

# The RULE of THREE By Ethel Train

## Mother Was Object of So Much Solicitude That She Longed for Just a Little Wholesome Neglect.

EVERYBODY called them "the Farnam girls," notwithstanding the fact they were married. Whether this was due to the enduring quality of their filial devotion or to a certain spinsterness that persisted in them, remained subject for conjecture.

There were three of them—Elizabeth, Mary and Ruth.

Elizabeth was thirty. In her twenty-eight year, as women physically inactive are prone to do when youth is on their side, she had begun to put on weight. Lindsay Weston, her husband, loyally asseverated upon all occasions that he liked it. Perhaps he did. If so, he must have failed to observe the pockets under the eyes that the superfluous flesh was making, the mottling of the relaxed skin. Not but that, upon the whole, his wife was a fine, upstanding woman, as women go.

The second daughter, Mary, though possessed of as large a frame, was not so well filled out as her elder sister. She was, in fact, bony. Nature had taken unnecessary pains, it seemed, with a face which was hardly worth the trouble of making. The cheek bones were high, the chin inadequate, the lips thin. Yet Mary had made a desirable match. Her husband came of people in good standing in the community. Nobody quite knew how she had managed to attach Jim, but the fact remained that she had.

Ruth, the youngest, was locally considered a live wire. In matters civic or charitable she was inevitably to the fore. She was potentially the best looking of the sisters, but she dissipated this advantage by wearing her hat high on the summit of her head and ruthlessly displaying her prominent ears. Her talk consisted of assertions closely strung together and uttered with her face as close as possible to that of the person addressed.

Not one of them, it was universally admitted, could hold a candle to their mother. Mrs. Farnam's figure was as supple and slender as a girl's. Her bloom was the more subtle for being a little faded, like roses at twilight; her hair none the less alluring because one felt rather than saw in it the underlying brown.

Mr. Farnam had surprisingly retained his physical energy and the freshness of his outlook upon life. He had the stoop of the tall man approaching sixty, but his white hair was thick as ever and his spare figure showed a pleasing concavity in the region of his gold watch chain. This chain he had worn for half a century, as well as a gold band through which his necktie was thrust. The substitution of a variegated necktie for his former black "cravat" was his only concession, as far as his personal appearance was concerned, to modernity.

In business, however, he was progressive enough. He had passed by natural stages from the exploitation of acetylene lighting to that of gas, thence to electricity, and for the past year had been engaged in the installation of electric lighting plants upon farms.

His efforts in this last venture had met with extraordinary success—so much so that he had moved into larger offices and had taken his third son-in-law into a partnership which had previously embraced the other two. By this action he had further cemented the already remarkably close, indeed, the relations of the Farnam family were the wonder of the town, exploited as one of its assets, like the model village at its outskirts near the soap factory.

At least four evenings a week, with or without their husbands, the girls spent in the society of their parents, either at their own homes or in the white frame house "set back" from the street, in which they had all been born. It was a charming, old-fashioned house, with an air of sweet retirement that breathed of Mrs. Farnam herself.

In the arc light that the town, bent upon improvement, had lately placed at the corner of the street, it was mysteriously flicked, upon an early summer night, with motionless shadows of leaves. Together its owners had planted the stalwart trees that flung them, more than thirty years ago. Their love had been a little love then, precarious of root as the saplings, awaying in every breeze. Now it was a thing of many years' growth; significant, weather-proof.

Behind the house was a little garden, with a flagged walk that cut the flower beds in two. The air that crept upward from it toward the bedroom window was blended of pleasant odors. When their daughters had left, it was an evening group about the lamp, Mr. and Mrs. Farnam often went out there to pace the circumscribed area and enjoy the fragrance, arm in arm. Such small interludes in a conscientious life were not unwelcome.

Another Thursday had come round. The Farnam evening meal was invariably partaken of at Ruth's upon that day. At half-past five Mrs. Farnam put on her black silk and laid out her husband's blue suit. Half an hour later he came in and began to dress.

"Janet," he inquired suddenly, seeing his wife's somber reflection in the mirror as he was slipping his tie through its golden bands, "why do you always wear that black dress when you go to one of the girls? Where's that new colored one you had on at Mrs. Sanderson's one night last month? I don't believe I've seen it since."

"I'm saving it," she told him. "What for?" he retorted. "Death?" She laughed. "The real reason I wear black," she admitted, "is that I'm expected to wear it. The girls never think of me in anything else. 'Mother' and 'black' go together in their minds. They're used to it. John, they haven't even seen my 'colored' dress, as you call it. I didn't dare tell them I was getting it made."

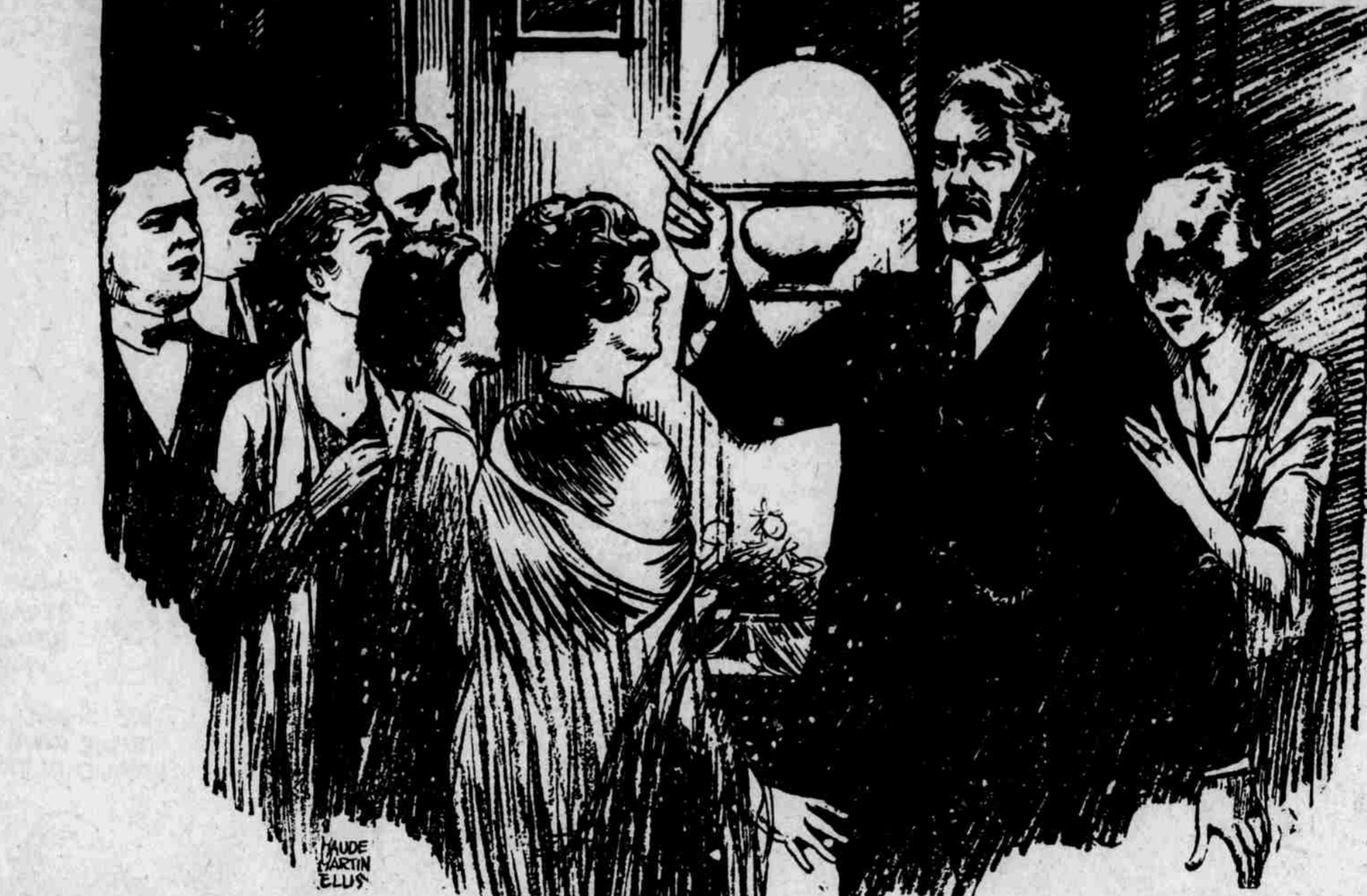
"Wear it tonight," he suggested, with a combative sparkle in his bright, dark eyes. "Jolt 'em a little. They're too settled—twice as settled as you are, at half your age. Do something different from what's expected of you! Something conspicuous!"

Not receiving an immediate answer, he turned and saw that she was gazing through the open window, with its gently bellowing curtain, with eyes that sought to pierce the foreground of trees screening her from the world beyond. Then she shook her head.

"I couldn't," she said, with decision. "Not here. Somewhere else, maybe. Here, never." "Where?" he demanded. "O, I don't know," she answered, evasively. "You never go anywhere!" he persisted. "I haven't been yet," she said, slowly, "but—some time—how knows? I might go. You never can tell. Come, John. Fix your tie and suit on your coat. It's twenty-four minutes past already, and you know it takes six minutes to get there. They'd think something had happened to us if we were late."

Ruth lived in a semi-detached modern house of red brick. Peter Hadley had bought it before their marriage, four years ago, while the sewing was still upon it, and it had been finished to suit the young couple's requirements. Ruth had supervised the alterations, having partitions removed or added—knowing exactly what she wanted. So far events had worked out precisely according to plan: one nursery, two bedrooms, was already full, and a second was awaiting the first of its predestined pair of occupants due to arrive in about three months. Upon the assembled connection Mr. and Mrs. Farnam entered, arm in arm.

Solicitously Ruth hastened toward them. "Let me pull out the folds of your skirt, for you, Mother," she said. "Peter, take Father's suit."



MAUDE MARTIN ILLUSTRATION

law of that appendage, the eyes of the two men met with an understanding gleam. Such ceremonial treatment was not observable in the office. But if the women wanted it, they might as well have it their own way—at home.

The sitting room was furnished in carriage paper and shellac, with mission furniture. Ruth did not believe in having things about that might prove detrimental to the free movements of the babies, but she was not sufficiently imaginative to apply this Montessori doctrine to the adult members of her family circle.

"Peter, draw up that chair for Mother," she dictated, as soon as greetings had been exchanged; then, too preoccupied to notice that she was cutting in upon a conversation between Mrs. Farnam and her favorite son-in-law, Lindsay Weston.

"Now, Mother dear, sit right down," Mrs. Farnam sat down obediently and Lindsay turned away. He had forgotten what he had been about to say. Then, at a signal from Ruth, Peter, formally advancing, offered his mother-in-law his arm, and, according to decree, these two led the way into the dining room.

"Father," asked Ruth, after she had assigned them to their places, "will you say grace?" In spite of the fact that this request was the unalterable preliminary to every meal he ate in this house, Mr. Farnam had never got used to it. He mumbled the formula very fast into his mustache and then looked up in obvious relief.

A relentless drop light in the center of the table picked up the glass, the crockery, the features of the assembled company and the pattern on the tablecloth. Mr. Farnam, with far from the usual grace, was struggling to think of some remark that should lead back from the initial note of solemnity to that of normal, everyday intercourse, by a transition not too abrupt.

Peter was watching Ruth to discover what he ought to do next. Elizabeth's attention centered upon the food that had been put before her. Lindsay was wishing that he had been placed beside Mrs. Farnam instead of between Ruth and Mary, neither of whom had the capacity to interpret his habitual whimsical vein. The result was that nobody spoke.

It was Ruth who, conscious that the pause was awkward, broke in by exclaiming nervously: "Peter! Mother's in a draft from that window! Won't you close it, please?" "I don't feel it," Mrs. Farnam returned as Peter pushed back his chair.

"You ought to feel it," her daughter's expression implied. Looking from one to the other, Peter halted midway between the table and the window. "Well, which is it, open or shut?" he inquired laconically.

Ruth drew her lips together. Whereupon, rather than contest so small a point, Mrs. Farnam gave way. "You'd better close it if it worries her," she told him with a resigned sigh. When the occasion had somewhat recovered itself and there was desultory talk going on, Mary, who had a flat, penetrating voice, drew the attention of the whole table to Mr. Farnam by asking him suddenly: "Doesn't that light hurt your eyes, Father? Ruth, the light's shining right in Father's eyes."

"That's just it," returned Elizabeth. "You never can tell just how vulgar those animated cartoons and comics are going to be. They change them every performance. I can't see you looking at them, Mother dear." "Perhaps I shouldn't notice it much if they were a little vulgar," her mother suggested, plying her needles busily—"in with all the rest." "Indeed you would notice it," her daughter asserted, adding reverentially, "You with your sweet, pure mind!"

"This was too much for Mr. Farnam. "I wonder, Elizabeth," he said, "that you allow your mother to knit." "Why shouldn't she knit?" his daughter asked, puzzled. "I thought maybe it might damage her in some way," he hazarded vaguely. "Not at all," was Elizabeth's solemn reassurance. "There's nothing more beautiful to me than to see my mother knitting there, beside the lamp."

"Here's where I come in," said father. "I've got something to say."

At ten precisely, Mr. and Mrs. Farnam, from the doorway, watched the departure of their guests. Elizabeth looked back over her shoulder. "Don't stand there—" she had it on the tip of her tongue to say, "in the night air," but thought better of it, and substituted "any longer than you have to. Do go inside! It's grown quite raw."

"What an evening!" she sighed, making a wry face. "Come, John. Let's go to bed." On Saturday all the grandchildren came to spend the day. There were Elizabeth's two pale, pig-tailed little daughters; Mary's three rollicking sons, and Ruth's young boy and girl. Mrs. Farnam asked nothing better than to have the whole troupe deposited on her hand. It was the most affectual relaxation she knew. Upon these occasions nobody assumed responsibility for her the liveliest day. Nobody asked her to sit down, or to get up, or to keep out of draughts, or sun, or rain. She was free to stey herself to pulp over the hot stove making the things they loved, or to grind away at the ice cream freezer to her heart's content.

When she had kissed each happy upturned face good-bye, and the last sounds of their little piping voices had died, her husband entered. At rare intervals, such as this when she had him all to herself, life was wholly satisfying. He gave it a background by his vibrant, deep-toned voice. His rare masculine tenderness and the firm quality of his tread. The trouble was that such moments did not last. Somebody was always stepping in. . . . That reminded her. . . .

She felt suddenly weary. "I'd go right after supper," she told him, "or, if you don't mind, I'll come in." He looked up at her solicitously. "Well, they're not going to see you if they do," he returned. "You've had a long day. When they get here you'll be in bed."

"Ought I?" she said doubtfully. "Maybe Mary and Jim will drop in." Elizabeth and Ruth and Peter are sure to run over, he laughed, and Peter are sure to run over, he laughed, and Peter are sure to run over, he laughed. "I'll entertain the lot."

Which he did, for all six arrived on the dot of eight, remained for two hours, and went as punctually as they had come. When all was quiet, Mr. Farnam put out the lights. A moment later he entered the bedroom, shoes in his hands. He had taken them off so as not to wake his wife, and he stood, his big frame silhouetted against the light from the hall, hushed and motionless, as though upon holy ground. He was glad to get back from the girls to where Janet was, even though she slept. The girls were all right in their way, but it was not Janet's. Not one of them was in the least like her. Her qualities were not transmissible. She was unique and, by some miracle, she was his. He felt very sorry for those poor fellows, Peter, and Lindsay, and Jim.

The Monday of the following week was to prove an eventful day for Mrs. Farnam. She had eluded her daughters' solicitude for her welfare during the whole of Saturday, and Sunday's stigmatized inactivities always diverted their attentions to their own homes. On Monday, therefore, they returned to the onslaught with renewed vigor. Elizabeth arrived ahead of the others while Mrs. Farnam was examining the shrubs.

"Mother!" she panted, for the day was hot, "don't stand there right in the sun! Where's your sunshade?" "I don't feel the need of it," replied Mrs. Farnam. "You ought to have it," Elizabeth insisted. "It would never do for you to get a headache." "I was going to get the mullin, and I'll have it sent special. They always do that for me at Green & Tompkins. We'll come back and put them together after lunch."

"The sewing machine's out of order," objected Mrs. Farnam, who hated standing about and watching other people work. "Well, we'll stop at Reynolds' and tell them to send some one to fix it within half an hour, briskly rejoining the competent Ruth. "It's right on our way."

When they had gone Mrs. Farnam heaved a little sigh of boredom. Her morning had been mugged out for her, and now she was similarly obliged to envisage her whole afternoon, an afternoon of passivity, watching the girls cutting and sewing on the machine. The morning passed; the lunch hour came and went. By one-thirty the girls had reappeared. The sewing machine was humming; the bags were making; all her little pretenses, pretenses and protestations had been of no avail. Absorbed in the execution of one of the simple domesticities of the proverbial last straw, what concern of theirs was it, when they came right down to it, whether she had certain bags or not? Whose house was it, anyhow? To go a step farther, whose life was it that they were endlessly supervising?—their own, or hers?

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Upon one of her peregrinations she heard the telephone ringing and went into the parlor to answer it. It was her friend, Mrs. Sanderson, who was calling her up to cancel, with many apologies, her invitation to the Farnams' for supper that night. Her husband, she explained, had suddenly been summoned east on business, and she had volunteered to drive him in the Ford to a point 15 miles distant to catch the through express.

As Mrs. Farnam stood with the receiver in her hand her face, so ruffled a moment before, became the picture of equanimity. She very nearly overrid the graciousness with which she accepted her friend's excuse. "It's all right, my dear," she declared. "Don't you worry yourself for one minute. Just right upstairs and pack Aa's things. Never

think of us again. Why, we've got enough for a regular feast here! Potted ham, and calves-foot jelly, and pie, and all sorts of things. More than I know what to do with."

After a few more amenities, her friend rang off. As for Mrs. Farnam, she did not walk up stairs—she ran. If only she could contrive to get the girls away soon enough, she could first prepare the supper, and then—then, put on the new bright dress!

"Nearly done!" she asked in a fever of impatience as she stood at the sewing room door. Elizabeth nodded. "Almost," she said. "What's your hurry? What time are you going out?" Mrs. Farnam paled. She was of all women the most upright and direct. Nevertheless, she answered without hesitation: "Supper's at half past six."

A quarter of an hour later the sisters, buoyed by a sense of accomplishment, met their father on their way out. "You'd better hurry, hadn't you?" advised Mary gratefully as he came up. "You'll be late. Supper at the Sandersons' is at half past six, mother says."

"But we're not going to the Sandersons," he objected. "Three pairs of eyes opened wide. "Not going!" "No. The party's off. I got a message at the office. They said your mother had been notified."

"Well," Elizabeth informed him, "she hasn't. Isn't that too bad of Mrs. Sanderson? We must go right back and make some other arrangement for her."

When they re-entered the house their mother was coming downstairs in a blue and white checked gingham apron, with her sleeves rolled up. There was a nervous moment before she discovered that her sins and subtleties had not found her out. Luckily, for the girls had got their assumption of Mrs. Sanderson's thoughtlessness firmly fixed in their minds.

"The only thing for you to do now," said Elizabeth oracularly, "is to come and have supper with us."

"Or with us," echoed simultaneously Mary and Ruth. "Was it an offer of hospitality, this, that with iteration and reiteration, they insisted upon? Was it not, rather a claim?" Flushed and resentful, Mrs. Farnam retorted with unheeded sharpness: "What's the matter with having it here?"

Mr. Farnam, who was beginning to catch the drift of her thought, stepped forward and encircled her waist with his arm. "That's what we'll do," he said. "We'll stay right here and have a little celebration of our own—for once."

"Just you two?" they demanded in an amazed chorus. "Just we two—and what's more?" their father affirmed significantly, "as we look at it we couldn't either of us be in more congenial company."

With a delicious sense of relaxation he took down a book from the shelf in the sitting room and began to read. Save for a soft rustling in the trees near the house and the squally light-footfall of his wife moving about over his head, there was not a sound to be heard. Janet had told him that she did not know when the evening meal would be ready. He was released from the obligation of watching the round, unimaginative face of the clock for confirmation of the hour, since no hour had been set.

He became so absorbed in his reading that he was no longer conscious of his wife's existence, and then, suddenly, he felt her presence, and raised his eyes. She was standing motionless in the doorway. He sprang up with the eagerness of a lover and closed the book.

"How—nice you look," he said, awkwardly. She looked, indeed, more than nice, clad in the gown she had referred to vaguely as "new" or "because she could not have old fashioned what its color was. It was gray, he thought, or blue, or some indefinite shade between that suiting the gradations running all the way from brown to silver in her hair.

In a contented and companionable silence they seated themselves at either end of the shining mahogany table. He felt no obligation to make talk. He loved to watch the moving about of her hands among the tea things, hands a little thinner than of old, with tender veining that offset their delicacy like the veining on a leaf. Her charm was of the sort that is deepened rather than diminished by the lapse of years. At eighteen she had been as "pretty" girl; it was of far rarer texture now that she was fifty-five. Her daughters were accustomed to draw the attention of their friends to her remarkable state of preservation. Her husband resented the unconscious disparagement of their attitude in so doing. In his opinion, his wife's beauty was unusual.

As the meal progressed, they fell into conversation. Suddenly she interrupted the easy flow of talk by saying: "I had to work hard to get this."

He thought she was referring to the food. "It was worth it," he declared, lifting a composite bit of salad upon his fork and examining it appreciatively. But she dismissed the supper with a gesture. "That wasn't what I meant," she said. "I meant the evening. This evening to ourselves. I can't remember when we've had an evening alone together before."

"I like it," he responded. "Don't you?" No answer, she was unusually reticent than he was conscious of their inquiry. "Like it?" she said disappointedly. "Is that all?"

He flashed her a smile. "It's a man's way of putting it," he said. "You're not enjoying it one bit more than I am. Not a bit."

When they entered the sitting room after supper he lighted a pipe and pulled his chair around next to hers because, he said, the other side of the table seemed so far away. "I'm so happy tonight," she said, looking up at him. Then, in a burst of confidence: "John, I'll tell you a secret. I'm sick and tired of having my girls around all the time. It's women, women, nothing but women, from morning till night. You don't know as much about women as I do. You don't know how small they can be. No man does."

"That's where you're wrong!" he cried. "I've had my own troubles with those three girls." "And you never told me!" she cried reproachfully. "I didn't want to worry you," he explained. "But after what you've just said I can't resist letting you in on the whole bothersome business. You know, of course, Janet, that I'm pretty nearly on easy street. Next time we move we may have to take the whole building, the orders are coming in so thick. In the middle of the rush one day Lindsay suggested expanding, opening a branch in a bigger place, Chicago, say."

"Good idea," she said. She was sitting erect, attentive and alert. "A cracking good idea," he agreed. "I said so right off the bat and offered to put him at the head of the new ship." "No one could be better," she declared with enthusiasm. "I've always believed in Lindsay. He's too big a man for this town. Well, what did Elizabeth say?" "She said that," exclaimed Mrs. Farnam, a belligerent little plink appearing upon either cheek. "Elizabeth said that? I wouldn't have believed it of her. I'm surprised at her. I'm ashamed."

"I offered it to Jim next," he told her. "It would be Jim, of course," she conceded. "It never would be poor Peter." "It's got to be Peter or nobody," he retorted. (Continued on Page Five.)