

Suggestion

By Mrs. Ernest Levenson

IF Lady Winthrop had not spoken of me as "that intolerable, effeminate boy," she might have had some chance of marrying my father. She was a middle-aged widow; prosaic, fond of domineering, and an alarmingly excellent housekeeper; the serious work of her life was paying visits; in her lighter moments she collected autographs. She was highly suitable and altogether insupportable; and this unfortunate remark about me was, as people say, the last straw. Some encouragement from father Lady Winthrop must, I think, have received; for she took to calling at odd hours, asking my sister Marjorie sudden abrupt questions, and being generally impossible. A tradition existed that her advice was of use to our father in his household, and when, last year, he married his daughter's school-friend, a beautiful girl of twenty, it surprised every one except Marjorie and myself.

The whole thing was done, in fact, by suggestion. I shall never forget that summer evening when father first realised, with regard to Laura Egerton, the possible. He was giving a little dinner of eighteen people. *Through a mistake of Marjorie's* (my idea) Lady Winthrop did not receive her invitation till the very last minute. Of course she accepted—we knew she would—but unknowing that it was a dinner party, she came without putting on evening-dress.

Nothing could be more trying to the average woman than such a *contretemps* ; and Lady Winthrop was not one to rise, sublimely, and laughing, above the situation. I can see her now, in a plaid blouse and a vile temper, displaying herself, mentally and physically, to the utmost disadvantage, while Marjorie apologised the whole evening, in pale blue crêpe-de-chine ; and Laura, in yellow, with mauve orchids, sat—an adorable contrast—on my father's other side, with a slightly conscious air that was perfectly fascinating. It is quite extraordinary what trifles have their little effect in these matters. I had sent Laura the orchids, anonymously ; I could not help it if she chose to think they were from my father. Also, I had hinted of his secret affection for her, and lent her Verlaine. I said I had found it in his study, turned down at her favourite page. Laura has, like myself, the artistic temperament ; she is cultured, rather romantic, and in search of the *au-delà*. My father has at times—never to me—rather charming manners ; also he is still handsome, with that look of having suffered that comes from enjoying oneself too much. That evening his really sham melancholy and apparently hollow gaiety were delightful for a son to witness, and appealed evidently to her heart. Yes, strange as it may seem, while the world said that pretty Miss Egerton married old Carington for his money, she was really in love, or thought herself in love, with our father. Poor girl ! She little knew what an irritating, ill-tempered, absent-minded person he is in private life ; and at times I have pangs of remorse.

A fortnight after the wedding, father forgot he was married, and began again treating Laura with a sort of *distrain*t gallantry as Marjorie's friend, or else ignoring her altogether. When, from time to time, he remembers she is his wife, he scolds her about the housekeeping in a fitful, perfunctory way, for he does not know that Marjorie does it still. Laura bears the rebukes like an angel ;
indeed,

indeed, rather than take the slightest practical trouble she would prefer to listen to the strongest language in my father's vocabulary.

But she is sensitive ; and when father, speedily resuming his bachelor manners, recommenced his visits to an old friend who lives in one of the little houses opposite the Oratory, she seemed quite vexed. Father is horribly careless, and Laura found a letter. They had a rather serious explanation, and for a little time after, Laura seemed depressed. She soon tried to rouse herself, and is at times cheerful enough with Marjorie and myself, but I fear she has had a disillusion. They never quarrel now, and I think we all three dislike father about equally, though Laura never owns it, and is gracefully attentive to him in a gentle, filial sort of way.

We are fond of going to parties—not father—and Laura is a very nice chaperone for Marjorie. They are both perfectly devoted to me. "Cecil knows everything," they are always saying, and they do nothing—not even choosing a hat—without asking my advice.

Since I left Eton I am supposed to be reading with a tutor, but as a matter of fact I have plenty of leisure ; and am very glad to be of use to the girls, of whom I'm, by the way, quite proud. They are rather a sweet contrast ; Marjorie has the sort of fresh rosy prettiness you see in the park and on the river. She is tall, and slim as a punt-pole, and if she were not very careful how she dresses, she would look like a drawing by Pilotelle in the *Lady's Pictorial*. She is practical and lively, she rides and drives and dances ; skates, and goes to some mysterious haunt called *The Stores*, and is, in her own way, quite a modern English type.

Laura has that exotic beauty so much admired by Philistines ; dreamy dark eyes, and a wonderful white complexion. She loves music

music and poetry and pictures and admiration in a lofty sort of way; she has a morbid fondness for mental gymnastics, and a dislike to physical exertion, and never takes any exercise except waving her hair. Sometimes she looks bored, and I have heard her sigh.

"Cissy," Marjorie said, coming one day into my study, "I want to speak to you about Laura."

"Do you have pangs of conscience too?" I asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Dear, we took a great responsibility. Poor girl! Oh, couldn't we make Papa more——"

"Impossible," I said; "no one has any influence with him. He can't bear even me, though if he had a shade of decency he would dash away an unbidden tear every time I look at him with my mother's blue eyes."

My poor mother was a great beauty, and I am supposed to be her living image.

"Laura has no object in life," said Marjorie. "I have, all girls have, I suppose. By the way, Cissy, I am quite sure Charlie Winthrop is serious."

"How sweet of him! I am so glad. I got father off my hands last season."

"Must I really marry him, Cissy? He bores me."

"What has that to do with it? Certainly you must. You are not a beauty, and I doubt your ever having a better chance."

Marjorie rose and looked at herself in the long pier-glass that stands opposite my writing-table. I could not resist the temptation to go and stand beside her.

"I am just the style that is admired now," said Marjorie, dispassionately.

"So

"So am I," I said reflectively. "But *you* will soon be out of date."

Every one says I am strangely like my mother. Her face was of that pure and perfect oval one so seldom sees, with delicate features, rosebud mouth, and soft flaxen hair. A blondness without insipidity, for the dark-blue eyes are fringed with dark lashes, and from their languorous depths looks out a soft mockery. I have a curious ideal devotion to my mother; she died when I was quite young—only two months old—and I often spend hours thinking of her, as I gaze at myself in the mirror.

"Do come down from the clouds," said Marjorie impatiently, for I had sunk into a reverie. "I came to ask you to think of something to amuse Laura—to interest her."

"We ought to make it up to her in some way. Haven't you tried anything?"

"Only palmistry; and Mrs. Wilkinson prophesied her all that she detests, and depressed her dreadfully."

"What do you think she really needs most?" I asked.

Our eyes met.

"Really, Cissy, you're too disgraceful," said Marjorie. There was a pause.

"And so I'm to accept Charlie?"

"What man do you like better?" I asked.

"I don't know what you mean," said Marjorie, colouring.

"I thought Adrian Grant would have been more sympathetic to Laura than to you. I have just had a note from him, asking me to tea at his studio to-day." I threw it to her. "He says I'm to bring you both. Would that amuse Laura?"

"Oh," cried Marjorie, enchanted, "of course we'll go. I wonder what he thinks of me," she added wistfully.

"He didn't say. He is going to send Laura his verses, 'Heartsease and Heliotrope.'"

*

She

She sighed. Then she said, "Father was complaining again to-day of your laziness."

"I, lazy! Why, I've been swinging the censer in Laura's boudoir because she wants to encourage the religious temperament, and I've designed your dress for the Clives' fancy ball."

"Where's the design?"

"In my head. You're not to wear white; Miss Clive must wear white."

"I wonder you don't marry her," said Marjorie, "you admire her so much."

"I never marry. Besides, I know she's pretty, but that furtive Slade-school manner of hers gets on my nerves. You don't know how dreadfully I suffer from my nerves."

She lingered a little, asking me what I advised her to choose for a birthday present for herself—an American organ, a black poodle, or an *édition de luxe* of Browning. I advised the last, as being least noisy. Then I told her I felt sure that in spite of her admiration for Adrian, she was far too good-natured to interfere with Laura's prospects. She said I was incorrigible, and left the room with a smile of resignation.

And I returned to my reading. On my last birthday—I was seventeen—my father—who has his gleams of dry humour—gave me *Robinson Crusoe*! I prefer Pierre Loti, and intend to have an onyx-paved bath-room, with soft apricot-coloured light shimmering through the blue-lined green curtains in my chambers, as soon as I get Margery married, and Laura more—settled down.

I met Adrian Grant first at a luncheon party at the Clives'. I seemed to amuse him; he came to see me, and became at once obviously enamoured of my step-mother. He is rather an impressionable impressionist, and a delightful creature, tall and graceful and beautiful, and altogether most interesting. Every one admits

admits he's fascinating ; he is very popular and very much disliked. He is by way of being a painter ; he has a little money of his own—enough for his telegrams, but not enough for his buttonholes—and nothing could be more incongruous than the idea of his marrying. I have never seen Marjorie so much attracted. But she is a good loyal girl, and will accept Charlie Winthrop, who is a dear person, good-natured and ridiculously rich—just the sort of man for a brother-in-law. It will annoy my old enemy Lady Winthrop—he is her nephew, and she wants him to marry that little Miss Clive. Dorothy Clive has her failings, but she could not—to do her justice—be happy with Charlie Winthrop.

Adrian's gorgeous studio gives one the complex impression of being at once the calm retreat of a mediæval saint and the luxurious abode of a modern Pagan. One feels that everything could be done there, everything from praying to flirting—everything except painting. The tea-party amused me, I was pretending to listen to a brown person who was talking absurd worn-out literary clichés—as that the New Humour is not funny, or that Bourget understood women, when I overheard this fragment of conversation.

“But don't you like Society?” Adrian was saying.

“I get rather tired of it. People are so much alike. They all say the same things,” said Laura.

“Of course they all say the same things to *you*,” murmured Adrian, as he affected to point out a rather curious old silver crucifix.

“That,” said Laura, “is one of the things they say.”

* * * * *

About three weeks later I found myself dining alone with Adrian Grant, at one of the two restaurants in London. (The cooking is better at the other, this one is the more becoming.) I had lilies-of-the-valley in my button-hole, Adrian was wearing a
red

red carnation. Several people glanced at us. Of course he is very well known in Society. Also, I was looking rather nice, and I could not help hoping, while Adrian gazed rather absently over my head, that the shaded candles were staining to a richer rose the waking wonder of my face.

Adrian was charming of course, but he seemed worried and a little preoccupied, and drank a good deal of champagne.

Towards the end of dinner, he said—almost abruptly for him—“Carington.”

“Cecil,” I interrupted. He smiled.

“Cissy . . . it seems an odd thing to say to you, but though you are so young, I think you know everything. I am sure you know everything. You know about me. I am in love. I am quite miserable. What on earth am I to do!” He drank more champagne. “Tell me,” he said, “what to do.” For a few minutes, while we listened to that interminable hackneyed *Intermuzzz*, I reflected; asking myself by what strange phases I had risen to the extraordinary position of giving advice to Adrian on such a subject?

Laura was not happy with our father. From a selfish motive, Marjorie and I had practically arranged that monstrous marriage. That very day he had been disagreeable, asking me with a clumsy sarcasm to raise his allowance, so that he could afford my favourite cigarettes. If Adrian were free, Marjorie might refuse Charlie Winthrop. I don't want her to refuse him. Adrian has treated me as a friend. I like him—I like him enormously. I am quite devoted to him. And how can I rid myself of the feeling of responsibility, the sense that I owe some compensation to poor beautiful Laura?

We spoke of various matters. Just before we left the table, I said, with what seemed, but was not, irrelevance, “Dear Adrian, Mrs. Carington——”

“Go

"Go on, Cissy."

"She is one of those who must be appealed to, at first, by her imagination. She married our father because she thought he was lonely and misunderstood."

"I am lonely and misunderstood," said Adrian, his eyes flashing with delight.

"Ah, not twice! She doesn't like that now."

I finished my coffee slowly, and then I said,

"Go to the Clives' fancy-ball as Tristan."

Adrian pressed my hand. . . .

At the door of the restaurant we parted, and I drove home through the cool April night, wondering, wondering. Suddenly I thought of my mother—my beautiful sainted mother, who would have loved me, I am convinced, had she lived, with an extraordinary devotion. What would she have said to all this? What would she have thought? I know not why, but a mad reaction seized me. I felt recklessly conscientious. My father! After all, he was my father. I was possessed by passionate scruples. If I went back now to Adrian—if I went back and implored him, supplicated him never to see Laura again!

I felt I could persuade him. I have sufficient personal magnetism to do that, if I make up my mind. After one glance in the looking-glass, I put up my stick and stopped the hansom. I had taken a resolution. I told the man to drive to Adrian's rooms.

He turned round with a sharp jerk. In another second a brougham passed us—a swift little brougham that I knew. It slackened—it stopped—we passed it—I saw my father. He was getting out at one of the little houses opposite the Brompton Oratory.

"Turn round again," I shouted to the cabman. And he drove me straight home.