



THE LADY and the Dress- Maker

the idea, and she came into it without difficulty. She "thought it was a very good plan." My mother and May's made no objection, so Kitty wrote a note to Miss Carteret asking her to come back with us on the next Thursday, and she agreed at once—with a warm expression of pleasure.

She was three or four years older than we were, and though four people made a light fit for the donkey cart, and her box sat on top of her head between us, she seemed to enjoy the fun. She did not get the Arab on, she told us to call her Helen, and we were excellent friends by the time that we came trotting—no, I don't think that I can honestly say that the Arab trotted—but we came ambling into the village and met the Rector taking a stroll. We stopped, and at once introduced Miss Carteret to him, and he raised his hat and welcomed her in his dear, polite old way, but he looked rather hard at her, and she blushed up all over in a way that made her look very pretty. We began by having a perfectly delightful time. May and I brought all our

to Kitty's for our afternoon work. I knew something that I did not mean to tell her and May. I knew they would think that I ought to have told them; but I simply could not.

Helen was there, looking just as usual. She was not a bit conscious of us, whereas I could not help blushing and forgetting what I was going to say, till May said:

"What is the matter, Nora? You look as if you had a secret. Has the Rector told you something about the parish tea?"

"I don't know anything about the parish tea," I said. "What nonsense?"

"Do you tell each other everything?" asked Helen, as she measured the distance for the frills on May's skirt.

"We've never had anything much that we didn't want to tell, except, of course, about birthday presents and things of that sort," said Kitty.

"We shouldn't tell any one else's secrets," I said emphatically.

"I'm sure you're a loyal little person, Nora," said Helen, "but I hope you'll never have secrets to keep or to tell."

out of it, and she saw Helen come out by herself afterward.

The mothers talked it over. My mother wanted to speak kindly to Helen and ask her if she had taken the name of Carteret as seeming more effective for professional purposes. Mrs. Crofter wanted Mrs. Kestrell to say that she had a visitor and to break up the arrangement, but Mrs. Kestrell, who was very shy, could not make up her mind to do anything.

I suppose I ought to have told mother what I had seen, but somehow I could not bring myself to do it. But Helen found out. I think Miss Jones spoke to her, and she must have seen that we were different and that all our happiness was gone.

She came in one day with flushed cheeks and eyes that looked as if she had been crying and said that she was very sorry not to finish her engagement; but she found that her mother wanted her and she must go back to London that evening. She had been to the Crown, she said, and found out that she could get their little trap to take her to Longford in time for the 5 o'clock train.

And there was no outcry. Mrs. Kestrell colored up and murmured something about being sorry, but that was all, and Helen went out of the room. I ran after her, and she threw her arms around me and cried and sobbed in a violent girlish way, then fled upstairs to her own room. I heard May and Kitty coming, and I ran away down behind the raspberry canes and cried by myself.

Oh dear, was my beautiful Helen an "adventress" indeed? We had read one or two novels about fascinating "adventresses," but I at least had never realized that these superlative beings were made of flesh and blood.

I believed with all my heart in Helen's self, in her eyes, in her tears, in all her frank, girlish talk—and yet—and yet—a false name, and secret meetings with a young man? What could account for these?

Helen would go, and we should never see her again; there would always be a dreadful memory left. I felt that I should never be able to wear any of the dresses over which we had laughed and worked together, and that somehow I should never like our innocent girlish life in the same way again.

I cried bitterly and I prayed for Helen. I was always the naughtiest of us three. I did not say unflattering attention in church as May did, and I had tempers that never disturbed Kitty, but I did pray then with all my heart, and I felt that there was some one to hear me.

Suddenly an idea darted into my mind. I would go and tell the Rector. If there was a way of mercy anywhere he would find it. Indeed, we often thought him much too kind. He would let naughty children go to the school feast when we thought it most injudicious of him to overlook their bad behavior. But, somehow, now, I felt that in that large mercy there was hope. And he was wise, and a man who knew the world and could judge.

I ran out at the side gate of Mrs. Kestrell's garden and hurried along the lane to the rectory. Perhaps the Rector was in the garden, and, sure enough, there he was, walking along by his tall hedge, in his long shabby coat and soft hat, his fine old head bent a little, and his hands behind him.

Somehow he looked lonely.

I did not wait to be frightened; I ran up to him and said:

"Please, Mr. Courtland—and the words would not come."

He took me by the hand and led me to the seat under the lilac trees, and then I found words and told him the story.

a strong likeness—"

"He says that he is quite sure it is Miss Benson," I said, and the rector turned suddenly upon me.

"Benson?" he said, and all of a sudden his face was alive with feelings—feelings of his own, not thoughts for other people. "Yes, and she lives in South Kensington with Mrs. Benson, her mother."

"I will come and see this young lady," said the Rector, and he set off down the path so fast that I had to run to keep up with him. He walked into the Kestrells' garden and right up to Mrs. Kestrell.

"I should be glad to speak to the young lady who is staying with you, alone," he said.

Mrs. Kestrell took him into the drawing-room, talking as she went, and Kitty and May fell on me, and talked to me, and scolded me, and wondered at me. We all sat on a bench at the end of the garden. I remember the look of it all, the polyanthus and the apple blossoms and Waggy barking at the birds.

I know what happened in the drawing-room, because she told me afterward.

She went down in a minute when she learned that the Rector was there and she came in and shut the door.

And he just looked at her and said, shaking:

"Are you Helen Benson?" and she cried out, "Grandfather!" and flew right into his arms.

It was not more than ten minutes before they came out on the lawn, Mr. Courtland holding Helen by the hand and looking as none of us had ever seen him look before.

"Mrs. Kestrell," he said, "it is I who must explain these mysteries. Before I came here, my only daughter, Helen, left me to marry a man of whom I could not approve. I did not seek her out, nor forgive her. She went abroad, and soon I learned that she was dead—dead, and lost to me, unforgotten. That, however, was not so. She and her husband escaped from the burning ship—I have much to learn of their lives in Melbourne. But this is their daughter, and after her father's death she came back to England with her mother, and has fitted herself to earn her living. And then—"

"And then," said Helen as he paused, "when I found out who my grandfather was, I wanted to be friends. I thought I would try. But, of course, I did not want him to hear my name—so I took another when I came to give the dressmaking lessons. And I was so glad to go to the rectory—and so happy. But you see I am engaged to be married, and Jack Wilford—he thought I should have no one to look after me, and he would come and see me, and spoil everything. And it was so hard to explain. I would not ask out my grandfather when I was doubted and suspected."

"But when little Nora told me your case—I knew how the likeness that had gone to my heart had come. Now it is all clear."

"Mrs. Kestrell couldn't help suspecting me," said Helen. "And there was a great confusion of kissing, and explaining, and wondering—and I—I went right up and kissed the Rector. I knew how glad he was, and that he was the happiest of us all."

"And now," he said, "Helen and I will go by the 5 o'clock train, and bring my daughter home again."

Of course there were a great many explanations, and at least eighteen days' wonder, for things did not often happen in Mirehurst.

Mrs. Benson came back and kept house for the Rector. She was very quiet and gentle, and I think she had had a very hard life.

We had Helen for a time to make a fourth (I should put in that she finished the dressmaking), and she woke up Mirehurst a good deal. But before long she married Jack Wilford, and we three went on again together.

THERE WERE THREE OF US IN MIREHURST



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THERE were three of us. The date of this story is in the dark ages, before bicycles were in fashion, and when the railway only came as far as Longford; and in those days, when you were eight miles from the nearest town and a mile and a half off the high road, you had to stay a good deal where you were put.

There were, as I began by saying, three of us in Mirehurst. There were only three, by which I mean to say, only three of us on the same social level, for though we all visited at the Park and knew the Ladies Gresham, they did not count for much in our lives, and besides were often away. To the farmers' daughters and the village people, of course, we did good.

We three, then, were sitting on the stile outside Cooper's Wood, talking about our spring clothes. For it was a cold, sunny day in April, and we had been picking primroses and anemones. Of course when there are only three of you, and you see each other every day, you talk over everything. We thought that there was nothing to do, but then we had to do everything there was. We taught the Sunday-school, we decorated the church and managed the choir and looked after the parish. We trimmed each other's hats, and invited each other to go for long walks. Sometimes we took each other into Longford in the donkey cart. We tried experiments in making cakes, and asked each other to tea to eat them. We read each other's books, and all our ideas were common property.

We were very dull, that is, we thought so, but sometimes—now on a spring day when the light lasts long, and the air blows cold, and primroses are being sold in the street, I feel half inclined to alter the old proverb and say, "Oh, the amusing old days when we used to be dull!" I've never talked as much, nor laughed as much, nor taken such a wild interest in my life as I did then. One or other of us used sometimes to sigh for a "great friend." We didn't know we were "great friends" to each other. We were only companions. I don't know if we were like sisters, because I never had a sister, but we were certainly like schoolfellows, quarrelsome and affectionate, and critical, and intimate—as girls are at school. I don't think either of us sighed for a lover. We all expected one in due time, and May, the eldest of us, was only 21—while Kitty and I had not long turned 19.

"Hats are going to be trimmed high," said May. "I have seen it in the Queen. But we mustn't have ours too showy, and set a bad example in the village."

May was a very proper girl. She always thought about appearances, and was really our Mrs. Grundy. Kitty was rather slow and lazy, but then she was so comfortable you could always fall back on her and she was never cross or in a hurry. May always said that though I had ideas, I never knew how to carry them out. Somebody, however, must begin thinking, and I don't believe that without me she and Kitty would have had so much to carry out. It was I who thought of having a working party for the girls who had left school—though Kitty cut out the work and May looked them up and read aloud at the meetings. I knew they did it; but they never would have done it without me. And everything that began to happen on that day when we sat on the stile began with me. And as I had the blame I may as well have the credit for it.

The reason why we had so much "say" in the parish was that our rector, Mr. Courtland, was elderly and a widower with no children. None of us could re-

member his coming to Mirehurst, but he came there alone. The people were very fond of him, and he knew them all very well; but nobody could say that we were a "highly organized" parish, and when we went to school treats or choir festivals in the neighboring parishes our feelings were hurt because we had so few new plans at work at Mirehurst.

However, as we always said, we did what we could. There never was anything like a squabble in our parish, and everybody was glad when the rector, in his shabby old coat and hat, dropped in upon them. Sometimes, indeed, he went up to see the Bishop or to visit at the Park, and then he wore a tall hat and a coat of such beautiful smooth, glossy cloth as I never see any one wear now. Then no Archbishop could have looked more ecclesiastical. He had been at college with Lord Fayhurst, who gave him the living; they were friends. Altogether he belonged to the "county"—there was no mistake about that.

We didn't exactly. Kitty's cousins did in another county—but her mother was a widow, and they lived in Mirehurst because it was cheap. May was the doctor's eldest daughter, and my father was Lord Fayhurst's agent, and I had five brothers at school—so, though of course we knew the Ladies Gresham and the Sinclairs at High Court and went to their garden parties and now and then to a Christmas dance, for real comfortable equal companionship we had nobody but each other.

"I'm sure, May," I remarked, "you began to come to church in a hat because Lady Lucy did. Every one must copy some one. We shouldn't like loud looking things ourselves and if our new things are pretty enough to be noticed, if I was Kate Lee or Bessie Canton, I'm sure I should copy them."

"That's one of your wild ideas, Nora," said May. "It's quite different. Of course the village girls will imitate us, and I do think the Home Farm girls get themselves up ridiculously. So, as I say, we should be quiet and correct."

"I think the Home Farm girls get very pretty things," said Kitty. "In spite of the Queen and paper patterns it's awfully hard to make a dress nicely."

"It takes up so much time," said May. "Grace Curtis is worse than no good, I said, and Miss Lowe at Longford is so expensive."

"We shall really want some nice things this summer. Besides the usual garden parties, there is to be the Duncombe Bazaar and Fred Sinclair's coming of age," said Kitty.

We were silent. I remember that an early nightingale stepped into the breach and sang madly against a background of rooks, hawks and wood-pigeons. Those sweet noises make my heart thrill nowadays, but then they were so natural that I hardly noticed them. Waggy, our terrier puppy, barked at the nightingale. Waggy ought to have been a Skye, but he wasn't. He had a lovely face, but his legs were too long, and his tail curled like that of a pig. Waggy lived at May's home. I adored him, and he preferred Kitty, and generally "boarded" round; so, like most other things, he was really "ours."

"I've got an idea," I said suddenly.

"I thought you had, you looked so silly," said Kitty.

"It's a new trimming?" said May. "Or a new story?" (I made up stories sometimes.)

"It's neither. There are going to be twelve dressmaking classes at Longford. Why shouldn't we go in the donkey cart?"

"Look here," went on, the idea developing. "Gertrude Black sent me the prospectus. The teacher is a Miss Carteret, a lady dressmaker—that's a new thing, you know. They're on Wednesday after-

noons at half-past 2. Ten shillings the set. Could we?"

"We should have to go without dinner. We couldn't be at all certain of the Arab doing it in two hours. We ought to allow three with putting him up at the Crown."

The Arab was the donkey's name. It was "spoke sarcastic." He too, was joint property. He belonged to my mother. The cart was Kitty's and the turnout was kept in a stable at May's house.

"But he would be quite sure, if we came away at half-past 4, to get home in time for high tea at 7. That's all that matters."

To make a long story short, we went. We could do commissions in Longford at the same time. There was a Longford carrier came out on Thursday; you ordered them one week and he brought them to you the next. So if you wanted, say, a pound of sausage on a Friday you could not have it till Thursday week. The postman brought over parcels for us twice a week. It was before the parcels post, and we never ordered anything by letter. I don't know why. Dressmaking classes were quite a novelty, and cookery and ambulance ones had just been heard of. New ideas were stirring in the air.

Lord Fayhurst's agent, and I had five brothers at school—so, though of course we admired ourselves for being content with our own village. And I would write stories and I thought of putting them in print.

Miss Carteret was a tall, thin girl, with straight eyebrows, bright, gray-blue eyes and quantities of brown hair. She was very well dressed, and she was a brilliant teacher. We knew a little about teaching—we had to do it. May got up her facts by heart, Kitty taught out of a book, I—well, I came of a line of teachers—and, if like Professor Owen I was a "bone ahead" of my class, I managed. But we had never been really taught, and it set us all on fire. We "dress made" at every spare minute—and though there were three wet Wednesdays and the Arab took advantage of the mud to be slower than usual, we went every week. Once we lunched at the Blacks' and met Miss Carteret, and felt her to be a new sort of being. We thought her dress a little too tasteful, her eyes a little too steady and her manners almost too free from awkwardness, but we thought and talked of no one else but the Lady Dressmaker. For she did dressmake as well as teach. Sometimes she "went out to work," as she called it, and then, she said, "had very good times."

Our own dressmaking quite ceased to give us any satisfaction. May was always turning Kitty and me around and criticizing "the set of our backs," and Kitty, who had always made up neat bows for trimming all exactly alike, quilts even and with a great many stitches, tried one with one of its legs longer than the other, and didn't like it.

Then I had another idea.

"Suppose," I said on the fourth Wednesday on which the Arab took us in to Longford, "suppose we could get Miss Carteret to come out and stay with us for a fortnight and do up our things. She might come in with us to the classes."

"Nora! What a first-class notion! But where should she stay?"

"Well, there'd be more time at Kitty's if our boys came home for Easter. Would you mother, Kitty?"

Mrs. Kestrell, Kitty's mother, always had things pretty and nice. They had a sweet little spare room. I used sometimes to wish I could go away to live, and come back and stay in it, and as she was very indulgent and kind most of our experiments were tried at the cottage. We rushed in upon her, and propounded

"THE ARAB"

old clothes and new materials down to Kitty's, and we planned and consulted and contrived, and Helen had lovely ideas for the things we had read so much, too, and was so sympathetic. I showed her my story—the story—which was growing slowly, pretty much as I grew, and she made good criticisms, and could tell me just the practical things which are so puzzling—such as what makes a will valid, and why a bishop if you call a bishop if you want to speak to him. She was quite a woman of the world.

The first thing that began the trouble was that a friend of Mr. Crofter's—have I said that May's name was Crofter—came down for the night, and said to May:

"Oh, I see that you have that pretty Miss Benson staying in the village."

"Not Miss Benson—Miss Carteret," said May. "She's a lady dressmaker."

Well, it was very hard to convince him it was not Miss Benson, and when he was gone, and they mentioned it, Helen did look very odd. She turned quite pale, and said likens were curious things.

The next thing that was Miss Jones, who is a horrid gossip, said that she had seen Helen in Hazelbridge cove talking to a young man. She knew her hat, she said.

All this declared that we should not think of telling Helen anything so ridiculous, and just then the Rector asked us all to tea, and to see his tulips in flower. We went. He was always very kind, and we were fond of him, but with Helen he was more than a dear old thing; we saw that he was a fine, courtly gentleman, and her way with him was lovely. He showed her all his pictures and books, and she looked at them and talked about them—just in the right way. We all liked her better than ever, and we went home and worked on our colored muslin dresses for the bazaar.

All this time I felt in an odd way as if Helen was specially my property. We had more to say to each other. Dear Kitty never talked much except about things in the village, and May was very decided in her opinions, and thought it wrong to admire my myself on Helen's secrets, and lines which we all thought correct. But Helen had read a great many other things and she made one think, and to be made to think, to have new thoughts given to one, is the greatest of all delights when one is young.

One day I went into Hazelbridge cove to see if the bluebells were pretty long, and the trees got greener every day. The nightingales were singing like mad. Mirehurst was a lovely place in spring.

As I came up to the dell where the bluebells opened first, there I saw Helen standing under a young beech tree, and—yes—there was a strange young man by her side—a tall, handsome fellow he was. They were standing close together and talking very earnestly. I stopped short, and then, I don't know if I did right or not—but I turned and ran away. I could not force myself on Helen's secrets, and I did not mean to betray them; but I felt sure that we should hear nothing of her friend.

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He listened, with his kind, thoughtful eyes upon me, and he looked very grave—though his first words were kind.

"She's indeed a sweet girl," he said, and then he thought a little.

"It does not seem to me that there is any adequate motive for a deception on this young lady's part. I think it would be kinder to question her on the point."

"Oh, yes—yes!" I said.

"I do not see why, perhaps foolish but quite innocent construction should not be put on the young man's visits. But a false name? If Mr. Jex is not misled by

Well, years have gone by. May married an India civil servant and lives her life over the sea. And dear Kitty went a longer voyage still, and—

—her boat with sails of snow. Came safe to port, I know."

And I, I have written and published a great many stories, and had a full big sort of life, with Helen for my friend. There is a railway to Mirehurst, and it is a very little village.

But when the nightingales sing, and the daffodils are out, I think of the dear, old old times, before there were any changes, and I wonder if I have ever been as happy since.



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