

## Miss Johnson's Ellen

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she was rich yet she was greedy, and she never gave.

Ellen was not lacking in dignity and to Evelyn only, was she an abject slave. It was as though she had been given a wonderful flower, in whose beauty and perfume she took her highest delight, whose preservation was her sacred charge. "I must have water," said the flower, and Ellen got it. "I must have light. . . . I must have shade. . . ." Ellen found no task too heavy to procure it. Throughout the community she commanded respect; she was universally popular. Although she was still called "Miss Johnson's Ellen," there was more than one young man who would have felt honored had she consented to share his name. It was only in Evelyn's eyes that her status never changed; that she, was nothing but the menial, the waif, the uneducated atom plucked from a London Home.

But Ellen did not worry. To quote Miss Johnson, she had "a fine mind. She can forget more things than you can remember," boasted the spinster with one of her acid smiles, and the group of people laughed uneasily and felt sorry for Ellen. But Miss Johnson had told them a truth so big, they could not grasp it. Ellen's ability to forget was the secret of her great happiness. She forgot all the unpleasant things and remembered the other ones. She had forgotten the morning when unable to express her joy in Canada, in her new home, her gloriously expanded life, unable to express this in routine, she burst into a loud shrill song. . . . "Work, for the night is coming," she carolled suiting her actions to her words. Suddenly Evelyn appeared in the kitchen doorway. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Please, miss," faltered Ellen, "I'm praising God."

"Be good enough to praise him in the barn," returned the older girl. "I dislike any kind of noise."

No one ever presumed to correct Evelyn, and least of all, Miss Johnson. She never corrected any body. She just flayed them with her bitter sarcasm, but she sometimes looked at her niece in an enquiring sort of way, as though asking, "How far will you go, I wonder?" That was the look on her face when Ellen came downstairs after preparing the spare room, and the look she wore pretty consistently throughout the whole of Evelyn's visit.

Toby's coming threw the house into a merry turmoil. He seemed to fill up every nook and corner of it with his wholesome gaiety and buoyant spirits.

He insisted the first night of his arrival upon helping Ellen wash the dishes while Miss Johnson was busy in the garden and Evelyn was busy on the verandah with a book. He talked more than he helped, but Ellen liked it. She looked at him as she looked at Evelyn, with an enveloping radiance shining from her eyes.

"There, now, that's all, thank you," she said. "You just run along and I will come in a minute. Miss Evelyn is all alone on the verandah." Although Toby had never been "Master Toby," Evelyn had always been "Miss Evelyn."

Toby lingered. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Set bread."

"Set bread? That's not important. Besides, you are ungrammatical. You should say 'seat bread.'" After you have done it, then it is set. Come on, Ellen!" She laughed and shook her head.

Then he began to tease her. He held things up so high that she could not reach them and the ones she could, he whipped away just as she was about to grasp them. Finally, Ellen stood quite still.

"Come on, like a good girl," Toby insisted. "Seat yourself on the verandah and let the bread stand. I want you—"

She made a swift pass, touched him and left a dab of flour on his nose. Before she could escape, he caught her tightly around the waist and held her to him. She struggled and the color flamed into her cheeks. Her heart beat very fast and he could feel its thumping.

Suddenly all the laughter died in his eyes, and he looked at Ellen as though seeing something strange about her, something he never knew existed. A growing amazement possessed him, an extraordinary sense of embarrassment. "Ellen," he stammered. "Why, Ellen. . . ." He released her and walked rapidly from the kitchen.

AND Ellen stood in the middle of the floor staring after him, her hand clutching at her throat, trouble in her

warm, brown eyes. "Oh, dear," she whispered. "Oh, dear me. . . ."

Miss Johnson approached the pre-occupied young man who was trampling the flower beds and remarked,

"We took considerable pains to make broad paths through the garden this year, Granville. Of course, if you prefer to crush the nasturtiums, forgive my mentioning it. Oh, by the way, Evelyn expects you to go motoring with her. She is waiting."

Toby was not an ideal companion on that drive. He was plainly abstracted, and made no attempt to amuse Evelyn Magrath, a fact which she soon began to resent. "I suppose we are both bored, here," she said aloud. "After all, Maplehurst has not much to offer. It was all right when we were children, but now—" she broke off to ask, "I say, Toby, have you noticed Ellen?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, that's the hard thing to put into words. She has changed. . . . she has an air of complacency as though she owned the farm. She presumes and Aunt Frances spoils her." Toby smiled at the idea of Miss Johnson spoiling any one, and Evelyn went on.

"She'll find it difficult to get rid of Ellen, mark my words."

"Does she want to get rid of her?" asked Toby, quickly.

"Oh, I don't know that she does this minute, but these arrangements don't last forever. I must confess that Ellen has got on my nerves. She hasn't a thought outside the stupid farm."

"Fortunately for us, that thought includes our comfort," remarked Toby.

"Mere material man," sighed Evelyn and changed the subject.

Evelyn seemed to "expect" a good many things of him during the next few days and when she did not, Miss Johnson devised some grotesque means for his amusement. "You and Evelyn had better take your lunch and motor over to the Grange, to-day," she would suggest, "Ellen was up at five this morning getting it ready." Or they must take their tea and see the cascade by moonlight, or some other silly thing at an equally silly hour.

"Can't Ellen come, too?" Toby asked at last. "It seems as though she had all the bother of getting us ready and none of the fun."

"Oh, mercy, no," Miss Johnson cried. "In the first place three in Evelyn's car would be a crowd, and then Ellen has too much work to do. She's used to taking

bother, anyhow."

But Ellen vowed nothing was a bother. She was an "Irritating optimist," according to Evelyn. She held a glorious faith in the Big Scheme of Things and knew that they all worked for the best. If it rained she was thankful because she could turn out the pantry cupboard; if the sun poured down a gruelling heat, she was thankful because she could bleach some linen or wash the blankets. "A person like that lacks sympathy," said Evelyn, "don't you think so?"

"On the contrary," replied Toby. "I think she gives the best kind."

He was disappointed that Ellen's manner with him after that night in the kitchen was perfectly natural and unstrained. He would have been glad to find that she could not meet his glance without a blush; he would have been glad to know that she sought him, shyly, or better, that she avoided him. He saw her clearly for the first time, her beauty, her selflessness, her splendid poise and generosity of character; and he wondered with an emotion far deeper than curiosity if she could see any difference in him. It was as though he were constantly looking for a sign. But Ellen did not give him one. She was just the same.

It was Evelyn who changed, who became restless, irritable, almost as caustic in her speech as her aunt, and especially toward Ellen. Finally, Toby protested.

"I say, Eve," he said one afternoon when he had been "expected" to drive with her, "what can a clumsy fellow do to help?"

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks," she answered shortly.

"But you are not—that's just it. You are all wrong."

"A pleasing, tactful remark for you to make," returned Evelyn.

"Why should there be tact between us? It is only a polished form of insincerity, after all. Tell me, what's bothering you, Eve! Let me try to help."

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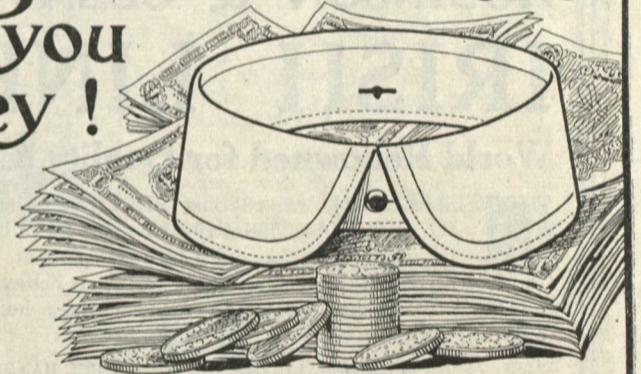
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