

HONOURS EASY—By ALEX. JOHNSON

Being a Battle of Wits Between a Resourceful Woman and a Clever Masculine Person

EILEEN sat on the terrace and felt worried. Before the war Della Triuna was the only spot on the Cote d'Azur which was not mobbed during three parts of the year. It has only one efficient hotel. But the Grand Hotel des Anglais is irreproachable. Cuisine, view, gardens and tennis courts are beyond criticism. They are in fact everything the prospectus claims for them, which is a good deal, for the proprietor who composed that admirable document is a thoroughgoing Gaul, and therefore apt to be a little florid in praise.

The terrace was the star feature of the hotel; it was cut at a perfect height for securing a perfect temperature, and was arranged as a sun-trap.

Yet with all these advantages, Eileen, out of sheer contrariety of spirit, sat and hated them all, not for what they were—which would have been unreasonable if not impossible—but for what they stood for.

Inez Lewis, sitting beside her, noted her depression, and asked the reason for it. Inez was an ordinary girl—if there is such a thing as an ordinary girl—and was rather afraid of Eileen. People often were. Eileen had been to Oxford, and taken honours in history, and to Africa, and shot things with some skill and success. Moreover, she could talk.

Such a record and such accomplishments would no doubt merely have marked her down as a suffragettish sort of a person if she had not had a face to help them out. Women who disliked her said her mouth was too big and her eyes set too far back; but even they admitted that she had nice hair. With men her looks were more than striking enough to attract attention, and once attention was attracted her personality did the rest. They saw grit in her mouth and soul in her eyes, and endowed her with a good many other qualities to which her claims were a little doubtful.

Now Eileen turned at Inez' question and smiled.

"Yes," she said, "I am afraid I am feeling a bit humpy to-day. I think it must be all these men who are on my nerves"—she indicated the tennis court with a comprehensive wave of her arm—"They're—they're so immaculately flannelled, their whole lives are immaculately flannelled, and so's mine. It's enough to drive anyone back to Africa. Just think, year in and year out they go on existing without saying anything worth saying or doing anything worth doing; and when they die they don't die; they simply cease to exist. . . . I think I'm going away to become a char-woman, or a 'publican's wife, or a tinker, or someone else who's allowed to have views of the world. There isn't a man or woman in the hotel who can talk about anything, excepting you, of course, dear—and possibly one or two I haven't met; and between thirty and forty per cent. of the men I have met devote more or less of my spare time to making love to me!"

"You do talk, don't you?" said Inez admiringly. "I expect you feel heaps better now. I believe," she went on—Inez always preferred discussing people to abstract questions—"Mr. Dermer, who arrived last night is supposed to be clever. Several people have said that they got that impression, so I expect there is some truth in it."

"Him clever!"—Eileen came as near snorting as is graceful in a heroine—"The people here call a man 'clever,' if he can do a step-dance on a billiard table without going through. That's the sort of a thing that passes for cleverness in this crowd. He can't dance, anyhow; and all he said to me last night—someone introduced us, and it took me twenty minutes to shake him off—was 'Rotten!' and 'Splendid!'"

"Really," said Inez, laughing, "I expect he was afraid of you. What on earth did you try to talk to the poor man about? Syndicalism? or proportionate representation?"

"Neither, so there!" said Eileen, with increasing scorn. "I assure you I kept quite strictly to the most childlike topics; the sky, and the sea, and the fourteen kinds of subtropical palms growing in the hotel gardens—"

"I expect you spouted all their Latin names."

"I didn't, because I haven't a notion what they are,—and then I went on to a short but comprehensive discussion of our local golf, tennis and pigeon-shooting facilities, adding a few well chosen words on grouse prospects at home. I tell you, my dear, conversationally, at all events, the man's simply an imbecile."

EILEEN'S voice was clear and decisive. It was in fact impossible for anyone hearing her to go on believing in Mr. Dermer. Mr. Dermer himself found it so impossible that he was obliged to resort to desperate measures. Eileen's voice had aroused him from a refreshing sleep in the

depths of a deck chair, thoughtfully placed by the hotel management (or possibly the hotel gardener) in a leafy retreat, from which Eileen's own chair barred the egress. He had yawned twice loudly and coughed discreetly. Now he got up, trying to make the sort of noises that a newly awakened man may be supposed to make, stretched himself laboriously, and pushed a liesurely way out.

All might have been well if Inez had not become hysterical at the critical second, and gurgled. Mr. Dermer turned and gave vent to a well shaped grin.

He was a very big man, thin, but broad. His build was a little clumsy, but there was nothing more about him to suggest stupidity. There was nothing "pretty" about his face, but it was clever, and strong, and good-natured. Most people liked him immediately, though a good many were puzzled by him.

He took off his hat to Eileen.

"Hallo, Miss Arthur," he began, with a really admirable affectation of surprise. "This is a bit of luck! Striking on al-

most the only person I know in the hotel—at least the only person I know worth talking to," he added twinkling.

Inez decided immediately that, whatever his conversational abilities



They sat together on the terrace after dinner.

or imbecilities, no fault could be found with his twinkling.

Eileen, still outwardly placid, though inwardly furious, introduced her, and they talked. Their conversation was the usual Della Triuna shop. But even Eileen was forced to go back on her own judgment of Mr. Dermer. He quoted Swinburne, Mark Twain, and Strindberg—without appearing to drag any of them in—palmed off three spontaneous epigrams as Shavian, and finally reduced Inez to fits with a brief descriptive appreciation of his own journey from Mentone to Della Triuna on a ten year old motor bicycle, purchased for five pounds at a blacksmith's. To describe an adventure in the "mechanical" class without becoming either technical or a bore is a rare and refreshing achievement, which seemed to come easily to Mr. Dermer.

AFTER about twenty minutes he got up, excused himself, thanked the ladies for their toleration of his intrusion, and finally turned to Eileen and said:

"I say, Miss Arthur, they tell me all sorts of things about you. It makes me quite afraid. I hear you're most frightfully clever; took honours at Oxford, and—and all that sort of thing."

"I only got a third," said Eileen, who had no idea how to meet this cowardly attack, especially as she was still just a little uncertain whether it was an attack or not. Mr. Dermer went on placidly.

"And though I'm afraid I'm a most frightful duffer myself, I would awfully like to have a chat with you some time or other on one or two more serious topics. Say on—Syndicalism—or perhaps proportionate representation."

Eileen gasped.

"Of course," added the tormentor, "you understand I'm not much use at these things myself. Never was, somehow. But I'm no end interested and keen on learning. I always feel it's the duty of a man who's

a bit of an ass, and knows it, to get taught all he can about things when he meets cleverer people. I've got quite a passion for clever people, in fact. Attraction of opposites, no doubt."

"I do not suffer from any such attraction myself," said Eileen, in her most "Do go away—I've got no use for you" tones.

Mr. Dermer turned on the smile again.

"Splendid!" he observed, oracularly, and passed away slowly to the company of the immaculately flannelled on the lower terrace.

When he was at last at a safe distance, Inez burst out laughing.

"Well?" demanded Eileen, with asperity.

"Well," laughed Inez. "You've been ragged, my dear, that's what's happened to you. And you jolly well deserve it, too. That man's as clever as sin—and ever so much nicer. He had you simply on toast, darling."

"I fail to see," returned Eileen, obstinately, "that he showed any signs of being clever. It's not clever to keep up a chatter like that about commonplace occurrences. Lots of the world's most appalling bores make a practice of it, and do it much better than he does. He was merely a great deal more garrulous than last night. I very much doubt now whether I shall ever speak to the man again."

"Rubbish," said Inez, with conviction. "Why, you silly thing, you're just beginning to get interested in him. And think how the poor fellow needs educating, anyhow. And he appealed to you so pathetically!"

"I don't see that I'm called upon to educate him," said Eileen.

"He called on you himself. Isn't that enough?"

"No; it isn't nearly enough, and he was decidedly impertinent; so, as I say, I shan't speak to him again unless I'm actually forced."

SHE was not actually forced. Mr. Dermer did not press his company on either of them again. But

Eileen explained to Inez next day that she could hardly ignore "the man" altogether—without attracting attention; especially as he was rapidly becoming the most popular person staying at Della Triuna. He had quite a phenomenal knack of being extremely interested in whatever the person he was talking to seemed interested in; and people generally therefore came to regard him as intelligent.

So Eileen did not ignore him. It became rather obvious after a few days to everyone except herself that she was going out of her way not to ignore him.

She herself only admitted her change of opinion gradually, beginning by confessing that he could, on his day, play a respectable game of tennis. She was rather disgusted to find that Mr. Dermer had also shot things—had actually been all the way to Africa to do it; and once she detested him cordially for nearly three hours, when before a small but interested audience, he set her right over the penetrating capacity of the type of game rifle bullet she used herself. Other people's knowledge is only tolerable so long as it does not check us in our own subjects.

"Of course," she had said, "I don't know much about these things—except from experience."

Mr. Dermer laughed.

"A little knowledge can be as dangerous acquired that way as any other," he answered, "if you shot away at a rhinoceros at that distance with a 3.03 Jeffries' split, he'd take as much notice of it as an express armoured train, and be within twenty yards of you before you could get in a second shot."

There followed the quick laugh that marks the efficient and unanswerable score.

This one small discomfiture challenged her. She decided that she must get a public revenge in some way or other. She was sure that if she could turn a general conversation on to some such topic as the Poor Law or the Pragmatic Sanction she could make him look the sort of idiot he professed to be. But conversation at Della Triuna, when it became general, was usually confined to sport and the weather, and it was difficult to divert it to themes demanding wide interests and an understanding of "educated" topics. In the meantime Mr. Dermer went on indefinitely finding new and entertaining comments to make on sport and the weather.

When they met without an audience, which—by a most astounding series of coincidences, they did with increasing frequency, he talked intelligently, but by no means intellectually; yet there was always something quizzical about his comments which puzzled and exasperated her.

If she had been just a shade less sure of her own ground she might have suspected him of attempting to patronize her. But a girl who has long been treated as an intellectual equal by intellectual men is rarely liable to such qualms.

So for a few days she merely continued to hate him, and find him a very interesting study. But of one thing she remained convinced—that Mr. Dermer was not really clever, but merely a man who knocked about the world, and picked up a few stray bits of

(Continued on page 17.)