

THE CONFESSIONS OF A WOMAN ROGUE

A True Document of Wonderful Human Interest

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PART I.

I AM thirty-eight years old and I have a criminal record of twelve years. My face is in the Rogues' Gallery in New York. Scotland Yard gave me a weary chase, and for years the police of Paris and Berlin were nightmares to me. I have tasted the bitterness of prison life, having been tried and convicted for forgery in Chicago.

I make this bold statement neither in a spirit of bravado nor as a seeker after sympathy. As I would tell a father confessor the story of those blackened years, truly and as simply as their complexity will permit. I here set forth the narrative.

Scissors there be in plenty to cry that such a tale of woman's degradation will serve no good purpose. But living as I have, through almost every phase of life, as you will presently see, I have learned that even the most sordid story can point a moral.

My reformation comes through no religious enthusiasm. I know no creed, and since I was ten years old have never attended a religious service except while I was in prison. Nor am I a would-be reformer. I am just a woman whose veneer of crime did not stifle that longing for a woman's blitheness, the love of an honest man, home and children.

Sometimes it was mighty hard to keep that little flicker alive, but it was the one human thing in my life, and I felt that if I let that go I would go down to the lowest dregs. I told the prison chaplain about it one day, and the way he took my hand in his and the things he told me were sweeter than water to the thirsty traveller. From that day I got a fresh grip on my little shred of hope, and though I had hard running and stumbled more than once after the prison gates were opened, I won my blitheness. I have a husband who knows my past but loves me devotedly; I have a home, and, joy of joys, I have a son! To you women who have always been good these three things may seem commonplace, but to me their possession is a blessed miracle for which I lift up my heart daily in joy and gratitude.

Before I turn back the years to what to me was the beginning of things the story of my minor must have a place, as my face has played no inconsiderable part in my career. I have been called beautiful; at twenty I passed for sixteen, at thirty-eight my most severe critic would tax me with only thirty years. My gay little French mother bestowed upon me great, dark eyes, a laughter-loving mouth filled with small white teeth, and a spirit of unquenchable youth. I am slender but not tall, have small hands and feet, and my father's gentle blood has etched my features into lines of refinement.

My mother was a dancer in the Kirsalfy ballets, my father was a young man who belonged to a wealthy old family. They had neglected the formality of a wedding ceremony and my arrival was doubtless far from welcome. These details I learned in after years, though I have never been quite clear as to who tided me over the period of my early infancy. Certain it is that my mother did not burden herself with the cares of the nursery. My father I only knew from a little faded photograph given to me after my mother's death.

My first memory dates back to a convent, where I was one of many blue aproned children. The ringing of a bell and the marching in line ordered our days in ceaseless monotony. In the morning a great clanging ended our dreams and we hurried into our clothes, standing in line while the monitors washed our faces, brushed our hair and fastened refractory buttons. Another clang and we marched to prayers, then on to breakfast of bread and milk, on to the schoolroom and on and on to the various tasks of the day, the bell ringing out at every interval until bedtime found the silent, joyless line with measured step headed for the dormitory.

When I was in prison, robed in the garb of shame and forever marching from one task to another, I harked me back to those blue clad days of childhood so far away and yet so like in the sickening routine. Now when I think of those sad faced little ones a surging pity fills my heart and I toss my boy until he crows and gurgles and register a vow that one child at least shall have his full portion of laughter and sunshine.

One day a wonderful little lady came to the convent and took me away. She was young, and I was so awed by her beauty and the gay ribbons and feathers that bedecked her that I could not remember to call her mother. I know now that the home my mother took me to was untidy and tawdry, but in it I learned to laugh and to play and blossomed out amid the gay chatter of mother's visitors, who came in and out at all hours with an entire absence of ceremony.

I lived with mother for five years. When I was almost ten she died, and one of mother's visitors, whom I had been taught to call "Uncle Jack," took me home with him and my education began.

That no fault of the grievous years shall be laid upon my mother, I must pause to tell you the impress she made upon my life. I have thought it all out since, and I look upon the few years with her as the haven of my maturity. Although she did not lavish upon me any great amount of affection, and certainly did not discipline me or teach me any of the things mothers usually impart to their children, she did teach me to meet the upsets of fate with a brave front and smiling lips.

I have often heard her say, "Laugh, troubles, the world does not like sad people." That she lived up to that precept I know, for often we were hungry and cold, especially when mother became ill and could not dance any more. Her face grew white and pinched and her eyes looked very big and bright, but even to the end she would try to sit up and laugh and chatter with the dancing girls and queer looking men who came to our tiny room. When I saw her after her eyes had closed for the last time the smile still hovered about her lips.

I have known a lot of ballet girls since, and they all seem possessed of that generous quality that prompted those Kirsalfy girls to share their slender purses with mother and me. If their moral standard is more lax than the accepted one it is because they have never been taught to think beyond their toes. Their lives are frightful grinds and the reaction turns them into irresponsible children, so my first impression of women was that to live from day to day, heedless of the future, and to follow the guidance of any one who was kind enough to do the thinking, was a very satisfactory arrangement for a woman's life.

And so we come to "Uncle Jack." Jacques Lutreau is the name he went by at that time. I am going to give Jacques Lutreau the benefit of the doubt, when I say that he took me home with him without any definite plans for my future. Sometimes in bitterness of spirit I have been tempted to think otherwise, but in my life there has been no time for hatred, malice or recriminations born of an uncharitable spirit. In any event, no one else wanted me or would take me, so of the two evils left to choose from, I chose with Jacques Lutreau or a charity institution—well, possibly I drew the long end after all.

Lutreau's home, after our one small, poorly furnished room, seemed a luxurious affair. As a matter of fact it was a fairly comfortable flat, three flights up, over a grocery store. A living room, with an alcove, where Lutreau slept, a bathroom and a combination kitchen and dining room, held out before me a vista of comfort of which I had never dreamed. But I was too heartbroken to care about the new things. I cried my lonely little heart out, as only a child cast out alone into the world can cry. My poor little butterfly mother, whose wings were broken so soon, was a dear and beautiful reality to me after those negative days in the convent.

It will give you a glimpse into the contradictions of Lutreau's character when I tell you he gathered up all of mother's trinkets and poor little souvenirs and arranged them in my room; even her dancing shoes and frock of fringed gauze were carefully put in a box and laid on my dresser. He also told me of my father and gave me the worn photograph. For a little while he left me alone with my grief. He was very quiet and walked the floor uneasily, but one night a lot of men came in. Next morning when I awoke they were still playing cards, and after that Lutreau grew more like his former self.

He was disgusted beyond measure and gave way to a volcanic explosion of French imprecations when he discovered that I could only read by spelling out the words, and could not write at all. Lutreau was highly educated, master of several languages and an omnivorous reader. He took me in hand and taught me daily to spell good purpose that at fifteen I was reading Balzac and De Maupassant in the original. But I must not go ahead of my story.

The lessons followed the vagaries of Lutreau's moods rather than a set course of study. Reading, writing, bits of philosophy and classic lore were jumbled together for me to assimilate as best I could. And when Lutreau found that I was an autodidact he taught me sleight of hand tricks, at which he was very clever. I wonder yet if this freak of nature was responsible for my subsequent career.

Lutreau had good reason to keep his knowledge of this tricky art a secret. I found our "magic sciences," as he called them, great fun and worked hard to perfect myself. My one talent is drawing. This interested Lutreau greatly and he obtained a good teacher for me. I liked the drawing better than the writing, though I developed great facility with pen work. But Lutreau made me copy signatures over and over until I could practically duplicate them, and it was very tiresome.

All the while I was having my scribbles, childish looks behind. Lutreau fed and clothed me well, and I am sure that he never spoke one harsh word to me; but I do not think that I ever was troubled to feel grateful, and certainly I never felt for him the least bit of affection. Just why I cannot explain, unless it was intuition, for the keenest craving of my life has always been to love and to be loved.

No woman ever came to the flat and I soon lost sight of mother's friends. The only woman I knew at that time was the one who came to us twice a week to wash and clean. Ignorant as she was, I took comfort in her presence and looked forward to her days of work.

The gambling became a nightly occurrence. I could hear the whirr of the roulette wheel and the clink of coin, and sometimes angry words, but I soon became accustomed to these sounds and slept as peacefully as if I were in the convent. I acquired the habit of not asking questions, and Lutreau never spoke of his affairs. Naturally of a gay temperament, my youth rose paramount, and I made the most of the impression life we led, and as Lutreau was my only companion I took up his pursuits for pastime. I learned to juggle the roulette wheel—I say juggle advisedly, and I could go him one better on the tricks that had made him the most noted card sharp on the Continent. But my star performance, and one that Lutreau gloried in, was to hold a cigarette in my right hand, blowing the smoke into myriad rings, while with my left hand I could manipulate the secret springs under the roulette table or go through my neighbor's pocket with equal ease.

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