

"FACES WE SELDOM SEE"

III— THE DUCHESS

BY ISABEL A. MALLON



HE said in a laughing way, "They call me 'The Duchess,' because I never looked like the ones you see in flesh and blood!" You suddenly remember that the average duchess is red of face, hooked of nose, and badly gowned, while the one standing before

you is a very tiny woman, slight but well formed. Her hair is of a light-brown shade, knotted loosely on top of her head, and breaking away into most fascinating little curls all over her forehead. From under this frame look out two large dark-brown eyes, with thick curly lashes, eyes that are bright and sparkling with delight, as if the world were full of sweet things. The mouth is small, but determined, and the whole expression of the face is that of a woman of wit, good temper and sweetness.



"THE DUCHESS"

As for her frock! Well, no duchess ever wore such a lovely tea-gown. It is of soft, rich plush, with some old ruffles of lace about the wrist and throat, and the tiny feet peeping in and out from under her petticoat are in the most bewitching Louis Quinze shoes, just such shoes as "Phyllis," or "Mollie Bawn," "Lillian," or "Mrs. Geoffrey" might have delighted in. Now, you know who it is. It is Mrs. Margaret Hungerford, who has given to you and me, and to everybody who knows how to read, those delightful love stories, full of brightness, full of wit, and as clear and pure as a glass of water taken from a well by the wayside. Few women have as many ardent admirers as "The Duchess;" few women who have written novels have as great a right to this admiration, for few have made love as pure and beautiful a thing, few have created as loving and lovable characters, and none have depicted the charms of the Irish gentleman as has this woman. We think of the Irish famine, we think of the Irish peasant, but we are so far off that we forget that on the Emerald Isle there is a gentry blue-blooded, kind of heart and courtly of manner. And it has been left to this tiny little statuette of Dresden ware to depict these people.

About her personally: She married when very young, and her husband died in less than six years, leaving her with three tiny girls to care for. In 1883 she married Mr. Henry Hungerford, of Cahirmore, and she is the mother of six small people, one of whom is the most delightful baby of a year, rejoicing in the name of Tom. He is just such a baby as she writes about; a roly-poly fellow, who can be picked up in your arms and kissed until he laughs with glee, and you are physically weary of sweetness.

Mrs. Hungerford has discovered that the best working hours are in the morning; and so for three hours every forenoon she may be found in her den. It is not the sort of a room you usually think of as a workshop. There is a huge grate in it, and the log fire blazes up as if to suggest the pictures in its flames for the fair occupant to see. Book cases are all about the room, overflowing with dictionaries, books of reference, novels and histories, while about are flowers in plenty. Charming pictures are on the wall, and lovely bits of the valuable old china to which "The Duchess" is devoted. The desk is a marvel of neatness, every package or bundle of manuscript being tied and labeled, and as she funnily enough says: "I scribble my notes on the last sheets of my friends' letters. Wouldn't they be surprised if they knew that the last sheet became the scene of a love affair, a full account of a murder, a boycotting, or, most likely of all, a flirtation? I am not a very good sleeper, so I am very apt to plan out my scenes at night, and write them in the morning. Write with regularity? Sometimes I have written the last chapter of a book first—a good situation will come to me, I will write it out, and later on write all around it.

*In this series of "Faces We Seldom See" the following sketches, each accompanied with portrait, have been printed:

KATE GREENAWAY February 1892
ALICE FREEMAN PALMER June "

"Phyllis" was my first book. And do you know, all my family are in the army, and I am the only one who has ever drifted into this sort of thing? Yes, I have written twenty-seven novels, and a lot of short articles besides. At school I took the prize always for composition, and my greatest pleasure used to come, when I was a tiny tot, from inventing fairy stories, and watching how spellbound the other children became when I told them. I laugh whenever I think that I was only ten years old when I wrote a ghost story that frightened me so I could not go to sleep until I had gotten the bedclothes over my head. I regard this as the greatest work of my life. At eighteen I began to write regularly, and have never stopped. Yes, I am very proud of the Irish gentry, and I am glad that you Americans like the picture of them given in "Rossmoyne." I am the daughter of a clergyman, the Rev. Canon Hamilton, rector of one of the oldest churches in Ireland, and St. Faughnan's Cathedral in Ross, Carbery, County Cork. My grandfather was John Hamilton, of Besington, Dunboyne, thirteen miles from Dublin. We came over from Scotland to Ireland in the reign of James the First. I am more than happy; I have a full, complete life, in which my only trouble is a review. I have never overcome my terror of one, and as each arrives I am a coward before it is read.

"As to the origin of my nom de plume, there is not very much to say about it. Many years ago while engaged upon 'Phyllis,' I happened to attend an 'At home' at the house of one of my intimate friends. As I was about to enter the reception-room my host saw me and came forward. He waved the footman back, and himself announced me to the guests, as 'Her Grace, The Duchess.' Very solemnly he said it, and being all well known to each other, the laugh was universal. Then somebody else took up the plot, and said the title well became me. I was a person of such an 'august presence,' being full five feet in height, and at that time very young and slight. This still further delighted us all, and from that hour the sobriquet clung to me. It was all very foolish, very frivolous, very light-hearted, but we were all young together, and a laugh seemed to us then the best life could give. In England I am no known by this title. My editors here strongly disapprove of my making use of it; but on the first sheets of 'Phyllis' it was inadvertently printed, and these sheets, uncorrected, were sent across the water. Hence the American knowledge of me by that name."

Having a beautiful home, and being the head of a happy family, Mrs. Hungerford seldom goes away, and when she does her husband declares that everything goes wrong, while as for the children they set up a piercing moan when it is suggested that the lady of the manor should be out of their sight even for a few days. In 1889 "The Duchess" went to London, and it is pretty to see how her face lights up as she tells of her reception there.

"The Duchess" is happiest when she is at work in her garden; she digs and delves and clips and investigates weeds, and decides that they shall be turned out, and is assisted in her work by a bevy of handsome children, who are healthy and obedient, who take to mother each story of happiness or sorrow, and who believe that to help mother in the garden, or to be near mother any place, is a supreme delight. In all her work Mrs. Hungerford has shown her love of children and her love of home life, and after you see the dear chicks that she has herself, you can quite understand how she can write of them so well.

Her husband? Well, what are her heroes? He adores his wife; he is a great athlete; he rides, drives, shoots, fishes, and does all equally well. It is an idyllic home, but it would not be if it were not that the home mother is so overflowing with joy and gladness, with love and kindness, that she imbues each one near her with some of her own virtues. The women who are careful as to the books they put in their daughters' hands—and all women should be this—need never be afraid at giving a book that bears upon it the signature of "The Duchess." Never goody-goody, never sinking into the skim milk weakness of many women writers, her stories are absolutely sweet and pure, full of piquancy, full of innocent love making, full of fun. She paints men and women, girls and boys, at their best, and as only a bright Irish woman can. There are few American women who have not laughed with "Dicky Brown," mourned over the boycotting in "Rossmoyne," been happy and sad with "Phyllis," or watched the gradual growing of love between "Lillian" and her guardian. It is unfortunate that there are not more writers who have not only the piquancy, but the goodness of "The Duchess."

Her home is at St. Brenda's, Bandon, County Cork, and a visitor there is given, by the pretty hostess, that hearty Irish welcome that is so delightful. All about the house itself are flowers and shrubbery, a great many rose trees, beech trees all over the lawn, which slopes from the house down to a river that runs at the foot of a deep valley. There is a most wonderful kitchen garden, where fruit trees are many, the apple and pear trees laden with blossoms, a quarter of an acre of strawberry beds, while the raspberry and the currant bushes vie in number. All the country through there are beautiful drives, and Mrs. Hungerford is specially fond of driving.

You keep saying over and over again, "It is an idyllic home," and it is, my friend. It is the home of a woman who does not dip her pen in acid and write cruelties; instead, it goes into a well of hopeful thoughts, and writes out the pretty tales where true love triumphs. True love triumphs here in this, her own home, and all of us are very much inclined to picture what we, ourselves, have experienced. You bid good-bye to "The Duchess" sadly, but you carry away with you the most charming picture imaginable, and you fully realize that as a delightful hostess, a witty writer, a loving mother and wife "time will not wither, nor custom stale her infinite variety;" and in your heart you say, "God bless her and hers."