

A METEOR.

[The Triumph of a Debutante].

Already the curtain had fallen upon the first act of the theatrical event of month, the first night of a new play and the town debut of a young aspirant for stellar honors, which might prove meteoric or of duration; it depended upon herself. She had been the talk of newspapers and of people; public curiosity was rife, owing to judicious advertising, rival cliques observed, and to sincerity of purpose and conscientious work in her art, her supporters asserted.

This bandying back and forth of her name and yet no tarnishing hint approaching caught public attention; the position seemed anomalous, somewhat; it amused, and then interested, and all the world and its neighbors had flocked to form its own opinion and pass judgment of its own—or rather to choose the one already made, which suited them the better. It requires mental exertion to have an original opinion; it is far easier to use that of some one else, and, characteristic phrasing, utter it as one's own; and human nature as a class dislikes mental effort; a few brains may do the thinking of the word.

The play had begun charmingly; it unrolled itself amid artistic settings that elicited admiration from connoisseurs, and clothed its naked plot in sparkling, flowing epigram that delighted the audience; it required intelligence to catch always the double entendre, and there is pleasure in feeling oneself equal to demands.

But until the debutante came on they were manifestly impatient, and when, at last, she entered, calling to some one back as she came, there was complete silence as they gazed at her, walking down as unconsciously as though no eyes were watching her every motion, the dainty white gown simple as only a createur could accomplish, the rippling auburn hair caught in a loose knot in her neck, and a tiny fluffy dog held close to her breast; thus she stood, the one natural wholesome figure in the play. The house caught its breath a second and then burst into applause; physically, at least, they approved her.

She spoke her lines with an ease and unconsciousness that made every woman in the house feel it required only naturalness to be a good actress; the actress; the hard work that accomplishes it was a matter unknown to them, but they applauded unstintingly where any chance offered, and the debutante appreciated their welcome, though inwardly her artistic sense was jarred when the dialogue was stopped by the noise. But she was grateful to them, so grateful; their sympathy helped, but again she felt that annoyance that she should allow herself to think of the audience. She was a woman, after all, as well as an artist, and success meant so much.

The play went on; epigrams flew about her unheeded; many lost point by her presence; it refuted them, and the relish departed; then came a sense of constraint, and gradually she was left alone with the hero. Him she amused; it was a phase of woman hitherto unknown, this unsophisticated but intelligent creature, who, to his experienced eye, possessed possibilities yet undeveloped. His role was that of one who teaches well and thoroughly certain things, and then demonstrates them. Why not educate her?

The curtain fell with enthusiastic demonstrations from the audience. In the closing scene the debutante had held an animated and witty dialogue with the hero, and given it as one who appreciated the points, which were as different in their originality and flavor as the scent of musk and new-mown hay. It came, like the latter, with a touch of salt blowing over it from the

ocean beyond; it was piquante and clean.

She was standing in the middle of the company when the curtain was raised for the encore, and the applause grew louder; it was for her, principally; public opinion had pronounced in her favor, and it was pleased to be enthusiastic. Again she was called out; this time only the hero came with her, and as she stood there bowing, flushing with pleasure beneath the thin rouge, suddenly she held out both hands to the audience with a gesture that thanked and appealed to them at once, and at that moment the little white dog she had first carried in, escaped from some one back, and, running across the stage, bounded about her barking squeakily, and as the curtain was falling again the people saw her pick up the little animal and hide her face in his shaggy coat.

In the foyer the critics were discussing her. She was unsuccess. There was a charm, a magnetism and an earnestness that won them. Crudities she had, but they were few and trivial, and would shortly disappear; awkwardness was a word unknown to her; the press would support "society."

Back in her dressing room the debutante was sitting with her head on her arms, on the low dressing table. The mirror reflected her figure, absolutely motionless, and the bare little room, which the maid was putting to rights after changing the debutante's gown. She was clad now in a delicate blue, and the curves of her neck showed exquisitely white and pure against it. The auburn hair had been done high on the small head, and an endless bit of blue ribbon wound its way through the twists.

The dog was curled, sleeping in her lap, and she was thinking—thinking, ten minutes before she would go on, how deadly tired she was—and there was a queer, fluttering pain about her heart; it would not let her draw a long breath. Never mind, one made but one debut; how she had dreaded and longed for it; those few people in front held her future in their hands when she faced them tonight; now it was assured; no not assured, but chance was given her to do something. She was not to be condemned without a trial; that would have been worse than death; but she had deserved a hearing; how she had worked, and struggled, and gone without for three years to accomplish the result of tonight. The future would be the same hard work, ceaseless thought and practice. What had given her such a pain in her heart? She had had it before, but never like this now. Probably it would stop presently. Dear little Kate! How the little sister's eyes would sparkle when the debutante told her of her success, the little sister who was hopelessly ill and would be always, for whom she lived and worked, and who was the only tie in her life; and Kate had been her inspiration and unswervingly believed in her abilities when she had thrown herself down upon the bed in the abandonment of despair. Dear little Kate, she would have what she wanted now, the hard times were past, and the debutante need look no longer grudgingly at the dainties Kate liked and pass them by because their little all was hoarded and paid out that she might study. How selfish it had made her feel when the money was used for her and Kate went without; the joy of repaying and making up would be the sweetest thing in the world. There was the orchestra playing; she could just hear it; nearly time to go on again. Why didn't that pain go away?

In front of the curtain the seats were all filled again, the last man was in his place; no one wished to miss the debutante's second entry.

The stage was set for a ball and the usual automatic figures walked to and fro in pointed and pointless conversation, and, standing in groups, endeavored hopelessly to be those simplest of

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