

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

BY CATHERINE SCHURMAN

THERE are some things more to be desired than gold—anybody can tell you that, if you ask discreetly. By the time you've finished questioning you'll have a large list to choose from, so varied are tastes in this world. Now, there are people who think you can get along without a sense of humor—try it, and see how uncomfortable you are. A sense of humor is a kind of mental umbrella: it protects you from a good many storms, if you only happen to have it with you.

Mrs. Lessing and Mrs. Courtney agreed on one point, one point only: each believed she possessed a keen and fully developed sense of humor. Mrs. Courtney said frankly that she could never have lived in Malta without one. Some of the more serious inhabitants in Malta resented this remark of Mrs. Courtney's; but they found nothing to criticize in Mrs. Lessing's that it was easy enough to see the joke on someone else; in fact, they agreed heartily that it took a genius to join in the laugh on himself.

Mrs. Courtney and Mrs. Lessing were on the top rung of gay society in Malta. The latter was very long and insecure that led up to them, and they knew it and gloried. They hated each other; not with that frank outdoor hatred of the Western plains, but with the refined dislike of civilization, which is a thousand times more deadly. Each wanted to be first—after all, that is the way of the world. There was a feud of old standing too—but that's another story. Mrs. Courtney and Mrs. Lessing were too clever to allude to this hatred publicly. Just the opposite, they hung up the curtain of friendship, and for a long time no one knew how thin the drapery was. Finally one or two more perceiving than the rest peeped through; then everyone knew, and Mrs. Courtney and Mrs. Lessing dropped all pretense. Mrs. Courtney talked; she couldn't help gossiping any more than a brook can help running over its own bed. Mrs. Lessing was different: she never gossiped; but she made her plans, for all that, and she never lost a chance to score when she could. Both played the game for all it was worth.

Mrs. Courtney's horseback luncheon was the talk of Malta, till Mrs. Lessing's masquerade ball pushed it hard for honors.

Their clothes were the wonder and pride of Malta. Whether you preferred Mrs. Lessing's dark beauty in cerise to Mrs. Courtney's blond splendor in blue, was, after all, only a matter of personal taste.

For several months the efforts to outdo each other kept up, and all Malta held its breath and laughed at the skirmishes. Malta was rather quiet then; so everyone was interested and had time to bet on the result. The bets were nearly even—perhaps Mrs. Lessing's wonderful good nature placed her a bit in the lead. The women liked that. Herein Mrs. Lessing showed her wisdom. She never admitted, as so many fascinating women do, that her own sex bored her; she was always the center in a crowd of femininity. She had a way of listening, had Mrs. Lessing. Mothers told her of their children's illnesses, and young girls confided their love affairs. No one stopped to think if she realized how pretty she was with her eyes half shut, or if her throaty contralto voice was a trifle sweeter and more sympathetic than Nature intended.

Mrs. Courtney played her cards pretty well too. She was a different type of woman, vivacious and entertaining. Nobody was dull when Mrs. Courtney was around; everybody wanted to be on the spot too—there were reasons for that.

ONE day it was noised through Malta that the new General had arrived. Rumor had it that he was young. That afternoon every woman in Malta drove or strolled about the park. The women averred that it was the unusual weather; but the men smiled knowingly among themselves, though they said nothing. They were nearly all husbands and well trained. The General came, saw, and conquered, as had been done so many years before him. He was a good enough looking chap—the type so many women admire, fair and tall, with curly hair. Among themselves they called him Adonis; but his real name turned out to be Peter. One can never get away from a name, after all, whatever you may think.

From the hour that Mrs. Lessing and Mrs. Courtney saw Peter it was war to the teeth. Figuratively speaking, their chariot wheels were decorated with captives, as it were. There is an old German saying, "What I have not that is what I wish." So was it with Mrs. Courtney and Mrs.



"It's the Love of a Man Like You that Counts."

She used to blush a little too, so that she looked quite pretty, and she relished in her mind for the hundredth time a walk she and Peter had had together. Probably she never knew that Mrs. Lessing had insisted on it.

The war went on briskly for sometime. "The War of the Roses" someone caustically called it; for Mrs. Lessing always wore a red rose, while Mrs. Courtney admired pink ones. Peter kept them both supplied, and they were content. So was the florist. He had fallen under the charm of Peter's gracious manner, and the flowers were always fresh. Perhaps Peter's fattering account pleased him too. Who knows? Finally it became apparent to all Malta that Peter was changing before its very eyes. He was much quieter, thinner, and those who flattered themselves on their perspicacity spread abroad that the war was nearly over.

PETER was finally given three months' leave of absence. Ten days before he left there was a large ball in the Café Printemps. Those of you who have been in Malta remember the café with its large grounds and big shady trees, and how each evening long strings of colored lanterns sway softly in the darkness. Nevertheless, there is plenty of shade for those who wish it. Pierre Martelot attends to that. He has always had a soft spot in his heart for lovers. "C'est la vie," he used to say, and his parchment like old face cracked into the semblance of a smile as he pointed to a couple in a secluded corner.

Mrs. Courtney and Mrs. Lessing were both at the ball. Peter arrived late, owing to some business or other, so that perhaps half the couples were at supper when he came in. Mrs. Lessing happened to be sitting for a minute alone.

Peter went straight to her. "Good evening, Lady," he said. "You're looking very well this evening."

Mrs. Lessing moved over to let Peter sit down beside her, and she smiled into his eyes as she always did. "A thousand thanks for the warmth and originality of your compliment," she replied a trifle sarcastically. The evening was really very hot, and Mrs. Lessing always felt the heat. There was some excuse for her feeling irritable. Peter was so elusive too!

Away out in the distance Mrs. Lessing saw Mrs. Courtney, and her mood instantly changed. "I'm so glad you've come!" she added. "I was really beginning to feel bored; there are so few people one really finds pleasure in talking to. Even little Jones is tiresome tonight. He's not so good looking as he used to be, either. Why do some light men fade when others never seem to lose their looks?" She looked away naively, with the innocent expression of one who does not realize that she has said anything personal.

Peter smiled in pleased agreement, a little self consciously. He thought to himself that appreciation was a great thing in a woman, and he thought again how pleasant it would be to come home in the evening and find such a helpmate waiting. "After all, looks don't mean much," he protested.

Mrs. Lessing laughed softly. "In theory, no," she answered; "in practice, yes." Then she gave away one of the secrets of her sex. "Looks are everything to a woman," she said. "Take poor little Martha Snubbins, for example. She has no looks, consequently no good times."



"Silly Little Peter—This Is Life!"

Peter glanced carelessly in the direction she indicated. "She's certainly not beautiful. I suppose she's good, though. That's the usual alternative, isn't it? I must ask her to dance tonight," he continued confidently.

"Do," said Mrs. Lessing. Here at least was safe ground, and she cordially praised the little Snubbins girl.

Peter was not very wise; he only thought how sweet and womanly Mrs. Lessing was, and he looked at her again with a distinct sensation of pleasure. "She's beautiful," he mused to himself; but at the same time a vague feeling of dissatisfaction surged through him. He felt as if he were looking at a beautiful painting with part of it gone—such a difference does soul make in a woman's face. Not that Peter realized this; he only thought that Mrs. Lessing wasn't looking quite so well as usual, and he instantly reproached himself for the thought. Eager to make amends for the slightest disloyalty, he urged her to go out to supper with him, but Mrs. Lessing refused.

"I promised to wait for Mr. Graf," she said gently.

Peter frowned. Graf was old and ugly, with a fly specked reputation. These things weighed in the balance with his enormous wealth were as nothing to some people. "I'll see you later in the evening," he said.

Mrs. Lessing nodded a gay goodbye.

PETER went, splendidly erect, down the long hall and out to the dining room. Malta balls were hilarious and convivial; this one was no exception. Gay crowds of people talked and laughed at beautifully decorated little tables. More than one invitation was sent to him to be one of them. In one corner of the room Mrs. Courtney was sitting. Peter saw the vacant seat at her side with a feeling of satisfaction and made his way through the crowd to her table.

Mrs. Courtney's cheeks were flushed and her eyes were very bright. The empty champagne bottles explained it; but Peter's youth stood him in good stead and concealed this from him.

"Dear boy," said Mrs. Courtney, "let's have one more glass; let's drink a toast to the one we love best."

The half hysterical crowd at the table cheered appreciation noisily.

"To the one we love best!" it repeated instantly and drained the toast.

Mrs. Courtney leaned over toward Peter. "The one I love best!" she whispered foolishly, and met his surprised glance boldly. Peter noticed as one in a dream how powdered and painted her face was. A feeling of revulsion, which is always the death of love, passed over him. Mrs. Courtney mistook his silence; for she grew bolder still and laid her heavily ringed hand on his. "Silly little Peter," she purred, "this is life!"

The scales dropped from Peter's eyes, and he no longer saw the woman he might have loved; only the intemperate woman of the world, with her glass in one hand, very gently he drew his hand from hers and rose dutifully to leave; but before going he turned to say goodbye. "Aren't you making a mistake in calling this life?" he asked pityingly, and the next instant was gone.

The question fell unpleasantly on Mrs. Courtney's ears. She started up as if to call Peter back; but he was too far away, so she turned again to the mandarin creature on her left. More than one person remarked that evening on the unusual hardness of Mrs. Courtney's laugh.

Peter's mind was full of a strange peace. "I should have known all along," he said to himself, "that there was no one but Mrs. Lessing." Then he turned into the garden to seek her.

He found her at last away down in one of Pierre Martelot's shady corners, and with her Mr. Graf. As Peter drew near he saw they were sitting very close together, and he heard his own name mentioned. "Peter!" said Mrs. Lessing, with a soft little laugh of gratified triumph. "Jealous of Peter? He's only a silly little boy. He hasn't cut his wisdom teeth yet. It's the love of a man like you that counts. That's life!" She smiled bewitchingly into his dissipated old face. Perhaps she feared his millions might escape her yet.

Peter was stunned. He relived in a few short moments his months in Malta, and he saw for the first time what an exaggerated opinion they had given him of himself. Then, phoenixlike from the pyre of his self esteem rose a tardy sense of humor, and he smiled wryly as he turned back into the café.

MISS SNUBBINS sat alone in a corner of the room. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw Peter standing before her, and she started, uneasily afraid to accept an invitation to dance that must have been purely imaginative. "Shall we sit it out instead?" she hazarded. "You look rather tired." Peter sank into a chair beside her. How sweet her voice was and how sympathetic her manner! he thought to himself. For once Peter was impulsive.

"May I tell you something?" he began, and, not waiting for an answer, he told her everything. He began about his home—a happy, old fashioned home in the country—and how pleased he was to get a position in Malta. He didn't omit anything; he told her about his taste of Malta society, and how youth and inexper-

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