Her Brilliant Failure

By Katherine Lewis

With chin uplifted and lips firmly compressed, Margaret advanced to meet fate.

Fate in this particular instance was represented by Margaret's father, a self opinionated, self made man with a grievance. Margaret realized fully that she was a factor in the grievance. Her three sisters constituted the remaining factors.

John Leckie felt that he had been played a scurvy trick when, having proved that he could surmount obstacles before which the average man fell back dismayed and could rise from nameless, penniless obscurity to a position of power if not popularity among men and affairs, nature had sent him daughters instead of sons. His wife had died of very shame for having failed so signally to fulfill her duty in this respect.

The eldest daughter had tried to expiate her mother's offenses by entering her father's office as bookkeeper. Today she ranked as his right hand man. She wore mannish clothes, too, and talked shop with her father from soup to coffee and was tremendously bored when her sisters proposed entertaining a few friends at dinner.

The second daughter had chosen art and had opened a small studio in a western city. Anything, in her estimation, was preferable to being told whenever she met her father that if she had been a man she might have built iron bridges instead of air castles in art.

One thing John Leckie had done—he had given them the best educational advantages money could buy, and then he had said, "Now go out and do things."

Margaret, fresh from the trip abroad which Leckie considered the essential finishing touch of a girl's education, knew that she would be expected to "do things." Her father had given her time to unpack her trunks, to call on her few relatives and the intimate family friends and to recover her equilibrium, so to speak. Now, when he sent for her to join him in the library, she knew what his question would be. Nor was her surmise incorrect.

John Leckie leaned back in his untufted leather chair and stared frankly at the tall, slender girl, who from some unknown and far distant ancestor had inherited a grace almost patrician.

"Sit down, Margaret. I've spent a good many thousand dollars on your education. What d'you expect to do with it?"

"I think I shall take charge of the house," she said, calm, without quaking within.

"Take charge of the house?" echoed her father harshly. "I pay Mrs. Jenkins to do that."

"And the whole house looks as if it were handled by a hireling," replied Margaret, meeting his angry gaze without flinching. "Bought! Hired! The words are stamped all over the place. We have no home life, no home atmosphere, and I want to make things more pleasant, more like some of the homes in which I have visited. I think that is my forte."

A deep purple flush mounted to Leckie's forehead, and his fist came down on the table with a ringing thump.

"So, after all the money I've spent on you, after all the plans I've made for my girls to take a place in the world as good as their father made for himself, you have no bigger ambition than to mend socks and bake pies. That will add to the luster of our family name, won't it?"

Margaret bit her lip. Leckie had spoken as if the name had been handed down through ten generations instead of—one.

"Now, see here! That gag doesn't go. You're going to do something! Think of your sister Harriet"—

Margaret did think, and then she almost shuddered. She remembered Harriet's untidy room, some cigarette stubs she had seen lying on the unpolished brass tray. Harriet had said that after the long day in the office she simply had to smoke to quiet her nerves.

"Harriet is a credit to her father. Men down street call her a wonder. And you want to mend socks! Good heavens! Say, do you think you could sell goods? I'll start you in a millinery shop—a lot of society women are going in for that sort of thing—or a tea room, if you like. But you've got to do something."

Margaret rose and half timidly laid her arm around her father's thick neck.

"Father, dear, I'd so much rather just make tea for you and your few friends. Perhaps we might have more friends if"—

He flung aside the encircling arm.

"Now, see here, you're not going to sit back on your haunches and do nothing just because I have money. You've got to make a name for yourself at something." He was brutal now in his disappointment. "If you can't do anything else, you can teach. I know a man; helped him out of a tight place about three months ago; name is Graydon. He lives somewhere out in Westchester county and is on the school board. He has pull enough to get you a job at teaching out there, and you can try your hand at that. If you can't earn five hundred a year giving out some of the education that I paid about five thousand a year for, you're a disgrace to the family. I'll see Graydon in the morning. School must open out there in a week or so."

He bent over his desk as if the subject were closed. Margaret paused in the doorway. Her face was very white. Her eyes burned like red stars in the gloom of the curtained doorway.

"I'll do what you say, of course, father, but I warn you in advance that I will be a failure. I was not meant for that sort of thing."

Her father flung back his big head and stared at her.

"Perhaps you think you were born to play a lady, but I will fool you. You don't come from that sort of stock."

And so it happened that Margaret Leckie was placed in charge of district school No. 16. The one redeeming feature of her new position was the long walk to and from the depot, for she commuted daily rather than take board in the small village around which homes of millionaires were clustered. These long walks steadied her nerves for the labor of teaching the unkempt and insolent children of gardeners, coachmen and truck raisers who fell to the lot of school No. 16. She had spoken the truth when she said that she would fail. The power to organize and discipline children in numbers is not given to all, not even to the woman who by the magic talisman of maternal love may develop into a model mother in her own household. To the problems of undisciplined youth and unclean persons and untutored minds she gave the best energies at her command, but she worked with the sense of failure forever dogging her footsteps.

She was not surprised, therefore, when one particularly dull and lowering afternoon Mr. Graydon's motor car drew up at the schoolhouse. It was to be an investigation by a committee of one. She had felt it coming—ever since Billy Dobson had put red pepper on the stove and school had been dismissed for the afternoon. She rose, very straight and girlish and big eyed, as Homer Graydon entered the door. It was his first visit to the school, and she was surprised to find a clean cut, youngish looking man instead of the side whiskered, portly personage she had somehow pictured this arbiter of her money earning fate to be.

Quite some time passed before he referred to the Billy Dobson incident, and Homer Graydon had taken measure of the woman before the matter came up for discussion. By this time Margaret was herself once more, and she did not strive to dodge the issue.

"There is no use talking about the matter, Mr. Graydon. I was not cut out for a schoolteacher. I know my limitations, but my father refuses to recognize them. There is only one thing I want to do, and he will not permit that."

She never knew how it happened, but before Homer Graydon left that schoolroom he knew what her simple ambitions encompassed, and he knew just how she would attain them.

The lowering clouds had lifted suddenly, the autumnal colorings on the trees shone in the sunlight, and his own heart sang in measure to the onward plunge of his car. He was taking the unsuccessful schoolteacher to the depot in the village, and it was all he could do to refrain from telling her then and there what he had brought into his money grubbing life.

The world says that love at first sight lives only in novels and magazines. Homer Graydon says he knows better. John Leckie first said it was sheer laziness on Margaret's part, but sometimes when he goes to the cozy Graydon home and looks from the contented face of its mistress to the proud face of its master he wonders if it pays only "to do" things—when you're a woman.

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