

Mrs. Kemper

ISN'T she a bedraggled-looking piece?" That was what Belle Farmer, fat and coarsely vigorous, sitting in the local Beaute Shoppe and having her bobbed gray hair marcelled, said when Mrs. Kemper went past. It was what other people thought but were not brutal enough to say. To state such things was, perhaps, the chief usefulness of Belle Farmer in the community.

It did describe Mrs. Kemper exactly! But she lived in a good house, a white-painted frame house just outside town, with mowed lawn and flowers and a bird-bath. In the living room, she had silk draperies and tapestry-covered furniture, just as in town. The Kempers had enough so that Mr. Kemper could hire his farming done. They were not counted among the country people. Mr. Kemper was a director in one of the banks, and they were good members of the Congregational church. They had sent their two boys to college.

And besides these material advantages, Mrs. Kemper was an Easterner, her speech had a refined softening of the r's that sounded like culture, and she had taught in the high-school before she married Mr. Kemper. As a matter of course, she had been taken into the principal study club. She was always counted among "the ladies" in this little town. Her personality was protected against primitive comment from any one but a Belle Farmer or a stranger.

She seemed to accept the full protection of her circumstances. In the club she occasionally put or seconded a motion of her

own accord. She was one of the first to welcome new church attendants, and she brought the arrival of strangers in town to the attention of the minister and his wife. She patronized Essie Whittie, a half-wit and the town's one object of charity, like the other ladies. She did all these things with a certain poise, as if she had told herself that her position gave her the right and the obligation.

And yet she did them with a nervous obliqueness, too. When she made a call, even upon the minister's wife over whom—because she and Mr. Kemper were such well-paying members—she felt a bit of rightful although respectful authority, she rocked too much, one foot always pushing at the floor, and her sallow hands fumbling at the chair arms. When she rose to put a motion in the club, she never got quite away from her chair, never took her hand from the back, and in her voice there was a determination to assert her rightful place prevailing resentfully over a fearful timidity. At first, talking to strangers, although her voice was refined and controlled, she did not look at them; and when she did, with a quick sort of inadvertency or that same determination, both turned away ashamed.

With Essie Whittie, her relations were the most painful of all. A pretense had to be maintained of Mrs. Kemper as patroness and Essie the humble and grateful beneficiary. And yet it was as if Mrs. Kemper was a fraud in that rôle, and both of them knew it. Nervousness fluttered the refinement of her voice, although she sat with great dignity. Other ladies were at their blandest and most assured with Essie. But Mrs. Kemper feared that primitive quality. It took off her protection with a crude contemptuousness and left her a bedraggled-looking piece.

When she entertained the club, the ladies said how nice it was out here in the country. She smiled, with that painful

assumption of poise that always diffused an atmosphere of shame about her. Yes, they thought it was nice, she said nervously. She and Mr. Kemper had thought of moving to town, but they really preferred this. She tried to accept praise for the improvements, the furniture and the curtains, with a conviction she could never make quite real. When they praised the refreshments and envied her the country cream, they were all made uneasy by the sense of that pained sickishness underlying her manner. It was as if these things did not really belong to Mrs. Kemper and she could not quite claim credit for them. The guests felt as if they had made a mistake somewhere.

Only when they admired her phlox, her manner brightened. Her other flowers were only so-so—"did pretty well." But she had a genuine knack at raising phlox, and for the warmly fragrant, tufted masses of white and rose and magenta bloom, her smile did for the moment take a pleased credit. "Mrs. Kemper has nice phlox," the ladies occasionally said to each other, and with a relieved gratification, as if they were glad to be able to say that much, at least.

After the ladies were gone, the living room was warm and disordered and the kitchen full of the best thin dishes, with genteel débris of cake crumbs and melted pink ice cream. An afterglow of hospitality spread through the house in the long low slants of country sunlight that fell now through the west windows. Mrs. Kemper paused in the living room, momentarily warmed and enlivened, deceived by the polite thanks of the good-bys and the gratification of entertaining into feeling herself one of the ladies. Mrs. Butters, who helped out for all the principal families, was washing dishes in the sunny kitchen. "Well, I think your angel cake turned out real good, Mrs. Kemper," she said. Mrs. Kemper tried to talk with Mrs. Butters

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about the refreshments and the house, but always with that furtive uncertainty, the same that she felt with Essie Whittie . . . as if Mrs. Butters were going to see through her somehow or other.

"Well, I guess here comes somebody wants a little of these refreshments too!" Mrs. Butters said heartily when Mr. Kemper came to the kitchen door. "You better set down, Mr. Kemper, before it's all et up. I don't know, though," she added, "whether you deserve any of these good things for not getting back while any of the ladies was here."

Mr. Kemper seemed to be surprised by Mrs. Butters' good-natured attack, but to enjoy it. Mrs. Kemper became more uncertain and subdued when he entered, and she lost the dignity of her hostess attitude. They could cook him a supper, she said, fry him some eggs—

"My goodness, a man that couldn't be satisfied with good things like this!" Mrs. Butters cried. She knew how the other families did on club days.

And yet there was something in just having Mrs. Butters, in making the arrangements and paying her and sending her home with angel cake, as the other ladies did. After she had left, the talk died out in the kitchen.

"Are you having enough, Arthur?"

"Hm? Oh yes, plenty."

She went into the living room, stood a moment at the screened door, and then went out on to the lawn where she idled and wandered. She looked across the pleasant slope of their land, green as far as she could see, and bright under the evening light—the elm trees tall and leafy, and on the other side the plain and useful dignity of the big barns—looked with a timid wistfulness;—hurt and resentful, too, as if she wished

she dared really claim it all.

She was never sure of herself on her own ground. She was never certain that she had been given the right to take this home-like pleasantness into her heart. She averted her eyes with that veiled and sickened fear, and turned back to the neat refuge of her garden. She touched with her fingers the rough stone warmth of the bird bath, walked over the fresh grass, and stood beside the phlox. She touched these almost with authority, brushing off a cobweb and disentangling two flower masses—they were hers, they did well for her. She bent and smelled the warm fragrance, . . . and then she stood, her face lifted and averted, her figure still against the sky of early evening—it was all so quiet, so peaceful and yet living, the green fields and green pastures stretching away, and two moths here in the garden hovering over the sweetness of the phlox. If she only dared enter into the heart of the place!

She went back into the living room. Mr. Kemper was sitting there. He was trying to get something to suit him on the radio. There was a wavering about her figure in the doorway; she overcame it and entered the room. He looked up; then, between cracklings of the static, asked her:

“Well, did it go off all right?”

In her careful, refined speech, with a tinge of shy gratitude, she told him that it did. But he did not go on to talk to her, or to let her talk. He turned off the radio, went through the kitchen and out of the house. She dared never feel quite sure that he did not leave a room because she came into it—although his manner was friendly enough, if bleak, and he had never hinted at such a thing. She did things to the room—arranged the ornaments on the table, examined a rent in a cushion cover—claiming it in that way, and unaware of the timidity of her manner;

unaware most of the time of the reason for her halting approach to everything and everybody, for what underlay and spoiled all her attempts at sociability and dignity.

It was quiet at home with the boys both gone. Mrs. Kemper dreaded the silent evenings with her husband. Perhaps he dreaded them, too.

She went into the downstairs bedroom where the ladies had left their hats. But she avoided the reflection of herself in the wide mirror in the evening light. She would not actually take into her consciousness the thin figure in the nicely made summer dress of good material—not actually accept as herself the sunken chest and protruding stomach, the thin and sallow neck and sallow face and faded hair, to realize that she had been allowed to sink into this dim disguise.

Yet Mrs. Kemper was not so meek as she looked. The ladies in the club had found that out once or twice. She had her sense of dignity. She felt the claims of her refinement and competence and intelligence that could never quite take their due. She was resentful now, standing beside the bedroom window and looking out at a bed of tiger lilies, resentful that a never resolved fear kept her from owning this that was hers.

She wandered through the house. It was too late to see to read, too early to turn on the lights. Her footsteps through the empty house had a restless loneliness.

It was darker upstairs. The doors of the boys' rooms were closed. Charles was married and in business for himself. Wilbur was through school and working in Chicago—engaged, his parents thought, although Wilbur hadn't said anything; they weren't sure. Mrs. Kemper went on into her own room. She loved her sons, but never closely. She was undemonstrative with them. Something had always kept her a little apart from them,

as if she dared not quite claim them, too. And they were fond of her, but she was in the background.

In her bedroom the light was dim. It gave a strangeness to the familiar furniture . . . so that after entering the room she seemed to forget just what she had come to do, and stood there. . . .

Sunk into the silence, into the dim light, it seemed as if her self-consciousness was lost and all the old half-forgotten—yet never forgotten—things had their chance to rise and possess her. Her throat and her breast ached with them. She had to remember the lovely figure of her husband's sweetheart, the girl he had been in love with, and whom she could never be quite sure that he had forgotten—she had to see it as it was in the photograph, the breast so rounded and small in the tightness of the taffeta basque, and the round throat, round chin, dark eyes under the fringe of dark hair.

She had to remember all that old history. Some of it was only hearsay to her—the illness and the death, the very personality of Arthur's sweetheart . . . but with irresistible painstaking, she must go over again all the details of it. She herself had come from the East and was teaching in the high school; and she had been living with her aunt next door to Arthur Kemper; and Arthur had started going with her, and then one night he had asked her to marry him. She had to live again through the tentative delight, the halt and the long sickening uncertainty.

He had asked her to marry him. When she thought of it, that night after he had asked her, a happiness seemed to grow and grow in her until it was just about to bloom . . . but it could not, chilled by the fear that he did not love her, did not really want her, had only taken her out of weariness because the other girl was dead. The staying and crushing of the bloom

hurt her, so that even now she moved her head a little in pain.

But anger invaded her again. He had married her. He had taken her. They had two sons. She was his wife. She was Mrs. Kemper. Why need she feel this way?—Again she must go over, with that same painstaking minuteness, the evidences that still kept her fear uncertainty. After the wedding, when they were alone together for a moment, he had put his arm around her and said, "Well, I guess it's us two now, Caroline." And when she was so sick, after Wilbur was born, she remembered that one glimpse of him standing uncertain and awkward in his concern, and then driving off twenty miles through the cold for another doctor. And when she had been sick again, just a few years ago, and the doctor here didn't seem to be helping her, he had said himself, "Well, I guess I'll have to take you up to Rochester." And he had kissed her sometimes, even in these last years, of his own accord—when Charles was married (the night after that), and when they got news that her father was dead. And then once Mr. Wellington had said, "I tell you, we fellows that married good wives are lucky," and Mr. Kemper had agreed: "That's so, all right." And he was good to her, gave her all she needed, had wanted himself to refurnish the house, and seemed to be satisfied here. . . . She went over every one of these things to get the full savor out of them. They convinced—almost—of course he cared for her. But there was something needed to complete them. He had never once said, "I love you."

Again, over the timid sweetness of these memories, there flooded the whole of her fear and her resentment. She could never ask. She feared to end the fear, lest she be dispossessed finally and altogether. Even in this dusk, she must keep her eyes averted from the faded, drooping image in the mirror—the pale

eyes sought for reassurance but could not ask it, the thin breasts beseeched it and sagged in humility, the hands trembled and could not reach, . . . and without the word, the eyes had never dared to brighten, or the breasts to bloom, the hands had wavered and clenched uncertainly and never dared to touch. She dared not claim her sons because she could never be sure that love had conceived them. She dared not take her place among the women who had received the certain consecration of that crown. When she looked at the Parkins girl, and Mollie Regus, outlaws now both of them, an awful envy seared her; for although she bore the title, they had been taken in desire. She dared not look a low and primitive creature like Essie Whittie in the eye.

What was she doing in this room? It was a strange place. She could not claim its terrible intimacy that only increased her solitude. Lonely and restless once more, avoiding the sight of the mirror, of the bed with its smooth counterpane, she went downstairs and out on the lawn again.

There she had the pleasant sight of the house and the fields and the barn. The feelings of the bedroom were only imaginings. She thought: Why, I have a nice home, two sons, a good husband—all she had ever dreamed of having. . . . She tried to make that statement end the uncertainty. She tried to take the pleasantness of the farm-yard in the summer evening light into her heart and let her heart rest in its peace.

But then she began wandering again. She had forgotten for a moment what she was thinking . . . she paused near the phlox, and touched the bloom. But even that she did not take into her hands. Yes, she had a good home, two sons, a good husband . . . but she could never take possession of them. All her own treasures were sunk within herself, within this droop-

ing pallor, and could never be loosened—brightness, laughter, tenderness, bloom . . . she had been a shy girl, prim, and not very pretty, sensitive under the primness . . . yet she felt that all this was sunk within her, and that she could not possess even herself without the key that had never been laid in her hand.

She wrung her hands with a little secret gesture. Then she moved to the house through her uncertainty.

The next day Mr. and Mrs. Kemper drove into town. Mrs. Kemper went into Dodd's Dry Goods to do some shopping. She went timidly through the doorway, in a dim dread; then with dignity enforced over her reluctance, she went up to the counter and asked to see some goods. She had a right, she was Mrs. Kemper, every one knew that she had means—and who was this clerk but Gertie Evans, a spinster, brittle and bleached? She would insist on the kind of goods she wanted. Other ladies came in. They spoke to her about the church. She was pleased with her purchase. . . . But going out of the store, she turned her eyes away from having to meet her dim and drooping reflection in the window glass, and hurried, shoulders bent, feet moving nervously—the aversion was only a habit, she had forgotten why she felt it, as usually she did forget. The sunshine was pleasant out there on the street and their car was waiting.

People spoke to her. She was Mrs. Kemper. But Mrs. Hallie Davis, looking down from her Beaute Shoppe, frowned impatiently, resenting that nervous manner and sunken figure—remembering what Belle Farmer had said, and wondering why she need look like such a bedraggled piece: a woman who had a nice home, and a good husband, some one to look after her, and not a real trouble in the world.