

HER * LITTLE * HIGHNESS.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF NATALY VON ECKHARTHE.

Author of 'A Priestess of Comedy,' 'Countess Dynar,' 'A Princess of the Stage.'

BY ELISE L. LATHROP.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

Mignon blushed deeply as Count Cyprion bowed before her, and with the most gallant words, offered her his arm. She accepted it with an expression of solemn gravity, as it seemed to him, and none too willingly, for Mignon hated anything noticeable. Why had the count made such an unusual request? Was it true, as they said, that he occasionally made a joke of taking young girls into dinner, and afterwards ridiculing their simplicity and lack of experience?

Two of her young friends had, in confidence, poured out their hearts about Count Cyprion to her, and, strangely enough, one told exactly the same story as the other. Mignon was no average girl. She remembered other strikingly similar conversations, and drew her own conclusions. Especially as, in secret, the memory of a handsome man, still young despite his grey hair, whose hand had held one of her braids, who had handed her a red rose with such a fascinating glance, was still fresh in her heart.

Mignon was neither shy nor quiet, and would chat very animatedly; but to-night as she sat beside the captain, she was silent, and only her large, brilliant eyes glanced at him occasionally, questioning, as though ready for the expected conflict. Ah, now he turns toward her; now it will be decided.

"Tell me, Miss Mignon, you are probably fond of skating?"

A change comes over the girl's madonna-like face, and her eyes flash.

"Not at all," she says, dryly. "I am far more enthusiastic over pretty, harmless anecdotes."

The count listens in amazement. Strange! Is he deceived, or did the girl's voice sound ironical? Still he remains unsuspecting.

"Anecdotes? Delightful! I have several fine ones. Which will you hear? The one about the much-tormented lieutenant or the stern boarding-house keeper? Of the ever-tiring student—"

Valeria suddenly pauses in surprise at the undesirable look on the rosy face.

"If it suits you, Count Lankwitz, I would rather hear your opinion of the pastor who confirmed me," says she, calmly; but her delicate nostrils quiver with suppressed laughter, and though she tries to make her voice sound indifferent, every word is mocking.

The scales suddenly fall from his eyes; for a moment he is speechless, greatly embarrassed, for almost the first time in his life.

Then he leans back in his chair and laughs, laughs more heartily than he has for years. Whether Mignon likes it or the reverse, he seizes her soft little hand and draws it to his lips.

"I have not had such a coup in years," he cries, delightedly, "and I have never before bowed my head so remorsefully. The deuce! That was a fine stroke, Miss Mignon. You have stretched me half-fainting at your feet; now be a generous conqueror and tell me frankly who betrayed to you my plan of war by which usually I conquer."

She shrugs her shoulders and joins in his laughter.

"Even among girls there is an 'Alliance chiffon d'enfant sociale,'" says she, jokingly.

"A defensive and offensive alliance in accordance with the demands of modern women, and which exacts equal rights for its youngest as well as its oldest sister. In this case, social equality."

"Good graces!"

Cyprion leaned forward, his handsome face flushed with interest and amusement.

"Do you read the papers, Miss Mignon?"

"Of course."

"And you swear by the flag of those fair malcontents who, as long as the world exists, can rule the hearts of men, and thus the world, and yet are not satisfied with their power."

"This power is of too problematical a nature. In this case woman is like the fetish of the Africans, before which the men bow and do homage until they think it well to thrash it for a change."

Cyprion laughed.

You refer to barbaric affairs. Cudgels are unknown in Germany, thank fortune."

"Actual ones, yes; but there are moral ones here as in every land."

"Mention one."

"The injustice and inconsistency with which women are treated."

"How calmly you utter such long words. Can you illustrate your view with an example?"

"Certainly," Mignon pushed back a golden curl from her temple, and smiled. She argued without becoming the least excited or arbitrary. "What inconsistency toward women is displayed by placing them on an equal footing with men in one respect, when it is advantageous for the men—I mean in the matter of taxes—and yet denying them all other rights? Every poor working woman who supports her children by her own hand must pay taxes without hope of pity, for men generously admit a woman can work as industriously as a man. But when any matter affecting the welfare of the whole people is to be decided, she is denied any voice. That is inconsistent. If it is admitted that a woman is capable of supporting a family, and if she pays taxes like a man, she should have the same right that a man has to vote."

"You forget, Miss Mignon, that we distinguish between very different kinds of work. A woman, may, perhaps, hoe potatoes, wash and iron and sew excellently, without having the slightest idea of social matters, politics and the burning topics of the day. A clever hand does not always necessitate brains."

"And is a peasant who has grown up in the same atmosphere as his wife cleverer and more enlightened than she?"

"In this case, yes. In every village there is a tavern, and in this tavern politics are discussed. Drivers, travellers, peddlars bring news from the outside world, and the peasant sits and hears them discussed, while his wife is home, cooking and looking after the children, within the narrow bounds that nature has determined for her for centuries."

"Very well, I admit that. Besides, I am convinced that every true woman would prefer such activity to a fight with public opinion. But then one should leave woman to her quiet, unpretentious work, and not overburden her, or, if it must be, then decree: "Whoever pays taxes is entitled to vote. Those who pay none are not." That would be just."

Cyprion smilingly shrugged his shoulders.

"Women pay taxes for the civil comforts they enjoy, for protection, order and law. Whoever is a member of a community must pay his or her share. The head of the family is the man."

Involuntarily Mignon glanced at her imposing mother, behind whom Baron Ohly was completely eclipsed.

"You are silent, Miss Mignon, but you look so thoughtful as though my words had not fully convinced you," said Cyprion, his eyes resting with ever increasing enjoyment upon the bent head of his neighbour, whose face at this moment was as expressive as a song without words.

She smilingly shook her head.

"No, I am not yet convinced."

"Then let us continue the discussion."

"Not now."

"And why not?"

She smiled mischievously.

"Because the present course, if it is to be enjoyed, must be eaten while it is hot."

Again he laughed more animatedly than in a long time. How charmingly this little thing understood the art of remaining gay and neutral, despite the grave, forbidden theme. He ate the delicacies before him, but very absent-mindedly. At this moment he would have eaten birds' nests without the slightest notice.

"So, then, an 'Alliance chiffon d'enfant!'"

he laughed, returning to the beginning of their conversation. "And this aims at the equality of girls with grown women. Delightful! Decidedly the best *fin de siècle* arrangement I have met with. Pray explain it to me. What do the young ladies demand? Eight hours a day of society?"

How well that teasing manner became him. Mignon flushed again slightly.

"Eight hours of such work would probably become unendurable in a short time. No, we *debutantes* fight against a position in society which makes every gentleman think he has a right to ridicule us."

"You cannot possibly make such an assertion from experience?"

"My own experiences begin to-day, with this, my first appearance."

"Indeed. Then you were regaled with fairy tales?"

"Ah? Are you fond of skating? Do you like to hear anecdotes? Who confirmed you? Those are three questions which one is always perfectly justified in putting to a strange young lady. Tell me, truly, did you ask my mother then when you met her again at the court ball?"

He laughed again.

"No, Miss Mignon, these questions would

be insulting to a lady of your mother's intellectual ability."

"And not to me?"

"No, although now that I have the pleasure of your acquaintance, I should not address them to you."

"And you would ask them of Miss von Thurn and Grete Liebach, just as before?"

"Without the slightest prick of my conscience."

"Ah! There is the score of our girlish existence."

"Do you require me to entertain your friends with scientific and political topics?"

"Yes, did you not me? And is it much of a request that my sisters should enjoy the same recognition as others?"

"We are coming back to the Alliance sociale," said Cyprion, smiling. "As in the great woman question of the time, only a few of the cleverest women are at the head of a grumbling crowd, so you, as an unusually gifted and intelligent young lady, have undertaken the leadership of your girl friends. Do you really believe that every woman is capable of study, and occupying a position in the world? A thousand times no. Nature has placed a barrier in woman's delicate physique, which can never be removed. Thousands of women would ruin their health by study and the practice of a profession, and our poor, nervous, miserable generation would be completely enfeebled. But the few women whose bodies can keep pace with their minds are so rare that an agitation for their sakes is not worth while. They will accomplish their purpose without it, even under present circumstances. And now we will draw a parallel. You just mentioned Miss von Thurn and Grete Liebach. I will boldly assert that it would be impossible to hold an interesting conversation with these shy and superficial little things."

"Try it."

"And yet you make an assertion?"

"Yes. And for the reason that it was not possible to talk with these ladies on the simplest one of my three topics."

"Impossible. They were surely piqued by your manner, and punished you with silence."

"Certainly. And just by that proved their incapacity, and that they had no right to demand anything better. Arrogance is always a sign of foolishness. No one will carry on an intellectual conversation with those ladies, even if they live to become great grandmothers. But when one is interesting and amusing, even as a mere girl, she will be able to parry these insignificant questions cleverly." Cyprion raised his champagne glass, giving Mignon a very speaking glance. "And win the respect of every man by her charming conversation. Here's to the Alliance chiffon, Miss Mignon. You do not need it, for you have conquered even before war was declared."

The glasses clinked, and Mignon's cheeks glowed like crimson roses.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PRINCESS RAFAELA was dressing her little son's Christmas-tree herself.

She stood on a stool under the spicy branches, and raised her slender, rounded arms to fasten on all the gilt and silver ornaments that Count Cyril presented to her on a tray.

The slender figure was clad in black velvet, and on her curly hair rested a little widow's cap of white crepe. Her only ornament was a string of rare pearls around her white throat, which rose gracefully from the broad black gauze bertha.

She turned her rosy face toward the young chamberlain.

"Does this angel look well here, or shall it hang higher, count?"

Cyrl drew back a step and inspected it.

"Will your highness see for yourself? In my opinion the pretty little thing is too much hidden by the green."

"Let me decide."

Involuntarily she held out her hand to be helped down from the stool. Cyril stood at her side, her soft, little right hand rested in his, and for a second their eyes met, and each thought of the same moment—that unhappy moment when the loveliest of princesses, a bride, tore her court train from her cavalier's hand.

A deep flush rose to the young widow's cheeks, she glanced up hastily.

"Yes, the angel hangs too low, the wings are entirely hidden. Please try how it looks on the upper branch."

And then she watched Cyril's hands as

they executed her commands. Did they tremble or was it only the unusual work which made the count awkward? He had trouble in accomplishing his task. Rafaela stole a glance at his face. Each day she marvelled afresh at the change in it.

She did not understand how she could ever have disliked him or thought him eccentric. The repellent, misanthropical look of the past had given way to a pleasant gravity, and he seemed charmingly just to and considerate of his fellow-men. It was even said that the count's latest hobby was to make himself the zealous defendant of all whom society condemned.

How did it happen that her child had such a tender, passionate liking for this grave, quiet man? He is the only one of whom Rafaela is not jealous, and with whom she is willing to share Carl Henry's love.

"It is well that we have so many little angels to adorn the tree," said Cyril, busy fastening the little winged dolls. "The prince is especially fond of them, and will be much pleased."

"You have made him love the Christmas angel by your pretty stories, the angel and his mother in one person," rejoined the princess, gently, "and no one appreciates that better than I. Oh, Count Lankwitz," she continued, warmly, "how much I have to thank you for. It is the first tree I have ever dressed for my child. Often it seems like a dream to me that the little one really loves me so tenderly. Hear him now calling at the door: 'Mamma, mamma!' The little fellow is curious, and oh, it is so hard for me not to bring him in. But I must take him a few *bouillons*." And happy as a child herself, the princess rushed out of the room, and on the other side of the door, Cyril heard her laughing and petting the little prince.

He drew a deep breath. How indescribably sweet it would be to be a spectator of such happiness! Rafaela returned. Her cheeks glowed, her eyes shone with happiness.

"Oh, he is so happy, count," she cried. "And he persists that mamma must be the Christmas angel to-night and bring him all his pretty things from the Christ-child."

The young chamberlain drew a step nearer.

"Your highness, I too, have a great Christmas wish on my heart."

She listened delightedly.

"Anything, anything! Pray speak, my dear count."

"In the sense of the little prince, I would fain beg you to be this evening, in the child's eyes, the bright form he looks for. Do not prove the tale I told him false. Wear a white gown to-night, and let him still imagine his mother is the angel which looks and words so often prove her."

Rafaela had bowed her head.

"Leave off mourning for the first time. Wear a white gown for the first time," she whispered. "That is a surprising suggestion, and yet—yet, you are right, count. For the child's sake. He must not lose his belief in your kind words."

She glanced at the tall figure almost hesitatingly, and continued still more softly:

"Henry is so fond of you. And nothing must shake his love. The child has so very much to atone for his mother. Forgive me for his sake," she added, holding out her hand.

Cyrl started, and for a moment his face was steadily pale. Rafaela did not see it. He stooped and kissed her hand. When he raised his head again his face wore a tortured look.

"Forgive! What have I to forgive, your highness?" he gasped. "In all humility, I have to beg you to forgive whatever in my mad delusion I—"

"Count Cyril, we were both foolish children. We obstinately clutched the thorns, and trod the roses under our feet."

He shook his head in his old gloomy way.

"I was a poor weak creature, mentally and physically ill, blind and deaf, wandering on a false path. This is Christmas eve, a feast of kindness and charity, your highness. Do not let me go away empty-handed, among all those who are hidden peace on earth. Let me be certain that you will forgive and forget all that I have ever done."

Her large, astonished eyes rested anxiously upon his flushed, excited face.

"Good heavens, how strangely you speak, count. What has happened? What have you done to me that I have not done to you? We mutually vexed each other, and

Horses, Sheep and Cattle Ailments

SPECIALTY BOOK free with every bottle, containing full instructions for the treatment and cure of all the foregoing ailments. Bound in durable GREEN & BLACK, Gaily A. Mitchell, of London, England, are the sole manufacturers. Gaily's Fluid is sold by all Druggists.

Speedily Cured by "Gaily's Fluid."