

to the staircase. She was not going to run the gauntlet of those panic-stricken, flustered men if he knew it.

'My dear Mignon,' he said, using for the first time his wife's pet name for the friend of her girlhood, 'I can't allow any books. You must just rest until dinner, or you will be tired out before the evening is over.'

He kissed Eve's hand before he let it go, and they were all silent until her footfall had passed beyond hearing. Then Sinclair turned, full of righteous wrath, to confront the offender, from whom the others had somewhat withdrawn. That he had voiced practically their own sentiments was no condonation, inasmuch as he had broken the letter of a gentleman's code. To blame a woman for her ugliness was entirely natural, but to let her know it in words was an offence almost without pardon. Hayhurst knew this as he spoke first.

'Sinclair; I can never forgive myself. Would you like me to go?'

'I suppose you ought to go,' admitted Sinclair, gloomily; 'of course your going will wreck the performance, but we must make Miss Saxton our first consideration.'

'Certainly. In any case she will probably refuse to act with me, and quite rightly, too. I had better await her initiative.'

Angry as they all were with him, it was plainly evident that he was his own harshest judge. Sinclair softened as he saw how bitterly his friend took it to heart.

There was nothing more to be said, and they had to await the ruling of the woman who had gone to her room smarting with this rough touch to a living wound. For she was a worshipper of the beauty denied her; she had always regarded it in others with a passionate admiration quite beyond its real worth. She had idealised it in writing and in verse, envied its possessors with a wistful envy which had never contained a spice of malice. Many pretty women of her acquaintance were yet fairer for some added touch of grace suggested by her artistic eye and hand. But she was very human, very womanly; and although she had schooled herself to do without the thing she loved, the rough verdict against her from careless lips hurt intolerably.

And every man in the house-party had heard it, and without doubt endorsed its veracity. How could she possibly meet them all with a serene bow and carry out the evening's programme, which included enacting love-scenes with a man who had frankly told his fellows that she was so little to his taste? She felt at first that she could not; self-respect almost insisted upon her not doing so; but wiser counsel prevailed at length, and she saw that the way of true dignity and right dealing lay straight in front of her with no turning either to right or left.

Nervous of temperament, she was not without a fine courage when it was needed; moreover, for a woman she was supremely just, and she knew instinctively that Hayhurst, brutally as he had spoken, must now be suffering the extreme penalty of his own carelessness. She alone had sensed the physical suffering which had made the rehearsal so intolerable to him, and so recommended him to the mercy of her own judgment.

By dinner-time she was strong in good resolve, yet dreading unspeakably the evening's ordeal. She went down at the last moment to find the social atmosphere disturbed. The women were mystified and the men taciturn and uncomfortable, with a tendency to ostracise the offender in their midst.

Eve felt that with her lay the key of the position; if she could show herself bright and undisturbed all would be well. To this end she bent the whole strength of her will, for once rising entirely above the shyness which so often marred and obscured her real charm. Almost forgetting herself and her indignity in an unselfish effort to restore harmony and good feeling, she showed at her very best—that best which only her intimates had knowledge of. She talked for them all with such a tactful, kindly humor that very soon the meal, which had commenced with such dourness, blossomed into merriment and good cheer. She had lifted the cloud, and once even, noticing the undercurrent of feeling against Hayhurst, she had deliberately drawn him into the conversation with a friendly and direct question.

In answering he met her eyes full, and almost for the first time in his life his own fell in shame and contrition before those of a woman. Gallantly as she was bearing herself, the pain of the wound he had dealt her showed in the kind, blue eyes. And she was going to carry the whole thing through, a thing that must have become so distasteful to her as to be well-nigh impossible. How distasteful it was he only realised as they were starting in the omnibus that was to take them to the town hall; for in passing her he had touched her dress, and she drew it away sharply with an impulse too quick and unconscious for her to control. Until the performance began he had no speech with her; she held court without him, for not a man of the house-party but was her sworn and loyal servitor. There were many in the cast, many pretty girls; but for once they had to give place to Eve, the heroine of the occasion.

They had to give place, too, on the stage, for there the artist rose above the woman, bringing out a thousand subtle graces of voice and movement. She was not pretty, but she had her beautiful moments—an inspired brilliance and charm of expression which could hold and fascinate an audience.

But it was not easy this night to forget the woman in the artist; she had to struggle hard to rise above self-consciousness and do justice to her part. Yet she did it, and Hayhurst played up to her with a zeal and earnestness of which the rehearsals had given no hint. He was one of those who invariably rehearse badly and perform well; but on this occasion he put his whole soul into an endeavour to adequately support her. No one did amiss, and the two chiefly concerned did so admirably that success was assured.

The next morning at breakfast Miss Saxton found among her letters a summons to town. Under more fortunate circumstances she would hardly have obeyed it, but on the present occasion it furnished an excuse for an unobtrusive retirement from a position which had become a trifle conspicuous. She made the announcement openly, but only the women were deceived as to her true motive. Nina Sinclair declared hotly that she should not go—that if the worst came to the worst they would detain her by force.

'It's suicidal, Eve; I won't hear of it. You must be shockingly overworked as it is. You looked deathly when you fainted, and you don't look much better now. We won't let her go, will we, Jim?'

'Certainly not, unless she really wishes it,' replied Sinclair, with a gravity which puzzled his wife.

'I expect I must go,' said Eve, as brightly as she could; 'it does not do to quarrel with one's bread and butter.'

'You are not going,' insisted Nina. 'Only wait until I have sent the men off shooting, and then we will fight it out.'

But one man refused to shoot that day, and as Eve stood outside on the terrace, wearily out of sorts and jarred in body and mind, Hayhurst joined her. She would infinitely have preferred his not doing so as she made a civil remark about the beauty of the morning. But he was too desperately in earnest to answer remarks on the weather.

'Miss Saxton, I believe I am right in assuming that you are not leaving us because you must, but because I unwarrantably insulted you yesterday?'

'Oh, no,' she said, gently and coldly, for malaise and fatigue had blunted all the sting to her. 'Please don't think me so petty and mean. My business is real, but I frankly admit that I thought my going might obviate any slight awkwardness—for others.'

'Don't go!' he cried, passionately, and then got himself in hand again. 'If you do it will be said, and truly, that I was guilty of driving a lady guest out of my host's house. My punishment will be just, but you will not inflict it?'

A far harder-hearted woman would have been stirred by the man's remorse—and, after all, what a trifle it was—just a trespass from the law of conventional chivalry, and yet calculated to attract more censure from the witnesses than a graver offence against more important ethics.

'Major Hayhurst! this is just a storm in a teacup—a fuss about nothing. I know quite well that men are accustomed to criticise women frankly among themselves, and your only crime was in letting me hear the criticism—and that was pure accident.'

'You are mistaken,' he said. 'Men, decent fellows, don't speak so of women, even among themselves; they don't, indeed. Miss Saxton, until yesterday I had always thought myself a gentleman. If you go away to-day I shall never feel myself one again, and it is more than probable that I shall be cut by my own messmates. Officers who are gentlemen will not associate with one who is not if they know it.'

He did not spare himself; so it lay with her to spare him. With a gracious gesture she held out her hand in complete forgiveness.

'I will not go, Major Hayhurst—and the subject is closed between us. I quite realise that you were suffering, and, therefore, a little cross and cantankerous.'

She used the quaint word purposely to lighten it to him; but as he took her hand he was not deceived into thinking that she would not rather have gone away.

Throughout the next fortnight the companionship between Hayhurst and Eve Saxton was an unusual one as between man and woman. The previous happening had entirely brushed aside conventionality and the constitutional shyness which was Eve's misfortune. They never talked platitudes when they were together, and Hayhurst compassed her about with a watchful care, which met her, turn which way she would. He did not make these attentions conspicuous or lover-like; he would obey her instantly if she dismissed him that he might enjoy the smiles of beauty; but he would return again to her neighborhood at the earliest possible moment and divine, apparently by instinct, the thing she would best like to do.

With the enthusiastic collusion of Nina Sinclair he would plan excursions which effectually prevented Eve from working too hard; if she elected to remain behind, the two between them would make such a course practically impossible. And in so far as she could, Eve met Hayhurst's kindness in a like spirit; but he knew well enough that, although he had won the outer courts of her friendship, she would try to keep the door of the inner sanctuary barred against him. Womanly pride would keep sleepless watch and construe the entrance of love as an act of contrition.