

A QUESTION IN ETHICS

(By Matrice Francis Egan.)

Ruxton took a cup of tea from Mrs. Valgrave and refused the drop of Jamaica rum she offered from her dainty cut glass decanter.

"No," he said, with the smile of a man who must deny himself for the sake of duty, "you're awfully kind, Mrs. Valgrave, but I must keep my head clear—I must write my last chapter to-night."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Valgrave, relighting the lamp under the hot water kettle, "you don't know how I shall rejoice in your triumph, for it will be a great triumph. Your first book is all white roses and dew-drops—but this, this!" Mrs. Valgrave clasped her fingers, which glittered with bands of brilliants and topazes, under the candles.

Ruxton stood holding his teacup and looking into the eloquent violet eyes before him.

"You are very kind," he said, drinking the flattery of the voice and the eyes. "But I am not sure that 'The Pride of Life' is an advance on 'The Lily in the Woods.' I think that I put my best into my first book."

"Don't go yet," Mrs. Valgrave said, looking over at Lafayette Square, where the cold winter shadows were falling. "There has been such a crowd here—such a crowd, but not one spirit."

The light from the great fireplace glittered on the arabesques of jet that covered Mrs. Valgrave's velvet gown, whose long train was thrown in front of the low chair into which she had thrown herself. Her slender figure, her well-formed head crowned with a coronet of red gold hair, were lighted at intervals by the steady glow of the candles and the thousand flickers of the fire. The scent of violets filled the warm air. Ruxton felt a sense of delicious contentment upon him—she sympathized with him. There was a short silence. The sound of carriage wheels broke it.

"I hope that nobody is coming here!" she exclaimed. "These minutes are sacred!"

The strokes of the horses' feet on the asphalt died away.

Ruxton had doubts about his novel, "The Pride of Life," which the publisher of "The Lily in the Woods" had bought before the tenth chapter was finished. A young man from a country village in Northern New York, he had enjoyed his success as only he who has struggled can enjoy it. "The Lily in the Woods" had been the idyll of a pure and simple life. He had written it from the impulse of an unstained heart. Its motto was

"The dew upon the lily in the shade of tangled wood paths, where the mosses grow Entouched by foot of man—that never know The garish moonlight—so art thou, O maid!"

"Sipping his tea in the presence of Mrs. Valgrave, whose face and exquisitely graceful figure were now outlined in the fire and candle light against the darkening background, he envied only by a little sword-point of sharp brightness, which now and then pierced the gloom, Ruxton felt as if his past experience of life had been cold and colorless. He thought of the little house in the hop fields, whose rooms were even now wreathed with holly for him—those plain, whitewashed rooms, where there was no scent of violets and gardenias, but only the homely smell of old rose leaves and last year's lavender. How dim it all seemed! He thought of his own little bedroom, with the crucifix standing out against the wan wall in the evening shadows, and of the serene face which would flash when his hand should touch the old-fashioned knocker, wreathed with holly, too. Far off! Far off! But here the joy of life—no maxims of narrow duty—rich scents and the stimulus of understanding words from a beautiful woman.

"You will finish the last chapter to-night?" Mrs. Valgrave said, softly.

"To-night."

There was silence again. Again a counter-picture arose before him—the picture of the winding road through the dried and snow-sprinkled wild asters—in the early morning light. Again he heard the distant sounds of singing from the groups of farming folk hastening to the chapel, over the snowbound earth. Ever since he could walk he had gone hand in hand with his mother on Christmas morning towards the sacred place where the neighbors waited for mass, while they sang the "Adeste Fideles." He reached towards the decanter of rum and half filled his teacup with the aromatic liquid. He wanted to forget—to feel that life was full of color.

"The Pride of Life will make you!" Mrs. Valgrave said, enthusiastically. "My dear boy, when I finished the MS. last night, I wept for sheer joy. Who could have imagined that the anaemic young monk of 'The Lily in the Woods' is the very passionate god of 'The Pride of Life.' I inspired you—admit that."

"I think you did, Mrs. Valgrave," he said, slowly. "Some things you said—"

"Many things. I will bring you the MS.—since you must finish the book to-night. It's the only copy, isn't it?"

"The only copy?"

"She copied it. If it should be lost!"

"I should be ruined! There's more than two years' work in it."

"And I—should never be the same. There is so much of me in it. There are some passages in it I must read to you now before you take it. They are not of my heart—not of my heart which was imprisoned and bound while my husband lived."

She arose and swept across the room, her train of glittering jet and soft velvet catching the light as she went. She returned with the portfolio containing many sheets, and sat in the low chair again.

"You must dine with me on Christmas eve," she said, as she turned the pages of the MS. "I shall have the Vivrian minister and the Countess de Bravoise. He is in love with her. She cannot marry him. The Count de Bravoise will continue to live—ard, after dinner, the theatre."

Again the chandeliers flashed before his eyes—he was kneeling at the rail as he had done every Christmas, and—the



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Problems of a Honeymoon

John brought the subject up again on the train, as he and Ellie were returning from their brief wedding journey. His brow grew quite wrinkled as he mentioned it.

"I don't know much about women, anyhow, Ellie," he admitted; "and you know mother's always been the head of the house, and your grandmother's always been the head of your house—and how they're going to manage it—all of us living together—is more than I can tell."

"I wish I could have seen your mother and made her love me a little before we were married," sighed Ellie, which was the nearest she had come to acknowledging that there were difficulties in the way. But she had acknowledged it to herself with some faintness of heart, if John had not known it. She was going to a house where she ought really to be the housekeeper and homekeeper, and she knew that John's mother was already jealous of John's wife. She must take with her into that house the white-haired grandmother who had raised her from infancy, and was always busy, counting nothing too hard for her active old hands. And she herself was very young, and she must manage all these difficulties herself and not burden John with them. No wonder that she looked a little thoughtful even while she was smiling at John and assuring him that they would manage somehow.

Their journey took them past her old home, where her grandmother was ready to join them. Old Mrs. Vedder was filled with forebodings, and whispered to Ellie brokenly:

"I'm so afraid she'll think I'm in the way! I don't want to be in anybody's way, Ellie."

"That's all right—don't you worry, grandma," said Ellie, holding one of the withered hands in both hers.

But Ellie's heart sank more and more at sight of the tall, stiff woman who was at the end of the journey, who gave them a formal greeting, allowing Ellie to kiss her cheek and extending a cold hand to old Mrs. Vedder. If it had not been for John's persistent gaiety that first evening would have been dismal indeed, but as it was, John jested and Ellie laughed bravely and pretended not to be thinking of anything else.

"I hate to go off and leave you to fight it out alone," he said to her the next morning. "We are in for it, I guess, Ellie."

"I am glad you are going," said "I am glad you are going," said Ellie, ruthlessly. "The worst will come up then, and we will have it over."

And after John had gone she went back into the dining-room, where Mrs. Mayfield still sat at the table with her untasted breakfast before her.

"I suppose you will want the keys," John's mother began at once. "I will give them to you, and show you where things are, and then my work will be done. I suppose I can find a little corner somewhere about the house, where I can sit down and fold my hands and not be in anybody's way."

In anybody's way, Mrs. Vedder heard, and arose and spoke up with trembling voice.

"I s'pose that means that I'm in the way—an' I thought that's what I'd be when I come here. An' I'll go away—you needn't fear that I'd want to be a burden on anybody. Ellie can find some place for me—the poor-house, if nowhere else."

"Grandma! You are hurting me dreadfully!" Tears had rushed to Ellie's eyes, and the old woman saw them and sat down again, wiping her own eyes. It was a great change. She no longer had Ellie to find a herself, peaceful and happy in the little old cottage, and with no one to interfere. Ellie felt it all in a flash, and somehow, too, she felt the tired heart that other women who had been all-in-all to her son for nearly thirty years, and now Ellie had come and she was not all-in-all to him any more. Ellie went and fell on her knees beside her, and tried to hug her unbending waist.

"Mother!" she cried—it was the first time she had found courage to call her by that name. "Mother, I don't want the keys—you've had them so long—and I am too young and inexperienced for so much responsibility. But you'll teach me, won't you? I'd be so glad to learn."

"You needn't run yourself down that way, Ellie," cried grandma, sharply, ready to fight for the child

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she loved. "You know as much about housekeepin' as anybody, I should hope."

The storm was about to break again, but Ellie still tried to smile. "I could keep house in a cottage, grandma—and I did do it nicely, did I not? But mother will show me how to manage this big house—won't you, mother?"

John's mother arose stiffly, with the look of pain about the lips which comes from a hurt at the heart.

"You can soon learn it," she said, turning away. "I suppose I can manage to busy myself about something when my work is taken out of my hands."

Ellie started up and hurried to her room. A flush of indignation and of despair had come over her. Surely she had been patient and sweet tempered. Surely she had done her very best to please John's mother and to reconcile her to the new condition of things. And here, already, everything had broken up in wrangling and discord. Ellie threw herself down upon the bed and buried her face in the pillow. She and John might have been so happy but for this. She wept hot, resentful tears. Truly, it was best, as she had always heard, for young married people to have a little home of their own, with no third party near to sow the seeds of trouble. This was her first day in her new home—and perhaps she had years and years of life before her—and she did love John so, and might have made him so happy, if it had not been for this—

And if she loved John, did not his mother love him, too? And how she must love him—that quiet, unobtrusive woman, whose feelings ran deep. And there was grandma, whose life was torn up by the roots in her old age—and it is so hard for old roots to set themselves in new soil. And—why, that was what had happened to John's mother, too—her life had been torn up by the roots.

When Ellie arose she had forgotten herself and her griefs. She was thinking of two lonely old women downstairs, the width of the dining-room between them, each brooding over her own sorrow.

"Never mind about me," Ellie was saying to herself, as she bathed away the tears from her eyes, "I will try to make them happy."

When she came down, after a little, she was lugging a large white sack stuffed to bursting.

"Look what I found in the closet in my room, grandma!" she cried, cheerily. "All this sack of scraps."

"Those are for the rag-man," said John's mother, briefly. Perhaps she had been thinking, too, for her voice had lost a little of its coldness.

Grandma was already fingering the scraps wistfully.

"They'd make a mighty pretty quilt," she said. "I used to make quilts all the time—scraps of the children's clothes, from their baby-clothes on up. Ellie doesn't know anything about it. That was before her day. They've sort o' gone out of fashion now."

She had spoken rather at than to John's mother, as though with a timid little desire to conciliate her.

"How I would like to have one of those old quilts!" cried Ellie, with tender interest. "Made with scraps of my old dresses, grandma—and maybe some of John's baby dresses, mother—and a piece of my wedding dress right in the middle. That would be something John and I could keep always."

"These 'ud make a mighty nice nine-piece," said grandma, reflectively. She was still regarding the odds and ends of cloth that lay across her lap.

John's mother had approached insensibly.

"I used to make quilts," she said, with something that was almost like softness in her voice. "It was years ago—I knew them all—Nine-Piece and Irish Chain and Chariot Wheel and Magnolia Bloom—and I could find scraps of John's little clothes. I'll show you some of his little dresses, Elinor—you'd never think he was ever that small, looking at him now."

Ellie's arms were around her—the pretty young face was laughing tearfully up at her. The very idea of seeing John's cunning little baby clothes! And it was John's mother who had kept them all these years!

"We could do the quilting in John's old playroom"—his mother was melting more and more—"I haven't had much time to sew. Maybe it'll help me to sit down a little."

"I'd like to make quilts again," said old Mrs. Vedder, looking up wistfully over her glasses.

Mrs. Mayfield had arisen to go on some errand, but she sat down again.

"Ellie," she said, "if you'll look in the machine drawers you'll find needles and thimbles and things—and bring the gold thimble for your grandma. John gave that to me when he was twelve years old."

Ellie's face was aglow with delight.

"I am so glad that John loves his mother!" she cried from her heart.

And then John's mother surrendered the last trace of the coldness and hardness she had kept in store.

"John's always been a good son to me, my dear," she said, "and a boy that's done that can't help making a good husband. Hand me that piece of pasteboard, Ellie, and your grandma can cut a pattern for both of us to go by."

John came home to lunch earlier than usual that day, filled with apprehension, and stole into the house almost on tiptoe. At the end of the hall he paused and looked through the portieres in deep amazement. Ellie was flitting gayly back and forth between the dining-room and kitchen, getting the daintiest of lunches on the table, while over by the window sat two spectacled old ladies, eagerly comparing colors of scraps they held in their hands.

"This was a little blue pique of John's when he was two years old," said John's mother, smiling at the memory. "I made it myself, and trimmed it with white braid—and he wanted to sleep in it that first night. This ought to go with something dark. How would that piece do?"

"That's a fall dress Ellie had—let's see!" reflected grandma. "She must have been about twelve then. It was trimmed with blue silk. It'll go with that blue just right." And Ellie's grandmother went placidly on with her sewing. John slipped out again on tiptoe, and surprised Ellie, rosy and smiling, in the kitchen.

"How did you manage it?" was John's amazed question, and then

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Oh, my blessin' on you, Toome, sure I'm never done a-thinkin' On the lovely little village on the border of Lough Neagh; But, alas! I cannot see it, and my heart is sore an' sinkin'; For the fields I like the best are there and I am far away.

Sure I am tired of the city with its roar an' smoke an' bustle; An' I am longin' to be lyin' lookin' easy at Lough Neagh; When the moon is out a-shinin' an' you hear the bushes rustle With the breeze that comes a-stealin' from Slieve Gallion far away.

An' I long to see Mayola, and to hear its old-time story, That it tells the sally-bushes as they kiss its shinin' tide; Sure, the sight would light my spirit with a gleam of boyhood's glory, When I used to go a-roving on the pleasant riverside.

An' I long to hear the blackbirds in the Newbride's plantin' singin', A-strivin' which can sing his song the loudest an' the best; The thrushes join the chorus, 'till the world aroun' a-ringin'; An' the sun is loath to leave us as he lingers in the West.

Ah, I'm longin' to be over, but the dearest, kindest faces— Whose smiles to me were glimpses of a region most divine; I'll miss among the others, for they've left the dear old place; An' they're sleepin' in the graveyard up beside St. Treah's Shrine.

But, my blessin' on you, Toome, an' may sorrow's sullen shadow Ne'er chase from you the glory of contentment's brightest rays; An' may happiness like sunshine fall by river, lake, an' meadow— It's yourself I'll love forever for the sake of other days.

—Mayola, in The Gael.

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