

## THE MOCKBEGGAR

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old couple as they lay huddled in the corner, a confused blot of rags and shadows.

"It's love that holds them together," she said in her debating-society voice hushed down to a whisper, "not the mere fact of marriage."

"I dunno," said he truculently. "I don't believe they'd be together now if they weren't married—anyhow, not together like this."

"Why not? Why shouldn't lovers be faithful?"

"It's different, as I've told you a hundred times, especially when you're old. I'd think nothing of it if they were young or middle-aged. But they're old, and there must have been lots of times when they were tired of loving and tired of life, and would never have gone on if they hadn't belonged to each other."

"That's just it—they were tied."

"And the tie kept them together over the bad places. It's like being roped on a climb. When one or another of them went down there was always the rope, and as soon as they were on their legs again they didn't notice it. I believe people who aren't married—no matter how much they love each other—somehow they're hardly ever in together at the finish. You generally find that if the going's rough they drift apart. Why, you yourself say you'd hate to belong to a man all your life; you want the one great Moment, and then not to spoil it by going on together. I think there's a good deal to be said for that, though, as I've told you dozens of times, I want to marry you."

He looked very young as he sat there beside her in the dying firelight. He was only a boy, or he wouldn't have come with her; he wouldn't have let her force her adventure on him like that. He was very young, but he would grow old, like Mr. Dalrymple. That soft brown lock of hair on his forehead would be grey, his face a little worn, perhaps. Should she see it then, or would they have gone their separate ways? She wondered what he would look like when he was old—what he would be like? Kind, protective, unselfish, like Mr. Dalrymple? A strong arm to lean on when she needed it most? Growing old together—together not only at the start, but at the journey's end—but tied, as Mr. and Mrs. Dalrymple were tied, by the memories of struggles and toils together, by adventures and hardships shared, by long years of companionship in wayfaring, by the love of their children.

She bowed her head suddenly over her lap and tears fell into her hands.

"Meave, darling, what is it? Tell me."

His arm was round her, his shoulder under her cheek.

"Bob—Bob—will you always love me when we're old?"

"Of course, I shall always love you."

"As much as that—?" She waved her hand towards the indefinite mass of Mr. and Mrs. Dalrymple.

"I should hope so"—with a little contempt.

"Then—Bob—let's go back."

"Go back where?"

"Home—I want us to get married."

"My little Meave! But you said—"

"It's seeing them. They're so happy—they're so true. They're dirty, terrible, shameless old things, but they're happy. They've got something that we haven't got, that we can't ever have, unless we're married."

He had the wisdom to be silent, bugging her without a word.

"Let's go back home. It's not ten o'clock yet, and we can tell Mother we were caught in the rain and waited to see if it would stop. She need never know."

"And we'll get married?"

"Yes—though you know she'll make us go in for everything—bridesmaids and rice and church bells and all that."

"Never mind! It'll make Mrs. Dalrymple's fortune come true."



They both laughed a little.

"When shall we start?" he asked her.

"Oh, soon—now."

"But it's coming down in buckets!"

"Never mind. We're only an hour from home. We haven't got to face all that walk into Ryde, and then the journey into London."

She shivered a little, and he drew her close in sudden, fierce protection.

"I shouldn't have let you come. I've been a fool about all this. I didn't believe in it, and yet I gave way, because I was afraid of losing you. I should have had sense enough for both of us, and made you go my way instead of yours."

"Is that what you're going to do in future?"

"Yes—when you're a silly little thing!"

She laughed with her mouth close to his.

It was he who remembered the need for quick action.

"Come, we must be getting off, or we shan't be home till it's too late to explain. Are you ready?"

"Quite. I'm glad we didn't bring any luggage, except in our ulster pockets. It would have been difficult to explain why we'd gone for a walk with two suitcases."

They giggled light-heartedly, and went out on tip-toe.

They were off, but just as they were leaving the Mockbeggar she remembered something that had been left undone.

"Bob, we ought to tell them. I want them to know."

"For heaven's sake don't go back and wake them up. What do you want them to know?"

"That we're going to be married."

"What on earth has that got to do with them?"

"Oh, nothing, of course, but I thought—Give me a leaf out of your pocket-book, there's a darling."

He gave it, and she scribbled on it: "We are going to be married," and creeping back into the room, put it on the mantelpiece beside the pictures of the blowsy girl and the sailor.

"And look here," she added, "as we're not going to London, we might just leave the price of our tickets with them. It may help them a lot."

"They'll probably spend it on drink."

"Well, let them. I don't care. I can't bear to think of people without proper boots on their feet."

The firelight was playing reproachfully on the toe of Mr. Dalrymple's shoe.

"Nor can I. Well, here's the money. It'll be a surprise for them when they wake up."

He put it beside the paper on the mantelpiece, and they both went out.

It was daylight when Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Dalrymple awoke; the storm had ceased.

"Hullo! They've gone!" said he.

"Not taken any of our things with them, have they, Reg?" asked his wife, looking round anxiously.

"Not they—they're gentry. Gentry don't take poor people's things without a lawyer. What's this?"

Her husband had found the treasure on the mantelpiece.

"I'm blowed if they haven't left their money behind 'em—a pound, if it's a tanner!"

"That's luck for us, anyway, if it ain't exactly luck for them."

"Oh, I reckon they done it on purpose. They'd never have put their dough just there by our Jack's likeness. It's Christian charity, that's what it is."

"I don't believe it's Christian charity—that'd be tuppence. A pound's nothing but an accident. Howsunever, it makes no difference to me what it is, so long as it's there. I could do with a plate o' ham."

"A plate o' ham and a cup o' coffee, and a bottle o' whisky to come along with us to Tonbridge."

"That's it. But look there, Reg—there's writing on the paper!"

"So there is. Pity we ain't seollards."

"Maybe it's a word for us."

"That's what it is, I reckon."

She picked up the paper and inspected it solemnly, then passed it on to her husband, who did the same.

"Pity we never got no school-learning, Reg."

"I've never felt the want."

"But I'd like to be able to read the word they've left us."

"That's because you're a woman and made of curiosity. I, being a man, says let's take the money and be thankful. And now, old lady, pack up your traps, for, thanks to this bit of luck, we'll have our breakfast at the 'Blue Boar.'"

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