

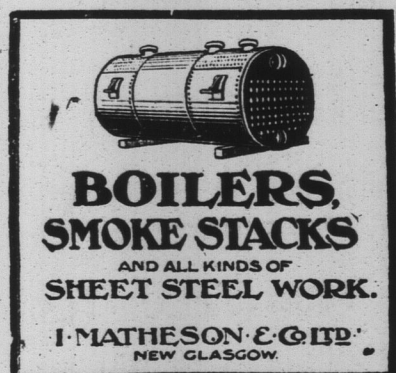
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By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN Author of "The Sowers," "Roder's Corner," "From One Generation to Another," Etc. Copyright, 1894, by HARPER & BROTHERS

CHAPTER I.

MY dear madam, what you call heart does not come into the question at all. Sir John Meredith was sitting slightly behind Lady Cantourne, leaning toward her with a somewhat stiffened replica of his former grace. But he was not looking at her, and she knew it.

They were both watching a group at the other side of the great hall-room. "Sir John Meredith on heart," said the old lady, with a depth of significance in her voice.

"Yes, indeed. Why not?" Sir John smiled with that well bred cynicism which a new school has not yet succeeded in imitating. They both belonged to the old school, these two, and their worldliness, their cynicism, their conversational attitude belonged to a bygone period. It was a cleaner period in some ways—a period devoid of stunts. Ours, on the contrary, is an age of stunts, wherein we all dabble to the detriment of our hands—mental, literary and theological.

Sir John moved slightly in his chair, leaning one hand on one knee. His back was very flat, his clothes were perfect, his hair was not his own, nor yet his teeth, but his manners were entirely his own. His face was eighty years old, and yet he smiled his keen society smile with the best of them. There was not a young man in the room of whom he was afraid conversationally.

"No, Lady Cantourne," he replied. "Your charming niece is heartless. She will get on."

Lady Cantourne smiled and drew the glove farther up her stout and motherly right arm.

"She will get on," she admitted. "As to the other, it is early to give an opinion."

"She has had the best of trainings," he murmured. And Lady Cantourne turned on him with a twinkle amid the wrinkles.

"For which?" she asked. "Chaissez?" he answered, with a bow.

The object of his attention was the belle of that ball, Miss Millicent Chyne, who was hemmed in a corner by a group of eager dancers anxious to insert their names in some corner of her card. She was the fashion at that time, and she probably did not know that at least half of the men crowded round because the other half were there. Nothing succeeds like the success that knows how to draw a crowd.

She received the ovation self-possessedly enough, but without that hauteur affected by belles of balls—in books. She seemed to have a fresh smile for each new applicant—a smile which conveyed to each in turn the fact that she had been attempting all along to get her programme safely into his hands. A halting masculine pen will not be expected to explain how she compassed this, beyond a gentle intimation that masculine vanity had a good deal to do with her success.

"She is having an excellent time," said Sir John, weighing on the modern phrase with a subtle sarcasm. He was addicted to the use of modern phrases, elegantly spiced with a cynicism of his own.

"Yes; I cannot help sympathizing with her—a little," answered the lady. "Nor I. It will not last."

"After all," she said, "she is my sister's child. The sympathy may only be like that myself once. Was I? You can tell me."

He fumbled at his lips, having reasons of his own for disliking too close a scrutiny of his face.

"That is more than probable," he answered rather indistinctly.

"Then," she said, tapping the back of his gloved hand with her fan, "we ought to be merciful to the faults of a succeeding generation. Tell me, who is that young man with the long stride who is getting himself introduced now?"

"That," answered Sir John, who prided himself upon knowing every one—knowing who they were and who they were not—"is young Oscar."

"Son of the eccentric Oscar?" "Son of the eccentric Oscar."

"And where did he get that brown face?" "He got that in Africa, where he has been shooting. He forms part of some one else's bag at the present moment."

"What do you mean?" "He has been apportioned a dance. Your fair niece has begged him."

The other young men rather fell back before Guy Oscar—scared, perhaps, by his long stride, and afraid that he might crush their puny toes. This enabled Miss Chyne to give him the very next dance of which the music was commencing.

"I feel rather out of all this," said Oscar as they moved away together. "You must excuse unorthodoxy."

"I see no signs of it," laughed Millicent. "You are behaving very nicely. You cannot help being larger and stronger than the others. I should say it was an advantage and something to be proud of."

"Oh, it is not that," replied Oscar; "it is a feeling of unimportance and want of smartness among these men who look so clean and correct. Shall we dance?"

"Yes," she said, "let us dance by all means." Here she knew her own proficiency, and in a few seconds she found that her partner was worthy of her skill.

"Where have you been?" she asked presently. "I am sure you have been away somewhere, exploring or something."

"I have only been in Africa shooting."

"Oh, how interesting! You must tell me all about it."

She was watching the door all the while. Presently the music ceased, and they made their way back to the spot whence he had taken her. She led the way thither by an almost imperceptible pressure of her fingers on his arm. There were several men waiting there, and one or two more entering the room and looking languidly round.

"There comes the favored one," Lady Cantourne murmured, with a veiled glance toward her companion.

Sir John's gray eyes followed the direction of her glance.

"My bright boy?" he inquired, with a wealth of sarcasm on the adjective. "Your bright boy," she replied.

"I hope not," he said curtly. They were watching a tall fair man in the doorway who seemed to know everybody, so slow was his progress into the room. The most remarkable thing about this man was a certain grace of movement. He seemed to be specially constructed to live in narrow.

hampered places. He was above six feet, but being of slight build he moved with a certain languidness which saved him from that unwieldiness usually associated with large men in a drawing room.

Such was Jack Meredith, one of the best known figures in London society. He had hitherto succeeded in moving through the masses of that coterie, as he now moved through this room, without jarring any one.

CHAPTER II. MISS MILICENT CHYNE was vaguely conscious of success—and such a consciousness is apt to make the best of us.

It was certainly one of the best balls of the season, and Miss Chyne's dress was without doubt one of the most successful articles of its sort there.

Jack Meredith saw that fact and noted it as soon as he came into the room. Moreover, it pleased him, and he was pleased to reflect that he was no mean critic in such matters. There could be no doubt about it, because he knew as well as any woman there. He knew that Millicent Chyne was dressed in the latest fashion; no furled-up gown from the hands of her maid, but a unique creation from Bond street.

"Well," she asked in a low voice as she handed him her programme, "are you pleased with it?"

"Eminently so."

She glanced down at her own dress. It was not the nervous glance of the debutante, but the practiced flash of experienced eyes which see without appearing to look.

"I am glad," she murmured. He handed her back the card with the courteous smile and bow of gratitude, but there was something more in his eyes.

"Is that what you did it for?" he inquired. "Of course," with a glance half coquettish, half humble.

She took the card and allowed it to drop pendent from her fan without looking at it. He has written nothing on it. This was all a form. The dances that were had been inscribed on the engagement card long before by smaller fingers than long partner's arm with a little flourish, a little movement of the hips, to bring her dress and possibly her self more prominently beneath Jack Meredith's eyes.

His eyes followed her with that incomparably pleasant society smile which he had no doubt inherited from his father. Then he turned and bowed where he ought to bow, asking with fervor for dances in plain but influential quarters where dances were to be easily obtained.

And all the while his father and Lady Cantourne watched.

Behind his keen eyes Sir John watched Jack go up and claim his share of the hands of Miss Millicent Chyne. He could almost guess that she said, for Jack was grave, and she smiled demurely. They began dancing at once, and as soon as the floor became crowded they disappeared.

Jack Meredith was an adept at such matters. He knew a seat at the end of a long passage where they could cover the hands of all beholders who happened to pass, but no one could possibly overhear their conversation, no one could surprise them. It was essentially a strategic position.

"Well," inquired Jack, with a peculiar breathlessness, when they were seated, "have you thought about it?"

She gave a little nod. They seemed to be talking up some conversation at a point where it had been dropped on a previous occasion.

"And?" he inquired suavely. The society polish was very thickly coated over the man, but his eyes had a hungry look.

By way of reply her gloved hand crept out toward his, which rested on the chair. "Jack," she whispered, and that was all.

It was very prettily done, and quite naturally. He was a judge of such matters and appreciated the girl's simplicity of the action fully.

He took the small gloved hand and pressed it lovingly. The thoroughness of his social training prevented any further display of affection.

"Thank heaven!" he murmured. The music of the next dance was beginning, and remembering their social obligations, they both rose. She laid her hand on his arm and for a moment his fingers pressed hers. He smiled down into her upturned eyes with love, but without passion. He never for a second risked the "gentleman" and showed the "man." He was suggestive of a forest pool with a smiling, rippled surface. There might be depth, but nothing had yet reached beyond the surface.

"Jack," said Sir John as they passed on, "when you have been deprived of Miss Chyne's society, come and console yourself with a glass of sherry."

The dutiful son nodded a semi-indifferent acquiescence and disappeared. "Wonderful thing, sherry!" observed Sir John Meredith for his own edification.

He waited there until Jack returned, and then they got off in search of refreshment. The son seemed to know his whereabouts better than the father. "This way," he said—"through the conservatory."

Sir John Meredith and his son stood in silence looking around them. Finally their eyes met.

"Are you in earnest with that girl?" asked Sir John abruptly. "I am," replied Jack. He was smiling pleasantly.

"And you think there is a chance of her marrying you—unless, of course, something better turns up?" "With all due modesty, I do."



"Well," inquired Jack, "have you thought about it?"

Sir John's hand was at his mouth. He stood up his full six feet two and looked hard at his son, whose eyes were level with his own. They were ideal representatives of their school.

"And what do you propose marrying upon? She, I understand, has about eight hundred a year. I respect you too much to suspect any foolish notions of love in a cottage."

Jack Meredith made no reply. He was entirely dependent upon his father.

"Of course," said Sir John, "when I do you will be a baronet, and there will be enough to live on like a gentleman. You had better tell Miss Chyne that. She may not know it. Girls are so innocent. But I am not dead yet, and I shall take special care to live some time."

"What is your objection?" inquired Jack Meredith after a little pause. "I object to the girl."

"Upon what grounds?" "I should prefer you to marry a woman of heart."

(To be continued.)



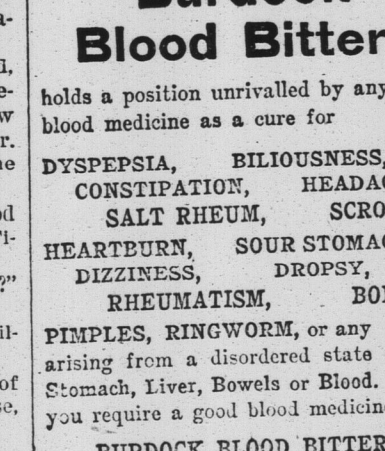
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