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COMPLETE *Love* **MAGAZINE**



DECEMBER

GIRL ALONE

Exciting Novelette

By

PEGGY GADDIS

KISSES ON ACCOUNT

By **RUTH BROWN**

TOO PRETTY TO TRUST

By **VICKI
HILLE**

Redmond

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COMPLETE Love MAGAZINE

Vol. 2

ROSE WYN, *Editor*

No. 2

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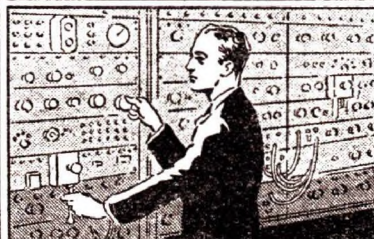
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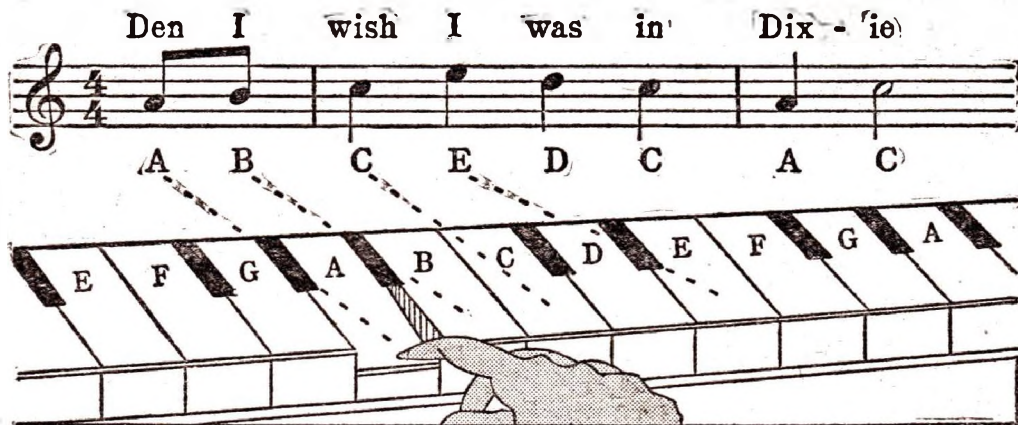
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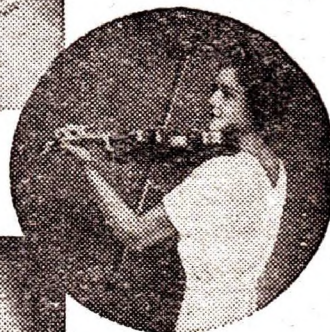
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20x5.25-19	2.65	1.35
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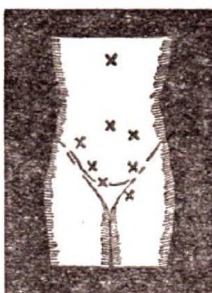
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He Blamed Her for a Past She Had Never Had

*"You'll marry me," said Loren grimly, "just
as we planned."*

CHAPTER I

HER first impression was of a blinding pain through which her clouded mind crept back to consciousness. She lay beneath a sky of midnight blue, thickly sprinkled with stars. There was no moon, but the scene was illuminated with a ghastly ruddy glow. All about her there were cries of pain, loud voices, people.

Slowly, bit by bit, she took in the scene before her. The wrecked train lying on its side, the rescue workers, the loud hissing of steam, the crackle of flames—and then once more a merciful blackness swept over her.



Girl Alone

Heart-Stirring Novelette By Peggy Gaddis

"But why," she cried desperately, "if you hate me so terribly, are you so determined to marry me?"



Her next impression was of a large, dimly lighted room, the scent of flowers, a soft spring wind that crept through the open windows, fluttering the soft cream curtains beneath beautifully patterned English chintz draperies; a dressing-table, frothy with net ruffles, half filled by gold-stoppered crystal bottles, a bowl of larkspur and snapdragons on a table beside her. And then there was the crisp starched rustle of a uniform as

a trained nurse came to the bed and lifted her limp wrist.

"You mustn't be frightened," said the nurse with a professionally cheerful smile. "You're quite all right. You've hurt your shoulder and wrenched your back a bit, but there are no internal injuries, and all you have to do is lie very quietly for a few weeks."

The girl whose midnight-black hair flowed over the pillows, framing a beautiful oval face that was almost as white as the pillow itself, lighted by two great dark eyes and the soft loveliness of a beautifully shaped mouth, looked up at the nurse, a piteous expression in her eyes. "But—I don't seem to know where I am, or even—who I am!"

There was quick, driving terror in the last three words. The nurse looked startled for a moment before she resumed her calm, cheerful manner. "But you mustn't be frightened," she soothed. "That's because of the shock. You'll be quite all right when that has worn off. Mrs. Stephens and your fiancé are outside. Shall I bring them in?"

The girl's eyes widened until they looked enormous in her pale face.

"My—fiancé?" she whispered.

"Yes—Mr. Loren Stephens," answered the nurse, and left her alone.

Presently a plump, pretty woman in a flowered taffeta house coat came rustling to the bedside. With her was a tall, sun-bronzed, disturbingly good-looking man of about twenty-eight.

"You mustn't be alarmed, my dear," the woman said stiffly, although she was manifestly trying to be kind. "The nurse has gone to telephone Dr. Elden. Meanwhile, you are quite safe and—among friends." The last words came with an obvious effort.

Then the young man came forward. "The nurse tells us you've forgotten who you are," he said, and while his tone was courteous the girl who lay

looking up at him sensed the contempt that it held. "You needn't bother about a pose like that. I made a bargain with you, and you needn't have the slightest doubt but that it will be carried out to the letter."

The girl shrank from the cold dislike in his intensely blue eyes. Her own wide, dark frightened gaze clung to his face while she tried desperately to find some remembered feature that would give her a clue to the situation.

"But—but it isn't a—pose," she stammered faintly, and then cried out wildly, raggedly, "Oh, don't you suppose I'd remember if I could? It's terrible—not to even know—who you are!"

She burst into wild, uncontrolled sobbing, and the nurse came hurrying in, motioning the other two out, busying herself with soothing the distraught girl. The doctor arrived a little later, but though he resorted to every trick he knew he was unable to touch on a single clue that would arouse the girl's slumbering memory. Life for her seemed to have begun in that moment when she had awakened in the meadow in the ruddy glare of the burning wrecked train, with the screams of the wounded mingling with the excited cries of the rescue workers.

"You are Zaida Ramsay," Dr. Elden told her, speaking slowly, carefully, his eyes riveted upon her own in an almost hypnotic gaze. "You are engaged to be married to Loren Stephens."

"But I can't be!" she cried out wildly. "Surely if I were engaged to a man I couldn't help but remember him!"

"But you are," protested the doctor, and went on to mention things about New York with which she should be familiar. But in the end both patient and doctor were exhausted and nothing had been gained.



SO it went for several days, while the girl's natural health and strength returned with the quickness of youth. There were consultations with the city's noted specialists, but nothing was gained. It was as though the girl's mind had closed its door and locked it in that wreck, and nothing they could do would reopen that door again.

Loren and his mother were unfailingly kind and courteous to her, assuring her again and again of their welcome. Yet she could sense behind their attitude something that was alert, watchful and almost contemptuous.

She lay one morning and watched the maid unpack the trunks and suitcases that had, they told her, comprised her luggage, and that, checked on a train following the wrecked one, had arrived in good order. She saw exquisite, if somewhat daring, evening gowns unpacked; cobwebby lingerie, a great deal of it black chiffon or lace; extravagant slippers; extreme hats, jewelry that seemed to the girl very garish and spectacular. But none of it struck her as at all familiar.

Loren came in one evening, to pay his usual visit to her on his return from business in town. She lay very still among her pillows, looking up at him as he greeted her with his usual courtesy that was chill and formal. And suddenly, daringly, she spoke a thought that was in her mind.

"For an engaged man, aren't you—terribly formal?"

Loren studied her with that curious, almost impersonal intentness that she disliked so much. "Meaning what?" he asked shortly.

"Meaning," said Zaida frankly, "that perhaps if you—kissed me, it might—help me to remember."

"Oh," said Loren. His eyes were more gray than blue as he bent his handsome brown head and set his

mouth on hers coolly, politely, entirely without any warmth.

Then, "does that help to stir the ashes of memory?"

Disappointed, coloring a little, she shook her head. "I—don't feel as though—you'd ever kissed me before."

"Why should you?" answered Loren reasonably. "Because, of course, I never have. After all, I never set eyes on you until the day they brought you here from the wreck."

Zaida stared at him, stricken to complete silence.

Loren said suddenly, roughly, "See here, what's the sense of all this pretending? You've no more lost your memory than I have. You're putting on an act—a very good one, I admit—but it's all pretty senseless, don't you think? Unless, of course, you've done something that you're afraid will catch up with you, and so you're pretending to have forgotten all about it."

Zaida caught her breath, her eyes enormous in her pale face. "Do—do you suppose—I have?" she faltered, too frightened at the thought to resent his tone or manner.

Loren said grimly, "From what I know of you, I consider it extremely probable."

And as though he could no longer tolerate her presence, he turned and went swiftly out of the room, closing the door sharply behind him.

Zaida lay perfectly still, her body held rigid, her hands clenched. Had she done something wrong, something from which she was trying to hide, something so terrible that her shocked mind had closed the doors upon her memory of it? The thought filled her with horror, a horror all the more vivid because she was so helpless before it.

She thought of the daring evening gowns, the underwear that the maid had unpacked a few days before, and something told her they were not the sort of clothes that she would want to

wear. She shrank from the thought of appearing before Loren and his mother wearing one of those very clinging, very décolleté gowns; she could not believe that that underwear was the kind she would deliberately choose.

She was a little bewildered by Loren's kiss. Somehow it had been very sweet, despite the fact that he had quite obviously despised her when he kissed her. And what did he mean by saying that he had never kissed her before, that he had never set eyes on her until the day they had brought her here from the wreck? But he was engaged to be married to her! And he believed that she was merely pretending to have lost her memory!

She would not admit, even to herself, that she was in love with Loren. And yet, if she were going to marry him as he and his mother insisted, then why shouldn't she be in love with him? If he had never set eyes on her, she had probably never seen him either. Still, how could that possibly be? If they were engaged, surely they must have been friends, at least.

THE puzzle kept her awake most of the night—that and her frantic effort to force ajar the door that had clicked on her memory with the crashing horror of the train wreck.

The next morning she had a fever, and it was several days before she and Loren had a chance at further conversation. By that time they had wheeled her out on the terrace in the primrose-colored spring sunlight. As she saw Loren coming up the drive, she sent the nurse away.

She faced him resolutely. "Please!" She stopped him when he would have walked past her with merely a nod. "You and I have to have a talk. Couldn't it be now?"

Loren came to stand beside the wheel chair, looking down at her, his blue eyes cold, his mouth set in a thin straight line. "We're going to have a lot of time to talk after we're married. Hadn't we better save a few in-

teresting subjects?" he suggested with his usual icy courtesy.

"That's just it," she said quietly. "We aren't going to be married."

Loren looked unpleasantly startled, and his eyes flashed. "And where did you get that idea, my dear?" he demanded, and his tone was a taunt. "We're going to be married the very moment you're able to stand on your own feet and support the weight of an armful of orchids."

She flung out her hand in a little protesting gesture. "But why," she cried desperately, "if you hate me so terribly, are you so determined to marry me?"

"Because I will not let you destroy my sister's happiness," he said grimly. "You know how much Ellen and her happiness mean to my mother and to me. You should know—you've traded heavily enough on our devotion to her. Well, you and I made a marriage bargain in return for your keeping your secret from Ellen. And I shall carry out my part of the bargain—and see to it that you carry out yours."

She shrank from his words as though they were blows. When he had finished, she said unsteadily, "Please—be a little kind! Can't you understand that—I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about? Your sister Ellen's happiness? But what have I got to do with that? Please believe me—I—don't remember one single thing that happened before the moment I awoke after the wreck. Please—oh, please—be a little charitable! Believe me—and—tell me!"

Loren was studying her with that same curious, almost impersonal intentness. Then, as though something in her pleading voice had touched a responsive chord in his heart far beneath his contempt for her, he said grimly, "Okay—you asked for it. My sister Ellen worshiped her husband. She thought him the paragon of all the husbandly virtues. There were some of us who were inclined to believe that Bob had a stray fault or

two, but because everybody loves Ellen, we kept the suspicion of his faults from her. He—died rather gloriously at that; he was drowned rescuing two frightened youngsters who'd gone over their depth at a local beach. After that, of course, he became a sort of hero around here. And Ellen's worship of his memory became almost an obsession. She's not very strong—her baby was less than a month old when Bob died. Shortly after Bob's death—the newspapers made rather a lot of it—your first letter came, addressed to me, fortunately. I think I would have killed you if the letter had been sent to Ellen."

Zaida had listened, her frightened eyes never leaving his stern face.

"You don't begin to feel any faint stirrings of a returning memory?" he demanded contemptuously.

She shook her dark head, her eyes like those of a small, frightened animal. "Please—go on," she said faintly.

Loren shrugged wearily. "There's not much else to tell. You pointed out that you were Bob's mistress and had been since a few months before his marriage to Ellen, that his marriage had scarcely interrupted your relationship, and that during his frequent business trips out of town he had been with you. You had letters to prove it, and your price for those was—marriage to me, as head of the family and holder of the family purse strings."

Zaida gave a little stricken cry. "Oh, no—surely I couldn't have done that! Why should I have wanted to marry a man I didn't know?"

"You said, in your letter, that you were tired of being the other woman, and that you yearned for respectability and an assured social position!" said Loren coldly. "Naturally, I agreed to your bargain—what else could I do? The truth about Bob would have dealt Ellen a death blow—the scandal in the town wouldn't have been—very pleasant for any of us. And so—you were on your way

here on a visit to my mother, at the end of which we were to be married, when the train crashed twenty miles from the station."

Zaida drew a long breath. "I—can't believe anyone could be so—low," she whispered piteously. "But if you say it is so, then—I know it must have been. But now—of course I set you free from that bargain. I'll go away—at once. I can't possibly stay here."

"You'll stay here," said Loren grimly. "And you'll marry me on the twenty-seventh, just as we planned. And if you should happen to regain your memory in the meantime—well, we'll have to make the best of it. Frankly, I'm almost inclined to hope that you don't. I could—almost like you as you are now."

Zaida lifted wide eyes; her breath caught in her throat. Beneath her delicate skin the color rushed warmly into her face. Her soft scarlet mouth was faintly parted in a little soundless gasp of astonishment. "Oh," she whispered faintly, "I wish you could!"

There was such a passionate yearning, such an intensity of appeal in the words that Loren did something that surprised himself almost as much as it did her. He bent his head and kissed her. It was an ardent, passionate kiss that clung and burned its way into her very heart.

And then, as though he suddenly realized what he had done, he straightened, and she saw that his face was gray and stern.

"And that," he stated grimly, "was a pretty rotten thing to do."

"Was it?" whispered Zaida radiantly. "I—loved it."

"You should have hated it and been insulted by it," he told her brutally. "For while I despise you and everything you stand for, I suddenly—desired you—because you are lovely and seductive."

Then he turned and went into the house. Zaida's hands covered her face convulsively. She loved him with all her heart. She couldn't help it! And

he hated her because she had been the other woman in his brother-in-law's marriage, because she had stood between his brother-in-law and that adored little sister.

She could not help despising the woman whom Loren's words had pictured so clearly, the woman she was supposed to be. But even though she tried desperately to summon it, not one scrap of memory returned. If she had been in reality all that Loren said, couldn't a miracle have happened in that awful wreck? Couldn't the old Zaida—all of Zaida Ramsay that was ugly and sordid and grasping—have died and a new Zaida have been born? Oh, if she could only make him believe that!

He found her lovely, desirable; couldn't she hope that some day he might really love her as she loved him? He wouldn't let her go away because he couldn't trust her not to return to Ellen some day with her story. He was marrying her because he couldn't trust her, and every scrap of pride, every instinct of outraged self-respect rose within her, telling her to run away, to leave this place at once.

But she told herself forlornly that she couldn't afford pride or self-respect at the moment. She had wronged Loren's sister; he would marry her to protect that sister. And eventually, if she were a good and devoted wife, perhaps she could make him love her and believe in her.

Later, lying wide-eyed, wakeful through the soft spring night, she dozed a little toward dawn. And then it was that the first dream came to her. She was in the day coach of a train speeding across the country. She saw herself, shabbily dressed in a cheap blue suit, a nondescript hat. There was another girl standing beside the seat, smiling down at her, talking. She couldn't hear what the other girl was saying; she noted that there was a strong resemblance between herself and that girl. And then she saw that the other girl was wear-

ing a small, expensive-looking hat, a beige broadcloth dress, a mink coat thrown carelessly across her shoulders. The girl leaned down, said something, smiling warmly—and Zaida awoke.

The dream was so vivid that for a long moment she lay quite still in the breaking dawn, remembering where she was. And then a sudden thought crashed upon her consciousness; in the dream the strange girl had been wearing the same clothes in which Zaida had been found after the wreck! The beige broadcloth dress, the mink coat, the expensive hat all hung in the big cedar-lined closet across the room from her!

She was shaken a little. Could it be that the strangely vivid dream had not been, after all, a dream, but a faint opening in the tightly closed door that guarded her memory? Could it be that she was beginning to remember? The thought brought her upright in bed, wide-eyed, breathless. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture the dream, but she could see nothing more.

She said nothing to anyone about the dream; she merely hoped desperately that it would return, that she would hear what the strange girl was saying, gather some clue, some inkling of the truth.

CHAPTER II



HE was able to be up and about now. She wore the clothes that had come in the trunk and suitcases, though she hated them and felt awkward and uncomfortable in them.

Satin lounging pajamas, luxurious negligees, evening gowns cut so low that she invariably wore a jacket or scarf about her shoulders, sophisticated daytime dresses. At first she had been a little surprised because the clothes did not fit perfectly, but the nurse had pointed out that that

was undoubtedly due to her loss of weight during her illness.

Loren and his mother were carefully courteous to her. As soon as she was able to be up and around, they began to introduce her to their friends. There were small, quiet dinners at home at first, then teas when more of Mrs. Stephens' women friends came; a reception at last, and then a big dinner-dance at the country club, where, as Loren's fiancée, she met the town's best people.

She was a success at the club. She danced a little, not much because she was still convalescent, and only with Loren. She knew that he was glad and relieved because his friends liked her.

When they reached home that night he held her hand a moment at the foot of the stairs as she started to say good night to him. His arms went suddenly about her, and he said roughly, "You're so lovely! I'm mad about you! And I wish with my whole heart and soul that I wasn't!"

For a moment, because it was so blessedly sweet to be there in his arms, she gave herself up to his embrace, she lifted her warm mouth eagerly for his kisses, while exquisite ecstasy poured through her. But it was only for a moment. She knew then that his kisses were an insult, the sort of kisses a man gives a woman whom he despises, even while he desires her. With tears running down her cheeks, she broke free of him, raised her hand and struck him hard across the mouth.

He caught her wrists and held her when she would have fled. His eyes blazed down at her and he said harshly, "I'll let you get away with that just this once. But I warn you that if you ever behave like a fishwife again, you must expect to be treated like one!"

And then he let her go, and she ran, blinded by tears, to her own room. And there she crept into bed and cried herself to sleep. And—dreamed again.

That time the scene was changed, though the two characters were the same. Herself and the strange girl, who bore a rather striking resemblance to herself, though she was obviously a little older and a little heavier. The scene now was a private compartment on the train. Through the windows Zaida could see the rushing landscape. And now the other girl was helping her into the biege broadcloth dress and the mink coat lay over the arm of a seat with the silly little hat beside it. The other girl wore a negligee, and she had a cigarette between her lips, her eyes squinted against the smoke as she fastened the biege broadcloth dress on Zaida. Zaida saw her own face in the mirror, enraptured by the transformation made in her appearance by the suavely cut, very becoming gown. Then the dream faded, and she awoke.

And though with the coming of dawn the sharp outlines of the dream faded a little, she still remembered it clearly enough to relate it to Loren, when she encountered him on the terrace, about to leave for his work in town.

Loren listened, his eyes remote, wary, as she told him swiftly about the two dreams. For a moment, when she had finished, he was silent. Then he gave a dry chuckle, and said grimly, "Sorry, my dear. It's a good story, but I'm afraid it won't hold water. If you aren't Zaida Ramsay, then where is she? I'm quite sure she'd have lost no time in getting here after the wreck. And remember, all the dead were identified beyond any question. You wore her clothes; there were letters in your bag, all sorts of identification. No, my dear, you're Zaida Ramsay; there's no doubt about that."

SHE drew a long, hard breath and her hands clenched at her sides. She wanted so desperately to believe that there had been some mistake, that her dreams had been in reality

vagrant traces of returning memory, that she was not this girl whom Loren despised, but whom he was determined to marry to protect his sister's happiness.

"Oh—and by the way," said Loren suddenly, "I'm bringing Ellen home with me this evening to stay until after the wedding. And if you so much as drop a single hint that you ever knew Bob in even the most casual way, I promise you I'll wring your lily-white neck! Do you understand?"

Zaida looked up at him, great tears slipping down her white cheeks. "How you hate me!" she whispered desolately, black despair in her heart.

Loren said grimly, "Do you wonder? You could hardly expect me to love you, under the circumstances, could you?"

As he looked down into her dark, tear-filled eyes, Zaida said faintly, "No—of course not."

Loren said, very low, almost as though he were talking to himself, "And yet—it wouldn't be hard to love you. You—are a very dangerous woman, my dear. Women like you should be locked up."

Zaida stood still and watched him as he ran down the steps, got into his roadster, drove off without another word.

She was still standing there, white, desolate, her dark eyes tearless now but bitter with a hopeless grief, when Mrs. Stephens came out to her.

"Hadn't we better run into town this morning and see about your wedding gown?" she asked. "There isn't much time. Next week—Thursday—is the twenty-seventh."

Zaida flushed painfully. "I'm afraid that is—couldn't I use one of the gowns I've already got?"

Mrs. Stephens' head went up. "I hardly think so," she said distantly. "After all, Loren is very well-known and prominent, socially as well as financially. It would scarcely do for you to wear just any dress to your

wedding. It's going to be rather an important social event, I'm afraid."

"But I haven't any money," protested Zaida desperately.

"That's not important. Your wedding gown will be my gift."

Mrs. Stephens seemed to feel there was nothing more to be said, and because it was easier to give in than to argue, Zaida went with her.

"I don't quite think white, do you, Zaida?" asked Mrs. Stephens, with a delicate insolence that the salesgirls did not catch.

"Pale pink would be lovely, Mrs. Stephens," suggested the salesgirl. "Miss Ramsay would be lovely in it."

And so they chose it—a gown as lovely as springtime and apple blossoms, with a veil and slippers to match. As she tried on the dress, Zaida felt as though all this were happening to someone else. She couldn't even feel like the girl called Zaida Ramsay.

That night when Loren came home, he brought Ellen with him, Zaida's heart went out to her. Ellen was very slender and blond, frail and almost ethereal looking, with great burning blue eyes and a soft mass of golden curls. The baby was a treasure, perfect as a tiny doll, with tiny fists and a button of a soft little mouth.

"Don't you think his mouth and his nose are like Bob's?" Ellen asked.

"Darling!" protested her mother, halfway between tears and laughter. "He's too young to resemble anyone yet."

"But I want him to look like Bob!" said Ellen. "I want him to grow up to be exactly like Bob in every single detail of looks and character. I want him to be Bob all over again."

There was such a passion of tenderness, of hope, of exaltation in her tone that despite herself, Zaida trembled a little and looked up to meet Loren's eyes upon her, warning, stern. Later, when Mrs. Stephens had taken Ellen and the baby upstairs, Loren said quietly to Zaida, "Thanks for—being still about Bob."

Zaida said hotly, "How could you possibly think I could want to hurt her? I'd rather die! She—she breaks my heart."

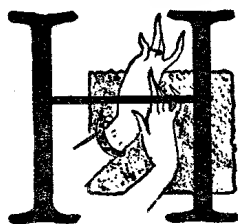
Loren nodded. "You do begin to understand then why I am willing to—go to any lengths to protect her? If she knew the truth—" He broke off, looked at her, and his lip curled a little.

Zaida went white. "I can't marry you when you hate me like this—"

"You'll marry me and like it!" said Loren grimly. "Because it's the only way I can be sure of protecting Ellen—always. I'll do everything possible to make you happy—I promise you that. I daresay in years to come we might—get on very well together."

And because just then there was the sound of footsteps in the hall and Ellen's light, soft voice, there was no chance for her to answer. But lying awake in her room that night she told herself miserably that she had been a fool to ever believe that there was the slightest chance that Loren could learn to love her. Always, when he looked at her, he would remember Bob, and the wrong that she and Bob had done Ellen, and always he would turn from her in contempt of her and, if he became too attracted to her, of himself.

CHAPTER III



HER wedding day dawned bright and clear. She thought that was a little funny. It would have been more in keeping, she felt drearily, if there had been leaden skies and a sad drizzle of rain. Because that was the way she felt. She was marrying the man she adored with every beat of her heart; yet he was a man who despised her because she had wronged his gentle, lovely sister.

It was hard to make herself believe that she had done that, and yet she

must have done it because she was Zaida Ramsay. And if she had not been on her way to the Stephens place, what had she been doing on the train? And with all Zaida's credentials in her possession, all the rest of it, how could she question her identity? Yet something deep in her heart cried out that she was not, that Loren was her only love, that there had never been any other man in her life.

Though neither Loren nor his mother had really wanted it, and Zaida had shrunk in horror from the thought, they had seemed to feel that a big wedding was expected of them. So the beautiful old church in its grove of oaks was decorated for the bride and filled with the well-dressed, well-bred people who were Loren's and his family's friends. Yet Zaida, as she entered the church in her pale-pink wedding dress felt as though she walked among strangers who might very easily be enemies.

Loren's hand closed firmly over Zaida's as she reached the altar. And then the minister spoke the words that made her Loren's wife.

His kiss, when the ceremony was over, was bittersweet. A hard, burning kiss that for a moment took no cognizance of the audience who looked on. And then, his face white and stern, he offered her his arm, and they turned and came up the aisle, Mr. and Mrs. Loren Stephens. Man and wife.

In the limousine, driving back to the Stephens' home for the wedding reception, Loren grinned down at her, though his eyes looked harried. It was as though the strain of despising her was more difficult than he had bargained for.

"It just occurred to me that not once have you asked me where we are going on our honeymoon," he reminded her.

Her hands clenched around her bouquet, but she forced her voice to steadiness. "Need we carry the farce of our marriage that far?"

"It just happens that we must—so

far and no farther," he answered, and there was a certain triumph in his voice that made her look at him, puzzled. "We are going on a honeymoon, my dear, to South America. A good, long honeymoon. Two years, perhaps longer. You see now why I insisted that you go through with the marriage, even after you suffered a change of heart and were willing to let me go?"

It took all her courage to answer him steadily, evenly, "I'm sorry to seem stupid—but I'm afraid I don't."

"Because I knew that if you went away now, unmarried, you were still dangerous!" said Loren grimly. "But as my wife, you are going with me so far away that there won't be a chance in the world of your destroying Ellen."

"You—still think I would?"

"I'm afraid I can't believe that the leopard changes his spots," he told her cruelly, though the look in his eyes told her dimly that he was suffering, and that somehow a little of his suffering was eased by taunting her, striking out at her in his pain.

She drew a hard, uneven breath. "Perhaps I am—as bad as you think me," she told him steadily. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know. I suppose you couldn't possibly believe that the old Zaida Ramsay, whom you so thoroughly despise, is dead and that I am—a new person? If you could believe that—oh, please, please—try to!"

There were tears in her voice, and her eyes pleaded with him. She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

There was a long, tense silence and then he said harshly, "I'm sorry! But every time I look at you—every time I touch you—it's as though—Bob stood between us. And I can't forget.

THEY drove the rest of the way in silence. They reached the house ahead of the other guests, and as the old butler opened the door to them, he said worriedly, "There are two gentlemen waiting, Mr. Stephens,

in the library. They insisted it was very important—"

Before he could finish the library door opened, and two men came out into the wide hall.

One of them spoke sharply to Zaida.

"Is your name Zaida Ramsay?"

Cold terror swept over her, and she shrank a little, gleaned a shred of comfort from the fact that Loren's arm went instinctively about her as though he had forgotten everything except her need for protection.

"This is Mrs. Loren Stephens, my wife," he said sternly.

"But up until about an hour ago, she was Zaida Ramsay," said the man. "I'm a detective." He showed his badge. "I have a warrant for her arrest."

Zaida caught her breath and fought the terrible wave of blackness that threatened to engulf her.

Loren said sharply, "There must be some mistake."

"I'm afraid there's no chance of a mistake, Mr. Stephens," answered the detective courteously but firmly. "She's charged with first-degree manslaughter. Her car hit and killed a child the day before she left New York to come here. It was a case of hit and run—if she'd stopped, tried to help the boy, he'd have had a fighting chance. But she beat it—and we've had a hard enough time finding her."

"It isn't true—oh, it isn't true!" moaned Zaida wildly, clinging to Loren with both shaking hands, conscious of the blessedness of his arms about her, hiding her face against his shoulder as though she expected by some miracle that he could save her.

"We've got positive proof, Mr. Stephens—we'll be glad to show it to you and give you full details," said the detective. "We can easily get extradition papers, unless she wants to waive them and come back of her own free will to stand trial. And you, as a lawyer, know that that will be by far the best thing for her to do."

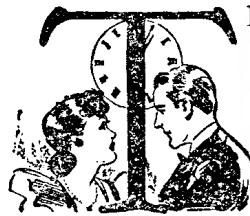
And in the end, Loren agreed. His face was set like stone, his eyes steel-gray, yet his voice and his manner toward Zaida were gentle and tender as he led her upstairs to her room and left her there to change hurriedly to a traveling costume. A few minutes later they had left the house, ostensibly on their honeymoon. The long journey to New York was a nightmare to Zaida, though Loren's presence helped her. He was no longer cold and contemptuous. Now that she was faced with a danger beyond their knowledge, they clung together, and Loren was gentle and comforting.

But he could not quite hide his horror of her callousness. Nor could she herself believe that she could have done so hideous a thing. Yet there seemed no possibility that the detectives, working long and patiently and persistently to build up the case against her, could have made a mistake. She was Zaida Ramsay, and not only had she been the other woman in Bob Alcott's marriage, but she was a hit-and-run driver charged with manslaughter.

Loren persuaded her to sleep a little on the train, but it was a worried, restless slumber. But suddenly into it there came again a part of that dream she had dreamed twice before. Her-

self, shabby and drab, and that girl who bore a resemblance to herself, yet was so much more smartly dressed. Once again she saw the girl leaning above her in the day coach, saying something to her, but she could not hear the other girl's voice. She saw herself, the shabbily clad girl, rise at last and follow the other girl down the aisle of the day coach and—

Then she started up to full wakefulness. The dream was ended; the mystery was not solved.



THEY had reached New York. The detectives had wired ahead, and the news had leaked out. There were newspaper reporters at the station, but the two detectives and Loren hurried her to a taxi.

They went directly to police headquarters. Bail was set for her, and Loren guaranteed it. An hour later, she was free to go to a hotel.

She was exhausted when they reached the hotel and were assigned to rooms. There was a private sitting-room, with a bedroom opening off at each side.

And Loren, when the bellboy had



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put down their luggage and gone, said wearily, "Try to get some sleep, darling. I'll be just across in the other bedroom if you need anything."

She held her breath for a little precious moment. He had called her darling. Of course, it didn't really mean anything. But for a long time after he had gone and his own door had closed behind him, she sat huddled in her chair, her hands over her face, savoring the loveliness of that single word.

This was her wedding night! She could almost have laughed aloud at that, only never in her life had laughter been quite so far removed from her experience. She was soon to face a trial for manslaughter. The weight of evidence against her was overwhelming.

There was no hope of sleep for her that night. When morning came, she still sat huddled in her chair beside the window, looking out with wide, blank eyes.

When she heard Loren in the sitting-room she rose, had a shower and put on a simple dark dress. She tried to do something about her white, haggard face, but because the rouge looked so garish and unreal, she wiped it off and went out to Loren, her face untouched by artifice.

He tried hard to greet her cheerfully, not to exclaim over the haggardness of her face. He had ordered breakfast, and when it came she tried to drink the orange juice and coffee and even to nibble at the crisp buttered toast, because he wanted her to.

They were both startled when the telephone rang. Loren answered it. Zaida, watching him because her eyes loved to linger on his beloved face, saw the startled expression that touched it.

He said crisply, "Yes, of course; do come up, by all means. We'll both be very happy to see you."

He turned back to Zaida. "An old friend of yours who wants to help you if he can," he said quickly. "His

name is Jim Lucas. Does that mean anything to you?"

He was watching her, suddenly tense, as Zaida closed her eyes and sought frantically among her scattered senses for some hidden spring to which the name of Jim Lucas would give the necessary pressure. But she could only shake her head at last and say, "No—I don't feel as though I'd ever heard the name before."

Loren was frankly disappointed, but when there came a knock at the door he hurried to answer it. A stout, middle-aged man, carefully, almost too well tailored, came in, almost as though he were not quite certain of his welcome.

Zaida was in the alcove by the window, and for the moment he did not see her. He spoke to Loren swiftly.

"I suppose you'll think this is rather presumptuous of me, Mr. Stephens, in view of the fact that you and—Zaida are on your honeymoon. But after all, I've known your wife a long time, and the fact that I was in love with her didn't mean she necessarily cared anything about me. As a matter of fact, she didn't. And I didn't really expect it—a fellow like me would have to have a lot of nerve to expect anybody like Zaida to love him! It was enough that she let me love her and give her a few little trinkets now and then. She's a swell girl, Mr. Stephens, and you're a lucky fellow—although you probably realize that yourself."

Loren said grimly, "I do know it, Mr. Lucas. Thank you for coming. I'm sure that Zaida will be delighted to see an old friend."

He turned and Jim looked toward the table in the alcove. And Zaida, drawing a long breath, stepped out of the alcove and into the full sunlight. She looked at this man who had obviously played an important part in her past. She was trying desperately to unlock that barred door to her memory. But the man said sharply, "Why, this isn't Zaida!"

THERE was a stunned moment. Zaida's knees threatened to collapse. Loren stared at Jim Lucas as though he thought the man had suddenly gone insane.

And then Loren demanded, "What do you mean?"

"I mean this girl isn't Zaida Ramsay!" snapped Jim truculently. "Say, what is this, anyway? Some kind of frame-up? You'll never get away with it. Why, this girl doesn't even look like Zaida when you get close to her. Oh, she's the same type and about the same size, but Zaida's got too many friends here in New York for you to hope to get away with this impersonation!"

Zaida had dropped helplessly into a chair. Her face was paper-white. Loren was listening to Jim, his eyes blazing, his jaw set. And when Jim had finished, Loren said sharply, "Have you any pictures of Zaida?"

"Of course!" answered Jim hotly. "She and I were good friends—pals. I'd have married her like a shot—but so would a lot of other men. She met some fellow in a small Southern town—she was crazy about him—a fellow named Alcott—and after that none of the rest of us had a look-in."

Loren said swiftly, "And this is not—the girl you called Zaida?"

Jim flung her a glance. "She certainly isn't! Why, take a look at that—that's Zaida!"

He drew a well-worn leather case from his pocket, flipped it open and held it out to Loren. And Loren, after looking at it, handed it to Zaida. Scrawled across the bottom of the picture were the words:

Worlds of love to my pal, Jim.

Zaida.

The picture showed a girl with a soft fur collar pulled high about her neck, a gay, silly little hat crowning her lovely head. Suddenly Loren Stephens' wife cried out wildly, "Loren! I know her! She's the girl I've had those dreams about!"

"What?" Loren was beside her now,

his arms about her, holding her close. "Try to think, darling! Try to remember! What happened in the dreams? You saw her talking to you. She was trying to persuade you to do something. Think, darling, think!"

She was very still, rigid, her eyes closed. But slowly, very slowly, the black clouds that had gripped her memory began to clear, and she whispered faintly, "She—she told me she was a wealthy girl—who'd always had—everything but love. She—wanted to find out what it was like—to be poor. She—she—she offered to pay me for—the job I was going to, and to—trade—her clothes and her luggage for mine."

She was trembling now, and Loren's arms were tight about her and Jim Lucas was leaning forward, listening tensely. And after a moment a little more of the blackness lifted and the girl went on painfully, "It seemed—crazy to me, but I'd never had any pretty things, and her clothes were so beautiful, and she—she—was very persuasive. And so I changed with her. And we went into the diner together, and we were there when suddenly there was a terrible crash, and people screamed, and the train lurched and seemed to—settle—" She shuddered beneath the impact of those memories.

She opened her eyes and looked dazedly about. And then once more at the picture of the girl Zaida.

Suddenly she put her shaking hands over her face. "She—she was dead," she whispered. "And a moment later—I must have fainted."

Loren held her very close, and above her head he looked up at the startled Jim. "When did you see Zaida last?" he demanded sharply.

"The day she left to marry you," answered Jim frankly. "I tried to talk her out of it. I thought it was a foolish thing to do. But although Zaida usually came to me to talk things over for her, she was stubborn and wouldn't take advice from anybody. She was pretty crazy about this Alcott

fellow. He'd told her a lot about the old Southern plantation where his wife's family lived and about the wealth of the family that was handled by the wife's brother. She reasoned it would be pretty nice to live like that. I'll never know why she decided to marry a man she didn't even know, unless it was because she felt she had the whip hand. Zaida was always a great one for the whip hand."

Loren was frankly puzzled. "But if she was so determined to marry me, why did she want to change clothes with another girl, send someone in her place and lose the very thing she had tried to gain?"

"She was pretty scared about this hit-and-run thing," answered Jim frankly. "She wanted me to square it for her. I'm supposed to have a lot of influence, but I told her I couldn't do anything about it and that the best thing she could do would be to get out of town for a while and not let anybody know where she was. I hid the car for her—as well as I could. It took the police a little time to locate it—and the girl they thought was Zaida. Anyway, knowing Zaida, I feel pretty sure she had a scheme cooked up so that even if this girl took the rap for her, she could step back into the picture eventually. She still had Alcott's letters to hang over your sister's head, you know."

LOREN looked down at the girl in his arms, and his brow was furrowed. "If you're not Zaida Ramsay—and we're pretty sure now that you're not—I wonder who you are?" he said, frankly puzzled.

"Mrs. Loren Stephens sounds all right to me. Do you mind?" she asked radiantly.

Loren took her hand in his, held it close as if he meant to protect her always.

Jim spoke dryly. "Not that I'd want to throw cold water on your enthusiasm or anything like that, but had

it occurred to you two that she's not Mrs. Loren Stephens? She was married to you as Zaida Ramsay, and she's not Zaida Ramsay, so the marriage is illegal."

Loren's jaw hardened, and his arms went around her tightly. "We'll be married again, immediately."

"But how can you," Jim argued reasonably, "until you know what her name is?"

Loren stared at Jim gravely. And the girl they had called Zaida gasped.

Loren said swiftly to her, "Don't worry any more about it now, darling. Just lie down and rest while Mr. Lucas and I go out and see what we can do about clearing all this up. There's a way out somewhere, and we'll find it. We've one great consolation, anyway. The doctor said that when you had fully recovered from the effects of the wreck, your memory would come back. Maybe not all at once—but at least you have remembered events leading directly up to the wreck. The rest will come back eventually."

CHAPTER IV



THEN he picked her up as though she had been a child, and carried her into the bedroom. He put her down on the bed, tucked a satin quilt

around her, and gave her a light kiss before he left her alone.

She lay still, hearing them go out, the door close behind them. Quiet settled about her, a blessed quiet that lay like a benediction on her nerves. It was a relief to know that she was not Zaida Ramsay, with a character and a record that represented everything she despised in life. It was enough to know that she was herself, with her own principles and ideals, whoever she might be.

For the moment she was not worrying about her own identity. She

was conscious only of a deep, abiding peace.

She drifted off to sleep. As she slept she seemed to see a shabby little house at the tree-shaded end of a street; she saw a small, toiling child carrying a hoe much too heavy for her strength, weeding a vegetable garden. She saw a tall, sharp-faced woman whose name was Aunt Harriet, who wasn't really an aunt at all, but a woman who had taken the little girl into her home when the child's widowed mother had died. Aunt Harriet had never been actively unkind to the child, nor had she ever been actually kind. She had done her duty, rigidly, coldly, neither knowing nor caring that a small, sometimes frightened child cried herself to sleep at night, out of a weariness and loneliness far beyond her years.

And suddenly the girl, lying in the hotel room, saw the scroll of the past unroll. Aunt Harriet—the shabby, down-at-the-heels house—the dusty lane—the sun-drenched garden. And suddenly she turned her face to the pillows and wept with relief and happiness.

SHE was waiting for Loren when he came in. She was dressed in a smart, simple green dress from her

trousseau, and one look into her shining eyes as he entered the room told him that the miracle had come.

"I'm Linda Gordon," she told him breathlessly. "And I was on my way to New York to take a job a girl I knew in school had found for me. I've just telephoned her. She knew my voice. She's coming later for positive identification, though I'm sure it's not necessary."

She told him everything breathlessly—the name of the little town, Aunt Harriet, the pet kitten. When she had finished Loren said shakily, "My darling!"

"Oh, Loren—you—don't hate me any more?"

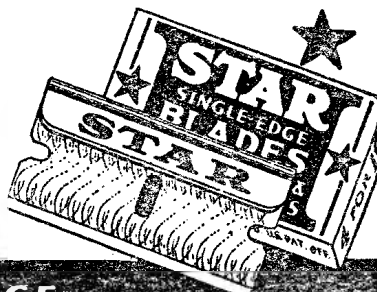
His arms caught her close. "Hate you, my dearest? Even when I thought you were Zaida and felt that I should hate you—I couldn't, though I despised myself because I couldn't! Even then I loved you! But now—oh, my dearest, if you could ever forgive me for the things I've done and said—"

"Forgive you?" Her voice was shaken by such a wealth of tenderness and yearning that it left no further need for words. But she spoke them, anyway—just three, before she lifted her soft mouth for his kiss, "I love you!"



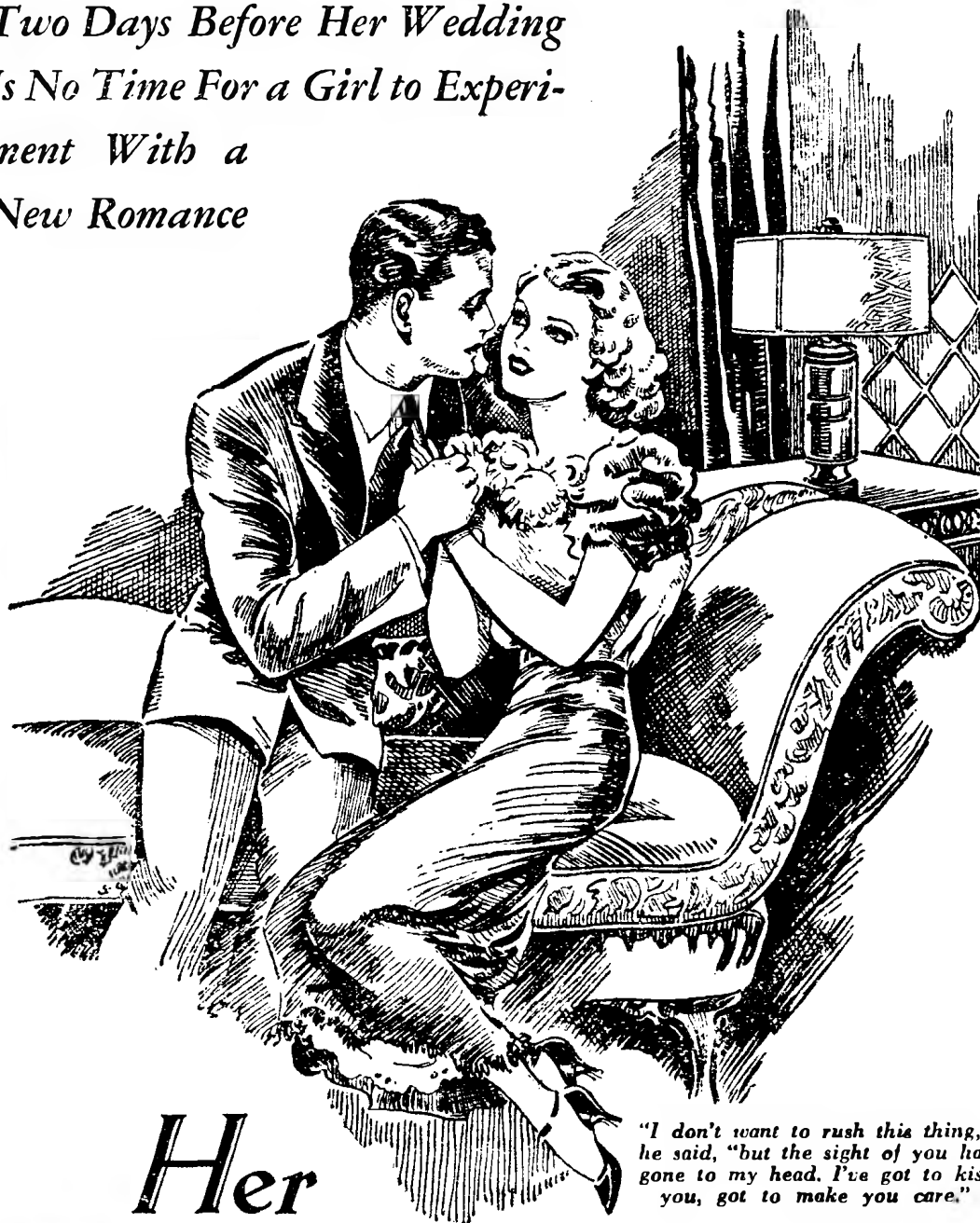
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*Two Days Before Her Wedding
Is No Time For a Girl to Experi-
ment With a
New Romance*



Her Two-Day Romance

By Rowena R. Farrar

"I don't want to rush this thing," he said, "but the sight of you has gone to my head. I've got to kiss you, got to make you care."

THIS is enough to drive a person slightly batty," Consuella Farson muttered wearily, as she fought her way slowly through the milling, shouting throng of hero worshippers.

Broadway had gone completely mad again. Another young man had skyrocketed to fame and possible fortune by conquering the Atlantic Ocean. She hadn't even bothered to remember his

name, or keep up with his headlines, because she was too busy doing her last-minute trousseau shopping. In two days she was scheduled to become Mrs. August Ware, the wife of a promising young physician.

Besides, she was getting slightly fed up on men with wings. When Lindbergh flew the Atlantic, she was just a wide-eyed kid who had slipped away from her nurse to see what the excitement was all about. She had been lost for hours. Since then aviators had come along in a dazzling succession.

But Consuella had grown hero-weary lately. There was a reason. For when Howard Hughes rode up Broadway someone had relieved her pocket-book of a hundred dollars. A few days later, on Corrigan's day, a man had stepped on her toe, practically crushing it. So now, with her wedding only two days off, she had no business whatever braving a typical Broadway welcome-home mob. Nevertheless, here she was, right in the thick of it.

"Here he comes!" A thousand eager voices shouted gleefully, as a car rolled up the colorful street, amid an incredible barrage of paper snow. Seated on the top of the back seat, between the mayor and his official greeter, was a shyly grinning young man, who was waving to the right of him, and then to the left.

Consuella caught a fleeting glimpse of him, but she refused to stretch her neck to see him better, and she couldn't very well stand on tiptoe, because her Corrigan toe was still sore. But someone on the third floor of the building just behind her became so excited over the first view of the new hero that he—or she—forgot to tear up the telephone book before throwing it out the window. That was bad for Consuella, because it landed on her right shoulder, and she promptly went down and out for a long count.

When she came to, she was bouncing along in an ambulance on the way to a hospital. She sat up instantly and issued swift, not-to-be-ignored orders to be taken straight home. So the am-

bulance pulled up in front of a fashionable Park Avenue apartment building, and Consuella climbed out, unassisted, and marched by the astonished doorman into the elevator. Her shoulder ached horribly, but she tried to ignore the pain. It served her right for having gotten within three city blocks of a flyer!

Sibyl Andrews, her devoted secretary-companion, as darkly beautiful as her employer was fair, took one look at her bruised shoulder and called Dr. August Ware, who arrived in record time.

He was a handsome young doctor with dark eyes, smooth black hair and a brisk manner. "You ought to be spanked," he scolded Consuella, "for going within a mile of Broadway on a day like this." But instead of spanking her, he strapped up her shoulder and then kissed her on the mouth. She would be his wife soon, and his kiss should have thrilled her more than it did.

She lifted flower-blue eyes to regard him anxiously. "Are you sure we were meant for each other?"

"Do I have to convince you every day?"

She nodded slowly.

HE kissed her again, more ardently that time, as definite proof that they were meant for each other. "You stay quietly in bed for the rest of the

day. If that shoulder pains you tomorrow, we'll have to X-ray it. But don't think you're going to use this little accident as an excuse to postpone our wedding!" He said it jokingly, but she knew he was serious. She had postponed marrying him several times, for no good reason except that she was afraid she didn't love him enough.

He had been very patient with her uncertainty. She supposed she should be grateful that someone as ambitious

and intelligent as August should want to marry her.

After he had gone, taking another kiss away with him, she lay on the sofa in her luxurious living-room, brooding darkly. There had been a whirl of parties, but she had reserved today for herself. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to catch her breath, to think. It wasn't only that she was fed up on men with wings who became heroes and cluttered up Broadway. She was jittery and frightened and sad. If the truth were hauled out in the open, she was bored. She had lost her zest for life.

She wondered wistfully how it would feel to fall madly, hopelessly, or desperately in love. "I'm twenty-one," she reminded herself, "and never yet have I met a man who could thrill me down to my toes. I would wait for him to come along, only I don't suppose there is such a man. That sort of love is found only in the movies."

Her thoughts were interrupted by a light knock on her door. Sibyl was out, and the maid was busy in the kitchen. So Consuella arose stiffly and went to answer it herself. No doubt it was August, back to worry about her shoulder. He would admire her in the house coat she was wearing of pale yellow crepe, the color of her hair, splashed with blue flowers, the color of her eyes. He would scold her some more for having gone out today, tell her how beautiful she was, kiss her, and then talk about the palatial home they were planning to build. She sighed.

"Hello. Mind if I come in?"

She gave a little gasp of surprise, for the young man who had knocked on her door was a stranger, astonishingly tall and broad-shouldered. A stranger, yet there was something vaguely familiar about him. His face was deeply tanned, his teeth exceptionally white and even, his grin shy and troubled. But his eyes were bold. They were brown, flecked with gold, and piercing. He was dressed in a shabby tweed suit. He did not wait

for her to speak, but brushed past her and then turned to help her close the door.

"I—don't think I know you," Consuella stammered in surprise, and frowned severely. Young men weren't in the habit of crashing into her apartment.

"I didn't expect you to remember me," he said tensely. "I'm Hank Norman, from Gainsville. We used to go to the same grammar school—back in the dark ages. I'm—I'm in trouble, and it's your fault. So you've got to hide me. They're after me." He shuddered. "I can't stand it."

"Are you crazy?" Consuella flared.

"Oh, yes," he grinned. "There's no doubt at all about that."

"I suppose that's my fault, too," she retorted sarcastically.

"Yep. It's all your fault."

She thought that over in baffled silence. Then she said icily, "Did you escape from a lunatic asylum?"

"I think I did." He mopped his brow with a grimy handkerchief. A lock of tawny, sunburned hair fell over his eye. He shook it back with a sigh of relief and looked about the room admiringly. He whistled. "This is cozy. I always wondered what your apartment would be like. Now I know." He stared at her with glowing eyes. "You're more beautiful than ever."

She ignored that and said coldly, "You needn't bother to bribe me with compliments. Have you committed a crime?"

"More or less." He was aggravatingly vague.

"And it's my fault."

"Oh, absolutely."

"I give up." She opened the door with a jerk. "I don't like this game. Would you mind leaving?"

He strode across to the door and closed it quickly. "Don't do that to me! Someone might see me. I had a terrible time slipping away from them. Have you no heart? If you should come to me in distress, I would comfort you, protect you, even hide you away, until all danger was past—"

"This," Consuella broke in sternly, "has gone far enough! Stop clowning and give me facts. What have you done? Who is after you? Why are you here? How is it my fault?"

"It's a long story," he retorted, grinning. "Couldn't we sit down? I'm practically exhausted."

SHE found herself leading the way to the sofa against her better judgment. She offered him a cigarette. He smoked while he talked.

"It began back in Gainsville years ago when you were the pampered darling daughter of the richest man in town, and I was the fifth child of the poorest man in town. You had a birthday party, and of course, I wasn't invited. That hurt, because I was desperately in love with you."

Consuella stirred uneasily. She stared at him thoughtfully. There was that something vaguely familiar about his eyes and the stubborn set of his jaw. Out of a long line of admirers, she was beginning to remember a ragged little boy who had tried to kiss her once. He had been Henry Norman then, one of the children in Gainsville she had not been allowed to play with.

"You moved away to New York," he continued, "but I never forgot you for a moment. I sold newspapers during high school and books during college. It was pretty tough going. Then I fell in love again—with an airplane this time. The two loves were an unbeatable combination. I was obsessed with the idea of amounting to something, of impressing you. So I flew the Atlantic and broke all records. Now I'm famous, I suppose, and it's all your fault. They threw tons of paper at me today, made speeches about how wonderful I am, and pretty girls practically tore me to pieces. I'm on the front page of every newspaper in the country. I can't even eat breakfast without making the headlines. It's awful. I can't stand it."

Consuella's amazement was drowned in her laughter. She threw back her head and laughed excitedly. "You

blessed idiot," she exclaimed, "didn't you know it would be like that? You brought it all on yourself."

"I didn't realize," he said, suddenly solemn, "quite how humble and inadequate and helpless I would feel at so much praise and adulation. I want to break down and bawl. Honestly, I feel like a fraud. Any aviator with good equipment could fly that puddle as I flew it. I want to crawl into a hole and hide until this hero business blows over."

"And that's why you've come to me?"

He nodded. "No one will ever think of looking for Hank Norman in the fashionable apartment of Miss Consuella Farson. In a couple of days some other idiot will do something spectacular, and then I can emerge and go about my business without feeling like a goldfish. Am I—asking too much—of you?"

Consuella hesitated. She wanted to grant his request, but there were many reasons why she should not.

In the first place, hiding away was the very last thing he should do, if he really craved oblivion. Fifty million persons, at least, would be wondering where he was. In the second place, August Ware would be furious, when and if he found out. And of course she would have to tell him. And in the third place, there was her wedding just two days off. The apartment would be in the spotlight. She shuddered to think how much it would be in the spotlight if Hank Norman were discovered tucked away among her souvenirs!

She shook her head regretfully.

He held up his hands before her eyes. "Look how they're shaking. I'm a nervous wreck. Flying the ocean was child's play compared to bucking that mob of reporters and camera men and autograph seekers."

"What you need," Consuella told him, "is a square meal, strong hot coffee, rest and quiet. I'll fix you up with the food and drink. Then you must go."

"Thanks, angel," he said happily. "But surely you wouldn't—"

Before he could say more, the door opened and Sibyl walked in. Consuella introduced them as calmly as possible under the astonishing circumstances, and Sibyl gasped with amazement. "Not the Hank Norman who flew the Atlantic?" Her eyes were wide with admiration.

"In person," Hank sighed, "and please don't tell anybody."

Consuella lay back on the couch and watched this Hank Norman devour a man-sized meal and drink three cups of coffee, with Sibyl hovering over him to fulfill his slightest wish. He told them a little about his Atlantic hop, and as he talked Consuella realized that her heart was hammering strangely. She was too excited to eat. Her shoulder still pained her, but she scarcely noticed it.

He got up finally and said slowly, "Well, that was a swell meal. Guess I'll be taking off. Sorry I bothered you."

"Oh, no!" Consuella exclaimed, then promptly blushed. "We'll—we'll put you up for the night. You—you can have Sibyl's room, and—and she can share mine."

A smile of triumph flickered across his face. Sibyl was regarding her disapprovingly. Consuella ignored both expressions.

"I hope you won't regret this," he said gratefully.

"I'm sure I won't," she told him recklessly, although she knew full well that she was marching straight into trouble.



BREAKFAST the next morning was a gay affair. Consuella and Sibyl looked startlingly lovely—deliberately. Consuella was wearing a morning dress of cool green linen. Sibyl had elected to appear in pink. Even the maid was dolled up in her very finest uniform.

Hank looked rested and ruggedly handsome after a good night's sleep. They read all about him, aloud, in the headlines of the morning papers.

One paper commented:

The hero of the hour can't take it. He failed to show up at a banquet given in his honor last night. In fact, it looks as if he had slipped away to hide from his many admirers. Perhaps he is trying to intrigue the public's fancy still more by playing hide-and-seek. It is one of the public mysteries of the year. Where is Hank Norman hiding? There must be a woman mixed up in it. Who is she?

Another paper listed the offers open to Hank Norman, when and if he could be found to sign contracts. They totaled over fifty thousand dollars, including offers from vaudeville agents, circuses and Hollywood. Hank wasn't at all interested, only amused.

"You're crazy not to cash in on your fame," Sibyl told him. "You could make a cool million."

"What do you think I should do?" Hank asked Consuella.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said, with pretended indifference. She was fiercely proud of him for not caring about the money. There was a lump in her throat, for some strange reason.

After breakfast he followed her into the living-room, and shut the door. She whirled about in astonishment and fright.

"I don't want to rush this thing," Hank said challengingly, coming swiftly toward her, "but the sight of you—so near—has gone to my head. I'm not responsible. I've got to kiss you, hold you in my arms. I've got to try to make you care."

He reached out and pulled her close. He almost crushed her breath away in his sudden ardor. "I've loved you always," he said huskily, kissing her eyes, her flushed cheeks, and then her trembling mouth. "Darling!"

At first she was rigid and furious. She struggled wildly to free herself. But his arms were bands of steel about her slender, defiant form. At first her lips were unresponsive, but they

sprang to life, with an inevitability that frightened her, beneath his demanding kiss. Soon she was kissing him back in ecstatic surrender.

He was hurting her shoulder, but she didn't care. He was bruising her lips, but she didn't care. For here, at last, was a man whose kisses thrilled her down to her toes, whose touch was magic, whose smile was a challenge, whose deeds were brave and gallant. For a moment she forgot August Ware and their wedding plans. She forgot everything but the throbbing of her own truant heart and the blaze of his eyes.

"I'm not going to cheapen myself or our love," he said, "by touring the country as Exhibit A to be gaped at, along with the monkeys and kangaroos. You are rich, and I am poor. I would like to match your fortune with one of my own, but the knowledge that I could do it is enough. I'm going into an airplane factory as an aeronautical engineer, at seventy-five dollars a week. You'll have to get used to living on my salary."

"Wait! Don't!" Consuella choked. "I—I'm going to be married tomorrow. There's a luncheon today, a rehearsal tonight—August Ware, my fiancé, will be here soon."

"Skip all that," Hank said rashly. "Tell him your true love has come along. Tell him to go find some other girl. Tell him we were childhood sweethearts and that you could never marry anyone else."

"I can't do that," she frowned miserably. "It's—it's all arranged."

"Break it up," Hank insisted, with a glorious disregard for everything. "I was supposed to fly to Washington today to be decorated. Tomorrow I'm expected in St. Louis. None of that matters. Our love is more important to me—" He broke off. "You haven't said you love me yet. Do you?"

She nodded.

"Say it."

"I love you."

"Now prove it by breaking off with Dr. August Ware."

Obediently, Consuella went to the telephone. Hank stood over her while she dialed August's number, asked for him.

"Dr. Ware is not in," the secretary said. "Is there any message?"

Consuella sighed. "This is Miss Farson. Please tell him to call me the moment he comes in."

"Yes, Miss Farson."

THE day flew by on gilded wings. Consuella broke engagements right and left, using her shoulder as an excuse. When the telephone wasn't ringing, she and Hank talked and talked. Sibyl was busy answering the doorbell, signing for hats and shoes and gloves, and opening wedding presents which now would have to go back. She seemed quite satisfied with the sudden turn of events, not at all jealous that Hank's fancy had not settled on her.

Several times during the day Consuella tried to reach August, but she was told that he was at the hospital performing a very delicate operation and could not be disturbed. That made her feel terrible—mean and shallow and unworthy.

As the hours passed, the dread of telling him became so acute that she knew she couldn't go through with it. While he was busy saving a life, she was being made love to by a harum-scarum aviator and agreeing to everything he proposed. "I'm the one who's lost my mind," she reproached herself sternly.

But all her doubts and fears and good intentions were shattered every time Hank kissed her. There had never been anything in her life quite like his kisses and his manner of making love. He had swept her off her feet. She was his obedient slave. It was simply awful, in a tender, vibrant, wonderful sort of way.

By nightfall, society reporters were beginning to haunt her telephone and her doorway. "Is it true that Miss Farson has broken her engagement and canceled her plans to be married

tomorrow?" one of them asked with uncanny intuition.

"We have no statement to make," Sibyl told them all. "Please go away."

The evening papers carried headlines about the missing aviator and a brief paragraph, in the society gossip columns, about the rumor that the Farson-Ware wedding might not take place as scheduled. No one was clever enough to put the two together.

Dr. August Ware called on his bride at nine o'clock that night. Despite the long siege in the operating room and a thousand details incident to his marriage, he had taken time to get into a dinner jacket. No one had dared point out to him the item in the papers about his wedding, for Dr. Ware had a temper. Consuella knew very little about that temper, except what she had heard and discounted. A doctor is privileged to miss parties, and even wedding rehearsals, without creating any gossip. But when both the bride and groom fail to show up, that's when rumors are born.



HE telephone was ringing shrilly when he arrived, and he had to force his way through the group of reporters doggedly occupying the hallway, and when he was finally admitted to Consuella's private sitting-room, where they had retreated to be safe from the press, he found his bride in another man's arms.

Consuella, having expected a telephone call from her fiancé before he came, was taken completely by surprise. She moved quickly out of Hank's embrace and stood up, her face crimson. She felt both guilty and defiant.

Hank looked around, and at sight of the third and decidedly important member of the triangle, broke into a troubled grin. But he did not waver as he gazed straight into Dr. Ware's angry dark eyes.

"Consuella!" August said sternly, putting everything he had into that one reproach. Then he clenched his fists and took two steps toward the usurper of his rightful place.

"Let's just skip the fight," Hank said easily. "You could swing at my jaw and I could swing at yours. In fact, we could knock each other completely out, but that wouldn't help matters very much."

"Who is this smart nobody?" August asked harshly.

"I'm—I'm trying—to find my voice—so I—can introduce you," Consuella trembled. "This is Mr. Norman—Hank Norman, August. He—just—flew the Atlantic."

"How noble of you!" August said with jealous sarcasm.

"Yes! Wasn't it?" Hank retorted.

"And what are you doing hiding in my fiancée's apartment?"

"Keep cool," Hank said calmly, "and I'll tell you. You see, it was like this. When I was standing on the steps of the City Hall accepting the keys to the city, I happened to see Consuella's picture in the paper sticking out of somebody's pocket. It said she was going to be married in a couple of days. I couldn't afford to let that happen—not when I had loved her all my life. So I broke away from my public and made a dash for her apartment—"

"Hank!" Consuella gasped. He wasn't telling the same story at all!

"I had to have her undivided attention for several hours straight," Hank went on quite frankly, "because I figured it would take that long for me to make her love me, make her see what a mistake it would be for her to marry the wrong man. So I begged her to hide me away, to protect me. Being an angel, she fell for that line. That gave me time to show her the real meaning of the word 'love.'"

"Hank Norman, I hate you!" Consuella blazed out indignantly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I'm making a clean breast of everything," said Hank, "so Dr. August Ware will see that you were

innocent of any duplicity. She tried to call you today, Dr. Ware, to tell you—"

"That's enough out of you," August Ware snapped. "I'll attend to you in a moment." He turned on Consuella. "You can't break off with me," he warned, "just by calling me up and announcing that you have changed your mind. If our wedding doesn't go through, as scheduled, and this Hank Norman business leaks out, I'll be the laughingstock of New York. You can't do that to me. I have built up valuable prestige. I don't intend to let you tear it down with your fickle fancy. I—"

Before Consuella could calm down enough to defend herself, Hank broke in angrily, "Don't you talk to my girl like that!"

"She's not your girl!"

"Ask her!"

Both men turned to Consuella. "Are you my girl?" Hank challenged confidently.

"Are you?" August gritted.

Consuella looked wildly from one to the other. They both looked ready and willing to tear each other to pieces. She had gotten herself into hundreds of tight spots in her brief life, but this one had the others topped. There was no escape. If she yelled for help she would have reporters crashing through the door. If she said she was Hank's girl, August would dive into Hank. And if she said she wasn't, Hank might stalk out of her life forever, and she simply couldn't let that happen.

She hated him for having played such a smart trick on her, but she loved him far more than she hated him. He could make the blood race in her veins. He could make her spirits soar. He could lift her heart to the sky. After sampling such a delicious brand of love, she knew that she would be miserable with anything less.

It was too bad that this wonderful thing had had to happen to her at such an inopportune time. Still, it was much better for it to have happened

before, rather than after her marriage. She knew that August Ware was not being treated exactly fairly, but how could she remedy that? If she married him, loving another man, that would be unfairness in the extreme. Yet she couldn't let him down, hold him up to ridicule.

"I'm all mixed up," she wailed. "Just—just fight it out."

August regarded her reply as a major triumph for him. "That's exactly what I want to do," he said, and lunged forward.

HANK had been caught unawares, and the two men toppled over the sofa. Consuella crouched in a corner while the fight gained momentum. There Sibyl joined her, attracted to the room by the noise. Then the maid crept in. The fight went fiercely on, as the audience increased slowly. Chairs toppled over. Vases were shattered. The room was in an uproar.

Presently the reporters, who wanted only a statement about the Farson-Ware wedding, broke through the outside door and rushed in to see what all the commotion was about. "It's Hank Norman!" one of them shouted. "And Dr. August Ware!"

There was a dash for the telephone. In a short time the room was filled with photographers, their cameras and their flashlights. Despite all this interference, the fight went steadily on. Hank and August seemed oblivious to everything but the matter of knocking each other out. Consuella crouched in her corner, watching them, practically paralyzed with emotion.

About that time she thought of the police. "Oh, dear!" she wailed frantically. "When they come, everything will be terrible!"

Sibyl pulled her head over and screeched in her ear. "Stop Hank! He's killing August!"

"August can take care of himself," Consuella replied crazily. "He started it. Besides, how can I stop them?"

"August doesn't really love you,"

Sibyl told her, still shouting in order to be heard. "He thinks he's got to marry Park Avenue before he can achieve success. You've been a sap, Consuella. He was marrying you for your money and social position."

Consuella thought that over as calmly as possible. It was a blow to her pride. "How do you know?" she asked Sibyl.

"I know because I'm in love with him, because I know him, because I knew him before he met you. He'd love me if you were out of the way."

Consuella broke into a smile and hugged Sibyl fiercely. "You're wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You've solved everything!" She got up and cupped her mouth with her hands. "Stop it! Stop fighting, Hank!"

Hank shook his head. "Don't bother me now, woman!" he mumbled.

"Please stop, Hank! I love you! Don't you hear?" she yelled. "I love you!"

"She loves him!" the reporters shouted.

Hank stopped fighting obediently, and August promptly dropped down to the floor, exhausted.

"Are you my girl?" Hank asked Consuella stubbornly. "Yes or no. Say it!"

"I'm your girl."

"Did you hear that, August Ware?" Hank drove it in relentlessly. "She's my girl."

"I heard it," August mumbled un-

caringly, because by that time his head was cradled in Sibyl's lap, and she was looking down at him tenderly.

Hank looked about the room in amazement. He eyed the broken vases, the upset furniture, the gaping reporters and the flashing cameras. He turned to Consuella with an apologetic grin, as he rubbed his swelling jaw. "Do you think we'll ever live this down?"

Her answer was lost in the shuffle of a hundred eager questions. It was strictly a field day for the reporters, and they intended to make the most of it.

"Mr. Norman, do you have a statement to make?"

"Miss Farson, are you and Mr. Norman engaged?"

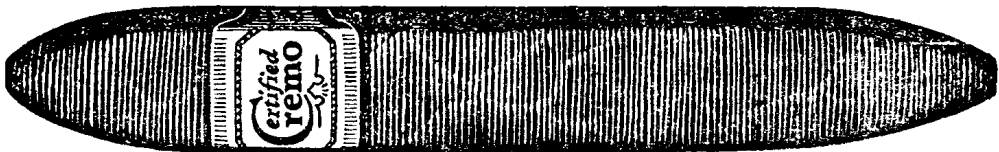
"When are you going to be married?"

"Where are you planning to live?"

"What are you planning to do next, Mr. Norman?"

"Next," Hank said slowly, pausing for emphasis, as they hung on every word. "I plan to kiss my girl." And he did it, too, right there before everybody—even the police, who came rushing in to make arrests for disturbing the peace, but who remained to grin and offer congratulations.

Consuella didn't care if the whole world saw her in Hank's arms, with his lips against hers in a kiss of promise, for that was exactly where she wanted to be—always.



*You don't have to pay 5¢
for a fine long-filler cigar...*

SMOKE Cremo NOW 3 FOR 10¢

*"You're under arrest!"
the policeman said
gruffly. Correnah's eyes
were black with un-
named fear.*



Too Pretty to Trust

By Vicki Hille

*The Fate That Threw Them Together Was the Very
Thing That Kept Them Apart*

WHEN she closed the door softly and stepped out into the darkness of the veranda, Correnah knew Ken Farris would be waiting. The musicale was over. His stepmother, her employer, had gone to bed. Even as Correnah sniffed the fragrance of the rain-drenched garden, Ken appeared from beyond the shadows.

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With a whispered, "Correnah!" he took her in his arms, kissed her soft red lips, until her arms went around his neck and she kissed him back.

"For a super-efficient social secretary, you're the sweetest, cuddliest little thing," he said huskily after a moment. "I'm mad about you!" His fingers caressed her thickly curling brown hair. "Kiss me again!"

"For good night," she murmured, as she gave him her lips. Then she drew back determinedly. "I must go now, Ken. Suppose servants' talk reaches your stepmother's ears."

"I don't think anyone likes her well enough to tell her," Ken shrugged. But he released her. "If you truly realized how eager I am to be with you, you'd meet me some place to talk." His voice softened. "We could make plans, little lovely."

Correnah let her eyes go beyond him, across the blurred garden to the part of the imposing house occupied by Mrs. Harrington Farris. It was completely dark. Mrs. Farris' musicales usually ended by ten-thirty, and eleven o'clock bedtime for everybody was her rule.

Correnah sighed. For five months now she'd been in bed every night at eleven, up every morning at seven. At first, when she'd been so desperate for a position, she'd told herself she could stand the strict rules and the isolation of the country estate. But now, standing in the perfumed night, thrilling to Ken's ardor, her pulses singing with excitement, she grew suddenly rebellious.

"This past month, since I've known you love me, have been difficult for me, too, Ken," she admitted softly. "I'd like to have the whole world know—instead of our having to hide like this—"

He reached for her hands again, held them tightly in his own. "Only six months more, sweetheart. Just until my final decree of divorce."

In the dark Correnah's eyes were pensive.

"You know how it is,"—Ken went on. "My stepmother is very fond of Tressa. She won't admit Tressa's a jealous nagger." He sighed heavily. "Even when Tressa keeps an eye on me nearly every place I go, my stepmother only thinks she's cute."

"You mean—Mrs. Farris really thinks there's a chance for a reconciliation?"

Ken nodded. "I have to handle

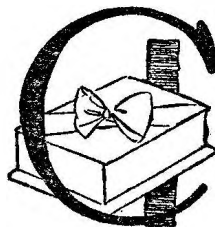
her carefully. She has absolute control of my income, you know."

He leaned closer, until Correnah was caught once more in the compelling wave of his magnetism. "I'm crazy over the whole delicious five feet four of you, lovely. I get my trust fund in about a year—and then Paris, London, jewels and furs—everything you could ask! Come on! Let's get out of here and talk."

For an instant Correnah hesitated. But she was twenty, and in love, and she couldn't stay shut up all the time.

"All right," she agreed breathlessly.

Ken straightened. "We can't go together," he said, suddenly matter of fact. "Someone might see us. But meet me at that restaurant and cocktail lounge on Grand Street. I'll go first in my car, and you follow a few minutes later in that coupé you use for errands."



CORRENAH stole upstairs to her own room. It had begun to rain harder. Above the patter of rain on her windows she could scarcely hear Ken's car purr away from the sleeping estate.

She slipped into a smart suit, put a smart little hat on her curls. A few seconds later she was out in the garage, thankful for the gust of wind that drowned the engine throb of the light coupé. This was adventure!

But as she turned into the main road leading to town, some of her high excitement dwindled. The night was black and lonely. She felt relieved when she looked in the rear-view mirror and saw headlights behind her. Like two great unblinking eyes they stayed—five minutes, ten minutes—until Correnah knew a sudden scary feeling of being followed. She speeded up, but the car

kept at exactly the same distance.

And then, when she was tense with nervousness, she glimpsed street lights ahead. To her relief the mysterious car gathered speed now, came abreast, faintly revealing a long, dark sedan with a lone woman driver. Then it streaked on, disappearing around a curve.

Almost simultaneously, Correnah heard a crash, then a horrible cry. A moment later her own headlights showed her a crumpled human form in the road, the dark sedan pulling away fast.

A hit-and-run driver!

Instinctively, Correnah jammed on her brakes. The next instant her own car slithered off the wet road and crashed into a telephone pole. The jolt brought Correnah's face down hard against the steering wheel.

A little dazed, rubbing her cheek, she scrambled out of the car and ran unsteadily toward the figure in the road. The man lay with queer grotesque limpness on the pavement. But as she reached him he rolled over, half sat up, and she glimpsed bony old features drawn with pain before he sagged back against the wet asphalt.

With increasing horror Correnah now saw headlights approaching. Desperately she tried to pull the man from the highway.

The oncoming car came to a stop. The big figure of a man leaped from the roadster.

"What's happened?" His voice was deeply resonant, but young.

"Someone — hit — him," Correnah said through chattering teeth.

In the eerie light, her gray eyes were enormous. The young man pushed back his hat and peered at her intently. Her fingers went up to the long painful bruise on her forehead where she'd hit the steering wheel.

"You must have been clipping along pretty fast on this wet pavement," he commented curtly.

In the split second before he turned back to the victim, Correnah realized that he had a strong, handsome face, was very blond and that his eyes were a brilliant blue. And—he hadn't believed her when she had said someone else had hit the old man!

She watched him as he gently lifted the limp body of the old man and carried it to his roadster.

"There's an emergency flask of brandy in that side pocket," he said. "Get it!"

Correnah found it, but her hand shook so that she couldn't hold it to the old man's lips.

"I'll do it!" His voice was sharp. "You'd better get ready to face the police and tell your story. I see cars coming."

He glanced toward her coupé. It had a bent fender; the bumper was torn off, and one headlight slanted crazily upward.

"No matter how serious the accident," he went on sternly, "it's always better in such circumstances to tell the truth."

Fear shot through her. "E-but I didn't do it!" she cried. "A dark sedan passed me on the curve—"

In silence his blue eyes regarded her.

The old man coughed, then said plainly, "Think I must have broken some ribs."

"He's better—" Correnah quavered.

"Lucky for you he isn't dead!"

"But I tell you I—I—" Her senses reeled; her knees buckled; a black curtain shut off everything.

SHE came to with her face against a smoky-smelling tweed shoulder. She was sitting on the running board of a car. She heard voices, the slamming of car doors, an ambulance siren wailing. She opened her eyes.

"All right now?" The young man leaned her against the car door, got up.

Still hazy, she nodded. She glimpsed

another man looking down at her—a policeman in uniform.

"You're both under arrest," he said gruffly.

The shock cleared Correnah's head. She stood up shakily. "For what?"

"There's plenty on you."

Her eyes, wide and black with unnamed fear, swept the knot of people crowding around her. "It's only—that we were the first ones he saw when he came to—"

"We heard the old man say you did it!" someone snapped.

Her gaze flashed to the big young man.

"Looks as if we were in for a bad night," he said very low. His eyes went over her white piteous face with its frame of damp curls peeping out under her smart little hat, but Correnah couldn't read his thoughts.

Then she was in the rear seat of a sedan. The policeman drove with the young man beside him. They were being taken to jail.

At the station house Correnah tried to shake off her weakness and terror. Her head throbbed, but she held it high.

"I'm Correnah Marsh," she answered the captain's questions. "I'm employed by Mrs. Harrington Farris. I—I didn't hit that old man. I—I got there just in time to see a dark sedan pull away. A woman was driving. I skidded—" Her voice thinned. She was close to tears.

"Thayne Grayson is my name." The young man took his turn. "I used to live here, but I've been away for nearly two years. And don't you think, captain, that the officer was a little hasty, preferring charges against us? The old man was—not himself. And there were no eye-witnesses, you know."

Correnah gave him a grateful glance. Perhaps he did believe her! He smiled at her, his eyes very blue, his teeth very white. With his hat off, showing his thick blond hair, Correnah decided he was handsomer

than she had thought at first. He was—wonderful!

He motioned her to a bench against the wall. Then he talked earnestly to the captain. When he joined her, Correnah knew that at least they weren't to be locked in cells. He sat down beside her.

"You look like Little Red Riding Hood in that suit. Correnah is much too dignified a name for you. I'm going to call you Corrie."

"You're awfully good." She smiled, her eyes warmly grateful, her lips trembling.

His eyes seemed to grow bluer. "I think maybe you're worth it. I'll know you are if you have the courage to face this thing."

"You still think I did it!"

Thayne's eyes grew stern. "You aren't going to lie to me, too, are you? I can't stand a coward."

Baffled, she stared at him. And then suddenly in place of the blond attractiveness of this man before her, her mind switched to Ken Farris' dark good looks. Ken would believe her. Ken!

She jumped up. "Oh, I just remembered I had an engagement! He'll wonder what became of me!"

"Of course there'd be a man where you're concerned." His face was sober. "And probably there's a woman waiting somewhere for the old man, poor soul."

She flushed, and her eyes filled with quick tears. "May I use the phone here?"

He nodded toward a telephone booth. "Maybe your friend can get bail for you. I can't do a thing until morning."



N the booth she dialed the restaurant, asked for Ken. After a long interval his voice, sharp and worried, came over the wire.

"What happend, Correnah?"

"I'm in jail!" Her voice broke.

She heard him gasp. In a low rapid voice she explained. Then, "Ken, I can't awaken your stepmother at this hour. Can you come down here and arrange bail or something?"

"What a mess!" His voice was annoyed. Then it changed to a soft caressing, "Darling, I love you. I'm terribly sorry about all this. But I can't be mixed up in it in any way. For both our sakes, you know—"

"Oh!"

"I'm terribly sorry, darling." All of his charm was in his voice. "It makes me feel like a heel. But I don't see how I can possibly do a thing for you—that is, until after my stepmother hears about it. Then I'll raise heaven and earth—"

"I—see. Then good night, Ken." Slowly, she replaced the receiver.

As she emerged from the booth, Thayne Grayson gave her a sharp look.

She met it and found herself explaining carefully, "I really shouldn't have asked him. He's—in a rather peculiar position—that is, publicity—" She broke off as Thayne cocked a skeptical eyebrow.

At that moment a newspaper reporter appeared, carrying a camera.

"Must you?" Thayne asked him as the man got out plates and a flashlight.

"Yes. I make my living this way." The reporter was chubby and nonchalant, but he had keen black eyes. He stared at Thayne. "Say—you're Grayson, the engineer who came back here to look over the site for the big bridge!"

"Right." Thayne smiled.

"Boy! Is this an item for a night-court reporter!"

"Can I talk you out of it?"

"Nope."

After the reporter had gone, Corrie said in a small, worried voice, "Mrs. Harrington Farris will have a fit."

Thayne's mouth twitched.

"You know her?" Corrie asked quickly.

"I grew up in this town. How on earth did you happen to pick her for a boss?"

"I needed the job desperately." In a soft, breathless voice Corrie began telling him why.

"You're so exhausted your words are running together," Thayne said after a moment. "Perhaps that's why you don't seem to be seeing this thing clearly." He slipped an arm around her, drew her head to his shoulder. "Let's call a truce."

She thought she heard a truant note of tenderness in his voice. It was a new note to her limited experience. It bathed her in lovely warmth and contentment. Her long, shining lashes fluttered down against her cheeks. All the things she should be thinking of—Ken, and explaining this night to Mrs. Farris—yes, and even making this man see she was innocent—seemed to diminish in importance. It seemed so utterly right to be in the secure curve of Thayne Grayson's arm. It wasn't passionately possessive like Ken's; it was just—sweet. She drifted off to sleep.

THE sun was shining brightly when she awakened. Thayne was gone. She'd been sleeping propped against the wall corner with her head on his folded overcoat.

As she rubbed her eyes, Thayne appeared carrying a tray.

"Good morning. Here is your coffee." He grinned. "Smells gorgeous!" She wrinkled her nose, met his mood of lightness. She took the thick white cup he handed her. "How did they happen to let you out to buy this?"

"Oh, I'm a free man this morning. They found no marks upon my car's beautiful enameled surface. They took measurements in the road. They decided, finally, that I was only a good Samaritan."

Corrie's throat went tight. She set the steaming cup on the bench beside her. "And what did they decide about me?"

His blue eyes clouded. "You're behind the eight ball. But in a few minutes you'll be out of here, on bail. At last I managed a connection."

He handed her a morning paper. Corrie took one look at the front page and gasped.

"But how awful!" She stared at the picture of herself and Thayne under the caption:

IN POLICE NET AFTER ACCIDENT

The small print below the picture danced. But Corrie traced with one small finger words to the effect that the old man was in a critical condition in the hospital and was not expected to live.

"But he can't die! He lied!" Tears sprang to her eyes.

From the far side of the room, the captain called Thayne. Thayne left Corrie, spoke with the captain, then came back.

"You're free to go now, Corrie. But you're to appear in court the day after tomorrow. I advise you to see a good lawyer immediately and tell him the whole truth."

Suddenly Corrie was furiously angry—and terribly afraid.

"I've told the truth, and you won't believe it. How do you expect I'm going to make a lawyer or a judge believe it?" she asked passionately. "I was driving fast; I admit that. I had a date with—with my fiancé." Corrie lifted one small, trembling hand and brushed back the little curls which clung to her forehead.

"It was as I told the captain—a woman in a dark sedan passed me, going fast. And the next thing I knew my headlights had picked up the old man, lying stunned in the road."

"And so you drove straight into a telephone pole and smashed your car to help things out," suggested Thayne, his face tense.

It was no use. Corrie could see that. The fire died out of her. Suddenly it seemed as if the world would

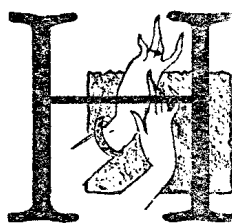
never be right again if this big blond man looking down at her so sternly didn't believe in her honesty.

She threw out her hand in a helpless gesture. "Perhaps Mrs. Harrington Farris will help me. There must be some way to locate that dark sedan. Maybe she and Ken Farris—" She tried to bolster her mounting panic. "They have plenty of influence."

"Ken Farris—" Thayne's face hardened queerly. Then, "Come along," he said curtly.

His face wore a closed-in, grim look as Corrie followed him outside to his roadster. He was silent all during the drive to the estate. As they reached the gates, he stopped the car, came around and opened the door for Corrie. She climbed out.

"I—I don't know how to thank you, Thayne." She looked up at him, her gray eyes bright with unshed tears. "I appreciate what you've done all the more because—because you don't believe in me."



HER eyes went over her pale, childish face with the ugly bruise marring her smooth forehead. They rested upon her curls, soft and shining as brown satin in the morning sunlight. They came to her mouth.

Suddenly he leaned down and pressed his own mouth against the rosy freshness of her lips. After a breathless, mad leap of her heart it was over. Color flamed in her cheeks, and she dared not look back at him as she turned and ran through the gates.

When she was sure the foliage along the driveway shut him from view she pressed her fingers to her throbbing temples.

"I'm certainly mixed up all of a sudden," she thought as she reached a side door of the house. She put her key in the lock, opened the door

and found herself facing Mrs. Harrington Farris.

"You can give me that key, Miss Marsh, and pack your things." The old lady's face was furious.

"But I can explain, Mrs. Farris. I didn't hit that man. I—"

"Nothing can explain why you were out at that hour in my car—or this disgusting publicity!" Mrs. Farris waved a morning paper, her dark eyes snapping angrily.

At the end of the long hallway Corrie glimpsed Ken standing in a doorway.

She made a swift, silent prayer. "Please let him calm her down, share the blame, save me my job—please!"

But Ken made no move.

"There is no explanation of your disobedience to my rule of retiring by eleven, is there, Miss Marsh?" Mrs. Farris asked curtly.

"N-no—"

"Then while you pack, I'll make out your check."

Ten minutes later Corrie was walking back down the long driveway, carrying her suitcase. Before she reached the gates she stopped to read a note that Parks, the butler, had slipped into her hand. It was a hasty scrawl from Ken.

Little Lovely:

I don't dare antagonize my stepmother while she's in this mood. I'll try to convince her later that she should give you back your position. Suggest you go in town to the boarding house at 14 View Street. I'll come to you there as soon as I can manage it.

KEN.

Tears came to her eyes. She had misjudged him! He was going to help her. The tears fell down her cheeks as she started down the road.

"I thought this would happen!" It was Thayne's voice.

Corrie wheeled, wiped the tears from her eyes with a small doubled fist.

Thayne's car was parked by the side of the road. He opened the door.

"Get in."

Corrie got in. "Still playing the

good Samaritan?" She tried to smile.

"You refuse to take yourself out of my thoughts." Thayne kept his eyes on the road. He added after a moment, "I still have hopes that you'll come through."

Corrie was silent. There was no use in arguing. She'd tried that. Besides, all she could think of was how Thayne's lips had felt upon hers.

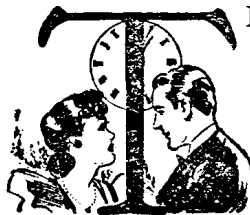
He looked briefly into her gray eyes, pensive and shadowed beneath the brim of her pert blue felt hat.

"You've caught my heart, little Corrie," he said huskily. Then his voice deepened. "But I'm not going to make a fool of myself. We never could find happiness together with this between us."

Corrie stiffened.

"There's nothing between us! And you forget—I'm engaged."

He gave her a long look. It could mean anything, Corrie reflected with a strange fluttering of heartbeats. It could mean he didn't care—or it could be reminding her that she wore no engagement ring and was very much alone for a girl in trouble, and that he didn't believe her—again.



TEN minutes later she and Thayne stood alone in the dim old-fashioned hallway of the boarding house Ken had recommended. The

landlady had disappeared to telephone for verification of Mrs. Farris' check. In sudden panic Corrie wondered what was going to happen to her when the check was all spent.

"Don't look like that!" Thayne said abruptly. He reached for her cold little hands, drew her close. "Sometimes I almost believe in you, Corrie—"

"If only you would!"

His blue eyes held hers, then slowly he bent his head and pressed his lips against the sweetly tremulous curve of her mouth. Corrie felt as

though his warm eager kiss were drawing some vital flaming spark from her very heart, up to her own lips. When he released her she was shaken and breathless.

Thayne went to the outer door, opened it. "Good-by for now."

Her gray eyes shining, her heart hammering, Corrie watched him go. It was almost as though she loved him, Corrie thought as she unpacked in the tiny room upstairs—loved him with a new, deeply satisfying emotion that had been locked away in some secret compartment of her heart. But of course it couldn't be love, for she loved Ken. All this wild tumult within her at Thayne's kisses must be only relief that Thayne had said he might believe in her.

She was still a little dazed with the turbulence of her emotions when the landlady called up to tell her Ken Farris was waiting downstairs.

As she entered the room downstairs, Ken rose and came towards her quickly, his dark, clever face tense.

"I came as soon as I could, darling." He looked at her closely. "You seem very radiant for a girl who's in a spot—"

Corrie said gravely, "But of course, I didn't do it. It was a hit-and-run driver. They surely can't pin it on me after they investigate." She was surprised at her surge of confidence.

"Don't be too sure," Ken warned her. "The old man will live, they say now, but he's going to prosecute. His lawyer is good. He's the one who's handling Tressa's divorce from me and who managed to get her a slice of my estate."

Corrie felt icy again with fear. "I realize circumstantial evidence is against me—"

"Suppose you draw me a diagram of exactly what happened," Ken suggested. "If we could interest my step-mother—"

"I'll get a pencil and paper." Corrie started upstairs.

She was a little startled when Ken

followed her. "I'll bring them down," she told him.

"Never mind," Ken said easily. "I'll come up."

It wasn't customary, thought Corrie, for a girl to receive a man in a boarding house room, but surely there could be no harm in talking to him upstairs, drawing diagrams on the table. Probably the landlady wouldn't even know about it.

Yet the minute they were inside the tiny room, Corrie knew she'd made a mistake. Ken's dark eyes had a strange, hungry look she'd never noticed in them before.

"Perhaps we should take these downstairs," she said brightly.

"I like being up here with you—alone." Ken crossed over to her in two swift strides. "Corrie—I'm mad for you!"

Corrie caught her breath sharply, but before she could speak, Ken had crushed her to him. He rained hot, fierce kisses on her lips, stifling her, and strained her to him with an ardor he had not dared permit himself when Corrie was under the protection of Mrs. Harrington Farris' roof.

"My little lovely!" he murmured. "You darling!"

Corrie quivered with revulsion. She knew with a sudden flash of wisdom that Ken had never loved her. She pushed him away violently, her gray eyes blazing.

"Don't touch me!" she gritted. Then with a frightened sob she ran out into the hall.

Almost blindly she ran down the stairs. She could hear Ken following. Waves of humiliation swept over her. She'd been a little fool to be swayed by talk of wedding plans from a man who was not yet divorced from his wife! Hungry for love, she'd mistaken clever philandering for the real thing.

SHE hastened her steps. She wanted to get outside into the clean, cool air, feel it on her feverish cheeks, breathe deeply. She reached the ves-

tibule, flung open the front door, then gave a startled gasp. A big blond young man was charging up the stoop.

Thayne!

"Hello! I'm back—" He broke off, eying her flushed face, her flying hair; then his glance went over her shoulder to Ken.

For a second of electrified silence she watched Thayne's blue eyes grow the color of cold steel. A muscle twitched in his cheek. Then he said, "Hello—Ken."

"Why—hello, Thayne."

"You two know each other?" Corrie asked, puzzled, her gray eyes going from one man to the other.

Ken nodded. "Yes, we know each other—quite well," he said noncommittally. He kept his eyes on Thayne while he laid his hand on Corrie's arm with deliberate familiarity. "I'm so sorry about all this, darling. I'll be seeing you. Good-by."

"G-good-by." Her mouth was dry.

Ken sauntered down the stoop, called back casually, "Good-by, Thayne."

"Good-by." Thayne's lips scarcely moved. He stood rigid, regarding Corrie.

"Is that the man, Corrie?"

She caught her breath. She wanted to cry out, "That was the man!" But somehow the words stuck in her throat.

"Tell me!" Thayne demanded. "Is that the man you phoned to from the station that first night—the one you said was your fiancé?"

Corrie nodded slowly.

"I understand several things—now," Thayne said; then, "Good-by." He turned, hurried down the steps and climbed into his roadster.

A wild desire to run after him possessed Corrie. But she felt drained and weak, and her throat was choked with sobs. She loved Thayne Grayson with all her heart; she knew that now.

After that the miserable hours dragged by. Corrie paced the floor

of her room, she tried to force herself to eat, sat tense, dry-eyed, listening, listening. The landlady must call her soon to tell her Thayne was downstairs, waiting. Or surely there'd be a telephone call from him.

But nothing happened, nothing but bewilderment and heartbreak. Then Corrie realized dully that the time had come for her to go into court.



LITTLE later, alone, utterly forlorn, she went up the granite steps of the courthouse. With a gesture of courage

she had put on a red print dress under her blue swagger coat and a tiny mad hat on her curls. She looked very young and pert. Only her distraught gray eyes with their violet shadows reflected her inner panic.

Always, forever after, Corrie was to remember the horrible moment when her case was called. She rose, took the oath, and then everything became a jumble. Her own voice, answering routine questions, sounded high and strange. The suave, sharp-eyed lawyer badgered her, accusing her of manslaughter, until she contradicted herself. All the while she struggled against weeping. An elderly man, appearing as witness, swore the injured man had pointed out Corrie as the driver who had hit him. The judge's face grew sterner.

Hoping against hope, Corrie looked around for Thayne—or even for Ken. But she saw no familiar face.

And then recess was called. With her head held high, Corrie went out into the dingy corridor. She had a strange feeling of not being really alive. In a daze she moved down the long hallway toward the doors opening out on sunlit lawns.

Then her heart gave a sickening lurch, and she knew this wasn't a nightmare, but vivid reality. For the man looming in the lighted square of

the outer doorway was Thayne Grayson!

Relief flooded over her. She took two quick steps, then her feet halted. A girl had joined Thayne, a girl who was the personification of loveliness in a green suit trimmed with silver fox, her beautiful dark eyes flashing under a tiny veiled hat.

"Darling!" The girl put her arms around Thayne's neck and kissed him.

Corrie's heart became a leaden thing as she watched Thayne kiss the girl, then slip an arm about her. It brought back to Corrie vividly the feel of Thayne's arm around her own waist the night in the police station when she had slept with her head against his shoulder.

She turned away. She couldn't bear it. Thayne had a line, too, and she'd fallen for it! She heard the girl's soft, happy laughter float down the corridor. That was what she herself should be doing, reflected Corrie—laughing at everything. But somehow she felt like crying—crying as if she could never stop.

She reached the empty courtroom, sank into a chair at the rear and closed her eyes.

An attendant tiptoed in, tapped her arm. "The judge would like to speak to you, Miss Marsh."

Wonderingly, Corrie went to the door of the judge's room, turned the knob with icy fingers. As she stepped inside, she caught her breath sharply. Thayne stood, grave and tall, at a window. Near him stood Mrs. Harrington Farris, Ken, and the gorgeous girl who'd been with Thayne in the hallway. The judge was there, too, seated at a big desk. Corrie had heard them talking as she'd opened the door, but now a hush fell on them all.

The girl crossed the room to Corrie.

"I'm Tressa Farris, Ken's wife." Her dark eyes flashed. "I—I saw Ken make love to you. I've hated you." Her voice sank almost to a whisper. "I was spying. I was insanely

jealous." Her red mouth softened, and a look of wistfulness lighted her dark eyes. "I wanted Ken back again—terribly."

Corrie stared at her, stunned. No one in the room moved. They all seemed to be waiting for something.

Tressa squared young shoulders that looked suddenly valiant.

"I was spying the night I followed you in my car and hit the old man. When he got befuddled and accused you—well, I thought I'd stay out of it. Only I worried when I found I'd involved Thayne, too. The paper at first didn't say he'd been freed."

Thayne! If she loved Ken, what was Thayne to this girl?

NOW Corrie saw two round shining tears roll off Tressa's dark lashes. A wave of pity swept Corrie. She suddenly found her voice.

"You shouldn't hate me," she said, very low. "I—I made a dreadful mistake, thinking I was in love with Ken. And I know," she added generously, "Ken didn't really mean it, either. He was lonesome and upset—and—" She broke off, then added softly, "I think it was because I wanted very much to be loved."

Ken slipped an arm about Tressa. He looked calm and relieved for the first time in months.

The judge spoke in calm, pompous tones. "I think that fixes things up. In view of the generous money settlement on the victim of the accident who is recovering, I think Mrs. Farris can be on probation to her husband and Mrs. Harrington Farris." He cleared his throat. "I dismiss this case."

"Oh—thank you!" Tressa smiled up at Ken. "I'm going to be so good, Ken. I won't let jealousy break up our lives again."

Then she looked across at Thayne.

"Thayne darling! You've been grand, considering you could have been horrid about all this." She smiled. "In fact, as a brother I think

you're tops. I've always thought so, but now I'm going to try to be a better sister to you and a perfectly wonderful wife to Ken!"

Corrie caught her breath. Her eyes flew to Thayne. He was Tressa's brother!

Something she saw in his eyes sent swift, lovely color to her cheeks. She lowered her lashes to hide the shining light she knew must be answering the glow in Thayne's steady gaze.

"I wanted to help Corrie as well as you, Tressa," Thayne said in his deep resonant voice. "I love Corrie—but suppose you let me tell her so privately." Smiling, he waved them all toward the door.

Above the mad tumult of her heart, Corrie heard Tressa's laughter, the judge's mock growl, Mrs. Harrington Farris' murmur.

Then the door closed.

Thayne looked down at her. "Darling," he said tenderly, "can you ever forgive me for walking out on you?" His arms went about her, drawing her to him. "It was foolish of me to be so hurt and angry, but I couldn't help feeling furious when I heard that Ken was the man in your life. First because he was my sister's husband, and I wanted to see her happy, and second, and fully as important, I was terribly jealous because of you."

His eyes seemed to grow bluer. "I love you, little Corrie. It's crazy to ask it, I know—but it seems as if I had been waiting all my life for you. Darling, will you marry me? Would you go into the marriage license bureau with me right now?"

"It would save a trip, wouldn't it?" Corrie murmured. Then Thayne sealed her sweet, tremulous mouth with a long kiss.

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BRENDA stood in the center of the sleeping porch, whistling softly through her teeth. The whistling meant that half of the lusciously blonde Marcy twins was wrestling with a problem. And this time

she came back from the thought of Mike's hair that was like a bronze helmet, his jaw inclining to squareness, his nice humorous mouth.

"Whistling through your teeth. I've told you before it makes you sound like



*When a Girl
Has to Scheme
for a Man's
Kisses*

*Brenda caught her breath
at the thought of Mike's
kisses. They would be
stolen kisses, but no
matter.*

the problem was a big one. Six feet plus, in fact. Mike Gallagher to be specific.

"Oh, stop it!" Gale snapped, kicking off her silver sandals.

"Stop what?" Brenda asked with a far-off look in her eyes. Reluctantly,

a—popcorn wagon." Gale wriggled irritably out of the green velvet sheath that was a duplicate of the dress her twin was wearing.

With her heart feeling heavy as lead, the best Brenda could do was to pin on her smile. "You're cross!" she

said with calculated lightness. "Darling, I'd never again have a wrinkle in my disposition if Mike had kissed me as he kissed you tonight. Walt and I saw it happen in the trophy room just before the last dance. We ducked, of course. Tell me, what was it like?"

Gale dropped down on the brocaded bench in front of the dressing-table, and stared, tight-lipped, into the triple mirror, "Oh, for Pete's sake, don't try to act naive!" she said. "You've been kissed plenty of times."

"Plenty," Brenda admitted, "but never by our handsome, legal-minded friend. Just what have you got, darling, that I haven't? I thought we were so exactly alike that I haven't been bothering lately to look in the glass to see if my nose needed powdering—I just look at yours."

"Don't be ridiculous," Gale said icily. "My nose never gets shiny."

Brenda smothered a sigh. She hadn't been a twin for twenty years without learning that her sister was devoid of a sense of humor. She said, "I was only speaking figuratively." And then, because she had to know, she added, "Gale—is he really crazy about you?"

"Hadn't you noticed?" Gale reached for the cold cream jar.

Brenda's deep-blue eyes became wells of pain. "No, I hadn't," she said, unfastening the clasps of her dress slowly. "I—well, I guess I thought the honors were pretty evenly divided there. You know—with this Early Victorian idea of mother's of buying our clothes alike, no one can sort us out. Walt was complaining only tonight that when he cuts in on one of us it's like playing grab bag. I think it's time I had another talk with our maternal parent on the subject."

"No!" said Gale sharply.

Brenda clung determinedly to the light tone, knowing that she would be lost if she didn't. "Oh, I'll admit her idea has its points," she conceded. "It makes us a sort of moral influence in the community. People can't tell whether or not they're seeing double,

and they start going easy on the cocktails. And it's come in handy—like the time Dudley happened into the Crystal Room when you were having lunch with that hockey player. Still—"

Gale whirled around on the bench to face her. "Promise me you won't say anything to mother. You've got to promise me," she insisted.

The smile came unpinned. After all, there was a limit to one's endurance. "I won't promise," Brenda said mutinously. "I hate green. I hate having to wear silly, jingling little bracelets just because you happen to like them. I hate orange-colored bathing suits and leopard cat fur coats, and I adore hats with veils. I'm going to have one with a veil a mile long. I'm going to trade in my leopard cat coat for a gray squirrel. We've never liked the same things, and I've always given in. Well, I'm completely fed up."

"Look," Gale bargained. "If you'll only let things run along as they have been you can go with Dud to all the shows that he gets passes for. Dud won't know the difference. He never has."

"And that's another thing," Brenda said. "I'm through pinch-hitting for you when you want to stand Dudley up for another date. Dud is—well, we'll skip how swell he is, and get back to this business of clothes. I am going to have another talk with mother about that."

Gale bit her lip in vexation. "I'm sure I don't know what's come over you," she said.

Brenda might have answered, "I haven't minded your flirting with every new man you meet. But this time it's Mike. I'm in love with him. Up to my eyebrows. I fell in love with him two months ago, and tonight I saw him kissing you. It's done something to me. Can't you understand that?" But she didn't say it, of course.

"Listen," Gale went on persuasively. "You know how effective it is—our dressing alike—and how it pleases mother to stun the multitudes. And it

isn't as though you'd have to be doing it very much longer. After I'm married you can wear barber-pole stripes or a sarong, for all I care."

Brenda took a long time to find her quilted satin mules. Long enough to make sure that her voice would sound all right when she asked, "You mean—Mike is serious? And that you aren't going to wait for Dud?"

Gale turned back to the task of cold-creaming her lovely face. "Answer number one—when Mike kissed me tonight he said something about being a one-girl man and my being elected. Answer number two—Dud can't even afford to buy me a ring. On the salary he's making he won't be able to marry anyone for the next three years. And I'm not waiting three years to get married. Not when I can have old T. P. Gallagher's nephew."

Brenda looked at her. "There are times," she said quietly, "when it's hard to believe we're really sisters."



HE was in bed five minutes before Gale was. She hadn't bothered to cold-cream her face or to slip on a hair net to preserve her finger-wave. It seemed pointless. Life itself seemed

pointless if Gale was going to marry Mike.

The grand times, few as they had been, that she and Mike had had together hadn't meant a thing to him, Brenda told herself. He hadn't remembered, for instance, the time they'd sat on the log in the woods, talking for so many hours that her feet had gone asleep and he's stood laughing down at her, his arms supporting her while she leaned against him. He hadn't remembered the rainstorm that had turned into practically a cloudburst the day they'd driven to that funny little Italian place for lunch. The rain had seemed to come from all sides at once, and they'd had to roll up the car windows, making the coupé a small pri-

vate world inhabited by only the two of them.

He hadn't remembered, because even then he probably had been falling in love with Gale. There was no telling how many times Gale and he had ridden that same bridle path. Or how many times Gale had lunched with him at Luigi's. Gale had always been the secretive kind. It suddenly became significant to Brenda that when Mike had cut in at dances he had always asked, "Well, what did I draw this time—the Gale or the Breeze?" He never said it the other way around. She had been blind not to have noticed that Gale had always come first.

Surprisingly, Gale, who usually slept until noon, was already up and dressed when Brenda awakened the next morning. Brenda recognized it as strategy on her twin's part. Gale intended to be on hand if there was to be an argument about clothes with their mother.

"I see I am to wear my green knitted suit this morning," Brenda commented, not without bitterness.

"Oh, don't be petty," Gale retorted. "I'm only wearing this until I dress at noon. Mike phoned early. I'm taking the twelve-twelve train into the city so that I can meet him at his office before one o'clock. We're driving out to Luigi's for lunch."

Brenda reached blindly for her dressing-gown.

When she went downstairs for breakfast twenty minutes later, she found Gale busy with a huge box of red roses. "Aren't they gorgeous?" Gale purred. "They just came. From Mike."

Brenda said pointedly, "When are you telling Dudley?"

Her twin tilted her golden head to study her arrangement of the flowers. "I thought maybe you'd do that for me tonight. He'd never get wise that it wasn't me. I thought—well, you know you could break it to Dud so much more tactfully than I could."

Her twin began whistling through her teeth.

Gale said nervously, "I realize it's asking a lot, darling. But if you'll be me just this once more, I swear I'll never ask you to do it again. I—I'll give you my next week's allowance—anything. Please!"

"All right," Brenda agreed slowly, veiling her eyes with her lashes. "I'll tell Dud tonight, if you still want me to."

"Don't worry about my not wanting you to," Gale said, burying her nose in the flowers.

Brenda went on into the kitchen and fixed orange juice and coffee for herself. It was ten o'clock and Thursday, which meant that Helga, the maid, had left for the day two hours earlier. Helga was a supermaid, and Mrs. Martin found it politic to allow her to leave Thursdays as soon as Mr. Marcy's breakfast was out of the way.

Hunting out a box of cheese crackers, Brenda smuggled them upstairs and hid them on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. Then she went into the room where her mother was adding the last deft touches to her street attire.

"Just checking up on you, loveliness," Brenda said. "Today's the day you gild the lily, isn't it? I mean, you're going into town and shoot the works—shampoo, finger wave, facial, manicure and what-have-you, aren't you?"

"And I've got shopping to do besides." Mrs. Marcy frowned at a pair of doeskin gloves and rejected them for others. "If I can't get through in time to catch the four-thirty-six train home I might as well wait and ride back with your father. What have you and Brenda planned for today?"

"This isn't Gale," Brenda told her patiently. "Gale has a date for lunch and I'm"—she hesitated, and a dimple flickered in one smooth cheek—"going to do just—things," she finished with intentional vagueness.

HALF an hour later over the sound of running water, Gale called, "I might as well tell you I'm using those new bath salts of yours. You're sure to smell them."

"Help yourself, darling," Brenda called back cheerfully. "And leave the door unlocked. I'm bringing you that new best seller for you to read while you're in the tub."

"Why this sudden service?" her twin demanded suspiciously a moment later as Brenda gave her the book. "Call me in fifteen minutes. I want plenty of time to dress."

"You'll have plenty of time," Brenda assured her. With her back to the bathroom door she palmed the key. "Plenty," she repeated as she went out, closing the door. There was a faint clicking of the key in the lock as she locked the door from the outside.

She had some uncomfortable moments with her conscience. Gale would probably never forgive her for hijacking this lunch date, Brenda reflected, as she laid out with feverish haste a smartly tailored black suit, frilly blouse and her smallest, most becoming black hat.

She had first planned to wear her new wine-colored outfit, but the hat that went with it was too big. Men didn't want a wide brim getting in the way when they kissed the girl. Brenda caught her breath at the thought of Mike's kisses. They would be stolen kisses, but no matter. Resolutely, she closed her eyes to the inevitability of his learning what she had done. Her one chance of keeping him from finding out would be in claiming this date as a down payment on her twin's debt to her for taking care of Dudley. Maybe she could get away with it.

"I hope—I hope—I hope," Brenda chanted fervently under her breath.

She was all dressed for the city, and ready to tell Gale that she was locked in when her twin discovered the fact for herself. It was a good thing,

Brenda decided, stuffing her fingers in her ears to drown out Gale's shrill, furious protests, that their nearest neighbor was still up in Wisconsin. As there seemed little chance of making herself heard, she scribbled off a note and stuck it under the bathroom door.

In the note Brenda said that so long as she was to be Gale to Dud that night she was stepping into her rôle a little early and was having lunch with Mike. There were cheese crackers in the medicine cabinet. She hoped the magazine stories would hold out. It would probably be four o'clock or after before she would be back, she wrote.

She caught the train that was two ahead of the 12:12 her twin had planned to take. And all the way into the city a nagging little fear rode in the seat beside her. It was while the conductor was punching her commutation ticket that she remembered that she hadn't closed the west windows of the sleeping porch. They were the long casement kind, and now that fall had superseded summer there weren't any screens on. There wasn't a thing to stop anyone as agile as Gale from stepping from the bathroom window ledge to the broad one of the adjoining porch. And once back on the sleeping porch, there wasn't anything to keep Gale from telephoning Mike.

As soon as she reached the city, Brenda hunted out a telephone booth. She had to find out whether or not Gale was still locked in. Depositing the necessary thirty-five cents, she called the house. Then she waited, her heartbeats sounding thick and heavy in her ears.

She didn't have long to wait. "Hello," Gale answered in a high, angry voice.

Stealthily, Brenda replaced the receiver and leaned limply against the wall of the telephone booth. If her twin had discovered the open windows right away, and if she hadn't wasted precious moments in phoning Mike,

there was still time for her to make the twelve-twelve.

She'd better take a taxi to Mike's office, Brenda decided. If he wasn't busy with a client and she told him that she was starving, maybe he'd take her to lunch right away. She doubted if any girl had ever had to scheme so hard for a kiss. But then, she reminded herself, probably no other girl had ever wanted anything as badly as she wanted one of Mike's kisses.

"Oh, Mike," Brenda whispered there in the stuffy little booth, "it's cheating—it's stealing—but don't you see, it's the only way I can get the kind I want? You'll kiss me after you're married to Gale. But they'll be brotherly kisses. I don't want that kind from you, Mike."

BUT by the time she had completed the ten-minute taxi ride to Mike's office, she had almost lost her courage to go through with the thing. Then she was in the elevator, being whisked to the thirty-fourth floor where Mike and his uncle had their law offices. And there was no turning back after saying to a competent-looking secretary, "I'm Miss Marcy. Mr. Gallagher—Mr. Michael Gallagher—is expecting me."

Her gloved hands felt icy and her throat dry as she followed the secretary into Mike's private office. What if Gale had called him! What could she say if Mike knew that she wasn't Gale?

"Miss Marcy," the secretary announced, and withdrew.

"Hello," Brenda said breathlessly. "I know I'm early, but I—I—"

Her voice failed her. For Mike, tall, dark and incredibly handsome in a blue double-breasted suit, had sprung out of his swivel chair and was coming swiftly toward her. A grin slanted up the corners of his mouth, and there was a purposeful look in his gray eyes. Her heart thrilled as she recognized that look. He was going to kiss her.

"What do you mean early?" Mike was saying. "Old Father Time has

been treading water ever since nine o'clock this morning when I called you. Did you get my flowers? Did?" He stopped as the telephone on his desk began to ring, shrilly, insistently.

"I think I'd better wait outside," Brenda said, panic-stricken. With a dreadful certainty she knew that it was Gale who was calling.

"No. Wait here," he told her. "I'll make it snappy."

With her legs feeling like tissue paper, Brenda walked to the window. She heard Mike exclaim, "I don't get it. You say you missed the train—"

Brenda took a tight grip on the window sill, and began whistling through her teeth. It was going to call for some tall explaining. She was thinking so hard and fast that she wasn't aware that Mike had hung up. She broke off her whistling when he startled her by saying at her elbow, "That was Gale calling. What was her big idea, pretending to be you?"

Bewildered, Brenda turned and blurted, "You mean, don't you, why was I pretending to be Gale?"

Young Gallagher groaned. "How do I know what I mean? You've got me putting toothpaste on my shaving brush and salt in my coffee. You've got my heart turning over like a flapjack every time I see a blond curl sticking out of one of those silly little hats you girls all wear. Just yesterday in court—"

"You mustn't," she whispered. "You mustn't tell me all this, Mike. I'm not Gale. I'm Brenda."

"Of course you're Brenda!" he almost shouted. "Whom do you suppose I asked to lunch? Whom do you suppose I sent the flowers to?" His voice broke. "Whom do you suppose I love?" he asked, and drew her gently into his arms.

Then he was kissing her, hungrily, as though he would never let her go again. And for Brenda all her life that had gone before was but a path lead-

ing up to that moment, a moment so blindingly bright, so breath-takingly beautiful that she had to close her eyes. Mike kissed her eyelids.

"Brenda—will you marry me?" he said. "Did you hear me say that I love you? Oh, Brenda—you little witch—you put a spell on me that day in the woods."

"You put one on me the first time I met you," she told him. "And that's a record, I'll have you know. Up till then tall good-looking Irishmen were just—well, tall good-looking Irishmen."

"And then?" Mike prompted.

"I—I can't be flippant about it," Brenda whispered. "I've wanted so terribly for you to love me. I've wanted so terribly to be right here, this way, in your arms. Oh, Mike, I want to belong to you always!"

It was when they were in his coupé on their way to Luigi's that Mike said, "I'm just getting it now. I mean, that phone call of Gale's. I kissed her last night. She knew I thought it was you because I told her. And I bet she figured out just about when you were due at my office for lunch and thought she'd get me mixed up again. Great little kidder, Gale."

Brenda looked out of the window. "A—a great little kidder," she repeated. It gave her a sick feeling to think to what length Gale might have gone to get Mike. Not Mike himself, but T. P. Gallagher's nephew, his heir. It was the money Gale had wanted.

Mike was chuckling. He was saying, "She sure put on a good act. Besides pretending to be you, she let on she was hopping mad. Said she'd been locked in the bathroom and missed her train. She might have convinced me at that if I hadn't seen you over there by the window whistling through your teeth. Everyone knows which half of the Marcy twins does that. And just in case you've forgotten—it's the one I'm going to kiss at the next stop light!"



A Woman Like Eve—

*When They Met Again He
Was Engaged to a Woman
as Fascinating as Eve. And
She Had Thought He
Would Remember Their
Kiss!*

*"You—are going to marry her?" she couldn't
help asking.*



CHAPTER I

LESLEY stood at the stuccoed archway between the Moorish marble hall and the seventy-foot-long living-room. Wearily she surveyed her assistant as he adjusted the coral-and-silver draperies at the windows, through which the California sunset spilled upon satin-brocade Renaissance furniture and deep Persian rugs.

She sighed raggedly. "I guess we can call that the finishing touch, Jim—

Pulsating Novelette

By Frances Lake

my. You can drive my car back to town. I'll wait around for Sylvan; he'll probably be too paralyzed to drive anyway."

Silly, she thought, to feel suddenly so—rebellious. Particularly now, when she had so successfully finished decorating this huge, elaborate house for Dorina Dorne, Hollywood's famous—well, anyway, a Hollywood actress.



"Nothing you or anyone else could say could change my opinion about Dorina," Ricci snapped.

Dorina, whom she had known two years before in New York as—not Dorina at all; Dorina, whose brief return to New York last year on her way to Paris vacation, had included a patronizing visit to the Todd Interior Decorating Salon, a casual promise to Lesley "to do my very first Hollywood house when I have one, my dear," and a still more casual invitation to her bon voyage party that night.

Lesley had gone to that party out of curiosity. Lesley had returned from that party with the memory of a man whose black, adoring eyes and dark

glossy head—a memory that had risen night after night in her dreams, for the year of months since then.

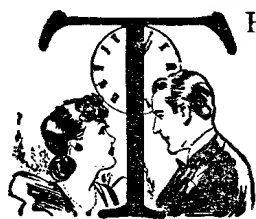
Jimmy, lean, lank, shook his tousled head as he joined Lesley. "That guy gets away with murder," he said, with the familiarity of three years' business association. "Just because he's the boss' son. Old Man Todd opens a California branch, with you to contact the male clients, Syl the women. And you do all the work while Syl makes whoopee at their drinking bouts."

Lesley shrugged resignedly. "Why do you suppose I do it? Because if I

make good, this time next year the California branch will be mine. Lesley Vaile, Interior Decorating, Jimmy. That's why I took over this job of Dorina Dorne's, because it's our first contact with the movie colony and—"

"Dorina Dorne!" Jimmy interrupted disgustedly. "Two years ago she was a strip-tease artist on Broadway. A movie scout spots her—Hollywood! That girl's been in more scandals than history has dates, and they cast her as a sweet little innocent. Remember that Park Avenue penthouse we did over for her—and the check that came from Broadway's number one playboy—"

"Sh!" Lesley cautioned, tucking an escaping mahogany-red curl behind her ear. "We're not supposed to know those things." She bent over, picked up a book of brocade samples from a chair, and pushed it through Jimmy's arm. "Anyway, it's none of our business. All we have to do is hope and pray she lands this Ricci Barron—whoever he is—so we'll get paid for this job."



HE mutinous note in her voice carried to the man who had come up the tiled terrace outside and was standing at the screened doorway, listening to her, staring at her.

Staring at Lesley, he thought of a night in New York, one year before. A bon voyage party aboard a great ocean liner, when Blue Noacre, polo-playing playboy de luxe, had sailed for Europe. He thought of another night a week later—a bon voyage party for Dorina Dorne.

Lesley's lovely face, with those wide black eyes, framed by that gorgeous mahogany-red hair, was half turned toward him as she spoke to this Jimmy somebody.

The man stared at her in still wonder, because he'd been afraid he

would never see her again in his life, and it was the one thing he wanted from life. Slim and small and gailant in her trim black linen suit, she was even lovelier than his dreams of her had been.

"That dame sure must be a born gambler," mused Jimmy, gazing over the luxurious living-room. "A jump ahead of bankruptcy, and she shoots the works on a show like this, in the hope of hooking a guy—it's marriage this time, I suppose?"

"You suppose right," said Lesley, grinning. "Dorina's a desperate woman, Jimmy. She's afraid she'll be through in the movies when her contract ends. That's why she let down her hair to me when she asked me to take over this job, I guess. And this Ricci Barron, who's returning from a big-game-hunting expedition this week-end, is her best bet, she figures. So she leases this pile of Moorish architecture, and with her paid chaperone to give the impression she's a sweet young innocent, she hopes her past won't catch up with her before—"

"Before she marries the guy," finished Jimmy, giving her a pat on the shoulder. "Well, I feel sorry for him, but I hope she puts it over, because it's your only chance to get back the twenty thousand dollars you sunk here. She's got my best wishes."

"Just yours?" Lesley laughed, crossing the hall beside him. "Dorina says he's simply mad about her, begged her to marry him last winter on the Riviera—"

She broke off, musing. "He's probably fat and bald. Rich old flirts usually are—"

Then she stopped, rigid, staring at the man beyond the doorway. "Oh!" she said softly, and then breathlessly, "Oh! It's—you."

At the breathless wonder in her voice, Jimmy glanced sharply at her. The radiance in her face fairly blinded him. Tactfully, quickly, he opened the door to let the man in, and then left

them. And Lesley didn't even know he had gone.

For her, there was no one in the world at that moment but this tall, darkly handsome young man whose black eyes were smiling down at her, as they had smiled at her in her dreams since she had met him a year before.

"You—don't remember me?" she whispered.

Slowly, he shook his head. "Should I?" His voice was soft, vibrant as she had remembered it.

Lesley laughed a little. What a silly, romantic fool she had been! For a whole long year, her dreams, her thoughts, her hopes had been woven about this man—and he didn't even remember her.

"Let's see; you're—" He paused, his dark brows meeting thoughtfully. "I meet so many girls."

"Who probably all fall in love with you," thought Lesley deliriously. Why had she let him see she remembered him so terribly?

"My name wouldn't help," she told him remotely. "We never knew each other's names. We—practically stumbled over each other, getting out of Blue Noacre's stateroom one night a year ago in New York when he was sailing for Europe. Everybody was drunk, and I was sick of it all and—"

"And I took you home?"

"You started to. Then you drove out toward Long Island and said you'd never take me home, because I was the one girl—the usual line, you know. So I got out and took a taxi. It cost me three dollars. I guess you'd had too much champagne."

"That," Ricci informed her, grinning, "was not champagne—"

"And then," she said quickly, "we met again a week later, when Dorina Dorne sailed. You said—"

She stopped in time, blushing painfully.

He had said, "Look, lovely redhead. We might as well get married and take a trip on an ocean liner ourselves. Every time I come down here

to see somebody off, here you are." He had suggested painting the town together that night, then seeing her home.

She had laughed, reminding him that he had promised to see her home before, and hadn't. She had said they didn't even know each other's names. And he had answered, "Well, let's leave it that way—until we're so madly in love, we'll have to get married, and then we'll read each other's names on the license."

It had been mad; it had been glorious. She had been half in love with him then, despite his smooth line of the week before. She had been hopelessly in love before they had finished painting the town at dawn, when he had put her in a taxi at Times Square, on her promise of a dinner date at a hotel roof the following night.

And she had kept her promise—but he hadn't. So she knew he hadn't meant any of it. Why she couldn't forget him was one of the unsolved mysteries of her life.

"I SAID what?" he prompted now, his dark eyes warm, eager. "It must have been Dorina's champagne, since I don't remember. Tell me, did I kiss you—or propose, perhaps?"

Lesley stiffened in cold white anger as his words tore away the ideal her dreams and the kiss he had given her that last night had woven about him.

"No," she said icily. "You didn't kiss me. And you didn't propose, either. Don't worry. You were just—drunk. And now I suppose you're looking for Miss Dorne? This is her new house, although she isn't moving in officially until tomorrow. Right now you'll find her at Muriel Sabre's, the next estate down the beach. Muriel's having a cocktail party there, and I imagine you'll find yourself quite at home."

His hand caught her wrist as she brushed past him to the door. "Nice little interior decorators," he said softly, his black eyes brilliant, "shouldn't discuss clients' secrets

where they might be overheard. How do you know I won't tell?"

Lesley met his eyes squarely, slow color flooding her cheeks as she remembered what she and Jimmy had said. How much had he heard?

"I don't know," she said in slow, withering contempt, "if you're the kind of man who—eavesdrops and tells. I can only beg you to forget what you heard. It was all malicious gossip. No foundation, naturally. Will you let me go, please?"

"Where?"

"Home."

"And where is home?"

Lesley just looked at him, hating herself, hating him because his touch, his nearness, his voice stirred her so unbearably.

Then he moved suddenly, crushed her against him with strong, hard arms, and his mouth was a deep slow flame burning against hers. Her hands pushed tensely against him until he caught them in one hand and held them quietly.

He held her like that and kissed her until the rigidity went out of her, and she lay helplessly, almost eagerly in his arms, beneath his mad, compelling lips.

"No!" she whispered, when finally he raised his mouth from hers. "Oh, no!"

"Yes," he said, kissing her again. "Those two are for lying to me, when you said I'd never kissed you. And I know I did. I couldn't be with you two minutes without wanting to kiss you. And what I want, I usually get. And this—is for calling me a rich old flirt. And this—is because you thought I was fat and bald."

And then he laughed down into her black eyes, which had widened in horror.

"You mean," she gasped, "you're Ricci Barron!"

"I'm Ricci Barron." He smiled sardonically. "And maybe I ought to thank you, and let you go, for that—er—illuminating discussion I over-

heard. There's nothing like preparing a man for his own wedding, you know. But I'm letting you go until you promise you'll go with me to my lodge up on Pine Mountain this weekend. We'll start Saturday afternoon—tomorrow. Now will you tell me where your home is, so I may call for you, my sweet?"



HE pushed out of his arms, her face white, stricken. "Your price for silence, I suppose?" she demanded.

"Call it that." His voice was clipped and harsh now. "And you won't refuse. Because if you don't come I'll tell Dorina everything I heard. I'll pretend I'm mad, washed up with her. And you know Dorina. When she gets through with you, I'm afraid your career as an interior decorator will be over."

Lesley said, low, "You couldn't be so—despicable!" He was in love with Dorina, of course. That's why his eyes were so angry, so hurt. He was doing this to get even, because of those things she and Jimmy had said about his Dorina. They should never have given voice to such gossip—only it wasn't gossip, it was the truth. If he weren't so blindly in love—

She said slowly, "You must forgive—my assistant and me for those things we said. It was horrible of us. None of it is true, naturally. You know how things start in Hollywood. People jealous of other people's success, sticking knives in their backs—"

"I know all about that," snapped Ricci. "Nothing you or anyone else could say could change my opinion of Dorina."

Lesley looked at him. He meant it. He really believed Dorina was everything Dorina wanted him to believe. Well, that was all right. That was fine. "You—are going to marry her?" she couldn't help asking, and then would have given anything to have been able to recall the words.

Ricci grinned. "I've ideas about that, too," he said.

"Then why," she asked, "do you want me to go with you this weekend?"

"I'll give you one guess." He caught her hands tightly, not smiling now. "But don't look so frightened. I promise you that nothing will happen that you don't want to happen. And I promise another thing—you'll return with a contract to redecorate my mountain lodge. Now how's that?"

"I guess," said Lesley hesitantly, not quite sure of her ground, "that will be—all right. Anyway, you leave me no choice. But I warn you, it will be strictly business. And if we're there alone—I mean, if you haven't caretakers or servants about—I won't stay overnight. So if you still want me to go, you may call for me at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I live in the last bungalow on Barberry Beach, a mile from Los Angeles."

She faced him, defiant, yet unbearably stirred. He smiled strangely, a smile that stopped before it reached his dark, grave eyes.

They stood looking at each other like that for a long moment. And then running footsteps clicked across the terrace outside.

"RICCI darling!" cried Dorina, jerking open the screen door and flying to him. "Oh, darling, I didn't expect you today. But I knew that gorgeous streamlined car outside couldn't be anybody's but yours. Didn't I say it was Ricci's?" she demanded gayly of the crowd following her into the hall—Sylvan, Muriel Sabre, a dozen or so other men and girls, all in smart beach clothes.

Dorina's hands were on Ricci's shoulders, pulling him down to her. And her face in its frame of midnight black hair was like an exotic tropic flower lifted to rain, as she raised her lips for his kiss.

Ricci's arms gathered her to him as if he couldn't hold her close enough.

Lesley turned away from their kiss, and looked up at Sylvan, lean, sleek, blond, standing beside her. She was almost glad when his arm swung around her shoulder, drawing her to him. And that was surprising, because usually she did not like it when he acted so possessive. And he had been acting like that a lot lately, especially when he'd been drinking, and particularly around this crowd. She supposed it was the atmosphere.

She shrugged away sharply.

"Why, Lesley Vaile!" Dorina's voice came, honeyed, rebuking. "Aren't you ashamed? When Sylvan's been mad to get back to you for hours! He said he wanted to get back to his wife—"

Lesley's chin lifted. "I'm not his wife, and you know it, Miss Dorne. I don't know why you say that—"

"Honey, of course you're secretly married—or something," purred Dorina. "Why don't you announce it? Everybody suspects it anyway, with Syl seen at your bungalow at all hours of the night and dawn."

Lesley stared at her, long and hard, and knew that Dorina had seen her and Ricci here in the hall, their hands locked. Ricci was turning toward her, his dark eyes narrow, speculative.

She looked at Sylvan, waiting for him to make Dorina take back her words. But he just stood there, grinning.

Then, small head lifted like a defiant red banner, she shouldered straight through the crowd, out the door and down the terrace to Sylvan's car. He slid into the seat beside her as she switched on the ignition.

"Don't be like that, honey," he pleaded. "What do you care what that gang thinks, anyway? You ought to know them well enough to realize they wouldn't believe any relationship between a man and woman could be platonic, much less a business association like ours."

"Maybe I don't care," said Lesley, swinging the car onto the highway toward Los Angeles. "But why did you

call me your wife—if you did? Why didn't you make Dorina Dorne take back her vicious insinuations?"

Sylvan said sulkily, "I called you my wife because that's what I want you to be. You ought to know. I've been asking you for two years. And, honey, I thought for a while you would, but lately—"

"Lately!" thought Lesley. Since she had met Ricci Barron, whom she hadn't known was Ricci Barron until today. For a whole long year she had lived with the image in her heart of a man who was in love with another woman, while another man was in love with her. All around the mulberry bush.

She supposed she would marry Sylvan eventually. It would please his father, she knew. It would have pleased her own father. Co-partner in Todd, Interior Decorating, before he had died three years before, he had often wished she and Sylvan would marry some day. He had thought Sylvan would grow into the fine, steady man his father was.

Well, the only fault she had ever found with Sylvan was that he mixed too much pleasure with his business. But that was probably because he'd never shouldered any responsibilities. Married, he'd be all right. Nice, probably. She supposed he did love her, in his spoiled-boy way.

But she was too provoked at him right now to think about it. And when she drew up in front of his apartment hotel, and he insisted on driving her the two blocks to her bungalow, she just walked away and left him.

CHAPTER II



ON Saturday morning Lesley sat at her desk, hands clasped motionless on its plate-glass surface, gazing absently around the

salon with its rich hangings, cases of imported fabrics,

rare pieces of furniture from all over the world.

She was thinking that she didn't have to worry about collecting Dorina Dorne's twenty-thousand-dollar bill, because Dorina's marriage to Ricci Barron would doubtless be announced any minute.

And in her file were three promising prospects—one a famous movie director who had come to her through the publicity decorating Dorina's home had given her.

Lesley supposed she should feel very satisfied and successful. But she didn't. She felt small and tired and forlorn. She wished she'd never come to California, where life seemed to be all tinsel and glamour; where people who could bluff the loudest and put on the showiest front seemed to be the ones who reached the top.

She'd better marry Sylvan, that was what she'd better do, Lesley told herself. That would stop all this morbid self-pity and—remembering a man who couldn't ever mean anything to her, anyway. Besides, there was a good foundation for successful marriage with Sylvan. A common interest. Their work. Together, they could—

She looked up and saw Dorina Dorne, red mouth a crescent of malice, blue eyes cold and hard, standing at the grilled railing that separated her office space from the salon proper.

"I just dropped by," said Dorina, "to tell you you'd better let Sylvan handle the contract to redecorate Ricci Barron's lodge on Pine Mountain. Ricci mentioned last night he was hiring you—"

Lesley stood up quietly, offered Dorina a chair. Dorina refused.

She went on, her voice liquid honey, "Naturally, Ricci was attracted when he saw you yesterday. He's attracted to every pretty face he sees. That's why I'm marrying him practically right away. I'm not giving him the chance to get accustomed to any more pretty faces—except mine. And naturally you turned on the full ap-

peal of your well-known technique, when you found he was a likely prospect."

Lesley said coldly, "I didn't even know he had a mountain lodge until he told me—in the same breath in which he asked me to redecorate it. What do you mean, my well-known technique?"

Dorina laughed. "Darling, don't play me for an innocent. You know why you're such a successful interior decorator, so valuable to Todd, Inc.—for their men clients. Why, darling, don't you realize everybody knows there's been something between you and practically every wealthy man in New York whose penthouses and apartments and yachts you've redecorated?"

"Name one," said Lesley in a low, fierce tone. "Name just one!"

"Well," Dorina shrugged, "we won't count Sylvan, because he's your—er—business partner, too. And that's to be expected. But there was Kip Faber, and don't try to tell me that rich old rake didn't proposition you, because he's got the reputation for not even hiring a secretary unless—"

Lesley's lips parted, but no words came. Kip Faber had propositioned her; he was the only man who ever had. But when she had threatened to turn the job over to Sylvan, he had left her alone and she had never seen him again. She supposed he was the kind of man who would say he had been successful, just to keep up his reputation.

"Then there was Blue Noacre—" Dorina paused maliciously.

Lesley's face flamed; her black eyes flashed dangerously. Blue Noacre, gay, debonair young scion of one of New York's most famous families, whose penthouse and yacht she had decorated, had invited her to his bon voyage party last year, where she had met Ricci Barron for the first time.

Blue had liked her, had dated her for a dinner dance at his exclusive

club one night. He was a little wild, but a gentleman to his finger tips.

Where had Dorina gotten all this? From her imagination, of course, from her own mode of living. She wasn't capable of thinking any association between a man and a woman, however casual and businesslike, could be platonic.

LESLEY leaned weakly against her desk, thankful for its support. Her knees were quicksilver; her whole body trembled in a wild up-sweep of rage, of hurt bewilderment.

"Blue Noacre—" she began, then stopped, crushed. You lived a respectable life; you worked hard to get ahead in this world. You minded your own business. And what happened? Slander. Jealousy. From people like Dorina Dorne!

"That's right, darling," Dorina laughed derisively. "I'm glad you've sense enough not to try to explain. Because the harder you try to explain such things, the more people will think you're really covering up something."

Lesley said in low fury, "You ought to know. You've plenty to cover up in your life. I wonder if Ricci Barron would be marrying you so fast, if he knew—"

"Ricci," said Dorina, her voice slowing humbly, "knows an actress of my obscure beginning—burlesque—naturally faces all kinds of publicity, good and bad, when she becomes famous. He understands the bad originates from people with small, jealous minds, who are envious of my picture success."

Lesley looked at her under dark, half-lifted lashes. Dorina meant every word of it. She had actually made herself believe her questionable past had never been a reality; a rôle, perhaps, that she had played in some picture. Because she wanted to believe it. And because she so desperately wanted Ricci to believe it.

Bitterness, mingled with a kind of awe, started deep down inside Les-

ley. She had certainly underrated Dorina Dorne's ability as an actress.

"And," Dorina went on amiably, "that brings me back to Ricci. It will be much more pleasant if you don't do over his lodge, my dear. Pleasant for Ricci, pleasant for you. Because you see, his grandfather is arriving there shortly. And in case you never heard, his grandfather holds the purse strings to the bulk of Ricci's fortune until he marries—with his approval. Ricci's father ran away with quite a notorious woman and broke Ricci's mother's heart. And his grandfather—well, my dear, if he finds you there and happens to learn of your reputation and thinks Ricci's the least bit interested in you personally, which naturally Ricci would be—you're very pretty, you know—why, he's quite capable of ordering you off the premises. And he's the type to let the world know why. So I'd advise—"

"I'd advise," Lesley said with violence, "that you leave this shop this minute. Unless you'd rather I called Jimmy and had him lead you forcibly to the door!"

Dorina stared, a little disconcerted. Then she laughed. "Oh, I'll go, darling. I understand how one's past catching up with one can be annoying. But—"

Lesley picked up the phone, made connections with the basement store-room. Glancing out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Dorina was leaving the shop quickly.

Lesley sat at her desk a long while after that, without thinking, without moving. There was only a sense of void within her. Then one idea gripped her. Was she going to take this without protest or defiance? If she refused to go to Ricci Barron's lodge, she would be doing just that. Besides, he might tell Dorina everything.

Perhaps he hadn't meant it. She might never hear from him again. But if he came that afternoon, she

would certainly call his bluff and see just how far he would carry through.



At two o'clock she closed the shop for the week-end, as was customary. At four she sat at the dressing-table in her small, cool bungalow, dressed in a tan crepe ensemble with a bolero jacket and bodice of paisley cloth. A smart scrap of a felt hat capped her mahogany-red curls.

Outside her bedroom windows, the soft California breeze waved the giant fronds of palm trees with a gentle undulation. Suddenly she was conscious of a vague loneliness, a strange unrest. Ready and waiting, conviction grew deep within her that Ricci Barron would not come.

Slow color dyed her cheeks as she remembered their meeting yesterday. In her surprise at seeing him again, she had shown him all too plainly how much he had been in her heart since they'd met a year before. So he had kissed her, made a little gay talk—and thus had gotten out of an embarrassing situation.

At a sound from her living-room, she looked up, saw Sylvan coming toward her bedroom door, swaying a little, grinning sheepishly.

"Hi, hon—"

She jerked to her feet, nerves on edge. "What do you mean by coming in here like this? How many times have I told you not to? No wonder people are saying things!"

"Honey, do you have to shout?" he begged piteously, cupping his head with his hands. "I just wanted to rest a little." He stumbled toward her bed, fell across it as if he would never move again. "Don't want to go to old hotel. So lonely. Want to be near you—"

Lesley stood helplessly looking at him—and then the doorbell rang. Hurrying out, she closed the bedroom

door carefully behind her, crossed to the front entrance and let Ricci Baron in.

She never remembered afterward what she said to him or he to her. Until they were sitting on the chintz-covered divan, Ricci's incredibly long legs stretched out, and he was saying in a strangely shy voice, "How about forgetting the lodge today? It's a good three-hour drive. I thought maybe we could go places and do things tonight, and include Pine Mountain in our plans for tomorrow."

"Maybe you forgot," said Lesley tightly, "I told you it would be strictly business if you came today. We'll go to Pine Mountain now, or not at all—"

The bedroom door opened noisily, framing Sylvan. Frowning perplexedly, he clutched the doorknob to steady himself, and his weight swung it open farther, revealing the disordered bedroom.

"Hon!" He peered uncertainly into the living-room. "There's something I wanted to tell you, and I forget—" Then his eyes focused upon Ricci, who sat like a graven image, looking at him.

"Oh—excuse me," murmured Sylvan politely, and bowed so elaborately that he almost lost his balance. Then with the greatest of caution, he closed the door again, shutting himself inside.

Exasperation, humiliation, despair raced through Lesley with each pounding beat of her heart. Then she began to laugh, because it was all so very funny, really. Things had happened with the clicking precision of a movie sequence.

She kept on laughing until Ricci, getting slowly to his feet, looked down at her and said, with a fierce, terrifying softness, "If you're ready—"

She went out with him to his car. She didn't know where he was taking her, or when he would bring her back. What did it matter? Nothing at all mattered, anywhere in the world.

AFTER they left the foothill towns behind them, the drive up Pine Mountain was an almost continuous winding incline. Ricci chattered pleasantly of nothing in particular, but for all Lesley heard, he might not have spoken at all. She knew he wasn't saying what he was thinking.

He was thinking of Sylvan Todd in her bedroom. He despised her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She could explain, but she knew he wouldn't believe her. She could see it in his grim, chiseled-in-metal profile.

Finally he swung into a deep grove of cedars, and soon the car's powerful headlights flooded a great rambling log house set in the midst of towering pines. Lights glowed mellowly from the windows.

Ricci braked his car in front of the wide rustic porch, and before Lesley could move, his arms closed around her, his hand lifted her chin.

His face, a white blur in the soft, pungent twilight, was intolerably close. Lesley flattened her hands against his chest, pushing him away. But she didn't really want to push him away. All she wanted was to stay in his arms, to draw his dark head closer until his lips, hard, tender, compelling, were once more against hers. As they had been against hers yesterday. As she had dreamed of them against hers for a whole long year.

Ricci laughed harshly. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm not even going to kiss you—again. I never did go in for too keen competition complicating a girl's life. Maybe if I'd known yesterday how things were, I wouldn't have asked you to come up here."

Lesley said passionately, "You can forget you asked me. You can take me back right now. I—hate men who believe everything they hear about a girl, without knowing, really—"

She broke off. What was the use? Naturally, Dorina had been busy with her slanderous lies. Then, topping

everything, Sylvan had unwittingly made things appear so much worse.

"No, I won't take you back," said Ricci, as if that were all he had heard. "Because I always try to finish what I start. You'll look the place over, give me your ideas. And maybe you'll get the contract. I suggest, however, that you forget your—antagonism toward me, if possible, and assume the pleasant, businesslike attitude you would feel toward any prospective client. Because, you see, my grandfather's here tonight. I didn't expect him until late tomorrow. He's strait-laced and conventional and all that sort of thing, so—"

"I understand," said Lesley icily. She understood perfectly. That's why he hadn't wanted to bring her here tonight. Probably he'd planned to take his grandfather away somewhere tomorrow so she wouldn't meet him. "Perhaps you'd prefer to have Sylvan take over the job. He's really very capable, and it would be all right with me—"

"I'd prefer," he whispered fiercely, "to have Sylvan in China—"

Abruptly he let her go. He got out, helped her out of the car, and led her into the house. A white-haired old caretaker met them in the entrance hall.

"We didn't expect you until tomorrow, Mr. Barron," he said, surprised. "You've had dinner?"

"No—and dying of hunger, Mike," Ricci grinned. "Both of us. Where's granddad?"

"In the living-room. If you'll give us a few minutes?"

"Of course," said Ricci, and ushered Lesley into a lovely old low-raftered living-room with rustic furniture and black bearskin rugs.

An elderly man, stalwart for all his years, with black piercing eyes, snow-white hair, shaggy brows and a clipped mustache, rose at their entrance.

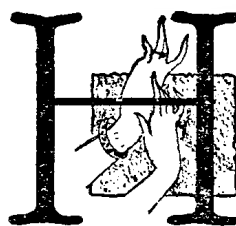
"Miss Vaile, my grandfather, Patrick Lederer," introduced Ricci. "Grandad—"

"The girl you've been raving about for months?" inquired his grandfather, appraising Lesley keenly. "Young lady, you'll have to be mighty charming to live up to—"

"I'm sorry," Lesley remonstrated politely. "I'm afraid you're mistaking me for Miss Dorne, the actress. I—just met Mr. Barron yesterday." It was a fib, but since Ricci didn't really remember, what did it matter? Oh, why didn't he say something?

"I'm—only an interior decorator, Mr. Lederer," she smiled. "Mr. Barron invited me to look over his lodge, with the idea of doing it over."

There was a swift exchange of glances between the two men, a murmured apology from Mr. Lederer. Then Ricci, grinning, his black eyes dancing devilishly, suggested a tour of inspection while they awaited dinner.



HE led her through a spacious old dining-room with antlered heads of moose and deer on its mellow, oak-paneled walls; a gun room; a combination library and den. Upstairs there were six small guest rooms and the master bedroom, all simply, yet to Lesley's mind, beautifully furnished in harmony with the rustic surroundings.

Ricci neither offered suggestions for redecorating nor asked hers, however, through the pleasant, leisurely dinner at which his grandfather joined them for coffee. Later, when they were again in the living-room, Mr. Lederer excused himself—for a short walk in the brisk mountain air before retiring, he said.

"You're not returning to town tonight?" he asked Ricci from the hall.

Ricci glanced at Lesley. "I'm afraid Miss Vaile has to get back—"

"Nonsense! That road down is treacherous at night. You don't work

on Sunday, do you, my dear? Why not stay over?"

Lesley looked up at him and did not realize that her eyes were deep, black pools of wistfulness, revealing what was in her heart. More than anything, she wanted to stay here, not only tonight, but forever. Never before had she felt so alone and homeless. She was growing fond of Ricci's grandfather already. What great friends they could have become, she thought, if—if—

Ricci laughed softly. "Perhaps I can persuade Miss Vaile," he said, following his grandfather to the door.

But when he returned, his voice was remote, brusque. "And now to business. I'll want everything changed, of course. The modernistic trend, naturally—black and red, chromium, angles." He gestured impatiently. "Or what are your suggestions?"

"I have none," answered Lesley slowly. "I don't see how you can possibly want anything changed. It's all so beautiful, so—gracious—"

Their glances locked, and as Lesley looked, the expression of his face changed. His black eyes deepened as if with unutterable yearning. The muscles along his lean dark face tightened perceptibly, as if he were holding himself in leash.

Lesley closed her eyes quickly as he took a step toward her, and felt as if his arms were already about her, his mouth on hers.

Then suddenly there was the sharp scuff of tires on gravel, hilarious voices. The doorbell pealed loudly.

A servant hurried through the hall, and returned, ushering in Dorina, Sylvan, Muriel Sabre and her fiancé, Thayer Marks.

Dorina flew to Ricci, caught his hands gayly. "Darling, we simply couldn't resist coming! We've been to a dozen night clubs, and they were so dreadfully boring. So we decided a party up here was the grandest idea. You don't mind, darling?"

Ricci's dark, brilliant eyes, his

smile, assured her he did not mind. Lesley turned away, and saw Mr. Lederer coming into the room.

As Ricci presented him, Dorina moved slowly toward the elder man.

"I've heard so much about Ricci's grandfather," she almost whispered, gazing up at him in a kind of awe. "And now I'm meeting you. What must you think of us, bursting in like this? I'll never forgive Ricci for not telling me you were here."

Lesley almost laughed. That was probably the truest thing Dorina ever said. She would never forgive Ricci, because if she'd known his grandfather was here, she'd certainly never have come, half tipsy, like this.

THERE were two hours of it: dancing to the radio, highballs, which Dorina refused, under Mr. Lederer's beaming approval. She devoted herself exclusively to him, as if no one else were there.

Watching her, Lesley felt a little sick. You had to hand it to Dorina. Young men, old men—when the occasion warranted, she could certainly turn on the charm. Mr. Lederer seemed completely captivated.

A little later, when she was dancing with Sylvan, Lesley said suddenly, "If someone doesn't suggest leaving soon, I think I'll scream. And I wish you'd stop drinking, Sylvan; you'd had enough when you arrived."

Sylvan grinned. "Can't leave until Dorina does. Came in her car. And I think she's got ideas about staying all night."

Dorina had, it developed. For not five minutes later, she commanded everybody's attention. "What do you think of Mr. Lederer's suggestion?" she cried gayly. "He's asking us to stay over tomorrow. I think it's a perfectly marvelous idea, myself."

And thus it was settled. Lesley found herself in one of the guest rooms upstairs. She removed her dress, stood hesitantly in her slip. She knew she couldn't sleep. Bitterness, rebellion, a deep, aching lone-

liness stirred chaotically within her.

Finally she unfolded a soft blanket that lay across the foot of the bed, wrapped it around her and put out the lights. Drawing a deep chair to the windows, she sank wearily into it.

She didn't know how long she sat there, gazing out into the dark stillness, before she heard someone fumbling at her door. Turning around, she saw Sylvan framed in the light from the hall.

Before she could move, he lurched forward, struck something and fell heavily to the floor with a sharp, agonized cry.

Lesley flew to him. "I could kill you, Sylvan Todd!" she whispered savagely. "Haven't you done enough to me?"

"My shoulder!" he gasped, clutching it in pain. "I've—dislocated it. It's happened before—"

Lesley stared at him as he struggled to his feet. She followed automatically as he stumbled to the bed and sank down upon it. He was actually suffering.

"Just wanted—to say goodnight." He was completely sober now. "You've been so cold. I love you so. I'm—sorry, Les. You'll have to get help. One of the men—"

Lights snapped on. "Something wrong? I heard—"

Lesley stiffened, turned—and met the opaque, expressionless eyes of Ricci Barron, standing in the doorway.

HER lips moved, but no words came. She gestured helplessly toward Sylvan. Mr. Lederer appeared behind Ricci. Dorina came running across the hall, pushed past Ricci, stared aghast at Sylvan.

"Oh! How—disgraceful, Lesley Vaile!" she cried in a shocked, incredulous voice. "Have you no shame at all? Isn't it bad enough in your own home, without flaunting this—"

"Keep quiet!" Ricci commanded sharply, and went over to Sylvan. "What is it, Tedd?"

Sylvan explained falteringly, his voice thick with pain. If they could remove his coat, he suggested, give his shoulder a quick jerk backward, it would do the trick.

Lesley turned sickly away as Ricci and his grandfather bent over Sylvan. She heard a sharp groan, then Ricci saying, "All right now?"

There was a pause. Lesley turned. Sylvan was on his feet, smoothing his hair nervously.

"Yes—" He thanked them unsteadily.

Dorina said in low horror, "I feel utterly disgraced because I brought you here, Sylvan Todd. I demand that you apologize to Ricci and Mr. Lederer. And explain if you can. Naturally people know about you and—this woman, but to be so brazen—"

Mr. Lederer said coldly, "My dear Miss Dorne—"

Ricci reached out, pulled Dorina to him slowly. His face was white, set. "I think we'll have your apology first, Dorina," he said softly. "To Miss Vaile and Todd. One doesn't make such insinuations as yours, unless one has absolute proof. You haven't, I take it?"

"Dorina hasn't," said Sylvan clearly. "I'm afraid she's let her imagination run wild. I've been criminally thoughtless toward Lesley, I admit. Too often. Of appearances, I mean. And I do owe you an apology, Ricci, Mr. Lederer. And"—he turned to Lesley—"you, my dear. I came to your room tonight only to remind you of our appointment with the Bob Jordans in the morning. We must leave early. I knew you'd forgotten—"

He smiled at Ricci and his grandfather. "Lesley and I have been engaged for some time. We—plan to marry very soon." He gestured helplessly. "A man doesn't realize, sometimes, how a thing like this might appear to other people."

Eyes glued upon his tall blond slimness, Lesley's heart went out to Sylvan in gratitude, pity and—perhaps love. There was no Jordan ap-

pointment tomorrow. He had lied, vindicating her.

Sylvan was wilful, impulsive, horribly spoiled; a big little boy running wild. But inherently he was good, kind, without malice.

Red head lifted proudly, Lesley went over to him, tucked her arm through his. When she spoke, it was directly to Dorina.

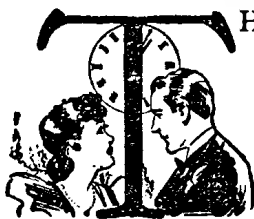
"Yes," she said, "we're marrying very soon. And I'm sorry you feel we've disgraced you tonight, Dorina. So perhaps you wouldn't mind, under the circumstances, if I asked to borrow your car to drive back to town."

Dorina consented eagerly, as Lesley had known she would.

Mr. Lederer said to Lesley, "Nonsense, child! There's no need for such dramatics—"

"If Miss Vaile," said Ricci slowly, "wishes to leave now with Todd, I'll drive them back. Dorina and her friends will remain, as planned. The road is too treacherous for Miss Vaile to attempt for the first time, after dark, and Todd shouldn't drive with that shoulder of his."

CHAPTER III



HE return down the winding mountain road, through the sleeping foothill villages, was the most silent drive Lesley had ever known. Ricci was at the wheel; she sat in the back seat with Sylvan, and—as the perfect anticlimax—he had fallen immediately asleep with his head on her shoulder.

He was still sleeping soundly when Ricci finally drew up before her bungalow, as dawn was tipping the distant snow-peaked mountains.

Gently extricating herself from Sylvan's dead weight so she would not awaken him, she got out of the car and ran across the porch before Ricci could help her.

"Please!" He caught her arm as she opened her door. His dark eyes pleaded mutely. His low voice stirred her unbearably. "Forget tonight's unpleasantness, won't you? Put it down to Dorina's—jealousy, perhaps. For, you see, I owe you an explanation, too. I've wanted so desperately, ever since I met you a—my dear, won't you let me come to you tomorrow?"

"Don't!" Lesley tried vainly to pull away from him. Her head throbbed. What was he saying? "It doesn't matter, really. Nothing you could say would matter. Will you—just go, please?"

Oh, didn't he see she couldn't endure another moment of this? Couldn't he feel the cry of her heart—its tortured, hopeless cry of love for him?

He smiled whimsically. "Have you forgotten we haven't yet discussed how I want the lodge redecorated?"

"You must excuse me, Mr. Barron. I—honestly don't want the job. If you would see Sylvan—he could do it much more satisfactorily, I'm sure. Besides—" How could she say she simply couldn't bear to change a single feature in that beautiful, serenely gracious house of his?

"Besides," finished Ricci in sudden harshness, "it would be in the family, in either event"—his hand tightened around her arm—"yes?"

"Yes!" Lesley answered, almost hysterically, "it would—be in the family."

She watched him go, taking note of his tall, impeccably tailored figure, his wide shoulders, his shining black hair, for she realized she would never see him again if he could help it. His going had that finality in it.

Then she went in and lay down across the bed without undressing.

SHE awoke at six o'clock Sunday evening. She awoke then because the doorbell was pealing insistently. She went to the door and admitted Sylvan, blond, freshly debonair in his evening clothes.

"Hi, hon!" he greeted her, kissing the tip of her shiny nose, seemingly unaware of her disheveled appearance. "How about a little dinner at the Club Palomar?"

She smiled dryly. "I can imagine that." The Palomar. The most exclusive supper club on the California coast. Membership only. Membership meaning practically a million-dollar-a-year income.

"I mean it, honey." Sylvan grinned. "I've a guest card. Besides, after last night, I think you need a little change of excitement, something different, to take the bad taste out of your mouth."

From the way he said it Lesley couldn't tell whether he meant Dorina's lies or his proposal. He was changed, somehow. She couldn't put her finger on the difference, but it was there.

Ensconcing himself in a deep, chintz-covered chair, he grinned up at her bewilderment. "And I've got news, honey. For you. So slip into that swank silver outfit of yours, and let's show them a thing or two."

He refused to tell her what his news was, however, until they were at the Palomar and he had ordered dinner.

She looked as lovely and glamorous as any movie star as she sat there that night beneath the great crystal chandeliers in the high domed ceiling. Their myriad rays of light shone down upon her strapless silver lamé gown, her gorgeous mahogany-red hair.

Sylvan said solemnly, "I never thought you were so beautiful, Les. I guess I took your beauty for granted, the way I've—taken other things for granted."

"Let's have your news," she said.

His father had called long distance today, he told her. And learning she'd handled the Dorne contract entirely and had gained three prospects through it, he had raked Sylvan over the coals and had insisted that Lesley take a vacation of a month—as long

as she wished. Palm Springs—Hawaii—

"But you didn't have to tell him I did it," Lesley interjected. "Besides, I don't want a vacation. What would you do—"

Sylvan grinned. "That's what dad wants to know. He said you're shouldering my responsibilities out here as he's shouldered them in New York, ever since I've been out of college. And he's right. Maybe I want to find out, too, if I can do anything besides bend my elbow over a bar. You don't suppose I want my wife to be a better interior decorator than I am, do you?"

He went on persuasively, but suddenly Lesley wasn't listening. She was looking across the room, toward a far palm-shadowed corner where Ricci Barron sat with his grandfather, with Dorina Dorne, Muriel Sabre, Thayer Marks. The girls wore the gowns they had worn last night when they had arrived at his lodge, so Lesley supposed they had just come from there.

They were all very gay, almost as if they were celebrating something. Was it the announcement of Dorina's and Ricci's engagement.

And then Lesley knew she was going to take her vacation, and remain away until he married his Dorina, which she supposed wouldn't be very long. Here, anywhere she might go, she was likely to run into him like this. And suddenly she knew she couldn't endure it.

But after he was married, this wrenching, tearing pain that licked like flames across her heart at sight of him would go away. He would be Dorina's then, definitely. And the dreams and hopes and madness that had dwelt in her heart a whole long year would have to die.

She didn't know that Sylvan, following her deep, revealing eyes to Ricci, was watching her while she was watching Ricci, the ash of his cigarette lengthening and falling unheeded.

CHAPTER IV



BUT she didn't go to Palm Springs, nor did she go to Hawaii. She just got in her car the next morning and started driving—across Southern California, through Arizona, into New Mexico, stopping at any town that caught her fancy—a night, a day or two.

Without destination or desire, she drove like that for almost two weeks, daily scanning the Los Angeles papers for the news she both hoped and feared to find. But she never found it.

Until she couldn't stand it any longer.

She told herself—and almost believed it—that she wanted to get back to see how Sylvan was managing without her. He'd probably closed the shop, had been having a gay time all the time she was gone.

She was surprised—and a little provoked—when she got back to find the shop open for business as usual, with Jimmy sitting at her desk, greeting her as if she hadn't been gone more than an hour.

A little sharply, she inquired about Sylvan.

Jimmy grinned broadly. "Les, what did you do to that guy? He's been going like lightning ever since you've been away. Signed up those three prospects you got through the Dorne job, and lined up half a dozen more. The old man's sending us two new assistants next week."

"Oh!" said Lesley thoughtfully. "Well, that's—fine."

She drove slowly home, and suddenly it was all very clear why Sylvan had sent her vacationing. He had wanted to show her, before they married, that he could stand on his own two feet. And now that he had—

She felt suddenly as if the world were closing in upon her. Sylvan would come tonight, confident that

she would marry him soon. And she would marry him, because she had promised.

But she knew now that she could never love him if she lived a hundred years. She liked him; he was fun. But she couldn't love him—because a pair of dark eyes, a black glossy head, a man named Ricci Barron would possess her heart to the longest day of her life.

A man who, for all she knew, was already married to another woman.

Well, she was thankful for her career. Where was it she had once read that when love failed, work and only work was one's salvation, the best antidote to heartbreak. And now that Sylvan was doing so well, together they would be a tremendous success.

UNTIL almost seven o'clock she worked furiously at cleaning her small bungalow, dreading to hear the phone, the doorbell, wondering why they didn't ring. Then she bathed, slipped into soft green satin lounging pajamas and was just lying down across her bed for a moment's relaxation in the cool, dusky twilight, when she heard a car pull into the driveway.

Jerking upright, she looked out of the window just in time. It was barely light enough to show her Ricci Barron, in white dinner clothes, striding across the yard.

Black eyes wide, staring at nothing, her heart beating like a caged thing, she stood in the center of her bedroom until the doorbell stopped pealing, until long after she heard his car back out of the driveway.

She didn't know how long she might have stood there if the ringing of the telephone had not jarred her back to consciousness.

Sylvan! Oh, if he would only hurry, take her away from here, marry her tonight! She flew to the telephone, then stopped, staring at it. Ricci, she thought, would have had time to get somewhere to call her.

After a few moments, she called Sylvan's apartment. And when he answered her, gayly, almost hilariously, she felt a blind upswEEP of rage.

"Yes! It looks as though you'd missed me, doesn't it?" she cried. "Here I've been home hours. You haven't even called—"

"Why, hon, if you'd answer your doorbell, your phone—"

"Oh, so you sent Ricci Barron, did you? I suppose you were too busy. I suppose if you were getting married, and too busy to come to the wedding, you'd send him—"

"I might," he said, with a low chuckle, "do even that—if I happened to be marrying you."

Then before she could even gasp, he went on, "Because he's one swell guy, baby. You ought to know him better; maybe you'd like him, too. He's been hanging around, helping me, ever since you've been gone. At first he was only under-foot, but now I think we could turn him into a first-class interior decorator, maybe a partner, if it weren't for his money—"

"You—" she choked. She was beyond reasoning, beyond anything. "You get right over here, Sylvan Todd. That's my shop, or will be. Your father—I'll tell him you're trying to crowd me out! I don't want Ricci Barron as partner—or anything. Because I never—want to see him again—"

"Hold everything, hon. I'll be there before you can catch your breath."

And the doorbell rang again, almost before she did catch her breath. But it wasn't Sylvan. It was Ricci.

"GO away!" she whispered violently, staring at him through the screen. "Go away! I don't know why you—"

"No," he said, his dark eyes hungry, glowing. "I won't go away. I'll never go away. Why should I go away when I've found the one girl in all the world who means the world to me?"

"If you mean me, you'd better look for somebody else. What about Dorina? Maybe you were too busy believing her that night at your lodge to hear me say I was going to marry Sylvan."

Ricci smiled. "I was at Sylvan's when you called. That's why he didn't come. He knows, as I know, that you can't marry him. Because you wouldn't marry any man you didn't love, would you?"

"What makes you think I don't love him? Do you think any girl couldn't love any man but you, once she saw you?"

"I'm not talking about any girl. I'm talking about you. You couldn't love any other man once you saw me—could you? Do you, Lesley Vaile?"

"Go away—please!"

"Let me in, dearest."

When she didn't, he took a knife from his pocket, split the screen and unlatched it.

Breathless, she backed away until the wall stopped her. He came on, and when he was in front of her, close, he raised his hands against the wall on both sides of her, imprisoning her.

"Do you, Lesley Vaile?"

"I suppose you asked Sylvan if all those lies Dorina told about me were true. I suppose when you found they weren't—"

"I didn't ask him anything darling. I told him—that I fell so desperately in love with you when I met you last year in New York, that I haven't known whether I've been coming or going since. When you walked out on me, after Blue Noacre's bon voyage party, I cabled Blue, asking who you were and where I could find you. He never answered. Then I met you a week later, when Dorina sailed—"

"You told me you didn't remember," she accused.

"I had to think fast, darling. Remember Dorina's set-up. You thought I was marrying her. Would you have listened if I'd told you then that I loved you? Then I thought of the

lodge, getting you up there, straightening everything out. Maybe you wondered last year why I didn't ask your name or tell you mine. I wanted—forgive me, sweet—to find just how much you could be interested in me for myself alone. All my life, everywhere I've gone, girls have practically thrown themselves at me because I'm Ricci Barron and my parents left me a lot of money. I got so sick of it—”

He broke off, then went on, low, “And then—honestly, darling, I forgot where we'd planned to meet that next night. I went to a hundred places, I think, and didn't find you. I was wild. That's why I've sworn off champagne for the rest of my life. That's why I took the next liner and followed Dorina to the Riviera and made love to her madly—just to find out who you were. She would never tell.”

He grimaced ruefully. “I guess she knew why I wanted to know. Then I went to Africa—and all I could think of was your big black eyes, your mop of red hair that I knew would follow me to the end of my days. So I wrote Dorina I was coming to see her here. I was ready to pay her anything she asked in order to find out who you were. And then I walked into her house, saw you!”

She steeled herself against the hungry vibrancy of his voice, the flame of his hands on her shoulders as he drew her to him. She saw it all now. Dorina employing her, planning her campaign of lies to poison Ricci against her when he should learn who she was, knowing, perhaps, that Ricci would not cease until he found her.

“Your grandfather—” Lesley's voice came muffled; he was holding her so close in his arms.

“My grandfather,” he chuckled, his lips caressing her hair, “has been waiting up on Pine Mountain ever since you left there. He's been waiting for me to bring you there—as Mrs. Barron. He said if I couldn't,

he was going to try his best to make you Mrs. Lederer, because maybe then I'd stop raving about you, even in my dreams. He said that, the night we saw you at the Palomar.”

“You had Sylvan take me there!”

He nodded, pressed his cheek hard against hers, then moved his lips across its softness until his mouth hovered over hers, close. “I stayed overnight with Todd when I brought you both down from Pine Mountain. The next day, too. I was there when his dad called. We both thought his idea of a vacation for you was a swell one. I knew you were hating me pretty hard. I thought if you went away a while you'd gain a perspective of me, maybe, that you wouldn't here. Because I'd be parked on your doorstep every hour.”

LESLEY stood very still within the tightening circle of his arms, her face burrowing against him so that he could not look into her eyes.

“You were with Dorina that night at the Palomar—having a grand time.”

“Yes, my darling, I was with Dorina. In person. But my mind and heart were with a red-headed girl in a silver dress, thousands of miles away across the room—the girl I'd originally planned to have there that night, with my grandfather and me. He drove down with the crowd—we couldn't seem to shake them—”

“You were so sure I'd come back from my vacation—loving you—”

He lifted her face, forcing her to look up at him. His eyes were the deep, black passionate eyes that for a year of nights had filled her dreams. Her breath caught in ecstasy.

“Yes, I was sure, Lesley Vaile. When a man loves a woman the way I love you, he knows that woman was meant for him from the beginning of time. There wouldn't be any use fighting it, dearest, even if we wanted to. Now—any more questions?”

“I guess—no more questions—”

“Then give me your lips—”

Secretary De Luxe

There was chaos as the voice of Broadway's most garrulous columnist broke in. "Is this the young lady? Is it true your engagement is ended?"

By Karen Cookson



*Mary Denis
Didn't Know
Herself Until
That Night Her
Boss Forgot She
Was a Secretary*

D. MARY DENIS was not the type of secretary to waste her employer's time by daydreaming on the job. Today, however, Mr. Norman Aster had had to repeat the opening paragraph of the letter to the South American branch three times.

Finally he demanded hotly, "Would

it be too much to ask for your attention, Miss Denis?"

D. Mary turned with a start from the windows that looked down on Wall Street. She had not been seeing Wall Street. In her mind, she had been seeing Fifth Avenue and the formidable house where Nancy Boyle, Mr. Aster's

fiancée, lived. Tonight that beautiful old house would blaze with lights. Its ballroom—that marvel of the gay nineties—would be opened for the first time in years, as Mr. and Mrs. John Leeds Boyle entertained for their daughter Nancy and the young man she was going to marry.

Few affairs nowadays were as gala as this one promised to be. Few people, indeed, had ballrooms in which to stage incredible parties.

Mr. Aster's thoughtful-eyed secretary decided that of all the parties to which she had not been invited, this was the party she most longed to attend.

It stood for something in D. Mary's mind—that Victorian ballroom in the old Victorian house. It stood for romance, the romance of an era that had passed, an era which had been characterized by the waltz, by lace-paper valentines and gallantry, by the five o'clock Fifth Avenue parade and by the coach and four; an era when women had induced love by highly artistic flirtations instead of by casual camaraderie.

"I wish to advise you that the utilities stock—" Mr. Aster was saying. He broke off wearily. Then, seeing that his secretary hadn't even noticed him, he leaned over, amazingly, and caught D. Mary's firm little chin between his thumb and first finger.

"What are you thinking about?" he demanded, his tone revealing the fact that he was no longer angry, but only amused and curious.

Behind her silver-rimmed glasses, D. Mary's eyes were wide and shy, like startled brown pansies.

"The dance," she breathed, "the one Miss Boyle's parents are giving tonight for you and for her. Oh, it will be marvelous!"

Young Mr. Aster was blunt.

"It will be deadly," he said decisively. "You've no idea what a bore it will be! Dowagers and debs and a lot of silly chatter—" He paced up and down, hands in pockets.

"But, look here, I didn't know you

cared about things like that," he went on. "You're not—that is—er—I supposed you were a quiet sort of girl, with no hankering after the bright lights. You're always cool and efficient and neat and poised. You never show up with a headache or shadows under your eyes. No ruffles. Excellent worker. Excellent references—"

"Precisely," said D. Mary. "Daughter of a New England college professor. Graduate of Smith. Inexperienced before I came to Aster & Aster, but a brilliant mind. And yet even brilliant minds like to see Paris gowns, and meet handsome men, and hear superlative jazz once in a while."

"True," agreed Mr. Norman Aster thoughtfully. He stopped pacing, and lit a cigarette. "I have it!" he told D. Mary abruptly. "You'll come to Nancy's party! You'll see just how it is for yourself. I'll fix everything. And now do you suppose you could take that letter for me?"

"Yes, of course," said D. Mary. "I'm frightfully sorry. And please don't think any more about what I said, Mr. Aster. I was just being silly. Spring fever, you know."

With a yellow pencil almost the shade of her smoothed and subdued hair she made brief marks in her notebook. "I wish to advise you that the utilities stock—" she prompted.

"Never mind the utilities stock!" roared young Mr. Aster. "You thought I was joking about the party. I wasn't. I want you to come if it will give you pleasure. And Nancy will be delighted."

"Oh, I couldn't—"

"Why not?"

"Well, because I practically invited myself."

"Nonsense! You've a suitable dress?"

D. Mary laughed suddenly. It was all so fantastic! D. Mary Denis going to a party at the Fifth Avenue Boyles'!

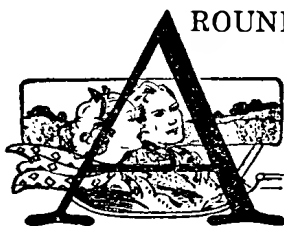
"Yes. I've a suitable dress. But—really, Mr. Aster, I'm afraid that, aside

from that, I'd be a washout. I wouldn't fit in."

"Oh, but—er—you're charming," protested Mr. Aster, with a gallantry that was a little slow. "Lots of young men—er—prefer the studious type of girl."

D. Mary hesitated. She was tempted.

"I'll send someone for you around nine," announced her employer decisively.



ROUND nine D. Mary Denis was practically trembling with excitement. She had spent so many nights shampooing

her hair, or reading at the public library, or window shopping! The appearance of Mr. Aster himself was the last straw.

"Why, I didn't expect you to call for me! I thought you intended to send a friend," she gasped, when she opened her apartment door and discovered him, tall and a little aloof in tails and a white tie.

It was obvious, however, that she wasn't displeased.

She wasn't wearing her glasses. With a brief smile of amusement, young Mr. Aster read her eyes. Such frank eyes they were, clear and brown and honest, not blue and veiled, as Nancy Boyle's were. Nancy's lovely eyes hid her secrets; D. Mary's gave hers away. Assuming, of course, that she wanted to make a secret of the fact that for the first time she was seeing her employer as a man; assuming that she wouldn't want him to know that she found him attractive in evening clothes.

"You're looking mighty nice yourself," he said calmly.

D. Mary stammered, "B-but I didn't say—"

"You don't have to say," Mr. Aster informed her blithely, and D. Mary suspected that the blitheness had

been caused by an indiscreet number of cocktails.

She didn't worry about that, however. Mr. Norman Aster was old enough to take care of himself.

In her lunch hour she had rushed out and bought a new evening dress. It was smart and simply cut; made of soft black satin, it was slinky beyond belief, the sophisticated sort of dress she had wanted for years. It had had one disadvantage from D. Mary's point of view—an audacious little slit in the skirt—but D. Mary had promptly remedied that. She had sewed it up. She wouldn't want Mr. Aster or his fiancée to think there was anything audacious about her.

All the lights in all the tall buildings of Manhattan seemed to be twinkling just for her as Mr. Aster led her out to his car—a long gray coupé which tonight he drove himself.

It wasn't until they were moving downtown that he told her that the party at the Boyle home had unexpectedly been called off.

"So I thought we'd do a little night-clubbing on our own," he said.

"I do hope it wasn't anything serious, like a death in the family," D. Mary said sympathetically.

Mr. Aster started. Then he laughed aloud. "Well," he said, "it was a death in the family, in a way."

D. Mary decided that it must have been a very distant relative. Mr. Aster didn't seem greatly upset, only a bit sullen.

She sighed a little as she relinquished the picture of herself, dramatic in the black satin gown, dancing in the Victorian ballroom with a gallant, lace-paper valentine partner. But her excited brown eyes lost none of their sparkle.

They had dinner at a smart hotel where a famous orchestra played for dancing. At her place was a corsage of double Russian violets centered with gardenias, which the fiancé of Nancy Boyle had ordered for D. Mary Denis. Then, before going on to a round of night clubs, they visited a

gay revolving bar. There followed the Club Debonair, the Mirror Room, the Club Skyland. There was the popping of champagne bottles, the sweetness of the gardenias, the lightness of D. Mary's head, music, laughter. There was the moment when Mr. Aster became Norman, and Miss Denis became Mary. As they danced, Norman teased her to tell him what the D., her first initial, stood for. Laughingly, she refused to tell.

And then suddenly there was chaos as the voice of Broadway's most garrulous columnist broke in on their merriment. "Mr. Aster, is this the young lady over whom you and Miss Boyle quarreled? Is it true that your engagement is ended? Will you let us have the story?"

There were flashes of blinding light in their faces as the cameras clicked. D. Mary was horrified; Norman was furious. He caught her hand, hurried her to the exit. And then at last they were alone in Norman's long gray coupé.

It was a lovely dream turned into a nightmare.

THEY drove slowly along the Hudson. "She was angry because you invited me to her party," D. Mary said. "Oh, you shouldn't have considered me at all! I wouldn't have had you break your engagement for the world!"

Norman stopped the car in a sheltered spot, and took her in his arms.

"You're sweet," he said. "Absurdly sweet." He held her protectingly; all the carefree blitheness of the early evening was gone from both of them. The famous Mr. Aster was like a weary, small boy.

D. Mary had seen him like this before. So many days, in the press of business, he forgot to eat any lunch, and became headachy and harassed. D. Mary would send out for sandwiches and milk, and coax him into taking them. Then he would be all right again.

In this case, however, food wouldn't help. Reunion with his fiancée was the only possible remedy.

"Would you care to tell me about it?" D. Mary asked gently.

Norman Aster shrugged. "There's not much to tell. Nancy isn't jealous—she's just spoiled and a little vain. She resented my having an interest in any girl but herself. I told her that I wasn't—that is, that you—"

"That I'm very plain, and wear glasses," D. Mary interposed quietly.

"No—not that," Norman Aster denied quickly, too quickly. "But I told her that you weren't the type of secretary to flirt with the boss. She wouldn't believe me. She demanded that I prove my love for her by letting you down. I wouldn't do it. And Nancy is very stubborn—"

"And you're stubborn, too—"

"Yes, I suppose I am. But I thought it was mean of Nancy, a girl who has everything, to deny a little fun to a girl who hasn't had her opportunities."

Gallantry! Romance! Was it only that morning that she had been sighing for the days when men had been courtly?

D. Mary whispered before she could help herself, "Oh, I didn't dream you were half so nice! I've been thinking of you as horribly level-headed, painfully unromantic, in spite of the fact that you're so—handsome. But you're not like that at all, really! You'd rather have a misunderstanding with your fiancée and be hurt yourself than hurt an unimportant girl you hardly know. Why, I—I think you're wonderful!"

Norman Aster stared down at her—at the golden head against his shoulder, the tender brown eyes, the wistful red lips.

"I think you're wonderful, too," he exclaimed amazingly, and bent and kissed her.

The fragrance of the gardenias, his arms, holding her so securely, his kiss, all combined to make D. Mary's head spin dizzily. She clung to him.

They were both shaken and startled when sanity returned.

"I think we'd better go home," suggested D. Mary bewilderedly.

In her New England life she had not been kissed many times. She was aghast at herself.

"You're not angry?" Norman asked uneasily.

D. Mary shook her head. "No, I—I couldn't be angry." She added, with the frankness that was so characteristic of her, "I—I enjoyed it. But we mustn't let it happen again, you know."

Norman Aster's gray eyes were strange. "Yes, I know—we mustn't let it happen again. Not ever again."

DMARY stood staring into her mirror for a long time that night before she got ready for bed.

She was a girl transformed. Her hair was full of golden fires, her eyes were dark and sweet and mysterious; her lips were warm and red with the remembered joy of a man's kiss.

For a minute she smiled at herself, and then she scowled.

"You're Daffodil now," she said aloud. "I thought you didn't ever want to be Daffodil instead of Mary. I thought you hated—Daffodil."

Daffodil Mary Denis—that was her full name. Daffodil, after the pretty, light-hearted mother who had left her baby and her professor husband after two years of unhappiness in the strait-laced New England college town, and had fled to Paris to design the now famous Daffodil Hats. Mary, after her paternal grandmother, who stood for all the traditions and culture which the blond Daffodil had found unendurable.

All these years Mary Denis had succeeded in suppressing the Daffodil side of her nature. And now suddenly a man's impulsive kiss had opened Daffodil's prison door. She was free and a force to be reckoned with.

Mary had taken Mr. Aster's letters with care and precision; Daffodil had

stared out of the window and dreamed of Nancy Boyle's party.

Daffodil had rushed out to buy the slinky black satin dress; Mary had sewed up the daring little slit in the skirt.

Daffodil had hurried off tonight without Mary's eyeglasses. Daffodil had sipped champagne, and danced and laughed and returned Norman Aster's kiss.

Daffodil had gotten Norman into trouble with his fiancée. But in the morning, Miss Denis resolved firmly, Mary would go straight to Nancy Boyle and explain matters. Mary would make amends for the disturbance Daffodil had caused.

If D. Mary could help it, she was not going to be like her pretty, frivolous mother.

Nor would it do Daffodil any good to suggest that, given a chance, she might catch the delightful Mr. Aster on the rebound. Mary wasn't going to let her attempt anything as underhanded as that!

If Daffodil had been so shameless as to lose her heart to an engaged young man, she would just have to learn to get along without it, decided Mary with a tightening of her red lips that would have reminded the folks back in her home town of the dignified grandmother who had reared her from babyhood.

And it was a very dignified young person who presented herself to Nancy Boyle the next morning. The D. Mary Denis, whom Nancy consented to receive while she breakfasted in a small sunroom, wore prim brogues on her small feet, a neat brown suit that revealed nothing whatever of her slim figure, eyeglasses that shone in the sunlight and hid her clear eyes, and a pulled-down dark felt hat.

Nancy put aside a coffee cup, and threw her one contemptuous glance.

"What's the idea of the masquerade costume?" she demanded.

D. Mary was startled and confused. Her carefully mustered-up poise deserted her.

"M-masquerade costume?"

Nancy slammed a newspaper down on the table that separated them.

"See yourself as the cameras see you!" she invited frigidly. "Norman told me that you were just a plain little secretary from the sticks. Fortunately for me, the cameras never lie—although my dear ex-fiancé does! You didn't look quite so plain and retiring last night!"

"Oh!" gasped D. Mary. She stared at the tabloid picture of a slim, wide-eyed blonde in a smartly cut black satin dress who was clinging to the arm of a handsome, tall man in evening clothes. A lovely, radiant, although obviously dismayed blonde. "But this—"

"Isn't Norman and you, I suppose?" suggested Miss Boyle grimly.

"No—yes—I mean—" D. Mary hesitated. Of course, the girl clinging to Norman Aster's arm was Daffodil, not Mary Denis, but how could she explain that to his outraged fiancée? How could she say, "This isn't the real me. This is the picture of a personality who lives inside me, a personality named Daffodil, whom I try to suppress. A personality I have suppressed! Daffodil won't bother you any more. I promise you—"

How could she say that without sounding insane?

Nancy Boyle would never understand.

D. Mary thought quickly.

"Let's not talk about me," she begged gently, hoping that she had found a way to repair the damage she had caused. "I want to tell you about Mr. Aster—how heartbroken he feels. That's why I came, really. I want to explain his attitude—"

"I'm not interested in your explanation," said Nancy Boyle, "I'm interested in you and your disguise. Take off the ridiculous hat and the phony eyeglasses please! You might as well. You thought you could fool me with them, but you can't."

"They're not phony—" began D. Mary placatingly.



BUT little blue-eyed Miss Boyle had worked herself up into a towering rage. Like all girls who have been given their own way from infancy, she had very little self-control.

"I said take them off!" she shrilled hysterically, springing to her feet.

D. Mary insisted quietly, "I'm sorry; I can't do that. I wear these glasses every day. I need them."

"That's not true!" cried Nancy Boyle. "And if you won't take them off, I'll take them off for you," she threatened.

D. Mary took a backward step, but too late. Nancy had moved like a lithe cat, and snatched the glasses from her nose.

There was a sudden sharp tinkle as the lenses shattered upon the tiled floor of the sunroom. Then, before D. Mary had had time to anticipate a further attack, Nancy's hysterical hands were clutching her prim, small hat, and pulling it off her head.

"Now get out!" Nancy cried, flinging herself upon a divan and bursting into tears. "Get out!"

D. Mary's grave eyes studied her pityingly for a moment before she obeyed. When at last she turned and left Nancy, her lips were tight with determination.

To D. Mary Denis, with years of New England training behind her, it was an appalling thing to see this girl whom she had always looked upon as the acme of beauty, breeding and glamour, changed into a bad-tempered little vixen.

No longer did she blame herself for Nancy's quarrel with Norman. Norman's date with her had been merely the occasion for their break, not the cause. The cause lay in Nancy's own temperament.

Sooner or later Mr. Aster, if he were wise, would have parted with Nancy anyway.

She caught a glimpse of herself in

a hall mirror as a man-servant showed her out, and paused in astonishment.

"Well, well, Nancy certainly made me look a little more human," she murmured. "Not bad! Not bad at all!"

ON the steps she encountered a throng of reporters. One of them recognized her. "You're Miss Denis," he challenged. "What did you want to see Miss Boyle about? Say!" he gasped, coming closer to her and perceiving her tousled curls and the crushed little felt hat in her hand. "You two girls didn't get into a hair-pulling match, did you? How about letting us have the story?"

"Please go away, and let me alone," D. Mary whispered dramatically. "You've caused enough trouble!"

"Oh, now, Miss Denis—" began the reporter placatingly.

D. Mary stole a glance at him out of sly brown eyes. She opened her bag and fumblingly produced a tiny white handkerchief. She looked as if she were about to cry. In reality, she was getting ready to talk for publication.

"It's all been a misunderstanding," she announced suddenly.

"Of course," chorused the reporters soothingly.

"If I tell you the real story, will you promise to print it just as I give it to you?" she asked.

They promised readily.

"I think I'd better begin with Mr. Aster," she decided leisurely.

"Yes, do, Miss Denis!" urged the man who had first recognized her.

"Well," said D. Mary, her dark eyes demure, "to get along with Mr. Aster, you have to understand him, and I don't believe that Miss Boyle does—quite.

"Mr. Aster is one of the kindest men who ever lived," declared his prim secretary, warming to her subject. "He isn't in love with me—not in the least—but he planned to take me to Miss Boyle's party last evening because he knew that I never got a chance to go to parties like that.

"As you know, Miss Boyle objected. But when Mr. Aster starts a thing, he sees it through. That's the way he's made. He was determined to give me a good time for once in my life, and he did—at a terrible cost to his own happiness."

"You don't think that he likes you better than Miss Boyle?" asked one of the reporters.

D. Mary shook her golden head. "How could he?" she asked, her brown eyes very wide and innocent. "I'm extremely plain. You can see that for yourselves."

"Will you pose for us now, and let us use that as a caption for your picture?" demanded a photographer.

"Certainly," said D. Mary, who had been working for just this, and smiled obligingly for the cameras. "Mr. Aster," she confided matter-of-factly, "thinks I'm one of the plainest girls he's ever seen."

"Mr. Aster," murmured a cameraman with a knowing glance at his colleagues, "must be more or less blind."

D. Mary, who had no colleagues, merely smiled to herself. "But not, let us hope, incurably," she added to herself.

Then came the question D. Mary had been hoping they wouldn't think of.

"What is your full name, Miss Denis? We know that you always sign yourself D. Mary—but what does the D. stand for?"

D. Mary hesitated. If she didn't tell them of her own free will, they might have her looked up and find out about the college professor father and the frivolous, runaway mother. They might rake up that scandal of long ago. They might even find out about the wickedly beautiful Daffodil Hats that women spent hundreds of dollars to import from Paris each year. Why, they might go so far as to suspect that D. Mary Denis was really two persons in one—a naughty, carefree girl who liked dresses with slits in the skirts, and music and laughter, a girl who had dared to fall in love with her at-

tractive employer, and a precise, dignified girl with a New England conscience, a girl who had wanted only to make amends for the trouble she had unwittingly caused, and who wasn't sure—even now that she had discovered Nancy Boyle's ugly temper—that she had a right to try to make her employer see her in a more favorable light.

D. Mary shivered at the very idea.

"Daffodil Mary Denis is my full name," she said in a small voice. "And now may I go please?"

SHE was late to the office, but Mr. Aster was later still. D. Mary spent most of the day with one eye on the door and the other on the telephone waiting to hear from him.

It was almost five in the afternoon before she heard his step in the outer office. When he appeared in the doorway, he had a large collection of newspapers under his arm.

"Have you seen today's editions?" he demanded by way of greeting.

D. Mary shook her head.

"You really shouldn't miss them," said her boss, unfolding a page before her.

D. Mary bent over the newspaper, wonderingly. Then her gaze became magnetized.

She gave a little gasp of horror. Those traitorous reporters! They had told the world that D. Mary Denis was not without beauty all right—but in such a way that they had made a complete fool of Norman Aster. The headlines read:

"YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND MR. ASTER!" SAYS DAFFODIL DENIS, BLOND SECRETARY

"His fiancée doesn't understand him, but I do. He isn't interested in me—it's just his kind heart that makes him take me to night clubs," declares pretty "Daffy" Denis, over whom débutante Nancy Boyle broke her engagement. (Story on Page 2.)

Above the headlines there appeared the picture for which D. Mary had smilingly posed—a slim, shapely blond

girl, posed against the graystone austerity of the Boyle Fifth Avenue home. She was a wide-eyed, defiant girl who, with her glasses broken and thrown away by Nancy Boyle, her ugly little hat ripped from her head by Nancy Boyle, and her prim coiffure destroyed and pulled into lovely, glimmering, flyaway little ringlets by Nancy Boyle, had been transformed into a youthful vision of beauty.

The newspapers questioned in heavy black print:

WOULD YOU CALL THIS GIRL PLAIN?

"I'm very plain," Daffodil Denis told reporters modestly. "Mr. Aster just couldn't care for me!"

It was scandalous and appalling. D. Mary was trembling with a cold chill as she rose slowly to her feet and faced Mr. Aster. He would never forgive her for what she had done. Never! She had made a fool out of the man she had merely been trying to awaken.

His first words were astounding.

"You can read without your glasses," he remarked mildly.

D. Mary stared. "What? Oh—oh yes. I suppose I can." Was he going crazy? What difference did it make at a time like this whether she could get along without them or not?

"Who told you that you needed to wear them—ever?" persisted young Mr. Aster whose gaze was confusingly intent.

D. Mary felt as if she would scream any minute. Here when she had offended him unpardonably and was struggling to find words of apology, he centered the conversation upon her eyeglasses!

"I had headaches when I first came to the city," she explained, "and so I had my eyes examined—"

"At one of those small, cheap little places, I suppose?" interrupted Mr. Aster.

"Why—yes," faltered D. Mary miserably.

"Where they fit you out with glasses whether you need them or not—and regardless of how beautiful

your eyes are—just to make a sale,” continued Mr. Aster bitterly. “The truth of the matter probably is that you should never have worn them at all,” he told her angrily.

“I know,” she admitted weakly. “G-go ahead and call me names. I deserve anything you say.”

MR. ASTER suddenly came closer to her. “Look here,” he demanded. “Were you deliberately trying to make a monkey out of me? That’s what I want to know. ‘You have to understand Mr. Aster!’ It sounds like the title of a comic song!”

“I—I suppose Miss Boyle will never forgive you?” choked D. Mary.

“I suppose not,” agreed Mr. Aster.

“If only I could do something to make it up to you!” she said diffidently. “Oh, I’m so sorry about those newspaper stories! And I wasn’t trying to make a monkey out of you. I was just trying to get my picture in the papers,” she went on, having reminded herself that confession was good for the soul. “You see, I had been to Miss Boyle to patch things up for you. But she wouldn’t listen to me. She—”

“She tore off your glasses and smashed them,” supplemented Mr. Aster, “and pulled off your hat and mussed your lovely hair.”

“How did you know?”

“She called me on the telephone to tell me so,” said Mr. Aster serenely. “She said that she had made a wreck out of my beautiful blonde. I didn’t know whom she was talking about until I saw those newspaper pictures of you and the headlines.”

“I—I don’t know what you are talking about,” said D. Mary, blushing. But she was beginning to. In spite of the fact that her New England practicality whispered that this was only a dream from which she would awaken.

“See here,” he said sternly. “It simply isn’t decent for a man to have a secretary named Daffodil.”

“I know,” sighed D. Mary. “I’ll resign, of course.”

Mr. Aster paid no attention to her. “Daffodils,” he continued, “belong in sunny apartments where they can look bright and pretty all day, and be waiting to decorate a man’s home-coming at night. You ought to have a white-and-green kitchen,” he planned, “and a cool blue living-room, and a bedroom done in silver and yellow—”

“Mr. Aster!” interrupted D. Mary, drawing her slim self up stiffly. “Just because you’ve discovered that Daffodil is a part of my name you needn’t jump to conclusions!”

“Why, Daffodil Mary!” smiled Mr. Aster. “You do me a great injustice. I’m asking you to marry me.”

“Marry you? But why?”

“Because you have everything that I ever wanted in a girl,” he explained triumphantly. “You’re the essence of what every man wants in a wife. You’re prim, yet you can be naughty; you’re very beautiful, yet at times plain; you’re brilliant, yet you can be idiotic; you’re reserved, and yet seductive; you’re light-hearted, and yet serious. Oh, in other words, Daffodil Mary Denis, you’re adorable! You’re complex, unique, paradoxical. Cleopatra was like that, and the famous Helen—and a very tantalizing woman named Eve.

“I want you, and only you,” he whispered, catching her small hands in both of his. “Will you have me, dear?”

D. Mary had finished with duplicity forever. “If you’re sure you want me,” she answered simply. “But—I thought you loved Nancy?”

“I thought so too,” Mr. Aster replied. “Now, however, I know that I was mistaken. Why, Nancy was entirely beautiful, entirely aristocratic, entirely conventional and entirely spoiled. Darling, think how deadly marriage with her would have been! I couldn’t have borne it, longing as I always have, and as all men long, for your kind of woman.”

“A Daffodil Mary?” smiled D. Mary.

“But certainly!” sighed young Mr. Aster contentedly. “A Daffodil Mary.”



Champagne Cocktail

By Celia Keegan

HE bought me champagne cock-
tails

At the cities' finest bars.
He always sent me orchids,
And he drove imported cars.
You said I was a darling,
And my eyes like shining stars.

He offered me his honored hand,
Asked if he dared to hope
You said you'd die without me
And you begged me to elope.
You didn't have a nickell!
Guess I acted like a dope!

Well, I've had the gorgeous flowers
And my stately motor trips,
And I tasted champagne cocktails
In demure and dainty sips.
But the most intoxicating glow
Has come—from your dear lips!



He reached out and covered her hand with his. "I guess," he said slowly, "I would tell you anything!"

Scandal for Two

CHAPTER I

SALLY MEREDITH fished around in her black patent-leather bag and pulled out a battered clipping.

Wanted: Governess for thirteen-year-old girl. Must be mature, experienced, force-

Captivating Novelette

By Ruth Herbert

ful and extremely tactful. Best of references required. Apply Lancaster, 30 Old Country Road.

"Apply William Lancaster, III," elaborated Sally. An impish twinkle danced in her smoky-gray eyes, quirked the corners of her red mouth.

"Hey, Sally!" whispered Eddie Horton. "The boss is watching you."

Sally thrust the advertisement hastily back in her bag. Then she fixed her wide gray eyes soulfully on Jake's face and let her mind wander, while Jake roared.

Jake was her boss. It was his regular day for roaring. Once a month regularly he called in all the reporters on the *Herald*, of which he was city editor, and told them how terrible they were.

Jake let out a moan that shook the rafters. "Nothing ever happens! Listen to him! Well, I'll tell you something that's going to happen, sure as shooting, while you sit around in corners and sleep. William Lancaster is going to run for governor!"

Every one of the seven people in the room gasped—except Sally.

Jake eyed her suspiciously. "So you're not surprised? I suppose you knew all about that!"

Sally pushed a red curl behind her ear. "I've heard rumors," she admitted airily.

"Rumors! We can't print rumors!"

"No," agreed Sally sympathetically. "And you can't print interviews, either—not with Bill Lancaster. Because you can't get near him."

She Spent Her Vacation Trying to Break Up a Famous Bachelor's Romance

"Meredith!" barked Jake, and Sally jumped.

"I suppose," sneered Jake, "that just because you're starting off today on a month's vacation—in our busiest season—you are no longer interested in the problems of this newspaper!"

Sally grinned at him. "Why, Jake darling, you know that wherever I go, whatever I do, the *Herald* is always uppermost in my thoughts!"

"Nonsense!" snorted Jake. "And you're my so-called star reporter!" He swept the room with a derisive gesture. "They expect me to run a newspaper with material like this! This rag hasn't had a scoop in so long that the owners would drop dead if we ever once outsmarted the *World*."

"What do you expect us to be, fiction writers?" snapped Eddie Horton. That crack of Jake's about Sally's being the star reporter had irritated Eddie. "Nothing ever happens in this sleepy little two-by-four burg."



JAKE banged his fist down on the desk. "Listen. This town has material that the New York tabloids would envy. Here's a rich, eccentric bachelor of twenty-six who ought to be good for columns of copy, and we haven't had a story on him since he left Yale!"

"Two years ago he made a non-stop flight from the Pacific Coast to test some gadget he invented himself for his own plane. It should have been front-page stuff. And what do we get? We get a wave of the hand and a polite, 'Sorry, boys, nothing for publication.' Last year a new million-dollar-hospital went up here in Johnstown. Everybody knows that Lancaster must have built it, because he's the only guy in town with that much money to give away. But not one of you was able to get a story on it. No wonder I've premature gray hairs."

"What do you mean, premature?" chortled Eddie.

Jake wilted him with a glare.

"For months now Bill Lancaster has been the other half of a twosome with Muriel Waters. The Waters iceberg looks like a cat who's just lapped up a bowl of extra heavy cream—but she won't talk. We can't get within a mile of Lancaster. Are they engaged? Don't ask the *Herald*. We wouldn't know!"

His voice trailed off into a sputter of rage.

"Where," asked Eddie Horton cautiously, "did you pick up the dope that he's going to run for governor?"

"I've got sources," said Jake sourly. "The business men are organizing a reform party, and the story goes that they will ask young Lancaster to head the ticket, and it's ten to one he'll accept. But I can't print it, because we've got no proof."

Jake eyed Sally thoughtfully. Abruptly he changed his tactics. "Sally," he coaxed in an astonishingly soft voice, "how about postponing that vacation?"

"Not on your sweet life!" exclaimed Sally, alarmed. "Listen, Jake, this is all settled. I didn't have a vacation last year or the year before that or the year before that or—"

"All right," interrupted Jake hastily. "You don't have to rub it in. Go on and enjoy yourself, while I stay in this hot stuffy little town and try to keep the paper from going to the dogs, so that you'll have a job to come back to. But anybody who breaks that story of Lancaster running for governor gets a hundred-dollar bonus."

Sally turned and blew him a kiss from the doorway. "Just have the check ready for me when I get back, Jake," she called wickedly, and departed to the tune of Eddie Horton's snort of derision.

She jumped into a taxi and ordered the driver to take her to 30 Old Country Road.

Leaning back in the speeding cab,

her eyes narrowed speculatively. That hundred-dollar bonus was something to think about. But even more important, she had a personal score to settle with William Lancaster. When the rumor of his supposed engagement had been still hot, Sally had slipped into the back seat of the Lancaster town car while the chauffeur's back was turned. Bill Lancaster, hurrying from his office into the car, had been confronted by a pair of candid gray eyes.

Sally had summoned the engaging, one-sided smile that had won her so many scoops. "Mr. Lancaster, won't you give the *Herald* a statement—"

She had never finished that sentence.

The oblivious chauffeur had already been slipping into high. Bill Lancaster had cast about wildly for escape.

Sally had laid a slim hand on his perfectly tailored sleeve.

"Don't paw me, woman!" he had snapped irritably. Then, jerking open the door, he had hurled his six-foot body out of the moving car. Sally had gasped and had looked hastily out of the window to make sure he hadn't been killed. She had caught a glimpse of retreating broad shoulders as he strode grimly away.

Don't paw him, indeed! He hadn't even looked at her. Sally for the best part of twenty years had been accustomed to being seen—and usually admired.

"He wouldn't recognize me if he were introduced to me tomorrow!" she thought viciously.

Yes, Sally had a score to settle with William Lancaster.

FROM her bag she took a mirror, some hairpins and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. Working swiftly, she slicked back her rebellious red curls and pinned them tight to her small head. She turned down the brim of her smart little off-the-face hat so that it became a bedraggled affair with no style, and hid almost completely the upper half of her face.

As a crowning touch, she perched the horn-rimmed spectacles on her wholly inadequate little nose. Then she peered into the tiny mirror—and immediately became convulsed with laughter.

"Not so hot, baby!" she murmured. With sudden decision, she yanked off the spectacles and thrust them back in her bag, ran the comb riotously through her mop of hair, and flipped the hat back to its original jauntiness.

"Sink or swim," she muttered, "I'll do it under my own steam."

The taxi rolled up a long graveled driveway and stopped in front of a rambling gray-stone house. It was a charming house, set far back on emerald lawns, among protecting giant trees; a proud house, disdainfully aloof from its neighbors, arrogant.

"Like its owner," thought Sally wryly.

"Wait for me," she said to the cab driver. "You may have to pick up the pieces."

She took the imposing stone steps blithely, two at a time.

To the dignified gray-haired butler she said quickly, "Mr. Lancaster is expecting me."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Lancaster's advertisement said—"

Sally's raised eyebrows were a masterpiece of haughtiness. "Will you please take me in to Mr. Lancaster immediately?" she said imperiously.

She felt a thrill of triumph when, after a slight hesitation, the butler turned and led the way. Her high heels sank luxuriously into thick carpets, and her eyes took approving note of tall mirrors and polished old mahogany. In her mind she was already beginning her story, "Secure in his ancestral home, surrounded by magnificent family portraits and antiques, Mr. William Lancaster—"

She sighed. A lot of water would run under the bridge before the *Herald* printed that story.

The tall young man behind the huge desk in the living-room did not

look up as Sally entered. He said with weary courtesy, "Won't you sit down, Miss—"

"Sally Meredith."

Sally's voice was low and sweet and slightly husky. At the sound of it, the man started and lifted harassed black eyes. When he saw Sally, he scrambled to his feet and gave her a bewildered, apologetic smile.



It was Sally's turn to stare. She had thought she was prepared for Bill Lancaster, Johnstown's legend. She had poured over the file of pictures in the *Herald* morgue. She had seen him at close range during those few minutes in his car, before he had jumped out. But now she was thrown completely off guard by the height of him, by incredibly black eyes set in a thin, dark, restless face.

She had expected someone arrogant and spoiled and disagreeable.

She had never seen him smile.

It was unfair, that smile. It flashed fleetingly into his stern young face and made him seem hesitant and appealing and a little shy.

Sally stood and faced him, a slim girl with adventurous gray-green eyes and a disarming childish mouth.

"I beg your pardon. I thought you were another applicant."

His voice was nice, too.

"I am," said Sally.

"But the advertisement said—"

"I know," said Sally hastily. "I'm not mature or experienced. But I would be a good governess—honestly, I would. I can teach French and Spanish, and I can ride and swim and play tennis. And I like children—I always get along well with children."

"It's out of the question."

"Won't you," begged Sally, "just give me a chance? Just try me for a week—a day?"

"We're wasting time," he said firmly. "I couldn't possibly consider it."

Sally rose slowly, reluctant to go. He hesitated, then stammered with obvious embarrassment, "If—if you're in need of money, I'd be only too happy—"

He meant it; he was a very human person, this Bill Lancaster.

"Why, he's sweet," thought Sally, startled.

"No, thanks," she said aloud. "I'll get along somehow."

He looked distressed. "But surely you—"

But she crossed the long room and stood facing him, burnished head high, gray eyes unwavering. "Here's a gift from me to you—proof positive that honesty does not pay."

She tossed the pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on the mahogany desk.

"What do you mean?"

She smiled ruefully. "I'll bet I could have had this job. When I slicked my hair back and made my hat look funny and put on those specs, I looked fully ten years older. And in my bag is a complete set of forged references stating that I am an experienced governess. I was going to use them."

He cleared his throat. "Why—why did you change your mind?"

"I hate liars," said Sally simply.

She was halfway to the door when his voice stopped her. "Wait—please wait a moment."

She retraced her steps.

"You see," he said quietly, "I hate liars, too."

He went on abruptly. "My sister is thirteen years old. Our parents were killed in an accident nine years ago, and—well, Babs and I have only each other." He hesitated.

"Yes?" murmured Sally encouragingly.

"I've had three governesses for her in the past year—and I don't know why, because Babs is not a bad child." He glanced at her quickly, as if daring her to challenge that.

"I'm sure she isn't," said Sally warmly. "No child is bad."

His face lighted. "That's what I think. Maybe I should send Babs

away to boarding school, but somehow I can't do it. I—I want her to have a home."

"You are sweet," thought Sally. "You're a darling."

HE crossed the room abruptly and pulled the bell cord. "Ask Miss Barbara to come in for a moment, Carter," he said to the butler.

"If she likes me," asked Sally daringly, "am I hired?"

He hesitated. "You're so young," he said perplexedly. "And so pretty." He stopped. "I beg your pardon."

To her horror, she began to blush. That habit of blushing was the bane of Sally's existence. In three years she had worked up from cub to star reporter on the *Herald*. She had covered divorces, suicides and murders. But still, at the most inopportune times, she continued to blush.

Like a blessing, Barbara drifted in.

She was built like her brother—lean and long-limbed, with an imperious carriage, a wilful, sweet mouth and a half-wary softness in her black velvet eyes.

She did not wait for introductions. "Well, for Pete's sake!" she exclaimed instantly. "Where did you come from? All the others have been old hags with stringy hair."

"Barbara!" exclaimed Bill.

She paid no attention to him. "You're pretty," she said excitedly to Sally. "Are your eyelashes real? I wish I had red hair. If you stay, will you teach me to fix my hair like that? Will you let me use your lipstick? Will you help me to buy an evening dress with no back in it?"

Sally gasped. She stole a glance at Bill. He was waiting with a half-triumphant smile on his face. He might almost have said aloud, "You see, it's too much for you."

"If I say no," she thought, "I'll antagonize the child—and if I say yes to all those absurdities, Bill will know right away that I'm no good."

She thrust her chin up. "No," she said deliberately, "I won't do any of

those things. But if you'll let me, I'll teach you to brush your hair every night until it shines. I'll show you how to walk balancing a book on your head, so that you can enter a room with an air."

She grinned at Barbara, a crooked friendly grin. "And then when you're eighteen, you will really know how to wear an evening dress!"

She didn't dare look at Bill. She didn't know whether she had made a fool of herself or not.

"You," said Barbara unexpectedly, "have some sense."

Sally turned to Bill then. His eyes were amused, but they were friendly. "You'll do," he said softly. "You'll do, Sally Meredith."

"You mean I'm hired—without any references?"

"You don't look as if you'd steal the silver," he answered dryly. His voice became businesslike. "You will have a connecting room with Babs. Blake can take you in the car to pick up your clothes."

"I have a suitcase outside in the taxi," said Sally. She went out quickly, not daring to look at him. But she thought she heard his low chuckle follow her.

CHAPTER II



It wasn't, she soon discovered, easy to be a governess. She had one battle with Babs over learning French and another over not having a permanent. Both times she had a sick feeling that she had met her match. But she stuck to her guns, and both times—to Bill's admiring surprise—she won out.

Babs was wilful and arrogant and spoiled. Babs was also intelligent and generous and fiercely loyal. Babs was a darling, thought Sally. Babs was just like Bill.

But if Babs was difficult, she had an even harder job with Bill, from whom she wanted that story. His very

courtesy put a distance between them. He left for the office before they came down to breakfast. He always had dinner with them, but it was mostly a two-way conversation with Babs—he was obviously Bab's slave. As soon as the child had gone to bed, Bill either went into the library, alone, to read, or else got dressed and went out somewhere. Sally guessed shrewdly that he was going to see Muriel Waters, but she wasn't even sure of that.

By the end of the first week, she was bored to tears. She didn't dare go into town, even to a movie, for fear someone from the *Herald* would see her. She just sat alone in her room every evening, until she was ready to explode. And every evening she took out a little notebook labeled "Impressions of William Lancaster" and stared at its blank pages.

"Jake was right," she thought disgustedly. "I'm a washout as a reporter."

On the ninth day, she revolted. That evening she put on her best dress. Sally had mortgaged a month's salary for that dress. In the hand it was just a handful of white silk jersey, with a gold-leaf belt, but on Sally it was a dream come true. It outlined the gracious, melting curves of her slim young figure, and clung to her as if it had at last found its reason for existence.

Sally put it on and felt her stunted ego begin to revive.

She ran a comb through her red curls and caught them up high on top of her head with a single jeweled pin. She painted her warm young mouth with red. She put one drop of heady perfume behind each ear. And then she lifted her chin and went down to dinner.

Babs stared, awe-struck, reverent. "Sally! You're so—so impossibly pretty! Bill, isn't she pretty?"

Bill was staring at her, too, as if she were somebody he were seeing for the first time and would like very much to meet.

"Yes, of course," said Bill.

The tiny pulse in Sally's throat was hammering. She leaned over and kissed the top of Barbara's head. "I'm going out after dinner." She didn't look at Bill.

But all during dinner she felt his eyes on her, discovering her.

"Blake can take you in the car."

"No, thanks," said Sally quickly. "I'll order a cab." She hurried out before he could answer.

OUTSIDE, her bravado collapsed like a punctured balloon. She didn't have any place to go. She didn't dare go anywhere, because she'd be sure as fate to run into somebody like Eddie Horton.

She ducked around the corner of the house and went out into the garden and sat on a stone bench by the fountain. The moonlight cast mysterious shadows through the tall trees and turned the water into a shimmering pool of silver. It was a night for romance. Sally sat alone and resented the beauty of the night.

"For two cents," she thought raggedly, "I'd chuck the whole business."

She looked up and saw Bill coming toward her. He carried his tall body straight and his black head high.

"May I sit down?" he asked politely.

She moved over without a word.

She knew she ought to make some explanation about tonight, but she didn't know how to start. She felt suffocated by his nearness.

"This is a nice spot, isn't it?" said Bill. "I come out here often, when I'm lonely."

If he were engaged to Muriel Waters, thought Sally breathlessly, he shouldn't be lonely.

She looked at him with great childish eyes. Fragrance came from her hair, and her mouth was a soft, lovely line.

"I'm lonely too," she confessed. "I was going out tonight, but—something made me change my mind."

"Ever since you've been here," said

Bill hesitantly, "I've wanted to know you better. But I didn't want to intrude—to take advantage of your position here to force my company on you—"

He was so terribly nice. There was something the matter with Sally's heart; it was pumping crazily, as if she had been running.

She couldn't say anything; she just smiled foolishly and gratefully.

Suddenly in that moment they were friends. Bored? Lonely? Sally had forgotten there were such words in the dictionary.

"Bill," she said, "tell me about yourself."

He began to tell her, hesitatingly at first, and then with the surrender of a reticent man who at last has found a friend. He told her how he felt about his job and about flying and about Babs. He told her all about the non-stop flight from the coast and about certain improvements that would have to be made in his invention before it would be a success.

At the end of an hour Sally knew why Bill Lancaster always dodged reporters—he was shy.

"You gave the money for the hospital, didn't you?" asked Sally.

It was appallingly easy. He didn't even hesitate. "Yes." He told her all about the hospital. And then he added, "I've never told anyone else about that—not even Babs."

"Why do you tell me?" asked Sally, in a small voice.

"I guess," he said slowly, "I would tell you anything!"

The lump in Sally's throat was choking her.

He reached over and covered her hand with his. "Sally, I've noticed—I couldn't help but notice—that you never leave the grounds, that you never go anywhere. I'm not asking you to tell me why. But I think you must be in some sort of jam—and I want to get you out of it, if you'll let me. You don't have to tell me anything—except what I can do to help."

She felt herself getting all misty-

eyed and trembly. "Do you always take people on faith like that?"

"No," he said quietly. "Not always."

Her heart gave a quick hurting leap. She wanted to run away somewhere and hide. She wanted suddenly, more than anything in the world, to let her hand stay, warm and close, in Bill's hand forever.

She said in a choked little voice, "Thank you, Bill. I'll remember."

Abruptly embarrassed, he changed the subject awkwardly. "Will you wear that dress again tomorrow night? We're having company. Muriel Waters is coming to dinner—I want you to meet her."

Sally tumbled off her starry heights.

"I'd like to very much," she said politely. "I'd better go in now, I think."



HE told herself, marching upstairs to her room, that she was thrilled. She was a reporter, wasn't she? She was here to get a story. Well, now she would get the lowdown on the Waters situation. She was thrilled—she was thrilled to pieces. But her eyes were wet.

She took out her notebook and wrote down carefully everything she had found out about Bill Lancaster.

"Jake will probably raise my salary for this," she told herself defiantly.

But she didn't care about salary. She cared more about Bill.

The next morning, expertly and a little shamefacedly, she began to pump Babs about Muriel Waters.

"I don't like her," said Babs definitely. "She gurgles."

For no apparent reason, Sally suddenly leaned over and kissed her.

"But are they engaged?"

"Yes," said Babs disconsolately. "I don't know why they haven't announced it. It's Bill who's holding off. I hope it's because he wants to wiggle out of it."

"She doesn't wear a ring," prodded Sally skillfully.

"Bill is having mother's diamond reset for her. Bill wanted her to wear it the way it was, but Muriel wanted platinum."

"But Muriel won," thought Sally, with a sick little pang.

"Have they known each other long?" she asked.

"She lives near here," said Babs gloomily. "She began by coming over every day, pretending it was to see me, and staying till Bill got home. Then she kept telling him what a dear child I was and how I ought to have a real home, with a woman's guiding hand." Babs' nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Babs," said Sally, with a sudden twinge of remorse, "you ought not to gossip about your brother to outsiders."

Babs looked hurt. "But, Sally, I wouldn't tell anybody but you!"

Sally felt like a traitor.

Just before she went down to dinner that night she wrote blackly across a page of her notebook:

It's true about the Waters girl. Just my luck!

Babs met her at the bottom of the stairs. "Sally, you need some jewelry with that dress."

"Oh, no, darling," said Sally. "This one is better plain."

"But this would suit it," said Babs breathlessly. "This was an old-fashioned pendant of heavy gold, set with a single magnificent emerald."

Sally caught her breath. The child was right; it would be perfect with the dress.

"It was mother's," said Babs shyly. "Bill gave it to me, but I'm not to wear it until I'm grown up."

"You darling!" said Sally, touched. "But I couldn't possibly wear it. Your brother wouldn't approve."

Bill came up to them just then, looking lean and distinguished in white tie and tails, carrying himself like a dark young god.

"What wouldn't I approve?"

"Bill," said Babs, "make her wear it."

Sally's eyes met his, and she began to feel short of breath, the way she always did when Bill caught her un-awares.

"It's perfect," said Bill quietly. "Here—let me fasten it for you."

Was he lingering a little over the clasp? Just the light touch of his fingers sent a little tingle down Sally's spine.

"Be still," she commanded her wildly beating heart. "Be still!"

MURIEL WATERS swept in—an acquisitive, predatory blonde in aqua chiffon that matched exactly her big shallow blue eyes. Muriel was beautiful, like a diamond—and like a diamond cold and hard and glittering.

She rushed over to Babs, kissed her. "My precious child!"

Babs surreptitiously scrubbed the back of her hand across her mouth. Her eyes flew to Sally's. "You see?" asked Babs' black eyes.

Sally saw.

Bill was saying, "And this is Miss Meredith—Sally to the family."

Muriel's hard blue eyes narrowed. "It's nice of you to help out until I can take things over," she said condescendingly.

Anger shot through Sally. "Not at all," she said coolly. "Babs needs a woman's guiding hand."

Behind Muriel's back she met Babs' delighted grin and winked deliberately.

By the time dinner was announced, Sally's nerves were on edge from being patronized, and her gray eyes were flying storm signals.

At dinner Muriel kept the conversation a triangular affair, with Sally definitely on the outside. Finally Muriel turned to her. "What a charming necklace, Miss Meredith!"

"It belongs to Babs," said Sally.

Muriel turned to Babs in sweet rebuke. "Your mother's, Barbara? I

should think you would cherish that, my dear, instead of lending it about indiscriminately."

Angry little green flecks lit Sally's smoky-gray eyes.

"Sally isn't indis— whatever you said!" said Babs loudly.

"Babs!" warned Sally.

Bill's black eyebrows shot upward. "Babs cherishes that necklace more than anything else she owns, Muriel," he said levelly.

Sally's heart warmed a little, but Muriel shot her a venomous glance, and Sally knew she had made an enemy. Her turbulent heart leaped to meet the challenge.

Muriel was picking daintily at her salad.

"Dieting," thought Sally wickedly. Ostentatiously she demolished steak and vegetables and two helpings of mashed potatoes.

Barbara, her eyes glinting with mischief, followed suit. "Let's have another piece of pie, Sally."

Muriel didn't know enough to keep still. "Barbara, my dear!"

"I'd love another piece of pie," said Sally. "Do try it, Miss Waters. You haven't eaten a thing!"

"No, thank you," shuddered Muriel.

"It's awfully good," said Sally gushily. "Maybe ten years from now I'll have to watch my figure, too, but meanwhile I do love pie."

Bill choked suddenly, and reached hastily for his glass of water.

THEY had coffee in the living-room. Muriel took the chair by the coffee table and poured, as if by divine right. She looked very decorative in the firelight and very much at home, pouring Bill's coffee. Sally's heart twisted painfully.

"Three lumps, please," she said grimly. "And cream."

As soon as she could, she bore Babs off to bed. She carried away with her the picture of Muriel leaning over to put her hand possessively on Bill's arm.

Sally took a stinging cold shower. She stepped into a blue princess-cut house coat and zipped it wrathfully up the front, noting with small satisfaction that she didn't bulge anywhere. She parted her hair in the middle and pushed it back with bobby pins tied with two narrow blue ribbon bows. She looked young and glowing and freshly scrubbed.

"I wonder how Muriel looks without her make-up," she thought wrathfully.

But it didn't help any. It was Muriel who was down there with Bill. It was Muriel who would feel the strength of his arms and the warmth of his kisses.

At ten o'clock there was a light rap on the door and she opened it upon Bill—Bill gravely offering her a plate upon which reposed a huge wedge of chocolate cake. His black eyes were dancing.

"I thought you might be hungry," he said solemnly.

Sally took the plate from him helplessly.

He reached out and tangled his fingers in her short curls. "You look about ten years old," he said softly. Then he released her abruptly. "Good night, spitfire."

CHAPTER III



SALLY opened her eyes the next morning upon a bright blue world—with a heart that was gray and dreary and defeated. "Wednesday," she thought wearily. "It's been only eleven days since I bounced up to this house in a taxi and began leading with my chin."

She would give Bill notice today. She couldn't stand any more.

But, amazingly, Bill was at breakfast.

"I waited around," he said, "to tell you two some news. We're having a party tomorrow night."

Babs clapped her hands gleefully. She loved parties.

Sally opened her mouth to say she couldn't be there.

Bill said, "It's rather important—for me. Among the guests will be a delegation to ask me to run for governor."

Sally's heart began to beat furiously.

"Bill!" exclaimed Babs excitedly. "How scrumptious! You're going to do it, aren't you?"

"What do you think of the idea, Sally?" he asked.

His eyes were on her face, dazzling her.

"Who is going to ask you?"

He went into careful detail. He named important names. He told her everything.

A little imp in Sally's brain was shouting, "A scoop! Front-page stuff! How Jake will go for this!"

Bill said, "Well, what do you think?"

Her throat hurt. She felt all hollow inside, and her knees, even sitting down, felt wobbly. "Why ask me?"

He winced, as if that hurt. "I'd like your opinion."

Under the table, Sally's hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. Reporters were practical, hard-boiled people—and she was a reporter. She was one of the best reporters in the State! Besides, he was engaged to that squashy blonde.

"I hope you accept," she said.

"Then it's settled," said Bill.

She spent all afternoon writing in her notebook.

Bill was very quiet at dinner that night. Whenever Sally looked up from her plate, she met his eyes. Immediately after dinner, he said, "Sally, may I see you in the library for a moment?"

"He's found out!" she thought, panic-stricken.

When they reached the library, Bill took something out of the desk drawer and handed it to her. It was her notebook.

"I found this in the upstairs hall. Is it yours?"

"Yes." She wet her lips. "Did—did you read it?"

"I'm afraid I did. You see your name isn't on it anywhere."

Well, she would take it standing. She gritted her teeth and flung her head up, waiting for the deluge.

But there was no anger in his face. His eyes were incredibly soft and deep. He hadn't guessed from that notebook that she was a reporter! He trusted her so much that he didn't even have a suspicion of what that book meant. He thought—there was no telling what he thought! Probably that she was in love with him.

A betraying wave of scarlet stained her face.

"You're blushing!" said Bill softly. He touched her hot cheeks. "Temperature about a hundred and ten."

She didn't know what made her do it. But his touch snapped some tight-coiled spring in Sally, and she turned her head and nestled her cheek against the palm of his hand.

"Sally!" said Bill huskily. He reached for her and gathered her close. He held her so tight that she could hardly breathe. She felt his kiss clear to the tips of her toes.

"It's only a kiss," thought Sally desperately. "You've been kissed by experts, my girl. This is—"

And then she stopped thinking. He was kissing her as if he would never stop. He kissed her hair and her eyes and the warm little hollow of her throat. He kissed her mouth again. And again.

She kissed him back.

She wanted to spend the rest of her life kissing him back.

And then he let her go.

"I'm sorry. I had no right—"
No right!

Sally stumbled out of the room.

Bill had kissed her, and nothing would ever be the same again.

She had kissed him back. She had taken her heart and held it out to

him, bare and quivering, in her hands. And he had said, "I'm sorry."

She took a piece of paper and began to write.

Dear Jake—

THE next night was the party. Sally put on the white dress, and it might have been a bungalow apron for all the lift she got out of it. She went downstairs early to arrange the flowers.

Muriel was already there. She had come especially early, she said, to see Sally.

Sally waited.

Muriel said, "Miss Meredith, I hardly know how to say this. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but—the truth is, Bill and I feel that you are much too immature to have charge of Barbara."

Bill and I!

"Was there any reason why Mr. Lancaster couldn't tell me himself?" asked Sally proudly.

Muriel shrugged deprecatingly. "My dear, you know how men are! Of course, after we are married, Barbara will be put in the proper boarding school. The child is sadly in need of discipline."

Sally forgot her own pain in a sudden rush of compassion for Babs. "Miss Waters, please don't! I'll go immediately, of course. But don't—Forgive me for intruding like this, but you must not send Babs away to school. She'll feel she isn't wanted. She'll be miserable. She's a tractable child—truly she is, if she is handled sympathetically. And she worships her brother."

The other girl's eyes were cold. "Really, Miss Meredith, aren't you forgetting your place?"

"You mustn't do this to Babs!" cried Sally.

Muriel lifted a quick hand for silence. Sally whirled around. Bill was standing in the doorway.

She couldn't tell how much he had heard. His eyes were inscrutable. It

was as if last night had pulled a dark curtain between them.

"Sally, may I speak to Muriel alone?"

He was putting her in her place, dismissing her. She went out with her head up.

The guests began to arrive. Sally stayed in the background, but Bill sought her out, introducing her carefully to everyone. The men whose names he had told her, the men who were on the committee, came singly, or with their wives, so as to avoid suspicion.

One of the last guests to arrive was Eddie Horton!

Sally stared at him as if he were an extremely solid-looking ghost.

"Sally!" he gasped, comprehension flooding his eyes. "Well, you little imp! I might have known you were up to something. What do you know?"

"What are you doing here?" asked Sally.

He grinned airily. "Oh, Jake isn't the only one with angles. I've got a bona fide invitation to this shindig—don't worry about that. Nobody knows I'm a reporter—but I'm going to report plenty! The rumor goes that things are going to pop tonight—and your uncle Eddie can use that hundred bucks. Have you got any dope?"

"Not a thing," said Sally. "I think it's a bum steer, Eddie. Well, let's dance. We can enjoy ourselves, anyway."

"So you're keeping things to yourself, are you? Well, you're not fooling me any, my pet. But I'll dance with you."

Bill came up later and cut in. At his touch Sally felt herself melt inside, but she held herself taut and rigid. She wrapped a cellophane covering around her heart.

"I'm going to disappear with the fellows into the library. Watch out for things, Sally, will you?"

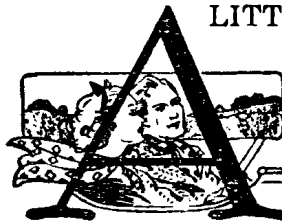
It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she had already been dismissed, but she bit back the words.

She would not spoil his night of triumph for him.

"Certainly."

His arms were hard and close around her. She could feel the hard, uneven pounding of his heart. "Sally, I want to see you after the guests have gone. I have something to tell you."

To give her her dismissal in person, probably! She didn't answer. She wouldn't see him—tonight or ever again. There were limits to what even a cellophane covering could stand.



LITTLE while later,

she saw the men begin to drift, one by one, toward the library. Quickly, she sought out Ed-

die Horton, drew him slyly aside.

"Come on, I'll show you around the grounds. It's a honey of a place. Too bad you couldn't smuggle in a camera man."

She kept him outside for an hour, showing him around and giving him careful bits of information that could do no harm. And then she kept him another half hour by going feminine on him and letting him make casual, meaningless love to her. It wasn't hard to do; Eddie would have made love to her in the past, despite his professional jealousy, if she'd ever given him any encouragement.

When they finally went back in, the library conference had broken up and the first guests were beginning to leave. Sally escaped quickly to her room. It was over—the long pretense was finished.

She put on a negligee and began to pack.

It must have been an hour later that she heard a cautious knock on her door. When she opened it, Eddie Horton slipped inside and stood grinning at her.

"What are you doing here, you fool?" demanded Sally.

"It worked like a charm," he whispered. "I hid away till all the guests had gone, and then I let the butler discover me, supposedly dead drunk, laid out on the sofa in the sunroom. Lancaster didn't know where to send me, so he told the butler to put me in the guest room for the night and let me sleep it off."

"Well," snapped Sally, "that's all very bright of you, but what's the idea of barging into my room like this?"

"You're holding out on me," said Eddie implacably. "I want the low-down, Sally. Come on, give."

"I wouldn't tell you anything if I knew it!" said Sally furiously. "Now get out of here, before I wake the house!"

He laughed. "Come off your high horse, my sweet. It's after midnight, and you're in a very fetching negligee. I know very well you won't yell for help."

"Oh, won't I?" gritted Sally.

The hot, red-headed temper that wouldn't let her stop to think boiled over—and she screamed. As soon as that scream had shattered the stillness she knew that it had also shattered her little tissue-paper house of pretense. But it was too late to think.

THE door opened and Bill burst in. His blow caught Eddie Horton on the side of the head and sent him sprawling.

"Get out!" snapped Bill. "I don't care how drunk you are! You should know better than to force yourself on a helpless girl. Get out before I break your neck!"

Eddie got up, nursing his jaw. "Helpless girl, my grandmother! She's the smartest woman reporter in the State."

Bill's lips went white, and the whiteness spread to his whole face. "Get out!" he said menacingly to Eddie.

Eddie got out. The door slammed behind him.

Sally felt like a criminal come to

judgment. She looked at Bill—and faced a stranger. He looked too thin, too dark. He was all cheekbones and black blazing eyes. His mouth, usually so generous-looking, was thin and straight and tight.

"Is it true?"

"Yes."

He waited, staring at her as if she were beyond comprehension.

"I'll leave in the morning," she faltered.

"If you please." Each word fell from his lips as if it were freshly chilled.

"Perhaps you'd rather I'd leave to-night," flared Sally.

"So it was all a trick," he said, still in that frozen, aching voice. "All of it. That notebook—that was your story, wasn't it? And I thought it was—oh, what a stupid fool I've been!"

Sally clenched her hands tight and hard.

The thread of his icy self-control held for one moment longer. And then the storm of his bitterness broke over her. He gathered up all the harsh, hurting words he knew and flayed her with them. She was a liar, a traitor, a cheat! He pelted her with words, like tiny hard pebbles.

"Bill!"

They both whirled around. It was Babs—a forlorn little figure in a long white nightgown and dressing-gown, standing in the connecting door between her room and Sally's. "I heard," said Babs. "Bill, you've got to let her explain."

"Go to bed, Babs," said Bill.

"I won't!" sobbed Babs. "You're acting crazy. You've got to let her explain. I love Sally!"

"Darling!" whispered Sally. "Go to bed, Babs. I love you, too."

"Well," said Bill, his voice crackling, "have you—have you something to explain?"

She turned on him furiously. "Don't stand there looking so—so self-righteous. I've been on my own since I was sixteen years old. You wouldn't

know anything about that, would you? I learned the French and Spanish I've been teaching Babs at night school, after a hard day's work. Yes, I'm a reporter—and a good one! And I'm proud of it!"

"No doubt," said Bill, "you're especially proud of those kisses last night!"

"Well, what have you got to be so proud of?" she flung at him. "It seems to me we're quits. You kissed me and then went running off to kiss Muriel!"

"Not exactly," said Bill slowly. "Muriel and I aren't engaged any longer. I broke it off—as soon as I found out that I was in love with someone else."

The anger evaporated, leaving her as weak as water. "Bill," she said shakily, "Bill—I resigned from my job on the *Herald*—last night, by special-delivery letter. I wrote to Jake, the managing editor, and told him I was through."

"Sally—why?"

They had both forgotten Babs.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" said Babs. "Can't you see why?"

"Babs!" murmured Sally, turning scarlet. But Babs was gone, closing the door behind her, softly and definitely.

Bill reached for Sally and gathered her in his arms. He said, just before he started kissing her, "Here's one for your book!"



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By Deborah Michael



"You've too many best girls now, Doug Bishop," she said. "You're not for me!"

Moments To Forget

VIRGINIA walked showly out of the Square Theater lobby, her lovely head in such a turmoil that she forgot her usual, "Good night, Carl," to the doorman. She sauntered along the quiet, moonlit street. Then halfway down the block she paused and looked back at the words glowing in lights above the theater entrance.

Pineville's Own Douglas Bishop in
"Love For a Day"

Her lips moved slightly as she repeated it to herself. Suddenly the lights went out and she turned away from the blackness. Just like that, she thought miserably, he had gone out of my life. For she had finally let herself realize tonight that Doug would never come back. He was too

far away now—much farther than the mere miles that separated them.

As scene after scene of "Love For a Day" unreeled again in her mind, she saw it all so plainly—saw that the modest, likable boy from Pineville who had loved to take engines apart was no more. In his place was a suave, darkly handsome cosmopolite making love to the most glamorous women in the world. A man who wore evening clothes as easily as he had worn the greasy overalls in the garage during summer vacations. A man whose name was in headlines constantly, whose slightest move was a matter for speculation, rumor and widespread publicity.

He was the toast of Hollywood. Women mobbed him, fought for souvenirs. He had gone so far beyond

He Had Too Many "Best" Girls to Suit Her

his sleepy little home town in the Middle West and its high-school teacher, Virginia Carey, that even remembering them must cost him an effort.

Yet, a year before, soon after that talent scout had spotted him in the university play, Doug had held her close in his arms, saying good-by.

"Maybe I'll flop, honey. Maybe I'll go high. It doesn't matter a great deal except for what it has to do with our future. Whichever it is, wait for me, honey—please. I'll be back, whether it's in a private car or riding the rods."

"Darling," she had said softly, blue eyes blurring with tears, "all I ask is just that you come back. I don't care how. Just come back."

For a long time he had stood there, pressing her tightly to him. Then he had kissed her quickly and clattered down the steps of her front porch. And already lonely for him, she had gone into the house.

He had written regularly for the first six months. Things were slow, but the screen test had gone over well and Superior Pictures had put him under a short-term contract. First there had been just bit parts that no one seemed to notice, but then had come that scene in the aviation picture that had made history for Doug—a scene after a crack-up that had brought thousands of fan letters asking the name of the dying flyer. Critics applauded, said Douglas Bishop had stolen the picture in a few hundred feet of film. Overnight he was a sensation! There had been a new contract, featured rôles and stardom in the offing.

VIRGINIA had worried for a while, wondering what this sudden success would do to him. Then she had laughed at her concern. How foolish, when his letters were the same as before, when he refused to take either himself or Hollywood too seriously.

He had written to her:

That scene that got me the big break was a laugh. I've done better in college dramatics. But things are happening, and I shouldn't complain. It means too much to us. These make-up and camera men can do wonders. I hardly recognize myself on the screen. But people think I look great, and I guess that's the main thing.

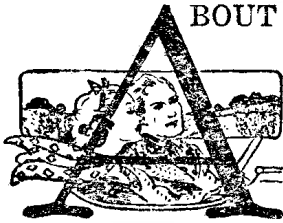
Finally, though, the letters had stopped. He had explained that letters were hard enough for him to write anyway, but with the way they were driving him at the studio, sitting down with pen and paper was just about impossible. But she was to remember that he loved her as much as ever and was coming back for her as soon as he could.

That letter had rung an ominous little note of warning in Virginia's heart, but she had continued to write, and he had sent a telegram now and then. Then in a few months the columnists had begun to link his name with that of beautiful Anita Drummond. Virginia had spent long moments before her desk, wanting to pick up a pen and pour out her heart to Doug, but her imagination was too vivid—she could almost see her letter lying unopened in a big pile of fan mail. Perhaps it wouldn't even be read by Doug, but answered with a form letter by some typist who'd think Virginia just another screen-struck schoolgirl.

So she had kept her pride and stopped writing, too. But hope had never quite died within her. Now she was turning in at her little picket gate. Bill Lomax called to her from his porch next door, asked her to take a walk with him. She thanked him, but refused. She knew what he was thinking, what everyone in Pineville was thinking. They'd said it to her face.

"You're crazy, Ginny Carey, to wait for Doug Bishop. Do you think he wants to have anything to do with us now? He's gone too far. Why don't you marry one of our boys? The first thing you know you'll be a bitter old-maid schoolteacher."

And now, after seeing this new, sophisticated Doug in the picture to-night, she knew they were right.



ABOUT a week later the telegram came—the telegram from Doug Bishop. She found it under the door Monday noon when she came home to get some lunch. Eagerly she tore it open and read:

COMING BACK SATURDAY TO MY VERY
BEST GIRL STOP CAN HARDLY WAIT TO
SEE YOU

DOUG

It couldn't be true! It just couldn't. But there it was in the fifteen grandest words she'd ever read.

"I wasn't a fool!" She laughed aloud, a glorious lilt of happiness in her voice. "He didn't forget! Oh, Doug, Doug, I love you so!"

She could hardly teach that afternoon. The excitement was too overwhelming. For the first time in her life she was self-conscious about facing her pupils. "They can hear my heart singing," she thought. "How can they help it?—I can't hear anything else myself."

Virginia left the school that afternoon with steps that were more of a dance than a walk. A block from home she saw Mrs. Gainer coming out to her gate—keen-eyed Mrs. Gainer who was always so full of news that she made it almost a waste of money to buy a newspaper. Virginia stopped and said hello. Mrs. Gainer beamed.

"Guess you must have heard, too, Ginny—the way you're clicking those heels of yours along the street. And that's the first time in months that you've smiled as if you really meant it."

"Heard what?" asked Virginia, her flushed face aglow.

"About Doug Bishop coming back."

"You know?"

"Of course. It's all around town. The manager of the Square Theater let it out. Doug's making a personal appearance there Saturday. I suppose you'll be seeing him a lot while he's here."

"A little," said Virginia, hugging her secret close to her heart. A little? The rest of her life!

"Funny idea, those telegrams," went on Mrs. Gainer.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nearly every woman in town got one of them. I'm surprised you didn't. Maybe you got a special one."

Virginia colored. No one, she thought, ever got a telegram so special as the one she had received.

"Here's mine," Mrs. Gainer said, fishing in her bag. "They're all alike. Just a stunt, I guess."

Smiling with polite interest, Virginia took the telegram. And there, like sharp steel arrows piercing deep into her heart, were the words:

COMING BACK SATURDAY TO MY VERY
BEST GIRL STOP CAN HARDLY WAIT TO
SEE YOU

DOUG BISHOP

No! It couldn't be. Not Doug! She read the telegram again—and again.

"Sort of cute, don't you think?" asked Mrs. Gainer. "Doug Bishop sending us all—"

"I'm sorry," Virginia broke in, trying desperately to control her voice. "I've got to go. I have so many things to do—"

The telegram was like a burning coal in her hand. She thrust it into Mrs. Gainer's hand and ran stumbling down the street, her face deathly white. She didn't stop until she was lying across her own bed, her tear-streaked face buried deep in her pillow.

For an hour she lay there, her body racked with sobs, her mind torn with the agony of her thoughts. How could Doug have done this to her—forget her, then make a fool of her with a horrible, cheap stunt!

He'd sent her soaring to the heights

with fifteen telegraphed words, then turned and brought her spinning to the depths by sending that very same message to almost every other woman in town!

IT was a long time before the sobs quieted and the tears dried. She got a firm grip on herself and got up off the bed. She washed her face and powdered it.

"There's a life to be lived," she thought miserably, "Doug or no Doug." She had to go on facing Pineville and teaching its children, smiling and being that "pleasant, attractive Ginny Carey." And luckily she'd told no one about thinking that telegram was for her alone. She could get by from day to day, existing from dawn to dusk, living again in dreams from dusk to dawn. But Doug Bishop would not see her when he came to Pineville. She couldn't face that!

Friday night Virginia left for Chicago. Jed Martin, the night man at the station, looked at her through the ticket-window grill in amazement when she put down her money for her ticket.

"You're not leaving, Ginny—just when Doug Bishop's coming back!"

"I'm afraid I have to, Jed. I've been planning this trip to Chicago for a long time."

"When are you coming back?"

"Sunday evening."

"Then you'll miss him completely." He shook his gray head reproachfully. "And here I thought you'd be more anxious than anybody else in town to see him again."

He pushed her ticket through to her.

"Maybe," he said, looking at her wisely, "you've sort of forgotten Doug, just because he went away."

"Maybe," she said, with an attempt at nonchalance, "he's forgotten me."

"I don't think Doug would, Ginny," Jed said gently. But she had turned away to hide sudden tears and was walking outside to wait for the train.

She filled her week-end in Chicago as full of entertainment as she could. But music, plays, restaurants were futile. Her heart was still heavy, her step listless, when she got off the train at Pineville about nine o'clock Sunday evening.

Jed called to her as she walked through the station waiting-room.

"You sure missed something, Ginny. Doug's a great boy. But I think he missed you more than you thought he would."

"Why?" she asked.

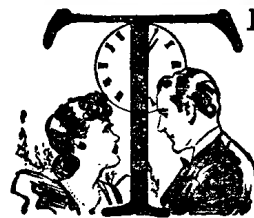
"Well, he heard you'd gone to Chicago. And when they were seeing him off this afternoon, he came over and asked me about it. He seemed disappointed."

"Then he left?"

"Yep. Jumped on the train, waved and off he went."

"Back to Anita Drummond," Virginia thought.

She smiled her good night to Jed. Then slowly, carrying her week-end bag, she set out toward her cottage a few blocks away. There were the "Welcome, Doug Bishop" banners still strung across the street and tacked to trees. There were streamers, confetti—all ashes of a tribute to Hollywood glamour.



THEN she had reached the cottage and was turning up the path, unlocking the door and switching on the light inside.

The minute the light flashed on, there was a pounding at the back door. She went into the kitchen.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Just an old friend you tried to run away from," came a familiar deep voice.

"Doug!" She leaned against the wall, fighting for composure. Here was the moment she'd waited for ever since he had gone away, the moment she had tried to escape the moment

she had discovered the truth about those telegrams.

Then she opened the door. There he stood, his wide mouth grinning rather sheepishly. Big, lanky Doug in a wrinkled tweed suit, fumbling with his hat, and looking just about as he had the night he had left Pineville for Hollywood.

"May I come in?"

Unable to speak for the stifling tightness in her throat, she nodded, and he stepped inside.

"Well," he said, "this looks like home." He perched on the kitchen stool and looked into her eyes until she shifted them. "And you—you look wonderful, Ginny. It's been hard—awfully hard." He sighed.

"Has it?" She was trying desperately to be calm and indifferent, aloof from her ragged emotions. Hard! He didn't know what that meant. Couldn't he realize, couldn't he see in her eyes how much he had hurt her?

"You bet." Then he seemed to sense her tenseness and changed the subject. "How about a glass of beer and some pretzels, honey?"

She smiled slightly and opened the ice box. He helped her uncap some beer, then poured it while she found the pretzels. "Just as it was once, long ago," Virginia thought. "Doug and I drinking beer in this kitchen with a kiss for every pretzel." And suddenly she wanted to throw herself in his arms, to forget what he'd done, to toss her pride to the winds and feel the thrill of his kiss once more. But she held back with rigid control.

"It hasn't been a real homecoming until now," he said. "So—happy homecoming!" He drank some beer.

"Of course," she said and raised her glass. It choked her to drink the beer, but somehow she managed to get it down.

"Boy, what a relief from pink and red and green cocktails!" he laughed.

Then Virginia found an old habit too strong for her.

"Your tie's crooked," she told him. "And your hair needs combing. She

fixed the tie while he hurriedly smoothed down his thick hair. She tried to do it carelessly, tried to keep him from seeing that doing a trifling thing like this for him brought her, as always, a little nearer heaven.

"They're always doing that to me at the studio," he said ruefully. "I'm never dressed to suit them, especially when it's a stiff shirt and white tie and tails they want. I'm glad to get away for a while—glad now, anyway. I wasn't particularly glad when I heard you'd gone. Why did you do it, Ginny girl?"

He started to put an arm around her, but she drew away. She mustn't let him catch her with her guard down, she warned herself.

"Oh," she said easily, "I'd been planning a trip to Chicago for weeks. I didn't think one home-town admirer more or less would matter."

"It wouldn't—except when that one's the one that counts."

"Counts where?"

"Counts anywhere."

"Except in Hollywood." Her tone was accusing despite her efforts to control it.

"Including Hollywood," he said emphatically.

"How about Anita Drummond?" She tried, vainly, to ask the question as though the answer could not possibly matter.

DOUg whistled softly. "So that's why you stopped writing," he said knowingly. "Just when those birds out there were starting to drive me crazy and I needed your letters so much. I'm afraid you believe everything you read in the newspapers. Our publicity department would appreciate that, but I don't. Anita Drummond and I have about as much in common as—well, as one of those cute cocktails they try to make me drink and this swell beer."

He drained his glass and refilled it.

"Frankly," he said, "I think she's impossible. And just between you and

me, she thinks the same about me." He laughed.

Then he looked at her, directly, seriously.

"Honestly now, Ginny, why did you run away?"

"What makes you believe I did?" She sounded cool, her attention centered on munching a pretzel. "Does he think," she puzzled, "that I can just laugh those telegrams off?"

"Jed Martin told me you were almost crying when you left Friday night."

"He was lying," she said defiantly.

"Yeah," he grinned sardonically, "there'd be a lot of sense to his lying, wouldn't there? I believed him. That's why I'm here now. I rode to the next station, got off, bought a car and drove back to park on your back porch until you blew in from Chicago. I waited in back so none of the Pinevilleites could spot me and spoil everything."

She was looking at the pretzel again, trying to hate him, yet with every breath yearning to feel once more the pressure of his lips, the comforting strength of his arms.

"Listen!" Doug got off the stool and took her firmly by the shoulders. "I came back for you. I want to marry you, take you with me. Don't you understand that? Why do you think I sent that telegram?"

"Telegram!" She shook his hands off and stood up, cheeks livid, eyes lashed with fury. "The idea of sending me the same telegram you sent all the other women in town. 'Coming back to my very best girl.' How horribly, horribly funny!"

"Ginny!" He tried to hold her, but she twisted free. He musn't touch her now, not when she wanted so to despise him.

"You've too many best girls now, Doug Bishop—here, there and everywhere. You're not for me!"

"Ginny," he pleaded, "I'm as mad about that telegram business as you are. I was ready to rip Al Corky apart

when I found out. He's my publicity agent. He heard me telephoning that telegram to you—said it would be a clever publicity stunt to send the same telegram to every woman in Pineville. I made him promise not to, but he did anyway!"

"How do I know that's true?" Ginny demanded. If it only were true!

"How do you know? Because I'm telling you! Oh, you crazy, doubting little fool! I ought to spank you. Haven't you any faith in me? Look." He pulled a rumpled telegram out of his pocket. "Here's one I picked up when I got here. See how it's signed—'Doug Bishop.' And how was yours signed?"

"Why—" She hesitated.

"Just plain 'Doug,' wasn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it was." She remembered now.

"Of course it was. But Al added my last name to all the others. He wasn't taking any chances on those women not knowing who was coming to town. Don't you get it? And mine was sent hours ahead, too. Check up, if you want."

"I guess," she said meekly, "I don't have to." Then he had meant that "best girl," just for her, after all!

"ANOTHER thing," he went on. "You're afraid of me. Just because they can make me look smart on the screen, and pay me a lot of money, and build me up so women act crazy when I get out in public you think I'm high-hat. Well, my sweet, you're crazy, too. I haven't got a big home or a swimming pool or a platinum watch. I still buy ready-made clothes when the studio doesn't catch me, and I never wear tails except on the screen. It takes a lot of make-up to hide my blushes when I kiss those leading ladies of mine. As a great lover, I'm a flop. I'm the worst example of a matinée idol you'll ever see in your life. I'm the same guy who'd rather take you to the movies on Saturday night with beer and pretzels afterward than dine in Holly-

wood with Anita Drummond. And you're afraid!"

Was he acting now? He couldn't mean all this. A famous movie star wanting to spend his Saturday nights with a Pineville schoolteacher! She couldn't believe that, yet never before in her life had she wanted to believe anything so much!

He took her arm and drew her out on the back porch. He pointed to a ramshackle car in the alley.

"See that car? It's taking you and me back to California—tonight!"

"That," she asked doubtfully, "is your car?"

"Sure. The first one I ever really owned. I bought it specially for our honeymoon trip. Wait'll you hear that engine purr!"

"Doug! You picked that out to drive?" A handsome, wealthy idol of the screen buying that battle-scarred old chariot! Willing to be seen in it anywhere—in Pineville or Holly-

wood! And suddenly she knew her starry eyes were looking at "just plain Doug"—the same boy who'd clattered down her front steps one night after saying he'd be back for her. And he'd kept his promise because he hadn't changed. Only Doug Bishop who used to lie under automobiles and wear greasy overalls could pick out that old car in the alley simply because the engine purred. It could never belong to the glamorous Douglas Bishop she'd thought he had become.

"Of course I picked it!" he exulted. "It runs like a million. I think it's swell. Don't you?"

"Darling, that's all I need to know. I love it!" And with a little cry of joy she went eagerly into his arms, her trembling lips lifted for a kiss that fulfilled the yearning of months, her heart swelling with vibrant new life because it would always beat so close to his.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

*Of Complete Love Magazine, published Bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1938*

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Complete Love Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Periodical House, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th St., New York, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; C & A Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Ill.; E. L. Angel, E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Ill.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

A. A. WYN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of September, 1938.

JOSEPH F. HUGHES,

Notary Public

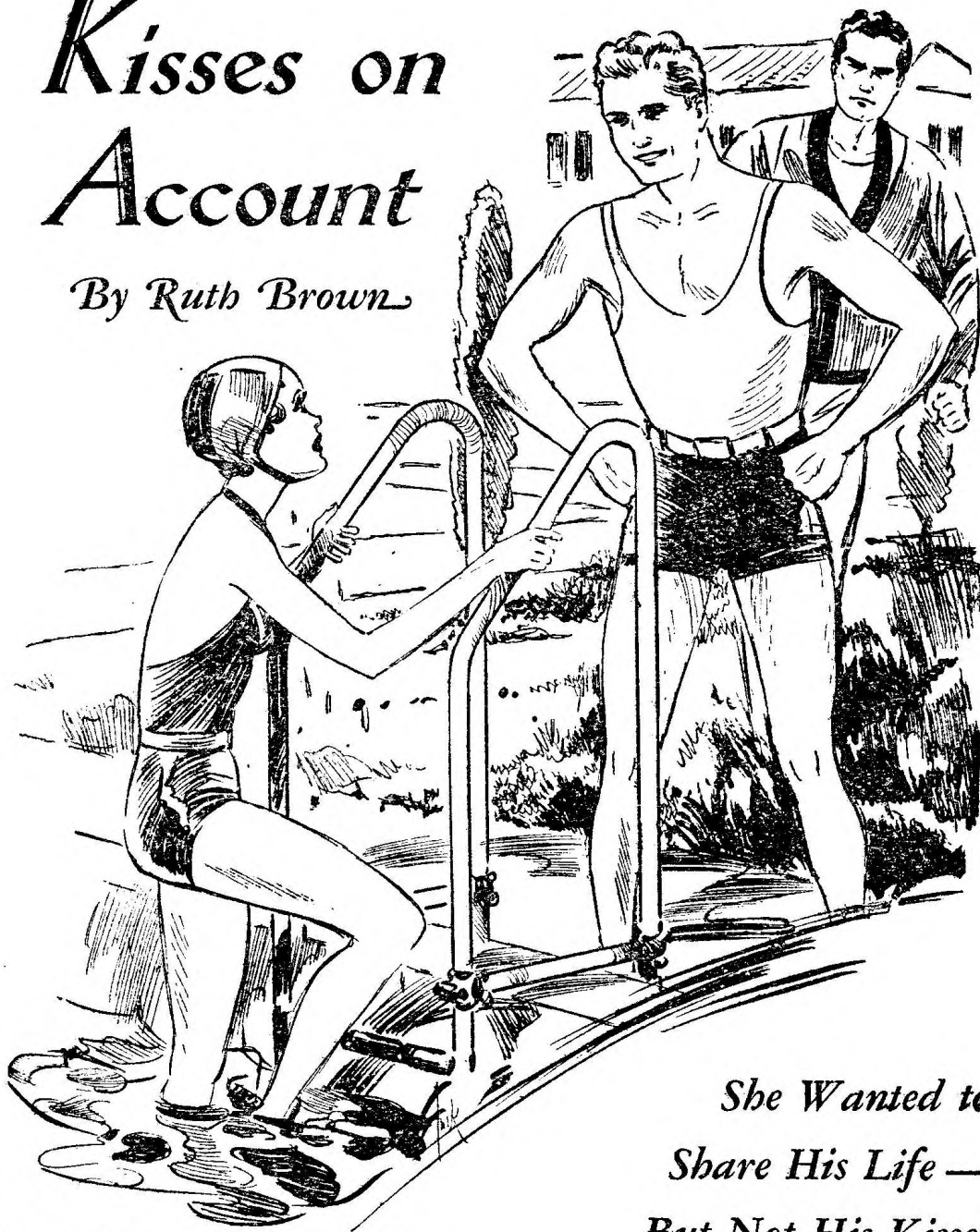
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Commission expires March 30, 1939.

Kisses on Account

By Ruth Brown



She climbed up the ladder, drops of water sparkling on her lovely legs and shoulders. Red was waiting for her.

*She Wanted to
Share His Life —
But Not His Kisses*

THE gleaming coral-colored tiles of the Vista del Mar pool were cool and hard, but pressing her slim body tightly against their surface as she lay, face downward, looking at the water, seemed to bring some comfort to hurt, bewildered Kristi Stephens.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and the pool was practically deserted. The galaxy of swimmers and spectators that usually thronged it had all gone to Berendo Beach for the swimming and diving meet.

Probably at that very minute Rick Bradshaw was poised on the quiver-

ing tip of a springboard, looking like a bronze statue of Apollo, with the sun gilding his fair hair as he prepared to dive. Later that afternoon he'd be coming back with another delicately etched silver cup to add to his collection, to be exclaimed over and made much of by all the glamorous débutantes in the hotel ballroom that night.

That part of it was all right. After all, Kristi had known all those things about Rick long before she had ever become engaged to him. She had known that he was a champion swimmer and the handsomest man alive, known that wherever Rick went, he'd always be followed by a crowd of dazzled girls. She wanted it that way. It made her feel proud that Rick had singled her out from them all.

But she hadn't known, really, how awful it would be when she had come to Vista del Mar in order to be near Rick.

The Southern California beaches were teeming with girls as pretty as Kristi—some of them prettier—and all of them seemed to swim as easily as they breathed.

Kristi couldn't swim a stroke. What was worse, she couldn't learn. Rick had tried to teach her during her first week at Vista del Mar, but he'd given up in disgust. Kristi had been raised in an inland town, and from babyhood the water had filled her with a terror that she'd never been able to overcome. It was just one of those things.

So Rick had grown tired of taking her to the various meets and exhibitions. He left her at the hotel now, returning at the end of a day or two with the cup or the medal, elated over each new achievement, and day by day Kristi grew more discouraged. She wanted so much to be part of Rick's life, to share things with him, but she couldn't. Not when swimming was Rick's whole life, and she was such a dud.

HOW about a dip with me, since we seem to be all alone?" It was a masculine voice, deep, pleasant.

Kristi, startled from her moodiness, rolled over. Her eyes, deep and startlingly blue in their frame of silky curling lashes, took in the strong tanned figure of the lifeguard. His friendly, alert brown eyes smiled at her, and his red hair shone like copper wire in the sunlight.

Kristi pushed her tumbled black curls away from her face as she answered regretfully, "I'm sorry. I'd really like to—but, you see, I can't swim."

She waited for the incredulous surprise that usually greeted this admission. It was as though you said that you couldn't walk, or talk, or any of the things that normal human beings did. But the red-haired lifeguard seemed to think that it was quite possible that there were people who didn't swim.

"Can't you?" he asked matter-of-factly. "Well, how about learning? Lesson number one right now, if you say so."

Ruefully, Kristi shook her head. "I can't—I mean, it's no use. I've tried. I'm one of those people who simply can't learn."

"Nonsense! There aren't any such people. Anyone can learn to swim."

The confident directness of his tone penetrated into Kristi's consciousness, seemed to impart itself to her. Well, maybe she could learn! It really sounded possible, the way he put it.

She sat up, suddenly alert, the aquamarine blue of her satin lastex swim suit molding itself caressingly about the slim curves of her figure.

"Do you really think I could?" she asked eagerly. "I'd give anything—anything, I tell you—to be able to swim! I have a very special reason. But I'm so afraid of the water—"

"That's your whole trouble—fear. Once you trust the water, learn what a friendly force it is, you'll become a mermaid overnight. Come on, let's go."

Petrified with fright, and yet thrilling with eagerness, Kristi went.

She didn't actually swim that afternoon, but "Red"—Kristi learned that his name was Blake Crossland, but everybody called him Red—had taught her to float, showed her that you actually had to use effort to sink, and that if you just rested your body on the water, as though you were lying down, the water took care of the rest.

Kristi was thrilled. She could float—she could actually float!—on the water. And if she could float, most assuredly she could swim, too!

"I'll take a lesson every day," she told Red excitedly, crimson lips trembling with eagerness, bright banners of achievement in her cheeks. "I'll pay you anything you want, if only you'll teach me to swim."

Red's brown eyes looked down at her with a curious expression in their depths.

"You don't have to pay me—at least, not in money. And before the week is out, you'll be swimming. You see, you've overcome your fear complex. The rest will be easy."

Kristi was trembling with elation as she thanked him. She wouldn't let Rick know a thing about her undertaking until she could really swim. How surprised he'd be! He'd be proud of her then, and take her with him to the meets.

It wasn't until she was in the shower, with the icy spray tingling invigoratingly against her, that Kristi thought again of Red's parting words.

"You don't have to pay me—at least, not in money."

Now just what had he meant by that? Kristi wondered a minute, and then dismissed it from her mind. You simply couldn't attribute a sinister meaning to anything a man as nice

as Red said, any more than you could suspect Santa Claus of being a gangster!

At dinner time, when Kristi came downstairs, looking incredibly lovely in a dinner dress of starched yellow lace, Rick was waiting for her in the dining-room. Her heart lifted, lurched a little, as it always did when she saw Rick again after a few hours' separation. He was so big and bronzed and handsome. There wasn't anyone quite like Rick in all the world!

But tonight there was something wrong. It took Kristi only a minute to sense that. Rick was scowling. His mouth was sulky.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked solicitously as he held her chair for her. "Did something go wrong this afternoon?"

"Wrong? I'll say it did!" Rick answered bitterly. "Those cockeyed judges! Giving the diving medal to some squirt from Oregon that nobody even heard of!"

"But, Rick, you can't always win. Maybe he was a good diver—"

Almost before the words left her lips, Kristi knew she had said the wrong thing. Rick's scowl deepened.

"What do you mean—good diver? If you mean a better diver than I am, why don't you say so? After all, Kristi, a man has a right to expect some loyalty from the girl he's going to marry!"

"I didn't mean it that way at all, Rick; honestly I didn't." Kristi's voice was distressed. "Of course, he couldn't be as good as you, darling. You—you're wonderful!"

Pacified, Rick smiled at her, his gray eyes lighting.

"Skip it, sweetheart. Did I remember to tell you that you're something of a knockout tonight?"

Kristi smiled back at him. Rick, in one of his loverlike, complimentary moods, was irresistible. She hoped he wouldn't ask her what she had been doing all afternoon. Kristi wasn't very good at evasion.

Rick didn't ask. He began talking about the big two-day aquatic exhibition that he was going to the next morning in Hollywood. Two more lonely days for Kristi, but this time she didn't mind. It meant two days of freedom to go on with her lessons with Red.

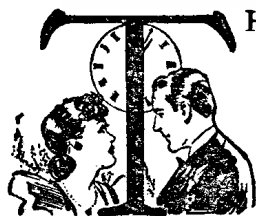
Rick came home from Hollywood with two cups and three medals. The newspapers carried pictures of him, cups in one arm, and the graceful form of Edna Jarmon, the women's backstroke champion, in the other.

That picture did things to Kristi's heart, cruel, blistering things. That look, almost of worship, in the eyes Edna Jarmon turned up toward Rick! The way Rick was smiling down at Edna, with that super-special look of protective adoration that Kristi had always thought he kept for her alone!

"Oh, well," she told herself valiantly, "it's all publicity stuff, anyway. He couldn't very well glare at the girl. And as soon as I can swim, too, everything will be all right."

Then Rick went to Coronado, and Kristi, setting her jaw firmly, redoubled her efforts in the pool. She could swim a dozen wavering strokes, then two dozen, under Red's patient encouragement.

Sometimes his hands would touch her shoulders or her ankles in an effort to illustrate his instructions, and Kristi found herself wondering about those hands. She could not remember ever having seen such lean, expressive fingers before. They were so strong and yet so gentle and sensitive—strange hands for a life-guard in a hotel pool.



THAT was explained the day Kristi found the heavy book lying on Red's canvas chair, where he'd been reading it in odd moments. Somebody or other's "History of Human Anatomy."

Then Red came and caught her looking at it. He took it and put it behind a cushion with a shamefaced grin.

"Cramming for my fall exams," he told her briefly.

Kristi's eyes widened.

"Then you—you're studying to be a doctor?"

"Yep," admitted Red. "Final year coming up. Well, ready for your lesson?"

The subject was closed just like that, but Kristi looked at him with new respect. Probably he was very poor and worked to pay his tuition. Swiftly, she determined that she'd find a way to give him a substantial check before the season was over.

Soon Kristi discovered that she could swim the entire length of the pool, and after that, several times the length of it, if she wanted to. It was so ridiculously simple, she told herself triumphantly, as simple as walking, really, once you got onto it.

She climbed up the ladder that afternoon, drops of water sparkling on her lovely legs and shoulders. Red was waiting for her.

"Well, how am I doing?" she demanded, turning the full impact of sparkling blue eyes upon him.

"Swell," answered Red soberly. Reaching out, he possessed himself of one small hand, his strong brown fingers closing over it warmly. "There's nothing more to teach you, Kristi. You do all the regulation strokes—do them well. Now it's only a matter of practice."

The pressure of his fingers sent a warming thrill through Kristi. He was so sweet, so dependable! He'd been so patient, so good, and she hadn't been able to do a thing to repay him for his trouble.

"Red," she said hesitantly, "I wish you'd let me pay you. You can't realize what learning to swim has meant to me—it means my very life!"

Red's eyes met hers. They were brilliant with a lambent flame that seemed to reach out and caress her.

It was almost as though he had touched her, and yet there were inches between them.

"Kristi," he said softly, "I told you once you didn't have to pay me—in money. But I'm ready to collect right now in the only collateral I want. Like this—"

Swiftly, before she realized what was happening, Kristi was in his arms. She could hear the steady, rhythmic pounding of his heart, and his arms were like steel bands around her.

The contact seemed to drain her of all strength and will. She could only lie there in his arms, and wait for the kiss that she knew was coming. A kiss that she had no right to, but desired with all her heart!

For all his strength, Red's lips when they met hers were tender, almost reverent. His kiss was full of such overpowering sweetness that Kristi found her mouth clinging to his, responding to his ardor with an ecstatic, pulsating ardor of her own.

THEN her conscience overwhelmed her, and she tore herself frantically away from him, her eyes stricken, her whole being weak and trembling from the tide of emotion that had overwhelmed her.

"Oh, Red, I'm so sorry this happened! I hadn't any right to let it happen. I'm engaged—to Rick Bradshaw. That was why I wanted so badly to learn to swim, because he's so wonderful, and I was such a total loss."

Red's lips, that had been so warm and full of ardor a moment before, tightened. His brown eyes were somber, the light that had shone in them extinguished.

"You love him, Kristi?"

"Yes, of course I do!" Kristi cried feverishly. "Rick's marvelous. There's no one like him. Let's forget what just happened, Red. We can always be friends. I—I like you a lot—you know that—but anything else is out."

Red's smile flashed, but there was no warmth behind it.

"Okay, Kristi, we'll be friends."

He took her hand in his again and pressed it. Outwardly, everything was just as it had been before that cataclysmic kiss, but Kristi, with an odd, frustrated feeling within her, knew that it wasn't the same at all, that it never could be the same again. That kiss had left its mark—a mark that nothing, not even time itself, could erase.

She went slowly up to the hotel to meet Rick for a cocktail before dinner, but there was none of the usual expectancy in her movements. For the first time Kristi was uncertain of herself, of Rick, of their love.

Rick was waiting in the bar, and his opening remark started a new train of thought.

"Do you think you can amuse yourself tonight, Kristi?" he began apologetically. "There's going to be a moonlight swimming party at Castle Rock, and of course you wouldn't want to go—"

Kristi's heart began to pound. This was her chance to spring her big surprise on Rick!

She smiled at him, her eyes wide and blue behind her fringed lashes.

"But of course I want to go," she assured him brightly. "I wouldn't think of missing it!"

Rick flushed a little. He looked ill-at-ease.

"But, Kristi, there's deep water all around Castle Rock. You couldn't—"

"I want to go anyway," Kristi repeated stubbornly.

"Well," Rick said slowly, "you're putting me in rather a spot, Kristi. I had no idea you'd even consider it. I half promised to take Edna Jarmon—"

Jealousy flamed, white-hot, through Kristi. In a sudden, unconsidered effort to hurt Rick as badly as he had hurt her, she retaliated.

"In that case, I'll get another escort. I wouldn't think of interfering with your plans—or Edna's."

Rick had the grace to flush, but his mouth drooped into its familiar sulky lines.

"Of course you needn't do that. I'll explain to Edna—" he began.

Kristi rose, leaving her cocktail untouched. "But I insist, Rick, that you keep to your original plan. I'll get some man or other to take me."

Some man or other! That was a laugh, Kristi told herself bitterly, as she walked out of the bar. As though she had a speaking acquaintance with any other man at Vista del Mar—except Red Crossland! Now there was an idea! Maybe Red would take her. She'd have to see.



It made Kristi feel ashamed, asking him, knowing how he felt about her and how she felt about Rick. But Red's easy acceptance of the suggestion took the sting out of it, and Kristi felt very grateful to him, and a little humble, too.

There were four couples in the motor launch that set out for Castle Rock that night. Rick and Edna, Kristi and Red, and four other people whom Kristi knew only casually. Kristi wore a scarlet wool bathing suit that echoed the rich ripeness of her mouth. Red had warned her that wool would be best, for the water around Castle Rock was very cold.

More than once during the boat trip, Kristi wished that she'd let well enough alone and stayed at the hotel. It wasn't exactly pleasant, watching Edna Jarmon cuddling up against Rick in the stern. Rick himself was reckless and boisterous, with a hard, glittering light in his gray eyes. Red was very quiet, almost too quiet for sociability, and Kristi felt vaguely unhappy and worried. She no longer anticipated showing Rick how she could swim. It didn't seem to matter much any more.

When the rock was reached, and a camp fire lit, the swimmers prepared to go into the water.

Rick reached Kristi's side, spoke in a low tone. "You'll be all right by the fire, Kristi. We won't be swimming long."

Kristi gave him a level, direct look from her blue eyes. She said nothing, but walked to the edge of the rock and stood poised beside the others, her slender figure proud and erect. She could feel Rick's eyes, half frightened, half puzzled, following her, and it was only the quick tense grip of Red's fingers on her wrist that kept her from losing courage and going back to the camp fire.

"Easy," his voice said, low and encouraging in her ear. "Remember, it's just water, the same kind that's in the pool."

Kristi's fright evaporated. She felt very sure of herself as the ocean closed over her.

It was too cold to stay in long. Ten minutes later the swimmers were back, grateful for the driftwood fire.

Kristi felt Rick's hands on her shoulders, swinging her about to face him. His expression was anything but pleasant.

"Since when," he demanded, "do you dive nonchalantly into water thirty feet deep?"

Kristi certainly hadn't expected that kind of reaction. He sounded actually angry.

"I've been learning," she told him, "while you were busy at the exhibitions. What's wrong? I thought you'd be pleased."

"I was going to teach you myself, when I got time," Rick growled. He seemed to have forgotten that he'd said it was impossible to teach her. "And whoever did teach you was a rotten instructor. Your form's simply terrible."

Indignation seethed through Kristi. This was the thanks she got for trying to be a part of Rick's life, wanting to be able to do things with him. Much as she loved Rick, she could still see that his attitude was petty and malicious.

Forcing back tears of disappoint-

ment, Kristi turned and walked away. She sat down beside Red at the camp fire, and stared, hot-eyed, at the leaping flames.

"Well," Red said, "how did Rick like the big surprise?"

Kristi burst into tears.

"He didn't like it," she wailed. "Everything's wrong, and I'm a fool!"

She felt Red's arms reach out for her, knew that in another minute she would be sobbing out her hurt and disillusionment in his arms, and she wanted with all her heart and soul to be there.

BUT a sudden clatter of voices from the opposite side of the fire interrupted them. Rick's voice rose above the others, defiant, opinionated.

"What do you mean, I can't swim around the rock? What's a slight undertow to a swimmer of my rating? Of course I can, and I'm going to!"

The words of remonstrance from the others were cut short by the splash of Rick's body as he dove into the water.

Red was on his feet in one lithe movement.

"The crazy fool!" he muttered from between tight lips. "He'll never make it. The undertow's terrific on the ocean side of the rock."

Dragging Kristi by one wrist, he started across the level rock toward the crags that lifted on the ocean side. The others straggled after them, mute, frightened, to the narrow ledge that hung out over the frothing sea.

Presently Rick's figure rounded the rock from the comparatively quiet water, swimming strongly. Even in her anxiety, Kristi thrilled to the beautiful, rhythmic lift and fall of his arms. Swimming, the way Rick did it, was an art.

Then he reached the churning water where the treacherous rip tide eddied in and out. For a breath-taking instant he disappeared, as if pulled under by some gigantic hand. Then his head was again on the sur-



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face, but the waves were tossing him furiously back and forth, with Rick as powerless as a rag doll in their grip.

A scream rose to Kristi's lips, but never left them. In that instant she was aware of Red's form, poised beside her. He was going to dive!

She clutched his arm. "Red, don't! You can't save Rick. You'll both be drowned!"

Red shook her fingers off impatiently. His lean, strong body described a perfect arc into the churning surf. For a short heartbreaking interval, there was no sign of life in the treacherous green depths below. The watchers above stood spellbound, intent eyes fixed upon the moonlit water.

Suddenly Kristi drew a long breath. A head had appeared above the water—no, two heads—no longer buffeted aimlessly by the waves, but traveling steadily toward the safer, quieter water.

"He's going to make it!" Kristi heard someone cry. "What a swimmer! He's got Bradshaw beat a mile."

Back on the other side of the rock, willing hands stretched out to help Red and the now nearly unconscious Rick to safety.

Kristi followed them slowly, her mind in a turmoil, her heart beating slowly, painfully. For while the two men had been in the grip of that relentless water, it had been Red's safety she had feared for, Red and Red alone for whom her heart had cried.

Rick was lifted into the launch for a speedy trip to the first-aid station. As Red took Kristi's icy little hand in his to help her into the boat, he looked down at her with sudden quick concern in his brown eyes.

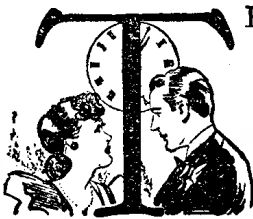
"Why, Kristi, honey—you're like ice, and you're shaking! It's all right. Rick will be okay. He's just swallowed a little too much water."

Kristi could only look at him wordlessly, all her heart in her enormous eyes. She couldn't speak. She couldn't tell Red what she had felt in those

few perilous minutes—that he, not Rick, was the one she loved. She was engaged to Rick, owed him her loyalty and allegiance. She couldn't break with him, just when he had failed to pull off a difficult stunt like swimming around Castle Rock.

You had to have a definite reason to break off an engagement, and Kristi had none—none except that in a blind, dramatic moment her one concern had been for the safety of another man, a man with red hair that shone like copper in the sun, and lean brown hands that were strong and clever and gentle. It had been a moment when Kristi's mind and heart had been in turmoil—still were. Could she be sure?

An hour later Rick was all right again, but Kristi tossed restlessly all night, her heart full of doubt and misery.



THE next morning she was surprised when Rick appeared for breakfast. "Should you be up?" she asked him solicitously, as he joined her

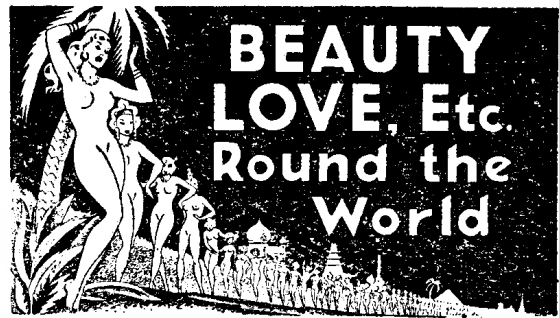
at the table in the dining-room.

Rick's smile held something of a sneer.

"And why not? Do you think it takes a week to recuperate from a little ducking? And why did that fool of a Crossland have to dive in after me and pull a spectacular rescue stunt? I'd have made it all right by myself."

Kristi stared at him in amazement. Could Rick really mean what he was saying? It had been perfectly apparent to everyone that he had been entirely at the ocean's mercy. Instead of being grateful to Red, he was belittling the entire occurrence.

Kristi started to speak. Then she pressed her red lips firmly together. Telling Rick what she thought of him would only make him sulky and difficult.



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But the other guests at Vista del Mar didn't bother to follow Kristi's lead. By the time a dozen people had told Rick what a superlative swimmer Red was, and how he undoubtedly owed his life to Red's intervention, Rick was seething. He simply couldn't bear, Kristi saw, to have his superiority challenged.

But she was quite unprepared to have him stalk up to Red at the pool and say with supercilious sarcasm, "Look here, Crossland, a lot of people seem to think you're quite a swimmer. How about a race out to the buoy this afternoon? That ought to prove who has what it takes!"

Red looked at him coolly. His brown eyes were inscrutable.

"I don't think either of us ought to attempt such a distance so soon after last night."

Rick's lips curled scornfully. "Oh, so you're yellow, are you?"

"But if you insist," Red went on, ignoring Rick's remark, "how would three o'clock suit you?"

"Okay. On the pier at three. Come on, Kristi."

Rick stalked away, and Kristi followed, her misery deepening. Where was this silly rivalry ever going to end?

AT three o'clock she was on the pier. Because the distance to the buoy was nearly half a mile, she brought a pair of binoculars with her.

The two men appeared, Rick, leant-hipped in yellow latex trunks, swaggering a little under the eyes of the crowd; Red, quiet, grim-mouthed, unostentatious in his navy blue suit.

Kristi found herself an isolated spot, and as the two men dove into the water, she trained her field glasses on them.

At first neither gained an inch. Then, deftly, surely, one bobbing head drew away from the other—and the head in front shone like copper in the sun. Red was leading!

Yard by yard, Kristi watched him draw away from Rick, around the

red buoy that bobbed on the blue water. Then he was on the return lap, and Rick—Rick hadn't even neared the buoy yet! He was hopelessly out-classed. Kristi couldn't help the thrill of vicarious pride that coursed through her at the superiority of the man she was now sure she loved.

The two figures were just passing each other now, Rick still bound for the buoy, Red already returning. Kristi saw Rick's stroke falter. He had left his course and was swimming toward his antagonist.

Suddenly a cry escaped her. One long leg had shot out, landing with fiendish force against Red's side. The perfectly coordinated movements ceased. Red doubled up, relaxed again, and was submerged by the water.

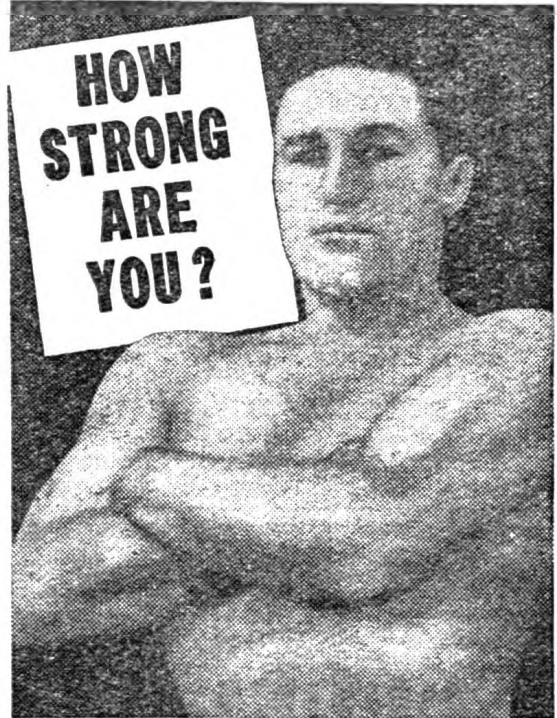
Shocked, breathless, Kristi ran for the nearest speedboat. Nobody else had been watching through field glasses; nobody else could possibly know of Red's danger!

At her frantic plea for help, men sprang into the speedboat; the motor roared. Kristi tumbled into the cockpit after them. The boat seemed to crawl over the water toward the spot where Red had disappeared. Farther out, Rick was rounding the buoy. After incapacitating Red, he'd gone calmly on with the race, convinced that his competition had been eliminated.

Kristi's blood seethed with contempt for him. This was the man she'd thought she owed her loyalty to! She wondered now how, even for a moment, she could have paused in her choice between Rick and Red. Looking back, she could see that Rick had given her the clue to his real character by dozens of petty, underhanded little things, but she'd been too blind, too infatuated, to interpret them correctly. Well, she wasn't blind any longer.

It was Red, it must be Red, always. If only he was all right, if only they brought him back to her!

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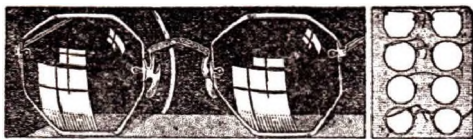


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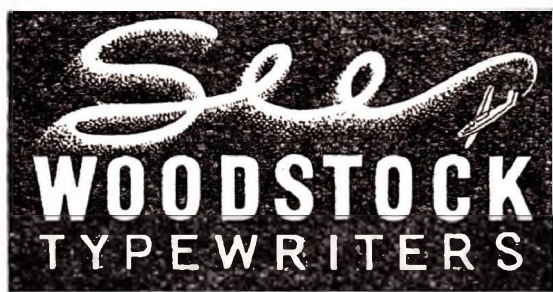


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fore they found Red, white faced and water logged, and dragged him into the boat.

They reached the pier again just as Rick was climbing out of the water. Kristi heard him say, "What happened to Crossland? He was ahead of me, and then suddenly he seemed knocked out."

She could only flash him a look of unspeakable scorn as she followed the men who were carrying Red.

So he thought no one would ever know of the contemptible thing he had done! Well, they would know, Kristi thought furiously. She'd shout it from the housetops!

IN the first-aid station, Red lay, white and exhausted, when Kristi was allowed in to see him. His eyes were closed when she entered, but as she came toward him they opened, came to rest on her, and then his lips smiled and he reached out a hand to her.

Instantly, Kristi was beside him, tears in her blue eyes. She clung to his hand convulsively, as though she never meant to let it go.

"Oh, Red—darling, darling Red—you're going to be all right! You have to be, when I love you so!"

Red's eyes were smiling into hers.

"If you love me, kiss me," he whispered.

Kristi's warm mouth trembled against his in a stinging ecstasy that thrilled her.

"And what about Bradshaw?" Red asked.

Kristi's eyes reproached him. "Oh, how can you ask that, after what he did to you out there? No one else knows, Red, but I'm going to tell—"

Red laid a brown finger across her rebellious scarlet mouth.

"No, darling. Losing you is enough punishment for any man. Let's forget about it and about him. He doesn't matter to us any more."

Kristi felt the anger ooze out of

her at his words. Red was right, of course.

"We'll get married at once," Red was saying. "Boy, will I wallop that last stiff year at college, with you to come back to!"

"But, darling, can we?" Kristi's face was anxious. "I've a little money—not much, but maybe we could make it do for a year if we're careful—"

Red scrutinized her lovely earnest face with loving brown eyes.

"Sweet, what are you talking about? My father's the famous Dr. Crossland, a leading nose-and-throat specialist. I'm going to take over part of his work when I'm through school. We'll never have to worry about money."

Relief and astonishment were mingled in Kristi's blue eyes.

"But I thought you worked as a lifeguard to pay your way through school!"

"Nonsense!" Red laughed. "I'm only holding the job down for a friend of mine who really is working his way through school. He had to be operated on for appendicitis at the last minute, but he'll be here any day now to take it over. He'd better be, because I have to use the rest of this vacation for a honeymoon! Tell me, Kristi, sweet, are you glad I taught you to swim?"

"Am I?" echoed Kristi fervently. "I told you it meant all the world to me, and it does, Red—oh, it does!"

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