

A WOMAN'S WAY

By JAMES FORBES

CICELY had just refused Sam Ludlow's sixth offer of marriage when she met him. She was in a mood of complete satisfaction with the universe at large. Had she not been enjoying one of the keenest pleasures a woman knows, reducing the man who loves her and whom she does not love, to a state of the completest misery? Sam was still hanging on to her skirts when Mrs. Benjamin Fitzallen brought the newcomer and introduced him in her own perfunctory fashion, by saying to Cicely:

"You are the very person I want. I shall leave Mr. Talbot in your charge. He is quite a stranger here, and both of you being literary people you are sure to get on together."

Like most people of limited intelligence and wide social ambition, Mrs. Fitzallen had but the vaguest notion of the personal elements that went to make up the crush at her garden-parties and her At Homes. Now, having made two people thoroughly uncomfortable by giving them labels neither deserved, she bustled off in search of other victims of her hospitality.

"So you are a literary celebrity, Miss Hammond?"

Cicely explained that her only claim to distinction lay in verses written in the *Church Magazine*. Mr. Talbot explained that he illustrated books instead of writing them.

At that they both laughed, and the laugh brought a sudden sense of comradeship. Presently Cicely was being escorted off to tea by her new acquaintance, while Sam, left behind, glowered after them in sulky wrath.

The sudden ease which had come into their companionship was shown by Mr. Talbot remarking:

"That nice boy looked very unhappy. I don't see why he could not have come along to tea also." And he smiled in a knowing, fatherly way.

But Cicely shook her head and replied:

"I have known him since I was a baby. We are great chums. He really does not mind. He always says he hates teas and crushes."

Conscience thus placated, the search for tea was continued, ultimately with a success that led them to a tiny arbour wherein was found a table and seats for two.

Cicely thoroughly enjoyed herself; she had always liked men older than herself—Sam Ludlow was ridiculously young—Mr. Talbot talked to her with a seriousness of a world with aims and activities of which she knew nothing, and withal there was a merry gleam in his eyes which made Cicely feel he was in many ways as young as she.

Perhaps the acquaintanceship would have ended with that pleasant hour's chat in the arbour had not Sam Ludlow, in a rage, gone off with the motor-car. That he had intended to return but was prevented by a burst tire, had nothing to do with the fact that his action had left Cicely without an escort or a means of getting home.

The dilemma was easily bridged over. Mr. Talbot knew how to manage a car—Mrs. Fitzallen was delighted to lend one.

The *tete-a-tete* of the garden was continued with quite evident mutual satisfaction during the spin through country lanes, under the hallowing influence of a rising harvest moon.

After good-bye was said, Cicely was in so contented and happy a frame of mind that she astonished Sam by her kindness and leniency when he came in later on full of excuses and apologies for his flight from the garden-party.

On a day of the same week Cicely met Mr. Talbot at the railway station. He was going up to town by the same train as she. When they got out at Victoria it was time for luncheon. Obviously, Cicely could not have had anything to eat—what, therefore, more natural than that Mr. Talbot should put on his I-say-it-and-there-must-be-no-refusal manner; steer her to a cab and whisk her off to the Carlton?

There were many more meetings, generally managed, let the truth be confessed, by Cicely. Her knowledge of Mr. Talbot's movements would have done credit to a staff of detectives—this perhaps because it was the first thing in her life she had put her whole soul into. Without entirely realising it, she gradually let the thought of meeting Mr. Talbot dominate her whole existence, and she felt completely happy and contented in a dreamy sort of way; love with her was still in the expectant stage—none of its great hopes or fears sent her storm-stricken against the rock of life. She just met Mr. Talbot as often as she could manage, and whether they remained together for one minute or fifteen, she had for the time a consciousness of perfect accord—of a rushing together of some obscurely hidden sympathies. On such days Cicely walked as on a cloud, and fed on moonbeams. She was so kind and tender in her manner to Sam, that he always attempted to make his seventh proposal.

Yet, though Cicely managed many little meetings with Mr. Talbot, it was to chance she owed those which gave her food for her most tender reflections—those about which memory could faithfully recall many shades of tenderness shown in his manner, many fleeting looks of interest which flashed from his eyes.

One such a meeting had taken place as she was on her way to visit Mrs. Fitzallen, just about a month from the day on which she had first met him. She was riding a stolid grey pony, and, when she overtook him in one of the green-shaded country by-ways, it seemed for the moment as if he were the visual expression of her thoughts. Perhaps her eyes told something of what she felt; he helped her to dismount without a word, and they walked along for some distance in that mute companionship which is the surest test of understanding. They then suddenly became very gay; they sent points and counter-points of conversation about with the lightness of tufts of thistledown. Cicely only got back on her pony when the pretentious and glaring facade of Mrs. Fitzallen's villa came into sight.

As she remounted she perhaps leant a little heavier on his shoulder than was necessary, he perhaps held her hand in farewell longer than was necessary. At any rate, her face got touched with a glow of youth and beauty that made Mrs. Fitzallen loud in her exclamations of admiration when she was greeting her a few minutes afterwards.

"Riding always brings a colour to my face," said Cicely.

"I should think it does," said Mrs. Fitzallen. "I have never before seen you looking so well."

"I must hide my blushes in those lovely roses of yours," said Cicely, going towards a magnificent bowl of roses which brightened a recess near one of the windows.

Why did Mrs. Fitzallen's voice suddenly sound as if it were coming from the other end of the world, instead of from the other end of the room? Why did she, Cicely, answer

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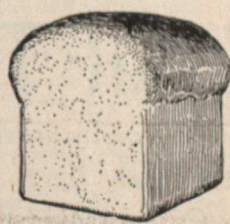
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