A WOMAN'S PRIVILEGE.

—OR—

A Modern Portia Who Changed Her Mind.

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'TWAS late in October, and Hawthorne Manor, with hospitable doors thrown wide, was in its glory.

Each October it was Arthur Hawthorne's and his young wife's custom to gather around them, in their beautiful home, as gay and congenial a company of clever men and fair young women as could be brought together under one roof. For Mrs. Hawthorne's birthday and their wedding anniversary both came during this month of beautiful days and brilliant foliage and as long as the weather held pleasant for out-door pleasures, they kept open house, to celebrate these two events.

And all their guests came gladly and left them with regret, for it meant much to be invited to the Manor in those days

Both host and hostess were gay and charming, and the house was spacious and beautiful.

The stable was stocked with fine horses, all at the guests' disposal The grounds were large, with many beautiful woodland paths which were most attractive for quiet promenades, while the river was an ideal place for their frequent boating parties.

The Hawthornes were not match makers in the accepted meaning of the term, but yet more than one marriage could be traced to an acquaintance that had been made, or had ripened, during an October visit at the Manor.

It was now late in the month, and the gaiety was at its height. When there was nothing else on foot, it was quite the custom for the party to divide and wander off in pairs, to ride or walk together; and now it was even whispered that one of these couples was upon the very verge of their romance.

The heroine was a young and pretty girl from a distant town, the orphaned child of a clergyman who had lived and died in honorable obscurity in his distant parish among the hills.

And now, for the first time in her young life, she was surrounded by all the luxury which her nature had perhaps unconsciously craved.

The hero, no longer in his first youth, was George Osborn, a man of the world, and weary of most of the world's pleasures. A man whose history in the past was not without dark stains upon it, but who now was charmed by the piquant grace of this beautiful young girl, and seemed ready to lay his fortune, and what remained of his worn-out affections, at her feet.

A few of the guests had left the Manor the day before our story opens, and others, who had been unable to come before, had now arrived.

It was Everett Caryll, one of these new-comers, who was now, in the early afternoon of the brilliant October day, walking in the woodland path above the river with Mabel Newcome, the heroine of the supposed romance.

That their walk together had not been a pleasant one was evident from the expression upon each face. The girl's cheeks glowed, and her eyes sparkled with a troubled, half angry light, while Caryll was looking at her with an expression of pained surprise.

"I wish you had not come," she said impatiently, "or that, being here, you would be less disagreeable."

"You never used to think me disagreeable," he answered quickly.

"Then and now are very different," she replied coldly; "as different as life at Hillside is from this at Hawthorne Manor."

He turned and looked at her, and then, "I do not understand you at all!" he burst out impetuously. "What has changed you so? You were so gentle, so lovable in every way; but now I cannot find the Mabel I have always known in you at all! Ever since I came last night, I have tried to speak with you alone, and you have avoided me. And now you seem so heartless and frivolous What caprice has taken possession of you?"

She looked at him with scorn. "If this is what you brought me here to listen to, I will go back," she said.

"No, no!" he exclaimed quickly "but your coldness has made me wild. I do not know what I have said,—but Mabel, I love you so—I must speak now!"

A strange expression came into the girl's face. "You have waited too long," she said bitterly—"and now it is too late!" And she turned away from him.

He put out a detaining hand, and in a voice that was strangely intense and quiet, he said: "We must understand each other now, whatever comes. Mabel, you must have known that I loved you, and your reproach is most unjust. I did not speak before, because your sister, who stands in the place of a mother to you, exacted a promise from me that I would not speak until I could offer you a home. 'You are a poor man,' she said, 'and Mabel is very young. Bind her by no promise yet—it would not be fair to her; but if she loves you, she will understand: and when you can offer her a home that is worthy of her, come again.' Mabel, I thought you knew—that was why I went away in silence!"

She was looking up at him now, half-frightened, half-fascinated by his earnestness, and by the words that came with suppressed passion from his lips.

"Last week, when Hawthorne urged me again to come here for a holiday, he told me I should meet some of my old friends, and it was the mention of your name alone that brought me. But when I came I heard strange rumors,—a story that a man, unworthy of you, Mabel, in every way, but very rich, was about to ask you to become his wife, and that you would not refuse! I could not believe it then, but now—I do not know what to think! What does it mean?"

"You called it a caprice!"

He flushed, but she went on hastily:

"You have no right to question me, or criticise me so, even if what you heard were true! Am I not free to make my own choice in such a matter? And if luxury seems better to me than privation and wealth the best thing in the world, am I to blame?

"I always hated to be poor; my nature rebelled against the commonplace routine of daily life at home—you know it! And now, if a life of luxury comes within my reach, shall I not take it? We have always been good friends, but nothing more; and now you seem to blame me because you find I am not what you thought me. But it is best you should know me as I am. You called me frivolous and heartless awhile ago; you have told me some hard truths and they do not help to turn me from the path that I shall take."

"Is a man's love nothing to you, then?" he exclaimed, passionately. "Mabel, my love for you is—"

"Hush, hush!" she interrupted hastily, "do not go on, I cannot listen to you! Everett, old friend forgive me; I have already chosen, and have promised to marry Mr. Osborn."

A step was heard, and, turning, Mabel saw the man whose name she had just spoken approaching them.

"Ah, Miss Mabel," he exclaimed, adjusting his glass, "I have found you at last! I have been looking for you everwhere;" then apparently seeing her companion for the first time, he added, "but pardon me, perhaps I am intruding."

Mabel looked from Caryll's stern white face to Osborn's smiling one. "I am glad you have come," she said. "Now we will go for a walk, as I promised you this morning, and perhaps Mr. Caryll" glancing up at him, "will accompany us."

But Caryll muttered something about "returning to the Manor," and after a few casual remarks on either side, Mabel and Mr. Osborn passed on together under the pine trees, while Caryll stood there alone, thinking bitterly of all his shattered hopes.

How mistaken he had been in her, this girl he had loved so well! She hated poverty, she said, and he knew it. For this he had left the quiet town where he had learned to love her, and had gone out into the world to work for her, to gain wealth for her, and his dream had been to return and lay it all at her feet, and devote his life to making hers beautiful and happy. He had been so sure that she loved him! And surely she must have known—Bah! she was not worth regretting, she would sell herself to the highest bidder! If he could have told her then, "I too am rich," would she not have chosen him—perhaps? But she should never have the chance! After all, she was nothing to him—he did not really care, it was a mere idea."

He roused himself, and, pulling his hat down over his eyes, turned hastily toward the Manor. It was not late, and he could catch the evening train back to town. After what had happened he could not stay. He must find Hawthorne and tell him—what? Her name could not be mentioned! But he could not leave so suddenly without a reason, and it never occurred to him to invent an excuse to serve his purpose! So there seemed nothing left for him to do but stay the week out, and see as little as possible of Mabel and this lover of hers during that time.

Caryll would turn away and try to crush his involuntary thought of "I could forgive her if she had chosen one who was worthy" with "They are worthy, one of the other"

And then he would plunge recklessly into the pleasure of the moment, devote himself to the fairest woman, laugh with the merriest, jest with the brightest, though all the while he only saw her face. They found him a brilliant companion during those days when he was in torture, though his wit was apt to be biting and his sarcasm keen.

Some of the guests at the Manor had known that Mabel and Caryll were old friends, and though by this time his avoidance of her had become marked, and many surmised that a quarrel had taken place between them, yet no one really guessed the truth.

It was a rainy morning. A sudden shower had put an end to the boating party which had been arranged for that day, and now most of the company had assembled in the music-room, and were busily planning an impromptu fancy-dress dance for the evening. Two chests of costumes, used in tableaux and on many similar occasions, had been brought down from the attic, and Mrs. Hawthorne was gaily apportioning them to her guests.

"I am reversing the order of things," she said, "and am fitting out the gentlemen first, so that they can go off and smoke in peace, while we decide upon our costumes at our leisure. Then, too, we shall have the advantage of knowing their characters, while they will have to find out ours to night by observation. Now, Mr. Caryll it is your turn, and which of all these various costumes will you select?"

But Caryll was not there, and a momentary silence followed the question. Then a merry, dark-eyed girl suggested that they should assign him a character in his absence, and "Let it be something dark and sombre," she added, "for our friend has grown moody of late, until I could almost fancy him to be the victim of an unrequited passion. Have you not a brigand's cloak, or a monk's gown and cowl to give him? Or better still, let him appear as Dante; there is something in his profile that suggests Giotto's portrait, is there not? The Florentine robe and cap would become him rarely, and then he could sigh openly for his fair Beatrice, whoever she may be. But here he comes to speak for himself, though my suggestion is worth considering."

Caryll had entered in time to hear the allusion, and had seen Mabel's face flush with momentary annoyance as her eyes encountered his from the other side of the room.

He smiled rather bitterly. "But as I sigh for no Beatrice, would not the character be misplaced?" he said. "Beside, I am not fool enough to attempt to masquerade as a wise man; but," as he caught sight of a suit of motley lying near, "let me see if I have wit enough to play the fool!"

A laugh followed, during which he gathered up the suit, accepted the jester's cap and bells from Mrs. Hawthorne with mock gravity, and carried his treasures away to his room.

That evening the Manor presented as gay a picture as could be imagined. It had ceased raining in the early afternoon, and Hawthorne had ridden forth to invite friends from the surrounding country-houses to their impromptu dance, and many of them had come in strange costumes, hastily improvised for the occasion. And now, as usual in such assemblies, court ladies and cavaliers of all eras and nationalities mingled with pretty Bo-peeps and gypsies, while Beatrice Cenci danced with Romeo, and Juliet held earnest converse with a Chinese Mandarin.

Altogether, they were a bright and merry throng; and as Caryll, in his character as Jester, passed from group to group, laughter greeted his brilliant sallies which, true to his prerogative, spared no one.

The evening was half over when he suddenly found himself face to face with Mabel, who looked lovelier than ever as Portia, clad in the scarlet gown of the young doctor of the law.

"How is it that I find fair Portia of the Nineteenth Century alone?" he exclaimed, with a shade of sarcasm in his tone. "Where is my Lord Bassino?" and he looked about him. "I will go seek him, and say I found his lady pining for his company."

Mabel colored. "No, stay here. You have not spoken to me before, to-night; why do you avoid me?" she asked.

"I avoid no one, 'for misery loves company,'" he replied.

"You called me 'Portia of the Nineteenth Century,'" she said quickly, ignoring his reply. "Am I so unmistakably modern that I would look out of place in the Venice of Shylock's time?"

"Ah no, you look the character to the life; but in these degenerate days even our lovely Portia's are changed. Now the old story is reversed, and the caskets of lead, and silver, and gold are brought for Portia to choose from, and she is wise enough to take the gold, no matter to what manner of man it may belong. Now Portia says, 'I see you, Lord Bassino, where you stand, such as you are. Would you were trebled twenty times yourself, with thousand times more gold, ten thousand times more rich!' Right well does our modern Portia know 'the quality of mercy—not of mercy'—"

Her eyes flashed as she drew herself up in anger. "This is unmanly. How dare you to insult me! By what right—"

"Only the fool's privilege of speaking the truth, fair lady. Besides, I spoke of Portia, no one else. But if the cap fits, it is at your service; pray wear it for me!" And with a mocking bow he held his cap and bauble out to her.

By this time the by-play had been observed, and others gathered near; while Mrs. Hawthorne, as unlike her assumed character of Lady Macbeth as a gentle, gracious woman could well be, exclaimed, "Why, Portia dear, what comedy are you two playing here?"

"No comedy, but a farce," replied Mabel, quickly. "This presumptious Jester has chosen to usurp my character of a 'Daniel come to judgement,' and offers me his fools cap instead; but I will not deprive him of what becomes his head so well." And linking her arm in Lady Macbeth's, Portia turned and left him without another word.

As Caryll stood there, still following her with his eyes he caught sight of Hawthorne hastily leaving the room, and who, as their eyes met, beckoned to Caryll, at the same time laying a cautious finger on his lip.

In a moment Caryll had joined him in the hall, where several other men had hastily gathered. "What is the matter?" he asked.

"The gardener's house is on fire—no danger of its spreading—the only wooden building on the place. Say nothing to the others. Whoever is willing to help, come!"

Without an instant's hesitation all followed him but one. Osborn said something about "violent exertion and night air," but no one heeded him, nor was he even missed, as the men, once out of the house dashed forward at the top of their speed, guided by the light from the burning building in a distant part of the grounds.

The fire, which had broken out in some light sheds connected with the gardener's cottage, had gained such headway, that by the time they reached it there was little hope of saving the building. Still they worked manfully, passing the buckets of water and helping the men with the few small hand-pumps that were about the place.

But the flames mounted rapidly and soon they saw that the little house was doomed. The gardener's wife and sister, with the children wrapped in such things as they had caught up in their panic at the first alarm, were gathered in two little groups near by, watching and loudly bewailing the destruction of their home, when suddenly a piercing shriek rent the air.

"My baby! My God! I thought that Mary had the baby, but she is not here! she will be burned!" And the agonized mother rushed forward towards the house.

Hawthorne caught her and held her back. "You cannot go—it is too late; the poor little thing has been suffocated before this, and you would only lose your life as well!"

Then some one suddenly darted out of the crowd. "Where is the child? there is yet hope and will save her if I can,"

"In the room up over the stairs. May Heaven bless you!" sobbed the unhappy woman.

"Caryll, this is madness! You must not go, it is certain death!" they cried, and tried to hold him back; but he shook them off, and dashed through the open door and out of their sight.

Minutes passed, and they seemed hours to those who were watching eagerly for Caryll to reappear. Suddenly there was a heavy crash within, and then dense volumes of smoke and flame poured out of the open door.

"The stairs have fallen!" some one said, and then a moment after out from the scorching flames came Caryll's tall figure, wrapped in a blanket he had hastily caught up. He reeled forward a few steps unconcious of the cries of joy with which he was greeted, and then fell into the friendly arms held out to receive him.

A muffled cry came from beneath the blanket, and there clasped close to his breast was the struggling child unhurt! But Caryll himself, blackened and scorched, with a great gash across his head from the falling beams, lay there insensible.

They improvised a litter, and, as gently and as quickly as they could, they carried him back to the Manor.

Two of the party went on ahead to see that the hall was free from guests, for they dreaded the ghastly effect of the litter, with its unconcious burden, appearing suddenly in the midst of a group of merrymakers. They were assembled in the supper-room, however, and the hallway for the moment was quite deserted. The doors, through which they could hear the sound of voices and laughter, were quickly closed, and then swiftly they bore their insensible companion up the stairway to his room.

But, unknown to them, there had been one spectator to this scene. A few moments before Mabel had gone to her room to repair some damage her gown had met with in the dance, and coming down again, had been at the head of the stairs when she saw them enter the hall. As they passed under the great hanging lamp, the light fell full upon the senseless figure, and in a moment she saw the ghastly disfigured face, and the scorched arm and hand hung powerless over the side of the litter, while she recognized the burned and discolored garments as the suit of motley which Caryll had worn.

She shrank back into the shadow among the draperies and no one saw her, though they passed so near as to almost touched them as they went by. Long after they had disappeared she still stood there, conscious of nothing but a dull sensation of misery, until at last she heard footsteps again and looking up, she saw Hawthorne coming quickly along the hall. Then she went forward and laid her hand upon his arm; she was so white and still, that she might almost have been taken for the ghost of the brilliant Portia of an hour ago.

"I saw you," she said faintly, "as you came in. What has happened? Oh Mr. Hawthorne, is he—dead?"

"Not dead, thank God!" he answered quickly, "though dangerously hurt, I fear. There has been a fire, and he saved a child's life at the risk of his own. I am going for the doctor;—say nothing yet to the others." Then he hurried on, and at the foot of the stair was met by Osborn, who was seeking her no doubt. He, too, stopped Hawthorne.

For weeks Caryll lay between life and death in his upper room. Brain-fever had resulted from the falling beams, and he had also been severely burned.

One by one the guests departed, and still there, heavily unconscious, or else in his delirium going through with painful minuteness the scenes of that eventful night. Now he was the mad Jester, with a word for every one; now he was rushing through blinding flames and smoke to save the child; now he was on the stairs, crooning his way down, with the baby in his arms; now the stairs were falling all about him,—"Help!" Then, with a groan, he would again relapse into unconsciousness.

But at last his strong constitution got the upper hand; he rallied and consciousness returned. After that his convalescence was rapid, but it was December, and snow was on the ground, before he was strong enough to leave the Manor.

"I have no words in which to thank you for all your unwearied kindness," he said, as he took his leave. "I owe my recovery to your care, and I know that I have taxed your hospitality severely with the care of a helpless invalid for all these weeks."

"Indeed you are wrong, and the debt is all on our side, Mr. Caryll," replied Mrs. Hawthorne, warmly. "You did a noble deed that night, and I could hardly thank you more sincerely if you had risked your life to save my own little child. But it was a desperate thing to do, nevertheless, and I can hardly yet think of it calmly, for the risk was fearful."

"If it were not for the ingratitude of it, after all your kindness, I should say that the risk seemed a small thing to me that night. Life itself was a matter of little moment to me then. I was horribly morbid, I fear; but now I think I am in a healthier condition of mind, and I shall endeavor to make better use of the life you have given back to me than I probably would have done had I escaped the scorching. 'A burnt child dreads the fire,' you know; yet believe me, I owe you far more than my light words would seem to imply."

They had grown very fond of Caryll during his convalescence. Mrs. Hawthorne's original liking for him had strengthened into a strong feeling of friendship, while her husband admired more and more certain sterling qualities which showed more plainly upon close acquaintance.

And Caryll himself was, as he had said, in a healthier condition of mind than he had been for some time. He knew that he must begin afresh, for the position he had held had of necessity been filled during his long illness, and now he had no wish to supersede the man who was doing his old work well.

It was a difficult thing to find a good opening, but Caryll had brains, and he had no doubt but that he would succeed in time.

Still it was with some surprise that early in the winter he received the offer of a position of high trust and such as is rarely attained by a man, however well qualified to fill it, without the aid of influence in high places.

He at once felt sure that he owed it to Hawthorne, and as he was not in town, Caryll wrote to him, and the answer was short and characteristic.

"My dear fellow," wrote Hawthorne, "whatever position has been offered to you, accept it without hesitation. I do not congratulate you, because it is not half what you deserve; but I shall congratulate Ericson & Company if they succeed in securing your valuable services.

"Do not forget that the Manor doors are always open, and a hearty welcome awaits you from Mrs. Hawthorne and myself, whenever you can spare the time to come.

"Always cordially yours,
"ARTHUR HAWTHORNE"

In the early summer an important matter of business necessitated immediate personal attention in England, and to Caryll's surprise, the firm appointed him to go over and attend to it.

He had only time to receive the necessary instructions, pay a flying visit to Mabel or to bid the Hawthorne good-bye, and then start off on the first steamer that left New York.

His success in arranging the business in a highly satisfactory manner, far beyond all expectations, though it kept him away longer than he had expected.

The summer and early autumn had passed; November had come and Caryll was still in London.

But now at last all was settled and the next day he was to sail. He had been to the bankers for the last time, and now was hastening back to his hotel, when suddenly a voice, with which he had no pleasant associations, exclaim: "Caryll! by Jove!"

He looked up and found himself face to face with George Osborn.

"This is indeed a surprise; I had no idea that you were in London," said Caryll.

"We have only just arrived; in fact, Caryll, I am a subject for congratulation; I am her on my wedding-trip, and am still enjoying the honeymoon."

In spite of himself, Caryll's usual self-control was shaken. However he managed to mutter something civil, and Osborn was so much taken up with his own affairs that he noticed nothing amiss in Caryll's manner.

"You really must come and dine with us to-night; we are stopping at the Grand, and Mrs. Osborn will be delighted to see you," he went on. "She often speaks of your risking your life in that quixotic fashion last fall at the Manor. I declare I am sometimes inclined to be jealous, she makes such a hero of you. I see that falling beam has left you an ugly scar across your face."

Caryll clinched his hands in his efforts to control himself and speak with apparent unconcern.

"Thank you," he said, "but it will be impossible for me to come,—even to call, as I am on the point of leaving London. I go on to Liverpool this afternoon, and sail to-morrow. Pray give my congratulations to Mrs. Osborn;—and good-bye."

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No more troubled spirit ever paced a steamer's deck than Caryll on the following night. What did it mean, this revulsion of feeling, this strange upheaval of all the old emotions which he thought were gone forever? Would he never be able to forget, or to calmly hear her name; or look, if need be, upon her face?

Perhaps, in time, this wished-for calm would come; but now all was wild tumult within him. The love he thought he had strangled was only sleeping, and had reawakened with a terrible force, had gained strength, even during its repose, and now threatened to overmaster him. It was well for him that every minute was taking him further away from her, the woman he still loved—George Osborn's wife!

Why was it that his passion had slept while she was free, or bound only by a word that could have been broken as easily as a silken cord? He might have won her then, in spite of all; surely she almost loved him once! But no; at her first word he had coldly acquiesced; had scorned for awhile, and then forgotten her until he learned that she was the wife of another man; and then, with overwhelming force, his passion rose again and threatened his destruction.

Soon the wide ocean would roll between them, but that could separate them no further than the few cold words which he had blindly let her say.

Long before the vessel reached port Caryll had gained control of himself; but he had passed through a terrible ordeal, and he felt as if nothing could ever move him deeply again.

It was a stern, grave man that entered the office of Ericson & Company—years older than the Caryll who had left there not five months before. He received their congratulations unmoved, and even when he was advanced, in recognition of his services, he felt strangely indifferent.

Among his letters he found a few words of welcome from Hawthorne, congratulating him upon his success, and asking him to come and see them at the Manor at his first opportunity.

The following day Caryll resolved to run down and spend the night with them. When he arrived at the station, he sent his hand-bag over by the wagonette, thinking it would be pleasant to walk to the Manor by the short cut through the woods, and up the path by the river.

It was all so familiar, and yet he was so changed! The trees were bare, and the November sunshine shone aslant upon him through the open network of the branches. By and by he reached the grove of pine-trees by the river. It was here, hardly more than a year ago, that he had quarreled with her, instead of trying to win her love! He had called her frivolous and accused her of caprice; and then had treated her with scorn because she chose honeyed flattery and wealth to his harsh words and poverty! She was right; for even now what could he offer her in comparison with Osborn, if she were free? If she were free! Ah, the remorseful agony of the thought! What did it mean? Could he never free himself from this love?—would it always rise up in this way and haunt him like a ghost, all his life long?

Like a ghost? What is this figure coming up the path toward him, clad in a soft black gown, and with the sunlight changing the golden hair on her bent head into a crown of glory?

She is coming nearer, nearer; her light footfall on the pine-needles under foot. Has his love and longing wrought this spell and brought her again before him for an instant, only to fade away from before his eyes forever?

Or can it be—? "Mabel!"

She was very near before she raised the bent head and saw him. Then she started a little, and there was no trace of color in her face; but she only said "Everett!" in the old glad way, and held out her hand. He grasped it tightly to assure himself that this was no fleeting vision, and in spite of the pain it gave her, she smiled.

"You are surprised to see me here," she said. "Then you had not heard that my sister is dead, and I am with Mrs. Hawthorne again; not as a guest this time, but as her companion."

"But I do not understand," he stammered; "I thought that you and Osborn—"

She turned her face away, and tried to withdraw her hand. "Mr. Osborn married Miss Alison a month ago; do you not remember meeting her here last fall?"

"But you—How dared he trifle with you?" Caryll exclaimed hotly.

Her face flushed crimson. "No, no, no; you do not understand. He was very kind;—I—I asked him to release me. It—it was another caprice, perhaps."

Caryll drew her towards him. "Mabel!" I can hardly believe that I am not dreaming! You asked him to release you—when?"

"The morning after you were hurt," she murmured. "O Everett! I saw you that night, and for awhile I thought that you were dead." There was a pitiful tremor in her voice, but in another moment she was tightly clasped in his strong arms, and he held her as if he would never let her go.

"My love," he said, "my darling, if I had only known! I understand at last; but with your own sweet lips tell me why you asked for your release?"

"Because—even a modern Portia may change her mind," she said.

Mr. Julius Gradwold, proprietor of the Golden Rule Bazaar store, informs us that he invites the general public who desire to purchase any holiday presents to hurry up, as his goods are going very fast, and New Year's is too close at hand to make new orders. He still has plenty of beautiful holiday goods, but he cannot tell how long they will last, and some items are already sold out.

PHYSICIANS

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