LOVE UNAWARE

By Louise Robinson Rhodes

THE STORY OF A RICH YOUNG WOMAN WHO HAD NO OBJECT IN LIFE.

EDITH CARPENTER felt distinctly bored. Her attention wandered from the French novel in her hand. The kaleidoscopic emotions of the heroine seemed unreal. She, at least, had never felt anything at all approaching them. The half-dozen years of her young womanhood passed vaguely before her mind. There had been the chaotic dreariness of the months following her father's death; the old house had been sold; the familiar belongings which mean "home" had been stored in a warehouse, from which she and her mother had not even yet found the courage to reassemble them.

They had travelled until she hated the sight of a railroad ticket. She had danced through the seasons at home and abroad; she had gone in for athletics; she was a member of half a dozen charitable boards, where her money was of more value than her inexperience. Nowhere did she seem needed.

She glanced across at her mother, and smiled whimsically. Mrs. Carpenter was a mild little woman, content to labour over intricate lacework, with an hour's gossip or a light novel for diversion. Naples was associated in her mind with the elaborate piece of Honition she had fashioned there; Cologne was represented by a bit of Battenberg. Indeed, nearly every stopping place in their wanderings was interwoven with some needlework design which had supplied for her the abiding interest her daughter lacked. Now her lips were moving slightly as she counted stitches. Clearly she did not need her daughter's attention.

Edith turned back to her novel with a sigh, only to drop it with a shrug of distaste. The hero had appeared now, and was declaring his undying affection with deep sincerity.

"Men don't really do it that way," she thought with the cynical smile of a connoisseur.

In her life, men had come and men had gone. They had wooed in every tongue. Some, perhaps, had been sincere, but many had shown such an evident affection for her fortune that she had ended by distrusting them all. No, not all; there had been an evil day when one man had paid his ardent court so well that her heart had beat with answering love. But just as the declaration trembled upon his lips, a pretty girl whose face was her only dowry had come upon the scene, and the man, as if in spite of himself, had followed the bidding of real affection. Somewhere in the world he and the little girl were happy, no doubt, with never a thought of the heiress who had gone her restless way, bitterly flouting the lovers who gathered about her until only the most desperate dared to woo.

Edith threw down her book with some impatience.

"I am going for a tramp, mother!" she exclaimed.

"But, Edith," protested her mother, "there's the Carters' dance this evening, and Mabel Ford's tea this afternoon! You'll be all red and blowsy after a walk in this wind. You had better take the carriage."

"'Deed and I won't take the carriage, mother," laughed Edith, "and if I don't look fit, I won't go to the parties."

"You are so headstrong!" sighed her mother.

"Of course, but you like me, so it's all right!" she replied, walking briskly from the room.

It seemed exhilarating to face the sharp wind and put up a good fight against it, even if there was nothing tangible to be gained; so Edith turned into Vine Place and walked into the gale.

Perhaps it was because she was a little breathless, or it may have been because of her real interest in architecture, that she soon stopped before a handsome house in the process of construction. The simple lines and massive stone pleased her artistic sense, and she ascended the half finished portico to get a glimpse of the interior.

"Come in, come in, Miss Carpenter!" called a cordial voice, as Stephen Wentworth, the architect, advanced to meet her. "I had ben wisking for a woman's opinion in the matter of these dining-room arrangements."

"I shall be glad to come in," said Edith, as she shook hands with the alert, elderly man who helped her through the temporary door. "If there is one subject that I thoroughly enjoy, it is architecture. Mother nearly went demented because I would poke around the old cathedrals and ruins for hours at a time; but their grace and strength appealed to me more than paintings."

"You ought to be an architect," said Mr. Wentworth laughingly.

Edith looked at him speculatively for a moment, and then turned her attention to the dining-room which had failed to satisfy. Her comments were practical and suggestive.

"I do like a woman's opinion on internal arrangements," said Mr. Wentworth, when they had completed a tour of the house. "I often wish I had a daughter. I should work her into the business."

"Will you work me in instead?" asked Edith impulsively.

"You?" exclaimed Mr. Wentworth in astonishment. "You do not need to work!"

"I think I need work more than many people who earn their living," she replied seriously. "I get very tired of an aimless existence. I should really like to enter your office as an apprentice."

"If you are really serious," said Mr. Wentworth, "you may work there every morning; but you must be busy, for the sake of maintaining discipline among the real workers."

"I shall be a real worker myself," said Edith.

"Very well, it's a bargain. I'll teach you the craft as far as I can, and in return you shall furnish me with a woman's point of view."

II.

When Mrs. Carpenter was informed of her daughter's plans, she protested weakly, and then yielded, with the tearful sugestion that Edith would surely ruin her figure stooping over a horrid desk.

There was a pleasant novelty in the quiet, orderly routine of the office, where so much was accomplished and so little said. Edith learned to be of real use to Mr. Wentworth, and he commended her work, but the young architects in the outer office, and the young women clerks and stenographers, held aloof. They knew her as the rich Miss Carpenter, and resented her attempt at serious work. At first the gulf they placed between themselves and her troubled Edith, but she soon learned to go her busy way in peace.

"I wish you would go out to the Thompson house, Miss Carpenter," said Mr. Wentworth one morning, "and see if you can make any suggestions for the library. They are leaving everything to me, and I have been too busy to give the finish and decoration the attention it deserves. Tom," he added, beckoning to a young man in the outer office, "take Miss Carpenter out to the Thompson house."

Tom rose with alacrity, and smiled frankly at Edith, with a friendliness which had seemed lacking in the attitude of the outer office. During the short drive he took up the burden of conversation, carrying it lightly from one topic to another, but always returning to something of interest in their profession.

"I suppose Mr. Wentworth sent me with you because I am new in the office and can be spared easily, and because I might get some practical ideas from your suggestions?" he remarked. "I think I have always been an architect," he continued laughingly. "My first recollection is of building houses with blocks, and my earliest playmate was a quiet little girl who let me make houses for her by outlining rooms with sticks and stones. She was very obedient, and would tend her doll in the enclosure which I said was the nursery, or make her mud pies in the kitchen. She never carried her primitive pastry into what I called the parlour."

"When I went to school," Tom went on, "I was easily reconciled to arithmetic, because the problems so often dealt with the dimensions of rooms or buildings. Spelling and reading were dull, but they led to history, and I was able to interest myself in the characters because I could imagine them living their lives in wonderful castles, or losing them in gloomy towers, or pining away in a moated grange. It was the same when I went to college. The classics has a fascination because of the work of the ancient builders and sculptors; geometrical calculations were applied architecture, and mechanical drawing became a hobby."

Edith did not interrupt his reminiscences, and he continued his simple story.

"The family intended me for a physician. My father and grandfather belonged to that real order of nobility, the country doctors, and it was their hope that I should take up the succession. I really tried. I studied medicine for a year, but it was a hopeless failure, and father himself advised me to give it up. My younger brother is making it up to him, however, so I felt free to follow my bent."

Edith found the personal note in Tom's remarks intersting, and wondered a little why she had never seemed to get so near a man's ambitions before. Then she reflected bitterly that she herself had been the ambition of so many men that it had been impossible to find their hopes and plans interesting.

As they went through the Thompson house, plans in hand, she became absorbed in the work before her.

"Just a foot or two less space would have made this smoking-room more cosy," she said. "I love cosy rooms. I would like this one all in browns that would shade into the smoke and lighten into the lamp-light."

In the library she fell a-dreaming. The wood in which the room was to be finished was very beautiful, and the irregular outlines of the apartment lent themselves to restful nooks and corners.

"There should be a low bookcase built in there, and a high one should reach from door to door on that side," she said. "I would have some book-loving verse done in old English over the mantel. There should be a great, sturdy table drawn up in front of the fireplace, and a tiger-skin stretched before it. The dear old books should be right here to my hand, and the chairs should be deep and roomy, so that I could curl up and forget myself. Oh, this could be such a charming room! But of course it never will be; people like the Thompsons, who leave all the planning to the architect and the furnishing to some fashionable dealer, will never get the real comfort out of their money!"

"I should love to build a house for you!" said Tom with enthusiasm. "You would be an inspiration. I can imagine you presiding over the daintiest old china in the dining-room, with just the right picture behind you, and the shine of the wood matching your hair. Or in a red dress in the library—you must be extra pretty in red," he added reflectively, while Edith suddenly regretted the whim which had made her wear her darkest and plainest gowns at the office.

"The fire would snap," continued Tom, "and throw red lights over your dress and face, and I never should be able to keep my eyes on my book!"

Tom was dreaming now, and Edith turned away to hide a smile which would ripple over her lips. Tom caught a fleeting glimpse of it, however, and a slow red burned in his face as he remarked laughingly:

"Rather cheeky to put myself in the library, too, I suppose, but just the same I should like to build a house for you some day!"

There was a boyish earnestness in his manner which was irresistible, and Edith smiled now in frank good-fellowship. His open admiration was so evidently for herself alone that she found it genuinely delightful.

III.

Mr. Wentworth was very busy that autumn, and Edith was often sent out to see that his plans were being carried out in the best possible manner. Tom was always deputed as escort, and each day he fitted Edith into the new rooms with a word here and there. It came to be like a child's game of "playing keep house," and Edith took up the sport with mock-serious discussions of her preferences in form and colour.

"But really, I must have my way about some things!" said Tom one day. "I fully intend to be the head of the house," he added, "but I shall try to be a lenient master. You may have your way in the dining-room and library, but I shall assert my rights in the living-room."

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