

The Eternal Feminine

Temple Bailey

Table of Contents

<u>The Eternal Feminine</u>	1
<u>Temple Bailey</u>	1

The Eternal Feminine

Temple Bailey

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

IF it had been any one but Anne Beaumont!

"I don't like turning conventionalities topsy-turvy, Sophie," she said, as we went downstairs; "I don't believe I can ever ask a man to dance with me."

"Other women do," I murmured.

"My husband would never have agreed to such a thing," Anne stated.

That is where Anne always had the advantage of me. Although she had been a widow for five years, she still quoted the authoritative masculine point of view, while I, having in my teens chosen a career instead of a husband, and never having rectified my mistake, was forced to fall back on the unsupported feminine.

"Perhaps you'd rather sit out the dances," was my somewhat malicious way of putting it.

Anne, poised like a white butterfly on the landing, turned on me a reproachful glance.

"No woman would rather be a wallflower," she affirmed.

"Of course not," I returned promptly, "and I don't believe it is going to be very bad after the first plunge."

Anne leaned over the stair rail and surveyed the formidable group of men in the lower hall. "It's dreadful," she said. Then, gathering about her a scarf of silver tissue, she commanded, "You go first, Sophie," and we descended together.

At the foot of the stairs, Charlemagne Dabney met us.

"Charlie, boy," Anne said plaintively, "ask me to dance with you. I simply can't get used to the leap-year idea —"

"

And I, having prepared to blunder into a formal, "May I have the pleasure?" was so illumined by her method that I employed it with success — for though I lacked Anne's appealing coquetry, I challenged old friends, and my card was soon filled.

But Anne did not depend on old friends. She danced with the count from Hungary, the multi-millionaire from the West, the Senator from Kentucky, and to fill up spaces she fell back on Charlemagne Dabney.

"I think it was lovely of you," she told him at supper, "to open the house for the week-end and the dance. Only, it's too bad that you insist on the leap-year idea for the whole time."

The Eternal Feminine

Across the table Elizabeth Ames sparkled radiantly. "I like it. I didn't dance with a single bore, and before I go home I am going to ask all of the men to marry me!"

Anne's face wore its most gracious expression, but I knew how she felt. Elizabeth is eighteen and pretty. Anne is twice eighteen and pretty. And there's a difference.

Anne opened her eyes very wide and said to Charlemagne, "You see what you've done? Elizabeth is going to ask you to marry her."

Charlemagne smiled at Elizabeth. "No such good luck. There are too many young fellows who will accept her before she gives me the chance."

Elizabeth laughed back, "Don't be too sure that you'll escape."

Anne's delicate eyebrows were raised. "Of course she is joking; no woman would really ask a man — "

Charlemagne sighed. "I wish one woman would."

Anne's lashes fluttered. "Why don't you ask her?" she challenged.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I feel weak in the knees when I think of it," he said, "for fear she might say 'no!'"

"Faint heart," I murmured, but no one paid any attention to me.

It seemed to me, after that, as if some of the brightness had gone out of Elizabeth's face. But Anne fairly scintillated. And she was exceedingly amiable to Elizabeth.

"Ask the count first," I heard her say, "he's simply charming."

Elizabeth flung up her head in a quick way. She was all in sheer pale yellow, bordered with daffodils, and there was a twist of gold ribbon in her fair hair. Only extreme youth could have worn it, and, as she flashed her answer back to Anne, I had never seen her more beautiful.

"The count wouldn't have me as a precious gift," she said. "I'm too crude. He likes a more finished product — like you, dear Mrs. Beaumont."

"Now, what do you suppose she meant by that?" said Anne that night, when we were in our kimonos and were comforting our complexions with cold cream. "Do you think she meant it for a compliment, or was it a reflection on my age?"

"No one can reflect on your age," I told her. "Nobody knows it but Charlemagne and me, and we won't tell."

"That's the advantage of living on the other side and coming back to meet the younger generation," said Anne; "they haven't kept tab on the years."

She got up and moved restlessly about the room. With the cream on her face and with her hair down, she looked old, and I had a vision of Elizabeth in the yellow gown.

Perhaps something of my thought showed, for Anne stopped suddenly and gazed into a long mirror set in the door. "Oh, youth, youth, Sophie," she cried.

The Eternal Feminine

"Anne," I said, "come away from that mirror. No one can be beautiful with her face full of cold cream."

She laughed and dropped down on the rug in front of me, and after a while she said, "Did you hear what he said to-night?"

"About wishing a certain woman would ask him?"

"Yes. He will never ask me, Sophie. He thinks I am still mourning my husband — he thinks I don't care — "

There wasn't much to be said after that. But before I left her, I whispered, "Why don't you tell him, Anne?"

Anne's shocked eyes condemned me. "Oh, Sophie, as if a woman could!"

I passed Elizabeth Ames' room on my way to my own, and she called to me, "Come in, Miss Sophie."

"It's so late," I protested, standing on the threshold.

But she was insistent. "Please come," she begged.

"You ought to be in bed," I scolded, "getting your beauty sleep."

But even as I said it, I knew she didn't need it, for she was as daintily fresh as a rose. Her fair hair hung down in two heavy braids over her white gown. She looked like a lovely child.

"Miss Sophie," she said abruptly, when she had put me into a big chair in front of the fire, "tell me about Anne Beaumont and Mr. Dabney — "

"What about them?" I asked innocently.

"Were they in love with each other — years ago — before she married Mr. Beaumont?"

I nodded. "They were engaged, and Anne was very young. She had never seen much of other men, and when Mr. Beaumont came along, with his air of foreign distinction, she was fascinated and broke off her engagement. But she never really cared for Mr. Beaumont — "

"And you think Mr. Dabney has — has stayed single for her sake?"

"I think so. Yes."

"And you think he loves her still — "

"You heard what he said to-night?"

"I don't call that love," she cried. "If he cared, he'd tell her. He couldn't help it. It would just come — if he really loved her — "

"He thinks that she has never cared — and he isn't an impetuous boy — "

"I know — but he's a man ." She was all aglow. "And if he cared, his heart would say, 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' and then his lips would say it — "

The Eternal Feminine

"You believe, then, that he doesn't care for her?"

"His allegiance is a memory — an old dream — of the girl she was, not of the woman she is. Isn't she older than he, Miss Sophie?"

"She is younger," I said gravely.

"She seems older — and — it's spoiling his life. He — he won't look at another woman — because in a way he feels bound to her. Some day I'm going to tell him."

I stared at her. "Tell him what, Elizabeth?"

"That he is throwing away his happiness — that there are other women."

She had risen and stood in front of me with her hand on her heart. Her eyes were like stars, and the radiance of youth shone from within and round about her. If Charlemagne should see her in such a mood —

I thought of Anne, dear Anne.

"Elizabeth," I said sharply, "if you should tell him that, he would think — that you — cared."

She swept out her arms in a charming gesture of surrender.

"Well, if he did," she cried, defiantly, "what then?"

All that night Elizabeth and Anne contended in my dreams, and in the morning, worn to a frazzle, I went down to breakfast, to find that Elizabeth had gone for a ride with Charlemagne, and that Anne was still in bed.

I drifted into the library and found there a circle of somewhat fagged-out feminines. The men were riding or on the links.

From the light bits of conversation that were wafted to me as I sat and read in the window-seat, I gathered that most of the women took Charlemagne's leap-year idea as a joke, but I knew that to Elizabeth and Anne the question presented itself seriously, and that each would settle it in her own way, and according to the tradition of her own time.

For that education and environment had made the difference, I did not doubt. Had Elizabeth been born eighteen years earlier, when women were taught the mysteries of advance and retreat, that coquetry was their best weapon, and that man must always be the wooer, she might have felt all of Anne's shrinking from a revelation of herself; whereas had Anne been brought up in the later days when boys and girls mingle in close comradeship, when plays and books subtly analyze the state of woman as the pursuer and man as the pursued, she might have been as frank about her feelings as Elizabeth.

Hence, I argued, they were both of them what their generation had made them, and I, who loved Anne, and adored her for her womanliness, was yet forced to admit the potency of Elizabeth's youth, and the charm of her complete surrender.

After a time the men began to drift in, and I heard the multi-millionaire from the West inquiring for Elizabeth. He was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, sure of himself, but not unpleasantly so, and when he couldn't find the girl he wanted, he came over and talked to me.

The Eternal Feminine

"Say," he began at once, "it's all tommyrot about this leap-year business. When I want a girl to do anything, I want to ask her. It makes me feel foolish to have to wait for her to come to me. I wish Dabney would cut it out."

"But think what an opportunity for a girl to get what she wants," I said.

"They don't know what they want," he stated dogmatically. "The way to win a woman is to pick her up and put her on a horse and run away with her — "

"Suppose she doesn't care to be run away with?" I asked.

"Oh, she'd settle down to it," he said securely; "and besides that, I can't really imagine a nice girl asking a man to marry her."

I thought of Elizabeth as she had stood with her hand on her heart and had hurled defiance at conventions.

"Girls are hard to understand," I murmured.

"Oh, I don't know," he contended. "If a man gets right down to primitive principles and keeps after her, he'll get her — and it makes me hot to think I am wasting valuable time trying to stick to Dabney's old rules, when I have to go back West again on Monday."

I wanted to be sure, so I murmured, "Of course it's Elizabeth Ames?"

"Who else?" he demanded. "Oh, I'm going to jump over the traces, Miss Sophie, and let her know I mean business. This thing of sitting around and letting her go off with another man — you know she's riding with Dabney this morning?"

I nodded.

"He's twice her age, and she thinks she likes him. Girls get romantic streaks, and Dabney's the kind they put up on a pedestal, but he isn't any more suited to her than — a bunch of beets — "

"I suppose not," was all the response I dared venture in the face of such an outpouring of eloquence.

"They are coming now," he said, and through the window I saw them — Elizabeth, looking like a little girl in her three-cornered hat, with her hair tied with a broad black ribbon, and Charlemagne sitting his horse like a centaur.

The Westerner deserted me at once, and, the rest of the guests following, I was left alone in the library.

I curled up in the window-seat, drew the curtains to shield me from the gaze of those who might step within, and tried to take forty winks to make up for the four hundred I had missed the night before.

But I couldn't sleep. Elizabeth and Anne — Anne and Elizabeth! I couldn't get their affairs out of my mind. Would Elizabeth propose, would Anne, would Charlemagne, would the multi-millionaire? Again and again I tried to fit together their widely different theories, until in despair I wished that Charlemagne and his leap-year week-end had not tempted me from my maidenly apartment in town, where the worries of lovers were confined to my manuscripts.

And even as I pondered, I heard Elizabeth's voice saying, as she came in from the porch, "I suppose you think I am awfully forward to make you spend all your morning with me — "

The Eternal Feminine

As he followed her into the library, Charlemagne laughed. "I might feel flattered," he said, "if I didn't know you were doing it to make McChesney furious."

McChesney was the multi-millionaire.

"McChesney?" Elizabeth's tone was startled.

"Don't hedge," Charlemagne teased. "He's bound to win out, Elizabeth. No woman can escape a man when he goes for her like that. You might as well give in."

"I shall never give in."

"He's a nice fellow."

"He's not my ideal — " there was a pathetic note of appeal in her young voice.

"Ah — ideals — " Charlemagne had dropped his banter. "Don't spoil your happiness looking for the ideal man — he's like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow — something we hear of, but have never seen."

There was a heavy silence. Then Elizabeth said, catching her breath, "But — but I have found my ideal, Mr. Dabney."

"You have? And it's not McChesney?"

I peeped at them through the curtain. They were in big wicker chairs in front of the door that led to the porch. Elizabeth had taken off her coat, showing her thin white blouse with its crisp frills. Her cheeks were as pink as the rose which she picked to pieces with nervous fingers.

"No," she said tremulously, "it's — it's not Mr. McChesney."

I held my breath. Would she dare?"

"It's — it's a man much older than I am," she went on, "and — and I don't know that he has ever thought of me — in that way — perhaps if he had, he might like me — a little — "

I am sure that Charlemagne felt the charm of her youth, as she made her little confession, and I am just as sure that he was absolutely innocent that he was the object of it.

"He would undoubtedly love you more than a little," he said heartily. "Look here, Elizabeth, you won't mind telling me who he is — will you — ?"

Here was an opportunity holding out open arms, and did Elizabeth embrace it as beseemed an advocate of woman's right to woo?

Not she! She simply gasped in a panic-stricken way and stood up.

"Oh, no," she whispered, with her cheeks flaming, "I couldn't — I couldn't tell any one."

Before Charlemagne could answer, McChesney blundered in.

The Eternal Feminine

"Say — " he stopped dead still on the threshold, "I think this is a case of monopoly. I'm tired of hanging around waiting for the girl I want. I am going to break the rules, Dabney, and ask Miss Ames to take me for a walk in the rose garden."

And Elizabeth actually turned to him with an air of relief.

"Oh, yes," she said breathlessly, "I'd love it!"

And away they went. And Charlemagne, turning back into the library, met Anne Beaumont coming in at the other door.

She wore a thin, trailing white gown, and there were dark shadows under her eyes. She looked tired and fragile and every day of her thirty-six years.

"Anne!" Charlemagne said, as if for him all the morning stars sang together.

Anne dropped into the chair where Elizabeth had been.

"I'm afraid I'm awfully late getting down," she faltered, "but — but my head ached."

Charlemagne stood behind her chair, and there was a look on his face that, for the first time, made me ashamed of my eavesdropping. The other had been comedy, but this was real.

"Poor little Anne," he said.

Anne propped her chin on her hand and gazed out through the open door with wide eyes.

"Yes," she said slowly, "poor little Anne."

He came around and took the other chair. "I wish — I knew how I might comfort you," he said.

For a moment Anne looked at him with that wide stare, then, like a flash, it came. "Oh, Charlie, Charlie boy," she cried, "why don't you ask me to marry you — I can't ask you, you know — "

Before she had finished, he was on his knees beside her, and then I shut my eyes and put my fingers in my ears, for the time had come when I had no right to hear or see.

But as for theories — Oh, who knows what a woman will do? There was Elizabeth and there was Anne —

But I never would have believed it of Anne!