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# LOVE

Stories



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ALL NEW  
STORIES

## THE LOVE PIRATE

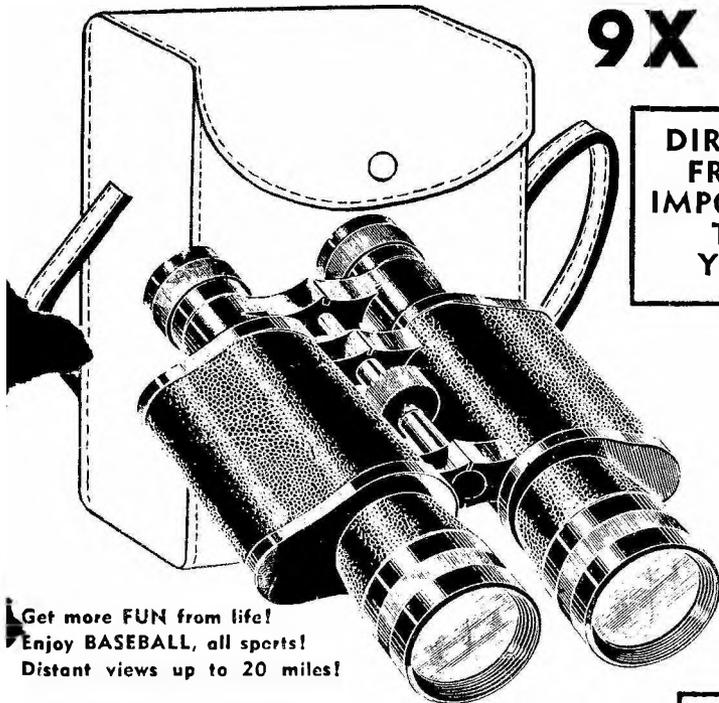
by Francis Flick

NEW ASTROLOGY DEPARTMENT  
YOUR LOVE HOROSCOPE

by Irys Vorel

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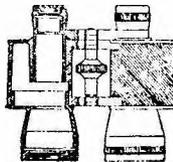
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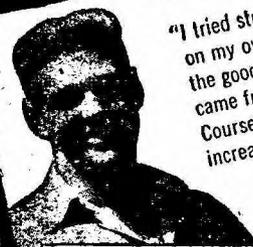
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# Gay LOVE

Stories

Marie Antoinette Park, Editor

November, 1954  
Vol. 13 No. 3

## NOVELETTES

- THE LOVE PIRATE ..... Francis Flick 10  
Dirk's ancestor, that first Dirk Beaumont, was a pirate.  
How would he have handled the situation with Melanie?
- WEDDING RING ..... Doris Knight 64  
Cynthia wished that she hadn't let Jeff talk her into  
marrying him!

## SHORT STORIES

- STRICTLY A BUSINESS DEAL ..... Lenore Shell 31  
At last Penny had a truly brilliant idea, but she muffed it!
- SHE HAD NOTHING TO LOSE ..... Emily Grant 40  
But how could she hope to compete with a girl like  
Valerie?
- PICK UP AT SEVEN ..... Pat Regan 53  
Maybe a girl doesn't have to be so smart after all. She  
can just be herself.
- A KISS TO DECIDE ..... Mid Hathaway 79  
It hadn't occurred to Jane that the man would show up  
some day and change all her life.

## NEW ASTROLOGY DEPARTMENT

- YOUR LOVE HOROSCOPE ..... Irys Vorel 6

**All  
Stories  
New**

LILLIAN MEISEL — Managing Editor

Next Issue on Sale November 1st

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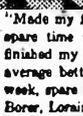
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### I TRAINED THESE MEN



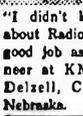
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"I didn't know a thing about Radio. Now have a good job as Studio Engineer at KMMJ." — Bill Delzell, Central City, Nebraska.



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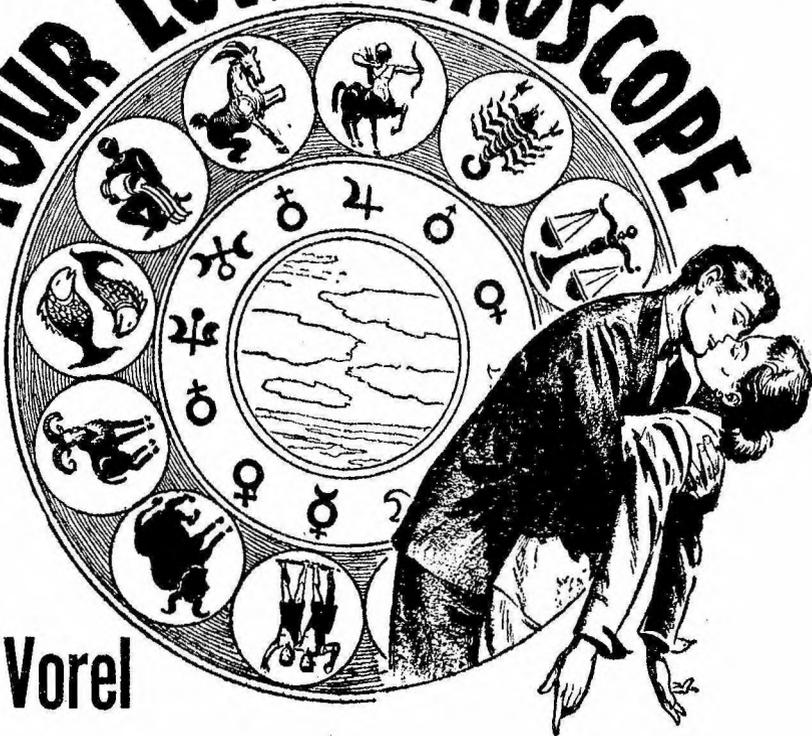
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# YOUR LOVE HOROSCOPE



By  
Irys Vorel



**H**AVEN'T you sometimes wondered over the capricious vicissitudes of love? How Cupid favors some lovers apparently all the time, and then persistently ignores lonely hearts?

Take the case of Cousin Mary—a drab, colorless office worker in her forties, who had wrestled with a typewriter all her life. Love evidently had passed her by. Then one fine day an astrologer told her that she'd find herself happily married by the end of summer. This seemed a preposterous prophecy, and everyone laughed. But when Mary went on her annual vacation to some woodland retreat she met a widower, who had a comfortable home and a car. He was a retired businessman, his children all

married and out of the way, and Mary was just the reliable "Safety-First" Miss he wanted for a companion. The climax of this summer courtship culminated to the tune of wedding bells.

Pit against this happy tale the sordid reports of divorces and love tangles of some of Hollywood's high-priced beauties and the fantastic nightclub escapades of our poor little rich glamor-girls. What are they running away from? Their insufferable loneliness? Evidently beauty and fame and youth, a gorgeous wardrobe and an unlimited bank-account *cannot buy love or hold a sweet-heart*. There's something deep about romance, something elusive—like the proverbial Pimpernel.

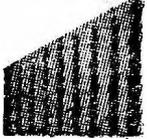
As least so it is decreed by Your Love Horoscope.

Love stars do not function to order, unfortunately. There are times when

[Turn To Page 8]

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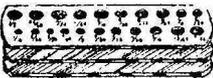
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- 1—Stubby 1/4 x 1 1/4"    1—Recess (#2) 1/4 x 4"

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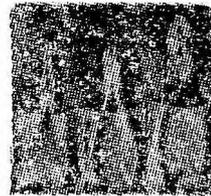


## 3 pc. PLIER SET

Finest drop forged imported steel. Ground and polished heads, polished finish, and knurled handles for easier grip. Individually pocketed in heat sealed plastic kit.

- 1—Lineeman Slip Joint, 7"
- 1—Long Nose, 6 1/2"
- 1—Diagonal, 5 1/2"

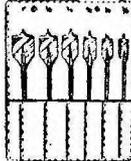
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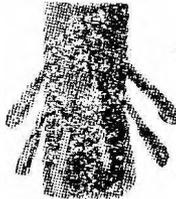
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they lie dormant and life seems drab and meaningless and humdrum. Then all of a sudden transit in the sky occur that activate love urges and pronto!—two human hearts are stirred by an irresistible attraction power. It's love at first sight!

This same Love Star, mind you, is not responsible only for courtship and sex appeal but for an *all-around personal magnetic charm* as well. These planets of romance are mainly Venus and the Moon, and when in a friendly ray to one another are the popularity stars. They cause you to sparkle with charm in a circle of friends, to attract the favor of your boss and the goodwill of your co-workers.

Please, do not think of your Love Horoscope *only* in terms of your relationship with the opposite sex. No, they work all the way around the clock of popularity. They fluctuate, to be sure, but they are never more radiant than with the New Moon or Full Moon stimulating their power.

During September bright Love stars shine from the mating sign Libra. There'll be a lot of 'lovers in the lime-light', especially those with their natal Sun in Virgo or Libra.

Dick Haymes, for one, born on September 13th, will find his birthday to occur right under the benign beams of the Harvest Moon, on September 12th. Watch developments in Dick's love life—and in his rather ragged career as well. His romance with Rita may again be the cynosure of all eyes, for drastic issues are presaged for these lovebirds. Lots and lots of excitement, perhaps trouble, too. But eventually all these tempestuous trials are apt to turn out as blessings in disguise. Beyond the rocks of discord lies the sea of smooth matrimonial bliss for the couple. And as far as Dick's career as a crooner and a film actor is concerned—we wager that a new lease on life is indicated for him.

You Virgo-born frequently pass through the ups and downs of an error

cycle in private life and in business. But when you have passed through the maelstrom of such set-backs you may rest assured that a mature happiness awaits you. All of you, who cut a candle-trimmed cake during the middle of September *may expect agreeable surprises to overwhelm you before the year is out.*

Ingrid Bergman is a Virgo-girl who had to fight for her love under a barrage of criticism. And Arthur Godfrey is still in the throes of a very critical period in his career. But he too, we predict, should come out victor ultimately, regain his health and the favor of his very fast audience. You Virgo-born are rarely down all the time; you can take the count of ten and come up again to stand on both feet.

Rita Hayworth's destiny also comes under this stellar ray, she's a Libran and her birthday is October 17th. She experiences a Neptune transit at this time. This indicates that poor Rita is by no means through with her disconcerting wrangles with the men in her life—Orson Wells and Ali Khan, respectively, the fathers of Rebecca and little Yasmine. The Damocles Sword of custodianship of the little five year old Princess may hang over her head for a few more moons to come.

Love Stars in Rita's and Dick's horoscopes indicate reciprocity, however, and that—with some self-discipline and mutual understanding—their romance should steer into the port of lasting harmony.

You Librans, born in October, should know that the Moon and Venus *do not necessarily indicate* that such contradictory astral currents would affect your love life. President Eisenhower also is a Libran, born October 14th, and his family life is blessed by peaceful aspects. But he has his hands full with the affairs of state in a turmoil, and the international war-like situation in Asia causes him many a sleepless night. They are a constant source of

[Turn To Page 77]

# FIGURE SLIMMER

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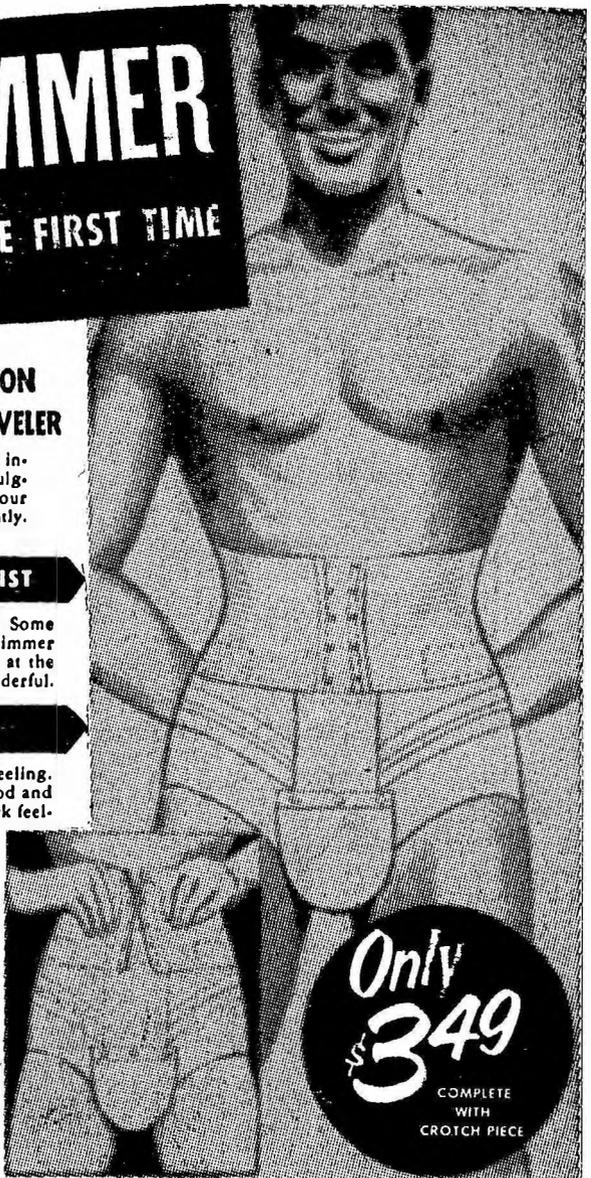
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## FEATURE NOVELETTE



*"Sure, honey, I'm a test pilot. ...I'm engaged to an expensive girl, and I need money."*

Dirk kept thinking about his ancestor, that first Dirk Beaumont, and how he would have handled a situation like this.

# ***THE LOVE PIRATE***



**by Francis Flick**

**T**HE PLANE circled over the Mississippi River before it put down for a landing at the small Louisiana air field. Dirk Beaumont frowned, his face tightening in resentment. This trip was completely un-

necessary and Robert Randolph had been ridiculous to demand he come back to attend personally to certain legalities if he wanted to sell Beau Acres. Randolph could have just as easily attended to this himself and left

Dirk peacefully in California, test flying for Douglas Air Craft.

He hadn't been back in Louisiana since he was fifteen. And a lot of water had spilled under the bridge. He could remember though, in minute detail, his father's funeral and the night his mother had taken him North to her family. Under his mother's will, Beau Acres, the cotton plantation and the great white house, could be rented until such time as Dirk either wanted to sell or move in. Robert Randolph, his father's best friend, had been in charge of the property and all of this could have been taken care of by mail and Dirk needn't have been forced to fly Southeast.

His dark eyes were hot with annoyance when he came in on signal from the field and made a three point landing, then taxied to the administration buildings. Of all the nonsense, he thought as he pushed back his helmet and climbed out of the borrowed plane from Douglas.

Suddenly a girl was running toward him, her long slender legs flashing in the sun. Her short, feathery hair caught the sun and shone like black satin, her dark blue eyes danced with excitement. The girl was incredibly lovely.

"Dirk!" she cried. "Oh, Dirk!"

He grinned as he tried to recognize her. There was something so familiar about her. Then he remembered the high school dates, and the years they'd been kids together. But who could have thought she'd turn out like this?

"Melanie Randolph." He reached out both hands and for a moment they stood there smiling at each other. "How could a man know you'd be this beautiful?" he asked.

"You've changed too." A small dimple showed for a second at one side of her mouth and was gone. "I'll drive you into town."

"You mean you came here just to meet me?" He cocked a black eyebrow at her.

"Just to meet you." She flashed that smile again.

"Southern hospitality, I love it." Some of his resentment about her father abated. Melanie could make the next day or so very pleasant indeed. They'd reminisce and she'd help him catch up with all the people he'd known and tonight in the bright moonlight they might even flirt a little.

THE ONCE sleepy little town was bustling. The muddy Mississippi was teeming now with trade. There were new houses and stores and the streets were filled with cars.

Melanie glanced at him. "Are you sure, Dirk, you want to sell Beau Acres? A Beaumont has lived there ever since your pirate ancestor built it."

He laughed. "I'm sure, honey. I'm a test pilot and my work doesn't bring me to this part of the world. Besides, I'm engaged to an expensive girl and I need money."

"Oh," she said softly as she stopped the car in front of an imposing white hotel.

"I was ready to murder your father for making me come here, but you make it very much all right." He was amazed at the blush that touched her cheeks. Whatever else she was, she wasn't any smooth sophisticate. "I'll talk business with your father tomorrow and wind up this sale, but won't you show me the town tonight? And have dinner, Melanie?"

She hesitated. "Please have dinner with us, Dirk. At seven-thirty." She smiled. "We can see the sights later."

He'd caught her hesitancy. "Maybe there's a man who'll object if we go out together. Maybe you'd prefer making it a threesome." Strangely, he was conscious of a feeling of acute disappointment. He looked at her left hand and was relieved when there was no engagement ring there.

"It'll be all right," she said and handed him the keys. "Use my car and

I'll catch a ride home with Dad. We still live down the road just below Beau Acres." Her look was odd just before she opened the car door and slid out from behind the wheel. "See you at seven-thirty," she called and he watched her duck in and out of traffic with amazing skill.

She was startlingly beautiful and intriguing. As he dragged his bag out of her car he wished he knew why she'd looked at him so oddly when she gave him the keys.

**A**FTER DIRK had showered he put on a fresh suit and sent a wire to Kay in Hollywood that he'd arrived and would be home shortly. He grinned, wondering how Kay would like this town and his old home? Too slow, too old. Kay liked life fast and modern.

At loose ends, Dirk decided to drive along the river road. It had been years since he'd left Lee's Drug Store after a fudge sundae and ridden his pony home along this road. Now, it was like driving back into his past.

The sun was a crimson fire as it set across the river and the silvered cane fields were on his left as he slowly drove through. There was an acceleration of his pulse as he left the cane plantations and came to his own acreage, planted now in cotton and grain for cattle. In the distance he caught a glimpse of one of the balconies of the big white house.

There was a gleam in Dirk's dark eyes, an inner excitement. The first Dirk Beaumont had been a buccaneer, a dare-devil of a man who'd made a fortune in slaves and booty and had settled here on these acres in feudal grandeur. He had been the *seigneur* and had ruled his retainers with the ruthlessness of the pirate he was. Since he could remember, Dirk had admired the old boy and his wild love for adventure and the fearlessness with which he'd sailed his schooners to the wind, their Jolly Rogers flying to waylay

French and Spanish ships and return with their booty.

In those days, Beau Acres had been the headquarters for the first Dirk Beaumont's smuggling operations. Then, beautiful New Orleans to the south was a fantastic mosaic of luxury and poverty, of gaiety and crime, of violence and beauty. It was to New Orleans that the first Dirk went for relaxation and pleasure, where he rubbed shoulders with rogues and adventurers and found a titled French wife to grace his home. He hung her with emeralds and diamonds but he never found a way to stop her nagging tongue and her incessant demands he stop pirating. He'd been an old man when he finally just gave up and quit. A broken-hearted old man.

Dirk smiled now. He'd taken that story to heart. And when he began as test pilot he'd sworn he'd never marry a girl who was afraid of his work. Never one who'd nag him to quit. Who couldn't feel the excitement of flying much faster than sound into the mysterious great blue yonder.

He stopped at the entrance gates and looked up the long avenue of great oak trees to the house. The oaks wore beards of Spanish moss that moved with ghostly softness in the sudden dusk. There were magnificent magnolias and azaleas in the gardens and Dirk thought of the hours he'd played there. The beauty made him suddenly homesick. He'd been in Modoc, where he tested jets, and he could feel the tortuous heat and see its parched aridity.

Well, he couldn't stay here like a stranger and remember. He drove slowly down the river road and pulled off on what had been their levee. He sat there looking out at the river.

His childhood had been carefree and charming and Melanie had been a part of it. And if Dirk rode his horses a little faster and took jumps a little higher, his father had always smiled

indulgently and said a lot of the old pirate's blood had flowed in Dirk's veins. His mother had finally left because she could no longer endure the memories here without his father, but Dirk still shivered when he thought about that first winter they'd spent in New England. What would his life have been like if he'd remained here in his ancestral home and raised cotton?

**T**HE MIST rose from the river and Dirk could feel the moisture against his face.

"Mr. Dirk!" a voice called and Dirk turned toward Tom Daws, who'd always worked for Beau Acres.

"Tom!" he cried and piled out of the car. They shook hands as old friends always do. "Are you still working here?"

"Yes, sir." Tom smiled wryly. "I'm head gardener for Mr. Watson. But maybe not for too long." There was wistfulness in his eyes. "Miss Melanie told me you're coming back here to live again."

After a moment Dirk laughed. "Melanie couldn't be more wrong. I'm here to sell the place to Watson."

All the happiness drained out of the old man's face. He looked out into the mist. "Make me a promise son. Promise you'll talk to me before you do anything. Maybe you'd go hunting with me at our old grounds in the bogs?" There was definite pleading in the faded eyes and Dirk agreed. Tom thrust out his hand and they shook on it.

"Son, this Mr. Watson isn't any real gentleman. Not like your folks."

Dirk grinned. "I wouldn't bet on it." He thought about the first Dirk Beaumont who'd built this and founded the family. Whatever else they might have called the old pirate, it wasn't a gentleman. "I'll see you tomorrow, Tom. Before I do anything definite."

"That's a promise." The old man turned and went along the river path toward the house.



It was with surprise that Dirk found that most of the Randolph place had been sold until only the house with its garden was left. It was Melanie who opened the door when he climbed out of the car.

She looked beautiful standing there smiling, the hall light shining on her black hair. And it was then Dirk knew why she'd given him her car. He'd done exactly as she'd planned. Dreamed by his own gate about the past.

"You did stop?" she said.

"Just as you expected." He laughed down at her. "You're quite a girl, Melanie. And so lovely." Their eyes met and clung and it was he who glanced away first.

"Father had to go unexpectedly into New Orleans on business and asks to be excused. He'd like to see you in the morning."

"Fine." Dirk took her hand as they walked into the living room. He noticed with shock that many of the pieces of fine old furniture were no longer there. Fortune hadn't smiled on Mr. Randolph and he hadn't expanded with the town.

Mrs. Randolph was as charming as Dirk remembered and he found he liked looking across the dining table at Melanie through the flickering candlelight. She was so beautiful his throat tightened a little.

Melanie and he talked for a long time after dinner about all the old

friends. He found he was a lot more interested in watching her talk than in reminiscing about boys and girls they'd known in school. It was remarkable, too, how much Melanie remembered about his football and the high school dances, about his horses and even then his fanatic love for planes. Little things that Dirk had forgotten long ago.

"Let's go for a ride." He got up and went over to her chair. Gently he touched her glorious black hair.

"I'll drive you back to your hotel." She smiled.

Her dress was like gray mist and he loved the way she moved. He watched her with a puzzled frown. It was incongruous that she'd not married and there must be a lot of broken male hearts around.

He drove slowly through the soft moonlight. After a while Melanie broke the companionable silence. "Tell me what your girl's like," she said.

"Kay? She's quite something, believe me. Terrific." He found himself telling Melanie about the girl he was going to marry. They'd met a year ago and had liked each other from that first night. She was one of the few girls who had the love of adventure deep in her and who delighted in his being a test pilot. There was no fear in Kay, he said proudly.

After a long time Melanie asked, "Wouldn't she be happy here with you?"

He laughed. "She loves the west and that's fine with me. My work's in California."

"You might try raising cotton and cattle," she suggested mildly.

"Not for me." He smiled. "Maybe I might have thought about it after I'm through testing jets if Kay were enthusiastic." He talked on about his work and his dream of flying faster than anyone else. And suddenly he realized he was doing all the talking; he'd relaxed and some of the hard tension had run out of him. Almost

unconsciously he turned and parked again by the river.

The Spanish moss looked silver in the moonlight and there was the sweet scent of magnolias. Melanie's dark blue eyes looked fathoms deep and he thought he could see the beat of her heart in her throat.

"I think you're like that old pirate ancestor of yours," she said and he loved the soft velvet of her voice. "I think if you could you'd probably rove the seven seas."

"I'm strictly a sky man, honey." He chuckled and was very conscious of her nearness.

She reached to turn on the radio just as he did and their hands met. Without any conscious volition he had his arms around her and his lips met hers. It was a long exciting kiss and Dirk felt strangely shaken when he finally let her go. It hadn't remained a light, casual thing, the kind of kiss a man would give a girl he'd liked a long time ago. Melanie looked very white in the moonlight.

"I'd better take you back to your hotel," she said.

"I'll drive you home and get a taxi," he protested.

"Please," she said.

Dirk didn't argue. The casual things they said riding into town didn't mean anything. Each of them was thinking of the disturbing kiss and trying to forget it.

At the hotel he stopped the car and turned to her. "Come in for a night-cap or coffee, Melanie?"

"Not tonight." She put her hand on his arm and her eyes were shining. "It's been lovely. I'm sorry you aren't going to keep your home and someday have your children live here."

"Maybe," he admitted, "someday I'll be sorry too. Thanks for a lovely evening." He leaned over and kissed her lips lightly. "You're wonderful," he said and got out of the car. It would

be too easy to take her in his arms and really kiss her again.

## Chapter 2



DIRK STOOD on the sidewalk until she pulled a way and then he turned and walked into the hotel. As he picked up his room key at the desk he heard bright gay laughter in the tap room. Familiar laughter. It was ridiculous, but it sounded so much like Kay that he had to look. Besides, he didn't want to go on up to a lonely room right now. He didn't want to think tonight about Melanie.

Kay, with her bright copper hair, was surrounded by men and Dirk stood there stunned. She was in Hollywood. He felt like a man having delusions.

"Hi, Fly boy," she called brightly when she saw him. "Surprise. Surprise."

The other men looked at him enviously as he strode over to the table. "You're in Hollywood." He grinned.

"I am not. I began thinking about these Southern belles and decided I'd keep an eye on you, darling." Her smile was pure enchantment as she reached out her hand to him. "I just drove up from New Orleans and that's where we'll spend our honeymoon. I'm mad about it. I flew there today." Her eyes searched his and her smile was cute and perky. "And I decided I wanted to see this old family plantation before you sold it. Not that I'd ever want to live here." She shuddered charmingly. "It wouldn't be any fun what with this girl named Melanie so much in love with you."

Dirk started. "You're stark mad," he told her. There was something coldly angry in Kay's eyes and for the first time he realized that she was

capable of jealousy. Absurd though this was, Kay was definitely jealous of a girl Dirk hadn't seen in years and who hadn't any real interest in him.

When Kay introduced him to the men, she saved Paul Watson, his tenant at Beau Acres, until last. They studied each other frankly. Watson was tall and lean with a hawk-like nose and almost stern mouth, an assured man quite capable of taking what he wanted.

"I came into town to see you," he told Dirk. "I thought we might settle our business tonight." He waited until the other men left reluctantly, almost on some secret signal. "Julep?" he asked Kay courteously and when she declined he glanced questioningly at Dirk. "They're fine here." Without further discussion he ordered two from the waiter. Then he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a thick envelope which he tossed on the table. "There's five thousand cash to bind the sale. I'm determined to own your plantation, Dirk." His smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

Dirk lit a cigarette. Then he pushed the envelope back across the table. "I don't do anything about it until I've talked to Mr. Randolph." For some reason he resented the idea of selling the old family place to this man. Maybe it was that he looked too well groomed, too New York.

"You're not married?" Dirk asked.

Mr. Watson looked surprised. "Not that I'm bragging about. Why?"

Dirk shrugged. "I guess I always thought of children on the plantation."

Kay laughed. "Darling, I was so right. Old memories are stirring you. We're having lunch with Paul tomorrow at your home. And he's promised to invite Melanie so I can see the girl who's carrying such a torch for you."

Red burned Dirk's face. "Leave her out of this," he ordered. "She's wonderful and it's not decent to say she's

anything more than my friend." His eyes met Paul Watson's and his anger lay naked.

Paul laughed easily. "You're mistaken. You're Melanie's secret heart-ache."

"You sound like a man she's turned down." Dirk had the satisfaction of seeing the red burn Paul's face this time.

"Let's say our disinterest was mutual." Slowly Paul put the envelope back into his pocket. "We'll settle the sale at lunch tomorrow. But I'm going to own Beau Acres." He smiled at Kay as he shoved back his chair. "I wish you were going to stay," he said quietly and his eyes held hers.

"You might make it interesting," she agreed.

**A**FTER HE'D left them, they said nothing for a minute. Then the words burst out of Kay. "Who is this Melanie Randolph? Someone too precious to be discussed?"

"By a man like Watson anyway," Dirk said.

"You were out with her, weren't you? I fly here to surprise you and find you out with the old flame." He was suddenly aware of the flint in Kay's eyes. "I don't like any of this."

This was a new Kay. One he didn't like too well. "Let's not quarrel. Certainly not about something that just doesn't have any meaning."

"That's not what Paul says. I wonder if you didn't come back just to see Melanie again and use the sale as an excuse." She jumped up quickly. "I'm tired and we'll fight if I stay. Good-night."

He caught her arm. "This is a hell of a way to say goodnight, darling. Let's talk it over. You're making mountains, you know."

"We'll talk tomorrow. Tonight I like my mountains." She stiffened against his touch and he reluctantly let her go.

After that he finished a cigarette.

It had been a foolish impulse that had made her fly East, unless, of course, they did marry immediately and honeymoon in New Orleans. Dirk crushed out his cigarette. It seemed to him that he was being manipulated and pushed around. There was something too determined in Kay's desire to see Melanie and in Paul Watson's to get Beau Acres.

Up in his room, Dirk thought about Melanie. He was burned up that Paul had talked about her and insisted to Kay that she was in love with Dirk. Thinking about it now, he couldn't remember kissing Melanie more than a few times before tonight, and then only on special occasions. Paul wasn't the type to easily forgive a rebuff from a girl. There was something not quite right about Paul Watson.

Tomorrow he'd talk to Kay and make her understand. And after she'd met Melanie she'd stop believing Paul Watson's story.

**O**NLY, KAY didn't. Dirk and she were having breakfast when Melanie came into the big panelled dining room looking for him.

Kay nearly spilled her coffee when she saw Melanie and her face tightened a little. Dirk introduced them and was relieved when no immediate explosion occurred. Upon his insistence Melanie joined them for coffee.

Kay watched her, obviously disliking her charm and graciousness. The dislike was there in her eyes. Finally Kay took a cigarette and waited for Dirk's light.

"I understand, Melanie, you've been carrying a very bright torch for Dirk for years." She laughed softly.

Dirk could feel the anger pound through him as Melanie's face whitened. "Oh, yes," she said softly. "I've adored him since we played together in his tree house. Dirk's always been my best beau. So naturally, Kay, I want him to be happy." Her eyes were

narrowed. "Do you think you can do that job?"

Kay stiffened. "I can make him happy. Don't ever let that worry you."

"Then don't let him sell Beau Acres," Melanie said flatly. "It's been his family home for generations. It is more a part of him than he realizes."

Dirk felt a little like the man who wasn't there. It was one of the first times he'd been discussed between two girls like this. And he hoped it would be the last.

"You want him to move back," Kay said nastily, "so he'll be around and you can try to wreck our marriage. No thanks. Neither Dirk nor I will ever be stuck in this place."

He got up. "I'd appreciate it if you two will just kindly let me speak for myself. I'm going to see your father, Melanie."

"I'm really here to ask if you'll go right over. Dad has to go back to New Orleans." She smiled up into his eyes.

He left them sticking jabs into each other. Women, he thought as he strode out of the dining room. *Women!*

Mr. Randolph's office was up the street and it seemed to Dirk that he hadn't changed at all in the years. He was still as rotund, his hair just as black and his eyes as snapping. No one could have been more cordial and a pleasant warmth permeated through Dirk.

They discussed the terms Paul Watson had offered and Mr. Randolph admitted they were generous. "But why sell Beau Acres, Dirk? Why not go on renting? Then, when you marry and your children want the old plantation it will be here for them."

**D**IRK WALKED across to the window and looked down on the busy street. There were cars and Army trucks jamming the old street and people crowded the sidewalks. It had changed.

"There's a camp nearby," Mr. Randolph explained.

Dirk turned and came back to the desk. "I'll not live here, sir," he said with finality. "My work's on the West Coast and the girl I'm marrying has all her ties there too." He smiled wryly. "Life here would bore Kay."

"But won't you look at the old place before you decide? Just *look* at it?" Mr. Randolph was persistent.

"It won't change things, sir," Dirk said gently. "But Kay and I are having lunch there with Paul Watson. Melanie too. What do you know about him?"

Mr. Randolph scratched his chin. "His bank references were excellent. He seems to do a great amount of entertaining at Beau Acres, but never local people. The parties are mostly stag and the men apparently come up from New Orleans. At first, he tried to date Melanie, but she didn't like him and after he'd persisted for a while, he suddenly stopped calling. I don't think Melanie had any real reason for her dislike." Mr. Randolph smiled. "Except that she resents anyone but a Beaumont living at Beau Acres."

Dirk lit a cigarette. "Melanie's lovely. It's odd no man has managed to carry her off and make her marry him."

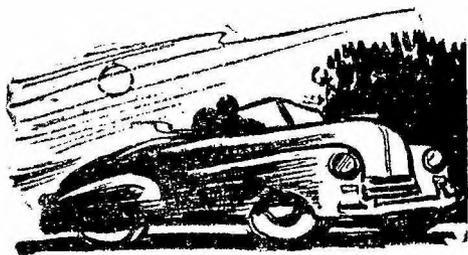
"It's not too odd," Mr. Randolph said. And the conference shifted back to business. "If you don't want to sell to Watson there'll be others who'll want to buy if they can believe your place is definitely on the market."

Dirk smiled. "I'd like to sell it to a married couple. I had a wonderful time growing up there and I'd like to think that other children were having all that fun too. Try to find a nice couple with some kids will you, sir?"

"I will," he promised.

"And it won't be necessary for me to come here again. Can't you have the papers mailed to me?"

"Surely. I just wanted you to see it again before you finally let it go. I



wanted to be sure you knew what you were doing." Mr. Randolph got up from behind his desk. "I felt I owed that to both you and your father."

"Thank you sir." They shook hands and Dirk thanked him for taking charge of the property these past years and then left. Somehow, he felt there was something else he should have said.

**T**HERE WAS a note from Kay back at the hotel that Melanie would pick him up at one o'clock and that Kay'd see him then too. He felt let-down. He'd wanted to show the town to Kay. It didn't make sense that she'd go off with Melanie and he wondered if Kay were with Paul? It was an unpleasant idea and he decided she had probably found a beauty salon. Kay usually did.

It was warm, and Dirk strolled through the business section. It was gratifying that so many people remembered him. Old friends welcomed him home. Not right, they said, not to have a Beaumont living in Beaumont and smiled at their little joke. Many of them urged him to remain and when he explained that he was here to dispose of Beau Acres there was something almost sharp in their urging, as if many of them wanted to say more and didn't. A few asked slyly about Melanie and he felt his neck redden. Paul Watson had spread a lot of gossip and hot anger surged through him.

Melanie drove up to the hotel promptly at one, just as he and Kay converged on her car from opposite directions. Driving out to the planta-

tion Kay was very quiet, almost aloof. Dirk tried to make conversation, but halfway there he gave up. This, he decided, was certainly going to be a delightful luncheon and he cursed himself for agreeing to come.

They turned in the gates and drove slowly up the long avenue of great oaks with their beards of Spanish moss. In the distance the great white house was beautiful in its simplicity and dignity. The gardens were even more magnificent than from the river road and Kay suddenly sat straighter, her eyes incredulous.

"This is yours, darling?" she said. "I guess I didn't dream it was quite like this."

"This," Melanie said, "from the beginning was one of the great show places on the river."

"Oh," Kay laughed, "you don't have to tell me how much you love it. If you'd marry Paul you'd get it after all."

"Kay," Dirk said sharply. "Let's try to be decent."

"I don't think Melanie's too decent, knowing you're mine."

"Oh, hell," Dirk said.

The main house looked serene behind rows of two-story columns that enclosed it on all four sides. The second gallery was guarded by grilled ironwork that was like white lace and Dirk heard Kay gasp at the sheer beauty of it.

"It's wonderful," she said softly. "Oh, darling."

He smiled at her and when she raised her lips, he kissed them lightly.

They stopped at the wide white steps that led to the lower gallery and Paul Watson stood in the open doorway to welcome them. He looked proud and assured and hard resentment tightened through Dirk.

He glanced at the tall double windows with their jalousies and thought about the great central hallway where he'd played as a child on rainy days.

He wondered if there were the same gold framed mirrors and the same rose-carpeting on the spiral stairway. And if the three great chandeliers still hung from the ceiling.

Suddenly he needed a little time before he walked into his own house with a man who wanted to buy it. "There used to be a tree house in one of the biggest oaks." Dirk smiled. "I'd like to see if it's still there."

Paul's eyes narrowed for an instant before he smiled. "Sure. Go ahead. But your julep is frosty."

Dirk felt a sense of acute disappointment when he found the tree house gone. Nostalgia gripped him as he strolled through the garden. A man beckoned him surreptitiously from an azalea shrub and he hurried to meet Tom Daws, remembering that he'd promised to go hunting today.

"I got to talk to you," Tom said softly and glanced behind him. "Don't sell this to Mr. Watson," he begged.

Dirk groaned. He was getting this advice from everyone. "What's bothering you, Tom?" he asked.

The old man shook his head. "I don't know. But funny things were going on here last night. Mr. Watson's a strange fellow. I can't talk here, Mr. Dirk. But I know things you got to know. I'll meet you by the levee tonight."

Kay called and Tom hurried away. "Later," he called softly and Dirk agreed.

When he joined the others on the shaded side of the gallery Kay smiled. "Who was that awful old man you were talking to?" she asked.

"I stopped to say hello to one of my favorite people," Dirk said. "Tom Daws, he worked for my family for as long as I can remember."

"The family retainer." Paul's voice had a snap in it.

"And friend. Yours too, Melanie."

"One of my best," she said.

### Chapter 3



HE MINT juleps were frosty and delicious and after them the lunch was superb. It was strange for Dirk to walk into his own dining room and not sit at the head of his own gleaming mahogany table.

He kept thinking about the first Dirk Beaumont and how he'd built this and then used it as headquarters for his smuggling until he married his determined wife.

He didn't quite like the attention Paul was paying to Kay, nor the way she flirted. Probably she was paying Dirk back for believing Melanie loved him. Yet, he wondered if Kay realized that Paul wasn't a man to be flirted with and then be casually dropped. It was true, Kay loved attention and usually there was a coterie around her. He'd never minded; just as he thought—until Melanie—that he, too, had the same freedom.

It was after Paul asked Kay if she happened to know Brad Grayson and she admitted she'd met him at the Turf Club at Santa Anita, that Paul became even more interested in her. Dirk frowned as he and Melanie talked quietly. Grayson belonged to a fast crowd Dirk had never believed were quite on the right side of the law. Once, Kay had been drawn into the fringe of the group by friends and he'd been delighted when she no longer saw any of them, though Grayson persisted in his attentions for quite some time. It had only been their engagement that had finally stopped his flowers.

It was curious to Dirk that, because Kay knew these New York people who played in Los Angeles during the racing season, Paul was definitely more interested in her. It didn't make sense.

After lunch Dirk found himself

walking to the river alone with Melanie, Paul apparently was detaining Kay. They watched the boats on the river and Melanie was quiet and peaceful. As he had last night, Dirk found himself relaxing.

After a while, she turned to him, her dark blue eyes unfathomable. "I'm glad I can say goodbye to you alone."

"Goodbye?" He looked at her quizzically. "I'm not going for a day or two. Among other things, I promised to see Tom again. I want to find out what's on his mind."

"I'm the one who's going, Dirk." She half smiled at his amazement. "I'm going to New Orleans tonight because there's a man who's wanted me to marry him for a long time and I've finally decided to say I will." There was a tinge of bitterness in her voice. "You don't need me, Dirk. You never have."

He put his hand on her arm spontaneously. "Don't go tonight," he urged. "Wait a little."

"Until you're gone?" She faced him and he could read the clear honesty in her eyes. "You've been gone too long, Dirk. Only I was stupid enough not to realize it. You're engaged and you'll marry very soon, so what I do needn't concern you." She turned to the boats on the river. "I talked my father into making you come back. I used the sale as an excuse. I wanted to see you just once more before I married someone else." She looked straight into his eyes. "I suppose I've loved you all my life. Like a dream. I was a fool."

"Melanie, I, I wish you'd stay until I go. That's selfish of me, isn't it?"

"I watched one trail take you away a long time ago. That's enough. Be happy, Dirk."

"And you Melanie." He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her goodbye. And he knew that both of them remembered vividly their kiss last night. He could still feel the warmth and sweetness of her lips and the

pounding of her heart against his own. "We'd better join Kay," she said.

THEY WALKED back to the swimming pool and found Kay and Paul sitting under a beach umbrella. When Melanie thanked him for lunch his eyes mocked her a little, though his courtesy remained as old-world as ever.

"I have to rush along, Paul," she said.

"I'm sorry you're going," he answered. "I'll drive Kay and Dirk into town."

Dirk watched her walk with Paul to her car and then drive away. He felt a sudden loneliness. This didn't make sense. He wasn't responsible for whom she married and he'd had no idea she'd remembered the old days and cherished them.

He looked up at the giant oaks and decided that under no circumstances would he ever sell to Paul Watson. If he didn't want it himself, he'd still see that people got it who might love it as old Dirk Beaumont had. As Dirk had, as a boy. Now, that Melanie was going to marry and move away there'd be nothing ever to bring him home again.

Kay watched him closely and anger straightened her mouth. "I wonder," she said fiercely, "if you aren't in love with Melanie?"

Before he could answer Paul joined them. He smiled at Kay. "Would you like to dress up and go dancing with me tonight? You too, of course, Dirk."

"I'd love it without Dirk," Kay said. "We'll be married soon, and then I'll be dating my own husband; until then I'll date an attractive man when he asks me." She smiled up into Paul's eyes.

"I'd like that," he said softly.

Driving into town Dirk managed to keep his temper under control. It wasn't reasonable to blame Paul since it had been Kay who'd decided on the twosome. Certainly she hadn't flown

South to have dates with other men, he'd understood she'd come to be with him. This was one of the times, Dirk thought, when he'd be delighted to give all women to the birds.

As Paul stopped at the hotel he turned to Dirk and his smile was strange. "I fired Tom while you and Melanie were down at the river. He'd been rude and impudent and I won't stand that. Besides, the old man has outlived his usefulness."

Anger pounded through Dirk, building on the anger already burning in him. Yet, there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say. If Paul didn't want Tom that was his business. But Tom had worked for the Beaumont family for years and now he was Dirk's responsibility. Beau Acres had been his home.

"Have you decided to accept my offer?" Paul asked.

"No. I'm not selling to you."

"I have a lease until spring and by then you'll change your mind." Paul was confident.

Suddenly Dirk smiled. "I'm going to move in myself." He heard Kay gasp and felt like doing that himself. What insane impulse had made him say a thing like that? He had no intention of ever living at Beau Acres again and he'd only said it to anger Paul.

"I'll double my offer if you'll accept it right now." Hard toughness had crept into Paul's voice.

"No," Dirk said and climbed out of the car. He waited to help Kay out, but she waved him away.

"Don't wait. I want to talk to Paul."

He stared at her. This dismissal was unexpected from a fiancée. In a moment, Dirk turned on his heel and walked into the hotel. Everything had gone wrong since he'd been home. For about two cents he'd go on out to the field and fly back to Modoc.

**U**P IN HIS room, Dirk tried to read, but Tom kept worrying him.



Being summarily fired was shabby treatment for a man who'd given his working life to Beau Acres. Tom had been definitely afraid of being seen talking to Dirk, but Paul found out about it through Kay. Logically, it seemed as though Paul were determined that Tom shouldn't talk, which meant he might have knowledge of something important.

Some old school friends phoned Dirk and he agreed to meet them in the tap-room for cocktails. A few had changed so much he no longer knew them, but all offered warmth and friendliness. It was nice until he got tired of parrying their insistent question of why he didn't come home to Beau Acres. Things were booming in the South and there was money to be made on the plantation's vast acreage. No one seemed to understand that flying was in his blood and was his first love.

There was no music like the whine of the jets.

After a solitary dinner Dirk's worry about Tom increased until finally he hired a car to drive out to the plantation. Paul was out for dinner and dancing with Kay, so he wouldn't know that he'd come to keep his date with Tom. And it would give Dirk a chance to snoop around a little. He didn't really give a damn if Paul were there.

He parked where Tom said he'd meet him. After innumerable cigarettes he decided that something must be wrong because old Tom would be here otherwise. He remembered the cabin where Tom used to live alone in frugal independence. Probably he'd moved a dozen times in the past years, but it was worth a try before he went to the big house to inquire.

Dirk cut through the plantation and saw the lights from the house through the trees. The moon slid under a cloud and he kept to the shadows as he cut around the house. He found the path he'd often taken to the tree shaded field where Tom had lived. Dirk thought about Melanie and the times they'd taken this path together and realized he was thinking about her much too much. Loneliness was deep in him.

Suddenly Dirk stopped. There was a noise behind him, like a twig breaking. He had the definite impression that someone was behind him, stalking him. He shrugged, let them stalk.

It might take some arranging, but he'd take Tom back to Modoc with him. You don't let a man be kicked out after serving your plantation for a lifetime and not take care of him.

Dirk grinned at himself in the darkness. Old Dirk Beaumont would be laughing himself silly if he could know his descendent was getting belated feelings of a *seigneur*.

Quietly, he walked on toward Tom's cabin. Another twig behind him broke. He whirled. But there was only a call

of a whippoorwill and a whisper of a breeze through the trees.

The moon slipped out from behind a cloud and there was Tom's cabin ahead, silvered in the moonlight. There was only a faint light from behind the shaded windows.

Dirk knocked and when there wasn't an answer, he tried the door. It opened.

"Tom," he called and stepped into the room.

In the dim light from a lamp he saw Tom sprawled on the floor. A bullet hole was through the center of his forehead. Tom was dead!

Suicide because he'd been fired? Or murder? Dirk didn't know.

He drew in a long breath and closed the door softly behind and stood looking around. The gun was beside Tom's right hand. And the hand was still warm.

IT WAS A sparsely furnished room, little for any man to have acquired in a lifetime of work. Tom's possessions were pitifully meager. A few cans of food on the shelf, a mason jar half filled with sand, dog-eared magazines and some rusty garden tools stacked in one corner. Dirk remembered then that Tom had always taken care of his sister and her children. His throat felt dry and his eyes burned. The old man lying there had always been his friend.

A faded curtain, behind which Tom's clothes hung, moved. Tiptoeing, Dirk picked up the gun. He pointed it at the curtain.

"All right," he said. "Come on out."

A white faced Melanie pushed aside the curtain. They stared at each other, stark terror in her eyes. Without speaking Dirk took her in his arms and felt her body shake.

"Someone may come," he told her gently. The snapping of those twigs took on a new significance now. "Why are you here, dear?" His arm tightened around her. "You're supposed to

be in New Orleans telling some man you'll marry him."

She leaned against Dirk. Fear for her engulfed him. If anyone came and found her here she might be in serious jeopardy.

"I didn't go," she finally said. "When I got home there was a note from Tom telling me he'd been fired and asking me to come here tonight. That it was important." She shuddered. "I got here about two minutes before you did and found him. I hid when I heard you." She buried her face against him. "Oh, Dirk," she half sobbed.

He lifted her face gently. Tears spilled out of her closed eyes and suddenly Dirk was kissing her. Her arms tightened around him and everything was forgotten except that Melanie was in his arms again.

They both heard the soft footsteps outside and she jerked away, her eyes wide with fright.

"Get behind that curtain again," he whispered.

"You've got the gun in your hand! Wipe it off."

He looked at it and realized he was still holding it. "I can't. The murderer's fingerprints may be on it." He pushed her. "Hurry."

Dirk lit a cigarette and watched the door, he was ready to shoot. Suddenly it burst open and Paul Watson stood there. Slowly his eyes traveled from Dirk's grim face to the gun in his hand and then to the dead man.

"You killed him?" Paul asked pleasantly. "I heard the shot as I came down the path. Did Tom have something on you?"

"No," Dirk said vehemently. "I found him like this. He was my friend."

"You'd have to say that, wouldn't you," he asked reasonably and his eyes traveled around the room. "I heard the shot and the gun's in your hand." His smile was smug and satisfied.

Dirk could feel his anger rise. His

instinct was to swing at Paul, but Melanie must not be involved. He had to get Paul out so she could leave. He was desperately afraid she'd suddenly pop out to announce she'd found Tom dead before Dirk arrived. But someday he wouldn't have to control his anger and he could follow his impulse.

"I'll make a deal." Paul lit a cigarette. "I'll forget I heard the shot and swear we found Tom together. That it's suicide. If you don't deal." He smiled again. "I'll swear you murdered him. The deal is that you sell me your plantation—now."

"We'll go up to the house and talk it over. I need a drink," Dirk said.

"Well, all right." He took out a neatly folded handkerchief and held it out. "Put the gun on it." When Dirk finally did, he folded it carefully up in the handkerchief. "Keeps the fingerprints intact. We met some friends and came back to the house. Kay's up there. She can account for all my movements, so she's *my* alibi."

Dirk didn't have time to resent Kay's being here. He was too busy thinking. "Let's go," he said.

Silently, he followed Paul up the path. There was something big and important that Tom had known, something Paul hadn't wanted him to tell. Or maybe it was just something Tom had suspected. Dirk hoped Melanie was out of the cabin and started for home. Though there was no sound of a motor starting in the still night. When they walked in the front door, Dirk realized that the palms of his hands were wet.

"**D**ARLING," Kay cried, then laughed. "You're the big surprise this time."

Briefly, Paul told her about Tom and then added casually, "I explained to Dirk that I was with you almost every minute tonight. Right?"

Her eyes suddenly were still, then she agreed that Paul had been with her. There was something wrong about

It and Dirk felt excitement tingle through him.

"The old man must have had enemies," she said indifferently. "He was the type who would."

"He had one anyway," Dirk said coldly. He didn't add that Tom had been sufficiently disturbed to leave Melanie a note asking that she come and see him. He'd tried desperately to reach one of them.

"I want to go home." Kay got up abruptly from the brocaded Regency sofa.

"Paul or I must call the police," Dirk told her quietly.

"I'm going to get my coat." She seemed angry as she left the room.

"Well, was it murder or suicide?" Paul asked politely. "I guess I better tell you now that I'm now offering you just half of my original price. You could stand trial for murder if I tell my story."

Again Dirk had an almost uncontrollable desire to sock him, but he pushed it back. The charge was ridiculous. Melanie could clear him in about two seconds, only that might seriously involve her. He thought about it. He had to know who'd killed Tom and he had to find out what Tom had known. The immediate question was how to stall for time until he could figure things out.

"That small offer would hurt me. I'm marrying Kay and I need money." Dirk tried to look like a harassed man. "Suppose we stall the police until tomorrow and I'll see what I can raise on some of my other property. You can go to the cops any time and explain you decided there was something suspicious in my being there before you arrived. And I want Kay kept out of the mess."

Paul teetered on his heels, his mouth a cold hard line as he considered it. "I don't want Kay messed up either. Until six tomorrow then. And just for the record, I happen to know that Beau Acres is all you own so don't bother

lying. Meanwhile, shall we call the cops?"

## Chapter 4



IT SEEMED a long time later when Sheriff Banning and his deputies left, curiously noncommittal about Tom's death. About all the sheriff would say was that no one was to leave Beaumont.

"Not even you, Mr. Beaumont." He smiled dryly.

After that Kay and he said good-night. "Six tomorrow's the deadline," Paul warned him coldly. "And that little matter in my handkerchief will be found in the cabin."

In the car Kay asked, "What on earth did he mean?"

"I'm to give him a definite answer that I'll sell him Beau Acres, or he'll try a touch of blackmail." Dirk smiled.

Driving into town, Kay snuggled close to him, her lovely rust colored head on his shoulder. "Let's get married tomorrow, darling. You can make the sheriff let us go to New Orleans for our honeymoon. I don't care if you don't have much money."

"You're sweet." He slipped his arm around her. "Did Paul say anything special tonight? I mean about the plantation?" He hesitated then added, "Or Tom?"

"Nothing, except that nothing was going to keep him from getting it and he wanted me to help the sale along. I want a cigarette, darling."

He parked under a tree and the moonlight made dappled patterns on the road. When he started to dig out cigarettes, her arm crept around his neck and tightened.

A long time later, he wondered where he'd lost the magic of her kiss?

"I'll take that cigarette now," she

said huskily. She'd never been more beautiful, he thought, as he looked at her in the flare from the match.

They smoked companionably for a while before he asked, "Were you really with Paul every minute tonight?"

"Is it important? Yes, I guess so. We met two men, engineers from New Orleans at the night club. They were friends of Paul's and they talked briefly about some project, but I paid little attention. I was surprised when Paul suggested that the four of us drive out to the plantation for a drink." Her voice still held some of the irritation she must have felt. "About half an hour before you came in with Paul, his friends started to leave and couldn't get their car started. Paul went out to help. After about twenty minutes I heard the car go down the drive and then Paul rushed in and said he thought he'd heard a shot and was going to investigate. I was to stay in the house."

"I see," Dirk said slowly. The time element was all right. Though he was confident Paul would see that his friends alibied him for those twenty minutes. It would only take about three or four minutes to get to Tom's cabin, a few seconds to kill him and then three or four minutes back. That left plenty of time for Melanie to arrive at the cabin. And it could have been Paul on his way back to the house whom Dirk heard.

"Let's sell your land to Paul and get married." When he started the car and didn't answer Kay got angry. "I'm glad that damn Melanie went to New Orleans tonight. I'm sick of her wearing her heart on her sleeve for my man."

"She isn't," Dirk said wearily.

"I'm going to get you back to California. You act entirely different here." She snuggled up to him again. "I guess you're not happy unless you're testing jets and I guess I'm not either. I'm going to marry you tomorrow if I have

to get the sheriff to perform the ceremony."

"First we have to find a murderer," he said quietly. "We have no other choice."

**A**T THE HOTEL, Kay didn't want a late cup of coffee and went immediately to her room. Restlessly, Dirk glanced into the taproom, but saw no one whom he knew. He thought about going to the sheriff's office and hashing over Tom's murder, then decided against it. He might be asked pertinent questions that would draw out the information that Melanie had been there at the cabin.

When he went to the desk for his room key he found a note to call Melanie no matter what time he got in. Since the telephone operator might be curious, Dirk went to one of the public phone booths.

"Oh, Dirk!" Melanie's anxiety rushed over the wires. "Is it all right? Or should I call the sheriff right now and tell him I found Tom?"

"Say nothing!" he shouted and brought down his voice. He brought her up to date on the developments, even to Paul's threat and his demand that he get Beau Acres for half his original offer.

"I'm calling the sheriff," she said flatly.

"You are not." There he was shouting again. "Later, we'll both go to him. I think Watson knows one hell of a lot more about this murder than he's telling. Let me snoop."

Reluctantly, she agreed. "I don't like it. We're breaking a law by withholding important evidence."

"We're probably breaking eight," he admitted. Then he found himself asking, "Are you still going to marry that man in New Orleans?"

"Yes," she said. And the phone clicked in his ear.

For some reason he felt happier. At least, the man didn't know tonight he was going to get Melanie.

**A**T EIGHT the next morning Kay called his room to say she was waiting in the lobby. When he joined her five minutes later it didn't take any crystal gazer to know she was burned up.

"Why didn't you tell me Melanie didn't go to New Orleans last night?" she demanded.

"I didn't think it was important." He grinned as he took her arm. "Let me get you coffee and you'll feel better."

"No I won't. You're much too interested in this old childhood sweetheart of yours." She didn't say anything more until she'd had half a cup of coffee. "We're going to get married right now or not at all. This place was named for your family, you ought to be able to arrange it."

"I doubt it." He smiled. After a while he said, "A friend of mine was murdered Kay, and I," he hesitated, "I walked in and found him." He wished the hardness would leave her eyes. "I have to find out who did it. Don't you understand, Tom worked for my family most of his life."

"Who cares?" she cried. "For years he worked on the plantation but not for any Beaumonts. He was a stupid old man and he wasn't anything really to you. He couldn't be."



"He was murdered," Dirk said very quietly.

"Who cares?" she repeated. "He's no loss to anyone. Least of all to us."

He stared at her. He'd always known she'd had a hard streak of ruthlessness in her, as most fearless adventuresome persons do. But he hadn't suspected how utterly heartless she could be about an old man of no real importance. . . . Except to a couple of people who'd found his kindness and consideration some of the happiest memories of their childhood.

"Please, Dirk. Murder's not your business. Sell out to Paul and let's marry and leave." She shuddered. "I hate this town."

"I'm beginning to think it's pretty wonderful." He reached across and covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry, but Tom's my responsibility."

"I think you lie." She spaced her words. "I think it's Melanie who's your responsibility." Before he could stop her Kay left the table.

He felt as embarrassed as most men when their girl quite obviously leaves them flat in a fight. It seemed to him that everyone in the dining room was staring at him.

Well, as soon as Tom's murder was cleared up, he and Kay would marry. Idly, he wondered what she'd say if he told her he wanted to live at Beau Acres. He'd told Paul he was going to. The idea was absurd and he denied the idea even as he thought about it.

**I**T WAS A busy day. Dirk talked to everyone who'd been a friend of Tom's. No one knew of anyone who'd been his enemy. As the day progressed Dirk learned of the many kindnesses Tom had done for people. He might have lived in a sparsely furnished cabin, but his life had been rich in giving. It was small wonder that two children had instinctively loved and trusted him.

Through the long unproductive

hours, Dirk's feeling grew that he belonged here. It was disturbing. There was a deep pride and love in him for Beau Acres that he hadn't suspected. And a responsibility. He was glad that Melanie loved the old place and had made her father bring him back once more.

Finally, Dirk was able to persuade a sulky Kay to lunch with him and they drove to a charming inn. However, she was gay by the time they walked in and he felt that their difficulties could be easily settled.

There in the small dining room they saw Melanie and Paul. She was laughing and Dirk stiffened.

"Well," Kay said. "Paul likes her."

For a minute Dirk couldn't speak. Wild jealousy tore at him and he wanted to take Melanie away from Paul and out of the place. Just as his pirate ancestor had done with the girl he loved so long ago.

"That Melanie's nothing but a southern flirt," Kay said. "She wants every man she sees. And Paul," she added bitterly, "loves it. I don't want any lunch here." She whirled and was halfway out the door when Dirk caught her.

"Isn't this ridiculous?" he asked coldly. "What in the hell do we care if Melanie and Paul have lunch together?"

"I'm sick of the whole thing," Kay said.

"We're still having lunch here," he told her flatly and surprisingly she was docile about returning to the dining room. She even waved at the two sitting by the bay window.

They were drinking coffee when Melanie and Paul came over to them.

"We were sorry you didn't join us." Paul smiled. "Maybe you'll both come to the house for a swim this afternoon?" He touched Kay's shoulder. "I wish you would."

"Thanks," Kay answered. "Dirk and I have an important date."

Paul kept smiling. "Then we swim alone, Melanie."

There was nothing Dirk could do except stand there and feel the fear build in him for Melanie. If Paul even suspected that she'd found Tom's body, he might easily see that an accident happened to her in the pool.

"Maybe Kay won't swim," Dirk said cheerfully. "But I will."

"Technically, it belongs to you for a few more hours." Paul chuckled. "So you're welcome to come." He turned to Melanie. "Tomorrow at this time the plantation will be all mine."

"Really?" she said.

When they left, Dirk urged Kay to come along and swim, but she was adamant. "I'm sick of this foursome. And unless you marry me today, I'm through."

"This isn't a very easy time for me, Kay. I *have* to find out who killed Tom."

"If an old bum is more important than I, that finishes us. You can almost see the cotton sprouting out of your ears," she said furiously.

"We've always agreed about things, honey, can't we agree about this?" he urged.

"I don't think so, ever. I'm not a girl to wait around for a man to make up his mind." Her smile twisted. "Especially when I thought he already had."

"It's only Tom's. . . ."

"If you say that again I'll scream."

"Let's not decide anything until tomorrow," he asked.

"I don't know. I'm sick of it."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Will you please come swim?"

"No. And don't bother driving me back to the hotel. I'll phone for a taxi." She flounced out of the dining room.

After some persuasion, she allowed Dirk to drive her back to the hotel. He felt miserably unhappy, but there was nothing he could do to make her

understand. How could she be expected to know how he felt?

Even when he stopped in front of the hotel, he still urged her to come to Paul's, but she only laughed. "Why won't you understand?" he demanded.

"Maybe I do, too well." She was out of the car before he could slide from behind the wheel and open her door.

Hell, he thought.

**B**EFORE going to the house, Dirk drove to the old levee and cut across to Tom's cabin again. He stood there in the small room looking around. Nothing had changed, except that a body no longer sprawled on the floor. Then he noticed one can of beans was gone and so was the half filled mason jar of sand. Little enough for a man to lose when he died.

Slowly, Dirk went back to his rented car and drove through the long avenue of oaks to the big white house. He heard Melanie's laughter and went directly to the swimming pool.

Two strangers were sitting with her and Paul at a wrought iron table under a bright beach umbrella. They looked a little bored when Paul introduced them as two engineers from New Orleans. Dirk beamed. These were the men Kay had met last night who'd had the engine trouble with their car.

One of them started asking questions about jets and Dirk answered politely.

Suddenly Melanie said, "Dirk's ancestor, the one who built this place, was a pirate. One of the most dangerous who ever sailed the seas." She smiled into Dirk's eyes. "I suspect you feel that same way about speeding through the sky. I guess you feel as if you're conquering the elements."

He stared at her. He'd never thought of it quite this way, but at that, maybe he was a throwback to the old boy.

"Only the first Dirk," Melanie went on softly and her eyes never wavered

from his, "would never have let his home go. He built it and took care of it for his lady."

"I think I'll take care of mine too," he said very slowly and his eyes didn't waver from hers either.

Paul laughed. "You'll have to hurry, my friend. Because at six Beau Acres will be mine."

"I'm not so sure," Dirk grinned.

The two engineers flashed Paul a look, but his smile was reassuring. They were disturbed, though, when they suddenly got up to go, telling Paul they'd see him later. When he walked to their car with them, Dirk took Melanie's hand.

"I'm not going to let the old pirate down. I'm going to stay."

"What about your flying?" Her eyes looked as though they'd been touched by stars.

"There's an Army field near here. They can always use a good test pilot occasionally." He looked out over the garden. "This is where I belong and I know it now." He swallowed hard. "Melanie, will you stay and forget the man in New Orleans?"

"I'll stay. Always if you want me."

"I want you, darling. Maybe I always have in my heart, only I had to come home to find it out. I've a couple of things to do and then I'll come to you."

"I'll be waiting," she said softly.

He met Paul by the side of the house. "I'll expect you here at six," Paul said.

"Or before." Dirk grinned.

**A**S HE WALKED on to his car he noticed the mason jar that was half filled with sand standing beside one of the columns on the lower gallery. On impulse he picked it up and put it in the glove compartment of the car. It was the one he'd seen in Tom's cabin, but it couldn't have been important or Paul wouldn't have left it there.

Walking into the hotel with a jar of sand in his hand made him feel a little foolish. But he had to see Kay first of all and try to tell her that they didn't really love each other enough. Not nearly enough.

There was a note from her in his box. She'd found it out too—and he was never more glad about anything in his life!

She'd taken the train back to California, she wrote. When he'd been a flyer he'd been exciting, but she couldn't endure any country yokel. It had been fun while it lasted.

He was grinning like a fool as he took the elevator.

Up in his room, he studied the sand. It seemed to be trying to tell him something, but he couldn't figure it out. Maybe Tom had been experimenting with seeds. Well, there was one way of finding out.

He went into his bath and carefully plugged the washbasin. Then he poured the sand and ran it through his fingers. There were no seeds. There wasn't anything but sand.

Dirk turned on the water hoping it would wash down the drain all right. The water kept climbing up until the sand was soaking and then he remembered he hadn't lifted up the plug.

It was then he saw the film. An opalescent scum rose to the top of the water. He grabbed it up in his hand and smelled it. Oil!

For a long time Dirk stood there staring at it. This was the answer as to why Paul Watson wanted his plantation so desperately. And Tom had

been killed because he'd found it out and had been trying to tell either Dirk or Melanie. There was a sandy deposit near the bog where they used to hunt, so there was oil on his land or else offshore.

Paul Watson had been so confident he'd gotten careless and left the mason jar on the gallery.

Dirk moved fast. He phoned Mr. Randolph and talked rapidly, urging him to get out to Beau Acres and take Melanie home before Paul discovered the mason jar was gone.

After that Dirk went to the sheriff's office. They talked for a long time and some of the deputies went to pick up the two engineers and Paul Watson.

"How can you expect a man to solve a murder when you and Melanie hold out on me," the sheriff growled. He had a few other things to say on the subject before he let Dirk go.

The sun was setting over the river when he drove to Melanie. As he passed the gates of Beau Acres his heart almost sang because someday their children would be playing there and he'd build them the best tree house in this crazy world. And on rainy days they'd play in the great hall.

And he'd tell them about a buccaneer, the first Dirk Beaumont. And then maybe he'd tell them about pirate love.

He turned into Melanie's driveway and she was running to him before he stopped the car. Then, at last, she was in his arms.

THE END

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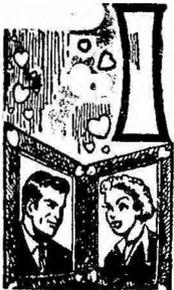
Penny had faith in Bruce — but it was a little shaky!



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# STRICTLY A BUSINESS DEAL

by Lenore Shell



IT WAS a pretty foolish thing to do, decided Penny as she opened the morning *Inquirer* and turned to the society section. They'd put her picture on page 15 and over it they'd printed *Engagement Announced*. It gave Penny Sheppard little goose pimples and shivers, but not because she was sorry.

Wait'll Daddy saw that! That would teach him a lesson. Pushing her into the arms of any suitor whose bank account happened to match hers!

She and Betty Miller, her giddy friend, had really thought up a dilly of a fiance, Bruce Locke. He was a real flesh-and-blood creature, but miles away in some distant corner of South America.

Penny took a sip of hot coffee and brushed back a lock of reddish-gold hair. Her brown eyes, that didn't look

like they'd be afraid of marriage, gazed around the three-room furnished apartment contentedly. The apartment overlooked Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square. Penny had rented it as soon as she'd turned twenty one, six weeks ago. Chestnut Hill was miles away. And so was Daddy and his suspicion of any but solvent suitors.

There was a knock at the door. With a start, Penny jumped up from the sofa. She straightened her Nile green pajamas and hurried into a robe. Dad certainly didn't waste any time beating a path to her door, she thought worriedly as she opened it.

It was a pleasant surprise to see instead, a strange, tall man. He leaned against the door jamb and his handsome face wore a sardonic smile.

"Hello," he said. "Are you Penny Sheppard?"

"Yes, I am. Who are you?"

The young man began to laugh mirthlessly. "Don't you recognize me?"

Penny racked her hazy brain. The party last night had ended late. "No," she admitted finally. "Should I?"

Without answering, he brushed past her in the doorway and strolled on into the living room where he sat down on the sofa, crossed his knees, and shook out a cigarette.

Penny gasped. Of all the insolence! She left the door open, determined to keep her voice down while she ordered this brash stranger out of her apartment.

"See here, Mister . . ."

He glanced up from his lighted cigarette and completed Penny's sentence for her. "Mister Locke. Bruce Locke." He blew out the match coolly and threw it away.

Penny felt weak in the knees. She forgot her years of poise and stammered, "You mean you're . . . I mean . . ."

Well, this was a fine mess that she and Betty had cooked up. All they knew about Bruce was that he was an

orphan who'd gone to the University of Pennsylvania with Betty's brother Jack, two years ago, and that he was twenty-five years old.

On stiff legs, Betty went and closed the door. Coming back she said faintly, "I thought you were in South America."

Bruce blew smoke rings. "I was, until a couple of days ago. A business associate of mine reads the society page. I saw him this morning and he congratulated me on my good luck."

Bruce's blue eyes ran over Penny appreciatively. "I'm beginning to see why."

Penny settled back in the chair with relief. Thank goodness he wasn't angry. "I suppose I should start in explaining how it all happened."

**B**RUCE'S eyes were amused. "News does get around. Betty's brother Jack, called me this morning. It was the first he knew I was in town. I talked to Betty, too."

"Then you know."

Bruce nodded his head in agreement. He appeared thoughtful. "Do you think your idea will work?" he asked dubiously. "Do you think a diamond will scare off fortune-hunters?"

Penny toyed nervously with the dinner ring she'd transferred to her left hand. "I don't know, but I'd like to give it a trial. Do you want to break the engagement right away or would you be willing to let it go for awhile?"

Bruce smiled delightedly. "Oh, let's not break it so soon. Let's get acquainted, first."

Penny eyed the devilish glint in Bruce's eyes warily but she said, "Wonderful," and meant it. There was an afraid-of-nothing, likeable quality about him that appealed strongly to Penny. She was willing to bet that Bruce would never worry himself into a phobia about whether or not a girl was after him for his money. If he had any money. She wondered idly if he did.

That was the first thing Dad would check into.

"How about some coffee?" she asked guiltily. She had forgotten to offer some.

"Great idea."

Penny disappeared into the kitchenette and was soon back with fat cups filled with steaming coffee. Then she went for the cream and sugar.

She brought them back, humming happily, and said, "Maybe there's something I can do for you, too."

"There is." Bruce was giving her a little boy look, eyes wistful, face lonesome. "You can go out with me tomorrow."

Penny laughed. "I hope you don't practice that look too often. It could be dangerous."

"Then the answer is yes?"

Penny looked up over her coffee cup and smiled at his eagerness. Besides that, the way he kept eyeing her was most distracting and sent pleasant tingles through her.

"Tomorrow?" he said leaning forward.

"Yes. Tomorrow."

They decided to do some sightseeing the next day and then Bruce stood up reluctantly. "I've got an appointment at twelve," he explained. "I'm trying to get backers for a proposed oil company. It's not hard convincing them that Maracaibo has some of the world's richest oil deposits. It's when we start talking money that we get stalled."

"Oh, well," he shrugged smiling, "I've got a month to do it in before I start back, and I've just begun the rounds, so..."

"A month!" repeated Penny. A month wasn't very long to get acquainted with someone you were beginning to like. But she wished Bruce hadn't mentioned money. She could feel something inside of her shriveling up.

"I'd better go," said Bruce unwillingly. "You know," he grinned, "I

think I'm going to enjoy being engaged. Goodbye."

The door closed after him and Penny sat down, thoughtfully, to nurse a four-year-old wound. When she was seventeen, she'd been in love with Stanley Powers. Only Stanley was poor, so Daddy tried to buy him off. Penny never knew whether he succeeded or not, but Stanley promptly disappeared. He signed up with the U. S. Navy and Penny never saw him again.

With an effort, Penny roused herself. She would be late for her art lesson. Then she decided to skip it altogether. She wasn't good at art. It was just something to do.

**B**EFORE she could shower and dress, as she'd planned, there came another knock at the door. Scuffing her mules slowly across the carpeting, she approached the door with dread. This would be Daddy for sure. She opened the door and it was Donald Sheppard. He strode in with a grim look on his face.

"Hello, Penelope," he said brusquely not looking at her.

Oh, so it's Penelope and not Penny. That meant he was angry.

"Hello," said Penny faintly. It wasn't going to be easy standing up to Dad. It would take all her will-power.

Donald Sheppard was a graying, distinguished importer of wines, impeccably dressed, and proud of his flat stomach. He glanced about the room disapprovingly. It was obvious he couldn't understand why anyone would leave Chestnut Hill for this.

"Now, about this nonsense in the morning papers," he said turning to her. "What does it mean? Who is he? What does he do? Do you know anything at all about him?"

"All I know is that Bruce Locke is a very nice guy," Penny said hotly.

"And you've known him how long?"

Penny was silent.

Donald Sheppard studied his daugh-

ter critically. "I don't have to remind you that fortune-hunters are always with us. Did you take that into consideration?"

"No," snapped Penny. "I left it all up to you." But she did feel a warning nudge. Trying to shrug it off, she said a little wildly, "Why shouldn't I marry whomever I want?"

Donald Sheppard's shoulders sagged. "My dear, I can see that I went about this the wrong way. After all, you're twenty-one and legally of age. What I came to tell you," and he sighed heavily, "is that I took it upon myself to have your young man investigated. Now, wait a minute, Tracers, Inc. will send the dossier to you, not me. You'll have all the facts about Bruce Locke first-hand. I won't see a thing."

Penny felt like saying bitterly, "Not even the duplicate copy?" But when her father got up and kissed her forehead gently, she softened. After all, she was all he had. She knew how much Dad had always longed for a large family. It was perhaps natural for him to be over-anxious about an only child.

"Tell Mother I'll call her tomorrow about having lunch together," she said before he went out.

Donald Sheppard nodded his head approvingly. "I'll tell her. And come see us for dinner soon. Goodbye, dear."

After her father had gone, Penny undressed to shower. Under the cold needles of water, she felt sadly triumphant. She had bested Daddy, but to what purpose? Where men were concerned, she still lacked self-confidence. Are they after me or my money? would always haunt her unless she did something about it. And Penny didn't know what to do.

**T**HE FOLLOWING day Bruce called her early. They saw each other every day, after that, for three weeks straight. Mornings, Bruce had his appointments. Afternoons and evenings they spent together. They did

everything from feeding pigeons at City Hall to picknicking at Fairmount Park.

During this time, Penny discovered that the worthwhile men respected her diamond, while to certain others, it made no difference. She was having such a wonderful time with Bruce, however, that it seemed unnecessary to call the whole thing off. Besides, he'd be leaving for Maracaibo, soon. The thought made Penny's heart lurch apprehensively.

One day, Bruce called her as usual. "Hurry it up, woman. It's a beautiful day and there are still a lot of sights we haven't seen. I'll wait for you in the lobby."

"I'll be down in ten minutes," said Penny.

It took her less. She stepped out of the elevator in a cool-necked dress of linen tweed and comfortable nylon mesh wedgies. She noticed that Bruce was dressed comfortably, too, in a white sports shirt open at the throat and brown slacks.

They stepped out of the air-conditioned lobby into the street and the blast of hot air caused Penny to draw back. She threw Bruce a reproachful look, "Nice day did you say?" The hot sun glared overhead through the city haze.

"I can see you've never been to Maracaibo," said Bruce teasingly.

"Where to today?" asked Penny dabbing at her damp forehead.

Bruce took her hand and they started off down the narrow street. "You know, in this wonderful city that William Penn laid out in such neat squares, we have not yet set foot in one of its most historical buildings?"

"What's that?" asked Penny disinterestedly. She personally thought today was fit but for one thing, the water at some beach.

"Independence Hall," said Bruce, gauging the distance between them and the oncoming trolley. They made a dash for it and got in panting, just as

the doors closed behind them and the trolley started up again with a jerk.

By the time they got off at Fifth and Chestnut, Penny had adjusted to the end-of-the-summer heat. "You know, I've already seen Independence Hall," she protested to Bruce.

"When was the last time?"

"Well-I, I think it was when I was a Girl Scout..."

"There. You see."

Hand in hand, they walked into the brick building. While Bruce inspected the crack in the Liberty Bell, Penny inspected Bruce, the little laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, his strong tanned arms. With a horrid lump in her throat, she wondered what it would be like with Bruce in South America.

It was a full hour before they finished looking over the century-old relics and before they walked out into the sunshine and shade of the little park behind the building.

"Let's sit down," said Penny. Her feet should have been broken in after all of the weeks of walking, but instead they ached.

"How about canoeing on the Schuylkill?" suggested Bruce relentlessly.

"No. We've already done that. Let's sit first," insisted Penny finding a bench. They sat down and Penny fanned herself with a limp handkerchief. Since the day they'd met, Bruce hadn't volunteered any information as to how he was faring with his proposed venture. Now Penny asked curiously, "How are you making out with the oil company, Bruce?"

"You mean, how am I making out raising the money? Not so good. It doesn't look like I'm going to get anyone to back me to the tune of thousands."

**P**ENNY FELT a stab of warning, but she ignored it resolutely. "There's me, you know. I could help you." She didn't stop to examine why she wanted to help him. It didn't oc-

cur to her at the moment that it might be because she was in love with Bruce.

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "Take money from a woman? Never!"

"But why not, Bruce? The money is mine, from Mother's side of the family. We can handle it strictly like a business deal. I'll charge you the customary 6% interest. Or maybe you'd rather I buy stock in your oil company, instead?"

Penny's heart hammered wildly. She was plunging into something every instinct told her to avoid.

Bruce studied her for a long minute and his voice was deadly serious. "I couldn't, Penny. Thanks, but I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"With that phobia you've got men after you just for your money, it would be the worst thing that could happen to us."

Penny was silent. She watched a bushy-tailed squirrel scamper up a tree and didn't even see it. Bruce was right, of course. But what was she doing, if not trying to overcome that hideous phobia of hers?

Penny's hand went over Bruce's as she turned to him. "Please, Bruce. That's why I'm asking you to let me help. This might be just the thing to rid me of the phobia. Don't you see? If I trust you with my money, it means I'm not afraid to marry..."

She paused in panic. She had been about to say, "...it means I'm not afraid to marry you." Bruce had never mentioned marriage. Maybe he never would.

Penny sat stiff and unmoving, holding her breath, while Bruce debated with himself. Finally, he spoke. "I don't know," he said uncertainly.

"Please, Bruce. Please."

"Well, all right."

Bruce slid his arm along the top of the bench behind Penny and pulled her to him. He held her quite tight with one arm. "I shouldn't let you talk me into this," he said in her ear.

People were walking back and forth in front of them and Penny thought, what a time to make love! But that was so like Bruce. He did what he wanted to when he wanted to. He wasn't afraid to tackle anything he believed in. And it appeared he believed in her.

"Bruce, people are looking!"

"So what?" Bruce kissed the corner of her mouth. "You look quite nice to me, even though your nose is shiny."

"It is?"

Instinctively, Penny reached for her purse and her compact. But Bruce grabbed her hands and stopped her. "Never mind. I love you the way you are."

Penny let her breath out slowly. She hadn't realized until now that she'd been all tensed up for days waiting for Bruce to say "I love you."

"Oh Bruce, do you?"

Bruce's voice was a little hoarse. "The first minute I saw you, I was glad it was me you'd picked to be engaged to. I couldn't tell you sooner, because I had to give you time to feel the same about me."

Penny laughed shakily. "Remember, you haven't seen an American girl to speak of, in two years of Maracaibo."

Bruce gave her a long, burning look. "Let's not get away from the subject. Now it's your turn to say it."

"I love you, Bruce."

Bruce kissed the other corner of her mouth rewardingly and Penny felt that it was going to turn out all right. She had conquered her phobia and she would marry Bruce.

**T**HE FOLLOWING morning Penny sat in her cozy kitchenette sipping hot coffee with plenty of sugar and cream in it, when the telephone rang in the next room. She ran to it, happily, it must be Bruce. He usually called her this time every morning.

"Hello," she said liltingly.

"Hallo," a female voice at the other end of the wire said with a slight ac-

cent. It didn't sound quite authentic. "I just got something I want to tell you that I think you should know."

"Who is this?" said Penny sharply. She knew no one with this accent, although the voice did have an elusive familiarity.

"Never mind who is this," the voice went on. "Do not marry Bruce Locke. He is no good for you. He marry you for your money. Goodbye."

There was a click in her ear and Penny realized that the anonymous caller had hung up. She stared dumbly at the receiver before she hung up, too.

Who could it have been? Why had they called? Maybe it was someone Bruce knew, having himself a good joke. She would ask Bruce if he knew someone that would do such a thing. She, Penny, didn't think it so funny.

Penny slid into a candy-striped dress and zipped it up thoughtfully. She had a horrible, premonitious feeling that the anonymous 'phone call was a bad omen. She tried to shrug it off as she drew a red mouth under a slightly sunburned nose.

When the buzzer sounded, she sped to answer it. Bruce must be here to talk over their forthcoming oil transaction. Later, her lawyer would come. But in the meantime, Bruce could get her out of this mood.

She opened the door quickly, Bruce was there in a gaudy sports shirt and tan slacks and he held a package. He was grinning in a devil-may-care way.

Penny blinked at the red and green and yellow and several other colors of his shirt.

Bruce laughed. "This," he said touching the shirt, "is in honor of our engagement. Something spectacular and unusual, which is the way I feel. This," he indicated the package, "is the shirt I was wearing on the way over before I bought this one. And this," he brought out a square little box from a pocket, "is for you."

Penny opened the white box and gasped at the diamond nestling inside.

It was lovely and sparkling but so big. "Bruce, are you sure you can afford such a large one?" she said protestingly as Bruce slid off the dinner ring and slid on the diamond. But the ring was too big. It slid off her finger.

Bruce went and closed the door while Penny sadly returned the ring to its box. It would have to be made smaller. This too, seemed like a bad omen.

Bruce came back and held her in his arms. "What's the matter, Penny?" he asked anxiously.

Penny brushed back her hair. "I don't know," she admitted tensely. "I just have the most awful feeling as if something unpleasant is going to happen."

"To us?" laughed Bruce. But his laugh seemed somewhat affected by her mood. "What is it that's bothering you?"

Penny walked away and sat down. "It was just that stupid 'phone call."

"What was it about?" asked Bruce warily.

"About us. I mean. . . Bruce, do you know any woman in Philly who would be jealous of you?" Bruce was staring at her oddly and Penny rushed on, "I mean she said not to marry you."

"OH?" SAID Bruce. "You're the only girl I've dated, Penny. Did she say why not to marry me?" asked Bruce carefully.

Penny's face flushed ashamedly. "Yes, she said. . ."

Bruce finished it for her. ". . . That I was marrying you for your money." His face was taut. "Is that it?"

"Yes." It was a whisper.

"I see." Bruce's fingers drummed on the end table. Above his gaunt face, the colors of his shirt appeared incredulous.

"Did you believe her?" he asked suddenly.

"Of course not," denied Penny hotly.

"But it's upset you?"

Penny was silent. Last night she'd

been sure she'd conquered this terrible phobia of hers. Now it was back, stronger than ever. Stirred up to a pitch by a 'phone call. After all, now that she recalled it, Bruce hadn't mentioned love until she'd mentioned money.

"There's only one thing to do." Bruce looked dejected and beaten. "Forget about this whole deal of ours. Forget you ever mentioned money to me."

Penny was silent. What could she say? She loved Bruce as much as ever. That hadn't changed a bit. But did he love her?

"But on the other hand," Bruce was talking to himself, "supposing we forget money now. We get married, and it crops out again in some other form. No, that's not the answer."

Penny's face was wan. "Bruce, let's not do anything right now. Let's just think about things for a couple of days first."

Bruce whirled on her. "I've been pretty patient with you right along. First you talked me into borrowing money from you. Now you want a chance to talk me out of it. Well, it's gone too far."

"You're not being fair," flared Penny.

"Let me tell you something. I've got pride, too. If all I wanted was money, there are dozens of richer girls than you, right here in Philly. And a lot easier to get."

Bruce strode toward the door.

Penny felt jagged snippers at her heart. "Bruce, where are you going?"

"Back to Maracaibo," was the answer and the door slammed shut.

The tears came and slid down her cheeks for a long time. Penny remained sitting numbly where Bruce had left her for what seemed like hours. When a knock at the door finally roused her, she got up automatically. But it was only the boy bringing up the customary morning mail.

"Thank you," she said mechanically, forgetting to give him a tip.

Penny glanced through the envelopes disinterestedly. A bill, a post card from a friend in Canada, and—the words sprang at her—something from Tracers, Inc. It must be the dossier on Bruce that Daddy had said he was having sent direct to her.

PENNY weighed the envelope contemplatively. She had only to open it to find out all about Bruce, his job, his character, how much he was worth. It was a bitter temptation to resist. Daddy had probably guessed it would be.

Dazedly, Penny sat down to take stock. If she were ever to dig out the root of her unhealthy fear, this was the time to begin. She had faith in Bruce. It was shaky, but it was there. If she just gave that faith a chance to grow, it could easily crowd out a sickly phobia. She couldn't let herself believe Bruce was a fortune hunter.

At the thought of Bruce, she folded over with a little cry. In his way, he had tried to help her. If he would only give her one more chance. . .

Penny got up, finally, opened a desk drawer and resolutely dropped the envelope from Tracers, Inc. into it. Should she ever decide to, she could open the envelope any time. Intuitively, she knew she never would.

Somehow, somehow, she had to get Bruce to believe in her again, just as she was making herself believe in him. Every now and then, Penny glanced tenderly at the too-large diamond in its open box. Bruce had forgotten it.

The telephone jangled shrilly and Penny jumped. She was too nervous, she realized, and probably would be until she had Bruce back.

She picked up the receiver. "Hello," she said.

There was a giggle. "Hi, Penny, it's me."

"Betty!" Penny was relieved. She certainly couldn't stand any more.

anonymous 'phone calls today. "What's new?"

"Say, how'd you like my accent?"

"Your accent!" Penny felt like she was going to be sick. "Betty, was that you that called this morning?"

"Who else?" crowed Betty. "You mean you didn't guess? Golly, was I that good?"

Penny choked up. *No, Betty, she thought. You weren't very good. I was just dumb.*

"Hey, Penny. Are you there?"

Penny hung up softly. She didn't blame Betty too much. Betty was giddy and full of ideas and this was her idea of a joke.

Her heart ached with longing for Bruce. Like he'd said, there must be dozens of richer girls in Philly than she and most of them easier to get. She didn't want to give Bruce a chance to find out how easy it might be.

Then too, there was the chance he might decide to sail for Maracaibo maybe tomorrow. Her hands went clammy at the thought.

Doggedly, Penny stared at the newspaper clipping of the announcement of her engagement to Bruce.

Three crammed weekfuls of memories came rushing up at her. When at last Penny put the clipping down, she knew what she must do.

And there was something else that she knew now. She felt sure that Dad hadn't been able to buy off Stanley. Stanley had simply run away, unable to stand up to her father or her money. Whereas Bruce wasn't afraid of her money or her phobia. He was simply fed up with both.

Feverishly, Penny hunted for paper and pencil to scribble down what she would say over the 'phone. Oh, it was a truly brilliant idea. She could almost see her monstrous phobia dissipating into thin air.

She dialed furiously. There should still be enough time for the final edition.

"Hello, Evening Bulletin? Give me

the society editor." She waited and tapped her foot impatiently. "Hello. Society editor? This is Miss Penelope Sheppard. I want you to print a wedding date for me. Yes, to Mr. Bruce Locke. In tonight's edition.

"You say Mr. Locke called you today, *retracting* the engagement?" She felt the breath knocked out.

"Forget all about the retraction Mr. Locke called you about. It was due to a lovers' quarrel. We've made up since then." Penny waited breathlessly for the editor to challenge this statement, but she didn't. She merely said something pleasant. After all, this was Donald Sheppard's daughter. Penny then told the editor to print that she and Bruce were to be married quietly tomorrow and that they'd sail for Maracaibo shortly after. Then she hung up.

Her hands were as cold as ice, but Penny felt elated. It simply had to work. If Bruce had told them to print a retraction he'd probably check to see if they did so.

**S**HE REMEMBERED she'd forgotten to eat. She went to the refrigerator and came back nibbling grapes. Betty called back to see if she were mad and Penny said no. Then Mother called about bringing Bruce to dinner soon. Penny said yes, she would.

She was loath to step out of the apartment. The hours dragged on and Penny felt sure the papers were out. Why didn't the boy bring her the *Evening Bulletin*? She called down a dozen times to see if he was on his way up.

In the midst of it all, Penny showered and changed into a full-skirted blue surah. She cologned her hair and wrists, spent minutes deciding on the right earrings. Finally, the buzzer sounded.

Her white heels sped across the carpeting as she hastened to the door. She almost collapsed with joy at the sight of Bruce in the doorway, tense-mouthed, angry.

"What do you call this?" he waved the paper in her face. "Whose screwball idea was it this time?"

"Mine," said Penny weakly.

"What's the gag?" he asked roughly.

"Don't you know, Bruce?" Penny's voice was a whisper. "I was proving that I love you. That I want to finance all your future oil companies."

Bruce turned and gave Penny a slow, searching look before the grin began playing around his mouth. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll wait until I can do my own financing. My uncle left me a tidy little trust fund, available on my twenty-sixth birthday. And in the meantime, I have my regular job as construction engineer in Maracaibo."

Penny began to cry. He reached her in one, quick stride. "You little dope," he said hoarsely, pulling her tight, "as far as proving anything goes, I've loved you every second, phobia or no phobia."

"I don't have it anymore," Penny started to say but he didn't even hear her, because his mouth was on hers, kissing her again and again.

THE END

**CAMPAIGN**

**FOR LOVE**

by Kate Tempest

is the feature in the  
October issue of

**TODAY'S  
LOVE STORIES**

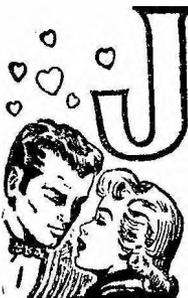
# SHE HAD NOTHING TO LOSE

Nothing, that is, but love!

by  
Emily Grant



*The impact of his black eyes was jolting...*



ACQUELINE DARB-Y'S high heels tapped a merry tune as she left the elevator on the floor given over to the Marsden Advertising Agency's many offices and went down the hall to knock on Marty's door. Her friend had promised to meet

her for lunch and when she failed to appear, Jac had decided to check.

"Come in," came Marty's muffled voice.

She glanced up from the list she had been studying and darted a surprised look at the clock. "Gosh, Jac, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late." She tried to smile, but somehow it didn't come off.

"Something wrong?" Jac asked

lightly, taking in Marty's worried expression and her tight mouth.

"Sure is. The new boss is a tarter. I've been herding secretaries in and out of his office for two days now and he has turned every one of them down. I'm just about ready to blow the whole thing!"

Jac couldn't remember having seen her friend in such a state before. Usually, Marty was the essence of the efficient personnel manager, routine functioning smoothly under her capable supervision, her quiet good humor dominant. Now she looked like a harrassed nursemaid trying to cope with a dozen wild Indians at once.

"And what seems to be his main objection?"

Marty threw up her hands in disgust.

"That's something I haven't figured out exactly, although I have my suspicions. He insists on a homely girl and any other time there would be a dozen available, but just when I need one, the only thing I can turn up are beauties."

"Hmmm." Jac's brown eyes narrowed speculatively. "Sounds like a woman-hater or a guy with a jealous girl." She perched herself on the corner of the desk. "Or is he married?"

Marty shrugged tiredly.

"The grapevine hasn't come up with much, but I gather he is engaged to Valarie Johnson, Mr. Marsden's niece. He's Haliburton Q. Reynolds from the Philadelphia office. That's all I know."

"What's he like outside of his disposition?"

Before Marty could answer, the door flew open and a tall young man stepped inside. Jac turned curiously and then caught a ragged breath. He was young, she thought, much younger than Marty's words had led her to believe and he had the broadest shoulders and the blackest eyes Jac had ever seen.

Right now, his dark brows were drawn into a frown, his square jaw set and his eyes flashing fire. He glanced

briefly at Jac, taking in the soft gold of her hair, her tawny eyes and soft red mouth, then looked swiftly away.

"Haven't you located a secretary yet, Miss Worth?" he demanded.

"I'm still trying, Mr. Reynolds," was her flustered reply.

"Then try harder. Work is piling up and I've got to have one. Today, preferably."

Martha started to protest, but the door had already crashed behind him. Jac let go of the startled breath she was holding.

"Whew!" she ejaculated softly. "He's a regular tornado."

It was a new experience to be sized up so abruptly and then dismissed. Not that she was any tearing beauty, but there was an aliveness about her, a vibrant intensity that was seldom passed over so lightly. It was deflating and intriguing in the same breath.

"That isn't the worst of it," Marty agreed ruefully. "If I don't produce in short order, I'll be joining you among the unemployed. I'd part with that new coat of mine if you could come up with a solution."

Jac laughed. "Sorry, Marty, it wouldn't fit. Nor would I fill his requirements. Chances are he'd think I was too fluffy. Now if I were homely—"

**S**HE BROKE off, conscious of Marty's sudden stare, and she slid off the desk hurriedly.

"Hey, now wait! I don't like that gleam in your eye. What are you thinking, anyway?"

Marty sprang to her feet, grabbing her coat with one hand and Jac's wrist with the other.

"Let's get out of here."

Protest in every slim line, Jac allowed herself to be towed out of the office and into the elevator. Once on the street, Marty hailed a taxi.

"What are you up to, Marty?"

Marty gave her a little shove and climbed into the taxi after her. "Nev-

er you mind. I'll tell you later." She gave the driver an address and settled back with a sigh of relief.

Jac's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Martha Worth, if you have any crazy idea of disguising me, you'd better think again. That is what you have in mind, isn't it?" she demanded angrily.

"You're darned right."

"Then you'd better get another brain storm and fast. I won't do it."

Marty's blue eyes pleaded with her, her round little face serious.

"Jac, you've got to. I can't afford to lose my job and you need one. If you turn me down, you aren't the friend you claim to be."

Jac had a sudden desire to shake her dark haired tormentor.

"But Marty, he'd recognize me in a minute. Besides, how do you know I'd suit him? I'm no genius."

"Bosh! You're one of the best secretaries going and if your company hadn't folded, you wouldn't be out of a job. Be a sport, Jac. Give it a whirl. I've got a hunch he's desperate enough by now to seize on anything I send him and I've got to get him out of my hair. He can't do any more than turn you down."

The taxi pulled up to the curb in front of a big brownstone building and they went up to Marty's apartment, Jac still protesting.

"Sure, I need a job," she admitted, "but Hal Reynolds didn't look like a person you'd fool for long. You're asking an awful lot, Marty."

"But you'd like a crack at him, wouldn't you?" her friend guessed shrewdly. "Oh, don't look like that! I saw your face when he gave you the once over. If anyone could thaw him out, it would be you."

She dived into a clothespress, her purse flying in one direction, her coat in another, and come up with a plain gray suit and a white blouse.

"Here. Climb out of that glamour and try this on," she ordered.



"But it's too big," Jac protested weakly. "I wouldn't be able to keep it on."

It wasn't that the prospect of a job didn't tempt her. It did. Her funds had shrunk to such proportions that it bordered on being dangerous and she hadn't found an opening in three long weeks of searching. Nor was Marty wrong in guessing that Hal Reynolds had intrigued her. He had, but she had the queerest feeling down deep that he was no one to tamper with. Not only that, but having seen her such a short time ago, he would tumble immediately.

"That's just the point," Marty was rushing on. "Being large, the suit will tone down that heavenly figure of yours and with a pair of my low shoes, horned rimmed glasses and no make-up, he'll never guess you're the same person. Please, Jac?"

*I must be losing my mind*, Jac was thinking in a panic as Marty ushered

her into Hal Reynolds' outer office less than an hour later. This was the craziest thing she had ever heard of. Of course, with her blonde hair pulled tightly back into a thin bun and those awful glasses perching awkwardly on the bridge of her slightly upturned nose, she certainly looked as dull as dishwater and twice as placid.

Her mirrored reflection had given her a distinct shock. Without make-up, she seemed entirely different, pale, scrubbed and uninteresting. Moreover, she was uncomfortable in Marty's suit. It was full all in the wrong places and they had had to pin the skirt over to make it stay up.

Yet what did she have to lose? Her rent was due at the end of the week and the few bills in her purse wouldn't last forever. It was like being caught in one of those trick rooms they used in horror stories, with the walls closing in on her silently, purposefully. She shivered.

**WHEN SHE** reappeared in the doorway to beckon, Marty's face was pink tinged, her lips compressed, her dark eyes worried. Jac took a deep breath and plunged.

"Mr. Reynolds, this is Jacqueline Darby," Marty introduced them nervously. "She comes highly recommended and her references are excellent."

The impact of his black eyes was jolting, racing over her as if she were a piece of furniture and Jac's spine tensed. They came to rest on her face at last until she was tempted to turn and run, her heart bumping along uneasily under that piercing gaze, her hands going moist.

Then he spoke abruptly. "You can go, Miss Worth."

With one last look of warning and entreaty, Marty turned and left.

"So you think you'd like to work here?" he was asking. "Why?"

Jac's chin came up bravely. "I—I like to eat," she faltered and then bit her lip. What was the matter with

her, anyway, she thought scathingly? Was she afraid of him?

Amusement touched his wide mouth and for a moment, she could have sworn that she caught a glimpse of devilry deep in his eyes. It was gone so swiftly that she dismissed the thought as ridiculous.

"All right," he said finally, after a few questions. "Suppose we give it a try."

Jac's knees threatened to give out completely as relief flooded her. Good heavens, she had made it! Was it possible that he had been fooled so easily?

He gave her little time to consider it. In a matter of minutes, she was seated by the corner of his desk, her pencil flying to keep up with rapid dictation, her predicament lost as her natural efficiency took over. When he finally stopped, her wrist ached and her notebook bulged.

"Type those up as soon as you can," he directed briefly. "And by the way, do you object to working overtime for a while? There is a great deal to be done before I can get squared away. My predecessor seems to have left a lot of unfinished business."

"If you like," she managed and retreated to her new office.

Marty came in at closing time, her eyes anxious.

"How's it going?" she asked with a glance at his closed door. "Do you think he suspects?"

Jac flexed tired fingers. "I don't know, Marty," she admitted slowly, shaking her head until the unaccustomed glasses nearly flew off her nose, "but I've got an awful feeling he does."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, but if he blows this thing sky high, Marty, I'll never forgive you."

"What are you worrying about? You won't be any worse off than you were. I'll be the one to lose. Nearly through?"

"He asked me to work late."

Marty smiled apologetically.

"Well, things did get pretty far behind," she admitted. "You don't mind, do you?"

"It means more money," Jac shrugged, "and that's no hardship. But I don't mind telling you. I'm scared."

Marty grinned.

"Then it's the first time," she retorted emphatically and smothered a sudden giggle. "Honestly, honey, you're a picture sitting there. You look like an old maid aunt!"

"Thanks!" Jac scowled fiercely, but without heat. "What a nut I was to let you take me into this! If that's all you've got to say, you'd better clear out of here before I crown you."

Marty tilted her head, her eyes twinkling.

"Oh, I don't know. You didn't put up much of a battle after you got a good look at him," she teased. "Your pulse started clicking like the tumblers on a safe."

Jac colored. "Don't be silly. He's strictly from the North Pole. Scram, gal, and let me work."

**D**OGGEDLY, she went back to her typewriter. The pile of completed letters grew apace, but it was growing dark when she rose finally to carry them in to his desk.

He glanced up briefly. "Done?"

She nodded shortly.

"Good. Sit down and have a cigarette, if you smoke, while I sign them." He looked at her closely. "Would you rather go down to the restaurant or shall I have something sent up? The break might do us good."

She met his eyes in frank surprise.

"That's up to you, Mr. Reynolds. Either way."

"Then we'll go down."

He returned to his task, having lighted her cigarette, and she found herself studying him covertly from beneath her lashes.

He wasn't handsome, she thought, and somehow he didn't seem as coldly inconsiderate as he had sounded

earlier. She wasn't sure she didn't understand his impatience. After all, he was new on the job and taking over an advertising agency the size of Marsdens was no snap.

Judging from the letters she had typed, there were some very impatient clients to soothe and some important campaigns to be planned in a hurry. Marty had given her to understand that the former manager had been lax, until the loss of a few good accounts had resulted in an explosion that had rocked the entire personnel.

Her eyes drifted past him and came to rest on a photograph. Her heart gave a queer little leap as she studied the face that seemed to be staring accusingly directly at her. It was a beautiful face, but there was a haughty lift to the chin, a thinness about the mouth in spite of its slight smile, a coolness in the clear blue eyes that set Jac shivering again.

So this was Valarie Johnson, she thought slowly, the girl behind his demands for a homely secretary! It gave her a queer little lost feeling deep inside, yet what difference did it make? Why should it matter? He was merely her employer, she reminded herself sharply.

It was a relief when he finally finished and put an end to her speculation.

"There," he commented, coming to his feet. "We can fold these ready for mailing when we get back. Let's go."

She had a bad moment when she shrugged into her coat. It was a bright, shimmering blue, hardly in keeping with her disguise, but to her intense relief, he seemed too preoccupied to notice.

They went down the elevator in silence to the little restaurant on the street level.

"If your work continues to be as efficient as today's sample, I'm sure we'll get on. Miss Darby," he announced quietly, once the waitress had taken their order.



A small glow of satisfaction swept through her and she began to relax for the first time. Then he spoke again, a wry note in his voice.

"However, if I hadn't been so desperate, I doubt if I'd have taken a chance on you."

Jac's eyes leaped to his, the mockery in his dark eyes clogging her breath.

"What do you mean?" The words emerged from between stiff lips.

"You don't think I'm a complete fool, do you?" he demanded. "Is that Miss Worth's suit you're wearing?"

Jac went rigid, the betraying color rushing into her cheeks. So, she thought angrily, he had known all along. He had known and been laughing at her secretly all afternoon. Her chin rose defiantly.

"How did you know that?" she blurted out and then could have bitten off her tongue as his mockery deepened.

"Even dowdy secretaries don't use safety pins to hold up their skirts."

In dismay, she glanced down. Sure enough, the skirt had twisted until the pin peeped from under her jacket shamelessly. She gave it a furious twist, wishing in sudden desperation that she was miles from this particu-

lar restaurant, out of reach of his derision.

To her complete horror, the sudden strain popped open the pin and it flew to land several feet from their table. She froze, staring at it as if it were a monster.

**HIS BURST** of laughter shattered the last remnants of her control. Temper flaring, she sprang to her feet, clutching the offending skirt to avoid complete disaster, intent on putting plenty of distance between them.

Before she could escape, however, one big hand fastened on her shoulder none too gently and pushed her back into the booth. Then he bent to retrieve the pin.

"Were you going some place?" His tone was light as he placed it on the table before her.

She raised furious eyes, stabbing the pin viciously back into the skirt.

"Home to forget such a place as Marsden's exists," she flung at him.

Their glances collided, hers tawny, defiant, more than little ashamed, his frankly searching. Then his mouth set.

"I'm afraid not. You walked into this situation with your eyes open and I refuse to be left in the lurch."

Jac drew a quivering breath, gathering up her purse with hands that shook.

"That's what you think," she retorted with spirit. "You'll just have to find yourself another secretary." She started to her feet again.

"Sit down!" It was an order, curtly spoken, the laughter vanishing from his face as if it had never existed, a tiny flame lighting the murky depths of his eyes. "If you walk out on me now, I'll fire your friend the first thing tomorrow morning."

She sank back limply. Oh no, she thought in dismay! Her own humiliation was bad enough without costing Marty her job. Besides, she had agreed to it, hadn't she? And she was a big

girl, now, answerable for her own actions!

She swallowed her battered pride, rallying painfully, and reached up to snatch off the cumbersome glasses. "You mean that, don't you?" she managed finally.

"I do. Every word of it."

"Very well. Since you put it that way, I don't want the loss of Marty's job on my conscience."

His eyebrows shot up as if he doubted that she had one and she ached with the sudden desire to throw her purse straight into that mocking face. She conquered the impulse with some difficulty and turned her attention to the fare the waitress was setting before them.

There was little or no conversation between them after they returned to the office but Jac was so furious that she welcomed the frigid silence.

When she let herself into her apartment shortly after nine, she flung herself down on the davenport in a spent little heap.

"Of all the impossible situations," she exploded. "He's the most conceited, insufferable man I've ever met!"

"*Is he now?*" her heart seemed to jeer. "Or is it just because he has you backed into a corner? After all, you brought it on yourself. At twenty-one, you're old enough to know better than let the first good looking man that comes along throw you into a pink tizzy."

The jangling of the phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Jac, I've been worried," came Marty's anxious voice. "How did you make out?"

"Awful," she wailed and launched into an account. "He made me feel like an idiot."

Marty smothered something that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. "Gosh, honey, I'm sorry."

"You sound it."

"I can't help it." Her laughter rang

over the phone until Jac held the instrument away from her ear to glare at it. "I wish I could have been a mouse. Maybe it's just as well."

Jac was indignant. "Just as well? What do you mean?"

"Well," Marty went on reasonably, "if you had gone on with the disguise, you'd have had to buy clothes you couldn't use later. As it is, you're not out anything."

"Nothing more than a sizeable chunk of my self respect," she retorted heatedly.

"And isn't the job worth it?"

Jac's reply was a long time coming.

"Well, if you put it that way, I suppose it is, but it was humiliating."

"And that won't hurt you one bit," was Marty's unfeeling retort. "A little humility might be good for what ails you. So far, you've had things pretty much as you wanted them."

"Marty Worth, I believe I hate you."

"Can't say I blame you, but you'll get over it. You always do, bless you. And Jac. Thanks for saving my job for me."

**T**O ALL OUTWARD appearances, she was calm when she walked into the office the next morning. Inwardly she was still furious with herself, with Marty, and with Hal, her heart racing like a crazy drum at the thought of facing him.

At least she was more comfortable, she thought as she hung up her coat and smoothed the skirt of the simple dark green dress she was wearing. She had been tempted to burst out defiantly in bright red but an inner voice had warned that pushing Hal any further might prove dangerous.

He gave her a long, steady look that seemed to tabulate each change, the faint undercurrent of mischief back in his eyes, but he merely put her to work. In spite of her efforts at discipline, her awareness of him grew and sharpened. It was disturbing and a little frightening.

What ailed her, anyway, she wondered impatiently? So he was tall and lean and his dark hair had tendency to curl. What difference did that make? Yet in spite of telling herself over and over that he was engaged, that Valarie had specified the type of secretary he should have, it did no good.

Woven through her typing was the memory of the way his eyes had blazed down at her the night before, of the way his big hand had felt when it fastened on her shoulder, and the stubborn set of his jaw. Too, she remembered the little boy look of mischief that came and went in the depths of his dark eyes.

Once she even found herself speculating what it would be like to be in his arms, to have his lips on hers and in desperation, she jerked the thought to a stand-still.

"For Pete's sake, Jac, snap out of it," she told herself furiously. "He isn't for you. He's tagged, marked taken, with no trespassing signs all over the place. How stupid can you get?"

She thrust her disturbance aside and plunged into the work. Later as she became familiar with the different departments that made up the firm, as she began to study the various layouts that were rapidly taking shape, her interest deepened.

Several times she voiced a suggestion that Hal seized on, his attitude undergoing a slow change. Then one night after the building had fallen into silence, he put it into words.

"You know, Jac, you have a knack for advertising," he announced, her first name slipping out unnoticed. "Mr. Marsden is due in tomorrow and I'll have to bring it to his attention."

But the elation his first words had brought was subjugated swiftly as the import of his revelation struck her. That meant Valarie, too, she thought in dismay. Trouble spelled in capitals unless she was badly mistaken.

"Well, aren't you pleased?" Hal was asking.

"Of course," she replied hurriedly, and summoned a smile.

His glance searched hers until she dropped her eyes in confusion.

"What's bothering you, Jac?"

She rallied her forces with an effort and met his look squarely.

"I was just wondering how long my job would last after your fiancee gets here."

"And what makes you think that will have anything to do with it?" His hand that had been drumming idly on the desk was suddenly still.

"Wasn't it because of her that you requested a homely secretary?" Her intonation was crisp, but inwardly she was tense, apprehensive.

His answer was a long time coming, a warning gleam in his eyes.

"Perhaps," he admitted a little stiffly, "but as long as your work is satisfactory and Mr. Marsden approves, you have nothing to worry about."

She rose swiftly, wanting to be free of him. He made no attempt to stop her and she hurried out of the building as if pursued. Once in her apartment, she showered, put on a comfortable robe and rummaged in the tiny kitchen for something to eat, but she couldn't settle down. It was then that she forced herself to face the truth.

"I'm in love with him," she thought painfully. "Completely and irrevocably."

It was as if a relentless tide had swept her beyond all reason and she remembered the weakness that had struck at her knees earlier as they leaned shoulder-to-shoulder over a display, her pulse doing a tango when their hands had met inadvertently.

Had he felt it too, or was it just her? She groaned. And how could she hope to compete with Valarie? Unless she had misread that haughty expression, her rival was not the type to give up easily or gracefully. Hal hadn't even bothered to deny that she ran him like a toy machine.

What was she like? Would she be

all ice as her photograph promised? Jac shivered. If she was, she wasn't right for Hal. He needed someone who was interested in his work, someone with warmth and understanding.

Jac came to her feet in utter disgust and slammed into her bedroom. She was being idiotic again, she told herself furiously as she settled herself in the vain hope of sleeping.

**I**T WAS LATE when she arrived at the office the next morning and she found Hal waiting impatiently. She slipped out of her coat hurriedly and crossed toward her desk, aware of his astonished look.

"Celebrating something?" he demanded queerly.

She shrugged nonchalantly. She knew she looked well, she had meant to. The brown wool dress had a fitted bodice and gracefully flaring skirt, caught about her waist with a wide gold belt that accented her slimness. The rich color pointed up the perfection of her light complexion and the touches of gold trim echoed the tawny lights in her eyes.

"The big boss is coming in today, isn't he?" she asked innocently.

His glance searched her face mercilessly, his mouth going a trifle grim, and then without another word, he retreated to his own office, shutting the door forcefully as if he hoped to shut her out as well.

In spite of herself, she grinned. She knew she was deliberately playing with fire, that the whole thing might explode in her face without a moment's warning, but somewhere within the dark bonds of night, she had made up her mind to take a stand of sorts.

Perhaps it wasn't fair to Hal, but she had some rights, didn't she? And if Valarie proved to be more than she had bargained for, she'd have to find a way of forgetting him. But not until she was sure it was hopeless!

By noon, she had finished the odds and ends of work left from the day



before and caught up her filing, but Hal was still barracaded in his office, so she left to lunch with Marty. Across the same table that had separated her from Hal that first night, Marty warned her that Mr. Marsden had arranged a staff party for that evening.

"It's a command performance, Jac, and if you need a loan for a new dress, just say the word. You'll have to make your plays count from here in. Once Valarie gets a good look at you, the trolley will be off the rail but good."

Jac shook her head. "Thanks, Marty, but my black one will do." Her expression took on stubbornness. "I ought to have more pride, Marty, but I just can't seem to help myself."

Marty nodded sagely, smiling a little.

"Cheer up, honey. Once you've met the wonderous Valarie, you'll feel differently. She's completely ruthless in a beautiful sort of a way and believe me, if the situation was reversed, it wouldn't bother her a minute."

It must have been after two when Jac's office door opened and Valarie came in.

She was tall and willowy and breathtaking, just as her photograph had promised, and Jac's heart hit bottom with a thud. For a tense moment, Valarie stood there poised, studying Jac

insolently, her blue eyes getting chillier every passing second.

"Am I in the wrong office or are you Mr. Reynolds' secretary?" she broke the silence at last.

Jac rallied swiftly.

"You are and I am," she told her firmly and started toward Hal's door.

"Don't bother announcing me," Valarie snapped curtly, waving her aside. "I can take care of that little matter myself."

She sailed across the room leaving a cloud of expensive perfume behind her and banged into the inner office.

It was impossible to hear what was going on in there, but Jac knew a sudden, sick fear. What if Hal really loved that iceberg? What would she do?

Valarie's visit proved to be a short one. Jac caught a glimpse of her expression as she whipped past her, the glass in the out door vibrating dangerously as she wrenched it shut.

"Whew!" Jac breathed softly. "She's really hot."

Her fingers stumbled badly on the typewriter keys as she waited for Hal to reappear, time stretching out like rubber, but it was as if he were determined to stay hidden. What was he doing in there? Pacing the floor, chewing his nails or just plain fuming?

**T**HEN A short, round little man came puffing in. His glance was shrewdly encompassing as he came directly over to her desk and sank into a chair but his eyes held a twinkle.

"So," Mr. Marsden began slowly, his words emerging in gusty little rushes. "You're the cause of Val's tantrum, are you?" He chuckled. "Well, I can see why she was disturbed."

Jac's face went scarlet, his attitude so unexpected that it left her at a loss.

"I'm sorry if she was upset," she managed to falter.

A laugh started deep within that huge chest and came roaring out into the room.

"Are you now?" he grinned. "Well, I'm not so sure I agree. Valarie is a badly spoiled girl and though I must admit I've enjoyed spoiling her, there are times when I wish I hadn't. It raises havoc, especially when she makes up her mind she is interested in one of my boys."

Jac glanced nervously at Hal's door, sure that this man's booming voice must penetrate it. Then as if in answer to her fears, it opened and Hal stood there.

"Mr. Marsden. It's good to see you." He was smiling and yet the set of his jaw belied his quiet tone. "I take it you've met Miss Darby."

"I have," and Val didn't do her justice." He lunged ponderously to his feet as if he had already dismissed her from his mind. "How are things going, boy? Getting straightened out enough so that you can enjoy our little party tonight?"

"It's beginning to shape up and most of our clients seem willing to bear with us until we can get under motion again."

"Good. Good. I'd be interested in seeing some of the copy."

Jac went limp as the door closed behind them, her emotions tangled like a ball of yarn deserted by a tired kitten. With a sense of shock, she realized that she hadn't considered Mr. Marsden's reaction. True, the danger was past, but what if he had fired Hal as well as herself?

She went through the motions of working until five o'clock but afterwards, she wasn't sure just what she accomplished. She tapped on the inner door and stepped inside at Hal's bidding.

"Is it all right if I leave now, Mr. Reynolds?"

He gave her one straight, hard look and nodded. Then Mr. Marsden spoke into the taut silence, coming heavily to his feet.

"Don't forget the party, Miss Darby. Nine o'clock or thereabouts and if

you'll inquire at the lobby desk of the Plymouth Hotel, they'll direct you to the ballroom."

"Thank you."

It took courage to walk in on that party. Marty had a date, so Jac was alone. Hal, Mr. Marsden and Valarie were receiving and she moved toward them, her head high. Her black strapless dress with its flower strewn skirt framed her blondeness like a gardenia displayed against jet black and Valarie's icicled glare betrayed her set smile.

Though she did not lack for partners, Jac's mind wasn't on her small talk. All she knew was that Hal was hovering about Valarie as if he intended to wear away her displeasure by dint of sheer stubbornness and Jac died a little inside. She wanted to crawl off in a corner and cry.

Once Hal asked her to dance. A duty dance, she thought ruefully, but the minute his arm closed about her, a tiny rainbow gleamed momentarily through her dark thoughts and she gave herself over to the moment.

*Make the most of it, her heart seemed to say. This is the only chance you'll get to be in his arms.*

He danced smoothly, easily and she followed his lead as if they had always danced together, the music ending all too soon. He guided her back to her chair and stood for a moment looking down at her, something of his old twinkle back in his eyes.

"You do everything well, don't you?" he asked lightly and left her.

The wild little hope his jibe had aroused subsided swiftly as she watched him go back to Valarie, her rival smiling up at him. So, she thought dismally. They've patched up their quarrel.

The rest of the evening dragged unbearably, but Jac was too stubborn to leave. Doggedly, she danced, smiling as if her heart hadn't fairly snapped in two, escaping only when the orchestra began the last waltz.

She murmured her thanks to Mr. Marsden and once out in the cool night air, hailed a taxi.

**B**ACK IN the apartment, inertia claimed her and she sank down on the davenport and tried to bring order to her churning thoughts. There was no use lingering now, letting her love for Hal become an instrument of torture. Monday, she'd resign. It was all that she could do.

"If only I could despise him," she thought wretchedly. Valarie had won easily, surely, and it meant a lifetime of giving in to her demands. Couldn't Hal see that? Or didn't he want to see it?

A knock brought her out of her preoccupation with a start. Now who could that be at this hour, she wondered and then smiled. It must be Marty.

She swung open the door and then went rigid, shock ripping through her.

"May I come in?" Hal demanded.

"Why—why, of course."

His face was white, his lips in a thin, uncompromising line, his eyes glowing like dark coals. Her heart caught in a little knot of apprehension, but she stepped aside and let him in.

In frozen silence she watched him remove his coat and hat, her breathing shallow, her hands icy. And then, so swiftly that it caught her completely unaware, he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

There wasn't time to resist if she had wanted to. His mouth came down on hers with an angry bruising that rocked through her like the tornado she had called him that first day. Then as her lips took fire beneath his, his anger softened and her arms crept shamelessly up around his neck.

"I've been wanting to do that ever since that first day," he said when he raised his head at last. "You've raised Cain with every plan I ever had."

She stiffened a little under his scowl, trying to free herself, but he refused to let her go. Why had he kissed her

like that and why was he frowning? Was this his idea of revenge? She began to panic.

"Please," she begged. "Let me go."

"Not on your life. If you think you're going to get off scott free after having turned my life upside down, you're crazy."

"But Valarie—!" Her voice broke off sharply as the import of his words crashed home.

"Valarie and I are finished. I went through this evening because I owe her uncle that much and more, but Val and I said all we had to say to each other this afternoon. She issued her ultimatum and when I refused to capitulate, she stalked off in a rage."

"But tonight she was smiling at you," Jac accused stubbornly, "and you were dancing attendance as if she was the most important person in the world to you."

He gave her a rough little shake.

"Didn't you hear a word I said?" he demanded and then gave her a little push toward the davenport. "Sit down there and concentrate."

She wanted to believe him, her heart fairly standing still as she searched his dark eyes, but she had been so sure, so positive that Valarie had won.

Hal planted himself in front of her, feet wide apart, and began.

"Mr. Marsden has been more like a father than an employer. He helped me get my start a long time ago, making me practically one of the family, and Val and I were thrown together a great deal. Since I was green, I went along with his suggestions without question and when Valarie started putting in her two cents, it was so gradual that I thought little or nothing of it."

"Not until you and your friend,

Marty, ganged up on me. At first, I was furious with you and if I hadn't been desperate, I'd never have hired you. As it was, I did but something in the way you acted made me begin to get the picture. This morning when you walked in dressed to the teeth, I decided to have it out with Val."

He paused, studying her closely, letting the silence grow until she had to break it or burst.

"So?"

"So I decided on a little research. I coaxed Val back into a good humor, followed her around like a pet lapdog trying to recapture what I thought I had felt for her, but it was no good. Then I discovered that you were gone and decided to continue the experiment a little further. Any objections?"

"That depends," she temporized, her eyes fastened on his shirt front.

"On what?"

"On how seriously you intend to take that research."

"Playing it safe, is that it?"

She had to look at him then, had to have some inkling to his thoughts. Then suddenly, her doubts slid away like snow off a sun warmed roof. The deviltry was there in his dark eyes and the laughter, but the mockery was gone. She gave a soft little sigh and relaxed, shrugging a little as if it didn't matter, as if her pulse and her heart were behaving properly.

"Well, I suppose there has to be research at that," she admitted thoughtfully, happier than she had ever dreamed was possible. "Very well, professor. Go ahead. Research."

And he took her at her word.

THE END

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by Francis Flick

**in the October issue of REAL WESTERN ROMANCES**

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My Dearest,  
Enclosed please find my love,  
Packed in a starlight case—  
Ribbioned with bands of moonlight,  
Bordered with cloud-spun lace;  
Sealed with a dozen kisses,  
Sped by the beat of my heart—  
Into the blue—to my Sweetheart  
With the speed of a Cupid's dart!  
Please note my address in the corner,  
To keep it from going astray,  
And to gently suggest that I'm waiting  
Your reply, by return mail—TODAY!

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Don't miss the  
2nd issue of **SCIENCE FICTION STORIES**

Louanne's mind was convinced, but not her stubborn, rebellious heart!

# PICK UP AT SEVEN

By Pat Regan



*"Hey, those are just bare statistics!  
I want to hear about you!"*

would never have found the nerve to come here at all if it weren't for Pris.

The receptionist was in the middle of a phone conversation so Louanne had to wait. *Please don't give me time to think about this or I won't go through with it*, she silently pleaded.

"Mr. Marlow will see you right away, Miss Bailey." The voice propelled her through a wide door into a room filled with Florida sunshine in the center of which sat a very blond young man at a huge bleached oak desk.

Louanne had to wait a moment for him to notice that she'd arrived. While she did her attention was caught by the arresting set of wide shoulders, a twisted, humorous grin when his glance discovered her at last.

"Hello!" He was on his feet, striding tall and long-legged around the corner of the desk. His voice, so pleasantly, deeply masculine was doing what Louanne had only read could be done to a girl's composure.

"I understand you're interested in shop space in the new Hibiscus Hotel building?" He'd pulled up a chair for her and his sweeping glance made her glad she'd worn the smart little checked suit with the black accessories. Glad, with a breathlessness that almost frightened her.

She dropped her gaze until it fell on the key ring in the center of the desk. Slowly, but with painful certainty, the

**L**OUANNE BAILEY pushed open the door marked *GIB MARLOW, REAL ESTATE BROKER*, with a brava-do that deserted her the moment it slushed quietly closed behind her.

This was a daring thing she was about to do. She should have done it a month ago to make it really effective. Only she hadn't known then that Pris would arrive day after tomorrow. In fact, she

gladness ebbed away. For strung between what must be a car key and an apartment key was, of all things, a Phi Beta Kappa key!

He perched on one corner of the desk, scooping up the keys absently. "Miss Bailey, have you even the remotest idea of what that space rents for?" His lean, boyish face was puckered in amusement. He was all but laughing at her!

"Seven hundred and fifty dollars a month was the price quoted to me," Louanne stood up, fury zooming like a Roman candle through her. "Did you think I'd come here without knowing that?"

"Hey, I'm sorry!" He stood up, too, but he couldn't seem to stop laughing. "Guess I was just surprised that such a little girl—"

"—could be so astute a business woman," Louanne finished for him. "Sorry to disappoint you!"

At the look of sheer bewilderment on his face, she was instantly sorry. He couldn't know that any success she'd had as a gift shop proprietor *was in defense against people just like him*. From all appearances he was a nice guy, with no intention whatsoever of high-hatting her intellectually. Why did she have to let that silly honorary emblem put her on the defensive and spoil things?

"Who's disappointed?" Gib demanded. "In fact, I was thinking that since it's almost noon and there are so many details—well, would you have lunch with me?"

Louanne eyed him warily. She'd never had lunch with a Phi Beta Kappa. Wouldn't that be something to brag about when Pris arrived?

OVER PLATTERS of French fried shrimp served on a glass table in full view of the Gulf, Louanne relaxed in spite of herself. Maybe it was the pleasant drone of Gib's voice as he told her how he'd been brought up in Florida as a small boy when his father

inherited a large tract of real estate; how he'd got his degree in Architectural Engineering at Tampa U but found he liked selling the houses better than designing them.

"Maybe the day some girl inspires me to build a house for her, I'll start designing them for other people," Gib mused, grinning as he leaned towards her. "What kind of houses do you like, Louanne?"

The question startled and confused her until she realized that it was just a line with him. All this time, under the warm slant of his blue-eyed glance and his slow, easy smile, she'd let herself be hypnotized into forgetting to be defiant, forgetting, in the deliciousness of the moment, that they didn't speak the same language.

Now he was trying to pin her down, trying to get her to reveal how little she knew about the things that mattered to people like him with college degrees and Phi Beta Kappa keys.

"I—I don't like houses. I like motels," she said crisply. Then to change the subject, "How soon do you think it will be before I can move into the Hibiscus Hotel building?"

He laughed softly and captured two of her trembling fingers in his hard, brown clasp. "Oh, no you don't! I told all. Now let's hear about you!"

The pulse at the base of her throat began trip-hammer pounding and she withdrew her fingers hurriedly. Even her voice shook a little as she skimmed quickly, resolutely over the facts. She'd come here a year ago with an ailing aunt and opened a gift shop. After her aunt's death three weeks ago she'd decided to expand her holdings. That was all he needed to know.

"Hey, those are just the bare statistics!" He pounded with mock solemnity on the table. "I want to hear about *you!*"

Louanne wished on a sudden uprush of panic that she hadn't come. Gib Marlow of the Phi Beta Kappa key would be amused no end if she were

to start with the years she'd spent in that oddly inhabited household in Cedar Lodge after the death of her parents when she was ten.

**T**HERE WAS Uncle Bruce, a full professor at the University, who tried desperately in his absorbed fashion, to be at least a part-time father to his sister's orphaned child; Aunt Celia, his wife, a renowned concert pianist, who was home only between tours; then Pris, the bi-product of all this brilliance, whose piquant dark good looks would have been quite enough without the straight A average she carried all through high school and on into college.

These were the figures in the center of the stage upon whom the spotlight played so dazzlingly.

While in the wings with Louanne was tiny but scrappy Aunt Milly, her mother's maiden sister, who kept house for this family of intellectuals. It was Aunt Milly who comforted Louanne when she brought home barely passing marks in high school; when low C's were the best she could manage the one year she stubbornly insisted on attending the university.

"But, Louanne, *everyone* doesn't have to get a college degree," she'd croon soothingly. "You've won so many prizes with your lovely silver and shell jewelry and you cook so expertly. *Someone* has to do those things."

But it was no comfort at all. The things you did with your hands just didn't impress boys who were striving for B.A.'s and Ph.D.'s after their names. Besides, they only dated sorority girls. Which made Pris the recipient of all the phone calls and invitations.

When Aunt Milly developed a heart condition, warm air and sun was the doctor's prescription. It was heaven-sent escape for Louanne, escape from the prospect of becoming a household drudge and a social outcast, to accept the invitation to accompany her.

Once there, it was at Aunt Milly's insistence and with her capital that Louanne was set up in a gift shop where she also taught tourists, with more time on their hands than they bargained for, to make their own shell jewelry.

Three weeks ago Aunt Milly took a turn for the worse. With no more warning than that she was gone. And on top of Louanne's grief and loneliness came Pris' wire that she was coming down to relax after a hard school year.

Suddenly it was as though Aunt Milly still sat in the little old walnut rocking chair in the sun, her soft voice urging Louanne on to battle:

"Take the insurance money, Louanne, all fifteen hundred dollars of it and really have a swank set-up for your shop when Pris arrives. Show her that someone else can accomplish something *without* a college degree."

So here she was! The fifteen hundred dollars would only pay two month's rent. It was a terrific risk if her business didn't increase considerably. But Gib Marlow didn't need to know that. She wouldn't get moved before Pris arrived but it would give her something to brag about.

"I missed you." Gib's voice touched her gently, like soft caressing fingers, drawing her abruptly back to the moment. "You were gone a long time."

Her glance, caught by the probing intensity in his, was held almost as though by physical force. There was a sudden ringing in her ears and her chest felt as though someone had tightened a steel band around it.

"I have to let my girl go at three." She pushed back her chair. "Thanks for a nice lunch."

As Gib's pale blue convertible purred over the causeways between the Keys, Louanne was conscious of a new exhilaration in the air, a strange, happy bubbling in her veins. She was suddenly, torturously aware of this man, an awareness that was equal parts

misery and delight. But she wouldn't let any of it show. She wouldn't!

WHEN GIB let her out at the shop he promised, in the cool, clipped voice of the business man, to negotiate for the hotel space she wanted. Then abruptly his voice dropped and he said roughly, "You're having dinner with me tonight, Louanne. *I'll pick you up at seven.*"

She knew she should make some sound of protest as she slipped out of the car. But her throat muscles seemed paralyzed. She stood stupidly, watching Gib's car zoom around the corner and knew she hadn't wanted to protest.

Her legs were so weak they hardly held her up the rest of the afternoon as she bent over women tourists at the long tables, sold gifts at the counter between times. Only none of it was as real as the butterfly wings beating against her ribs and the merry-go-around sensation in her head.

At six o'clock, just as she locked her door, Terry Lansbury appeared at the curb in the shiny maroon and grey station wagon he drove as representative for a sports equipment company.

"Thought we might run out to Lido Beach and have a swim before dark." Terry's grin flashed white against the tanned hue of his skin. He spent his weekends acting as golf pro at one of the fashionable clubs.

Louanne closed the car door he'd opened for her. "I have a dinner date, Terry. I'm to be picked up at seven. Sorry." She'd always had fun with Terry. And right this minute, if she'd used the good sense she was born with, she'd cancel her date with Gib Marlow and go off with Terry. He was her kind. Simple, uncomplicated, not given to deep conversations about intangibles.

"Two-timing me, eh?" Terry grinned again, put the car into gear. "You'll be sorry!" he called and was gone.

Terry's light words rang in her ears

like warnings of storms to come as she drove Aunt Milly's ancient coupe back to her one-room-and-kitchenette motel apartment. Her fingers trembled as she dressed and she smeared her lipstick three times.

But the moment she felt the slant of Gib's blue glance on her she felt somehow beautiful in the soft green linen sheath with the rhinestones winking about the low neckline. Beautiful with the deep, happy undertone of contentment.

They had a leisurely dinner in town at a famous Spanish restaurant and afterwards drove slowly out to the Casino at Lido Beach to dance. A moon-washed Gulf rolled majestically in over sugar-white sand and the beating of Louanne's heart echoed every pounding wave.

Dancing, Louanne had difficulty breathing, with Gib's hard arms holding her close against him, his chin warm and reassuring against her temple. She'd been held like that before, she kept telling herself angrily. This is just another date. But against every argument the madness persisted. And below the madness the dull, barely distinguishable dread of what must eventually be faced up to. *This couldn't be!*

IT WAS LATE when Gib finally stopped his car in front of her motel. "This has been fun, Louanne."

"Lots of fun!" Louanne echoed hollowly, getting quickly out of the car.

He was close behind her when she reached the door. "This wasn't just a business date for you, was it, Louanne?" he asked gruffly.

She whirled in surprised protest. "Oh, no!"

They moved together, because nothing could have kept them apart. Gib's mouth over hers was sweet and warm with the same nameless urgency that was in Louanne. Breathless, laughing, she stepped away from him.

"I'll call you tomorrow." He whis-

pered through the slowly diminishing crack in the door. "Sweet dreams!"

All the next day Louanne kept insisting to her heart that nothing had happened. It had been just an ordinary date. Then the breathlessness would wash over her at the memory of Gib's kiss and her response to it and everything would get out of focus. She was just evading the issue. She wasn't facing facts. She was in love with Gib Marlow.

The wire came at noon.

LEFT DAY EARLIER THAN EXPECTED. WILL ARRIVE TOMORROW AT FOUR. LOVE. PRIS

That meant today!

The phone rang before she could bury the wire at the bottom of the waste basket. At the sound of Gib's voice, her wildly palpitating heart drowned out coherent thought.

"Tonight?" Gib asked softly.

Everything was a sweet, delicious blur again with him even as close as the other end of the wire. "I—can't, Gib. I'm expecting my cousin from Michigan."

"You mean I'm not going to see you all the while she's here?"

The words rushed past her lips before she could think to stop them. "Have dinner with us at my apartment tonight."

He whooped happily. "You've just bought yourself a dinner guest. I'll bring champagne."

What she had done didn't hit her until she'd hung up. Gib and Pris! If she'd ever hoped to hold him, Pris was the last girl she should let meet him. But it was too late now. But then hadn't it been too late from the beginning?

At four o'clock the shop door opened and banged shut, bringing every head up around the work table. Even Louanne, who knew Pris' every feature, stared, too.

Clad in an off-white linen suit with

India print sandals and bag, her ebony hair cut to a curling cap about her vivid intelligent face, stood Pris.

Louanne kissed her and wished fervently that she could be glad she'd come. But she couldn't. And all at once she slipped from her role of capable shop proprietor back to being all thumbs again and lost for the right word.

As they drove to the apartment Pris asked uncertainly, "You are glad to see me, aren't you, Louanne?"

"Of course!" Louanne said quickly to cover her lack of welcome and small gnawing guilt. "We even have a dinner guest."

WHILE PRIS showered and made herself even more beautiful, Louanne started dinner, hoping against wild hope that Gib would phone that he couldn't make it.

But just as Pris emerged from the dressing room in a fetching sleeveless creation, the door bell rang.

"Hi!" Gib grinned down at Louanne. "I came early so I'd get a preview of you in a ruffled apron."

As he stepped towards her, delight zig-zagged through Louanne. But Gib's lips never reached hers because at a slight sound behind them he froze. Pris!

Gib's arms dropped from around Louanne and she led him dismally into the living room and introduced him to Pris. Neither of them knew anything about the other but they fell into an animated conversation almost immediately.

Suddenly Louanne felt as she had in Cedar Ledge when the house was filled with Pris' friends. She got up quickly and hurried into the kitchen. The kitchen had always been her haven of escape then, too.

After a few moments Gib came out to make the champagne cocktails at the sink beside her.

"I missed you today," he said simply.

Louanne flushed but didn't raise her glance. He charmed them at all levels, she was thinking forlornly. But when he carried the drinks back into the living room she had no choice except to follow.

After their second cocktail, Pris said brightly, "I think your little shop is cute, Louanne. Aunt Milly always insisted you were capable of more than you let on."

Louanne stiffened. But she'd expected Pris to be patronizing, condescending, hadn't she? This was the moment she'd been waiting for. "Oh, but you haven't seen anything yet, darling. Next week I move into the Hibiscus Hotel building. That's Class with a capital C."

Pris' amused laughter filled the room. "Same old Louanne. Remember when we were little and I'd always get the best marks in school? You'd come back with, 'I don't care! Someday I'll be famous! I'll shoot a lion or swim the ocean or—something! But I'll be famous.'"

Gib was laughing now, too. Louanne's cheeks burned with shame and embarrassment because what Pris said was true.

Louanne stood up. "It's just unfortunate that we can't all be as brilliant as you, Pris." The words dropped like small bombs in the quiet room, dissolving the laughter.

Abruptly Gib was on his feet, too. "I see I shouldn't have brought champagne. After dinner, how about the three of us going someplace where we can dance it off?"

After dinner Gib suggested that Louanne let him and Pris do the dishes. "Anyone who can concoct such food should never have to touch a dirty dish." He laughed down at her.

Louanne fled to the dressing room. Gib patronizing her, too! The sound of their voices, blended in absorbed conversation, convinced her mind that they were right for one another. But not her stubborn, rebellious heart!

**G**IB WRANGLLED a floor-side table at the Flamingo Club. He ordered Daiquiris all around while the music invited two of the three of them to dance. But which two? Gib would have a hard time making a decision about that.

"You and Pris dance, Gib," Louanne could stand the suspense no longer. "I'm tired."

Louanne had never felt so alone in her life as she did the moment Gib took Pris into his arms to dance. She squirmed uncomfortably about in her chair to avoid having to watch them together. That was when she spied Terry Lansbury at the bar. Out of sheer desperation she gave him a gay little salute, hoping he'd come rescue her.

Terry arrived at the table at the same moment that Pris and Gib returned. Louanne made the introductions. Gib invited Terry to sit down. But Terry didn't hear him because he was looking at Pris.

Louanne watched Pris' slow, sweet smile practically dissolve poor Terry. Suddenly Louanne wanted to scratch Pris' eyes out. Then she reminded herself that it wasn't Terry she wanted to save for herself from Pris. It was Gib. Only she couldn't fight for Gib because she knew she couldn't have him anyway.

But she could fight for Terry because she felt sorry for him. He didn't stand any better chance with Pris than she, Louanne, did with Gib.

But before she could think what to do about it, Terry had said to Pris, "Dance?" and they had gone back onto the floor together.

"Well!" Gib's short laugh didn't quite cover his annoyance. "He didn't lose any time, did he?"

Louanne pushed back the almost uncontrollable impulse to touch Gib's hand and say softly, "Let's you and I go somewhere we can recapture what we had last night."

But Gib's half amused, half annoyed

glance was following Pris and Terry around the floor. Last night was gone forever.

"I like your cousin, Louanne," Gib said thoughtfully. Then, so she wouldn't think he'd forgotten her completely, he added hastily, "Shall we dance?"

In his arms she was stiff and miserable with the memory of how they had blended together last night. Then she had felt alive, beautiful. Tonight she was clumsy, dead inside.

"Maybe you were too tired to come tonight," Gib said with quick concern as they walked back to the table.

"I feel wonderful!" Louanne lied gallantly.

Just before they were ready to leave, Gib said unexpectedly, "We've got to show Pris the sights while she's here, Louanne. How about organizing a deep-sea fishing trip for tomorrow?"

Louanne wanted to cry out her protest. She loved boats, loved to fish. But Gib's suggesting it in front of Terry indicated that he meant to even the party up. Someone was extra. But who?

"That's a swell idea!" Terry exclaimed, his smile for Pris. "The boat leaves Ed's dock at eight sharp."

As they were leaving Louanne hung back a little, hoping Terry would offer to drive her home. But he didn't. So that by the time she got to Gib's car, Pris was already seated next to him. She could only crawl in with them and pretend not to notice how close that brought Pris to Gib.

When they were getting ready for bed, Pris said through her mask of night cream, "I'm sorry, Louanne, if I upset you at dinner time. I certainly didn't mean—"

"I wasn't upset," Louanne cut in. "It was the champagne. One night Terry and I practically took the town apart after we split a bottle."

"You and Terry—" Pris began uncertainly. Then to hide her relief she said just a shade too brightly, "Where-

ever did you find such a fascinating man as that Gib Marlow?"

Louanne practically choked on the words that were to give Pris the right of way with Gib. "Nice, isn't he?"

**T**HE NEXT morning Louanne had to make so many last minute arrangements to leave her girl in the shop all day that she had to take a cab to the dock. When she finally clambered aboard the big fishing boat in plaid shirt and levis rolled to her knees, Pris was already flanked at the rail by Gib and Terry. Only Pris' outfit was a gold linen slack suit with a bright tie at her throat.

Deliberately, almost defiantly, Louanne wedged herself in between Pris and Terry. Certainly she was entitled to one man's attention even if it weren't the right man.

But the big boat was hardly more than out into the open Gulf, happy, expectant couples waiting their turns at having their hooks baited, when it hit her. Sea-sickness! She reeled and staggered toward the cabin, still unbelieving. She'd never, all the many times she'd fished, been sick on a boat.

"Louanne, what's the matter?" Gib followed her, stood uncertainly in the cabin door as she crawled up onto a bunk.

"It's really quite plain. I'm sea-sick," Louanne moaned.

Gib touched her shoulder consolingly. "I'll get you something from the captain."

When he returned Louanne sat up obediently and drank it. "Please don't think you have to look after me. Just see that Pris has a good time."

"Terry seems to have taken over in that department," Gib said impatiently. "Sure you don't feel well enough to just sit on the deck?"

"No!" Louanne buried her head in the pillow. "Just go away and leave me alone!"

He stood looking down at her for a minute as though he meant to say

something more. Then he turned abruptly and left.

Through the haze of her misery Louanne spent the rest of the trip listening to Pris' gay squeals outside when she pulled in a big one; heard Gib's deep, amused voice teasing her. She'd certainly succeeded in driving him away with her nastiness. She could only burrow her head deeper into the pillow and wish she'd never been born.

When the boat docked at six o'clock, Gib came to help Louanne ashore. But as he stepped from the cat-walk his ankle turned.

Terry helped him to the car but Gib insisted on driving.

"Another casualty!" Terry grinned down at Pris. "Since you and I seem to be the only survivors, how about my stopping by later to take you dancing?"

"Oh, fun!" Pris agreed, breathless, starry-eyed.

**WHEN GIB** stopped the car in front of Louanne's motel apartment, Pris hurried inside.

"Could I talk to you a minute, Louanne?" Gib asked.

Louanne sat very still, a strange foreboding clutching at her heart. "Of course."

"I'm sorry but I'm not going to be able to get that space you want in the Hibiscus Hotel building," he plunged.

Louanne drew in one deep breath. "Why?"

"Your volume of business doesn't warrant it. You'd never be able to pay the rent, Louanne."

Louanne began to tremble. "And how did you happen to come to such a momentous conclusion unless—"

Gib turned so that the full impact of his concerned glance was focused upon her. "Look, Louanne, I half suspected it when you came to me that first day. So I had some investigating done. I don't want you to lose your shirt—"

Louanne was out of the car like a

small whirlwind. "How touching! I suppose the dinners and dancing—and—" she broke off just short of adding "and the kisses". "I suppose all that came under the heading of investigating!"

She turned blindly and ran toward the door. She could stand his falling for Pris. She'd half expected it. But to have him have used his charms on her before Pris arrived on the scene just to find out how solvent she was—

He caught up with her at the door, swung her roughly around to face him. "What's the matter with you, Louanne? Surely you've got sense enough—"

He stopped at the look on her face, the sudden stillness of her.

"Sense enough to know you only have a tourist business, is what I mean. It wouldn't ever warrant such overhead as the Hibiscus Hotel—"

"I know what you mean," Louanne said quietly. "I haven't any sense period. I know that. But you're the first one who ever came right out and said it. Everyone else patronizes me." The anger and hurt had been mounting slowly inside her until she could say with deadly mocking sweetness, "Well, Mr. Marlow, here's news for you. Phi Beta Kappas bore me, too!"

And she went inside and slammed the door.

She heard Pris singing above the roar of the shower. Slowly she sank into a chair and covered her flaming face with trembling fingers. Why had she said that to Gib? Maybe he could never love her but she hadn't wanted to make him hate her.

"Feeling better?" Pris stood above her, all dewey and breathless with the prospect of a gay evening ahead.

Suddenly Louanne couldn't stand Pris' doing to Terry what Gib had done to her. "Why do you bait Terry just to amuse yourself?" she asked scornfully.

"Bait—Terry?" Pris eased down into a chair.

"You could have Gib, you know," Louanne rushed on. "Why do you pick on a poor vulnerable guy like Terry who won't have any more sense than to fall in love with you?"

Pris stood up. "You've tried to throw Gib at me from the moment I arrived," she began slowly. "Do you dislike him so much or are you in—that's it, you're in love with him. You think that just because he's—why your sea-sickness was sheer panic!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Louanne turned away. She'd never studied psychology but in a vague sort of way she did know what Pris was talking about.



**T**HERE WAS no stopping Pris now. "Instead of being sweet to him, you hide from him, try to throw him at me. You couldn't fight for him so you run from him."

Louanne lifted her chin defiantly. "I suppose a girl like you—with degrees and everything—you'd marry a guy like Terry who hadn't anything but his looks and—"

Pris' cheeks turned crimson. "Terry has—everything. Yes, I'd marry him tonight if he'd ask me. But I'm not even sure he's in love with me—yet."

"But he's only a salesman. What would you have in common? How could you help feeling superior?" Louanne probed.

Pris smiled a soft, secret smile. "Love has little or nothing to do with education. It depends on the people. As long as you agree on things in general, think alike," she stopped to sigh happily. "Today on the boat, I could tell that Terry and I thought alike by

everything he said. He just fits all the gaps in my life. It's as simple as that!"

For the first time in her life Louanne felt on a level with Pris. They were both women, both in love. And what Pris said made sense. Such very good sense that it wasn't any wonder she got such good marks in college.

"I've been an awful fool, Pris." Louanne touched her cousin's hand.

"Then do something about it!" Pris gave her a playful push and disappeared in the dressing room.

When Pris and Terry had left, Louanne put on a soft yellow silk print with a stand-out skirt over a crinoline underskirt and got into Aunt Milly's ancient coupe. No longer blinded by a Phi Beta Kappa key and her silly pride, she could remember that Gib had been at least interested in her in the beginning. That was enough for any girl to start on.

But when she got to Gib's apartment motel, the lights were all out in his section. So she sat down on a pink wrought iron bench in the yard to wait for him. She had to see him tonight. Tomorrow she would have lost all the nerve it took to come here in the first place.

**B**UT BY ELEVEN o'clock the other people in the motel were giving her strange glances as they came home. Nice girls don't hang around young men's apartments at this hour.

She was just grinding the old car's starter when a deep voice said at her elbow, "Even these old jobbers won't start unless you turn the ignition key on."

"Gib!" She said his name on a soft, eager rush.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked flatly.

Her throat felt stuffed with cotton. "Gib—I came to apologize—about what I said about you're being—a Phi Beta Kappa!" It was an inane thing to say but she couldn't think of anything else.

"You're convinced that that isn't the worst thing a man could be?" he asked coldly.

Louanne could see how hopeless it was. He not only thought of her as simple and uncomplicated but dumb, too! This time she turned the ignition key.

Slowly the door opened beside her and Gib pulled her out onto the walk so that she was facing him. "Wherever did you get that horrible hunk of pride?" he asked softly at last. "I've been wracking my brain to think what made you act so strangely after your cousin arrived. Phi Beta Kappa! You were scared silly of it!"

Louanne nodded miserably. But before she could say anything in her own

defense, he was kissing her. Firmly and with purpose.

"I'm in love with you. You know that, don't you?" he whispered against her cheek.

Louanne nodded again. It was going to be wonderful being married to a man who could figure things out like that.

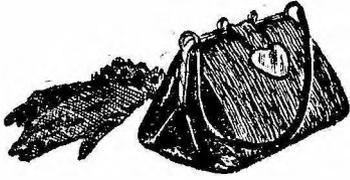
"You're way ahead of me," he grinned. "But what you don't know is that I want to marry you—right away."

Louanne only smiled this time, a soft, secret smile. And then he kissed her again. Maybe, her heart sang happily, a girl didn't have to be so smart, after all!

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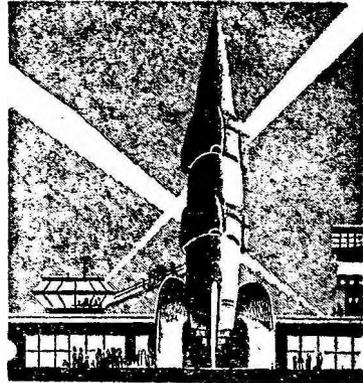
by Anobel Armour

Chestnut blossoms in pink lanes  
And the heart of me still going  
Past these narrow window panes  
To where winds forever blowing  
Carry words which you once said,  
Words of love you spoke to me.  
I should stay here, but instead  
I go where my heart must bel



## The Strangest Voyage Ever Taken!

*What was the secret of the  
starship which would take  
these people to a new world,  
but a world from which they  
could never return? Why  
were they all listed as*



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leads off the New, Pocket-Sized, October*

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Sale at  
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## FUTURE

Science Fiction



*"This must be awful for you — it's my fault for having consented to marry you."*

To be fair, it was Alan who had been second choice. But nobody seemed to remember that!

# WEDDING RING

by Doris Knight

Thrilling Novelette



THE OFFICE party to launch the new perfume, **CONSTANCY**, was going full blast. Everybody was telling everybody else what a wonderful and successful party it was. *Everybody, that is,*

*..but Cynthia and Jeff.*

Cinnie stole a side glance at Jerry and bit her lips. He was having a rough time. A very, very rough time. She could see that. It was terribly hard on

Jeff, because everybody, from the President of the Cosmetics Company, Mr. K. Allbright, himself, to the office boy, Paddy, had been crazy about Alan Campbell.

Alan, swift as quicksilver and gay and charming, and Assistant Advertising Manager at Allbright's, had been one of the passengers on the ill-fated *Comet* which had crashed in Arabia with no survivors left.

Janet Brown, seeing Cinnie was alone, sauntered over to her. "You're a brave woman, Cinnie," she said, "to face this crowd of Alan-worshippers,

when you're going to marry another man, just four months after Alan was killed."

Cynthia looked at Janet, a compact, straight-backed woman with no nonsense about her. Even in her best cocktail dress she looked like Mr. K. Allbright's confidential secretary—which she was.

"You never did like Alan, did you?" Cinnie asked quietly, remembering when Janet, of all the office members, had refused to add her congratulations and best wishes when Cynthia became engaged to Alan.

Janet shook her head so violently that her straight brown hair danced. "I don't trust any glamor-boy who trades on his charm," she said tersely. "But the man's dead, and it's not right to talk against him when he's not around to defend himself. What I want to know is, are you going to give Jeff Dale a decent break? Or will you go around the rest of your days, mooning about that heel who died, and starving the finest man who ever walked this earth, for wifely affection!"

Cynthia's cheeks grew crimson. Janet had a reputation for blunt speaking, but she thought she'd gone too far this time.

Coldly she said, "I've promised to be Jeff's wife. I'm marrying him in exactly three days. We understand each other perfectly!"

With relief, she saw that Jeff was beckoning and she murmured an excuse and fled.

As she walked across the room, she thought, "Jeff isn't as handsome as Alan was. He's just an ordinary, tall, good-tempered man with blond hair and very nice blue eyes, who happens to love me very much. I'm the affectionate type. At least, that's what Alan always said. I need love. I'll make Jeff the best wife in the world, to make up for the fact that I don't love him as I should."

Jeff grinned one-sidedly at her as she joined him.

In an undertone he muttered, "The great Allbright himself is giving us a solid-silver frying-pan or some such handy little gadget to have around the house, so we can't duck out on this cocktail brawl. But if one more person tells me what a lucky boy I am, to be stepping into Alan Campbell's job as well as marrying his gal, I'm going to hit him or her as the case may be. I've quietly had enough!"

She grinned at him. "Sissy!" she jibed in an undertone.

**W**ITHOUT them being aware, Janet had wandered over. She murmured, "One good thing about you two. You don't avoid the mention of Alan's name as if it might strike you dumb if you spoke it. Some people are like that about a first husband or a fiance who has died. It makes things awkward."

Jeff grinned wryly at her. "Shucks! Alan's the most alive subject in this room! Haven't you noticed? He named the new perfume and gathered in the thousand dollar bonus. He doted on cocktail binges like this one. So it seems that Alan most decidedly is here!"

The older woman drawled, "You're so right, Jeff. Everybody from Allbright's wife to the newest file clerk adored that man. God's gift to women."

Before Cynthia's brown eyes could dart sparks of fury, she drifted off, leaving the engaged couple alone together again.

He put his hand comfortingly over hers. "Don't mind Janet's sharp tongue, darling. She's on my side all the way and she seems to think you don't appreciate me. She's my godmother, you know, and all the maternal in her comes out when I'm around."

Mr. Allbright came bustling over. "If you two will come with me now," he said fussily. "I think the best place for you to stand will be by the band."

Jeff said under his breath, "Hold

my hand, darling! Here goes for the official announcement that I've got Alan's job! After having done his work for the last two years!"

She knew it was worse for Jeff than it was for her. It was a case of raised eyebrows because she was going to marry so soon after having lost her fiance, Alan, in the plane crash. But they didn't seem to resent it as bitterly as the fact that Jeff was getting Alan's job.

Mr. K. Allbright made the announcement about the job. Then he spoke of the wedding and on behalf of the whole office force, he presented Jeff and Cinnie with a pair of elephant book-ends. They were brass and they both had trunks held high, which was lucky. Or so Mr. Allbright explained.

CYNTHIA fought against faintness.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in a nearby mirror and was astounded to see that her face looked quite composed. Inside she was all churned up and it seemed incredible that her agitation didn't show. Certainly she looked all right. The cocktail dress which she had picked up at a sale fitted her slim figure well.

Alan would have loved the black-and-gold dress. He'd had such marvelous taste in clothes.

Alan. Always Alan.

Jeff was right about one thing. Alan *was* alive at that office party. And he stood between Cynthia and Jeff, separating them.

She let her thoughts slide back four months to the day when Alan had gone zooming off to the Far East to advertise the new perfume *CONSTANCY*, which he had named.

Cinnie had bought him a brass elephant exactly the same, only smaller of course, as the twin elephant book-ends! It was a good luck charm. Or so the proprietor of the curio store had told her.

Even now, she could remember the

way Alan's gray eyes twinkled at her as he held the brass elephant in one hand.

"What sort of a wife are you going to be?" he chuckled. "This thing weighs a ton! And you expect me to take it along on a plane trip! Darling, definitely you are the most impractical, absurd, utterly adorable nitwit fiancée, a man ever had, and I'm crazy about you. I'll love you till the day I die!"

Her mind returned with a sickening lurch, to the present.

The luck charm hadn't worked. Alan was dead. And in three days, she was marrying Jeff, who had been her best friend and constant escort before Alan Campbell had arrived at Allbright's Cosmetics to sweep her heart into his keeping.

It occurred to her now, as she listened to the end of Jeff's quietly clever thank-you speech, that, after all, Jeff had been first in everything. First with Cynthia, for they were on the verge of getting engaged when Alan took over. And Jeff had been promised the job of becoming the Assistant Advertising Manager. But Alan came in from a rival company and talked Mr. Allbright into giving him the job instead.

So, really, to be fair, it was Alan who had been second choice. But nobody at Allbright's seemed to remember that.

It was her turn to say something to Mr. Allbright. Keeping her eyes carefully averted from the twin elephants, she managed to say, "Thanks so much for the present. We do appreciate the fact that you remembered us, in the middle of launching this marvelous new perfume. It's awfully sweet of everybody! Thanks again."

Mercifully, after they'd done some hand-shaking and accepted dubious congratulations from people, they were free to make their get-away from the party.

JEFF SAID, as they taxied to her apartment on Sixty-Eighth Street, "What sent you into such a dither, when you glimpsed those elephants, darling?"

She thought of fibbing to him. But somehow she couldn't do that. They'd always been honest with each other. She sighed and told him about the good luck elephant she'd given Alan.

He nodded gravely. "I figured it was something like that. I'll change the things for something else. Something which won't be a constant reminder of Alan. I can find out through Janet where Mr. Allbright got the brass elephants."

"No," she told him, taking a deep breath. "I won't be silly. Mrs. Allbright might take a notion to drop over and see us. It wouldn't do you any good at the office if the wedding present wasn't in evidence."

He shrugged. "You're the doctor, Cinnie. Personally I'm all for heaving them into the nearest garbage can."

At the entrance to the apartment house, he caught her to him and held her close for a long moment. He said huskily, "I won't come in tonight, honey, if you don't mind. I'm very fond of your family, but they do disapprove of me and I can't take any more disapproval in my stride tonight!"

He added, just before he kissed her, "I love you very much. I love you enough for two. For both of us."

He kissed her then and went off hastily. She wondered if he was whistling in the dark to keep up his courage. Was he beginning to be afraid, as she had been all along, that their marriage would not work out right?

But, as he had pointed out, she couldn't go through the rest of her life in love with a memory. The longer she put off marriage, the harder it would be to take the plunge.

Sighing, and with her arms weighted down with the brass elephants, she went into the house.

Her mother wanted to know all

about the party. So did her younger sister, Lea.

Lea burst out, "I don't see how you can be so utterly heartless, Cinnie. Alan was so absolutely terrific!" She choked and disappeared into her room.

Her mother looked at Cinnie in a worried sort of way. "I do hope you realize the seriousness of the step you're taking, darling," she murmured. "It's only been four months since Alan crashed. And you and Alan were so much in love and he was so simply charming. I don't see *why* you had to be in such a hurry to marry somebody else? Why not wait a year?"

Her father put down his newspaper. He was a quiet man but when he was roused he had no trouble finding words. He found them now.

"Stop it!" he thundered. "The girl is right. Jeff is worth ten of Alan, but Alan had the surface-glitter which blinded everybody to the fact that he was pretty much of a phony!"

Cynthia's mother gasped, "John, what a simply awful thing to say!"

The girl slipped away, leaving them bickering, feeling shocked because her father had entertained such wrong ideas about Alan. She'd always been aware that he hadn't been crazy about Alan, but she hadn't dreamed his dislike had gone that deep.

CLOSING and locking her bedroom door behind her, she thrust the brass elephants into the clothes closet where she couldn't see them and sat down and thought about Alan.

They'd had such grand times together! Alan had been so exciting and he could make love so wonderfully that a girl was breathless and shaken...

Alan was so vividly, excitingly *alive*.

But he'd crashed with the rest of the *Comet* passengers on the unlucky plane which had smashed and fallen on desert sands, in far-off Arabia.

Jeff had broken the news to her.

She'd been sitting at her desk, typing a letter with half her mind and

thinking about Alan with the other half. The buzzer sounded and she took up notebook and pencil and hurried into Jeff's office.

Instead of Jeff's usual, "Take this letter, Cinnie," he grasped her hand in his and she felt how cold his fingers were against her own. Those fingers which usually were so warm.

Gently he said, "Bad news, Cinnie. There's been an accident. The *Comet* crashed. Everybody was lost. The passenger list was telephoned to the newspapers and they contacted Allbright a few minutes ago. Because Alan's name was on that list, darling."

Even remembering that awful moment after four months, she felt as if her heart would stop beating. She decided she must not think about Alan. It wasn't fair to Jeff. But all the same, when she fell asleep, it was of Alan she dreamed!

## Chapter 2



THE THREE intervening days drifted by somehow and she woke to a feeling of absolute panic on her wedding day.

For a moment she just lay in bed, watching the sun streaming in at the opened window and she thought, "I can't marry Jeff! This is madness. If I can't have Alan, then I don't want anybody. I'll tell Jeff I've changed my mind."

She saw her beautiful gray suit, suspended from the padded, perfumed hanger. And the silly hat with the froth of veiling. Her wedding outfit.

Her mood changed, remembered how sweet he'd been about the quiet wedding she wanted. He'd wished her to be a white satin bride. But when he found out how she felt about it, he was quick to give in and say he wanted her,

whether she married him wearing a sack or a wedding gown!

She was ready to scream if any of her family uttered the words, "Happy is the bride the sun shines on!" But nobody did.

Lovely corsages arrived, well before noon. Orchids for the bride. Gardenias for her mother and sister.

The wedding ceremony itself was mercifully brief, and, so far as Cynthia was concerned, totally unreal.

Jeff, tall grave sweet Jeff, was the only real person there so far as she was concerned and she clung to him.

She thought, looking down at the bright shining wedding ring on her finger, "Dear Jeff. He was so afraid I'd back out at the last minute. And I almost did."

She wished the feeling of unreality would go away.

She wished she'd stop thinking about Alan. She was a married woman. She was married to Jeff. She was his wife.

If she tried too hard to be gay as she drank the champagne and pretended to eat the tiny sandwiches, perhaps that was only to be expected.

The others tried, too. Janet Brown was very witty. Jeff's Uncle Bert had a fund of good stories which he told well.

Cynthia thought as she cut the wedding cake. "If only this wedding reception was over! Why didn't we elope?"

Jeff's hand slid over her own. He smiled into her troubled eyes. "I'll cut the rest of the cake, dear," he murmured.

It was at that precise second she heard the tinkle of the doorbell sounding above the hum of voices. Mentally she counted noses and wondered who had arrived unexpectedly, for everyone they had invited was present.

Her mother went to answer the door and they heard her scream in a shrill, startled sort of way.

Cynthia whirled round and so did everybody else.

Someone was coming in through the opened door. A man, bronzed and handsome but leaning heavily on a stick.

**S**OMETHING happened to Cynthia's heart in that moment.

"Alan!" she cried. She thought she was shouting the name but the word came out in a choked, husky whisper.

He faced her.

She thought, "It's a mirage. I'm dreaming. This can't be true. It isn't Alan who is standing there. Alan is dead!"

The next minute she was held close in very warm arms. Alan's vibrant tones were saying, "Cinnie darling. Oh, Cinnie, my dearest."

Dimly she was aware of people staring. Of Janet saying, "Oh, no! This is too much!" Of Jeff's white face.

She gasped, "Oh, Alan, Alan, they told me you were dead!"

Everything happened at once then. Alan kissed her. People asked questions. Alan clinging hard to her hand, told them how he'd met with an accident on the way to that desert airport. He'd been run into by an Arab and left for dead. So he'd missed the ill-fated plane.

It was Jeff's dead-level voice which asked the question, "Where have you been for the last four months then, Alan? Why didn't you let us know earlier that you were alive?"

Alan said lightly, "A slight case of amnesia, old boy! I was picked up by some natives. They nursed me back to health but it was only a few days ago that I recovered my memory."

"Sounds like a phony Grade-B movie to me," sniffed Janet.

Nobody paid any attention. Cynthia's mother was weeping and saying, "I told you not to marry somebody else, Cinnie!"

Lea was crying, "Oh, isn't it romantic? Just like a TV play!"

The rest of the guests were beginning to realize what had happened. The

bride's former fiancée was not dead! What would happen now? Whispers rustled sibilantly all over the room.

Cynthia was so ecstatic in her happiness at seeing the man she loved, that there was room for nothing else in her mind and heart. She clung to him, sobbing and kissing him.

Till suddenly the sun glinted on her wedding ring. She looked down, seeing the ring through a blur of tears.

"Alan!" she gasped. "I've just married Jeff! Oh, this is awful. Darling, do try to understand. I was so miserable without you. I..."

He said quietly, "Jeff won't try to hold you against your will, darling. The wedding can be annulled easily enough. Stop looking so stricken!"

A cold voice said, "No, Alan. That's exactly where you are wrong! I'm not letting Cynthia go! She's my wife. She married *me*! I'm sorry that you..."

She gasped, interrupting, "Jeff, you don't mean that! Do you think for one minute that I'd stay with *you*, when *Alan* is back?"

Sorry the moment the ugly words were uttered, she turned from Alan to face Jeff. His eyes were bleak and angry. His face looked older suddenly and very weary.

He told her quietly, "Do you think this is exactly the place and the time to discuss these things, Cynthia? After all, this is our *wedding reception*. Remember?"

**W**ITH apparent irrelevance he added, "You're wearing *CONSTANCY* perfume, aren't you? The new scent that Alan named?"

She became aware that he wasn't looking at her but at Alan, and she realized, too, that there was an odd tension in the air. Abruptly, Jeff seemed in control of the situation, for that was the impression she received. That all at once, Alan was wary and worried. And Jeff was in a towering rage.

The wedding cake, half-cut, with the

bride and groom figures on top looking silly, seemed to mock her. So did the wedding decorations and the gold ring on her finger. She wished frantically that she hadn't let Jeff talk her into marrying him. Everybody but her father had been sure it was the wrong thing to do, and how right they had been!

She drew a long breath.

"You're right, Jeff. We three can talk things over after the wedding reception is over. Right now, this can turn into a welcome-home party for Alan."

Alan said in an undertone, "Cinnie, don't needle Jeff any more. The guy's getting a rough deal."

Low as he had spoken, Jeff caught the words. "That's right," he said grimly. "A very rough deal. *All around!*"

He emphasized the words.

Alan regained some of his poise. He smiled in his charming whimsical fashion at the wedding guests.

"All of you know that Cynthia and I are in love and that she was engaged to me, and that she never would have considered marrying Jeff if she hadn't thought I was dead. I'm sorry. It's a tough spot for Jeff. But Cynthia and I belong together and. . ."

The doorbell rang again.

Lea rushed to answer. She ushered in Mr. K. Allbright and his daughter, Daphne.

Daphne was a blonde with a vague air of wondering how anybody but Allbrights should be on earth. She wore striking clothes which made her seem even prettier than she was. Cynthia never had liked her.

Now, she was making a tremendous fuss over Alan.

"The reporters telephoned us," she explained in her throaty voice. "Daddy was sure you would be here."

Alan seemed very embarrassed, Cynthia thought. Especially when Daphne kissed him warmly.

Mr. Allbright had some very decided

ideas. One of those was that his daughter should not do any dating of office personnel. It was one of his hard-and-fast rules.

Cynthia knew, however, that before Alan had fallen in love with her, he and Daphne had gone about together. Now, she felt a distinct stab of jealousy.

Mr. Allbright took over. He said, pumping Alan's hand up and down, "I never was so glad to see anybody in my life, Alan! Welcome back from the dead!"

It was, Cynthia thought distastefully, exactly the thing Mr. K. Allbright would say!

Alan had turned all his charm back on. Mr. Allbright was saying, "This will be excellent publicity for CON-STANCY perfume! I took the liberty of bringing some newspaper reporters along. You won't mind if the photogs take a few pictures, Cynthia?"

He went to the door fussily and ushered in the crowd of reporters. They swarmed over everything like bees seeking honey.

CYNTHIA was seething with rage. She wanted to hit Mr. Allbright and his lovely, vague daughter, Daphne. But she remembered just in time, that both Jeff and Alan worked for Allbright's. It wouldn't do to tell him what she really thought of this idea.

Jeff said quietly, in her ear, "We might as well let the whole world in on this, Cinnie, via the press. It'll be all over town anyhow that Alan is back. Let them get their interview and pictures and have it over with."

She looked up at him, gratefully. "I'm sorry, Jeff," she muttered confusedly. "This must be awful for you. It's my fault for having consented to marry you."

She began to cry and he took her in his arms comfortingly and kissed her. It was just then that cameras flashed and pictures were taken. Cynthia realized belatedly that the wedding cake

with the bride and groom figures on top, were the background for the pictures!

Everybody left finally.

Except the family and Alan and Jeff. They sat there in the ruins of the wedding reception which had turned into a free-for-all. The reporters had helped themselves liberally to food and drinks.

The best china dishes were everywhere. Crumbs of cake were ground into the rugs. Cigarette butts were left in every conceivable spot. Remnants of drinks lingered unpleasantly in tall glasses. The bride and groom figures from the top of the cake were on the floor in danger of being stepped on.

It was Jeff who stooped and picked them up, putting them carefully on the table. He said in a casual voice, "Well, Cinnie, we'd better be leaving or the hotel will think we don't want those reservations!"

She looked at him with big eyes and involuntarily moved a trifle closer to Alan.

"Surely you're joking, Jeff," she said. "I'm not going on any honeymoon with you! I'm staying right here and tomorrow morning early, I'm going to a lawyer to start annulment proceedings!"

To her amazement, it was Alan who said, sounding very embarrassed, "Cinnie, you can't do that! It'll put me and Allbright in a poor light if you do that! Mr. Allbright told the reporters that you were staying married to Jeff. He's a very conventional soul is Old Allbright. He believes in the sanctity of marriage."

She gasped, feeling as if Alan had struck her. "Is this your way of punishing me for having married somebody else, Alan?" she said, beginning to cry.

He took her in his arms. "Darling, no! I understand about this marriage, and everything can be straightened out later. But right now, do play along, darling. Jeff has given me his word of

honor that he won't so much as kiss you. Don't you see? It's just an outward form."

Cinnie didn't see at all. She felt as if she'd dropped twenty stories in an express elevator.

She drew away from the fervor of Alan's kiss. All at once, his kisses had lost the power to thrill her.

### Chapter 3



EFF said coldly, "It seems there are some sides of Alan's nature you aren't familiar with, Cinnie. For instance, his overwhelming ambition. What is your love in comparison with the fact that he might not get his job back at Allbright's if he doesn't measure up to the Old Man's standards?"

She heard him above the singing in her ears, and a sense of loss, in her heart.

All of a sudden she felt very weary.

Her heart didn't spill over any more with happiness. She felt no emotion at all except a desire to creep away by herself and go to sleep. Alan's abrupt return had drained her emotions.

She said in an indifferent tone, "All right, Alan. If that's the way you want it." She turned on her heel and walked away feeling nothing but apathy.

Her mother and sister wept over her and advised her not to go on the honeymoon. She brushed aside their protests, and went out and got into the car with Jeff, leaving him to bring her luggage and not even bothering to wipe away her tears.

Jeff looked down at her.

"Alan should have stayed dead!" he told her violently. "We've all lived with the idea that he'd died, for too long. He made a mistake when he came back home!"

They weren't going far, only to At-

Jantic City. But it seemed like the end of the world to her.

She said in a low, bitter tone to her bridegroom, "I don't know what you think you'll gain by this. I'm aware that you blackmailed Alan into asking me to go on a honeymoon with you. I don't know what means you used, but it won't do you any good to keep me, an unwilling bride!"

He made no reply.

She was so tired that she slept most of the way to Atlantic City and it was only when they were almost at the big seafront hotel that he shook her roughly by the shoulder and snapped, "It's time to wake up, Cynthia."

He had always called her Cinnie. She felt like a stranger.

They might as well have had signs, BRIDE AND GROOM on their backs. The room clerk smirked at them as Jeff registered. The bellhop grinned knowingly as he showed them to their suite.

Jeff overtipped him and he went off whistling gaily.

Then Jeff and Cynthia faced each other.

Jeff said evenly, "We're going on drives. We're going fishing. We're going swimming. You might as well have a good time and relax. I haven't turned into somebody with two heads even if Alan is back from the never-never land!"

She looked at him warily but she said with spirit, "I wish I knew how you managed to persuade Alan to give you this chance to win my love and I assure you that it won't do the slightest bit of good. I'll always love Alan. You're just a rebound husband."

On that exit line, she went into the bedroom and turned the key noisily in the lock. The effect was slightly marred when she remembered she didn't have her suitcases. She had to open the door again and ask Jeff to give them to her.

He was gazing out the window of the living room of the suite and there was

such a look of misery on his face that she was startled and shocked.

She said, a catch in her voice, "I'm sorry, Jeff. I wish. . ."

He whirled around.

"Save your pity!" he flung at her furiously. "I don't need it!" He slid her suitcases spinning into the bedroom without entering. He almost pushed her after it and this time, it was he who shut the door noisily and with finality.

That wedding night alone, with the heavy locked door separating them, seemed symbolic of the whole honeymoon.

**F**OR TWO days they went through the outward forms of being a honeymoon couple. They took long drives. They went swimming. They went sailing. All the time, there was a wall of ice around her and he couldn't come anywhere near.

Inside that wall, she thought constantly of Alan and planned their future life together. Jeff simply did not count.

On the third day she decided to go for a walk alone.

She hadn't gone far when Alan appeared as suddenly as if he had come up out of the earth. He caught her in eager arms and kissed her. He cried, "Darling, I must have been crazy when I asked you to do this! I've been suffering the tortures of the damned! I've been jealous and burned up, the whole time. I haven't been able to do my work right."

She wondered why she didn't feel the impact of his kiss to her very heart. She experienced no emotion at all except a vague disquieting sense of disloyalty to Jeff!

She said slowly, "It was a horrible thing for you to ask me to do, Alan!"

He drew a long breath and nodded. "I see that now," he said quietly. "But at the time I was so emotional and mixed-up I couldn't think straight."

"What was the real reason you asked me to go on this fake honeymoon with

Jeff?" she asked rather curtly. "Why, Alan, why?"

He looked sidewise at her.

"I'm pretty broke," he said slowly. "I was—in debt. I needed that thousand dollars bonus. It was Jeff who thought up the name of the new perfume. I saw the slip of paper on his desk and I went in and told Old Allbright it was *my* choice for a name. He said I'd get the prize. By that time I was in too deep to back out, though I felt like a heel. So I went to Jeff and told him the whole thing."

Her hands were cold. So were her feet. Her heart was the coldest of all. She was thinking bitterly that nobody ever really knew anybody else in this world. She could have vowed that Alan was the most honorable man she knew. Yet he was telling her casually that he had stolen Jeff's name for the new perfume, and taken the bonus.

Alan was talking on. "Jeff said I could have the bonus and the name. But I had to sign a paper saying they really belonged to him. I knew how mad he was about you. So—I did sign that paper. It seemed very safe. He wouldn't do anything to hurt me since it would hurt you worse. But now..."

"Now, he's holding it over your head and making you jump through hoops!" She was tingling with fury against Jeff. It helped her pain to be able to lash out at Jeff. But underneath was a throbbing sense of loss.

Alan had cheated. Alan!

Were there other dark ugly things she didn't know about the man who held her heart in his keeping?

**H**E MUST have sensed her withdrawal, for he said swiftly, "Darling, I met some very influential people out there in Arabia. There's the chance for an American to get ahead fast. They put out a wonderful line of native perfumes but they haven't any idea how to package and advertise and sell the product. I don't want Jeff to go to Allbright with that letter. I've got to

get some cash saved up first. Then, with a good letter of recommendation from Allbright's, I could set the world on fire out there. There's no limit to the heights I might reach."

He took her in his arms again eagerly and she felt how he trembled. "Darling, get that letter for me! Get it from Jeff. Then you must apply for an annulment of this marriage. You must marry me and go with me to Arabia. We'll be so happy, darling."

She thought blankly, "His kiss doesn't mean anything at all. And the idea of going off to Arabia with him, makes me shudder."

These two things astounded her so that she forgot to struggle. Forgot to tell Alan to stop kissing her. So it was that Jeff came along just then and saw them.

Such fury looked out of his eyes that she felt as if she were being shriveled by his glance. He said in a low, angry tone to Alan, "I've been patient too long. I've wanted to do this for ages!"

With that, he hit Alan. Hit him so hard that he reeled back and almost lost his balance.

Alan said hastily, "I deserved that, Jeff. I'm not going to sock you in return. Though maybe I ought to. For marrying my girl when you thought I was safely out of the way!"

He turned on his heel and walked off then, not glancing back.

Jeff looked at his bruised knuckles. He breathed deeply a couple of times. He said gruffly, "Fighting never settled any problem yet."

They went back to the hotel and up to the suite, silently.

She said slowly, when they were inside with the door closed, "He told me about—CONSTANCY. Naming the perfume, I mean. When it was your idea."

He nodded. "I expected he might tell you about it before I had a chance." He sounded very grim. He didn't add anything else.

She murmured, her face crimson, "May I have the letter he wrote?"

For a moment, Jeff hesitated, then he took the letter out of his wallet and gave it to her. She read the words and then crumpled the paper furiously in her hand, and flung it into the wastebasket.

Jeff stooped and picked it up. He tore the letter into many pieces and flung them down like confetti. "Now your sweetheart is quite safe," he said.

She quavered, "Jeff, I . . ."

He didn't give her time to finish. He grabbed her in his arms and she felt a surge of emotion sweep over her even as she struggled to free herself from his embrace. His lips went down on her own, hard and demanding, and it seemed to her that there suddenly wasn't enough air in the world to breathe. He kept on kissing her and she stopped thinking and lay limp and yielding in his arms.

Then, abruptly, he thrust her away, saying savagely, "No, I don't want you. At the wedding reception, you called yourself an unwilling wife. I have no desire to take your love by force. Nor do I want you here on this travesty of a honeymoon. Pack up and get out! Go to Alan. I tried to save you from ruining your life by marriage to him. I see you *want* your heart trampled on! All right. Go ahead. Get out!"

She said, her voice dripping with icicles, though her heart still leaped excitedly to the memory of his love-making, "You're so right. I *am* going. I'll get my freedom and end this farce of a marriage."

She flung into her bedroom and packed and he didn't come after her to beg her to stay . . .

**A**LL THE way to New York on the train she seethed with fury. She'd show Jeff. She'd go to Alan immediately. They would leave for Arabia together. She fought down the sick feeling of dread which flooded over her at the very idea.

She tried to ring Alan at the apartment hotel where he had told her he was staying. The switchboard girl reported after the bell had rung repeatedly, "I'm sorry. Mr. Alan Campbell doesn't seem to be at home. Any message?"

She said she would call later and replaced the phone.

A moment later, she was talking to her mother. Mrs. Bartlet took it for granted that Cynthia was speaking from Atlantic City and the girl did not disturb that idea.

Her mother said worriedly, "After all, perhaps it's just as well that you went away with Jeff. That Janet Brown was over and she said Alan wasn't quite as charming as he always seemed on the surface. After all, your father is a good judge of character. He always said that Alan . . ."

Cynthia held the phone away from her ear while her mother talked on. She interrupted finally, "I must go now, dear. I just thought I'd ring up and tell you I was all right."

Swiftly she replaced the phone before her mother could ask any questions.

She had checked her bags at Grand Central.

On impulse she went to see Janet Brown.

It was Sunday night and Janet was washing her hair. The brown locks stood on end, as she came to the door, a dripping towel in one hand and a book in the other. She showed no surprise at seeing Cynthia.

The girl drew a deep breath. "I came to ask you a question," she said. "A very important question. Why is it that you dislike Alan so much?"

Janet took time to fumble in a drawer and locate a towel before she replied. Then she said, "I feel the man's charm, same as everybody else. Only . . ."

The door to an inner room opened and Daphne Allbright came out. She looked as vague and yet as pretty and

poised as usual. She drawled, "The trouble with Janet is, that Alan has been meeting me here at her apartment ever since he first came to Allbright's! It's all very innocent, I assure you. Perhaps you know how fussy my father is about my dating anybody in the perfume company office? Well, Alan and I are very close friends. Janet had a boy friend once, ages ago, who two-timed her. She thinks Alan is the same. But he isn't really."

Cynthia wasn't listening.

She was seeing Janet opening the front door to admit Alan. Alan smiling a welcome at the boss' daughter! Alan, froze in his tracks when he saw Janet already had another guest.

"Cinnie!" he gasped and for once, he had completely lost his casual, easy charm.

Cynthia looked down at the wedding ring.

It seemed to give her strength. She said quietly, "Sorry, Alan. I didn't mean to spy on you. I came to Janet to ask her a question. But now you're here, I know you'll be happy to know that the paper you spoke of, has been destroyed!"

**T**HEN AND there, in front of Daphne, he tried to take Cynthia into his arms. But she side-stepped, saying, "No, Alan. If I were you, I'd forget that bankroll you meant to save up. I'd take Daphne and go to Arabia and grab that job. Because I've suddenly discovered that it's my husband I'm in love with! You were merely a mirage. I mistook infatuation for love. I hope I'm not too late to tell Jeff so and make him believe me."

He tried to beg her to reconsider. She paid no heed. She had opened Janet's door and was racing out to find a taxi which would take her to the apartment she and Jeff had furnished with so much loving care.

**J**EFF WAS at the apartment.

When she came in breathlessly, her key in her hand, he was slumped down in the middle of his back in one of the twin easy chairs they'd bought. He was staring balefully at the elephant book-ends set on an occasional table.

He looked up. For a second, the happiness flaming in his eyes dazzled her and made her pause uncertainly. Then the joy was gone as if a curtain had been pulled down.

"Have you come to pack up your things?" he asked bitterly. "You can have everything. I don't want them."

She stood close to him. "I don't want them either, if I can't have the husband I want, to go with them!" she whispered uncertainly.

He didn't understand. "Alan is..."

Her heart was thundering. She said quietly however, "Alan is simply a grand-standing charming young man without any reality to him. Alan is the type of man a silly girl might think herself in love with, for a while. But if she had any sense, she'd fall in love with a real man! Somebody like her—husband for example!"

She couldn't go on. She stood there, her eyes shining and and her body trembling, as she waited.

He looked at her and slowly the happiness came back to his face. He whispered, "You mean that, Cinnie? You want to—stay married to *me*?"

She told him, "I want to stay married to you for the rest of my life, my darling. Because I love you. I love you deeply and truly with a love very different from the phony feeling I had for Alan. I..."

There wasn't any need for more words. She was in his arms. His lips were on hers. Happiness was singing in her heart. On her finger, her wedding ring shone triumphantly....

THE END





# Your Love Horoscope

(continued from page 8)

worrimment for the supreme executive.

All you October-born Librans may well learn a lesson from your brothers and sisters in the zodiac, whose chaotic problems may hit the front-page. *Do not use sledge-hammer methods* when

your clear vision is temporarily be-fogged by baffling issues in your affairs. Maintain a conciliatory attitude toward fellow-beings, should the smooth rhythm of your relationships be disturbed.

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## **VIRGO HAPPINESS**

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*"Knowledge and timber shouldn't be much used until they are seasoned."*

*Oliver Wendell Holmes. (Aug. 29th.)*

Virgo beauty and charm season with the years, and there's comfort in the thought that not being an apple-blossom belle could mean conquest, as a September rose. Your concept of true happiness is a matured evaluation of other person's viewpoints as a requisite for smooth romantic relationships.

Money means quite a bit to you, that is *money* for what it buys and for the harmony it can bring. You do not worship it by any means as mere "cash", but as the material proof of accomplishment. A careless squandering of it by loved ones in your life could make you most miserable, as does the want of security.

You are a perfectionist, hence can be congenial with only a few companions, who are attuned to your intrinsic nature. A great deal of enjoyment can

be derived when alone in a cosy, tranquil flat, sharing your time with a pet or a good book.

Mannerisms in others that may lead to friction are resented by you as well as disorder and sloppy habits, unpunctuality and gross abandon to sensuous pleasures. You do not mind, however, converting some friend or even sweetheart from dissipation to a healthy, normal mode of living.

Is 'he' a Virgo-born? Then you should adjust your existence to a routine formula, avoiding confusion and discord. *Shun extremes in all you do.* Don't burst in with chatter when he seems lost in a silent mood, and don't indulge in temperamental outbursts, ever, or loud scenes in public.

Gifts and luxurious tokens of affections are appreciated, yes, but not unduly so. *Virgo happiness is based on kindness and sympathy and consideration for a man's dignity and poise.* He's most happy with reasonable moderation.

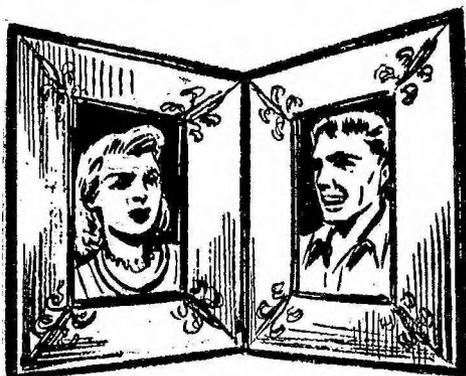
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## LIBRA HAPPINESS

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*"The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death."*

Oscar Wilde. (October 16th)

What's the use kidding yourself! Love's the greatest happiness Libra-folk can experience. LOVE—actually, when a sweet affair of the heart stirs your soul to ecstatic bliss. But even vicariously—if no sweetheart happens to be in your life at the moment—you indulge in love for love's sake. A sizzling motion picture may set your heart going through the tempestuous thrills depicted in the screen. Reading about the loves that inspired history's great men and women of achievement, or a love-story magazine telling you about fictitious romantic situations that *could* be your own, will feed the hunger of a Libra-born for sentimental happiness.

You're also apt to be made happy by delicate gifts. An item of finery, or a piece of jewelry—albeit costume jewelry—and a flask of perfume may produce raptures of joy. You cultural

Libra belles can be contented when a romantic gift means an addition to your hobby collection, a lovely accessory to your home or a piece of antique furniture in good taste.

You've got to be treated with tact and diplomacy to feel relaxed. Blunt, impatient remarks, the clumsy antics of an aggressive suitor or wolves who whistle at the wrong time, may actually cause you mental distress. Broken promises are taboo. To forget your birthday or an important anniversary is an unpardonable *faux-pas*.

If your boy-friend happens to be a Libra man he's easily pleased. Just to look at your well-groomed, charming self, whom he'd like to show off to the world, makes him feel romantic. Do you want to offend him? Flirt with the man at the next table in a restaurant, boss him around or force him to introduce you to *all* his friends! And don't ever let him catch you looking untidy! That might be the end of a perfect romance.

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YOUR LOVE HOROSCOPE with Planetary Indications for November and December, will be in the next issue of *Gay Love Stories*, on sale November 1st. We would appreciate your dropping us a postcard, at your convenience, to let us know how you like our new department.

# A KISS TO DECIDE

Of course, Jane was a little too young to be hired as a housekeeper, cook, and nursemaid...



by Mid Hathaway

*"Are you offering your services?"  
he taunted.*

JANE WAS in the slathouse, grafting gardenia buds when she heard the tinkling of the gate bell that announced the arrival of a customer.

She called out, "Be with you in a minute," and finished fastening the tape around the stem she had been budding.

As she came out of the slathouse she saw that her customer was not examining the plants growing in cans, but was standing by Don's play-pen, looking down at the plump two-year-old with curious intensity. Don was being his most ingratiating self, chuckling

with joy and trying to give away, one after another, of his toys to the tall, thin man.

Jane pushed an ash blonde curl back from her forehead, smoothed her neat blue slacks over her hips and asked politely: "What can I do for you?"

With an effort the man drew his dark eyes away from the baby and turned them solemnly on the girl. "Are you—" he began slowly, while incredulity built itself into the brown depths of his eyes— "You're not Jane Rockwell?"

"Yes, I am," she said firmly. "Who

are you, and what do you want?"

He didn't answer at once. Instead, he resumed his absorbed study of Don. "So that's my baby," he said aloud at last, talking to himself, more than to the girl.

Jane bristled, immediately on the defensive. She reached down and snatched the baby up into her arms, hugging him so protectingly close that he grunted his dismay. "He's happy here with me," she explained breathlessly. "It would upset him to have to get used to someone else taking care of him. I've saved every cent of the allotment money and you can have it all, if only you'll agree to let me adopt Don. I've gotten so fond of him—" She broke off, choking, unable to go on.

"It's a mistake," he said gently, "to let yourself care so much about someone who doesn't belong to you. However, there's no need to get all excited. I'm not going to start throwing my weight around and making high-handed demands without considering all the angles."

"Thanks," she said curtly. "That's big of you, I'm sure. You marry a girl and then go to Korea and forget all about her. When she dies giving birth to your baby, you take up the business of ignoring the baby where you left off with ignoring the mother, your wife. And now, two years later, you show up here and magnanimously agree to consider all the angles. Pardon me if I fail to appear impressed!"

"Did Maida tell you that I ignored her?"

"Yes. She said if it hadn't been for the allotment checks, she'd have thought she merely dreamed she was married. And after she died, I knew what she meant. I wrote you all about it, and about wanting to keep Don. The only answer I got was that the checks started coming in, for him." Seeing the glint in his eyes, she rushed on, "I know that fighting was no picnic, but there must have been some

times when you could have written a line or two, just to let Maida know that you still loved her—"

**H**E LAUGHED harshly. "A lot she cared whether I loved her or not! I did write her three letters, though, and got no reply. After that I didn't bother. All Maida cared about was the money she got from me. She told me that, even before I sailed." His eyes had shifted from her face to that of the baby again. "He does look like me, doesn't he?" he observed wonderingly, as though still finding it hard to believe.

"His hair is blond; yours is brown," Jane pointed out. But she knew that was no item of importance. The child's big brown, widely spaced eyes were an almost perfect copy of the man's eyes, as were the high cheekbones and well shaped nose. The baby's mouth was more softly curved but that, too, was to be expected.

"My hair was blond, too, when I was his age," Weston Barfield said. "May I—may I hold him a minute?"

Jane nodded, and blinked the tears out of her eyes when she saw the gentle clumsiness with which this strange man handled his young son.

"Look here, young fellow," Weston said, "how would you like to go bye-bye with your old man?"

"Bye-bye. . . .bye-bye," Don echoed, bouncing up and down with enthusiasm.

"You're not taking him anywhere now," Jane said firmly. "It's time for his nap."

"I've got a car," the ex-Marine said cautiously. "I thought maybe I could take Don to the beach and sort of get acquainted with him. You could come along, of course, if you like," he granted as an afterthought.

"That would be very nice," Jane said primly, "but you'll have to wait until after his nap. That will be about three o'clock."

"Okay, I'll be back at three." He handed her the squirming child, waved good-bye to him and walked slowly out through the gate to his car, waiting for him at the curb.

As Jane took the baby into the house to get him ready for his nap, her heart felt heavy with foreboding. *If I should lose Don, she thought, I don't know how I could go on. . . .*

She had been so completely confident that the Marine Sargeant would not want his son, because there had been no letters or anything. She had thought that she would have to look him up to get him to sign the adoption papers. It never once had occurred to her that he would show up like this.

She thought back to that day, a little over two years ago, when Maida Barfield had stumbled through the swinging gate of the little nursery garden and fainted on the path, her suitcase sprawling open beside her, spilling baby clothes all over the petunia bed.

In one hand the blonde girl had clutched an ad from the morning paper—Jane's ad, reading:

WANT TO SHARE MY HOME WITH YOUNG WOMAN BETWEEN EIGHTEEN AND THIRTY. WILL EXCHANGE REFERENCES.

She had included her Coral Gables address and telephone number. Naturally she had not expected a war wife who was going to have a baby most any moment to reply, but after the girl was there, she could do nothing but call the doctor and hope for the best.

The doctor had announced at once that there would not be sufficient time to get Maida to the hospital.

Maida had lived twenty hours after the baby was born. Long enough to tell Jane about her faithless husband in Korea, and to beg her to "look after the baby."

If the strange girl had any other living relatives, Jane had been unable to

find any trace of them. She finally made the funeral arrangements herself, wrote Don's father, whose address she found among his wife's things, and settled down to being the baby's adopted mother.

THERE HAD been only one person who objected to this arrangement, and that was Jane's fiance, Victor Arden, a struggling young attorney who had been devoted to Jane even back in the good days when her father was still living. But they had kept postponing their marriage until Vic's legal practice should grow profitable enough to keep them both.

The first, last and only time they had a serious disagreement was when Jane insisted on keeping Don.

"Just because some strange woman faints on your doorstep, that doesn't make you responsible for her baby!" Vic had contended.

And Jane had said stubbornly, "I want to be responsible for Don. He's such an adorable baby, I couldn't stand to put him in an orphanage."

"You'll just get more and more attached to him and then his father will come home and take him away from you," Vic pointed out sensibly.

"I don't think so," Jane insisted. "I think that when he comes home he'll let me adopt the boy."

Vic's horrified anger had arisen to the boiling point. "Well, that lets me out," he had snapped. "I'm not getting married to any ready-made families. I want kids, sure, but I want them to be my kids, not somebody else's orphaned brats."

So that had been the last time she had seen Vic, and she heard that he had started keeping company with another girl. Jane would have been unbearably lonesome if it hadn't been for Don. The baby had taken almost all of her time that was not devoted to tending the flowers and selling them. All but the evenings, after he was asleep. Then she missed Vic, and her Dad. She

finally had gotten a girl to share the house with her, for a time, but she was a popular girl who went out on dates almost every evening, and a week ago she had gotten married and moved away.

Once in awhile, when she could get a neighbor woman to come in and stay with Don, Jane had gone along on a double date with Yvonne and her friend, but she never had so very much fun because she had to steer clear of her favorite topic of conversation: Don. The men whom Yvonne knew were not interested in hearing about orphaned baby boys.

And now here was this man who had every legal right to take the baby away from her, threatening to upset the whole pattern of Jane's life. She'd given up the thought of marriage, in favor of Don. Now she had no intention of giving up Don without a struggle. If his father really cared anything about him, it would be different, but this was the first time he had shown the slight-

est interest in his son. And she told herself fiercely it was more curiosity than interest.

She had to admit that the ex-Marine Sergeant was attractive, and not at all like she had imagined him. For such a long time she had thought of Weston Barfield as a cynical, heartless guy who thought nothing of getting married and then breaking the girl's heart by ignoring her existence. It was something of a shock to see him looking so grave and serious-eyed and tired. He didn't look like a hard-boiled, cheating type of man who broke female hearts as carelessly as he broke open a package of cigarettes.

Of course you couldn't always tell by appearances, though, she reminded herself grimly. True, she'd heard only Maida's side of the story, so far. But she must not let herself change her opinion of the man at once just because he looked nice. The only thing to do was to wait. Wait and see.

[Turn To Page 84]

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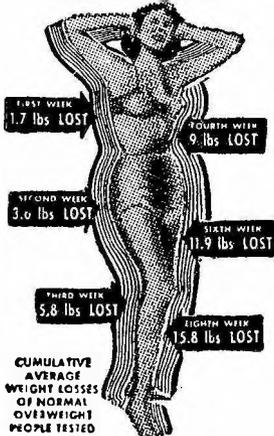
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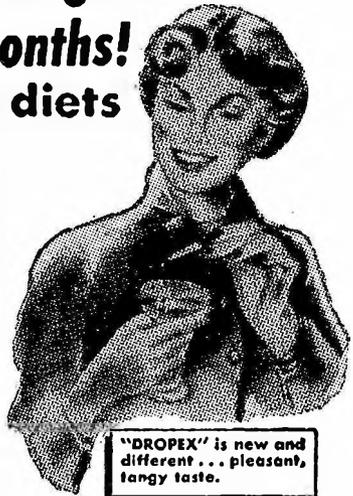
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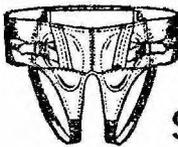
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## GAY LOVE STORIES

SHE WASN'T sure why she should bother about how she looked, but for some reason it seemed important to look her best when Weston called at three that afternoon. Jane put on her white eyelet embroidered dress and the tiny bonnet that matched. Her soft light hair curled childishly around the cap, making her look like a storybook nursemaid. She pulled her white sandals onto her well shaped bare feet and fastened the buckles. She wore no rouge and only a touch of lipstick, but she had a healthy coat of tan and looked anything but pale.

Don, in his handkerchief-size playsuit, was ready for the excursion to the beach when his father arrived.

Weston scarcely glanced at the girl who had taken such pains to look attractive. He had eyes only for the chubby baby boy. "Well, son, ready to go bye-bye with your old man?"

"Bye-bye. . . bye-bye," Don chirped.

"Is that all he can say?" Weston asked Jane.

"He knows a few other words," she defended the child. "He calls me 'Nane'. Water is 'wa-wa'. And the neighbor's cat is kiy-kiy. He's really very alert, and understands everything I say to him, but they seldom learn to talk so very young when there are no older children around, and only one adult."

"He's missed his daddy," Weston asserted, carrying him out to the car. "I'll take his education in hand now. Make a real man of him."

Jane felt a lump of premonition in her throat. She choked, "Don't you think he ought to be a boy first? I hate to see children who are forced to grow up too fast."

"Oh, sure," Weston granted easily. "This lad is going to have the kind of boyhood that I only wished I had. No orphanages for him. And no being farmed out at ten to people who only want him to work for them without

[Turn To Page 86]

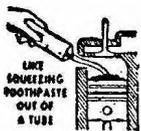
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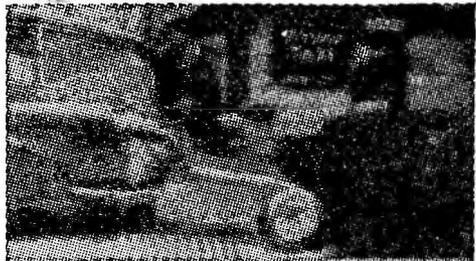
Just squeeze Power-Seal out of the tube into your motor's cylinders through the spark plug openings. It will spread over pistons, piston rings and cylinder walls as your engine runs and it will PLATE every surface with a smooth, shiny, metallic film that won't come off! No amount of pressure can scrape it off. No amount of heat can break it down. It fills the cracks, scratches and scorings caused by engine wear. It closes the gap between worn piston rings and cylinders with an automatic self-expanding seal that stops oil pumping, stops gas blow-by and restores compression. No more piston slapping; no more engine knocks. You get more power, speed, mileage.

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## GAY LOVE STORIES

pay. I don't know yet how I'm going to give him all the things I want him to have, but I'm going to!" he asserted.

Jane looked at him incredulously. "When did this intense interest in your son's welfare begin?" she asked with a tinge of bitterness.

"A couple of hours ago, when I first set eyes on him."

"That's fine! Yes, *that's just fine!*" she snapped. "Did it ever occur to you that Don didn't just automatically become two years old and cute and cuddly and normal? After ignoring his existence for two years, you suddenly show up and announce your intention to disrupt his whole life. Do you realize that if it hadn't been for me, Don would have spent his first two years in an over-crowded, under-staffed orphanage—the very kind of life you blandly assert he never should have?"

He slowed the car and sent a side-long glance in the direction of his companion. "Say, you're kind of pretty," he observed irrelevantly. "Especially when you're mad. But I don't see what you're so burned up about. Didn't I send enough money to take care of the kid's needs? If not, I'll make it right with you—"

"Money!" she scoffed. "No doubt you think money will buy anything, even affection. I couldn't love Don more than I do if he was my own, and you think your money will compensate for my having to give him up! He loves me, too, but you think you can pay him to forget me! Well, I don't need your money and I haven't spent any of it. And if you care anything at all about Don, you won't disrupt his whole life just for the sake of a sudden whim—"

"Sudden whim?" he echoed. "What sudden whim?"

"Now don't try to tell me you've been planning for the child's welfare all his life, and dreaming of the wonderful things you were to provide for

[Turn Page]

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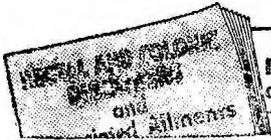
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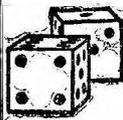
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## GAY LOVE STORIES

the future! Why don't you admit that you haven't given him a thought until now? That you only came here to see him out of curiosity and that, finding him more appealing than you'd expected, you acquired this fine whim that you have labelled fatherly devotion?"

**S**HE HAD expected him to flare back at her, spouting bromides like, "Blood is thicker than water," but his voice was quiet and thoughtful when he spoke:

"I don't know how well you knew Maida, and far be it from me to talk against someone who is dead and can't defend herself, but the fact is that she was divorced only a few days before I met her, and I knew her less than a week before we were married. When you wrote me about the baby, you took it for granted that he was my son, but I wanted to see him before I built up any dreams around him."

"I told you his birth was premature," Jane pointed out.

"Yes, I know you did, but you must remember, I didn't know you from Eve. You might have been saying that just to get me to dole out some money for the kid's support—"

"If I'd done that, I'd have spent the money when it came, wouldn't I?" she demanded defiantly.

"I'm not doubting you now, I'm just pointing out the way things looked to me away out there in Korea. After one good look at Don I could no more doubt that he's mine than I could doubt that I've got two eyes to see him with. And I am grateful to you for taking such good care of him. I'm also sorry you've grown so attached to him, because as soon as I can provide a good home for him, and hire a nurse to take care of him, I'm going to take him away from you—"

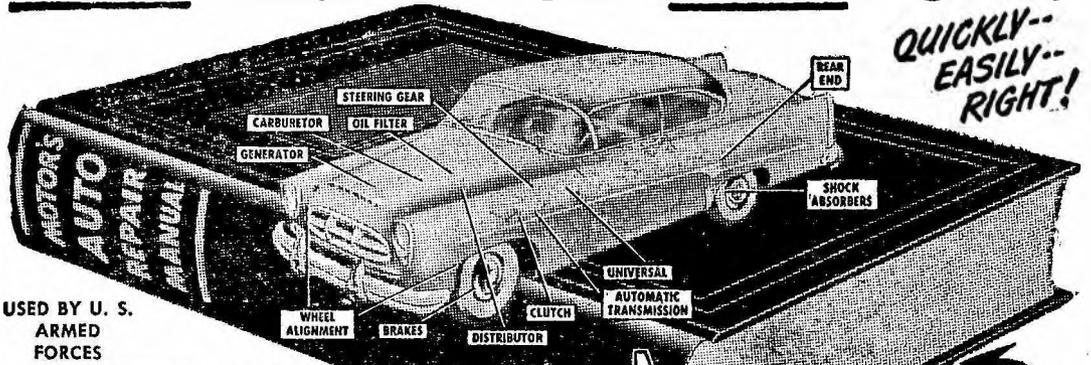
"You won't be able to find anybody reliable, and she won't take as good care of Don as I would!" Jane cut in fiercely.

[Turn To Page 90]

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## GAY LOVE STORIES

His grin was amused. "Are you offering your services?" he taunted. "I'm afraid you're a little too young to be my housekeeper, cook and nursemaid. People would talk—unless, of course, you're setting your cap to marry me?" He tilted a mocking eyebrow at her.

Jane's face turned an angry brick red. "Of course not. I hate you," she told him crossly. "Besides," she added, not quite truthfully, "I'm already engaged to be married."

"And how does your fiance feel about Don?"

"He—he wanted me to turn him over to an institution," she admitted.

"There, you see? I'm really doing you a favor by removing an obstacle to your marriage. Still, having charge of Don has been good experience for you. When you have children of your own, you'll know exactly how to take care of them."

"I'll never have children of my own," she said bitterly, more to herself than to him.

"Why not?"

"Because I'll never get married!"

"But you just said.... Hey, what is this?"

"I just said I was engaged. I was, but not any more. He—he made me choose between Don and him, and I chose Don!"

"Well, he'll come back to you, won't he? When he finds out you've given up Don after all."

The girl's lips protruded sulkily. "No. I hate him now, too. I hate all men."

He was grinning teasingly again. "Don will be a man some day. Maybe he's lucky that I am rescuing him from your future hatred."

"All right laugh," she snapped. "Laugh while you can. Maybe it won't seem so funny after the court decides who should have custody of Don. They are apt to give major consideration to the welfare of the child, you know. They will realize that I'm a better

## A KISS TO DECIDE

mother to him than you and a hired housekeeper ever could be!"

"And they'll also agree that I'd make a better father than a man-hating old maid," he chided. "But here we are at the Hammock now, so let's forget our quarrels and see if we and Don can't have some fun for a little while."

**IT WAS PLEASANT** Jane decided a few minutes later, as she sat on a blanket, propped her back against a palm tree and watched Don and Weston build a castle out of a mound of white, sugary sand.

"Ook, 'Nane!" the baby squealed with glee.

"Jane is looking," she assured him warmly. "My, that's a big one."

"Big 'un, big 'un," he chorused happily, paddling down the beach for another pail of water.

His father's eyes followed him. "Isn't he terrific?" he said with intense pride.

An elderly woman, leaning against another palm tree nearby, laid down the book she had been trying to read and commented sadly: "I wonder if you young people realize how lucky you are."

"I beg your pardon?" Jane said politely.

"Don't ever let anything or any person separate the three of you," the woman went on. "When I was about your age I divorced my husband because of a misunderstanding. I brought up my baby the best I could by myself, but I'm afraid I made a weakling of him. When he thought he was going to be sent into battle, he couldn't take it, he killed himself. I don't even have the satisfaction of knowing that he died bravely. And I have only my own stupidity to thank for his cowardice. I'm a lonely woman, old beyond my years—believe it or not, I'm only forty-six—and all because when I was your age I didn't use my head."

"I'm sorry," Jane said, "but you see—"

[Turn Page]



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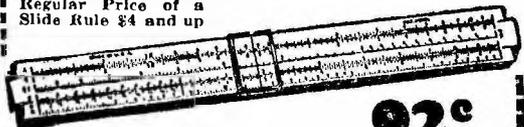
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## GAY LOVE STORIES

"That won't ever happen to us," Weston interrupted gently. And to Jane's surprise he reached out, put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. Over her head he smiled at the older woman. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "We won't forget it, will we dear?"

And before Jane could utter one word of shocked protest, Weston's mouth closed on hers in a quick, fierce kiss. And a moment later, against her ear he was murmuring the hurried warning, "Don't embarrass and disillusion that poor woman. Let her think she's done her good deed for the day."

Don, feeling neglected, put a chubby arm around each of them and presented his cheek for them to kiss, which they obligingly did.

"That's a sweet picture," their self-assigned mentor commented smilingly. "I'll never forget it." She stood up, waved good-bye to them, and walked slowly toward the parking lot.

Jane felt strangely shaken by the incident, and the tingling memory of Weston's kiss stayed with her all night and through the following day. Try as she would, she could not keep her heart hardened against him. Outwardly, he was so very different from the way she had visualized him, it was hard to keep on thinking of him as cold and calculating and heartless.

As for Don, he obviously was quite taken with his newly arrived father. Before the afternoon was over, he was calling the man "Daddy" as though he had known him always, and during the days that followed, he looked forward eagerly to his dad's visits.

Sometimes they went to the beach or park, and on these trips Jane was invited to go along. At other times, Weston just played awhile with his son on the porch or in the yard.

But never, after that first afternoon, did he make any personal advances toward Jane. In fact, whenever he took

[Turn To Page 94]

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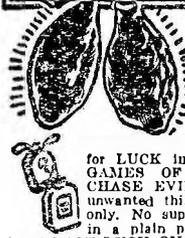
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Don from her, he seem to be avoiding touching her. She was annoyed to find herself feeling hurt and puzzled by his attitude. "After all," she told herself grimly, "I'm not poison, am I? And if he's afraid I'm setting my cap for him, he's crazy. I wouldn't have him as a gift."

She did not entirely deceive herself, however. She knew that the memory of the kiss that had been meant only to impress the sad old lady had made an indelible impression on her own heart. It hurt to know that Weston had forgotten it so completely. Or, if he remembered it at all, it was something he had no desire to repeat. In spite of all her resolutions, Jane knew that she was more strongly attracted to Weston than she ever had been to any man in her life, and the attraction had little, if anything, to do with Don. She also knew that it wasn't going to do anything but hurt her to fall in love with the ex-Marine.

THE BEST antidote for love, she thought would be another man. So when Stanley Gray asked her to go to a show with him, she accepted without even mentioning her responsibility to Don. "His father will be delighted to take care of him," she thought. And when he called for his daily romp with the baby, she asked him:

"Could you take care of Don this evening, Weston? I've got a date."

He gave her a queer, unreadable look. "You mean stay here with him until you get home? How late will you be out?"

"I don't know, exactly, but shortly after midnight, I suppose." She broke off, found herself blushing for no particular reason. "If—if you object to staying up that late, maybe you could take Don's folding basinette home with you and keep him overnight. Or, if you have other plans, I'll try to get Mrs. Dawson to come in—"

"No. No, I haven't any plans. I'll

## A KISS TO DECIDE

stay here with him if you don't mind. But you wouldn't object to my taking a little nap on your couch if I get sleepy, would you? You see, I start on my first civilian job in the morning, and I wouldn't want to show up half asleep—"

"You do? Why that's just grand. What kind of a job is it?" she asked enthusiastically.

"It's not much, at the start. I'm to drive a delivery truck for a wholesale bakery, but if I show initiative, there's a chance I may work up to being sales manager some day."

"You'll do it," she said. "I'm sure you will. I'm so happy for you."

"Are you?" he asked curiously, studying her radiant face with a perplexed frown. "I thought you'd be happy for me to stay unemployed indefinitely, because then I wouldn't be able to take Don away from you."

She bit her lip and avoided his eyes. "I hope I'm not as selfish as all that," she said stiffly. "I like to see ex-servicemen make good when they come back home. And now that you are going to work right here in the Miami area, surely you won't object to my seeing Don sometimes?"

"No," he said slowly, "I won't object. You've been a wonderful foster mother, Jane, and I can't ever thank you enough."

"Skip it," she snapped. "I didn't do it for you; I did it for him, and because I enjoyed it, and I don't want any thanks." She walked resolutely into the house and closed the door behind her.

IT WAS A good picture but Jane couldn't keep her mind on it. She was remembering Weston's clumsy but gentle brown hands as he helped his son into his sleepers. She was remembering the peculiar expression in his eyes when he had looked up to see her  
[Turn Page]

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## GAY LOVE STORIES

standing there in the doorway in her new dress.

"Have a good time," he said, but the words had come out flat and dull.

"The latest magazines are at the end of the library table," she had pointed out, "and the television won't wake Don, once he's sound asleep. Don't let him talk you into playing with him after his bedtime..." She turned away and went out to join Stanley, who was waiting for her on the porch.

Stanley was nice looking and pleasant and she tried her best to enjoy her date with him. When he suggested that they stop in at The Open Door on the way home, she assented just because she wanted to refuse and go rushing home to the child and the man who had come to mean so much to her.

She had met Stanley at a Garden Club dance a few weeks ago, and was glad he was new in town, and didn't know any of her friends who would tell him about Don. She encouraged him to talk about himself so that she could avoid telling him anything about her own major interests in life. She knew that if she wanted any more dates with him, she would do well to refrain from mentioning her devotion to Don.

As the cab slowed to a stop in front of her home, Jane was surprised at first to see the house in complete darkness. Then she recalled Weston's mention of the fact that he might take a nap. Probably he was asleep on the davenport.

"Good night," Jane said to Stanley, while he was paying the driver, "I surely had a nice time and I want to thank you—"

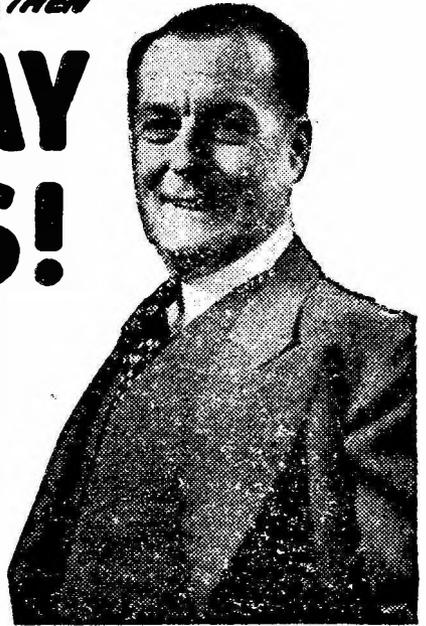
"Not so fast," her escort said with a teasing laugh. "I'm not going to be brushed off like this. You've at least got to let me kiss you goodnight."

"But it's late and I'm tired—"

"Uh-huh, the old routine. I've heard it all before. You spend your hard-earned dough on a gal and then she re-

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fuses even so much as one tiny good-night kiss—”

“Oh, all right,” she agreed crossly, “just one then. But after that I’m going in and you’re going home.”

They were standing in the darkness of the screened porch, and Stanley was putting his arms around her, when she heard Weston calling her name, hoarsely, as though he was in great pain:

“Jane! Jane! Help me! I need you-u-u...” His words trailed off into an indistinguishable mumble.

“Who’s that?” Stanley demanded. “What’s the matter with him?”

“It’s Weston,” Jane said, as though that explained everything that needed explaining. “He sounds like he’s been hurt. Maybe you’d better come in with me, if he needs help—” She was hurrying on into the house ahead of him, turning on the light in the living room.

Weston was lying on the couch with his back toward her. She ran over to him, leaned down and looked at his face. His eyes were closed, and his breathing even. “He’s asleep,” she thought, “he talks in his sleep.”

“Who is he, your brother?” Stanley asked. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He talks in his sleep,” she said aloud. “He must have been having a bad dream—”

“Well, let’s wake him up then.”

**B**EFORE she could stop him, he had Weston by the shoulder and was shaking him. “Wake up, old man. You’ll sleep more comfortably in bed.”

Weston stirred, rolled over on his back, his eyes still closed. “Jane,” he mumbled. “Where are you, Jane?”

She touched his arm gingerly, “I’m right here, Weston.”

His next act was as startling as it was unexpected. He caught her shoulders and pulled her down to him, closing his arms around her fiercely, possessively. “I thought I’d lost you,” he said with a deep sigh of relief. “Don’t ever leave me again, Jane. I can’t live without you. I need you with me, like this, for always—” He broke off,

finding her mouth with his in a long and soul-stirring kiss.

“Hey, what is this?” Stanley’s puzzled voice came to her from a great distance. He was noticing a kiddycar, standing near the table. “If you’re married, why didn’t you tell me—”

“Please go, Stanley,” Jane said brokenly. “I’m sorry if you think I played a mean trick on you, but I had no idea Weston cared anything about me. If he talks like this in his sleep he must care—a little—”

“I care a lot more than a little,” Weston said, sitting up. “I care so damned much that I’ve been going slowly mad, all evening, thinking of you with that guy, wishing I hadn’t let you go with him—”

Stanley had marched out of the house, but neither of them noticed.

“Then you weren’t asleep, at all?” Jane asked dazedly.

“I think I’ve been asleep all my life, until tonight,” he said slowly, “when I woke up to the fact that none of my theories were important enough to stand the risk of losing you.

“You see, when I kissed you that first afternoon, I suspected I was falling in love with you, but I wouldn’t let myself give in to it until I could be sure of you. I thought you might marry me to get my son, just as Maida married me to get my allotment checks. I wanted you to love me for myself, but now I’m afraid I’ll lose you altogether if I wait for that. So if you’ll marry me now, I’ll take a chance on winning your love, later—”

“It won’t be much of a chance to take,” she was saying, smiling shyly up at him.

“You mean you love me already?” he cried eagerly.

“I’m pretty sure,” she nodded. “I think one more kiss might decide it.”

One more kiss was not needed to decide anything, but it was worthwhile for its own sake!

THE END

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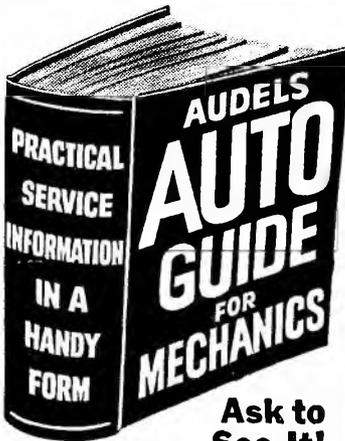
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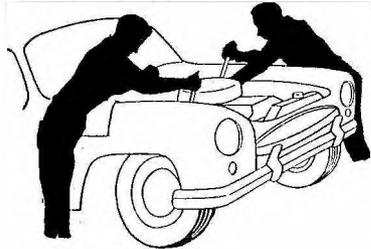
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