The Eber=Ready Edgar: DRAWN BY GEORGE D'A. CHADWICK
By Louisa C. Osburne Haughton
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The Ever=Ready Edgar

By Louisa C. Osburne Haughton

EDGAR MORRIS was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, for he was one of those men who could fall in love at sight and out again while you wait. He had three strings to his bow when he met his Waterloo, and it was the miscalculated attempt to add a fourth that became his everlasting confusion.

He had met the first at a graduation ball at the Naval Academy, and, being a bit bored by finding himself for once at a discount, he exerted his powers of fascination to an immoderate extent to capture the most charming young person present. The fascinating Miss Elsie Martin was in something of a pet because her particular midshipman had dared to dance twice with her most intimate friend, and in consequence the young woman had much that was caustic to say in regard to friendship in general, and the inconstancy of the Navy in particular. Edgar having been refused a dance by the friend, was in total sympathy with her.

It was a simple thing to lead his partner to one of the cozy corners, so considerately provided, to sit out a dance, and he had always found it plain sailing when he could get a woman's undivided attention in a properly-shaded light, amid suitable surroundings.

He lounged gracefully beside her, fixing his gaze pensively on the farthest possible point visible. After a few minutes' silence he drew himself up with a sigh, and leaned a bit closer, caressing a ribbon about her gown, and said: "A civilian has not the ghost of a chance in this gaudy Naval splendor. No woman will look at him while there is a brass button in sight."

He was toying with a string of buttons which she wore on her sleeve, in token of all the hearts in the Navy that were beating for her.

"Still," she answered, "a girl can never be sure of any sailor: for me a civilian every time. The uniforms are pretty, and a girl must wear some brass buttons or she is not in it at all. But sailors are all exactly alike, and only care how many girls they can get on their dance-cards."

"You are too charming a girl to put up with that sort of thing. *You* have only to choose"—looking unutterable things in her eyes. "Do you know you have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen? Even here in this dark place they are like stars," untying the string of buttons. "May I keep these as a souvenir of this evening?"

She laughed lightly but did not resist the robbery: "I do not need a souvenir to remember you and this evening."

"All the same I will bring you one tomorrow. May I come to you before I leave for home? I could not go without seeing you again."

When she arose to meet her next partner Edgar remained behind in a contemplative attitude, indicating that all he cared for now was to go home.

He was not the man to neglect such a good lead, so bright and early next morning he appeared, and after suitable preliminaries produced a tiny gold match-box, engraved with his coat-of-arms and monogram.

"I bring you this rather than something I might buy for you," he said. "It was given me by the Baroness X, and I prize it so much that I want you to have it."

Elsie, duly impressed, promised never to part with it.

"You see," he continued, "my arms on it will serve to remind you of me, and our initials are the same."

They talked for an hour or more, when he rose to go. The girl looked so pretty and dainty that he stood for a minute or two silently admiring her. She raised her eyes slowly and looked into his. It was too good a chance to pass. In a moment she was in his arms, and he was covering her face with kisses. All the more wonderful and meaning, considering the vast practice he had had.

"Do you really love me? It is too good to be true."

Soon he had to tear himself away to catch his train, and he left her—to write ardent letters to her for months.

The second of the trio he met at an Easter house-party. He picked out Ethel Miller as his partner—a girl with little to say, who listened to him by the hour.

"I should think you could write a fine book," she observed one day.

"I have only to put my own life into it to make it a wonderful thing," he said. "All authors do, I suppose! Listen to this!" reading from Eric Mackay's poem:

"'And could I enter Heaven, and find therein,
In all the wide dominions of the air,
No trace of thee among the natives there,
I would not bide with them—No! not to win
A seraph's lyre—but I would sin a sin,
And free my soul, and seek thee otherwhere!'"

"How glorious I should feel if any one loved me enough to write a poem like that to me," the girl said.

"Maybe he will," answered the accommodating Edgar. "Those lovely eyes would inspire any man to great things. The violets in your gown are scarcely so blue. May I have them as a souvenir of the day?"

She looked pleased and unpinned the flowers.

"I suppose you mean the violets," she said.

"I only wish the eyes went with them," he replied. "Tomorrow I leave. May I see you before I go—I mean alone—to say good-by? I have a little souvenir for you."

That night Edgar sat long and late, cudgeling his brains for a rival poem to the immortal Eric's. At last he got it to his satisfaction, and copied it out in a fancy hand on a set of tiny gold tablets bearing his coat-of-arms on one side and "E. M." on the other. Having accomplished this mighty work he lay down to sleep the sleep of the just.

Next morning it was easy to draw the present object of his affections to a secluded corner in the rose-garden. He brought out the tiny tablets and said:

"I did my little best for you, but it is not worthy of those lovely eyes." In an intense, low voice he read:

"'Pale, passionate, purple flowers,
With your message to me
Of possible perfumed hours
And eyes as blue as the sea.

"'Mute, matchless, marveling eyes,
Deep as the slumbrous sea;
With lingering, languorous light
You have stolen my heart from me.'"

"It is beautiful," she said softly.

"I wrote it on these little tablets, for I want you to keep them to remember our happy meeting," he said. "I prize them so much that I want you to have them. They were given me by a little Polish Princess. I met her in Venice. My arms on them will serve to remind you always of the man, and our initials are the same."

She said nothing as he put them in her hand, taking hold of her fingers as he did so.

"Look at me, Ethel!" very tenderly, "will you always think of me, and today in the rose-garden?"

She let her hand rest quietly in his for a moment, and looked across to the distant hills.

"Will you write to me, Ethel? Tonight, so I may have it tomorrow? Ethel—do you love me a little?"

A servant appeared to announce the carriage.

When the chestnuts were in bloom in the Bois de Boulogne Edgar was speeding along the perfect French roads in his big automobile. There was a delightful supper at "Robinson's," which was served on a platform among the branches of the trees, and there was a certain little gray-eyed American he was longing to see again. He had met her at the studio tea, where some marvelous effects in light and shade had her name to them. His thoughts were centred on "*Le vrai arbre*," and he hoped the moon would do her duty.

It all turned out as he had arranged: Eva Muse, the little artist, was there and sat next him—laughing as the supper was drawn up in baskets to the top of the tree. The moon rose large and red, and they paused in their talk to listen to a song rising from the platform below: an exquisite tenor singing English words:

"If I love thee today it may be to sever!
If I love thee tomorrow 'twill perchance be forever;
Shall I love thee forever, or love thee to sever?
Ah, love, if I'm wise, I had best love thee never."

Eva Muse leaned her head on her arms and gazed over the rail to the moonlit valley below.

"It is good to hear an American song again," she said. "I am longing to go home. I am thinking of the moonlight on the Chesapeake, and the purple mist over the salt marshes, and the tangled underbrush. Everything is so orderly here: everything has its hair combed and brushed, and is heavily perfumed—even the trees," and she drew a long breath of the chestnut blossoms.

A wedding party passed below, blowing through paper pigs, and impossible rams' horns, the bride and bridegroom riding in state in a hearselike carriage. Eva looked at them through the tree. "They don't even know how to love each other here!" she said.

"I thought they prided themselves on their artistic conception of that," Edgar replied.

The rest of their party clattered down to buy some of the horns as souvenirs.

"Not as I understand it," she answered slowly.

"Do you understand it?" he said softly, leaning very near (he felt he could give her some valuable points). To his surprise she burst into tears.

Edgar, in common with most men, could not bear to see a woman in tears. He smoothed her hair tenderly, and put his arms around her. She yielded to his caress and sobbed: "America is so far away, and I must stay here to finish the work I came to do."

He whispered soothingly of her talent and a great future for her. Then he spoke in glowing terms of the wonderful color-effects at a certain seaside village in the States. He told of the blue shadows in the black-green pines, with the red sunset behind them, and the violet mist rising from the salt marshes to meet the golden light overhead. These things he said she must paint when she went home.

The party below called for them to come down.

He held her closer in his arms in the bright moonlight and looked into her eyes. "Do you know you have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen!" he said softly. "Even the tears cannot spoil them; sometimes they are gray and sometimes blue as the heavens. Eva, can you love me a little bit?"

Some one called from below: "If you don't come down we will come up." So they parted with a sigh and joined their companions.

In the automobile they soon reached Paris. Edgar stood with her at her door for a few minutes.

"It is too late for you to come in," she said.

He took a tiny fan from her and clasped her fingers.

"I am going to keep this forever as a souvenir of the happiest day of my life. Will you use this and think always of me and Bohemian Paris?"—giving her a gold cardcase. "The arms on it will serve to remind you of the man, and our initials are the same. They are so intertwined as to make you remember that I have held you in my arms. I give it to you rather than something I could buy, because I prize it so highly. It was given me by a charming little French Marquise. Good-night!"—very softly—"Beloved!"

In a few hours he was on his way to England.

When October closed, Edgar sailed for America on the "Baltic." He settled himself in his cabin and appeared only in time for dinner when they were well down the channel. At his right was seated a very handsome girl, and he felt sure of a pleasant voyage.

Of course he was not at a loss to open conversation, and when they were about three days out they knew every cozy place on the ship. When they were off Nantucket Light they felt sorry it was nearly over.

"I suppose we shall meet often this winter," he said, "as we have so many friends in common."

"I hope so," she answered. "Oh, you must come to my house-party at Christmas. I am going to have my school-friends. We have not met for three years."

Edgar, of course, promised to come.

They passed close to the lightship in the dusk of the afterglow, and as they stood a song was borne toward them on the evening breeze:

"Beloved, I've waited for thee,
Through the years and the loves as they passed."

The girl turned toward the sound.

"For I knew that I'd see thee some day
And meet thee and love thee at last."

Edgar stirred uneasily and looked out to sea, where the moon was making a silver pathway over the softly stirring waters. The girl leaned over the rail and sighed softly as the exquisite voice continued:

"Ah, dear, if we'd wasted our lives
In loving each love as it came,
Could our hearts beat as madly as now,
Would our happiness be just the same?"

Edgar changed his position slightly, so as to gain a better view of her face.

"Yes, I'm glad I have waited and watched
Through life's midsummer madness for thee,
For I know I have found thee at last,
And that thou hast been waiting for me."

She looked fixedly out to sea. He looked at her with something intangible in his eyes.

"I am glad I have waited for thee
Through the years and the loves as they passed,"

he half whispered, leaning a little closer to her.

"I hate the idea of parting with all this beauty for the bustle of the city," she said irrelevantly.

"Think of the delightful time we will have at the house-party," he said softly.

"Oh, one must not borrow happiness any more than trouble," she answered, twisting a ribbon which the breeze swiftly straightened out.

"The wind won't allow us to think about it," he said, drawing the ribbon through his fingers thoughtfully.

Suddenly Edgar threw the ribbon from him and said: "We have built many air castles?"

"Yes," she answered, "on the quicksands of an ocean voyage."

"'Ah, love, if we'd wasted our lives
In loving each love as it came——'"

he hummed. "Do you remember that eight days ago we were strangers?"

"And we part tomorrow the best of friends," she answered.

"And nothing more, Eleanor?" he asked eagerly.

"Are we not the best of friends?" ignoring his use of her name, and gazing out at the moonlit water.

"I suppose we are," he muttered; "still, I can never forget these happy days. After all, what is happiness?"

"Who can say?" she answered, turning from the rail.

"Is this good-by?" he said softly, putting his hand on her arm to detain her.

She instantly withdrew, and said in a surprised tone: "Shall I not see you tomorrow?"

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"Oh, yes, when we are leaving the ship with all the rest, but that will be too poor a good-by after these happy, happy days," leaning very close as she moved farther from him. "Eleanor, look at me!" (He was playing the card that usually won.) "Look at me with those glorious brown eyes—the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen." She looked steadily out to sea. "Don't you know that I love you? Can't you see I am mad about you? Eleanor——"

A woman passed them, leaving the fragrance of violets behind; as she turned to her companion, one of the officers of the ship, the moonlight caught his brass buttons, and they flashed for a moment.

"Come along!" Edgar said roughly, "this is no place for a serious talk."

"Good-night," she answered, "we have an early day tomorrow!" And for the first time in his career Edgar lost a trick.

The next day as they shook hands on the pier he pressed a tiny gold pencil into her hand as he said:

"A souvenir to remind you of the voyage. I give it to you rather than something I might buy. It was given me by an Italian Countess. My arms on it will remind you of me, and our initials are the same. Write to me with it—soon—Beloved——"

Ah, the fervent letters he wrote to her for weeks! But she, being a woman of penetration, and having met other men, answered them temperately.

The sun rose on the battlefield of the Christmas house-party as it rose on the other Waterloo, and many manœuvres were developing, all unknown to this Napoleon of love. He really wanted Eleanor Morse, for he was, after all, a true sportsman, and this was the only game in his long career that had not fallen at the first shot. If a man cannot be sure where he stands with a woman after the intimacy of an ocean voyage and two months of impassioned letters, he has met with rare game indeed. Eleanor had invited the girls to come a day before the men, because there was much to be exchanged in the way of experiences, and the men would sorely interfere with these confidences.

By way of convenience in the exchange of these secrets the largest room in the house had been selected, and four narrow beds set up in a row. "Exactly like the dormitory!" they all exclaimed.

They all talked loudly and at once, for at least an hour, around a tea-table, before a big log fire in the library. The conversation, put into orderly and consecutive sentences, resolved itself into this:

One had met a perfectly fascinating man at the Naval Academy Graduation Ball. He was really the handsomest man on earth, etc. He gave her a souvenir that she was crazy about and would exhibit to her friends on their return to their room.

The second had met a wonderful poet at an Easter week-end. He had read her Eric Mackay's "Love Letters of a Violinist," and then had written her a poem quite equal to them. This she would read later, when she would also show a little souvenir he had contributed to her memory of him.

The third had met an awfully nice chap in one of the studios in Paris; he was not an artist, but had a real, sympathetic appreciation. Had they exchanged souvenirs? Of course. One always does in these affairs.

The hostess was busy serving tea and cakes to the trio, thirsty with the recital of the doings of three years. For some reason, hardly formulated in her mind, she said nothing of the voyage home, except that it had been enjoyable. She listened closely, however, and found points of similarity that made her think.

It was soon time to dress for dinner, and they all tripped to the "dormitory." A maid had laid out the contents of the various dressing-bags, and in a shining row lay a gold match-box, gold tablets and a gold cardcase, each having the side with the same elaborate coat-of-arms engraved on it turned upward.

Dire confusion naturally followed this discovery, and the hostess had much difficulty in restoring order, that explanations might be made.

As her hand pressed a tiny gold pencil closer into her belt she said: "'He' seems to be one and the same in each case. May I ask what name he had to each?" The identity being proved she feigned surprise. "Edgar Morris!" she exclaimed. "Let me break it to you gently: he will be here tomorrow."

At dinner the presence of the older members of the household precluded any further discussion of the all-absorbing topic, and it was with a sigh of relief that they rose to respond to the suggestion of bed, after the evening spent in the drawing-room. They talked long and late over the matter.

Eva remarked pensively, "I suppose Elsie and Ethel have the most beautiful eyes he ever saw."

"Yes," answered Elsie, "and did a Countess, or a Princess, or a Queen give him your gold souvenir? and did he prize the cardcase and the match-box?" (examining them minutely, then contemplating her tablets): "'The arms will serve to remind us of the man, and our initials are the same in each case!'"

Eleanor smiled to herself; she remembered that her eyes also were "the most beautiful on earth."

"Nellie, dear, how did you happen to know Edgar?" said Eva.

"Oh, he was one of the men on board the 'Baltic' coming home," she replied.

"It is a wonder you did not bring home a souvenir, too," said Ethel.

"Perhaps they gave out before he met me," laughed Eleanor, and her hand instinctively touched the pencil.

It was difficult to decide upon the plan of action, but finally Eleanor was chosen to manage the campaign, as she alone had escaped his wiles. It was agreed that each was to see that Edgar had no chance at a tête-à-tête with any of them except Eleanor, who was to manage the situation as she thought best; she mentally registered an oath to make him see the error of his ways very plainly.

She had long ago learned the value of silence, and was glad again that she still had the pencil concealed. She was even more of a sportsman than Edgar, and this very chase was much to her taste. He had not touched her at any point, so she could meet him with a clear eye and steady pulse. Edgar, on the other hand, was unreasonably dazzled by his opponent.

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He came—and she received him as she had all the others, with a calmly cordial greeting, while he looked unutterable things into her eyes.

The others had gone off on the motor-car. Would he walk, or come in to the fire? He decided upon the fire. He had so much to say to her that is always more comfortably said by an open fire in the twilight.

"'Beloved, I've waited for thee,'"

he whistled softly as he gazed at the flames.

She was pondering whether or not she was to prepare him for the ordeal before him. Torn between mercy and justice she glanced at him, and he looked so handsome and well-groomed that mercy lost.

"He can take care of himself," she concluded.

"I thought the house-party would never come," he said tenderly, leaning toward her. "I wish you could see your eyes in the firelight," slowly—"the most beautiful eyes on earth."

She laughed suddenly, having heard something like this before. He drew back offended.

"What is there to laugh about in my remark?" he said stiffly.

"Not your remark," she answered, "so much as my own thoughts," toying with a gold pencil.

"You never wrote me a line with that pencil," he continued, mollified; "all your letters were in ink, and I wanted to think of you as using something I had given you." Leaning nearer he caressed the lace on her sleeve.

She changed her position so as to be beyond his reach. "I have some charming girls here; you must not make love to all of them. Give the other men a chance."

Edgar, for him, was somewhat abashed.

"That was rather a hard one" he said. "Have I ever given you any reason to suppose that I have even looked at any other woman! Eleanor, I love you. You must know that I love you—I have loved you, and you only, from the moment we met, and why, I do not know, for you have always treated me like a dog"—a pause—"perhaps that is why I am mad about you."

"'Ah, love, if we'd wasted our lives
In loving each love as it came,'"

she sang softly.

"'I am glad I have waited for thee,'"

he hummed, looking straight at her.

A confusion of voices arose in the hall, and the three girls came in ahead of the men. At once they struck the scent of a scene. However, they acted as if nothing had occurred.

For a moment Edgar felt the pangs of the man against the wall with a row of musket-muzzles pointed at him. Then with the instinct of self-preservation he rushed forward, shaking hands with them, and saying how delightful was the surprise Miss Morse had unwittingly prepared for him. As a forlorn hope he made his eyes say things to each one which his lips might not utter in the presence of the others. And each, womanlike, listened to her heart's delusion, unheeding the subconscious knowledge that this also was on a par with all the rest.

Miss Morse acted well the part of surprised hostess.

"Now, tell me, Mr. Morris, where did you all meet?—for we have been so scattered."

She held him on the rack of inquiry for some time, and the others, clever enough to follow her lead, kept him in agonizing dread of discovery until it was time to dress for dinner.

Edgar spent the next few days in futile attempts to see each girl alone and come to an understanding. He fully appreciated the gravity of the situation, for he wanted the one woman, and the three indiscretions that confronted him would seriously obstruct his way to this end. He could not be sure of the silence of the three, for there seemed to be a sort of free-masonry among them more felt than hinted, and at the same time there was no suspicion of the truth having leaked out, for each treated him with all the cordiality possible in a crowd.

He was sitting gloomily, beside a big log-fire in the library, on the last day of the party. The others had gone out to skate, and he had pleaded letters to write, for the strain was growing too great for him to enjoy himself.

Tomorrow the house-party would be at an end, and he could not leave without doing something decisive. The short twilight of the winter evening began to be darkness, and the fire was dying down. Some one entered the adjoining music-room, and began to play softly. After a while the music shaped itself into a song.

"'Beloved, I've waited for thee,'"

the musician sang softly.

He leaned forward suddenly, for it was Eleanor.

"Heavens, what a voice," he said to himself. "Like everything else about her, perfection."

Then she began Tosti's "Good-By." She sang it wonderfully, and it is not an easy song to sing.

He saw every bit of it in the dying fire as a mirage—the gray sky and the sea with the black swallows silhouetted against them, above the line of white breakers. He lived it all, too, in the few minutes of the song.

"'Good-by forever!'" she sang, and he was wrought up to such a pitch of emotion that he lost the mastery of himself. He must speak to her.

He went in and leaned on the piano, looking at her in the dim light.

She did not notice him, but played on.

"Eleanor," he said—"Eleanor, beloved! Look at me! I am going tomorrow, and is it to be good-by forever? You know I love you; I want you as never in my life have I wanted anything or anybody. I want you for my own—my wife—Eleanor! And whatever has gone before no woman can say I asked her to be my wife."

She was fumbling with something on the music-rack.

"'I am glad I have waited for thee!'"

he sang softly, seating himself on the corner of the piano bench beside her. He tried to take her hand, but with a swift movement she drew it away and switched on the piano lamp. On the music-desk in a row before him were the gold match-box, a set of gold tablets, a gold cardcase, and slowly she drew from her belt a gold pencil and placed it beside them.

"This is my answer," she said, rising.