A DEBT OF GRATITUDE

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

THE table by the middle window had been reserved for three. Vogel's was full at that hour. There were smart frocks and pretty women and laughter disproportionate to the wit that evoked it, and a hum of voices like the drone of locusts in a summer field. Through this gay company the three late arrivals made their way to their waiting table unnoticed.

They were not of a sort to attract attention, even in less showy assemblies than Vogel's boasted at the height of the season. The woman's hair was prematurely white, and the tracery of her delicate skin suggested suffering physical or mental, perhaps both. She talked much with painstaking vivacity. In her dress, as in her manner, there was an indefinable suggestion of an effort to conform to another's standards. "Now, isn't this regularly jolly?" she exclaimed, as she took her place, and the expression, incongruous on her lips, produced an effect almost pathetic.

Her husband, Oscar Moreland, who looked younger than she, had the closely fitted, rotund figure which is a confession of a struggle between vanity and gluttony. He had small, restless eyes, and a reddish mustache which he caressed affectionately or tugged with impatience, according to the changes of his mood. The third member of the party, Farrel by name, was tall and broad-shouldered, with a dominating ugliness which has for most women a fascination beyond that of beauty. He was a man of long silences, in which there was nothing morose. His smile, which was slow in coming, had a genial warmth, like sunshine.

The meal was a silent one, in spite of the efforts of the white-haired woman, who talked insistently and played with her food. The husband ate hastily and paid little attention to the other members of the party. Farrel listened with kindly gravity to his guest's efforts to be entertaining, and once or twice remonstrated: "You're not eating anything. Come now—to please me."

The meal ended, Moreland pushed back his chair. "I'll find you soon," he said. "There're some fellows here I want to see." He crossed the room with haste, and his wife's volubility dropped from her like a discarded garment. She leaned back in her chair, glancing at her companion with the air of one who is sure of being understood. Indeed, Farrel's look, as it rested on her, was full of sympathetic comprehension.

"Tired, aren't you?" he said. "We'll get away from this racket. There is a porch outside where you can look at the water and rest." He guided her to the retreat he had mentioned, and ensconced her in a rocking chair. The moon was rising, revealing with delicate touches all that was lovely in the landscape, while the shadows hid all the sordid and unsightly. The dew had set free imprisoned fragrances. The woman did not suggest that it was "jolly." She only sank back in her chair, with a deep sighing breath, and closed her eyes.

For a moment Farrel towered over her, big, strong, protecting, and the moonlight disclosed on his rough-hewn features an expression of exquisite gentleness. But when he spoke his words were matter-of-fact.

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"I'm going for a cigar. You sit quiet; I'll be back in a minute." As he turned he perceived a small boy beckoning him. Farrel advanced, and the urchin withdrew, still gesticulating violently, with an air of caution amusingly at variance with his contortions.

"Here, kid," said Farrel impatiently, "drop that monkeying and come to business." The boy stole close, still proudly mysterious.

"She tole me to get yer out o' sight o' the old lady 'fore I give it to yer," he explained, and handed over a note. Farrel regarded him thoughtfully a moment, then opened the communication and read it through.

So that's her. Well, I can't say I admire your taste, Oscar boy. Be at the Point at ten o'clock sharp. I've about made up my mind to go with you, and if we're going to take the plunge, what's the good of standing on the bank shivering?

Farrel stood reflecting, then slowly tore the missive into bits. The boy grinned up into his face understandingly.

"She tole me to giv' it to the cove 'long with the old woman in the blue gown," he said, "an' to get yer out of the way fust. An' I done it."

"You're a smart kid, all right," said Farrel. He felt in his pocket for the expected coin, then strode back to Mrs. Moreland, forgetting his cigar. She did not turn at his approach, yet something in her attitude suggested that she was listening for his returning step, and that the sound gave her comfort. He stood beside her chair and spoke briefly and with authority.

"You are to stay here. I'm going to take Oscar canoeing."

"It's a lovely night," she acquiesced, like one accustomed to falling in with the plans of others. "But, Oscar—I'm not sure—"

"Oh, he'll go," said Farrel, thrusting his chin forward, and she laughed gently.

"How sure you are—of yourself and of your ability to make other people do as you wish! I wonder if women ever feel that way? I suppose they do—the beautiful ones."

"Some women can feel pretty sure of some things," said Farrel. "You can be sure of me, for instance." Her answer was to lay her hand lightly upon his sleeve.

"You've been wonderfully good to us, Joe," she said. "Sometimes I'm afraid we're selfish to monopolize you the way we do. I know I'm not entertaining. I try to read up on things, so as to know what to talk about, but even Oscar almost goes to sleep on an evening when we're alone together. That's one of the penalties of married life," she went on with a pathetic effort to speak lightly. "You have to put up with your wife whether she's stupid or not. But you—you're free."

"I have to thank you," said Farrel with deliberation, "for the happiest hours of my life. And perhaps some day I may have a chance to reciprocate, by doing something for which you should thank me." He bent his head over the hand on his sleeve and went away abruptly, leaving her surprised but not startled. She sat smiling to herself as she mused on her good fortune. Old before her time, delicate, uninteresting—she checked off her disadvantages on her fingers—she was nevertheless blessed with a devoted husband and a loyal friend.

She fell asleep in her chair, thinking happy thoughts and wrapped about by the peace of the silvery night. She was wakened by the sound of hurrying feet. Men were running past. Voices sharp with excitement spoke out of the dark. She felt frightened and deserted. Down on the Point she could see bobbing lights.

She rose to her feet and stumbled across the porch. The place seemed empty. The music had stopped. The chill of nameless apprehension clutched her heart. She could have cried out in her relief when she saw a man standing by an open door, straining his eyes in the direction of the Point.

"Has something happened, sir? Can you tell me if anything is wrong?"

He turned quickly, more than glad to be the first to give her the tidings. "Why, yes, ma'am. There's two men

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drowned off the Point. Went out in a canoe, and got to fooling, I suppose, as folks will when they've had more to drink than is good for them, and so upset."

"A canoe!" Confidence and terror had grappled in her heart, but as yet confidence had the upper hand. "Oh, it couldn't be!" she gasped.

"What couldn't be?"

"Why, my husband and a friend are out in a canoe. But they would be careful. And even if they upset, Joe would bring him ashore. Oscar can't swim," she babbled on, her face chalky in the moonlight. "But Joe is as much at home in the water as on land." She put her hands to her lips, choking back a cry. "Oh, God! Why don't they come?"

The man took her by the arm. "You'd better come down to the Point, lady," he said with authority. "You might be needed to identify the bodies."

It was the overturned canoe that had first attracted attention. There had been the usual aimless hurrying about, the usual loss of time. When Mary Moreland and her guide reached the Point it was crowded with people, who nevertheless fell back and made way for them to pass. Mrs. Moreland wondered what it was that the man kept saying and why the people cast such pitying looks upon her. For Joe would not let Oscar drown. She clung to that thought with blind, unreasoning faith. Whatever happened, Joe would bring her husband back to her.

A boat was coming in. The other boats were following a little behind. The waiting people were so silent that the splash of the oars in the water struck on the ears like blows. Mrs. Moreland stood on the little strip of sand where the boat's keel grated. She saw them lifting out two limp, dripping bodies, and she ran forward while a man held a lantern so that its light fell upon a sodden face, staring blankly upward. Somewhere a clock struck ten, and a woman in the crowd broke into a shriek of hysteric laughter and dropped in a faint. They carried her away, the red oval of her painted cheeks showing grotesquely against her deathlike pallor.

Everything was being done that could be done. So at frequent intervals the woman who had taken Mary Moreland in charge gave her assurance as the night dragged on. The doctors had come from the city in automobiles, and hadn't paid any attention to speed laws, she might be sure. And it was really wonderful how often people came to, after having been dead for hours, to all appearances.

Mrs. Moreland gave the assent required, with little evidence of emotion. The woman suggested that it was a singular accident. "Perhaps so," Mrs. Moreland said dully. "I don't know much about accidents."

"I only mean that the water was so still there didn't seem much chance for an upset, if one took ordinary precautions. And didn't you say your husband could swim?"

"Not my husband—at least, he wasn't much of a swimmer. But Joe—Mr. Farrel—was very skillful."

"He was the big man," said the woman understandingly. "He did his best. They say he'd gripped the little man so tightly that they pulled both bodies into the boat together. There, that's right! You'll feel better for a good cry."

But the sharp sound that had broken from Mrs. Moreland's lips had not been the forerunner of tears. "I knew Joe would try," she said simply, and settled herself for the long waiting.

At two o'clock the silence of the building was broken by suggestive sounds, raised voices, hurrying feet, a door shutting sharply somewhere. Mrs. Moreland's companion sprang from her chair. "It sounds as if something had happened," she said unsteadily. "I'll go out and see."

She came back running. "One of them is breathing!" she gasped. "They didn't know which. I suppose one of the doctors will come in just as soon as he can be spared. Oh, you poor soul!" she cried hysterically. "If you

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would only give way a little! It would help you through this dreadful time of not being sure."

"One of them," said Mrs. Moreland with white lips, "only one of them!" She folded her hands and sat very still. One man living and one dead. God had made the choice between them. And she must wait to know which.

"Joe hasn't anybody to care," she murmured, staring overhead as if speaking to some invisible Presence, "and Oscar is all I have." The other woman saw her moving lips and shivered.

When the doctor came, his look of pitying sympathy gave his message before a word had been spoken. Mrs. Moreland lost her self-control and cried out. "It is the other," she said—"the other!" She caught his hand. "You'll not give up while there's any hope!" she entreated. "It isn't time to stop hoping yet."

"Everything possible will be done," the physician promised. He felt her pulse, and in an undertone gave some directions to the other woman, wondering with a sense of surprise, not blunted by long professional experience, that this fragile, delicate, guarded creature could show such endurance in suffering.

At the door he paused. "Is Mr. Farrel married?"

"No."

"He spoke a woman's name when he was coming to. He said quite distinctly, 'For Mary's sake.' I thought that perhaps there was someone who should be notified."

"There is no one," said Mrs. Moreland in a hard voice, "to care particularly." Then as the door closed, her tense figure relaxed and her first tears came to her relief.

"Poor Joe!" she whispered brokenly. "He did his best, and I ought to be grateful. It isn't his fault that he's the one to come back. I must never let him know."

"Why don't you marry her?"

Joseph Farrel and his friend and physician, Dr. Gale, sat by a crackling grate fire. The room had the luxurious comfort characteristic of masculine establishments where ease ranks first. Outside the storm raged. Indoors the flames leaped up the chimney's throat, and rings of tobacco smoke dissolved against the background of tall bookcases and handsome pictures. It was an hour for confidences.

"Why don't you marry her?" Dr. Gale repeated, as his companion made no rejoinder. "She's been a widow for three years now. And it's easy to see how it is with you."

"It's been that way with me for more than three years," said Farrel with deliberation. "The question is, how is it with her?"

"I don't know." The doctor stroked his beard. "But my opinion is that she'll have you if you ask her. She's so overwhelmingly grateful—"

"That's it," Farrel broke in sharply —"that's the devil of it. If it wasn't for her gratitude I'd risk it."

"Don't be an ass, Joe," said the physician with a friend's candor. "You're not a sentimental woman. Take her on any terms, and in a year she'll bow down and worship you. I know the type. As for her gratitude, it does credit to her head as well as to her heart. When you risked your life for that husband of hers you did more than was reasonable. For, from all I hear, he was a common little beast, and anybody but a woman, and a particular sort of woman, at that, would have thought herself well off to be rid of him."

Farrel rose and paced the floor. "I can't let her marry me out of gratitude," he repeated, halting opposite his friend. "Because I wasn't trying to save Oscar Moreland."

"You mean you weren't successful in saving him," the physician corrected him sharply.

"I mean what I say," drawled Farrel, as was his habit when excited. "I meant to drown him, and I did!"

Gale fell back in his chair, past speaking. The other man continued to stride across the room, his hands in his pockets, his strong face drawn into a frown.

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"It's not easy to show you things from my standpoint," he said abruptly. "You were right when you called Oscar a beast. All appetites he was, and no soul. He liked food and drink and women, all on the same level. His wife bored him desperately, and she knew it, poor soul, and atoned by worshiping him all the more devoutly. Queer things, women."

He stood before the grate, staring moodily at the flying sparks, and a full moment passed before he took up the thread of his story.

"I'd heard about this other woman, of course, but I supposed it would blow over like his other affairs and no harm done, so that Mary didn't know. But that night at Vogel's a boy brought me a note she meant for Oscar. I saw that things were getting near a crisis that Mary's heart was to be broken, and that she was to be humiliated before the world, every sweet memory, even, poisoned. If I could have believed that it would have killed her, I might have borne it. But she's the sort that lives and lives—and suffers."

He paused to light a fresh cigar. Dr. Gale followed his example, but the hand of the physician shook.

"I got Oscar into the canoe. He didn't want to go, of course, but I made him. And then I opened up. I didn't tell him about the letter. She had written him to come down to the Point at ten, and I suppose they would have laid their plans then. I simply said that the thing had got to stop, and he cursed me for a meddlesome fool and laughed in my face. And he taunted me with being in love with his wife, and laughed again and said that she'd love him just as much after he'd run off with another woman, and would never look at me. It was all damnably true, too, but injudicious. And at last, when I was tired of listening, I had my say. 'I've given you your chance, Oscar,' I told him, 'and you've rejected it. And now we'll never go ashore—neither of us.'

"That sort of man cuts a poor figure at such a time," observed Farrel dispassionately. "His face was as white as a sheet before his silly grin had faded out. Then he started to screech for help. I had my fingers on his throat at the first sound, and the canoe went over."

There was a long pause, and again Farrel stood before the grate and watched the flames. Then he looked with grave attention at the white, troubled face of his silent friend.

"Of course, you understand that I was condemning myself as well as him. For both of us I was judge and executioner. I was ready to pay the price, a life for a life. Mary would mourn him, but she would be happy, too, in a way, when nothing could prevent her from idealizing Oscar's memory and making herself believe he had loved her devotedly. And to save her from what I saw before her, I would have stopped at nothing. The only thing I didn't take into account was the possibility of their fishing us out of the water in time to save either of us. I thought I'd made a sure thing of it till the Day of Judgment."

The other man seemed on the point of speaking. Farrel made an appealing gesture. "Wait a minute and I'll have finished. I want you to understand that my conscience hasn't troubled me, not in the way you might have supposed. I'm glad I killed him. I'd do it again, and as quickly as I'd lift my hand, if as much was at stake. But I'll acknowledge that when I found that I was back in this world, and that he was out of it, I was confoundedly uncomfortable. I meant to finish up the job, you know, as soon as a good chance came. But I hadn't taken Mary into account."

His voice changed exquisitely. His face, stern but now with strenuous passion, softened till he looked another man.

"She needed me, Gale. She's the helpless sort, one of the women who need a man to turn to in every emergency. And since I was ready to die for her happiness, I would be a sneak to refuse to live, if that's any satisfaction to her. Sometimes I've thought —but that's foolishness, I reckon.

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Anyhow, you see that I couldn't run the risk of having her marry me out of a mistaken sense of obligation."

It was Gale's turn. The physician cleared his throat more than once and spoke hoarsely. "You haven't asked my opinion as to the morals of the case, Farrel, and I won't force it on you. But I will say one thing. In spite of all, I think Mrs. Moreland owes you a debt of gratitude, a bigger one than she dreams of."

A WOMAN'S WAY

By PHILIP A. BARTOLOMAE

Act I

THE MAN: "I love you! Be my wife."
The Woman: "You dear!"

Act II

The Man: "Alas! I find I love another."
The Woman: "Oh, dear!"

Act III.

The Man: "How dare you bring *her* here?"
The Woman: "She's a dear!"

Act IV

The Man: "It's always been only you I loved."
The Woman: "My dear!"

AN amusing story is told at one of the Philadelphia clubs. It seems that an older member thereof, a clever chap, was being frightfully bored by his *vis-à-vis* at table in the café one evening, the latter individual being as dull as the former was bright.

The talk was fast becoming unendurable, when the first-named member chanced to observe a man at the other end of the dining room yawning in a manner that threatened to dislocate his jaw.

"Look!" exclaimed the first member in desperation. "We are overheard."

THE blessings of poverty and the uses of adversity are only appreciated at long range.

DON'T be too good—it isn't polite.

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