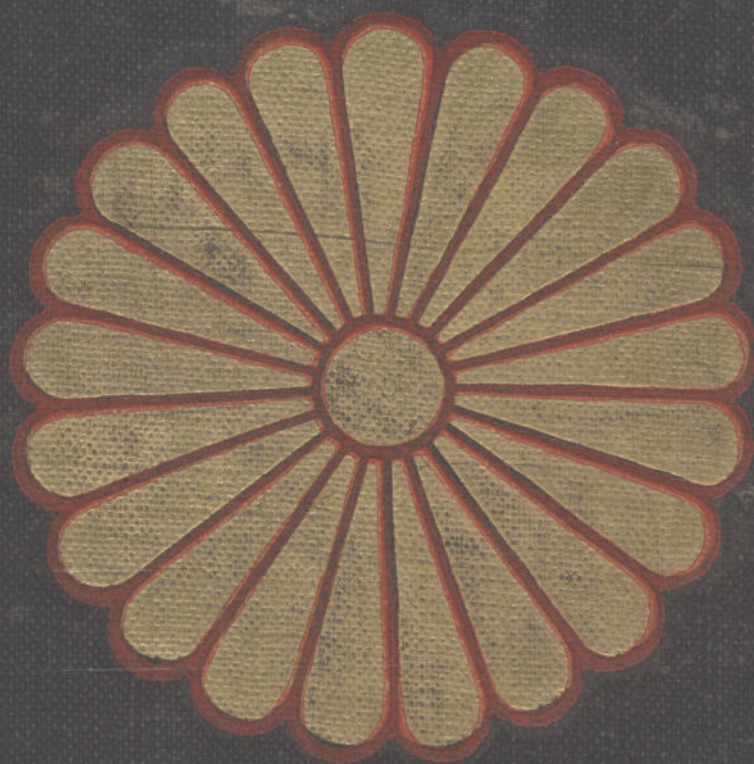


THE  
LADY OF THE  
DECORATION



FRANCES LITTLE

# The Lady of the Decoration

By  
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The  
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TO ALL  
GOOD SISTERS, AND TO MINE  
IN PARTICULAR

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SAN FRANCISCO, July 30, 1901.

*My dearest Mate:*

Behold a soldier on the eve of battle! I am writing this in a stuffy little hotel room and I don't dare stop whistling for a minute. You could cover my courage with a postage stamp. In the morning I sail for the Flowery Kingdom, and if the roses are waiting to strew my path it is more than they have done here for the past few years.

When the train pulled out from home and I saw that crowd of loving, tear-



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ful faces fading away, I believe that for a few moments I realized the actual bitterness of death! I was leaving everything that was dear to me on earth, and going out into the dark unknown, alone.

Of course it 's for the best, the disagreeable always is. You are responsible, my beloved cousin, and the consequences be on your head. You thought my salvation lay in leaving Kentucky and seeking my fortune in strange lands. Your tender sensibilities shrank from having me exposed to the world as a young widow who is not sorry. So you "shipped me some-where East of Suez" and tied me up with a four years' contract.

But, honor bright, Mate, I don't believe in your heart you can blame me for not being sorry! I stuck it out to the last,—faced neglect, humilia-

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tions, and days and nights of anguish, almost losing my self-respect in my effort to fulfil my duty. But when death suddenly put an end to it all, God alone knows what a relief it was!

And how curiously it has all turned out! First my taking the Kindergarten course just to please you, and to keep my mind off things that ought not to have been. Then my sudden release from bondage, and the dreadful manner of it, my awkward position, my dependence,—and in the midst of it all this sudden offer to go to Japan and teach in a Mission school!

Is n't it ridiculous, Mate? Was there ever anything so absurd as my lot being cast with a band of missionaries? I, who have never missed a Kentucky Derby since I was old enough to know a bay from a sorrel! I guess old Sister Fate does n't want me to be a one

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part star. For eighteen years I played pure comedy, then tragedy for seven, and now I am cast for a character part.

Nobody will ever know what it cost me to come! All of them were so terribly opposed to it, but it seems to me that I have spent my entire life going against the wishes of my family. Yet I would lay down my life for any one of them. How they have stood by me and loved me through all my blind blunders. I'd back my mistakes against anybody else's in the world!

Then Mate there was Jack. You know how it has always been with Jack. When I was a little girl, on up to the time I was married, after that he never even looked it, but just stood by me and helped me like a brick. If it had n't been for you and for him I should have put an end to myself long ago. But now that I am free,

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Jack has begun right where he left off seven years ago. It is all worse than useless; I am everlastingly through with love and sentiment. Of course we all know that Jack is the salt of the earth, and it nearly kills me to give him pain, but he will get over it, they always do, and I would rather for him to convalesce without me than with me. I made him promise not to write me a line, and he just looked at me in that quiet, quizzical way and said: "All right, but you just remember that I'm waiting, until you are ready to begin life over again with me."

Why it would be a death blow to all his hopes if he married me! My widow's mite consists of a wrecked life, a few debts, and a worldly notion that a brilliant young doctor like himself has no right to throw away all his chances in order to establish a small

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hospital for incurable children. Whenever I think of his giving up that long-cherished dream of studying in Germany, and buying ground for the hospital instead, I just gnash my teeth.

Oh! I know that you think it is grand and noble and that I am horrid to feel as I do. Maybe I am. At any rate you will acknowledge that I have done the right thing for once in coming away. I seem to have been a general blot on the landscape, and with your help I have erased myself. In the meanwhile, I wish to Heaven my heart would ossify!

The sole power that keeps me going now is your belief in me. You have always claimed that I was worth something, in spite of the fact that I have persistently proven that I was not. Don't you shudder at the risk you are taking? Think of the responsibility of

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standing for me in a Board of Missions! I 'll stay bottled up as tight as I know how, but suppose the cork *should* fly?

Poor Mate, the Lord was unkind when he gave me to you for a cousin.

Well it 's done, and by the time you get this I will probably be well on my sea-sick way. I can't trust myself to send any messages to the family. I don't even dare send my love to you. I am a soldier lady, and I salute my officer.

ON SHIP-BOARD. August 8th, 1901.

It 's so windy that I can scarcely hold the paper down but I 'll make the effort. The first night I came aboard, I had everything to myself. There were eighty cabin passengers and I was the only lady on deck. It was very rough but I stayed up as long as I

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could. The blue devils were swarming so thick around me that I did n't want to fight them in the close quarters of my state-room. But at last I had to go below, and the night that followed was a terror. Such a storm raged as I had never dreamed of, the ship rocked and groaned, and the water dashed against the port-holes; my bag played tag with my shoes, and my trunk ran around the room like a rat hunting for its hole. Overhead the shouts of the captain could be heard above the answering shouts of the sailors, and men and women hurried panic-stricken through the passage.

Through it all I lay in the upper berth and recalled all the unhappy nights of the past seven years; disappointment, heartache, disillusionment, disgust; they followed each other in silent review. Every tender memory



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and early sentiment that might have lingered in my heart was ruthlessly murdered by some stronger memory of pain. The storm without was nothing to the storm within, I felt indifferent as to the fate of the vessel. If she floated or if she sank, it was one and the same to me.

When morning came something had happened to me. I don't know what it was, but my past somehow seemed to belong to someone else. I had taken a last farewell of all the old burdens, and I was a new person in a new world.

I put on my prettiest cap and my long coat and went up on deck. Oh, my dear, if you could only have seen the sight that greeted me! It was the limpest, sickest crowd I ever encountered! They were pea-green with a dash of yellow, and a streak of black under their eyes, pale around the lips

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and weak in their knees. There was only one other woman besides myself who was not sick, and she was a missionary with short hair, and a big nose. She was going around with some tracts asking everybody if they were Christians. Just as I came up she tackled a big, dejected looking foreigner who was huddled in a corner.

“Brother, are you a Christian?”

“No, no,” he muttered impatiently.

“I ’m a Norwegian.”

Now what that man needed was a cocktail, but it was not for me to suggest it.

At table I am in a corner with three nice old gentlemen and one young German. They are great on story-telling, and I ’ve told all of mine, most of yours and some I invented. One of the old gentlemen is a missionary; when he found that I was distantly connected