

**THE LADY
CHARLOTTE:
A NOVEL**

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The Lady Charlotte: a novel by Adeline Sergeant

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ADELINE SERGEANT

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THE
LADY CHARLOTTE

A Novel.

BY
ADELINE SERGEANT,

AUTHOR OF

"JACOBI'S WIFE," "DEVERIL'S DIAMOND," "BROOKE'S DAUGHTER,"
"WINIFRED'S WOOING," "SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN," "NO
SAINT," "THE MISTRESS OF QUEST," "THE
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THE LADY CHARLOTTE.

CHAPTER I.

COUSINS.

"You seem to have made yourself pretty snug down here!" said Arthur Ellison, stretching his limbs comfortably over the chintz-covered sofa, and settling his fair head into the solitary cushion with which his cousin had provided him.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Esther, a little sharply, as if she discerned a possible reproach in the words.

"No reason in the world. I may smoke, I suppose?"

And without waiting for her consent, he exerted himself so far as to extract a cigarette from a silver case, and to light it with a fusee which diffused a pleasant aromatic odor through the room. Esther watched him silently, with a doubtful look. When the cigarette was well alight between his lips, he laid his left arm behind his head, and surveyed the apartment with an air of quizzical satisfaction.

It was a fair-sized room, but with a low ceiling, across which ran a broad whitewashed beam; the casement windows had diamond panes, and evidently

opened into a garden, for sprays of jessamine and rose seemed to be trying to force their way across the low wooden sill. It had, to some eyes, a rustic, old-fashioned charm, emphasized by the wooden paneling and rudely carved mantel-piece, now dark with age; by the red tiles of the floor, where the carpet left them exposed, and the gleaming brass of the high fender. There were quaint old engravings on the walls, in black frames, and some curious and rather valuable china on the mantel-shelf. Fortunately, the farmer's wife to whom the room belonged had not modified its general aspect of old-world simplicity by any attempt at modern fashions; and the utmost that Miss Ellison, her lodger, had done by way of alteration was to hide some faded upholstery with loose chintz covers of artistic design, and to fill every available jug, vase and basin with flowers and leaves and grasses of all kinds. When she had arranged her books on a side-table, and stacked her papers neatly on each side of the great inkstand, Esther felt that the room left nothing to be desired.

Esther Ellison's face and figure were not out of place, even in this rustic environment, although she knew less of the country than of the town. One could imagine that she would be by nature a lover of outdoor things, of trees and flowers, birds and beasts. She was not very tall, but she was lithe and strong, and her movements had the quick alertness of some wild creature rather than the more languid grace of a town-bred girl. She had a grace of her own, but to the trained eye, it was too unconventional; it had

the swiftness of the swallow's flight, the aloofness of the untamable woodland bird. Her complexion was as brown as a gypsy's, melting into a rich crimson in the cheeks, intensified by the deeper red of her curved mouth with its rather pouting lips; her eyes were dark and brilliant, between two rows of curling black lashes; her hair, cut short and slightly parted on one side, like a boy's, curled all over her small and prettily-shaped head. There were dimples in her cheek and chin which seemed, somehow, to match the sparkle in her eyes; but there was none of the plumpness which one might have expected with the physique that she possessed; indeed, she was quite too thin for beauty, and the little nervous brown hands which were clasped before her on the table, were undeniably claw-like. Her face, her figure, her usual attitude, expressed vivacity and eagerness amounting to passion; she could be brilliantly handsome and attractive at times, but she could also sink into absolute insignificance. When she lost her color and her eyes were dim and her small features at rest, she was merely a little plain brown person with a clever look, a shabby frock, and an appearance of age not justified by her three and twenty years. She depended on her health, her spirits, and her surroundings for her good looks.

Arthur Ellison knew this very well, and commented on it to himself as he lay and looked at her and at the room. The rustic background set her off very well, he thought approvingly. Esther's dark head and vivid coloring were finely relieved against the yellow-brown of the paneled wall. It was a pity that she sometimes

lost her color when she was in London. The country air suited her better.

He said so aloud.

"Why?" Esther asked immediately.

"Does it need saying? Your eyes are bright and your color is good: two things which show that you are happy and prosperous."

"Is it not time that I was prosperous after the years of hard work I have had?"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders. "Prosperity does not always follow on toil," he remarked sententiously. "Look at me."

"I do look at you," said Esther laughing. "And I observe no special signs of toil about you."

She laughed, though with some reserve of manner, as though she thought more than she meant to say; but Arthur remained grave. He altered his position, bringing his feet to the floor and resting his head on one hand while he kept his eyes on his brown boots as though in profound meditation concerning their shape and color. During the short silence that followed, Esther observed him keenly, and somewhat furtively. There was a touch of anxiety in the knit of her eyebrows and the set of her red lips.

He was not in her eyes an unpleasing specimen of humanity to contemplate, but he could not be called a handsome man. He was rather under middle-height, and slightly built; his hair and skin were fair, and his eyes a brilliant but somewhat chilly blue. The attractiveness of his appearance consisted chiefly in the refinement and intelligence of his face; his features

were clearly and delicately cut, and denoted intellect above the average. But it was not a strong face, and it was undeniably a cold one; thereby differing in essentials from that of Esther which expressed warmth, perhaps, first of all, and strength next.

Unlike as they might be, they were first cousins and had been brought up together, until, as their friends and they themselves averred, they were more like brother and sister than cousins. At seventeen and one and twenty respectively, they fell in love with each other, were engaged, and fell out again with remarkable rapidity; the engagement was dissolved, but the habit of comradeship only interrupted and never broken. For a time, however, they saw little of each other. They were alone in the world, and had nobody to interfere with them. Arthur came up to London and plunged into journalism and desultory, and rather Bohemian, literary life; Esther, whose passion was for learning, managed to get a scholarship at a woman's college, and by means of it and by the expenditure of her very small patrimony, secured four years of residence at Oxford. She was almost penniless when she left it, but she had secured a first-class in History, had excellent testimonials, and was confident of her powers of earning her own living. But she was not quite sure whether she could earn a living for Arthur as well as for herself; yet it sometimes seemed to her as if he half expected her to do so.

Well, she was willing to do what she could for him; a woman is always tender to the man whom she even fancies that she has loved; and Esther was no excep-