather, and she decided to take a walk in the direction where she had reason to believe 'Mr. Charles' lodged.

She was not sure as to the exact house, and she could not well look into every window of the long terrace, down which she had one day seen him turn, with the unhesitating step of one who treads familiar ground.

She walked slowly in the faint hope that Fate might stand her friend, and bring about the desired meeting; and Fate, being in a propitious mood, did what was required of her for once.

'Mr. Charles' lounged in an easy chair, smoking a better cigar than any other shopwalker in Crossways could afford to smoke.

He appeared to be reading; but either his book was not interesting, or Madam Fate whispered in his ear to look out of the window; for he had been staring through the rain-washed panes for fully five minutes when he suddenly sat upright with a gleam of interest in his handsome eyes.

Lady Rosamund was just passing the gate; walking with her accustomed springy step, and looting every inch thoroughly, in spite of her rain-cloak and thick boots.

'Where the dickens can she be going? This forsaken place leads to nowhere likely to contain anyone she knows. I have a mind to follow her up.'

No sooner said than done.

He had not changed his boots when he returned from 'business' Half a minute sufficed for the donning of mackintosh and cap, and Lady Rosamund was still in sight as he passed through the little gate and started to follow her, wondering if he would be equal to the invention of some excuse to speak to her.

The elements were on his side.

Blacker clouds than any that had been seen that day crept up from the south-west and broke right over Crossways.

An umbrella was simply nowhere as a shelter from such a deluge, especially as a

stiff breeze accompanied the downpour.

The long terrace had come to an end some time before, and Lady Rosamund, turning her back on the remaining specimens of uncomfortable human dwelling-places, had taken to the high road.

The storm made her seek shelter in a convenient shed just within a field, the entrance to the said field being a five-barred gate, which she was essaying to cross, encumbered as she was with her rain cloak, when steps came hurriedly up the road behind her, and a well-remembered voice said courteously—

'Allow me to help you over. If I mistake not, we are both bound for the same haven of refuge.'

He sprang over the gate and lifted her from her slippery perch, from which she had been preparing to jump.

They both made a rush for the shed, and then she faced him, half breathless, but with radiant eyes and glowing cheeks.

'Thank you, Mr. Charles, or—Lord Durham Carlos. Which name would you rather I called you by?'

'How did you find me out?' he asked, smiling down into her laughing eyes.

'You ask me that? Have you forgotten the old days when we robbed General Heavittree's orchard together many and many a time? I remember your brothers, Carstairs and Hugh, always declared that the orchard should have been a part of the Rothstorp property; so they robbed it on principles.'

'I suppose so. The apples were excellent, and the pears delicious. You were there, but you were younger.'

'Not younger than you. You look about one-and-twenty.'

She laughed merrily.

'I am nearer one-and-thirty, Lord Durham. Well, I am twenty-eight, I remember that orchard well, and you also. How did you find me out, Rosamund? You see I don't stand on ceremony with an old friend; I hope you will follow my lead, more especially as I have no desire that my shop-mates, or anyone else for the matter of that, shall know who I am. They imagine that the D. before my surname of 'Charles' stands for David. Do you think you could call me 'David'?' She shook her head very positively.

'Impossible! You don't look the least little bit like a David. Are they humorous—your shop-mates—or merely unimaginative?'

'The latter, I should say, from my fortnight's experience of them.'

'Even the girl with the dark eyes at the glove-counter?'

'Even she also. How did you find me out, Rosamund?'

'By your eyes and your nose, and an in definable something suggestive of a Carlos which hangs about you.'

'How long have you known for certain?'

'About an hour.'

She told him of the letter she had received, asking, in return, for a confession of the terrible crime he had committed, alluded to in that same letter.

'Mr. Charles' laughed.

'It's just this,' he replied. 'this shop walking business. Now, I ask you, could anything be more harmless? The duke refused to pay my debts—it was about the five and twentieth time of asking—unless I could prove to him that I was working honestly for a living. I immediately took this situation. I learned the shop-walking business when working up the Shop Girl at private theatricals a year or two ago. But instead of being pacified and relenting, the duke turned crusty; he kept his word about paying the debts, but he cut off my allowance. What do you think of that for an affectionate father's attitude towards an erring, but repentant son?'

This time it was Lady Rosamund who laughed, and she did it very heartily.

CHAPTER II.

'Is that all? Really and truly? You have not committed a forgery or murdered anybody?'

'I have not, I assure you. Have you been weaving a romance of that sort about me? And are you disappointed?'

'Not a bit. I think it is lots better fun being a shop-walker. But oh, to think of it!'

She went off into another peal of laughter.

'It is rather a joke,' he owned. 'I'll spend my first takings on you; you deserve it, for I get a commission on every article sold in my department, and you are one of our most regular customers. So, kindly tell me what I can do for you, madam.'

She laughed again at his tone.

'You do it to perfection, you really do,' she declared. 'I could almost believe that you were 'to the manner born.'

'Thank you. But you have not told me what you will have a trinket of some sort?'

'Certainly not. I absolutely decline to have anything. Do you forget that you have to live on what you earn? How do you propose to do it?'

'My dear old chum, I never proposed in my life, and it is too late to begin now. When I am tired of shop-walking—'

'Well?'

'There is always Monte Carlo and its cemetery.'

She looked at him.

You are too good for that. Have you left the service?'

'Had to. Sold up everything I possessed—except a change of clothes and a brace of pistols.'

'Don't, Durr; you hurt me.'

'Ah! that old name. I wondered if you would remember it. You always called me Durr in those days.'

'Did I? I had forgotten. The name slipped out of its own accord from some locked store-cupboard of memory. I wish I were rich: I would lend you enough to start you somewhere abroad.'

'Don't you know that no man worthy of the name would accept money from a woman?'

'Pooh! Clap trap, twaddle. Besides, it would be offered from friend to friend, not from woman to man. Anyway, I haven't got it to offer, so you had better

follow Lord Hugh's example and go in for an American heiress.'

'That would involve a proposal of some sort, and, as I have already told you, that sort of thing is not in my line. Why did you not marry Hugh, by-the-by? He was dead gone on you.'

'Or thought he was. I am not fond of cold shoulder, Durr.'

'You don't mean—the duke—'

She nodded.

'Also the duchess. You see, mon ami, you three brothers are rather expensive items, even in so wealthy an establishment as that of Rothstorp. A penniless bride would be a mistake for either; besides, I only half cared for Hugh. I am old-fashioned enough to want love as a chief motive power, if ever I do marry.'

'My dear girl, you are frightfully out of date.'

'I know I am; but just consider the matter for a moment. Take my sister Sophie for instance. Did she ever enjoy an hour of real happiness, in compensation of having sold herself to Lisle Thread? Of course, it is sweet to have plenty of jewels, and all the dresses one wants, and carriages and servants, and nothing to do but enjoy one's self from morning all night. But I would rather have one year of love—real love—than an eternity of such an existence as that; for, you see, Lisle Thread has to be taken into account.'

'Now sketch your side of the question,' he said softly, watching her curiously as she stood gazing dreamily out at the rain.'

'Well, the man would come first, instead of last, for one thing. He would be a man to whom I could give myself willingly, because I should love him without caring whether he was rich or poor. What would it matter? He could work for a living, and I know how to keep house on next to nothing. You may not believe it but I dress on forty dollars a year, and I could manage with half that, and still look decent.'

'In my opinion every girl who thinks happiness worth waiting for should learn to manage on small income. Knowledge is always power. She never knows how soon her money may be swallowed up in some failure, nor does she know whether the man of her choice will be rich or poor. There would be more real happiness in the world if men and women would not sell themselves for money.'

'This is getting worse and worse, Rosamund. Who cares about happiness? One likes to be amused, I grant you. It is not possible to get amusement unless you have money; therefore money is the one thing needful.'

'It is not—I speak from experience; love is the one thing needful, and I, for one, mean to wait for it. Come, the rain has ceased, and I must be getting back.'

'Why need you hurry?'

'Because my father cannot go out in wet weather, and staying in makes him fractious, and because I want to have him in a good temper this evening, for people I dislike are coming to dinner; and, if the pater is not in an amiable mood, I shall have to do all the talking.'

'I shall certainly not try to hinder you, then; though, Heaven knows, this chat with you has been like a glimpse of Paradise. I have had no one to talk to but Maggie Brent and her fellow-assistants since I came here.'

'Is Maggie Brent the girl with the eyes?'

'Yes. She imagines herself to be in love with me. But she means to marry one of the firm who imagines himself in love with her. Her mind is saturated with the literature which teaches that it is a right and proper thing for a woman to love one man and marry another; and so Maggie Brent is perfectly happy—or will be, if I make up my mind to respond to her advances.'

'Poor, foolish girl! But she is safe, as far as you are concerned.'

'You speak very confidently.'

She flashed a look at him as they turned into the muddy road.

'If I thought you were a villain, Durr, I would not speak to you again, though I am even lonelier than you are.'

'And yet Lady Rosamund Loftus has the reputation of being a thorough-paced flirt?'

'And so she is. But—flirting is harmless enough; my sort of flirting. And so is yours.'

'Have it your own way, you out-of-date enigmas. I presume you disapprove of women cycling, and playing golf and hockey—'

'On the contrary, I think it good for both mind and body, so long as they don't give up all their time to it. I cycle myself, because my father says he cannot afford to keep a horse for me.'

'Good-bye. When shall I see you again?'

'Why, you have just said—'

'That was for a talk and a walk. I want to see you as often as possible. Your act like a tonic on me. Come to the shop every day, and buy—reels of cotton.'

'Poor Sir Empson! Good-bye, Durr.'

'Good-afternoon, madam.'

She left him, laughing; but her lips sobered into gravity, and she sighed a little as she hastened homewards.

'Poor Durr! What a mad freak! And how like him to think of it! They are a bizarre lot—the Carlos family. It is too bad of the duke to be hard on him, though, of course, it must be trying to have to keep on paying his debts. Poor Durr!'

As she dressed for dinner that evening, Lady Rosamund wondered if Sir Empson Richmond had any suspicions as to the identity of 'Mr. Charles.'

Probably he had not seen him.

His anxiety to preserve secrecy with regard to his connection with the establishment would, of course necessitate ignorance of his employees beyond their mere names.

He acted evidently, the pleasant part of sleeping partner, while Mr. Price did all the work of organizing and managing.

'You don't look particularly fetching.'

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The man's eyebrows went up as he remembered one or two decidedly expensive luxuries which the Earl of Barenians permitted himself to indulge in, and which were the daily talk of the quiet old town of Crossways.

'Who are your guests for the evening?'

'Sir Empson Richmond and his son. My father is desirous that I should marry one of them; he does not mind which. Kind of him, to leave me a free choice, is it not?'

'Very.' A peculiar smile played round the handsome mouth. 'I am wondering if I shall let you into a secret, Rosamund. You have my secret already; shall I put you in possession of Sir Empson's?'

'By all means. Especially if it will give me a substantial reason for refusing to marry either him or his son.'

'It might do so. Once upon a time Sir Empson backed a bill for me; his signature was 'E. Richmond.' I had occasion to learn every stroke of every letter by heart before that bill was met. I saw the same name, written by the same hand, at the foot of a business letter yesterday which was addressed to Mr. Price, who acts as manager of the extensive business carried on in High Street under the name of Richmond and Price. And this morning, Sir Empson, amply disguised by a full black beard, had a private interview with his junior partner. I understand they have establishments in half a dozen other towns as well as the one here—all rather out-of-the-way towns.'

'Are you sure it was Sir Empson? I understood he had made his money in cotton—'

'But not on reels! I am quite sure. I rarely, or never, forget a voice. Sir Empson's is rather raspy.'

'Dear me! The aristocratic Sir Empson! Think of it! Why doesn't he own up like a man instead of hiding his light under a bushel? Is his son in it, too?'

'I think not. I fancy he is in blissful ignorance of the plebeian source whence he derives his ample pocket-money.'

'How very funny! Look here, Durr, suppose you come to dinner this evening, and meet them? My father will be delighted to see you, so long as I refrain from flirting with you. Will you come? It would be a splendid joke for Sir Empson Richmond to dine with one of his shop-walkers.'

'But it might result in my losing my situation, and that I have no wish to do as long as—'

'As what?'

'As long as Maggie Brent continues to adore me. And now I am going to suggest that you walk alone, Lady Rosamund; and that you forget that I have a claim to any surname other than that of 'Charles,' until this day week, when I hope you will, out of the kindness of your heart, meet me here under this tree, and give me the pleasure of chatting over old times with you. Is it a bargain?'

'There's my hand on it, Mr. Charles. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye. When shall I see you again?'

'Why, you have just said—'

'That was for a talk and a walk. I want to see you as often as possible. Your act like a tonic on me. Come to the shop every day, and buy—reels of cotton.'

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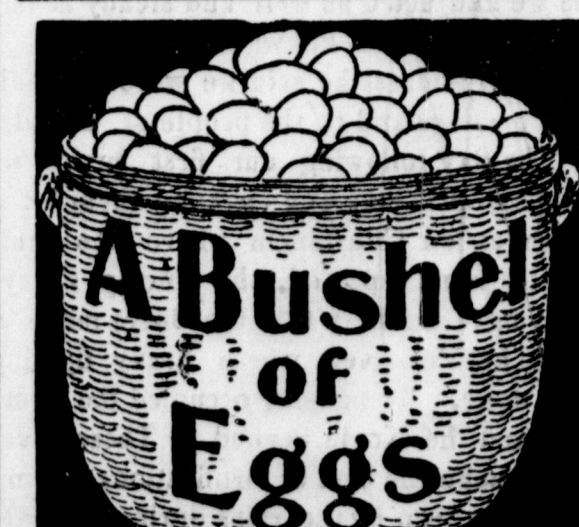
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(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



In the fall and winter is worth a barrel in hot weather. There's a way that never fails to fetch eggs when they're wanted, and that is to feed, once a day, in a warm mash

Sheridan's
CONDITION
Powder

It helps the older hens, makes pullets early