

Humble Pie

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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THERE are some people who never during their whole lives awake to a consciousness of themselves, as they are recognized by others; there are some who awake too early, to their undoing, and the flimsiness of their characters; there are some who awake late with a shock, which does not dethrone them from their individuality, but causes them agony, and is possibly for their benefit. Maria Gorham was one of the last, and for the first time in her life she saw herself reflected mercilessly in the eyes of her kind one summer in a great mountain hotel. She had never been aware that she was more conceited than others, that she had had on the whole a better opinion of her external advantages at least, than she deserved, but she discovered that her self-conceit had been something which looked to her monstrous and insufferable. She saw that she was not on the surface what she had always thought herself to be, and she saw that the surface has always its influence on the depths.

Maria Gorham was an old young woman in her early thirties. She had taught school in her native village in one of the New England States since she was seventeen. She had been left quite alone in the world, five years before, when her mother died. She lived entirely alone in the house in which she had been born. It was one of the cottages prevalent in certain localities. She was entirely fearless. So quietly poised was she in her own self esteem that it had never occurred to her that anybody could possibly have any ill will, or even any uncomplimentary feeling, toward her. She had always heard herself called good-looking, and it had not occurred to her to doubt the opinion of others. She had also heard herself called industrious, capable and more than ordinarily clever, and she acquiesced with that opinion also. She had also heard her taste in dress extolled, and she had packed her little trunk with entire confidence. Dexter Ray's sister Emma had run across the street, and was watching her. "I thought I'd like to see you put all them pretty things in, I suspected you was packin'," said Emma, with a gentle admiration, and not a suspicion of jealousy. Maria noted Emma's faulty English with a superiority which gave her a certain pleasure. "Poor Emma," she thought, and replied all the more sweetly. "Yes," said she, "I am going on the eight o'clock train to-morrow morning, and I must have my trunk all ready to-night."

Emma watched Maria fold her blue foulard gown daintily. "Well," she said, "I guess there won't be many to that hotel where you are goin' that has any prettier things than you."

Maria laughed. "Nonsense," she replied, but in her heart she quite agreed with Emma. She had entire faith in her wardrobe, which she and the village dressmaker had prepared.

"I suppose you'll wear that handsome pink wrapper mornin's," said Emma.

"Yes, I have planned to," replied Maria. Just as she spoke there was a ring at the front door bell, and Emma started and blushed, altho she had herself nothing for which to blush. "I rather guess that must be Dexter," said she.

Maria frowned.

"Dexter said he guessed mebbe he'd jest run in an' say good-by," said Emma, timidly, and with even more embarrassment.

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Maria herself blushed, but, as it seemed, with anger rather than embarrassment. However, she tried to speak politely. Dexter Ray was the only man who had ever wanted to marry her, and while she thought herself too good for him, she considered that he was to be rewarded at least with politeness for his an' say good-by," said Emma, timidly, and with even more embarrassment.

Maria herself blushed, but, as it seemed, with anger rather than embarrassment. However, she tried to speak politely. Dexter Ray was the only man who had ever wanted to marry her, and while she thought herself too good for him, she considered that he was to be rewarded at least with politeness for his pretensions.

"I really don't see how I can stop my packing," she said, "I wonder if you wouldn't just run down stairs and tell your brother that I am real sorry, but I am packing."

Emma stood up with dignity. She had at times a little sense of injury on her brother's account. "All right," said she.

"I have been working very hard all day finishing up some sewing and getting the house ready to leave, and, if I stop now, I don't know when I would get to bed," Maria added, with more conciliation in her tone.

"All right," said Emma, and went out. Maria heard her tell Dexter. "She says she's real sorry; but she's awful tired, she's been workin' so hard all day, and she's got to get her trunk packed to-night." There was more sorrow in Emma's voice than there had been in Maria's. Maria stole a glance out of the window, and saw Dexter going meekly down the path between the flowering shrubs after his rebuff. He was quite a tall man, a little older than she, and there was an odd faithful bend in his shoulders. Maria sighed, she could not have told why. Sometimes she wished that Dexter had been a more fitting match for her.

Sometimes she had actually felt angry with Dexter Ray that he did not try to make more of himself, but he spoke no better English than his sister. He also, in her opinion, had no ambition. He kept the village drug store, and several times he had had an opportunity to be selectman, and once town clerk, but he seemed to have no interest except in measuring out drugs and dispensing soda water. It would have puzzled Maria had she been required to mention by what right in view of her own antecedents she regarded herself as on a higher social scale than Dexter Ray. Her father had been a small farmer, and his father before him. On her father's death she had sold all the farming land, and that made her little nest egg in the savings bank. She had never saved much from the money which she earned teaching. She had a weakness for pretty things, both for her own person and for her house. She had had a bay window and a piazza put on the house since her father's death. She had also a very splendid carpet in the parlor and a set of plush furniture. She had never traveled. There was in the depths of her soul a feminine timidity about setting forth alone on strange paths, in spite of her steady egotism. It was almost as if she feared lest her faith in herself would desert her, if she were deprived of the accustomed support of admiring friends and subjected to the cold scrutiny of strangers. However, nothing could have made her admit the slightest hesitation, and the next day she was to set out alone to spend a whole month at a great mountain hotel. "I declare," Emma Ray said, when she returned. "I should think you'd sort of dread startin' out all alone to-morrer, Maria."

"I don't know why," replied Maria, calmly.

"I should think you'd sort of dread goin' into the dinin'-room all alone."

"I don't know why."

"Of course, I know you'll look as fine as anybody," said Emma in a conciliatory tone.

"I don't know why I should dread it, however I looked. This is a free country."

"I suppose there's a lot of rich folks at that hotel."

"Well, riches don't make any difference in a country like this, do they?"

"I don't know," replied Emma.

"They ought not to, anyway," said Maria, firmly, substituting the principle for the fact with a fairly great loyalty.

"Mebbe they don't," said Emma.

Presently Emma added. "Of course, it ain't as tho you wasn't educated. Of course, you have been school-teachin' all your life, and I s'pose lots of them rich folks couldn't teach school any more than they could fly."

"They haven't been obliged to," replied Maria.

"They couldn't, anyway."

Maria made no dissent to that. In her heart she agreed with Emma. She folded carefully a white lawn sacque

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trimmed with frills of embroidery, and laid it in one of the top trays of her trunk.

"That will be real pretty to wear with your black silk skirt," said Emma.

"Yes, I thought it would," said Maria.

"It looks as if you might have a dreadful hot day to-morrow," said Emma, glancing out of the window which faced the west. The sun was setting like an awful ball of fire for the ultimate consumption of the world.

"Yes, it seems as if it might be hot," assented Maria.

"What are you going to wear travelin'? You'll have quite a long journey, most nine hours, Dexter said. He studied it out on the time table."

"I'm going to wear my gray mohair I had last summer."

"Well, that sheds the dust fine."

"Yes, and I'm going to put my black silk skirt in the top of the trunk where I can get at it easy, and put it on with this cambric sacque to go to supper in, if it's a warm night," said Maria.

"That will be a real good idea," said Emma, approvingly. "It won't be so much work as getting into a dress, and you'll feel tired."

"That's what I thought. I'll wear this cambric sacque to supper, and then I suppose I shall sit in the parlor and listen to the music. They say there's music and dancing every night."

"Well, there ought to be something when they ask such prices."

"Yes, that is so," replied Maria. She was herself secretly dazed at the wild extravagance into which she was about to launch, but a spirit of defiance had suddenly seized her. It was a hot electric summer, prone to burst forth in fierce storms, and Maria, in spite of her great self poise, had an irritable, high-strung nervous temperament. All at once it had seemed to her that she could no longer remain where she was and go her daily rounds. She hated the very sight of all the old articles of furniture, which had heretofore been to her almost like members of her family. She had acquired the habit of sitting in the front parlor, a room which had never been used unless there was company in the house. She also slept in the front chamber instead of her own for weeks. From these rooms she could look across the street and see Dexter Ray coming and going, and sometimes she was conscious of a distinct anger against fate which had not provided her with a better lover. She had an unacknowledged humiliation because of her single estate. She was afraid that people would think nobody had ever wanted to marry her. She took a pleasure of which she was ashamed in having Emma Ray run in often and in her apparently unappreciated hints concerning her brother. Emma had been almost aghast when Maria told her of her resolution to go to the mountains and spend a month.

"Why don't you wait and go on one of them fifteen-dollar excursions?" said she. "There will be time enough before your school begins."

"I am not going with a rabble. I would rather stay at home," replied Maria, firmly.

"But it must cost an awful sight at that hotel."

"I don't care. I'm going to take the money out of the bank, and I am going. I need a change. I have been getting nervous lately, and, if I go at all, I am going the way I want to go. I don't care if it does cost. I have made up my mind."

Dexter was almost as much aghast as his sister when she told him of the proposed flitting, but after a minute he said: "Well, I guess she's right. She'd better go the way that's a-goin' to do her good, if she goes at all. I'm glad she's goin' to have a little vacation. She has worked hard all her life." The expression of Dexter Ray's face as he said that was gentle, almost noble. The tears sprang into his sister's eyes. "I don't know as she has worked any harder than lots of other folks," said she, and she spoke almost crossly to cover her pity for her brother. "Go right up an' down the street here," she added. "How many women or men have ever had a real vacation?"

"That don't alter it any," replied Dexter, still with the same gentle, noble expression. "I'm real glad she's goin' to have one, anyway." The emphasis which he put upon the she was like a benediction. It almost transfigured the face of the man, which was homely with a commonplace homeliness. He was a good druggist, and the village people held him, after all, in esteem, altho he had always been, in a measure, a butt, because of his awkwardness and shyness. He stumbled on all the thresholds of social intercourse with his kind, but he never made an error in putting up a prescription. The night they were talking about Maria's going away he proposed timidly to his sister that perhaps Maria would like to have him carry her to the railroad station in his buggy. "There'd be plenty of room in front for her trunk tipped up on end, and it would save her fifty cents," he said.

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"Land, she'd turn up her nose at the bare idea," replied Emma.

"Well, maybe she would ruther have the stage come for her," returned Dexter, meekly. "I was only thinkin' of savin' her some money."

"It would make no end of talk," Emma said, with more leniency toward Maria.

"Well, I s'pose you are right," responded Dexter, with a sigh.

However, Emma was so sorry for him that the night before Maria left, when the trunk was packed, and she was about to go home across the street, she said, timidly, "I s'pose you've got the stage ordered to take you to the station in the mornin'."

"Of course," replied Maria. "It isn't very likely I would leave that until after nine o'clock at night, when the train left in the morning." She spoke with some asperity. She seemed to have a glimpse of Emma's meaning in putting the question, "Why?" she demanded further.

"Nothin'," replied Emma, meekly. She felt cowed, and as if she had done her brother's cause great harm. "Only — "

"Only what?"

"Oh, it wasn't nothin', only Dexter, he said he'd jest as lief take you and your trunk down to the train, and save you the expense."

Maria's face flushed. "Well, I rather think I wouldn't go down to the station with Dexter Ray right in the face an' eyes of all the people, with my trunk tilted up in front," said she. "I should think your brother would have known better than to propose such a thing."

Emma Ray was almost in tears. She was capable of evanescent spurts of assertion, especially on her brother's account, but she was easily intimidated, especially by Maria, to whom she looked up with the greatest admiration and love. However, she also loved her brother, and she made a feeble feint in his defense. He didn't mean nothin' but kindness," she said, and Maria's heart smote her.

"Oh, I know it!" she replied, "and I'm much obliged to him, but you know, Emma, yourself, it wouldn't do."

"Maybe it wouldn't," said Emma, "but Dexter he didn't think of that. Men ain't apt to. He jest meant to be kind, and save you expense." There was something almost piteous in her tone.

"Well," said Maria, "when I started out planning this trip I made up my mind to spend some money, and not worry about the expense, but I'm just as much obliged to your brother." Maria always said, "your brother" instead of Dexter.

That night after she had gone to bed she thought about it all, and she felt almost angry again with fate, or with Dexter himself, she could scarcely have told which, that the one man who had fallen in love with her had been Dexter Ray and not some one whom she could consider as her equal, and who spoke better English. The position, socially speaking, she did not think of at all. A druggist was as good as anybody in her little village; in fact, it was considered a decidedly genteel calling. It was only Dexter's own personal drawbacks which she considered.

The next morning she started on her trip, and a queer little qualm of something like self-pity smote her when she saw one of the village women being driven to the station by her husband in his buggy, with a small trunk tilted up in front. She herself clambered out of the village stage coach, which was a relic preserved with pride, and she tripped a little and a bit of the braid ripped off the hem of her gray mohair. She was obliged to pin it up when she got on the train. The thought came to her that a woman was better off with a husband to take her to the station, and assist her out, and check her baggage. Then she straightened herself, and realized with pride that she was going to the mountains to stay a month in a great hotel at an enormous price, and the other woman was only going to pay a visit to her sister in Maine, and going on an excursion at that. It was almost dark when Maria arrived at her destination, then she had a drive of a mile through the woods, which rose and sank and beetled on mountain sides. The air was cooler, and she was conscious of a strange vigor in it. She rode in a mountain wagon which was filled with passengers, altho Maria could not remember seeing one of them on the train. They had all been on Pullman coaches. It had never occurred to Maria to take a Pullman coach. On the seat with Maria was a corpulent woman in a long black silk traveling cloak, and a hat draped with a chiffon veil. She cast one glance at Maria, then looked away, and it was as if she had not seen her at all. With this woman were her two young daughters in tailor-made suits and a young son carrying golf sticks. The two daughters were nearly of an age, and very pretty with pert tilts to their chins, and they carried themselves like princesses. They talked but little, but what they said was as the language of an unknown world to Maria. Both of the girls glanced at Maria very much as their mother

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had done, only they gave each other an almost imperceptible glance of amusement afterward. Maria wondered why. She caught the glance, as any self-centered person would have done. She shortly afterward raised her hands and straightened her bonnet. She wore a bonnet with strings tied under the chin, altho she was not nearly so old as the girls' mother. She also wore a nice little brown and white checked shawl over her shoulders. The shawl had belonged to her mother, and Maria always used it for an extra wrap on a journey, without a thought that its day as regarded fashion has passed. When she had seated herself in the mountain wagon she put the shawl over her shoulders and sat up straight with her school teacher air, which was almost majestic. She did not dream that the combination of majesty, and little checked shawl, and bonnet, and face, which was almost too young for such head gear, could possibly afford any amusement to the girls beside her. When she heard a soft subdued chuckle she did not dream that she was the cause of it. "Two silly girls," she said to herself, and eyed the mountains, and realized her own superiority, inasmuch as she was intent upon those majestic slopes, while the girls were chattering over their own petty little affairs. She made up her mind that she would write Emma Ray while she was away, it would please her so much, and she thought of a fine sentiment to put in the letter. She would say that she had never realized her own littleness so much as when she had her first glimpse of the mountains, and she did not know that in reality she realized her own superiority instead of her littleness. They reached the hotel, and she was shown to her room. She felt a slight inward tremor, because she had never been in a hotel before, but she fairly strutted across the office, holding her bonneted head high, with her little checked shawl still over her shoulders. And she carried out her intention of slipping on her black silk skirt and her white cambric sacque, in which to appear at supper. But for the first time in her life Maria Gorham had an awed sensation as she saw the other women sweep into the dining-room in evening gowns. She looked around furtively, and she saw not another woman in a sacque. But she was not easily daunted, not even when some other ladies in low neck gowns seated themselves at her table, and she saw them looking askance at her sacque.

She ordered her supper with dignity, and ate it, and when she had finished she marched stiffly the whole length of the dining-room. They had placed her at a table at the extreme end. She heard furtive chuckles, but she did not admit that they were laughing at her, Maria Gorham, and that she did not still believe in her sacque and its entire appropriateness to the occasion, and she would not weaken. She went into the music-room, and seated herself composedly and listened to the orchestra and watched the young people dance. When at last she went up to her room, and divested herself of the sacque, she did not own that she would not wear it again to supper while she was in the hotel. Instead she hung it up carefully with a little defiant air, under the cretonne curtain which served in lieu of a closet on one side of the room. "I don't care what other folks wear, I rather think I have a right to wear anything I choose which is tidy and comfortable," she told herself. The next morning she attired herself in the pink wrapper and went down to breakfast, and she was soon aware that not another woman in the dining-room wore a wrapper. She became aware that furtive fun was made of her. The people in the hotel were, on the whole, a well bred and good-natured lot, and were incapable of downright ridicule. But now Maria Gorham's spirit was up. Out on the verandah she went and walked up and down holding up her wrapper daintily. Then she sat down in one of the verandah chairs, and watched people pass her with furtive stares at her wrapper, and she felt fairly warlike. She said to herself that she would not persist in wearing the white cambric sacque to supper, since she had not planned that, altho if there came a warm night when she did not feel like putting on a tight dress she would wear it, but as for the wrapper she would not give in one whit. It was a pretty wrapper, and nicely made, trimly belted with a pink ribbon. She had intended to wear it mornings during her stay at the hotel, and she would wear it. And she did, but as the time went on she suffered tortures. Ridicule was the hardest thing in the world for one of her kind to endure. Open warfare would have been more to her liking, but ridicule it was that she had to prepare herself for every morning, and ridicule the worse because it was covert and could not be met with open resentment. Several times in the evening when she was wearing one of her best dresses, which somehow seemed not so fine as she had thought them, she heard herself alluded to as the woman who wore the wrapper mornings. She knew that was the name she went by, but the more she suffered the more obstinate she grew. She walked the verandah in her wrapper. She even climbed a mountain, a small one, marching to the summit as grimly and unflinchingly as the youth in "Excelsior," holding up the wrapper carefully above her starched petticoat. She wore on that expedition her little bonnet with a small black lace veil, and the black flies crawled under the veil and bit her cruelly. The next day her face was so swollen that she was obliged to call in the hotel physician, and it was on that day that Mrs. Evans came in the afternoon. There was a gentle knock at Maria's

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door, and Maria said, "Come in," and a woman as gentle as the knock entered, and asked if she could not do something for her. She had heard that she was ill. Maria answered her gratefully at first, then she caught a swift glance of the other woman's eye at the pink wrapper, a fold of which obtruded from behind the calico curtain, and she understood that this woman, sweet and gentle and kind-hearted as she was, had looked upon her in the wrapper as the others had. Then she spoke grimly, altho grimness only lent renewed absurdity to her distorted face. "There is nothing you can do, thank you," she said. "I have had medical advice. The "medical advice" alone would have proclaimed her the school teacher. The other woman was rather persistent in her kindness, she offered to read to her, but Maria refused more and more brusquely. The woman went away, but soon she sent by a bell boy a plate of grapes, having selected the choicest from some which had been sent to her from New York. "Now, she'll be coming again," Maria said to herself, and she was right. Next day Maria was better, still her face was too badly swollen for her to leave her room, and the woman came again. Even after she had quite recovered Maria was liable to a call from her, altho she never encouraged it. In fact, the woman, who had an obtrusively benevolent heart, had set herself the task of quietly leading up to the wrapper. She had talked it over with some other ladies, and they had agreed that it was a shame that a woman as good as Maria seemed to be should make herself so ridiculous. But the other ladies had not the spirit of this one. "I am going to tell her," said she, and she did about a week after she had first spoken to her. The woman was calling upon Maria one morning and Maria was wearing the wrapper, and the woman spoke out with exceeding sweetness, which still had a sting in it. "What a lovely wrapper that is you are wearing," said the woman.

Maria's face changed. She looked at her suspiciously, altho she answered with dignity. "Thank you!" she said.

"What a pity it is that wrappers, no matter how pretty they are, are not worn in large hotels," said the woman. Then her face colored piteously before the indignation in Maria's. "It does not make the slightest difference to me what is worn in hotels, or is not worn in hotels," said Maria, sternly. "I wear whatever I please as long as it is tidy and respectable."

Tears actually sprang into the other woman's eyes. "Oh, dear, I am so sorry you take it so!" said she. "I meant well. It was only because I hated to have — " She paused.

"Hated to have what?" asked Maria, pitilessly.

"Hated to have you made fun of," almost sobbed the other woman.

"If I am not made fun of for anything worse than wearing a wrapper in the morning, it does not worry me at all," said Maria, with her head up in the air.

The other woman rose. "Well, I meant it kindly, and I am going away in the morning," said she.

"Oh, I am not at all offended!" said Maria, in a somewhat softer voice, "and I thank you for your interest, but I do not allow even my dearest friends to interfere in matters so purely personal as my attire."

The next morning Maria in her wrapper shook hands with the other woman, as she went out of the hotel on her way to the train. "I do hope you don't lay up anything against me," said the other woman.

"Not at all," said Maria, briskly and kindly. Then the woman went her way. She was the only one of the guests who had spoken to Maria, and she had been in the hotel two weeks. Nobody at all spoke to her during the remaining two weeks of her stay. Maria was, on the whole, more lonely than she had ever been in her life, and she did more thinking. She thought a good deal about Dexter Ray. She thought how if she had a husband with her like many of the other women she would not have felt so defenseless and isolated in her wrapper, which she had begun to regard as a matter of principle. She felt sure that Dexter would admire the wrapper. She could see just the kindly, worshipful expression that would come into his brown eyes at the sight of her in it. She recalled how Emma had believed in the wrapper. She began to reflect as she had never done on the pettiness and worthlessness of externals. She wished she could see Emma, and hear her talk in her bad English. She began to understand that the bad English might be very much like the wrapper, something beneath a loving soul to notice, if the heart of the speaker were right. She remembered how very plain Dexter Ray was, and how clumsy, and how he talked just as Emma did, and it all seemed to her like the wrapper and the cambric sacque, something for people who had not love and appreciation in their hearts to make fun of, but nothing of any consequence to those who could see what was underneath; the honesty, and the affection, and the faithfulness. Two days before Maria went home she wrote to Emma Ray, and told her when she was coming, and asked her and her brother to come in and spend the next evening with her. Maria was pale when she posted the letter in the little hotel office. She had never asked Dexter to spend the evening with her before, and she knew what it would mean. Emma Ray, when she got the letter the

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day before Maria's return, read it aloud to Dexter. When Emma read that Maria would like to have them both come in and spend the evening the brother and sister looked at each other. Dexter's homely, faithful face flushed, then turned very pale. Emma gazed at him with the sympathy of a mother, rather than of a sister. Nobody knew how she had pitied him, and how hard she had tried to help him. She smiled with the loveliest unselfishness, then she looked again at the letter in her hand. "Guess Maria has been eatin' humble pie," she thought to herself, then she reflected how much she thought of Maria, and her brother, and how glad she was. "Well, I guess Maria thinks that the old friends that have always set store by her are the best after all," she said, and a moral perfume, as of the sweetness of humility itself, seemed to come in her face from the letter.

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