# MYSTERIOUS MISS SMITH

BY VANE TURNER.

GIVEN the least pretext, the imagination of Martin Harford, F. R. I. B. A., was apt to whirl him away, boundaries of time and space alike annihilated, professionally, yokes to thorough technical ability, this ardent, imaginative propensity paid him.

The very curliest Elizabethan chimney stacks he designated were never smoky; and it was the poetic suggestiveness of a new kitchen wing, combined with perfect practicability, that had just secured for him, through the patroness of the living, the important commission, for so young an architect, of restoring old Denham church.

But divorced from the regions where his fancy raised epics in stone, it sometimes wrought sad havoc with mundane engagements; though folks forgave a good deal of irresponsibleness to Martin Harford because he interested them.

It was neither ambition nor architecture, however, that held the young man so inconveniently spellbound at a covered table, where he had long finished lunching, impervious to the patient managerial glances that hinted that it was a city restaurant's busiest hour. Meantime, too, the hands of the moon-faced clock in front of him were industriously diminishing the short space that yet remained to pack up in before catching the Denham early afternoon train.

He still held absent-mindedly in his hand a letter opened in the leisure of the luncheon interval, from Mrs. Robbins of the Pear Tree farm, where he intended occasionally to put up while the most critical stage of the restoration was progressing.

"The front bedrooms shall be ready for you as you wish," wrote Mrs. Robbins, whose good qualities as a landlady he had already tested; and that was all in her letter of consequence to a busy man.

But Mrs. Robbins babbled indiscreetly of another boarder, about whom she craved Mr. Harford's advice, and between impatience and amusement he read on.

"Every inch a lady" she was, and "paid to the day"—so it seemed a pity Mrs. Robbins craved more. But in the heart of the country village folk demand credentials; strangers to find favor must have their history pat, and apparently this lady had nothing to tell. Moreover to an enigmatic personality she added the sin of receiving letters readdressed in two names, and this neither Denham nor Mrs. Robbins could get over at all.

As the crowning justification of suspiciousness, too, Lady Charlotte Waring of Denham Park—the living patroness whose gold was largely helping to keep the old church in the perpendicular—went so far as to say she thought the poor lady might want to keep who she was dark.

"Uncharitable old gossips!" muttered Harford, apropos of the landlady and the lady patroness, and promptly dismissed them from his thoughts. But it was a remark of the latter that had sent fancy soaring.

Vividly it came to him—the pitiable plight of those guiltless next-of-kin to names writ lurid in the annals of great crime; perhaps delicately nurtured aloof, unnaturally reserved, dreading friendship even, lest it should draw back shuddering, fearing contamination by that crimson stain!

Harford, in fact, harped on this doleful string, till haggard lines marred his sympathetic face, and even the hungry ones who wanted his seat began to pity the good-looking youth whose countenance so evidently bore the stamp of gnawing grief.

For himself, he mused on, the very last thing he would do in such a case would be to let suspicious silence make him a target for the inquisitive vulgar. To sink one's identity under the name of "Smith" and to satisfy the requirements of convention by inventing a family in the wilds of Australia were a far finer mask of concealment.

At this juncture two would-be luncheers jostled him on either side and a waiter with a flourish laid the paraphernalia of a fresh meal under his nose. Suddenly awakened to the exigencies of the situation, Harford rose with a murmur of apology and folded his letter. In doing so a hitherto unnoticed postscript caught his eye. Glancing over it absently, still musing, the strangeness of coincidence pulled up the train of speculations with a jerk.

"Miss Smith," it ran, "has an uncle in Australia. I am glad she is not so lonesome as I thought."

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From the moment Martin Harford caught a glimpse of Denham's tower veiled in the thin, blue haze of an autumn afternoon, thoughts of his work engrossed him to the exclusion of others.

It was not till walking up the farmhouse's prim box-bordered pathway two hours later he discerned the outline of a head with hair dressed high, silhouetted upon the lamp-lit blind in proximity to Mrs. Robbins' cap ribbons that he called to mind Miss Smith and her uncle in Australia.

"Some poor, crushed spinster, doubtless, with nothing to say for herself," was his inward reflection, as he turned the handle of the door leading into the old oak-beamed parlor. The absurd rumors of her alleged mysteriousness, the oddity of coincidence wherewith his idle commiseration for those people—their name must be legion—who had a terrible blank in the family history tattling tongues would fain fill in, blended curiously in his consciousness as he crossed the threshold of Mrs. Robbins' room.

There is a severe serenity of beauty that merits the term "classic," and also a particular elegance of simplicity that with unanimity we call "distinguished." These two epithets, hackneyed generally, the attire and appearance of the stately young woman who stood by the rotund Mrs. Robbins irresistibly suggested. Her hair, braided in a thick coronet over a low, broad brow, which wavy tresses shaded, was of a deep chestnut, according a harmony of contrast with eyes, duskily dark, and a skin of clear olive; the lips alone—mobile and perfectly molded—struck a richer note, that was enhanced by the pearliness of even teeth.

Miss Smith was speaking.

"Thank you, Mrs. Robbins, for your suggestion. I really should like to go up if, as you say, one can get a glimpse of the sea."

The musical tones of her voice had a certain precision that matched her clear-cut beauty. Harford's aesthetic sense, ever keenly alive, was apt to find the ordinary showy girl what he termed "rococo." Miss Smith's harmonious coloring and proportion satisfied the eye like a Grecian capital, and her low contralto rested the soul like a Beethoven sonata.

He bowed in acknowledgment of their hostess' fussy introduction.

"I was saying," remarked Mrs. Robbins, "that with a good field glass you can see the sea quite plainly when it's clear from the old church tower. Miss Smith ought to go up."

Mrs. Robbins looked toward Harford, whose customary gay ease of manner amaze had momentarily obscured. Gazing for one brief instant into the velvet brown eyes, under level brows, which were calmly interrogative, he hastened to asseverate that when weather favored a glint of ocean between the hills was distinctly visible.

"I will get the men to clear the steps and sweep them down and will be at hand myself to deal with alarmed owls who resent our trespassing."

Something in Harford's manner, frank and boyishly vivid, his look expressive of the kind of homage the nicest girl values, evidently pleased Miss Smith, for the slightly cold composure of her lovely face changed to animation, and they were soon chatting with great sociability.

About half past six, 20 minutes or so after Harford's arrival, Mrs. Robbins stopped knitting.

With the grace that naturally goes with a perfect figure, Miss Smith arose from her low seat by the fire.

"Thank you, Mrs. Robbins," she replied. "I will go. I want to buy some stamps, and I may as well give him my letters." She inclined her head graciously as Harford stepped forward to open the door. The mistress of Pear Tree farm looked at Harford, her face brimming with significance that he determinedly would not see. After a minute's silence, garrulousness got the better of her discretion.

"I can never think how Miss Smith likes to look the postman in the face after having to explain to the postmaster she expected letters under two names."

Martin Harford felt a hot flush invade the roots of his crisp, fair hair.

"That is neither your business nor mine, I think, Mrs. Robbins."

His voice and expression were schooled to be perfectly void of offense, but the words were emphatic.

Mrs. Robbins looked at him, wondering whether to reverse her oft-stated verdict that Mr. Harford was "such a nice, kind-hearted young gentleman," and remained dumb with surprise. She had "never thought Mr. Harford was tetchy before," and the discovery somewhat modified the rapture of her first opinion.

Martin Harford saw little more that evening of his fellow-guest, who, it appeared, read a great deal in the solitude of her sitting-room. But the fascination of her personality permeated for Harford the scenes that had been temporarily the framework of her beauty.

Later, when he had retired to rest and was reviewing the events of the day in a wakefulness to which the absolute stillness of the country night sometimes conduces in a Londoner, he decided that his admiration of Miss Smith was purely a matter connected with a trained artistic perception, and excited him in the same way precisely—as for example, the nave of Winchester cathedral. The notion pleased him, chiming in with his private estimation of himself as a young man too absorbed in a noble calling to be lightly shaken from a stability of emotion that it was convenient should endure until—the ladder of fame climbed and he with wealth and position to offer—the relaxation of a grand passion, suitably placed, might be decorously permitted.

As Harford sank gently into his first sleep the complaisant thought of his well-balanced state remained soothingly present. "A thing of beauty" was "a joy for ever"; but it took education to entirely dissociate the banality of falling in love from the true appreciation.

Martin Harford started from his pillow, wide awake. Some gossamer imp of mischief that delights to provoke the dreamer at his mercy, had touched a deliberately muted string. A clamorous question rang excitedly through his brain.

"If she is not Miss Smith, who is she?"

The answer rose to his lips with involuntary conviction.

"I should know if I could learn that other name."

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But the vividness of a night vision is a flash in the pan. By the light of another morning, whilst he was shaving with scrupulous care, Martin Harford was by no means clear that the second name, under which it was stated a letter for Miss Smith arrived, at all concealed her secret—if she had one. The only decision he arrived at was one that concerned himself.

Never, never, under any provocation, would he attempt to probe into what he was not told. He had been privileged to meet—his feelings were quite dispassionate—a woman who in beauty and charm was a peerless queen. She should at least find him a gentleman.

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From some knowledge, however, one may not have choice to refrain. Within the next few days the discovery that certain envelopes that Miss Smith took unto herself were inscribed "Carew," was, so to speak, forced on him. And her Christian name was Lesbia, too. It was written on a book she lent him—"Lesbia Smith."

These particulars, however, when Harford learned them, affected him strangely little. He had ceased to be curious; Mrs. Robbins wisely held her peace, and a week of the autumn gold late October can sometimes bestow glided by in the supreme contentment of interesting work, whose relaxation was the companionship of a gifted girl, radiantly beautiful. Only when he returned now and again to his small city office to supervise other business matters, a couple of clerks in the interval attended to, did he realize, dimly enough, that it would mean some new, strange agony when Lesbia Smith—or Carew, was it?—should pass right out of his life.

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It has been observed with truth that it takes a really happy individual, with a past of unruffled prosperity, to prick the bubble of somebody else's fond illusion, feeling gently all the edifying glow of duty done. It was a virtuous dissipation Lady Charlotte Waring particularly enjoyed, and in mid-November she invited Martin Harford to drink tea. When the empty cups had been set down and he was inwardly cogitating as to the decent moment for departure, her ladyship, assuming an expression of countenance she devoutly believed was maternal, laid a plump, detaining hand upon his arm.

"My dear Mr. Harford," she said; "I think it right to speak to you a very few plain words."

The young man's look was an index of mind; it bespoke blank amazement.

"Nothing to do with the church," assured Lady Charlotte, comfortably nodding her head and withdrawing the fat fingers from its sleeve. "You have, I fear, formed an undesirable attachment."

"No," cried Lady Charlotte, hurriedly, seeing her victim stiffen before her into an attitude portending speedy departure. "I say nothing against the girl, this Miss Carew"—the lady patroness underlined the name and paused an instant to enjoy the effect—"as I say, it was not her fault, and one a murderer who shot himself, cheating the gallows as they say. I believe it possible, even"—her ladyship beamed at her own generosity—"that she never heard of the Carew case in which Dr. Justice Waring—my late husband's cousin—sat on the bench."

Lady Charlotte began to dip flurriedly into a brocaded bag, from whose depths she produced a note. The victim was more unmanageable than she expected, and divers indignant declaimers from him, combined with his erect and warlike posture of defense, warned her that time was short.

"This letter is from Mr. Justice Waring who considered the man Carew the cleverest, basest prisoner he ever tried. He writes, 'At the end of next month John Carew will be released. If his ticket of leave is not forfeited within six months I shall believe in modern miracles. Crime to such a nature is irresistible. I don't think he could be respectable if the condition were five thousand a year.'"

"It was a life sentence," said Lady Charlotte, with solemn impressiveness; "his old haunts will now see him again, and he will proceed to claim his niece. I am old enough to recollect the case well. It is 21 years ago; she was a pretty child of four, with a strange romantic name; there was ample money left for her upbringing and education; quite likely she is in perfect ignorance of the whole thing. But there must be many who can remember the cry from the dock, 'Good-by, girlie, till I come out again.'"

Her ladyship's victim stood rigidly; he was quite pale.

"Your assumptions are of the wildest, Lady Charlotte; excuse me if I beg you to refrain from repeating them. Happily the arrival of Miss Smith's uncle will refute all calumnies. He is now on his voyage home from Australia."

As he closed the door behind him he heard the lady within.

"Smith!" it mocked; "Australia! Say Portland and Carew."

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From the rack of her ladyship's drawing room Martin Harford journeyed forthwith to town, aching with dull pain, his mind in a turmoil. Lesbia—he avoided the Smith and Carew both—had indeed disclosed nothing of her life's story, though candidly transparent in the expression of thoughts, feelings and ideals. Vaguely he had gathered from her that compliance with her uncle's will involved a renunciation whose nature he could not guess.

By 10 o'clock the next morning the intervening hours had evolved from Harford's chaos of surmise one fact—he loved her. Now in the morning sunshine he walked restlessly around those quiet cases of bare twigs, dead leaves and twittering sparrows—the squares of the West Central district, where he knew a man to stop and ply him with inanities—and pondered how he should act.

Suddenly, taking a turn, he faced the British museum. Newspaper files in a room yonder held the secret of the Carew mystery, and the clue was a child's name, in his pocket was a reader's ticket.

Martin Harford paused.

He gazed at the stately dull pile with grimed Ionic columns and the sooty pigeons wheeling about.

If trouble threatened was she not ten times dearer?

Then Martin Harford journeyed back to his rooms. Not by him would the dust from dingy newspapers and dingier scandals be dislodged.

By noon he had posted a letter.

"Lesbia," it ran. "Lesbia, my dear, all my heart and my life are your own. Can you love me even a little? Tomorrow I will come to Densham for your answer. I have not much to offer besides endless devotion, but be merciful, Lesbia, I love you so."

A wooer in suspense is a fidgety being. Harford reviewed over and over again his scant grounds for hope till his brain reeled and his courage quaked.

When on the following afternoon his train started for Denham he was worn out with surmise, and sought an anodyne in something to read. As he idly scanned the noonday "Special," damp from the press, a paragraph seemed to start forth.

"Lovers of the drama," he read, "will hear with regret the decision of Miss Lesbia Carew to resign her part in the new piece shortly to be produced at the Melpomene, where she was to have made her London debut. It is announced that the return of her uncle, the Hon. John Smith, from western Australia, is not unconnected with this promising young actress's determination altogether to quit the professional stage. Mr. Smith has lately acquired a large fortune, and is reported to be negotiating for the purchase of considerable estates in Herefordshire, his native country."

In certain developments of the untoward a sense of humor brings scant consolation to the sufferer.

Martin Harford, surveying the situation in his railway carriage, saw himself miserable and ludicrous, too. Lesbia Smith, professionally Lesbia Carew, had varied a little the serious studying of her part by vouchsafing to himself the heaven of her occasional companionship. That was all. Nothing could be simpler than to how his head to the inevitable, making it clear, if he could, that he was neither fortune hunter nor fool.

The affair might have been arranged, he perceived with the minimum of embarrassment, but for one unfortunate contingency—the lover worshiped the lady to the peril of his soul's health.

It was Mrs. Robbins who directed him to the garden to see where Miss Smith was to be found, imparting the information with a cryptic, beaming significance that crushed yet one more drop of bitterness into the cup of his sorrow.

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"I think you had better leave off trying to explain your meaning, Mr. Harford. I will certainly say 'No'; that being, I believe, what you expect? Lady Charlotte Waring called this afternoon; she was very incoherent, but I gathered she meant to insult me, though her intention she claimed to be 'kind.' I'm not very fortunate in understanding people—this afternoon."

There was a catch in Lesbia Smith-Carew's throat that hindered her; but she held her head as high as an empress, and Martin Harford would have given the world to kiss the hem of her gown.

"Lady Charlotte labors under a ridiculous misapprehension," said he; "I, perhaps, was not free from it, either, for I thought that you needed a friend—that my affection and such a home as I could offer might be a shelter from trouble and care."

"What made you change—your opinion?"

Again Miss Smith's voice quivered, and she turned her face away.

Harford put into her hand the paper with the momentous paragraph—at once his exculpation and his doom.

"You are rich," said he. "Until today I though you poor. You are distinguished, and before you lies social success; I fancied you friendless, menaced with hidden danger"—his tone dropped to an agonized groan—"even shame. You do not need me. It was an idle dream."

"And you loved me?"

So gently she breathed the words in the air thick with the falling leaves that blew around them, they seemed his passion's requiem. This was farewell.

Miss Smith tapped the ground impatiently, and made a despairing little gesture with her hands. The cheek she averted grew pink.

"Must I go on?" she cried. "Can't you see now? Oh, was ever a man so dense?"

And then it dawned on him.

# WHAT WOMEN DO FOR EDUCATION

FOUR years ago in nearly half the counties of North Carolina the average value of the schoolhouses, including grounds and all equipment, was less than $70.

There were 1,000 districts with only a log schoolhouse. There were 1,000 districts with no schoolhouse at all. In many cases even the best were ugly and dirty.

In 1902 some of the young women of the state determined to try to remove this disgrace. They went to work. They organized a State association. The first meeting was held at Greensboro in April of that year. Next came county associations, of which all white women were invited to become members. These now exist in 86 counties of the state.

Many of these offer prizes to the district showing the greatest improvement. A typical class is that of Wayne county, away up in the mountains. Last August the association in that county offered a prize of $100, which was won by District No. 1.

The district is described in the World's Work as containing only 16 families with children of school age. There are only 40 children on the census. The average attendance for the four months' term was 27.

Of the 16 families all are farmers and only eight own the land on which they live. Only one of them has had the advantage of a high school education. Seven of them tended only a one-horse farm. Not a mother in the district had any help except what the children could give night and morning.

Here is the account given by the teacher of the way the school earned its prize:

"When we went to the school we found an old building, the roof of which had recently been taken from an old church. The grounds were small and cut up with gullies, covered with trash, leaves and decaying stumps. The steps were nearly gone; window lights were broken out.

"The county gave us panes; the boys put them in. By Christmas we had enlarged our yard to about twice its original size, taking up 18 stumps. We leveled the grounds and scoured the floor and desks.

"We celebrated Thanksgiving day and gave a free concert Christmas. We gave a measuring party and festival for the purpose of raising money.

"After Christmas we celebrated St. Valentine's day, Washington's birthday and North Carolina day. We got up a program for Parents' day and gave another free concert on the last night of the school. To raise money we had an apron hemming and an ice cream supper and the young ladies of the association made a memory quilt.

"The men of the neighborhood fixed the yard, built an addition to the house and made some new steps. The schoolchildren set out the flowers, scoured the floor and seats and swept the yard once a month.

"We hired a painter to put two coats of paint on the inside and outside of the house. The children were all anxious to do something to raise money to buy a picture and some books. So one Saturday we all went to a cotton field and picked cotton.

"At 12 o'clock we spread lunches; later candy was served. We then had our cotton weighed, received our money, which was $3.75, and went home as merry and happy as you please.

"The little 6-year-old tots worked just as hard and felt just as important as any. All of my schoolchildren were small. I had only one boy 17 years old. All the other boys were under 12 years of age. I had four girls over 13 years of age. All the others were small, but they all worked willingly and cheerfully as members of the Betterment association."

### Some Things Nature Makes.

Nature is something of a manufacturer herself.

In the case of a certain cactus marvelous natural pottery is produced. Woodpeckers excavate nests in the trunk and branches, and to protect itself the plant exudes a sticky juice, which hardens, forming a woody lining to the holes made by the birds. Eventually the cactus dies and withers away, but the wooden bowls remain.

As a weaver nature also produces fine work. Certain tree barks and leaves furnish excellent cloth, as, for instance, the famous tapa cloth used in the South Sea islands.

Nature is a glassmaker, too, according to the Indian Review. By discharging her lightning into beds of quartz sand she forms exquisite little pipes of glass.

She makes valuable ropes of various kinds in the shape of tropical vines and creepers, and she is even a lace maker, as witness the lace tree of the West Indies.