

## The Little Sister

By Pomona Penryn

**T**HE marriage of Elinora to the Reverend John Arbour was considered by their friends an experiment and not more solemn than any adventure. Everyone said enigmatically that the Reverend John Arbour had a problem. The interests from which Arbour and Elinora turned to each other were diverse. He emerged from a life which, while it interested itself in men and affairs, had yet been almost cloistral. It was as if he had been born in middle life, having an infinitely human tolerance for the social absurdities from which he demurred because he had outgrown without having experienced them. Even in the early days of his art study, before he had thought of taking orders, his studio had been a symbol of this attitude. It would have been impossible for him to work in a "den"—among belongings which appear to be en route from their owner's old self to his next year's incarnation. Even in youth Arbour was never amateurish in his friends or his homes.

Therefore, when he met in Elinora a woman who had arrived at the same

accept them as often as I choose. Surely you understand, dear?"

The Arbours were alone in the world, save for Elinora's sister, at school in Florence; and they took a little cottage, remote and made of roses. Here, through the long summer, they lived in the companionship of books and fields, and found happiness. To Arbour that happiness was so perfect that he trembled for its future, at the hand of Destiny. To Elinora the happiness gave new self-confidence, a new sense of her power to live fully, and a kind of pleased surprise that she missed nothing of the old life.

Arbour was to have a living the following year in a neighboring parish, and the interim he was giving to the completion of work which kept him closely at home. In the mornings he would take his books to the garden and there, after a time, Elinora would join him to read or sew or move among the flowers. In those days John Arbour watched his wife in infinite content and with no wonder; she was, he thought, exactly as he had known that she would be. All her joy in things of little worth seemed to have fallen from her and she was proving, as she had protested, that these things were non-essentials to her happiness.

"Is it not strange, dear," Arbour would say, musing over his books in the garden, "that anyone should ever miss this kind of happiness?"

"Yes, John," Elinora would answer raptly.

"And yet," he would add, "is it not wonderful that we have found it, Elinora?—that we have found what is worth while without coming to it through suffering? I think I have believed that everyone must come to it through suffering."

"Yes," Elinora would assent happily; and, looking at him and at the cottage, remote and made of roses, Elinora believed that she believed completely in the reality of that happiness.

On a morning in September Arbour went for a gallop to beguile the hour that a class of little pensioners from the village was accustomed to spend with Elinora. His wife, in her white gown, sat among the children like Our Lady of the Child's Garden, Arbour thought as he left her. He spurred away down the road, passionately glad of all that had come to him. Elinora—Elinora whose curiosity had been unbounded, had found her world with him.

Less than an hour afterward Elinora, still in the garden, heard voices at the cottage gate.

"I give it up!" cried some one merrily. "I never meant to walk across the whole country. Shall we ask?"

A man's voice laughed and answered. The gate swung open and Elinora, rising, looked from the door of the arbor upon three intruders.

"Emily Bannister!" she cried suddenly. "And—you! But I thought you were all on the Nile!"

A little blue linen figure sped across the lawn and threw itself into Elinora's arms.

"It's Nora!" cried the newcomer ecstatically. "Nora, married! Dear, this is Mrs. Bannister, Max's wife. Never tell me that you live here? But we have come to be your neighbors."

Max Bannister paled a little as he took Elinora's hand. Three years before he had gone abroad with her image acting in his heart. Then her letter had drawn down the veil. He had since lived abroad, and Elinora knew of his recent marriage in London.

Emily Bannister was running on, in her pretty vaporous way, about Green Hill, a mile away, which they had taken until after the holidays.

"A houseful, until after Christmas!" she concluded, triumphantly. "And a dear old house. Nora, do walk over with us. Mamma and Patty and Toby Beach have driven over. Do come."

Elinora hesitated, with a glance toward the arbor. After all, the lessons

were nearly done. Only the play-hour remained. She tried not to see the little faces fall when she told them.

Out on the shady country road Elinora looked at Max Bannister's wife. She was an Englishwoman, and Elinora was struck by her beautiful serenity. There was a kind of hush about the woman, as if all that had come to her had but served to keep her inviolate from all that might come. Elinora suddenly wondered how Max—restless, adventure-some Max—had breathed in that tranquil atmosphere. Swift and sharp as a stab of conscience came the longing to find out.

At Green Hill they all went through the great house, and Emily planned a party for every room. There was a perfectly appointed music room, and they decided to have out Benthaly and his harp, and give a soiree at once. The ballroom was quite made. Emily thought, for a Firefly cotillion, to be danced with lowered lights and electrical favors. In the court Toby Beach declared that they might have a wonderful breakfast some noon, with all the fountains playing, and a peacock in the little hanging garden. And there must be a field-party—Elinora had never been to a field party? They would put up silk pavilions all over the estate—in the meadows and the pastures—and have an orchestra in the orchard.

Elinora listened. It was pleasant to recall old days, old names, old delights. It was pleasant to have the adulation of Emily and Patty and Toby. Here, come calling and singing before her, was the world which she had almost forgotten. It was pleasant to see Max Bannister again, and irresistible to wonder if he had found happiness. Emily was planning to have all the others out from town, and all the old business of devising pleasant things was toward.

"Stay for luncheon," Emily pleaded.

"Do. We want to plan it all out."

"But no," declared Elinora, "I must go home. I'm married."

"Then let us drive Mrs. Arbour over," said Max Bannister to his wife. "the trap is still at the door."

Mrs. Bannister looked up serenely.

"If Mrs. Arbour will forgive me," she said, "I think I won't go. My head is aching a little, and I'm longing for my tea."

Max Bannister looked at Elinora. "May I drive you over?" he asked.

It was mid-day, the sun was warm, the cottage lay a mile away.

"I shall be grateful," Elinora said quietly.

In the trap with Max a sudden shyness seized Mrs. Arbour, though she smiled at it and at herself. This was the first time that she and Max had met since the week before he sailed. His last words to her had been words of the utmost tenderness, his last letter a cry of pain. Now they met and talked of the comparative age of the elms that lined the drive, and that tranquil woman with the slow-moving hands and eyes had his happiness in her keeping. Had she? Elinora wondered again and glanced at his face. She had never cared for him, even remotely; there was not, she would have said, an ideal of Max Bannister's that was as high as the every-day living of her husband. Save casually, the thought of this man had not crossed her mind in two years. Yet her old unconscious impulse to witness, to determine, was uppermost.

Sooner than harbor a shadow of disloyalty by hearing even a word about those days, Elinora would have died. Yet—this man had loved her, had declared her to be necessary to his happiness, and now he seemed to have found that happiness with someone else. Had he?

It was Elinora's old way. This was one of the moments upon which she did not depend for happiness—neither did she depend upon etchings or beautiful rings. But it was a moment which gave a certain pleasant spice to the day which she had forgotten—and contented-

ly enough—that days possess. And now she remembered.

She was smiling as she went up the aster-bordered walk to the cottage; and Arbour, coming to the door to meet her, delighted in her beauty and her buoyancy. Elinora ran up the steps, with no thought but that her news was pleasant. She poured it all out to him—the Bannisters, Emily, Patty, Max, the soiree, the field-party, the orchestra in the orchard, the Firefly cotillion. To John Arbour, as he listened, it seemed as if doors in his bright world suddenly closed, cutting off all vistas. Something clutched his heart. These things were necessary to her, they had come back to claim her—and she did not know. That was the surprising part. She did not know. She did not know what her buoyancy meant. She was acknowledging her bondage eagerly, almost thankfully. She, who had declared herself ready to walk with him, casting off her allegiance to the old, putting on the new, now welcomed the first call to former things, and she did not know. And he was powerless to tell her. If only she were ten years younger, he thought swiftly, he could teach her. But not now—not now. The usual feminine im-

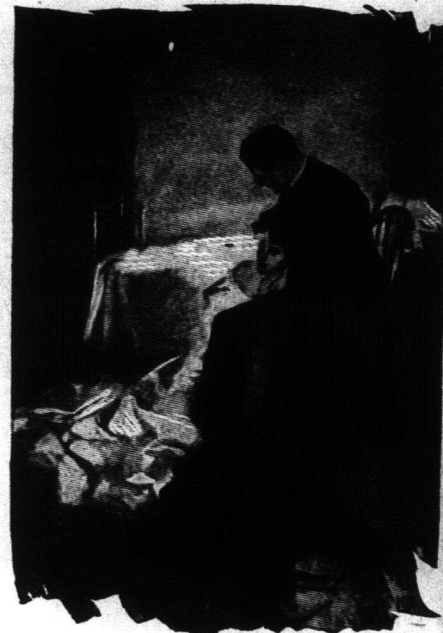


"Elinora was conscious of some one speaking in a near recess of palms."

belief by a sheer process of intellect and who held such a state to be proper and admirable even though she did not always trouble to practise its aloofness, he welcomed her as the ideal. He would have been content with nothing less than this special maturity in the woman whom he was to love, and having found it he went about his wooing with all the certainty of a man and the ardor of a boy. But he was partly in love merely with Elinora's aloofness from trivialities.

That a woman may have this essential aloofness of spirit and yet, in her immaturity, retain some very human signs of delight in the lesser interests was not revealed to him. He knew nothing of an innocent vanity which, however perilous its tendency, may yet, in that immaturity, be like the vanity of a child with new shoes. To be purified of small inconsequences, unreasons and coqueries would make a woman, Elinora would have said, one whom her husband praises to his friends the while he seeks with them relief from her rarified society. Perhaps Elinora would have said this because, though she was no longer in her first youth, she was still in the immaturity which believes that its moods are all reasons.

"For," she had said once to Arbour, "I am not socially delirious like many of my hostesses. I simply enjoy going where I go. I do not depend upon going—why, that is absurd. Neither do I depend upon etchings or beautiful rings, but I delight in these. As long as I understand that these things are by no means necessary to me I may safely



Arbour bent and drew her to him.

maturity which outlives youth was not in his reckoning. Because Elinora was past her first youth he fancied that the vanity of a child with new shoes had become a quality. If only he could have known her ten years ago!

"What a funny little look in your eyes, John, dear," Elinora said. "Of what were you thinking?"

It did not occur to him to evade her question.

"I was wondering," he said slowly, "what you were like at twenty?"

Elinora flushed. There was a certain refinement of brutality in the question, the keener that it was unintended.

"Oh," she said lightly, "brimming with opinions. I affected very slow speech, I believe, and fancied myself critical."

"Did you like—did you want," her husband persisted almost against his will, "admiration? I mean—flattery, Elinora?"

"Ah, you mean appreciation," she pleaded gayly. "No woman will confess to liking the other two. No, I rather courted reserve, I remember. I was afraid of being detected even in my choicest tastes. Of course, that was only shyness and a certain girlish snobbishness which the family ought to have beaten out of me."

"Oh, no," said Arbour wistfully. "No, Elinora."

In the afternoon Arbour went to his study, and found that Elinora had been there. Her mail was scattered about, a foreign wrapper lay on the floor—and a new visitor had come to his desk.

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