

The SCRUPLES of HAROLD

A Bashful Man's Wooing

BY

Alice and Claude Askew

Canadian Home Journal, April 1911

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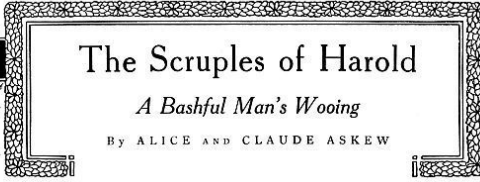
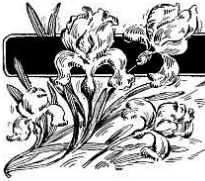
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The Scruples of Harold

A Bashful Man's Wooing

By ALICE AND CLAUDE ASKEW



I HAVE been maid to many ladies, I, Clementine Lafosse, but of all my mistresses none were so charming, so sympathetic as she whom I still serve, Madame—ah, but I will not give her present name yet, for that is part of my story. She was Mrs. Verrall when I entered her service—Maisie, as all her friends called her, and she had friends, parbleu! for to see her was to love her.

It was quite a little romance Madame Verrall's second marriage, and, ah, I love romance. I am not a Frenchwoman for nothing.

I do not think I need describe my mistress to you at length. It will be sufficient to say that she is petite and winsome and dark, that she flutters like a humming-bird, and that she has the merriest laugh that you can imagine.

Madame Maisie—she would not mind even if she knew I called her so—was always one of those to enjoy her life, to enjoy it to the full.

Mme. Verrall was always nice to me, even from the very first, and she soon saw that she could take me into her confidence, that I was not one of those who chatter about my mistress's affairs to the other servants. When I was dressing her hair for dinner she used to tell me all that she had been doing during the day, and, with her, it was not as I have had it with others—my Madame had no guilty secrets, nothing that she need want to hide from the world, and her intrigues and schemes—of which I will tell—were as innocent as herself.

But though she smiled and laughed and enjoyed her life, the world had not always been very kind to her—ah, mais non. When she was but a child of twelve her father had lost all his money and died soon after, of grief, poor man. Her mamma was a proud woman, for the family—the name was Leslie—was an old one, and Mrs. Leslie had been a society lady—grande dame—and so it was hard for her, very hard, to have to go away from London and live in a cottage in a sleepy little country village. There were sisters, too, and brothers, and life was difficult in those days when there were many mouths to be fed and little money to buy food with.

And so it was when she was barely eighteen that the squire of the great Manor House close by saw her and fell in love with her. Imagine it for yourselves. He was an old man of over sixty, and he wanted to marry with this spring-flower just bursting into blossom! Ah, but I call it wicked. But, voila! what would you have? Monsieur Verrall, he was so very rich, and poor Madame Leslie, she had such great need of money.

And so little Maisie, she was sacrificed, and I don't think she knew what it meant for her to be the wife of this old man. She was still so much a child

and she did not know love. She was a beautiful bride, they say, and there were many in the church who frowned when they saw her so young and fragrant and smiling, walking down the aisle upon the arm of that old man, whose shoulders were hunched together, and whose hands trembled as if he had the palsy.

He was good to his wife, this old man—I will say that for him—and good to all her family, too. Mme. Leslie, she was able to return to London and to the life that her heart craved for. Mms. Maisie's two sisters made their bow at Court only a little while after the young bride herself—they were handsome girls, too, and they soon made brilliant marriages to young men who loved them and whom they loved. It was all the doing of my young Madame, of course, but I don't think they remembered that.

It was the same thing with Mme. Leslie's two sons. They both obtained good positions, while, had it not been for their little sister, who had given herself in marriage to a man old enough to be her father, they might both of them to-day have been clerks in the City, working hard for a miserable weekly wage.

And now I must tell you something of this old Monsieur Verrall, who was Maisie's husband. He was a great connoisseur of art, and he had collected together at the Manor House a gallery of pictures that was worth thousands—nay, hundreds of thousands of pounds. I do not think I exaggerate. It was his hobby to invest his money in that way, and he was a very, very wealthy man. People came from great distances to see the pictures at Hingley Manor, and as Monsieur Verrall grew older and more feeble his passion for art seemed to increase, and he spent his money more and more lavishly.

Well, imagine it for yourselves, the old man ruined himself in this way—partly, at least, for there were certainly other causes that led to the loss of his large capital. Monsieur Verrall awoke one morning to the fact that he had but little left in all the world except his property of Hingley and his wonderful collection of pictures. It was necessary that these valuable works of art should go to the hammer.

Monsieur Verrall would not submit to the sale. His pictures were as dear to him as children. He broke his heart over them, and one morning he was found lying dead upon the floor of the gallery where his collection hung.

Mme. Maisie was a widow, and she cried for her old husband, who had been so good to her.

The picture gallery was left undisturbed that year, for Mme. Maisie could not reconcile it to her heart to hurt the memory of her dead husband. When all his affairs were cleared up there was enough for her to live upon comfortably, but of course all the world looked upon her as a rich young widow, a very rich young widow, for were not those pictures worth a big fortune? And they could be turned into money at any time. It was as good as having so much gold in the bank.



“Mme. Maisie travelled abroad.”

Well, Mme. Maisie travelled abroad for a few months, then she returned to England, taking Paris on the way, considerably, I venture to say, to the benefit of the milliners. She had reached the stage of grey and white frocks

by now, and the subdued colouring of her dove-like robes suited her. I think I said that she was dark, but I did not mention how clear and white was her skin, and her eyes, they were a regular golden brown. Ah, but she was a pretty woman, and when she engaged me—for it was then that I entered her service—I knew at once that I should be fond of her.

Well, I travelled with Madame to England, and it was not long, as I have said, before she took me fully into her confidence.

And now I must tell you how my mistress fell in love—ah, but it was delightful to hear her speak of it, for you must remember that she was still quite a girl and she had never yet known what real love is.

The man was poor, well-born, and, of course, good-looking. But then he had the misfortune to be proud and to object to marrying money.

And that was the trouble, you see, for of course Mme. Maisie was regarded everywhere as so rich a widow, and because of that this stupid Monsieur Harold Foster would not propose to her.

And he loved her all the while. Of that neither my mistress, nor I, nor anyone else, could have any doubt. He adored the very ground that Mme. Maisie trod, but that only made him more obstinate.

Monsieur Foster was a barrister by profession, and he was not doing badly at all. But still his income was a tiny one when compared with the thousands and thousands of pounds locked away in the Picture Gallery at Hingley Manor.

Moreover, the time had come when Mme. Maisie felt that the pictures must be sold and she must realise her fortune. Everyone told her so, and Mme. Leslie, her mamma, was more insistent than the rest. My mistress, now that she was independent, was inclined to be just a trifle extravagant, too. Who shall blame her, when she had London at her feet, and since she was so young and happy in her life?

Well, Mme. Maisie determined that she would have a big gathering at the Manor before the pictures were dispersed, and so a large house-party was invited. It was more or less a family party, for Mme. Leslie was to be there as well as my mistress's two married sisters and her brothers. Then, of course, there was Monsieur Harold Foster, who, since he had not ventured to propose in London, might perhaps pluck up his courage to do so in the country. So, at least, my little Madame hoped. And she confided her hopes to me.

“I’d give it all up for his sake,” she whispered, “I would, indeed, Clementine.”

It was a merry house-party at the Manor. The month was October, and there was shooting for the men, while the ladies would ride and drive about the country, and in the evenings some would play bridge, while the younger people would have childish games, so that the walls of the old house would echo with laughter such as had not been heard under that roof for years and years.

But Monsieur Harold would not come to the point, although I know—for Mme. Maisie told me so—that her favourite brother had done his best for her, and had even, half-jokingly and half in earnest, dared to speak upon the subject to his friend.

Monsieur Harold, it appeared, had told Madame’s brother to “shut up.” “You know perfectly well,” he said, “that I wouldn’t dream of asking a woman with all that money to marry me.”

“I should have imagined anybody would want to marry Maisie, even without the fortune of which you are so contemptuous, Harold,” George Leslie ventured to protest.

“Ah! without her fortune, yes.” Monsieur Harold’s voice softened wonderfully. “If she hadn’t a penny I’d ask her to marry me to-morrow; but, as it is, George, old man, we won’t discuss this again. My mind’s made up.”

“And so, I expect, is Maisie’s,” remarked the other dryly. For he knew what a determined little person his sister could be when she had set her mind upon anything.

But that was the position, and a whole fortnight passed without anything happening. Nor would that pig-headed Monsieur Harold budge an inch from the attitude he had taken up.

And of course Mme. Maisie had other admirers. That complicated the situation. There was one especially, a certain Monsieur Donaldson, who also was among the guests at the Manor. He had no prejudices against marrying a woman with a fortune, not he. On the contrary, I’m quite sure that it was the fortune which attracted him even more than the charms of Mme. Maisie herself. I did not like this Monsieur Donaldson.

I ventured to tell her once what I thought of this fine Monsieur Donaldson, but there—she would not listen to a word against him.

No, not even though I ventured to hint to her what I was quite sure of—that Monsieur Donaldson was a flirt. For, at the same time that he had his eyes upon my mistress, he was making himself agreeable to another young lady who was of the party, a tall, fair girl named Clara Brittain—her name was an appropriate one, for she was one of your true English type—ah, mais tout a fait. She played lawn-tennis and hockey and she was altogether the converse of my mistress.

“I’m going to have one more try, Clementine,” said my Madame to me one evening, as she sat before her dressing-table, while I was busy with her hair. “I am going to give Mr. Harold just a last chance. If he doesn’t avail himself of it, well, I’m afraid there’s nothing more to be done.”

Confident, I’m sure, of her own power. “I’m going to frighten him into an avowal,” she continued. “Mr. Harold is going to save my life.”

I raised my hands with a little scream of terror. “Madame would risk her life?”

“I’m not sure about its going quite as far as that, Clementine,” she responded; “as long as he thinks he has saved my life it will be quite enough. I’m going to take him out for a drive in my new motor to-morrow—just he and I—and we shall see if I can’t manage to run the car into a bank or get into some sort of difficulty that will look far worse than it really is. And then if I faint just exactly at the right moment, when there’s nobody else to look after me but just he—well, I really think that Master Harold may find himself compelled to speak.”

But, alas! my lady’s little plan, so fly mistress—the little plan was never destined to be carried out at all, for as it happened, Mme. Maisie’s life was to be really and seriously threatened, and that within but a few hours of the time when she had spoken so jestingly.

I will tell you how it happened. Hingley Manor caught fire that night. It was after we had all gone to bed, and the outbreak was not discovered until it had got firm hold of the old house.

Mme. Maisie had already succeeded in making her escape. I found her upon the lawn, pale, but trying to make the best of things, and wrapped up in a dream of a tea-gown into which she had managed to slip. I remember thinking even then how perfectly sweet she looked.

A little later, when I returned to the spot where I had left my mistress, I found that she was not there. I don’t know why I should suddenly have been

frightened, but I was—oh, horrible frightened—and I had an intuition that she was in danger.

Of course, Madame may have been in a hundred and one other places, but I felt—I knew—that she had gone back to the house, which was now little more than a furnace. I had no doubt of it whatever, when Mademoiselle Brittain came up to me and asked anxiously if I had seen Mme. Verrall.

“She was running about not five minutes ago,” Mlle. Brittain said, “asking everyone if they had seen her little dog Chloe. But no one had.”

A shudder ran through me right from head to foot. Chloe was my mistress’s pet Spitz, and she adored the little animal. Chloe must have been left behind in the burning house. Mme. Maisie had gone to find Chloe.

And it was at that moment that a window was flung open somewhere upon the first floor at the far end of the building, and I saw my mistress’s face and that she had the little dog clasped in her arms. And it was then that somebody rushed past me—a man—though, at the moment, I could not recognize his face, and while we all stood there helplessly he got a ladder up against the side of the house—in spite of the flames and the smoke—and he was soon climbing up it to the window at which my mistress stood.

And it was not till a minute or two after my mistress and her rescuer had reached the ground, and that Mme. Maisie had been given into the charge of her friends, that I realized—ah, mon Dieu, can you imagine my feelings? For the man who had mounted the ladder turned towards me, and for the first time I saw his face.

It was not Monsieur Harold at all—it was Monsieur Donaldson!

For now, I said to myself, the matter can be no longer in doubt. It will be Monsieur Donaldson who will claim my mistress’s hand, and it is well, for he is a brave man and deserves his good fortune. Not that Monsieur Harold would have been less brave had fortune brought him to the spot. Of that, *ma foi*, I am quite certain, for, as it was, poor fellow, he risked his life again and again in his efforts to save the horses.

My mistress, too, as you may guess, she had to keep her bed, and of course I tended her—ah, but it was an anxious time! We had been taken in at the house of a neighbour, and, of course, the rest of the house-party had dispersed to their own homes—all except Monsieur Harold and Monsieur Donaldson, who had found accommodation at the village inn.

It was two or three days later that Monsieur Donaldson himself called to see my mistress, and I—as I conducted him to the little boudoir which had

been given over to her use, and where she spent the day lying upon a couch—cheeks—I said to myself that now the time had come, and that Monsieur Donaldson would leave the house that afternoon an engaged man. For I knew she would accept him—there was so much gratitude in her heart.

It was about an hour later that she called me to her, and she was smiling, smiling happily. Monsieur Donaldson was there, too.

“Clementine,” she said, and there was that sparkle in her eyes which had been absent from them for so many days. “You may congratulate Mr. Donaldson.”

I was about to murmur a few words when my mistress interrupted me.

“Mr. Donaldson is engaged to be married to Miss Brittain,” she said. “He has come to tell me so. He got engaged to her upon the very day that the fire broke out at the Manor.”

And would you believe it? Monsieur Harold called that same afternoon, after the other had taken his departure, and he, too, remained a long while with my mistress.

I waited impatiently until Mme. Maisie called me to her, and then my heart fell, for she was weeping, and it was a few minutes before I understood that her tears were tears of joy.

For at last—at last, everything had been settled, and Monsieur had declared his love and been accepted. But—would you believe it?—he was pig-headed to the end, and he would not have proposed to my mistress at all—or, at least so he declared—had he not learnt from her own lips that she was no longer the wealthy widow that all the world had taken her for.

I have only to add that I am still with Mme. Maisie. She is Mme. Foster now, and she lives with her husband in London, and they are really very well off indeed.

For, as it turned out, the pictures were not quite all destroyed. Several—and those the most valuable, although damaged somewhat—were saved, and they realized a large sum of money when they eventually came to the hammer.

And sometimes I wonder if my mistress knew the day that Monsieur Foster proposed to her that those pictures might be saved, or whether, indeed, she believed that they were all utterly destroyed, as she had maintained.

I cannot say; Mme. Maisie alone knows.



THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

The word "Confident" has been added to the text by the transcriber for continuity as there appears to be a line missing in the original text.

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[The end of *The Scruples of Harold* by Alice and Claude Askew]