

THE
COMING QUEEN

L. Moresby
(Lily Adams Beck)
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THE COMING QUEEN

A DIALOGUE AND A STORY

BY L. MORESBY

I

'I believe you take as long to dress as I do,' she said pettishly; 'I call it neither more nor less than poaching when a man looks so well turned out. And a Poet, too! Well—you can sit down; I have twenty minutes free.'

She was dressed for a bridge party. Dressed—oh, the tilt of the hat over her delicate little nose; the shadow it cast over the liquid eyes, ambushing them, as it were, for the flash and spring upon the victim! But I was no victim—not I! I knew my young friend too well. She endured me more or less gladly. I sat at her feet and learned the ways of the sex, and

turned them into verse, or didn't, according to the mood of the minute. I had versified her more than once. She was a rondeau, a triolet, a trill—nothing more.

'Why mayn't a poet look respectable as well as another?' I asked, dropping into a chair.

'Because it isn't in the picture. You were much more effective, you folks, when you went about with long hair, and scowled, with a finger on your brows. But never mind—you've given us up and we've given you up, so it doesn't matter what women think of you any more.'

'You never said a truer word!' I replied, lighting my cigarette at hers. 'The connection between women and poetry is clean-cut for the time. As for the future—God knows! You're not poetic any more. And it's deuced hard, for we made you.'

'Nonsense. God made us, they say—or Adam—I never quite made out which.'

'It's a divided responsibility, anyhow. For the Serpent dressed you. He knew his business there—he knew that beauty unadorned may do well enough in a walled garden and with only one to see and no one else to look at. But in the great world, and with competition—no! And you—you little fools, you're undoing all his charitable work and undressing yourselves again. When I was at the Moresbys' the other night I just thirsted for the Serpent to take the floor and hiss you a lecture on your stupidities.'

She pouted: 'Stupidities? I'm sure the frocks were perfectly lovely.'

'As far as they went, but they didn't go nearly far enough for the Serpent. And believe me, he knows all the tricks of the trade. He wants mystery—he wants the tremble in the lips when a man feels—"I can't see—I can only guess, and I guess the Immaculate, the Exquisite—the silent silver lights and darks undreamed of." And you—you go and strip your backs to the waist and your legs to the knees. No, believe me, the Dark Continent isn't large enough; and when there is nothing left to explore, naturally the explorer ceases to exist.'

'I think you're very impertinent. Look at Mrs. Peterson. Wasn't she perfectly lovely? Why, even all the women were crazy about her shoulders. She can wear less than any of us, and wear it well.'

'I couldn't keep my eyes off her, if you mean that. But not along the Serpent line of thought. It was mathematical. I was calculating the chances for and against, all the time—whether that indiscreet rose-leaf in front would hold on. Whether the leaf at the back would give. At last I got to counting. She's laughing—will it last till I get to five-and-twenty? thirty? And I held on to the switches to switch off the light if it gave. The suspense was terrific. Did she hold together after midnight? I left then.'

'I won't tell you. You don't deserve to hear,' she said with dignity.

A brief silence.

'What do you mean by saying you poets made us?' she began again, pushing the ash-tray toward me.

'Well, you know, as a matter of fact people long ago didn't believe you had any souls.'

'Rot!'

'I shouldn't think of contradicting you, my dear Joan, but it's a fact.'

'Oh, the Turks, and heathen like that.'

'Well, no—the Church. The Fathers of the Church, met in solemn council, remarked you had no souls. It was a long time ago, however.'

'They didn't!'

'They did. They treated you as pretty dangerous little animals, with snake's blood in you. Listen to this: "Chrysostom"—a very distinguished saint—"only interpreted the general sentiment of the Fathers when he pronounced woman to be a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic peril, a deadly fascination, a painted ill." You see you had found the way to the rouge-box even then.'

'I shouldn't wonder if they were right,' she said, incredibly. 'I've often doubted whether I've a soul myself. And I'm sure Myra Peterson hasn't.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'At all events, the poets thought you were not as pretty without one. We disagreed with the Church. We always have. So we took you in hand. Your soul was born, my dear Joan, in Provence, about the year 1100.'

She began to be a little interested, but looked at her tiny watch—gray platinum with a frosty twinkle of diamonds.

'Go on. I've ten minutes more.'

'Well—we were sorry for you. We were the Troubadours of Provence, and we found you kicked into the mud by the Church, flung out into the world to earn your bread in various disreputable ways—by marriage, and otherwise. You simply didn't exist. We found your beautiful dead body in the snow and mud. And we picked you up and warmed you and set you on a throne all gold and jewels. Virtually, you never breathed until we wrote poems about you.'

'Jewels! We have always liked jewels,' she sighed.

'We gave you a wonderful crown first, all white and shining. We made you Queen of Heaven, and then even the Church had to eat humble pie and worship you, for you were Mary. We did that—we only. But that wasn't enough. You opened your eyes, and grew proud and spoiled, and heaven was by no means enough. You wanted more. You would be Queen of Earth, too. And we did it! We gave you a crown of red jewels,—red like heart's blood,—and we put a sceptre in your hand, and we fell down and worshiped you. And you were Venus. And you have been Queen of Europe and the New World ever since.'

'Of Europe only? Not of Asia? Why not?'

'Oh, they are much too old and wise in Asia. They are much wiser than we. Wiser than the Church. Wiser than the poets—than any of us.'

'What do they say?'

'Well—let's think. That you have your uses—*uses*. That you are valuable in so far as you bear children and are obedient to your husbands. That, outside that, your beauty has its uses also within limits that are rather strictly marked. That in many rebirths you may possibly win a soul one day and be immortal; if you behave, that is! If not—then you will be scrapped. But you have your chance all the time. With them you are neither goddess nor fiend. You are just women. Not even Woman.'

'What ghastly materialism!'

'No, no! The happy mean. The perfect wisdom. Meanwhile, you yourselves are all hunting after the ideals of the market-place, the platform, the pulpit. I wonder how many extra rebirths it will cost you! Never mind. Time is long. The gods are never in a hurry, and you will arrive even if you only catch the last train.'

'But this is all fault-finding, and unfair at that. Will you have the goodness to advise? If we stick on our pedestals, you all run off to the frivolers. If we frivol, you weep for the pedestal. What is it you really want? If we knew, we'd try to deliver the goods, I'm sure.'

'I'm not!' I said, and reflected. Then, gathering resolution,
'Have you the patience to listen to a story?'

'If it's a good one. How long will it take?'

'Ten minutes. The author is the Serpent.'

'Then I'll certainly put off Myra Peterson for fifteen
minutes. Who's it about?'—running to the telephone.

'Eve, Lilith, Adam.'

'Who was Lilith?'

'Adam's first love.'

She sat down, her eyes dancing, her lips demure; the
prettiest combination!

'I didn't know he had one. But I might have guessed. They
always have. Go on!'

I went on, and this is the story.

II

'You were speaking of the pedestal. That, of course, was
invented in Eden; for Adam early recognized the
convenience of knowing where to leave your women and be
certain of finding them on your return. So he made the

pedestal, decorated it, burned incense before it, and went away upon his own occasions; and when Eve had finished her housekeeping (you may remember, Milton tells us what good little dinners she provided for Adam), she would look bored, climb upon the pedestal obediently, and stand there all day, yawning and wondering what kept him away so long.

'Now, on a memorable day, the Serpent came by, and he stopped and looked up at the Lady of the Garden,—who naturally assumed a statuesque pose,—and there was joy in his bright little eye. But all he said was, "May I ask if you find this amusing?"

'And Eve replied, "No, not at all. But it is the proper place for a lady."

'And the Serpent rejoined: "Why?"

'And Eve reflected and answered: "Because Adam says so."

'So the Serpent drew near and whispered in his soft sibilant voice: "Have you ever heard of Lilith? *She* does not stand on a pedestal. She gardens with Adam. To be frank, she is a cousin of my own."

'And this made Eve extremely angry, and she replied sharply: "I don't know what you mean. He and I are alone in Eden. There's no such person as Lilith. You are only a serpent when all's said and done. What can you know?"

'And the Serpent replied very gently,—and his voice was as soothing as the murmur of a distant hive of bees,—"I am

only a Serpent, true! But I have had unusual opportunities of observation. Come and eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Long ages ago I tasted the Fruit. The savor of my teeth is sweet on it still."

'Eve hesitated, and she who hesitates is lost.

"I own I should like to know about this Lilith," she said. "But we were told that fruit is unripe, and I don't like bitter things. Is it bitter?"

'And the Serpent narrowed his eyes until they shone like slits of emerald.

"Sweet!" he said; "come."

'So she descended from the pedestal, and, guided by the Serpent, stood before that wondrous Tree where every apple shines like a star among its cloudy leaves. And she plucked one, and, tasting it, flung the rest angrily at the Serpent, because it was still a little unripe; and having tasted the Fruit Forbidden, she returned to the pedestal, pondering, with the strangest new thoughts quickening in her brain.

'If Adam noticed anything when he came back that evening, it was only that Eve was a little more silent than usual, and forgot to ask if the thornless roses were striking root. She was thinking deeply, but there were serious gaps in her knowledge.

'The first result of her partial enlightenment was that, though she now only used the pedestal as a clothes-peg and spent all her spare time in stalking Adam and Lilith, she

always scrambled up in hot haste when he returned. He could be certain of finding her there when he expected to, and he made a point of that because, as he said,—

"No truly nice woman would ever want to leave it and go wandering about the Garden. It does not do for a respectable woman to be seen speaking even to an Archangel nowadays, so often does the Devil assume the form of an Angel of Light. You never can tell. And besides, there is always the Serpent, who, in my opinion, should never have been admitted."

'Eve said nothing, which was becoming a habit. She only folded her little hands meekly and accepted the homage paid to the pedestal with perfect gravity and decorum. He never suspected until much later that she knew what a comparatively interesting time Lilith was having, and had indeed called on that lady at the other end of the Garden, with friendly results. She was well aware that Lilith's footing on the garden paths was much more slippery and unsafe than her own on the pedestal. Still, there were particulars which she felt would be useful.

'When Adam realized the facts, he realized also that he was face to face with a political crisis of the first magnitude. If they fraternized, those two, of such different characters and antecedents, there was nothing they could not know—nothing they might not do! The pedestal was rocking to its very foundation. The gardening with Lilith must end. She would demand recognition; Eve would demand freedom. It might mean a conspiracy—a boycott. What was there it

might not mean? He scarcely dared to think. Eden was crumbling about him.

'It was a desperate emergency, and as he sat with a racking head, wishing them both in—Paradise, the Serpent happened along.

"Surely you look a little harassed," he said, stopping.

'Adam groaned.

"Is it as bad as all that?" the Serpent asked, sympathetically.

"Worse."

"What have they been at?" asked the Serpent.

"They each know too much, and they will soon know more," he rejoined gloomily. "Knowledge is as infectious as potato blight."

'The Serpent replied with alacrity: "In this dreadful situation you must know most. It is the only remedy. Come and eat at once of the Fruit of the Tree. I have never understood why you did not do that the moment the Rib took shape."

'And Adam, like Eve, asked: "Is it sweet?"

'So the Serpent narrowed his eyes till they shone like slits of ruby, and said, "Bitter, but appetizing. Come."

'And Adam replied: "I like bitters before dinner."

'We all know what happened then; with the one exception that, as a matter of fact, he found the apple a little over-ripe, too sweet, even cloying; and not even swallowing what he had tasted, he threw the rest away.

'It is just as well to have this version, for it must have been always perfectly clear that Eve, having tasted the apple and thus acquired a certain amount of wisdom, could never have desired to share it with Adam. ['I have thought that myself,' murmured Joan.] No, it was the Serpent's doing in both cases; though naturally Adam blamed Eve when the question was raised, for she had begun it.

'But what was the result? Well, there were several. It has, of course, been a trial of wits between Adam, Eve, and Lilith ever since. But, in tasting, he had learned one maxim which the Romans thought they invented thousands of years later. It flashed into his mind one day, when he saw the two gathering roses together and found his dinner was half an hour late in consequence. It was simply this: Divide and Rule. Combined, he could never manage them; the sceptre was daily slipping from his hand. Divided, he could. So he put the maxim in practice and sowed division and distrust between Eve and Lilith. They ceased to visit each other, and were cuts when they met. And, naturally, after the Eviction the meetings ceased entirely.

'You will have understood before this, my dear Joan, that Adam was the first mortal to realize the value of competition. He now became the object of spirited competition between

the two. Each in her own way outbid the other to secure his regard. Eve's domestic virtues grew oppressive; Lilith's recklessness alarming. And it will readily be seen why women have pursued men, rather than the other way over, as we see it in the lower walks of creation.'

'Don't prose,' said Joan. 'What happened?'

'Well, in the last few years, the Serpent, who is always upsetting things, happened along again, and found Eve balancing in extreme discomfort on the pedestal, and Lilith resting, exhausted, after a particularly hard day's pursuit of Adam. And between them was a wall of icy silence.

'He paused and said, with his usual courtesy, "Ladies, you both seem fatigued. Is it permitted to ask the reason?" And his voice had all the murmuring of all the doves of Arcady.

'And Lilith replied angrily: "I'm sick of hunting Adam. I always catch him and always know I shall. And he wants to be caught, and yet insists on being hunted before he gives me the rewards. Who can keep up any interest in a game like that? If it were not for Eve, who would take up the running if I dropped it, he might go to Gehenna for me!"'

'Oh, how true! I like Lilith best!' whispered Joan. She was not smoking now.

"Strong, but pardonable," said the Serpent. "And you, dear Lady?"

'And Eve, casting a jealous scowl at Lilith, replied: "I'm weary of this abominable pedestal. If you had stood on it off

and on for five thousand years, you would realize the cramp it means in the knees. But I daren't get off, for Adam says no truly nice woman ever would leave it, and it pleases him. If it were not for Lilith, who would be upon it in two seconds, I should be off it in less. And then where should I be? She *will* go on hunting him, and of course he must have quiet at home."

"And you *will* go on standing on your imbecile pedestal, and of course such boredom makes him restless abroad," retorted the other.

'In the momentary silence that ensued, the Serpent looked up at Lilith and narrowed his eyes till they shone like slits of amethyst.

"My cousin," he said, "our family was old when Adam was created. He is poor game."

"Nobody knows that better than I," said Lilith tartly. "What do you suppose I hunt him for?"

"What, indeed!" said the Serpent, hissing softly.

"Because of Eve—that only!" she flashed at him. "She never shall triumph over me. And what there is to give, he has."

'He turned to Eve, narrowing his eyes till they shone like slits of fire.

"And you stand cramped on this pedestal, beloved Lady?"

"Because of Lilith—that only! She, at all events, shall not have him. And think of his morals!"

'Aha!' said Joan, with intense conviction.

'The Serpent mused and curved his shining head toward Eve.

"If you will allow me to say so, I have always regretted that you never finished that apple, and that my cousin Lilith has never tasted it at all," he murmured. "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, as certain also of your own poets have said."

"I have sometimes thought so, too," Eve replied mournfully; "and there is a word that now and then flashes across my brain like an echo from the past, but I can never quite recall it. It might explain matters. Still, it is no use talking. That apple rotted long ago, and if the Tree is still growing, which I doubt, there is always a guard of flying infantry at the Gate. It is easier to get out than in where Eden is concerned."

'The Serpent smiled blandly.

"You have evidently forgotten that, by arrangement with the Governing Body, I have always free ingress and egress. Look here!"

'He unfolded his iridescent coils, and there lay within them—shining, mystic, wonderful, against his velvet bloom—two Apples.

'There was no hesitation, for each was equally weary of Adam's requirements; and, snatching each an Apple, they ate.

'But the Fruit has grown bitter since the days of the Garden. There is nothing so bitter as knowledge. Their lips were wried, and the tears came, and still they ate until not an atom remained. The Serpent watched. For a moment each stared upon the other, trembling like a snared bird, wild thoughts coming and going in the eyes of the Barren Woman and the Mother of all Living. Then Eve stretched out her arms, and Lilith flung herself into them, and they clung together, weeping.

'And the Serpent opened his eyes until they shone like sun, moon, and stars all melted into one; and he said, "Ladies, the word you are seeking is, I think, *Combination*." And smiling subtly, he went his way.

'So Eve descended from her pedestal and trampled it; and Lilith broke the rod of her evil enchantments; and they walked hand in hand, blessing the world.

'Adam meanwhile was shooting,—big game, little game,—and, amid the pressure of such important matters, never paid any attention to this trifle. But this was the beginning of what will be the biggest trade-union the world will ever see. All the women who matter will be within it, and the black-legs outside will be the women who don't count. So now you see why men will not much longer have a run (literally) for their money. Adam may have to put up with it, for he never ate the Apple as Eve and Lilith have done, and therefore does

not know so much about the things of real importance. Unless indeed the Serpent—But we won't think of that until it happens.

'Now, my dear Joan, whether all this is a good or a bad thing, who can tell? The Serpent undoubtedly shuffled the cards; and who the Serpent is and what are his intentions, are certainly open questions. Some believe him to be the Devil, but the minority think his true name is Wisdom. All one really can say is that the future lies on the knees of the gods, and that among all men the Snake is the symbol of Knowledge, and is therefore surrounded with fear and hatred.

'Now that's the story, and don't you think there's a kind of a moral?'

I waited for a comment. Joan was in deep meditation.

'Do you know,' she said slowly, 'it's the truest thing I ever heard. It's as true as taxes. But where do you come in?'

'I wasn't thinking of us,' I said hurriedly. 'I merely meant—if you wished to be more attractive—'

'Attractive!'—with her little nose in the air. 'I guess it's you that will have to worry about your attractions, if that comes along. I won't waste any more time on you to-day. I've got to think this out, and talk it out, too, with Myra and Janet.'

She rose and began to pull on her gloves, but absently.

I felt exactly like a man who has set a time-fuse in a powder magazine. The Serpent himself must have possessed me when I introduced his wisdom to a head cram-full of it already.

'It's the merest nonsense, Joan. It isn't in the Talmud. The Serpent never thought of it. I made it all up.'

'You couldn't. It isn't in you. Or, if you did, it was an inspiration from on high.'

'From below,' I said weakly.

She smiled to herself—a dangerous smile.

'I must go. And you really were a little less dull than usual. Come again on Tuesday. The moral of it all is, so far, that the poets are really worth cultivating. I will begin with you!'

She flashed away like a humming bird, and I retired, to read my Schopenhauer. But the serious question is—shall I go on Tuesday?

[The end of *The Coming Queen* by Elizabeth Louisa Moresby]