

Emma McChesney & Co.

by

Edna Ferber

Web-Books.Com

Emma McChesney & Co.

1. Broadway To Buenos Aires.....	3
2. Thanks To Miss Morrissey	21
3. A Closer Corporation.....	36
4. Blue Serge.....	50
5. "Hoops, My Dear!".....	64
6. Sisters Under Their Skin.....	81
7. An Etude For Emma	93

1. Broadway To Buenos Aires

The door marked "MRS. MCCHESENEY" was closed. T. A. Buck, president of the Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company, coming gaily down the hall, stopped before it, dismayed, as one who, with a spicy bit of news at his tongue's end, is met with rebuff before the first syllable is voiced. That closed door meant: "Busy. Keep out."

"She'll be reading a letter," T. A. Buck told himself grimly. Then he turned the knob and entered his partner's office.

Mrs. Emma McChesney was reading a letter. More than that, she was poring over it so that, at the interruption, she glanced up in a maddeningly half-cocked manner which conveyed the impression that, while her physical eye beheld the intruder, her mental eye was still on the letter.

"I knew it," said T. A. Buck morosely.

Emma McChesney put down the letter and smiled.

"Sit down--now that you're in. And if you expect me to say, 'Knew what?' you're doomed to disappointment."

T. A. Buck remained standing, both gloved hands clasping his walking stick on which he leaned.

"Every time I come into this office, you're reading the latest scrawl from your son. One would think Jock's letters were deathless masterpieces. I believe you read them at half-hour intervals all week, and on Sunday get 'em all out and play solitaire with them."

Emma McChesney's smile widened frankly to a grin.

"You make me feel like a cash-girl who's been caught flirting with the elevator starter. Have I been neglecting business?"

"Business? No; you've been neglecting me!"

"Now, T. A., you've just come from the tailor's, and I suppose it didn't fit in the back."

"It isn't that," interrupted Buck, "and you know it. Look here! That day Jock went away and we came back to the office, and you said----"

"I know I said it, T. A., but don't remind me of it. That wasn't a fair test. I had just seen Jock leave me to take his own place in the world. You know that my day began and

ended with him. He was my reason for everything. When I saw him off for Chicago that day, and knew he was going there to stay, it seemed a million miles from New York. I was blue and lonely and heart-sick. If the office-boy had thrown a kind word to me I'd have broken down and wept on his shoulder."

Buck, still standing, looked down between narrowed lids at his business partner.

"Emma McChesney," he said steadily, "do you mean that?"

Mrs. McChesney, the straightforward, looked up, looked down, fiddled with the letter in her hand.

"Well--practically yes--that is--I thought, now that you're going to the mountains for a month, it might give me a chance to think--to----"

"And d'you know what I'll do meanwhile, out of revenge on the sex? I've just ordered three suits of white flannel, and I shall break every feminine heart in the camp, regardless-- Oh, say, that's what I came in to tell you! Guess whom I saw at the tailor's?"

"Well, Mr. Bones, whom did you, and so forth?"

"Fat Ed Meyers. I just glimpsed him in one of the fitting-rooms. And they were draping him in white."

Emma McChesney sat up with a jerk.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? There's only one figure like that. He had the thing on and was surveying himself in the mirror--or as much of himself as could be seen in one ordinary mirror. In that white suit, with his red face above it, he looked like those pictures you see labeled, 'Sunrise on Snow-covered Mountain.' "

"Did he see----"

"He dodged when he saw me. Actually! At least, he seems to have the decency to be ashamed of the deal he gave us when he left us flat in the thick of his Middle Western trip and went back to the Sans-Silk Skirt Company. I wanted him to know I had seen him. As I passed, I said, 'You'll mow 'em down in those clothes, Meyers.' " Buck sat down in his leisurely fashion, and laughed his low, pleasant laugh. "Can't you see him, Emma, at the seashore?"

But something in Emma McChesney's eyes, and something in her set, unsmiling face, told him that she was not seeing seashores. She was staring straight at him, straight through him, miles beyond him. There was about her that tense, electric, breathless air

of complete detachment, which always enveloped her when her lightning mind was leaping ahead to a goal unguessed by the slower thinking.

"What's your tailor's name?"

"Name? Trotter. Why?"

Emma McChesney had the telephone operator before he could finish.

"Get me Trotter, the tailor, T-r-o-double- t-e-r. Say I want to speak to the tailor who fits Mr. Ed Meyers, of the Sans-Silk Skirt Company."

T. A. Buck leaned forward, mouth open, eyes wide. "Well, what in the name of----"

"I'll let you know in a minute. Maybe I'm wrong. It's just one of my hunches. But for ten years I sold Featherlooms through the same territory that Ed Meyers was covering for the Sans-Silk Skirt people. It didn't take me ten years to learn that Fat Ed hadn't the decency to be ashamed of any deal he turned, no matter how raw. And let me tell you, T. A.: If he dodged when he saw you it wasn't because he was ashamed of having played us low-down. He was contemplating playing lower-down. Of course, I may be----"

She picked up the receiver in answer to the bell. Then, sweetly, her calm eyes smiling into Buck's puzzled ones:

"Hello! Is this Mr. Meyers' tailor? I'm to ask if you are sure that the grade he selected is the proper weight for the tropics. What? Oh, you say you assured him it was the weight of flannel you always advise for South America. And you said they'd be ready when? Next week? Thank you."

She hung up the receiver. The pupils of her eyes were dilated. Her cheeks were very pink as always under excitement. She stood up, her breath coming rather quickly.

"Hurray for the hunch! It holds. Fat Ed Meyers is going down to South America for the Sans-Silk Company. It's what I've been planning to do for the last six months. You remember I spoke of it. You pooh-poohed the idea. It means hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Sans-Silk people if they get it. But they won't get it."

T. A. Buck stood up suddenly.

"Look here, Emma! If you're----"

"I certainly am. Nothing can stop me. The skirt business has been--well, you know what it's been for the last two years. The South American boats sail twice a month. Fat Ed Meyers' clothes are promised for next week. That means he isn't sailing until week after next. But the next boat sails in three days." She picked up a piece of paper from her

desk and tossed it into Buck's hand. "That's the letter I was reading when you came in. No; don't read it. Let me tell you instead."

Buck threw cane, hat, gloves, and letter on the broad desk, thrust his hands into his pockets, and prepared for argument. But he got only as far as: "But I won't allow it! You couldn't get away in three days, at any rate. And at the end of two weeks you'll have come to your senses, and besides----"

"T. A., I don't mean to be rude. But here are your hat and stick and gloves. It's going to take me just forty-eight hours to mobilize."

"But, Emma, even if you do get in ahead of Meyers, it's an insane idea. A woman can't go down there alone. It isn't safe. It's bad enough for a man to tackle it. Besides, we're holding our own."

"That's just it. When a doctor issues a bulletin to the effect that the patient is holding his own, you may have noticed that the relatives always begin to gather."

"It's a bubble, this South American idea. Oshkosh and Southport and Altoona money has always been good enough for us. If we can keep that trade, we ought to be thankful."

Emma McChesney pushed her hair back from her forehead with one gesture and patted it into place with another. Those two gestures, to one who knew her, meant loss of composure for one instant, followed by the quick regaining of it the next.

"Let's not argue about it now. Suppose we wait until to-morrow--when it's too late. I am thankful for the trade we've got. But I don't want to be narrow about it. My thinking capacity is such that I can stretch it out to cover some things we haven't got yet. I've been reading up on South America."

"Reading!" put in Buck hotly. "What actual first-hand information can you get about a country from books?"

"Well, then, I haven't only been reading. I've been talking to everyone I could lay my hands on who has been down there and who knows. Those South American women love dress--especially the Argentines. And do you know what they've been wearing? Petticoats made in England! You know what that means. An English woman chooses a petticoat like she does a husband--for life. It isn't only a garment. It's a shelter. It's built like a tent. If once I can introduce the T. A. Buck Featherloom petticoat and knickerbocker into sunny South America, they'll use those English and German petticoats for linoleum floor-coverings. Heaven knows they'll fit the floor better than the human form!"

But Buck was unsmiling. The muscles of his jaw were tense.

"I won't let you go. Understand that! I won't allow it!"

"Tut, tut, T. A.! What is this? Cave-man stuff?"

"Emma, I tell you it's dangerous. It isn't worth the risk, no matter what it brings us."

Emma McChesney struck an attitude, hand on heart. " `Heaven will protect the working girrul,' " she sang.

Buck grabbed his hat.

"I'm going to wire Jock."

"All right! That'll save me fifty cents. Do you know what he'll wire back? `Go to it. Get the tango on its native tairn'--or words to that effect."

"Emma, use a little logic and common sense!"

There was a note in Buck's voice that brought a quick response from Mrs. McChesney. She dropped her little air of gayety. The pain in his voice, and the hurt in his eyes, and the pleading in his whole attitude banished the smile from her face. It had not been much of a smile, anyway. T. A. knew her genuine smiles well enough to recognize a counterfeit at sight. And Emma McChesney knew that he knew. She came over and laid a hand lightly on his arm.

"T. A., I don't know anything about logic. It is a hot-house plant. But common sense is a field flower, and I've gathered whole bunches of it in my years of business experience. I'm not going down to South America for a lark. I'm going because the time is ripe to go. I'm going because the future of our business needs it. I'm going because it's a job to be handled by the most experienced salesman on our staff. And I'm just that. I say it because it's true. Your father, T. A., used to see things straighter and farther than any business man I ever knew. Since his death made me a partner in this firm, I find myself, when I'm troubled or puzzled, trying to see a situation as he'd see it if he were alive. It's like having an expert stand back of you in a game of cards, showing you the next move. That's the way I'm playing this hand. And I think we're going to take most of the tricks away from Fat Ed Meyers."

T. A. Buck's eyes traveled from Emma McChesney's earnest, glowing face to the hand that rested on his arm. He reached over and gently covered that hand with his own.

"I suppose you must be right, little woman. You always are. Dad was the founder of this business. It was the pride of his life. That word `founder' has two meanings. I never want to be responsible for its second meaning in connection with this concern."

"You never will be, T. A."

"Not with you at the helm." He smiled rather sadly. "I'm a good, ordinary, common seaman. But you've got imagination, and foresight, and nerve, and daring, and that's the stuff that admirals are made of."

"Bless you, T. A.! I knew you'd see the thing as I do after the first shock was over. It has always been nip and tuck between the Sans-Silk Company and us. You gave me the hint that showed me their plans. Now help me follow it up."

Buck picked up his hat, squared his shoulders and fumbled with his gloves like a bashful schoolboy.

"You--you couldn't kill two birds with one stone on this trip, could you, Mrs. Mack?"

Mrs. McChesney, back at her desk again, threw him an inquiring glance over her shoulder.

"You might make it a combination honeymoon and Featherloom expedition."

"T. A. Buck!" exclaimed Emma McChesney. Then, as Buck dodged for the door: "Just for that, I'm going to break this to you. You know that I intended to handle the Middle Western territory for one trip, or until we could get a man to take Fat Ed Meyers' place."

"Well?" said Buck apprehensively.

"I leave in three days. Goodness knows how long I'll be gone! A business deal down there is a ceremony. And--you won't need any white-flannel clothes in Rock Island, Illinois."

Buck, aghast, faced her from the doorway.

"You mean, I----"

"Just that," smiled Emma McChesney pleasantly. And pressed the button that summoned the stenographer.

In the next forty-eight hours, Mrs. McChesney performed a series of mental and physical calisthenics that would have landed an ordinary woman in a sanatorium. She cleaned up with the thoroughness and dispatch of a housewife who, before going to the seashore, forgets not instructions to the iceman, the milkman, the janitor, and the maid. She surveyed her territory, behind and before, as a general studies troops and countryside before going into battle; she foresaw factory emergencies, dictated office policies, made sure of staff organization like the business woman she was. Out in the stock-room, under her supervision, there was scientifically packed into sample-trunks and cases a line of Featherloom skirts and knickers calculated to dazzle Brazil and entrance Argentina. And into her own personal trunk there went a wardrobe, each

article of which was a garment with a purpose. Emma McChesney knew the value of a smartly tailored suit in a business argument.

T. A. Buck canceled his order at the tailor's, made up his own line for the Middle West, and prepared to storm that prosperous and important territory for the first time in his business career.

The South American boat sailed Saturday afternoon. Saturday morning found the two partners deep in one of those condensed, last-minute discussions. Mrs. McChesney opened a desk drawer, took out a leather-covered pocket notebook, and handed it to Buck. A tiny smile quivered about her lips. Buck took it, mystified.

"Your last diary?"

"Something much more important. I call it 'The Salesman's Who's Who.' Read it as you ought your Bible."

"But what?" Buck turned the pages wonderingly. He glanced at a paragraph, frowned, read it aloud, slowly.

"Des Moines, Iowa, Klein & Company. Miss Ella Sweeney, skirt buyer. Old girl. Skittish. Wants to be entertained. Take her to dinner and the theater."

He looked up, dazed. "Good Lord, what is this? A joke?"

"Wait until you see Ella; you won't think it's a joke. She'll buy only your smoothest numbers, ask sixty days' dating, and expect you to entertain her as you would your rich aunt."

Buck returned to the little book dazedly. He flipped another leaf--another. Then he read in a stunned sort of voice:

"Sam Bloom, Paris Emporium, Duluth. See Sadie."

He closed the book. "Say, see here, Emma, do you mean to----"

"Sam is the manager," interrupted Mrs. McChesney pleasantly, "and he thinks he does the buying, but the brains of that business is a little girl named Sadie Harris. She's a wonder. Five years from now, if she doesn't marry Sam, she'll be one of those ten-thousand-a-year foreign buyers. Play your samples up to Sammy, but quote your prices down to Sadie. Read the next one, T. A."

Buck read on, his tone lifeless:

"Miss Sharp. Berg Brothers, Omaha. Strictly business. Known among the trade as the human cactus. Canceled a ten-thousand-dollar order once because the grateful salesman called her `girlie.' Stick to skirts."

Buck slapped the book smartly against the palm of his hand.

"Do you mean to tell me that you made this book out for me? Do you mean to say that I have to cram on this like a kid studying for exams? That I'll have to cater to the personality of the person I'm selling to? Why--it's--it's----"

Emma McChesney nodded calmly.

"I don't know how this trip of yours is going to affect the firm's business, T. A. But it's going to be a liberal education for you. You'll find that you'll need that little book a good many times before you're through. And while you're following its advice, do this: forget that your name is Buck, except for business purposes; forget that your family has always lived in a brownstone mausoleum in Seventy-second street; forget that you like your chops done just so, and your wine at such-and-such a temperature; get close to your trade. They're an awfully human lot, those Middle Western buyers. Don't chuck them under the chin, but smile on 'em. And you've got a lovely smile, T. A."

Buck looked up from the little leather book. And, as he gazed at Emma McChesney, the smile appeared and justified its praise.

"I'll have this to comfort me, anyway, Emma. I'll know that while I'm smirking on the sprightly Miss Sweeney, your face will be undergoing various agonizing twists in the effort to make American prices understood by an Argentine who can't speak anything but Spanish."

"Maybe I am short on Spanish, but I'm long on Featherlooms. I may not know a senora from a chili con carne, but I know Featherlooms from the waistband to the hem." She leaned forward, dimpling like fourteen instead of forty. "And you've noticed--haven't you, T. A.--that I've got an expressive countenance."

Buck leaned forward, too. His smile was almost gone.

"I've noticed a lot of things, Emma McChesney. And if you persist in deviling me for one more minute, I'm going to mention a few."

Emma McChesney surveyed her cleared desk, locked the top drawer with a snap, and stood up.

"If you do I'll miss my boat. Just time to make Brooklyn. Suppose you write 'em."

That Ed Meyers might know nothing of her sudden plans, she had kept the trip secret. Besides Buck and the office staff, her son Jock was the only one who knew. But she

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

