



DRAWN BY CHARLES M. RELYEA

"I—WHY, I DON'T SEEM TO THINK WHO IT WAS I MENTIONED!"

A STUDY in HOSPITALITY

By Harriet Lummis Smith

AS the clock struck five, Elinor looked up from her sewing. "I suppose I ought to stop," she sighed. "There isn't a square inch of me that doesn't ache; but I hate sewing so much that I'd rather take it in big doses, and be done with it."

She went on with her basting; but she worked irresolutely, and at last pushed the sewing aside. Rising, she went across the room and surveyed herself in the mirror. Apparently the result of her scrutiny was unsatisfactory, for she frowned sternly at the image in the glass.

"You're a disreputable-looking person for a housekeeper. And at five o'clock in the afternoon, too, with father likely to be home at any minute. I'm ashamed of you!"

A cold bath and a change to a clean gingham dress refreshed her. Resolutely dismissing from her mind all thought of the tiresome dressmaking, she ran downstairs to prepare her father's supper. Her conscience pricked her somewhat when she examined the contents of the refrigerator.

"O dear, I must be more forehanded! I thought there'd be some cold meat left for a hash, but we must have eaten every scrap of it. This makes the third supper in succession that I've had eggs. If father weren't an angel—"

The doorbell rang, and leaving the refrigerator, Elinor went blithely to answer the summons; but her gayety vanished when she saw the two figures at the door.

"Oh, why didn't I put on my blue voile?" she thought ruefully.

It did seem a pity that when her prosperous neighbors, who had only recently moved to the town, had come to call, she should be arrayed in a last year's gingham frock that she had made herself, and that had never hung quite right in the back. So full were her thoughts of the unfortunate mischance that she greeted her guests with a solemn face.

"Oh, how nice of you! Come right in." Her voice was not as cordial as usual, for at the moment she spoke she remembered that she had dusted the front room that morning very hurriedly. Doubtless the top of the piano would be dusty. Horrors! One glance confirmed her worst suspicions.

Miss Imogene Woodbridge presented a marked contrast to her hostess, for her pretty silk gown was rather elaborately made and in the height of fashion. Elinor noticed that she had come without a hat, and that lack of formality reassured her a little. Imogene's brother Dwight, immaculate in a white serge suit, looked undeniably handsome—and unmistakably bored. Elinor wondered resentfully why he had come.

"Take this armchair, won't you, Miss Woodbridge? It's more comfortable than that little rocker."

It was true that the armchair was very comfortable, but the real reason for Elinor's suggestion was that the occupant of the armchair would have her back to the telltale piano. As Dwight seated himself, Elinor cast a nervous glance at him. She had an absurd feeling that she ought to offer to dust his chair, in order

to protect his snowy raiment from possible contamination. She heard Imogene remark that the day had been very warm, and tried to reply with her usual vivacity that she had been too busy to notice the weather; but it was not easy for her to be vivacious, or even natural. The thought of her father's supper haunted her. Six o'clock was such a peculiar time to call! "I suppose where they came from," she thought, "people have supper late."

They talked about the weather in detail and then about some of the recent happenings in the town. Conversation dragged a little. Elinor's thoughts were so full of the undusted piano and the unprepared supper that she was not very entertaining. She realized it, and resolved to make up for it when she returned the call.

At least the young Woodbridges were not formal. They were staying a long time. Then the clock struck the half hour, and Elinor reproached herself. It was not such a long time; it only seemed so because she herself was stupid and ill at ease. She hailed with relief her father's appearance in the doorway.

"O father, come in! You know our new neighbors, don't you?"

Mr. Morton knew his neighbors and was glad to see them. He was always glad to see anyone. Smiling with pleasure, he shook hands with Elinor's callers, and in two minutes Dwight and he were discussing fishing, which happened to be a subject in which Dwight was profoundly interested.

Meanwhile Elinor and Imogene had returned to the weather. As they floundered through the intricacies of that inexhaustible subject, Elinor wondered despairingly what was the matter with her. The clock struck seven.

"Elinor!" Mr. Morton paused in the middle of a discussion of fishing tackle and turned to his daughter. "You'd better put on the supper. Our friends will be getting hungry."

Elinor flushed. Her father's blunder was not unnatural. Seeing these young people seated in the front room at an hour known as supper time from one end of the town to the other, he had innocently assumed that they had been invited to the evening meal. Yet by his blundering remark he had as much as asked them to go.

Then through her whirling thoughts, she became aware that Imogene was politely disclaiming the accusation of being hungry. Her brother said something to the same effect, and resumed the discussion of fishing tackle. Neither made a move to rise. With a chill of horror Elinor realized that they had tacitly accepted her father's informal invitation, if invitation it could be called. They were actually going to stay to supper.

"If you'll excuse me, then," Elinor said, with a feeble smile, and retired in disorder.

When she reached the kitchen she promptly sat down. She could ill afford the time, but she simply must collect her thoughts.

Wild ideas raced through her brain. Should she run to a neighbor's telephone and order

ice cream and a chicken from the caterer? With a laugh, she realized that the plan was absurd. No, three hungry people were sitting in the front room and it was after seven o'clock. She must use what she had and do it quickly.

After lighting the gas oven, she turned again to study her resources. Omelet and muffins would do. But no! She did not have eggs enough for both. It would have to be omelet and baking-powder biscuits. Of course she had preserves,—every housekeeper in town kept a stock of preserves at all seasons,—and a small supply of cookies. It was not a company supper; no ingenuity could make it such.

Beating eggs with frenzied haste, Elinor was thinking of other matters than supper. Slowly the fog of confusion and embarrassment cleared away from her mind.

"It's not what I'd like to give them, but it's the best I have. And just because I've got omelet instead of fried chicken, that's no reason why I should be glum, and stupid, and tiresome. They're welcome to the best I have—of everything."

Although she prepared the meal in record time, it was after half past seven o'clock when they sat down. Mr. Morton regarded the golden, puffy omelet and the baking-powder biscuits with a serene unconsciousness that they

did not eminently befit the occasion. Without a qualm he would have invited the President to such a supper. Elinor thought she saw a look of mild astonishment cross Imogene's face as she took her seat. But putting aside the dreadful thought that flashed into her mind, she set herself resolutely to carry out her purpose of giving these chance guests the best she had, not only of her larder, but of her brain and heart.

She was a different person now from the embarrassed girl who had entertained her callers before supper. She talked intelligently and brightly on many subjects. Young Dwight Woodbridge, noticing the change and puzzled by it, looked at her with an expression quite unlike the one he had brought with him; and his sister, too, woke up.

No one mentioned the weather again.

"Your friend didn't come, did she?" Imogene asked, when the pleasant meal was almost over.

"My friend?"

"Yes. Let me see—what did you say her name was?"

"I—why, I don't seem to think who it was I mentioned!"

"Why, when you called me up this morning—"

Elinor's gasp of astonishment interrupted the other girl, who looked at her with a startled expression on her face. "You know you said you wanted us to meet your friend, and—"

Elinor's face was blank; Imogene's was rapidly becoming so. Dwight, looking from one puzzled face to the other, asked bluntly, "Didn't you telephone to my sister this morning?"

"I—I don't remember that I did," Elinor replied faintly.

"Why, why, then some one was playing a trick on me!"

Imogene pushed back her chair and faced the others with rising excitement.

"Some one called me up this morning and said distinctly that she was Elinor Morton, and that she had a friend here from Colorado, whom she wanted us to meet."

"From Colorado? Oh, I see!" The explanation of the mystery came flooding upon Elinor so rapidly that it almost deprived her of speech. She stammered as she tried to make it clear to the others.

"It's Helena Norton who has a friend here from Colorado—Helena Norton; and I'm Elinor Morton. Over the telephone, don't you see—"

There was a shocked exclamation from each of the guests. "And we just descended on you and made you keep us to supper!" Imogene cried.

"That's not what I'm thinking about!" groaned Elinor. "The Nortons have a French cook, and their dinner at night. I've cheated you out of a perfectly gorgeous meal. I don't know how I can ever make that right."

"See here," said young Dwight Woodbridge. "If that's worrying you, forget it. If there's anything I detest," he went on, "it's the usual social stunts. Imogene dragged me over here after she'd assured me that it was perfectly informal and that I wouldn't have to wear a dress suit."

He closed with a burst of boyish frankness. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since I don't know when."

"Dwight Woodbridge!" his sister exclaimed, with a nervous laugh. "Stop paying compliments, and tell me what I'm going to do. How in the world can I ever explain to Helena

Norton that we've been taking supper with Elinor Morton?"

"I'll leave you to fight that out," said her brother unsympathetically, "for I'm going to have another biscuit." He went calmly on with his supper while the two girls discussed the harrowing situation.

At last Imogene called up Helena Norton, who had finished dinner, and explained, with profuse apologies.

"Come, Dwight!" Imogene cried as she hung up the receiver. "We've got to rush off now and make ourselves agreeable to that girl from Colorado." She gave Elinor both hands. "You're to take dinner with us very soon," she declared. "And I'm coming to invite you myself, so that you'll be sure to come to the right place."

"There isn't any other name in town that sounds like Imogene Woodbridge," said Elinor, with a smile. "I shan't be in any danger of making a mistake, even if you telephone."

Her foolish misery over the dusty piano, the ill-fitting gingham, and the plain supper had gone. Through this blunder she and Imogene had been enabled to skip certain rather tiresome preliminaries to friendship.

As the Woodbridges hurried breathlessly through the dark to Helena Norton's handsome house, Mr. Morton was listening rather perplexedly to his daughter's account of her earlier trials of the evening.

"But your supper was very good, my dear. The biscuits were as light —"

"I know, darling. But it was such a funny, plain little supper for company—and strangers, at that."

Her father smiled upon her with that unworldly smile of his that seemed to bring them very close together.

"Food and drink are secondary things, little girl, even at supper time," he said. "Give your best thought and your best sympathy; bread and butter are enough for the rest."