

# *Gold Hair*

Isabel Ecclestone  
Mackay

Illustrated by

Arthur William Brown

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# GOLD HAIR

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

*Maria feared baldness even more than death—more than anything, except the loss of Johnnie’s love—but she found out finally how both might be preserved—perhaps!*

John Hastings’ first memory of Maria Makewith was the unpleasant memory of being compelled to play with her. Mrs. Hastings and Mrs. Makewith were friends and, when Mrs. Makewith came to supper, Maria came too. Visitors meant honey for supper but all the honey of a bees’ harvest could not possibly have sweetened for John the long pent up bitterness of these many hateful occasions.

“Johnnie, ask little Maria to play with you in the back yard.” Mrs. Hastings’ voice would pleasantly suggest a warm and spontaneous response on Johnnie’s part, but her eye, brisk and compelling, was ready to beat down rebellion with a look.

“Oh, how nice!” Mrs. Makewith would gurgle. “Maria dear, say, ‘thank you, Johnnie.’”

Whereupon, without either of the victims being heard in defence, they were then conducted, more or less forcibly, to the scene of their festivities.

Here, as far as John was concerned, this farce ended. Scowling fiercely, he retreated to the wood pile, from the superb isolation of which he would watch his supposed playmate with a burning heart. Maria never followed him there. She made no demands. She quite expected not to be played with. And she never told. If John had troubled to remember anything about her he might have remembered this. It would have been so easy for her to call through an open window; “Ma, Johnnie won’t play with me,” achieving thereby some satisfaction for her slighted charms. But she never did it. All by herself she wandered timidly about the back yard, stubbing the toe of her boot in the dust or swinging herself on the swing with little strengthless pushes which barely lifted her feet from the ground.

Once, only once, John, unable to bear the sight, had given her what he called a “good swing.” In other words he had sent her up level with the beam and her terrified “Please, please, Johnnie, don’t!” showed him exactly the kind of thanks a fellow got for trying to play with a girl.

Fortunately she seemed to have some understanding of her own unworthiness and made no claims. Even in appearance she was negligible—a thin, freckled child with a mouth so large it seemed always trying to suck itself in at the corners, a pair of small, frightened blue eyes and a quantity of very light hair dragged back into a plait and tied tightly with a shoelace. This would have been John’s memory of her—if he had bothered to have a memory.

**W**hen Maria’s mother died and other friends came to supper in her place, John forgot Maria so completely that there remained not even gratitude for his deliverance. He was getting a big boy rapidly, and there was no time for yesterdays. The back yard was always filled with boys now, (even his mother saw the propriety of that) and every day persisted in coming to an end too soon. But more days kept coming and presently the back yard expanded into the street and the street into the town and all these together into a world inexhaustibly interesting. Only one thing remained the same—in John’s world there was no place for girls.

While still safely in his ’teens his mother noticed this peculiarity and at first was proud of it.

But this unusual detachment persisted so long that, from being proud, Mrs. Hastings began to be anxious. Now that Johnnie’s schooling was completed and he was doing well in a business way she would have welcomed a change of attitude. She was not the type of mother who seeks to keep an only son for herself. She wanted the boy to marry. For her, Johnnie’s courtship would mean a renewal of youth, and the prospect of grandchildren a desired happiness. She did not want Johnnie’s family to wait until she was too old to enjoy it. Besides, it wasn’t natural for a well set up lad to persist in such immunity, and what wasn’t natural couldn’t be right.



*There were times when Maria looked almost pretty.*

Also, and this was a serious matter, the nicest girls were going off. Mrs. Hastings felt a real pang when Rosina Allen married. She had had hopes of Rosina, a sensible, forehanded girl. Clara Birks, too, healthy, good-looking and respectful to her elders, with a bit of money of her own and so interested in Johnnie. But no one could expect a girl like that to wait forever.

Since Clara's marriage, Mrs. Hastings had centred upon Jessie Adams. Jessie was several years younger than the other girls but all the better for that, since, as boys became older they were inclined the more to youth.

Jessie was extremely pretty. She had a mocking, brown face, bright eyes and wavy, dusky hair. In manner she was a trifle giddy perhaps, but of the type which sobers with marriage. Yes, Jessie would do very well.

“I hope you will get home early to-night, Johnnie,” Mrs. Hastings would say casually, “Mrs. Adams and Jessie are coming in for supper.”

“Sure. I’ll be right on time.” John’s tone was cordial but absent. “If I’m not, don’t wait for me.”

“No. And, Johnnie, Mrs. Adams may have to leave early but that is no reason why Jessie should. You won’t mind seeing her home?”

“Don’t I always see her home?” asked the blind one in a surprised voice. Mrs. Hastings sighed.

“I am afraid Johnnie may never look at a girl,” she confided to Johnnie’s uncle Tom.

“Mebby a long trip would wake him up,” suggested Uncle Tom.

“Oh, but he might—” began Mrs. Hastings.

“Got to take some risks!” declared the oracle. And, shortly after, young John found that his firm desired him to take their western trip. Right to the coast he went, keener, more absorbed, less vulnerable than ever. And yet—there may be magic which works unseen. Those long days in the train, when there was nothing to do save watch the varying landscape or his fellow-travellers: those crowded days in a strange city beside a strange sea, meeting strange people—people who “gave you a jolt,” as they themselves expressed it! In spite of himself John was jolted. His mind began to write upon new pages. For the first time in his absorbed life he stood aside looking on.

And then, upon the last day of the journey home, it happened.

The smart young lawyer two seats ahead of him had vanished and in his place had appeared a young woman in an atrocious hat. While John idly stared at her, she put up her hands and removed the hat.

“By jove!” said John.

The exclamation was torn from him. Gold! Think of heaped up gold, shining, burnished, threaded gold. Think of the softness of flossed silk and the yellow of fresh buttercups. John thought of these things—and felt like a fool for thinking of them. But, surely, such hair was quite remarkable? He glanced around the car. No one seemed to find it remarkable. No one was

looking at the girl. He hoped no one had heard him say “By jove.” And yet surely that hair was—wasn’t it?

John got up and went into the smoking compartment where he devoted his whole attention to the landscape. The wheat, he found, was good. It bent to the breeze, ripe and heavy, ready for reaping. The oats were good, too, though somewhat light. All the yellow land of harvest lay bright under the sun. But nowhere was the yellow of buttercups—that was a spring-time gold, delicate, exquisite, like the gold of that girl’s remarkable hair.

He stayed in the smoker until lunch time and then went forward into the diner with an odd reluctance. Perhaps the girl with the hair would have left the train in the meantime. He hoped so. But in raising his eyes after taking the seat to which the waiter beckoned, he saw her just in front of him at the next table. They were seated on the sunny side of the car and John watched, fascinated, while the bar of light which lay across the girl’s shoulder crept upward as if drawn, like to like, by the glory of the gold above it. In a sudden panic he wrenched his eyes away. He did not understand his own sensation and he was afraid of the unknown, angry, too.

Lunch was a hurried meal, but the waiter, leisurely as all waiters are, kept him waiting for his check and, while he waited, the girl of the hair rose and turned to leave the car. He saw her face—a long, pale face, dimly freckled, light blue eyes with a timid look, a wide mouth and overlong chin. Had John expected beauty the shock would have been severe. But John had not expected anything. He had not thought about her face at all. It hadn’t seemed to matter. Nor did it matter now. Face and hair did not “belong”—why need they? The hair was not less beautiful for that.

The girl, in passing, looked directly at him and as their eyes met, a wondering look of half-recognition leapt timidly in hers. She hesitated, paused.

“Why, it’s Jo—Mr. Hastings, isn’t it?” She stumbled over words and blushed at her own awkwardness.

Rising, John admitted his identity. Suspense had made him almost as awkward as she.

“You don’t remember me,” went on the girl much embarrassed, “I suppose I have changed a great deal. I am Maria Makewith—we used to play together, you know, in—in the back yard.”

The back yard—from the depth of long oblivion there floated up to John a flashing picture of himself upon a wood pile and of a little girl—he

couldn't see the little girl plainly because he had looked at her so seldom.

"Why, of course," he said, with a cordiality heightened by a sense of guilt, "I remember you perfectly. You used to come to supper. And you never told."

"Told?" The pale blue eyes shyly questioned him.

"You might have told, you know," said John, "for I was supposed to be entertaining you. But probably you didn't want to play either."

"Oh—but I did!" admitted Maria. "I mean I—of course, I understood."

"Saved me a jolly good licking anyway," admitted John handsomely. "Are you travelling far?"

"Why—I'm on my way back to Springville," said Maria. "My aunt, Mrs. Thomas Walker, you know?—she has been so poorly. I am to take care of her."

There was the smallest pause and then—"In that case I shall see you often," said John. "You'll find the town very little changed. Mother will be so pleased."

Maria put out a nervous hand to steady herself against a lurch of the train.

"Oh—that *will* be nice," she murmured, and with a little bow passed on.

John looked after her with feelings in which dismay predominated.

**T**here seemed to be no reason for this dismay. In the safe seclusion of the smoker John convinced himself that there was no reason. He took his dismay out and laughed at it. He asked it questions. What possible difference could it make, he asked it, that Maria Makewith should come back to Springville? There was no answer. His dismay was not articulate.

With a feeling akin to excitement John dragged the child Maria's hair from its grave in his buried past and looked at it. It was just hair! He could see it plainly—light-colored, like tow; a great deal of it packed into a tight braid; no hint there of the golden glory it had since become. What had she done to it? How had she brought it to that perfection of rubbed gold? How had she learned to loop and drape those soft yet glittering coils? Whence had come—with an annoyed start he realized how absurdly he was allowing his thoughts to dwell upon a trifle.



For the few remaining hours of the journey he talked perseveringly to any fellow traveller who gave him the opportunity.

Mothers' eyes are proverbially keen, but mothers of one son are almost clairvoyant. Mrs. Hastings "sensed" at once that there was a change in Johnnie.

On the first Sunday night after his return he went to church. In Springville it was the proper thing for a young man of standing to do and the fact that Johnnie had done it so seldom had been a real humiliation to his mother. Yet, so strangely are we made, that this sudden change for the better was not hailed with the delight which it seemed to warrant. In fact, Mrs. Hastings was so startled that instead of employing tact and making no comment, the good lady had sharply demanded "Why?"

John had looked, most absurdly, as if he did not know why.

"I just thought maybe I'd go," he said. And as he said it he fidgeted.

It is to be feared that Mrs. Hastings got little good from the sermon that night. Her eyes, or rather, one quarter of the left corner of one eye, did not leave her Johnnie's face. For who could tell but that Johnnie's absence had made his heart grow fonder and that it might be Jessie after all!

Unfortunately, Jessie was not in church. She had a cold—the kind that makes the nose swell and the eyes water and which wisely seeks seclusion. And with Jessie absent, who else was there? Surely not the Osbourn girl who used lipstick? The Osbourn girl was there and her lips were red but Johnnie did not look at her. He seemed to stare straight at the pulpit and the only bit of femininity between him and the pulpit, of any age less than thirty-five, was Maria Makewith, who had come back to nurse her sick aunt. Mrs. Hastings did not waste time over Maria. The girl had a face like a frightened sheep and no style at all. Lovely hair—but what is hair? A mere appendage. Mrs. Hastings passed by Maria with nothing more than a mental note that she must ask her to tea. It was the duty owing to old friendship. She would invite her for some evening when Jessie was coming. It would make the inviting of Jessie less pointed.

Unaware of his mother's anxious scrutiny, John was enjoying the sermon. At least he was enjoying something and he thought it was the sermon. His restlessness had left him. He felt soothed and satisfied. He wondered why he had felt so oddly nervous at the thought of meeting Maria Makewith in the familiar environment of his home town. There she was,

sitting between him and the preacher, and it seemed altogether natural that she should be there. The hat she wore was turned up at the back and the line of the stiff blackness framed, without shading, the bright coil of hair beneath. The light from the chandelier in the middle of the church fell full upon the coil and upon the back of Maria's neck which was white and unfreckled, and from its whiteness springing strands arose like the rising of a shining fountain, lost immediately in the golden pool of the circled hair above. When Maria moved, lights in the pool danced and shimmered.

All that week he was cheerful and ordinary and upon the night of the tea he was almost too ordinary, even going to the extent of hoping that his mother wouldn't mind if work kept him a little late at the office. It didn't. Oddly enough, he was at home quite early and the little party began most promisingly. Mrs. Hastings saw with satisfaction that Maria, poor girl, provided just the proper foil for Jessie. She was so timid and yet so flustered while Jessie was gay and confident. Maria's long, plain face made Jessie's round, vivacious one more striking. Even Maria's hair, beautiful in itself, could lend no grace to the high and freckled forehead from which it had been severely dragged, while Jessie's hair, soft and dusky, completed her face as a frame completes a picture.

After tea Jessie had been persuaded to sing and John had turned the music. Then, when she had protested that she couldn't sing another note, John had asked Maria if she played and Maria, more flustered than ever, had admitted that she played "a little." It was, unfortunately, true. Mrs. Hastings, who had a taste for music, felt sorry for Maria, but she did not feel it necessary to ask her to play again. It was John who did that and the second playing was worse than the first. When it was over both Jessie and Mrs. Hastings concealed a gentle sigh—but John said surely Maria could give them one more? The two women exchanged an involuntary glance of pure wonder. They did not know that John had not listened to a note and that his whole intention was to prolong the curious pleasure he got from seeing the shaded light fall softly upon the gold which drooped above the piano keys.

**W**hen the third "piece" was finished, Jessie decided that it was time to go home. She hoped politely that John wouldn't feel it necessary to come home with them. It was full moonlight and they wouldn't mind at all, would they, Maria? Maria said they wouldn't. But John said nonsense, of course he would go. Only his mother noticed that the casual note was missing from his voice.

It was moonlight, as Jessie had said, and the air was soft. Maria lived quite at the other end of the town, so that, after leaving Jessie at her gate, the other two had still a ten minute walk before them. During the course of it, they spoke to each other just three times.

“It is so warm,” said John, “you don’t need a hat on a night like this.” And Maria meekly had taken off her hat.

“I don’t see why women wear hats,” said John, after they had walked a block or two.

“No,” said Mara, “unless it’s for freckles.” Perhaps she thought he might say that freckles did not matter. But he said nothing at all and they walked in silence to her gate.

“Don’t go in for a moment,” said John, adding in justification, “it’s too nice to go in.” They leaned against the gate posts and watched the moon. At least, Maria watched the moon. John’s glance was fixed upon a silver brightness very close to him.

“Good-night,” said Maria presently, in a faint voice and without the usual Springville handshake. “Good-night,” said John. He watched until the door had closed and then took the longest way home, his brain vexed with questions which it refused to answer. Mrs. Hastings was awake when he came in. “Is that you, Johnnie?” she called, as usual. “Seems to be,” he called back. “Tell you better in the morning.” And leaving her wondering why he wanted to make jokes at that time of night, he tumbled into bed and slept restlessly.

Maria did not try to sleep at all. Having made the invalid aunt comfortable, she sat at her window for a long time, very still, thinking of nothing. Then, abruptly, she arose and lit her lamp. Tilting back the shade and holding the light close to her face, she peered into the mirror, searching, appraising. The face which she saw there was tremulous, the small, blue eyes were alight, the wide mouth, sucked nervously in at the corners. In the hard light of the lamp there seemed no beauty anywhere. But her hair! Placing the lamp on the dresser, she began feverishly to tear out the confining pins. A soft, thick, gleaming coil escaped and slid heavily, silkily across her shoulder, veiling her thin arm. Another and still another—until she stood framed in a tapestry of woven gold. She felt its weight upon her hands, the scent of it brushed against her nostrils. She straightened. For an instant she was a woman strong with the strength of conscious power.

Her hair—it was beautiful! He loved her hair! She glowed with joy.

The next moment she had slipped to the floor, her plain face buried in her hands, fighting back the difficult sobs which choked her. With instinct, born of loving, she had guessed the truth. He loved—her hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

**T**he marriage of Maria Makewith and John Hastings was a great wonder in Springville. Nobody understood it—certainly not the mother of the groom. With Mrs. Adams, mother of Jessie, she talked it over endlessly.

“The first time I noticed *anything*,” she said distressfully, “was the night he first took Maria home. He was strange that night. And next day he was strange, and the night after he went out without telling me where he was going. And then I knew it was a girl. I was glad. I thought—well, *you* know what I thought! And all the time it was Maria—*Maria!* It’s like he’s been bewitched! Why,” bending close and lowering her tone, “I don’t believe he’s ever seen that girl the way she really looks. He doesn’t know she’s got freckles!”

“He will!” said Mrs. Adams, and there was a whole world of gratified resentment in the prophesy.

With Johnnie himself Mrs. Hastings had done her best. From the first horrified “It’s never Maria Makewith you’re thinking of!” she had not spared words of wisdom.

“It’s just a craziness, Johnnie dear,” she told him, half crying, “if you give yourself a chance it will pass off. Maria’s a nice girl, poor thing, but there’s nothing to her. A man’s got to have something when he marries. Something to keep tied to—beauty or cleverness or grace or even the opposite. But Maria hasn’t got anything—except a bit of nice hair.”

The occasion of the actual engagement had been a church picnic at which an accident had happened to Maria. She had wandered away into the woods above the river and John had, in his newborn restless way, wandered after her. He did not really try to catch her up. It was more satisfying to watch her flitting through the gold-green shadows. Then, a dog bursting viciously through the bushes had frightened her (Maria was easily frightened) and she had lost her head, running blindly without sense of direction until, just before John reached her, she had tripped and fallen where the wood bent in a sharp slope to the river. Down the steep bank Maria rolled, landing, torn and disheveled but quite intact, in a clump of bushes at its foot. Her hair had loosened, and when John picked her up the scent of it, warm, bewildering, like a live thing, stole to him—the urge of half-understood desire. Another man might have recognized and valued at

its true worth the force which shook him. But not John. He called it love and asked Maria to marry him.

Maria had burst into tears. The sudden blossoming of a hope too dear to admit had quite done for Maria. She sobbed, and John looking down from his greater height upon her crown of ruffled gold did not notice how unbecoming tears are to ladies with blue eyes and easily mottled skin.

“But—but, Johnnie, I’m so homely,” said poor Maria, striving to be honest against the press of her great longing. “Are you quite, quite sure?”

John was quite sure.

“Then I will,” said Maria. She lifted her tear-stained face to his with a bravery which he quite failed to recognize and her small, blue eyes for once seemed large, so great was the love within them.

**M**rs. Hastings bore up nobly at the wedding. She was a sensible woman and already she had begun to see possibilities in this girl whose homely face and awkward manner had seemed the outward expressions of an inward paucity. She was not so sure, now, that there was “nothing in” Maria. And even so, she was Johnnie’s choice and had to be put up with. The circle of Springville friends also, being in the main kindly folk, had determined to be pleased with Maria’s good fortune. The younger ones gave “showers” for her. The older women gave her advice. As for John, he went, as always, his own way, and if he saw a certain wonder in the eyes of the men who congratulated him, he put it aside just as he had put aside the unappeased questioning of his own mind.

The honeymoon was spent at Niagara Falls. For anyone living in Springville this was the proper proceeding and John had no energy to spare for doing the original. The night before the wedding he dreamed of the Falls as a woman with torrents of unbound hair, silver under the moon.

Their return, after the holiday of a week was accepted by Springville as the end of an astonishing episode. For Maria it was the entrance into her kingdom, but for John—well, for John it was neither a beginning nor an end, but a kind of muddled middle, from which no clear path led.

The infatuation which had held him had left him as suddenly as it had come. There had been no gradual weakening, no slow awakening. An inner urge had ceased to act and that was all. One morning, as they had sat in the hotel at breakfast, John had said suddenly, “You have very beautiful hair,

Maria.” It marked the end of his enslavement. The golden dream was a dream no longer.

Maria’s eyes had lifted themselves quickly, timidly to his face. “I am so glad you like it, Johnnie,” she said, “But—” She did not finish the sentence. Instinct stopped her. And her husband’s casual, “I wish you would call me John instead of Johnnie,” wiped the first flush of happiness out of her asking eyes.

It is a good thing that for most of us in a perplexing world there is always work. John went back to his with a return of vigor which his engagement had so strangely blighted. He stamped his questionings still more firmly down—let time answer them if he would. As for himself, he was married. The obvious thing was to get used to it as quickly as possible. Unfortunately Maria did not want to get used to it. She persisted in treating it as if it were a perpetual miracle. She would say “Just three weeks (or a month or two months) ago I was Maria Makewith.” Or “This time last year neither of us had even seen each other!”

“You forget the back yard,” said John dryly, upon one of these occasions.

“Oh—but that was not the same, was it?”

Wasn’t it? Somehow, as she spoke, John had an uneasy feeling—a feeling as if, after all, it were the same. As if some compelling will had said, “Take little Maria out and play with her,” and he did not want to play with girls.

Across the breakfast table Maria felt a twinge of a now familiar fear. Her hand went to her shining head.

“I think my hair gets heavier and heavier,” she said. “It took me half the morning to dry it yesterday—I can hardly find room for it on my head.”

“Why don’t you cut some of it out?” said John. He said it casually yet kindly. But for Maria it was like the first taste of ashes. She savored its bitterness during a pause which John did not even notice. Then: “I thought you liked my hair, John.” Her voice was flat.

“So I do—it’s wonderful. But if it’s a bother—” Then, seeing at last the stricken look upon her face, he blunderingly tried to make amends. “Of course it would be a frightful shame,” he added hastily. “No one in Springville has hair like you—so even if it is heavy you ought to be willing to carry it for the glory of your home town.”

She was so desperately frightened that she clung to his banter, smiled at it and told herself she was a silly thing.

Nevertheless she redoubled the secret rites, the delicate anointing, the brushing till her arms were tired. And when the baby came she, who had so loved babies, almost grudged its coming for the toll of gold which her indifferent health demanded. If the child had lived—but it did not live, and Maria struggled back to health more utterly dependent on her husband's love, more horribly frightened of losing it than before.

**W**ith health came a new torment—the torment of jealousy. There was no reason for this—but when does jealousy wait on reason? Jessie Adams, who had been away on a long visit, had returned to Springville. She had gone away a pretty girl, she returned a delightful woman. John was enthusiastic.

“Have you seen Jessie, Maria?” He did not attempt to conceal a certain boyish eagerness. “Do you know, I never realized that Jessie was such a looker. By jove, I feel as if I'd never properly seen her before. And style—whew!”

“New York styles seem extreme here,” said Maria primly.

John laughed.

“Extreme? Extremely fetching, you mean. Did you notice her hair?”

“Bobbed hair on a woman of twenty-two,” said Maria, “is not my idea of beauty.”

“Oh well—Jessie never had much hair to boast about—not quantities like yours of course. But I was thinking—why don't you loosen that middle part—in front, you know, and let it kind of fall across your forehead like they're doing now? You've got such heaps you don't need to draw it back so tightly, do you?” And before Maria, hurt to the heart, could answer, he was talking about Jessie again.

He thought about her, too, but in a curious way. It was as if his thought of her held a candle by whose light he examined himself.



*He looked up to find Maria's blue eyes fixed on him with a curiously speculative look. "I wonder why you didn't marry Jessie, John," she said.*

One night as he and Maria sat in their comfortable living room, she with her embroidery, he with his book, he had looked up to find her blue eyes fixed upon him with a curiously speculative look.

"I wonder why you didn't marry Jessie, John," she said. It was as if someone else were speaking. Someone detached and far off. And before he had time to consider he had answered in the same vein.

"It was odd, wasn't it?" And he went on speaking aloud some of the thoughts which he had been puzzling over.

"It was a kind of girl-blindness I think. If I could have seen Jessie then as I see her now I might have wanted to marry her and Frances Howard, too—she's a ripping girl, don't you think? And Emily Osbourn, too—if polygamy had been the fashion. Marriage seems to have wakened me up all around."

But Maria was nothing if not literal.

"I think Emily Osbourn is very loud," said she. "And she smokes cigarettes."

"She is that type, Maria. Why shouldn't she?"



“Did you marry me because you admired my type?” She asked it so naturally that John was lured on.

“Good gracious, no!” he said. “I wasn’t thinking about types then—er—that is, a man never thinks of the girl he marries as a type. She is unique. I don’t suppose nine out of ten men know just what it is that gets hold of them.”

Maria who had glowed at the beginning of this speech, shivered a little at the end.

“It isn’t always just prettiness that a man wants, is it, John?” she asked timidly.

“I don’t know what it is,” said John with the blindness of one discussing an abstract proposition, “but if I were going to name it, I would say it was romance.”

“Did you—” Maria began, but she saw that his mind was not upon the personal question, and anyway she was afraid to risk it, afraid of what the answer might be.

John did not answer the unfinished question. Maria had a way of beginning questions which she did not finish. He took it as a matter of course, as he took all of Maria’s “little ways.” For John was a good loser.

Never once had he admitted even to himself that the romance he had so hotly sought and blindly captured had faded into nothingness in his grasp. What he had chosen he had chosen. Never once did he shift the burden. Never in his inmost thought did he blame his wife for not being what truly she had never been. And this, as if in recompense, allowed him to see something of what she really was, to see and to value her gentleness, her crystal purity of mind and manner, her unlimited efficiency, the effortless ease with which his home was run, her timid dignity which asked no higher honor than to rule there as its mistress. He saw all this, but the one thing which he never saw was the one thing that mattered—the fire which lay beneath! He knew that Maria loved him—if he had thought of it at all he would have thought of it with humility and some wonder. But of the worship which lay behind the mild blue of Maria’s eyes and poured its hidden life into the warm sun of her gleaming hair he had no knowledge. The fire which had burned in him had died too soon—it had never glimpsed its answering flame.

With a certainty which was eminently sensible, though short-sighted, John considered he had done with glamor. He did not know that the call of that unknown thing which he had named Romance is never truly silenced.

Meanwhile who can tell what slow processes of adjustment and illumination were taking place below the level of his deliberately withdrawn consciousness. All that can be said is that so unaware was John of any process at all that he saw no significance in an episode which occurred shortly after this talk with Maria. Maria had been away for a visit. It was seldom that she visited, being prone to shyness away from home, but this visit had been arranged and furthered by Mrs. Hastings, who probably thought it would do Johnnie good to have a bit of freedom once in a while. John himself had been pleased with the idea. He was aware of a conscious-stricken feeling that Maria might not be having a very good time. But by the time she had been away two weeks he began to wonder how long wives really required for a holiday. A word of this attitude on his part would have been balm to the anxious heart of Maria but John would have thoroughly despised himself had he spoken it. No hint of his impatience must "spoil her visit." Instead he wrote formally that he was "getting along fine" and that she was to stay as long as she wanted to.

Maria, thus abjured, had naturally stayed much longer than she wanted to. But at last she was coming home. John looked around the living room uneasily before leaving for the station. It was a different looking room from the room Maria had left, for, with the best will in the world, John was not one of those men who can keep house. He had had the charwoman in, and he had had her word for it that everything was clean as a pin. But, quite apart from the cleanness of pins, the house was all wrong and John knew it. Nevertheless as he thought of Maria drawing momentarily nearer his dismay left him and he smiled. "By Gad, she'll *like* fixing it up!" thought John, and he set off for the station whistling.

**M**aria, according to instructions, would be in the chair car at the end of the train. She herself considered chair cars unduly extravagant but John knew that Mrs. Merivale and Mrs. Crompton Brown always "took a chair" and he felt that it was only proper that Mrs. Hastings should do the same. To-night the car was full. He glanced impatiently through the lighted windows trying to pick out Maria in the line of passengers who filled the aisle.

What was keeping Maria? He wished she wasn't always at the very end of everything. . . . and he couldn't see her in the car. . . . Perhaps she hadn't

come. . .? Mrs. Hartman (of the Hartman Mills) was getting out now, courteously assisted by a gentlemanly escort, name unknown. Paul Hartman never bothered to meet his wife. He knew that she was always sure of male protection.

“Empty little flirt!” thought John, tolerantly conscious of a satisfying glow as he contrasted his own lot with that of the absent Mr. Hartman . . . Well, Maria would probably be next . . . but she wasn’t, and the very last passengers were alighting. . . . she hadn’t come . . . well, why should she? He had told her to stay as long as she wanted to . . . and he was getting along fine . . .

“John!”

He turned with something suspiciously like a jump to find Maria timidly beside him. She was flurried, her blue eyes were very wide open and her hat was crooked. She did not look as if she had alighted from a parlor car. She read this instant accusation in his eyes.

“Oh, yes, I did get a chair, John,” she said, “but there was a woman with three children in another coach and she simply couldn’t manage *three*. I just went in and took the littlest one.”

“Oh, well,” said John. He didn’t approve, of course, but it was just one of Maria’s little ways and somehow Maria’s little ways appeared, like Maria, very welcome. He had considerable trouble in asserting his right to carry all the bags—Maria couldn’t get used to being waited on, and was quite tremulous with apology by the time they were settled in the car.

“You’re tired,” said John. “You should have stayed in the chair car with Mrs. Merivale and Mrs. Hartman.”

“Yes, John,” said Maria. She seemed to feel that she had really done something unpardonably self-indulgent in looking after the baby in the other coach. John would have liked to correct the impression but did not quite know how. Also he wanted to tell her how good it was to have her home but, unfortunately, what he really told her was that her hat was crooked.

Maria fumbled nervously with her hat, which amiably tipped to a corresponding angle on the opposite side.

“I don’t like to put more than one pin in it,” she said. “Pins are apt to break the hair.”

“I should think you could afford to break a bit,” said John. He had begun to think that Maria was unnecessarily careful about her hair. After all, hair

was—hair. And he was so jolly glad to have her home.

But Maria, who was not a mind reader, felt the faint flush upon her cheek grow fainter and by the time they had reached home it had faded quite away.

The beautiful autumn which saw Maria's return from her visit was the forerunner of a winter of dread in the town. Influenza, a poisoned legacy of some poor immigrants who had been detained in the place, broke out suddenly and with startling violence. Before its presence was realized it had taken its hold, and from a mere illness had become an epidemic. Public meetings were stopped, the schools closed and anyone willing and capable was requested to register at the town hall for nursing service.

John came home one noon with a worried face. "They're going down by the dozens over on the flats," he told Maria, "and not a trained nurse to be had. Mother and Jessie went down to the hall to give their names this morning—I thought they might have called for you."

"They did," said Maria, "but I couldn't go. I had been washing my hair and it was far too damp to risk going out. Besides, it's doubtful if so many will be needed. There is no sense in taking an unnecessary risk."

**H**ad John been observant he would have noticed the strain in Maria's voice and the unusual color in her cheek, but he was only puzzled.

"No—of course not," he agreed. But at the back of his mind he felt that there was something unnatural here. That Maria, whose *metier* was service, should hesitate to serve disjointed the probabilities.

"What's come over her?" he thought, and as usual, he attacked the point abruptly. "You're not afr—nervous are you, Maria?"

Truth-telling was in Maria's tradition. She reddened and paled and then, understanding the blank look on her husband's face, tradition went by the board.

"No, of course I'm not afraid," said Maria.

She tried to lie to herself, too, but it wasn't a success. The fear which had gripped her was all the more deadly because it was impossible to admit it. To be afraid for one's life—well, that might be cowardly but it was not bizarre. But to be afraid for one's hair!—Maria could hear the whole town laughing. Yet this, and this only, was the root of Maria's terror. To lose their hair had been the fate of many who had been stricken. Maria knew of cases

on every hand. The victims had not seemed to care—they had considered it a small price to pay for convalescence. They joked about it.

“If it doesn’t *stop* coming out,” said one, “I shall positively have to wear a transformation. My dear, I am actually getting *bald*.” Her listeners had laughed, all but Maria. She hated them for laughing. Hated them because, having so much, losing a little did not matter. With them hair was only hair.

“Of course,” another lady was saying, “if the fever is high, the only sensible thing is to cut the hair at once. Dr. Brown is doing that with all his patients—especially where the hair is heavy.”

Of all who knew her, Jessie Adams only had the flash of insight which summed up Maria.

“She isn’t afraid of dying,” said Jessie suddenly one day. “She is afraid of getting bald!” Nobody paid any attention to a statement so fantastic.

And then a few days afterwards both Jessie and her mother came down with the ’flu.

John told Maria of it at lunch.

“I thought there was something wrong this morning when I passed. The house looked so shut up, so I knocked and went in. They both had had the common sense not to try to get up. I sent Dr. Brown around to them at once and then went for mother, but mother is down on the flats with a woman and two babies. She couldn’t leave them. Mrs. Gregson can go to them in a day or two.” He paused, and as she made no answer: “I thought that perhaps in the meantime you could run over and do what is necessary.”

“I—I can’t!” said Maria.

Her face was very pale. Her mouth sucked in nervously at the corners.

“But”—began John. He looked into her eyes and found himself looking into a sea of terror. “No, I can see that you can’t,” he finished slowly.

He felt that he would never understand Maria.

He understood her even less when he came home at night and found that she had gone to the Adams house. But in a vague way he knew that she had fought with beasts at Ephesus. And he was obscurely glad of her victory.

Mrs. Adams and Jessie recovered rapidly. They had taken the disease lightly and Maria was an excellent nurse. By the end of the week she was able to return home. To John’s kindly but unobservant eye she looked quite fit, and the terrified look had gone out of her eyes.

“I must have imagined it,” said John to himself. And he proceeded to impart good news. Business was looking up. He had every hope of bagging a large contract if he could attend to it personally. It would mean, though, an absence from home—a week perhaps. Maria could close the house and go to his mother for a few days. It would be a nice rest.

But Maria did not want to close the house. She did not mind being alone.

“Burglars!” said John laughingly—Maria was known to be very timid of burglars.

But she shook her head.

“Have someone in to stay then.”

Maria thought she would not have anyone to stay.

“That’s what comes of being an old married woman,” said John cheerfully as he kissed her good-bye. “Next thing we know you’ll stop being afraid of a thunderstorm.”

“Perhaps,” said Maria smiling.

**W**hen he waved good-bye at the gate, she shut the house door quickly and slipped the bolt. She was shivering all over, but her immediate feeling was of intense relief. John was gone and he had noticed nothing. If he had noticed he would not have gone and if he had not gone he would have sent for Dr. Brown and if Dr. Brown had come—!

True, he had not cut off Jessie Adams’ hair, but that may have been because Jessie had so little or because Jessie’s ’flu had not been the bad kind. With the ’flu you never could tell—if she, Maria, were to take it, it might be very bad indeed. She could afford no risks. To her mind, hagridden by the one terror, Dr. Brown and a shorn head had become inseparable.

Since she had felt herself to be sickening, she had felt no other fear. Her attention was too firmly centered on the one thing which she so greatly dreaded. She possessed, suddenly, all the guile of a mother who schemes to protect a loved child from the spoiler. Very deliberately she made her plans, ending with a cheerful talk over the phone with John’s mother to whom she confided that she would be very busy during John’s absence—a surprise for John’s Christmas. No, thanks, she would not run over for supper, in fact, she did not intend going anywhere, until John came home. No, she would rather

not tell what the surprise was—until it was finished but it was going to keep her very busy for a time.

Maria hung up the receiver with a hand that shook, but she felt fairly safe. Mrs. Hastings was a busy woman and was likely to rest well content with the idea of Maria closely occupied with John's surprise. Mrs. Adams and Jessie were not yet well enough to go out, and there was no one else who would be likely to bother. Her next act was to take down her hair, brush it as well as she could with her shaking hands and braid it away in long smooth braids. If—if anything happened they would find it untangled, easy to comb and arrange. Her mind, morbid with brooding and already rocking with fever, could see that hair still bright in the darkness long after she who wore it had crumbled into nothingness. . .

Just what happened during the three days which Maria spent alone in her shut up house is likely to remain a mystery. Her memory was a confused nightmare of trying to keep coal upon the fire (so that neighbors might not wonder at a smokeless chimney), of not forgetting to drag in the milk, of trying to remember to do for herself as much as she could remember of the proper things to do. There was some medicine—but she never could be sure whether she had taken it or not. There was soup to warm, but she found it easy to persuade herself that only a very little soup was needed. On the second night she woke from a feverish doze with a fear that some time, without knowing it, she might call someone on the telephone—nor could she rest again until she had put this out of her power by cutting the connecting cord.

On the evening of the third day John came home. He had finished his business earlier than he had thought to. If he had not—but nothing would be as it is if it were otherwise.

**J**ohn had brought a present for Maria—something to celebrate the getting of his contract. For a long time he had hesitated what to choose, thinking at first of a tortoiseshell comb—Maria was dainty about combs. But when he had almost decided upon this a curious revulsion came.

“No—I'm hanged if I'm going to get anything more for that hair of hers,” he said half aloud, and marching into the store he had bought earrings instead. Earrings were “in” again and Maria had very pretty, delicate ears. The drops of the earrings were turquoise—Maria's eyes, though small, were very blue. In the train he thought considerably of Maria, remembering, as one might remember a dream, his first meeting with her when he had seen

nothing of her but her golden hair. “But there was a lot more to Maria than that,” he thought cheerfully.

He had not sent a telegram because Maria was not a wife who expected telegrams—or needed them. Maria would have no special preparations to make because she always had everything ready anyway. She would be a little gladder that he had come home earlier and her eyes would shine, that was all.

The house door, when he reached it, was locked. Maria was out then. He was conscious of disappointment—never mind, he would surprise her when she came home. But, though his latchkey turned easily, the door did not open. It was bolted. Bolts had been added to both front and back doors owing to Maria’s fear of burglars. She must have gone out by the back door. He would let himself in that way. But the back door was bolted too.

Then Maria was inside. She must be inside since the doors were secured from within. He knocked—and listened—and knocked again. There was no sound. Obscurely frightened, John left off knocking and attacked the coal cellar window. It did not take him long to break in, and running, he sprang up the stairs into the silent house. It was very cold. The fire was out—a tumbled coal-scuttle and scattered coals showed where someone had attempted to feed it and had failed. The telephone receiver lay upon the floor—its cut, green cord beside it.

A chill, deeper than the chill of the room, struck John as he looked about. And in the moment that he paused a high, childish voice, all on one note, came from the open door of the bedroom.

“No, no!” said the voice. “I won’t have it cut. No—oh, no, it’s not hair, you know, it’s more than hair! It’s everything—you mustn’t—please, please—” the voice ended in a sobbing wail.

With a bound John was inside the room. But the fever bright eyes did not know him, the burning hands beat him off.

“Don’t touch it—don’t touch it. It is all I have!” screamed the childish voice. “John won’t play with me—I tell you John won’t play with me if you take away my hair!”

“Maria!” called John softly.

But she only screamed that he should go away.



ater on when the doctor had been and gone and Mrs. Hastings was in conscience-stricken charge, John stole into the sick girl's room. The delirium had passed and Maria lay quietly, her difficult breathing the only sound.

"You mustn't disturb her, Johnnie," said Mrs. Hastings in a whisper. But the blue eyes had opened full on his and in them he read an unassuaged terror which brought a lump into his throat. But it was no time for explanations. His big hand fell lightly upon her braided hair.

"I won't let them touch it Maria," he said.

"Not—not even—?" It was the faintest whisper.

"No," said John. No evasion would help here. With a breath of relief he saw the fear die out of her eyes. But it took some of their life with it.

"Be careful, Johnnie—" warned Mrs. Hastings nervously, but he put her gently aside. He would take a chance.

"Maria," he said, in a clear voice. "Listen! They sha'n't touch your hair. I love it. But I love you more, Maria. It's you, Maria, not your hair—you—*you*."

Did it reach her? Did she understand? The eyelids were too heavy to raise. But surely that was the ghost of a smile.

"I want you Maria," said John, "—you—" He said it over and over. And then, "Maria, stay with me! Oh, Maria, stay and play!"

The sick woman's eyes opened. There was a surprise in them that caught his heart—surprise and a dawning joy.

He lifted her head, pillow, hair and all, into the curve of his arm, and lying there, Maria smiled and slept.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Gold Hair* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]