A Rush Order
HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH
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IT was at the eleventh hour that Miss Elwell determined to change the color scheme for her forthcoming luncheon. To be literal, it was noon Wednesday when she decided that the rose-colored candle-shades would not do for Thursday's festivity. She telephoned the florist, changing her order with the assurance of a good customer, then put on her wraps and went to see Miss Murray.

Miss Elwell had a reputation of being hard to please, but she was more than ordinarily interested in the success of this particular luncheon because it was the first formal entertainment Marian Dorchester had attended since her father's death. Miss Elwell and Marian had been friends when the latter was the petted only daughter of a wealthy father. They were friends still, though Marian was an orphan and penniless. Such loyalty is not as rare in American social circles as some would have us think. Instead of being wounded by the coldness of old friends, Marian found it difficult to make them understand that a girl with her living to make cannot afford to take advantage of all the hospitality offered her.

Miss Murray, who was the proprietor of a small fancy-work shop, which had a larger and more pretentious rival three blocks down the street, greeted Miss Elwell effusively. She was a slight, pale creature, with a general air of being overworked and undernourished. Her hair was invariably disheveled and her dress awry, and to associate her with the purely ornamental seemed incongruous enough at first sight. Yet down to her finger-tips she was an artist in her line, and the customers who knew her taste, trusted it.

Miss Murray's nervous smile vanished as Miss Elwell explained her errand. "You said Thursday?" she began. "You mean a week from tomorrow?"

"I mean tomorrow." Miss Elwell's well-modulated voice spoke the syllables with pleasant deliberation. There was a little pause.

"It is very short notice, Miss Elwell," said the proprietor of the fancy-work shop, pressing her pale little hands together till the nails looked blue. "Very short notice. I might say it is almost impossible to finish twelve shades in the time you have given us. If you had come yesterday, now."

"I know the time is short," Miss Elwell's pleasant voice showed just a touch of irritation. She did not enjoy criticism, even by implication. "And so if you do not care to take the order, I will not wait longer."

Two nervous red blotches flamed out on Miss Murray's thin cheeks. "Oh, I suppose we must try to accommodate you, Miss Elwell. We will do our best."

"Of course there must be no failure," warned Miss Elwell at the door. "I shall want them by eleven at the latest."

"By eleven? Very well, Miss Elwell, you may depend on us." The vision which had crossed Miss Murray's fancy, of one of her best customers walking into Anderson's, three blocks down, had been so vivid and painful that for a momemt she felt positively buoyant over the averting of that calamity. Then with a sudden rush of recollection she hurried to the

telephone, and the voice that answered her agitated summons belonged to Marian Dorchester.

"Come down here as quick as you can, Miss Marian," said the proprietress, tremulously. "We've got a rush order and no mistake."

"But what about this centrepiece?" demurred Marian.

"Oh, we'll have to put Mrs. Pearpon off. She's such a reasonable lady. Not like this one. Do hurry!"

But when Marian arrived, and saw what was expected of her, she looked dismayed. "Why, Miss Murray, I never can finish them by tomorrow morning."

"Don't say you can't — you must. Miss Florence is working on the order for that wedding, and you two are the only ones I dare trust with this. Of course, if I'm going to depend on you at all, I must be able to depend on you in an emergency like this." Miss Murray's thin voice had an impatient twang, but almost immediately she relented. "I don't mean to be sharp, my dear, but there's no two ways about it. They must be done, so as to be delivered at her home tomorrow morning at eleven, and they must be done well, too. She's just as particular when she's in a hurry as if she had given you a month's notice."

There were no minutes to be wasted in discussion. They made a hasty selection of materials, and Marian hurried home, but it was half-past two before she sat down to her work, and her heart sank as the inexorable seconds ticked away. She had learned to do such work with the deliberate care of abundant leisure. She could not all at once acquire the speed which comes to be a second nature when one must make the most of the minutes or be short of bread and butter next day. Her fingers trembled so that it was hard to thread the needle. When dinner-time came she left her work only for a cup of strong coffee, and the aunt with whom she made her home shook her head and sighed. "If your poor father could see you working yourself to death, not even time to eat" — An audible sniff concluded the sentence.

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that, Aunt Lucie!" Marian cried. "Tomorrow, now, I'm going to Alberta's luncheon, and be a real society butterfly for a few hours." But her laugh did not ring true. When the clock struck, the cold beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead.

It was a relief when Aunt Lucie went to bed at twelve o'clock. She charged her niece not to be long in following her, and Marian promised to come as soon as she could. "But that won't be till the next bedtime comes around," she told herself. She had given up all thoughts of sleep for that night, and her nerves had steadied as soon as she had reached this resolution. With all night before her, she could not fail to finish the assigned task.

She made herself a cup of tea a little later, and sipped it luxuriously, sitting in the arm-chair by the window looking down the dark, silent street. A policeman strolled by as she sat there, and a carriage drove past. Through the window she caught a rainbow-colored flash, and she smiled leniently. "Some girl is going home from a party, I suppose, and she'll sleep till noon tomorrow."

She had no time for envy, for in another minute her eye had caught the figure of a white-capped nurse in a lighted window across the way, and she drew a long breath. "Other people are wakeful, too," she mused, "and it's so much harder to watch than to work."

How the hours flew! She had imagined they would drag wearily, but the stroke of the half-hour followed the hour so promptly that she would have doubted the evidence of her ears if her eyes had not confirmed it. Aunt Lucie, coming in at seven o'clock, looked at her disapprovingly.

"Up and at work again. If poor John knew that you were burning the candle at both ends."

"Don't!" cried Marian, with a mock shudder. "Talk of electric lights and kerosene lamps and gas and dark lanterns, but please, if you love me, don't refer to candles! But they do look pretty, don't they, Aunt Lucie?"

And indeed the green silk shades, festooned with lace, were marvels of daintiness. "They're all done but one," Marian rattled on, "and so I'm going to stop awhile, and treat myself to breakfast."

Aunt Lucie shook her head again, as Marian played with her toast. "I should think you might be hungry after going without your dinner."

"Aunt Lucie, I'm surprised at you. Do you imagine that when I'm invited to luncheon, I'm going to spoil my appetite by a hearty breakfast?" Marian's gaiety was not assumed. Her spirits were strangely high. Except for a certain aloofness, as though she were moving in an unreal world, she felt like herself. She had no sense of fatigue. Instead it seemed that nothing was or could be a burden. Her conquest of a seeming impossibility had gone to her head. But once or twice Aunt Lucie saw her raise her hand and make a gesture as if to brush something from before her eyes.

"What are you trying to do, child?" she demanded.

Marian laughed and hesitated. "The truth is," she confessed, "that every now and then I see those shades. I suppose I strained my eyes working so long."

"I only hope you're not going crazy," said Aunt Lucie, sighing. "Your father had a great-aunt who spent forty years in an asylum. There's never any telling where such things will break out in a family."

Marian carried the shades to Miss Murray, was warmly praised, and hurried back to dress for Alberta's luncheon. She congratulated herself that, so far from showing the effect of her night's vigils, she had even more color than usual. Perhaps her eyes were a trifle hollow, but that would not be noticed. Her dress was a further occasion for congratulation. "White is the only thing for poor girls," she reflected, as she added the finishing touches. "No one remembers it, and a very little change makes it practically new." She left home as full of cheery anticipation as if she had not worked almost without interruption for twenty-six hours.

Alberta Elwell was in good spirits, too. The shades had come home in time, and the appearance of the table satisfied her most exacting ideas. "I'm glad I decided to change," Miss Elwell reflected, as she rearranged a wayward fern. "This green is positively charming."

There were a dozen of them, all girls from well-to-do or wealthy homes but one, and that one seemed likely to be the life of the company. Alberta thought she understood. "She's too proud to let them see she feels the change," she told herself; but in simple truth Marian's vivacity was only the reaction from her intense application. She had a feverish desire to drain every drop in this cup of innocent pleasure.

The signal was given, and the little company flocked out to the dining-room. But at the door Marian halted abruptly. The illusion of the morning had returned, and had become more definite. She saw before her what seemed to her excited imagination an endless number of green shades of painfully familiar design. The simple and obvious explanation did not occur to her, but in its place came Aunt Lucie's lugubrious suggestion, and the thought of her father's great-aunt and her forty years of confinement. She reeled and would have fallen if it had not been for the supporting arms of the girl who stood nearest.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," she panted, as Alberta hurried to her, consternation written on her face. "But I can't go out to luncheon. Please let me go and lie down somewhere, and then don't take any notice of me."

It was some time before Alberta could be persuaded to agree to this program. She wished at least to summon a doctor and a trained nurse, but finally a compromise was reached. Marian was to have a few hours of rest, and then, if she was not markedly better, Alberta was to have her own way in regard to calling in a physician. The luncheon party sat down, eleven in number instead of twelve, and no one knew nor cared what the color scheme was. The talk went on in hushed voices. Not one of them had the heart to be gay.

When Alberta stole into Marian's room after the girls had quietly taken their departure, she found her friend sleeping. She sat down in the easy-chair to wait till she should wake, and her eyes rested pityingly on the sleeper's face. The color over which Marian had congratulated herself earlier in the day had quite disappeared. How worn and wan she looked, poor Marian! If only there were something one could do for her!

Marian interrupted her friend's benevolent plotting by opening her eyes. She felt tired and languid and weak, but her head was clearer, and the monstrous fancy Aunt Lucie had suggested no longer seemed a certainty.

"Alberta," she began without delay, "what color are your candle-shades?"

Alberta wished she had sent for the doctor, according to her first impulse. "They are green, Marian," she said, soothingly. "Now you had better try to sleep a little longer."

"They look quite new," Marian persisted, tremulously.

"They are. They came home from Murray's this morning." Alberta hoped this ended the subject, and when Marian

cried: "Thank God!" and burst into hysterical weeping, she was sure it was a case for the trained nurse after all.

But the truth came out before she could get to the telephone, and then she sat on the edge of the bed and held Marian's hand, while Marian cried luxuriously and insisted that she was perfectly happy. "It's such a relief," she explained, with an ecstatic squeeze of her friend's fingers, "to feel sure that you're not going insane."

But the other girl in the case was not perfectly happy. She had always looked upon herself as a charitable young person, and had taken a benevolent interest in the welfare of working girls. Now all at once she realized the cost of a sudden whim, and a sense of humiliation took possession of her. The recollection of the generous subscription she had coaxed out of her father for the new building of the Young Women's Christian Association failed to restore her self-respect.

"Well, I'm going to get up now," asserted Marian, wiping her inflamed eyes and smiling on her friend. "And do you know, Alberta, with my usual perversity, now that luncheon is over, I'm hungry."

"And you shall have something to eat," Alberta promised her, with a lightening heart. She was on her way to order it, but she came back and kissed Marian's forehead. "Marian," she promised, "it's my last rush order."

Baltimore, Md.