Lagging Feet

Beatrice Redpath

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Lagging Feet

By BEATRICE REDPATH

Illustrations by Cyril Brady

They were commencing to speak a different language. It gave her a baffled, lost feeling; with him it resulted in a constant prick of irritation.

Linda placed the blame for it upon their having come to Lancaster. She wished with all her heart that Keith had never given up his law practice in Middleburg to come to the larger place.

"I hate Lancaster," she would cry bitterly, mournfully, "oh, how I hate it."

And she would repeat this sentence until Keith showed that he found the endless repetition unbearable.

"I don't see why you hate it. We're better off than we were in Middleburg; the schools are better; we've a nicer house and you don't have to do your own work."

"I didn't mind doing my own work," and she fixed her eyes upon him with dark reproach. "I'd a great deal rather. And the children are getting spoiled. They hear things at school which make them critical. Laura asked me to-day why we didn't have dinner at night like the Fultons instead of in the middle of the day."

"Well, why don't we?"

"I hate Lancaster," she cried, "oh, I hate it," she repeated with mournful insistence which stirred in Keith a suppressed anger.

"Why don't you get to know some of the women here? You've met them and they'd tried to be friendly. The children have made friends but you won't have anything to do with anyone in Lancaster. You had plenty of friends in Middleburg. Why can't you make friends here?"

"I don't like them," she said, her tone implying she had made up her mind conclusively upon that point, but to Keith it only suggested obstinacy; a blind determination to make her life as intolerable as possible.

"Why, don't you like them?"

"I can't get on with them."

"That's because you don't try. You expect them to talk of what interests you—do you ever make the least attempt to talk of what interests them?"

It was an unfair question, for Keith knew Linda could not talk upon subjects which would interest these women any more than he could plunge into various conversations he had heard since he had come to Lancaster, but to which he listened with an attentive ear. Later he usually made a point of finding out all he could about the subject under discussion. Surely Linda could make a similar attempt.

"Oh, why don't you leave me alone?" she cried in shrill protests, "can't you see I want to be left alone?"

"All right," Keith replied, compressing his lips as though he would never open the subject again, but Linda knew that the track was worn too smooth for them to escape from slipping into it again, the next time they spoke to one another. Or it might start up from a different angle. Keith was so filled with enthusiasms that it was impossible for him to keep the lid fastened down upon them; impossible not to talk while new ideas, new opinions, new thoughts were crowding his mind. The men with whom he was daily thrown in contact in Lancaster were men whose minds were mentally alert and the tentacles of his own brain, like those of a plant, were reaching out towards the sunlight and air. Back in Middleburg it was as though his brain had been buried in a cool dark cellar, pleasant enough, but with none of the thrill of the opening up of new vistas which now every day he was experiencing. He had tried to explain this to Linda, but she would only look at him with uncomprehending eyes. She did not want to understand. She was annoyed with Keith, annoyed with the children, whom she thought would naturally have sided with her. She reproached them constantly for their attitude.

"You'd think you'd miss your friends back in Middleburg?"

"Why, we do, of course," Laura replied, looking anxiously at Linda, "but I like the girls here too. And we're learning French and perhaps we're going to take up Spanish next term. What do you think of that?"



"I don't believe you're learning half as much as you did in Middleburg. And I don't think the girls are as nice either."

"Pure rubbish," Linda replied crossly. "I don't believe you're learning half as much as you did in Middleburg. And I don't think the girls are as nice either. That little Fulton girl reading French—and I'm sure she couldn't make a cake. What sort of a bringing up is that?"

Laura had not answered this question and Linda felt it was because her answer would not have coincided with Linda's opinion. They were all opposed to her in her hatred of Lancaster. And it made her feel she did not belong to them any more; she had shrunk in importance; her opinions no longer had the same authority. It was not that they left her out of their conversations; they were forever inviting her to listen; forcing their thoughts upon her.

"You see," Keith started in to say one evening while Linda sat sewing, "I knew when we took the case it would mean we must use a certain amount of finesse. Of course we were making a gesture——"

She looked blankly at him. "I don't know what you're saying." Her tone was antagonistic for she resented that he should use words that were new to her. It brought him to a full stop in his recital. Patiently he had tried to explain, "I mean dear that it would require a certain amount of contrivance ——"

What was the use of listening to what she could not understand.

"I gave Ellen notice to-day. She wastes food and she never dusts properly. When I spoke to her she said——"

Keith sighed. She could not miss that sigh and her eyes hardened. She went on with an inflexible determination to finish what she had been saying, "Ellen said she didn't like a mistress who was forever after her. It's easy to see she doesn't. I made up my mind to send her away. I could manage better myself. I'd get through the dusting and sweeping in half the time she takes."

"But that's not the point, is it?" Keith protested, "and besides I don't want you doing the work when I can afford to pay to have it done. I should think you'd had enough of it." He paused, then added, "Why don't you make a friend of Mrs. Fulton? I met her to-day and she asked me if I thought you'd like to go with her to the Woman's Art Club?"

Linda's face assumed an expression of faint contempt. "She's the silliest woman I ever met. She hasn't any more sense than a child of six. She's forever laughing when there isn't a thing to laugh at. And the way she brings up that child. Reading French——" she looked at him fixedly, "I suppose you'd like me to be like her?"

"I don't want you to be like anyone except yourself," he said slowly, "but I wish you'd make friends with women like Mrs. Fulton. She could help you a lot."

"Help me," she scoffed, "why, she told me herself she had never cooked a chicken. She doesn't even put up her own jam. She buys it. How could *she* help *me*?"

"She may know other things as important as jam."

"What?" she flung at him, "tell me what?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure," and his tone denoted weariness with the conversation. "I don't know what her interests are. But I'm sure she has them. I know I like to talk to her——"

"Men admire blondes," threw back Linda, knowing she had seen this somewhere lately, "and I suppose you know she uses rouge. You didn't suppose that was her own colour? And I wouldn't be surprised if she touched, up her hair either. That pale gold colour doesn't look natural to me."

"What does it matter if she does? It's her affair."

"Well, I don't think much of a woman who rouges and smokes and dyes her hair. If you want me to be a friend of a woman of that sort, it shows—it shows——"

"Shows what?" Keith's tone was steely. She saw she was infuriating him and angry tears rushed to her eyes. She blinked them back and as she looked at Keith it seemed to her he was an absolute stranger.

A picture flashed before her of a Saturday afternoon in Middleburg with Keith in his shirt sleeves cutting the grass on the front lawn while she cleaned the windows of the new sun room. She almost seemed to hear the echo of their voices. "Look Keith, look. Did you ever see windows as bright as these?" And his cheerful reply. "You're a fine little window cleaner. I'd give you the prize for having the brightest windows in all Middleburg." And again tears welled to her eyes and threatened to slip down her cheeks. She bent over her sewing so Keith would not notice. "Oh, I hate Lancaster," she murmured.

Keith turned sharply towards the door. "Haven't you anything else to say but that? I'm sick of hearing it."

"And I'm sick of Lancaster," she tossed after him with a flare of defiance.

She heard the door slam and then other pictures rose before her. The day Keith had got the news he was to be the lawyer sent to appear in an important case in Lancaster. She saw herself running excitedly about their little house, even more excited than he had been, packing his clothes, making preparations for this great event in their lives.

There had been the day he had received the offer from the best known firm in Lancaster to come in with them as junior partner at a salary which

had appeared to them dazzling. She had been the one wild with enthusiasm. She had had no regret at that moment about leaving Middleburg; if there had been regrets it had been on the part of Keith and the children. He had entertained doubts whether he would be able to cope with the work; whether he were sufficiently advanced to take such a position in a city like Lancaster. He had had doubts whether he would be able to get on with the men he would meet.

"They'll think me nothing but a 'hick'," he had said boyishly, with a humble look in his blue eyes, "I'll feel like a fool."

"You're every bit as good as they are."

"Maybe I am," he had laughed, "maybe my morals are as good. But I haven't had their opportunities. I've lived in a place like Middleburg all my life. If you talked to a man like Harold Fulton you'd know what I mean."

"I didn't think much of the man you pointed out to me as being Harold Fulton," Linda had replied disparagingly, "you're ever so much better looking and your clothes are every bit as good. His suit looked as though he had slept in it."

"It's nothing to do with his suit," Keith had answered, "if you'd talked to him you'd understand. He's in touch with things—always has been. His background's different——"

That had only served to irritate Linda. She had pointed out to him that she thought a good deal more of herself than the woman whom Keith had told her was Mrs. Fulton. It was plain to anyone that her dress was old fashioned. Keith had only looked at her with the look she had noticed frequently these days and told her it had nothing whatever to do with looks or what a person wore.

"I'm going to try and make myself the kind of man Harold Fulton is," he had said. "Now, when I'm with him, I feel as clumsy and as awkward as a school boy. But I'll learn—some of the things I need to know."

And that had been Keith's persistent attitude since he had come to Lancaster. He had been like a child, open to every new impression. He had come to tell her of these impressions and she had listened and grown more and more antagonistic and resentful because these people made him feel that way. She thought him strangely lacking in pride to confess it. She would have died rather than make such an admission.

She felt she had nothing to learn from them; instead she told herself she was immeasurably superior to a woman who frankly and even laughingly

confessed to being a wretched housekeeper; a woman who rouged her checks and smoked. Keith was carried away, by a superficial glamour and he was leading the children on to feel the same. It angered her; it maddened her; and yet she was helpless against it. Her only retort to it all was the old cry, "I hate Lancaster. Oh, how I hate Lancaster."

Keith insisted they must accept an invitation to dinner from the Fulton's. Linda accepted unwillingly, refusing to wear the new evening frock Keith had persuaded her to buy. "It's only ourselves. You're getting such extravagant notions," she insisted, "That evening dress has got to be my best."

"Do as you like then," Keith replied, "I know I'm going to dress. You'll feel queer if you don't."

"Then I'll feel queer," Linda said defiantly. "As though I don't know the right thing to do."

She wore a cornflower blue taffeta with a round neck edged with blue beads, and standing before the mirror in her room she told herself she was dressed as anyone in Middleburg would consider suitable for this occasion.

Somehow it did not appear as suitably in the Fulton's candle-lit dining room with Elizabeth Fulton wearing a black tulle evening frock. Linda regarded her critically, refusing to admire; even condemning the long string of pearls and the gilt buckles on her slippers which flashed when she moved.

She was as critical about the table; it seemed to her bare and ugly. No centre piece; no flowers; only six tall unshaded candles. The house seemed to her almost empty of furniture, and the dinner caused a smile that was almost contemptuous. The soup she was sure was canned. Filets with mushrooms accompanied by green peas and plain mashed potatoes struck her as inadequate. The salad was simple while the dessert was one she frequently made for the children but which anyone in Middleburg would have been ashamed to offer to guests. She thought of the elaborate high teas served in Middleburg, the table loaded with home made delicacies, and wondered what her Middleburg friends would think of this very meagre repast. But to her surprise Elizabeth Fulton made no apology for the shortage of supplies.

The conversation eluded Linda. She could not follow it. As soon as she caught up with what they were saying, they had leapt forward to something else. Keith, she saw was enjoying himself. He would, she thought bitterly,

and wondered if he were admiring Mrs. Fulton's ridiculous black tulle frock. The idea that he might be admiring anything roused her to fury.

"I heard Nesbitt speak the other night," Harold Fulton said to Keith. "He gave a fine address. I think he's the right man in the right place."

Linda felt it time to make some remark to show them she was not a dummy, "Who is Nesbitt?" she inquired, "I don't think I've ever heard of him before."

She saw the colour rush into Keith's face and knew she had made some mistake. Hot and angry with them all she tried to laugh, but it sounded forced even to herself.

"I'm sure you don't have time to read the papers very much," Elizabeth Fulton said in a friendly way, "with two children and a new house to look after. I know I find it hard enough to get time myself and I've only one child and haven't moved to a new place. These husbands of ours," and she smiled, "are so critical. They forget they're hearing what's going on every day while we don't hear much shut up in our houses ordering meals and looking after things."

But Linda felt Mrs. Fulton was only making matters worse. She would have liked to say that she guessed she knew as much what was going on as Keith knew, but she restrained herself and sat with a forced smile, listening, and not venturing again to break into the conversation. She seethed with resentment because everything was different from what she had known.

On the way home she expressed to Keith her contempt of everything. The house, she told him, was hideous, the dinner worse. Mrs. Fulton was ridiculous in her black tulle with that string of pearls which must have been imitation. She hoped she would never come to wearing imitation jewelry. She got a certain satisfaction in decrying everything. It seemed to ease the bitterness seething in her. But she wanted Keith to agree with her. She wanted to hear him say that the blue taffeta she was wearing was far prettier and more suitable than black tulle with a string of imitation pearls. But all Keith said was, "It all seemed all right to me. But perhaps I don't know much about that sort of thing."

She looked out of the window of the speeding taxi and it was as though a deep river were widening between them.

Keith declared it was necessary to invite the Fulton's back although Linda did not see the necessity. She protested that they wouldn't want to come. "They think too much of themselves," she added with a sneer.

"They've never given you any reason for saying that," Keith said, "and I'd like to ask them. They don't have to come."

Since he insisted she announced with the defiance that was growing habitual with her that if they came it would be to a meal to which she was accustomed. The children would be at the table and there would be no candles or that sort of nonsense. But she could promise him there would be plenty to eat.

Keith protested that the children might have their meal earlier, but this only roused Linda to a greater obstinacy. If the children couldn't come to the table she wouldn't have the Fultons. Keith looked at her thoughtfully.

"Why must you be so defiant about everything?" he said wearily. "It takes all the pleasure out of things."

"I'm the same as I was in Middleburg," she said stubbornly. "It's you who've changed. You and the children. You seem to be ashamed of me, all the time."

"You know that's absurd, Linda," Keith said, his eyes full of trouble. "We like it here and we want you to like it. But you're so determined to hate everything because it isn't Middleburg. You won't let yourself like anything."

She wouldn't tell him it was because she knew she would never fit in. He was clever and the children took after him; she had only her pride. And that pride seemed to twist and turn her in every direction until she didn't know what to do or think. She would not ape ways that were not hers; she would not even attempt to alter herself for she felt she would fail. She would make herself ridiculous. And her pride bolstered up her defiance.

With a fury of energy she threw herself into preparations for a meal which would make Mrs. Fulton ashamed of her meagre repast. For two days she was cooking and baking as though she were preparing to feed an army. She boiled an enormous ham in cider after a cherished recipe of Middleburg housewives, decorating it with walnuts and cloves and baking it until it glistened like polished wood. She made pies and whipped quarts of cream; chopped ginger and preserved fruits for the making of an elaborate dessert. Her cakes bulged with creamy fillings and were works of art.

When the table was laid with her best satin damask cloth, a vase of flowers placed on a centre piece of her own handiwork, she regarded it with complete satisfaction. There were plates of hot biscuits each covered with a folded napkin; dishes of coloured jellies; saucers of pickled peaches and

pears; fancy bonbonieres holding home made sweets. Light poured down from a centre lamp with a dazzling radiance. Here was a meal, she thought with satisfaction, any housewife in Middleburg would be proud to serve.

But somehow that pride evaporated as they sat down at the table. The children were obviously on their best behavior. Elizabeth Fulton was wearing an evening dress of some dull blue material with silver tassels finishing the heavy silk cord around her waist. Harold Fulton was wearing evening clothes. It was inappropriate and she felt Mrs. Fulton must be blaming her for not explaining that what they had been invited to was to partake of high tea with the children.

Linda was the only one to appear embarrassed. Elizabeth Fulton appeared not to notice that there was anything at all incongruous. She had taken hold of the conversation, much as though she were the hostess, Linda thought angrily, and was as usual carrying it beyond Linda's scope.

But not apparently beyond the scope of the children or of Keith. She listened to Laura responding to Mrs. Fulton's remarks about a play which the child had seen at a matinee performance, and felt more than ever out of things. Harold Fulton, after several attempts to open a conversation with her, had turned to Bob, and the boy's face was alight with interest and pleasure. Linda could not hear what they were talking about and felt she didn't want to hear. It struck her as absurd that the children should be taking such a leading part in the conversation and wished she had not insisted they should come to the table. She sat watching Keith carving the ham and giving him directions; helping the salad; passing the plates of hot biscuits; whispering orders to Ellen and it struck her suddenly that she and Ellen were taking much the same part in the evening's entertainment.

In Middleburg the conversation would have been entirely different.

"I declare, what a splendid ham. How long do you boil your hams, Mrs. Osborne?"

"How do you make your jellies keep their colour?"

"I'm going to ask you for a recipe for that cake."

That was how the conversation in Middleburg would have started, a gentle flow of flattery following the tasting of each dish. But no one mentioned the flavor of the ham; no one remarked that the biscuits were light as feathers; that the salad was an achievement. Linda felt cheated and disappointed and even more at a loss than she had been at the Fulton's. It was the children, she reasoned, who were shoving her aside; they and Keith

were doing all the duties that should have been hers. Keith had been right; the children should not have been at the table.

And it was the same when they had left the dining room and now Linda felt she could not stand it any longer. She was nothing but an onlooker. "Laura, it's time you and Bob were doing your lessons."

"Oh, please, Mummie," Laura cried, and then blushed and got up to go, giving Mrs. Fulton a quick shy glance.

"You must come and have tea with Dora very soon dear and then we can talk some more," said Mrs. Fulton kindly.

Linda felt herself stiffening visibly. She hated to see Laura's face light up at this invitation. "Laura is too busy with her studies to go out much," she said coldly as the children left the room.

"What an intelligent child she is. And so simple and childish. You must be very proud of her. What does she intend to do when she grows up?" went on Mrs. Fulton ignoring the stiffness in Linda's voice and manner.

"She won't do anything. She won't have to," Linda replied and felt an added flow of resentment at the question. She wondered if Mrs. Fulton thought they were as poor as that. "Her father, I hope, will be able to support her until she marries. I don't expect her to have to earn her living."

A faint smile appeared on Elizabeth Fulton's face but it was quickly banished. "Of course. But these days girls all seem to want to take up something or other. My Dora is going to take a course in journalism. Laura seemed so interested in acting I wondered if she thought of going on the stage."

Linda flushed furiously. She hoped Mrs. Fulton was not going to put such ideas into Laura's head. It was what she might have expected from a woman of that sort.

"I'd rather see her dead than on the stage. I hope that no daughter of mine——"

Elizabeth Fulton caught her husband's eye and Linda was conscious of the faintest, barely perceptible look that passed between them. It made her grow hot. Her resentment flared in a gust of passion. Surely even Keith would see that these people were not their kind.

"Don't be silly," she heard Keith saying good naturedly, "there's nothing wrong with the stage. If Laura could be a good actress I wouldn't have anything to say against it. I'd be proud of her. I think it would be splendid."

Tears misted Linda's eyes. She felt miserable and solitary. Keith always seemed to take sides against her. She sat silent, paying no attention to what anyone was saying, hating the whole evening; hating her sitting room that somehow seemed overcrowded with furniture; hating the meal she had prepared with so much labour; hating Keith, so good looking in his evening clothes; hating the Fultons; hating the children even; hating herself.

She turned from the front door as it closed behind her guests with a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness that's over. What an evening!"

"What was the matter?" asked Keith in surprise, "I enjoyed it immensely. After all you were right to have the children down. I was proud of them both."

She had been going to add that it was dreadful having the children at the table, but this checked her.

"Fulton said he was much impressed with Bob. He said the boy had such a clear mind and went straight to the point. And Laura was splendid, wasn't she?"

Not a word to say he was proud of her; not a word of praise for all the cooking she had done. He was proud of the children; glad to show them off; but he was not proud of her. And he did not seem aware he had left her out of his words of praise.

She turned without a word and went slowly up the stairs to the top floor, rustling in her blue taffeta. She could hear the children talking. Laura was still dressed, sitting on the end of her bed, her long slender legs tucked underneath her, cheeks bright with excitement. As Linda appeared in the doorway she cried gaily.

"Oh, wasn't it lovely? And isn't Mrs. Fulton beautiful? Did you ever see anyone like her? So interesting. I adored her. Didn't you, Mummie?"

Linda felt as though she would suffocate with the dark jealously rising in her. Wasn't it enough to have to listen to Keith? Her mouth tightened. "You'd better go to bed, hadn't you dear?" and she crossed the room to straighten a muslin curtain so that Laura's sharp eyes would not read what was in her face. "You won't be able to wake up in the morning in time for school."

"We were so excited, Mummie. At least I was, I couldn't go to bed. Do you really think she'll ask me to tea? Do you think she will soon? Wasn't that the loveliest dress she was wearing? Oh, isn't it exciting living in a place like Lancaster where there are people like Mrs. Fulton?"

"You're too excited," Linda said, trying to smother that dark jealousy. "It was too late for you to be up. Now go to bed as fast as you can—both of you."

"Say Mums, she's a peach," Bob said ruffling his hair above sleepy blue eyes, "and Mr. Fulton. I don't wonder Dad thinks no end of him. I do too."

"Go to bed," Linda repeated, "go to bed, both of you."

And after that evening Linda felt more than ever outside of Keith's life and the children's. They chattered and talked to her the same as ever, and she wondered at it sometimes, for she felt herself such a stranger amongst them. The atmosphere of the house depressed her; she wanted to be out all the time; anything to get away. She took no more interest in the cooking; she allowed the servants to do as they pleased. The house ran itself and this incensed her to further bitterness, for it seemed to run as smoothly if not more so than it had done before when she had spent all her time upon it. The servants were more willing and the meals better cooked than when she had spent hours overseeing the cooking of them.

For distraction and for something with which to employ her time she turned to the Movies. She would start out every day immediately after lunch and in the evenings she often started out again by herself if Keith were too tired to accompany her.

And day by day she followed through the usual intrigues of the screen. The erring wife; the unfaithful husband; the innocent dupe. She watched with unabating interest while they went through their parts. And she named people she knew; saw them in the roles she watched being played.

The tall blonde woman with the snake-like ways was, of course Mrs. Fulton. Some of these days Harold Fulton would discover that his beautiful blonde wife was not all he thought her. She found the counterpart of Keith on the screen; the husband, so simple and boyish he could not see he was being led away from his faithful wife. She saw Harold Fulton as the poor innocent dupe; saw herself as the wife always misunderstood, who slaved thanklessly for her husband and children, never appreciated. And then by some ingenious twist of fate her true value was adequately recognized by all.

Her whole point of view, which in Middleburg had been that most married people are fairly happy together, altered. Now she imagined every marriage was on the point of dissolution; every married couple involved in intrigue. Divorce was forever imminent. You never knew when some dark circumstance would alter your entire existence.

She met Elizabeth Fulton one afternoon when she was returning from the pictures and was passing on with a stilted bow when Mrs. Fulton stopped and held out her hand with a pretty friendly gesture.

"I haven't seen you for an age. I was thinking of you only the other day. When will you bring that clever little daughter of yours to tea. What about Wednesday?"

Before Linda's eyes flashed a picture of herself and Laura having tea with Mrs. Fulton; Laura would quite obviously be the one who would be led on to talk while she sat unresponsive in the background.

"I'm afraid I have an engagement for Wednesday," she said quickly, "but Laura I am sure would love to go."

She did not want Laura to go but she could scarcely deny the child the treat. Keith would see no reason for it and Laura would never forgive her were she to hear about it. She would have to let Laura go.

Mrs. Fulton regretted the previous engagement politely enough, yet it was obvious from her not suggesting another day that she had seen through the excuse. Mrs. Fulton did not press her to come, therefore it was really Laura who was wanted.

As Linda walked on she felt glad that she had shown Mrs. Fulton that she did not want to be friends; that any friendship between the two families was only of Keith's fostering. And yet the canker of jealousy stirred—she did not know of whom, whether it was of Laura or Mrs. Fulton or Keith. She only knew that it was consequent on their coming to Lancaster. Clenching her hands together she gave vent to her old cry: "Oh, I hate Lancaster—oh, how I hate it."

Laura became a frequent visitor at the Fulton's. She was forever being asked to tea with Dora; coming home bubbling over with excitement; telling what Mrs. Fulton had worn; what she had said; her opinions; her point of view. It was intolerable to Linda.

"Oh for goodness' sake stop talking about the Fulton's," Linda broke out one day in exasperation. "If you can't talk of anything else you had better stop going there."

Laura looked at her in surprise and growing astonishment. Linda knew that the child had gauged the remark and recognized that jealousy prompted it. Laura said nothing in reply. But after that she never mentioned the Fultons again. Linda resented the child's silence even more bitterly for she heard Laura talking of them to Keith. She would have given worlds to have

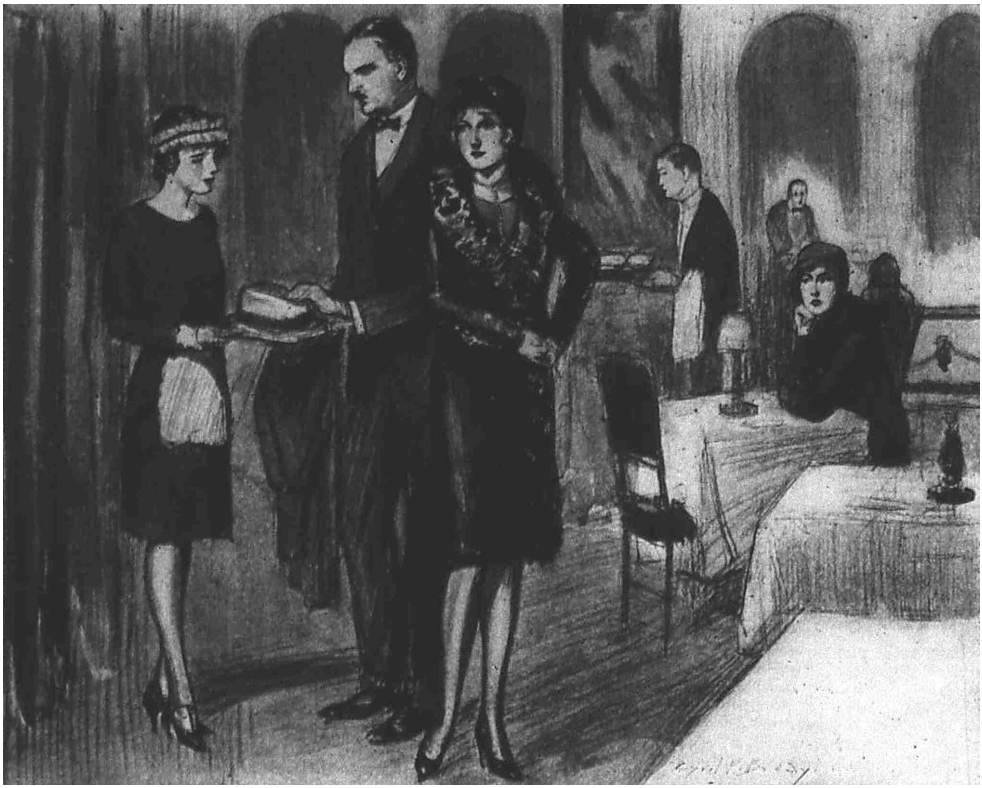
been able to recall that cry of exasperation, realizing too late the irrevocability of the spoken word.

And gradually from little scraps of conversation overheard, she endured the further torture of knowing Mrs. Fulton had been installed as Laura's ideal. Fate could have dealt her no unkinder blow, her rightful place usurped, she thought, by that woman!

And Keith: "I hope you'll grow up into a woman like that, Laura. She's everything I would like you to be."

Linda's eyes grew big and her mouth twisted. Keith —— holding up that woman to her child as an example of what he would like her to be! Bitterness flowed through her, hardening her against Keith and Laura. She hated them both.

It was a wet raw afternoon and coming out of the picture house Linda felt chilled and depressed by the state of the weather and the state of her mind. With a sudden desire for light and warmth and the appearance of gaiety she turned into the Lombard Hotel and ordered tea and muffins, sitting down at a small table near the door.



Passing her table and oblivious to her presence, were Keith and Elizabeth Fulton.

The lights and movement; the well dressed women; the orchestra throbbing faintly made her feel as though this were merely a continuation of the picture she had been watching. She played with that idea, looking into the faces of the women who passed her table and wondering what tragedies, what comedies, what drama was going on in their lives. And then the game suddenly came to an abrupt stop for passing her table and oblivious to her presence, were Keith and Elizabeth Fulton.

They sat down at a table near the centre of the room and she sat staring at the black ribbon bow on Elizabeth Fulton's hat at Keith's side face, while the waiter brought her tea and muffins and laid them before her.

A dead hopelessness settled down upon her like an unbearable weight. It was inevitable; it was what she had been waiting for; but now that it had come she felt stunned and helpless. It was only too obvious that Keith would come to care for a woman like Mrs. Fulton and for the first time she was

honest with herself and admitted Elizabeth Fulton's charm; her attractiveness; her good looks; her brains.

Turning to a mirror set in the wall she surveyed her reflection appraisingly. The brilliant light was cruel. Her clear pale skin she summed up as sallow; her gleaming brown hair she dismissed as lifeless and nondescript; her eyes, wide and hazel coloured, were not so bad; her mouth was too large. And her clothes had none of that air about them which Elizabeth Fulton somehow gave to everything she wore. They were merely clothes.

Her gaze came back to that table in the centre of the room and on a sudden impulse she rose to her feet. She would not sit there spying on them. Beckoning the waiter she paid him for the tea she had not touched and went quickly from the room, hurrying to escape.

She scarcely spoke that evening but Keith did not appear to notice. He was in more than ordinary good spirits, joking with the children, playing with the dog, putting records on the gramophone. And she sat looking on, pretending to read a magazine, while every few minutes everything blurred before her eyes.

Could she bear to sit still and see her home broken up; the children's life spoiled; the whole course of their life broken and changed? Her hands clenched beneath the folds of her dress. She owed it to the children to make some effort. If it had simply been for herself, she would have stepped out of the way; but the children seemed to make that plan impossible.

To speak to Keith was out of the question, too. It would only bring matters to a swifter climax; to speak to Mrs. Fulton was just as impossible. Mr. Fulton! He was the one. He was in the same situation as herself.

Lying wakeful all that night her resolve strengthened. She would not give Keith up without a struggle for the children's sake.

She dressed herself for the street shortly after Keith had left the house the next morning and took a bus downtown. She was shown into Mr. Fulton's private office immediately. As she entered he rose slightly awkwardly from his desk and seemed tongue-tied for the moment, listening, while Linda murmured almost inaudibly that she would like to speak to him.

"Why certainly, Mrs. Osborne. Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked in his kindly modulated tones, bringing a comfortable chair beside the desk. Noticing her embarrassment he smiled at her reassuringly, waiting for her to tell him the object of her visit.

Linda took a painful breath.

"It's on account of the children. I wouldn't have come if it had been only myself. It's Keith—and Mrs. Fulton. They were having tea yesterday at the Lombard Hotel. I happened to drop in there and they came while I was there."

He looked at her in silence, then involuntarily began drawing figures on his blotter. She could not make out his attitude towards what she had just told him. Then he looked up at her and smiled.

"I don't really think it's as serious as you seem to imagine, Mrs. Osborne. Really, you know, there's no reason why they shouldn't have tea together."

Hot colour flushed Linda's cheeks. Suddenly she felt terribly foolish and ignorant and crude. She struggled to speak. "He's in love with her, Keith is. It will break up our home. And there are the children—it's the children I'm thinking about——"

Mr. Fulton shook his head slowly. "I've no means of knowing your husband's feelings, but I am positive you are mistaken. I'm sure there's nothing of that kind between them. I may not know your husband, but I do know Elizabeth," and there was a ring in his voice that was strangely consoling to Linda.

She half rose from her chair, but Mr. Fulton laid a hand oh her arm.

"Don't go yet, Mrs. Osborne. Perhaps there's something I can say to reassure you. It's the little things that fester in our minds——"

Linda remembered the incident the other night. "I heard him tell Laura," she burst out awkwardly, "that he would like her to grow up to be just like Mrs. Fulton. Can you wonder that I think——"

"And why wouldn't he say that?" challenged Mr. Fulton.

The words struck Linda like a blow. After all why shouldn't he?

"He can't help seeing the difference," she admitted slowly. "No, he can't help it. I can see it myself—I see it all the time."

Mr. Fulton kept on drawing lines on his blotter as though he wanted to give his visitor time to recover herself, unobserved.

"What is the difference, Mrs. Osborne?" he asked quietly at length.

"Everything——oh, simply everything. I seem stupid whilst she can talk. My mind is wrapped up with little household affairs whilst she knows so much of what is going on in the world. Oh, I know. I'm Middleburg; she's Lancaster. Oh I hate Lancaster. How I wish we had never come."

Mr. Fulton rose from his chair and laid a hand on her shoulder with a faint friendly pressure. Somehow that touch comforted her.

"I know exactly how you're feeling," he said gently, "I've seen others go through the very same experience. You don't want to go back to Middleburg. You want to help Keith on. You're the only one who can. A woman feels it all more than a man. She misses her own environment. She becomes frightened. Mrs. Osborne, don't be afraid. Don't be too proud to learn. Keith isn't and your children aren't. Why don't you help, too?"

"If I were sure of Keith ——" and the doubt in her tone seemed fainter.

"Put that idea right out of your mind. It isn't so. Believe me, Mrs. Osborne," he said with a smile, "I should know it if it were so."

She believed him. He could have made her believe anything at that moment. She held out her hand while tears trembled on her lashes.

"I can't thank you. But perhaps I can show it."

As the maid opened the door for her on her return there was a scamper of feet in the hall. Laura appeared around the door of the living room.

"It's come, Mummie," she cried. "It's come. Daddie said I was to make you open it right away. Didn't you know——oh, didn't you remember it was your birthday?"

Laura was tugging her towards a huge box laid out on the sofa.

"Open it," she cried dancing up and down. "Mrs. Fulton has just telephoned to make sure that it came all right. You see she and Daddie—yesterday afternoon—he wanted her to help him choose it—he was so afraid he'd make a mistake and get the wrong thing. Here's the scissors."

Dazed, Linda stood looking on while Laura's quick fingers stripped away the sheets of brown wrapping paper, tore at layers of tissue, revealing finally a seal coat with great cuffs and a collar of chinchilla. "Isn't it too lovely, Mummie?" cried the child. "Put it on. Mrs. Fulton was wondering whether you would have liked fox on it better. Thank goodness she went with Daddie. He was going to get you a silly old black lamb. Oh," standing back with admiration on her bright little face, "you look as lovely as Mrs. Fulton."

Linda stood, still dazed, stroking the fur with gentle fingers. Laura looked at her curiously.

"Don't you like it?" she inquired anxiously. "Oh don't say you aren't pleased. Daddie has been thinking and thinking of it for weeks and he was so excited last night he could hardly keep from telling you. He wanted to get you the loveliest thing he could think of because he said you've been such a brick to him coming to Lancaster and being so lonely and hating it so much. Oh, do say you like it, Mummie!"

Tears swam over. A brick! She! Keith thinking about her—— Mrs. Fulton to help all the while she was thinking——. The tears slipped down her cheeks. Laura looked on, distressed.

"Oh, Mummie, don't say you're crying because you don't like it! Poor Daddie will feel so badly. Don't say you're unhappy about it?"

Linda struggled to hold back her tears.

"Sometimes, dear," she said very low, "you cry—because you're too happy."

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.

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[The end of *Lagging Feet* by Beatrice Redpath]