

"Of a surety, Monsieur."
"She is living here?"
"Since the first of the month."
"But where? How?"
He pulled himself up suddenly. One is not a boy at 50, and one does not make a confidant of a stranger whom one meets on the street corner.

But Marie was uncorked. The story gurgled out, and the man who listened, knowing Miss Marsden well, and belonging to the world on which she had turned her back, understood, as the good-hearted woman of another class and of different traditions could not understand.

"Voilà," finished Marie. "Voilà the story. It is of a meanness, that apartment-house, and she had the air poor—but always the aristocrat. Already I have meditated upon the dinner, Monsieur. It shall be of the best. Rogers and I have made the bank account."

"If you would allow—"

The man's hand went to his pocket, but the French woman's face flushed.

"Pardon, Monsieur, no. It is I, Marie, who offers the dinner. Mademoiselle permits. But it is this for which I ventured to stop Monsieur. I knew him to be a friend of the family and I said to myself, 'To dine alone is not right, on Noel.' Than the dinner, more than one should appreciate it. Perhaps Monsieur Fish would have the kindness—not for me, but for the old friendship—"

She stuck fast, tangled in embarrassment—then went on breathlessly: "If you could but add to the pleasure—to the surprise—if you would but dine with Mademoiselle on Christmas Day. I would have all things ready; it would be like a dinner out of the past. It is not good that one should see no old friend on the Noel, Monsieur!"

The man was as embarrassed as she—but with a difference.

"I would be glad to eat your dinner, Marie, but—Mademoiselle—it would be an intrusion. She has never sent me word—she would have let me know if she had been willing I should come."

He was stammering like boy.

"The pride, Monsieur—only the pride. A friend laughs at the pride. And on Christmas Day—it is the season of good will, is it not—the season of the soft heart? The Christmas candles would melt the pride, Monsieur. You will come?"

He hesitated then squared his shoulders.

"Yes, Marie, I will go."

A la bonne heure! There shall be sole au vin blanc."

"You will give me the address and I may send flowers?"

"To me, Monsieur. It is to be a surprise."

She gave him the address.

"Au revoir, Monsieur. You are of a kindness. It shall be a success, that Christmas dinner."

She hurried on to Rogers.

Bert Fish stopped a passing cab and drove to his club. He could think better at the club. His thoughts went back to the days when the Marsdens lived in the old Marsden house and he was exceedingly at home there. He could remember Ruth's debut. She was a pretty girl, a trifle cold and proud even then, but he admired her—tranquilly. He was past enthusiasm over debutantes and already dancing under protest. It was on her father's account that he had drifted into the position of friend of the house. At least that was what he had thought, but the debutante matured into a lovely woman and he still admired her—tranquilly. She had stood as his standard for womanhood. He had felt that if he should marry, his wife would be like her. Probably he would marry some day—some far-off day. One ought to do that sort of thing, and Ruth—but one was so comfortable at the club. Marriage entailed responsibilities, curtailing of freedom, domestic difficulties, trouble with servants, bad dinners. At the club one had what one wanted and one paid one's dues. That was all.

The gossips grew tired of connecting his name with Miss Marsden. Ruth was cordial, serene. She had admirers, a host of them, and each one went away, in time; but Bert Fish still dined at the house regularly on Sundays and dropped in at all hours. He was a selfish man, not a vain one, and it never occurred to him that Ruth loved him. Of course he loved her. He accepted that fact as he accepted the sunsets, but things were very well as they were.

He was in India when the crash came; months went by before he heard of

the financial failure, with the ugly suggestions of disgrace hanging around it, and of James Marsden's sudden death. He wrote to Ruth at once, but he had never heard from her. She had been courageous enough to do her own surgery, to walk off the stage before she could be elbowed from it. No one knew anything about her save the family lawyer, and his lips were sealed.

Society gossip wondered, and then forgot the Marsden bankruptcy. Even the real friends forgot.

Thinking the story over as he dined, Bert Fish realized that he, too, had practically forgotten, though he had been sadly shaken up and hurt when he found that the one woman he admired—tranquilly—had dropped out of his life and made no sign to him. He had never realized that she had not understood—that she had not believed he would care.

Now she was in New York. He would see her—and something stirred in him that surprised him mildly.

He ate his dinner in perfunctory fashion, roamed into the smoking-room, ensconced himself in a big chair, lighted a good cigar and sat staring at the ceiling. Only once during the evening did he speak. A friend slapped him on the shoulder. "My boy's half-back on the Yale team, Fish," he said proudly.

Fish lowered his gaze from the ceiling.

"Eh, what? Oh, yes. Nice boy?"

"Well, rather. I'm going down to the station to meet him now."

"How many children have you, Felix?"

"Four, and they're the finest ever."

My small girl makes her debut this winter and she's a winner. Why the deuce don't you marry, old man?"

He walked away.

Fish relapsed into silence. After a time he put on his coat and hat and went to the theatre. For the first time the club seemed big and cheerless.

When Ruth Marsden opened her door in the dusk of Christmas Day suggestions of festivity smote her nostrils. The scent of American Beauty roses mingled with an odor of highly seasoned cookery. Violets and lilies-of-the-valley defied the kitchen to do its worst.

For a moment the mistress of the place looked puzzled. Then she remembered. Evidently Marie and her Rogers had taken possession while she had her long walk. Her lamps were lighted. Her little front room was full of flowers. Surely Marie could not have remembered her preference for valley lilies, yet there were masses on the little tea table.

The curtains between the tiny parlor and the tinier dining-room were drawn, and Miss Marsden smiled at the mystery in which this odd Christmas celebration of hers was shrouded. Still smiling, she sank wearily into a low chair, and, closing her eyes, sat quietly with the perfume of the lilies caressing her senses and old Christmases drifting through her thoughts, until a subdued clatter of china and glass behind the curtains roused her.

She must dress for her dinner. Depression and untidy hair would be a poor return for the friendliness of Marie and Rogers. The occasion was festive; well, festive it should be, if she could make it so.

She went down the hall and into her bedroom, put away her coat and hat and turned to her mirror. The woman she saw there did not suggest gaiety. Her face rose pale and weary above the sombre black of her gown, and her brown hair was brushed smoothly back from her brow. A sprinkling of gray showed in the brown, and Miss Marsden eyed it with gloomy disapproval. The disapproval extended itself to include the black gown. What place had black at a Christmas dinner?

A gleam of inspiration dawned in Miss Marsden's eyes, and with a certain shame-faced determination she opened a trunk that stood in one corner of the room and recklessly tossed its contents on the floor. Down at the bottom she found the thing of which she had been in search, and as she shook it out the gaslight rioted over the glowing silken folds of rose color. She had kept no other gown of the kind. What had rose-color dinner-gowns to do with her life now? But this gown had associations. It had been a favorite with old friends. It—well, she had kept it.

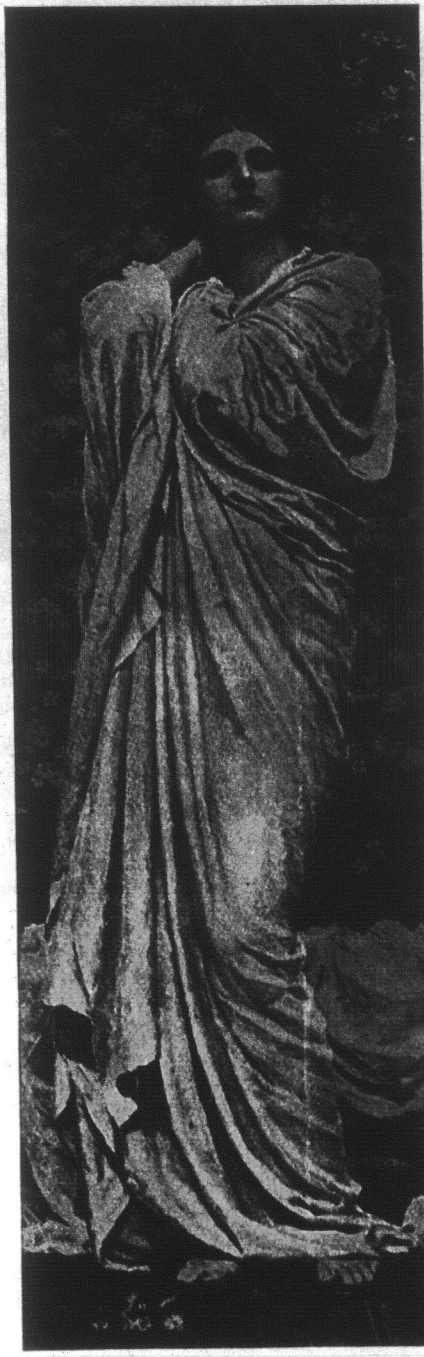
She rose to her feet with the brilliant burden in her arms and looked from the gown to the mirror, from the mirror to the gown. Eight years had not made her lamentably old. She had a fancy to see what the vanities could do toward wiping out the traces of those dull years.

Her hair first. She let down the soft brown mass, and drawing it loosely to the top of her head fastened it in soft puffs and allowed it to wave fluffily about her.

The effect was encouraging, and the faint color in her cheeks deepened. After all, forty-two was not an appalling age, and why shouldn't one be good to look at even if there were no one to look?

She slipped into the shimmering pink gown. It was out of date as fashions go, but it had been a picturesque gown in the first place, and it kept its art value. Miss Marsden's sloping white shoulders rose bare from out of a foam of fine old lace. They had always been good shoulders. Eight years had not changed them.

The forlorn figure in rusty black had faded out of the mirror. In its place was a slender woman with a delicate



BLOSSOMS.

From the Picture by Albert Moore, in the National Gallery of British Art, size 57 X 18 in. Exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1881 and purchased by Sir Henry Tate, Bart., who presented it to the Nation.

patrician face, who carried her head in regal fashion and wore a superb gown with nonchalant grace.

"You could do it even now," she said enigmatically, and in the shadowy background of the mirror men's faces came and went. She had ruled right royally in the days when the pink gown was new.

She turned and trailed her rustling skirts down the narrow hall to the little drawing-room. She was living over again those days when the world went well.

In the doorway she paused, and from the corner of the dimly lighted room a man came to meet her. She was not surprised. He was a part of the dream, and she held out her hands to him graciously, as she had given them to him in the old days.

"Bert," she said happily. There was no surprise in her voice—only tranquil acceptance of a great good.

"Dinner is served."

Rogers stood in the dining-room doorway, dignified, imposing, outwardly imperturbable though curiosity seethed within him.

Miss Marsden looked at him. He, too, was a part of the dream. She took her guest's arm and went with him into the little room where for a month past she had eaten her simple and solitary meals. Silver and crystal glass, fine napery, great bowls of roses floated the close, crowding walls and the cheap furniture, and Rogers loomed large, irreproachable, serene, though the incongruity of his stage-setting might well have shattered a less masterly repose of manner.

The kitchen door was slightly ajar, and through the crack peered an appreciative eye, unseen but seeing.

Miss Marsden sank into her chair and looked across the roses at the man who sat opposite.

"It is good," she said simply, and his eyes repeated her words.

"You were unkind, unfair."

She nodded. "Yes: it seems the pessimists are all wrong. The world has a heart."

No more explanation. Out of the experience of years they understood, and the woman's pride melted, with the man's selfishness, in the flame of the Christmas candles.

Marie was proven prophet.

They ate their oysters—those two who were finding themselves—and they did justice to course after course of a wonderful dinner.

Marie was more than a prophet. She was a cook. Her dishes were worthy to belong in the dream.

It was a gay little dinner. Even Rogers lost a shade of his portentous solemnity and consented to see humor in the fact that there was barely room for him to squeeze between sideboard and table, though up to the entree the wound to his dignity rankled sorely.

Miss Marsden's cheeks grew pinker each time she met her old friend's eyes across the roses, and her voice held a tremulous little note, though she talked and laughed lightly.

The man watching her heard the thrill in her voice and saw some inner thrill stir into ripples the serenity of the steady brown eyes. The restless discontent that had awakened when he knew that she had come back into his life rose and beat against his indifferent egoism and a touch of eager boyishness crept into his face and manner. How a man could waste the years, he thought, and walk blindly side by side with happiness!

Rogers put the coffee upon the table and discreetly withdrew. Marie had prompted him, and, when he appeared in the kitchen, she cast herself upon his manly breast and wiped away a tear with a dish-towel.

"I have done my best," she said dramatically. "It is now in the hands of le Bon Dieu. Such a dinner should have made it of an easiness for him."

In the dining-room there was silence as the door closed. Then Miss Marsden lifted a glass to her lips.

"To the old days!" she said softly.

Bert Fish shook his head.

"To the coming days!" he amended. His hand went out across the table and found hers.

Two servants sat in the little kitchen and waited anxiously. An hour went by. Ten o'clock came.

"E's 'avin' trouble," said Rogers.

Marie was more hopeful.

"It is that they have forgotten. That is the good sign," she murmured.

The bell rang sharply and Rogers sprang to the door with an eagerness foreign to his habitual calm, but he entered the dining-room with his usual noiseless dignity. Marie, prophetess, culinary genius *de ex machine*. She had forgotten to close the door.

Bert Fish looked at the couple and smiled. His chair was on Miss Marsden's side of the table.

"Rogers," he said, and there was a huge content in his usually dry voice, "are you and Marie pledged to the Delmores after their return next month?"

"No, sir."

Marie had come forward and was beaming at her husband's side.

"We think," said Mr. Fish, with a certain lingering emphasis on the "we" and a look at the woman beside him, "we think we shall need you after we come back from Florida."