

TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR.

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH; SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 1894—TWENTY PAGES.

PRICE, FIVE CENTS.

A LONDON LOVE STORY.

By J. M. Barrie, author of "A Window in Thrums," "The Little Minister," Etc.

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I.—HELEN'S HAT. Helen and I had a bet of a hat the other day, and she won. At that time I thought, from looking at them, that the price of ladies' hats could not run to more than five shillings; but this is a complete mistake. The cost of ladies' hats varies according to what is not on them; that is to say, half-a-sovereign extra is charged for taking out the feather, and a guinea extra for taking out what a man would call a hat, and leaving only the bow of ribbon. As almost nothing is the fashion just now, hats are unusually dear this season.

To pay for a ladies' hat, however, is, after all, a small matter. The difficulty is to go into a shop in cold blood and buy one. That is what I had to do, according to the conditions of the



Gripping My Umbrella By the Middle, Demanded to Know What He Meant.

and I was allowed to take no one with me. Helen said that if I could not pick out a hat that would suit her it was plain I did not really love her; and she coldly stared when I asked permission to take another man with me, not to help to purchase, but to stand by while I said sternly to the saleswoman, "I want a lady's hat."

There is a milliner's shop next my apartment, and I thought I could slip into it as if by mistake. Just as I was about to do so, however, the door-bell rang, and I saw a man in a top hat and a woman in a long dress standing together. The man was gripping the woman by the middle of her umbrella, and she was looking at him with a stern expression. I saw the man's face as he turned towards me, and he said sternly to the saleswoman, "I want a lady's hat."

into a milliner's shop and bribe them to tell me which was their best hat for a pretty girl, brown hair, dancing eyes, 20 inches around the waist; but Ravenscroft, who pretended to know about hats (though it is quite clear that he thinks the bigger they are the doer), said that would not be safe. His advice was that I should do a round of milliners' windows on wet days so that my umbrella might hide me. Woodhouse, however, who has sisters and hearskins to them, said this would be foolish, as they only exhibited a variety of hats in the second-rate shops. He urged me to walk boldly into a shop and insist on their giving me the best hat without having bought the hat. This was because my courage failed me; and instead of asking for a hat I requested the boy who opened the door to direct me to Ploccadilly circus. If he had been a boy of average smartness he could have read between the lines and insisted on my taking a chair. I hurried into a side street after this escape, and presently came to

The place to buy ladies' hats, warranted, is Bond street; but in no thoroughfare in London are there so many inquisitive people. Bond street can never expect to do a great trade so long as the jewelers and fish-sellers, and even the sandwich-board men, stare impudently at wayfarers. I was simply driven from a milliner's door by a fish-seller, who kept looking after me as if he thought I was afraid to face him. Then there is a dressmaker's window in which a woman in black stood all day looking for me. I soon discovered that she knew I was honestly desirous of buying a lady's hat, but she would not let me. It was impossible to go into a hat shop with that woman ready to triumph over me. A grocer's boy, too, passed me twice within 10 minutes lingering about in a most impudently suspicious manner, which so incensed me that I followed him to his shop, and complained to his master. There was a curious look in the latter's eye, and I could not help feeling that he knew I wanted to buy a lady's hat.

With another gentleman, like a gentleman, I had quite a scene. I was just going into a shop to buy the hat when he looked fixedly at me. This confused me, and turned me from my purpose; but half an hour afterwards I was back at the shop door. Again he

passed me, with a look that told me plainly I was discovered. I lost my temper, and, gripping my umbrella by the middle, demanded to know what he meant. He replied with affected surprise, but I saw through him, and said that I would stand there until a policeman came to my aid. He answered that as he wished to consult my convenience entirely, he would not go away. So he put his back to one window, and I put mine to another, and there we stood glaring at each other until 4 o'clock, when a mist came on in which I walked softly away. When I was a mile from the shop I saw that the mist was my opportunity for buying the hat, and I at once hailed a hansom. I got out at the top of New Bond street, however, as it had struck me that there was a look of enlightenment on the cabby's face. To blind him I walked a little way down Oxford street, and then turned back. Soon I was at the shop I now knew so well from the outside, and, though my throat felt dry, I determined to buy that hat. I waited until two ladies had left (I had seen them through the window) and then entered with my teeth set. "I want a lady's hat," I said, and I had a face on me that showed I was resolved to stand no laughing. The milliner had a twinkle in her eye, but my fierceness put it out, and I saw her hand shake as she brought out some hats. I bought the dearest one, gave the address to which it was to be sent, and then retreated, keeping my eyes on hers to the last moment. That woman was afraid of me—nearly as much as I was of her. Helen says it will do.

II.—HELEN'S SECRET. Dropping in on "Acrostic, London," (such is my friend's telegraphic address), nearly a month ago, I found him in despair. He is the puzzle editor of a weekly journal for gentlemen, and his readers have become so sharp that he can solve anything by return of post. "Ask them," I said complacently,

"Why Helen kept a secret?" Helen really has kept a secret, for a reason which—though this is unreasonable—makes me love her more than ever. What the secret is I don't know, and why she has kept it I refused to tell my friend; but he liked my suggestion, and we drew up the puzzle lines.



476 ANSWERS WERE SENT IN.

During the first week over a hundred answers were received, all incorrect. My friend was elated, yet nervous lest I should be trifling with him. Some what elated myself, and growing proud of Helen with every post, I then confided to him why Helen kept the secret, and the reason struck him as so obviously the only possible one, that he gave the competitors this hint:

"Observe that I have called Helen a 'very woman,' so that she is just like yourselves. Try, therefore, to imagine yourself in her place with a secret. Only one thing could make you keep it from Claude. What is that?" Even then they could not guess. The competition is now closed, no award having been made, and 476 answers were sent in. We have stamped womankind, and thanks to me, or rather to my Helen (not quite mine yet, but nearly so), "Acrostic, London," has saved his reputation. And yet the answer is so simple!

The general character of the solutions offered may be gathered by sampling. According to a number of competitors, Helen kept a secret because it was discreditable to her. One letter says: "For secret was probably of such a nature as this: she really needed a larger size than she let on." The puzzle editor, who understands the language of young ladies better than I, translates this into English. It means that Helen is charged with deceiving me as to the size of her gloves. Competitors with a loftier view of their sex hold, on the other hand, that Helen kept the secret from Claude because it was something that would cause him pain. "Being a very woman," writes "A Wild Briar Bush," Helen would rather die than give the man she loves a moment's uneasiness.

I rather like that letter. It shows "A Wild Briar Bush" has some understanding of the agony involved in keeping a secret. But it shows ignorance of Helen. Some competitors have done their best to make me comfortable. "I can easily understand," writes "The Other Jenny," "that Helen would keep a secret from Claude. Very likely he gave her a number of presents, which he bought himself. She pretended to think them the very things she had been wanting, while in reality she had several like them upstairs. However, not to hurt his feelings, she pretended to 'on.' Equally unjust to Helen is "Alackaday," who writes, "There is one secret Helen would naturally keep from Claude, for he is not described as a 'very woman.' It is that she has loved before. Men are so unreasonable that every Helen has to pretend to every Claude that she never knew what love was until she met him. Helen has, therefore, kept her secret because she knows what men are." Not content with this absurd solution, "Alackaday" adds, "P. S. But let Claude be com-

forted. Helen will tell him her secret yet; namely, after they are married!" "A Noble Woman Nobly Planned" writes: "This week's competition is, 'Why did Helen keep a secret?' The answer that at once springs to the point of my pen is, 'Because she had given her promise to do so. Having once given her word, Helen, if truly a very woman,' would keep it although she was threatened with death at the cannon's mouth." In contrast with that view is "Sweet Seventeen's": "How do you know she kept the secret? You can't really know for certain; and I don't believe she did." "It will be found upon inquiry," writes "Baby Tucker," "that the reason why Helen kept the secret was because she did not know it was a secret."

Quite a number of letters were after the manner of "Harum-Scarum's," who said: "Dear Mr. Puzzle Editor—I never compete in the competitions, because I am not clever enough, but the new one has made me just miserable. I mean the one about Helen's Secret. I don't care a bit why she kept the secret, but I should like awfully to know what the secret is. I keep wondering about it all day, and so I venture to send you a stamped envelope, and will you kindly write the secret and post it to me?" "Materfamilias" writes: "I think your competitors wholesome and exhilarating as a rule, but I must tell you I object to the one about 'Helen's Secret.' You ask young girls to conceive themselves in Helen's position, that is to say, with 'almost a lover.' We recognized no such persons in my young days, and I should be sorry to have my girls think they exist now and have privileges. P. S. Is Helen a real person? If so, is her surname Montgomerie? I ask in confidence, and from no mere curiosity."

Only one male competitor entered. He is an illustrious idiot, and gives us a list of cases in which women are well known to have kept a secret.

I don't know whether the reader needs to be told why Helen kept a se-

cret. It is because she has forgotten it.

III.—HELEN'S TEMPER. One of the choicest pleasures in life, I take it, is to be shut up in a hansom with the glass down, the outer world in a mist of rain, a cigar between my teeth, and my thoughts on Helen's temper.

To think of it! There was a time when I liked Helen yet had never seen her face so on fire, had never heard the stamp of her little foot that seems to me to rhyme with ram. But those were the days when our intercourse was slight and stiff, and I could only say to her distantly, "I wonder how you can be so nice," to which she would answer coolly, "Do you think me especially nice?" to which my civil reply would be, "Oh, Helen!" and her frigid response to that, "I'm so glad you like me."

Gradually the wall of ice was broken down, but still I had never seen Helen in a rage. By this time we were, if not friends, yet acquaintances who could be almost cordial when we met, and I would tell her, indifferently, that her eyes became her, with a few commonplace about her gown; while she, still reserved, would tap my shoulder and take me out of the crowd, where she could hold me by the watch-chain, and now and then I leave the tag of my chain loose for Helen to play with.

Nevertheless, there seemed no probability of our somewhat distant relations becoming closer, until one day when it suddenly struck me that I seemed to love Helen. I was thus, I was sitting on a bench beside an elderly lady, and instead of listening to her conversation I was wondering dreamily, why Helen had always been so haughty to me and I so freezing to her, and whether the fault was hers or mine. And thus cogitating about Helen, I forgot it was an elderly lady, whom I knew even less than I knew Helen, and my arm—

Thus love came to me, and I lengthened the tag of my watch chain, and ceased to treat Helen with mere formal politeness, and I was initiated with her, although I had never seen her clench her teeth. Helen's temper was something she had kept from me, but I should love her for it alone.

I remember reading once in a very clever book that women are difficult to understand, and Helen has convinced me that this is true. All of Helen I love, but her temper I love most; and this displeases her so that she storms at me until I love her more than ever, and she reads it in my delighted face, and his me on the cheek, which again ravishes me, with the result that she sobs sufficiently to empty her heart, and I ought to promise never to reveal in writing her angry or more. But I cannot, for I am an artist.

Had I never known Helen in a rage I could have continued to think her the girl for me. The world would still have been to me the pensive Helen and the Helen who smiled, and I should never have thought it possible that with these could be combined Helen with a temper. It is as if I had grapes and cherries and bananas all growing on one tree. Helen pensive, as when she sits with her chin in her hand, like a baby face which I see, though, curiously enough, I have never taken to children. I never see Helen pensive without feeling that she ought not to be left alone, and then if I am very near her, and there are other persons

about, I find it wise to keep my hands in my pockets. I have a strange desire to puzzle Helen's chin.

Helen laughing is quite a different girl. Then she has a pretty way with her shoulders and her eyes gleam. But Helen in a rage! Then were it hypocrisy of one's privileges to remember Helen pensive or laughing Helen. Have you lived for years in a flat country and then see the Alps in a storm? Truly this suggests the change that comes over Helen. Did you ever, in summer time, light a nicey laid fire, but to see it go ablaze? If so you can imagine the tempest that makes me deliberately outrage Helen. I know I will how to do it now. I begin mildly and craftily as not to arouse her suspicions, and she answers, "I am sure I don't care," and then I say a little more, and she trusts on me with, "You are insufferable," and then I light another match and she cries, "I hate you!" and there never was such a white fury, and I am beside myself with delight. Such coloring I never see elsewhere, such flashes of lightning. Was there ever a maid like Helen? She cares if it is a sham, and I think so too. Often I determine never to do it again, and then when I see her a madness comes over me, so that I not only do it but repeat the lost opportunities when I might have done it and did not. I am an artist.

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