

## AT DINNER.

"Eric, if you ever meant the faintest part of the love you profess, don't, don't—I beg of you—for the last time—don't enlist."

"Upon my word, Gesta! Well, what a silly girl! Nothing going to happen to me, dearest—now, why cut up so? Here's the opportunity of my life—to get out and fight and do something fine—and you pretend you'd be content to have me stay home! How would you feel to hear me called "old woman," "coward," "the dancing captain of Company D," and all the rest of it, like poor Rollins, and he has a wife and child to excuse his back down? You'd be pretty well ashamed of me, I think. Why, you don't suppose I could go about here in comfort and idleness with the boys all at the front, do you? Impossible, Gesta. Be sensible and look at things in the proper light; stop imagining all sorts of calamities. I'll be coming back presently, bristling with medals and honors and epaulets—a colonel, at least. Think how fine that will be—a gallant soldier's bride! You should value the honor in keep for you, Miss—you don't deserve it a bit."

In bantering tones, half chaffing, half consoling her, he quieted the outburst of sobs and tears in which she had flung herself at his feet, and finally managed to unclasp the locked fingers from about his knees. Then, silent and moodily resigned, the girl arose and slowly crossed to the window. Eric talked on in an effort to gloss over his determination to volunteer with his company; but the object of his concern gazed abstractedly at the flag that flaunted over the street and appeared not to hear. Her suddenly induced calm and change of front took Eric somewhat by surprise, but he told himself that at last she was accepting the situation in a reasonable way, and he secretly rejoiced. Going up behind her he slipped an arm about her waist, and bent back the dark, imperious head until it rested on his blue-coated shoulder.

"You dear, foolish girl, how terrible you've been about nothing! I'm not going to get killed—no one's going to get killed. We'll make a splendid dash across Cuba, wipe out the Spaniards and come home famous warriors. See?"

"Eric, you will never stand here—at this window—again. I know it, as surely as I'm standing here now."

"For heaven's sake, Gesta, do look at the bright side just once, won't you?"

"When do you go?"

"We'll be mustered in tomorrow and expect the call to Tampa at any moment."

"Good bye," holding out her hand.

"Now see here, Gesta, are you trying to break me all up? What do you mean by saying good bye like that?"

"Well—you're going aren't you?"

"Not until you're my wife."

"Oh."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Aren't you going to marry me, Gesta?"

There was no answer.

"Do you mean to say, you're not going to keep your promise to marry me on Sunday?"

"Eric, if you cared a fig for me you'd have some consideration for my wishes."

"Darling—"

"Oh, how can you—how can you profess to love me and lightly contemplate leaving me like this?"

"I love you devotedly—absolutely—I want you to be my wife. But I cannot turn a deaf ear to my country and be dubbed a coward. If you loved

me, Gesta, you would not ask it."

There was silence for a good many minutes. Eric Winthrop took out his watch. "I must get back to camp. I had only leave for the afternoon."

When they had descended to the hall Gesta's stubborn will gave way. In a torrent of grief she flung her arms about her brave soldier's neck. He caressed her hair and rushed away the tears.

"There, there, dear love—why do you make it so hard?"

"Eric—I love you so—it rends my heart—to lose you!"

"But you are not going to lose me, sweetheart. We have many a day—many a year of joy before us. You will marry me Sunday, Gesta?"

"Yes—"

"And follow me directly I leave for Tampa?"

"Yes."

"I shall take care about your rooms at the hotel. We may have whole weeks together before I go to the front! You will have everything ready for a moment's notice?"

"Yes."

"My darling girl! We shall be so happy. I'm glad the war came along if only to hasten matters between you and me. Mind Sunday—eleven—you will be ready? Until then, dearest!" With a last embrace he darted down the steps.

On Sunday morning there was a severely simple wedding in the parlors of Gesta Mathias' home. Only close friends were witnesses, and everything was informal and hurried, the groom, immediately after the ceremony, returning to his military duties—for the regiment was to break camp in the afternoon and depart for Tampa.

On the south bound train that evening Gesta also took her departure for Florida. Two days after she was ensconced in her luxurious hotel that basks under the radiant skies of our beautiful Riviera. The air was still comfortably cool, the sea a resplendent blue and the beach like shimmering crystal. Gesta found her new environment more than harmonious. The gayety of the hotel, the novel and exciting atmosphere of the large army encampment, lent to her honeymoon a delicious entrancement.

Eric's work in his regiment was arduous. Constantly drilling the troops and endless detail of provisioning and providing them for the coming invasion of Cuba left him little time to devote to his wife, but every moment of duty was compassed in loving attendance upon her.

They were happy—much too happy, in fact; their growing delight in each other and in their surroundings made the prospect of separation, now momentarily expected, tenfold harder to face. But Eric regarded it hopefully cheerily, looking on to the period of their reunion, while Gesta became gloomy and silent; the mere appearance of an officer or the sound of a bugle would call forth a lowering brow and a threatening light in her darkly handsome eyes.

Needless to say, this attitude of his wife caused Eric no small uneasiness, and he constantly strove to reassure and comfort her. But he had not counted upon the intricacies of her nature. It is doubtless if he suspected their existence. She would meet his efforts almost resentfully, it seemed to him, and never made reply to his loving words except by lavishing the wealth of her embraces upon him.

At last came the dreaded command. The transports were to sail at day-break the following morning. All about were bustle, hurry and confusion. The immense amount of stores to be shipped, the quartering of the men—a hundred and one delays de-

manded constant attention, and there were no leave-takings during the day. Finally, however, the men were gotten aboard their vessels and a few officers given leave of absence—Eric to dine at the hotel and report on board ship at 9 p. m.

"Mind—our last dinner must be something I can remember in Cuba," he had told Gesta, and the dainty table she had ordered spread in her boudoir delighted his senses when, after the fatigue of the day, he sank into the cosy chair awaiting him.

"Isn't this jolly?" she said gayly, a sweeping gesture indicating the room, the flower laden table and a steaming covered dish. "Of course we wanted to have this dinner alone, didn't we?"

"Of course, darling," entwining his arms about her sinuous form.

"And we're going to eat it in our own way—take plenty of time and—plenty of wine?"

"Why, yes." He gazed gratefully at the bottle in the heaping pail of ice. "But I must be back by 9, remember! Back on board ship at 9. Just think, Gesta, off to Cuba at last!"

There was such a ring of exultation in his voice that her face clouded instantly. But she forced it away, and with increasing gayety moved about the room. "Yes, yes, I know, dear—but it is only 6 now. Come, let's commence, shan't we?"

She kissed him several times—his neck, his ears, his eyes—before she took her place at the table. He began to marvel a little at her brilliant mood, and thought how plucky she was, at this last moment, to summon up such bravery. He himself felt now weight of his undertaking, how momentous was the expedition, and that the chances of his returning were by

no means certain. But he was careful to conceal his oppression from her, and the thought that at last his life-dream was within reality, that he was to stand in battle, in the army he revered, and fight for the glory and well-being of his country—that banished all other considerations from his mind.

How gay she was, how grateful everything seemed, and the pretty temptress, she was constantly pouring wine! He leaned across the table again and again to kiss her. She was glorious tonight.

The dinner was finished, and they moved over to the open windows. There was a stand there with cigars and more wine. A soft breeze blew the curtains about, and a golden moon hung just before them as if to be plucked. Again she poured the wine, and each time she leaned forward with his goblet he caught her breath. It was a delicious wine, so mellow, and the perfumes rising from the flower beds so sweet! In the distance he could hear the wash of the waves, and just about them the breeze was rustling the leaves of the vines. But more than all this were her eyes, her great, dark, dewy eyes! And there were her lips—rich—rich and—warm—

The sun was streaming in at the window, glaring and hot, when Eric Winthrop opened his eyes. He stared fully a minute without seeing; he closed his eyes, opened them, blinked them. He was in bed—he saw that—by his side was Gesta sleeping. Something horrible began to torture his brain. With a start he sat upright. "Gesta!" he called, imperatively. She opened her eyes in perfect consciousness.

"Is it—is it—where is the ship?"

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