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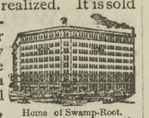

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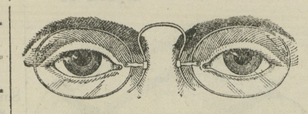

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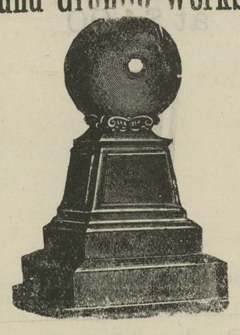

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A Premature Courtship

It Occurred When the Girl Was Part Child, and It Had to Be Done Over

By LOUISE B. CUMMINGS

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"Tim," said Norman Fisk to his friend, Timothy Forman, "I wish you would do me a favor. I must be absent from home on business for a month. I don't like to leave an old woman and a little girl in the house alone, and I'd like you to at least sleep there while I'm gone, though if you like you can eat there as well."

Fisk was forty-five and Forman thirty-four. They were chums, Fisk being a widower, Forman an "old bach." Fisk's household consisted, besides himself, of his aunt, an old lady of sixty-five, and his daughter, Maud, still in school.

"Certainly, old man," replied Forman. "I'll sleep there anyway. It won't be necessary for me to spend my evenings there, will it?"

"Not at all. Blanche usually studies her lessons in the evening, and my aunt goes to sleep over her knitting."

"Your house is only a few blocks from the club," said the other, dismayed at the picture.

"Just so, and I'll see that you get a latchkey. You can go in as late as you like."

The first night Mr. Forman went to his friend's house at 9 o'clock. True enough, there was the old lady dosing over her knitting and a girl in short dresses sitting at a table with a globe lamp on it studying her lessons. The girl looked up at Forman with an expression on her face indicating more interest in his coming to spend some time with them than mere protection warranted. Her glance told him that it would not be entirely safe to treat her absolutely as a schoolgirl. Her aunt woke up and welcomed the custodian, but the girl said never a word.

The next few evenings Forman spent at his club. Then one morning leaving the house Blanche went out at

"DIDN'T YOU ENJOY IT ALL, TOO?"

the same time with a pile of schoolbooks under her arm. They walked on together, but it didn't occur to Forman to offer to carry her books for her till she remarked that they were very heavy. When he left her at a corner and returned them she gave him a look of gratitude.

Blanche at recess informed her bosom friend, a girl about her own age, that she had had a grown man to walk to school with her. She had pretended that her books were heavy because she wished to be treated like a young lady. She was not sure whether she would fall in love with her escort or not. He certainly seemed very nice. True he was a little old for her, but a fortune teller had told her that she would marry a man twice her age.

The next evening Mr. Forman came in rather early—10 o'clock—being tired and sleepy. He found the schoolgirl with a pack of cards before her playing solitaire. With a pout on her young lips and a knitting of her smooth brows she said:

"Oh, I can't work this out. Won't you help me, Mr. Forman?"

Forman sat down opposite her. From that moment she ceased to be interested in the cards, except for a pretext, prattling to him and endeavoring to appear like a young lady.

"How old would you take me for, Mr. Forman?"

"Fourteen—perhaps a year older."

"Oh, dear, you are far out of the way. I'll be seventeen next month."

"You don't mean it!"

"Are you a believer in platonic affection, Mr. Forman?"

"I never thought about it. Are you?"

"It's dangerous. The least thing is liable to break down the platonic and bring about the true love."

"What do you mean by the least thing?"

"Well, an act of kindness or of sacrifice; a touch of the hand; a kiss."

"Good gracious! You talk very queer for a"—

"Oh, yes; I know you consider me a kid. You forget I'll be seventeen next month, and eighteen is legal age for a woman."

Forman remembered a time when he had considered a girl of eighteen in her prime and one of twenty-two passe. Then he thought how nice it would seem to be back in those youthful days. How much he had lost by coming to middle age. And here was a girl who was plainly indicating that she wished to be considered a companionable person for him. Wouldn't it be fine if he could go back a dozen years and she could go forward a few years, and he could love her and she could love him, and he could get rid of his wretched club life and all that?

The next evening Forman, who had received a letter from Fisk, made a pretext of it to go to the house to tell Blanche that he had heard from her father. "Take good care of my little girl" was the injunction, and Forman made himself believe that it was incumbent upon him to afford her some amusement, so he asked her aunt if he might take Blanche to the theater. Permission was given and tickets secured for a Friday night, when the girl would not be obliged to go to school the next day and could therefore sleep late.

Blanche wore the dress with the longest skirt in her possession and put on all her finery, including a number of gold and silver bangles. She looked very pretty and, more than that, wore on her face a youthful expectation that was fast fading from her escort. She had been to a theater but once or twice in her life, while the drama was an old story with him. But in his companion's enjoyment he found a new sensation. The theater, the players, many of them "mouthing their words" and overacting, were to her real persons, their joys and sorrows real emotions, while the hero and heroine seemed to be enacting her own feelings.

Forman, blaze himself, sat regarding his companion with infinite satisfaction. When he felt her arm against his own a thrill ran through him. When she turned her face toward his, looking for a companionable appreciation of some noble sentiment expressed by one of the actors, he smiled good naturedly and sympathetically. Then when the curtain fell he took her where they could get an ice, which to her was more than a canvasback duck to one who had been satiated. And that night Blanche went to sleep dreaming that Forman was the hero and she the heroine in the play that had been enacted. As for Forman, he sank to slumber thinking about the pretty young thing who had sat beside him at the theater.

Forman passed the next evening at his club. Saturday night is gala night at most clubs and there were plenty of his companions there to keep him company. But somehow the evening dragged. At billiards the face of Blanche was always interposing itself between him and the object ball. At bridge he lost because he couldn't keep his mind on the game. And so it was in whatever he did. When he went home to the house he was guarding he felt relieved because he was under the same roof with the girl who had thrust herself unbidden into his thoughts. His club life seemed more unsatisfactory to him than ever.

One morning Forman woke up conscious of the fact that he was drifting into an equivocal position. His friend had asked him to look out for his home and the two people in it during his absence. What had he been doing? Turning the head of that friend's daughter, not quite seventeen years old. In this Forman was wrong. It was not he who was turning the girl's head, but she who was turning his head. At any rate there was something very delightful between them. How would he meet his friend when he returned? Then suddenly he was terrified at the thought that Blanche would give the whole matter away to her father.

And this is exactly what she did. She didn't tell him her secret, but when Forman went to the house on the evening of Fisk's arrival to get something he had left there Blanche received him so enthusiastically that her father could not help noticing it. Forman began to stammer something that would help the matter.

"It has been a pleasure to me," he said, "to afford your little girl"—here Blanche gave him a reproachful look—"some amusement during your absence. Her aunt was good enough to let me take her to the theater, and I gave her a drive in the park in my buggy."

"Didn't you enjoy it all, too, Mr. Forman?" interrupted Blanche, with another pronounced reproachful look.

"Very much, very much!" replied Forman, reddening.

"I dare say you've been very kind, old man," said Fisk, and there was something in the familiar appellation of "old man" that for the first time grated on Forman's feelings. "I think I'll stroll over to the club with you tonight for a game of bridge."

That was the last meeting between Forman and the little girl for three years. He was then just passed middle age and she a young lady.

"Blanche is home," said Fisk to his friend one day. "Come round and see us."

"I will with pleasure," replied Forman, and he chose a time for calling when he knew his friend would not be at home.

When Forman called he saw a vision of loveliness advancing to greet him with pleasure in her eye and a smile on her lips. It seemed to him all at once that he had been growing younger as the girl had been growing older. Surely this could not be the little girl whom he had taken to the theater and to whose prattle he had so often listened. That experience now seemed to him like a dream.

The child had passed completely into the woman. Nevertheless she had not recovered from her girlish fancy, and though she endeavored to conceal the fact from Forman she failed. He saw through the disguise at once, and his heart was filled with a great joy.

There was a courtship, but a post facto one. The real courtship had occurred three years before.

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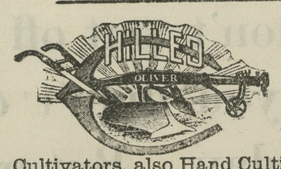

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