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The Reformer

By CHARLES M. SHELDON,
 Author of "In His Steps," "Robert Hardy's Seven Days," Etc.

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(Continued.)

She trembled and hesitated. She had had to reach out her hand and put it in John Gordon's and say one word. She did not move nor speak for almost a minute. Then she said, looking straight in front of her:

"Must I give an answer now?"

"Luella, you have already given me answer! You have promised to be my wife!" The words were spoken by him in a moment of great longing as he saw her indecision and foresaw her inevitable answer.

Her eyes darkened a little.

"I never promised to be the wife of—"

"The wife of?"— John Gordon repeated after a silence so long that his suspense was not bearable to him.

"I hardly know how to finish"— She uttered a short laugh, and John Gordon rose at once to his feet. "I can never live in Hope House," she added in a low tone.

"Is that your answer, then?" He stood looking at her calmly, but she did not look up.

"Yes," she finally replied.

"Then we must go our separate ways, so help us God!" he exclaimed in a sudden burst of passion, for his heart was hot within him.

He paused a moment irresolutely and then started to go out. She had not made any motion nor lifted her head to look at him. At the door he turned for an instant and saw, to his astonishment, that her proud head lay on her arms, which were outstretched on the table near which she had been sitting.

He was back by her side, kneeling again and calling her name. When she lifted her head, there were tears on her glowing cheeks.

"John, I cannot bear to have it so— 'Then do you love me, Luella, enough to share all with me?' he cried.

"Yes, I love you, John," she said slowly. But even as she said it she drew back from him a little. "At the same time I do not see why it is necessary to live at Hope House."

"Not necessarily there, but somewhere among the people. Luella, do you not understand my reasons for wanting to know the people?"

"I am not sure," she replied in a troubled tone, and then suddenly she turned away from him and put her head down on her arms again.

John Gordon rose and walked up and down the room. Twice as he went past the table he paused irresolutely, his mind in a turmoil, his heart uncertain. The third time he stopped, with a decision in his manner, and placed his hand on her head.

"I do not ask you to marry me unless you can trust everything to me. If you are not able to say without any fear or doubt, 'I will go with you in all the way you have chosen,' I do not, I cannot, plead with you, Luella. Is that asking too much, dear? Can the man who loves you ask any less?"

"No, no, he can ask no less! But, John, I fear to go!"— She had raised her head and was looking at him with more agitation than he had ever known her to show. "I am not certain that I am fitted, that I am adapted, for such a life. I have a horror of the places—the—I do not love the people, John, as you say you do. Am I to blame for that?"

She asked the question almost timidly, but nothing could soften the hardness of the statement to him. He did not yet see that the one thing that kept her from coming to him without any questions was her lack of religious experience. She did not love the people because all her life had been so far devoted to a love of the things that had surrounded her social position.

"No, I do not think you are to blame. But, oh, Luella, could you not learn to love them? Could you not come with me and let the future?"

"I could not pretend," she began, with a return of her proud attitude.

"I do not ask you to pretend. If you love me, will not all the rest be possible?"

She was silent a moment. Then suddenly she looked up and said frankly:

"I would not be true to you if I kept anything back. I not only do not love the people as you do, but I do not see why you should sacrifice your life to them, as you plan to do. I cannot see that you will accomplish anything."

"And is accomplishment the great and only thing? Is there nothing in being or in striving regardless of accomplishment? But I cannot argue the matter. If you love me enough, Luella, all the rest will follow; if you don't, it will all be useless to you."

She still looked at him with the uncertain, disturbed air that had marked her manner when he first began to talk to her, only the look had deepened into an expression of doubt and painful unrest.

"I do not see the need of all you plan to do. I do not see the need," she said slowly.

"You would not have to see that if you only loved me," he replied in a low tone, and there was a hopelessness in it that had not been present before. He stood looking at her, and suddenly he added:

"Let us be entirely frank, Luella, that we may not misunderstand. You shrink from the thought of living in a

place like Hope House; you hesitate to commit your future to me because of the physical losses, the absence in our future of these physical luxuries we have both known, into which we have been born—is that it? Your love for me is not strong enough to make this loss seem insignificant—is that true?"

It was a blunt question, and he purposely put it bluntly, perhaps more so than was fair to her. Over her face the color deepened, and she evidently felt the implied reproach in his summing up of her hesitation.

"That is not quite the truth."

"A part of it?"

"You have no right to force such a question upon me."

"I have a right to know the whole truth."

"You would not understand"—

"I would understand everything if you loved me enough to go with me without question."

"Love does not mean being unreasonable."

"Yes, Luella, it does, at least this far—that love will trust where it can not always give reason."

She was silent again.

He took a step nearer.

"Luella, one question only: If I decide that I must go to live in Hope House, will you go with me? Or will you refuse on account of the physical and social loss?"

She looked at him steadily at first, although her color deepened and her lips trembled.

"You have no right to ask such a question."

"I have—the right of a man who loves you."

"Then I will say not go, not for the reason you think, but—"

"It is not necessary to explain," John Gordon answered sadly. "Luella, it is plain to me that you do not love me."

"You have no right to make any such test!" she exclaimed passionately.

She stood up and faced him proudly, and he simply looked into her eyes a moment and then turned and walked out of the room. This time he did not look back. As he closed the door, Luella Marsh fell upon her knees by the side of the table, exclaiming:

"God pity me! God have mercy!"

John Gordon went out of the house calmly enough, although his heart was torn with passionate conflict. As the current of the city swept him on, there surged up in his soul her anger that he had ever loved this woman who could not have the test of faith in the man who loved her. But it was at this crisis that his real religious experience rescued him from wreck. Had it not been for that this story had never been told. But as he went his way that day his anger fell, and in its place there grew up a tender memory that left no room for harsh judgment.

But for the present he was overwhelmed by the result. He had put Luella Marsh into the altar place of a proud man's affection. Every day since the time she had pledged her heart to his he had thanked God for what had been given him. Her apparent response to his ambitions, especially noticeable in her correspondence during his absence, had exhilarated him. To find now that she would not trust her life to him because he had chosen a career of hardship and loss of physical things struck him the severest blow he had ever experienced. The failure on the part of his father and sister to understand or sympathize became insignificant compared with this event. As he walked along he began to torture himself with questions. Had he made a mistake in taking her answer as final? Had he, as she said, no right to make such a test? Was it asking too much of any woman to ask her to leave a home of luxury to which she had been accustomed from birth and go at once into surroundings that were repulsive to her? And then she had confessed that she did not love the people as he did, but—was that an un-

Perhaps in all his life he had never felt so lonely as at that moment. The consciousness that his father and sister and now the woman who had promised to be his wife had repudiated his life smote him with a sense of personal abandonment that was keen and searching.

For a moment he felt so completely alone that he let go of every motive for action. The city and the overwhelming thought of its misery and sin and selfishness enraged him. "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" he cried out, and nothing at that moment would have saved John Gordon except the fact that what he had mentioned to his father and sister and Luella as his religious experience was the greatest fact so far in his career. As he stood still there at the foot of the steps gradually his spirit grew calmer. The consciousness of God in his life grew stronger. The purpose of his life cleared. And after a little while he started on, knowing that his life work would not be changed in its main intent by anything that had so far happened. Only as he went on he also knew that he could not and would not be the same man and do the same things in some parts of his earthly vision as if Luella Marsh had decided to walk with him in the way. It was also quite clear to him that without being able to give a good reason for it he was not closing the chapter with Luella yet. He certainly entertained the idea of her still coming into his life. It was not from his interview with her that he drew any such hope. But he knew that he did not yet consider her action as final, or possibly it was his own action that was not final.

He stopped at a corner, and the sight of a street name on a car going by decided his next movement.

"I'll go and take tea at Hope House," he said to himself, and took the car, noting, by the time, that he would reach the house just as the little family of residents were in the habit of sitting down to their evening meal.

Hope House stood in the midst of its desert of tenements and its corner saloons and vaudeville halls like an oasis of refuge and strength. Saloons to right and left and front and rear, with piles of brick and wood and rubbish hung together in chaotic, tumbled heaps, with openings for human beings who streamed in and out of court and alley and doorway or sat in pallid, huddled masses on the stoops or curling formed the frame in which Hope House was set, unique and alone.

John Gordon left the car one block from Hope House and walked down past five saloons in the block until he came to the arched entrance of the house. Going into the little court, he breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the familiar cleaner tubs that stood against the outer wall of the court, and marvelled at their ability to blossom with such freshness in such surroundings.

"If cleaners ever had any fragrance in this part of the city, they must almost smell of beer and sewer gas," he said to himself as he went on into the broad hall that opened on the court. He was by no means a stranger to Hope House. Since his return from abroad he had been a frequent visitor and had been welcomed with that inner welcome that springs from well known common purposes.

"You are just in time!" called out a quiet but cheerful voice as John Gordon stepped into the doorway of the dining hall. "Miss Manning is absent. You may take her seat by me."

"I count myself fortunate," John Gordon replied as he took the seat, returning the greetings of those at the table.

"We were talking about you," said the head of the house, with her quiet but earnest manner.

"I'm sorry to interrupt the conversation," replied John Gordon.

"No interruption, we assure you. We are glad you came in, for you are the only person who can answer a question Mr. Ford just asked."

"Rather a personal question, Mr. Gordon," said Ford, a student from the university, who was a resident of several months' standing. "The question I asked Miss Andrews was this: What is Mr. Gordon going to do? Will he possibly come in here with us?"

John Gordon did not answer the question at once. He knew the complete freedom of the social atmosphere of Hope House, especially at meal-times, and understood well that his silence would not be misconstrued as discourtesy.

He looked around the circle of earnest, friendly faces at the table, and his gaze included as it had many times before, the room itself, with its high, dark valances, its few but choice portraits, its plain but attractive homelikeness; but, as on every other occasion, his look finally came back to the face of the head of the house, for she was the genius of the place.

Grace Andrews was in her thirty-sixth year. At the time John Gordon first met her at Hope House she had been in charge of the settlement for twelve years. Twelve years of association with desperate human problems such as those that swarmed like the people themselves had left on her face marks of that human, divine earnestness that all great women bear who have loved the people. If Grace Andrews did not impress strangers or visitors as being great in any real sense, it was because the look of her face spoke of a quiet peace that so many people superficially associate with meekness, but do not consider as an element of power. The residents of Hope House understood all that, and the oldest residents understood it better than the youngest and had more unquestioned reverence for the greatness of Grace Andrews than those who had less knowledge of her.

(To be Continued.)

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