

Complete Story.

THE ENIGMA.

Mrs Congreve stood before a full-length mirror and gazed at her reflection with critical eyes. Her room was so brilliantly lighted that the many electric lamps caused almost a glare. Few women would have had the moral courage to survey themselves in this fierce and unbecoming light. But Mrs Congreve was not afraid.

She knew that more critical eyes than her own would be turned towards her presently, even if the light were more subdued; would watch every feature, note every detail of her appearance, from the white rose placed in her dusky hair to her black satin slippers.

She was dressed entirely in black, the one touch of colour being lent by that white rose in the dark wealth of deep-brown hair—hair that matched the star-like passionate eyes. It was a daring thing for her to wear, she knew, for she was a pale-complexioned woman with a soft creamy skin that was only rarely touched into carnation when her mood was an emotional one. She wore black because she thought it the most suitable frame for her face. It was a kind of foil which enabled one to follow the marvellous display of facial expression which so largely contributed in giving point and meaning to her recitations.

Mrs Congreve was the latest craze in fashionable society. She was the most popular reciter of her day. She had made a sensation on her first appearance in public, and many had been the offers made her by enterprising managers for her to go upon the stage proper, but she had refused them all, content to remain in the position she had long ago set herself out to attain, and which had been secured by years of hard work and unremitting study.

Society hostesses had outbid one another for her appearance at their musical At Homes and receptions, and altogether Mrs Congreve had her hands pretty full with regard to engagements.

She was supposed to be resting at present—a rest that she had fairly earned, and not in the sense of lacking an engagement. She had been invited to form one of a house party gathered together by a society friend of hers, Lady Plumton, who had been among the first to acknowledge her gift, and for whom she had some feeling of gratitude.

Although Lady Plumton had not expressed anything to that effect—had, in fact, insisted that she should take a thorough rest—Mrs Congreve knew very well that after dinner she would be asked by one or other of the guests just to read them a few verses, and that it would give pleasure to her hostess if she complied.

The finishing touch had been given to her toilette, she had dismissed her maid, and was thinking of going downstairs to the large, comfortable hall at Drake

Court, where the guests generally assembled while awaiting dinner, when there was a rap at her door. She gave permission to enter, and a short, rather florid woman came in. She had a smiling, vivacious face, covered with a thousand wrinkles, and surmounted by beautiful white hair elaborately dressed.

"I just want a moment's chat with you, dear," she said, "before we go downstairs. How well you are looking! Really I think you are the wisest of us all in your persistence in wearing black. It becomes you beautifully.

Lady Plumton had taken a great fancy to this strange, gifted woman—whose history, so far as the world knew, was a blank. Who Mr. Congreve was, if he was still alive or had ever existed, was unknown, as was the whole of this woman's past. A few men, fascinated by her beauty and charm—a charm that made one feel that to win a smile from her was something to remember—had dared to attempt love-making. But she had responded to none of their advances. However passionate, wilful or loving she might be in the little monologues she recited, and which had brought her such swift fame, when she relaxed into herself she was a quiet, self-contained woman, whom club-boungers called "The Enigma."

And an enigma she looked to-night, with those dark, haunting eyes fixed musingly on Lady Plumton's face, and the still features pale and composed as those of any statue.

"I hope you will have a good time, Mrs. Congreve," remarked her hostess. "There are a number of people here who wish to make your acquaintance. Among them are Lord Bradacre and his wife. They have never seen you, but your fame has reached them in Italy, where they have spent the last few years. He was Ambassador there, you know, and his term of office has just closed at his own request. He wanted to come back and live in England once more."

At the name of Lord Bradacre a sudden frightened expression came into Mrs Congreve's eyes. A wave of scarlet stained her creamy skin, and her long, white, slender fingers were clasped and unclasped in nervous restlessness. But Lady Plumton observed nothing, and whatever emotion that name may have brought to life in Mrs. Congreve, long years of self-control enabled her to master it now. In a moment or two she looked up, her white impassive face as enigmatic as ever, the strange eyes as introspective and musing. Lady Plumton chatted on a few minutes, and then suggested that they should go downstairs.

The other paused for a moment. There was a moment's sharp struggle with the instinct which prompted her to say to her hostess, "Let me get away from this house at once. There is someone you have named whom I cannot meet."

And then she signified her assent, and together they descended the wide oak staircase, which was one of the beauties of Drake Court.

Most of the visitors had arrived that afternoon, among them Mrs. Congreve. But a few others had come by a later train, and they were nearly all seated in the cosy hall. A kind of hush fell upon their chatter when Mrs. Congreve came quietly among them. She always created an atmosphere about her, and what had been commonplace seemed instantly to change into something unaccustomed and rare.

Introductions were effected, but several of the people had met Mrs. Congreve before, and they were charmed to remember that fact now that Lady Plumton had taken her up socially.

The conversation was resumed, and a few minutes later the dining-gong sounded. At the same moment the curtain was brushed aside, and Lord Bradacre appeared. He was a man who looked older than his years. The hair was brushed back from a high, intellectual forehead, and was already grey, although he was only a year or two over forty. There was something courtly and distinguished in his manner that avouched of the Ambassador, but his voice when he spoke was disappointing, and something of a contrast to those handsome, mobile features, for it was cold and unvarying in tone.

Mrs. Congreve heard that voice—heard and remembered it. She nerved herself to face this man, and she felt a touch on her shoulder.

"Allow me to introduce Lord Bradacre," murmured Lady Plumton.

The softly-shaded lamps threw a pleasant glow over the scene, but Mrs. Congreve's face was half in shadow. She bowed to the ex-Ambassador, saw him start forward with something more than conventional words upon his lips, and then recover himself in a moment, and quietly respond to her bow.

Lady Plumton paired her guests, and they passed into the dining-room.

During dinner Mrs. Congreve could feel rather than see Lord Bradacre's eyes fixed upon her. She herself glanced, not at him, but at the fair, exquisitely-dressed nonentity with the practised Society smile who bore his name.

Mrs. Congreve did not enjoy her dinner. The sight of this man, of something in those careworn features, something in the aged and altered face, awoke strange and tender memories in her, brought back to life dead dreams that she had thought put out of sight and mind for ever. Those few moments in which they had stood face to face had shaken that splendid self-restraint and quiet confidence she was so justly proud of—remembering the price that had been exacted to obtain it.

She found herself wishing that she had not accepted Lady Plumton's invitation. She was only a pretender, with no right to Society beyond that of one of its mummies. She felt that it was a loss of dignity to have come to Drake Court. What had induced her to accept the invitation when she had been so firm in refusing all others? Was it fate that had seemed to impel her to break a rule that she had vowed should always be kept? She did not wish the world to regard her as anything beyond an artist whose services were paid for in hard coin. It was a derogation from that

ideal she had held, that almost scornful pride, that though she might sell her art to those who wished to buy it, and found amusement in it, herself and her soul should be her own—and one other's—her child's.

But something—she could not tell what, since human, and especially feminine, inconsistency must always be a puzzle—moved her to do her best when presently she was asked if she would recite something—any little thing that she could manage without putting herself to any strain.

Her choice was a ballad out of a book of verses written by an anonymous author. It was called "Plainte Eternelle," and was the cry of a deserted lover for his vanished mistress. Throughout the poem there rang the poignant pleading for the faithless one to return to the aching heart that had been forsaken.

She gave it little gesture—the poem did not call for that—but she spoke the words as perhaps they had never been spoken before. And had the poet who wrote them been present they might have held a new meaning even to him.

Every modulation and expression of which the human voice is capable did she give to the seven verses which composed the piece. There was despair,

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