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MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, Editor

Volume 8

March, 1946

Number 5

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LILLIAN MEISEL, Managing Editor

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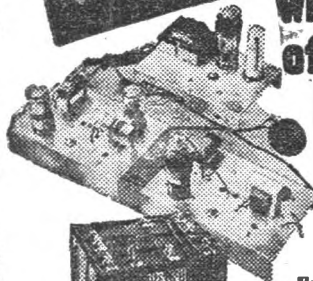
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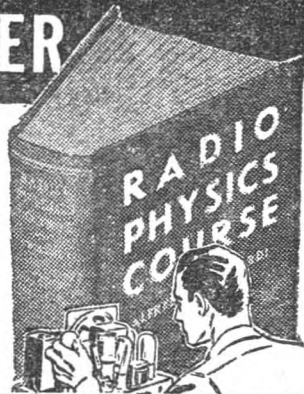
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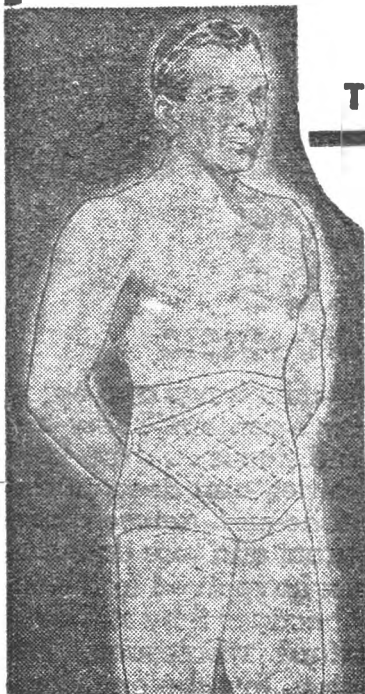
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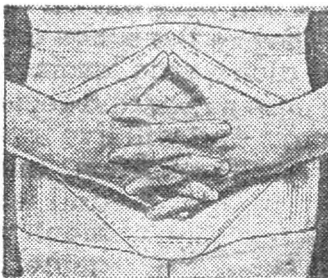
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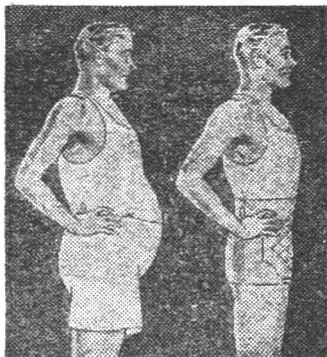
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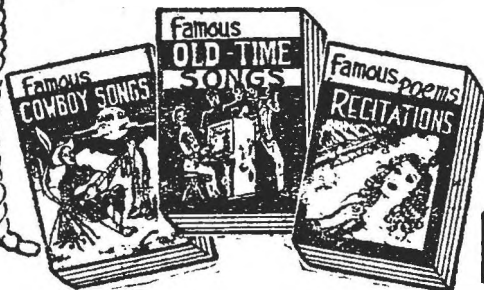


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*Novel by the
Author of
Wench In Love*

CHAPTER I

NICK MACKLIN felt a pardonable smug satisfaction, an all's-right-with-my-world sort of thing, as he stood there before his apartment door. He looked down,



Nick knew that, to him, she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

BY
RHODA TEMPLE

Miss Featherbrain

Alias Miss Virginia Houghton could certainly scramble up a man's life!

for a moment, at Alicia Barnes' cool, amused black eyes. He smiled at her, a nice smile. Not even her brother Tom's impatient rattling of change in his trouser pocket, which demanded no further delay with the cocktails, could take away Nick's beautiful feeling.

It wasn't every man who had a

girl like Alicia. A girl whose black hair shone like fine satin, whose glamorous beauty made him catch his breath and who, at the same time, had a nice possessiveness toward him. It gave a man a whale of a lot of confidence and pride to take a girl to lunch at the Colony Restaurant and see that every male there wished he

could give the wolf call. It wasn't every man, was it, who'd come out of the Navy to a dead little shipyard and, by hook or crook, been able to build his first Atlantic Class sailboat ready to prove its sleek fleetness? And certainly it wasn't anyone but a superman who could find a charming three-room apartment in crowded New York these days, and who now was giving Alicia and her brother a preview of the official housewarming.

Alicia reached up and brushed her cool, slender fingers caressingly across his cheek. "Hurry and let us in, Nicky," she said in her deep, thrilling "just-for-him" voice, "I'm going quietly crazy wanting to see this new home—of yours."

"You'll like it, honey," he promised. Had he, he wondered, caught a meaning beneath her words that she wished it were *their* home? His heart skipped a couple of beats at the thought.

He knew that his big high-ceilinged rooms in this beautiful old house on East Ninth Street, were the perfect setting for the mellowed Chintzs and the Sheraton and Duncan Phyfe pieces which had been in his family for so many, many years. It was nice, he thought, to live with furniture which wasn't just furniture, but a part of your life.

Sure, Nick assured himself happily, Alicia would love it and it would "become" her, as his grandmother had been wont to say. And he wanted Alicia's first impression to be perfect. He wanted to hear her catch her breath when she first saw his living room, in sheer delight.

NICK had deliberately not brought her here alone because he'd been afraid that he'd tell her that he loved her and wanted to marry her but fast. And he couldn't yet. He couldn't until the orders started pouring into the Macklin shipyards for his racing sailboats. He was broke and he wasn't asking Alicia to share any beer and skittles—she who was meant for fresh caviar and vintage champagne.

If only Tom liked the boat and won the regatta with it, then the yards

would hum again. The big firm of Carpenter and Mason were taking on the distributorship of the boat who won that regatta. And Nick had only one real competitor—the new Orinco Boat Company.

"Perhaps," Alicia's black eyes smiled at him, "I'll find places that will need the feminine touch."

"You will!" Nick's voice was suddenly ragged with his need for her. He was lonely for her and he had so many things he wanted to say to her. Silly, beautiful things. He had only known her since he'd been out of the Navy, but hers was the face a man dreamed about when he stood watch on quiet starlit nights, when there was surcease from the boom of big guns.

"Welcome," he said softly and held the door wide for her.

He took Tom's hat and hung it up in the little foyer with his own. He heard Alicia gasp as she walked into his living room and he chuckled with pleasure. She liked it. He felt swell.

Nick followed her into the room and there was a sudden whirlwind of motion. Someone light and very holdable, clutched him around the neck and began swirling him around until he thought they both were a couple of dervishes. Two warm, soft lips pressed tightly against his in a long kiss, a breath-taking kiss. Then a lot of spun gold curls were buried in his neck and a stray tickled his nose. Ginny!

He saw, out of the corner of his eye, that his favorite chair had been pulled close to the brightly burning fire, a fire which they certainly didn't need this warm spring day. His dilapidated maroon dressing gown was draped cozily over the arm of the chair and his most odiferous briar was on the end table with his tobacco pouch.

The feminine touch, he groaned to himself as he recalled Alicia's words. He was afraid to look very long into her frosty eyes. And he began to suspect that Alicia's gasp hadn't been such sheer delight.

"Ginny," he said sternly to the excited, happy girl swinging recklessly

in his arms. He managed somehow to get her deposited firmly on her own two feet and to disengage her arms from around his neck. "Ginny. . . ."

"Oh, Nicky, Nicky. You wretch. You hateful meanie. You destroyer of maiden's dreams. I was out in that old California just pining, but simply. And you were here all the time," her eyes were filled with reproach. They reminded Nick of the soft, trusting brown eyes of a Setter puppy he'd owned before the war, and he was uncomfortable. He knew he couldn't scold and hurt Ginny for busting in like this. He just couldn't give her pluperfect hell for it when she was so obviously deliriously glad to see him again.

HE LOOKED at Ginny closely and blinked. Good Lord, the kid had grown up in these last three years. He mentally counted on his fingers, she was nineteen come the Ides of March. His family and hers had been next door neighbors in Southport, and he'd been seven when she was born.

He grinned down at her now as he remembered that from the time she could crawl she'd gotten herself and him into messes. He remembered the trees he'd jerked her out of, and the water when she was learning to sail his boat. But he'd never, since the day she was born, been able to jerk her out of his hair.

Nick sighed a little as he looked at her now. If only Ginny would not leap and then think. If only she wouldn't do something first and then wonder about it.

Miss Featherbrain!

The old name came back to him. Just like yesterday three years rolled away and he was jerking her out from under his seat on the train because she was determined to go along with him into the Navy.

"Hello, again, kid," he said softly and then he looked over at Alicia and smiled hopefully, "Alicia," his voice begged a little for understanding, "this is Virginia Houghton, alias, Miss Featherbrain. We grew up together," his hand unconsciously

ruffled Ginny's golden curls. She's really the only kid sister I've ever had."

He was waiting for Alicia's answering smile. Waiting for her acknowledged understanding in the flashing glance that two people who love know. He waited.

"Hello, Alicia," Ginny said very sweetly and very condescendingly, then she turned all her attention back to Nick, "I'm definitely not your kid sister. And you know it very well," her voice dropped to a low caressing note as she added, "darling."

That ties it, Nick tried to laugh as at a joke. "Take this stuff, Ginny," he pointed to the cozy slipper effect by the fireside, "back where you found it. And behave, you," he added ominously under his breath.

"Oh, Nicky, darling," she drawled and rolled her beautiful soft brown eyes at him. Nick could have cheerfully spanked her with a two by four.

GINNY made a great business of gathering up his personal belongings and he flushed. All Miss Featherbrain had to do, he thought glumly, was to just appear and he'd find himself in a mess. He saw her smile her best gamin smile at Alicia and was worried.

"Isn't he just too cute," Ginny sighed indulgently.

Nick could feel Alicia's eyes searching his face. He felt more hot and more uncomfortable and wished he could take off his coat. No sane person would build a fire on a day like this. He wished wholeheartedly that he was back on his battleship where all a guy could do was to dream about girls. But, he reassured himself, surely Alicia could understand that Ginny was just showing off like a kid. Just trying to create one of her beloved "situations"—and, brother, how Ginny dearly loved her "situations."

Alicia was still staring at him, coldly, thoughtfully. He felt contrite. He hadn't prepared her for Miss Featherbrain. . . and Lord knew you had to be prepared. "Look, honey," he held out his hand to

Alicia, "come with me and let's shake the cocktails."

"Well," Alicia hesitated and it seemed to Nick that her indecision hung over him like a straight edged razor, "perhaps."

"Oh, no, no, no. Wait!" Ginny called gayly from his bedroom. Here we go again, Nick thought and sank resignedly into his favorite easy chair, drawn so close to the fire they didn't need. "Nicky," Ginny floated back into the room with a smile for him which held the familiarity of a lifetime, "has an absolute passion for daiqueries, but abso. And besides. I've a surprise for him. A gorgeous, tied up in bright red paper surprise for his homecoming, even if he did slide in on a wing and not let me know." Ginny took a cigarette and Nick almost jerked it out of her hand before he remembered, with a thud. that she was grown up now. He saw the look she gave in the direction of Alicia's brother Tom. "Hello," she said huskily and Tom practically fell on his face jumping to give her a light. *Nuts*, Nick said to himself.

He felt suddenly old and thoroughly bewildered. She'd been bad enough when she was just a harum-scarum kid, but grown up it would take the complement of a battle-wagon to cope with her. She spelled trouble always, this girl.

He noticed with surprise that she was rather tall and beautifully proportioned. He looked her over very carefully, looked at the gold of her hair, her lovely soft brown eyes and the beautiful planes of her face. He felt a big brother's pride. The wolves would always whistle to her and she'd just walk away and leave them slayed. Ummm, he thought. And wondered if Tom were all right for her to know?

"Come in, package," Ginny called gayly and her surprise came walking. Old and wizzen, a broad smile cracking his wrinkled cheeks, his hand shaking the cocktail tray like crazy came Nick's father's old man about work. His best pal—Jed.

"Jed!" Nick yelled and rescued the tray before he grabbed the old man. Nick's bright blue eyes misted as he

thought back at all the years he and his father and Ned had been together. Jed had been nursemaid, friend and confidant. He'd taught Nick to sail his first boat, to dig the biggest clams and to laugh when he darn near broke his neck. After his father's death two years ago, he'd pensioned Jed off, sharing with him his Navy pay. And here was Jed, all dressed up like someone's houseman, grinning at him.

"Hi, kid," Jed gulped, looked warily at Alicia, "Welcome home, sir," he finally managed with commendable dignity.

Nick laughed and hugged Jed again. "Are you nuts?" he asked. "This is Jed," he told Alicia proudly.

"Hello, Jed," Alicia said sweetly and looked hurt when Jed snapped to attention and bowed low.

I'D LIKE to kick him right in the bow, Nick decided furiously. Jed and Ginny were making Alicia feel that she was an outsider, that the three of them were a closed corporation. They were patently trying to freeze Alicia out and it was a damn shame. Well, he'd fix it. He walked over to Alicia and put his arm around her. "Sweet," he said tenderly and wished he could kiss her, "if you ever decide to take me it will be for worse and not for better." He gave a quick glare at Jed and Ginny and was pleased that they both looked unhappy.

Alicia responded instantly and he was glad that her smile was a little triumphant, "Am I complaining, Nicky, dear?" Her voice, Nick thought, was thrilling and he sighed like a man in love.

"So, there I was going to Hollywood, Ginny spoke as though she were just picking up again a fascinating story. She had poise, this kid, Nick thought, and liked it. "And Jed was lonely so I took him along."

"Were you in pictures?" Alicia asked sweetly.

"Oh, never. Ah, never," Ginny's voice was strictly from soap opera, "Me, I was radioing around. But I'd forget to read lines so I'd ad lib and lay the biggest, cutest eggs on shows.

They adored me, but definitely, on rehearsals but they said I was dismal on the air." She sighed a mighty sigh and Nick started to grin at her before he saw Alicia's stoney face. "I was working hard at it, the reading I mean," Ginny pushed her fingers through her curls dramatically, "when I learned that my own hero was back from the boom of war. When I learned that hammers again beat at dear old Macklin. . . ."

"Shut up!" Nick roared. He wished that all his furniture didn't personally represent Grandma Beebee, Aunt Tessie and Grandpa Macklin. It would be such a pleasure to smash the hell out of it.

"Little Miss Featherbrain," he snarled to himself.

CHAPTER II

"**W**HAT TIME tomorrow, Nick," Tom asked, "can we try out that new boat of yours?" Nick came quickly back from his world of contemplated mayhem. "Say ten o'clock, Tom? I'll have Hargrove aboard to skipper so I can talk to you about the boat. She's the fastest racing job in her class you've ever seen. She's one lovely honey." His eyes held a faraway look; the look of men who sail the seas and look always at the far horizons.

Nick came from a long line of boat builders. His great-grandfather built three-masted schooners and his grandfather and father carried on that same fine tradition. They began on the rock-bound coast of Maine and ended today with the shipyards in Southport where the last of the Macklin's was building racing sailboats.

Building one sailboat, Nick amended, until it proved itself better than any of the Atlantics and the orders came bouncing in.

"See you then, Nick, at ten on the dock in Southport. Come on, Ginny," Tom pulled her to her feet, "let's go find a quiet spot and dissertate on jibs and mizzens."

Ginny used too much lipstick, Nick decided dourly, when she came out of his bedroom with some saucy impu-

dent flowers in her hair masquerading for a hat. He wondered if her eyelashes could possibly be that long. She was a slick chick all right. He looked at Tom sharply, searchingly and for the first time actually saw him as an individual. Until this moment Tom had been just Alicia's kid brother and a fine sailor who could win the regatta with the new sailboat. But now Tom was something else; now he was a date for Ginny.

Am I an old man with a flowing mustache, Nick asked himself bitterly. Am I Ginny's grandpa and grandma? Hell, I'm a guy back from the war in love with the most beautiful girl on the face of this funny earth, struggling to put a shipyard back on its feet so I can get that girl for my own. Nick's blue eyes narrowed, Ginny had managed to get along very well indeed from the looks of her during the years he'd been away from Southport. She was a big girl now, she was. . . . Nick gave it up. He knew he'd still trail along when she got into more messes; he'd still be the guy who'd stick his neck out for her.

He couldn't help wincing when he saw Ginny and Tom to the door and heard Tom murmur softly, as he took Ginny's arm too possessively, "Baby, you're really quite a dish."

What Tom needed most, Nick decided furiously as he slammed the front door, was a good poke right in the nose. He was a pretty brash kid to be taking Ginny out.

SOMEHOW, the evening didn't go along very well after that. Nick tried tactfully to find out more about Tom from Alicia. He apparently did a poor job of it because Alicia blazed out at him in anger. About all the information Nick squeezed out was that Tom was perfect, thank you. Then Alicia settled down into being too cool and aloof, or else odiously cheerful.

If she was sore at him and had things on her mind, why didn't she just tell it? Why didn't Alicia come right out with it like Ginny always did? Why only give out like a reasonable facsimile of a snowflake?

Nick became more unhappy and disgruntled. Finally he stopped trying to charm away Alicia's bad mood and they both went into uncomfortable silences. It was with relief that he took her home immediately after the nice dinner he'd ordered for what he'd thought would be a sort of special occasion—the first time she'd seen his apartment. He was a little brisque when he explained that he was going to Southport on a very early train and would meet her and Tom at ten sharp. Her lips were very cool and unresponsive when he scooped and kissed her.

He walked back down town and let thoughts chase themselves around in his mind until they became exhausted. He was angry because of the dismal evening with Alicia. But before he went to sleep that night he'd made up his mind that the spoiled dinner had been entirely Ginny's fault. She'd busted in and messed things completely up; he'd give her the devil next time he saw her. He sleepily promised himself that he'd keep her combed out of his hair forever.

"Miss Featherbrain," he muttered and pulled the blanket around his chin, "makes things just dandy."

* * *

THE NEXT morning was ideal for sailing as though Nick had ordered it special. Not even the breeze could be improved upon, which was a great compliment indeed for the breeze, coming from a man who was about to put his boat to the test. Nick whistled gayly as he changed to white ducks in his office in the Macklin yards.

At nine-thirty he was on the dock after having checked the sails for about the sixteenth time. His blue eyes held the pride of creation as he watched the boat bob gently as the little rippling waves broke against her sides. "Baby," he said softly, "you're a beauty and please do your stuff today for papa."

He looked for Hargrove on the dock and was suddenly irritated. Hargrove should have been there long be-

fore this to talk things over. He was one of the best men with an Atlantic Class sailboat around and he'd been wildly enthusiastic each time they'd tried out the new boat. Hargrove would be the perfect man to skipper the boat in the big race, but Hargrove had his own boat entered. He should be here.

Nick saw Ginny then sitting on the dock swinging her long beautiful legs nonchalantly. She was elaborately pretending that she didn't know he was there, or in fact, any place within miles. She looked beautiful, he thought as he walked toward her, in her white slack suit and the flame sweater.

"You'll get your pretty pants dirty," Nick told her and was amused at her wide-eyed startled recognition. Then he frowned. Alicia certainly wouldn't like her being here when she arrived with Tom. "Look," he said sternly, "you did plenty damage yesterday. You're cutting capers in my love life. So quit it and behave."

"So?" she asked and demurely lowered her twinkling eyes. "How long and how well do you know Alicia and her beautiful brother?"

"Long enough," he answered curtly. He felt a mild tinge of uncertainty as he realized that he neither knew Alicia very long nor very well. Still you didn't have to grow up with a girl, did you, to know you loved her?

"You," Ginny shook her head sadly. "are a goon. And I suppose you didn't worry about me getting home to Southport safely last night? I suppose," she sighed, "that witch Alicia has come between us."

Nick's hands clenched. He wanted to shake her and heave her into the water. "Stop it!" he ordered and he wasn't kidding. "For sixteen long years you've dragged me into your harum-scarum messes, then I went away to the safety of war. Well, you've done all right for yourself by yourself these last three years. Continue it." He turned.

"I've a message for you," she called sweetly.

NICK STOPPED and whirled to face her. He had a nasty hunch

that something was amiss, or maybe it was that Miss Featherbrain never was the bearer of good tidings. "Give out with it," he said.

"Hargrove can't skipper for you. He had to dash into New York to see a man about a job."

"What!" Nick exploded. Atlantics are sleek racing jobs and the perfection of the crews' seamanship is of paramount importance. No one knew better than Nick that in order to demonstrate his Atlantic Class boat, he must have excellent crew work. There wasn't anyone he could get now to fill Hargrove's place with any degree of satisfaction, much less excellence. Unless. . .

He looked at Ginny speculatively. She was wonderful with an Atlantic, almost as good as Hargrove. If she didn't get flighty or interested in something else. She was the only really good person with a sailboat who could manage to think of something else while she cut through the water at a terrific speed, that he'd ever known. Oh, nuts, he thought in disgust. Alicia would be angry and Tom's mind wouldn't be on any boat if Ginny were skipper. He'd use his brains and postpone the sail until this afternoon when Hargrove would probably be back. And he'd keep his fingers crossed that the breeze didn't either die or work itself into a gale.

"Can't I help?" Ginny asked hopefully. "I'm strictly huba huba with an Atlantic." She must have seen his bewilderment because she explained as though she were speaking to the old man of the mountains, "Huba huba is current for that ancient 'in the groove' line."

"Well, just think of that now," he snapped at her. "No, you can't help except by behaving yourself and leaving me my own problems."

He turned away from her again and saw Alicia watching him. Tom was with her and her father. Mr. Barnes hated all water and all boats, especially did he hate sailboats, but he was ducked out so he must be going along for the ride. "Oh, dear Heaven," Nick groaned and jerked Ginny off the dock. "You'll have to skipper for me. I can't stall old man

Barnes: he's the bank roll. Please, Ginny," he begged, "do your stuff. Don't let me down."

Ginny wrinkled her pert little nose and pulled down her flame sweater. "Let you down?" her voice dripped tragedy, "'Tis you, my lost love, who've let me down for yon black-eyed dizzy."

"Shut up!" Nick hissed and jabbed her with his elbow.

HE SMILED in welcome, but one look at Alicia's white angry face wiped it off. Tom dove for Ginny and they began a silly series of protracted giggles while Mr. Barnes sputtered about his hatred for all diabolical sailboats. A dandy group picture, Nick thought unhappily, just dandy.

"Is this boat safe?" Mr. Barnes barked as though he would only believe the worst.

"Of course, sir," Nick grinned reassuringly, "So safe that Ginny is going to skipper."

"Ugg," Mr. Barnes answered and crawled aboard.

"Please, Alicia," Nick caught her arm and held her back for a moment. "Please, honey, don't be angry. I should have explained about Miss Featherbrain, but I just didn't think about her. I love you," he whispered.

Alicia's black eyes searched his face, "Do you, Nicky?" she sounded skeptical.

"Look, honey," he tossed discretion out the window. To heck with being broke and wanting everything to be perfect for Alicia before he asked her to marry him, "will you marry me when I manage to get a couple of quarters to rub together?"

"Yes," she said quickly. He caught her hungrily to him. Right there in front of her father, her brother and Ginny, right there in front of everybody, he kissed her. It was a beautiful kiss; he could feel the ice in Alicia melt and he knew that she was his. It was wonderful and he wished he didn't have to go sail a boat.

"It's all right, Dad," Alicia called gayly, "we just got engaged."

"Ummm," Mr. Barnes congratulated them.

Nick felt Ginny's eyes on him. Soft, brown eyes that were now somehow filled with bewildered, unbelieving pain. And for no reason at all, in the midst of his new found happiness, he felt like a heel.

Ginny was at the helm going out of the Southport Harbor. He saw that she wasn't relaxed as she always was, that her back was tense. He thought about going over to her and saying something gay and silly, but Mr. Barnes at that moment began asking questions about the boat.

It happened quickly.

CHAPTER III

INE MINUTE they were sailing beautifully and skillfully out of the Harbor. The next, Ginny collided with a moored cruiser. Tom shouted as the sailboat jarred and Mr. Barnes yelled at the top of his lungs as he sprawled on the deck.

In an instant Nick was at Ginny's side, his face white. "I—I," she wet her dry lips and tried again, "I didn't tack quickly enough. I'm so sorry, so terribly sorry, Nicky."

"No damage is done," Nick tried to be cheerful, but he hadn't counted on Mr. Barnes.

"Take this thing right back to the dock," Mr. Barnes bellowed, "back at once. It's a danger, this boat. Unmanageable."

They all tried to argue with him that accidents could happen to anyone, that it wasn't the fault of the boat. But it remained completely hopeless; trying to influence Mr. Barnes, Nick thought bitterly, was like trying to talk sense to a whale.

"Please, Mr. Barnes," Ginny brushed her hair off her forehead, "it was my fault. I just didn't tack quickly enough."

"Boat's no good. Unmanageable," Mr. Barnes reiterated and that was that.

On the dock Alicia came over to Nick's side. "This is sickening, Nicky. Father will never buy your boat for Tom now. It's really a shame," her voice became noticeably colder, "that you had to trust the

whole thing to Ginny. Call me later in New York?"

Nick nodded, he couldn't trust himself to speak. He watched Alicia walk away and the last thing he heard was Mr. Barnes' "Ugg!"

"Ok," he said to the slender, worried girl who waited quietly by his side, "let's have the reason for it, Ginny. You've been sailing since you can remember and never in your life have you collided with any boat before." Suddenly he was swept by an almost uncontrollable anger. Had she deliberately messed it up for him? Deliberately jammed that cruiser because she was childishly mad about Alicia? She'd looked stricken when Alicia had told her father of their engagement. His fingers bit into her shoulders, "Come on, why did you do it?"

GINNY'S eyes blinked shut, then opened and she looked at him like a frightened child. "I couldn't help it. I," her voice broke once before she went on, "I was thinking about something and—and—"

"You'll have to do better than that," he shook her hard, "Why, why did you jam that cruiser?"

"I can't explain," she said it with finality. He saw that she no longer looked like a frightened child. She looked much older, much more grown up, and there was a hopelessness to the droop of her shoulders that would have tugged at his heart if he'd let it. "I was thinking about something," she spaced her words, "and I wasn't paying any attention to the boat."

"Ok," he dropped his hands from her shoulders. "So, you weren't paying any attention," the words lashed out at her. "Well, pay some attention to this: Stay out of my life from here on out, Miss Featherbrain."

"All right, Nicky," there was an unsteady tilt to her voice and he could hear how close she was to losing control. She walked away quickly.

Nick stared at her and he was mad clear through. She knew what selling the boat to Tom and having him win the regatta meant. It meant all the work the yards could handle because it meant that Carpenter and Mason

would take on the distributorship of the racing boats, it meant that he'd win out over the new Orinco Boat Company. But Ginny was thinking! A fine explanation, he thought, for wrecking a shipyard and his life.

Maybe he had been too tough with her about it. He didn't want to hurt her; she was just a dopey kid who managed to mess up everything. Probably when he cooled off, he'd telephone her. No, he decided firmly, he'd better let the whole thing stand because Alicia wouldn't want him to go on playing nursemaid to Miss Featherbrain.

Hargrove came running up to him, "Hey, Nick, am I too late?"

"Yeah," Nick answered shortly, "much. What in hell happened to you?"

"Aw," Hargrove's voice was heavy with disgust, "some cluck phoned me to come right into New York to see about a swell job with a boat broker. I must have copied the address down wrong because I couldn't find any such address."

"Dandy," Nick muttered. "Well, I'll see you around."

He walked to the nearest cocktail bar and climbed on a stool. He morosely ordered a double Scotch, maybe if he gave his mind a jolt with some artificial stimulation he could somehow think his way out of his problems. He played with the idea of racing his boat himself in the regatta, but he knew that while he could design and build beautiful boats, and while he could sail well, he lacked that something which won races. He couldn't get that extra burst of speed which made the difference.

WITH HIS second drink, he thought about Alicia. She should have stayed with him, he decided. Wasn't the girl you loved and just got engaged to supposed to stick around when the going got tough and hold your hand, or something? Nick felt very lonely and very unhappy.

He glanced out the open doorway and thought he caught a glimpse of a white slack suit with a flame sweater.

He was probably wrong because Ginny wouldn't be hanging around trying to see him.

He lit a cigarette and made circles on the bar with his glass. What could he do, he wondered? Tom would now buy an Orinco boat and if he managed to win the regatta with it, that would be that and Nick might as well pick up his marbles and go home.

She slipped on the stool beside him and he saw that her face was tense. "Nicky," she faltered.

"Hello," he managed a smile. "Sorry I blew up and lost my temper. What were you thinking about Ginny that made you jam that boat?"

She hesitated for a long time and stared down at her hands in her lap. "You and your engagement." She said it almost inaudibly.

"Well, for the Lord's sakes," he began and then stopped when he read so clearly the hurt pain in her big expressive eyes. She was a funny kid. But he supposed his engagement would knock her for a little while until she got used to it. She'd probably feel that she'd lost her playmate. He'd speak to Alicia about it and soon she and Ginny would be pals. He felt better. "All right," he smiled, "let's forget the boat jamming. After all, if Hargrove hadn't gone off on a wild goose chase, you wouldn't have been aboard. It was just one of those unlucky things."

"I'm afraid not," she said slowly. "It's worse than you think. I, I got that phony message to Hargrove so I could skipper for you."

"Why?" he yelled and nearly knocked over his glass.

"I wanted to make you proud of me," she told him simply. "And I thought maybe I could protect you against that phony Alicia and her silly brother. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I had to tell you. Goodbye, Nicky," and she hurried away.

He was too bewildered to feel any anger. Girls, he thought disgustedly, were impossible to understand. He thought seriously of being a hermit.

Then an idea began jabbing itself into his mind. Could it be that Ginny thought she cared about him? Could

that be what was wrong with the kid? He threw back his head and laughed loud and long. He was getting as crazy as Miss Featherbrain herself.

ALMOST before Nick realized it, the date of his promised housewarming arrived. Jeb rushed around polishing and dusting. He phoned the caterer and left reproachful notes around for Nick. Then he announced that he was needed at the yards and wouldn't be on hand to serve.

This is for Alicia, Nick reminded himself grimly, as he tried once again to tie his tie right. She wants the mob around, and she's the one to be pleased.

Alicia arrived early. She wore a blue dress of some soft material which clung to her figure. Her dark curls were piled high on her head and topped by something which Nick took to be either a feather or a hat concealed by a feather.

"I'm afraid I'm dreadfully early . . ." she paused long enough for Nick to make the appropriate noises of denial, and then went on, "but I wanted to be alone with you for a while."

He was touched. This beautiful creature wanted to be with *him*. He was so pleased that he was almost embarrassed, and he took her coat clumsily.

It seemed to Nick, then, that time raced. Soon, the rooms filled with people and as he moved from group to group he was conscious, always, of Alicia and her circle of admirers. His ears picked up her light laugh from the general hub-bub and he felt rather than saw when she looked his way.

Everything was going smoothly—and then Ginny arrived!

She was with a man whom Nick had never seen. He was tall and blonde and strikingly goodlooking and seemed to pose in the doorway. Alicia's brother stood behind them.

"Well!" Alicia's voice seemed louder than usual, "Well, how *dramatic* of Miss Houghton, bringing your rival to your own party!"

It was the first time Nick had ever seen Jim Bradley, owner of the

Orinco Boat Company. For a split second he remained motionless, then he went over to the party by the door.

Ginny kissed him. He noticed her smudged lipstick and wondered how much of it was transferred to him. Of the four, only Ginny and the Bradley person seemed entirely at ease.

As Nick welcomed his guests, he could have cheerfully murdered Ginny for having brought Bradley. He knew that the room was buzzing and by tonight it would be all over town that she had brought the boat-owner to his party in the hope of making a deal. Lord, that feather-brain of hers!

"Your lipstick!" he hissed in her ear. "It's smeared all over; your face is a mess."

She smiled gently. "I know. You should see yours."

He ducked into the kitchen and rubbed his lips violently. He began to knock together more cocktails for his thirsty guests. There was a sound behind him, and Ginny stood in the doorway.

He turned his back on her, rudely. "Go away."

"I can mix a wicked Martini," she suggested.

"My little helpmate," he murmured. "Just go away."

There was silence then, save for the sound of his hurried cocktail preparations. Damn it all, he wondered, where was the rest of the gin? His mind was a blank. He turned to Ginny savagely.

"You cause me more trouble—" he began.

SHE seemed small, and nostalgically familiar against the cold brightness of the modern kitchen. Her eyes were hurt above her fixed smile. She turned to leave.

"Oh, hell, kid," Nick walked over to her and took her into his arms, "I'm sorry. But you do the darndest things."

The head against his shoulder nodded in agreement. "You're right,"

she said mournfully. "Absolutely right. I'm stupid and wicked."

He was shocked. "You're not wicked!" he protested, and tried to add, "and you're not stupid," but the words stuck somewhere just below his Adam's apple.

"You'll grow up," he conceded magnanimously.

Evidently, it was the wrong thing to say. Ginny drew away. "Can you wait?" she asked coldly.

Nick kicked open the swinging kitchen door, balancing his tray of cocktails carefully. He was unpleasantly aware of a new and disturbing emotion and it concerned Ginny. If it wasn't for the fact that he'd known her all his life, and she was just a kid, besides, he'd begin to think that he was falling in love with her.

Alicia threw him a frosty look as he emerged from the kitchen, Ginny, carrying a tray of canapes, close on his heels. Her inference was unmistakable and so was her annoyance at Ginny playing hostess. The buzz in the room changed tone; Nick knew that most of his guests had been talking about him and the fact that Jim Bradley was at his party.

Bradley, himself, brought the question out into the open. He finished a cigarette, extinguished it in a nearby ashtray and ambled over to Nick.

"Nice place you have here," he waved a hand affably.

Nick nodded. "I'm lucky."

"Do you mind talking over a bit of business?" Bradley asked abruptly.

"I didn't know we had any business to talk over," Nick said stiffly. "Besides, my guests—"

"Macklin," Bradley's thin smile didn't quite reach his eyes, "Macklin, why don't you act smart and sell out to Orinco? Your boat can't possibly win the Regatta and you won't get that Carpenter and Mason contract without winning."

"You know a lot about my business, don't you?" Nick was aware of the many discretely interested eyes turned in their direction and realized that there were just as many wide-opened ears, he tried to keep his face

expressionless.

"Our business," Bradley corrected gently. He was a better actor than Nick, from his expression, he might have been talking about the weather. "With Carpenter and Mason handling Orinco distribution the Macklin shipyards may as well fold now and save money."

Nick didn't answer. To his oversensitive ears the conversational tone in the room seemed louder. There was a flurry of movement as some of the guests rose to leave and Nick was glad of the excuse to break-away.

Bradley made one more attempt, just as he was about to leave and after the conventional goodbyes had been said. "We could use a good man like you," he called over his shoulder.

Nick colored with anger, but remembered that he was the host. "Thanks," he said evenly. "I'll remember that—if ever I need to."

CHAPTER IV

EVERYONE was gone, then, but Alicia and Ginny. They were sitting, with an appreciable distance between them, on the Duncan Phyfe sofa. Alicia was aloof and dignified and unbelievably beautiful. Ginny slouched a bit wearily, her slim legs crossed, her hair disheveled.

"Well, kids?" He drew up an ottoman and sat facing the girls. He was ghastly tired, and unhappy. Bradley had paid most of his attention to Alicia. Some of his guests had questioned him about his intention of closing the Macklin yards. And Ginny, right in front of Alicia's nose, had played the perfect and complete hostess. Oh, everything was ducky, all right. Just as ducky as things could turn out, he supposed, in a world which contained Miss Featherbrain.

"Well, kids?" he repeated.

Alicia answered. Her right eyebrow elevated a bit first, so he knew that the forthcoming statement would be, to say the least, unkind.

"Is it well?" she asked unnecessarily.

Ginny slanted her brown eyes sleepily at the girl. "You seemed to be having a good time," she remarked.

Alicia's lips straightened. It gave them a thin look, despite the lipstick. "Weren't you a bit too busy," she asked sweetly, "to notice much of anything that went on?"

Ginny appeared to give the question much thought. But she smiled, also sweetly, and made no answer.

Nick clutched vainly for bright conversation. "Quite a party?" he heard himself say squeakily, and wished immediately that he hadn't said it.

Alicia leaned forward and laid her hand over his. "Are you going to sell?" she asked.

Nick looked up at her curiously. She looked as if she wanted him to sell to Orinco. But, he reassured himself quickly, how could she understand just how much the Macklin yards meant to him?"

"No, honey," he shook his head. "I don't want to—quit."

AN UNBECOMING red mottled Alicia's face. "But, Nick, you just can't afford not to. I mean, of course I don't know much about it, but Jim Bradley seems sort of nice, and—well—about us, darling, we'll just be starting out—"

She made Nick feel ashamed. Here he was, considering himself and ignoring the possible welfare of this lovely creature who was trusting herself to his care. His shoulders sagged.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "Maybe I'm grandstanding. I'm all mixed up at the moment."

"Of course, I'm right. I was only thinking of you—"

"It says here!" Ginny interrupted scornfully. She turned to Nick and her eyes looked shocked. "You're not serious, Nick!"

"And you keep out of things which don't concern you," Alicia flung out. "You started enough trouble as it is.

And if you're so opposed to his selling, why did you bring Jim Bradley here in the first place."

"I didn't bring him here," Ginny retorted furiously. "He came with your brother! Tom was my date. I was just taken along for the ride."

"Tom wouldn't have brought him here!"

"Well, since you're so sure Tom wouldn't, was it you? He seems to know you pretty well, judging from remarks he made on the way over. Go on... why don't you tell Nick that you've known Jim Bradley for a long time. Why don't you?"

Alicia turned to Nick. Tears trembled on her long eyelashes. "Nick," she said shakily, "Ginny says perfectly dreadful things. I don't want to fight with her. It doesn't matter to me what she thinks, as long as you realize that I only want your happiness." She pressed her hand over her eyes.

Nick put his arm around her trembling shoulders and glared at Ginny. "Now! See what you've done now."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," there was nothing sleepy about Ginny now. "I give up. You can go to blazes. And, Bub, you're on your way."

As she walked toward the foyer, with the obvious intention of getting her hat and jacket, Nick yelled:

"Since everybody's worked so furiously to get me to sell the yards, including you, with your Featherbrain antics, maybe you'll be interested to know that right as of now I've decided to take a job with a New York boat broker and start trying to sell other peoples' boats. And I hope," he added bitterly, "that I'll be a success in that, at least."

When he had finished speaking, Alicia snuggled a bit closer to him and slipped her hand in his. Ginny turned and stared, and he saw that for once she was speechless. She remained scornfully speechless while he helped her into her jacket and walked to the door with her.

* * *

SINCE Nick's anticipated new job would keep him in New York,

he sent Jeb to stay at the yards in Southport and gave him power of attorney just in case someone would want to buy the boat at once and Nick couldn't be reached. He was determined now to sell to Bradley although he told it to no one but Jeb.

GINNY stayed away from him. He told himself that life would be simple, pleasant and uncomplicated, now. But if he did find it too simple and too pleasant, at least he didn't find it uncomplicated. And Ginny was to blame for that, too. Because if she stayed away from him bodily, she still seemed to be ever-present in his thoughts. He worried about her. She was a dope. She was flighty. She was a gal who needed a lot of looking after. She was his pal.

So he spent more time than ever with Alicia. He sent her flowers daily and took her to the best plays and the smartest night clubs. She was as beautiful and scintillating as ever.

But something was wrong. Perhaps, Nick told himself, he had too many things on his mind at once, or perhaps Alicia did. That would account for the lack of ardor he felt for her.

He carried the conviction within himself that he was letting the Macklin tradition down in selling the yards. But he fought against it. A man should think first of the woman he loves; of her future. He shouldn't gamble. Alicia was happy. He was happy.

Or was he?

The look of scorn on Ginny's face as she had walked out of his apartment after his party kept him feeling like a heel. He swore at himself because he couldn't erase it from his memory. On the day before the regatta, he decided not to sell.

* * *

By five o'clock, the next morning, Nick was in Southport. It promised to be an ideal summer day, welcome cool, with the calm of dawn to be followed by a flirty wind. Nick was

happier than he'd been for days. He stood at the edge of the walk and looked at the old Macklin homestead. Nothing had changed, save himself, and he didn't want to change; he wanted to feel one with his heritage. He strode across the grass, its damp ends licking his shoes, and he breathed deeply, smelling the garden roses and the particularly old-fashioned scent of pinks.

Early as it was, Jeb was up. The old man was eating breakfast in the kitchen and when he caught sight of Nick he jumped to his feet.

"Nick!" he sounded relieved, as well as happy. "I'm glad you're here."

"You don't sound as surprised as I thought you'd be," Nick grinned. "How did you know I'd change my mind about coming here, even if my boat can't race?"

"Changed your mind?" Jeb was bringing out a chair for Nick when he asked the question, so that his face was hidden.

"Sure. How'd you know I wouldn't sell, after all?"

"Nick—*Mister* Nick, didn't you get my telegram?" the color had drained from Jeb's face. "Don't you know that I've *sold*?"

FOR A moment Nick was stunned. He wanted to ask him all sorts of questions but his tongue felt thick and clumsy. Finally, the words came:

"To whom?"

"Why, to Miss Ginny. She's set her heart on entering the regatta. She thinks sure she'll win."

"Jeb," Nick pleaded, "say this is a joke. Things can't be as bad as I seem to think I hear. You didn't really *mean* that—I can't even say it!"

Jeb nodded unhappily. "It's true, son. . . bloody butcher knife." He crossed his heart solemnly.

"Well," Nick said, sunk in gloom, "you may as well give me the horrible details." Suddenly he brightened. "The crew. She must know that it's impossible to get a decent crew now!"

Jeb looked as if he was about to strangle. "She has me—sir."

The fact that he added "sir" showed Nick his state of mind. Jeb never used the word unless he was doing his funny best to be formal, for an occasion, or he felt uneasy and perhaps a bit guilty.

Nick looked at him reproachfully. "Well, you finish your breakfast, Jeb, while I go talk to the real culprit."

He ran across the lawn and jumped the low hedge between the Macklin house and Ginny's. Ha, he told himself firmly, this time she's really going to hear a few things. I'll let her know that she won't get away with this mad idea. . . . And *before* she gets a chance to look helpless and unhappy; too. I'll just tell her what I think and then walk away before she can even offer an alibi—

Engrossed in his whirlwind plan of attack, he hardly noticed where he walked, but before he reached her window, a handful of pebbles in his hand, he saw her on the walk.

"Now, see here, Ginny," he began, then stopped and looked down at his left foot, because she was staring at it. "Now, see here—"

"Nicolas Macklin!" Ginny shouted, and for once her voice carried above his, "you vandal! Coming here at this unearthly hour, barging right through my favorite bed of Sweet William, and" she pointed an accusing finger toward his left foot, "and tearing half of it up by the roots!"

Nick looked at the offending foot. A tiny sprig of the flower waved jauntily between his foot and his shoe.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Now, see here, Ginny—" he remembered that he must say it fast, before she dragged out her helpless expression.

His gentle Ginny was shaking him. "And stop sounding like a broken record," she added.

"Well, if you'd give me time to finish," Nick said sulkily. "I wanted to tell you that you just can't race today. You're bound to make a mess of things. You'll probably come in last. The fine, beautiful Macklin Atlantic Class sailboat will be disgraced."

HE WOUND up breathless but triumphant. He'd said what he

wanted to say—practically. If the words had come out without quite the proper anger that he'd planned, at least he'd managed to keep out an edge of pleading that seemed to want to slink in.

When he looked at her, he knew that once again he was a dead duck. He tried to tell himself that it was all a trick—this unhappy stuff, this puzzled look, as if she'd just woke up and found out she was only an Earth-girl.

"Besides," he added weakly, "your crew! Old Jeb—holy hat!"

Later, he admitted to himself that this was a point which he shouldn't have brought up. It was then that he thought he saw her eyes become suspiciously bright. Ginny wasn't much on the crying business, but there was a mist on her lashes, like the dew on the hedge.

From some remote corner he heard a voice just like his own saying: "Of course, if you need me. . ."

A few minutes later, when he entered his kitchen, old Jeb looked up. He took one glance at Nick's face then reached out his hand.

They shook hands solemnly, in mutual defeat.

"Son, you've got a gol-darned flower stuck in your shoe," Jeb said kindly, and he stooped and removed it.

CHAPTER V

NICK, immaculate in white ducks, was on the dock when Alicia arrived. He gave a low whistle of surprise. "Hello, honey," he called as he ran toward her. "Say, it's wonderful of you to come. But how did you know I was here?"

Her kiss was hasty and if he hadn't of known better, he'd have sworn she was shaking with almost uncontrollable anger.

"Is it true?" she demanded, "can it be true that you're going to let Ginny race your boat?"

Nick looked uncomfortable. "Yes—and no," he hedged.

"Which is it?" Alicia's lovely voice sounded harsh.

"Ginny's racing, but the boat isn't mine. She bought it."

There was no mistaking Alicia's excitement. She grabbed Nick's arm. "You can't let her. You must stop her."

"But, honey." Nick looked at her wonderingly, "don't get so excited. I'm one of the crew. . . and Ginny's no slouch when it comes to handling a boat." To his own surprise, he really meant what he said.

The girl soothed down a bit. "I'm only thinking of you," she said softly. "I don't want Ginny to disgrace the Macklin reputation as designer and builder of boats."

Nick was touched. Her concern was unexpected and it pleased him. "Nothing short of death will deter Ginny," he said glumly, and felt like a hypocrite because he thrilled to the coming race.

It was a pretty scene, with the spectators' boats anchored in the center of the course, the whistles tooting wildly. There was a goodish wind ideal for racing, and the boats, seven of them, were trim beauties.

When Nick went aboard with Jeb and Ginny, he saw in enormous straggling letters the name MISS FEATHERBRAIN L, printed on the stern of his beautiful sleek boat.

"That does it," he thought glumly. "That's enough to capsize us, all by itself."

There was a grimness about Ginny that was unfamiliar to him. A bit of her childishness seemed lost. Nick wanted her to win more than anything in the world. He felt that he could hardly bear it if she was disappointed.

Suddenly, he pointed to the Orinco entry. Alicia was aboard, standing next to Tom. "Now, I wonder what Alicia's doing on that boat?" he muttered.

Ginny seemed unsurprised, she nodded matter-of-factly. "Alicia's quite a gal with a sail. Or, didn't you know?"

Nick wasn't quite sure just what she meant. When he tried to read her expression she looked back at him blandly. Was this a crack aimed at Alicia or him? Sometimes, he admit-

ted cautiously to himself, Ginny, for all her featherbrains, was way ahead of him.

* * *

GINNY seemed tense as they waited for the Blue Peter to be run up. When the flag was raised she checked her stop watch and handed it to Nick.

In five minutes the first gun was fired, and Nick grinned at her reassuringly: "Okay, skipper?" he called.

She smiled back, lines of strain on her young face. Lord, Nick was thinking, winning this race means so much to her. . . we've just got to win. But once the starting gun was fired, he was too busy to think of anything. Ginny seemed to be a split-second ahead of him in her reactions. He was conscious of a fierce pride in her seamanship.

The Orinco boat was ahead, she was number one and MISS FEATHERBRAIN was second. Ginny was trying desperately to overtake her. She adjusted the sails and trimmed the main sheep. Nick saw that she was sailing magnificently, but recklessly. Gradually, they began to overhaul the Orinco and Nick knew that Ginny wanted to get MISS FEATHERBRAIN in between the other boat and the wind. As they covered the Orinco, her sails fell slack. It seemed for a moment that the two boats would collide, and Ginny yelled to haul in the sheet and release the spinnaker.

Nick grinned as they shot across the finish line first. He began to think that he'd known all along they'd win.

* * *

When Nick called for Alicia, to take her to the dance at the Yacht Club, his bubbling happiness was dampened. She looked sullen and unhappy, and when he took her into his arms, she turned her face away from him.

"What's the matter, darling," he asked anxiously. "Are you ill?"

She picked up a light scarf and

threw it over her curls. "I'm not ill," she said evenly, "but I'm very disappointed in you."

"In *me*! Holy hat, didn't the boat I built win today? Even though," he added conscientiously, "if it was due to Ginny. And winning that race means the Carpenter and Mason contract. The Macklin shipyards are set now, honey."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she burst out, "why don't you forget about building boats!"

Nick was too amazed to answer. He followed her silently, and drove, without saying a word, to the Club. He was completely baffled and about ready to stop trying to figure things out.

As he opened the door to help Alicia out of the car, she said abruptly: "Let's not go in right away. I want to talk to you."

"All right." He shut the door and walked around the back of the car. "All right. Let's talk."

She stared at him, and he knew that he looked stern and formidable. It wasn't the way he wanted to look, especially to Alicia, but it was the way he felt.

She pulled at his sleeve timidly. "Nick," she burst out, "I want you to sell the yards to Orinco."

"Why?"

SHE DIDN'T answer; but suddenly Nick knew all the dreadful answers. He *should* have felt as if his world was ending. He should have thought that there might be some other logical explanation. But he felt nothing except a freedom and peace. And a confidence, as if the world was his oyster.

"I'll tell you why, if you'd like." His voice was harsh, and yet a warmth was creeping around the edges, an eagerness to get this sordid scene over.

He leaned an arm over the steering wheel and turned to face her squarely. "You became engaged to me because you love Jim Bradley. You were both cheap enough to use the only weapon you had powerful enough to have gotten my boat out of the race. I'll admit, I haven't quite

yet figured just how you wanted to work it. . . But it all led up to Orinco getting the Carpenter and Mason contract."

He fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes, offered her one and lit one for himself. "Didn't it?" he insisted.

"You're almost as clever as your Ginny," Alicia said and gave a short, sarcastic laugh.

Nick was so pleased by the term "your Ginny" that he forgot to be insulted at the comparison.

"But you're not too bright," Alicia went on spitefully. "Why do you think I was so disappointed when your silly Ginny person gummed things up when she demonstrated your boat for Dad?"

"I can guess now," Nick admitted modestly. "But I don't want to spoil your good clean fun. Go ahead and tell me."

Alicia was beside herself with rage. "If Dad would have bought the boat for Tom, then Tom would have lost the race, gotten a bonus from Jim for doing it, and Jim would have gotten the contract."

"Geniuses, all of you," Nick applauded. "And then the lovely Alicia would have grabbed off the noble Jim while the dope Nick held the bag."

But Alicia looked oddly triumphant for a moment. "Jim," she stated "is mine. Period. No matter what."

"I'm glad," Nick commented. "That's just what I'd wish for both of you. And now, don't you think we've had enough fun? Let's go in."

WHEN THEY went in, Nick realized that they must have sat outside a long time. Ginny had been presented with the cup for winning with MISS FEATHERBRAIN I, all the formalities were over, and the dancing was in full swing.

He practically shoved Alicia in Jim Bradley's direction and went to look for Ginny.

She was standing near the low balustrade on the balcony. The cup on the rail, her hand steadying it lightly. Later, he realized that there were people around her.

The bright summer moonlight shot

across her slim figure in its full-skirted, off-the-shoulder dress. He knew that, to him, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. For the first time, he saw his pal, his kid-companion, Miss Featherbrain, in all the fullness of her beauty and tenderness and young womanhood.

HIS HEART seemed to squeeze itself within his breast. He knew that he loved this girl so much it frightened him. It was too good, too perfect, too all encompassing.

She must have felt his presence. She turned and walked slowly toward him, bringing the moonlight with her. Her hands went out to his. One of them held the cup.

"For you, Nick," she said softly. "For you, the very best boatbuilder in the whole world."

People gathered around them and for a while there was no chance for Nick to say the things he wanted to say most in the world. But finally they were alone.

She smiled at him, and the newfound knowledge of his love made him shy. He began an agonizing series of worries. Surely she couldn't love him; she was so especially wonderful. Maybe she considered him just a pal. Maybe she even loved someone else—He decided to lead up to proposing to her by easy stages.

"You're very clever, you know," he decided to start with what he considered conversation. "Very clever, kid, to have seen through Alicia's double-dealing from the start."

"Oh, Nick," Ginny's words sang, "you mean you don't *mind*?"

"Of course not, Miss Fea-, Ginny I like you to be clever, sort of."

"I don't mean that, Nick. I'm not clever at all; things just seem to happen right for me someway. I mean, you don't mind about Alicia?"

"Alicia," he answered vaguely. "Oh, Ginny, I'm the worst dope in the world, but even I began to realize that I wasn't in love with her."

Ginny sighed happily. "Gee, I was worried stiff. Oh, Nick, Nick, you utter idiot, when did you find out that you didn't love her?"

He answered carefully. "I'm sure it was the night of my housewarming. The night," he stopped for a moment and then rushed the words out quickly. "The night I fell in love with you."

A small, silvery-clad tornado flung herself into his arms. He held her tightly for a moment, then kissed her full on her young, upturned lips.

"I love you," he said unsteadily. "Before heaven, I love you as I've never loved another person in my life. Will you be my wife, soon, my darling."

Tears were clinging to Ginny's dark lashes. She brushed them away sheepishly. "I'm so happy," she gulped. "I always cry when I'm so happy I don't know what to do."

Nick patted her gently. Yes, he was thinking. Life with my Madame Featherbrain will not be dull. She'll always be doing just what I don't expect. But, somehow, he felt that she'd always be loving him; as much, or almost as much, as he'd be loving her.

(THE END)

COMING NEXT ISSUE

**THE HEART THAT COULDN'T
LOVE**

An Unusual Novelette

By Rhoda Temple

"This is the time," her heart whispered. "This is the time when he'll ask me to marry him."

But he said, "You're so wonderful, I hate to think that I have only three more days to be with you, Angela."



*Roger called Angela a "Beautiful little Angel!"
and never dreamed she was just a*

Grease Angel

By
RUTH BRANDAO FERRARI

ANGELA stood in front of the mirror a long time, appraising herself. Yes, it was all perfect. The expensive blue dress was ultra feminine, the red-gold curls upswept in a bewitching coiffure. Two weeks "in training" indoors had extinguished the tiny freckles which had appeared on her nose this summer, and there was not a trace of grease beneath the perfectly manicured nails.

She was ready for Roger Whitman—Roger, the most wonderful man in the world, who was coming all the way from his West Texas ranch to visit "the most feminine, fragile, loveliest girl he'd ever seen." Roger, who never dreamed that Angela Reynolds was a Grease Angel!

She hadn't planned to deceive him—she'd just slipped into it. Some months ago Angela had been very ill with pneumonia, and the doctor had prescribed a rest at a ranch while she recuperated. It was the doctor who'd found Roger's place for her. "I don't want you to go to a dude ranch where there'll be a lot of social life," he'd declared. "I've gotten a line on a place that doesn't usually take boarders, but I believe they'll take you. You're to do nothing but rest, young lady. Get plenty of fresh air, but don't even ride. Just rest!"

Roger had been away when Angela arrived. His kind, homey mother had done all she could to make Angela comfortable, and sensing that the girl was very weary she hadn't asked questions. That was why, when Roger arrived three days later, Mrs.

Whitman had nothing to tell about the pale little boarder's background.

She never suspected, of course, that since the beginning of the war Angela had been doing the work of two men in Uncle Dave's garage. He wasn't really her uncle, but her godfather. Angela's own father was dead and she loved Uncle Dave more than anyone in the world except her mother. From the time she was able to walk she'd hung around his garage, and by the time she was eighteen she knew quite an amazing lot about the mysteries of motors.

When Uncle Dave's two sons and most of his help went off to war, Angela had taken a load off his mind by offering to operate the gas pump, put air in tires, and so forth. But before many months, work had piled up so that Angela was doing the job of a highly skilled mechanic, and doing it well—and receiving what she considered a staggering salary. She loved her work, and was proud of it. And with the war over, she still worked at it.

BUT WHEN Roger Whitman rode into the ranch one evening, dusty and bedraggled but nonetheless thrilling, he looked at the dainty young lady on his porch with tender admiration and said frankly, "You're Angela Reynolds of course. Our first boarder—and what a break to find she looks just like a girl with the name of Angela ought to look."

Angela flushed, but she was giddy with delight. Her dress, she knew, was lovely. She'd never spent much

money on clothes or cared about them, but Angela had a wide variety of friends and one of them was a very wealthy girl who'd joined the Waves. Jane had said, "My clothes will be dated by the time I'm out of uniform. You take them, Angela, all of them!" So Angela had, after some protest, taken them—and never worn them until this trip to the ranch. In New Orleans she rarely got out of her work clothes.

Roger was a very busy man, but he found time to show Angela around the ranch, and he spent long evenings with her on the veranda, wonderful evenings. When he said her name, "Angela—Angel," it had a beautiful sound. Sometimes she almost forgot that only a few weeks ago Uncle Dave's regular customers were gaily calling her "Grease Angel."

Roger took it for granted that she was a girl of some means who didn't work. He seemed to like to think of her as always fresh and clean and becomingly dressed, and she let it go at that. She didn't tell him any lies—but neither did she tell him the truth. She seemed to be fitting into his dreams—and he was the stuff of which her own dreams had always been made.

His first kiss, one night in the moonlight, turned the world into a place fit only for gods. But when Angela, her health fully restored, decided that she must go back, Roger still hadn't asked her to marry him.

"Well, of course he hasn't," she told herself sensibly. "He's not the kind of man to rush into matrimony. He wants to be sure."

He promised to come see her whenever he could manage to get away from the ranch, and with that she had to be content. He wrote her regularly, sweet, intimate letters. But New Orleans meant a long trip for a busy rancher, and six months went by before she got the letter she'd been waiting for—the letter that said he could manage a flying trip to New Orleans in about two weeks.

She didn't feel too badly about taking a vacation now, because Uncle Dave's sons were back and could take

over. Anyway Uncle Dave understood—he always did. He said, "Leave now, darling, and spend these two weeks resting up a bit. And get some pretty clothes—and all the rest of it."

"All the rest of it" meant beauty treatments for dry skin and neglected hair and hands. And today, "all the rest of it" had been adequately taken care of.

TIME TO meet Roger! She thanked her lucky stars that she'd been hoarding gas all these months, against this prayed-for visit. She drove out to the airport, her heart going faster than the motor but not nearly so smoothly. He was the last one off the plane, and she thought the waiting would kill her. But at last she was in the strongest arms in the world, and the lips she'd been waiting for practically forever were bending way down to find hers and hold them as though never to let them go.

In the car he murmured, "Beautiful little angel! I was afraid I'd dreamed you up, but you're lovelier, daintier than ever. You make me feel, as usual, like a clumsy ox."

She looked at his strong shoulders, his unruly sun-bleached hair and rugged features, "Not clumsy, darling," she answered. "Just right!"

He demurred at staying at her home, but agreed finally when she insisted. He seemed relieved to find it wasn't a mansion but merely a nice, comfortable raised cottage, and he liked gentle little Mrs Reynolds immediately. They were very gay at dinner, but later when Angela was dressing to go dancing with Roger, her mother slipped into her room.

"He's a grand person, baby," Mrs. Reynolds remarked, "but aren't you making a mistake, not telling him about your job? I know he'd think it was something to be proud of—that's the sort of person he is."

Angela nodded, more worried than she cared to admit, "I'm sure he would, mother, but you see, it's too late—or not soon enough, depending on how you look at it. I'll have to tell him after we're engaged, after I'm

sure he loves me. But if I sprang it now, when he's built up that picture of sheltered, dainty femininity—why, it would just queer everything."

Mrs. Reynolds said doubtfully, "Well, maybe you're right. But it's always seemed to me the sooner people tell the truth the better."

Angela shrugged aside the conviction that her mother was right. She dressed in the glamorous white evening gown she'd splurged to get, and was rewarded by the look of adoration in Roger's eyes when she entered the living room. On the way downtown, he said, "I'm afraid I'm not much of a dancer, Angela. Not good enough to dance with a vision like you."

She smiled dreamily. If he stepped on her feet, she'd still be happy.

THEY WENT to a little patio night club where the roof was the sky and a Spanish orchestra played haunting music. Roger was not the best dancer Angela had ever found, but he didn't step on her feet. He held her proudly and led her steadily if not intricately, and she was sublimely happy in his arms.

She was happier still when he kissed her that night in her mother's garden, fragrant with summer flowers. "This is the moment," her heart whispered. "This is the time when he'll ask me to marry him."

But instead he said, "You're so wonderful! I hate to think I've only three days to be with you, little Angela."

"Three days!" she was staggered. "Oh, Roger, you must stay longer than that!"

"Can't possibly, darling. I've got another rancher looking in on my place while I'm gone, and an extra man, but I can't stay away any longer than that."

"Then, young lady," Angela told herself firmly, "you'll just have to see to it that he takes you back with him."

She did her best. She practiced wiles she didn't know she had. She was gay, she was mysterious, she was even petulant—the sunny little Grease Angel whom everyone loved! And Roger always reacted satis-

factorily. When she was gay, he was gayer, when she was mysterious he was adoring, when she was petulant he was stern until she snapped out of it. Every mood, every swim, every ride, every dance, every new frock, every hour just seemed to make him love her more. His kisses became steadily more adoring. But he never asked her to marry him.

And the day he was to leave, Angela admitted to herself that he just wasn't going to. "Well," she told herself grimly, "so what? He just doesn't love you enough. You've done all you can, but it isn't in the cards. Now, be a good sport and smile when you tell him good-bye."

They were about to leave for the airport when the message came. Roger's reservation had been cancelled. Angela's heart leaped absurdly as she listened to his end of the telephone conversation and surmised what had happened. But why did it matter—another day with Roger would only make it harder to smile when she said good-bye.

Roger was hanging on the phone, asking questions. He hung up sharply, "They say I might get a plane out of Jackson, Mississippi, if I can catch the four o'clock bus up there. But it's five of four now—there isn't a chance."

She said impulsively, "I'll drive you part of the way to Jackson. We'll overtake the bus."

"Why, Angela, that's wonderful of you. But wouldn't it tire you terribly?"

The Grease Angel, who could work twelve hours a day! She said, "No, of course not. You can drive up, and I'll be plenty rested to start back."

So that was how it was. They overtook the bus before its second stop, but Angela said, "Let's go on, and you can get it further along the line. I feel like riding."

ONCE MORE he was concerned about her going back alone, but she overruled him. One part of her mechanic's brain registered that the motor wasn't purring as smoothly as it should, but that didn't seem important. What mattered was that

soon every moment would be taking Roger further from her, and she had to hang on as long as she could.

Finally they stopped, and since they were an hour ahead of the bus, they had dinner in a dingy restaurant where the flies and the over-attentive waitress were equally annoying. There was no chance to say any of the important last-minute things. But after all, why were they important? Nothing could change the fact that Roger didn't intend to marry her.

When they left the restaurant, the bus still hadn't arrived, but Roger insisted that Angela start back. "The bus may be delayed, and it will be so late for you to be on the road, darling. I'm afraid it will be dark before you hit New Orleans anyway."

"It gets dark pretty late now," she answered absently, and got into her car. He bent to kiss her. Their lips met briefly, and she started off. Simple, undramatic—to a passerby, even unemotional. And yet, Angela felt her heart torn out of her.

She rode for a long time, her eyes glued on the gravel road, her thoughts on Roger. Where had she failed? Had her accentuated femininity been unconvincing? Had she spent so much time under automobiles that she'd lost all allure, and forgotten how to make fascinating small talk? Was there perhaps another girl? Or was it just not in the stars for Roger Whitman to fall in love with Angela Reynolds?

At last she pulled off the road, for the simple reason that she couldn't see to drive any longer. The tears came now, freely. And because she was afraid someone might stop and offer assistance, she got out of the car and wandered toward the bayou which ran parallel to the road. She dropped down on a log and wept until there were no tears left. Then she sat staring wretchedly at the still water into which the weeping willows cast their languid images. It was the brief moment of a Louisiana dusk, and the world seemed peopled with shadows—lovely, heartrending shadows, like the shadow of a lost love.

Angela rose at last and went back

to the car. And it refused to start. Her brain began to work slowly and she realized that the motor hadn't sounded right all afternoon. Well maybe it would bring her to her senses to tinker with a motor.

But there was a practical streak in even a heartbroken Angela that wouldn't let her attack a motor in a forty-dollar dress. She unlocked the rear compartment of the car and took out the grease-splattered overalls she always carried. She covered windows and windshield with rags and made a quick change inside the car. Then she went to work, a flashlight pointed on the motor.

She'd found the trouble and just finished correcting it when a truck went by and she heard a voice shout, "Stop." She turned to see the truck slowing down, and a man jumping out of it, carrying a suitcase. The man shouted his thanks to the truck driver, and raced toward Angela. And if she'd been as fragilely feminine as she'd pretended to Roger, she'd have definitely fainted away.

HE CRIED, "Angela, what's the trouble? Angela, let me look at you!"

Roger grabbed the flashlight and pointed it from the tousled hair to the filthy over-sized overalls. This was too much! Bad enough to lose him, but to suffer this anti-climax—to have him somehow come back and find her like this. She gasped, "It isn't fair! I don't always look like this—I didn't want you to ever see me looking like this—"

But he was kissing her, grease spot on her cheek and all. He said, "Baby, you don't know how wonderful you look to me. You look like a girl who might live on a ranch where life isn't all roses, not like a little hot-house flower that a clumsy Texan could adore but never hope to possess."

She shook her head crazily. There must be something wrong with her ears. She couldn't be hearing right. Did he mean that he hadn't asked her to marry him because she was too—too dressed up, too fragilely feminine, too much the Angel Angela for his ranch? She'd thought of every

reason but that one. And yet, it was pretty simple—

He said, "Darling, I'm a lucky fool. I was on that bus before I discovered I'd lost my wallet. I know I must have dropped it in your car—pulled it out my pocket when I took out a handkerchief or something. I'm not used to carrying the darn thing! I had enough change in my pocket for my bus ticket—that was why I didn't notice the wallet was gone till I was aboard. So I got off the bus at the next stop and bummed a ride back, hoping to catch up with you. And if it hadn't been for that, I'd have never seen you looking like this, never suspected there was a possibility of making you a rancher's wife, never dreamed you could do anything as useful as fixing a motor. Something I can't do, by the way. Where on earth did you learn it?"

She answered faintly, "They call me Grease Angel at Uncle Dave's garage. That's where I work. Oh, Roger, I was afraid to tell you!"

He stared at her in frank bewilderment, "You little idiot! Some day I want you to explain that in words of one syllable, and I still won't understand it. But now, let's find that

wallet. A married man needs to hold on to his money."

They found it wedged behind the seat. He took the wheel and started down the road, "Now, we have the price of a marriage license. Could we find a minister tonight?"

She answered firmly, "I will not get married in these clothes!"

"They're the most becoming clothes you ever wore," he sighed, "but I guess women just have to be difficult. Okay, darling, we'll wire mother that I'm inadvertently delayed, and drive back to New Orleans tonight. But somehow we're going to get a plane West tomorrow—or else we'll have to drive your car with you to take care of motor trouble. And then some day you'll tell our grandchildren that Grandpa got married because he wanted to take an automobile trip and thought it would be handy to have a mechanic along. And the little darlings will say, good old Gramp, so that's where we inherited our brains—"

But at that point he stopped talking and driving simultaneously because a curly head had worked its way up to the vicinity of his chin.

(THE END)

A Powerful Novelet of Midnight Mystery

NOBODY KNEW THE CORPSE

By Talmage Powell

Plus

**CLOTHES MAKE THE
MURDER**

By Seymour Irving Richin

WINGS FOR THE KID

By Grant Lane

In the March Issue of

Crack
DETECTIVE
Stories



DISCOVERY

*I cannot set in orderly array
The reasons for my happiness today;*

*I cannot write in formal word or line
Why every joy that earth can give is
mine.*

*I only whisper lest the jealous hear,
I have discovered that I love you dear.*

By Lalia Mitchell Thornton

Two of a Kind

By
WANETA SCHOTT

Although Howard kissed her deliberately, Judy felt that he hated her.

A LOG WAS burning cheerfully in the library fireplace of Granite Lodge, but Judy shivered a little as she stiffened in Howard Layne's embrace. Her hands pushed up defensively against his broad shoulders. Her head turned away from his kiss.

"What's cooking?" he teased, tightening his arm about her waist. "Afraid Allen Hunt might see you?"

"Allen!" Her brown eyes burned up into his. "Oh! You—" Only she couldn't think of any suitable name to call him.

Every instinct within Judy had warned her that Howard Layne's lips on hers would be madness, a substitute for the Heaven of Bill's kisses that she longed for so much—just as this trip had been a dreadful mistake; coming up here two days ago to Howard's Lodge with her fiancé, Bill Warren, in company with her employer and his wife, Allen and Delphine Hunt.

For despite the fact that Howard had deliberately touched her lips with his just now, despite the magnetic attraction that seemed to draw her toward him whenever they were in the same room, Judy felt that beneath his smooth polished manner, *Howard Layne hated her!*

That had been the bitterest disappointment of all. Because she had hoped that in this young attorney, Bill's former buddy, she might find an ally, someone who could help her win back Bill's love.

"Howard's a swell guy," Bill had



Judy thought that Howard Layne made unjust accusations; but Howard Layne didn't intend to tell her what he really thought.

said when she heard him persuading Allen to come up here. "He owns quite a lot of property. When he was discharged the Army medic advised him to go to the mountains for a little while before resuming his practice. He wanted something to do so he's managing Granite Lodge this season himself."

ABRUPTLY, now, Howard's fingers caught in her chestnut curls. A little roughly he tipped her face up to his. "No fair shoving, Judy. You expected a kiss, or else why did you ask me to dance you in here away from the crowd! So give!"

Judy's heart stopped. His taunt about her employer, Allen Hunt, still rang in her ears. The terrible hurt inside her turned into anger at his unjust accusations. Just as his dark head bent down, her hand shot up from his shoulder and left the dull red print of her fingers across his cheek.

Like an electric shock, it charged the tension between them. His gray eyes went black. It was a full second before he could speak. Then the harsh vibrance of his voice lashed at her like a thin steel whip.

"Why, you little two-bit cheat! You're not content with letting down Bill, and carrying on right in front of him with your boss, Allen Hunt! You've got the nerve now to—"

Judy winced. He had never come out in the open before. But it was just as she thought!

Angry and heartsick, she cut in desperately, "I haven't let Bill Warren down! Can't you see that it's Bill who's rushing Delphine! That I'm only playing up to Allen to get to tag along with them!" Her eyes were wide with emotion. "Bill's practically ignored me for a month! Ever since the day he walked into my office and met Del, who had happened in to see Allen. She took him away with her in her car. Between the two of them, almost every date Bill and I have had since, they've managed to make a foursome. That's why I wanted to get out of there now! I couldn't stand seeing Bill dancing with Del, his arms around her and—"

"Stow it!" Howard rasped. "That's

a sharp piece of dramatics, but you're just wasting your breath! You can't lie to me, Judy. When Bill phoned me for reservations last week, he told me you had changed! I get what he meant!"

Shock swept over Judy. Bill said *she* had changed! Howard was still holding her in his arms, one hand claspng her shoulder now so hard that his fingers burned through the white wool of her sweater.

"Maybe you've forgotten that Bill and I used to lie in a foxhole together? All through the long hours of black and death, he'd whisper to me about you, telling me what to write to you first if anything happened to him, dreaming about you until dawn crept up on his mud-caked face, taut and haggard with his love for you! Do you see now why you can't lie to me, Judy!"

Howard's dark gray eyes were blazing into hers. Pain stabbed into her heart.

What had happened to that Bill? The Bill whose lips had once kissed hers until she was breathless with her love for him, had begged her to wait until he would come back, had said they would marry then at once!

THEN HOWARD kissed her, and she was conscious that her arms had crept up about the man's neck, that her lips were responding to his. For one long eternity she stood trembling in Howard Layne's arms, dominated by his kiss.

And then, abruptly, she was standing alone, almost falling, as she caught the back of a chair for support. Voices were coming toward the library! Howard had stepped to one side by a huge map of the world. He had whipped out a handkerchief and was rubbing her lipstick off his mouth.

Resentment burned within her. Seeing him do that, her nerves steadied, and the bitter reality of her unhappiness lessened with her anger.

The voices were distinct now, Allen, and Bill and Delphine.

In low tones, crisp with hate, she said to Howard, "You're not any different from the rest of the wolf pack,

are you! You don't want Bill to guess you'd steal a kiss that might have been his!"

She saw him stiffen, but her eyes smarted with the ache of tears dammed for so many days by her pride and she didn't see the white that had crept under his bronzed features. He had no time to reply, for the approaching trio breezed into the room.

"Well, here you are!"

It was Del who spoke first. Her blond head was flung back revealing her smooth white throat above the low neck line of a tight black wool dress.

She went straight to Howard and lay her hand on his arm, ignoring Judy completely. She never misses a conquest, Judy thought, no matter how many men she keeps dancing in her trail.

Judy's glance swept to Bill, whose lips tightened grimly, and her heart throbbed with a hurting ache. She wanted to cry out, "Bill, darling, can't you see she doesn't love you! That she's only playing with you like a cat with a mouse!" But her lips were silent in the knowledge it was useless.

"We want to have a dance, Howard," Delphine was saying, "and invite some of the local crowd from the valley. Allen is stuffy and says you don't okay that! But you will, won't you, please?"

Howard's rugged face softened a little. "Well, I don't know. It's been the custom here at the lodge not to mix the two. We're dependent on them for supplies and our relationship seemed to work out smoother if the city crowds who come here relied on themselves for their entertainment. But I suppose, perhaps once—"

Judy writhed inwardly. He would be eating out of her hand too, in another day. Like Bill! Fire flashed in Judy's eyes.

"You mean," she broke in sweetly sarcastic, "that you think the townspeople aren't as apt to run you out if they don't discover the type of stuck-up snobs you take in as paying guests, isn't that it, Howard? The type of women especially, who might

even stoop so low as to hijack some of their more eligible men! Like that young druggist Del met!"

"Judy!"

BILL'S harsh cry struck through the silence that followed her outburst. Judy gloried in the bitter violence of his tone. Bill knew of course she meant Del and that she was justified in her implication! "I've been too easy," she thought. "From now on, I'm going to say what I think, and act like I feel! That's the first time he's even looked at me today!"

But Bill wasn't alone in staring at her. She let her glance flick around the room, first at Allen, who grinned approval, then at Del. At the intense hatred that shone in Del's odd amber-colored eyes, she winced. How could she cope with anyone so coldly ruthless and clever as Delphine Hunt!

It was Howard's voice that pulled her glance over to him, and added to the already crushing ache in her heart.

"I guess the mountain lions aren't the only cats on the prowl tonight," he said, giving her an icy look.

He turned abruptly toward Delphine and took her arm. "Let's go into the bar."

Judy stood rigid. A queer panic struck through her. Why did she have a sinking feeling when Howard Layne looked at her like that? Why did she suddenly remember the mad pressure of his lips on hers a few minutes ago? The crushing strength of his arms, as they held her close against his heart!

Bill followed after them, and she thought she was alone until Allen Hunt moved over toward the fireplace and tapped his pipe against the palm of his hand, flinging the dottle into the flames. She started as he turned toward her.

"I could go for you tonight in a big way, little Judy," he said. "You're more beautiful than ever when you're mad!"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Bill doesn't think so," she said thickly, glancing out the hall door.

"Judy!"

There was something in his voice

that drew her eyes back to him. He stepped a little closer, within reach of her, but he didn't touch her.

"Judy, forget that young fool! I'd call him off Del, but he'd only fall for someone else! Can't you see they're two of a kind? That if you ever married him you'd lead the same kind of a life I have! Lonely, distraught for months on end, grabbing at just a few scattered weeks of happiness, in between times, until finally your love would die, and your life together would be just a habit!"

The tears that had lain stinging against her lashes shone in her lustrous dark eyes. Impulsively, she reached out her hand. He took it firmly in his. In this moment, she understood Allen Hunt as she never had before. And she was amazed to see that underneath his suave exterior, no matter what he said, he still loved Delphine.

All the gossip about him might be true, that he chased around as much as Del, but in her own heartache, Judith understood why a little more clearly now, and all the fair qualities that she had always admired in him as her employer, stood out against the slander against his name.

A LITTLE of her tenderness must have suddenly been revealed in her gesture, for he placed his other hand on her arm and said a little harshly:

"You've been a swell sport, Judy. You've taken Bill's lousy fling like a thoroughbred. But I know what you're going through."

"You've always been something pretty special to me, Judy," he said grinning now. "I believe I'm a little glad to have one ideal left to cling to."

"Allen—I. . ."

Then suddenly, a deluge of tears broke. The strain she had been through the past month and the climaxing scenes tonight had been too much. In another second Allen's arms were about her, his lips whispering against her curls as she clung to his shoulders burying her face against his coat, trying to choke back the sobs in her throat.

"Judy, baby. No man is worth all this. Forgive me, honey, if I've been partly to blame for—"

But just then, Judy felt the muscles in Allen's arms tense beneath his coat sleeve. His head jerked up.

"Sorry," a man's voice cut in from the open door, a sneering taunt in the tone. "You should put a sign in the hall, Judy. You must be a little bored tonight with so many interruptions!"

Judy's heart stopped. She had sprung away from Allen. Howard! The memory of his kiss burned on her lips at the sound of his voice now. A wave of despair rushed through her.

Howard was staring at her coldly. He hadn't believed her before! What must he think of her now, finding her in Allen's arms! And only a little while after she had so hotly denied his charge!

"Take it easy, chum," Allen admonished coolly, but Judy caught his suppressed anger. "I just happened to be a convenient lamp post for Judy to lean against, that's all. She's had about enough raw deals lately without any additional jibes."

For an instant, Judy thought Howard was going to strike Allen. His hands clenched into hard tight fists, as their eyes held one another's. Then his gray glance swept to her.

"I guess I underestimated you, Judy. I thought you were just a passing fancy in Allen's life, but I see you've fooled him completely! No wonder Del and Bill are consoling themselves with each other!"

"Howard! No!"

Judy's cry was a little gasp.

"You're crazy, man!" Allen blazed.

"Crazy enough to barge in here just to tell you there were some sandwiches in the bar, yes."

With a quick turn, he was gone from the doorway. Something inside Judy shattered into a million little pieces.

When they entered the beamed, low-ceilinged bar, a rhumba was coming in over the radio. Bill and Del were dancing together.

Howard wasn't in sight.

THAT night Judy couldn't sleep. Her dreams were mixed up.

There was someone she called Bill whom she was trying to reach, but he looked like Howard. All night long it seemed she was fighting her way through to him.

In the morning she went down to breakfast early. She wasn't hungry, except for the sight of Bill. She decided to have one last talk with him. Perhaps if she told him what Allen had admitted about Delphine he would come to his senses.

But when she reached the dining room, Bill's chair was empty. The aroma of coffee and pancakes floated in from the kitchen.

From the conversation of the Claytons and Trents, two older couples who were lodge guests, she realized Del and Bill had been up a long time. They had gone out toward the stables presumably to take a morning ride! He hadn't even made this date with Del a foursome!

"I'll be glad to go home," she thought, desolate. "I was a fool to think if I saw Bill up here every day for a week, I'd be able to win him back!"

She slipped out of the lodge by herself a few minutes later. The crisp morning air was fragrant with wood smoke. The rugged grandeur of the setting, the terrace of almost solid granite, the rambling structure, with its windows catching the morning sun just rising above the tall green pines into the clear, bright blue of the mountain sky—it all swept over Judy, and her breath caught in her throat. Despite her heartache, her thoughts drifted from Bill to the man who owned the lodge, Howard Layne, as she followed a narrow trail.

Abruptly, a little later, she turned when she heard footsteps on the path behind her. Unaccountably, a little pulse began pounding in her throat as she recognized Howard's tall figure.

"Are you capable of nothing but making trouble?" he called out sternly to her.

She waited questioningly, wondering what had happened now.

"I particularly warned everyone

not to go out alone on these narrower trails. If you're seeking a rendezvous with Hunt, I'm sorry to have to take you back. You should have remembered and kept to the road."

Anger flamed within her.

In her haste to get away from the lodge, thinking of Bill perhaps kissing Del in some remote secluded canyon, she hadn't cared which way she went; or whether she ever got back or not. What difference would it make!

"You'd probably have been lost in another half hour," he added, when she didn't speak.

"I've always managed to take care of myself! I'll thank you to let me mind my own business!"

Flinging back her chestnut curls in an arrogant gesture, she turned and began walking away from him farther on up the trail.

SUDDENLY, she was jerked roughly around, as his hand came down hard on her shoulder. "You little fool! You happen to be my business right now! I'm responsible for your safety while you're up here."

She tried unsuccessfully to wrench out of his grasp. A dizzy madness washed over her. Out here in the morning sun, Howard Layne's lean rugged features were a deep bronze. The splendid strength of his physique caused the Army doctor's recommendation for a period of relaxation to condition his nerves to seem senseless.

The steady steel of his hands, the gray of his eyes as they held hers, made her tremble, and her heart raced.

"I always collect a reward when I rescue a gal from danger," he said. His glance fell to her lips.

"That's the only way you'd get it!" she flared.

She couldn't know the tantalizing picture she made, beneath the broken shadows of the tall pines, navy wool slacks and a bright red jacket molding her trim figure, her shining chestnut curls brushed back from her

smooth skin, her brown eyes, wide, her soft red lips parted a little.

"Judy!" he said.

Then his hand tipped her head up firmly beneath his, and his other arm tightened about her waist. His lips pressed hers.

She struggled at first, then again, in spite of all will within her, she felt her lips yielding to his, and she was still. Her arms reached up about his shoulders and her hand touched the back of his neck. There was a magic she hadn't dreamed a man's lips could possess in Howard Layne's kiss.

And all at once she thought, "How wonderful to know the *love* of a man like him! How safe and protected a girl would feel in his arms!"

The unhappy way Allen Hunt had pictured her life with Bill swept through her. How wonderful if she never had to worry about Delphine, of the countless other Dels who might lure Bill in the future even if she could win him back now. Somehow, with Howard's lips on hers she didn't want that life. The memory of Bill Warren's kisses faded. It was as though she were suddenly free.

In the glory of that freedom, she felt strangely shy. Her hands pushed against Howard's shoulders. She strained away from him.

Deliberately slow, his head lifted.

"Nice pay!" he said scornfully. "Thank the guy for me who taught you how to kiss!"

Judy winced. She wanted to cry out, "You taught me, Howard Layne! I've never kissed anyone like that!"

His arms fell away from her. Abruptly he swung around toward the Lodge, thrusting his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"Get moving. I have to go down for some supplies before lunch."

Blindly, Judy plunged ahead of him along the narrow trail back. A few seconds ago, she had almost forgot that Howard *hated* her.

BUT HE didn't go for supplies on their return. When they were

in sight of the Lodge, they could see a figure pacing up and down on the terrace. As they drew closer, it stopped and then came running toward them.

Judy felt an emptiness within her. It was Bill Warren, his face gray under his tan.

"Something terrible's happened," he rasped hoarsely, groping for Howard's supporting hand.

Then he turned to Judy. His voice broke. "I've been a fool, Judith! All kinds of a heel! Going for Del the way I did!" The words ran together, almost incoherent.

"Steady, fellow." Howard gripped his shoulder. "Get hold of yourself! What's the trouble?"

"Murder!"

.. "What!"

The cry burst from Judy's lips and Howard's almost simultaneously.

"It will be murder—if he dies!"

"If who dies?" demanded Howard, suddenly tense.

A wild premonition shot through Judy.

"Allen?" she gasped.

"She put sleeping tablets in his drink last night! They'd quarreled! He'd refused to give her a divorce!" Bill flushed as he met Judy's eyes. "Judy—I—I, oh, I need you, Judith!"

He caught hold of her arms, and pulled her to him, dropping his head down against her curls. "I love you, honey. I've never stopped loving you, really."

Stark panic surged through Judy. Bill was clinging to her, telling her he loved her. Allen's words were ringing in her thoughts. *A few scattered weeks of happiness, in between times. He'd only fall for someone else.* And maybe then sometime, it would be Bill trying even to kill her, as Del had tried to kill Allen now! *They're two of a kind!*

Then Howard's telling her how Bill had longed for her under the stress of battle rushed through her brain. When he was in trouble or *in between times*—he loved her!

She had been waiting and praying for this moment when Bill might



come to her, but now, a little wildly, she looked around for Howard, before she realized he was gone, that he had rushed toward the Lodge a few seconds ago.

She let Bill cling to her. She even put her arm up around his shoulder and pressed her head against his chest. But she felt nothing at all, only a pitying sympathy for the ideal of the man she had once loved.

IN A little while, his head moved and he tipped her face up to his. "Oh, Judy, darling!" he whispered, as his lips sought hers. "It's so good to be with you again."

She had to say something now.

"No, Bill," she murmured gently, evading his kiss. "We're through."

Consternation racked his strained features. "Judy! I know I don't deserve you. I've never deserved you! There was a girl in Australia, but I got over her, Judy." His blue eyes were bleak. "And I didn't want to marry Del, honestly! I've been horrified realizing I've been the cause of this—this tragedy. I've always come back to you, Judy! Can't you see that it's you I really love. Won't you believe me if I promise to love you—forever? Never to look at—"

A dull ache swept through her. It seemed heavier than her anguish when she had been trying to win Bill back from Del. For the Bill she had idealized was completely gone. He had never existed!

"It's no good, Bill. Something's happened that's—well, it's really for the best. I'll always be glad to be your friend, whenever you need me. For that's the way you feel about me, Bill. Perhaps someday, there'll be someone, some girl who can hold you, but I—"

"Judy!"

Her name was a prayer on his lips. His young face was drained of color. He tried to draw her back into his arms, but she turned away from him toward the Lodge.

"Judy, it isn't Allen, is it?" he asked hoarsely. "If it is, I hope he dies!"

"Bill!"

He ran the fingers of one hand through his blond hair. "Oh, I don't know what I mean—without you, Judy!"

"Perhaps there's something in there we can do," she said, gently. "That will help us both."

Bill looked at her a little wildly, then his glance fell. "Del said there

was nothing. The doctor's with him. He says there's a remote chance. That's all."

"How did anyone know? Who found Allen?"

"He was still alive when Del and I got back from a ride. I thought she was acting queer all morning. Then she came screaming out of their rooms, for someone to call a doctor. He looked so like death that it was too much for her and she confessed what she had done, and begged everyone to help her save him."

When Bill and Judy reached the terrace, the rest of the Lodge guests were clustered in the big entrance way, awaiting some word from the physician. She flushed at the stares directed toward Bill and her.

HOWARD came down a few minutes later. His bronzed face was pale, but his manner was calm.

"There's nothing any of us can do, except refrain from making any disturbing noises, perhaps," he said. "If his heart hangs on a little longer, he will have a chance. I suggest you go into the dining room. The cook has some hot coffee ready."

The group began talking in hushed monotones.

"Stay with me, Judy!" Bill begged, before she had a chance to leave him. "I—I can't stand it here alone!"

But by evening the household tension was over. Allen Hunt was going to recover.

Seeking to evade Bill after dinner, Judy pulled on a coat and slipped out on the terrace. Suddenly she discovered she was not alone. A shadow moved toward her in the patches of moonlight filtering through the heavy pines. The arc of a cigarette glowed as it curved to the granite flagstones, and the scraping crunch of a shoe scuffing it out followed.

Then a man's voice spoke into the night.

"You're going back to the city tomorrow, Judy?"

"Yes," she answered, somehow feeling magnetism of his presence, knowing even before she heard him

say that it was Howard Layne.

"With Bill?"

She hesitated a second. Just what did he mean? But what did it matter?

"Yes."

The shadowed silence between them hung heavy and tense.

Then suddenly his arms found her and drew her tight against him. "Oh, Judy, darling! I can't let you go! Do you hear me!" His voice was harsh with sincerity. "I've been in love with you ever since Bill showed me your picture out on a Jap island, when he started reading me parts of your letters. I've loved you this week even when I tried to hate you for what I thought until this noon you had done to Bill."

He stopped a moment, and Judy's hand crept up his arm and gripped his sleeve hard. Her heart fluttered and then began racing wildly.

"But tonight! I know it was Bill who was in the wrong. I know now you were telling me the truth! That you didn't care for Allen! I can't let you go, Judy! No matter, if you still love Bill, I can't stand by and let you in for the life you—"

"Howard!" she whispered, a radiance glowing within her. "I'm not going back *with Bill*. I just meant back to the city with him. I found out today, too, that I—" She hesitated.

His hand lifted her face tenderly up to his. "That you love me? Oh, Judy, darling! Don't be afraid to say it!"

"I—I do love you!" she said, her voice scarcely more than a whisper.

For all at once, Judy understood the magnetism of this man. It was their love for one another. The kind of love that will endure forever! she thought.

Just then the moon climbed up above the pines, and cast a silver glory into the night. Howard Layne's arms folded about her. Tenderly, reverently, his mouth sought her lips.

(THE END)

Reporters

Don't Cry

*Christy felt, with a sickening realization
that she wasn't worth a tenth of Bob's love*

CHIRSTY WORTH argued with herself all the way to the campus library, an unaccustomed frown digging itself into the smooth space between the lines of her dark golden eyebrows. She was remembering Big Mike's taunts. But she was remembering, too, the hand-

some image of Bob Baker's face and the fact that he hated reporters.

It had all started in Big Mike's office when she'd laid the pages of copy paper on his desk. . . .

"Big Mike" Carlon, editor of the Chronicle, took his cigar from his mouth. "Not again?" he said, with

By
Gene Pike



He was just another man — an assignment, she reminded herself.

the tortured patience of an exasperated man.

"Now look. You stay on Shopping Hints until I assign you a feature article to write. Not before. Shine all you like in dear Professor Britton's journalism class, but around here we don't deal in theory.

"Women reporters!" He groaned like a ham actor. "Why in thunderation I let Britton talk me into hiring a part time one with still a year more of journalism is beyond me. I must have been drunk!"

Christy fought for control, her slim throat too choked with anger to risk opening her mouth. She kept telling herself, "I won't let him make me quit, I won't! He can't get rid of me that easily."

She raised her head like a fighter and faced Big Mike. For a moment they glared at each other, then the raucous shrill of the phone at Big Mike's elbow broke the silence. Christy watched his fat shoulders hunch into tenseness as he listened, the receiver pressed to his ear.

"Well, that's your tough luck," he finally croaked. "You're fired!" He slammed the receiver down then and turned to stare at Christy, his mouth working over the butt of his cigar.

Abruptly, he fished over his desk, found a picture, tossed it across the desk to her. "Take a good look."

Wonderingly, she took up the bit of pasteboard, looked down at the pictured masculine face in her hands. Fortright eyes under even dark brows looked at her levelly. The nose was straight; the mouth strong, yet beautifully shaped. The chin was set determinedly and in the middle of it was a small cleft. As she studied the man's face, unaccountably, her heart began to beat faster. It was an appealing face, the most handsome she'd ever seen.

"Some new movie star?"

Big Mike laughed shortly. "Only the most decorated man in the U. S. Army. Or was. Just discharged, he picked this small North Carolina university for finishing his last year of college. His father has controlling interest in two department stores

in Chicago. This is how it sums up: Former social playboy, multi-decorated hero, returns to studies. What does a hero think of school now? How is the veteran being treated? Are people sympathetic to him?" He paused. "Great story, isn't it?"

Christy nodded quickly, breathlessly. If she could get this chance!

"There are few other facts beyond bare official Army releases at the time of his awards. You think you could get more for a feature?"

"Please. . . . let me try."

Big Mike grinned one-sidedly. "The last reporter who tried, and failed, just got fired." He let that sink in. "Robert Baker the Third is a hard man to interview. He hates publicity. He abhors reporters. He despises newspapers."

" oh " Disappointment flooded through her.

"But he's news, and I want it!" Big Mike eased back in his chair then and looked languidly at the ceiling. "Now. . . . it would be a simple job for a nice looking girl who is entered in the college to learn to know a new student. I happen to be informed that this minute Mr Baker is in the downstairs left reading room of the campus library. Yes, sir. . . . a smart girl would know just what to do." He blew a smoke ring, and watched it disintegrate into the surrounding air.

Christy looked at the lights of the library ahead and thrust her hands deeper in the pockets of her white fleece coat. What if she did have to deceive Nick Baker in order to get her story? No story, no job. And it meant too much for her to quit.

Christy thought longingly of the long waisted, draped white evening dress at Mandel's. Yes, the job meant too much. It meant those extra little luxuries she would have to do without. It meant Prof Britton's esteem and his faith in her ability. She couldn't lose that. Big Mike wasn't going to have the chance of firing her. She *would* show him she could write a feature!

On that decision she strode ahead quickly.

FROM THE doorway of the reading room, she spotted him right away. The classic lines of his head would stand out in any crowd, she thought, taking in his bronzed good looks. She hesitated a moment, for some reason wanting to run, then forced herself to walk in.

A book lay on the long table in front of him. He didn't look up as she laid her coat on the chair directly opposite him. She put down her notebook, studied him cautiously, wondering at the best method of approach. Finally, she let her shoe knock against his under the table.

"Oh. . . . I'm terribly sorry." She smiled, but apologetically, and let her eyes fall down.

His eyes were blue! She had thought from his picture and his dark hair they would be black. But they were a clear, piercing blue like the color of a wind swept sky on a sunny morning.

And he had smiled back, warmly, happily, as if to a friend. Why. . . she thought. . . . even if he does hate reporters, he must like people.

Slightly confused, she was conscious he was still watching her and involuntarily, she felt a flush sweeping her face. She wished now she had looked more carefully into her mirror before leaving the office, wished that the small nose were better powdered, her soft, red mouth more carefully painted.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him close his book, push back his chair. She kept still, and when he reached the doorway, she rose, reached for her coat. By the time he had paused on the library steps to light a cigarette, she was almost beside him.

"Hold that light, will you?"

He held the match in his cupped hands for her and in the glare piercing the darkness she looked up at him. "Thanks. I left my lighter. Oh. . . . you're the same one I kicked under the library table."

They turned together, went down the steps.

"What course are you taking here?" His deep throated voice

struck her as the most musical she'd ever heard.

She hesitated, decided to tell the truth. "Journalism."

He stopped short, jerked his head round at her. When she didn't say anything more but kept looking at him questionably, he said, "Sorry. Long ago I let slip some important information about a business merger my father was planning. A reporter I thought was a friend got hold of it but he promised to treat it confidentially. Instead, the news was printed and almost ruined Dad. Ever since, I'm afraid I've been allergic to anything pertaining to newspapers." He laughed then. "Sorry I had to go into all that spiel. You looked rather hurt and I didn't want you to misunderstand my reaction."

"That's all right. I understand."

"I believe you do," he said softly. Then. . . "Look. Let me buy you a cup of hot chocolate at Dennison's. It's still early."

She nodded and threw her cigarette away, almost angrily. It was proving too easy. She thought, instead of journalism I should have majored in dramatics. She wondered if he were really interested, if he liked her as much as he seemed.

DENNISON'S was crowded but they found a back booth, far enough away from the blare of the juke box for their voices to be heard without having to shout to each other.

They had exchanged names and now Bob Baker said, "Christy. . . I like to say it. Christy. Somehow it suits you. It sounds fine and clean and beautiful. I like that."

Her heart lurched. "Drink your hot chocolate. You sound like a man just out of a foxhole."

He grinned, but his voice was serious. "A plane. I was a gunner for the swellest crew that ever flew a ship. But it isn't that. I had plenty of time in Chicago before coming here."

She watched his brown, steady hand carry a cracker to his mouth. "Don't you find it dull here?"

His white teeth flashed again.

"Nothing you find interesting is dull." His blue eyes measured her.

She felt herself blushing. "Oh. . . be serious."

"I am."

"I mean. . . there are lots of schools." Darn him, anyway, she thought.

"Yes. But I thought this one offered the best work in business administration. As soon as I finish, I'm going into the business end of a small commercial airline one of my overseas buddies already has started."

So he wasn't following in his father's footsteps? Christy kept her face straight. That was news. She tucked away the information carefully.

"A case of veterans sticking together, eh?"

His face went a little hard. "Not exactly. We aren't a queer sort of specimen, a different species. Over there a few of us found a few of our own sort. If our plans and ideas click it means simply teaming up as any other business minded men would do when the chance came."

Then he looked at her, and his face brightened. "Come on. Let's dance."

Being held in his arms gave her no familiar impersonal feeling, as she had hoped. Instead, she was conscious of the tweedy tang of his shaving lotion, the scent of his cigarette tobacco. She felt the softness of his sleeveless sweater under her hand and knew that beneath was hard, sinewy muscle. Her breath caught a little as his chin came to rest against her hair. It seemed so natural and right to be in his arms.

"You're sweet, Christy," Nick murmured, his arm tightening.

As if she were frightened, she drew back from him. "Let's sit down," she said.

Puzzled, he followed her back to their booth.

This is crazy, she told herself. I can't be falling for Bob Baker. Not possibly. Yet there was the tug at her heart when he smiled, the thrill in her body at his touch. She liked the erect way he held his head, the vibrant tone of his voice, the firm set of his lips.

Bob Baker, she thought. In the haze background of her mind, it seemed as if she were seeing the letters of his name, stretched one behind the other, slowly, slowly, wrapping themselves like lines of ticker tape around her heart.

"What happened, Christy?" Bob's eyes were worried.

She managed to laugh quickly. "I just wanted to sit down."

He kept looking at her. "Don't evade, Christy. You have an attitude like, 'well, he's a veteran, I must handle him gently! I'm not a problem child.'"

His voice softened then, grew earnest. "Christy. . . I want you to understand. I fought in the war. So did lots of others. But don't think of us as a group to be handled with kid gloves. We're just a bunch of guys who were fighting. We did our job and we're back home now to take up where we left off. Treat me like any other student here."

SHE WAS listening as he talked and thinking: So this is how he feels, this is what he thinks. He had said, we were just a bunch of guys who were fighting. There was no bid for glory in his words, no gripe for privileges. He was pleading for understanding, not just for himself, but for all of them.

She swallowed, hard, and for a moment held her eyelids tightly under the shadow of her hand. It wasn't that she felt close to tears, she told herself. The light was hurting her eyes.

"Christy. . . don't turn from me. I'm not a wolf, G. I. or otherwise. I'm just a guy who said you were sweet because I meant it."

She stood up quickly. "It's getting late," she said, her voice catching a little.

"All right. I'll walk you to your dormitory." He was silent then, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

They took a graveled path, and under their feet the small rocks crunched crisply. The moonlight shone down on them, making long shadows of their figures on the bor-

dering grass that snuggled close to the roots of the tall stretching trees.

Christy raised her face to the moonlight, as if asking for benediction—or guidance. Bob Baker was turning into a disturbing element, threatening to ruin her first chance of a break from Big Mike. Oh. . . why did he have to turn out to be so. . . so nice? she thought. If he knew she were a reporter, not just a student. . .

He touched her sleeve gently as they neared the shadow of her building.

She paused and he turned her around to face him.

"You know, Christy. . . I was waiting there on the library steps for you to come out tonight. If you hadn't asked for a light, I would have had to make some other excuse for speaking. When I saw the glare of my match make a glowing halo around your face, I knew for certain it was the same face I had seen in a million dreams. Christy. . ."

His head bent nearer, and she moved closer into the light touch of his arms. When his lips came down on her own, she closed her eyes against the silvery, purplish light that flashed like a meteor across her brain. She felt dizzy, limp. It was like breathing in the midst of an atom's burst, senseless to any moments of time or space.

Then he was speaking again. "You'll meet me for dinner, tomorrow night? We can talk then. There are so many things I want to say."

She nodded wordlessly. Almost afraid to speak, she was choked with an emotion that was strange, yet sweet. . . terribly sweet.

When he had gone, Christy climbed the stairs to her room like some dazed robot. Shutting the door behind her, she leaned weakly against it.

It was just the moonlight, she told herself desperately. After tomorrow night, she needn't see him again. That would be sufficient time to get the remaining information she wanted. She was a reporter, wasn't she? An assignment was a job, not a romantic or sentimental interlude.

SHE SLEPT fitfully, waking now and then to reassure herself she had made the right decision. But when she awoke in the morning, her eyes still looked wretched and puzzled.

Before classes, she checked by the Chronicle office for a typewritten assignment she had left in her haste the night before. She felt in no mood for confronting Big Mike this morning, and hoped he wouldn't be in.

The Chronicle was an early morning paper and as a rule, the offices and news room were usually almost deserted until pressure of the next edition hounded everyone's heels. But Big Mike was sitting at his desk, moodily scratching his cheek.

He ignored her until she was ready to leave.

"Hey. . . Worth!"

She tightened her lips, walked over.

"Just thought I'd pass on an idea for you. National News Service is pleading for features on student veterans for their syndicated Sunday magazine supplement. A by-line goes with it. Doesn't pay badly either."

He narrowed his eyelids. "You'd better have the feature you're working on in by tonight's deadline so it can run in tomorrow's edition. This type of material for N. N. S. has to pass the test of local printing before they'll handle it. Let your other work go until that's in. I imagine you'll need the extra time."

Clamping his teeth on his butt of cigar, he turned curtly to the papers sprawling his desk. It was dismissal.

Christy stalked out, her hands twitching. That last crack of his burned. As if she needed more time to get and write a difficult assignment than any other reporter! She wished she'd had the nerve to tell him what she thought of him and his high reputation as an editor. He didn't know a good reporter when he saw one.

But deep beneath her surface anger, she was thinking: A by-line in a news service Sunday supplement was just the beginning. It meant recognition and—and extra money. Extra money. Visions of the evening dress

at Mandel's rolled in front of her eyes.

And then she thought of Bob. Well, what of Bob? What if she was fooling him? He was nice, that was all. Only the moonlight last night had made her think there was special magic in his kiss. He was just another man. . . . an assignment, she reminded herself again.

Tonight she was seeing him for dinner and then she need not bother with him any more. It was simple. she told herself, over and over.

Then why didn't the image of Bob's face leave her mind, the memory of being in his arms fade away? Why no excitement over the chance of a by-line, the thought of extra money? Why was there the little prickling of doubt? Why wasn't it fun to plan and scheme?

BOB MET her in the lounge of the college inn. He took her hands eagerly.

"Christy. . . . it's been ages since last night."

Her heart beat almost too fast, hurting her. "Oh. . . . hello, Bob," she managed to say between tight lips.

They went through the door into the dining room, found a table in a secluded corner. Bob ordered for them both, while she clenched her hands under the table, desperately trying to still the tremor that shook her. She was seeing his face, hearing the tone of his voice when he greeted her. Bob. Thoughts of him, the sense of his nearness flooded through her.

She knew it then. Nothing would ever count as much as a smile from Bob, the touch of his hand. The meaning of everything would be summed up forever in Bob. And she knew with a sickening, wrenching realization that she wasn't worthy of a tenth of his love.

She couldn't write the feature Big Mike wanted. Not if Bob didn't want her to. Money to buy an extra dress didn't matter, recognition and a by-line didn't matter. Not when you had to sell your soul to get it—to lie and cheat and take advantage, to pretend you were something

you weren't. The job didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except that she wanted Bob to go on loving her.

She looked at him. "Bob. . . . there's something I have to tell you. . . ."

"If it isn't Miss Worth! How is my prodigy coming along?"

Of all the people she didn't want to see! Prot Britton.

Christy's smile cracked as Bob stood up politely. She introduced them and felt as if she were waiting for an avalanche to hit. Every second was like a heavier and heavier stone approaching. Then it came.

"So you're the young man Mike told me she was interviewing."

He turned smilingly to Christy. "I stopped by the office to inquire how you were progressing with your job. It pleased me that Mike seemed to expect big things." He held out his hand in goodbye. "It's good to know such an outstanding and well known veteran chose our school, Mr. Baker. It'll be fine publicity for us." He smiled again and left them.

Christy couldn't say anything. It was as if she were fascinated by the growing look of disgust and hatred on Bob's face as he stared down at her, his nostrils dilated.

He flung down his napkin. "Just another double dealing reporter!"

She watched him, dull eyed, stride from the room, his shoulders set.

SHE DIDN'T remember leaving the inn, or walking slowly, dazedly, down the street until she reached the office. Like an automaton, she pushed open the door, went to her desk, sat down and stared in front of her, oblivious to the sounds that went on about her.

Feature. A. story about veterans. Well. . . why not write her swan song? A magnificent gesture to throw in Big Mike's face. But she'd write it the way she wanted.

Suddenly, her fingers began to move on the typewriter. And at the familiar "dump, dump" of the keys, the words on the paper began to echo the thoughts in her heart.

She wrote her thoughts simply, without using names. Into it she tried

to put every inflection of Bob's when he had explained that the veteran was not some queer new animal. She pleaded for a normal treatment for them, the right sort of understanding. They knew they were changed, she wrote. They knew the war was something that would remain in their memories, but they wanted merely the chance to take up where they left off, hoping that things at home were better than they had been.

She tried to make it different from a clinical, cold analysis of a new species. She wanted it nothing like a clear, concise report of what someone said, a big name, presented in the accepted newspaper style. It was her swan song, wasn't it? She would write as she felt.

When she finished, she realized how tired she was, drained of every ounce of energy. The job of cleaning out her desk could wait until morning. She gathered up the pages she'd written, went to Big Mike.

"There's your feature, but won't you be surprised when you finish reading it." Her laugh was hysterical, going off into a high key. "But I don't even care what you think because I'm quitting!"

Before he could say anything, she had turned and left.

She managed somehow to find her way to her room and, too exhausted to care, collapsed on the bed. The train of her thoughts, like tired, overloaded freight cars, rolled to a stop. She was conscious of nothing until morning.

When she pushed open the door marked "Daily Chronicle," she could glimpse Big Mike sitting at his desk like a big frog mournfully contemplating the universe.

She didn't say anything, but walked to her desk, began opening drawers, taking things out.

"Hey. . . . Worth!"

That bellowing tone again. Christy paused, her head reared angrily. Didn't he know she'd quit! She walked over to him.

"I quit last night. Remember?"

BIG MIKE took the cigar from his mouth. "No one around here

quits unless I've fired them first. I haven't fired you." He pushed a newspaper across the desk. "Don't you read the Chronicle any more?"

There in front of her eyes was her article. And underneath the heading a black by-line. She stared at him, open mouthed. "You. . . you printed it?"

Big Mike ignored her amazement. "I always print the best. I had my doubts I'd ever drag anything so good from you. You felt it pretty much, didn't you?"

Christy could hardly believe her ears. Here was Big Mike, toughest of editors, talking almost like a human being.

"But it wasn't the article you asked for."

"When you get something better, who should kick?" he remarked sagely. "I'm sending it on to National News. I'd rather have a reporter any day who cares more for honesty and fineness in his work, than one who's merely dazzled by the lure of publicity and more money. Now get back on the job, Christy."

A little stunned, she went back to her desk rather meekly, surprised to find how much more thrilled she was at his words of praise than at the fact of her brand new by-line. Big Mike was human, and he'd called her Christy!

Even though she'd lost Bob, she had gained her pride. And a new approach to life, a way of judging things, a finer sense of values. The knowledge of that lessened a little the gnawing pain of her sense of lost for Bob. It hurt, terribly, to realize what he thought of her, to remember the look of aversion in his face.

"Christy. . . ."

She turned slowly, not believing she'd actually heard his voice. But Bob was watching her, a newspaper in his hands.

"I. . . . I went through hell, Christy, thinking horrible things about you. Until. . . . I read your article this morning. I knew then no one who could write as you did, could ever be as ruthless and hypocritical as I thought."

He moved closer. "You did under-

stand, Christy. Just as I thought once you did. And. . . and you didn't use any names. It made a better story that way. I'm glad you wrote it." He grinned down at her then. "I guess it's time I was getting over my fear of reporters."

He was glad she'd written it. Bob was glad. Suddenly, it became real and the tears sprang to her eyes. "Not. . . not much of a reporter. Re-

porters don't. . . don't cry."

Bob reached for her then and she went into his arms. Then she glanced at Big Mike, embarrassed. But he saw her and winked, then twirled around in his swivel chair and presented his back.

She raised her face to Bob. "It's all right now," she whispered. "Everything's all right now."

(THE END)

I DREAM

*When I've reached the depths
of deepness,*

*And find things to be what they
seem - -*

*Do you know what I do, my
darling?*

*The only thing left—
I dream.*

*I dream in lazy green mead-
ows to lie,*

*Blue skies, and sunshiny
weather;*

*Things, my sweet, that you
and I*

*Will never know
Together.*

By

HELEN HOFFMAN

POLLARD



There Were Three Brothers

And Carol couldn't quite be sure which one she really loved!



What? No kisses for me?" Dirk's ironic voice challenged.

JUST WHEN Carol Harris was feeling the greatest tug of apprehension standing there at the Union station on Alameda in Los Angeles, waiting for Tommy O'Daniel, her fiancé, and Dirk O'Daniel,

there they were. Tommy, big and young and eager, and Dirk, dark and tall and aloof.

Carol hadn't been happy over Tommy's telegram sent to her from San Francisco on his release from the

By .

Beverly Boande

Army stating Dirk had flown out from Chicago and would be coming home with him to stay long enough to be best man at their wedding.

Carol had once been engaged to Richard, Dirk's older brother, and Dirk hadn't figured the daughter of a welder making \$1.10 an hour was good enough for the O'Daniel millions. Dirk had broken that engagement up quickly.

Had he come to the coast to break this one up, too? Chicago, where he was a prominent lawyer, before and since his discharge as a Navy Commander, was a long way from Los Angeles. Why had he come?

Tommy's blue eyes smiled into Carol's serious brown ones. In a moment his closely cropped brown head was bending possessively above her own blonde one. "Darling," he said in his young husky voice. "I've missed you so."

"Me, too," Carol said, remembering to return his kiss despite the fact her blood was beating wildly under the watchfulness of Dirk's dark eyes. She hated those disapproving wide-apart eyes of his.

"What? No darlings or kisses for me?" Dirk's ironic voice challenged through the confident curve of his lips.

Carol's brown eyes cooled angrily. How dare he even in jest speak of kissing? He knew how she hated him.

"Sure, Dirk, you can kiss my bride-to-be," Tommy offered generously before Carol could object verbally. "I'll dig up a taxi."

Dirk took his brother's offer before Carol knew what he was about. His lips were like melted steel, and she wanted to cry out against the hot searing flame that shot through her. He let her go suddenly and she felt as though she were falling. There was an emptiness all about her, all through her.

"SO YOU are marrying into the O'Daniel family after all," Dirk said bitterly. "First engaged to my brother Richard, now to my kid brother, Tommy. Is my turn next?"

"I haven't a thing to say to you, Dirk O'Daniel," Carol told him furiously,

still trembling inwardly from his kiss. "You ruined my life once. You aren't going to get a chance to do it again."

"No? So you love Tommy!" Carol knew that a slow touch of pink was tinting her skin. He must know then about Sherry Spier, and how miserable Tommy had been over the breaking of his engagement to Sherry, until she, Carol, came along. She had been heartbroken herself at the time—over Richard. Wasn't it natural that she and Tommy should fall in love—with so much in common?

Carol opened her purse, looked inside unseeingly and closed it loudly, remembering it was one Dirk had sent her at Christmas. If he thought his many gifts could make up to her for taking Richard away he had another thought coming. Gifts to assuage his guilty conscience—that is what they had been.

Carol adjusted the belt of her blue coat nervously as she asked Dirk flippantly: "And what business is it of yours if Tommy and I are in love and want to marry?"

"You don't love him." Dirk's voice was a bullet. "You got him on the rebound. He and Sherry had some silly quarrel over his joining the air corps after Pearl Harbor. You're trying to get back at me for breaking up your marriage to Richard. But why make Tommy the victim of your revenge?"

Carol ignored his question. She would never forgive him for trying to date her himself, after Richard had decided marriage and a movie career wouldn't mix. Not good enough to marry the O'Daniel millions, but good enough as a playmate. That is the way Dirk had figured it. He had even had the audacity to speak of love. That is the kind he was. Not that he hadn't done it beautifully, almost convincingly, but it hadn't fooled her any.

If he hadn't thought her good enough to marry his brother, she certainly wasn't simpleton enough to believe he would want to marry her himself. She laughed at him softly now. Laughed because she had been waiting a long time for this moment.

"You thought you were mighty smart getting your friend Levy to give Richard a chance at pictures after his medical discharge just two weeks before our wedding," she informed him acidly. "You broke that up nicely. But try breaking Tommy and me up and see how far you get."

BY THE time Carol had finished speaking, the laughter had fled from her lips, her voice. Fear had walked in, for she had seen molten steel in Dirk's eyes.

"I will break it up," Dirk told her firmly. "Incidentally—I have a little surprise for you. Richard and Sherry Spier will be house guests at our place until your wedding. I invited them, knowing you would want all your—old friends. In fact they should be at the house in time for dinner tonight."

"Nice of you to take so much trouble for my marriage, Dirk," Carol commented dryly. Oh, how she hated him. He must have given a great deal of thought to breaking up this marriage. It must mean much to him to travel so many miles to do that very thing.

"Nothing is too much trouble—for you, Carol. Nothing," Dirk replied quietly.

"For you." Carol heard mentally the extra words he didn't say. "For you—who never heard of Shakespeare until an English teacher shoved it at you: for you—who worked at the five and ten on Saturday nights instead of going to the country club dances. Nothing is too much trouble to keep you out of my family."

So that was what Dirk's defense was to be. Something out of Tommy's past and something out of hers. How clever of him. To have defied Tommy openly would have been disastrous. But to set them against each other with little jealousies!

Carol smiled bitterly to herself as Tommy called to them from his proud stand by a taxi. She couldn't have done better herself, she had to admit. Dirk was clever—too darned clever.

RICHARD stood out amongst the guests at the O'Daniel's Holmby

Hills mansion at dinner that night as a movie star should. Carol saw him at once as she and Tommy entered the living room. Richard saw her, too, and came to her side immediately. She felt her heart start to stir, and then suddenly settle back to its normal beat as though to say: "Not this one."

"Carol!" Richard said her name with an accent she knew hadn't been his originally. He caressed her name, made a melody of it. His eyes were as dark as Dirk's but he used them eloquently. He saw every part of her meticulous grooming from the up-swept blonde curls to the silver slippers on her slender feet in the second he held her hand. But she was unmoved; only faintly amused. If she could have been so calm in the past in his presence she could have probably held him despite Dirk, she thought to herself.

"I want you to meet an old friend of Tommy's," Dirk's voice said behind Carol. "Sherry Spier. Carol Harris."

Carol tried to be patronizing as she acknowledged the introduction to the small sweet-faced red-headed girl. It wasn't successful. A sadness to the girl's face reached through to her.

"Congratulations, Miss Harris," Sherry murmured softly. "You will be very happy with Tommy, I know." She looked up at Tommy standing silently by Carol's side. Carol looked away, feeling she was gazing upon something not meant for anyone to witness. As she turned her glance, her eyes met Dirk's black ones, watching her, weighing her. She breathed an almost audible sigh of relief as dinner was announced.

Dinner was an endless uncomfortable affair. Conversation was stilted. Even the O'Daniel guests seemed to sense the tension and found their words with effort.

Dirk's sleeve brushed against Carol's arm once as she reached for her goblet. She was acutely aware of it. Instinctively she moved closer to Tommy, ashamed she had acknowledged Dirk's nearness even to herself in a fleeting unwanted thought.

What was she doing thinking about

Dirk anyway she reprimanded herself? It seemed as though she was always thinking of Dirk, hating him as she did. But it was Tommy she was going to marry on Sunday. And what more could a girl ask? Tommy loved her. He had a brilliant future in the family's law firm and they would have financial security all their lives. So she was happy, wasn't she?

Wasn't she?

Dirk's taunting voice to her left interrupted her thoughts. "Does that kid brother of mine look like the happy groom-to-be to you?"

Despite herself Carol looked at Tommy's young profile. It had lost some of its youth. The jaw was set, the lips tight, the eyes worried, as they reluctantly wandered time and again toward the opposite side of the table to Sherry Spier's pale face where she sat with lowered eyes, her food untouched.

Carol tried not to notice. Ignoring Dirk she turned her attentions to Richard. "You look as handsome as ever," she told him, and was silently amused at the pleasure which flooded his handsome features. She knew she was flirting, but Tommy wasn't even listening to the conversation, and anything she could do to annoy Dirk was very much all right with her.

"You are the very same too," Richard said softly, and though his tone of voice was conventionally correct, his eyes declared "I still love you, Carol. I know you love me, too."

"What are you going to do about Tommy—and Sherry?" Dirk interrupted, his voice so low and penetrating Carol felt every blood cell in her body vibrate to its deep rich tone.

She had to fight for composure as she answered brightly: "Why, I am going to marry Tommy and make him happy ever after." Deliberately she ignored the last part of his question.

"Are you?" Dirk inquired meaningfully, and his eyes slid down the table to Sherry.

Once more Carol glanced at Sherry. So the girl was still in love with Tommy. So what? She would get over it. Look how she herself had re-

covered from Richard. In fact, she was even finding his attentions to-night something of a bore.

Tommy was too quiet. Dirk was consistently rude, and Richard was increasingly boring. The evening was definitely not a success. Carol was glad when it was over and she and Tommy stood before her apartment door saying goodnight.

All evening the fear that Dirk might succeed with his idea of inviting Richard and Sherry had been like a bit of hemlock in the liquid movement of her mind. To reassure herself that her future was in no peril of changes, Carol put her arms about Tommy's neck and kissed him.

Carol closed her eyes to enjoy it in all the fullness of its sweetness. She realized miserably that Dirk's face was there in her mind, Dirk's lips, just as they had been earlier in the day. The kiss wasn't what it should have been. Had Tommy been thinking of Sherry?

"You're just tired," Carol tried to tell herself as she climbed into her bed a few minutes later. You're just imagining things. "Everything will be all right in the morning."

BUT everything wasn't all right in the morning. Nor the next morning. On the tennis courts, in the pool, and over meals, Tommy and Sherry avoided each other until even Mr and Mrs O'Daniel noticed and were embarrassed. Dirk didn't help matters any either, by constantly calling it to Carol's attention.

Finally it was Friday night—the eve of the wedding rehearsal at the Little Church of the Flowers. Carol was feeling anything but like a bride-to-be as she walked down the aisle as the organ began the traditional "Here Comes the Bride."

Dirk was there by Tommy's side, apparently enjoying himself. "The line forms to the right to kiss the bride," he announced when the rehearsal was over. Before Carol could protest, his lips were pressed against her own. Not hard and hurting this time, but warm and unexpectedly soft. Carol's anger melted and caught

her lips off guard. They returned his kiss quickly, but completely.

"Come on, Sherry," Dirk urged a moment later. "If I can kiss the bride-to-be, I guess you can kiss the groom."

Somehow Dirk had Sherry in Tommy's arms. Carol saw Tommy tremble as Sherry stood on tip toe and put her arms about his neck before his head bent to hers. It was as though they were Babes in the Woods and had been separated in the night only to find each other at dawn.

Anger at Dirk flooded Carol's heart and mind. "I would like to see you alone a moment, Dirk," she demanded, trying not to notice that Tommy was still kissing Sherry, and that Richard was waiting to take his turn to kiss her, too.

"It is warm in here, isn't it?" Dirk questioned with a taunt as he walked with her out of the church.

"I just want to tell you," Carol told him icily, "that all your tricks and insinuating remarks aren't going to break up Tommy and me. You can stop shoving Sherry at Tommy's head and save yourself a lot of trouble."

"No trouble at all," Dirk assured her, laughing at her, and pulling her to him. "No more trouble than this." His arms held her close to him, and instinctively Carol tilted back her head for the kiss she felt sure was coming.

Dirk's soft laughter was like ice water thrown in her face. "Sorry," he said, releasing her abruptly. "The rehearsal is over."

Carol was sick at heart as she undressed for bed that night. Over and over again her mind brought back the picture of Sherry in Tommy's arms. And over and over again, she saw Tommy's big young frame tremble as he bent his head to kiss her. And over, about and through it all, ran the humiliating remembrance of the moment she had thought Dirk was going to kiss her and he hadn't.

Just as Carol was about to slip away into sleep, there came a sudden realization of that which she had been trying not to see for the past three days.

Tommy still loved Sherry Spier.

CAROL dressed with great care for the dance the next night at the Huntington Hotel which Mr and Mrs O'Daniel were giving to introduce her to their friends. She let her long hair fall into a golden cascade about her shoulders. A tiny black velvet ribbon cut the long delicate line of her throat above a sheer white strapless evening gown.

"You look lovely, Carol," Tommy told her as he called for her, but Carol knew he wasn't really seeing her at all. His eyes were looking off in the distance, seeing in his mind, Carol was sure, a red headed sweet faced girl whose blue eyes were faintly shadowed from too much weeping.

Through the long hours of the night before Carol had managed to make her decision. She knew what she had to do. Taking off the ring wasn't easy. So many dreams were cuddled up in it. "I think I have something that belongs to Sherry, Tommy," she said softly as they drove out Beverly Boulevard toward Pasadena.

Even in the dim light of his car Carol could see the relief that spread across Tommy's face. It hurt her pride a little. "Thanks, Carol," he said awkwardly, "I—"

"Don't," Carol stopped him. She quickly leaned toward him and kissed him on the cheek. Dear Tommy, Happy Tommy. "You hurry and find Sherry," she urged. "She has been waiting a long time. I want you to hurry and find your happiness."

Mechanically Carol acknowledged the introductions at the dance as the many guests arrived, Tommy beside her, but so anxious to get Sherry alone.

"Dance?" Dirk asked Carol as the party got under way.

She was almost grateful to go into his arms. She had seen the look upon Tommy and Sherry's face as they slipped outside a moment before. It had left her sick at heart. She felt so alone, so lost.

"So you are going through with it?" The question was an insult thrown in Carol's face. So he didn't yet know she had returned the ring.

Well, she wasn't going to tell him. She wouldn't be able to stand his gloating, the way she felt right now.

"By hurting Tommy do you actually think you are getting it back at me for getting Richard that picture contract at the wrong moment?" Dirk continued. "Are you really so cheap and small as to marry Tommy to revenge yourself on me over Richard? Do you call that love?"

"A lot you know about love, Dirk O'Daniel," Carol replied icily. "All you know how to do is break up everyone else's love affairs. Why don't you go out and get one of your own?"

Dirk stopped dancing suddenly. Forcibly he led her outside away from the crowd. He swung her about angrily, his hand tight upon her arm.

"SO YOU think I don't know about love!" he demanded harshly. "Do you think I don't have anything else to do but keep you from getting married? I loved you the first day Richard brought you home, and I knew, too, that Richard didn't really love you. He is my brother and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him, but he loves only himself. He always will. I merely gave him a chance at the movies to see if I was wrong, if I was letting my love for you be unfair to him.

"When I saw you weren't essential to his happiness I came to you and tried to tell you how I felt about you, but you were so wrapped up in feeling sorry for yourself you wouldn't even listen to what I had to say." If you really loved Tommy I would never have told you how I felt about you. Knowing you don't, however, I'll do everything I can to stop you from ruining your life and his."

"You needn't bother," Carol offered quietly. "I have already given Tommy back his ring." She hadn't meant to tell him herself, but there was some satisfaction in seeing the surprise on his face at her words. "It really wasn't necessary for you to go so far as to tell me you loved me in order to save Tommy," she

told him bitterly. "You are a little disgusting, Dirk O'Daniel."

"Carol!" She heard him call her name as she pulled away from him and hurried indoors. Never had she been so near to tears. Quickly she made her way to the ladies room and sat down on the settee fighting for control.

Sherry pushed open the door and came in a few moments later. "I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Tommy and me, Carol," she said in her sweet voice, now rich with happiness. "Dirk must be very happy tonight, too."

"Yes. He must be," Carol agreed resentfully. "He has been trying to keep me from marrying one or another of his brothers for as long as I can remember."

"But surely you know why?" Sherry asked amazedly.

And then Carol did know why. It was like having walked through an endless tunnel and finally catching a glimpse of the light at the far end.

DIRK loved her. It was as simple as that. He had loved her so much he had left home hurriedly, busy as he was in hopes there was still a chance to make her his wife. And she? What had her silly selfish heart been doing, but trying to hurt the very man she had been loving all this time.

It was Dirk she had always had on her mind, always angry at him, always thinking about him, always keeping tabs as to where he was, what he was doing. And always she had deceived herself into thinking she did these things in order to *someday* pay him back for breaking up her marriage to Richard. Blind? Why if she had been stone sightless since birth she could have seen more than she had seen these past years.

She had believed herself to be in love with Tommy. Both young fools trying to deceive their own hearts' choice. Her fondness for Tommy had been intermingled, she had to admit, with an underlying desire to hit back at Dirk. A feeling of protection and tenderness for Tommy because he, too, was disappointed in love, had

led to this dreadful mixup of her emotions.

At least she could tell Dirk she believed him now. It was probably too late to have what might have been hers with him, but she must find him no matter what.

She found him on the terrace where she had left him. The music was soft and low as it came through the night. The full moon through the palms smiled down encouragingly.

"Dirk!" She spoke his name humble—almost afraid.

She knew he had heard and her heart lost its anchoring within her breast as he stood in the darkness watching her, not answering.

"I love you, Dirk," she whispered into the night. "I am so ashamed for not believing you long ago when you told me how you felt. I was always so conscious of the distance between our families socially that I just took it for granted that was the

reason you made Richard that movie offer when you did. Tommy was heartbroken over Sherry, and I—I was all upset, too. We mistook it for love. We were so very wrong, Dirk."

"Better dry those tears, honey child," Dirk said, offering his handkerchief. "They aren't being worn on brides this year."

Carol almost stopped breathing for a moment her joy was so great. "Bride?" she asked in a small humble voice.

Dirk drew her into the circle of his arms. "Tomorrow is Sunday—the day you become Mrs O'Daniel, remember?"

"Mrs Dirk O'Daniel?" Carol questioned, a star springing into her eyes.

Dirk kissed her thoroughly. "From now on, my darling, that is the only O'Daniel for you—ever."

Carol didn't try to reply. Her lips had more pleasant things to do.

(THE END)

For the February ROMANTIC LOVE Stories

LONG IS THE NIGHT.....(Novelette).....Carol Grey
Cliff's arms were around Ann . . . yet she wasn't the girl in his arms.

A LION WENT A-WOOING Ruth McCaslin
Ronnie told herself that she didn't even like Kip Hollister.

CINDERELLA, CAN YOU COOK? Kathleen Godwin
Everything about Mike was special, but Julie tried to forget him.

I HAVEN'T CHANGED Kathy Andrews
And Bonnie's foolish heart betrayed her . . .

ONE SET OF WARM BLUE EYES Elaine Heyward
Bonar Martin always got what he wanted; this time it was the girl Dick loved.

BE NICE TO MY SISTER Vera Henry
But you don't have to fall in love with her!

PIXIES DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE! Beverly Boande
If Gertrude was Rock's idea of a model wife, then Merry would be more like Gertrude than Gertrude herself.

LONG RANGE(Poem)..... Clarence Edward Flynn

MARRY ME FOR KEEPS Edris Hubbard Fortney
Lilyan slapped down her memories and decided to hate Ricky.

BET WITH MY HEART(Poem)..... Wilma Ericson

LADY TARZAN(Novelette).....Ruth Brandao Ferrari
Sheila was a born hoyden . . . and she made it pay!

THIS ISSUE IS NOW ON SALE



THINK ONLY OF THIS

*Love like a slender taper
Burns on the wall tonight,
Whatever the gusty winds that blow,
It makes a lovely light!*

By Merle Beyon

A trivial accident brought matters to a climax.



Her Sister's Man

By
Coral Lee Baxter

*Paula had to prove to Alan that
she wasn't afraid of him . . .*

PAULA CURTISS stared bewilderedly across the small width of her living room at Alan Spence. With every reason to hate her, why should he ask her to go dancing with him? Especially, when he knew that she didn't date.

"B-but I'm married!" she stammered confusedly.

His gray eyes narrowed as he briefly glanced at her. "The way I've heard it, you never were really married, except for a brief ceremony. I'd say you're either the most fan-

tastically loyal woman I ever heard of, or you're simply getting a big kick out of making a martyr of yourself. But, either way, I think you owe me a little consideration."

In the soft glow shaded lamps, his tall form seemed to dominate every inch of the apartment living room as he stood at a table aimlessly leafing through one magazine after another, cigarette smoke bluely swirling up past his tawny head.

Paula sat at one end of the couch, silently staring at him, feeling the uncanny power of his personality. Browned by the sun and winds of every campaign from Tunisia to Berlin, his rank of major submerged now beneath the civilian anonymity of well tailored evening clothes, he still radiated an air of authoritative self assurance hard for her to resist.

Yet, despite his compelling personality, her sister, Elinore, hadn't been able to make up her mind about him. She'd had to ask Paula whether or not she should marry Alan. And now Elinore was at Uncle Charley's Texas ranch to get Alan Spence out of her system.

He tossed the last magazine aside and straightened. "Well, what do you say? Afraid to risk one evening with me?"

"You know it isn't that!" she flared.

He swung toward her, his voice scathingly contemptuous. "Who do you think you're ribbing beside yourself? Where's the glory in dedicating your whole life to the memory of Chuck Curtiss unless you can prove to me, to yourself, and the world, that no man has the power to sway you? You won't date because you're afraid to get your emotions stirred up. You're a pretty, little dope, charming, attractive, lovable, but as yellow as they come!"

Paula gasped. How dared he talk to her like that? Why didn't she just slap him—hard? "Why—why—" she panted, on her feet, small fists clenched, glaring up at him, "—you can't call me yellow, you big bully! I'm not afraid of you or anyone else!"

"But what?" he grinned tauntingly.

"You talk big for such a cuddly little kitten of a girl. But you're afraid of me!"

"Am I?" she blazed. "Wait till I get my clothes changed, and I'll show you how afraid I am!"

PAULA savagely brushed her dark hair into a shimmery froth of ringlets about her slim shoulders. Then, in a two-year-old yellow, date dress, a matching ribbon tied around her small head, a gleamingly golden, metallic belt accenting her slender waist, she dragged a snowy evening wrap as aged as her dress from the remote depths of her closet, and defiantly gave it to Alan to hold for her to slip into. "Afraid, am I?" she jeered. "Of you and who else?"

His amused glance set her heart to hammering like mad, which only made her all the more furious.

What he needed, she wrathfully told herself as he solicitously helped her into his car, was a little toning down, and she'd get a big kick from doing the job.

But, a half-hour later, she decided that it was rather fun to be out dancing with him, thrillingly conscious of the stir of feminine interest his appearance caused in the nightspot Mecca of cafe society. And it was good to feel the exhilarating lift of high heels, a long skirt swirling around her ankles, smooth music soothing her ruffled feelings.

Not that it altered in the least, her determination to crush him, so she shamelessly flirted with him and was all starry-eyed and breathlessly attentive when he talked.

Yet the thought of Chuck Curtiss had a sobering effect upon her. It made her realize that her response to Alan's mute challenge was becoming a little too spontaneous. It was quite all right to take the conceit out of him, but not at the price of falling in love with him.

Seeming to sense her thought, he said as the floor show began with four grinning Negroes in a soft-shoe dance, "You're a good deal of a fanatic, aren't you, Paula? Of course I've heard from Elinore how you and she met Chuck Curtiss and Greg

Upton at a party a couple of years ago. She told me that they were sailors on shore leave, how they rushed the pair of you off your feet and into a double wedding, and about the radio broadcasting a sudden cancellation of all shore leaves, cheating you and your sister out of your honeymoons. Then a destroyer went down in the North Atlantic, and you didn't either of you have any husband at all. So, under the circumstances, how you can insist that you're married—"

Paula forgot that she was being nice to Alan. "You just can't comprehend such a thing as loyalty, can you?" she flamed. "If you married a girl and lost her somehow, right away, you'd promptly forget having made sacred vows, wouldn't you? You'd not feel married at all. Well, I do. I feel just as much married as if I'd had Chuck these past two years. To me, 'unto death' means just that, and for both man and woman!"

She held up her slim hand before him. "Chuck Curtiss put those two rings onto my finger, and I've not forgotten." Something impelled her to add with savage provocation, "and it will be a better man than Chuck who takes those rings off me!"

Alan's voice rang out like steel against granite. "I accept that challenge!"

Paula sagged back against the softness of the red-upholstered booth. "I—I beg your pardon?"

He leaned nearer across the small table, gray eyes frighteningly confident. "I'm taking you up on that!"

"But," she hastily countered, "it's Elinore with you."

"IS IT?" His voice raised to combat the throaty tones of a torch singer who followed the dance act. "Let's just consider Elinore past tense. She didn't love me enough to marry me without your okay."

"The only thing Elinore ever decided for herself," Paula flew to her sister's defense, "was the trip to Texas to forget you. I had nothing to do with it. But because she had to ask me if she should marry you, I knew that she didn't love you. I

told her not to marry you, for she wouldn't have been happy with you. There's nothing so hard on a woman as an unhappy marriage. I know!"

With Alan's gray eyes on her, she hurriedly continued, "Elinore and I saw firsthand what an unhappy marriage is like, our parents always fighting. I think Mom really died because she couldn't take it any longer. But Elinore and I grew up dreaming of the understanding and happiness that every girl wants. When Father married again, choosing a woman who hated us as much as we did her, we walked out. I decided to do that, Elinore didn't. She just cried. She didn't find her job with the telephone company. I did it for her. And I chose our apartment."

"SHE may be twenty-three, a year older than I, but, I'm the one who's made the decisions for both of us since there were any at all to be made. Now perhaps you can understand why she asked me if she should marry you. She didn't seem to realize that if she really loved you, she wouldn't have had to ask."

"That's not the way I got it from her when she broke things off with me," Alan objected, voice hard. "Her story was that you're so obsessed with a crazy loyalty for the man who never was actually your husband, that you expected the same insanity of her. You acted horribly shocked a year ago when she started dating again. Then you behaved as if she were contemplating bigamy by wanting to marry me. Because of you, she's in Texas right now to forget me. All right, I'm out to see if you can practice what you preach. And so you can't ever say that I pulled a fast one on you, I'm warning you now that in my own good time I'll take Chuck Curtiss' rings off that hand of yours!"

A wild, unreasoning panic in her breast, Paula managed to look him straight in the eye. "Try and do it," she defied him, but her voice was shaky despite her effort to control it.

Then she felt awfully let down when the evening ended and he

didn't offer to kiss her goodnight. "I must be slipping!" she thought sourly.

THE next day she dedicated her lunch hour to the purchase of an up to the minute date dress and wrap. When she got home from the office that afternoon, she found a letter from Elinore in her mailbox. And Elinore was getting over any weakness for Alan, judging by the way she raved about the men at a nearby redistribution center.

Which was just dandy because it meant that Elinore wouldn't be getting homesick, pulling in suddenly, without any warning, and catching Paula dating Alan. Such an event would be embarrassing to say the least, after the way Paula had gone out on a limb by preaching steadfast loyalty to the men they'd married. She'd had to play up that angle, knowing her sister well enough to realize that if she'd simply borne down on the fact that Elinore didn't really love Alan, the girl would have immediately and very inconsistently been convinced that she did love him.

It had been a pretty delicate situation, one which required handling with gloves, Elinore's whole happiness at stake.

And now, Paula thought ruefully as she prepared supper, she was up to her neck in another one equally touchy. Not for one minute could she let Alan even guess how afraid of him she really was. For from the first time when Elinore had brought him home with her, Paula had known that he could be highly dangerous to her own peace of mind. He was the one man, she'd realized even while Elinore was introducing him, who could, if permitted, replace Chuck Curtiss in her heart.

Right now she had no more intention of permitting it to happen than she'd had at the beginning, so it was up to her to watch her step. It would be plenty gratifying to take some of the conceit out of Alan, but about as safe as playing around with a very live time bomb!

That evening Alan took her to a basketball game where she got so excited that she forgot to put on an

act for his benefit, losing all her dignity, too, flushed and happy at the end when her favorite team won.

"You're still just a kid," Alan grinned on the way to his car, as she breathlessly chattered about the plays highlighting the game. "That's why it gripes my soul to see you setting yourself up as a sort of human tombstone to the memory of Chuck Curtiss. You still have lots of life ahead of you, a long time in which to exist purely in the rapt exaltation of noble self sacrifice."

"I don't feel particularly noble about it," she sturdily defended herself. "I guess I'm just a one-man woman."

"One man at a time, yes," Alan laughed, "and it's high time that a man keeps you from going to waste."

"Don't forget," she retorted, guiltily conscious that for hours she hadn't even thought of Chuck, "that I'm out with you merely to prove to your satisfaction that I'm not afraid of you." Sheer panic prompted the lie as she added, "You don't tempt me nor stir up my emotions, so what does it get you, dragging me around this way?"

"We'll see," he said stopping his car in front of her apartment building. "But I don't expect either of us to prove anything in only two evenings. Perhaps a week from now—"

IT WAS a week of being dated every single night. Alan let Paula get so little sleep that twice she was late to work in the morning. And it was a week that proved that even when given a chance to sleep, she couldn't without dreaming of Alan. Worse, just when she should be concentrating on her work, Alan's gray eyes and his tantalizing grin would materialize before her, and she'd catch herself blankly staring out the window, wondering what his kiss would be like. And it was a week in which Elinore's letters were full of men she'd met.

Paula was sorely tempted to get out of town herself, but she knew that running away wouldn't do any good. Proving to Alan that she wasn't afraid of him, taking some of

the conceit out of him, no longer seemed as important as proving to herself that he really didn't mean a thing in her young life. And the sooner she did it, but conclusively, the better for her!

Then suddenly a trivial accident brought matters to a climax. It was Sunday afternoon. They'd parked his car, going for a leisurely hike up-river, and were returning along the water's edge, scrambling over the slippery stones, when she turned her ankle and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms. For a long moment she lay back in the curve of his elbow, his gray eyes still betraying startled concern. And she forgot her ankle, a greater, achingly sweet pain in her abruptly hammering heart.

Slowly his head bent down, his lips took her mouth, and even before her arms traitorously went around his neck, she knew it was hopeless to fight against loving him.

It was right, being in love with him, she decided. Just as right as when she'd given her heart to Chuck, nothing at all shameful in this new love risen phoenix-like from the old. Odd that she could think of such things while his heart pounded hard against hers, and his arms strained her to him!

But when he released her, he looked sheepish, as if he'd done something disgraceful, asking, "Are you able to walk, Paula?"

"Able to walk?" she repeated vaguely. Why should she worry about walking while still soaring through roseate heavens? "I guess so." She experimentally tried a few steps. "No harm done."

Then she thought, "How perfectly dumb of me. He would have been willing to carry me!"

WITH an overwhelming surge of feeling, she knew that she belonged to him, would always belong to him as she'd once thought she would never belong to any man but Chuck Curtiss. A sudden shyness possessed her as Alan just stood looking down at her and said nothing. She couldn't seem to, either, not any-

thing which would adequately tell him how she felt. But there was another way.

She raised her eyes to the sky. "Forgive me, Chuck," she silently breathed. "I'll never forget you, but I know you'd want me to be happy!"

The gurgling chuckle of hurrying water at her feet, the glorious colors of frost-nipped trees bright against the sky, a faint odor of woodsmoke in the crisp autumn air, made her feel queerly as if this had all happened sometime before. It wasn't like when Chuck proposed in a night club. This was different, as if rehearsed before she ever was born, meant to be, predestined by fate!

She mutely held up her hand, eyes humid with surrender, heart frantically pounding while she waited for Alan to free her from the rings that had symbolized her loyalty to Chuck. But Alan didn't seem to understand. She felt herself crimsoning beneath his questioning gaze, then suddenly finding her voice, she blurted out, "Well, take them off me. You've won the right just as you said you could!"

He still looked down at her, face frighteningly grave. "You're mistaken." His voice had an edge that sent a chill to her heart. "I haven't the right. I'm more sorry than I can say."

It wasn't possible, she thought numbly, turning away from him, that she could one minute be so divinely happy, so shamed and humiliated the next. But it was her own fault. She'd forgotten that he loved her sister, that he wasn't the sort to turn to another girl on the rebound, except merely to amuse himself. She said tonelessly, "Well, you win. You had the power to sway me."

Walking along at her side, he said, "I wish you'd slap me down. I've been crude, cheaply melodramatic in my thinking, unfair to you. I've hurt you—"

She cut in, "Let's not post-mortem. It was a dare, remember? You said I was a coward, yellow, by being loyal to Chuck, refusing to date. I set out to prove something, but what's the use of talking about it?"

"Because," he said grimly, "it was a scurvy trick to play on you. You see, Elinore didn't by herself decide to go to Texas. I sent her there to get her out of the way so I could prove to her that you or any other woman can love again if a man takes the trouble to drag you up out of your memories."

THEY were back at his parked car now, his eyes avoiding hers as he held the door open for her. When he was around and under the wheel, she said with attempted brightness, "Confession is supposed to be good for the soul. Tell me the rest. I can take it."

Glancing down at her briefly as he wheeled the car out onto the highway, he said bitterly, "Why couldn't your sister be half the woman you are?"

Paula thought miserably, "Why couldn't you have loved me to begin with, instead of her?" To keep the silence from getting too oppressive, she said, "You do love Elinore, don't you?"

"I asked her to marry me."

"And I told her not to, so you hate me."

"Right now I'm too busy hating myself," he retorted gruffly. "I told Elinore when she was leaving for Texas, that I'd find a way to get your approval of our marriage. She said okay, that if you changed your mind about it being disloyal to Greg for her to become my wife, and if you would tell her so yourself, she'd marry me after all. So I simply intended to make you realize that life for either of you, needn't be one long, mournful torching. My idea was to prove to you that you, or she, could love again, not to actually make you love me. It just didn't occur to me that you might. I was merely out to teach you a lesson."

There was no room in Paula's heart for tears, only the dead, wooden feeling that she'd laid herself wide open to hurt by letting Alan date her. By permitting him to taunt her into it, she'd asked for all she'd gotten. It was her fault as much as his. "You succeeded," she choked. "I've had a perfectly gorgeous lesson!"

There didn't seem to be anything to say after that, not until he stopped his car in front of her apartment. Then there was only one decent thing for her to do. She said, "Stick around while I telephone Elinore to come home and make you happy."

He followed her up to her rooms. "Look, I can do my own phoning—"

Paula was dialing long-distance. "Yes, I know," she said wearily, "but I ruined things for you, so now I can fix them up again."

Elinore wasn't at the ranch. Uncle Charley, delighted to hear Paula's voice, wanted to visit over the wire, but she cut him off with, "We've only got five minutes. Now do you have that message straight? When Elinore comes in, please don't forget to tell her that Alan has made me understand a lot of things, and to come home quick as she can. She'll know what I mean. "Thanks."

She hung up and turned to Alan. "You'd better go now before I break down and make a fool of myself. Don't come back until Elinore has had time to get here." With a supreme effort she kept her voice steady. "Don't worry about me. I'll get over it. All I ask of you is that you make her as happy as she deserves to be."

Alan simply took her hand in one last, long, bone-crushing grip and left her alone. She aimlessly wandered around the suddenly cold, cheerless apartment, still feeling too numb and dead inside for even tears. It was like when the news had come about Greg and Chuck, only worse, much worse. Then she'd had Elinore to comfort. Now there was only herself to pity.

AND in her misery she knew with a desolate self-arraignment, that she'd earned all the hurt she suffered. For she hadn't been honest even with herself. She'd clung to an idyllic conception of lifelong loyalty to Chuck, refusing to admit even to herself that she'd fallen in love with Alan at first sight. She'd posed as a noble martyr, an example of steadfast devotion to Chuck Curtiss, doing it to shame her sister into giving up

Alan, justifying herself with the thought that Elinore could never make him happy. Then she'd told Alan that it was Elinore's happiness that had been so important.

Right along, deep down in her heart, she'd known that it was her own selfish love for him which had betrayed her into all that shameful hypocrisy. She'd even convinced herself that she was dating him sheerly to take the conceit out of him, while all the time she dreamed dreams in which he loved her, not Elinore.

So heartbreak was her just reward, nothing left for her but to go far away somewhere and learn to always be honest with herself and other people, and to let them make their own decisions.

She was lifelessly emptying her closet, laying out dresses on the bed to be packed, when the doorbell began its long, frantic peals. It couldn't be ignored, but she lacked the energy and interest even to lift the small phone in her entry from its hook and to ask who was making all that commotion. Listlessly she pushed the button that released the lower-door latch.

Feet came bounding up the stairs, and Alan burst in on her, gray eyes eagerly glowing as he caught her and

whirled her into the small living room in a succession of dizzy dance steps.

"Look at this!" He shoved a telegram into her surprised fingers. "It came while I was trying to get your Uncle Charley by long-distance to tell him for Pete's sake to have Elinore phone me before starting home. Now I don't have to let her down. Go on, read it!"

Signed by Elinore, it read: "Darling, forgive me. I'm married. Paula was right. I didn't really love you after all. Concentrate on her. She's worth a dozen like me."

Paula dazedly felt her hand lifted, Chuck's rings gone from it for the first time in two years. "Why look so stunned?" His voice was coming as if from a long distance away. "Of course I love you. What's wrong with a guy getting hep to himself at practically the last minute, so long as he does?"

Now his arms were blessedly tight around her, magically draining all her hurt away. "And Paula, honey, if I ever seem to forget even for one minute, that I'm the luckiest guy alive, just dangle these two rings in front of me. Tomorrow, the minute the stores open, you'll be choosing the ones you'll wear for life!"

(THE END)



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BONDS





BRIGHT

I've loved a lot of men, but not like you.

This is the real thing, different from the rest.

I've said the same to other men, that's true.

But after all, this is the surest test:

*Now while upon my throat your lips grow
bolder*

*I don't smile at the next man past your
shoulder.*

By Mary Carolyn Davies

The Man With the Pipe

George was thoughtful and considerate; he was protective. He was everything Ann wanted. And then along came Tod Hunter!

ANN ALL but ran the last half block. Six-thirty-five, and George had said he'd call at seven. Unless George's habits had changed greatly in the past six months, that meant he'd be there promptly at ten of the hour.

For the first time in the year she had been engaged to George Latham, it occurred to Ann that unfailing promptness might, on occasion, be a little annoying. As now, for instance. If she weren't so certain George would arrive in exactly fourteen-and-one-half minutes, she wouldn't be in such a dither about that pipe.

In spite of her very real worry, Ann gave a stifled little giggle. A man's pipe lying cozily on the table beside the chintz-covered couch in the kitchen of her Greenwich Village apartment! How ever could she explain that to George? The answer was, she couldn't of course. That was why she had to get the thing out of sight before George got there.

It had been hard enough to ex-

"Are you by any chance proposing to me, Tod Hunter?"

By
**TUGAR
DePASS**



plain the apartment itself. George had written her very sternly on the subject—"I thought it was understood you would stay at a genteel boarding house for young ladies, and I must say I consider you've been very impulsive in making this move. I do not think it at all proper for a well-brought-up young girl to live alone. Especially in Greenwich Village."

She had written at length, explaining that Greenwich Village was no different from any other part of the city, except that its residents were mostly young writers and artists. And since she herself hoped to become a writer, wasn't it only natural that she should want to live there?

The only thing she hadn't explained was how she, a mere copy girl at the time, had been able to sub-rent an apartment for which any number of other people would have given their eye-teeth.

Dashing into the entrance of the apartment building now, the pleated skirt of her dark green blazer suit fluttering with her haste, Ann paused automatically to glance into the mail box on which the gilt letters said "Ann Bryant." One letter, post-marked Pleasantville, South Carolina, and addressed in her mother's vigorous scrawl. She tucked it into the pocket of her blazer, and turned toward the door of her ground-floor apartment.

Fleetingly, her thoughts winged back to the first day she had entered that door, and, again, she gave a stifled little giggle. What a nerve she had had!

PASSING the building on one of her long Sunday walks, a man's voice raised in anger had caught her attention. Pausing, she had glanced with idle curiosity toward the sound, and seen a tall, dark-haired young man facing a half-dozen or so people grouped before him.

"I'm sick and tired of this," he was practically shouting. "How everybody for miles around seems to have learned I'm closing my apartment is more than I can understand. But, for

the last time, it is *not* for rent! I may be gone three days or three weeks or three years—I don't know. A war correspondent never knows. Besides, I'm not going to have strangers messing around my things, probably misplacing half of them so I'll never find them again. So will you please all go away and let me get back to my packing—I've a train to catch in exactly forty minutes." And he had turned and strode back into the building.

Now, russet head bent as she fished in her bag for her key, Ann's lips quirked. How doubly furious he had been when, turning to close the door of his apartment, he discovered her, already in the room, standing right behind him. She hadn't stopped to think at all, beyond the bare fact that here, at last, was what she had longed for ever since she came to New York—a vacant Village apartment. And one swift glance had told her it was *exactly* the apartment she had dreamed of, too. A floor-through affair, and with all the doors open, she could see straight through to the pocket-size garden out back of the big kitchen.

Tod Hunter—as he later told her his name was—looked ready to pick her up bodily and toss her out into the hall, so she had begun to talk. Without stopping to catch her breath, she had told him all about herself, stressing the fact that she was a good housekeeper and that she was engaged to a man back in her home town, so she wouldn't be having dates or doing any entertaining. And, finally, she had promised desperately, "You'll find it exactly as you left it. I won't move a thing. Not even—" her gray-green eyes swept past him, and she saw the old pipe on the table beside the couch in the kitchen—"not even that pipe," she finished triumphantly.

It was that last that had done it, she rather suspected. For, suddenly, Tod Hunter had begun to laugh.

And such an infectious laugh it was, that, just remembering it, made Ann laugh now—

SHE stopped abruptly as, starting to fit her key into the lock, the door swung open before her. Slowly, her eyes very wide and startled, she stepped into the room. For there, lounging on the arm of the big chair by the window, one long leg swinging, smoke curling up from the pipe in his hand, was *Tod Hunter*.

And I can't hide him in the desk drawer! Ann thought hysterically. But she'd certainly have to get rid of him before George came. George was terribly jealous. That was why she'd been so careful to write him that she didn't know any men at all except the ones who worked on the *Daily Bugle* with her. And this *Tod Hunter*—well, George would never believe she'd seen him just once before in her life, and that for a scant twenty minutes!

Just look at him now. So perfectly at home here he hadn't bothered even to stand up or say a word of greeting. There he sat, just grinning at her between lazy puffs on that horrid, smelly old pipe! And those eyes—what was it about those bright blue eyes that made her feel both hot and cold all at the same time?

"So you're back," Ann finally exploded. "You *might* have given me a little warning. I suppose you expect me to pack my bags and move out right this minute!"

"Not at all," he told her calmly. "I thought I might just move in with you—in about three days, that is."

Ann almost choked as she looked up and saw George. Tod was going on, his eyes twinkling, but his voice very patient, as though he were explaining something to a child. "Why not? I've been looking around quite a bit and I've come to the conclusion you weren't exaggerating that day you bragged so on yourself. You are a good housekeeper, I've inspected every corner and under all the cushions. You overlooked one point, though you forgot to tell me you were a good cook, too—I sampled that apple pie in the refrigerator. You *should* have told me that." He gave her a hurt look "I've been practically having nightmares about it for the past six months. But never mind—"

he gave her a consoling grin—"I guess being a woman of your word makes up for that omission. Gosh, honey, you don't know what it meant for me to find this right where I left it." He glanced fondly down at the pipe in his hand. "And so," he finished happily "why shouldn't we both live here? You'll make a darn good wife."

"A—darn good wife?" Ann's mouth literally dropped open. She sat down limply on the edge of the nearest chair. "Are you, by any chance, *proposing* to me, *Tod Hunter*?" she gulped.

He cocked his dark head on one side, and scowled at her. "Now don't tell me I'm making a mistake after all. You aren't dumb, are you?"

To her own astonishment, Ann heard herself saying meekly, "I don't think so." And then, suddenly, she burst into giggles. This was absurd—utterly absurd! It must be this crazy *Tod Hunter's* idea of a joke or something. Wouldn't it just serve him right if she took him up on it, though!

And then abruptly, the giggles ended in a choked little gasp, as 'the reason' she couldn't possibly call this crazy bluff appeared in the frame of the door she had forgotten to close. George, trim and neat as always, in a pin-striped gray suit, a white carnation in his buttonhole, every strand of his sandy hair exactly in place.

Oh gosh, Ann thought frantically, how long had he been standing there? How much had he heard?

IT SEEMED an eternity that she just sat there staring at George's face, but, actually, she knew, it was only a second or so before she realized, from his polite, questioning glance from her to Tod, that he had heard nothing.

With a joyous laugh of pure relief, she jumped up and ran to him, both hands outstretched. "George—George, darling!" she cried. "Oh, but it's good to see you—do come in." What a silly she had been to sorry for a minute—it was perfectly simple to explain *Tod's* presence! Still holding George's hand, she turned. "This

is Mr Hunter, George," she said calmly. "He's my landlord. My fiancé, Mr Latham, Mr Hunter."

Tod flashed her the hint of a wicked grin, and stood up and gave George an exaggerated bow. "I stopped by to check up on a pipe," he said.

Ann made a small, choked sound, but George didn't notice. "Something wrong with the plumbing, I presume. These old buildings—tch-tch!" he shook his head sadly. clogged drains—something's *always* happening."

"Right you are, sir." Tod, too, shook his head sadly. "Only, this time, I'm afraid it's something much worse than any of those things." Abruptly, he leaned forward close to George's ear, and hissed, "This pipe *smells*. It's a simply over-powering odor, and once you get even a whiff of it you could never forget it—not even to your dying day." He straightened, and turned to Ann "That's true, isn't it—er—Miss Bryant?"

Ann nodded absently. Funny, she'd never thought of it before, but the scent of that old pipe of Tod's was rather hard to forget. She'd had to pick up the pipe every morning, of course, in order to dust the table, and all day long that queer, pungent scent had lingered in her memory. Only, come to think of it, she'd never considered it an *objectionable* odor—

With a little start, she brought her wandering thoughts up sharply, suddenly becoming fully aware of the double meaning in that speech of Tod's. Why the conceited thing! Did he actually think just because she had lived here in his apartment, smelled his old pipe, she had fallen *in love* with him?

She wished she could tell him just exactly how mistaken he was, but, of course, she couldn't—not with George here. She could only stand there fuming silently, while George gave Tod a lengthy and indignant lecture on the dangers of a pipe that smelled. According to George, she might have contracted any number of horrible diseases from such a pipe, and it was Tod's part not to have made sure the

plumbing was in perfect order before he rented her the apartment.

How glad she was though, that he had come up for this unexpected visit! Maybe now she could make him understand how amazingly successful she had been. She'd written him all about that success, of course, but, somehow, George had never seemed to take in that a rise from copy girl to assistant editor of the Woman's page in just six months was something to be pretty proud of. Once or twice she'd even thought she sensed a hint of annoyance in his replies to her news of a promotion.

She found herself glancing a little guiltily at the Windsor desk in the corner. In the top drawer of that desk were four post cards from Tod Hunter—the only communication she had had from him during his six months absence. One had come after each of her promotions, and the same brief words were on all—"Nice going, Red—keep it up."

It was silly, she supposed, but those cards had meant a lot to her. She still couldn't imagine how Tod had learned of the promotions which had caused him to write them—

A GAIN, her thoughts ended abruptly in mid-air, as she realized George had asked her a question and she hadn't the least idea what.

"I'm sorry, darling," she apologized quickly, "I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

George looked faintly annoyed, but his voice was light enough, as he said to Tod, "Now there's the artistic temperament for you, Hunter—day-dreaming right in the middle of a conversation." He shook his head with mock sadness, and turned back to Ann. "My dear, I was just asking if you didn't think we should take advantage of Mr Hunter's kind offer to conduct us on a tour of some of the well-known night clubs this evening. I know very little of the city, as you know, so I had planned just a quiet dinner in some nearby restaurant, and a nice long talk here in your apartment afterwards. But—"

(Continued On Page 72)



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(Continued From Page 70)

he pursed his lips thoughtfully—"I think one should never turn down an opportunity to broaden ones experience."

Ann found herself wishing George wouldn't talk quite so much like a character in a mid-Victorian novel. It made him sound a little stuffy and—well, pompous. And he wasn't really. It was just his up-bringing that made him talk like that. Orphaned when a mere baby, he had been reared by his wealthy, autocratic grandfather, who practically owned the town of Pleasantville, since he owned the cotton mills which supported the town.

And George had never been allowed to associate with the young folk of the town—he'd even had private tutors instead of attending the very good public school—so was it any wonder that he unconsciously adopted old Gerald Latham's stilted manners and speech?

But that didn't mean George was really like that proud, selfish, arrogant old man. Certainly not! Ann told herself indignantly, not liking at all the amused quirk of Tod Hunter's left eyebrow as he looked at George. The very fact that George had fallen in love with her proved that. Little Ann Bryant, whose widowed mother took in sewing for a living—why, it was practically a real-life Cinderella story, that's what it was.

She looked straight into his bright blue eyes, and opened her lips to say firmly that she much preferred George's original plan. To her utter astonishment, she heard herself saying instead, "That's very nice of you—I'm sure George and I will both enjoy it very much."

What on earth was the matter with her? she wondered furiously. Didn't she know her own mind two seconds on end?

And then still gazing into Tod's eyes, she suddenly knew what had made her change her words. For, surprisingly, instead of the mischievous twinkle she had grown to expect in those eyes, Tod had been looking at her with humble pleading,

mutely begging her to fall in with his suggestion!

"I—I'd better change into a formal, hadn't I?" she stammered, a little wildly, and, not waiting for an answer, turned and hurried into the bedroom.

WHEN she returned to the living room half an hour later, creamy yellow chiffon fluttering about her ankles, russet curls piled high on her head, she was more than ever sure of that last. For there was no sign of George, and there stood Tod, in a perfectly tailored tuxedo which, he calmly informed her, he had changed into in the kitchen!

"Slightly perfumed with moth balls, but it looks okay, don't you think?" he ended.

In spite of herself, Ann caught herself thinking that it did, indeed, look okay. Tall men with broad shoulders and slim hips did something for dress clothes—or vice-versa, she reflected absently.

And then, with a start, she demanded, "What have you done with George?"

Tod threw back his head and gave a whoop of laughter. "I assure you I'm not quite that desperate yet, honey. I haven't bashed George over the head and stuck him away in a closet or anything like that. I just very tactfully hinted that since you were going formal perhaps we should also. So he's gone back to his hotel to change, and he'll meet us at Twenty-one in two hours."

Ellie stared at him, aghast. "Did you tell him you were changing right here?"

"Certainly not." Tod looked injured. "Do you think I want to compromise my future fiancé with her present one?"

Ann was so worried she decided to let that pass. "Well, what did you tell him?" she demanded.

"Oh, that." Tod shrugged. "Well, you see, the time element—er—sort of intrigued me, so I told him I was visiting a friend of mine way over on the other side of the city. It's perfectly true," he added hastily at

(Continued On Page 74)

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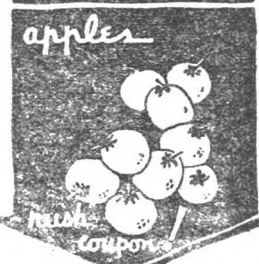


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(Continued From Page 72)

Ann's indignant gasp. "I am staying with Roy James—you know him, probably, he works on your paper." Then, with an infuriating grin, he finished calmly, "I told Roy it would be for only a few days—at the most, five, I figured. She's a red-head, I told him, and you know how red-heads are—stubborn. It will probably take me a couple of days to break her down, and the sovereign state of New York will require another three to satisfy its silly laws—blast it!"

Ann said a lot of things without stopping once to catch her breath. She said her hair was *not* red, it was auburn. She said she was not stubborn, she was just sensible—a lot more sensible than *some* people she knew. She said she didn't know the first thing about the laws of the state of New York, and didn't care, but as for those first two days they could be two years and it wouldn't do him a darn bit of good.

"Because," she ended breathlessly. "you know perfectly well this whole thing is a perfectly absurd joke or—*or something*. You can't possibly really want to marry me. Because, after all, a man usually wants to marry only the girl he loves. And you can't love me because you don't *know* me!"

AND THAT was when Ann quite literally lost what little breath she had left. For Tod said softly. "Oh, can't I?" and his arms closed around her and his lips came down hard against hers.

It was quite a kiss. Even as she struggled frantically to free herself, Ann realized that. Probably because he's had plenty of practice! she thought furiously.

Almost as though he had read her thought, Tod released her as abruptly as he had swept her into his arms. Looking down at her very soberly, he said quietly, "I want you to know I've never before kissed a girl like that, Ann. Because I've never before kissed the girl I love and want to marry."

Ann drew a deep, shaken breath, and swallowed hard. "Why," she said

slowly, incredulously, "why I believe you're really serious!"

"Of course I am." The ghost of a grin tugged at the corners of Tod's mouth. "Why else do you suppose I kept track of you all these months through Roy?"

Ann shook her head dazedly. So that was how he'd known when to write her those cards. "But that's the silliest thing I ever heard of!" she said wildly. "Why didn't you just write to me and tell me you loved me?"

"Would you have believed me?" One dark brow shot up quizzically.

"No—no, I guess not," Ann admitted slowly.

"Well, there you are." Tod shrugged, and added with a wry grin, "But I must say I didn't expect to find it so hard to convince you in person."

Then, abruptly, he took one quick step forward, and placed his hands on her shoulders. Gazing intently into her eyes, he asked urgently, "But now that I have convinced you, sweet, what's the verdict? Do I have any chance at all? If I try very, very hard do you think I might possibly make you fall in love with me?"

Ann felt a whispered "Yes" trembling on her lips, and bit it back in horrified haste. The man was hypnotic, that was all! She stared back at him for a long tense moment, fighting desperately for calm. "I'm sorry, Tod—honestly sorry," she said at last. "Because now that I'm convinced this whole thing isn't just your idea of a joke. I don't mind admitting I've thought of you quite often these past months. Which is perfectly natural, of course—" she added hastily, as his eyes brightened to blue flames—"since everything here in this apartment is a reminder of you. But the answer is definitely no. I love George—I think I've loved him almost all my life. So—" she forced a little smile—"there really isn't much point in your going with us this evening, is there? I can explain to George—say you had another engagement you'd for—"

"Not so fast, lady," Tod broke in,

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(Continued From Page 74)

his eyes suddenly twinkling. "You don't get rid of me that easy. Me, I'm a man of my word. I promised George a tour of the night spots, and that's just what I'm going to give him. But you needn't worry—" he chuckled—"I won't try to throw any monkey wrenches into your beautiful romance—at least, not any George will notice. I'd just sort of like to know the guy a little better, find out, if I can, *why* you love him."

"I can tell you that right now," Ann began, but, again, Tod stopped her.

"You can tell me on the way to the club," he grinned. "It's a little early, but we don't want to keep George waiting. He wouldn't like that, would he?"

"No, he wouldn't," Ann said quickly, not stopping to think. And then, as Tod laughed, she added firmly, "George is always very punctual himself, so, naturally, he expects other people to be, also. And, in case you're interested, I think that's a most admirable trait."

"So do I," Tod assured her, and spoiled it by adding, "if you don't make a fetish of it."

OVER AND over during the remainder of that evening Ann caught herself remembering his use of that word fetish, and getting madder and madder with herself for letting such little, unimportant things bring it to her mind. Like George's insistence that two, and only two, cocktails was the correct number. And eight, on the dot, the right hour for dinner. And his obvious disapproval when Tod greeted one of the waiters by his first name, and held a lengthy conversation about the man's family.

Then there was the matter of her dancing—or rather, her not dancing. Since V-J day, the night clubs were more crowded than ever, of course, and George would take one look at the packed floor and make up her mind for her. "My dear, I'm sure you'd much rather just sit and watch, wouldn't you?" he'd say, whenever they first arrived at a new place.

In a way, it was very flattering. She knew that George was just being thoughtful and considerate of her, as he always was. She'd always loved his protective attitude toward her, his treating her as though she were very precious—in fact, that had been one of the many reasons she'd given Tod why she loved George so much.

Just at that point in her thoughts, Tod said cheerfully, "Funny, this place doesn't seem to be nearly as crowded as the others, does it? Because it's getting on to the tag-end of the evening I suppose. Would you like to dance, Ann?"

Ann felt her cheeks grow hot. The dance floor here was, if possible, more congested than any place they'd been tonight. So, of course, Tod had somehow guessed how she was feeling. Just look at that twinkle of amusement in his eyes!

She turned her own eyes to George. "I would, darling," she said softly "With you." There, that ought to show Tod he couldn't read her mind and use the information for his own ends.

Too late, she realized she'd said exactly what Tod wanted her to say. He was openly grinning as George murmured a polite assent and came around to pull back her chair. Because now, of course, she couldn't refuse to dance with Tod without being openly rude. . .

She danced with Tod practically continuously for the remainder of the evening. For George, after that one dance, announced firmly that he couldn't see why otherwise perfectly normal people could get any pleasure from being shoved and pushed around like that.

Unfortunately, being George, he'd added politely, "Of course, if you care to dance, Hunter, I'm sure Ann won't mind."

Ann was quite sure she would mind, very much indeed, for the simple reason that Tod had maneuvered this whole thing. Oh, he'd be a good dancer, of course, but *that* wouldn't make her enjoy dancing with him.

To her surprise, he wasn't a good dancer—not nearly as good as George,

(Continued On Page 78)

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“I'D MARRY JIM IF
IT WASN'T FOR THOSE
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OF HIS

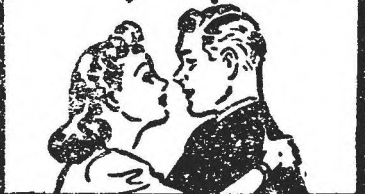
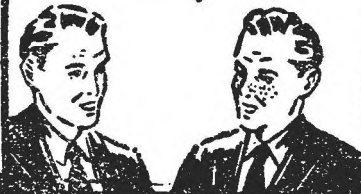
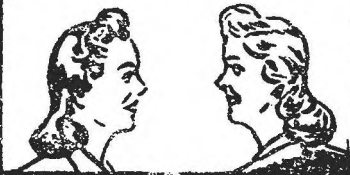
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HIM RIGHT
AWAY

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IT SOUNDS
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“YOU CAN THANK
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(Continued From Page 76)

really. For about the first three dances, she took a smug satisfaction in that. And then, being an essentially honest person, she began to feel puzzled and no little annoyed. Because, in spite of Tod's erratic steps and off-key humming, she knew perfectly well she was happier than she'd been all evening.

And, to make matters worse, every time someone bumped them and Tod's arms tightened about her, she would find her thoughts winging back to that moment in the apartment when he had held her close just like that and kissed her.

WAS TOD, too, remembering that moment? she wondered. And knew, with one swift, upward glance, that he was.

"A poor substitute, sweet," he said softly, "but better than none at all."

A little desperately, Ann thought, he still doesn't understand, and I *must* make him.

But she could think of nothing to add to what she had already told him on the taxi drive to the Twenty-One. She'd explained about George and his grandfather, so Tod would understand George's reserve and rather stilted speech, and then she'd catalogued all George's sterling qualities which made her love him so much. His devotion to his Grandfather, his insistence on overseeing the Latham mills himself, though there was no need for him to work at all, his cultured tastes in books and music.

"In short," she'd concluded, "George represents what every girl wants most in a husband—security."

"Security," Tod had commented wryly. "An awfully dull word, I've always thought—unless highly spiced with romance, of course."

She'd had to laugh at that. Not knowing Pleasantville, Tod naturally didn't understand that marrying George Latham was the most romantic thing that could possibly happen to a Pleasantville girl. Swiftly, she had described the little town and her life there, trying to make him see the contrast between her life and George's. They had known each

other by sight, of course, as people in small towns do, she'd told Tod, but, in the normal course of events, she probably never would have got beyond that nodding acquaintance.

Then, one wet spring day, she'd lost control of Mom's old station wagon, and skidded into the ditch right in front of Latham Hall. A few minutes later, George had found her, still dazed and shaken, and carried her in his arms up to the house.

"I guess that was romantic enough for you," she'd ended triumphantly, wrinkling her nose at Tod.

As Tod led her back to the table now, Ann wondered again what she could possibly add to all that to convince him there was no earthly use hoping she would ever fall out of love with George, and *in* love with him. Oh, she liked him, of course; more than any man she'd ever known—except George, naturally. She'd even go so far as to admit she found him enormously attractive, physically. Why, right now, just the touch of his hand on her elbow was making her heart beat a little faster. . .

But tomorrow was Sunday, and she and George would have a long, quiet day together. He would call for her about eleven, George had said, explaining in an aside to Tod that he believed at least an hour's walk before lunch essential for good health.

ONLY, IT didn't turn out that way. She had just finished getting into the new fawn-colored cashmere wool frock she'd been saving for just such a special occasion as George's visit, when her phone rang. It was Roy James, calling from the office to tell her she was wanted on the job at once. "A headline glamour gal eloped with her father's chauffeur last night—you're to do the story for the evening edition, I imagine," he explained.

In nothing flat, Ann had slapped a bright green beanie on the back of her coppery curls, slung her old tweed coat about her shoulders, and was out of the apartment.

It wasn't until she practically ran headlong into George in the hall out-

THE MAN WITH THE PIPE

side that she realized, with dismay, she'd completely forgotten him. Swiftly, she explained her haste, adding, "And I can't tell how long I'll be—perhaps all day. I'll probably have to go out and interview the girl's family and get what dope I can about the boy. So you'd better just go back to the hotel, darling—I'll call you first chance I get."

She was about to hurry on past, when the expression on George's face stopped her. "That's the most absurd thing I ever heard, Ann," he said coldly. "I'm in the city for only a short time and you want to devote your one free day to that silly, unimportant job of yours, instead of spending it with me."

"Silly? Unimportant?" Ellie stared at him, bewildered.

"Certainly." George shrugged. "I've never regarded this idea of yours to work a year before our marriage as anything but a whim, and I thought of course you yourself had sense enough to realize it was just that. But if you're taking this absurd job *seriously*, actually putting it above *my* wishes, I think it's high time I put a stop to it. In short, I want you to turn in your resignation today, and come home and marry me right away."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Ann drew a deep, shaken breath. "I don't suppose it's occurred to you I might have something to say about that! Why, you pompous, self-satisfied, conceited, smug—"

"That will be quite enough," George snapped. "I'll be charitable and assume that you're not quite yourself this morning, my dear. However, for the sake of our future happiness, I feel it my duty to demand a fitting apology. As you are obviously in no state to make one now, I shall wait at my hotel until you come to your senses."


And he stalked away, every line of his stocky figure proclaiming injured dignity, and yet, somehow at the same time, confidence that she would apologize.

Ellie stared after him, her eyes mutinous. "And I'll be darned if I will," she muttered. Then, aghast, she

(Continued On Page 80)

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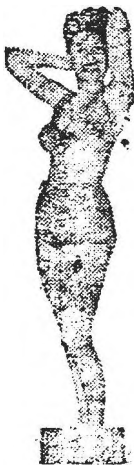
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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 79)

thought, but if I don't, I've lost him. I'll never be Mrs. George Latham!

But, even as she thought that, her chin came up, and she said right out loud, "Just the same, I'll be double darned if I'll apologize."

"Nice going, Red," an amused voice remarked right behind her.

Ann whirled around. Tod stood there grinning at her, dark head cocked on one side, left eyebrow raised.

"And what's nice about it, I'd like to know?" Ann demanded. "Since you've obviously been eavesdropping, you ought to know I've j-just said goodbye to—to—to—" her voice trailed off in a strangled gulp.

"Goodbye to love? Uh-huh." Tod shook his head. "You've just said Hello to love, my sweet. To our love, a love that's going to last all the days of our lives, and grow more wonderful with each passing day. Come here, sweetheart, here where you belong."

HE HELD out his arms, and Ann went into them. She hadn't known she was going to, she hadn't thought about it at all — she just went.

With his cheek hard against hers, Tod whispered, "You were never really in love with George himself, honey; you were just in love with a picture of him your imagination had built up—a sort of composite picture of all the fairy-tale Princes of your childhood. And George isn't in love with you, either, because he's much too absorbed in loving George. He doesn't want a wife; he just wants a humble worshipper at the foot of his pedestal—a girl who will never fail to appreciate what a great honor it is to be married to George Latham."

Ann sighed, but it was a sigh of relief and understanding, of a final and complete acceptance of the truth. For it was true, everything Tod had told her. Especially about George. She could see it so clearly now. If nothing else, his obvious lack of pride in the success she had made of her job should have shown her the truth long ago. George had neither wanted nor expected her to succeed.

THE MAN WITH THE PIPE

He had consented to this year in New York only because he was sure she would fail, and thus become even more humbly grateful for the 'honor' he was bestowing upon her.

Her eyes shining with happiness, she drew back a little and looked up at Tod.

"Say it, darling," he urged softly. "I know it's true, but I want to hear it from your own lips. You do love me, don't you?"

"I love you," Ann said quietly, solemnly. And then, in a joyous rush, "Oh, Tod, it's going to be so wonderful, married to you! We're the same kind of people, you and I. We know how to laugh together, and, if the time ever comes, we'll know how to cry together. And our jobs—even that part of it is just perfect. I'd like to go on working for awhile—*job!*" she broke off with a gasp. Good gosh, I completely forgot. I had a hurry up call from the office! I've got to get down there right—"

"No you don't," Tod broke in, with a shamefaced grin. "Hold onto that red-headed temper of yours now, until I finish explaining. I had Roy make that call. There wasn't any elopement—or maybe there was. Society gals have been eloping with chauffeurs for a good many years now. Anyway, it was the only thing I could think of on the spur of the moment. You see, I figured if you had to make a choice between your job and George, the job would win. And I knew you'd have to make that choice. George would never stand for the great George Latham being stood up for a little two by four newspaper job. So—"

Ann stopped him with a quick, laughing kiss. "So you tricked me, you heel! I ought to be furious with you."

But she didn't look a bit furious. She just looked the way a girl in love always looks, her eyes aglow with her happiness, her lips parted tremulously, ready to respond to the kiss Tod was even now bending his dark head to give her.

(THE END)

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"I didn't mean to intrude," he said coldly. "But you do have the doorway blocked a bit, you know."



Rehearsal for Love

*If only Sue hadn't been
such a flirt . . and if only
she and Ellis hadn't fought
every time they met . . .*

FOR THREE years, Sue Silver had rehearsed what she'd do if she ever met Ellis Blair again. She was going through the same old routine as she watched her slim, golden-haired reflection in the mirror near the water cooler of the Pullman.

Ellis would come toward her, of course. First she'd look at him casually, freezing the warm lights in her brown eyes. Then she'd let the faintest flicker of recognition cross her face. With a queenly air she'd say, "You look so familiar. I've surely seen you somewhere. . . ."

Of course he'd reply, "Sue, it's Ellis. Surely you haven't forgotten me."

She'd toss her red gold curls. "Why, so it is. Ellis Blair. But you're so changed I didn't know you. My, it's been such ages since we had that silly little affair back in Bellevue. I really haven't thought about you from that day to this."

"No," he'd say, his sensitive mouth hardening, the sleet coming into his gray-green eyes the way she'd always remember. "No, I don't suppose you have." It had always been so easy to hurt Ellis.

After that she'd arch her eyebrows

and stare at him stonily. "Mr. Blair. Here's your ring. I was so mad when you got engaged to Muriel Ashland and left town that I kept it. But we were only children then. Now, it's a matter of complete indifference to me. But, thank goodness, I can hand the ring back to you at last and never have to look at you or it again." Then she'd turn around with an air of definite finality and carry herself magnificently from the room, or the street, or wherever it was she'd happened to meet him.

SHE HAD just gotten to the magnificent exit when she pivoted and bumped headlong into a lean figure in a tweed suit. "Where's the fire, Beautiful?" Vincent Travers caught her in his arms a moment, his black eyes travelling over the streamlined curves of her figure.

Sue struggled away from him, trying to stave off the strength of his sultry gaze. "Mr. Travers." Her husky voice trembled. "Please try to remember that I'm a stewardess on this train. Just because you make this run every weekend is no reason for you to get fresh."

"Why not? You know you like me a little." He uptilted her face by putting a finger under her chin. "Look at me a minute and tell me why I'm so hard to take."

No, Sue had to admit to herself, he really wasn't hard to take. In fact, most girls would have found Vincent Travers exciting. He was handsome

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IDEAL LOVE

in a dark, devil-may-care sort of way. His hair was black and curly, and whatever lankiness there might have been to his long, loose-jointed body was offset by a catlike grace of movement. His face was lean and olive-skinned and his black eyes burned with a smouldering intensity. At the moment their gaze was fixed upon Sue.

She tried to disentangle herself from his arms. "Mr. Travers, I have work to do. Please don't get in my way."

Vincent Travers smiled as though what she had said was a delicious joke. "Listen, Beautiful. You know that's the wrong technique to use on me, if you want to get rid of me. I'm never interested in a woman unless she's hard to get. And you, Beautiful, are exceedingly hard to get."

"I'm not interested in what you find interesting. I just happen to work on this train for a living, that's all." Sue stepped quickly away from him and dashed out the Pullman door to the platform. She saw Vincent follow her.

Anger always added a rose pink to the creaminess of Sue's cheeks, a glint to the warm, dark eyes that contrasted so strangely with the golden hair under the perky little cap. In her pencil-slim olive green uniform, she looked like something the railroad companies ought to use for a glamour ad.

"Mr. Travers," she was saying, "just because I'm employed here, I don't see why I have to take your insults."

"I know. I know, Beautiful. But here we have a long train ride ahead of us, all the way from Chicago to San Francisco, and you won't even come into my compartment for a Scotch and soda." The man whipped into his pocket and drew out a long, silver case. "Cigarette? No strings attached to it, Beautiful. Only a cork tip."

Sue laughed in spite of herself and reached out a slim hand. "Thanks. Let's make it a sort of peace pipe, shall we? No more passes, and I'll—well, I'll even go out to dinner tonight

REHEARSAL FOR LOVE

with you. George the porter takes over for me at five-thirty. I'll meet you—in the diner," she added quickly.

His dark forehead crinkled into a scowl. "Oh, so that's it? Out in the diner, where there are plenty of people to chaperone you. Little Vincent on one side of the table, and little Sue on the other, all safe and comfy." His face cleared a little. "Well, okay, baby, dinner it is, in the diner."

Sue smiled, the light of victory in her eyes. She extended her hand. Suddenly without warning, Vincent drew her to him and began to kiss her. She tried to free herself, she fought to draw her mouth away, but his arms held her like a vise.

In the midst of her struggles she looked over Vincent's gray tweed shoulder and saw a sight that froze all the blood in her body.

There in the doorway stood the man she'd practised meeting for three whole years.

Ellis Blaire stared back at her, a look of embarrassment in his gray-green eyes. Then he started to speak in that deep voice she'd never forgotten. "Oh, I—I beg your pardon. I—I was just going through. You have the doorway blocked a bit, you know. I didn't mean to intrude."

Vincent straightened up and freed Sue. "Oh, that's all right, chum. The green light's on. Traffic can go ahead any time." Nonchalantly he lit a cigarette.

"Thanks." Ellis Blaire gave them both a quizzical smile. His gaze lingered for a moment on Sue, without a flicker of recognition. Then he opened the door and walked out.

"Ellis!" Tight-lipped, disheveled, Sue strode after him. "Ellis, it's Sue. Surely you haven't forgotten. . ."

Something had gone desperately wrong with the act she'd rehearsed for so long. These were the words Ellis was supposed to be saying. Of course, it was Vincent who had spoiled everything.

Instead of the sleet coming into Ellis' gray-green eyes, there was only

(Continued On Page 86)

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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 85)

a stare. "Sue?" he asked. "Sue who? I don't believe I know you."

Sue forgot all about that business of arching her eyebrows and looking at him stonily. "Ellis, it's Sue Silver," she cried frantically. "Surely you remember. . ."

He looked as though he were groping for something on the dusty shelf of memory. "Well, so it is. The high school kid I used to know back in Bellevue. I didn't recognize you."

High school kid! Sue's mouth was doing the hardening now. She could see Vincent watching them from the doorway. "I don't suppose you've thought about me from that day to this."

Ellis showed two even rows of teeth in a frosty smile. "Not much. I've been pretty busy. Two years in the army and a six-month stretch of being state auditor are no vacation. But I think your boy friend's over there, looking for you."

Hot blood burned in her cheeks. "He's not my boy friend. He's just a man who makes this run once a week."

A sarcastic smile hovered about Ellis' lips. "Oh, I see."

She was desperate now. "No, you don't see. I hardly even know him. Besides, what difference can it possibly make to you? Ellis—" She was going to swing into the last speech of her scene, if it killed her. "Mr. Blair."

"At your service." A mock smile twisted his face.

This wasn't the Ellis she used to know. Somewhere he had lost his old sweet seriousness and learned to be hard. She hated the way he made her feel—like an awkward grammar school kid.

"Ellis," she flung out desperately, "let's cut out the nonsense. I want to give you back your diamond ring. I—I've never had a chance before."

STANDING so close to him again, she was having a hard time holding onto her emotions. Everything was coming back with a rush. . . The Junior Prom at Bellevue High

(Continued On Page 88)



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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 86)

School. . . The night they had gone apple-knocking in Smith's orchard. . . Lover's Lane in the spring. . . The compelling warmth of his mouth. . . The rhythm of his heart when she had lain in his arms. . .

His voice broke through her thoughts. "Well, I see you're still wearing my ring." His tone was bitter now. "See here, Sue. We're no good for each other. We decided that three years ago. Let's just leave it that way."

Sue's golden head came up with a jerk. "Listen, Ellis. I'm not in the habit of running after people. You should know that. But there are some things I promised myself I'd try to straighten out if I ever saw you again. About the ring, I mean."

"Okay. Go ahead. Shoot." His wide mouth was hardening, now, the way it should have done at the beginning.

"I—I can't do it here. Are—are you going to be on this train long?"

"All the way to San Francisco."

She breathed more easily. Then impulsively she blurted out, "If you're not doing anything around six o'clock, I wish you'd give me at least five minutes of your time. . ."

The ironic twist came back to his lips. "Of course. I might even take you out to dinner. Then you could tell me the full story of why you gave a twenty-one-year-old kid the brush-off and kept his three hundred dollar ring. I'd find it very interesting."

Brush-off! In spite of the miserable wrench at her heart, she tried to keep her poise. "All right, Ellis. Any time you say."

Again he looked at her mockingly. "Let's make it—shall we say—six o'clock. Dinner for two—in the diner."

IT WAS twilight when Sue slid into the chair that Ellis held back for her at the table for two. She turned her head and watched the electric blue snow and houses race past the window. Her heart was turning somersaults in her throat.

(Continued On Page 90)

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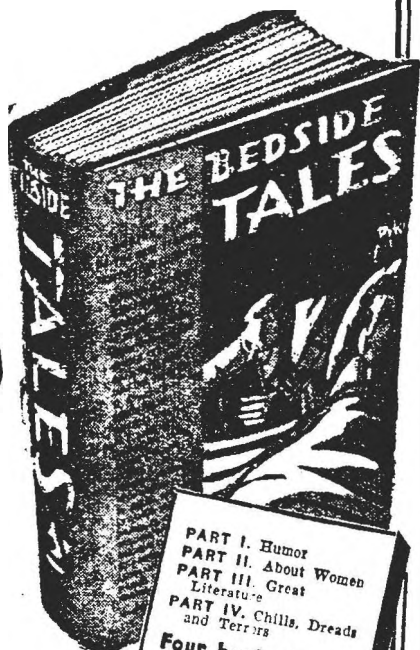
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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 88)

She heard Ellis rattle silver covers off steaming dishes. Food! Where would she ever get the strength to choke it down? "Ellis," she began impulsively. "I always wanted to tell you about the ring." She ripped the vivacious diamond off her finger and tossed it toward him on the white table cloth. "You see, I—" Her dark eyes dropped before the cold stare of gray-green.

"Skip it, Sue, and eat your dinner. After all, if this thing has waited for three years, a few minutes more aren't going to make any difference."

"I—I guess you're right." Miserably she tried to swallow a spear of asparagus. Her pulses were racing the way they had in the old days, when she was engaged to the slim, brown-haired boy who worked at the bank.

How handsome he looked—lean, bronzed, older. He had always been the kind of fellow who made the girls turn and stare at him. But now he was positively devastating. She must do her best not to let him know that he still affected her.

Suddenly anger swept over her. So she had given him the brush-off, had she, and kept his ring. That was the way he put it. Well, she'd show him right now, it was the other way round.

"Ellis," she began, a warm flush suffusing the creaminess of her skin. "We might as well settle this thing right away. You got engaged to Muriel Ashland and left town. After you'd promised to marry me."

His eyes were like gray steel. "You're forgetting that you got engaged to Forrest Owen at the same time you were wearing my ring."

"Of course I did," she snapped, a three-year-old resentment flaming through her. "But you knew I was just trying to make you jealous. I caught you kissing Muriel Ashland the night of the Country Club dance, right after you asked me to marry you."

"I didn't kiss her. She was kissing me. I'd been trying to elude her all evening. But she pounced on me under the grapearbor, where I was

REHEARSAL FOR LOVE

waiting for you to finish your dance with Jim Hicks. You know how man-crazy Muriel always was."

"But the next time I found you kissing Muriel, you certainly weren't trying to get away. You were putting on quite a little show for my benefit."

"Only because you were going around with Forrest Owen," he persisted. "See here, Sue, we haven't changed. We used to think we were in love, but all we did was try to hurt each other. You went out with Forrest Owen because you knew it would hurt me. And I went out with Muriel Ashland because I thought it would hurt you. That isn't love."

Sue felt a tug at her heart. Oh, yes, it is love, she thought, but you just don't realize it.

"How about Muriel Ashland?" she heard herself asking shakily. "Did you marry her after all?"

"No," he replied, "and you didn't marry Forrest Owen either. I know because I checked on you."

So he'd been checking on her, had he. At least, he cared that much.

IT WAS queer, how she'd dreamed three whole years of meeting Ellis again, and now that she had, she felt the same old conflict of emotions. She wanted him to take her in his arms, and she wanted to hurt him at the same time. Her love for this man who sat so stonily before her had always been so mixed, so turbulent, that her heart felt as though it were being wrenched all over again.

"Ellis," she blurted out, "it's funny about us, isn't it? When we meet again, we fight the same as ever. And yet I—I can't help feeling glad you didn't marry Muriel."

Laughter erased the little frown lines between his eyes. "You know, it is funny. Because I felt the same kind of relief when I found out you didn't marry Forrest Owen." He began looking at her intently. "I've often wondered, Sue, whether we weren't in love with each other after all. We always wanted to hurt each

(Continued On Page 92)

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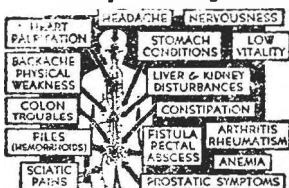
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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 91)

other, but that might just have been because we were both jealous."

Of course it is, thought Sue, her heart singing. At last you've found that out.

Ellis went on talking, his eyes studying her face. "I always wanted you to myself, Sue, but you were always so busy looking at other guys that I was sure you didn't care. But after I left town, I couldn't forget you. I broke off with Muriel because it wasn't fair to marry her when I didn't love her. If you only hadn't been such a flirt—"

"I only did that because I loved you, and you were doing the same thing to me," she said softly. "Oh, Ellis, what silly kids we were. Now that we're grown up, we might do things differently."

His hand sought hers over the table. "Sue, darling—if you'd only give me another chance. I haven't thought about anybody but you for the last three years."

"Neither have I," she murmured.

Suddenly he stiffened. "But that man who was with you this afternoon. He was kissing you. . . ."

She grimaced. "That's Vincent Travers. He's always bothering me and I loathe him. He means absolutely nothing to me."

Ellis's fingers tensed on her wrist. "Just say the word, and I'll give him a good hard punch in the nose. I didn't relish what I saw."

"Thanks, El, but I can handle him. You know—" She stopped suddenly and breathed down deep.

"What is it, darling?"

"I—I'm making things too easy for you. But there's never been anyone but you, either."

His fingers reached down and found her hand again in a warm grasp. "If this weren't the diner, I'd kiss you." He twisted the diamond back onto her slim finger. "Anyhow, that's back where it belongs. Let's let it stay there."

"For always, Ellis," she whispered softly.

(Continued On Page 94)

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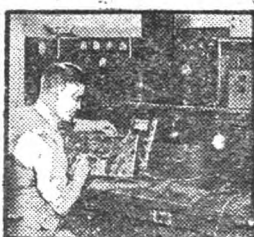
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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 92)

Suddenly a strident voice cut in upon them. "What's the idea, Beautiful? You were supposed to have dinner with me. And to think you stood me up for a blue serge suit, after all we've been to each other."

Sue gasped. In her excitement at seeing Ellis again, she had forgotten all about her dinner date with Vincent. "I'm sorry. I—I just guess I forgot, Vincent."

Ellis's firm jaw began to set. "I thought you just told me you hated this man, Sue."

"I do. Oh, Elis, you've got to believe me."

But Ellis was getting up from the table, glints in his eyes. "This is just the way you treated me in the old days, Sue. I never could trust you. I never knew when you were two-timing me with somebody else."

Fury seized her. She ripped the diamond off her finger. "If that's the way you feel, Ellis Blair, here's your ring. I never want to see you again."

Ellis flung the ring back on the table. "Keep it. It reminds me of too many things I'd rather forget." Then he quickly strode away from her down the long aisle and banged the door.

Vincent gave a long, low whistle. "Now that's too bad, Beautiful. I seem to have spoiled a lovely friendship. But I'll be very glad to pinch hit for him."

"You just leave me alone, Vincent." Sue was fondling the ring, sobbing as though her heart would break. "You've done enough to me already." And she hurried off in the opposite direction.

ALL evening, after Sue went back on her job again, she thought about nothing but Ellis. She went about heating milk for babies and propping up pillows under old ladies' heads, with welling eyes and a heart like lead. She didn't see Ellis anywhere. He must be consciously avoiding her by staying in his compartment. No, there was just one conclusion to all this. Ellis Blair was



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REHEARSAL FOR LOVE

about to walk out of her life for the second time in three years. And now she knew she loved him more than ever. Why had she flared up at him like that? If she only had another chance.

After a sleepless night of tossing and turning she came to a desperate conclusion. She decided to carve out for herself that second chance if it killed her. Last night, Ellis had said he hadn't thought about anybody else but her for the last three years. Surely he couldn't have completely turned her out of his heart again in one evening. It was, Eileen decided, up to her to make the next move, if she didn't want to see him go out of her life.

As she strode along the aisle, carrying a glass of water to the sick woman in lower 10, she planned exactly what she'd do. About thirty minutes before the train pulled into San Francisco, she'd go to Ellis' compartment and knock on the door. Then she'd try apologizing all over again and give him the ring. Only this time she was going to tell him she loved him so much she couldn't let him go.

She had just gotten to the part about knocking on Ellis' compartment door, when she bumped into a tall, lean figure in a pin-striped suit. The water glass jarred out of her hand. She looked up in dismay. Water trickled all down the front of the man's suit and sloshed into his shoes.

Her cheeks burned like bonfires. "Oh, Ellis, I'm so sorry. I—I certainly didn't mean to."

But Ellis wasn't paying any attention to the water at all. With a pleading look on his face, he took her arm. "Sue, will you come with me a moment? I—I've got to talk to you." He led her down the aisle into his compartment.

As he closed the door, he looked down at her, something like desperation in his eyes. "Sue, I—I've been thinking about us all night. You said last evening we were grown up, now, but I acted like a two-year-old when I didn't believe you about Vincent. It—it's just that I love you so

(Continued On Page 96)



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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 95)

much and I want to marry you, darling. But you probably wouldn't have me after the way I acted last night."

A radiant look came into Sue's face. "Oh, El," she whispered, "me too. I—I love you so much, I'll marry you any time you say. I was going to come and tell you I couldn't let you go."

Gently he tilted up her face, his eyes reaching down into hers. "Do you happen to have that ring with you, honey?"

She brought it out of her pocket and he slipped it on her finger. "There, Eileen. This time it's going to stay there for always, and I mean it."

"For always," she whispered.

Then he crushed her in his arms, and his lips found her mouth.

It was minutes later that Sue suddenly looked up at him with little frown lines puckering her forehead. "El, darling, tell me something. Yesterday, when I saw you first, why did you pretend you didn't know me?"

His smile was tender. "That, honey, was an act. You see, for three years, I'd been practising what I'd do if I ever met you again."

Her warm, brown eyes opened wide. "Why, El, so did I. At least five times a day."

"That, my sweet, must have been two people rehearsing for love." His gray-green eyes were shining with happiness. "But what say we forget the acting from now on and just be ourselves."

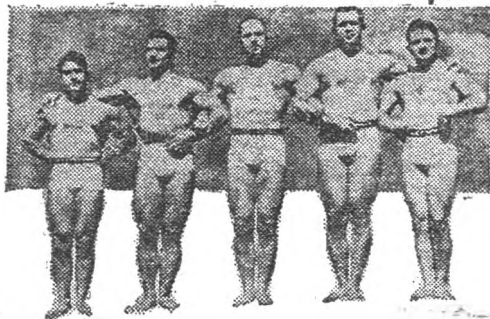
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Flight Engineer's
Heat Treatment of Metals
Industrial Engineering
Investing and Patenting
Machine Shop Practice
Mechanical Drafting
Mechanical Engineering
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Patternmaking
Reading Shop Blueprints
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Shipbuilding
Ship Hull Workers
Tool Designing
Welding, Gas and Electric
Foundry Work

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Rayon Weaving
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Higher Mathematics
Illustrating

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Radio, General
Radio Operations
Radio Services

RAILROAD COURSES

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Locomotive Engineer
Railroad Fireman
Railroad Gate Clerk
Railroad Section Foreman
Car Inspector

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Combustion Engineering
Engine Rooms
Marine Engines
Navigation
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Steam Engines

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Business Management
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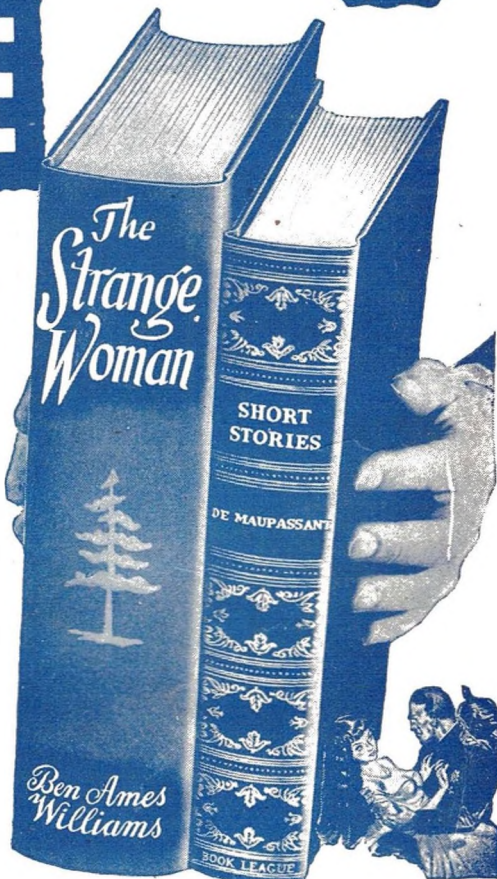
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