

That's Not Love

By Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

Table of Contents

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

That's Not Love

A gay world, that summer morning! The sprinkler on the lawn flung a rainbow mist into the air, and left tiny diamonds shining on the grass blades. Everything was astir—the leaves rustling on the trees, gay flowers swaying on their stalks. Curtains fluttered at the open windows, and through the cool, bright house voices came floating, light as butterflies. Serena Page had arisen.

To be sure, she had told her house guests the night before that just because she had to get up was no reason why any one else should be disturbed at the outrageous hour of half past eight; but somehow everybody was disturbed. Somehow her getting up made confusion all through the house; for that was Serena's especial talent—to create an exciting sort of bustle about her, without herself doing anything at all. Serena! Never was a woman so misnamed!

She came down the stairs, her filmy black negligee floating out behind her, so that she seemed, as always, to be coming in a breeze—an artificial breeze, though, perfumed and enervating, bringing no health or color. She was without make-up at this early hour. Her handsome, haggard face was pale, her eyes were heavy.

She entered the breakfast room, and there was the Moriarty girl, standing by the window.

“Good morning, Mrs. Page,” she said, with that enigmatic smile of hers.

Serena smiled, too, but faintly. Geraldine Moriarty was beginning to get on her nerves very badly, and she was longing for an excuse to fly into a rage with the girl. That was the only way Serena could get rid of people. She could do nothing in cold blood. She had taken on Geraldine in an outburst of generosity, and she would have to have an outburst of anger before she could send her away.

“Had breakfast?” she inquired.

“No—I was waiting for you, Mrs. Page.”

Serena took her place at the table, and the Japanese butler came forward to serve her. She did not know his name. She was not even sure that she had seen him before. She got her servants from an agency in the city, which upon demand would send her out a “crew” commanded by a butler. Sometimes things went wrong, and the whole lot left together; but another crew always came promptly, and her household suffered very little from the change. She had the art of making her home as impersonal as a hotel; but she did notice this butler. She smiled upon him, because his charmingly deferential air pleased her. He seemed to appreciate the solemnity of the occasion.

It was indeed an important occasion. It was the beginning of Serena’s diet. Before this elegant and luxurious creature the butler set half of a grapefruit, two slices of Graham bread toast without butter, and a cup of black coffee.

She shuddered a little, and closed her eyes. Every morning, henceforth, she was to get up at half past eight, go through a set of exercises, take a cold shower, and come downstairs—to

this! Every one said she wouldn't be able to stand it. Those who pleased her best said she had absolutely no need of a reducing diet, and would be made ill by it.

Only the Moriarty girl showed no interest at all. Serena observed that Geraldine had a slice of grilled Virginia ham on her plate.

"How Connie could ever have called her a sweet child!" she thought. "She's as hard as nails!"

Some six weeks ago Connie Blanchard had come to Serena with a most piteous tale about Geraldine Moriarty.

"Her mother and I went to the same school in Paris," she had said; "and now this sweet child's all alone in the world. Something awful happened to her father. He went bankrupt, or lost his mind, or something—I can't remember now—and Geraldine simply hasn't a penny. Fine old Irish family, you know, and she's awfully well educated. I'd love to help her, but you know how it is with me, my dear, living as I do in hotels—and I'm not strong. Do please do something for the poor child, Serena!"

Who could have done more? Serena had at once engaged Miss Moriarty as secretary-companion, and here she was, getting a nice little salary, and with practically no work to do. The secretarial duties were almost nonexistent, for Serena very seldom wrote or even answered a letter. She and her friends carried on their social activities by telephone, and they liked to do their own talking.

As for the companion part, that was absurd. Serena was always surrounded by companions, and mighty obliging ones, too—penniless cousins, ambitious and ambiguous ladies, all sorts of eager and pliant creatures, who made up a little court where Serena ruled magnificently. No—all the Moriarty girl had to do was to look on, and of course to admire; and it was at this simple task that she so utterly failed.

She didn't seem to admire anything or anybody, not even herself. She was ironically indifferent to her own dark beauty. She had no decent clothes, and when Serena had offered her some very good things that she was tired of, Geraldine had refused—politely, of course. She was always polite, always careful not to give Serena any excuse for getting rid of her.

“But you'll go, my dear!” thought Serena. “I've done quite enough for you!”

She glanced across the table at her silent companion.

“Hopeless!” she reflected. “Simply hopeless! Of course she's good-looking, in a way—but she has absolutely *no* charm, and *no* figure.”

Miss Moriarty went on eating with an excellent appetite. She was never talkative. She was quiet, but with a quiet which Serena did not find restful or soothing. She was a tall girl, thin and supple, with a careless grace in every movement. Her face had a gypsy darkness, with high cheek bones, features delicate and yet bold, and black eyes with a scornful light in them. She was dressed in a black skirt, a black jersey, and a plain white

blouse—a costume that made her look lanky, thought the dieting Serena; and she had that air of not caring.

“For Heaven’s sake, do talk, my dear!” cried Serena, overcome by exasperation. “I’m all on edge this morning, and it makes me horribly nervous to see you sitting there like a—like a graven image!”

“I’ll try,” said Miss Moriarty obligingly. “Have you seen the delphiniums?”

“Never heard of the things,” said Serena. “Oh, do answer that for me, my dear!”

For the butler had come forward to say that a “generman” wanted to speak to Mrs. Page on the telephone.

There was, inevitably, a telephone in the breakfast room. There were telephones everywhere in that house, so that, in order to speak to a friend perhaps a hundred miles away, one need not have the fatigue of walking more than twenty feet. Geraldine took up the receiver.

“This is Mrs. Page’s secretary,” she said. “Will you give me the message, please?”

“Tell Mrs. Page it’s Sambo,” said a curt and very clear masculine voice.

“It’s Sambo,” repeated Miss Moriarty, turning toward Serena.

She was surprised by the change that came over that haggard, petulant face. Forgotten were the nerves and the cruel diet.

Serena sprang to her feet and ran to the telephone, and even her voice was changed.

“Sambo!” she cried. “What an hour! Yes, I know, but why didn’t you write me, just once? I’m not reproaching you, silly boy! Only I did think you’d have time just for a line. No, no! To-day, Sambo? But can’t you give me some idea what time? Surely some time to-day? Oh, all right! By-by, big boy!”

She came back to the table and sank into her chair, laughing.

“I’ll take a slice of that ham,” she said to the butler, “and cream for my coffee. Quick! I’m starving!” Then she looked at Geraldine. “Sammy Randall is coming,” she announced.

“How nice,” said Geraldine.

But Serena missed any irony there may have been in the words. Mrs. Anson had appeared in the doorway, and she called to her:

“Betty, Sambo’s coming out to-day!”

“My dear, how simply marvelous!” cried Betty Anson, with fervor.

Serena expected that fervor. She took it for granted that all her friends would rejoice with her; and so they did. Serena, the queen, was happy, and all her court was happy, too, reaping the benefits of her good humor.

“But that awful Moriarty!” she whispered to Betty Anson. “She’s worse than usual this morning. I don’t know what’s the matter with her. She’s so indifferent and ungrateful!”

“Those people are always envious,” said Mrs. Anson. “Governesses and companions—they’re not exactly servants, you know, and yet they’re not—well, they’re simply out of everything.”

“I wish she’d stay out altogether!” said Serena.

Geraldine Moriarty wished the same thing. As she stepped out through the long window of the breakfast room to the lawn, she wished that she need never set foot in that house again. She hated it, she hated the life there, and at times she came dangerously close to hating the people in it.

For, though Serena’s conclusion that the girl was “as hard as nails” was an exaggeration, there was a grain of truth in it. She had, for her nineteen years, a character remarkably definite and independent. She had fortitude, courage, and the pride of Lucifer. She had come here, penniless, solitary, and so young, direct from the almost cloistered life she had led with her invalid mother, and not for one instant had she been dazzled or swayed by the luxury and the feverish gayety about her. She stayed because she knew no other way to earn her bread, but all her salary she put into a savings bank, and would not touch a penny of it. When there was enough, she meant to go away. She would learn typing and shorthand, find work in an office, and be done with this existence which she hated.

She lived here in exile, utterly alien and lonely, among these people whom she neither comprehended nor pitied. Her people had been gentlefolk. She had been brought up in a tradition of dignity, honor, and reserve, and she clung to that tradition with all the strength of her loyal heart. What her

people had been, she would be. Their ways were the right ways. Their manners, their speech, their tastes, formed the standards by which all others should be judged. And, so judged, Serena and her friends were damned. Geraldine saw no good in them at all. They were base, heartless, and vulgar.

She walked across the lawn to the sea wall at the foot of the garden, and jumped down to the beach, a few feet below. She wanted to be alone for a little while in the fresh, sweet summer morning, in the sun and the salt wind, and to forget the monstrous thing she had seen; but she could not forget. In anger, in contempt, she was obliged to remember Serena's face at the mention of that man's name.

Evidently Serena "loved" this man with the mountebank name, and her friends seemed to think it a charming idyl—the "love" of a woman of forty, who had divorced one husband and was living in constant bickering with a second. The fact of her being married was simply a side issue. Faith and honor had no meaning at all for these people, and love—that was what they called "love"!

II

The summer day was drawing to a close. The shadows of the trees were long upon the grass, the sun was sinking through a sky wistful and delicate, faint rose and yellow.

There was a blessed quiet all through the house. Serena and her friends had certainly intended to be back for tea, but they had not come. They never could do what they meant to do.

Obstacles intervened, and they were not well equipped for dealing with obstacles. It took so little to stop them, to bar a road, to turn them off toward a new destination. They had not come back, and Geraldine was having her tea alone in the library, reading a book as she sipped it.

That was how Sambo first saw her, sitting, very straight, in a high-backed chair, with the last light of the sunset on her clear, pale face. He said later that she had put him in mind of a Madonna, and there were not many women he knew who could do that. He stood in the doorway, staring at her, for quite a long time—so long that he never afterward forgot how she looked then, so still, so lovely, so aloof.

For a moment he was almost afraid to disturb her.

But the fear of disturbing other persons had not yet greatly influenced young Samuel Randall. He was a conqueror, nonchalant and superb. He took whatever things pleased him in this world. Slender, almost slight, with his fine features, his mournful dark eyes, he had a poetic and touching look about him; but it belied him. He was not poetic. He was greedy, and willful, and reckless.

He wanted to talk to this lovely image, so in he went.

“This a gentle hint?” he asked.

Geraldine put down her book and looked at him.

“I said I was coming to-day,” he went on, “and they’re all out. That mean I’m not wanted?”

And he smiled his charming, arrogant smile, for he knew so well that he was always wanted.

“Mrs. Page meant to be home by five,” said Geraldine, with no smile at all. “Something must have delayed her.”

“Then you’ll give me a cup of tea, won’t you? I’m Randall, you know.”

She said yes, none too cordially, and rang the bell for fresh tea. He sat down opposite her, slouching in his chair, his handsome head thrown back, his dark eyes watching her.

“I’m Mrs. Page’s secretary,” she explained with cold formality.

“Lucky, lucky Mrs. Page!” said he.

A faint color rose in her cheeks. She resented his attitude, his easy and careless manner, his appraising glance, and he read the resentment in her face.

“Prudish!” he thought.

This did not annoy him. He liked this tall, dark, unsmiling girl just as she was, a charming novelty; but he would have to change his tactics.

“You were reading, weren’t you?” he said respectfully. “I hope I didn’t interrupt you.”

“No, Mr. Randall,” she answered.

Then, suddenly, his undisciplined soul was filled with a sort of envy for this untroubled and superior creature who read books.

"I try to read," he said. "I wish to Heaven I could; but it's too late now."

"I don't see how it could ever be too late to read," said Geraldine, with a trace of scorn.

He had straightened up in his chair. He was no longer staring at her, but at the unlighted cigarette that he was rolling between his fingers.

"The thing is," he said, "I've been spoiled. People listen to me—any damned nonsense I spout—and I've got out of the way of listening myself. Now, you see, when I take up a book that's worth reading, I feel as if the writer fellow had got me into a corner, and was trying to lay down the law; so I want to contradict him, and I chuck the blamed thing across the room."

He spoke earnestly, and he was in earnest. It was his great charm that he was always sincere. He was not inventing things to say to this girl. He was simply selecting from his restless, curious mind those things which he thought would interest her. He was succeeding, too—he saw that.

Geraldine did not speak, because to her reserved and proud spirit it was impossible to speak easily to a stranger; but she thought over his words with an odd sensation of distress. She felt sorry for the conquering Sambo.

He had picked up her book, and was turning the pages. It was a copy of "The Hound of Heaven," which her father had given her long ago.

"Poetry!" he said. "Queer sort of stuff!"

Then he read aloud:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind—”

He stopped, and for a moment he sat silent. The light was fading out of the sky now, and in the dusk his face looked white and strained. The echo of his strong young voice seemed still to drift through the shadowy room.

Looking at him, Geraldine had an extraordinary fancy, almost a vision, of his terribly defiant soul fleeing, swift and laughing, to its own destruction. She was filled with an austere compassion and wonder. It was as if, in an instant, and without a word spoken, he had told her all the long tale of his wasted years.

“Sometimes,” he said, “the prey gets away from Him!”

“No!” said Geraldine steadily. “No—never!”

He struck a match, and by the flame that sprang out, vivid in the gray dusk, she had a glimpse of his face, with eyes half closed, proud and sorrowful; and he was changed in her sight forever. She saw him, not as a puppet in a shameful drama, but as a fellow creature with a soul.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve got lost!”

The match went out, and the room seemed very dark now. Geraldine wanted to speak, to tell him something, but she could not remember, afterward, what incredible words had come to

her mind. They were never to be spoken, however, for just at that moment Serena came home.

III

In her first generous enthusiasm Serena had declared that the "sweet child" must dine with them, no matter who was there, and now neither she nor Geraldine could find a plausible reason for altering the arrangement which had grown so irksome. This evening, as usual, Geraldine went upstairs to put on her one and only dinner dress.

But she was not so reluctant as usual, nor so disdainful. She felt that she was no longer utterly alone. This man who had come to the house was different from the others. She remembered his face as she had seen it in the flare of the match, and remembered the sound of his voice. If he was lost, it was because he had been misguided. He was somehow a victim.

Nobody noticed Miss Moriarty when she came to the table, for they were all very well used to her and her one evening gown—that is, nobody but Sambo; and to him she was new and lovely and profoundly interesting. He thought that her slender hands were beautiful. So was the sweep of her shining black hair away from her temples, and so was the proud arch of her brows; and he thought that her poor little black dress, and her youth and her disdainful air, were beyond measure touching.

But he prudently kept his interest in Miss Moriarty to himself, and behaved as he was expected to behave. The diet was postponed, and Serena had asked the butler to see that there

was “an awfully good dinner.” He had justified her blind faith in him, for the dinner was an excellent one. From the well stocked cellar he had selected the proper wines; but nobody cared for these. They all preferred whisky. Throughout the meal they drank whisky and smoked cigarettes, and their talk was in keeping with this.

“It’s not my business,” thought Geraldine. “I can’t change the world. I’m just here to earn a living.”

But the contempt and indifference which until now had been her armor failed her to-night. She was troubled and very unhappy. None of these people were mere puppets any longer. They had come alive, and they were pitiful, and a little horrible.

There was the girl they called Jinky—tall, gaunt, with a sort of wasted beauty in her face. A year ago she had eloped with a very young millionaire, and, as he was under age, his parents had had the marriage annulled—annulled, wiped out, so that Jinky had come back from her wedding trip discredited and shamed before all her world. She didn’t seem to care. She seemed hilariously amused by the whispered conversation of Levering, who sat next her; but to-night Geraldine felt sure that Jinky did care—that the wound had left a cruel scar.

There was Levering himself, with his supercilious, high-bred face. He had married for money, and he hadn’t got the money. It was a notorious joke in that circle that his middle-aged wife begrudged him every penny. He suffered his ignoble humiliation, and his wife suffered, too, because of her jealous and bitter infatuation for him.

There was the *chic* and lively little Mrs. Anson, with her eternal scheming for invitations and other benefits. There was her husband, gray-haired, distinguished in appearance, a slave to her ambition and his own weakness.

There was Serena, magnificent in her diamonds, talking only to Sambo, looking only at Sambo. There was Sambo himself, the man who had said that he was lost. He listened to Serena carelessly, and smiled, even when her face was anxious and frowning. He smoked incessantly. The light ashes from his cigarettes fell upon his plate, into his glass, and he swallowed them, as if he neither knew nor cared what was barren ash and what life-giving food.

“Now what?” cried Serena, jumping up. “Bridge, or dancing, or what?”

Geraldine had risen, too, and she fancied that she heard Mr. Anson, standing beside her, mutter:

“The deluge!”

He was unsteady on his feet, and his weary face was a curious gray. Geraldine had seen him like this before. He was trying to play, trying to be one of them, to forget—and he never could.

“Oh, dancing, of course!” said Jinky. They all went into the drawing-room, and one of the servants started the phonograph playing. The music began, the thud of drums like bare feet stamping, the sweet whine of Hawaiian guitars, like lazy laughter. Geraldine had followed the others, meaning only to pass through on her way to the garden, but halfway across the room Sambo stopped her.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

