

YOUTH AT THE PROW

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Youth at the Prow by E. Rentoul Esler

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E. RENTOUL ESLER

**YOUTH AT
THE PROW**

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BY

E. RENTOUL ESLER

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"A MAID OF THE MANSE," "THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS"
"MID GREEN PASTURES," "THE WARDLAWS"
"THE WAY THEY LOVED AT GRIMPAT"



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Youth at the Prow



A PHILANDERER

CHAPTER I

"LIGHT GREY, seven and a half, ladies' size—for myself," he added explanatorily, for Mr Roderick Weston did not want even the little shop girl at a glove counter to think that his female friends were sufficiently ill-bred to have large extremities.

He was a tall, slim, tintless young man, who carried himself easily and walked well, and on that hot, bright July day he had come down the darkened vista of the best draper's shop in Fordham like embodied youth whose vigour was toned down by becoming languor.

He was not a handsome man, and yet there was something about him that interested the general public more than good looks; not anything indescribable or suggestively mysterious, but rather the absence of certain disagreeable characteristics which very worthy people may possess.

Mr Weston had good manners, and dressed well, and had never been known in all his life to be in a hurry or over-heated, was never

jostled in a crowd, or elbowed at a railway station; had never been found at what he considered a disadvantage. His admirers called him gentlemanly and aristocratic-looking, and wondered how, under the sun, he kept himself always up to the mark; his enemies regarded him as an insufferable cad, and hated him for his perfections.

Although only five-and-twenty at this time, Roderick Weston had been more noticed and criticised and studied than many men of more abundant years and greater social importance. Circumstances had placed him midway between two social sets, and idiosyncrasy led him to make himself observed of both.

Hitherto few persons had come in contact with him without entertaining some feeling towards him, either aversion or approval, and it was characteristic of the man that he would rather have inspired dislike than indifference.

Standing by the Fordham draper's counter, testing the strength and elasticity of the gloves submitted to him, he was perfectly conscious that many pairs of eyes regarded him with interest and admiration, and that the girl serving him was fluttering nervously among the cases she displayed, and blushing as she answered him; not that he was asking anything but ordinary questions regarding shades and sizes; not that he had done more than glance at her once out of his clear, colourless eyes; but somehow Maysie Deane felt that he knew exactly what she looked like, and would recognise her a year thereafter if they met again.

This poor little shop girl, with an innocent, plain face, and a sturdy, solid little figure, waited on men daily that were far handsomer

than Roderick Weston—from her point of view, at any rate—men, too, who seemed to regard her more as a human being, and less as an automaton; but it might have been for that very reason that this man made her feel so hot and flurried.

Maysie Deane was always grateful to people who treated her as if she were a lady; not that she fancied herself one, or ever deluded herself into the comfortable faith that she looked like one. She knew that she was honest, and industrious, and independent, and she was clever enough to know that these are good qualities, and to respect herself on the strength of them; but the affluence, and ease, and elegance, the many friends, the hosts of respectful admirers, the wisdom and wit that Maysie considered the exclusive possession of "born ladies"—these were elements in a world which she dreamed about, but knew nothing of experimentally. Of course Maysie called the other shop girls young ladies, and they called her a young lady, but the word in that sense was merely a conversational counter, which no one mistook for a coin.

Now this man who bought three-buttoned gloves of delicate tint for himself, and who had a long, narrow face, a sallow complexion, and slim hands that surely circulated some paler, cooler fluid than blood beneath the smooth skin—this man, no doubt, lived in the world real ladies inhabited!

She was preparing the stranger's little parcel as she thought this, and involuntarily she sighed. In her own way the girl was very happy, but it was a commonplace, plebeian way, and she knew it.