

# The EASTER LADY

BY J.F. HENDERSON



**V**ALDEAN brought his automobile to a sudden stop in front of the village church, and listened with bated breath. Rising high above the mellow growl of the organ a voice floated out to his enraptured ears—a clear, thrilling, triumphant voice, singing Handel's stirring aria, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

"Her voice, by all that is wonderful!" he muttered, with an eager light in his eyes. "Surely I can't be mistaken. It must be the Easter lady!"

He sat there with a rapt expression on his face until the portals of the church swung open and the congregation spilled out into the April sunshine, bringing color and animation to the scene. He scanned the crowd with searching glances as it slowly melted away. The last to leave the church was the gray-haired rector, and walking by his side as he came down the walk was a beautiful young woman. Valdean's heart gave a bound as he looked at the girl. She was a dainty, willow creature, her face lit up with bewitching smiles, her dark eyes sparkling vivaciously under her white-plumed hat.

"It is she," whispered the man in the automobile. "I never saw her in my life before, but I know it is she!"

The rector and his companion came nearer. They were about to pass the car when the girl suddenly glanced up and stopped.

"Why, this is my car, I believe," she said blithely to the rector. "I'm to dine with Mrs. Camperdown, you know. Good-by, Mr. Roden, and tell Mrs. Roden I shall see her soon."

The rector lifted his hat with a profound bow and walked on up the village street, while the girl turned to Valdean with pretty assurance.

"This is the Camperdown car, is it not?"

In an instant Valdean was standing on the curb beside her, hat in hand.

"Of course," he said glibly. "It is anything you wish. That is—er—Let me assist you, madam. Take this forward seat, please, beside the driver."

The girl was on the step when she hesitated, looked the car over doubtfully and turned a half-frightened face toward Valdean. Her cheeks were flaming.

"Am I making a mistake?" she faltered.

"Not at all, I assure you," he stoutly protested.

"I am Miss Drummond, you know?"

"Certainly, madam."

"Mrs. Camperdown wrote me that she would have her automobile waiting in front of the church, but—I think—I know she said it would be a limousine."

"The limousine is out of order this morning," lied Valdean cheerfully, as he gently pushed the girl into a seat and hastily occupied the one beside her. "So it had to be this or nothing. You will find it just as comfortable, I think."

He put the car in motion, and it glided down the street with a soft, purring sound.

"Now," he added, after a pause, "if you will kindly tell me which way I am to go—"

"Which way?" exclaimed the girl. "Why, direct to the Camperdown farm, of course."

"Yes, of course, but—but I haven't the slightest idea where that is, you see."

The girl stared at him as if she doubted his sanity.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me who you are?" she demanded, coldly.

"Richard Valdean, at your service. My father is a well-known banker in the city—Sylvester Valdean, by name. Possibly you have heard of him. I was out for a spin in my machine, and happened to be in front of the church, and—and there was no other vehicle in sight, and—and you couldn't walk, you know—I could not let you walk—"

He choked in his eagerness, and paused abruptly.

"I suppose I ought to be terribly indignant," she said, suppressing her merriment, "but really I cannot be otherwise than grateful to you for this kindness. You are very obliging, I am sure. Besides, the mistake was mine in the beginning. Mrs. Camperdown lives two miles out in the country, and you are going in the right direction, Mr. Valdean." She hesitated a moment, and then asked: "Were you waiting for anybody at the church?"

"Yes, I was waiting for you," he replied, simply.

"For me?" she exclaimed.

"I heard your voice, you know—heard you singing that beautiful aria, and I stopped to listen. I knew it was the voice of the Easter lady, and I was waiting there to see you come out."

"The Easter lady?"

"You are not wholly unknown to me, Mrs. Drummond, although I confess I never saw you until to-day," said Valdean, slowly. "Last Easter I chanced to be at St. Mark's church in the city, and there I heard you sing for the first time. I know it was you, for I could not be mistaken in the voice. I did not see you, nor was I able to find out who you were or where

you lived, but your voice has haunted me for a whole year. In my thoughts, in my dreams, you have been known to me only as the Easter lady; but now—at last—"

He checked himself, and deliberately began to turn the vehicle into a cross-road leading at right angles from the one they were following. The girl quickly laid a small gloved hand on his arm.

"No, no!" she cried. "not that way. Keep straight on. Mrs. Camperdown lives—"

"Mrs. Camperdown can wait," said Valdean firmly as the car shot into the new road at an increased rate of speed. "I am not ready to take you to Mrs. Camperdown yet. I have waited a whole year for this opportunity; do you think I am going to turn you over to Mrs. Camperdown so soon?"

Miss Drummond sank helplessly back in her seat. He knew she was staring fixedly at him, and he half-expected an outburst of expostulation, but he did not turn his head.

"Am I being kidnaped?" she asked at last; and the humorous note in her voice assured him that his bold move was being condoned.

Valdean's face brightened with a quick gleam of excited pleasure.

"Then you will let me drive you to town?"

"Indeed it will be a great favor to me. I hope it is not asking too much of you."

"Oh, I shall be delighted. And we can dine at the Red Eagle inn, which is directly on the way, and still get home before nightfall."

The ice was broken; it was astonishing how quickly these young people arrived at a mutual and cordial understanding. By the time the Red Eagle inn loomed up before them they were chatting as gaily and unreservedly as if they had known each other for

years. They dined cozily and happily at the inn, consuming much more time than was necessary in the performance, and then taking their places in the car once more, they resumed their journey toward the city.

"I was sure something portentous would happen to-day," said Valdean, enthusiastically, as they bowled along the highway.

"And has anything portentous happened?" asked Miss Drummond, curiously.

"Surely. Nothing could be more significant than this chance meeting between you and me."

"But—does it portend anything?"

"To me it does. It holds a beautiful promise. It is the fate of the Valdeans, enthusiastically, as they bowled along the highway.

"Easter is strangely mixed up with the destinies of the Valdeans. My father met my mother for the first time on Easter day. My grandfather and grandmother first knew of each other's existence on an Easter morning, and they were married the same evening. It was the tricky spirit of that festival that brought my great-grandparents together nearly a hundred years ago. As far back as the record goes the members of my family have all met their affinities at Easter time. Will you contend, Miss Drummond—Margaret—that our meeting to-day has no meaning for the future?"

She gave him a quick, frightened look. Then the warm color streamed into her face and neck, and her eyes dropped.

"Might it not mean," he continued with desperate earnestness, "that we are both controlled by the same fate that rules in the Valdean family. Might it not mean that you and I—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the girl, but her voice was very faint and tremulous.

"Will you let me hope, Margaret?" he whispered again.

She slowly shook her head. "We have known each other so short a time," she protested.

"We have known each other for five hours," said Valdean, looking at his watch. "What does it matter? It is fate. At least, tell me that I may hope."

She was silent a long time; but at last she sighed softly and lifted her eyes trustfully to his.

"Yes, I—I think you may hope—"

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

Richard.

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