

THE PASSING OF MRS. SNARK

Drawing by Frank Snapp

THE final achievement of social position may be lost at the last moment by the slightest error of judgment. One small mistake can be fatal. There are some people who are like beasts at a fire. When apparent disaster faces them they become confused, and, blinded by the glare of the flames, stampede madly to their doom.

The late Frederick Townsend Martin tells in his book, "Things I Remember," of an ambitious American girl in England who, after years of patient engineering, managed to be presented to Royalty. She made a stupid blunder in royal etiquette, and immediately followed her first *faux pas* with another. Her fate is pictured in this tragic sentence, "The silly girl realized that she had sinned against Society, which never forgives fools. She made a hasty exit, and the waves of the social sea closed over her forever." And such was the unfortunate fate of Mrs. Ira D. Snark, a woman who started out with excellent chances of getting into Society, but was her own worst enemy, whom I tried in vain to save from being the victim of her own folly.

I cannot remember where I first met Mrs. Snark. I have a faint impression that it was either at French Lick, or at the Hot Springs of Virginia, or at the White Sulphur. I sometimes go to these health resorts; but my purpose is always social, with a covert eye for business. But for a longer time than I would care to tell Mrs. Snark had been a habitual visitor at not only the entire round of these places in America, but also at every notable spa on the Continent. I have heard of her at Vichy, at Ems, at Wiesbaden and St. Moritz, and all in the same season. Each of these cures has a distinctive specialty.

One autumn she went through the heart treatment at Nauheim, and then she was at Evian for chronic gout, and before Christmas she had gone out to another resort for inflammatory rheumatism. And yet she had time for a considerable stay in New York when gaieties were at their height; although at these periods I would now and then hear that she had been or was about to be operated upon by one of the most fashionable physicians for one of the latest disorders in vogue. I never could find out the nature of her trouble. She always looked the same,—a flabby, jelly-like woman, pallid, with faded blond hair, fishy eyes, and a deprecating manner. In those days she was timid and shrinking, with the animation of a turtle. She was profusely grateful for even a nod of recognition, and so sympathetic to the people she met, when they were mutually taking some particular treatment, that through actual pity many of them were civil to her. Thus after years of this life she had managed to annex a wide circle of acquaintances. She was a widow, spent money liberally, and was credited with a fortune.

THERE came a turn in the tide. One winter afternoon I saw her sitting in the famous peacock alley at the Waldorf. There had been a smart charity concert, and the dismissed audience was trooping down the corridor toward the tearoom. I could hardly believe my eyes. What a change in the lady! She was fashionably dressed, and really was not bad looking. She had acquired a certain distinction of manner, quite cosmopolitan, and many women, including a few members of the ultraset, stopped and spoke to her. She was actually holding court in her corner. To crown all, I spied Flora McMasters bearing down upon her and taking her off to tea.

I then began to do some quiet thinking. Flora never took up anyone unless there was something in it. I suddenly recalled that when that most distinguished woman, and one of the great planets in society, Mrs. Rutherford Clermont, was operated upon for appendicitis, it was stated in the newspapers that she had been cheered considerably by the company of another patient in Dr. Scalpel's famous sanatorium, and that this person was none other than my friend Mrs. Snark. Elizabeth Bleecker told me of a similar experience at a water treatment in the wilds of Wisconsin.

Flora McMasters is every year at the Hot Springs of Virginia. I will also add that she is a most energetic social promoter. She has ways and means, including several influential relatives, and has had a winning way in landing aspirants in Society. She is not rich; but she thrives by this undertaking. She detests me, and it has been open war between us ever since I arrived in New York and began my business of securing social recognition for my clients.

The situation flashed upon me! Mrs. Snark was a plum worth having; it had been a dull year, and the quarry had been scarce. As for Mrs. Snark herself, she was a deep woman and a sly old fox. She was going to creep into Society. For years, with infinite con-

ning, she had been slowly paving her way. She had discovered an untrodden path and made considerable progress.

Between human beings, in their mutual aches and disorders, real or imaginary, there is the closest bond. The freemasonry of pain is omnipotent. We are always more interested in our own ailments, and next to these we are interested in those of other persons similarly afflicted. What a boon is a sympathetic listener amid the dull surroundings of a sanatorium or a private hospital! Through invalidism, then, had Mrs. Snark begun to realize her social aspirations. She had now acquired a working capital of friends and acquaintances. Flora McMasters would go over the list and help her weed them out, and then—a dash for the Pole!

I was right. That winter Mrs. Snark attained the first two metropolitan steps to general recognition,—the Social Register and a subscription to Bagby's Musical Mornings. Later her name cropped out as patroness of a number of fashionable charity entertainments, and I heard inadvertently that she had subscribed liberally to many of these. She was now at the Plaza. Flora McMasters gave a luncheon for her there, no doubt financed by her client, which was attended by some excellent people. It was the usual Pilgrim's Progress. I could not have conducted the campaign better. I saw splendid opportunities in it, and could scarcely hold my hands off. But there is honor in the traditions of the growing profession of social promoting, and thus far the game was Flora's.

THEN came the first little mistake. A brand new house was taken at the court end of town, just off the avenue and the park, and in the shadow of the great Bellmore mansion, which commands the situation at this point. Mrs. Snark began to entertain. This was going a bit too fast. There was danger of a cropper.

Shortly after this move I was surprised to receive an invitation to a dinner with music afterward. Mrs. Snark was going to have an elaborate housewarming. Had Flora weakened, and did she need me, or did she only wish me to be a witness of her triumph?

It was indeed a gorgeous affair. More than fifty people were asked for the dinner. But the house and the furnishings—surely these were not evidences of Flora's advice! The whole thing was garish and glaring, in the worst possible taste. There was plush everywhere, and even the powdered-haired footmen were arrayed in a vivid green of this material picked out with gold facings, like spinach and eggs. The state drawing room was about as cheery and homelike as that of a second-class hotel. The hostess (I did not know her at first) was a wonderful figure in brilliant crimson velvet and a tiara, and she received her guests against a background of orange hangings and imitation goblin tapestry.

The company was miscellaneous. It showed the fruit of Flora McMaster's picking; but there was an undercurrent of that mob which you can always secure in New York if you offer food and drink. I saw old Mrs. Mowcher of New York and Newport, in her violent violet velvet; but she would go anywhere for a dinner. There was an opera singer, a college professor, and the newest postess of the newest passion, and thus I saw that Mrs. Snark had aspirations toward a salon. I caught sight of Flora McMasters. She looked at me appealingly. There was rebellion in the camp.

I had never been to such a dinner. I afterward found out that the Snark money had been made by gift enterprises in connection with patent medicines. Its present possessor evidently believed in the potency of what she called "suvveners." She bombarded us with gifts and surprises, from the oysters to the ices. Footmen stood behind each chair with colored tissue paper and ribbons to wrap them up, and they grew in bulk as the dinner proceeded. I remember among other things, pearl jewelry, small bronze busts of the President of the United States, and even manicle and shaving sets, parasols, and umbrellas. Each guest departed laden with packages. Another crowd came for the music, which was interpreted by artists from the opera and a young woman who whistled popular airs and imitated animals.

When I took leave of my hostess I found her beaming with delight. She was an animated, transfigured Mrs. Snark. She found a moment to whisper to me, however:

"Come to tea tomorrow afternoon. I must see you on business of great importance."

I had bowled over Flora McMasters!

I left the Snark residence with a young Westerner, a member of one of my clubs, whom I was much surprised to find there. His name was Elliot Harvey, and he was connected with a banking firm on Wall street,

By A SOCIAL PROMOTER

It seemed that he had known Mrs. Snark in other days; but just then he was somewhat reticent about her. It was from him I learned of the patent medicine business.

THE Snark house by day was as unattractive as it was by electric light. Its hostess received me in a small, bare reception room, which reminded me of a physician's office. She had practically parted with Flora McMasters. They had differed about the house, the furniture, the liveries, and finally the dinner and the gifts.

Mrs. Snark was indeed a changed woman. From a timid creature she had evolved into a mood that was brazen, bold, and stubborn. She had completely lost her head. Without much parley she unfolded to me a plan of social campaign, which she wished me to engineer—which was literally breaking into Society with a crowbar. At first nothing was said about my compensation. I was wary about giving points; but I told her honestly that she would have to put up a good round sum. She had already made serious blunders by the manner in which she entertained. She would have to lie low for awhile. Even if she had a large fortune, Society required something more than that. I congratulated her on the foundation she had built, the many friends she had made during her pilgrimages to health retreats, and tried to show her where she was undoing much of her good work. In case I took her up, I must have absolute charge and no opposition from her.

She laughed in my face. She wanted to begin at Newport. When I told her that this move was impossible she calmly informed me that she had already taken a villa on Bellevue avenue there, and that it would be "Pike's Peak or bust."

Just then—I shall never forget it—I saw that we were not alone. Someone else had glided into the room. If I had been a believer in spirits or fairies, I could not have been more startled. Standing between me and the door was a young girl, a dream of youth in all its buoyant springtime. I thought she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I gazed absolutely speechless at this apparition until I was rudely awakened by the hard burr of Mrs. Snark, who was rough on her R's.

"Why, Darrter, where did you come from?" And then to me, "This is my darrter Rruby."

Her daughter? Impossible! How could such a woman—Ruby! Gracious! what a name! It sounded like the heroine of a weak, old-fashioned ballad, who scattered dried flowers through the leaves of brown-covered books. Where had this girl been? Why had I never heard of her before? The voice that responded to my greeting was low and sweet, and the curtsy that followed, when she was bade by her mother to run off to Fraulein, was a marvel of quaint grace. But the secret was out. Here was exposed the mystery of Mrs. Snark's indomitable insistence upon shining in Society. I did not blame her. She had a stellar attraction. But, for all that, Newport, with its jealous mothers with daughters to marry, and its prejudices against new people, was no place from which to make a start.

I was willing to do much for little—Mrs. Snark's idea of terms and expenditures being below my lowest figures—to be near Ruby, as I actually found myself falling in love. I offered to come to Mrs. Snark's assistance any time that she might need advice, and this was something I should never have done for anyone else.

IHAVE said that the Snarks lived in the shadow of the great Bellmore mansion. In fact, among other preposterous plans hinted at by Mrs. Snark was something to the effect of securing the neighborly good offices of old "Lady" Bellmore, as she was generally called, for the Newport campaign. Someone compared the Bellmore residence to a grim fortress commanding Fifth avenue, with Lady Bellmore standing on its battlements and bidding daily defiance to the onward march of trade toward her castle as well as to the onslaughts of social climbers. Perhaps not so dominant in Society as was the late Mrs. Astor, Lady Bellmore was nevertheless a great power. She was a descendant of the colonial Dutch patroon Riner van Bevevyk, and was an aristocrat of the aristocrats. The first known Bellmore was the maker of the family's fortunes, and he believed in oldtime eugenics. His wife had come from a poor but exceedingly proud Knickerbocker family.

In each succeeding generation the wealthy Bellmores had made alliances with blood and race, and in "Bevie" (short for Bevevyk) Bellmore, the fourth in his line, the mongrel strain had disappeared. He was a good-natured, harmless, heavy young man, a little spoiled by