

picking holes in their neighbours with the same gusto and eagerness as is shown by the barn-door fowl picking at grains in the yard.

"*Cats!*" That was my mental exclamation, and at the very moment I thought the word a woman came in from the hall, and for an instant stood on the top step looking down into the lounge. She was slight and small, but she was not young, nor was she in any way strikingly dressed, but there was something about her which arrested my attention. The light of the lamps touched her hair—very white hair, piled softly and loosely upon her head. The light fell, too, upon her face, showing that she was smiling a little. I told myself it was the smile that drew my attention. It had some quality all its own—a serenity, a restfulness, a curious arresting charm.

She paused only for a second on the top step, then came quietly down into the lounge; and as she came I saw that her eyes were blue, and that they held the same qualities as her smile. They gave you a feeling that in the woman herself was an inward peace which no outward fret or trouble could destroy.

All this flashed through my mind whilst she walked across the lounge; and suddenly I became aware that the dark woman in red on my right was no longer talking of her neighbours, but of the sunset over the weald. And I realized in a funny sub-conscious sort of way that the little fair woman had stopped murmuring in undertones about countless he's and she's, and was describing her last winter on the Riviera. And all the while the white-haired woman with the blue, blue eyes was coming quietly across the lounge until she seated herself in an empty chair by my side.

I think I was the only person in the big room not engaged in conversation, and I had felt vaguely a tiny bit lonely and out of it when the newcomer said gently—

"I believe I saw you walking towards my pet wood before dinner. Did you ever see anything much more beautiful than that sea of bracken under the pines?"

She did not talk to me as if we were strangers—we might have known each other for years; and there was a friendliness in her eyes and smile which seemed to indicate that we really were quite old friends. And not only did she give me the sensation of having met a real friend, she gave me the same sort of feeling that is given me by a fresh breeze blowing in from the sea, or over heather uplands. Despite her white hair, there was in her very