

A CONQUERING HEROINE

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A Conquering Heroine by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford (The Duchess)

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MARGARET WOLFE HUNGERFORD (THE DUCHESS)

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BY

"~~THE DUCHESS~~" ps. et

(MRS. HUNGERFORD)

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"AIRY FAIRY LILIAN," "LADY BRANKSMERE," "MOLLY BAWN,"
"PHYLLIS," "ROSSMOYNE," ETC.

Hungerford.

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A CONQUERING HEROINE.

CHAPTER I.

"The present being a peculiar case,
Each with unwonted zeal the other scouted,
Looked scorn too nicely shaded to be shouted,
And with each inch of person and of vesture
Contrived to hint some most disdainful gesture."

"It is quite exciting!" says Miss Ruthven, in her clear, metallic voice, that, as a rule, sets everybody's teeth on edge. It is *so* clear, *so* distinct—each syllable so beyond doubt.

She leans back in her chair as she says this, not in the comfortable manner of most

people who love their cushions, but slowly, methodically, and looks at her tea. There is nothing to do with it, *except* look at it, or drink it; to stir it would be a monstrous absurdity, as she takes neither cream nor sugar.

“Yes! isn't it?” says a little pretty blonde girl, starting forward. “Exciting! That is just the word.”

“Well, I am not sure about that,” says Miss Ruthven, turning her handsome face—a face cold, calm, set as a cameo, but certainly handsome—toward the last speaker.

“Oh, yes, it is—it is indeed!” says the little, fair girl, eagerly. “Fancy—an Irish girl!”

Here one of the men standing round the fire laughs.

“One would think you never heard of an Irish girl before,” says he.

He is a big man, with scanty, rather red-

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dish hair, and eyes in which the predominating brown has a tinge of red through it too. For the rest, his mouth is too large and too suggestive to inspire respect, and his nose is a trifle hooked.

"Oh! Lord Luxford! How absurd! Of *course* I have heard of Ireland," says the blonde, giving him a gleaming smile that shows to the utmost advantage all her lovely little white teeth. "But——" Theodosia Gascoigne pauses, and looks a little vaguely round her—in most ways she is a little vague at times. "But——"

"Yes?" says Luxford—he is smiling at her now, but his smile is scarcely as pleasant as the one she has given him. There is a little cruelty in the *waiting* of it—the delight in the girl's perplexity—in her inability to explain herself.

"Oh! you know," says she, with some slight confusion.

"'Pon my word, I don't," says he. "Couldn't you begin all over again? Come now, Miss Theo——!"

"I don't see what she's got to explain," breaks in Miss Ruthven, not with the design of shielding Theo, but with a determination to let her own voice be heard. "We all think it so odd of Lady Ingram to——"

She is interrupted here.

"Oh! not odd—say delightful!" murmurs a soft voice from the depths of a cosey armchair. The owner of the voice so far gives in to the moment as to raise herself and let a charming face look out from the depths of her surroundings. Mrs. Gaveston—a widow of some years' standing, though still comparatively young (she herself would have taken out that begrudging word "comparatively"). She turns to a man standing close to her chair. "Nothing like *fresh* material. You agree with me, Mr. Frewman?"