

ELSA

I



HERE was a rosy hue all over the dinner-table, as two men sat patiently waiting; it cast its glow over the host's ruddy features, and made his fair hair, and good-natured smile, more noticeable by its warmth.

If his good-nature, and his perpetual smile, were sometimes a little monotonous, his wife (still in her dressing-room upstairs) never showed that she thought so. But the red glow from the curtained electric light had no power to change the pallor, or the look of ill-health, on the other man's face; he was freshly recovered from a long illness, and there were caverns in his cheeks, and black hollows under his dark eyes.

"Elsa is late," said Mr. Lander, "we won't wait. Bring the soup, Williams."

As the manservant obeyed, the guest looked down at his own thin long fingers.

"I feel like a ghost," he remarked.

"Glad to have you here again, my boy. I know you won't mind, though, if I run round to the club for half an hour after dinner." Mr. Lander laughed lightly. "Poker again, Leslie. I didn't know you were likely to drop in, or I shouldn't have promised to go. Elsa will look after you."

His guest glanced up.

"But perhaps, Mrs. Lander——"

As he spoke, the door opened, and she came in. There was something in her manner, which was out of keeping with her face, and her smile was nervous.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting,——"

"We didn't wait," her husband interrupted, with a giggle.

"I hope you are better, Mr. James. You have had a very hard time lately."

He took her hand, which was limp and unresponsive, and dropped it.

"I am all right now," he answered briskly, "although I am conscious of looking a fearful wreck."

She glanced at him furtively, as she took her seat ; and drew in her breath, so that her small full lips curled inwards for a second. Her hand, which was perfectly shaped, and laden with diamonds, touched the orchids in a vase near.

“Are you thinking of going away?” she asked.

“To recruit? Oh, no! I am too glad to begin the old life again, to wish to run away.”

She lifted her eyes, till they fell on his thin fingers, and she said softly,—

“You look as if a change of air would do you good,” and as suddenly veered round in argument, and added, “But unless your doctor thinks it needful, I should remain in town.”

“Doctors always think it needful.”

Mr. Lander laughed. “Awful rot, isn’t it? What’s the matter, Elsa?”

“My soup is cold.”

“Your own fault. You were so beastly late.”

She looked straight at him, with a leaden expression in her gray eyes.

“‘Beastly,’ is such an ugly word,” she said.

He chuckled, well contented. “Elsa always quarrels with my language, when she can’t deny my argument. Don’t you, Elsa?”

She was intent on the gold fringe, on the sleeve of her tea-gown, and did not reply.

“What have you both been doing,” the other man asked, “during my lost two months?”

“Oh, Elsa has been trotting about as usual. She is always very busy doing nothing. I only see her at dinner-time, and then she is usually tired or cross.”

The woman smiled. “I am out of favour to-night,” she said gently.

“Nonsense! Nonsense! I always speak the truth, you know I always speak the truth, but you don’t like hearing it. That’s all.”

She sipped her wine. “A generous lie is sometimes refreshing,” she remarked.

James broke in abruptly.

“I hope you have been well, anyhow, Mrs. Lander.”

“Oh, yes, thank you.”

“And the baby?”

“The child is quite well.”

Her husband leant forward.

"Let's have him down, Elsa. Send for Mary."

"Oh, no, Bertie. He's asleep by this time."

He shook his head. "I know better, I'll go and see myself."

"I don't want him to come down, Bertie."

"Why the devil not?"

"It isn't good for him to get so excited, just before settling to sleep. Mr. James can see him another day."

"The truth is, Elsa, you don't want to bother with him yourself. But you will kindly allow *me* to care for the child, even if you are so beastly unnatural."

Their guest grew crimson for the first time, and he moistened his lips, which were dry and parched.

The woman made no answer, nor did she look round, as her husband left the room. Her bent head, with its soft auburn curls, was immovable.

The man watched her, with his teeth set.

She spoke, without lifting her eyes.

"It is a long time since we have seen you."

"Very long."

"You must have been very dull."

"I was dull."

"You heard that Aimée is going to be married."

"Yes, Bertie told me."

"I have known the man a long time."

"Is he a good sort?"

"He is smart, and well-mannered."

"That is scant praise from you."

"I can express no more."

"Your reserve is wonderful, Mrs. Lander."

"Reserve! Why, you can't complain of that, surely. I know no one so reserved as yourself,—no one."

"Not to the people I care for."

She winced, and he saw it with a kind of stupid wonder.

"Was I rude?" he asked.

"A little frank." She clasped her hands tightly together, and added, nervously hilarious, "Don't you feel delighted to be well again? Didn't you feel out of the world when you were ill, and in a land of dreams and phantoms? I always do."

"Yes." He spoke brusquely, as her husband entered with the child.

It was four years old, small and dark-eyed; for the moment it was fretful, and inclined to be capricious.

"Papa dressed me so badly," he announced.

Mrs. Lander said nothing. With a fact once accomplished, she rarely interfered.

"May I have some 'trawberries?" he lisped.

"Not so late at night," his mother answered.

"Papa will give me some."

"Of course, Dickie. Come over here and sit near papa."

"He hasn't spoken to me yet," James said. "Have you forgotten me, Dickie?"

"Yes."

"Quite?"

"Tite."

"But I am Uncle Leslie."

"You're not my real uncle, nurse said so. You're sham, like my silver watch."

His father interposed. "But he is papa's friend, his greatest friend, Dickie. We were at school and college together, and I am fond of Uncle Leslie. Can't you love a sham uncle, you little rogue, as well as a real one?"

"Yes. P'rhaps I can. More 'trawberries."

"No, that is enough. Would you like a sip of my port for a great treat?"

Elsa looked across the table, her under lip twitched.

"That will do, Bertie. The child can go now."

The boy did not move.

"Run away, Dickie, and ask nurse to put you to bed."

"Nonsense, Elsa. He can stay a little longer."

"Do you want to teach him to disobey me?" she asked.

"Rubbish!" he giggled. "Look at his stained fingers. Oh, you dirty little boy!"

Mrs. Lander rose and lifted the child off its chair. It screamed with rage and kicked violently, striking out with a deliberate attempt to hurt.

The red glow was again reflected in the guest's face, he half arose from his seat, and then refrained.

"You had better punish him, Lander," he said.

"Oh, no. He's all right. Let him alone, Elsa. Dickie, come and say

good-night to papa, and don't kick your mother. Do you hear? Come away from him, Elsa. What a fool you are."

She had lifted the struggling personification of ill-temper, and held it in a vice which it could not escape. Her little teeth, which were like pearls, were clenched; the burden was somewhat heavy, but she reached the door and carried it upstairs.

The moonlight streamed in at a staircase window, and lit up the face which was capable of so much devotion and passion, but was never intended for the duties of a mother. Her lips quivered, her eyes were dry. Once in the nursery, she put the child down on its bed and stood near.

"Hush!" she said. "We are tired of hideous screams."

The nurse looked on, awed and interested.

"Are you going to stop? Or shall I tell nurse to punish you?"

The sound ceased.

"Sit up and look at me."

She was reluctantly obeyed.

"What would you do if nurse kicked your cat?"

"Kill her."

"What ought I to do to you then, as you have kicked your mother?"

The child fidgetted.

"I have no time to waste on you, now, and I expect you will be feeling rather sick, as you have eaten far too many strawberries; if you are ill, don't send for me. I shall not see you all to-morrow, and little boys who kick can belong to papa if they like, but they don't belong to me."

She turned without another glance at the child, and left the room. On the way downstairs she stopped to wash her hands.

"He was very sticky," she thought; "and he has torn my tea-gown."

Neither of the men had spoken much since she had left, and when she entered, both glanced up, with a nervous curiosity as to what she would do.

She took her seat.

"Pass me the claret, Mr. James, and you can both smoke. I think I should like a cigarette also. There are some in that silver box. Bertie, look for the matches."

James leant forward. "Here is a light."

"Thank you." Her hand touched his, and he felt it was as cold as ice. "I have torn my tea-gown, which is tiresome," she remarked. "But I shall order another to-morrow, so it doesn't matter much."

"Another!" her husband cried.

"Why not?"

"How many more bills?"

"She smiled. "Your son is extravagant, he spares neither material nor flesh. I regret that you did not interfere, it would have spared your pocket, and my wrist." She held up her hand, and showed where a small boot heel had bruised and broken the skin.

Her guest lost his head.

"What a shame, Mrs. Lander!" he cried: "that must hurt you, he really ought to be well punished, the little brute; if he were a child of mine——"

"If he were a child of yours," she answered, "he would never have wounded me."

The remark slipped out. Once spoken, the scarlet colour leapt to her face, his eyes scorched her, and his lifted wineglass rattled against his teeth. The truth lay stripped of its prudery, bare and naked. Its nudity shocked them. Mr. Lander unconsciously held it up like a glass, for them to see the reflection of their souls therein.

"Well, I'm sure Leslie hasn't much to thank you for," he muttered. "You never went near him, after he was on the road to recovery. I begged you to do so a score of times, but you are so deuced modest and particular." He flung down his table-napkin and rose. "I'm off to the club," he added. "See you again later, Leslie."

Neither moved till the hall door closed, then James looked at her.

"Elsa!" he cried.

She faltered, "Yes."

He rose to shut the door. She turned, as a dog turns at its master's voice, and stood upright.

He came back swiftly, and caught her in his arms.

"I love you," he said.

She nodded, dumb.

He kissed the lips which could not speak.

For a short time, her feeling, and the strangeness of the clinging contact of his mouth, obliterated all else. She neither thought nor stirred; her whole form swayed to his slightest movement, her eyes blind, her senses lost, her soul throbbing to the tune of his passion. She turned faint, and drew back slowly.

Then he looked at her, and his look gave her the knowledge of what "had been."

She clung to him freshly, with a sudden shame, and an idea that he, who had invoked the feeling, should aid her to hide it. He held her closely, with the second, more protecting manner of a strong passion, and then in a husky voice, which was unlike his old voice, he spoke.

"Elsa, my darling, my darling," he said.

"But you must have guessed, you must have known long ago," she murmured. "I nearly died during your illness. Oh, Leslie, if you knew,—if you could know,—" She broke off; his lips closed hers.

"And I," he said at length, "have had two months waiting for this."

"But it taught me, Leslie. I didn't understand before."

They were silent again. She leant against him as if for support, overcome by a vague dread of a fuller explanation, which was sure to come.

She pleaded, as women can.

"Let us forget all else, Leslie. All but the one great happiness to-night. I am yours, every thought, every atom of my love, my devotion, is yours,—and you,—I know it at last,—love me. There is nothing else in the world. Just we two here, and together, and loving as we love. Leslie,—" She touched his face, so that he bent his head and looked at her again. "Let us forget all else." She might have added, "duty, honour, and the rest," but her woman's tact refrained. "Let us live in the present, just for to-night. Ah, now you are angry! You don't love me!"

"I don't love you! God help me! Elsa! Elsa!"

There was silence again, and then in the hall a man's step.

She grew nervous and guilty. "We must go upstairs," she said; "the servants will want to clear the table." She drew away; he followed her silently.

Once in the drawing-room he closed the door, and followed her to the sofa. She made him kneel, and wound her arms round his neck.

"I—I don't know myself," she murmured. "Do you know me, Leslie?"

"Yes, at last."

"You have dreamed of me like this?"

"Not like this. Not half so sweet, not half what you are. Oh, Elsa, you are driving me mad!"

She smiled indulgently, and hid, half timidly, her own madness. She held him, as a woman hugs her own danger, with a queer pathetic kind of reasoning, that it is a protection against herself. And he held her, as a man holds a woman who belongs to him by right of her heart, her brain, and all her senses; a right which is all powerful, and, like a flood which sweeps away

the boundaries of a mighty river, is strong enough to break, and wash away, all the marriage ties in the world.

* * * * *

When Mr. Lander came home, his guest had been gone three hours. Elsa sat in the drawing-room still.

She forgot to say, "You are late," she only looked up and smiled.

He had gambled and won, and was flushed : a better and a more lenient mood had set in with his success.

"Well, old girl ! Still up ?" he said.

"Yes," she answered.

He went near her, and put his hand on her shoulder. "I was damned cross," he cried.

It came too late. She was inclined to be forgiving, because she was happy, not because her feelings were touched.

"That's all right," she said. "I am going to bed, now."

"How's the poor wrist ?" He flushed as he spoke, as if with shame.

"Oh ! it's nothing. You will want a whiskey and soda, you had better go down and get it. I am too tired to come with you, good-night."

"Good-night, old girl."

II

The next day was a warm June Sunday, and Mrs. Lander expected Mr. James to call. A Sunday is a dreary day to wait for anyone, the traffic is less ; her pulse throbbed to the sound of the wheels of every hansom which turned the corner of the street, while her cheek paled, and her heart sank, when it rattled past, and away, into the distance. When a cab did stop in front of the house, she sat immovable, with a nervous dread that the door might open to admit some other visitor ; and each time, during all the long tedious hours of the afternoon, her terror was realized.

The child, who had been banished, crept down unheeded, till it broke a valuable china vase, and Mr. Lander swore at his wife for not looking after it better. In the evening, her father-in-law and his wife came to dinner, which they partook of with a Sunday solemnity, not a soothing remedy for overstrained nerves. They impressed Elsa with the fact that she was a lucky woman to have married Bertie, and that Bertie's child was the finest in the world. By the end of the evening, her cheeks each bore a bright pink spot, and her lips smiled bitterly. Before she slept, she agreed that if her mirror reflected truly, it was just as well that Leslie had not come.

"There is always to-morrow," she thought, and, after a sleepless night, to-morrow came.

She rode in the morning, and looked for him in the park; the afternoon saw her sitting by the drawing-room window, waiting timidly, with a patience which was new. She went over in her mind his every action, his every word. She recalled his smile, till she was happy, and his kisses, till she blushed.

Then Bertie came home.

They dined out, and she again found sleep almost impossible. On Tuesday morning she took the child for a walk, till its chatter drove her mad. By the afternoon she was frightened and desperate, and she wrote to Leslie. Her letter was formal and brief, and merely asked when he was coming to see her again. She sent her maid round to his rooms, with an order to wait for an answer. After an hour the girl returned. There had been no reply. Elsa went upstairs and dressed for dinner, numb with pain. That evening at a theatre she flirted with a fair boy, who thought her the most beautiful woman in the world, and she talked more than she had ever talked before. But neither the evening, nor the excitement, caused her to forget for one minute.

On Wednesday Bertie remarked that she was "beastly pale." She answered that she hadn't slept well, and mentally resolved to have an old prescription made up, which contained chloral. She went for a ride, but could hardly sit her horse. After lunch she drove down the street where Leslie lived, and passed his club, with the faint hope of meeting him. That night she slept.

The next day she hoped no more, she settled into a kind of fixed despair. There was a maid who wanted to leave, and some bills to pay, and Dickie needed some new nightgowns, and a fresh pair of boots. Bertie told her to visit his married sister, and she could no longer make any excuse to herself for spending the whole of the afternoon indoors. She was afraid to ask the man when she returned if any one had called; she had inquired each morning, so absurdly often.

That evening at dinner the butler approached: "I beg your pardon, Mum," he said, "but I forgot to tell you that Mr. James called to-day. He said he was sorry to miss you, and would take his chance of finding you at home to-morrow afternoon."

She was dumb, and her throat was dry.

"I want you to come to a cricket match with me to-morrow," her husband remarked. "Send old Leslie a line to-night to put him off."

"I hate cricket," she muttered. "There is no game so dull, and no sun so hot, as when I go to a cricket match."

"Oh, nonsense! I want you to come. You'll like it when you get there."

"I can't go. I don't feel well enough."

"You aren't looking your best. But you may be all right to-morrow. I'll put Leslie off anyhow, he had far better come and dine some evening next week, when I shall be at home too. Do you see?"

With a terror, born of her longing to see him, she did as Bertie desired, and she went to the match.

The chloral gave her rest at night, by day she had none. Saturday was wet, and Bertie went to the club. She put on a peignoir when the afternoon came, and was careless of the fact that the drug and the misery had painted her eyes round with black.

A lady came to call, who asked to see Dickie, and gushed over him; he was stuffed with cake, and became sticky and obnoxious. His mother was conscious that the noise was deafening, and that he was naughtier than usual, when amid the din and the visitor's amused laughter a man was announced.

Elsa rose, she went to meet him, and gave him her hand, but she never knew what he said to her, or what she answered. In a dream she regained her seat, and became aware that he was taking Dickie by the shoulders, and turning him out of the room.

"Mamma! Mamma!" shrieked the child, "I hate Uncle Leslie, I hate him, do tell him to let me alone."

The appeal to her, touched her sense of humour, and she began to laugh. Her friend looked shocked, but that mattered so little after all; she laughed as a woman laughs, when she is dazed for the want of the relief of tears.

Outside the door, a small voice was heard plaintively hoping, "that God would kill Uncle Leslie, and put him in a nasty black box." Inside, Leslie was calmly taking a seat, and telling the astonished lady that "His good friend, Lander, was too lenient with the boy."

For half an hour she lingered, and casual topics were discussed. Elsa's haggard face grew flushed, with a feverish longing to get rid of her visitor. When she did at last take leave, and Leslie had walked down to the hall with her, Elsa rose as he entered, and (with an action recalling a scene of the week before) he closed the door.

"Why didn't you come to see me?" She asked.

"I am here to tell you."

She bit her lips, his voice was calm, although his eyes were troubled.

"Well," she said, "begin."

"Won't you sit down?"

She laid one hand on the mantelpiece to steady herself, and shook her head.

"I am going away, Mrs. Lander."

"Going away?"

"Yes, running away from danger."

Her lids drooped, and into her face crept a faint look of contempt.

"Then, you don't love me," she said, and pride, which is a weapon which wounds both the owner and the onlooker, came to stab her into composure. "You don't love me, and the other night was an acted lie."

He had had a week in which to rehearse the scene, and he had marvellous natural self-control, such as the world never teaches.

"No, not a lie. I do love you. But I can't stay to rob my best friend. I can't creep like a coward into his house, to steal his wife's affection. My love has not killed my sense of honour."

"Honour! The usual argument of men, when they want to silence a woman. Honour! Isn't love stronger than honour? We women often sacrifice honour for you men, and never reproach you with it—but,"—she broke off with a little laugh, "I can't fight the point. You want to go."

"I must go."

"I understand. You dreamed of me, and idealized me when you were ill, I was a pleasant remembrance in the long hours of convalescence;—but now that you are well, you are a man again, and think it more manly to keep your loyalty to your friend clean, even at the cost of sacrificing me."

"I cannot sacrifice Bertie. We have been like brothers."

She moved a step towards him.

"Why don't you look at me?"

"Because I am ashamed."

"Oh, Leslie!" Her voice broke.

"Child," his own vibrated strangely, "Don't torture me. Help me to do what is right."

"Why didn't you come. Why did you wait so long?" she asked.

"Because I was afraid of seeing you. I was a coward."

"Oh!" The cry was rapturous. "Then you do love me?"

He strode towards her, and then stopped short. "I love you. I love you so much, that I dare not even touch you. Good God! can't you help me to be a man, don't make a blackguard of me."

"Oh, Leslie!" And the sweetness, and the simplicity of her manner, as she said it, thrilled him from head to foot. "If only you would touch me—only my hand."

He recoiled at last.

"Oh! I know, I understand. I should not have said that, but I can't pretend. My heart aches so."

There was a pause, he fancied she was crying, but she lifted her face after a time, and he was mistaken.

"A woman," she continued gently, "never likes a man to say all those good things, which she ought to have thought of, and said herself. I am a bad woman, I suppose, but I wasn't bad before, at least, I hope not. Life isn't very easy for any of us, is it, Leslie? And we are apt to be children, and try to snatch at the nice things out of reach." She paused again. "I quite see that,—as you have said it,—you must go. Have you settled when?"

"To-morrow. I leave for Paris first."

"Why not to-night? A week ago—we were so happy. Why not allow me to imagine you on the sea, when the time comes round again; where I cannot touch you, or see you, or even hear you speak?"

"As you please. I am behaving very badly to you."

"To me! So you think so." She smiled slightly. "If you really thought so, you would have acted differently. Well, it doesn't matter. I am learning that so little matters after all."

He waited; and then something in her raised eyes, and piteous mouth recalled, not the pale Elsa before him, but the Elsa of a week ago, a warm living creature, responsive to his kisses.

"Elsa, how can I leave you? I—I am half mad. Let me kiss you once,—only once again."

She leant forward, he bent his head, his breath touched her cheek,—then the door creaked. They drew apart, the kiss unborn, as Bertie entered.

"You here, Leslie! That's right. Off to Paris for a few days, aren't you? Stay and dine? Won't you? Then come and have a smoke in my den. I want to talk to you."

His listeners moved forward.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Lander."

“ Good-bye, Mr. James.”

Their hands touched, he turned and went out. She stood listening to his retreating footsteps, and the future became a long cold path of pain and monotony, ready for her to tread alone.

BY THE AUTHOR OF “ A MERE MAN.”

THE THREE WITCHES



ALL the moon-shed nights are over,
And the days of gray and dun,
There is neither may nor clover,
And the day and night are one.

Not a hamlet, not a city,
Meets our strained and tearless eyes,
In the plain without a pity,
Where the wan grass droops and dies.

We shall wander through the meaning
Of a day and see no light,
For our lichened arms are leaning
On the ends of endless night.

We the children of Astarte,
Dear abortions of the Moon,
In a gay and silent party
We are riding to you soon :

Burning ramparts, ever burning !
To the flame which never dies,
We are yearning, yearning, yearning,
With our gay and tearless eyes ;

In the plain without a pity
(Not a hamlet, not a city)
Where the wan grass droops and dies.

ERNEST DOWSON.