THE HOUSE GUEST : : : By Alice Duer Miller

ELIOT had been married seven years—and he was bored; not bored with the temporary languor that came over him of a Sunday afternoon when he wished for enough energy to go and play golf, but actively bored so that every action of his life as far as he could see was ugly and lusterless. And yet he loved his wife and his two good little girls. Mary was pretty, good, devoted, and—though his mind hesitated a little over the last step—intelligent. Her mind was as alert and vigorous and quick to understand his thoughts as it had been when, the autumn after he left college, he had married her.

It was matrimony, he told himself, not Mary, that bored him; but he was aware that the line was a fine one. Nevertheless, he had been careful to draw it, when the evening before Sam Francis and he had been discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the married state.

Alice Duer Miller

Author of "Calderon's Prisoner," "Manslaughter," "The Charm School," "Less Than Kin" and many other fiction successes.

The first has recently been arranged for film production as "Something Different." "Manslaughter" has broken all records for popularity and created a tremendous impression when published serially as a strong treatise on the frequent conflict between love and duty and the inevitable justice of making the rich and favored suffer for their folly just as the poor and friendless must.

She is perhaps most widely known for a newspaper column which ran some years ago, called "Are Women People?"

Her present story is one of the series by the best American fiction writers on the little problems of matrimony which is attracting wide interest on successive Saturdays. Next week's will be "The Lost Columbine," by Julian Street.

Sam was a bachelor. He had come over to dine, and after dinner the two friends had gone to a moving picture. Mary was busy putting the children to bed. The picture, as it happened, dealt with the life of a young married couple; and, though all the walls were rough plaster, all the doorways were arches, and all the trees eucalyptus, breakfasts and babies and bills seemed to be much the same on one coast as on the other.

"It's a dull picture," said Sam, the bachelor, lightly.

"It's a dull subject," said Eliot, the married man, bitterly.

This opened the door to a discussion one the less frank and intimate because it was carried on in generalities. Eliot began by quoting that terrible sentence from Middlemarch:

"'I never loved any one well enough to put my head into a noose for them——' it is a noose you know."

Sam agreed, but wondered whether every man as he grew older (Sam was twenty-six) did not want a home of his own and at this point an irresistible desire for self-expression came over Eliot. He remembered how he had once been free—free not for evil things, but for adventures that were often nothing more than intellectual—free to miss a dozen suburban trains, if he wanted to finish a book at the club—free to go to the theatre without asking himself whether the money would not have been better spent on the children's shoes—free to wander all night on the bridges, thinking of some futile paradoxical philosophy, without owing any one an explanation of his irregular hours—free even to give up his job if it became intolerable to him—free to hazard his future in any way he felt inclined. This was the aspect of matrimony that no one explained to you. You were told about giving up your club or your favorite cigar, and perhaps a good tailor, but no one made it clear that your privacy and your leisure and your liberty to choose must go, too.

"And to some people," Eliot said judicially, as if had nothing in common with people like that, "to some people life becomes an intolerable bore when those things go. Of course, that does not apply to us, because Mary is an exceptional woman."

"Oh, very," said Sam smiling to himself in the darkness of the theatre, over the fact that any one could call Mary exceptional.

THE conversation made little impression on him, but in Eliot's mind it created a clear mental picture of his situation that he could not forget.

Never, it seemed to him the next morning at breakfast, had his two daughters asked why and when so often. Mary, neat and pretty, at the head of the table smiled and poured out coffee. She generally answered the children with a patience that seemed to Eliot miraculous but misplaced. She thought that the young minds were stirred by intellectual curiosity. But Eliot could never understand why, if this were true, the children never listened to the answers.

"They listen to mine, dear," Mary would reply, "because I really try to explain to them. You only try to put them in wrong for asking."

"Oh, I don't question, my dear, that you are better worth listening to than I am," Eliot would say, "only——"

That was the pattern conversation they usually had upon the subject, but this morning Mary did not answer every why and when—she seemed not to answer any one immediately—not even Eliot himself, though it was only afterward that he remembered her silence.

When he came home that afternoon a note from Mary was lying on the hall table—a not unusual occurrence. She had probably gone to the garden club. She was punctilious about letting him know her plans. It was the afternoon of the children's dancing class. The house was deserted. Eliot's spirits rose. He would actually sit down in his own sitting room and read—or think—or do neither, without any one saying, "What have you been doing all day, dear," or, "Did you remember the butter," or, "Why must I, father?"

He did it. He clasped his hands behind his head and looked at the ceiling. The little country neighborhood was silent. It was the first moment of this kind that he had had for months. He thoroughly enjoyed it.

He began to think about a little parody he was trying to write for a newspaper—he had been trying to do it at odd moments—in the train or in his bath—for several weeks. The occasion that made it appropriate had long since passed, but he wanted to finish it if he could. Within a few minutes, however, he heard the voices of his daughters returning. He wished the class had lasted a little longer.

Yet he was not an unnatural father and when they entered the room, flushed with exercise, elegant in their sheer white dresses and blue bows, he felt proud of them and glad to see them. He loved them even when the following interchange took place.

"Hulla, father. Do you like my new shoes? What is jazz?"

"Well, Marietta, it's a kind of music where the beat is irregular."

"Why is it?"

"Because people like it that way—the time changes."

"What is time, father?"

Remembering Mary's assertion that he didn't try to answer them, he paused a moment to consider, but Marietta went on: "I was called out in front of the class to make a courtesy, father. Where's mother? Why did she go away?"

"She hasn't gone away," said Eliot, disengaging his mind with difficulty, from the problem of time.

"She took a bag with her. Why did she, father?"

"We'll see," said Eliot, thinking to himself that she had probably taken the wash to the laundry, as it was Saturday, and sometimes, if they were short a sheet, and some one coming to stay—— He fished her letter out of his pocket. He had put off reading it for fear it would ask him to do something that would have interfered with his moment of solitude. He opened it, with Marietta sitting on the arm of his chair, and Doris, aged four, balancing on his crossed feet.

The letter said:

Dear Eliot—Something strange has happened that makes it impossible that you and I should ever live together again. I want to be alone for a few days and think over how I can arrange my life. I will come to the office Monday, and talk it all over with you. I am sorry this is Nora's Sunday out, but you can probably manage somehow with the children. They are so good.

Yours,
MARY.

HE BECAME aware that Marietta had been saying for a long time: "What does mother say, father?"—"What does mother say, father?"

He put the letter back in his pocket. "Oh, nothing, dear," he answered. "She had to go away for Sunday."

"Why did she?"

There was a question he couldn't answer. He had no idea—no explanation—no possible theory occurred to him. What could have happened? Had he done something? Or rather, for his conscience was absolutely clear, did she imagine he had done something to hurt her? Had she fallen under the spell of some sudden romance. One read of such things happening, but Mary! No. Had she gone mad? He remembered now that she had seemed silent at breakfast, but not portentously silent. He questioned the children as to the events of the day. Had any messages come? Had any visitors been there? No, nothing. It was almost incredible that you should live with a woman seven years and be unable to form even a hypothesis as to why she had left you. Not that he admitted she had left him—it was just some misunderstanding.

"I can imagine staying with a man who was unfaithful, or stole, or beat me, but I cannot imagine staying with a man whom I bored. Good-by!"

To his first shock a feeling of anger succeeded. How could any one treat another fellow creature like that—let alone a husband. And to leave him in suspense for days. And the children—suppose anything happened to the children?

They came to ask him to sit with them while they had supper and read aloud. They had asked him this almost every evening, since they had been able to speak, and he often refused. But this evening he consented. It was like a reproof to Mary. He chose Thackeray's "Rose and the Ring" to read to them. He hadn't read it for years. It was a magnificent piece of narrative. He read it well, too. At that place where the haughty Count Hoggin-narme stepped into the arena, and the lions rushed out saying, "Wurra, wurra, wur-rra——" he looked up to see two level spoons arrested in front of two opened mouths, while four eyes dilated with excitement.

After the children had gone to bed he had a long uninterrupted evening—one of those evenings in which he could have finished a dozen parodies—except that his whole being was taken up with anger and speculation. He walked up and down the sitting room all evening, and then went to bed—but not to sleep. How could Mary have behaved so? He began to imagine their interview on Monday—his side of it at least. About 4 o'clock he found he was going to use the phrase "My little motherless girls."

By morning, however, he had discarded it as sentimental. The feeling behind the words was there, however. It was Sunday. He would take them to church. He had never taken them to church before. He went and brushed his high hat. He looked very tall walking down the little lane to the paved avenue on which the church stood. The children, small and fluffy, held each a hand. His little motherless girls.

Marietta chatted as they went. "You never went to church with us before, did you, father? You're always so tired on Sunday when mother's home. The first time Doris went to church she thought the minister was God—all children do. I did myself. Why do clergymen dress like that, father? Why do they?"

If Mary had been there he would have answered, "Why do you wear ruffles on your skirt—because it's the custom," and Marietta would have replied: "Why is it?" and then the conversation would have been taken up by him and Mary as to whether Marietta was seeking information or simply trying to thrust herself into the foreground. But now Mary was not there, he felt obliged to try to answer his motherless little girl, and she actually appeared to try to understand him, so that they were talking rather earnestly by the time they reached the church door.

AND so it went on. It wasn't that Eliot had never before found his children's pocket handkerchiefs, or even blown their noses or put their hats on the right side before, but always he had done these things as a favor to Mary. But now he did them because there was no one else to do them, which made it somehow all very different.

In the afternoon he did not play golf, partly because he did not want to answer questions as to Mary's whereabouts, but partly because he became involved in a hymn Marietta had been most incompetently committing to memory for six months.

He was tired in the evening—he looked back on the day as a hard one, yes, and not a pleasant one, either, but he had not been bored.

He went eagerly to the office the next day, and waited nervously through the early hours of the morning. About twelve Mary came. One glance at her told him that she was neither crazy nor playing a joke on him. Her face was the face of a woman who had been through two days of suffering. They went into his private office without greetings of any kind and shut the door.

Mary was direct. "I sat just in front of you the other night at the pictures," she said. "I could not help hearing."

There was a pause. Eliot's mind rushed back to the conversation with Sam, and his heart felt like a falling elevator. He recalled things he had said with a relish and bitterness hidden from Sam, but obvious to Mary.

He looked at his wife. Her eyes were blazing. "And yet," he said, "I love you, Mary."

"I thank you for such a love," she answered, "the dull little woman at home—no, you didn't say that—quite. Suppose you had overheard me telling Virginia or Caroline that you bored me to death—that I'd stopped reading because you ne[ver] talked of anything but housek[eep]ing details——"

"That's most unjust," put in Eliot. "I said matrimony—not yo[u]

"Oh, let's be honest," answe[red] Mary, shaking her head, as if [she] were shaking out salt water from [a] wave that had passed over her. "Y[our] marriage is me, and mine's you. A[nd] it's duller for me than it is for y[ou] —I don't even get to town every d[ay] and see a lot of people, and yet I'm not bored—I know what you're think[ing]—you think I'm not bored be[cause] I'm not as clever as you but——"

"I wasn't thinking anything of the kind," said Eliot, and he imagined that he was telling the truth.

"Of course, you were, but that isn't the reason. The reason is that no one can get more out of life than he puts into it—or out of marriage either. You're not bored with your business—and heaven knows it's a dull one—every one agrees to that—duller if possible than your own home—but it doesn't bore you. Why not? Because you put a lot of yourself into it."

HERETOFORE a sense of guilt had confused Eliot, but now he saw light.

"Isn't my work here just what I put into the home?" he asked.

"After office hours, what do you put into it?" said Mary. "You come home like a king expecting everything to be arranged for you—or a guest, who mustn't be interrupted by the children—your own children mind you——"

"The men in the outer office will hear you, if you speak so loud."

"I hope they will," said Mary. "They are probably kings and house guests, too. They probably think they have an inalienable right to be bored by their women and children, too."

"Well, after all," said Eliot, "it's not a crime to be bored."

"Isn't it," she returned. "Now listen to me, Eliot. I can imagine staying with a man who was unfaithful, or stole or beat me, but I cannot imagine under any circumstances staying with a man whom I bored. Why should I? Good-by."

"Hold on, Mary. Where are you going?" He would like to have spoken with the tongue of men and angels, but he was distracted by a peculiar mental state. He felt it was impossible that he should ever have been bored with this vital, violent, irritating, handsome creature, and yet he knew quite well that he had been.

"Oh," Mary replied airily, "I'm going to my mother's—or on a trip—I really haven't decided."

"And are you ever coming back?" Eliot asked with a sarcasm that was meant to bite.

Mary took a step toward him, away from the door which she had almost reached. "Yes," she said, "I'm coming back, and I'll tell you when I'm coming back. When you've run the house so long that you feel uncomfortable if the food isn't good, when you feel guilty when the children interrupt me, when, in other words, I'm the house guest—that's when I'm coming back."

And she went out of the office and slammed the door.

NOBODY'S MAN

How a Great Leader, Almost Ruined by a Money Marriage and a Faithless Wife, Regains Success and Happiness Through an Unusual Woman's Love Is Fascinatingly Told in This Story of Intrigue, Politics, Mystery and Romance by the Noted Author of "The Great Impersonation," "The Profiteers," "The Great Prince Shan" and a Score of "Best Sellers"

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Andrew Tallente, political leader, has married for money. His wife accepted him to forward ambitions to a title. She has a cold and selfish temperament, and is interested in his secretary, Anthony Palliser, who has just disappeared. She has a sudden suspicion that her husband is responsible for the disappearance. Lady Jane Partington, a beautiful and wealthy aristocrat, interested in labor problems, is a neighbor who interests Andrew greatly. Andrew has missed some valuable political papers, and in an argument with Palliser on the edge of a cliff has struck him. The secretary fell over. Andrew is kept under observation by Inspector Gillian, of the police. Stephen Dartrey, the self-sacrificing Labor party leader, with Miller, a coarse-grained radical, and Nora Miall, a charming and brilliant feminist leader, offers Tallente the premiership. He joins their party, ignoring inducements of Horlock, the Premier in office. His refusal of a peerage causes his wife to threaten divorce. Nora Miall explains to him the philosophy of the new party and also her dislike for the intrusive Miller, which he shares. Tallente, back home after arranging to run for Parliament, begins the political attention to Lady Jane, whose beauty and brains both attract him.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

CHAPTER II

LUNCHEON was a pleasant, even a luxurious meal, for the Woolhanger chef had come from the ducal household, but it was hedged about with restraints which fretted Tallente and rendered conversation monosyllabic. Itwas served, too, in the larger dining room, where the table, reduced to its smallest dimensions, still seemed to place a formidable distance between himself and his hostess. A manservant stood behind Lady Jane's chair, and the butler was in constant attendance at the sideboard. Under such circumstances, conversation became precarious and was confined chiefly to local topics. When they left the room for their coffee, they found it served in the hall. Tallente, however, protested vigorously.

"Can't we have it served in your sitting room, please?" he begged. "It is impossible to talk to you here. There are people in the background all the time, and you might have callers."

She hesitated for a moment but yielded the point. With the door closed and the coffee tray between them, Tallente drew a sigh of relief.

"I hope you don't think I am a nuisance," he said bluntly, "but, after all, I came down from London purposely to see you."

"I am not so vain as to believe that," she answered.

"It is nevertheless true and I think that you do believe it. What have I done that you should all of a sudden build a fence around yourself?"

"That may be," she replied, smiling, "for my own protection. I can assure you that I am not used to tete-a-tete luncheons with guests who insist upon having their own way in everything."

"I wonder if it is a good thing for you to be so much your own mistress," he reflected.

"You must judge by results. I always have been—at least since I decided to lead this sort of life."

"Why have you never married?" he asked her, a little abruptly.

"We discussed that before, didn't we? I suppose because the right man has never asked me."

"Perhaps," he ventured, "the right man isn't able to."

"Perhaps there isn't any right man at all—perhaps there never will be."

The minutes ticked away. The room, with its mingled perfumes and pleasant warmth, its manifold associations with her wholesome and orderly life, seemed to have laid a sort of spell upon him. She was leaning back in her corner of the lounge, her hands hanging over the sides, her eyes fixed upon the burning log. She herself was so abstracted that he ventured to let his eyes dwell upon her, to trace the outline of her slim but powerful limbs, to admire her long, delicate feet and hands, the strong womanly face, with its kindly mouth and soft, almost affectionate eyes. Tallente, who for the last ten years had looked upon the other sex as non-existent, crushed into an uninteresting negation for him owing to his wife's cold and shadowy existence, twice within the last few months found himself pass in a different way under the greatest spell in life.

Nora Miall provoked his curiosity, had reawakened a dormant sense of sex without attracting it toward herself. Jane brought to him again, from the first moment he had seen her, that half-wistful recrudescence of the sentiment of his earlier days. He was amazed to find how once more in her presence that sentiment had taken to itself fire and life, how different a thing it was from those first dreams of her, which had seemed like an echo from the period of his poetry-reading youth. Of all women in the world she seemed to him now the most desirable. That she was unattainable he was perfectly willing to admit. Even then he had not the strength to deny himself the doubtful joys of imagination with regard to her. He reveled in her proximity because of the pleasure it gave him, heedless or reckless of consequences. Between them, in vastly different degrees, these two women seemed to have brought back something of his youth.

The silence became noticeable, led him at last into a certain measure of alarm.

"Lady Jane," he ventured, "have I said anything to offend you?"

"Of course not," she answered, looking at him kindly.

"You are very silent. Are you afraid that I am going to attempt to make love to you?"

She was startled in earnest this time. She sat up and looked at him disapprovingly. There was a touch of the old hauteur in her tone.

"How can you be so ridiculous!" she exclaimed.

"Would it be ridiculous for me?"

"Does it occur to you," she asked, "that I am the sort of person to encourage attentions from a man who is not free to offer them?"

"I had forgotten that," he admitted, quite frankly. "If course, I see the point. I have a wife, even though of her own choosing she does not count."

"She exists."

"So do I."

Jane broke into a little laugh.

"Now we are both being absurd," she declared, "and I don't want to be and I don't want you to be. Of course, you can't look at things as I do. You belong to a very large world. You spend your life destroying obstacles. All my people, you know," she went on, "look upon me as terribly emancipated. They think my mild socialism and my refusal to listen to such a thing as a chaperon most terribly improper, but at heart, you know, I am still a very conventional person. I have torn down a great many conventions, but there are some upon which I cannot bring myself even to lay my fingers."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be you if you did," he reflected.

"Perhaps not."

"And yet," he went on, "tell me, are you wholly content here? Your life, in its way, is splendid. You live as much for the benefit of others as for yourself. You are encouraging the right principle among your yeomen and your farmers. You are setting your heel upon feudalism—you, the daughter of a race who have always demanded it. You live among these wonderful surroundings, you grow into the bigness of them, nature becomes almost your friend. It is one of the most dignified and beautiful lives I ever knew for a woman, and yet—are you wholly content?"

"I am not," she admitted frankly. "And listen," she went on, after a moment's pause, "I will show you how much I trust you, how much I really want you to understand me.

"I am not completely happy because I know perfectly well that it is unnatural to live as I do. If I met the man I could care for and who cared for me, I should prefer to be married."

She had commenced her speech with the faintest tinge of color burning underneath the wholesome sunburn of her cheeks. She had spoken boldly enough, even though toward the end of her sentence her voice had grown very low. When she had finished, however, it seemed as though the memory of her words were haunting her as though she suddenly realized the nakedness of them. She buried her face in her hands, and he saw her shoulders heave as though she were sobbing. He stood very close and for the first time he touched her. He held the fingers of her hand gently in his.

"Dear Lady Jane," he begged, "don't regret even for a moment that you have spoken naturally. If we are to be friends, to be anything at all to one another, it is wonderful of you to tell me so sweetly what women take such absurd pains to conceal. * * *

"Dear Lady Jane," he begged, "don't regret even for a moment that you have spoken naturally"

When you look up, let us start our friendship all over again, only before you do, listen to my confession. If fifteen years could be rolled off my back and I were free, it isn't political ambition I should look to for my guiding star. I should have one far greater, far more wonderful desire."

The fingers he held were gently withdrawn. She drew herself up. Her forehead was wrinkled questioningly. She forced a smile.

"You would be very foolish," she said, "if you tried to part with one of those fifteen years. Every one has brought you experience. Every one has helped to make you what you are."

"And yet—" he began.

He broke off abruptly in his speech. The hall seemed suddenly full of voices. Jane rose to her feet at the sound of approaching footsteps. She made the slightest possible grimace, but Tallente was oppressed with a suspicion that the interruption was not altogether unwelcome to her.

"Some of my cousins and their friends from Minehead," she said. "I am sorry. I expect they have lost the hunt and come here for tea."

The room was almost instantly invaded by a company of light-hearted, noisy young people, flushed with exercise and calling aloud for tea, intimates all of them, calling one another by their Christian names, speaking a jargon which sounded to Tallente like another language. He stayed for a quarter of an hour and then took his leave. Of the newcomers, no one seemed to have an idea who he was, no one seemed to care in the least whether he remained or went. He was only able to snatch a word of farewell with Jane at the door. She shook her head at his whispered request.

"I am afraid not," she answered. "How could I? Besides, there is no telling when this crowd will go. You are sure you won't let me send you home?"

Tallente shook his head.

"The walk will do me good," he said. "I get lazy in town. But you are sure——"

The butler was holding open the door. Two of the girls had suddenly taken possession of Jane. She shook her head slightly.

"Good-by," she called out. "Come and see me next time you are down."

Tallente was suddenly his old self, grave and severe. He bowed stiffly in response to the little chorus of farewells and followed the butler down the hall. The latter, who was something of a politician, did his best to indicate by his manner his appreciation of Tallente's position.

"You are sure you won't allow me to order a car, sir?" he said, with his hand upon the door. "I know her ladyship would be only too pleased. It's a long step to the manor, and if you'll forgive my saying so, sir, you've a good deal on your shoulders just now."

Tallente caught a glimpse of the bleak moorland and of the distant hills, wrapped in mist. The idea of vigorous exercise, however, appealed to him. He shook his head.

"I'd rather walk, thanks," he said. "It's a matter of five miles, sir."

Tallente smiled. There was something in the fresh, cold air wonderfully alluring after the atmosphere of the room he had quitted. He turned his coat collar up and strode down the avenue.

CHAPTER III

Tallente reached the manor about an hour and a half later, mud-splashed, wet and weary. Robert followed him into the study and mixed him a whisky and soda.

"You've walked all the way back, sir?" he remarked, with a note of protest in his tone.

"They offered me a car," Tallente admitted. "I didn't want it. I came down for fresh air and exercise."

"Two very good things in their way, sir, but easily overdone," was the mild rejoinder. "These hills are terrible unless you're at them all the time."

Tallente drank his whisky almost greedily and felt the benefit of it, although he was still weary. He had walked for five miles in the company of ghosts and their faces had been gray. Perhaps, too, it was the passing of his youth which brought this tiredness to his limbs.

"Robert," he confessed abruptly, "I was a fool to come down here at all."

"It's dreary at this time of the year unless you've time to shoot or hunt, sir. Why not motor to Bath tomorrow? I could wire for rooms, and I could drive you up to London the next day. Motoring's a good way of getting the air, sir, and you won't overtire yourself."

"I'll think of it in the morning," his master promised.

"My wife has found the silver, sir," Robert announced, as he turned to leave the room, "and I managed to get a little fish. That, with some soup, a pheasant, and a fruit tart, we thought——"

"I shall be alone, Robert," Tallente interrupted. "There is no one coming for dinner."

The man's disappointment was barely concealed. He sighed as he took up the tray.

"Very good, sir. Your clothes are all out. I'll turn on the hot water in the bathroom."

Tallente threw off his rain and mud-soaked clothes, bathed, changed, and descended to the dining room just as the gong sounded. Robert was in the act of moving the additional place from the little round dining table which he had drawn up closer to the wood fire, but his master stopped him.

"You can let those things be," he directed. "Take away the champagne, though. I shan't want that."

Robert bowed in silent appreciation of his master's humor and began ladling out soup at the sideboard. Tallente's lips were curled a little, partly in self-contempt, with perhaps just a dash of self-pity. It had come to this, then, that he must dine with fancies rather than alone, that this tardily developed streak of sentimentality must be ministered to or would drag him into the depths of dejection. He began to understand the psychology of its late appearance. Stella's artificial companionship had kept his thoughts imprisoned, fettered with the meshes of an instinctive fidelity and had driven him sedulously to the solace of work and books. Now that it was removed and he was to all practical purposes a free man, they took their own course. His life had suddenly become a natural one, and all that was human in him responded to the possibilities of his solitude. He had had as yet no time to experience the relief, to appreciate his liberty, before he was face to face with this new loneliness. Tonight, he thought, as he looked at the empty place and remembered his wistful, almost diffident invitation, the solitude was almost unendurable. If she had only understood how much it meant, surely she would have made some effort, would not have been content with that half-embarrassed, half-doubtful shake of the head! In the darkened room, with the throb of the sea and the crackling of the logs in his ears, and only Robert's silent form for company, he felt a sudden craving for the things of his youth, for another side of life, the restaurants, the bright eyes of women, the whispered words of pleasant sentiment, the perfume shaken into the atmosphere they created, the low music in the background.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Robert said in his ear, "your soup. Gertrude has taken such pains with the dinner, sir," he added diffidently. "If I might take the liberty of suggesting it, it would be as well if you could eat something."

Tallente took up his spoon. Then they both started, they both turned to the window. A light had flashed into the room, a low, purring sound came from outside.

"A car, sir!" Robert exclaimed, his face full of pleasurable anticipation. "If you'll excuse me, I'll answer the door. Might it be the lady, after all, sir?"

He hurried out. Tallente rose slowly to his feet. He was listening intently. The thing wasn't possible, he told himself. It wasn't possible!

Then he heard a voice in the hall. Robert threw the door open and announced in a tone of triumph——

"Lady Jane Partington, sir."

She came toward him, smiling, self-possessed, but a little interrogative. He had a lightning-like impression of her beautiful shoulders rising from her plain black gown, her delightfnly easy walk, the slimness and comeliness and stateliness of her.

"I know that I ought to be ashamed of myself for coming after I had told you I couldn't," she said. "It will serve me right if you've eaten all the dinner, but I do hope you haven't."

"I had only just sat down," he told her, as he and Robert held her chair, "and I think that this is the kindest action you ever performed in your life."

Robert, his face glowing with satisfaction, had become ubiquitous. She had scarcely subsided into her chair before he was offering her a cocktail on a silver tray, serving Tallente with his forgotten glass, at the sideboard ladling out soup, out of the room and in again, bringing back the rejected bottle of champagne.

"You will never believe that I am a sane person again," she laughed. "After you had gone, and all those foolish children had departed, I felt it was quite impossible to sit down and dine alone. I wanted so much to come and I realized how ridiculous it was of me not to have accepted at once. At the last moment I couldn't bear it any longer, so I rushed into the first gown I could find, ordered out my little coupe and here I am."

"The most welcome guest who ever came to a lonely man," he assured her. "A moment ago Robert was complaining because I was sending my soup away. Now I shall show him what Devon air can do."

The champagne was excellent, and the dinner over which Gertrude had taken so much care was, after all, thoroughly appreciated. Tallente, suddenly and unexpectedly light-hearted, felt a keen desire to entertain his welcome guest, and remembered his former successes as a raconteur. They pushed politics and all personal matters far away. He dug up reminiscences of his days in foreign capitals, when he had first entered the diplomatic service, betrayed his intimate knowledge of the Florence which they both loved; of Paris, where she had studied and which he had seen under so many aspects—Paris, the home of beauty and fashion before the war, torn with anguish and horror during its earlier stages; grim, steadfast and somber in the days of Verdun; wildly, madly exultant when wreathed and decorated with victory. There were so many things to talk about for two people of agile brains come together late in life. They had moved into the study and Lady Jane was seated in his favorite easy chair, sipping her coffee and some wonderful green chartreuse, before a single personal note had crept into the flow of their conversation.

To be continued Monday

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