

THREE LOVING LADIES

By
THE HON. MRS. DOWDALL

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXIII

TO
KATIE BURRILL

THREE LOVING LADIES

CHAPTER I

Messrs. Burridge and Co's pantehnicons bumped majestically along the streets of Millport early in the morning. Mud seemed to be unaccountably falling from the sky through a close filter of smoke draped high above the town; for although there was no fog, the great stucco offices on either side of the street were slimy with coffee-coloured moisture, and the people who hurried along looked cold and slippery, like panic-stricken snails compelled to leave their shelters. The same mysterious mud oozed also from below the paving stones, and would continue to ooze long after the sun had penetrated the smoke filter and made the houses and the pedestrians comparatively dry.

Millport is one of the largest cities of the empire, and one of the richest. I have never heard of anyone living there for choice, or for any reason but an alleged opportunity for making money. Those who settle there are in the habit of transplanting themselves at regular intervals; removing to a house further away from the premises to which the breadwinner carries a neat bag or attaché case every weekday morning, between eight and ten. The removals mark a rise in the social scale, and are celebrated by new responsibilities, in the addition of servants, greenhouses, garages and acres of ground requiring "upkeep." The heights of Elysium are, in the end, reached by train. Between the main railway station and the outskirts of wealth, lie nearly two miles of shops, and a professional quarter where the inner darkness of blocks and terraces shades into the dim

glory of semi-detached houses. The next stage of grandeur is seen in the increase of laurel bushes and gravel paths round each semi-detached pair. When the flower beds in front, and the tennis lawns at the back, reach a certain standard of importance they flow into each other by connecting paths between the buildings, and each house then stands alone, detached, in the full radiance of encircling "grounds."

It was nearly ten o'clock before Messrs. Burrige's stately pantehnicons reached their destination, a large, square, cinnamon-coloured house, standing in about two acres of ground on the borders of Millport's largest and most satisfactory park. General Fulton, who had taken a five years' lease of it, wondered many times what had induced him to leave his comfortable little house in Westminster. He had meant to retire from the army at the end of the war, and had been turning over in his mind many agreeable plans for the future, when he was offered the command of a military district of which Millport was the centre. In a rash moment he confided the offer to his wife, hoping for some entertainment from her habit of commenting seriously on matters which he regarded as trifling. To his surprise and disgust, she surpassed his expectation, and pointed out unanswerable reasons why the command must be accepted. She confronted him with facts about his income, which had hitherto been sufficient. But he neither read the papers nor practised arithmetic, and, as she observed at the end of the argument, "seemed to suppose that girls' clothes grew on their backs." His reply to this last shot produced a silence which he knew to be ominous of a settled programme; he knew that he had thrown away his last chance by "saying something coarse," and that any further excuses would be

flung unregarded into the flame of her spiritual nature (a possession which is supposed by women who boast of it, to guarantee also a sound business judgment). He appealed in vain to his daughters Evangeline and Teresa. Evangeline said carelessly, "Oh, do let's, father," and left the room to post a letter. She informed the maid whom she passed on the stairs that, "we are all going to Millport, and isn't it fun?" Teresa ran her fingers through her untidy hair, done up for the first time, and said, "If it is by the sea couldn't we have a cottage?"

General Fulton, avoiding his wife's eye, mixed himself a whisky and soda. It was the only way to drown his bitter regret at having ever mentioned the appointment. "You'll never get another house as nice as this," he suggested feebly. "I've been to Millport once, and it's a filthy place. There was a great black church opposite the hotel, and drunken old women poking stale fish about." Teresa shivered, but said nothing.

"I don't suppose those poor old women ever thought of drinking until they were taught by their husbands," said Mrs. Fulton, glancing at the tumbler he held, but she added hurriedly, before he had time to protest, "and I believe it is perfectly necessary to poke fish before you can tell whether it is fresh or not. You would see that kind of thing in any town you went to, Cyril. And, anyhow, one doesn't live down there. Father and mother lived in Millport for years, and I know father said everyone lived right out."

"Well, I don't think I want the thing," he said bravely. "I am not going to take it." He gathered up his morning's correspondence. "I'm out to lunch, Sue."

“Do you mind paying some money into the bank for me as you go past?” she said gently. “The last quarter hasn’t been nearly enough. I suppose it is the income tax and the price of everything.”

General Fulton looked at her in exasperated admiration as she sat there, quietly warming her toes in front of the fire, meditative and candid; the typical gentle wife who patiently adds up the problems of life for her husband, and leaves his wisdom to unravel the answer.

“Why didn’t you say at the beginning that we were in debt?” he asked.

“I don’t know that we are, dear,” she said, looking at him in perfect innocence. “I only said that I couldn’t manage on what you gave me. I don’t know what your shares come to; it is all Greek to me.”

“Well, have it your own way, damn it,” returned her husband. “Perhaps you’ve inherited business instincts, and they always go with turpitude.”

“I wish you would think a little of the children sometimes,” she said, glancing at Teresa who sat lost in thought by the window, hearing what they said, and trying in vain to understand what the argument really meant.

“Do you want to go to Millport, Dicky?” her father asked kindly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It is on the sea, isn’t it?”

“It’s on shrimps,” he replied, “and docks—things that open and shut at you—and it is as black as night, and people walk about with bread under their arms. Well, good-bye, dear; your mother says we’re going, and she knows—she cares—God bless her.” He kissed Teresa affectionately, and left the room.

And so, the course of time showed Messrs. Burridge’s pantehnicons casting the contents of Cyril’s happy little home into the ornate cinnamon jaws of a house that he said made him think somehow of the late Prince Albert. “The sort of thing he’d have built for the head gamekeeper, Sue,” he remarked after lunch on their first day there. “And the park is the very thing for ‘interments’; you could see them winding all the way from end to end. I hope it will come up to your expectations in the matter of wealthy consorts for the girls; or is that not part of the scheme?”

“I don’t like joking about marriage, Cyril, you know that,” she replied, “it may mean so much to a girl.” She sighed. She had been very beautiful twenty years before, and would have been so still, but for the fact that years of quiet enjoyment of her own skill in getting what she wanted, and a conscious superiority over people who “worried about what couldn’t be helped” had obliterated the delicate lines of her face, and given to the fleeting dimple, which used to be the despair and delight of her lovers, the coarser appearance of a crease in a satin cushion.

“It may mean something to her partner, too, if you come to that,” returned Cyril. “It will to Evangeline’s, I should think. I wouldn’t be in his shoes for something. She’s like you, Sue, in

some ways; with all the naughty little point of the story left out. I never knew such a rough rider in the field of conversation. She'd never have been able to stuff me with the stories you did about the injury to your pure young mind when I kissed you. Lord! think of it!"

Mrs. Fulton kept a dignified silence for a minute or two, and then sighed again, as if to waft away the possibility of looking at Nature's beauties with a man who had been blind from birth. "How did you like the people you met to-day?" she asked.

"Oh, some of them weren't bad. Hatton will be here to breakfast. He'll always be about the place, so I hope you'll like him; he's my A.D.C. And all their wives will be round soon, I suppose, to pay their respects. Hatton hasn't got one I'm glad to say; though I daresay he'll be as preoccupied with the subject as if he had. I wish I had gone into the Navy instead of the Army."

"Why?" she asked, though she knew that the drift of what he was going to say would be somehow unflattering to herself.

"Because one's subordinates have always got a neat woman in lodgings somewhere, and they just clear off in their spare time and keep themselves employed until one meets them again. Their wives don't litter about the place and fight with each other."

"I don't know how any woman can care to be a mere tool like that," she replied. "It must make them so one-sided."

"Yes," he said, "but think of the feelings of the happy man who can say, 'This little side is all for me,' and knows that she

has no other to give to one who might like to have it. Why, it would make life a different thing. Where are the girls, by the way?"

"I think they are arranging their rooms and showing the servants where to put things. They seem to be the most curious creatures that we have got; but it was so difficult to find well trained ones. They call me 'Mrs. Fulton,' and tell me what they have been accustomed to. I think I shall engage a housekeeper, Cyril. I do hate explaining, and these creatures want to argue about everything."

"Can't the girls do it?" he asked.

"Oh no; they have other things to do. Besides, Evangeline turns everything upside down. I had the greatest difficulty in getting the dining-room table put where I wanted it. Of course I want the dears to have everything as they like, but I do wish sometimes they would be a little more help."

"Oh, well, we managed all right in the old place."

"Yes, but then these servants won't do nearly so much," she complained, "and they have more to do as it is. I must say I think it is only right that we should consider them more than we used to do. It must be so dreadful to work all day. I am sure that new girl Strickland would be more satisfied and likely to stop if you kept your room tidier, Cyril."

Evangeline poked her head round the door. "Father," she asked, "can I leave your books and have a lesson on the car from that magnificent Fitz-Augustus person of yours? He says he is going some messages for you, and he wouldn't mind—"

“Anything you like,” said her father, “so long as I don’t know anything about it; you can’t drive without a licence. Also, if you’ll make Dicky go for a walk with me. I must go into the town, and I must have some exercise, and I won’t walk alone.”

“I don’t think we’ll do that business after all,” he said as he left the house with Teresa half an hour later. “It only means a small additional coolness to the heels of an unknown gentleman in an office. They’ll warm up again to-morrow, like a lodging house chop. You’ve never lived in lodgings have you?”

“No, never.”

“Well, never do. When I lived in lodgings and used to be a bit off colour in the morning I used to see ornaments about everywhere. I remember I once saw a china dog, with a basket of forget-me-nots in its mouth, on the Colonel’s table in the middle of his papers, and I’m hanged if I know to this day whether it was a real one or not. I could never make up my mind about it, though it gave me such a turn that I went round to the chemist and got something.”

“What else,” asked Teresa. “That’s lovely.”

“Oh, I don’t remember anything special; but they never clean the mustard pot in those places—that was another thing. They’ve no sense. And I never could find the matches. They’d be at the bottom of a vase with dried grass in it, or that kind of thing. I think this ought to take us down to the docks. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes, awfully,” she agreed, and they walked some way in silence. “They are nicer houses down here if they weren’t so dirty, aren’t they?” she said presently, looking up at the windows as they passed along a street to which some bygone architect had bequeathed an indestructible dignity. Their restful proportions and large windows gave her a sudden sense of relief after the turrets and variegated excrescences, coloured bricks disposed in geometrical patterns, and twisted ironwork that adhered to the semi-detached quarter they had passed through.

“Yes,” said her father. “I expect all the old turpitudes—pious founders and all that—lived down here. Our place was probably a marsh or a coal mine or something, till the influence of the Late Lamented overtook it. A man I met yesterday was talking about slaves. They were up to all sorts of games down at their warehouses. The negro still flourishes apparently,” he added, as a group of black men passed them and turned down a narrow street, where tousled women stood at their doors, and children screamed in the gutter. They crossed over a thoroughfare at which main streets intersected one another, and accommodation for sailors was advertised by mission rooms, clubs, public-houses, slop shops, and reiterated offers of beds. Blocks of shops, shipping bureaus and warehouses split up further on into single gigantic buildings, the offices of the state and of great trading companies, full as beehives, and glittering with prosperity; all the organism of a seaport in touch with continents. The sea air was fresh in their faces.

“That’s good,” said Cyril. “We’ll go and hang about.”

They went precariously down a sloping bridge, slippery with mud from the feet of a stream of hurrying workers intent on their home affairs which lay on the other side of the river, and stood by a line of iron chains that stretched indefinitely along the gently heaving planks of the stage to which the ferry boats were moored. A red sun hung above the chimneys on the opposite side in a slight fog that was creeping up the river, and, from mysterious shapes behind this veil, hooters, sirens and clanging bells answered one another in warnings to the capering atoms of whom the drowning of even one would affect, in some degree, the life of the city.

“Do you know,” said Teresa presently, “that I haven’t seen a single person—what we used to call ‘person’—since we came out; nothing but the kind of people who make crowds.”

“That’s because you don’t know them,” said Cyril. “I saw a millionaire get off the boat a minute ago, ‘walking quite unaffectedly,’ as the newspapers say.”

“No, but the dressed people,” said Teresa, “you know what I mean. Where are they?”

“My dear, how should I know?” he replied carelessly. “That’s what I tried to explain to your mother before we came; I thought it would put her off. But I shouldn’t be in the least surprised if she took up philanthropy.”

“Do you mean that she’d go on committees?” Teresa asked awestruck.

“She might quite well, and if I were the committee I should just tell her what I wanted done, and leave her to do it her own way. You’d find it would work out in the end.”

“But those kind of people are generally so interfering,” said Teresa. “Mother is not.”

“No, but she is a master of strategy,” said Cyril. “I used to read about Napoleon when we were taught strategy. Did you ever hear of his battles?”

“You mean Waterloo?” she asked.

“Yes, but that didn’t come off. His great success was before then. She may meet her Wellington on the playing fields of Millport for all you know. We shall see. Let’s go back to tea. Have a taxi?”

“No, let’s go on the top of a tram,” said Teresa. “I want to have that rod thing arranged over my head. Did you see the conductor running round with a string and hooking the little wheel on at the back?”

“Well, I don’t mind,” he conceded, “but the smell will knock you down.”

“What smell?” asked Teresa.

“Demos, a crowd,” he replied, as they made their slow progress between the jostling workers who still poured uninterruptedly across the bridge, “see also ‘Demosthenes’ and ‘demon’— and ‘demi-monde’,” he added reflectively, as a whiff of strong scent struck him from a girl with a sharp elbow.

“What a fuss you make about smells and things,” she said. “They’re all life. They mean all sorts of things.”

“Well, they don’t mean anything I want,” he grumbled. “I believe everybody in this damned place wears fish next the skin.” This was said with profound disgust as they took their places on a little seat at the top of the tram staircase, and other swarms of people with pale, serious faces and drab clothing pushed past his knees to the glass shelter beyond. The windows became fogged with human breath and clouds of cheap tobacco, and as the sun disappeared in the drifting fog from the river, the mud began to filter down once more on to the roofs, and to ooze up from under the stones of the pavement. The car swayed under its heavy load, with occasional grinding squeals, stopping every few hundred yards to take up new burdens in place of those who had reached their destination. Teresa watched the squalid forms and weary faces with a new-born ecstasy. Some veiled desire, a love for something unknown, which had led her in pursuit for as long as she could remember, had stopped and shown itself to her for a moment. Then it fled again from her reach.

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

