

A Lady of Quality

By

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A LADY OF QUALITY

Being a most curious, hitherto unknown
history, as related by Mr. Isaac Bickerstaff
but not presented to the World of
Fashion through the pages of
The Tatler, and now for the
first time written down
by
Francis Hodgson Burnett

Were Nature just to Man from his first hour, he need not ask for
Mercy; then 'tis for us--the toys of Nature--to be both just and
merciful, for so only can the wrongs she does be undone.

CHAPTER I--The twenty-fourth day of November 1690

On a wintry morning at the close of 1690, the sun shining faint and red through a light fog, there was a great noise of baying dogs, loud voices, and trampling of horses in the courtyard at Wildairs Hall; Sir Jeffry being about to go forth a-hunting, and being a man with a choleric temper and big, loud voice, and given to oaths and noise even when in good-humour, his riding forth with his friends at any time was attended with boisterous commotion. This morning it was more so than usual, for he had guests with him who had come to his house the day before, and had supped late and drunk deeply, whereby the day found them, some with headaches, some with a nausea at their stomachs, and some only in an evil humour which made them curse at their horses when they were restless, and break into loud surly laughs when a coarse joke was made. There were many such jokes, Sir Jeffry and his boon companions being renowned throughout the county for the freedom of their conversation as for the scandal of their pastimes, and this day 'twas well indeed, as their loud-voiced, oath-besprinkled jests rang out on the cold air, that there were no ladies about to ride forth with them.

'Twas Sir Jeffry who was louder than any other, he having drunk even deeper than the rest, and though 'twas his boast that he could carry a bottle more than any man, and see all his guests under the table, his last night's bout had left him in ill-humour and boisterous. He strode

about, casting oaths at the dogs and rating the servants, and when he mounted his big black horse 'twas amid such a clamour of voices and baying hounds that the place was like Pandemonium.

He was a large man of florid good looks, black eyes, and full habit of body, and had been much renowned in his youth for his great strength, which was indeed almost that of a giant, and for his deeds of prowess in the saddle and at the table when the bottle went round. There were many evil stories of his roysterings, but it was not his way to think of them as evil, but rather to his credit as a man of the world, for, when he heard that they were gossiped about, he greeted the information with a loud triumphant laugh. He had married, when she was fifteen, the blooming toast of the county, for whom his passion had long died out, having indeed departed with the honeymoon, which had been of the briefest, and afterwards he having borne her a grudge for what he chose to consider her undutiful conduct. This grudge was founded on the fact that, though she had presented him each year since their marriage with a child, after nine years had passed none had yet been sons, and, as he was bitterly at odds with his next of kin, he considered each of his offspring an ill turn done him.

He spent but little time in her society, for she was a poor, gentle creature of no spirit, who found little happiness in her lot, since her lord treated her with scant civility, and her children one after another sickened and died in their infancy until but two were left. He scarce remembered her existence when he did not see her face, and he was

certainly not thinking of her this morning, having other things in view, and yet it so fell out that, while a groom was shortening a stirrup and being sworn at for his awkwardness, he by accident cast his eye upward to a chamber window peering out of the thick ivy on the stone. Doing so he saw an old woman draw back the curtain and look down upon him as if searching for him with a purpose.

He uttered an exclamation of anger.

"Damnation! Mother Posset again," he said. "What does she there, old frump?"

The curtain fell and the woman disappeared, but in a few minutes more an unheard-of thing happened--among the servants in the hall, the same old woman appeared making her way with a hurried fretfulness, and she descended haltingly the stone steps and came to his side where he sat on his black horse.

"The Devil!" he exclaimed--"what are you here for? 'Tis not time for another wench upstairs, surely?"

"'Tis not time," answered the old nurse acidly, taking her tone from his own. "But there is one, but an hour old, and my lady--"

"Be damned to her!" quoth Sir Jeffry savagely. "A ninth one--and 'tis nine too many. 'Tis more than man can bear. She does it but to spite

me."

"'Tis ill treatment for a gentleman who wants an heir," the old woman answered, as disrespectful of his spouse as he was, being a time-serving crone, and knowing that it paid but poorly to coddle women who did not as their husbands would have them in the way of offspring. "It should have been a fine boy, but it is not, and my lady--"

"Damn her puling tricks!" said Sir Jeffry again, pulling at his horse's bit until the beast reared.

"She would not let me rest until I came to you," said the nurse resentfully. "She would have you told that she felt strangely, and before you went forth would have a word with you."

"I cannot come, and am not in the mood for it if I could," was his answer. "What folly does she give way to? This is the ninth time she hath felt strangely, and I have felt as squeamish as she--but nine is more than I have patience for."

"She is light-headed, mayhap," said the nurse. "She lieth huddled in a heap, staring and muttering, and she would leave me no peace till I promised to say to you, 'For the sake of poor little Daphne, whom you will sure remember.' She pinched my hand and said it again and again."

Sir Jeffry dragged at his horse's mouth and swore again.

"She was fifteen then, and had not given me nine yellow-faced wenches," he said. "Tell her I had gone a-hunting and you were too late;" and he struck his big black beast with the whip, and it bounded away with him, hounds and huntsmen and fellow-roysterers galloping after, his guests, who had caught at the reason of his wrath, grinning as they rode.

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In a huge chamber hung with tattered tapestries and barely set forth with cumbersome pieces of furnishing, my lady lay in a gloomy, canopied bed, with her new-born child at her side, but not looking at or touching it, seeming rather to have withdrawn herself from the pillow on which it lay in its swaddling-clothes.

She was but a little lady, and now, as she lay in the large bed, her face and form shrunken and drawn with suffering, she looked scarce bigger than a child. In the brief days of her happiness those who toasted her had called her Titania for her fairy slightness and delicate beauty, but then her fair wavy locks had been of a length that touched the ground when her woman unbound them, and she had had the colour of a wild rose and the eyes of a tender little fawn. Sir Jeoffry for a month or so had paid tempestuous court to her, and had so won her heart with his dashing way of love-making and the daringness of his reputation, that she had thought herself--being child enough to think so--the luckiest young lady in the world that his black eye should have fallen upon her with favour. Each

year since, with the bearing of each child, she had lost some of her beauty. With each one her lovely hair fell out still more, her wild-rose colour faded, and her shape was spoiled. She grew thin and yellow, only a scant covering of the fair hair was left her, and her eyes were big and sunken. Her marriage having displeased her family, and Sir Jeffry having a distaste for the ceremonies of visiting and entertainment, save where his own cronies were concerned, she had no friends, and grew lonelier and lonelier as the sad years went by. She being so without hope and her life so dreary, her children were neither strong nor beautiful, and died quickly, each one bringing her only the anguish of birth and death. This wintry morning her ninth lay slumbering by her side; the noise of baying dogs and boisterous men had died away with the last sound of the horses' hoofs; the little light which came into the room through the ivied window was a faint yellowish red; she was cold, because the fire in the chimney was but a scant, failing one; she was alone--and she knew that the time had come for her death. This she knew full well.

She was alone, because, being so disrespected and deserted by her lord, and being of a timid and gentle nature, she could not command her insufficient retinue of servants, and none served her as was their duty. The old woman Sir Jeffry had dubbed Mother Posset had been her sole attendant at such times as these for the past five years, because she would come to her for a less fee than a better woman, and Sir Jeffry had sworn he would not pay for wenches being brought into the world. She was a slovenly, guzzling old crone, who drank caudle from morning till night,

and demanded good living as a support during the performance of her trying duties; but these last she contrived to make wondrous light, knowing that there was none to reprove her.

"A fine night I have had," she had grumbled when she brought back Sir Jeffrey's answer to her lady's message. "My old bones are like to break, and my back will not straighten itself. I will go to the kitchen to get victuals and somewhat to warm me; your ladyship's own woman shall sit with you."

Her ladyship's "own woman" was also the sole attendant of the two little girls, Barbara and Anne, whose nursery was in another wing of the house, and my lady knew full well she would not come if she were told, and that there would be no message sent to her.

She knew, too, that the fire was going out, but, though she shivered under the bed-clothes, she was too weak to call the woman back when she saw her depart without putting fresh fuel upon it.

So she lay alone, poor lady, and there was no sound about her, and her thin little mouth began to feebly quiver, and her great eyes, which stared at the hangings, to fill with slow cold tears, for in sooth they were not warm, but seemed to chill her poor cheeks as they rolled slowly down them, leaving a wet streak behind them which she was too far gone in weakness to attempt to lift her hand to wipe away.

"Nine times like this," she panted faintly, "and 'tis for naught but oaths and hard words that blame me. I was but a child myself and he loved me. When 'twas 'My Daphne,' and 'My beauteous little Daphne,' he loved me in his own man's way. But now--" she faintly rolled her head from side to side. "Women are poor things"--a chill salt tear sliding past her lips so that she tasted its bitterness--"only to be kissed for an hour, and then like this--only for this and nothing else. I would that this one had been dead."

Her breath came slower and more pantingly, and her eyes stared more widely.

"I was but a child," she whispered--"a child--as--as this will be--if she lives fifteen years."

Despite her weakness, and it was great and woefully increasing with each panting breath, she slowly laboured to turn herself towards the pillow on which her offspring lay, and, this done, she lay staring at the child and gasping, her thin chest rising and falling convulsively. Ah, how she panted, and how she stared, the glaze of death stealing slowly over her wide-opened eyes; and yet, dimming as they were, they saw in the sleeping infant a strange and troublous thing--though it was but a few hours old 'twas not as red and crumple visaged as new-born infants usually are, its little head was covered with thick black silk, and its small features were of singular definiteness. She dragged herself nearer to gaze.

"She looks not like the others," she said. "They had no beauty--and are safe. She--she will be like--Jeffrey--and like me."

The dying fire fell lower with a shuddering sound.

"If she is--beautiful, and has but her father, and no mother!" she whispered, the words dragged forth slowly, "only evil can come to her. From her first hour--she will know naught else, poor heart, poor heart!"

There was a rattling in her throat as she breathed, but in her glazing eyes a gleam like passion leaped, and gasping, she dragged nearer.

"'Tis not fair," she cried. "If I--if I could lay my hand upon thy mouth--and stop thy breathing--thou poor thing, 'twould be fairer--but--I have no strength."

She gathered all her dying will and brought her hand up to the infant's mouth. A wild look was on her poor, small face, she panted and fell forward on its breast, the rattle in her throat growing louder. The child awakened, opening great black eyes, and with her dying weakness its new-born life struggled. Her cold hand lay upon its mouth, and her head upon its body, for she was too far gone to move if she had willed to do so. But the tiny creature's strength was marvellous. It gasped, it fought, its little limbs struggled beneath her, it writhed until the cold hand fell away, and then, its baby mouth set free, it fell a-shrieking. Its cries were not like those of a new-born thing, but fierce and shrill,

and even held the sound of infant passion. 'Twas not a thing to let its life go easily, 'twas of those born to do battle.

Its lusty screaming pierced her ear perhaps--she drew a long, slow breath, and then another, and another still--the last one trembled and stopped short, and the last cinder fell dead from the fire.

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When the nurse came bustling and fretting back, the chamber was cold as the grave's self--there were only dead embers on the hearth, the new-born child's cries filled all the desolate air, and my lady was lying stone dead, her poor head resting on her offspring's feet, the while her open glazed eyes seemed to stare at it as if in asking Fate some awful question.