

Ruth Marsden's Christmas Dinner

Written specially for The Western Home Monthly.

A slim, erect woman in rather shabby black turned into lower Fifth Avenue from one of the side streets and walked northward, slowly, but with a certain quiet self-confidence. The street lamps were not yet lighted, but the dull end of a December day was closing in upon the world and the black figure toned in with drifting grays.

Hurrying folk passed the woman without giving her a second glance; and she, on her part, showed no interest in the passerby, though she lingered for a moment on a street corner to watch a dull red shaft of afterglow touch the stone carvings of a church tower into sudden warmth.

As she stood looking at the flickering light a short, fat woman, rocking down the avenue with a vigorous, side-wheeler motion, caught sight of her, stopped, stared incredulously and threw two expressive hands into the air.

"Mon Dieu! It is herself—of a certainty! Mademoiselle! You have not forgotten Marie?"

The broad, ruddy face was beaming with unmistakable joy, the black eyes were dancing with excitement.

Ruth Marsden smiled swiftly, and the smile changed her face as the sunset light had transfigured the gray tower.

"Marie!" she said, a trifle breathlessly, "Marie, you remembered me?"

She held out her hand and the radiant French woman took it diffidently.

"But surely, How could you forget?" she said in voluble French. "Was it not Mademoiselle whom we adored? Ah, Mademoiselle! It is to tear the heart. The son of a brewer is in our ho se. Me, I weep when I pass the door. The dinners I have cooked there, Mademoiselle—and for those who recognized the dinner recherche, the dinner of distinction. That the parvenues should have our house! It is said below stairs that Madame does not know Bechamel from sauce Meuniere. And you, Mademoiselle? You have made the voyage. You are now in New York to stay, is it not?"

The exclamatory French woman's keen, friendly eyes had taken in every detail of the figure before her. Even in the gathering dusk they had appraised the value of the cheap black coat, noted the worn black gloves, the neat but old-fashioned hat. Then they traveled to the face in which gentle kindness mingled oddly with stubborn pride. There were lines in the clean-cut, aristocratic face that had not been there eight years earlier, but the lips were curved as proudly as ever, the head had kept its haughty poise.

"A grande dame always," she said to herself. "That it is to have the blood. Son of a brewer! Pah!" she snorted aloud with a sudden vehemence that made her former mistress start nervously.

"But he may have made very good beer, Marie," Miss Marsden protested with a certain tranquil amusement.

The old house on Washington Square in which she and her father before her had been born had passed out of the Marsden family. She had had years in which to become accustomed to that fact. Since it was no longer the Marsden house, why should she care into what *nouveaux riches* hands it fell? Poverty makes anarchists, cynics, philosophers. Miss Marsden was too well born for anarchy, too well bred for cynicism, but the years since her father's ruin and death and her own self-exile had taught her something of philosophy.

"Mademoiselle permits that I accompany her to the door? It is late for her to make the promenade alone."

Marie was bursting with curiosity, but she could ask no questions.

Miss Marsden hesitated for an instant and a faint flush rose in her cheeks, but it went as quickly as it came, and an odd little smile flickered around her lips.

"I am used to being out alone," she said simply, "but I should be glad to have you walk home with me. How has

the world used you, Marie? My lawyer told me that all the servants found places at once."

"But yes, Mademoiselle; and Monsieur l'Avocat gave us the month's wage, by order of Mademoiselle. Places? With me it was an embarrassment, a pursuit. One remembered your dinners, Mademoiselle, and coveted your cook. It is in all modesty I say it. One is born with the genius. One deserves little credit. I considered the offers. The Delmore family had need of both a cook and a butler. They are not the true aristocrats but they are not without grandtainers, and they have money. One must make concessions—and certainly it was an advantage that they needed, too, a butler. Surely Mademoiselle remembers Rogers?"

Miss Marsden nodded. "The imposing Rogers! No one could forget him, Marie."

Marie. It is late. You were kind to see me safely home and it has been pleasant to meet you; but for the people who knew me in the old days I do not exist. You will oblige me by remembering that, Marie."

The suggestion was a royal command. "But, Mademoiselle, you will surely permit that I, Marie, come to see that you are well."

There were genuine tears in the imploring eyes and Miss Marie relented. "Yes, you may come."

"And for the Christmas, Mademoiselle? You will be alone, is it not?"

The pale, thin face looked a trifle paler, a trifle thinner. Yes, she would be alone.

"If Mademoiselle would but do me a favour, for the sake of the old service," stammered the French woman. "Rogers and I, we also are alone. It is not good to pass the Noel so without the fete, the gayety. Not to prepare a Christmas dinner! I, Marie, to fold my hand when the day of dinners is come! It would be of a sadness, of a waste, Mademoiselle. When one has the genius one owes something to the world. One must find expression. If Mademoiselle would but permit that we should offer her her Christmas dinner—"



"YOUTH LED BY LOVE."
From the painting by Edouard Bisson.

"Exactly, Mademoiselle! Me, I had become used to Rogers. He was of an intelligence, of a sensibility, and of a figure—Mon Dieu! What a figure superb for a butler he has! So that I would not lose him I married him. We are with the Delmores, who are now on the Riviera, while we guard the house here. They are not of the highest. I have already said it. But what would you? It is a compromise."

The two women had turned off the avenue and walked westward along a side street until the desirable residence district was far behind them. Finally, Miss Marsden stopped before a new and cheap apartment-house.

"I live here," she said with a touch of hauteur. The pride in her face had driven out the softness, yet she spoke gently. "I will not ask you to come up,

Miss Marsden's face was forbidding, but Francois stumbled desperately on,

"There would be a true Christmas fete for us, Mademoiselle—to be allowed to serve you, to prove that we have not forgotten your goodness, that there is the service of love. From my heart I could plan a dinner. I feel now the inspiration within me."

She stopped for breath; but Miss Marsden did not speak. If the thing had not been incredible one would have said, that the firm lips were trembling and that there was a mist in the proud brown eyes.

Marie took heart of grace.

"Mademoiselle would think of nothing, know nothing. Me, I would prepare everything. Rogers would serve—and we would be of a happiness. For a

Christmas present to us, Mademoiselle, you will say 'yes.' Is it not?"

She stopped, dismayed by her own hardihood. No thunderbolt fell.

Miss Marsden stood looking at her with a beautiful light in her eyes.

"You are a good woman, Marie—a loyal friend. It seems I have misjudged the world."

Marie laughed a gay little laugh of relief and delight.

"Eh bien, it is understood?"

"Yes."

"You will not give a thought to the Christmas dinner? You will not look into the dining-room, the kitchen?"

"I promise."

"Oh, Mademoiselle, I am proud, grateful. Rogers, too, will be enchanted. You are an angel, Mademoiselle. It shall be a dinner for an angel—with the tastes worldly. Good-night, Mademoiselle."

She was gone. Miss Marsden went up the narrow stairway and into her apartment. She took off her coat and hat and gloves in the dim light that filtered through the windows. Then she lay down upon the couch, and for the first time since she disappeared from a world in which no Marsden had ever been pitied or patronized she cried softly.

Meanwhile the French woman who condescended to minister to the palates of the Delmore family, when that family was not globe-trotting, was hurrying back towards Fifth Avenue as fast as two hundred pounds of flesh and embarrassing shortness of breath would allow. She must see Rogers. She must tell him the news.

As the fat little woman turned into the avenue a man came down the steps of a big brick house and paused for a moment to light his cigar.

Marie, skurrying Rogersward, was yet not blind to the merits of other masculinity. Her glance took in the tall, immaculately clad figure appreciatively. It was a portly figure—a figure coquetting with embon-point yet lingering on the hither side of discretion's boundary-line.

There are men who exude prosperity at the pores, and Bert Fish's prosperity, while not aggressive, was subtly and indistinguishably self-assertive. He had been born to the material good things and he had not thrown away his birthright. Possibly he had allowed it to assume undue proportion in his scheme of life; yet the man was no sensualist—merely self-absorbed and self-indulgent, after the manner of men for whom life has been made comfortable.

Marie, looking at the handsome, indifferent face, illumined by the lighted match, gave a dramatic start. This was her day of sensations; and, being French, she appreciated it. Why turn one's back upon Heaven-sent opportunity? If he did not care to know no harm would be done. If he had heart—this Monsieur Fish who had seemed the favored one in the days when the old house on Washington Square held its own and the servants' hall buzzed with gossip about the mistress and her admirers—he would rejoice. Mademoiselle had commanded that no one should be told. Oh, la, la! If one did only what was commanded the world would be of a slowness.

"Monsieur."

Bert Fish took his cigar from his lips and lifted his hat slightly.

Marie spurred her courage.

"Monsieur would not remember—it is not to be expected—but in the old days he was gracious enough to praise my sole au vin blanc."

"Marie," he said, "I make you my homage. There is no other cook in New York who could equal it."

A smile flashed into the man's face. "Marie, you were with the Marsdens. I remember you perfectly. I remember the sole, too. I begged to be presented to you."

"Yes, Monsieur; and Miss Marsden sent for me. Ah, Monsieur, it is because of her that I have spoken to you. I apologize, but when the heart speaks one does the thing impulsive. Me, Monsieur, I am all heart."

She pressed a chubby hand against her breast.

Bert Fish's placid face had sharpened slightly.

"What do you know of her?" he asked.

The shrewd little French woman heard the ring of interest in his voice and mentally applauded herself.

"I have but just left her, Monsieur."

"Here? In New York?"