

## *A Curious Companion*

“WANTED, by a young married lady, a companion to reside with her during her husband’s absence in India. A liberal salary will be given, with every home comfort, to any one suitable. Apply, personally, if possible, at No. 240 Upper Berkeley street, W.”

The foregoing advertisement was dispatched by me after considerable cogitation, and I awaited the result of it with some anxiety. My husband, Major Conyers, had been suddenly ordered to India; and having no sister or any available cousin whom I could invite to stay with me during his absence, I thought a companion would be the best thing with which I could provide myself; accordingly, I indited my small paragraph, which I had the satisfaction of seeing placed in a very conspicuous part of the paper on the morning after I sent it. I lived in London, consequently felt certain that the personal interview would be easily managed; but I had committed an error in not naming any particular hour, as, from eleven in the forenoon until quite late in the day, the applications for a personal interview with my unfortunate self never ceased.

Visitors in answer to the advertisement came frequently, but none of them suited me.

Just as it was getting dusk, my servant came up to the drawing-room and informed me that such a nice-looking young lady was in the dining-room; quite the nicest that had been yet.

“Ask her to come up-stairs, then, Ellis; but do not admit any one else,” I replied; and the next minute the drawing-room door was thrown open by Ellis, and “Miss Burke” announced.

She was dressed in mourning, and even in the dim light I could see a pale-faced, rather handsome girl of apparently about four-and-twenty. Her height was over the average, but seemed greater from her extreme thinness, which struck me as almost startling. “Good evening,” she said, in a low and rather pleasant voice. “I am afraid that I am very late; it was so kind of you to see me.”

“It is late,” I assented, “but that does not matter.”

“Thank you,” responded my visitor. “I came about your advertisement—I saw you wanted a companion, and I am anxious to get a situation of the kind.”

“I have had so many applications today,” I answered, for want of something better to say.

“Ah! I can quite fancy it,” returned Miss Burke. “I fear I am too late!”

“No,” I replied: “I have seen no one yet to suit me.”

“If you would only try me, I should do my utmost to please you,” she said most pleadingly. “I have already been a companion, and I can give you references which may induce you to think of

me;" and Miss Burke opened a small black velvet bag, which, until then, I had not perceived, and placed in my hand a monogrammed and coroneted epistle, addressed to herself, purporting to come from Lady Montacute, whose companion she had been for two years, and who expressed herself in the warmest terms, assuring Miss Burke, whenever she returned from the continent, whither she was just then going, that it would give her the greatest pleasure to answer any inquiries in her favor; in the meantime, Lady Montacute authorized her to make what use she chose of the letter now sent, ending by saying she was certain, wherever she went, Miss Burke must be a favorite and an acquisition.

Then followed a letter from a Rev. Mr. White, from a remote rectory in Cumberland, stating that he had known Miss Emily Burke from her childhood, and could certify that she was not only desirable in all respects, but a most amiable and talented young lady, whose family were both well known and highly respected. Nothing could be more satisfactory; and after reading the two missives carefully by the light of the fire, I raised my eyes toward my visitor, whom I found regarding me in the most eager manner imaginable.

"They are most kind letters," I said; "and as far as references go, I am sure I could not do better. Your duties would be very light—it is really only for the sake of companionship that I require any one, as I do everything for myself, but I have been very lonely since my husband went away."

"I can imagine it," responded Miss Burke, sympathizingly. "I should do my utmost to cheer you."

"You are very kind to say so," I answered. "Should we agree as to terms, when could you come?"

"To-morrow, if you will permit me," replied Miss Burke. "I am in lodgings, and the expense of them is so great, I should only be too glad to give them up—I am very poor," she added in a low tone."

I was sorry for the poor girl; and feeling I had been as prudent as possible in perusing her references, and trusting a good deal to her air of quiet respectability, I proceeded to state my terms, which were eagerly accepted. After a little conversation all was settled, and my companion promised to make her appearance before luncheon on the following day. For the rest of that evening I was unusually meditative; I was pleased and yet not pleased. She was not altogether my beau ideal of a companion. Although ladylike, and with undeniable references, there was a certain awkwardness in her manner.

Her room was to be on the same floor as my own; and on the following morning I went in, a short time before she arrived, to see that everything was ready for her. It was October, and the weather was chilly, so I decided that she should have a fire, as I fancied, coming from wretched lodgings, it might be a sort of welcome for her. At one o'clock she arrived, bringing with her a

small black box as she sole luggage, which Ellis and the housemaid, between them, carried directly to her room, whither she followed them almost immediately, to take off her things. I accompanied her, and remained for a few minutes telling her to join me in the drawing-room as soon as she could, lunch being ready.

She presently appeared, very much altered by the removal of her bonnet. She wore her hair in a crop, a fashion which I detested; and her figure without her cloak was only redeemed from awkwardness by the well-made black dress, which had evidently been the work of a first-rate *modiste*. She wore no ornaments, except a plain gold ring on the little finger of her left hand, which I noticed was particularly large. I ceased to criticize her after we had been together for a little. She was so pleasant, so chatty, and yet so quiet withal, that ere evening came I began to congratulate myself on my own perspicacity in having engaged her, and was fully prepared to indorse Lady Montacute's opinion, that she was sure to be not only a favorite but an acquisition.

A fortnight slipped quietly away, and in my weekly budget to my husband I gave most charming accounts of my companion, which our every day intercourse seemed fully to confirm. But about the third week, a something I could not explain made me take a dislike to her. I had not been very well, and her kindness had been unremitting; consequently, I felt almost angry with myself for indulging in a feeling which I could not help acknowledging was both unreasonable and childish.

But it gained ground in spite of myself; and one night, as I was standing by the looking glass in my bedroom, which was in the shadow, I caught sight of Miss Burke, who was leaning on the mantel-piece in the full light of the gas, which burned on either side of it, regarding me with a stealthy and searching glance, which I instantly observed, but had sufficient sense to take no notice of. The expression in her large black eyes haunted me for days, and caused me to say good-night to her on the landing, and, in addition, to lock my door, a precaution I had never before thought of taking.

One night shortly afterwards I awoke, fancying I heard a movement outside my door. My room was perfectly dark, and I was convinced some noise had suddenly awakened me. I listened intently, almost too terrified to breathe, until I heard most distinctly the handle of my door cautiously turned. An almost death-like horror seized me, and for an instant I was absolutely rigid with terror; but the spell was broken by another audible effort to open the door, and the hall clock struck three, which made me spring up in bed, seize the matches, and, with trembling fingers, attempted to or three times to strike a light. At last I was successful, and the welcome blaze of the gas which I lit gave me courage to call out boldly: "Who is there?" But no answer came. I pealed my bell vigorously, and in a few minutes I heard steps approaching, and Ellis' welcome voice asked if I was ill.

"No, Ellis, not ill," I said, "but terrified," as I unlocked the door and admitted her. "Some one tried my door not five minutes ago."

“Tried your door, ma’am? Surely not!” ejaculated Ellis.

“Yes, Ellis; I am certain of it, and it has given me such a shock. I cannot be left alone again.”

“What is the matter, dearest Mrs. Conyers?” exclaimed Miss Burke, who appeared in my room just as I had made the last remark to Ellis.

“I have been frightened,” I answered; “but do not disturb yourself, Miss Burke; it was probably nothing.”

“It could not have been anything, or I must have heard it,” she said, half to me and half to Ellis.

“Pray do not trouble yourself,” I responded; “I am only sorry you got up at all.”

She stayed for a few minutes, but getting no encouragement to remain, returned to her own room, assuring me if she heard a sound she would be with me in a moment.

The instant she was safely gone I turned to Ellis, desiring her in the first place to close and lock my door; and in the second, to prepare to remain with me until the morning; for I was so unhinged by the circumstance, trifling though it was, that to be left by myself was out of the question.

She had been with me ever since my marriage, now three years, and had been well known to my husband’s family all her life, consequently, I felt I might trust her, so I said: “Ellis, I have my own suspicions; but we must do nothing until we are sure. Meanwhile, you must have a bed made up in this room, and watch”—

“Miss Burke?” whispered Ellis.

“Yes,” I replied, “it was her who tried my door.”

“Well, ma’am,” confided Ellis, “I have been downright afraid of her this some time back—civil-spoken though she is. But what could she want at your door?”

“That I do not know; but we may find out.”

By dint of a blanket off my bed, and sundry shawls, Ellis was made comfortable for the rest of the night on the sofa, and I returned to bed, not to sleep, for I was thoroughly upset, but to lie and wonder how I was ever to get through the ten months that still remained of my husband’s absence.

Tired and unnerved, I met Miss Burke at breakfast, and we spent our morning in a very silent fashion. I wrote to my husband whilst she walked restlessly about the drawing-room, constantly

asking me how I was, an inquiry for which I did not feel so grateful as I might have done under other circumstances. Lunch came, and afterward Miss Burke, who was usually most unwilling to go out, asked me if I could spare her for the afternoon, as she wanted to go to see a sick friend.

“Certainly,” I replied, glad to get rid of her. About four o’clock I lay down on the sofa in the inner drawing-room, and must have fallen asleep, for I heard no one come into the room, but I awoke with the consciousness that some one was leaning over me with their face in close proximity to my own. I felt rather than saw them; so close were they that their lips seemed almost touching my own, and as I sprang up I came in violent collision with—my companion.

“Miss Burke!” I exclaimed, indignantly, but I could say nothing more, for, after all, the crime of leaning over me was not of a deadly nature, though coupling it, as I instantly did, with my previous suspicions, I felt not only extremely angry, but considerably alarmed.

“I was afraid you were ill, dear Mrs. Conyers. I do hope I have not displeased you,” she proceeded, in a deprecating tone. “I did not mean to offend you.”

“It is of no consequence,” I answered, rising from the sofa; “but please do not do it again. I am nervous and easily startled.”

The circumstance was then tacitly dismissed, and we got through the evening pretty fairly. I rather looked forward to a safe night, for I knew Ellis’ bed was in readiness for her. I said good-night a little earlier than usual to Miss Burke, but did not inform her that I had indited an epistle to her friend, the Rev. Mr. White, to ask for further particulars as to her antecedents.

I heard her come up to her room, and when her door closed, a feeling of compassion came over me, for I fancied I had not only unjustly suspected her, but been very cold in my manner, which she had evidently felt. Ellis came after I was in bed, and in a short time I had oral evidence that she was slumbering. It made me feel secure, at all events, though I was certain I should dream of all kinds of unearthly things if the snoring went on all night. Nothing happened to alarm us, and next morning, in a subdued and anxious voice, Miss Burke hoped I had not been disturbed, and that Ellis had kept me from feeling nervous—that last remark very reproachfully.

About twelve o’clock, when we were sitting in the drawing-room, Ellis came up and told me that a gentleman wanted to see me on business, but would not give his name. “Probably about some subscription,” I observed; “perhaps I had better see what he wants.”

Without suspicion of what awaited me, I went down stairs, and on entering the dining-room encountered a short and rather red-faced man, who, bowing profoundly, asked if I was Mrs. Conyers. On my replying in the affirmative, he continued: “May I ask what establishment you have?”

I must have looked astonished, as he explained: “I am a detective police-officer, madam, and my business here will, I am afraid, be an unpleasant one.”

“Indeed!” I ejaculated, “in what way?”

“From information I have received, I believe you have a person under your roof who is wanted on a very serious charge. I must ask your permission to summon every one in the house into this room. I have taken every precaution to prevent any one leaving it and if you will kindly accede to my request, I shall get over a painful duty as quickly as possible.”

If my lips had been capable of utterance, the words they would have framed would have been “Miss Burke,” but I said nothing. I merely rang the bell, which Ellis answered so promptly, I felt certain she must have been behind the door, ready to protect me in case of emergency.

“Summon the servants, Ellis,” I said; “and—and ask Miss Burke to come down stairs.” It was almost like a dream to me, seeing my four domestics walk in; and then—suspecting nothing—came Miss Burke,

“Got you at last, sir!” cried the detective, making an agile dart towards my companion.

“Not without some trouble,” coolly responded his prisoner, whose courage was apparently quite equal to the occasion. In my wildest moments I had never dreamed of so desperate a *denouement*, and the discovery perfectly paralyzed me with horror. It was too dreadful to realize that I had harbored a wretch of a man in woman’s clothing not only in my house, but in the capacity of my companion! In less time than I can describe it in, the detective and his prisoner had departed; it was quietly and quickly managed; and though a detailed account of it did appear in the papers, my name was, happily for me, not allowed to transpire publicly.

The *pseudo* Miss Burke turned out to be a notorious young man, or I may say lad, of the name of Browning, who, having embezzled large sums, as well as stolen a quantity of magnificent jewelry, had been unable—owing to precautions taken to prevent his doing so—to leave London, or to dispose of his stolen property. Through the agency of a female friend he had adopted his disguise, and my unlucky advertisement had suggested to him the idea of insuring his own safety, should I be credulous enough to take him upon recommendations, which, I need hardly say, had emanated from his own pen. Not only had he thought of his personal security, but that of the stolen goods, which, in the shape of diamonds and bank notes, were found securely stowed away in the little black box, which I had thought contained the worldly possessions of my poverty-stricken companion. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to penal servitude for fourteen years.

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