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MAGAZINE

SWEETHEART

STORIES

OCTOBER

10

CENTS



WANTED—A HUSBAND By Elaine Heyward



Revealed at Last!

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FORBIDDEN MYSTERIES
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Cover by Ernest Chiriacka

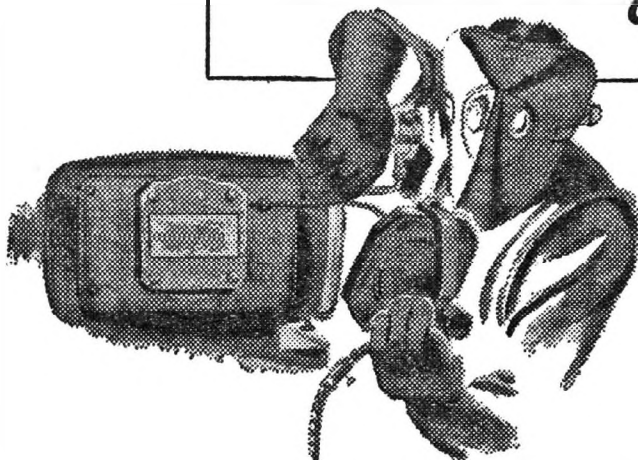
F. McChesney, Editor

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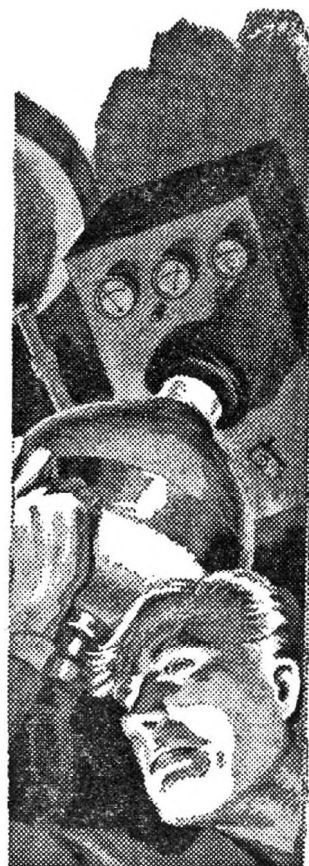
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"Life is good here, so I thought—you might not mind staying on—as my husband," Hope forced herself to say.

The Lady of Half-Moon Cay

By Adelaide Humphries

“**O**F COURSE you know,” said Randy, his voice filled with tenderness, his arms holding her closely against his heart, “you’re the loveliest thing ever created.”

Hope managed a small, unsteady laugh. Just as though her throat wasn’t pounding, making speech impossible; just as though beneath the storm of young, unashamed passion that burned in his kiss, her whole body was not trembling, her knees weak.

“What does it matter that we only met this morning?” said Randy huskily, as though she had argued the point. “Things happen fast in the tropics, like a hurricane. If you knew how lovely you are in this strange blue moonlight—”

Hope freed herself from his arms that let her go reluctantly and found her voice at last, though it shook a little.

“That’s it—the moonlight. You’ll feel quite differently in the morning.”

“I’ll be crazier about you then, if possible,” Randy assured her firmly. “Remember, I saw you first in morning sunlight.”

“Since I’ve ordered the plane for eight o’clock in the morning, let’s save the rest for then,” she answered, laughing a little though it was not a too convincing laugh. “Sure you can make it that early?”

“To spend the day at your home with you? Lady, talk sense!” said Randy and his blue eyes caressed her warmly.

She got away from him at last, and in her own room she hid her flushed face in her shaking hands. Oh, if only she dared take a little more time! If only she dared linger here at this beautiful resort hotel while Randy Apperson’s admiration and warm, eager interest in her deepened and ripened into love! Because she believed that it would, given the chance; and it would be so very easy to love him. She was more than half way in love with him

now, and that was going to make her plan easier, yet more difficult at the same time.

But she dared not wait for the two or three days more that might make Randy want to marry her. Before her closed eyes swam the vision of a man’s face; a dark, cruel handsome face with burning, dark eyes that said things his lips dared not utter—yet! She dared not leave Curt in charge of Half-Moon Cay any longer. He was so diabolically clever, so over-ridingly ambitious.

Why had her father ever trusted Curt, or believed in him? But it was too late now to think of that, now that her father was dead and Curt was so cleverly, so adroitly taking over.

She shivered a little and drew a long breath. It had to be Randy, and it had to be now! There wasn’t time to wait for Randy to fall in love with her and want to marry her. No time for romance; it had to be business. It was almost, if not actually, a matter of life and death. She dared not think of what Randy was going to feel about her when he knew the truth!

RANDY was waiting for her on the hotel terrace, and he smiled as she came towards him in the soft, early sunlight.

“I knew it! I knew you’d be even more beautiful this morning than you were last night!” he said contentedly as he tucked her into the car waiting to take them to the airport. “You know, it’s darned nice of you to show me your home. These islands in the Carribean interest me enormously. I imagine you feel like a queen holding absolute sway over one.”

“Half-Moon Cay isn’t one of the larger islands,” she said glad to be able to chatter like this. “But it’s the only home I’ve ever known. My mother and father came here on their honeymoon and liked the

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place so much they bought it. And because he was young and restless and had to have something to keep him busy, he put in the banana palms and the sugar cane. And because he was a good business-man, the plantation has paid. I was born there—I've never had any desire to go anywhere else except on visits—I'd probably die anywhere else!"

Randy nodded soberly. "Funny, I can understand how that could be, even though I've never had a place I could really call home. My parents died when I was a kid and a trust fund brought me up, yet I can understand how a person would feel about a place like Half-Moon Cay."

Hope caught her breath, but could not check the hurried intensity of her impulsive reply. "Oh, please, try very hard to understand—"

Startled, Randy said, "Why, you're crying!"

Hope managed a shaky laugh. "I'm a fool! It's only that I think Half-Moon Cay is the most beautiful spot in the world, and it would just about break my heart if other people didn't think so, too."

There was a slightly puzzled look in Randy's eyes, and hurriedly she began to describe the scenery to him and point out things of interest.

Randy's enthusiasm rose to meet hers when the plane, within an hour, circled above Half-Moon Cay. There was a tiny, crescent shaped beach where the surf rolled in great white breakers. The tall, feathery palms, the great rows on rows of banana palms, the lighter green squares of the sugar cane, the cluster of white small bungalows that marked the native village, and then the hacienda itself came into view. The hacienda was of cream colored stucco, its faded, rose tile roof visible above the surrounding trees and shrubbery.

The pilot set the plane expertly down, and Randy lifted Hope out. She smiled and nodded to the pilot, and she and Randy went up the shelving beach, as a native in the white shorts and jacket, that marked him as a house-servant came running down to the plane to get the baggage.

Randy was so entranced with the view as

they went along the path to the house, through lush shrubbery, and the house itself that seemed to rise out of a foam of flowering trees and vari-colored beds of flowers, and great masses of bougainvillea, that Hope could relax a little.

At the grilled gate set into the patio wall, a tiny old lady in a rustling, wide-skirted black taffeta gown, a filmy black lace *mantilla* held to her regally poised head by an ivory comb, stood waiting to greet them.

Hope said, "Donna Ynez, this is Mr. Apperson. Randy, this is Donna Ynez, who is my family!"

Donna Ynez inclined her head graciously, as Randy acknowledged the introduction; and then Donna Ynez spoke swiftly to Hope in Spanish. Hope paled a little, but answered almost curtly in the same language. Donna Ynez nodded, bowed again to Randy and hurried away.

"Trouble?" Randy asked Hope, catching the look on her face.

"NO, IT'S nothing serious," answered Hope and added quickly, "Would you like to ride over the plantation with me? I think my father's riding things will fit you fairly well, and it's the best way of seeing everything."

"I'd like it a lot, if you're sure you have time and I won't be a nuisance," answered Randy, puzzled by the sudden tautness of her lovely face and the almost sick look in her great dark eyes.

"You won't be a nuisance," said Hope almost grimly. "I especially want you to come with me."

"Then I'd like nothing better," answered Randy.

In the lovely old house with its four-foot walls, its beamed ceilings and its luxurious furnishings, Hope showed Randy to a bedroom on the second floor, and indicated the great cedar-lined closet in which he was to rummage for whatever he could find in the way of riding clothes. And then she excused herself and hurried to her own room.

With the door closed behind her she

THE LADY OF HALF-MOON CAY

stood just inside the room and looked swiftly about her. She went to the huge old-fashioned four-poster bed, mounted on a little dais, first, lifted the pillows and searched. But what she sought was not there. She went down on her knees and looked under the bed; she found what she sought at last, tucked away in the hangings of the bed above the pillows.

She drew it forth with fingers that shrank in distaste from the thing—a tiny wax image of a woman with two pins thrust near the heart. She grew a little sick as she looked down at this tiny thing that was supposed to be a wax image of herself, and that she knew had been molded about a few hairs from her head, perhaps a nail paring or two. She shuddered and flung it from her, scrubbing her hand hard on the roughness of the woven counterpane.

Voodoo! The word throbbed in her brain.

Every day for seven days her enemy would thrust another pin into the tiny image; and when the seventh pin had been thrust home, according to all the evil laws of voodoo, she would sicken and die. Suddenly, swiftly, mysteriously. She knew about voodoo. And while she did not fear it, she did fear the people who believed in its laws and who would not hesitate to use those evil superstitions against her.

Looking down at the tiny wax thing that lay on the floor she saw, instead, Curt Malvern. Tall, broad, powerfully built, his coarse, straight black hair, the almost Indian cut to his features. Most of all she shrank from the memory of his eyes. Eyes that seemed to draw her, helplessly, against her will—as the eyes of a tiger draw its victim.

SHE jerked herself erect and thrust such thoughts away. Randy was here. Randy, who must be made to protect her from Curt and his dark, evil plans. She made herself pick up the tiny wax image and drop it in a small bronze ash-tray with a little heap of twisted paper. She touched a match to them and watched it melt into nothingness. She left the bronze ash-tray and its contents there, as a mute testimony to her

knowledge of the voodoo charm and her contempt for its meaning.

Randy was waiting for her when she came back to the patio.

"Your father and I were pretty much of a size, except for the boots!" he said lightly. "Still, if I ride, instead of walk, my toes won't be too badly pinched!"

And then his tone altered sharply and he asked in swift concern, "Why, what's wrong? You're ill! You're white as paper."

"Nonsense. I'm quite all right," said Hope almost curtly, and led the way to the path where a stable boy stood holding the horses.

They rode off down the narrow trail beneath the tall palms, and Hope exerted herself to be gay and amusing and to make Randy feel at ease.

Shortly before noon they came to a man who stood talking to a group of natives. The reins of his big black horse were slung carelessly over one arm. He did not see Hope until she spoke and then the natives, looking at her startled, seemed to melt away while the white man turned easily and looked up at Hope. His eyes widened a little in pleasure and then narrowed as they took in Randy, just back of Hope.

"Hello, Hope," he greeted the girl coolly, with an easy, almost impudent familiarity that made Randy's jaw harden a little. "Back so soon? How was Havana?"

"Very nice, as usual," answered Hope. "Curt, this is Mr. Apperson, my house-guest. Randy, this is Curt Malvern, my overseer—and partner."

She seemed reluctant to add the last, and Curt did not miss that reluctance. His eyes flashed but he spoke smoothly to Randy.

"Your first sight of a banana plant, Mr. Apperson?" he asked when the introduction had been acknowledged.

"Yes, my first glimpse of the tropics, as a matter of fact," answered Randy pleasantly. "I'm very grateful to Hope for inviting me over for the day."

"Oh, for the day, eh? Too bad you can't stay longer," said Curt smoothly.

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"I wish I could," answered Randy quite sincerely. "But my vacation ends tomorrow, and I've already booked passage on tomorrow's Clipper."

"Then we'll have to show you as much of the Cay as we can in such a short time," said Curt more pleasantly. "We can have lunch at my bungalow. It's much closer than the hacienda—"

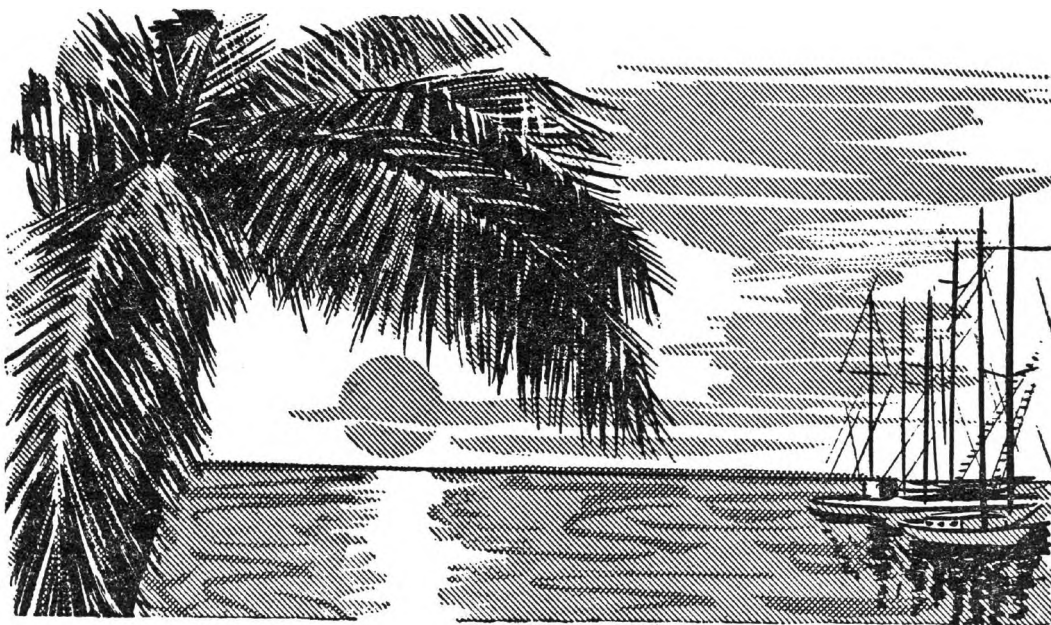
"No!" the word came sharply, flatly from Hope in almost a tone of terror, and Curt's jaw set hard and his eyes glinted with anger.

at Hope and said curiously, "You're afraid of him, aren't you?"

She tried to deny it, but the words would not come.

"Oh, see here now, that's an impossible situation," Randy protested swiftly. "You here alone except for the natives and Donna Ynez. Why don't you fire the surly brute?"

"If I only could!" Hope wailed, a little cry that came straight from her young, frightened heart. "But you see, he owns a share of the island. My father left it to



Hope stammered swiftly, "I mean—Donna Ynez is expecting us. She would be so disappointed, she so seldom gets a chance to entertain visitors. Why don't you come home to lunch with us, Curt?"

CURT'S look was almost savage, but his tone was smooth. "Thanks, afraid not. I'm pretty busy. I'll drop in for dinner though, there are some things we have to discuss. Shall you be here for dinner, Aperson?"

"The plane is picking me up around six," answered Randy, "so I'd best say goodbye now."

As they rode away a few minutes later, out of earshot of Curt, Randy looked down

him as a reward for faithful and devoted service. He won't sell it and I can't force him to, so I can't discharge him."

"He's a half-breed, isn't he?" asked Randy grimly.

"A quarter-breed. His father and grandfather were white, his mother was a half-breed," answered Hope dully.

"And that probably means he's got some of the worst traits of both races and not many of the virtues!" said Randy grimly. "But it's unthinkable that you should have to live here in fear—"

But Hope broke in hurriedly, "Let's—let's talk of pleasanter things. I'll race you back to the hacienda."

She was off like a shot, and Randy did

THE LADY OF HALF-MOON CAY

not overtake her until they had reached the house. After luncheon, Donna Ynez retired for her siesta, and Randy and Hope were left alone in the flower fragrant patio, the air cooled by the brilliant spray of the fountain as it sprang musically into the air and fell back into the beautiful old tile basin, where gold-fish darted among the pads of pink and lavender tropical water-lilies.

Hope was trying desperately to recapture last night's lovely mood of magic and romance; the blue moonlight spilling about them, Randy's arms close about her, Randy's mouth on hers, demanding, seeking. Deliberately she was flirting with him, provocative, alluring—until she realized with a little sick feeling of shame that Randy was completely and uncomfortably aware of her efforts at recapturing that mood and that he was withdrawn, aloof.

SHE got unsteadily to her feet, her face burning, and said hurriedly, "If you will excuse me, there are some things I ought to attend to. You'll find books and magazines in the library, if you won't be too bored?"

Randy was on his feet, cool, polite, withdrawn.

"Please don't have me on your conscience," he said politely. "I'll be quite all right."

There was no hint in his cool eyes of that magic she had seen there last night and which had filled her with a wild, unreasoning hope that maybe this crazy plan of hers might succeed without too much bitterness or unpleasantness.

She almost ran into the house and up to her own room. But there was no faint thought of abandoning her plan. She could not. She did not dare. There had been something in Curt's eyes this morning that made her shiver a little, just to remember. They had never come out into the open, she and Curt. She knew that he hoped to force her to marry him; force would be the only means he could possibly expect to accomplish that. But he had never spoken of that, nor had she ever let him see her fear and revulsion. But

now she knew that a show-down could not be very far off. And the thought was a cold sickness in the pit of her stomach.

She went into the bathroom, thinking a cold bath might refresh her. She turned the water on and came back to pick up her negligee and slippers. Something rattled in the toe of one slipper and she tilted it carefully, eyes wide. Out of it tumbled a small wax image of a woman with three pins thrust through the heart.

Dusk was falling when she went downstairs. Looking lovely as a dream in a pale rosy tulle frock, her blue black hair shining and a rose colored hibiscus blossom tucked above one ear.

But Randy who was waiting for her, looked at her as though he saw nothing lovely about her.

"What do you suppose could have happened to the plane?" he asked her mildly enough though his eyes were puzzled and cold.

Hope set her teeth hard for a moment before she could steady her voice enough to say in bright surprise, "Isn't it here?"

"You know darned well it isn't," Randy told her sharply. "I couldn't very well land without your hearing it—and it seems to me there's some darned funny business going on around here, anyway."

Before Hope could manage an answer, voices were heard in the patio and Curt came in. He was very big and handsome in white dinner clothes a scarlet cummerbund about his waist adding an almost piratical touch to his picturesqueness.

Behind him, two native boys were carrying baggage that Randy, wide-eyed, recognized as Curt said smoothly, "Your baggage came over on the afternoon boat, Apperson. Although Hope left orders for it not to be brought up until tomorrow, I thought the boys might as well bring it along tonight. Save them the job tomorrow and we're pretty busy."

Randy was too startled to speak, and Hope said quickly to the native boys, "In Father's room, please. Curt, will you show them?"

"Your father's room, eh?" said Curt and added, "Of course."

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When they had vanished up the stairs, Randy turned a white, outraged face to Hope and said unpleasantly, "And now if it isn't too much trouble, maybe you'll let me in on what all this is about?"

Hope said huskily, her voice shaken, "Oh, please, if you'll only just play up, and wait until he's gone! Pretend that everything's all right! I'll explain—*please!*"

CURT'S footsteps on the stairs reached them and there was such tragic intensity, such pleading, in Hope's eyes that Randy said grimly, "O.K., but believe me, lady, the explanation better be good!"

Curt came down and the boys were dismissed. Donna Ynez appeared and greeted Curt with stiff, cool courtesy. It was obvious from her manner that she disliked and feared him. But Curt was almost offensively at home, assuming the airs of a courteous host, as though making his position in the house so obvious that Randy barely restrained a desire to poke him one in the eye.

It was midnight before Curt left, a little drunk, and therefore even more offensive. Donna Ynez, with a frightened look at Randy, scuttled away, and Randy and Hope stood listening to the sound of Curt's footsteps dying away. Randy turned to Hope and said sharply, "All right, let's have it! What's it all about?"

Hope spread her hands in a little hopeless gesture.

"I know you are angry with me, and that you must despise me. But I was so desperate, so terrified, alone here with Curt," she stammered wearily. "Because the natives are afraid of him. But they look on him as a white man, and so they wouldn't dare oppose anything he wanted to do—"

"If the man is dangerous, why don't you have him arrested? That's simple enough," said Randy shortly.

"But you see he hasn't actually threatened me, or offered me any harm," she whispered, abased and shamed. "He—just wants to—marry me."

"But surely that's no crime—" began

Randy and stopped. Because of course it was a crime. The very worst sort of crime for a surly brute like Curt Malvern to lay even the weight of his desire against this lovely girl. "You should have a bodyguard," he finished grimly.

"A bodyguard would be of no service to me against Curt," she answered him quietly, steadying herself with an effort. "The only sort of protection I could have from Curt is another man—a husband."

Randy said stiffly, "As lovely as you are, that shouldn't be difficult."

"And so," Hope went on as though she had not heard him, "I knew I had to do something desperate, or else go away from Half-Moon Cay. It's my home—I have no other place to go. If I left, Curt would rob me of it within a year. So I started out to find a husband. I hadn't had a chance to meet any men. I never dared stay away from the Cay long enough to—to meet people or find anybody who might want to marry me. I knew if I stayed away, Curt would turn the natives against me and I'd be powerless—"

She stopped and drew a long breath. She looked up at Randy for a moment, steady-eyed, grave, and then she said quietly,

"So I went to Havana for three days, and on the third day, I met you. I thought you liked me a little—"

RANDY stared at her as though he thought she had lost her mind. "Are you trying to say that simply because we met, and kissed in the moonlight— Oh, for Heaven's sake!" he gasped, outraged.

"I thought that if you came here to the island for a few days, and if you saw that life is good here, you might not mind staying on as—as my husband," she reached the very depths of humiliation by saying the final word that had to be said.

Randy was completely taken aback. He was bewildered and angry. For no man ever quite forgives a woman for making him look ridiculous, and Randy felt that Hope had done a very good job of that.

Hope looked up at him swiftly.

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"You said you were out of a job, now that the trust fund is gone," she reminded him. "And that you liked the tropics. I thought maybe you might not mind having a—a place here—call it just a job if you like. My partner as well as my—husband. I'd gladly divide the income with you fifty-fifty."

"Then why didn't you present your proposition as a straight-forward business venture, instead of all this cock-eyed business? Offer me a job, at regular wages?"

"Would you have accepted it?" she demanded quietly.

Randy hesitated and then said honestly, "No."

"I knew you wouldn't," Hope answered quietly. "That's why I didn't dare offer it. Because if I had and you had refused, you'd have been suspicious when I invited you here—"

"Well, the net results would have been the same," Randy cut in shortly. "Because I haven't the faintest intention of staying."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," Hope told him steadily. "At least until the supply boat comes. And that won't be for another thirty days. It was the supply boat that brought your luggage this afternoon. There is no telephone here on the Cay, and there are no boats except small fishing boats that never go outside the harbor."

Randy's anger mounted. "Meaning, of course, that I'm to be a prisoner here until I agree to marry you!"

She flinched a little, but as steadily as she could, she answered, "I'm afraid that's about it."

"Why, you little—you little pirate!" he strangled with fury for a moment. "Well, let me tell you something, my little lady who has delusions of being a royal queen, I may have to stay here a thousand years, but I wouldn't marry you—"

He broke off, fought for his self-control and after a moment he said, "Besides, how do you know you could trust me? Marriage is a pretty risky business. You'd better just send me ashore. You know absolutely nothing about me. I may have a wife and half a dozen kids—several wives."

"I know all about you," Hope told him levelly. "I had my New York attorneys investigate you yesterday."

She didn't give him a chance to voice the helpless fury aroused in him by that. She turned towards the stairs, saying over her shoulder, "I'm sorry—truly I am. But there wasn't any other way—" her voice broke and she turned and fled.

LEST she should run back to him and say straight from her frightened, trembling heart, "I didn't investigate you—I didn't need to! All I had to do was take one look at you and know you are the only man in the world for me. It just had to be you! And I didn't dare tell you the truth, so I kidnapped you because I loved you and there wasn't time enough to—to pursue you in a more maidenly way. Oh, darling, darling—don't hate me so terribly!"

No, she mustn't say that to him. She mustn't offer him her heart because he didn't want it. The fact that he already had it would probably only add to his fury and his outrage. If only he would not despise her too much! If only he would let the magic and the loveliness of Half-Moon Cay creep into his heart, maybe he might even learn to remember that night on the hotel terrace in Havana when he had found her sweet to hold in his arms, exquisite to kiss, lovely to look at!

She was having breakfast alone in the patio next morning when Randy came out of the house. He greeted her unsmilingly and said sternly, "Last night when I opened my suitcase it had been pretty thoroughly gone through. Oh, nothing was missing, but something had been added—this."

He held out to her a tiny wax image through whose heart a pin had been thrust. Hope stared at it, her great dark eyes widening, her face going white as the lotus lilies in the black bowl on the table.

Puzzled, Randy demanded, "What the heck's it all about, anyway? Why are you so frightened over a blob of wax?"

"It's—voodoo," said Hope faintly.

"Oh, for the love of Heaven!" Randy snorted in disgust. "Are you going to tell

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me you believe in anything so fantastic? Voodoo my eye!"

Hope lifted dark, tragic eyes to his. "I don't believe in voodoo, but I do believe in the effect of it on the natives. They—they tell some pretty queer tales here among the Cays, and the natives believe in it so devoutly—"

Randy turned the tiny image curiously in his palm.

"What's it supposed to mean? Why should it be in my suitcase? And who put it there?"

Hope said dully, "Curt put it there, of course. There will be a pin thrust through its heart every day for seven days, and then you'll sicken and die."

Randy stared at her, his eyebrows raised, an expression of scornful amusement touching his handsome face; but before he could put into words his derisive, acrid contempt for that Hope went on.

"I know it sounds utterly crazy to you. But Curt's grandmother was a *mama-loi*—a voodoo priestess. The natives stand in complete terror of Curt because of that. They would obey him without a moment's hesitation, no matter what terrible thing he asked."

RANDY flung the tiny image contemptuously into the glorious flood of purple bougainvillea that sprayed the cream-colored wall of the patio and scrubbed his hands on a handkerchief as he said curtly, "Then if that's true, the best thing you could do would be to leave the Cay, sell out."

Hope shook her head stubbornly. "This is my home. I couldn't live anywhere else. Don't you see? Curt's trying to force me to marry him by making me believe some terrible danger threatens me, that only he can avert."

Randy nodded, "I can see that now, "he admitted reluctantly. "And I begin to understand why you wanted another man here. But I still don't see why a bodyguard wouldn't have done just as well."

"Curt would have a bodyguard—destroyed," said Hope quietly. "The natives are fond of me. They would respect my

husband. Once I am married to some one else, and Curt is convinced there is no chance of his getting me or the Cay, I believe he will sell me his share of the island and go away."

Randy thrust his hands deep into his pockets, walked the length of the patio and back again, his head bent in deep thought. When he came back he looked down at Hope and said grimly, "O.K., you win."

Hope's eyes widened a little. "You—you mean you'll stay?" she whispered, afraid to hope that was what he did mean.

His grimace was cold, far from mirthful. "I scarcely see what else I can do, inasmuch as there is no way of leaving the island. So trot out your parson and we'll be married any time you say."

Hot color stung her face and her eyes could not quite meet his because of the little sting in his tone.

Randy looked down at her, a curious light in his eyes, and said grimly, "After all, I don't know why I should object. You're very beautiful, the Cay is lovely—the whole thing may turn out to be rather good fun after all."

She raised her eyes and met the look. And then she rose and fled. Burning with shame, sick with the memory of that lovely handful of moments in Havana when his arms had held her close and his mouth had burned its seal upon her own soft, parted lips. She could never again know such loveliness; he hated her because she had kidnapped him and made him look, in his own eyes at least, ridiculous. He would marry her because she had made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to avoid it. But he would never love her, never forgive her.

She avoided him all that day and knew, sickly, that he was only too glad to abet her in that evasion. But as she dressed for dinner that night, she heard a terrific commotion in Randy's room and when she sped to investigate, Randy stood, a shoe in his hand, an inert, sprawling black thing at his feet.

"I found the thing in my bureau drawer when I reached for a clean collar," he told her, white-lipped and taut. "What is it?"

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"Well, Hope, how was Havana?" Curt asked with insolent familiarity.

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"A tarantula," she whispered, pallid. "Did it sting you?"

"No," answered Randy shortly and looked again at the evil thing. "They are poisonous?"

"Deadly. More so than a rattlesnake," whispered Hope and burst suddenly into tears, her body shaking so that she could scarcely stand.

"**H**ERE, steady! Chin up! There's no damage done," said Randy swiftly and incredibly enough his arms were about her, steadying her, holding her very close.

She was so near a collapse that his gentleness, so unexpectedly sweet, was too much for her. She flung her arms about him, her face buried on his shoulder as she wept.

She pulled herself together after a long, precious moment and drew herself from his arms.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I—sort of—went to pieces. You might have been killed."

"There was another wax image in my bed this morning," Randy told her, unsmiling, studying her curiously. "Two pins, this time."

She was deathly white now. "I'll radio Havana immediately," she told him when she could steady her voice. "I'll have them send a plane to take you off the Cay, back to the States."

"A radio, eh?" Randy's eyebrows went up and his voice was dry. "Then you're not quite so isolated here, after all?"

She shook her head. "I said that because I thought if you believed you had to stay here, you wouldn't mind quite so much," she told him almost inaudibly. "I thought that Curt would let you alone, but I see now that you're in danger. You must go away."

She turned blindly towards the door, but Randy's voice stopped her.

"If our engagement were announced, and Curt and the natives were made to believe we were going to be married immediately, do you think that would make him behave himself?" he demanded.

Hope said, without looking at him, "Yes, of course—"

"Meaning that the natives' love for you is stronger than their fear of Curt and his voodoo?" demanded Randy sharply.

"I—yes—at least I believe it is," she answered him steadily.

"Then we'll announce our engagement immediately," said Randy crisply.

HOPE leaned her slender back against the panels of the closed door and put her hands behind her, clinging to the knob so that he would not see the shaking of her hands as she managed a stricken, "You—you needn't—I realize now that I had no right to drag you into this—this mess!"

"Maybe not," answered Randy grimly. "But now that I'm in, I think I'll stay. I'd enjoy spoiling some of Curt Malvern's pretty little plans. Let's drop down to the village after dinner and give him the news."

For a moment she stood very still, wanting desperately to thank him, to say something gracious. To be poised and calm. But with her heart in a tumult, she dared not risk speech, lest she burst into tears and plead for his love. And that would be the final, the complete humiliation. So she turned and went blindly out of the room, thus missing the sudden light that was almost tenderness that leaped into Randy's eyes as he saw her go.

Randy had never seen the village at night and it was a sight well worth seeing. The moon rode high, a huge white disk whose prodigal light, strangely enough, was blue-white rather than silver. A strange, illusive blue that made the shadows look mysterious and a little dangerous. The beach was a shimmering silver strip against which the black satin of the ocean flung itself, to break into long feathery white rollers. The houses were neat small cottages, their windows glowing softly with mellow light from the very modern power plant that furnished current for the island.

Curt's house was a four roomed bungalow with a wide screened veranda. The coachman driving the old-fashioned Vic-

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toria in which Randy and Hope had ridden down from the hacienda, drew up with a flourish.

Curt, big and broad in his white mess jacket, the inevitable scarlet cummerbund wound tightly about his thickening waist, came down the steps to greet them.

"I am indeed honored," he said flamboyantly. "Do come into my humble abode."

Before Hope could manage her voice, Randy said curtly, "We came down, Malvern, to tell you that Hope and I are going to be married, immediately. We'd like you to hand the news on to the natives."

Hope, shrinking a little against Randy, saw the look that swept Curt's face and then was gone, like the ripple that spreads across a hidden dark stream, foretelling storm to come. Then he said coolly, "Well, that's great news! They'll want to make a feast, of course. If the marriage is to be immediate, the feast should be tomorrow evening, don't you think, Hope?" He was apparently untouched personally by the news.

Hope said hurriedly, "I—yes, that will be fine."

"Thanks for the congratulations and good wishes," said Randy dryly.

Curt showed his teeth in a little flashing smile that did nothing to the cold malevolence in his eyes.

"They were pretty obvious, I think," he answered promptly. "I've known Hope a long time. I know how lucky any man is who gets Hope. Good wishes would be superfluous, I think. Congratulations, of course. I'll be delighted to have another white man on the island."

"Maybe between us we can get rid of this cock-eyed voodoo business," suggested Randy quietly.

CURT straightened and looked surprised and a little amused. "Voodoo, Apperson? This isn't Port au Prince, you know, Apperson. I'm afraid somebody's been kidding you. There's no voodoo here!"

"Then why do you suppose I find small wax images with pins in their hearts, scattered around my room?" demanded Randy, and felt Hope shiver a little as she stood

very close to him. "And a tarantula in my bureau drawer this evening?"

"A tarantula, Apperson?" repeated Curt and laughed. "Well, after all, old man, you are in the tropics, you know."

"And the wax images?" Randy persisted.

Curt shrugged. "Either a practical joke, or one of the servants imported from another island," he dismissed the question carelessly. "I'll check up and see if any of the house servants are new."

"We'd better get back to the hacienda," said Hope hurriedly. "Donna Ynez is alone. You'll make the arrangements for the feast Curt?"

"Of course, Hope," said Curt and his voice was warm, almost caressing. "You know that anything at all I can ever do for you is a very great pleasure to me."

Randy said crisply, "Thanks—we both appreciate that."

He and Curt looked straight at each other for a moment, a naked sword of enmity between them. And then the Victoria turned and the coachman trotted the horses briskly back toward the hacienda.

Randy said after a moment of silent thought, his forehead drawn into a little puzzled frown, "Look here, Hope, are you sure you haven't been imagining things? This Malvern doesn't seem such a bad egg—"

"That's what frightens me about him; he's so very clever," said Hope huskily, and Randy nodded as though he could quite understand that.

Later, in her own room, her heart was like lead in her breast. She knew so well just how dangerous Curt was; but he was very clever and she knew that Randy was more than half convinced that she had concocted the whole story of being afraid of Curt just as an excuse to enlist his, Randy's, aid. A story that Curt's friendly behavior seemed to point out as an outrageous lie.

The following day was difficult but she managed to keep out of Randy's way until it was over. She dressed carefully for the feast. The natives would expect her to look lovely, and she did, in a filmy white tulle frock, with a green encased lotus

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bud tucked into her dark curls, her mother's pearls about her throat.

BUT though she was lovely as a dream, Randy's eyes did not warm as he greeted her courteously and helped her and Donna Ynez into the victoria.

The village was ablaze with lights to-night, a great bonfire blazing in the middle of the street that led down to the dock. Hope was greeted with affectionate excitement by the natives crowding about her, studying Randy with the friendly inquisitiveness of children. Curt was an efficient master of ceremonies.

He made a speech to the natives which Hope translated for Randy. It was a pleasant speech, in which he told them there would be a new "white boss-man" on the island and that the new "white boss-man" would be "the little boss-lady's" husband. There were cheers when he had finished. And then it was Hope's turn to speak. But as she stood up, slim and lovely in her filmy white frock beneath the yellow light, there was an unexpected interruption. The sound of a boat being beached on the sand below the light of the bonfire; they could see people getting out of the boat, and coming up the beach.

There were two women and four men in the party. One of the women, young and slim in dark slacks and a pull-over sweater, her shining golden hair framing an enchanting face, came running to Randy and flung herself upon him.

"Randy, you poor darling! What's it all about?" she cried, clinging to him and looking, wide-eyed, about the brilliantly lighted scene. "We got your message, but it was so fantastic we couldn't believe it. We thought you were ribbing us until the other message came last night."

"What the dickens are you talking about?" demanded Randy. "I didn't send you any message."

One of the strangers, a middle-aged man in yachting clothes, came closer and said crisply, "We received a message from you yesterday morning saying you were being held her against your will and asking that we rescue you. Then last night another and

more urgent message came, and I ordered the captain to proceed here at once."

He looked swiftly about the scene, and Elsa crept closer to Randy and asked uneasily, "But it isn't a joke, is it? Darling, you are in danger, aren't you?"

"Don't be a dimwit—certainly not!" said Randy sharply, and to Hope he said, "May I present my friends, Hope? Miss Laurens. Mrs. Laurens, her mother, Mr. Laurens, her father, and Mr. Clarke. Folks, Miss Hope Carrington, my hostess, and Mr. Malvern."

Elsa looked at Hope with a curious gleam in her eye and said coolly, "The whole thing looks like a wedding scene, but you can't have Randy, Miss Carrington. He's mine!"

Randy said swiftly, "Don't mind her, Hope, she's nuts!"

"I'm not, and she better had," said Elsa grimly. "I've had my eye on Randy for ages. He cabled us that he was being forced to marry the 'the Lady of Half-Moon Cay'—only you aren't getting away with it."

Randy said savagely, "Will you shut up? I never sent any cable—"

"No," said Hope, and was surprised to hear herself say, "it was I who sent the cables."

Randy said sharply, "That's not true! Why should you?"

"BECAUSE Curt was being very sure of me, and I needed someone to—to arouse him to a realization of—of how he really felt about me," stammered Hope and would not meet Randy's outraged eyes. "That—that was why I practically kidnapped Randy, but now that—Curt knows he really wants to marry me, you can take Randy home with you, Miss Laurens. Thanks for the loan of him."

And without waiting for any of them to speak, evading Randy's outstretched hand, she ran blindly towards the carriage and the coachman whipped up the horse so that the victoria clattered away.

Locked in her own room, Hope went swiftly to work. There was only one thing left for her now, of course. She would

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have to leave the island. She could not stay on here with Curt completely out of hand, as he would be after this. He must have found a letter from Elsa Laurens in Randy's suitcase and that was how he had been able to send the cables. For of course it had been Curt who had sent them.

She would have to leave the Cay to Curt, take whatever he chose to send her of the income of the place. That would be better—anything would be better—than to stay here on the Cay, married to Curt or trying to fight him.

She radioed Havana for a plane, and very early in the morning she heard the roaring of its motor overhead. She rang for a house-boy to carry her luggage down.

She started across the patio, and a tall young man unwound himself from a reclining chair and stood up. Wide-eyed, she stared at him. His white tuxedo was ruined; his collar had been torn loose from its moorings, one eye was rapidly taking on a purplish pouch that was closing it tightly; there were several cuts and bruises on his face, and one hand bore bleeding knuckles. But he looked, somehow, very pleased with himself, as he cocked his good eye at her luggage and said mildly, "Going some place?"

Hope stammered, "What—what happened to you?"

Randy grinned, and winced as though the facial movement had been painful. "You ought to see the other fellow," he said happily.

Hope reached for the back of a chair and steadied herself, before she asked faintly, "Curt?"

"Who else?" demanded Randy reasonably. "But he'll probably recover by the time the Laurens dump him in Havana. They have some pretty good hospitals there, I hear."

"The—the Laurens have gone?" she stammered, unable to take it all in. "But—but why didn't you go with them?"

"Chiefly because I didn't want to," answered Randy as though he thought that an extremely silly question. "Look, angel-face, if I'd wanted to marry Elsa Laurens, that could have been attended to a long

time ago. I've known her since way back."

"But—but she said—"

"Sure she said, and so did you!" Randy reminded her grimly. "You said you brought me here just to make Curt Malvern jealous. A more feeble lie I never heard! Unless it was Elsa trying to insist that she had some claim on me!"

"You don't have to worry about Malvern any more, darling," he told her gently. "He and I had a pretty thorough understanding last night. He's gone, and he'll never come back. You can send him a check for his share of the island. He and his voodoo are washed up."

"By the way," Randy went on when he saw that for the moment words were denied her, "I discovered before I left the village that the natives consider that feast as pretty binding. In their eyes, we're already married."

Hope said faintly, "That—that needn't bind you. There's a plane waiting now on the beach—"

"Then suppose we take it and find a parson," suggested Randy quietly.

"You—you don't want to marry me!" she stammered wildly.

Randy said politely, "Don't I? I certainly don't want to go away from you—ever!"

"You hated me for bringing you here," she reminded him shakily, afraid to hope.

"I was blind-mad when I discovered I'd been kidnapped," Randy admitted, with a wry, half-shamed grin. "I felt like a fool. Being dragged away like—oh, like a Sabine maiden or something. I hadn't had time to realize I was crazy about you. You're the loveliest thing in the world. I want to marry you—and spend the rest of my life here with you."

Her heart swelling with happiness and a delight she had thought never to feel again, she swayed a little towards him.

Randy's arms went about her and held her very close, and he bent his head and took her kiss with an almost reverent tenderness.

"My darling dearest!" he said huskily. "My blessed little Lady of Half-Moon Cay! I love you—so darned much!"

Tildy Keeps Flying

By Deborah Wynne



Pull yourself together, Tildy, she warned, you don't even know him!

TILDY lifted the little model bomber and planted a reverent kiss on its plastic nose. "You're my aero-dynamic honey," she told it. "Now go into that wind tunnel and show those skeptics in the front office I'm *not* an impractical female dreamer."

She walked to the door of her work shop and, turning at an angle to avoid bumping the small glistening wings, carefully backed out toward the hall. Then, so suddenly that it was all over before she could realize what was happening, the door struck with a force that sent her

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sprawling. The little bomber was knocked out of her hands, went into as neat a nose dive as though it had sustained a direct hit, and crashed on the floor.

"Hey!" came a startled male voice high above. "You shouldn't be playing with those models. Look what you did!"

Playing! Look what *she* did! Why—

Tildy glared past well polished shoes to long well pressed trousers, to a broad leather belt snug around the slim waist of an air corps dress uniform, and finally at the back of a blond head bent solicitously over her little plane.

She scrambled furiously to her feet and grabbed it from him. "You clumsy fool!" she stormed. "What do you mean by knocking me down?"

In frantic haste she examined the model. The tiny perfect nose was smashed and one of the wings broken beyond repair. Tildy laid her head on the unbroken wing, and for the first time in years sobbed aloud.

"For Pete's sake!" said the voice. "Don't do that! Are you hurt? Here, better use this."

Tildy took the large clean handkerchief. "Get out of here, quick," she told its owner, "before I come to and hit you with something for ruining weeks of work."

"Wait a minute!" he said. "You backed right into me. Just like a female—"

That did it. Her tears stopped at that familiar taunt. Tildy put the little wreck on the table and turned.

Angry as she was, she couldn't help noticing several things. First, that he was very handsome, with skin sun-tanned to shades darker than his hair, and blue eyes quite startling in that deep tan. Second, that he was looking at her in a way that made her uncomfortably aware of her grease-stained coverall, of dark curls unbecomingly tied up with wrapping cord.

"My being a female has nothing to do with it," she said. "Please go away. I'm going to need all the time I can get to repair these damages."

"You?" he said. "Can you—? Say, who are you?"

Of course she didn't have to tell him,

but—

"I'm Tildy Carson," she said, "company engineer. And I certainly can. I built this model from scratch, and there's nothing about it I can't replace. Only," her wide grey eyes narrowed in resentment, "thanks to you, I'll be held up again before I can prove— Say, who are *you*?"

"I'm Bob Thompson, lieutenant with the Bombardment Group. One of the visiting crews here today."

"OH." Tildy remembered now. The Army and the officials of Amalgamated Aircraft had decided that a visit by bomber crews to the workers who built their planes would be very effective industrial morale-building. She'd been too busy working to think much about it. Now this lanky blond had spoiled all that work. She wished to goodness he had stayed where he belonged, and that he'd quit looking at her as though she were some peculiar bug fastened to a laboratory slide.

She'd change that expression right now.

"Did the Army choose all its glamor boys to impress the girls on the assembly lines?" she asked sweetly, and was gratified by the swift rush of color under his tan, "or are you the only pretty one?"

Maybe she'd gone too far, she thought, almost frightened by his tight lips, by the white knuckles that stood out as he grasped the edge of the table. After a moment he stood away, and his mouth relaxed into a rather grim smile.

"The trouble with a lot of dames," he said, "is that they think wearing pants gives them a man's brain." He was at the door before he spoke again. "I'm glad you think I'm pretty," he added. "So sorry I can't say the same for you. Looked at a mirror lately?"

Then he banged the door shut behind him.

Oh! Barging into her, destroying her beautiful model, and now to top it all off, insulting her! All through State Tech., from which she had been last year's sole woman graduate, she'd had to fend off masculine scorn for a "female engineer." She'd had to work twice as hard to con-

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vince Amalgamated Aircraft's engineers that she could be a valuable addition to their staff. She was used to that.

But never had any man called her homely. To the contrary, they'd seemed unable to believe a girl could be attractive and still have a brain. This blond, this Bob Thompson, probably so accustomed to having every girl in sight fall for him—she hated him! Thank goodness she'd never have to look at him again!

She picked up a wrench and began to remove the damaged wing, but her hands were trembling and her eyes kept filling so she couldn't work. That sore feeling in her chest had nothing to do with the Thompson person, she told herself sternly. It was the delay in her work. And she was tired. She'd gotten in early and stayed late every day for weeks.

'Looked at a mirror lately?' Funny she couldn't rid her ears of that hateful question. Impulsively she laid down her tools. She wasn't getting anywhere with her repairs anyway. She reached into her locker for her handbag, and went down the hall to the dressing room.

She took one swift, dismayed look at herself and got busy. She had exactly one half hour before the lunch blast would send all shifts and personnel to the yard. The colonel with the army group was giving an address. Well by the time she joined the others she'd look different, all right. Bob Thompson, if he happened to see her again, could eat his words.

She finished with only minutes to spare, but it was worth it. The work-stained coverall lay in a neat bundle at her feet, replaced by a snug heaven-blue sweater and matching skirt that did as much for dark-lashed grey eyes as for the slender curves they accented. The curls, released from their wrapping cord bondage, fell softly around her face skilfully touched by lipstick powder. Tildy regarded herself with satisfaction, then hurried out to join the throngs of men and girls headed for the yard.

ON AN improvised platform at one end of the enormous yard, officials of

Amalgamated were shaking hands with the colonel and his aides. Radio men were connecting loud speakers, adjusting the mikes. And the air crews, Tildy noticed, were mingling with the workers, milling about and boyishly fighting for places near the girls on the huge unfinished center wings that served as seats.

Tildy looked about, wondering, just casually of course, if Bob Thompson was already out of the building. If he was, she thought scornfully, he'd be right in his element with all the fuss the girls would undoubtedly make over him. Well, she'd better move, the speakers looked ready. And it was extremely silly of her to feel so flat because she couldn't see that conceited blond. Just as silly as she'd been to waste her time 'looking at a mirror' when she should have—

There was a low whistle of admiration, then "Well, if it isn't Cinderella! Too bad I'm no prince." Tildy spun around, her heart doing queer things at the sound of Bob Thompson's voice. Now she was positive she'd been working too hard lately. Must have affected her mind. Otherwise why would she be glad to see him?

"Looking for me?" he grinned at her.

The man was really insufferable. "Of course not," she lied, "just trying to find a seat."

"How about here on the steps, next to me?" he said. "I'll even help save that pretty skirt." He spread a handkerchief on the step, patted it invitingly. "Last clean one I've got," he added, "so don't start to cry."

Sit next to him? She'd rather stand! If she moved fast she could still get across the yard before the speaker began.

"Come on!" Bob Thompson took her hand and pulled her gently toward the steps. At his touch, the will to resist crumpled. There was something about the feel of his palm against her own that ran up her arm, spread through her chest, quickened her breath. She wanted to pull her hand from his and run, and she wanted to let it stay where it was. She didn't know which want was stronger.

The sudden hush that fell over the noisy

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crowd in the yard as the president of Amalgamated motioned for silence made her sink quietly down beside Bob, thankful that the decision had been made for her.

THEY sat side by side, listening to the army chief emphasize the common interests of the builders and fliers of planes. Tildy glanced up at Bob, listening respectfully to his superior officer, apparently unconscious of her hand still clasped in his. He really is handsome, she thought grudgingly, and mentally traced the regular line of brow and nose and good strong chin. How many girls, she wondered with a peculiar pang, had leaned against the wide shoulder just on a level with her head?

"—and now, in closing," the man on the platform said, "I sincerely trust this visit leaves us with a keener awareness of our mutual and indissoluble importance, one to the other."

Their hands came apart as they joined the enthusiastic applause. Through it, Bob said, "The colonel is right, Tildy Carson. I am aware of my importance to you. One look at my 'pretty face' and see how you've improved!"

Tildy's hands fell into her lap, as powerless with anger as the legs on which she should have been moving rapidly as possible away from this—this—

She took a deep breath, but before she could release the blast of furious words he went on: "I ought to keep up the good work. How about a date tonight?"

Tildy stared at him blankly. One of us is crazy, she told herself, then with a deep inner conviction, it's I, or I'd manage somehow to end this idiotic business before he thinks of something worse. Why, he's laughing at me!

Suddenly she felt quite calm, no longer angry. The whole thing was beneath the dignity of anger. She'd date him tonight all right, even if it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. And it would be a date he'd never forget! She'd do a little 'good work' of her own. That would leave him a sadder and wiser man, and

spare some other girl the emotional whirlwind he'd set loose upon her.

"Well?" he persisted. "Date?"

She stood up, turned on the smile that had dazzled bigger men than he'd ever be, and in her softest voice said, "Tonight? That'll be just fine." Then before she could change her mind, she rattled off her address, and went inside.

IN A way, Tildy thought, dressing that night, it was too bad she and Bob Thompson had got off to such a start. Even a girl who knows a pair of calipers from a micrometer likes to be dated by a handsome lieutenant. Perhaps — she thought—perhaps she shouldn't go. Then, remembering the way he'd acted, the things he'd said, she brushed her hair with a vigor that made her scalp tingle. Darn him—darn him—! Wild horses couldn't prevent her from teaching him a much needed lesson, and whether the date could have been enjoyable or not was of no importance.

But that reasoning didn't at all stop her heart from doing a pole-vault at the sound of the buzzer, followed by Bob's voice over the house phone.

"Down in a minute," she told him, hoping her voice was sufficiently cool and detached.

Tildy knew she looked very well indeed as she stepped out of the elevator in a snug eyelet blouse that melted into a billowy jungleprint skirt. She knew the tiny purple cap perched on her dark curls accented their deep luster and called attention to her black-fringed grey eyes. But the way Bob was looking at her now made her feel at once so proud she could have braved Hollywood's cameras, and so annoyed she could have slapped him.

"You know," he said, "it's a mistake, saving all this loveliness for dates. With the rig you've got on, you could go into the plant tomorrow and charm a Flying Fortress out of a pile of junk without even raising a finger."

Why did he have to know exactly how to rile her in the quickest possible way?

"You make it sound like child's play,"

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she said coldly. "Would you like to take off in a 'fortress charmed by this rig?'"

"Well," he said, "I hate to be ungallant, but I've had pretty good luck so far. Maybe I'd better stick to men to design my work, and girls to design my play."

Tildy tightened her lips. "Maybe," she suggested, "you'd better stick to the kind of girl you're used to."

"Look," he said, "do we have to fight all the time. I thought I was making a pretty speech. Here's a swell night and two people with nothing to do. What do you say we bury the hatchet and just have fun?"

Tildy looked up at him, and he was grinning. Somehow the corners of her mouth twitched in a smile. It would be nice to relax, to 'have fun.' And it was hard to stay angry with Bob Thompson. Besides, maybe she'd started out to teach the wrong lesson. Maybe it would do more good to show him that a successful career girl could also be a charming date.

"Okay," she said, "let's have fun. How do we start?"

"Ever been to Forestside Amusement Park? No? Well, pack up your troubles, you're going now!"

FROM the moment they stepped out of a cab and into the open trolley that wove through lush moon-tipped woods across the river shimmering like a broad silver ribbon far below Tildy had a feeling of having stepped into a new world, touched with magic that ran through her veins and filled her with a sense of well-being, a carefree ease she'd never known.

She loved it, riding the roller-coasters, shrieking gleefully along with all the other unfrightened girls, Bob's arm protectively tight around her; stumbling through the

revolving barrel, laughing so she couldn't keep her balance, then suddenly not laughing any more as Bob picked her up and carried her out against his heart. His heart was beating as fast as her own—from the exertion, of course.

She liked dancing in the immense ballroom. The gaudy decorations and too brilliant lights became misty back drops to Bob's broad shoulders and gleaming head, just as her steps matched his and became part of the low throbbing of drums, the

sweet sadness of saxophones. When the music stopped and his arms came from around her Tildy felt as if a charmed circle had been broken, and stepped away quickly before she could follow the impulse to snuggle closer against him.

Pull yourself together, Tildy, she warned, you don't even know him!

"Having fun?"

Bob linked his arm through hers, led her toward the door.

Fun—that's it, she told herself. Just remember this is an evening of fun. Keep that in mind. Don't go slopping over. The career girl being charming, but not too charmed.

"It's swell," she said.

Outside they strolled down the wide path crowded with laughing couples, and stopped at a refreshment pavilion.

"Hamburger?" Bob said. "Coke? Evening at Forestside wouldn't be complete without them."

At a tiny table Tildy watched him enjoy the de luxe model hamburger complete with mustard, relish, and unidentifiable sauces; trying to keep her mind on her own food, not being too successful. For the first time she wondered what it would be like to be married. To work out the problems of making a home, instead of improving an



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engine. To look forward to a man's homecoming instead of the publication of an article on some engineering feat. To—

Bob had said something. He was waiting for an answer. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't hear you."

"I offered you the usual penny for, judging from the expression on your face, some very unusual thoughts."

Tildy hoped her laugh sounded spontaneous. "I was trying to figure out the formula for this hamburger," she said. Good thing you're no mind reader, she added silently, or the expression on your face would be even more unusual!

"Come on—" she got up. "You promised me a ride on the lake, remember?"

WALKING down to the man-made lake, getting into a gondola poled by a pseudo gondolier, Tildy was grateful for the dim lights that hid her face, because she realized with a shock that in her vision of herself in a little home, the husband she was greeting was tall and blond, and that his arms, as he hugged her, made a magic circle very much like the circle of Bob's arms on the dance floor.

It must be this fantastic adult playground. Letting down physical bars, romping like children, made one let down emotional bars too. That was it. Her loves were the sky-destined machines with which she worked. And even if, at some far off date, she should marry, it would be someone she knew very well, someone who realized—

Bob's arms came around her, easing her against the pillowed back rest, and all her neat logic was gone. I won't try to understand it, she thought, I'll just enjoy being here tonight.

"You know, Tildy," he said, "this has been a swell date. It'll give me something to remember when I'm up there in the dark, waiting and wondering if some yellow devil has my number."

No! she thought. That couldn't happen—he seemed so sure of himself, so invulnerable, and yet—

The thought of anything harming him made her feel hollow inside, and cold. She

moved closer, comforted by his nearness. He'd come back—of course he would—and it didn't matter any longer that it shouldn't be important to her. Because it was the most important thing that would ever happen. Just as the swift exultation sweeping through her now was the most important, the most thrilling sensation she'd ever known. It's happened, she thought wonderingly. I'm in love!

"Bob," she said softly, "don't think about those yellow devils. Not tonight. Let's talk about what you'll do when the war's over."

He laughed shortly. "When the war's over? Maybe I'll go back to what I used to do. I'm an architect. Very funny, in a way, when I think of the years I spent learning construction. Now one of the bombs we drop can destroy more buildings in an hour than I could plan all the rest of my life."

She drew her breath in sharply, and he looked down.

"War's an ugly business," he said, "but it's like surgery. Can't clean out a rotten mess without pain. Some day it'll be over, and then if I'm lucky, I'll help build a better world."

He smiled, and Tildy smiled back. and it was like the fusion of two arcs into a bond of understanding.

"Tell me about you," he said. "What are your ambitions?"

Ambitions? Only hours ago, she could have answered that question without hesitation. She had wanted nothing more than to be a recognized aeronautical authority. But now—to live in peace, to have a man and a home of her own seemed infinitely more desirable.

Strangely, he read her thoughts. "Most girls want to get married, don't they?" he said. "Ought to be easy for you, Tildy. You're lovely to look at and fun to be with. Some day you'll make somebody a wonderful wife."

That day could be now, she thought. If he asked me now I'd marry him and go anywhere, give up everything I've worked for. Maybe he feels it, too.

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"Someday," she told him, "you'll make somebody a wonderful husband."

HE SAT up abruptly at that, and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. "Getting late, isn't it?" he said. "Better get you home."

In the taxi, bound for home, she wanted the kiss a long time before it arrived. His arms came around her shoulders and she raised her face, her cheeks flushed, her lips soft, and deep inside her an indescribable anticipation. His mouth came down fully over hers, and she clung to him with every yearning she had ever had.

When it was over, he said harshly, "I didn't expect a kiss like that."

Her cheek still lay against his, but the fierceness of his voice startled her and she sat up.

"That was real," he said. "You've got no business to kiss a man like that!"

She moved away, huddled in the corner, her cheeks burning hotter, with shame now. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

He lit a cigarette, and she watched the glow sinking and swelling like the disappointed and humiliation within her.

"I mean," he said, "that was what I'd call a 'marrying' kiss. Maybe it's my fault for talking too much. If I gave you any ideas, forget them, because as long as I've got to go high-tailing it all over the world, I'm not getting myself involved."

Getting himself involved! He shouldn't have said that. Or perhaps she should be grateful, because it kindled a clean, hard anger that eased the dull knot of pain twisting at her. So that she could laugh.

"Aren't you being quaint?" Miraculously, her voice was quite normal. "What makes you think you're so irresistible that I'd want to involve you? That's the kind of male ego I despise."

"At least," he said, "I'm true to my sex. You deny yours by trying to imitate mine. Unsuccessfully, I might add. Those tears this morning—can you imagine a man having hysterics because a piece of work is broken? You ought to decide what you are and stick to it. And after that kiss," he added hatefully. "I advise you to trade in

your tool kit for a frilly apron."

Out of a blind swirl of hate Tildy fought to speak before a torment of choked sobs could give more truth to his argument. Mercifully, they pulled up at her apartment house, and she tore out of the cab, out of sight of Bob Thompson, filled with a burning wish never to see him again. Hating herself because the tears, running free now, were only partly rage at him. Because the greater number were for the love that had been born in her, and that now must die.

THE early shift was just getting in when Tildy walked through Amalgamated's heavy iron fences, displayed her identification picture to the surprised guard, and gave him a rather feeble smile in response to his, "Awful early, ain't it, Miss Carson?"

She couldn't tell him that the hours between the time she'd run away from Bob Thompson and now had been spent in sleepless torment. That she'd wept until her heart had seemed drowned in tears, so that for a while it had stopped being a solid ache. And that she had changed her clothes come to the plant hours before she was due, because those tears had washed away the fog she'd mis-labelled "Love" and shown her that her happiness lay in her work alone.

In her work shop, she picked up the grimy coverall, pulling it on like protective armor, defying the quick stab at the memory of Bob's "Looked in the mirror lately?" What Lieutenant Thompson thought, how he felt, would be of less than no importance to Tildy Carson. It would have to be.

She uncovered the tiny wrecked bomber, seated herself at the bench and got to work. Machines were much more satisfactory than humans, anyway. They worked according to a sane, logical formula. They were almost entirely predictable. Even when there was a smash-up, you could replace the parts.

She must be catching cold, better get a hankie. She dug deep into the pocket, and when she brought out a large white square

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of linen monogrammed R.L.T., it took minutes of angry concentration on the little wreck before her to erase the feel of Bob's arms around her, the thrill of his lips on hers.

In the days that followed, Tildy threw herself into her work with a feverish drive that hollowed her cheeks and etched violet shadows under sober grey eyes. There was a peculiar irony in the fact that the new model she was constructing would be a vast improvement over the one that had introduced her to Bob Thompson. "Probably a proverb somewhere that fits it," she said to the little plane, "something like 'it's an evil lieutenant that does nothing any good.'"

AT LAST it was complete and Tildy called the report to the chief engineer. "I'd like the free-spinning wind tunnel, sir," she said, "full pressure. Will you be there?"

"Mind if I look it over first, Miss Carson?" he asked. "Some army men are here now, discussing just the sort of thing I think you've got. Shall I bring them?"

"Of course," Tildy said. She hung up and turned exultantly. "Hear that?" The little plane seemed to give her a wide, understanding plastic smile. "Baby, you've just got to be right. We're exhibiting to the Army, and on us depends the honor of our sex. We'll show them!"

She picked up a polishing cloth and rubbed the immaculate little wings as though that would help rub out her unspoken "we'll show Bob Thompson." She hadn't really thought of him very often. Only when some trick of her mind conjured him up. Because it hurt, each time fresh and keen.

The men were coming down the hall now. She could hear the chief's voice. This is your big moment, Tildy, she told herself, do it up brown. She fastened a welcoming smile on her face and turned toward the open door.

Afterwards, she knew she must have carried it off well, because the others had seemed not to notice anything wrong. But when she had first looked past her chief,

past the portly colonel beside him, into the grave blue eyes, the tanned face and gleaming blond hair of Bob Thompson, everything had gone dark for a moment.

Then she was acknowledging introductions, able somehow, over the seething within her, to act rationally. To display her plans and diagrams, answer involved technical questions.

Thousands of men in the Air Force, she told herself bitterly, and they have to pick Bob to come here now! Isn't it bad enough that he's spoiled everything else for me? I won't look at him, I won't get near him. In a few minutes he'll be gone.

"Tildy!" Bob's voice, low and insistent, reached her ears just as his hands grasped hers too firmly for her to draw away without attracting the attention of the two older men bent over her plans. "I want to talk to you. May I see you tonight?"

"No!" she whispered fiercely, and twisting her wrists, trying to loosen his hold. Afraid of herself, of the treacherous tingle spreading up her arms. She'd gone through enough misery over him, she wasn't going to start it all over again.

"Let go!" she said, and as though the ice in her voice had pierced them, his hands dropped.

"Plans seem very clear," the colonel said. "Might fit in nicely." He turned to Tildy. "You see, Miss Carson, we need a very fast, very low-diving job to drop ammunition and supplies behind the lines. Divers we've got now depend on extremely light cargo to keep from crashing. Can't carry much. So we've had to parachute the stuff from high altitudes. Enormous costs in protective coverings. Unavoidable losses."

"The engines in Miss Carson's model are powerful enough to carry tons of bombs," the chief said, "why not supplies? This device on the altimeter would allow the plane to dive to as low as two hundred feet. At that point it makes automatic contact, relays through these amplifier tubes to levers which drag it level, then up."

"Looks like the answer," the colonel said. "Let's try her out. Take the model, Lieutenant, will you please?"

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With an effort Tildy kept her eyes away from Bob, knowing that he too must be thinking of their first meeting. So similar and yet so different. She wished desperately that she could be again the old Tildy Carson, so that this moment, into which all her training had gone, could give her the triumphant surge of pride she deserved, instead of the confused pain she felt.

AT THE tunnel, she set the plane controls for recovery from the dive, checked the altimeter and amplifier tubes, and turned the model over to a mechanic. With the others, she stood in front of the observer's window, listened to the roar as the terrific blast of air was released into the tunnel. With a silent prayer, she watched her little plane launched. It flew with almost unbelievable speed and accuracy, then, describing a beautiful arc, nosed down like a shining arrow, down, down, until it seemed impossible that it could come out before it crashed.

Tildy's palms were damp, her face tense as she watched. With no more than its own length to spare, the little machine stopped its headlong drop, levelled off, and then, almost as though a hand had lifted it, was sailing toward the top.

And on the very tip of the small shining nose rode Tildy's heart, almost bursting with pride and a defiant sense of vindication. I'm glad Bob's here, she thought, I'm glad! Now let him tell me I'm an unsuccessful imitation of his precious sex!

Again and again the little plane was tested. For air-resistance, for stability, for sustained pressure, for overloading. And each time it came through with flying colors, until at last the tests were over and Tildy was receiving congratulations.

From the colonel: "Miss Carson, if the full-sized job does what the model did, you've created something for which thousands of our men will be grateful."

From the chief: "Miss Carson, Amalgamated is proud of you. We'll rush this through as fast as we can."

All the things she'd dreamed of hearing one day. But the wholehearted joy she should be feeling wasn't there. She took

the little bomber off the long-poled net into which the mechanic had landed it and started back to her work shop, deliberately keeping her eyes away from Bob. Trying not to know that he was looking at her with an intensity that made her tingle.

At her door Bob caught up with her. "Tildy," he said, "at least let me tell you I know I was wrong. About the frilly apron, I mean. You do all right with a tool kit. That diver's a dream."

I ought to be glad he said that, Tildy thought—isn't that what I was trying to prove? But perversely, she wasn't glad. She had a panicky feeling that her throat was tightening with tears. To cover it she said coldly, "Thank you. Nice of you to realize I didn't 'charm it out of a pile of junk,'" and walked into the room.

Bob followed her. "You're still miffed about the things I said that night, aren't you?" he asked.

Tildy caught her breath. Miffed! The enormity of that understatement ought to show her clearly enough how lightly he'd taken what, for her, had been a trip to paradise. She'd gone through humiliation, through heartbreak, through despising herself for falling in love with someone who didn't want her. And he asked if she was still miffed!

She clutched the smoothness of the little plane closer. The heat of its still warm engines felt good to her cold, trembling hands.

"Once before I asked you to get out of here," she said. "I hope this will be the last time. Keep away from me. I hate you."

For a moment he stared at her, his lips tight, then he said, "Thanks for saying that. I needed to hear it. Because I was beginning to go soft. Forgetting a lot of promises I made myself. I'll get out—and stay out! But first I'm going to kill a memory that's been keeping me awake nights."

Before she could move, he took the plane from her and set it on the table. Then he reached for her, her arms held fast by his arms, her body pressed against his in a tight curve as he kissed her with a savage abandon that froze Tildy's brain with

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fear and dissolved her heart with its piercing thrill. When he left she felt as though part of herself had gone with him, and she was more miserably alone than she had ever been in her life. . . .

THE Army observers were already at the testing field when Tildy and the chief arrived. As they made their way toward the men examining the huge bomber, a little pulse of pride and awe began to beat in her at the sight of the clean sleek lines, the big powerful engines and four-bladed propellers of the ship that would prove to a male world what she, Tildy Carson, had accomplished.

Hoped to accomplish, she amended nervously. This was the real test. But it would be all right. She'd laugh at her fears when the test was over. They were almost ready. She could see the bomb-train they'd used for loading heavy crates of food, medical supplies and ammunition being trundled away from the bomb-bays. It was good to know her ship could bring mercy to our stranded men, and yet, when needed, rain death and destruction on ruthless enemies.

"You're sure the pilot understands it's 'hands off' the automatic levers?" she asked the chief. "He mustn't interfere. If he should get rattled—distrustful—it would be dangerous."

"Rattled?" the chief laughed. "Not this boy! He understands the mechanism. There he goes now."

A tall figure detached itself from the group of men, unbuckled a flying helmet that had been looped through his belt and put it on his head. And in the split minute before it was covered, Tildy saw the sun gleam on his hair. Blond, thick, several shades lighter than the tanned face below.

Her throat went dry, and her legs would have given under her if she hadn't clutched the chief's arm. Bob! But how was it possible? She hadn't seen him, hadn't heard from him all during the time it had taken to get out the big test plane. Almost, she had believed she could forget him. Forget his voice, his face, his kisses. Now he was here, and as though they'd never

separated, as though hurt and anger and humiliation had never been, she wanted him. Because she knew now that, without him, nothing made sense.

The chief was looking at her peculiarly. "Come, Miss Carson," he said, "Don't be nervous. This test is no more hazardous than any other on an untried plane."

Tildy stared at him blankly. Hazardous! Dear heaven, she'd almost forgotten that! Bob was taking his life in his hands. If anything happened, it would be because of her—! She broke away from the man beside her, running toward the shining plane that had suddenly become a leering devil, an instrument of torture that was taking from her all that life would ever hold dear.

She wouldn't let it—he mustn't go up—!

THE distance to the plane stretched endlessly, and as though her swiftly flying legs were caught on a treadmill, she saw Bob get into the plane, heard the whine of the motors as they tuned up. She was gasping with the effort of getting to him, and sick with fear that she couldn't make it.

She drew a shallow tortured breath and screamed "Bob! Wait!" but the call was drowned by the roar of the engines as the bomber wheeled slowly toward the runway. Tildy stood still, bracing her trembling body as the propellers churned, closing her eyes to keep out the stinging force of the air lashing against her. To keep out the sight of Bob, taxiing down the field away from her, perhaps forever.

She was dimly aware that the chief was beside her, that his arm was supporting her, that he was speaking to her. But not until she heard the big ship gather speed, heard the thunder of the engines flatten out, hit the high note that told of the take-off, did Tildy open her eyes. Bob was climbing now, nosing up clear and true as though he were following invisible tracks. And finally the big ship became a tiny silver thing she could have held in her two hands.

This isn't real, she thought, it can't be.

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I'm dreaming. That's my little model up there. Bob's not in it at all. It's just another test, in a larger wind tunnel.

"Smooth as silk," the chief said, "isn't she, Miss Carson? And young Thompson's doing smooth things with her."

Young Thompson. No use pretending. No use trying not to look up. Her eyes found the shining beam that held everything in life that mattered, and stayed with it as the chief went on talking.

"Didn't think he'd make it here. Had to cut yards of red tape. Good thing he asked for this test so long ago. The day we tried the model at the plant, remember?"

Remember? "He asked for this test—" Why did he ask for this one?

"I remember," she said to the chief, and then silently, he said he was going soft, forgetting promises he'd made himself. Not to fall in love, not to marry. But he does love me. This is his way of showing me he loves me. He couldn't fight it any more than I could. Oh, Bob—darling!

An exultation bright and powerful as a streak of lightning shot through her, and suddenly she felt as though she were beside Bob. Her two loves, Bob and the plane he was navigating. That was where she belonged. If they came through this ordeal safely, she would be with them. And if not—

THERE was a shout from the observers on the field and Tildy felt the chief's hand tighten on her arm as the plane headed into its dive, coming down with incredible speed. The breath left Tildy's lungs, the flutter became a pounding that tore at her. Two thousand feet, fifteen hundred—

The ship gave a sudden lurch, and Tildy bit back a scream. Another lurch, upward,

off balance. He must be manipulating the levers, distrustful, unsure as she herself was unsure. Bob, she prayed desperately, Bob, let it make contact, don't interfere! Those amplifier tubes are powerful beyond belief. They'll boost the current. Give it a chance—give it a chance. Oh, why hadn't the model crashed? Why had she made it at all?

The ship quivered, struggled for balance, and Tildy flung her arms over her face against the horror of the crash she knew must come.

Then her arms were held against her sides and the chief was shouting for her to look. As smoothly as a leaf floats on still water after it falls, the plane had leveled off. The bomb bay doors swung open, discharged the huge cases of supplies without a single break, and swung closed.

In the minute before the plexi-glass nose pointed skyward as she lifted, Tildy saw Bob wave to her, make a thumbs-up gesture. Then he was up, and the relief and happiness that swept over her were too much. She threw her arms around the chief's neck and cried. Beautiful, joyous tears that washed away fear and failure.

For once the chief's "Female engineers!" carried no contempt, as he patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Get it over with, Carson," he added.

Bob was coming down now, slow and easy, the way she was beginning to feel. The wheels plunked out of their wells, and he landed lightly as a feather on all three points. His legs cleared the pit as though a hidden spring had thrust him out, and Tildy was running into his arms.

And there was no one else but the two of them in all the world as his lips came down on her quivering mouth with a tender passion that needed no words.

Letter That Will Never Be Posted

How soon you stole my heart away,
And how soon, my dear, you'd know it
—If all the experts didn't say
That a wise girl doesn't show it!

P. Bracken

Wanted—a Husband!

By Elaine Heyward

She said hurriedly, "I'm Celia. Quick—look at me as though you were starved for the sight of me!"



THE OFFICE was light and airy. Twelve girls sat at the twelve large desks, and on eleven of them were pictures of men in uniform. Which was readily understandable when you read the sign above the door. "We employ only wives of men who are defending their country."

But on the twelfth desk, where a small, brown-haired, blue-eyed girl sat, there was no picture. It was because of this, and a few other discrepancies, that Mr. Olsen, the boss, was standing beside Celia Reed's desk, his roly-poly figure rocking a little on his

heels, his amiable, red-apple face registering suspicion.

"I cannot understand, Mrs. Reed, why you do not have a picture of your husband on your desk like my other girls," Mr. Olsen said in his slow, oddly accented English. "I should think you would be very proud of him."

"Oh, I am!" Celia hastened to say. "I—I just didn't bring his picture down."

Mr. Olsen raised bushy brows. "But I have mentioned it before—no?"

Celia groaned inwardly. He would remember!

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"I should like to see it," Mr. Olsen said pointedly. "And I like my customers to be aware of what I am doing for the cause."

Celia thought fast. "But—but the only one I had of him got—got accidentally burned just—just last night."

It sounded pretty weak, and from the deepening suspicion on Mr. Olsen's face it obviously didn't convince him. He said, "You say your man is of the Navy—no? And yet he never comes in on any of the convoys like some of my other girls' husbands. That is odd, yes?"

"But—" Celia stopped. She was quite out of reasons.

"Another thing—I think I see you too much with my office manager, Dirk." He frowned darkly. "It is not good, when your husband is away fighting."

Celia's hands clasped and unclasped nervously. Mr. Olsen's eyes were keen—too keen. Undoubtedly he'd mentioned this to Dirk too.

Mr. Olsen moved away, shaking his head.

Celia's hands fumbled against the keys of her typewriter. It looked as if she was going to have to produce proof of her husband—or else. And Celia had no proof—because she had no husband!

Dazedly, she went over the series of events that had got her into this predicament. She had been out of work, and needed a job badly. It was then that Celia's sister Ellen, who was married to an army man, and had held this job, discovered she was going to have a baby and had to give up her work temporarily. But she wanted it back later.

"But I know what it'll be," Ellen had complained bitterly. "Some cute little army wife'll get in there and soft soap Old Man Olsen into letting her have the job permanently. If you'd take it, Celia, then I'd be sure of getting it back."

And Dirk, who also worked in the firm, had added, "Ellen's right. You can't let her down. And there's another angle—by the time Ellen's back to work and you're out of her job, my deferment comes up and I go into the service. Somebody will have to be put in my job and—well—you might

as well hold it for me for the duration."

Celia had protested. "But it's a rule of Mr. Olsen's only to hire wives of men in uniform and I'm not—"

"No, but *I* am, and you're helping me. It amounts to the same thing," Ellen insisted.

"And you'll be the wife of a man in uniform," Dirk said, slipping his arm around her, "because we'll be married before I go. So when you tell Old Man Olsen you're a Navy wife now, you're just post-dating the statement a little, honey."

OH, THEY had sounded very convincing. It was a harmless deception and it was her duty to them to go through with it. They had heightened it by their description of Mr. Olsen, who, they said, was just a queer old crack-pot with crazy whims. His hiring only Service men's wives was one of them.

She had got the job easily on Dirk's and Ellen's vouching for her having a husband in the Navy.

But at the end of a short period of working for Mr. Olsen, Celia didn't see him as Dirk and Ellen had. Celia didn't believe it was just a crack-pot whim—his hiring only service men's wives—but his honest conviction that he was doing, in a small way, his share in the war by furnishing support to the wives of men fighting for their country. He was friendly, and fatherly, considering the girls all "my girls" and—well, Celia liked him!

She looked up now, to see him standing by Dirk's desk. Dirk was plainly agitated, and Celia knew with sickening certainty why—Mr. Olsen was putting him through the third degree about Celia.

When Mr. Olsen went into his office, Dirk came over to Celia's desk. There was a frown between his dark eyes. And his sharp-featured face was drawn into worried lines.

"Damn!" he said under his breath. "Who'd have thought that old buzzard was so keen! If he decides to check, Ellen and I can kiss our jobs goodbye for pulling this stunt. And you'll be out too." He plunged his hand through sleek black hair.

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"Looks as if we've got to produce a husband for you to satisfy the old coot."

Before Celia could answer, Mr. Olsen came out of his office, and Dirk hi-tailed it back to his desk.

Celia felt weak with panic. She wished violently she'd never let herself into this. If it meant only losing her job, she'd go to Mr. Olsen this minute and spill the works. But Ellen and Dirk—

While her mind was in this confusion, she saw the office boy call Dirk to the phone. As he stood there talking, his face lost its agitation, actually beamed. It was that way, to Celia's burning curiosity, the rest of the afternoon.

At five o'clock, when they met outside, Dirk caught her hand. "A solution right out of the blue, honey. That phone call was from my cousin, who's an ensign, and has just come in on a convoy. We'll pass him off to Olsen as your husband."

"But how, Dirk?" Celia asked.

"Look," Dirk said, "I'll call him tonight, and tell him to be in that little corner restaurant tomorrow at noon. You know, the one where the boss always eats. When Mr. Olsen comes in, introduce him as your husband who has just come in off a boat. That'll be enough to satisfy his nibs."

Celia felt all bewildered. "What—what does he look like?"

"Well—" Dirk frowned. "I haven't seen him since we were kids. He was a homely mug then. But you'll know him by his ensign's uniform."

Celia got into Dirk's car, parked in the back of a nearby garage, and sank wearily back against the cushions. "Oh, Dirk, I hate this all. If only—"

"Oh, don't be a baby!" He was frankly impatient. And then to soften his words, he drew her into his arms, and his lips melted against her. And so all else was forgotten except the sweetness of that kiss. She'd carry through, of course, for Ellen and Dirk.

The next morning, as Dirk passed her desk, he said, "It's all set, honey. Didn't have much time to talk to my cousin, but you throw out the cues and he'll follow through."

At noon, Celia perched a wisp of red hat over her brown curls and headed for the restaurant, her heart beating a little fast in consternation.

When she entered, she looked anxiously about the small room. There was no Navy man in sight, yet Dirk had said he'd be there early.

SHE WAS about ready to take a table when she saw him come through the door. Her breath caught. Maybe he had been a homely mug as a kid, as Dirk had said, but he was far from it now. In fact, he was just about as handsome as any man she'd ever laid eyes on. Her glance took in his broad shoulders, his crisp dark hair, and bold blue eyes.

He took a booth. Celia had barely time to get over to it and slide in beside him when Mr. Olsen came through the door.

She said, on a hurried breath, "I'm Celia. Quick—look at me as if you were—well, starved for the sight of me!"

He had the queerest look on his face, almost like startled surprise. And then he smiled, a slow broad smile. "Baby, that won't be hard. Not hard at all!"

He put everything he had into that look, so much so that Celia felt her cheeks flush.

It must have been a quite convincing picture, because she could see Mr. Olsen out of the corner of her eye look their way, stop dead still, and then come toward them, his face beaming. Cupid on the track!

"Celia," he said eagerly, stopping at their booth, "this man is—"

Celia's words came in a rush: "My husband, Mr. Olsen. He just came in on a boat, and met me here. This is my husband, Mr. Reed—Mr. Olsen, my boss."

Her introduction was as muddled as Celia felt, with the Navy man's eyes on her in that queer look. But in the next moment he stood up, gripped Mr. Olsen's hand, and said, with hearty sincerity, "This is indeed a pleasure—meeting my wife's boss."

"Pleasure!" Mr. Olsen beamed. "But it is mine, knowing Celia has such a nice husband. You know"—his tone was really apologetic—"I was commencing to doubt that Celia had one."

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The Navy man looked surprised. "Was it necessary for her to have one?" he asked.

Celia choked. Surely Dirk had told him the reason!

She said, giving him a little kick beneath the table, "Oh, darling, you're so forgetful! Don't you remember my telling you I was working in an office where they hired only wives of men in the service?"

Something like relief came into her companion's face. "Oh, sure—I remember now." There was a little twinkle in his eyes as he said to Mr. Olsen, "I am certainly indebted to you for hiring my wife. You know how small our pay is, and—"

Mr. Olsen swelled. "That is just it! You see how I am helping to win the war?" He looked at the two of them. "And now I will run along and let you two be alone." Whereupon he departed, whistling.

CELIA turned to the Navy man. "Thanks—thanks a lot," she stammered. "We were really, all three of us, in a jackpot."

He raised an eyebrow. "All three of you?"

"Why, yes. Didn't Dirk tell you?"

"Dirk?" He seemed to turn the name over. "Why, no—no, he didn't."

Celia remembered Dirk had said he'd had little time to talk to him. "Well, it's like this—" and Celia launched into the whole story while they had lunch.

"Hmm-m." His eyes were intent on her face when she finished. "Never thought I was going to be a married man on this leave. But baby, am I going to enjoy it!"

Celia stiffened a little, until she realized he was joking. She even laughed a little, as a thought hit her.

"What gives?" he wanted to know.

"I was just thinking that Dirk'll be surprised when he sees you. He said you were such a homely mug as a kid."

"Oh, he did, did he?" And then, with a frown, "Say, what's this Dirk—I mean my cousin—to you?"

"Why, my fiancé!"

"Oh!" His eyes on her face were most disturbing. Celia was all at once anxious to get away.

As she saw Mr. Olsen leave, she got up.

"Well, thanks for everything," she said hurriedly, "and—and goodbye."

"Hey!" He jumped up. "Look here, I've got to walk to the office with you!"

"But it's not necess—"

But he had her arm, propelling her through the door. "Tush-tush." His eyes were twinkling. "What would our Mr. Olsen think if he happened to see us going our separate ways?"

His hand on her arm was as disturbing as his eyes. Celia was glad the office was only a few blocks.

At the door he said, "Well, goodbye now." But there was, Celia thought, a little devil in his eye as he turned and left.

Dirk met Celia in the hall, his face dark. Before she could tell him anything, he exploded violently. "Darn that cousin of mine! He phoned right after you'd left and said they were moving him out right then and there, and there was no time to do what I'd asked. But anyhow," his face lightened a little, "he sent this picture of himself over. Thought maybe you could put it on your desk and it'd help."

Celia looked from Dirk to the picture of a small, scrawny man in uniform. Her mouth flew open. "Then—then who *did* I meet?"

"Who? What?" Dirk was equally astonished.

With her cheeks scarlet, Celia related the whole thing. She turned on Dirk angrily. "It's your fault for not giving me a description of him—with the whole town full of Navy men!"

Dirk looked at her, and then he began to laugh. "Well, I'd say this is just a swell bit of luck! The guy carried off his part and Olsen is satisfied, and that ends it!"

"Yes, thank heaven it is ended!" Celia heaved a sigh.

But every once in a while that afternoon her cheeks would suddenly flush as she thought of the whole episode. And Mr. Olsen kept hovering around her desk, pleased as punch over Celia's "so-nice" husband. He was such a dear, Celia felt terribly guilty.

But as she began putting her stuff away at five she wasn't thinking of the Navy

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man, but of going dancing with Dirk tonight and—

Suddenly she heard Mr. Olsen's voice boom out, "Hello, there, Mr. Reed!"

MR. REED! Celia's heart seemed to stop. She raised her eyes to look straight into a pair of blue ones above a uniform of the same shade.

He said, with a mischievous glance toward Celia, "I hope you don't mind my bursting in this way. You see, I wanted to pick up my wife and—"

"Mind?" Mr. Olsen slapped him on the back. "But it is a pleasure! Girls, I should like you to meet Celia's husband." He took him from one desk to another while Celia stood stiff and frozen. But she couldn't help noticing the admiring glances that his tall straight figure evoked. Except Dirk. Dirk glared as they were introduced.

Mr. Olsen suddenly snapped his fingers. "Look, I got it! Mama and her niece are meeting me uptown for dinner. Why don't you and Celia join us, Mr. Reed? I should like—"

"Oh, but I—I mean we—" Celia began hastily.

"Why, say, that's great! We'd love it, wouldn't we, dear?" Celia's supposed husband agreed enthusiastically.

Celia threw Dirk an agonized appeal for help. He came to the rescue. "But you see, Mr. Olsen, I was planning on taking Celia and—er—Mr. Reed to dinner myself. I was surprising Mr.—er—Reed."

Mr. Olsen looked crestfallen a moment. Then he brightened. "But look—we need a partner for Mama's niece, so you join *our* party, Dirk." He beamed around the group. "It is all settled, yes?"

"Yes!" Celia's supposed husband agreed heartily, ignoring Dirk's and Celia's glare.

There was nothing to do then but follow along. As they got into Mr. Olsen's car, he winked at Dirk. "You and I sit in the front, huh? So Celia and her husband can hold hands."

"Now that's what I call being darn thoughtful!" The Navy man grinned, and when they were seated he obligingly took Celia's hand.

Celia started to jerk it away, but their image was reflected in the front mirror, so she couldn't without being conspicuous. The fact that her pulse was beating rapidly at his touch added to her indignation.

When they got out of the car in front of the restaurant, Dirk threw a threatening aside to the Navy man. "Look here, you mug—"

But what he was about to say he didn't finish because Mr. Olsen was beside them then, but not before the Navy man had given Dirk a long, chilly look.

Inside the restaurant, in the foyer, a short fat little woman dressed in plain black came forward, her round face smiling amiably. With her was a striking blonde.

MAMA and her niece Joyce were introduced. It was obvious, the way she beamed on Celia and her handsome, supposed husband, that Mama Olsen shared her husband's view of hiring Service men's wives.

Mr. Olsen said, "I have brought Dirk, one of my office workers, to be your partner tonight, Joyce."

Joyce looked Dirk over with languorous eyes, and laughed softly. "I must say, Uncle Ben, that you're a very good picker."

Dirk smiled and returned the compliment. "And I must say Mr. Olsen has a very charming niece."

Dirk winked at Celia on the sly, but of course, Mr. Olsen didn't see that. Celia looked at his pleased face and groaned inwardly. Cupid was on the trail of making a new match!

When they were seated at a table, the music started. Her companion turned to Celia. "This is ours, isn't it, darling?" He emphasized the last word.

Celia gritted her teeth and rose. Once out of earshot, on the dance floor, she looked up at him, her eyes flashing. "I think you're pretty low," she said hotly, "taking advantage of this—this situation!"

He remained unperturbed. "Such gratitude!" he mocked. "Stop me if I'm wrong, but I thought you were pretty thankful this noon!"

Her cheeks flamed. "Then why didn't

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you let it just go at that? You deliberately walked back from lunch with me to find out where I worked, didn't you, so—so you could carry this on?"

He grinned at her. "What do you think, lovely?"

"I think you're a—"

"Shh! Papa and Mama Olsen!"

As the middle-aged couple danced by, Celia's partner drew her close, brushing his lips against the curls on her forehead. Celia felt her heart do a sudden hop, skip, and jump.

"Whew!" he said when they were past. "That was a close shave! Be a little more careful how you throw those dirty looks around, lovely."

Celia began her indignant tirade again, but all at once her partner pinched her. "Say something to me and smile, baby!" he cautioned. "Papa Olsen's niece and your boy friend are dancing by."

Dirk and Joyce were talking and laughing, but in case Joyce might look their way, Celia forced a frozen smile, and said the first thing that came into her head. "What's your name, anyway?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why, Reed, of course. Isn't that the way you introduced me? But you can call me Bill."

Celia sputtered helplessly and he grinned.

"Yes, sir, sure is nice diversion, being a married man for the duration of my leave!"

Celia stiffened, sensing trouble from him as long as he was in port. "And just how long is your leave?" she asked.

He looked crestfallen. "I expect we'll shove off in the morning. Too bad, isn't it?"

"Too bad? I'd say—" but she didn't finish it, because of the Olsen's again. That was the way it went all during the dance.

"Look, honey," Bill said finally, "you might as well relax and enjoy the dance. I don't think I'm too punk a dancer to make it possible."

He put it mildly, Celia thought. He was a divine dancer. It was easy—all too easy—to relax. And his arms around her

were sending a strange heady thrill through Celia.

But when the dance ended, she brought herself up sharply. Silly to let him get her in a dither. A man who had the brass nerve to act this way!

She danced with Dirk then. He was terribly upset, asking her everything that had transpired during the dance with Reed. He breathed a sigh of relief when Celia told him that the Navy man's furlough was up in the morning.

"Then this ends the whole thing—definitely!" He brightened perceptibly. "Must say the boss knows how to throw a party. And, say, his niece isn't so bad!"

CELIA suddenly looked concerned. She told Dirk about Mr. Olsen's pleased look when his niece and Dirk met. "Oh, Dirk, you don't suppose he'll start playing cupid with you, too, do you?"

"Won't do him any good if he does!" Dirk's arms tightened around her. Celia started to respond, but noticed the Olsens dancing nearby. She and Dirk had to observe strict formality throughout the dance.

The evening finally came to an end. Mr. Olsen insisted he take them all home. Celia decided she was going to get the jump on Bill Reed this time.

In front of her apartment she said, "Well, good night all." And then, turning to Bill, "Too bad, darling, that you must report in now. But I'm sure Mr. Olsen will drop you off at your headquarters."

Bill's jaw sagged. It was obvious she had taken him off guard and he could think of no quick rebuttal.

"Too bad—Too bad!" Mr. Olsen said, and after goodbyes all around, drove off. But not until Celia had the pleasure of throwing the obviously frustrated Bill a maliciously gleeful look.

So! Celia thought, letting herself into her apartment. That ends that, Mr. Bill what's-your-name!

But it was quite awhile before Celia went to sleep. Somehow a pair of bold blue eyes and an impudent grin kept her imagination busy.

The next morning, the minute Mr. Olsen

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came into the office Celia knew that he had something up his sleeve. He stopped at her desk and beckoned Dirk to come over.

"Look," he said, "Mama and I have made plans to take you young people to our summer home for the weekend. Celia, your husband, Dirk and Joyce." He nudged Dirk. "I guess, the way I saw you and Joyce say goodnight last night, it's all right with you, yes?"

Dirk flushed uncomfortably. "Why—" he began.

Celia suddenly felt irritated at him. She thought, He can just worry about himself! I have a perfect out for myself—and I'm going to use it!

She said, with a very good semblance of disappointment, "Oh, what a shame, Mr. Olsen! My husband left this morning. Otherwise, of course, we'd love to have come." She was enjoying her secure position so that she really put it on much better than necessary, saying, "When I think how Bill would have enjoyed tennis and swimming and—"

Suddenly she stopped, numb, frozen. For standing inside the nearby door was a familiar figure in a Navy uniform!

"CELIA, darling, you certainly said a mouthful!" Bill came eagerly forward, grinning at her impishly. "Lucky for me that we didn't shove off this morning at all. In fact,"—he beamed at them all—"I have an extended leave until Monday. And now, what were the plans for this week-end?"

Celia could only stand by in helpless panic. Dirk was obviously floored, too. Neither could seem to think of any means of escape, while Mr. Olsen and Bill blithely discussed plans.

Once Celia thought hopefully, When I go home to pack I'll phone, make some excuse—

But it seemed Bill was suggesting that they leave right now—from the office—why not? They could have a longer time. And Mr. Olsen said that was fine—they had plenty of bathing suits and things for everybody up at the lodge.

Celia thought, This is the end! I can't

help it if Dirk and Ellen and I *all* lose our jobs. I can't go on that weekend! And the only way I can get out now is to spill the truth!

"Look—" She swallowed hard. "This whole thing is a mis—"

"Well, we better finish that account we were doing, Celia," Dirk cut in rapidly, "before we leave." And he propelled her toward a desk at the other side of the room.

"Look," he said under his breath, "don't spill the beans. Play along, and I'll see that you aren't alone with this guy."

"Oh, yes?" Her face went red. "Well, he and I are supposed to be married, you know. What about—about tonight?"

"That's easy," he explained. "I was there once, and know the setup. It's a small cabin with just two large sleeping porches. One for the men, and one for the women."

"Oh, Dirk, I—"

"You've nothing to worry about, baby. I'll see that—"

"Come, come, you two!" Mr. Olsen cut in. "That work'll wait until Monday. Mama just phoned, and she's all ready!"

Mr. Olsen piled them all into his car and picked up Mama and Joyce. Celia bit her lip, noticing the way Joyce's eyes lighted when she saw Dirk.

On the way there, she avoided talking to Bill as much as possible, throwing him an icy glare whenever she could. Not even to herself would she admit that the shoulder crowded against hers was warm and thrilling.

When they arrived, Mrs. Olsen opened a huge chest and took out an assortment of bathing suits, slacks and shorts. She and Mr. Olsen stayed in the cabin, but the others changed into suits in the bath house.

When Celia emerged she stood for a moment thrilled by the beauty about her. She was suddenly aware of a tall bronzed figure in orange trunks standing beside her. At the same moment she looked down the beach to see Dirk and Joyce in the far distance. She bit her lip in anger. Dirk was certainly seeing to it that she wasn't alone with Bill, wasn't he? Oh, yes. Sure!

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She whirled angrily on Bill to see his eyes going admiringly over her slim body in the blue abbreviated suit. He whistled softly. "You sure weren't behind the door when they passed out the oomph, honey! Even a Navy man's roving eye would rove no further, once it had lighted on you!"

Her cheeks crimsoned. She said hotly, "Why on earth did you come back again today?"

"Why? Well, I just didn't like the brevity of our goodnight last evening." His grin was impudent. "Tonight's ought to be better."

"**Y**OU conceited fool!" Celia snapped. "Do you suppose I'd have come if I hadn't known where I stood? I'm not going to be alone with you at all."

He arched an eyebrow. "So what?" he said lightly. And then, with an amiable smile, "Well, now that that's settled, how'll we put in the afternoon, lovely? Swimming, boating, or playing tennis?"

"I don't care to—"

"Look," he said emphatically, "you've already put your foot in it, haven't you, by telling the Olsens how much I enjoy all those sports? They'd think it mighty funny if you didn't indulge in them with me. So honey, you might as well relax and enjoy yourself."

"All right," she said tartly, "I'll share them with you. But I won't relax—and I darn well won't enjoy myself!"

But she found that, even against her will, she was relaxing, and she was enjoying herself very much. Bill, it seemed, was as proficient in sports as he was in dancing. She couldn't help but thrill, watching his tall lithe figure flash across the tennis court, or seeing the muscles flex in his arms as he paddled the canoe.

And now, lying flat on her back beside him in the warm sand after a brisk dip in the lake, she was overpoweringly aware of his broad bare shoulders, his very attractive masculinity.

Bill was propped on one elbow, and she could feel his eyes intent on her face. He put a warm brown hand on her arm.

"Celia," he said softly, "you're sweet, do you know it?"

The bantering was gone from his voice. His eyes were burning into hers. Celia's heart began beating rapidly. A heady dizziness flooded her as his face came close—very close. But before his lips found hers, Celia threw off her trance, struggled to her feet, and headed for the bath house, her cheeks burning. It was a little while before she could calm her swirling emotions.

That night at dinner, Dirk seemed to be paying quite a lot of attention to Joyce. Hurt flooded Celia, even though she told herself Dirk was only doing it for effect.

Mama Olsen said, "Papa and I are tired. We're going to retire early. But you children take the car and run over to the tavern and have a good time."

When that was all agreed upon, Mama said, "Oh, by-the-way, did you children notice our new little guest house back there in the trees?" She touched Celia's arm affectionately. "You and Bill will have it tonight."

Celia shot Bill a startled glance. His eyes were dancing. She threw an appealing look to Dirk, but he was laughing with Joyce, and she doubted if he'd even heard Mama's startling remark. She must get him alone! He had to do something!

WHEN they were ready to leave for the tavern, Celia became suddenly aware that Dirk was just a little tight, and from the way Joyce was giggling she wasn't far behind him. The only answer was that they must have had a bottle with them that afternoon on the beach.

Indignation and anger burned her cheeks, but this was no time to argue with Dirk over his drinking. The only thing that mattered right now was getting herself out of this jam.

At the tavern, Bill swung her onto the dance floor and said with an impish grin, "Mama Olsen certainly thinks of everything, doesn't she?"

Celia gave him an icy glare. "This is one thing Mama Olsen is going to be fooled in!" she told him hotly.

He jerked a thumb toward Dirk and

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Joyce at the bar. "You really don't expect your boy friend to take time out from the little doll to try and do something about it, do you?"

She flung her head up. "I certainly do!"

She danced the next dance with Dirk. But when she repeated for the third time the predicament she was in, she knew it was hopeless. It simply wasn't penetrating his dizzy, slap-happy mood. The whole thing was up to her!

Somehow she got through the evening. One thing was fixed in her mind. When they got home, she'd make a beeline for that guest house and lock herself in!

It was late when they got home. She was aware that Dirk and Joyce were very tight now. But she wasn't worrying about them. Only herself. As soon as they got out of the car, without even saying good-night, she dashed for the guest house, locked the door firmly, and took her first long free breath tonight.

She got into the nightgown and light robe that Mama Olsen had taken from her veritable department store and laid on the bed for her. Celia's cheeks flushed a little at the pajamas and robe she'd laid out, too.

She sat down at the dressing table to brush her hair, closing her eyes against the lamplight. Suddenly a pair of hands covered her eyes, and an impudent voice said, "Guess who?"

She tore away the hands, and jumped to her feet, her cheeks flaming. "You! How—how did you get in here?"

"Who, me?" Bill grinned. "Oh, just a matter of a handy little skeleton key I always carry." And he displayed the steel object in his hand.

Celia's head whirled. He had outwitted her on every single count!

His eyes were admiring as they went over her. "How fortunate I am to be Mr. Reed!" he mocked.

He went a step nearer. Celia tried to move away, but she suddenly seemed rooted to the spot. His eyes were burning down into hers with fierce intensity. His hands reached out and caught her bare arms, moved slowly down them. At his touch a

little shiver of ecstasy and fire swept through Celia.

With a small, smothered exclamation he caught her in his arms, claiming her soft lips with his hard, fierce kisses. For a moment Celia forgot everything—everything except Bill's kiss.

And then, the position she was in suddenly washed over her. She broke away, white-faced, and all at once she was sobbing. Sobbing helplessly, her head in her hands.

THERE was a small silence, and then Celia felt Bill's arm about her shoulders in an awkward, comforting gesture. "Celia, don't!" He put his hand beneath her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. He looked very young and awkward and harassed. "Look," he said, "I'm a Navy man, and we've got a bad rep where girls are concerned. But we know the right kind of a girl when we see one—and respect her."

He gave her a crooked smile, flicked his fist past her chin, and left.

Celia stood there, her heart beating hard, while she heard squeaking sounds outside that meant he was getting into the hammock.

But for Celia there was no sleep. She lay there, wide-eyed, shaken by emotions that she couldn't understand. Was she just a heartless flirt at heart—engaged to one man, responding eagerly to another? To a man she knew nothing about—not even his name!

She was up and dressed the next morning, when a knock sounded at her door. She opened it to Bill. He looked as if he hadn't slept any more than she had.

"Thought we ought to emerge from the cabin together," he explained, and his usual mockery and impudence were oddly missing, "just in case the Olsens have their eagle eye out."

It was well that they did, because, sure enough, there were the Olsens on the cabin terrace, waving to them as they came out the door.

Joyce and Dirk were in the living room, and one look at them convinced Celia they

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had been up most of the night. Joyce was still high, but Dirk was sober now.

He looked pretty startled, seeing Celia come in with Bill, rather than emerge from the big sleeping porch that always accommodated the women. He got her to one side.

"Celia, what—" he began agitatedly.

"A guest house you overlooked, and that the Olsens assigned us to!" she told him tartly. "Lucky for me Bill was a gentleman. A lot of help you were, getting so tight that the predicament I was in didn't even filter your brain!"

"Celia," he began contritely, "I'm sorry. I—"

Joyce's high-pitched giggle cut in. "Best thing I ever heard! Sure did pull the wool over your eyes, Uncle Ben! Dirk told me last night when he was—" she hiccupped—"when he was tight." She pointed a finger toward the couple at the door. "Bill and Celia aren't married!"

It hit like a thunderbolt. For a moment everybody stood practically frozen.

"Celia, this is so?" Mr. Olsen's voice was strained.

"Yes," Celia said. Might as well admit it. They were sunk now!

MR. OLSEN'S face was very red. "It was bad enough lying to me, working in my office when you knew my rule, but to stay brazenly under my roof—"

But Mama Olsen stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Now, now, Papa! Maybe there is a reason. Maybe the children couldn't afford to get married or—or something." She turned a sympathetic face toward Bill and Celia. "That is it, maybe—yes?"

Joyce didn't contradict her, so obviously Dirk had said nothing about his part in all this—or that he and Celia were engaged. Celia expected Dirk to come forward now, not to involve Ellen, but to take the blame for the whole thing himself. But he remained silent.

It was Bill who stepped forward. "Yes," he said, "that's it, Mrs. Olsen. Celia needed the job, and we intended to marry as soon as we could—"

"You see?" Mama cut in. "When you're young and in love, and can't get married right away—" her eyes clouded with tears. "Oh, Papa, what a shame! Two such nice people!"

Mr. Olsen looked at his wife, and his face softened. "You want me to do something about it, don't you, Mama? All right, I'll arrange so they can afford—"

"Now you see?" Mrs. Olsen turned glowingly to the bewildered Bill and Celia. "You can get married right away! Look—" she was suddenly bustling about—"you run into town, Papa, and get a special license for these children and pick up a minister. Joyce, you go with him and get my wedding dress out of my chest at home. You children—" she indicated Bill and Celia and Dirk, "run out and cut some flowers for the living room." She was pinning an apron around her ample middle. "I'll go into the kitchen and stir up a wedding cake."

It was all so startling and had happened so quickly that Bill and Celia and Dirk could only stand there, struck numb. Even when Mr. Olsen said, "I don't suppose Reed is your real name, young fellow, so you'd better give me the right dope," Bill handed him, in a sort of daze, his Navy identification. Immediately, Mr. Olsen and Joyce hopped into the car and sped away, and Mrs. Olsen dashed for the kitchen.

Not until they were alone—the three of them—did they come to life.

"Good Lord!" Dirk said. "What are we going to do?"

Celia faced him angrily. "You spilled the beans. Why didn't you come forward and give the true situation?"

"But my job!" Dirk plunged a hand through his hair. "Look, there must be some other way!"

Bill's eyes were intent on Celia's face. "Celia—" he began.

Suddenly Celia's nerves broke. "This is all your fault! 'I—I hate you!' And yet, strangely, the words didn't come from her heart."

Bill's face went very white. "Yes, I guess you do. Though I thought may-

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be—" He broke off. "Celia, I *am* sorry. I never intended to get you in this jam. I really intended this all as a—a lark!"

A lark! His saying yesterday, "You're sweet, Celia." His kiss last night. A lark—all of it! But of course she had known that all along. Then why should it hurt so now?

Bill said, "You really love Dirk very much, don't you, Celia?"

His eyes were hypnotizing her. That must be it. Otherwise why should she feel a strange doubt surge through her? But his words, "a lark," came back. She lifted her head and said, "Yes, of course."

Bill looked at her for a moment. Then he began pacing the floor. He stopped suddenly. "I have it! Let them go ahead with these plans. Then at the last moment, I'll walk out on Celia. That'll show me up in their eyes as a heel and Dirk can step forward and marry you. That will definitely put him in the ranks of a noble hero, which, I think, the romantic Mr. and Mrs. Olsen will fall for in a big way. Your problem about getting married will be solved, and"—his mouth twisted a little—"will probably earn Dirk a nice raise!"

"Say," Dirk beamed, "that's a swell idea!" Hastily he sketched how they would go about it.

FOR THE life of her, Celia couldn't say why the flowers she arranged held no beauty, and why the altar in front of the fireplace seemed meaningless.

Mr. Olsen and Joyce were soon back, and Mama Olsen was proudly fitting Celia into the lovely old-fashioned wedding gown. "Lucky I was slender and tiny like you at your age!" And then as she stood back, and looking at Celia tears came to her eyes. "I never had a daughter to wear my dress, but this somehow makes up for it."

Celia stood in front of the mirror looking at herself when Mrs. Olsen left. She ought to feel happy. This was the thing she'd longed for, wasn't it, to be Dirk's bride? Yet there was a queer weight dragging at her heart.

She heard a little noise outside the win-

dow, and then a figure in a blue uniform came through from the sleeping porch and stood there facing her, his face drawn and white.

"Celia," he said, "forgive me for coming here now. But this is where I take a powder and blow, you know. I may never see you again. And—well, I wanted to see how you looked as a bride."

He stood there, his eyes drinking in the vision of loveliness. Celia's hand flew to her suddenly constricted throat. Why was it that things could be all tangled up, and then in one last, too-late moment, stand out sharp and clear? She knew now the reason for the weight dragging at her heart. She was in love with Bill!

For one wild, desperate moment she almost threw herself into his arms and cried out her love. Then she remembered that to Bill this was all just a lark.

"Celia," he said, "I won't get to kiss the bride after the ceremony. Would you mind very much if I did it now?"

She shook her head numbly. He took her in his arms, and his lips found hers. It was a kiss of goodbye. Her heart and soul—everything that was Celia went into that kiss.

And then it was over. Bill was gone. And Mama Olsen was opening the door and saying, "Come, dear."

Like a stiff, mechanical doll Celia followed her into the living room. There was the altar, and the minister beside it. There was the outside door to the right—through which Bill, as bridegroom, and Dirk, as best man, were supposed to come. But after a few moments of anxious waiting only Dirk would come, saying that Bill had ducked out, and step forward in his role.

But Celia knew now that she would never marry Dirk!

She stood at the altar. A minute, two minutes passed. The minister and the Olsens fidgeted. Joyce, as bridesmaid, shifted her bouquet nervously. It was time now—time for Dirk to make his appearance.

THERE was a movement outside the door. Celia closed her eyes against the

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pain in them. She heard Dirk step through the door, and knew he was beside her.

She opened her eyes and went very pale. Because it wasn't Dirk. It was Bill!

She gave a small happy sob. Only Bill heard that, and only Celia heard his soft, "Steady, darling!" as he took her hand.

Rich man, poor man, hero, rogue—she didn't know which she was taking for better for worse—did not know even his real name. But what did it matter when his eyes reflected the love in hers?

The minister said, "Do you, William Tennant Marshall, take this woman—"

Celia's breath caught. William Tennant Marshall! His name had been spread across the papers as a recently decorated hero in a famous battle in the East! William Tennant Marshall—her husband!

The ceremony was over, and congratulations were passed around. Not until then did Celia notice Dirk's absence. She heard Bill say something to the Olsens about Dirk's becoming suddenly ill. He was in the guest house and would be O.K. presently, he said.

Celia and Bill were alone then, while the Olsens went to tend to refreshments.

"You fraud!" Celia smiled up at her new husband. "Just what caused Dirk's sudden illness?"

He flashed her his old impudent grin.

"Well, if you must know—me!" And then swiftly serious, "Celia, when I left your room, I ran into Dirk with Joyce in his arms. I heard him say, 'Look, Joyce, no matter what happens today you and I can—'" Bill stopped, frowning. "Well, why go into that? I knew then that I wasn't going to let you marry an egg like that. I waited till I got him alone, and socked him cold. But even before that I'd about decided—" He stopped, not seeming to know how to go on.

"Yes?" Celia prompted.

His eyes held hers. "Celia, I wasn't wrong, was I? That kiss you gave me—it did tell me, didn't it, that—"

"That I love you!" She raised tear-wet eyes to his. "But, oh, Bill, you said this was all a lark!"

"It was," Bill admitted, "in the beginning. Until I fell in love with you, Celia."

She gave a small cry. "But, Bill—tomorrow you'll be going away!"

"But I'll be coming back, darling, don't you worry about that. And soon!"

From the dining room they could hear Mr. Olsen telling the minister of the fine job he considered he was doing by hiring only service men's wives. And in Bill's arms with the warmth of his love flowing through her, Celia heartily agreed.

At Busk

The purple aster tints of dusk
Are casting shadows garden-long
And silver-sweet across the earth
Falls the cloistered brooklet's song.

Except that tall trees have turned gold
And petal-stars no longer fall
Our garden's peace is so unchanged,
I almost seem to hear you call.

For though you spanned a curving sky
And passed beyond a surf-green sea
To fight for all that man holds dear,
Love keeps you very close to me.

Anobel Armour

Rehearsal for Love

By Lucinda Baker



Tim's kiss was tender and sweet and then it became more dangerous.

RAVEN was never quite sure just how she got engaged to Bill. It happened slowly. Little by little, she'd given in to Bill's demands, till one day she was wearing his diamond, just as her roommate Ellen Ray was wearing Tim Bristol's.

Bill didn't match up to the dreams she'd had of the man she would marry, but she was getting a little tired of waiting for dreams to come true.

None of the men she met in her job as a model was eligible, let alone romantic.

Bill, a young architect, had everything to offer, besides good looks and his love. So finally, just before he was drafted, she said, "Yes."

The day he left he gave her the ring. It was a large ring, a little too heavy, somehow. Its setting of yellow gold was to match her hair, Bill said.

"Now I can be sure of you," he told her, and his eyes had that "I'm-drinking-in-your-beauty-for-future-reference" look. He seemed to be memorizing the lines of her small face.

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Whenever Bill looked at her that way, a chill would come over Raven, almost as if she were afraid of him, which was insane. Bill really did love her.

But suddenly his hands clenched and he said harshly, "I'm kidding myself when I say I can be sure of you. Just giving you a diamond can't assure me some other man won't come along while I'm gone, and make you forget!"

Raven was somehow sorry for him, because she knew how it would be when he was in some far away camp. If only he could have been stationed at home! But local men were always sent to other states, and in the camp near town were soldiers from far away places.

Bill could be so nice, she reflected, but now the dark jealousy that made him a stranger seemed to flare in his eyes. "If you weren't so beautiful I wouldn't worry! But I know that everywhere you go, men see you and want to date you! I'll be fighting for us and some slacker will be dating you, making you forget!"

Raven controlled herself as best she could. "Bill, we mustn't fight on your last night! We've had fun, but you ruin it all by thinking such thoughts. You aren't yourself, not the kind, swell Bill I want to marry!"

Bill ran his fingers through his thick blonde hair. "O.K., Raven. But there's one thing I want you to promise me—that you'll tell me in person if you ever let me down. Don't write it in a letter!"

But even then, Raven was thinking, something's wrong. I don't feel as I should, seeing Bill go. I don't love him enough. I'm only a little sorry for him, because he seems to love me so terribly! Did all women feel like this about marriage, she wondered.

Then all the mean, jealous things Bill had said were wiped away for the moment. Bill caught her hand as he said, "Raven, honey, I didn't mean that I don't trust you, really, but I love you so much I can't bear to think that you'll be lonely while I'm away and go out with some other fellow. I love you so much, Raven!"

The old sympathy and tenderness swept

over Raven. Of course, he was afraid of their separation because of his love for her. But somehow she felt as though she were whistling in the dark, and not too bravely.

SHE AND BILL drove down to the little all night café where they usually had coffee and sandwiches at the end of their dates. But something was definitely wrong with the evening. Instead of making it gay and memorable with laughter, it was thick with an atmosphere of jealousy.

Bill kept saying, "If I could only be sure! What I hate is that I can't fight back. I can only sit up there in camp and wonder!"

The light in the little café made a nimbus of Raven's wind-blown hair, but she looked thin and a little tired. It was almost with relief that she saw Ellen Ray and her date sitting in a booth.

She had met Tim Bristol only casually before now, because Ellen kept her boy friends safely away from other competition. But tonight she realized that Tim hardly saw her when Ellen said, "You remember Raven."

Tim Bristol was the thin, gaunt type, and he was so angry that he looked darker than ever. "Good evening," he said. His hard, thin-drawn lips were white.

Ellen gave Raven that little secret look that meant she was having trouble and couldn't do anything about it. And then Raven saw her finger. The ring was gone. Ellen had broken her engagement!

"Another poor sucker who has to leave his girl and go to the army!" Bill remarked, as he and Raven sat down at the counter. "Tim Bristol is being inducted tomorrow, too. We had a long talk yesterday. He's worried stiff about Ellen, for fear she'll find someone else."

Raven said, "I've changed my mind, Bill. I don't want anything to eat." It was as if a cold wind had blown over her heart. She couldn't forget the tragedy in Tim Bristol's eyes. Though she had never known him well, she felt she would always remember his expression.

Bill's goodbye that night wasn't the way a farewell should have been, tender and

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gentle. It was full of regret, and hungry longing. Raven felt almost glad when it was over.

When she went into the apartment, Ellen was already there. Ellen, so brusque, so shiny and hard, tossed her head and said, "I finally did it. I told Tim I was through. Too bad it had to be the night he left."

"I don't see how you could!" Raven said wonderingly.

"Maybe because I'm not soft like you. I won't marry a man because I'm sorry for him, darling."

Raven remembered Tim Bristol's hard, stubborn face, and what Ellen had said about him in the beginning, "He's sure to go places in business." No, you couldn't feel sorry for a man like Tim.

Ellen went on, "Frankly I don't like the thought of waiting around, doing nothing. And twenty-one dollars a month isn't enough. It's too bad, but that's the way it is. A girl has to be careful. Besides, I've met some one else, Johnny Ames. Johnny is over the age limit and he's very nice, really. He has quite a lot of money, and even if they take older men soon, he's in a defense industry."

Raven said, "You make me slightly sick, Ellen. How can you be this way?"

Ellen grinned. "I know, darling, but I've never been the soft, sentimental type. By the way, I'm moving to a new, bigger apartment. You can find another girl. Frankly you're probably glad to be rid of me. Cheer up, honey, you don't have to worry about Tim Bristol! He's six feet tall and the draft board says he's physically perfect."

How could Ellen shrug away the look that had been on Tim's face?

No, Raven thought, I would never hurt you, Bill. Not that way.

SHE GOT through those first weeks by working hard, by diving into the days and keeping herself busy. And there were always Bill's letters, one a day and sometimes two. Raven refused all dates, and spent her evenings answering Bill, making

cookies and candy for him, thinking up new things to say.

In a way, she was more peaceful than she had ever been. When she thought that, her face went scarlet with shame. What was wrong with her? She should have been aching with loneliness over Bill's absence.

Bill wrote, over and over, "I wish I could put dark glasses on all the men you meet. Oh, Raven, if I could only be sure you would keep on loving me!" And sometimes, with forced humor, he would say, "Thanks for taking time off from all your dates with other men to write me." And, "I can't sleep nights because I keep imagining that you are out with other men."

Then there were the other letters, letters which were full of his love for her and his loneliness at not seeing her. He would beg her to forget the jealous suspicions that he had written before, and say that he knew she couldn't forget their love any more than he could. These were the letters that Raven waited for most eagerly. They made her smile at the others because she was sure he didn't really mean them or distrust her. But the reassuring letters came so seldom!

And then one morning, Raven's bell rang. It was Sunday, and she was dressed in slim hostess slacks of gold crepe.

Tim Bristol stood on the threshold when she opened the door. Tim Bristol! His face wore the same bleak look it had that night in the café, only now it was harder. Raven had the impression that first night that the bitterness had been freshly marked on him. But now it had turned hard and looked as if it would never be erased.

At first she felt sorry, and then suddenly she knew Tim Bristol wanted no sympathy. It would have been wasted on him. There was cruelty about him.

His eyes swept over her calculatingly. "Hello, Raven," he said.

"Ellen has moved. Didn't she tell you?" Raven asked uneasily. The uneasiness came from the feeling that swept between them, a kind of danger! It was hard to think of Ellen or anything else. She hunted wildly for something to say, trying not to let this crazy emotion get possession of her. "Are

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you home on leave? Bill didn't mention—"

"I'VE been transferred to the local camp," Tim announced. "Bill wasn't as lucky. I'd have liked to trade places with him because there's nothing here for me. It's a little too late for it to matter."

"I can give you Ellen's address," Raven said nervously. "If you want to see her, but—"

"I don't want to see her. I really came to ask if you'd help me get through this Sunday. Will you?" Tim asked. "I told Bill I'd be seeing you."

It was only ordinary politeness to ask him in to have brunch with her. Besides, she could get news of Bill, Raven told herself. But all the time, she felt uneasy and uncertain.

She took Tim's cap, and invited him in to the little dinette. He watched her as she sliced melon, made toast and coffee, opened a jar of home-made jam.

Every time she looked up, she met his dark eyes full of smouldering flame. Eyes that somehow frightened her. And she kept seeing his mouth, firm and hard.

How had Ellen been able to let him go, Raven wondered?

She meant to mention Bill, but she couldn't get her thoughts under control. Once, incredibly, she found herself thinking of how it would feel to be kissed by Tim.

Meanwhile, Tim set the table, moving with lithe grace in the tiny space between the cupboards and table. He didn't mention Bill. Neither of them did.

He said, "You don't know how much it means to a man, after he's been in camp for weeks, to see a girl like you. You're the way a woman ought to be, Raven. Feminine and gentle, to say nothing of being beautiful. It's too bad we didn't get acquainted while we had the chance before." He laughed amusedly, "I guess Bill was keeping you out of circulation. That's the only way to play safe, when you've got a girl like you."

Though it was supposed to be a joke, it fell flat somehow.

Raven dropped the spoon she held, and Tim came close and picked it up. When he handed it to her their fingers touched and a little shock went all through Raven. Their eyes met and held for the brief moment. "Raven," Tim Bristol said softly, and it was almost as if he had kissed her.

Raven turned back to her work, but she knew the truth. That night when she had seen Tim in the café, she had had a hint of what he could do to her, mean to her. She'd never been able to get the image of him out of her mind since.

They ate brunch, the sun spilling over them from the window.

In spite of Tim's apparent hardness, there was a gentleness about him that was endearing. Seeing him there, she couldn't help but imagine that he had been there, opposite her, many times, and that he would be again!

It was utterly senseless. She tried again and again to bring Bill into the conversation, but Tim avoided it. Bill might not have existed.

Yet Raven felt that if they kept talking, the danger that threatened could be avoided. She asked Tim, "What are your plans for after the war? Or do you have any?"

TIM'S intensity flashed in his eyes, making him very young and eager. For a fleeting second the hardness about him didn't show. "Of course I have plans for after the war. If you don't have them, you're lost. You've got to keep your mind on what comes after!"

That was exactly the way Raven felt. She didn't believe in being blue every day, in thinking only the worst. She said, "What are you planning, Tim?" Her heart beat fast as she waited for the answer.

His mouth quirked downward with bitter humor. "Of course, my plans have been subject to alteration recently. But I'm still going to have the farm, upstate, that I've wanted. I already own the land. I've even got the money to start building a house, when the time comes. I'll never be rich, but it will be a good life, Raven. The life I want! Funny that I, born in a city, would

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go to agricultural college and want to farm, but I do."

Raven thought, Ellen would have hated that! She felt blinding anger at Ellen for keeping him dangling, using him, when all along she must have known she wouldn't marry him. It seemed that as they sat together, the farm Tim wanted was already going strong. When he talked of it he was a different person. The dreams and the hopes crowded out from behind the hardness in his eyes, and Raven knew they weren't dead.

She said, as they washed the dishes, "Sometimes things which hurt us when they happen are for the best."

"You mean Ellen." He was drying plates in the awkward way men have, and he went on, calmly, though Raven sensed the resentment in his voice. "Yes, I guess it's better for you after you lose your illusions. Then you can take life as it is. The trouble was, with Ellen, that I spent my time working to buy her things, doing work I hated, while she was out meeting other men, richer ones. With women, it's the man who's on hand all the time, the man who's around to make love to her who wins."

You don't believe that! Raven wanted to say to him. You can't be bitter, you've got to realize all women aren't like Ellen! But she didn't.

"Advice to men—" Tim shrugged, grinning in that sardonic way he had, "put your girl under lock and key. Or some other guy will move in."

Raven took off her frilly little apron and went into the living room. She put on a dance record and pretended to be very gay, though she felt tremulous and tearful inside. It was horrible that anyone could have made Tim so bitter and miserable.

SHE stood watching the black disk whirl round and round, listening to "The Last Time I Saw Paris," but she wasn't actually hearing the music. Because, suddenly, she knew she was never going to find what she wanted in Bill! Maybe some other girl would, but it was hopeless to go on deceiving herself into thinking she loved

him! If she married him she would be cheating him and some other girl he might some day meet.

Tim Bristol said, "That music calls for dancing."

He took her into his arms and his touch burned through her like dry ice in her veins. They went half around the floor, and Tim said, "Raven!" very low.

He kissed her. He kissed her, and she wanted him to. She wanted to forget all the times they hadn't known each other. She wanted him to kiss her for the future.

At first his lips were tender and sweet, and then they seemed to change. The intensity of them was searing and savage, and though the sweetness was gone it was replaced by something more dangerous than sweetness.

He let her go abruptly, but caught up her left hand, and glanced at the too-big diamond. You're Bill's girl, Tim's eyes said, as if he had put it in words.

Raven said, "I know you must think I'm unfaithful, but—" There wasn't anything to say really. Suddenly she was angry and hurt, and fighting hard for dignity, for some shred of pride, because she remembered he had said, again and again, "To keep a girl faithful a man has to put her under lock and key. It's the fellow who's on hand to pay her attention who gets her." And that wasn't true!

She hadn't meant to flirt with Tim, she hadn't meant the kiss to happen. It had been out of her control, out of his, too!

If only he had said, Raven, we love each other. But he didn't. Raven could see that same, sardonic bitterness in him, and she knew he was thinking, I was right, all the time.

She wanted to slap him, hurt him, but she could only say, "I don't know how it happened. We'll forget it. It's just one of those things."

Some gallantry in her made her forcedly gay, and she thought, You'll never know that I fell for you so completely! You'll never know that! She wouldn't let him see it had meant anything to her.

She told him, "I think you'd better go. I've guests coming soon." He got his cap

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and thanked her politely, too politely, for the breakfast.

Raven hated herself because she could hardly bear to see him go, feeling as he did. It was wrong for the two of them, who could have been so close, to feel harshly to each other! And she wanted to cry out, Tim, Tim, don't misunderstand, don't do this to me!

Afterward she sat down and wrote to Bill. "There are some things I must tell you. I've had lots of time to think, and at last I know the truth. I have never really been in love with you. I tried to be, because it seemed the thing to do. But that little invisible thing that should have brought us closer together never happened, Bill. There isn't any other man. You will find some other girl, some one you will really love and have faith in, and it will be better for all of us. Good luck. Raven."

The feeling she had had for Bill had never completely possessed her as this long-ing heartbreak did. She only felt relief at having ended the silly imitation of love she and Bill had believed in. She was glad to be rid of the ring at last, for it had weighted down her heart as well as her finger.

ALL that week, it seemed, she was waiting against her will to see Tim. She prayed that some miracle might happen to make him come back to her, understanding.

And then, that weekend, she heard his voice on the phone, matter-of-fact, ordinary. "How about taking pity on a soldier, Raven? Let's do the town."

Her first impulse was one of thankfulness. She said, "Yes, Tim. Call for me at eight." And then she was frightened. What was he trying to prove? That she'd go out again and again with him, if Bill weren't around? He didn't know she'd broken with Bill.

But when he called for her, she had spent hours dressing. She even had a new gown, vivid printed rayon jersey, with an exotic turban to wind about her hair and fasten with an Indo-Chinese silver pin.

Tim looked at her as she pulled on a

scarlet wool cape. His mouth looked strained, and her own heart was beating joltingly. It had been a mistake to let him come, because already between them was the wildfire of temptation, the unexpressed kisses that could happen if they had only half a chance!

And the little entrance hall was too small for two people, otherwise they might not have brushed against each other. But it happened, and Tim caught Raven to him simply because they had to be in each other's arms! His kisses rained down on her little face. But she didn't let him kiss her lips. Somehow she struggled free before that happened because she felt she would have been lost.

She said, "Please get out, Tim! Don't ever come back! You're blaming me for being untrue to Bill, but how about you? What about your friendship for him? Whatever you think, I never really loved Bill. I—I guess I was only sorry for him. But you won't believe that, so I never want to see you again! First Bill doesn't trust me, and you obviously don't, either!"

She darted past him down the apartment house hall, and into the elevator. She pressed the button marked "Down" just as he caught up with her. Outside, she took a taxi, and they were lost in the traffic. It was raining and the streets were shimmering with reflections. Only her heart was dull and hopeless.

FOR a long time she sat in the back of the taxi, crying helplessly, while the meter ticked up a ridiculous sum and the wind-shield wiper swished monotonously.

In the end, there was no place to go but home again. She paid the taxi driver and walked stiffly into the apartment house, went back up the stairs instead of using the elevator. She was moving in a numb dream of pain, of hopelessness.

As she reached her door a man moved from the dark end of the hall. She heard Bill's voice, saying, "Aren't you home a little early to be wearing all that finery?"

And there was Bill, furious with anger, trembling with it. She opened the door and he followed her in, and when she said,

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"Bill, why didn't you tell me you were coming? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Bill laughed. "For one thing, I'm A.W.O.L. because of that letter you wrote! Oh, you turned out just as I feared! You've been going out with other men, and you didn't want to be burdened by an engagement. And you fell for Tim Bristol! You're just like Ellen. He said you would. You acted according to the way he said. Oh, I pretended I was sure you were different, but I've been afraid all along that you weren't."

Bill's face was angry, but Raven couldn't even see it. She was thinking dully, So you planned it with Tim.

"The only way to keep a woman safe is to keep her out of the way of temptation!" Bill said. "I'm marrying you right now. I'll take you back to camp and have you near enough to watch you!"

He was so angry, even a little drunk, that Raven knew it would do no good to reason with him.

Raven's voice rang out, clear and frozen, so he had to listen, "You'd better go, Bill. I'll never marry you. I was honest with you, but it's none of your business any more. You're little and petulant and spoiled."

Bill's bravado and anger seemed to leave him. "It's no use, is it? I got here too late."

There had been too much drama in the small living room that night for comfort. Raven knew she couldn't stay in it, and she couldn't argue with Bill any longer.

She moved in a strange half-world of torn emotions, of heartbreak. Losing someone you had never really had shouldn't hurt so much, it shouldn't do this to you!

It wasn't raining any more. The air was a sweet, fresh shock against her

burning cheeks, when she reached the street. And someone called her name. "Raven!" Tim Bristol had just driven up. He scrambled out of his coupé, his long legs moving with incredible speed.

Raven said, "You don't have to place temptation in my pathway any more, Tim. You've proved your point. You're free to go look after some other soldier's sweetheart, free to ruin the loveliness in life, to laugh at tenderness!"

"Stop it, Raven!" Tim ordered breathlessly. He caught her wrists.

"Raven, look at me!" He forced her face back, but she did not open her eyes. She kept them closed, holding back the tears she was too proud to show. "Raven, I—I'll try to explain to you that men go crazy, crazy lonesome, away at camp! They think too much. If they were hard in the beginning they get harder and more bitter! I'd been infatuated with Ellen for months, but I didn't realize if I'd really loved her, I'd have had faith in her. If Bill had loved you, he wouldn't have been so jealous! But I love you, Raven. I'd know, if you could love me back, you'd be faithful till the end of the world! Whatever you think, there is only you for me. Not the way I loved Ellen because that was only a shoddy imitation! This kind of love doesn't make a man bitter, it gives him hope and courage. Please, Raven, look at me!"

And when she did, she saw the hardness and bitterness were gone, leaving only longing. It was as if a mask had been taken away, and now it was really Tim looking at her. Tim as she had known he would be, the Tim she had loved.

Raven clung to him as he kissed her, and she knew that there would never be any bitterness or jealousy in their love.

Thrift

Although you've shattered my poor heart,
Luckily I've kept a part
Stored with frugal care away
To lose again another day!

May Richstone

Trial by Heartbreak

By Addeline Mason

“A WEEK?” Margaret Madison laughed in surprise. “But, Tim, that’s not much time!” Her voice was a soft, breathless ripple on the dusk that lay along the graveled paths of Creston’s little down-town park.

“Who cares about time?” the tall, shadowy figure strolling beside her returned lightly. “Falling in love isn’t something you do by clock or calendar, darling. It happens—just like that! And you’re as sure as you’re ever going to be. Deep down underneath all that sophistication you wear to fool the public, you know that’s true, don’t you, Margaret?”

“I—I suppose I do,” she admitted slowly. “But marriage is something I haven’t thought much about for quite a while. And a week isn’t much time to get used to the



idea. After all, we've only known each other—"

"Ten days, six hours and forty-five minutes," Tim Corbin said, laughing down at her. "It was exactly two p. m., a week ago last Thursday, when you came marching into the Recorder office to make my twenty-six years of bachelor existence look as forlorn as an old coat. I was hammering out a very dull editorial when I looked up and saw you standing at the counter. You were wearing something in blue with a cute little cape, and a wide-brimmed hat to match. Those shiny brown curls of yours were all filled with little coppery sparkles from the sunlight beyond. Darling—what would you have done if I'd gotten up and come over and kissed you right that instant?"

"Idiot!" Margaret giggled. "Your office girl would have passed out on the spot."

That giggle made her sound about six-

"Hello, there," Vivian greeted Margaret lazily. "I hardly expected you so soon. Tim must be losing his technique."



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teen instead of the efficient and business-like twenty-two she actually was.

"No—really," Tim insisted.

His hand tightened on her arm, swinging her around so they stood face to face in the deeper shadows of a huge maple tree beside the path.

"I want to know," he went on, "exactly how you would have felt about it at that very moment."

"Well—I guess—I would have said, 'How dare you!'—and then kissed you back," she admitted meekly.

Tim's chuckle was triumphant as he pulled her into his arms and bent to set his lips very gently to hers.

The last shred of uncertainty in Margaret's heart went swirling away into the darkness then. The magic of that kiss left no room for anything but the jubilant voice within her chanting over and over, I'm in love, in love, in love! I didn't know it would be like this!

THE years of work she had put into reaching the position of style expert and traveling representative for Gay-Time Dresses, Incorporated, had suddenly lost their importance. Nothing mattered but the thought of becoming the wife of a laughing, dark-haired editor of a small town newspaper, and settling down here in Creston to make a home for him.

"Now, about that date for next weekend," Tim said against her cheek. "There's really no reason for waiting, is there? As near as I can make out, you're as free as I am. No family to consult, no rich relatives to object. We can just climb into the car and drive away—"

"Please, Tim," she said unsteadily. "Let's not make definite plans tonight. I—I'd rather just dream a little first. It seems almost like tempting fate, anyway, to crowd too much happiness into one evening."

"Okay, darling," Tim laughed tolerantly. "No plans until tomorrow night, if that's the way you want it. There'll still be time to consider the weekend. But what a funny, superstitious little person you've turned out

to be! There must be a canny Scotch ancestor somewhere in your past."

Margaret was practically walking on air when Tim left her a while later at the Creston Hotel, where she was staying while she introduced Gay-Time Dresses to local style leaders.

That was her job, selling the line to leading small town stores and handling an opening campaign for each one. The publicity for her present campaign, at Creston's leading department store, had been responsible for her visit to the Recorder office and her first meeting with Tim.

She was still deeply absorbed in misty thoughts when she paused at the desk to get the key to her room. Her nod to Lew Bonner, the sleek and jaunty night clerk, was so absent-minded it was hardly a greeting at all.

So Lew, instead of pushing the key across the desk as he usually did, simply held it until she glanced up at him in surprise.

"Well—that's better!" he grinned impudently. "What does it take to put a look like that into your eyes—a stroll in the park in the dark?"

The guess was so uncomfortably close that it brought a wave of hot color to her cheeks. It seemed to cheapen and tarnish the bright gold of the dream that still surrounded her.

"Unless the hotel has gone in for a new type of service, that remark is way out of line," she retorted as she snatched up the key and turned away.

Lew had become distinctly annoying the last few days anyway. When Margaret first arrived at the hotel she had made the mistake of supposing his attentions to be just the usual friendliness to a business visitor in town. She had soon realized, however, that he fancied himself the type no woman could resist, and apparently took each new interest as the great love of his life.

But she put the incident firmly out of her mind as the elevator took her up to the third floor. She was too happy this evening to allow anything to upset her for long. She hummed softly to herself as she

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went swiftly along the corridor to her large corner room.

It wasn't until the key clicked in the lock and door swung open that her humming stopped abruptly.

Why, the lights were on! She certainly hadn't left them that way herself. The sun had been still shining into the room when she went out for dinner with Tim.

Cautiously she moved forward a couple of steps. And made a second discovery. The room was not empty!

A GLAMOROUS, baby-faced blonde with shrewd blue eyes and a sultry mouth was stretched comfortably in an armchair by the window smoking a cigarette. The evening dress of dusty rose crepe that outlined the lovely curves of her body, Margaret recognized instantly as one of Gay-Time's more expensive models. In fact, she had supervised the sale of that dress herself earlier in the day.

A smart fur jacket lay across the foot of the bed.

"Hello, there," the girl greeted her lazily. "I hardly expected you so soon. Tim must be losing his technique. You remember me, I suppose?"

"Why, of course, Mrs. Owens," Margaret answered, closing the door carefully behind her. "But naturally I'm rather curious as to why you've gone to so much trouble to call on me. What does Lew charge for unlocking doors?"

Vivian Owens laughed, but there was a sudden little flicker in the depths of her eyes.

"Bum guess," she drawled. "The maids have keys too, you know. Not but that I could probably bargain with Lew if necessary. There isn't much in this town I can't get if I really go after it. Right now I want a confidential little chat with you."

Margaret pulled her hat off, as the girl talked, and tossed it onto the bed. Then she went slowly to the mirror to touch her smooth curls with light fingers and inspect the trim lines of the smart, dark suit she was wearing.

But the motions were purely mechanical. Her thoughts were occupied with review-

ing what she knew of Mrs. Philip Owens, Creston's wealthiest and most sensational young widow.

At the store, where the Owens account was an important one, she had been told that Phil Owens' battered and broken body had been found in his big roadster at the foot of a high bluff only a couple of months ago. But it was evident that his widow was making very little pretense of mourning the death that had left her with a considerable fortune.

"Don't be too hard on Vivian," Tim had shrugged when Margaret mentioned the girl one day. "Phil drank continually. It's a wonder he didn't crack up long before he did. And Vivian paid, in the abuse she took from him, for every cent she's kicking around now. There's more or less gossip, of course. But I think people respect her honesty more than they would crocodile tears."

Honesty! Margaret wondered if Phil's shortcomings hadn't been as useful a shield to Vivian as the sweet, little-girl smile she affected, and the martyred halo that hung over her. She certainly had Creston hypnotized, at any rate.

But what could she possibly want here?

The answer was not long in coming!

"You're new here, I know," Vivian drawled, "but at that, you must have a pretty good idea of what you've walked into. Why, everyone in town knows how it is with Tim and me! You couldn't help stumbling onto it somewhere."

"Tim—and you?" Margaret turned to stare down at the girl in wide eyed astonishment.

Vivian nodded smugly. "We've been in love ever since he came here to take over the Recorder almost two years ago. We're simply waiting a decent interval before going ahead with our plans. So I advise you to stop chasing him. You're only making yourself ridiculous and embarrassing us."

A wave of hysterical laughter threatened Margaret's control, but she managed to keep most of it from her voice as she answered.

"Are you sure you aren't just day-dreaming, my dear? To me, Tim Corbin

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seems quite heartfree. And it doesn't make sense that you should have continued to live with Phil Owens until his death if he was as brutal as I've heard and you and Tim were in love all that time."

"I stayed with Phil because he needed me!" the girl flared dramatically. "In spite of the way he treated me, I could always do more with him than anyone else. Oh, Tim begged me to leave often enough. But it wasn't until just before Phil's death that I finally gave in to Tim's pleading, and to the realization that I couldn't go on any longer as things were. I—I was to have applied for a divorce within a week at—the time of the accident."

LUCKY accident for you, Margaret thought cynically. A divorce settlement would have been just crumbs compared to the whole fortune. It was also easy to guess that the question of a settlement might have had more to do with delaying the divorce action than the noble sentiment this girl had voiced.

The whole thing was too badly overplayed to be convincing. But a cold little fear was creeping into Margaret's heart just the same. There was something about Vivian's arrogant confidence—

"I don't know what you hope to gain, Mrs. Owens, by coming here with such a highly imaginative story," Margaret said finally. "You must know as well as I do, that if Tim Corbin was ever in love with you, he isn't now. I have good reason to be sure of that. You see, Tim has asked me to marry him—this coming week-end!"

Vivian shot out of her chair as though she'd come in contact with a live wire. The color drained from her face. Her full lips thinned to an ugly line.

"That's a lie!" she gasped. "Tim's mine, I tell you! You can't come sneaking in here after all I've gone through and rob me of the only—"

She checked herself with an effort, the words still echoing through the room as she struggled for control. When she went on again, her veneer of arrogance was back in place. But she was badly shaken now.

"I should have realized you'd try to pull

something of that sort," she said disdainfully. "I suppose you've tangled him into a declaration of some kind and think you can jam it through before he gets clear."

Margaret really did laugh that time.

"Newspaper men aren't easy to tangle," she returned. "And I've never seen one more capable of looking out for himself than Tim Corbin. If you're not satisfied with my word, go and ask him. Better still, I'll call him and have him come over and settle this now."

She reached for the phone on the small table by the bed. But Vivian's hand was there first, holding the phone down.

"Don't be in such a rush!" she advised. "You may not be so anxious to call him after you find out what's going to happen if you do succeed in pushing your little scheme through."

The shiver of fear in Margaret's heart leaped suddenly to her throat. There it was again, that deadly something in Vivian's voice—

"What do you mean?" she asked unsteadily.

"I mean," the blonde girl stated clearly and distinctly, "that if Tim Corbin marries you, he'll spend his wedding night in jail—charged with the murder of Philip Owens!"

THE ghastly silence that followed seemed to go on forever. To Margaret the whole mad performance had become a nightmare. Surely she'd wake up soon and find herself back at the store, smiling politely as she helped sell the dusty rose crepe to the girl before her.

But beneath it was the dreadful certainty that such a story couldn't be completely faked. There must be at least a thread of truth to the fantastic web being woven about the man who had come to mean so much to her in the last few days.

Her dry lips moved stiffly. "You—you have some sort of evidence, I suppose?"

"Very good evidence, indeed," Vivian nodded, her confidence all back now that Margaret's was visibly weakening. "I hoped I wouldn't have to go this far. But you may as well hear the whole story now. If

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you ever try to make use of it I'll simply deny it. Your word won't go far against mine."

She dropped back into the armchair. Margaret sank limply onto the bed, too weak to stand much longer anyway.

"Tim used to spend a lot of time at the house," Vivian continued. "Phil was usually gone, or too drunk to notice. But that night he came in unexpectedly, and Tim left by the door that opens from the living room onto the terrace. At least I thought he left. But instead, he waited outside to see what sort of mood Phil was in. Phil happened to be ugly—so he hit me. That wasn't unusual. But it was the first time Tim had seen it happen. He came charging back into the room and pitched a haymaker at Phil that stretched him full length on the floor.

"The trouble was, Phil's head hit the piano bench when he went down. It was pretty messy. We considered calling the sheriff and facing it out together. But Tim didn't feel that I should risk the scandal that was sure to be made of it. Finally we cleaned things up the best we could, put Phil into his roadster and Tim drove it out along the highway. I followed in my car and brought him back after he'd sent the roadster plunging over the bluff. When it was found the next day there was no reason to question anyone."

Margaret sat in frozen horror as the story ended. The emotionless way Vivian rattled it off was far more convincing than her earlier dramatics had been. Worst of all, for the first time, it made Tim's part in it seem believable.

It would be so exactly like him to go to any woman's rescue, and even to conceal something that every instinct within him would demand he face, if that was the only way he could protect an innocent person from the consequences.

"But even—even if that's all true," she said finally, "it doesn't mean he's in love with you now. Why should he ask me to marry him if it's you he wants? Phil's death freed you. There's nothing in the way—"

"Tim has a lot of funny quirks," Vivian

shrugged. "He feels that accidentally killing Phil cost him the right to marry me, or to benefit, even indirectly, from the money Phil left me. But I was beginning to get that talked out of him until you came along. If he really has some fool idea of marrying you now, don't kid yourself that it's because he loves you. He's simply trying to protect himself against the temptation of giving in to his love for me."

Vivian got up and reached for her jacket, then paused for a parting shot.

"As I told you before, I have plenty of evidence. And don't make the mistake of thinking I won't use it. I want Tim. But if I can't have him, I'll put him where no one else will ever get him!"

MARGARET didn't move for a long time after the door closed behind her visitor. She sat there in dazed confusion, trying to sort out what she had heard.

How much—or how little—of Vivian's story was true? Some way—somehow, she was going to have to find out.

But she couldn't possibly go to Tim about it!

She still believed that the love he had offered her was entirely sincere. But he wouldn't be the first man to offer marriage to one woman while another actually ruled his desires. And it would be his desires if Vivian was involved—not his heart or his mind. Of that Margaret was sure.

In torment, she sprang to her feet to pace the floor.

Would she still want to marry him if she knew it was only part of himself he was offering? Oddly enough, the answer seemed to be yes. All this had only made her realize how desperately much he meant to her. If he wanted her and needed her, she couldn't leave him to Vivian's ruthless scheming.

The possibility that Tim might be responsible for Phil Owens' death wasn't the main point to her. If it had happened as Vivian described, it had been purely an accident—unimportant now except for the hold it gave to her.

Was that hold as powerful as she was trying to make out?

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Margaret glanced at her watch, then whirled to snatch a tweed coat from the closet and pull a dark felt hat over her curls. Gathering up gloves and a purse, she rushed for the door.

But she used the stairway instead of the elevator this time, and managed to slip through the lobby without attracting Lew Bonner's attention. She didn't care to have him making any guesses about this particular expedition.

The boy in the garage around the corner was too sleepy-eyed to be curious. So miles of highway were soon sliding beneath the flying wheels of her car.

The small hours of the morning might not be a conventional time to go calling. But this problem couldn't wait, and was too much to solve alone. She needed the help of someone she could trust absolutely—someone who would know what to do.

The one person who fit that description exactly was Grant Page. She had been taking her problems to Grant for a long time.

WAY back when she first started doing publicity for Gay-Time, Grant had been a reporter. But since then he had quit newspaper work to write fact detective stories and dabble in criminology. He lived in Bay City now, only about fifty miles from Creston.

It was two a. m. when she rapped on the door of his apartment.

"Hi, wake up, sleepyhead!" she called softly as she knocked again.

There was the sound of stirring inside, and the bolt slid back. The door opened a couple of inches and a tousled, sandy head came into sight.

Margaret stuck her hand through the crack to pat him on the cheek.

"Open up, pal," she grinned. "This isn't your past catching up with you. It's just a lady in distress."

"Maggie—by gosh!" he grunted. "I might have known it would be you. When somebody comes hammering on my door at disgraceful hours it's always you. Wait until I get a robe."

"Hurry up!" she laughed as she followed

his pajama clad figure into the living room.

There was a robe across a chair. She picked it up and tossed it about his big shoulders while he still fumbled sleepily in all directions. Then she shook a cigarette from a pack on the table and struck a match for him.

A smile spread over his strong, attractive face as he settled onto the davenport and drew his feet up under him. He was really beginning to wake up now.

"Why all the service, Mag? Just because a man's turned thirty doesn't mean you have to start treating him like a grandfather. Bet there's a catch to it somewhere. Broke—? Out of gas—or just looking for entertainment?"

Margaret parked herself on the arm of a chair and stared down at the toe of one trim pump. "I'm in real trouble this time, Grant. Way over my head. It's something I shouldn't even tell you. But I can't handle it alone. It—it means too much to me."

"When a gal gets that serious there's usually a man involved," Grant mocked lightly. "Don't tell me you've been letting one of the treacherous creatures make eyes at you?"

"It's a man all right," Margaret admitted. "The most important one who ever came into my life. I—I've practically promised to marry him this coming weekend."

"Marry him!" The davenport creaked abruptly under shifting weight. "Now listen, my dear—it's all right to have your fun! But don't come barging in here scaring me— Do you really mean that, Margaret?"

She looked up in surprise, and discovered that the smile had vanished from his face. His nice grey eyes were no longer amused. She remembered suddenly that there had been a time when Grant himself had suggested marriage. But she hadn't taken it as much more than kidding then.

"I THOUGHT you were too busy building yourself a career to waste that much attention on any man," he remarked finally.

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"That's the way it's always been until now," she acknowledged. "But I guess there comes a time in every woman's life when a career isn't enough. This is the real thing, Grant. The trouble is—what would you do if someone declared and swore they could prove that the person you loved was guilty of an accidental killing which would probably be called murder if it came to light?"

Grant's feet slid to the floor. Slowly he stood up.

"That sounds like something you'd better explain from the beginning," he said quietly.

So Margaret told him all she could think of. Vivian's story, her own reaction to it, and her deep conviction that whatever Tim had done was what he had believed to be right at the time. Grant paced the floor while she talked and threw in questions occasionally.

"He must have loved her then—maybe he still does a little," she concluded wearily. "A lot of men go on loving women of her sort even after they know the truth about them. But her hint of an affair between them was sheer bluff. Nothing can make me believe that about Tim. If the code he lives by won't let him marry her now, it certainly wouldn't have let him play around with her while Phil still lived."

The room was silent for some time after she had come to the end. Grant continued his restless pacing without looking up at her.

"As I see it then," he said finally, "what you actually want, is for me to help clear a guy who is probably no better than he should be. And the fellow who will then walk off with the girl I've loved more years than I care to remember. The girl I've always hoped would get around to feeling the same way about me some day."

There it was—right out in the open this time! Margaret's heart went sliding down and down like a cold, hard lump within her. If only she'd paid a little more attention—if she'd even suspected—

But Grant had always been just Grant, the best friend a girl ever had. Why did

he have to go romantic on her now, just when she needed him most? For his sake, and her own, even for Tim's sake, she'd have to put a stop to it quick.

"You don't mean that, Grant," she said evenly. "You're just in a sentimental mood, for some reason. Why, we'd be crazy to turn a first class friendship into something it was never intended to be. Of course, if you don't care to help me—"

"Cut," he said drily. "I get the picture. And it goes without saying that I'll do anything I can. But Lord help that thus-and-so if he's giving you the kind of deal it sounds like. I'll park him where he'll never do any more two-timing, and put on a campaign of my own before I let you go adventuring again."

Margaret forced a laugh to her lips. But she knew he didn't intend it as a joke. It was rather frightening to discover so much suppressed violence in a person she had always believed to be mild and even-tempered.

The outburst faded from her thoughts, however, as they began to plan ways and means of handling the problem. Later on Grant went to get dressed and took her out for something to eat before she started back to Creston.

He didn't like the idea of her making the return trip without sleep. But she knew how gossip traveled in a place of that size. Half the town would be speculating about her midnight ramble if her absence from the hotel was discovered.

IT WAS daylight when she reached the city limits, so she slid cautiously along back streets and parked near the rear of the hotel. She was lucky enough to find the employee's entrance already unlocked. If the boy at the garage ever wondered about the car, he'd probably think she had just forgotten to bring it back the night before.

She had time for only a couple hours' sleep before the alarm dragged her out of bed again. But after a cold shower she felt better than she had expected. Telling her troubles to Grant had made the world look a lot more cheerful.

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She chose a gay plaid suit to soften the tired lines of her face, and wore a hat that dipped down over one eye. But when she headed for the Recorder office, after a couple of hours at the store, with the layout for a new series of ads as an alibi, her knees were practically knocking together.

"Hi there," Tim greeted her gaily as she paused in the doorway of his private office, just off the big main room.

He got up from behind his desk and came to draw her inside, giving the door a little shove to close it. But she shook her finger at him in mock severity when he would have taken her into his arms.

"Do you want to start a scandal that will rock this town to its first pioneer?" she demanded lightly.

"Sure. Why not?" he grinned. "If you're going to make an honest man of me Saturday, I may as well have my fling first."

But his eyes became suddenly concerned as he looked down at her. He caught her by the shoulders and turned her face toward the light.

"What's the matter, honey? You look about all in. It—it isn't that hard a decision to make, is it?"

A mist sprang to her eyes and an aching lump to her throat. He was so dear, so lovable. How could he possibly care anything at all for cheap, shallow Vivian Owens?

"I'm all right," she answered unsteadily. "Girls always get a little weepy and foolish I guess, when their hearts go into a tailspin. I—I didn't sleep much. But I'll go to bed early tonight."

"Not too early," he reminded her gently. "There's some unfinished business to be settled first. And remember—no stalling this time."

Margaret turned abruptly to lay her folder of ads on his desk. She realized with something of a shock that stalling was exactly what she was going to have to do until she could be more sure of what lay behind Vivian's threat.

They both turned their attention to business then, and were almost done when Grant Page, well groomed and business-

like in grey tweeds now, came strolling into the outer office.

MARGARET recognized his footsteps even before he appeared at the counter just outside the door that was now standing open again. A shiver of tense, nervous fear swept over her.

"I'd like to see Mr.—Mr. Corbin, I believe it is," the newcomer said to the office girl with a convincing air of being not quite sure of the name.

He placed his card before her.

Tim got up and went to take it as the girl brought it to him.

"Grant Page? That name sounds familiar," he smiled, shaking hands with the visitor. "Newspaper man yourself, aren't you?"

"Used to be," Grant nodded. "Doing mystery and detective stories for the fact magazines now. That's why I'm here. I'd like to check through your back files to see what I can locate that may be worth writing up."

"Sure. Glad to help anyway I can," Tim returned cordially. He went around to the other side of the counter to pull huge folders of back issues from beneath it.

Margaret rose to her feet and moved slowly to the doorway of the small office, fascinated by the sight of the two most important men in her life talking casually together. Both were tall. But Grant was the broad, solid type while Tim was more slender. Tim's wavy, dark hair and clean-cut features also made him much the better looking. But it was a competent, dependable brand of good looks that lost nothing by comparison with the other man's rugged assurance.

It took quite a person to stack up with Grant Page. Margaret felt a thrill of pride as she realized how well Tim passed that test.

They continued to talk while she studied them, Grant leafing through the papers without the slightest glance of recognition in her direction.

"Berry—" he commented idly. "That made quite a stir, didn't it? Every magazine in the country carried it, I guess.

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Margaret finally said, "You're making too much of the incident, Lew."

Leutch and Tull—both stories done from several angles. It's the less important cases that frequently pay off when you dig into them."

He was quite far back through the files by that time. "Say, you sure give plenty of space to this car accident! Owens? Who was he, to rate such a splash?"

That was the moment Margaret had been waiting for. The name she had hoped wasn't going to make any more difference to Tim than the others had. But his eyes were instantly on guard, his whole manner suddenly so cautious that she was sick with dismay. She knew Grant caught the look too, although he didn't seem to be watching Tim at all.

"The Owens family owned most of this town at one time," Tim replied evenly.

"Phil's grandfather built the mills, and his father stacked up quite a fortune with them. Phil the third was only important because he was the last of the line. Too bad it had to end that way. But the only mystery about that case is why he lived as long as he did. He made a career of drink and speed."

But Grant was not to be sidetracked so easily.

"You can't always tell about accident and suicide cases," he said thoughtfully. "Especially when there's money involved. Sometimes they turn out to be pretty neat killings. Who got the dough?"

Tim's voice was curt. "His wife—what there was left of it after Phil got through. But I can assure you it won't be worth your while to do any digging in that direction."

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THEN before Grant could push the subject any further Tim turned to Margaret, who still stood in the doorway. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said to her. "Just taking a lesson in how mysteries are manufactured. This is Mr. Page, a writer. Miss Madison, Mr. Page."

"Delighted to meet you, Miss Madison," Grant bowed, making such ceremony of taking her hand that she wished she dared make a face at him. He didn't need to lay it on quite so thick!

But she had to content herself with answering sweetly. "A writer? How perfectly thrilling! I've always wanted to meet a literary celebrity."

Grant's wince evened the score.

She and Tim went back to the ads then, while Grant continued to poke through the papers and ask questions about crimes that might really be of some use to him. Tim was entirely friendly again as soon as the Owens case had apparently been dropped.

When the noon whistles blew Grant insisted on taking them both to lunch.

"Really, I can't," Margaret protested uncomfortably. "I've been gone from the store too long already."

She was out of patience with him for even suggesting it. One of them would be sure to make a slip if they carried the pretense too far. But Grant seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"Surely you don't intend to go without lunch?" he said blandly. "So what difference does it make whether you take the time now or later? Corbin, haven't you any influence with the lady?"

So with Tim adding his arguments to Grant's there wasn't much she could do but give in. Tim knew she arranged her own hours at the store.

But they had gone less than a block from the office when a big cream colored convertible swerved in along the curb beside them, and a gay voice brought them to a halt.

"Tim—oh, Tim!" Vivian Owens called. "I was just on my way to see you. We'd like to have you do a notice for the USO benefit, if you will."

TIM excused himself and went to stand beside the car with one elbow resting on the door. Vivian's hand patted his arm affectionately as he made notes on a fold of paper he took from his pocket.

The sight of that possessive, coral-tipped hand set a crazy little pulse to hammering in Margaret's throat. For the first time in her life she was so furiously jealous that she would have liked to yank a handful of blond hair from that lovely head.

Vivian's claim that Tim was actually in love with her hadn't been half as hard to take as this first glimpse of the two of them together.

Grant's chuckle brought her attention back to him then.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," he mocked in an undertone. "That isn't—it can't possibly be, our baby-faced darling with the sticky fingers? Our bereaved little Mrs. Owens?"

"It isn't anyone else!" Margaret retorted between set teeth. "But for heaven's sake, Grant, can't you take this a little more seriously? If Tim begins to wonder— Oh, I never should have started this anyway. I'm sorry now—"

"You're not sorry at all. You're just developing a first class case of green-eyed jitters. And no matter who started it, Margaret, I'm finishing it up. If he's a two-timing chiseler I want you to know it."

Before she could get her mouth open to gulp out a protest she found herself facing empty air. Grant was heading for the curb.

"I say, Corbin," he cut in boldly, putting his hand on Tim's shoulder. "Isn't this Mrs. Philip Owens? I seldom forget a face, especially such a lovely one. And I remember seeing pictures—at the time of the tragedy—"

He paused with the sentence unfinished.

"May I present Grant Page, a writer and former newspaper man," Tim said stiffly to Vivian.

The look on his face should have blistered the intruder. But Grant was immune to looks. Vivian was too busy going into her role of martyred bravery to even notice.

"I know how deep your grief must still

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be," Grant murmured sympathetically. "I hesitate to even speak of it. But I'm planning a series of articles for a national safety campaign, and a few words from you, with pictures if you care to let us use them—"

"I'm sure Mrs. Owens wouldn't be interested," Tim cut in angrily.

"Oh, but I would, Tim!" Vivian corrected eagerly. "I'll be glad to do anything I can do—to help save others from the same sort of thing."

Grant bowed gravely. "I felt sure you'd understand, Mrs. Owens. Say, how about joining us for lunch? Then if you can give me a half hour or so afterwards—"

Vivian was sliding out of the car before he had even finished. The chance to cut in on Tim would have been reason enough, without the added lure of national publicity dangling before her eyes.

With a cool little nod to Margaret she planted herself firmly between the two men, leaving Margaret to make an awkward fourth at the end of the line as they moved on along the street.

And all during lunch she monopolized them both so completely that Margaret might just as well have been dining alone.

Tim did his best to divide his attention. But his fear of what Vivian might say was so apparent that she had only to mention Grant's article to bring him back to her abruptly. There was no longer any doubt in Margaret's mind but what Tim knew far more about Phil Owens' death than had ever been made public.

AS SOON as she reasonably could Margaret excused herself on the plea of having to get back to work, and left the other three together. She couldn't stand much more of Tim's attention to Vivian, or of watching the web tighten about him.

She spent a couple of hours at the store then, helping the clerks with the special selling technique she had worked out for Gay-Time dresses. But her head was aching so badly by that time, from worry and lack of rest, that she went to the hotel to lie down for a while.

She promptly dropped off to sleep and didn't wake up again until the phone jan-

gled beside her bed. It was Tim—waiting in the lobby to take her to dinner.

"Is it that late already?" she groaned. "Oh, Tim, I feel simply rotten. Would you mind very much if we just skipped it tonight?"

"Why, of course not—if you don't feel up to it," he said slowly. "But this was to be a rather special occasion, you know. It isn't—isn't that you're just upset about something, is it Margaret? Something I've done?"

An instinctive denial sprang to her lips. But she checked it abruptly. After all, he was entitled to as much honesty as she could manage under the circumstances.

"I have a terrible headache, Tim. But if—if there is any reason why I'm not exactly sure in my own mind, isn't it better to just wait a little?"

"Margaret—listen, Margaret! Oh lord, I can't talk here! Let me see you for a few minutes anyway. I'll order you something from the dining room and come up while you eat."

"I'm not hungry, Tim. And anything I could possibly say tonight would be all wrong. If you'll just let it go now, maybe by tomorrow evening—"

Her voice trailed off into silence as she realized that another evening probably wouldn't be much better. When was anything ever going to be better with Vivian Owens holding all the threads in her soft, greedy hands?

Tim had become very polite when he spoke again. "Tomorrow seems to be a favorite date with you, Margaret. But I'll try to go on believing in it a while longer. Six-thirty as usual then, unless I see you before."

The click at the other end of the line cut off anything further she might have said. And her pillow muffled her sobs after she crept wearily into bed.

IT MUST have been nearly midnight when she was aroused again by a soft rap on her door. She pulled a fluffy white robe about her and went to open it a crack.

Grant, in pajamas and robe himself, was standing there holding a small canvas cov-

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ered case in one hand. He slipped inside quickly and closed the door behind him.

"My room is just down the hall," he explained. "I thought we could go into a huddle occasionally without attracting so much attention if we were both staying at the same place. How do you happen to be in bed so early?"

"Broke my date with Tim," she shrugged. "This noon was about all I could take in one day. What have you got there?"

She pointed at the case he had placed on a chair.

"Phonograph. Had to hunt all over town for one I could rent. But I have a record I want to play for you."

"A record? Can't I do without entertainment at this hour, Grant?"

She went back to curl up on the edge of the bed with the robe pulled over her feet.

Grant laughed drily. "This one isn't entertainment, my child. It's strictly business. I lifted it from the sheriff's files, after a deputy and I got chummy over a few rounds of drinks. I'll probably get life if they catch me with it. But considering the condition of those files I doubt if it will even be missed."

He paused to light a cigarette before he went on.

"After I finished interviewing Vivian today, with friend Tim as chaperon the whole time—bless his heart, I headed for the court house and had the luck to run into an officer who was definitely a kindred spirit. Two drinks loosened him up and three had him pulling skeletons out of the closet. It seems that there were questions after the Owens accident. Phil was known to have gone home that evening in a condition that would be classed as cold sober for him. So Vivian, in order to explain his rushing out again and misjudging curves, produced a home recording and a story of her own."

Margaret had the sleep all out of her eyes now and was sitting up very straight as she listened.

"Vivian claimed she couldn't endure any more of Phil's abuse," Grant continued. "Said she was after evidence for a divorce,

and even admitted she wanted the kind of evidence that would get her a good settlement. So she had been keeping the recording attachment of their phonograph loaded and ready for use. When Phil came in that night, sober enough to be good and ugly, she managed to get the machine started without his noticing it. I had a hunch the recording might be the evidence she was bragging about, if it was properly interpreted. So I stuck it under my coat instead of back into the file. Let's see what you think of it."

HE TURNED to the phonograph and snapped up the lid, taking a wax disk from a stiff brown envelope in the record compartment. When he set the playing arm in place Vivian's voice swept into the room at once, clear and distinct, and with that note of dramatic scene-playing with which Margaret was already familiar.

She had obviously been talking when she started the recorder.

"—disgusting of you to accuse me of such a thing, Phil! I've tried to be a good wife to you. I've done my best—"

"Your best—yeah!" a thick, angry voice cut in sarcastically. "You mean you've done your best to hook me for every cent you could get. Well, maybe that's part of the game. But when it comes to running around with every Tom, Dick and Harry—"

Vivian interrupted swiftly, protesting her innocence and keeping him from getting anything onto the recording she didn't want there, but deliberately baiting him to greater fury at the same time.

Phil Owens as a person hadn't seemed very real to Margaret before. But with his voice coming into the room now, a voice she knew had been stilled forever soon after those very words had been spoken, a cold shiver of horror swept over her.

The quarrel went on, then suddenly flared to a climax.

"Keep away from me!" Vivian blazed dramatically. "You've beaten me for the last time, you brute! Phil, don't—"

"Oh, stop your sniveling," he jeered. "If I'd slapped you down more often—"

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Then the sharp, clear smack of an open hand, and a chair overturning as Vivian apparently fell against it. She must have expected the blow. She had certainly been angling for something of the sort. But the force of it evidently knocked all thought of the recording from her mind at that point.

Her carefully staged act blew up in a burst of language that was pure vitriol pouring from the machine. In the middle of it a door crashed violently.

Then a scream rose high and shrill, filling the room until the end of the record suddenly cut it off.

Grant's arm shot out to check it. But the door behind him burst open at the same instant. Lew Bonner stood there—white-faced and shaking.

"Who screamed?" he demanded wildly. "What's wrong in here?"

Grant forced a soothing smile to his face. "Nothing's wrong," he laughed pleasantly. "I was simply playing a recording for Miss Madison and got the volume turned a little too high. It was one I made from a radio thriller. Recordings are a hobby of mine—and of hers too, she was telling me."

"But that—that was terrible," Lew faltered. "We don't allow any disturbance after ten-thirty anyway."

Then as he began to get control of himself his prying eyes swept from one to the other in avid speculation. Margaret was painfully conscious of how it must look to him. Grant here with her at this hour, and neither of them dressed for calling.

"I assure you I had no intention of intruding," Lew said then with an exaggerated bow. "It was inexcusable of me to come bursting in. But I didn't realize—I supposed Miss Madison was alone—"

He backed out and closed the door on his knowing smirk.

"That does it!" Margaret groaned. "The story will be all over town before he gets through with it."

"Guess I should have had better sense than to come visiting dressed like this," Grant admitted ruefully. "Maybe a little palm greasing will shut him up. But how in the dickens did he happen to be listen-

ing at the door anyway? That scream sounded loud in here but it actually couldn't have been heard for more than a few feet outside."

"Snooping probably," Margaret returned. "If I'd known you were going to be here at the hotel I would have warned you that he's been taking a lot too much interest in my affairs. He may have been passing and heard voices. Or the elevator boy could have seen you come in and mentioned it to him."

"Your fatal charm!" Grant teased. Then his thoughts went back to the recording.

"The thing I keep wondering about," he mused, "is all that screaming after Phil is supposed to have rushed out. According to the deputy's story, Vivian knew he was too furious to drive and was trying to stop him. But why just stand and scream? On the other hand, if what she told you was true—if that was Tim Corbin banging in through the terrace door instead of Phil leaving—well, it's so much more convincing that way that it doesn't look so hot for the boy friend."

Margaret was forced to agree with him. Everything, everything they'd been able to discover so far, only added to Vivian's claim.

SHE was a long time getting back to sleep after Grant returned to his room. He left the recording with her, suggesting that she play it again when she had time, for any hint of evidence they may have overlooked. But the very thought of it was more than she could endure.

The next day dragged unbearably. She dodged Tim when he came to the store, but managed to scrape up the courage to go down to the lobby to meet him at six-thirty that evening.

She was wearing the blue dress and cape he liked so well, and a gay small hat with a veil that helped conceal the shadows about her eyes.

His smile as he came toward her, very tall and impressive in a trim dark suit, almost set everything right again for a moment. But before he reached her another

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figure came from the small office at the end of the desk.

"Miss Madison, just a moment please," Lew Bonner waylaid her smugly.

Then his voice dropped to a discreet undertone that was still perfectly audible to Tim, who paused a few feet away.

"I feel that I owe you more of an apology for last night than I made at the time, Miss Madison. It was unpardonable of me to burst into your room as I did, especially when you were entertaining Mr. Page. But at that hour—well, I can only hope you'll understand that I was deeply concerned for your safety."

Margaret was so furious she couldn't even trust herself to speak at first. It was such a dirty, contemptible trick! Such complete revenge for the snubbing she had been forced to give him.

But she finally managed to say, "I'm sure you're making too much of the incident, Lew. It was entirely unimportant."

Then she went past him to take Tim's arm with a bright, unconcerned little smile.

Tim said nothing at all until they were outside.

"Has anyone been annoying you, Margaret?" he asked then. "Either Lew or Page?"

She could have wept in his arms right there on the street for his fine, decent trust in her. A trust she didn't deserve at all, because of the desperate lying she was going to have to do now.

"Lew is a louse!" she said violently. "But not worth worrying about. Mr. Page came along the hall last night with a small phonograph and a new record he was enthusiastic about. I was up because I spent most of the afternoon in bed and couldn't sleep later. So he stopped to play the record for me. I guess neither of us thought how it would look until Lew came barging in to kick about the disturbance. He—he thought he'd heard a scream."

"You don't have to explain to me," Tim said quietly. "Or take anything from anyone else. You don't even have to go on staying at the hotel if it's at all unpleasant. I'm having an apartment held for your

approval. You can make use of it any time you like."

"Tim—Tim—" she choked, and couldn't go on.

Oh, why did the world have to be such a rotten mixed up place anyway?

He helped her into the car without saying anything more about it, and they drove out along the highway for dinner at a popular inn. He was so gay and entertaining the whole time that it was hard to believe he'd ever had a serious worry in his life.

But when they were heading for town again he swung the car out onto a point overlooking the river and switched off the motor.

MARGARET rallied every defense she could think of against what she believed was coming. And against the overpowering desire to just give in and hope for the best. But all he did was to lean back in his own corner of the seat and look down at her for a long time, his eyes smiling a little through the dimness as he studied her.

"I seem to have made pretty much of a mess of things, Margaret," he said at last. "I was so sure we both felt the same way the other night that I tried to rush you into something you weren't quite ready for, I guess. But is it necessary to treat me like a criminal, darling? Do you have to duck into stock rooms when you see me coming, and hide behind alibis?"

"Oh, Tim, it isn't like that at all! It's just—just—"

She put her hand on his sleeve and leaned toward him as she tried to think of something she could say.

Then without knowing exactly how it happened she suddenly found herself in his arms, clinging to him desperately and sobbing in an agony of grief.

"Margaret—darling," he whispered unsteadily. "It—it can't possibly be as bad as all that."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped awkwardly at her tears until she managed to get them under control a little. Then he tipped her head back and kissed her with a soul-satisfying thorough-

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ness that eased the ache in her heart as nothing else could have done. It just wasn't possible to go on feeling bad when the world was suddenly filled with rockets and stars and moonlight and music.

"I don't know what this is all about, honey," he said as he held her close. "I'm not even going to try to highpressure you into telling me unless you want to. But if there's anything I can do, anything at all—remember, I love you, darling."

"Maybe I don't deserve your love, Tim," she answered with a soft little rush. "Maybe I'm being an awful fool! But if you'll just wait a few days, just give me a little more time—"

"All the time you want, Margaret, of course. If this weekend won't do there are lots more coming. But don't start slandering my best girl. That's one thing I won't stand for."

It was easy to believe then that the barrier between them was just a dreadful mistake she'd managed to dream up somehow. Utterly ridiculous to think of Tim as being tangled in the dark web of Vivian Owens' life.

She was still so happy when he took her back to the hotel later on that she could look Lew Bonner in the eye and merely feel sorry for his vindictive twist of mind.

But she hadn't been in her room more than a couple of minutes when there was a quick double rap on the door. Grant slipped hastily inside when she opened it. He was fully dressed this time and had been watching for her.

"**L**ARGE evening, I see," he commented as he took in the glow of happiness on her face. "Has he managed to convince you that husband killing is merely a harmless hobby?"

"Oh, Grant, I must have been crazy to even listen to such a story about Tim," she burst out. "There can't possibly be any evidence to prove something that simply didn't happen!"

He turned abruptly and went to stand at the window, staring down into the street below.

"Sorry to stick pins into your toy bal-

loon, Maggie. But I believe there is evidence. And I believe I know what it is. Our Vivian is far too confident to hold anything but a pat hand."

"What do you mean, Grant? What have you found out?"

"I spent most of the afternoon up at the Owens place. Vivian and I are getting quite chummy. I also had a look at the machine that turned out that recording. Expensive affair. Phil had it specially built to make one recording after another automatically. It seems they're not usually made that way because of what's lost during the break between records. But he was principally interested in picking up a whole evening of conversation so he could spring embarrassing scraps of it on friends later. Nice chap apparently. But that machine set me to wondering if there wasn't more than one record made that night. The next one might not be so innocent as the one she turned over to the sheriff."

Margaret stood there listening with her happiness shrinking and shriveling as though it were actually the toy balloon he'd mentioned.

"I—I still don't believe it," she whispered with dry lips. "I won't believe it! Maybe she killed him herself. Maybe—"

Grant's shoulders sagged wearily as he came back across the room and took one of her trembling hands in his.

"That's a possibility, of course. I've done considerable studying from that angle. But I don't think her yen for any man would be strong enough to make her risk her own pretty neck to get him. It's tough going, Mag. I'm not enjoying it myself. Maybe we'll dig up something yet. But don't hope for miracles, my dear."

He gave her hand a quick little squeeze before he released it again, and went out to close the door softly behind him.

As Margaret got ready for bed she wondered miserably why she couldn't have fallen in love with Grant somewhere along the line. Nice, dependable Grant, who might never thrill her as Tim was capable of doing, but who would never make her suffer so horribly either. Maybe after all this was over— But Grant deserved so

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much more than the battered and broken fragment of a heart hers seemed likely to be by that time.

She wasn't quite ready to give up yet anyway.

THE following day was a busy one at the store. Margaret had little time to think. When Tim phoned to say he would have to skip dinner with her that evening because of work at the office it was a relief not to have to face him again until she had adjusted herself to a new low in hopes.

She ate alone as soon as she had finished work and was on her way to her room when she met Grant in the lobby. He risked a brief report beneath a casual greeting.

"No luck yet, Mag. That blonde can talk for hours and not say anything at all."

Up in her room afterwards Margaret stood thinking for a long moment. Then she whirled to strip off what she'd been wearing and replace it with a black dress-maker suit and high-necked blouse that added poise and sophistication to her natural dignity. The impudent small hat that went with it practically dared anyone to believe she was less sure of herself than she looked.

As a final touch she made her lips into a defiant splash of color.

A short time later her gloved hand was lifting the heavy knocker on the front door of the stately old Owens home.

Mrs. Owens was in, the maid informed her respectfully. She took Margaret's card and ushered her into the living room to wait. It was odd to be seeing for the first time a room she had heard so much about. There was the terrace door, just beyond a wide fireplace. And across from it a big cabinet that must be the combination radio, phonograph and recorder that Grant had described. Near her was a piano, with the sharp cornered bench in front of it that Phil's head was supposed to have struck when he fell.

Margaret was still studying it in gruesome fascination when she heard a light step in the hall and Vivian appeared in the doorway.

The blonde girl was wearing a pale green taffeta housecoat that might have given her a lily like beauty if it hadn't been for the hard, calculating glimmer in her eyes and the cynical lines about her mouth.

"Well, imagine seeing you here," she laughed. "What can I do for the efficient Miss Madison?"

"Nothing at all for me," Margaret shrugged. "But something for yourself possibly. I've been thinking over the story you told me the other night. And I've come to the conclusion I'd be rather gullible to give it much importance—on your word alone. You bragged of evidence to support it, Mrs. Owens. I'm here to be convinced."

Vivian's eyes narrowed abruptly. She crossed to the piano bench and sat down in a swirl of green taffeta.

"Why should I bother to convince you of anything at all?" she demanded then.

"Because—" Margaret returned levelly, "unless you do convince me, I'll call that bluff of yours by informing Tim Corbin that I'll be delighted to marry him Saturday."

"And have him dragged off to jail at the close of the ceremony? Go ahead if you think I'm bluffing!"

It was Margaret's turn to laugh then, smoothly and lightly.

"You're not only bluffing, my dear, but doing it badly. You don't want to send Tim to jail. You want to marry him yourself. I think you would agree to almost anything rather than carry out such a threat. Suppose you produce the evidence, if you have any."

Vivian was definitely shaken now, her confidence oozing away as she faced the counter-move that had been sprung on her.

"I don't mind telling you," Margaret went on sweetly, "that I already know about that recording you turned over to the sheriff. Secrets don't keep well in a town like this, you know. When I also heard rumors of the automatic recorder you have here things began to add up. If your evidence is another record made the same evening I want to hear it."

"How do I know but what you'll make

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use of it yourself when you know the whole thing?" Vivian burst out angrily.

"You don't," Margaret admitted. "You wouldn't even understand it if I told you I couldn't possibly harm Tim under any circumstance. But you've gone too far to back down now. You lose any way you handle it—unless you deal with me."

Vivian sprang to her feet, her hands clenched at her sides.

"Okay! You asked for it and you'll get it. Maybe you'll realize then that no matter whether I lose or not, you can't possibly win!"

She whirled and went running from the room.

IT WAS Margaret who began to go to pieces then. The palms of her hands were damp with perspiration when Vivian returned with another wax disk like the one Grant had obtained. She hadn't expected Vivian to give in so easily, or so completely. That fact alone was enough to crumble the last few shreds of hope in her heart.

"If you've heard of this recorder," Vivian said as she lifted the lid of the machine, "you probably know there is a break between records when nothing is picked up for a few moments. The one I gave the sheriff ended just as Tim came rushing through that door and swung on Phil. By the time this one got under way Phil was already stretched on the floor over there. But it's not difficult to complete the picture."

She set the playing arm in place then, and Margaret braced herself to hear what she hadn't until this moment believed could actually exist.

The first sound to come from the machine was a frightened sobbing so like the dying echo of the scream that still rang in her memory that a cold shiver swept over her. Then Vivian's voice, no longer filled with the consciousness of acting out a scene. Or with the rage that had followed Phil's blow. She was just plain scared to death and almost incoherent as she babbled.

"So dreadful—dreadful, Tim, to see him

lying there like that! I never hated him enough to want him to go that way. But I can see now that I shouldn't have gotten you into the tangled mess of my life anyway. It isn't right for you to have to face a rotten scandal because of something I'm really to blame for if anyone is. Maybe if you just go quickly—"

Tim's voice came then, weary with defeat as Margaret had never heard it, but evenly controlled and unmistakable.

"It's too late to consider what should have been done, Vivian. I'm in already—clear up to my neck. And I never was much good at ducking. But maybe we can manage without a scandal if you'll pull yourself together and do as I say. Lucky he fell on that small rug. We can just tie it up and chuck it off the bridge after we get him into the car and away from here."

The rest of it was mostly just noise and confusion to Margaret's numbed senses. Scuffling and dragging and moving that seemed to go on for an eternity before the record came to an end and shut its dreadful details back into silence again.

MMARGARET stood up, gripping her purse with both hands as she faced the other girl.

"You win," she shivered. "I've heard enough. But all you win is the chance to get him by honest methods, if you can. My price for clearing out of town before noon tomorrow and never seeing Tim again—is that record!"

"What kind of an idiot do you take me for?" Vivian flung back at her violently. "When you have that record in your hands you can laugh in my face."

"I don't think I'll be doing much laughing for quite a while," Margaret returned. "But I'm going to have the record. Otherwise, I'll go to Tim with the story. I doubt if even blackmail will help you then. As you once said yourself, Tim has some funny kinks. He might prefer to go to jail rather than marry you if he once learns the truth about you."

Vivian turned to walk the length of the room and back again before she answered.

"Okay, I'll give you the record. But

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only on the condition that you break with Tim first, so completely and finally that there will be no patching it up afterwards. That will make things easier for me if he has gone a little soft over you. And the record won't do you much good anyway if I swear it's a frameup."

Margaret's first thought was to refuse indignantly. But after all, she'd have to tell Tim something. Maybe a deliberate scene would be the easiest way out. And make it easier for both of them to forget. Vivian had apparently made up her mind anyway, and that record couldn't be left to dangle over Tim the rest of his life.

"All right," she agreed abruptly. "Drive down to the hotel in about an hour and bring the record with you. Park where you'll be sure to meet Tim as he leaves me and you'll undoubtedly be able to tell whether I've lived up to my part of the bargain or not. Send the record up to me then. But this time I'm warning you! Don't make the mistake of thinking I won't go to Tim anyway—if you doublecross me."

She left Vivian then, and went back to the hotel so heartsick and beaten that she didn't even resent Lew Bonner's curious stare.

"Will you phone Tim Corbin for me, please?" she asked. "Tell him I've got to see him right away. When he comes send him up to my room."

She was past caring what Lew might say. And she couldn't make that call herself.

Upstairs she tossed her hat aside, then pulled off her suit and blouse because the close-fitting neck seemed to be choking her. Dressed only in underthings she reached for something to put around her. It happened to be the white robe.

Grant came to the door a moment later.

"It's all over," she told him desperately as she let him in. "The whole thing is true. I just heard the second recording myself."

"What you need is a drink," he remarked. "Hold everything while I get the makings."

When he returned he placed bottles,

glasses and a bowl of ice on the dresser.

"Pour this down and you'll feel better," he ordered, handing her the finished product. "Then start at the beginning and tell me what you've been up to. I thought I was running this investigation."

AS MARGARET talked in broken sentences she forgot how time was passing. She still hadn't reached the end, or even thought about what she was going to tell Tim, when she heard another rap at the door.

She jumped up and glanced wildly about the room.

"What can I do?" she gasped. "I didn't realize—"

There were the bottles on the dresser and the glass in her hand. There was Grant in the chair by the window without coat or tie and with his shirt open at the throat. Herself, in a robe. It was then that the idea sprang complete to her mind. She couldn't have done better if she'd planned for hours.

"Come in," she called. And dropped onto the arm of Grant's chair to muss his hair with a quick flip of her hand.

That was the way Tim found them when he opened the door and stepped inside. The smile on his face froze to an expressionless stare.

"Tim! Why—why, Tim," Margaret faltered in faked astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Lew told me you wanted to see me," he returned levelly. "Apparently there's been a mistake."

That was her cue to spring to her feet in slightly tipsy indignation.

"So it's Lew again, is it?" she burst out. "I might have known he'd go on trying to get even with me. But I suppose you would have found out before long anyway. You—you see, Tim, Grant and I aren't really strangers at all. We just had a battle. That's why I thought I might marry you. But he followed me down here and—well, I guess you can see how it is. Maybe we'll get married ourselves this time."

Grant rose slowly to stand beside her, looking down with unreadable eyes. But

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he let her play it out entirely her own way.

"Yes—I see," Tim answered.

His look and his voice practically tore the heart out of her with the shock and disillusionment he couldn't hide. Her hand moved a little, almost went out to him in a desperate attempt to take it all back. But he turned to reach blindly for the knob and went stumbling from the room.

"What a nice, clean wallop you pack," Grant commented.

Then his arm shot out to catch her as she swayed and draw her close against his shoulder to sob out her grief.

"Was that part of the bargain?" he inquired when she could speak again.

"In a way, yes," she answered wearily. "But I didn't intend to drag you into it until it—it just seemed to happen. It wasn't a nice thing to do, I know. But if you feel too hopelessly compromised, Grant, maybe I can make it up to you someday—if you still want me."

"Sort of a shot-gun marriage in reverse," he observed drily. "It might be one way of keeping you out of jams at that."

BEFORE either of them could go on there was another knock at the door, light and discreet this time.

Grant answered it to take a stiff brown envelope from Lew Bonner's hands and shut the door again on his inquisitive stare.

"That's one thing I know what to do about anyway," Margaret declared between set teeth.

She took the envelope Vivian had sent her and dumped the record out on the bed. Then she grabbed it in both hands and raised it above her bent knee.

But Grant sprang forward, catching her wrist and twisting the record from her grasp in time to save it.

"What kind of a dim-wit are you?" he demanded. "Considering the price you paid for this it might be a good idea to make sure you got what you bargained for."

"But I don't want to hear it!" she stormed. "I tell you I can't stand it again."

Grant went right ahead placing the portable phonograph on a chair and snapping

up the lid. But Margaret was so determined that she stood at the window with her hands over her ears all the time it was bumbling on. She still heard enough to identify it.

The next thing she knew Grant had her by the shoulder and was spinning her around.

"Do you mean to say you sold out for that piece of tripe?" he almost shouted at her. "My gosh, Mag! This can't be the second record. Why, Phil couldn't have much more than hit the floor during the time between. They wouldn't even be sure he was dead, to say nothing of calmly discussing what to do with his body. She's holding out on you. She may have one or a dozen records yet. Enough, at any rate, to keep the poor guy under her thumb in spite of all you've done."

Margaret stared down at the record in stunned unbelief, her face drained of all color now.

Grant suddenly became gentle again, pushing her down onto a chair.

"Take it easy, Mag. You've had a tough time, I know. And there's no use doing any more worrying tonight. Tomorrow I'll see that blonde chiseler myself and clean up the deal if I have to break her lovely neck."

Margaret forced a tired little smile to her lips. "You're swell, Grant. I don't know what I'd do without you. But it's funny, isn't it? You knocking holes in the case after I was ready to quit. And so anxious to give Tim a break now, when you were all for hanging him at first."

Grant rubbed one ear and looked foolish.

"Guess I should have been satisfied at that. But somehow—he's turned out to be the kind of a guy I can't hate, Margaret. I can't even get properly burned up over the fact that you're never going to do a very good job of forgetting him. Go to bed, small-fry. Try to get some sleep if you can."

He picked up his bottles and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Margaret sat there thinking for a long time. She really intended to obey Grant's orders. But she knew how impossible it

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would be to sleep. And she knew how little success Grant would probably have with Vivian tomorrow.

Finally she reached for the dress she had worn during the day and pulled it on again. Then she repaired her make-up, slid into the tweed coat and pulled a hat over the tumbled curls she was too weary to comb. As she was about to leave the room she turned back to pick up the two records in their brown envelopes.

Lew Bonner didn't speak as she went through the lobby, but she could feel his eyes following her all the way to the street.

SHE took a taxi this time, and lifted the knocker on the Owens door with a steady hand. Vivian must have just returned from her trip down to meet Tim and deliver the record. She answered the door herself and was still wearing a fur jacket over a black crepe dress.

"Well, doesn't this ever end?" she demanded rudely.

Margaret brushed past her and walked into the living room before she turned to answer the girl.

"It ends, Vivian, when you choose to play fair for the first time in your cheap, greedy little life! I warned you about double-crossing me. I'm only back now because I was partly to blame for not thinking it through before. Also because I'm beginning to wonder if you killed Phil Owens yourself. You could have sent for Tim later to get you out of the mess. This isn't the second record. Maybe not even the third or the fourth. Unless you produce a complete account of that evening within exactly five minutes, I'm heading for Tim."

"I didn't kill Phil!" Vivian flared defiantly. "I can prove I didn't. And what good will it do you to go to Tim now? Nothing you can possibly say will ever matter to him after the way I saw him a while ago."

"One minute gone," Margaret informed her levelly. "He'll listen all right if you committed that murder yourself and are trying to hang it on him after he saved you at the time. You could have done it easily enough. A push when a drunken

man was off balance might be as disastrous as a blow to his chin."

"Will you mind your own business?" Vivian screamed. "I didn't, I tell you! I didn't."

"Two minutes to go," Margaret cut in relentlessly, bluffing for all she was worth.

Accusing Vivian of the killing had been purely a shot in the dark. She couldn't understand the effect it was having, and was almost too amazed to push her advantage when Vivian cracked suddenly and began to sob.

"Go away and let me alone," the girl wailed. "I love Tim, and I'm entitled to some happiness after all I've gone through. Maybe he didn't kill Phil. But I couldn't just give him up to you, could I, when he was beginning to pay some attention to me at last?"

"The records," Margaret reminded her grimly. "This is all very interesting, but I want the facts. You have exactly a half minute left."

Vivian gave in then and went trailing from the room, still wiping tears from her eyes. Margaret's few minutes alone were far from pleasant. What a fool she had been to allow herself to be taken in so completely. Apparently Tim hadn't killed Phil. Vivian certainly wouldn't have dropped the charge if she could possibly make it stick.

The records would straighten it all out in a few minutes at any rate. But nothing could ever straighten out what she had done to Tim.

When Vivian came back she went to the phonograph with two more wax disks in her hand.

"I only said Tim did it, to get rid of you," she repeated again. "These will show you exactly how—"

IT WAS then that the terrace door clicked and swung open abruptly. For a moment Margaret didn't even recognize the man who walked into the room. A hat was pulled low over his eyes, an ugly grin twisted his lips.

Then he spoke, and it was Lew Bonner's

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voice! Lew, with a grim automatic clenched in one hand.

"Okay, Vivian, hand them over," he ordered, taking the records from her paralyzed fingers and placing them carefully on the mantel beside him. "I always figured you'd sell me out some day, just as you threw me overboard when you began to take an interest in Tim Corbin. I still don't understand the record stunt. But I knew that scream of yours when I heard it the other night. And when the two of you began chasing around with more records tonight I decided to investigate."

"Lew, shut up, you fool!" Vivian blazed as her wits began to work again. "I'm not selling you out. I didn't intend—"

She broke off abruptly. Then her voice dropped to the deliberately persuasive tone Margaret had heard her use before with such good effect.

"I know what this is all about, Lew. You think I killed him too, and you're trying to protect me. It's nice of you to want to do it, after the way I treated you. But why should anyone take the blame for Phil's death when it was just an accident? I was going to play those records for Miss Madison to prove to her that he tripped over the rug and fell."

But Margaret knew it was too late to prove anything. So did Lew Bonner. His blundering remarks had been a complete confession.

"Sit down," he ordered, waving Vivian to a chair near Margaret. "You've pushed me around with that wheedling voice of yours for the last time. I have a score to even with both of you, and it will be laid to the battle you've been staging over Corbin. 'Murder and suicide' they call it. But they'll never be sure who killed who."

He was nerving himself for the job as he talked, his back still turned to the terrace door. His own voice covered the sound as it opened again. But the blaze of frantic hope in Vivian's eyes was like a shouted warning.

He whirled to meet Tim Corbin's headlong plunge. But Tim's fist lashed out with a lightning crack, his other hand grabbing the gun at the same time and twisting it

free. Lew went down in a sprawling heap.

"Good work," a familiar voice drawled.

Margaret looked up to discover Grant standing in the hall doorway. How both he and Tim had happened to arrive at the same time, one at each door, was more than her numbed brain could figure out.

Grant strolled forward, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, and leaned down to tie Lew's wrists together. Tim left the job to him and headed for the telephone without a glance at either of the girls.

"Better come to the Owens place, Sheriff," Tim said when his connection had been made. "You'll be interested in what's going on here I think."

He replaced the phone then and turned to Vivian.

"If you have any more of those records, bring them out. And I mean all of them this time."

The tone of his voice made Margaret shiver. She hadn't known it could hold that steely ring.

Even Grant paid no attention to her except to take the two records she still held and place them on the table with the two from the mantel. When Vivian returned a moment later she added one more to the growing stack—five in all.

THE sheriff arrived then, a lean, shrewd old man who studied Lew Bonner thoughtfully for a moment before he hoisted him, partially conscious now, into a chair.

"He seems to be the accident that happened to Phil Owens," Tim explained drily. "We caught up with him just as he was on the point of adding two more to the list to keep the truth from leaking out. You see, Grant Page came to me this evening with a story of some blackmailing Vivian was trying to do with a bunch of records she claims were made the night of Phil's death. We decided to talk to her about them, and spotted Lew on the side terrace when we drove up. He got in before we could reach him, so we had to get a little rough. The records will undoubtedly explain why he wanted them so badly."

The sheriff asked a few questions, then picked up the records and took them to the

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phonograph. He played them, one after another.

The story they told was similar to the one Vivian had first told Margaret. But it was Lew who came through the door just as the first record ended. And his intentions were evidently as much to incriminate Vivian, so Phil would divorce her, as to rescue her.

The fight was ugly and about even until Lew managed to catch Phil off balance. When it was over Vivian had frantically urged Lew to leave, telling him there would be less scandal if she faced it alone. But apparently it was more a matter of picking the person with whom she wished to be involved.

As soon as Lew was gone she had phoned Tim, asking him to come at once. When he arrived she told him Phil had tripped and fallen but she was afraid she would be accused of killing him. She wanted Tim to say they had been out together and found Phil that way when they came in.

His refusal was curt, but so formal that it denied anything more than a casual friendship between them. When the last record arrived, with Tim for some reason taking pity on her and suggesting the disposal of Phil's body, it didn't sound like the confession of guilt it had seemed to be the first time Margaret heard it.

When it was finished the sheriff turned to Tim with an odd glimmer in his eyes.

"You're too smart to let any woman talk you into becoming an accessory to a killing, son. What was the idea of tangling yourself into it?"

Tim stood by the fireplace with his hands thrust deep into his pockets before he answered.

"I've only lived here a couple of years," he said finally. "But I know what the name of Owens means to the old timers of Creston. The men and women who grew up with Phil's father and grandfather, who worked for them and respected them and in time came to feel that the Owens honor and integrity was something of their own. I wasn't sure it was a killing. I thought if it was, she probably did it in self-defense. And it didn't seem to me

that either she or Phil were worth a scandal that would be a humiliation to the town and a personal hurt to so many."

The sheriff nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean. A lot of people worried over Phil the third like he was a son of their own, and hoped he'd outgrow his hell-raising in time. But they were beginning to doubt it. There ought to be some way we can manage this without airing too much dirt. We might have a time making first degree stick anyway, and Lew there is going to want to save his hide. If he'll plead to a lighter rap, and if Page doesn't feel that his duty to his public—"

GRANT lifted a casual hand. "There's always a new story in the making, Sheriff, to take the place of one that folds up. Tim, if you'll see Margaret back to the hotel I'll help the sheriff deliver his prisoner down to the jail."

Tim came toward her then, and she rose without looking at him to walk with him out to the car.

They were half way to the hotel when he turned suddenly into a quiet side street and stopped the car in the shadows there. Then he reached out to put his hand on her shoulder.

"About that date for Saturday, Margaret. There isn't much time left—"

"Tim! But, Tim—" she gasped.

He laughed softly as he gathered her into his arms.

"There aren't going to be any buts this time, darling. Or any ifs or ands. Oh, I'll admit you had me floored for a while this evening. But I was already on my way back to have it out with you when I met Grant coming to hunt me up."

"Then you—you know—? He told you—"

"I knew as soon as the first jolt wore off that you and Grant simply aren't that kind of people. Maybe, if we try trusting our hearts after this—Oh, darling, darling—"

There wasn't any more laughter in his voice now, or anything casual about the way he kissed her. It was as sincere and promising as the answer she gave.

Hard To Forget

By Michael King



"In a tough spot of some sort?"
Hugh asked.

PAT DOYLE had escaped what seemed like sure death so many times that a superstition had arisen about her in Hollywood. Half the people said she bore a charmed life. The other half argued that she was like a cat and had nine lives to lose. All of them agreed that nothing could kill Pat.

But something — or someone — could wreck her career as the most fearless stunt girl in the pictures. And someone or something had.

It didn't even make the headlines. Planes that crashed during the making of an aviation picture and stunt girls who hover for weeks between life and death aren't sensational news items in Hollywood. Not even the mystery of the missing pilot caused more than a momentary stir.

If Pat had been conscious enough to talk, there might have been an investigation. But by the time she had fought her way slowly and grimly back to reality, the whole thing had become insignificant.

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Insignificant, that is, to everybody except Pat. She was trying desperately now not to burst into nervous tears. For the representative from the studio that had hired her was saying, too smoothly, too suavely, "I don't need to tell you how sorry the studio is about your accident, Miss Doyle. They have already paid your hospital bills up to date. This extra thousand dollars will give you time to take a nice long vacation and get on your feet."

Pat picked up a cigarette and put it down again because her fingers were shaking so. "There's no reason why the studio should give me a thousand dollars," she said quietly. "I can go back to work in a few weeks."

The man's eyes avoided hers. "We've talked to the doctor, and he told us very emphatically that you—you shouldn't work for months." And at Pat's shocked cry of protest, he went on, "Now don't get upset, please Miss Doyle. He assured us that you're perfectly sound physically, but he said it would be a long time before your—your nerves could stand the strain of stunting again."

"What you're trying to say is that I'm washed up, isn't it?" Pat said with a brave, light scorn. Her bright head lifted proudly, gallantly. "But what makes the studio so sure that I'd be afraid, before they've even given me a chance to prove that I'm not?"

THE MAN picked up his hat, twisting it uncertainly. Then, as if realizing there was no easy way out, he said brutally, "Would you be willing to go up in a plane—on a stormy night—?"

He didn't go on. There wasn't any need to. For Pat's wildly dilated eyes were no longer seeing him. They were traveling back into a dangerously black sky. The moon had been suddenly swallowed by banks of dark clouds, and the air was filled with the ominous rumble of thunder. The earth was a million miles away.

Somewhere down there, cameras had been getting ready to grind. Radios had been set up to tell Pat the exact moment she should take a parachute jump from the plane. But before those commands had

had time to come through, the storm had broken with the terrifying swiftness of a jungle animal leaping out of hiding onto its prey.

At first Pat hadn't been particularly upset. Unexpected storms were minor dangers in the life of a girl who had made her living for two years by pulling dangerous stunts that the stars were afraid to do. Her heart hadn't even trembled as the plane had dropped, risen again, lurched crazily.

By a white streak of lightning, she had seen the helmeted pilot in front of her. More fascinated than frightened, she had watched his dexterous manipulation of the controls. She hadn't been able to see his face—she had never seen it, as a matter of fact, but from the angle of his head, she had known that he was scanning the instrument board anxiously. However she knew these men who piloted stunt planes, knew they were to be trusted to their last breath to bring their ship through safely.

It had been this false confidence that had landed her in the city hospital.

Blinded by the too brilliant flare of the lightning, she had covered her face with her hands. It was only when a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach had warned her that the plane was dropping that she had pulled them away. And then it had been too late.

For then she had been alone in the plane! Her pilot had committed the unforgivable sin in the flying world. He had bailed out, leaving his plane and its helpless passenger to go crashing to earth.

Unluckily for him, the passenger had been Pat Doyle, the girl nothing could kill. Six weeks later she was alive—alive and holding in her hands the power to brand him from one end of the earth to the other as a criminal coward.

Like a person still half lost in a dream, Pat stared down at her hands. Slowly she realized that she was holding a crumpled check—a check for one thousand dollars, a check that was paying her off because she had lost her nerve. She, who had been the most fearless stunt girl in the show business.

Suddenly she was sobbing, wildly, hys-

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terically. But even in the midst of those sobs that brought the nurse hurrying into the room, she was beginning to plan.

Most of the check from the studio, she decided, would go to her younger sister, Kathie, to help her finish her education. What was left would carry Pat along for a while, at least until she had managed to pay Hugh Wallace back for the horrible, cowardly thing he had done to her!

HER FIRST thought was to go straight to whatever airport Hugh Wallace was working for now and shout so the whole world would hear, "You're a coward, a disgrace to the flying uniform you're wearing!"

But when she heard that Hugh had called at the hospital time after time, she decided that that would be letting him off too easy. Since he had had the nerve to try and see her, he would probably also have the effrontery to lie about what had happened. It would be her word against his, with a fifty-fifty break on which one would be believed.

It was then that she decided to meet him under an assumed name. Once she had a chance really to know him, she could find his vulnerable spot and strike at him as cruelly and swiftly as he had struck at her.

Fortunately there was no danger of his recognizing her. The night of the crash she had been wearing a black wig and a heavy, dark makeup. Weeks in the hospital had faded her skin to a delicate ivory. Her hair, which she wore in a long bob with a heavy bang to cover the scar on her forehead, was the color of wheat.

Meeting him, however, was not as simple as she had expected. For by the time she had left the hospital, she found that Hugh had left Hollywood. The officials at the airport he had worked for didn't know where he had gone, and their indifferent attitude said plainly that they cared less. One crazy pilot more or less meant nothing in their lives.

It was only by hiring a private detective that Pat discovered that Hugh Wallace was doing commercial flying in a city in Texas. A week later she had checked into

the same hotel where he was staying, and was on her way to the flying field where he was employed.

Her smile was dazzlingly gay as she said to the airport information clerk, "Has Mr. Hugh Wallace come in yet?"

"He came in about half an hour ago," the clerk replied. "But, he added, seeing the way her smile faded, "you might try the bar down the road. He sometimes stops in there for a drink on his way home."

Even if he hadn't still been in flying clothes, Pat would have known which of the men sitting at the bar was Hugh Wallace. There was something unmistakable about aviators, Pat felt; they were all so lean and bronzed and reckless. And Hugh Wallace was typical of them all, no matter how cowardly he might be at heart. The other men in the bar obviously weren't aviators.

Looking at him, a wave of such vivid remembrance of that night swept over her that she had to lean against the wall for support. Then, marvelling that her legs could still hold her, she walked over to the stool next to Hugh.

"A double scotch," she said to the bartender, in her husky voice.

It was not a ladylike drink. Even less ladylike was the way she gulped it down. But it had the effect she had counted on.

FOR HUGH, who had been staring morosely into the bar mirror, turned toward her, his attention definitely caught. His mouth twisted in a smile that spoke of bitterness rather than mirth. "Don't you think that's a pretty stiff drink for such a little girl?" he drawled.

Pat, who felt as if she had swallowed liquid flame, shrugged carelessly. "Maybe," she conceded, "but—I needed it."

He looked at her more sharply, and interest flickered in his dark eyes. "In a tough spot of some sort?" he asked.

Pat didn't look at him. She didn't dare risk letting him see the contempt and loathing that was in her eyes. For weeks she had been steeling herself for this meeting, and now that it was finally happening, she felt cold and shaken.

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"Bring the lady another drink," Hugh was saying. "But make it a single scotch—and lots of soda this time."

He held out a crumpled pack of cigarettes to Pat. "Smoke?" he asked. Then, "Maybe you'd like to tell me what's wrong. Sometimes it helps to talk—even to strangers. And by the way, my name is Hugh Wallace."

At the thread of sympathy in his voice, Pat stiffened. He could be kind to a girl he thought was a perfect stranger; he hadn't given a thought to the girl he had left stranded in his plane when he had leaped out to save his own life.

The memory filled her with a blinding fury that somehow braced her nerves. Her hand was perfectly steady as she held it out for the cigarette.

"Thanks," she said lightly, as he held a match toward her. "I'm okay now."

She picked up her drink, flashed him a provocative glance above its rim. "This is going to sound like a pick-up line," she said charmingly, "but haven't we met somewhere before?"

She held her breath as she waited for some slight hint of remembrance or recognition, but he merely shook his dark head. "I never forget a face," he told her, quirk-ing one mocking eyebrow, "particularly when it belongs to a beautiful girl like you."

Then, as if he had abruptly lost interest in the conversation, he turned his attention back to his drink.

Pretending to be absorbed in her high-ball, Pat stole covert glances at his lean profile. Filled with the tense excitement she had always felt when she had been about to perform a particularly dangerous stunt, she had scarcely noticed him that night of the crash.

A THOUSAND times since, she had tried to recall what he looked like, but there had been only the hazy memory of a tall, helmeted, goggled figure. She had supposed he would be rather attractive. Most of the stunt pilots she had met were. But she had expected a weaker face—a

face that would betray some of the cowardice that lay behind it.

Then abruptly their glances met, and she saw something she had not had a chance to see before. There was torture in his eyes—the torture of a man who is trying to forget something he is ashamed to remember.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" he asked. "Maybe that's part of the typical pick-up line too, but I don't mean it that way. Something just tells me that you don't want to be alone any more than I do."

Pat's hand gripped her glass tightly. "You're right," she said slowly, with a crooked, enigmatic smile. "I don't want to think."

If she allowed herself to think, she knew she would scream out the truth. Instead, she sat across the table from him, laughing and gay and attractive as any girl spending an amusing evening with a good-looking man. And after the first sense of shock and revulsion had worn off, it wasn't unbearably hard to do. For Hugh was not only attractive to look at; his mind darted cleverly from one subject to another with a swiftness that left no time for either thought or embarrassing pauses.

By the time they had reached their coffee and cigarettes, she had almost forgotten why she was with Hugh. Then, as if to mock her for her moment of forgetfulness, horror descended swiftly and sickeningly.

For he was saying, "It's stifling in this place. Suppose I borrow a plane from a friend of mine, and see if we can't find a cool spot up near the stars."

Pat's hands flew to her white face. Her ears were roaring with the crashing of remembered thunder, and her eyes were blinded with zigzagging lightning. She was falling—falling—falling!

When she opened her eyes again, Hugh Wallace's arm was around her, and he was holding a small glass to her lips. "Drink this," he said with quiet authority. "And then, if you'll tell me where you live, I'll drive you home. You probably aren't used to the heat here."

Pat pushed him away with a shudder.

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When she spoke, her voice was tense with an agony he could not possibly understand. "It was silly of me to go out like that. I—I guess it was the heat. But I wouldn't think of putting you to the trouble of taking me home, Mr. Wallace."

He was pulling her to her feet. "The name is Hugh," he reminded her. "And—it's not any trouble."

IT WASN'T any trouble, either, for him to see her the next day and the next, and quite a few more after that. He accepted Pat's story that she was traveling for a New York magazine firm. About himself he told her nothing, except that he was piloting a mail plane back and forth across the border.

That news, at least, was a relief to Pat. For as long as he was piloting a mail plane, he wasn't endangering anyone's life but his own. And—her face went hard and bitter—his life was scarcely worth worrying about.

It was strange, with that slow flame of hatred burning in her heart, that she could be so gay and charming when she was with him. Perhaps it was the result of years in Hollywood, where everyone seemed to act the part. Or perhaps it was that Hugh Wallace was not only an expert at forgetting but equally adept at making her forget.

There were times when Pat almost cried aloud, "How can you laugh like that? How can you drink and dance and wisecrack as if you hadn't a worry in the world? Don't you even remember a stormy night and a mangled plane? Haven't you a single qualm of conscience about the hideous thing you did?"

She was experiencing one of those moments as she and Hugh drifted through a Conga in a night club on the outskirts of the city. She had never before seen him so recklessly gay, so charged with vitality.

"Having fun?" he whispered, holding her closer. "Or is it the drink that's brought those stars into your eyes?"

Before she could answer, he had danced her nearer to the long wall mirror. "Look at yourself," he commanded softly, "and

tell me if you've ever seen a lovelier lady?"

Pat stared into the mirror, but she wasn't seeing an exquisitely slim girl in a billowing dress, with flowers in her gleaming hair. She wasn't even seeing a tall man, with crisp dark hair, and teeth that flashed a white challenge against his sunburned skin. She was seeing, with eyes that had suddenly gone sick and blank, the ghost that stood between them.

Jerking away from him, she whispered, "Let's go back to the table. I'm tired."

HE WAITED till they were seated; then he leaned across the table and crushed her cold hands in his. "You were seeing a man in that mirror," he said astonishingly. "He must have hurt you very much to make you look like that, my sweet."

Pat lowered her head. A poignant protest tore from her throat. "Don't—please don't!"

"I've got to," he insisted tenderly. "I can't stand seeing that scared look come into your face. Remember the day we met? I knew then that something terrible had happened to you. I wanted to help you then. But"—a shaken, purposeful note crept into his voice, "Now I'll never stop until I have."

Slowly Pat lifted her head. "There's nothing you can do to help me," she said tonelessly. Her eyes were great dark pools. "Some day you'll understand why."

Abruptly, as if realizing the uselessness of further argument, he dropped her hands. "Bring us two more drinks," he called to the waiter. And to Pat he said, with his suddenly twisted smile, "Since I can't help you, maybe a highball will."

Just how they got outside into the garden behind the club, Pat was never quite sure. They stood under a canopy of low-hanging stars. And Hugh's arms were around her, Hugh's lips were hovering dangerously close to hers.

"If you don't want me to kiss you, say so now," he told her unsteadily, "because if I do kiss you, I'll never give up fighting for your love."

Her love! He spoke of love when her whole being was burning with hate, when

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the only emotion that was left in her was a desire to hurt him as he had hurt her.

Then, just as she was about to draw away from him, a thought as swift as the spring of a serpent flashed to her mind. Let him kiss you. Let him think you care. Then whatever you do will hurt him a hundred times worse than before.

For a fraction of time too small to be measured, Pat shrank from the thought. Then she lifted her mouth to his. It wasn't until he was kissing her, tenderly, thrillingly, inexorably, that she realized her own folly.

She wasn't just allowing Hugh to kiss her. She was kissing him back—and all the hate in the world wasn't strong enough to check the flood of flame and ecstasy that was welling from his heart into hers. She had set the trap for him, then tumbled blindly into it herself. She was the one who was being tortured. She was the one who was trembling so that he had to pick her up and carry her to a nearby bench.

"Don't be so frightened—please, dear-est," he was whispering with heartbreaking tenderness. "Don't you understand that I'd die before I'd harm you? Don't you know that I love you, that I want to marry you?"

And as Pat, burying her head against his shoulder, burst into convulsive, racking sobs, he went on trying to soothe her. "Go ahead and cry all the old pain away. There's going to be only happiness ahead. We both have things we must forget; they're over now. We're going back to New York. I've been offered a job on one of the big transport planes, and we can get a house near the airport, and—"

"Stop! Stop, I tell you!" With the strength of desperation, Pat was on her feet. At the hurt look on his face, she cried out wildly. "Let's not talk tonight! Let's go inside and celebrate our—our love!"

IF WAS daybreak when she stopped pacing the floor of her hotel room. For hours she had walked up and down sobbing, "I can't have fallen in love with him! I can't love a man who's a coward and who's made a coward out of me. It was just the

moonlight and the music. I can't let it be anything more."

But even as she argued, she knew it wasn't true. Hugh's kiss had meant everything. If she saw him again, she would break down completely, she would tell him who she was. She would beg—yes—beg him to convince her there was some explanation for his having left her stranded in the plane.

The only thing left to do was to run away before she betrayed herself. Kathie's school was just about finishing up for the spring term now; she would wire her sister to meet her at the station. Then she would write a letter to Hugh and catch the morning train for New York.

It was a ghastly trip, haunted every mile of the way by the diabolically cruel letter she had left for Hugh. To Hugh, with the memory of her passionate, frantic kisses still lingering on his lips, it must have been a staggering blow.

She should have been glad that that was so. She should have been filled with triumph that it had been so ridiculously easy to strike back at him. She had not only told him who she really was; she had warned him that if he took the promised job with the transport company, she would go to them with the whole story, convince them that he was not fit to pilot a plane carrying passengers.

Now that she had accomplished that, demanded payment in full for the debt he owed her, there was no reason why she should feel more unbearably miserable than she had ever felt in her life.

It was only by a tremendous effort that she pulled herself together when the train reached New York. She couldn't let Kathie see how she was suffering. Kathie, so lovely and happy and young, knew nothing of the bitter side of life.

As Kathie, strangely grownup and more attractive than ever, rushed forward to greet her, Pat cried gayly, "I hope you're feeling like a celebration, darling! You can tell me everything that's happened while we have dinner."

Kathie hugged her affectionately. "It's wonderful to see you, Pat," she whispered,

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almost shyly. "It's been nearly two years since we've been together. And such a lot of things have happened—such a lot of wonderful things!"

Pat shut her eyes to hold back the tears. To be so happy, so young, so thrillingly in love. It took all of dinner and most of the evening for Kathie to tell Pat about it.

The boy's name was Dan Gregory, and he was a senior at college and the most wonderful person in the world. He had given Kathie his fraternity pin and as soon as he had finished college they were going to be married.

Lost in her own rapturous thoughts, Kathie would have gone on all night if Pat hadn't said finally, "I'm tired, dearest. And we've got to get up early and look for an apartment. Besides, we've got the rest of the summer to talk."

They found the apartment and Pat found a job, but they didn't talk, at least not about Pat's problems. With Kathie so youthfully and idealistically in love, Pat felt it would have been needlessly cruel to tell her so bitter a story, to explain that men weren't always what they seemed, that men could look like Hugh, fine and strong, and be cowardly and weak inside—that they could even charm the hearts out of women who had every reason to despise them.

AND THEN, when she finally wanted to explain, it was too late. For one afternoon when Pat came home from work she found Hugh Wallace sitting in their livingroom.

Pat stared at him with eyes gone suddenly so wide and dark that they seemed to be only fringed black shadows. She went whiter and stiller than a woman carved of ice. Frenzy and panic tangled with incredulity in her stunned mind, leaving no room for coherent reasoning.

He was saying to Kathie, with that smile of his that older and wiser women had found irresistible, "I'm really glad your sister wasn't in when I came. It's given us time to get acquainted. And I hope that you like me as much as I like you, Kathie, because—"

It was at the strangled sound from Pat that Kathie looked up. "Pat!" she cried in fright. She rushed across the room, putting a steadying arm around Pat's swaying figure. "You're ill again. Oh, I knew I shouldn't have let you take that job."

Pat brushed her aside. "Why did you come here?" through stiffened scornful lips she hurled the words at Hugh. "Didn't—didn't my letter make it clear that I hate you, despise you, never want to see you again?"

Only his eyes were alive and tortured in the controlled mask that was his face. "I know that as Pat Doyle you do hate me," he told her in a voice that was curiously toneless. "You have—every right to." There was bitterness and a desperate urgency under his next words. "But I had to find you. I had to try to make you believe that—"

Pat's hysterical laughter cut through his words like a hurled dagger. She lifted stiff, icy hands then and pushed the golden bangs from her forehead. Against her dreadful pallor the ugly, jagged scar stood out like a crimson brand.

"Do you think anything you could say would make me believe you're not responsible for that?"

A muscle tightened convulsively along the line of his set jaw. "I won't ever try to make you believe that I'm not responsible," he told her in that some toneless voice. "I am. But if you knew the whole story, perhaps—"

"Get out!" she cried furiously. "Get out of here!" At his admission of guilt, something had snapped in Pat. It was only then that she had realized how much some small part of her had been secretly hoping against hope, hoping against knowledge, that he might not be guilty. She hardly knew that she was screaming, "Remember—if you ever dare to pilot a passenger plane again, I'll ruin you, do you hear? I'll ruin you!"

Then she ran blindly from the room.

Even later, when Kathie tried to question her, tried to find out something of what had happened, Pat couldn't talk about it. At last, in a strange, dead voice

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that admitted of no further discussion, she said, "Don't ever mention Hugh Wallace's name to me, Kathie. He's part of my life I want to forget."

Only, forgetting was impossible. The memory of his kiss walked like a ghost at her side night and day.

TO ESCAPE it, she flung herself madly into her job with a movie publicity office, working all day and frequently most of the evening. It gave her little time to spend with Kathie, but fortunately her sister had a group of young college friends who seemed to be keeping her busy. At least that was what Pat thought, until the night she heard Kathie saying goodby to someone out in the hall.

By the time she had flung open the door, the man was gone. But it took only one look at her sister's guilty expression to tell Pat that her fantastic suspicion had been correct.

And when she forced herself to say quietly, "That was Hugh Wallace, wasn't it?" Kathie merely shrugged.

Pat walked over to the livingroom table and picked up a cigarette. She mustn't fly into a rage, she told herself. She waited until her outraged nerves had stopped quivering, and then she asked, "Have you been seeing much of him?"

Kathie took off her velvet evening wrap. In her silver clinging dress, her flyaway hair a bright halo about her small, proud head, she looked so young and unafraid that tears stung Pat's eyes. Once—a million years ago—she had looked like that.

Once she too would have said, as Kathie was saying, "I think you're mistaken about Hugh, Pat. He couldn't do anything bad. He's—the finest man I've ever met."

"What about your Dan?" Pat reminded her evenly.

"Oh—Dan's all right," Kathie answered in a muffled voice, "but he's just a kid. Hugh's different. I still can't understand what he sees in me. But I honestly think he's falling—really and truly, I mean."

Pat wondered how she kept herself from crying out, "Don't you ever dare see that man again; I've risked my life so that you

could be happy and sheltered. Do you think I'm going to let you go ahead and betray everything I've done for you?"

She walked over and put a shaking hand on Kathie's shoulder. "Do you love me, Kathie?" she asked gently. And when Kathie nodded, Pat said very very slowly, "Then—will you promise me not to see Hugh Wallace again?"

Kathie jumped up, avoiding Pat's desperate eyes. "I can't promise that, Pat," she said very low. "You just don't understand, but I can't—"

WHEN Pat finished her work the next day, she went straight to the hotel where Kathie had told her Hugh was living. He was waiting in the lobby as she pushed through the revolving doors.

Without waiting for her to speak, he led her into the cocktail lounge. "Bring the lady a Scotch and soda. And I'll have a glass of plain ginger ale," he told the waiter who seated them.

Then he said abruptly, "You came to see me about Kathie, didn't you? Well"—he paused significantly—"what do you intend to do about it?"

Her gaze didn't waver under the ironic challenge of his. "You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you," she retorted. Then her mouth set determinedly, and she lifted her head. "But if Kathie sees you again, I'm going to take the money they paid me for my"—she hesitated over the word, and undertones of contempt ran through her voice—"accident, and send her away to visit some friends of ours."

"That's not a bad idea," he commented with cruel casualness: "I wouldn't mind a change myself. It ought to be fun, showing a kid like Kathie the town."

Pat's face went white. "You mean—you'd actually follow her?"

His shoulders lifted. "Why not? I've got a little money. You've made it impossible for me to get the sort of job I want, so what would there be to keep me here? As a matter of fact," he added thoughtfully, "I might even marry Kathie if we had fun enough."

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"But you don't love her!" The words seemed torn from Pat.

His face had a curious expression, half grim, half triumphant. "I've loved only one woman in my life," he said, "but, you see, she happens to hate me, so I might as well take what I can get."

Pat stared down at her tightly clasped hands. She didn't need to look at his set face to know that he actually meant it. She had found his vulnerable spot, and had struck. Now he had found hers, and was diabolically striking back.

Still, cold, apprehension crept into her heart. "You're a very clever man, Hugh," she said at last, "clever enough to have dazzled Kathie so that she won't even believe my story. But—you must have had some reason for doing it." Her eyes narrowed. "What is it you want?" she asked quietly.

He took a cigarette, and lingered maddeningly over lighting it. With his gaze still concentrated on it, he said, "I want you to go up in a plane with me—tonight. I can hire a private one at the airport." He shot her a keen glance. "If we leave now, we'll have plenty of time to make arrangements."

Pat put both hands to her throat, as if by her touch she could ease its unbearable tightness. She thought she had been prepared to face any price he asked for Kathie's happiness, but the cruelty of the thing he was suggesting numbed her completely.

Her voice was unbelievably calm as she said, "And suppose I did do that—what proof would I have that you'd let Kathie alone?"

Their glances clashed for a moment.

"None at all," he told her coldly, "except that I promise. And I've never broken a promise in my life."

Pat rose, while she still could. Her voice was dull and toneless as she said, "You don't leave me much choice. Let's go."

THEY didn't speak on their way to the airport. Hugh busied himself with driving through the heavy evening traffic. Pat huddled numbly in her corner of the

car, like a small, terrified shadow that was trying to disappear entirely.

She wasn't thinking, wasn't trying to figure out why Hugh should want to torture her this way. She was saying over and over to herself, "It will be all over in an hour. Even if we crash, he will crash with me. And Kathie will be safe—Kathie will be safe!"

But when she heard the whir of propellers, saw the plane that was to carry her and Hugh up into that horrible black sky, she swayed and might have fallen if Hugh hadn't caught her.

He lifted her head with a strong hand, forced her eyes to meet his. Then he said in a voice that was suddenly shaken and heartbreakingly tender, "Don't look like that, Pat. I'm not going to harm you. I'll bring you back safely. That's a promise."

Then, as if her cold, quivering mouth were an irresistible magnet, his firm, warm one closed down on it. He held it there for a long, long time. Then, lifting his head, he whispered hoarsely, "Remember—I love you."

Neither the words nor the kiss reached through Pat's terror. She, who had once laughed at the idea of people being afraid, was now the victim of a frantic, mad fear.

Later, she had no memory of getting into the plane or of leaving the ground. She didn't even know how long they had been flying before she opened her eyes and stared around her blankly, incredulously.

Because a miracle had happened. Her hands had stopped shaking. Her heart was beating in a perfectly normal rhythm. And—this the most incredible miracle of all—she was actually enjoying it. It was as though months had been erased and she were back in Hollywood again, laughing at danger, getting the thrills out of her hazardous job.

In front of her she could see Hugh's helmeted head, and she could watch his dexterous manipulation of the controls. And then, as she watched, her eyes grew wider and wider. The set of his head, the way his hands moved from this spot to that, the way he scanned the instrument board, evoked no hint of memory. Photographed

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on her mind as every detail of the night of the crash was, she knew there was no doubt of a mistake.

Hugh had not been piloting her plane the night of the crash!

SHE WAS still struggling wildly and dazedly to fit that knowledge into his own blanket admission of guilt, when they taxied back to the field. Her disturbance and bewilderment were etched in every line of her face, as he helped her to alight.

When he handed her a flask of brandy, she pushed it aside. "I don't need it. I'm not frightened. I'm just so—happy—I want to cry!"

His own face looked ten years younger as he led her over to the car. "Then it worked!" he cried exultantly. "I told Kathie it would. I told her that if you could only be made to go up in a plane once again, you'd be yourself. It's like getting back on horseback after you've had a bad fall. Once the first fear has passed —"

"Wait!" Pat's fingers tightened about his arm. "You mean that you and Kathie planned this together?"

Then, realizing that that was completely unimportant in the face of the staggering discovery she had just made, she demanded, "Why did you let me think you had been piloting the plane that night?"

Some of the glow faded from his face. "Because I should have been, Pat. To this day, not even the company I worked for knows that I wasn't. It—it isn't going to be easy to explain, but I'll try."

Bit by bit the picture became clear. And Pat could see why it wasn't easy for him to tell. Hugh had been tight the night of the crash. Bored and restless, fed up with Hollywood, he had wandered into a friend's cocktail party late that afternoon. Everybody had drunk a great deal, and Hugh's host had insisted that he keep up with the rest.

When Hugh had finally arrived at the airport, his best friend had ordered him to go home, insisting that he would take his place. He was of the same general build as

Hugh, and was sure he could get away with it. Both of them knew that Hugh would be fired if he were caught drinking during working hours.

"He didn't mean to bail out on you." Hugh's voice and eyes begged Pat to believe it, as he himself believed it. "He swore he yelled to you to jump, and that in the high wind you just didn't hear him. Then when the wing snapped, he knew there wasn't a second to lose. And he didn't dare crash. You see, he was married, and had a very young baby that was ill, and his wife and baby needed him."

When the substitute pilot had come to Hugh with the story of what had happened, explaining that the parachute had carried him a long distance from the accident, Hugh had told him that he would take full responsibility. In all justice, he had felt that the responsibility was his. That was why he had tried to see Pat at the hospital. That was why he had been tortured with futile remorse when he discovered she had gone without leaving any address. That was why he had hired a detective to find her after she had left Texas and he had discovered her identity through her note—at least, that was one of the reasons.

"Then when you threw that scene in your apartment, I knew you would never believe me. The only hope of proving it was to give you a chance to see for yourself. I had to let Kathie in on the story. I had to convince her that the only way to save you was to restore your own nerve and clear, honest thinking. As long as you hated me so violently—"

Pat pressed gentle, silencing fingers against his lips. "Let's not talk about it any more," she begged huskily. "We've both been too unhappy—too long."

Her arms slipped around his neck. "Do you think we could ever—forget?" she whispered.

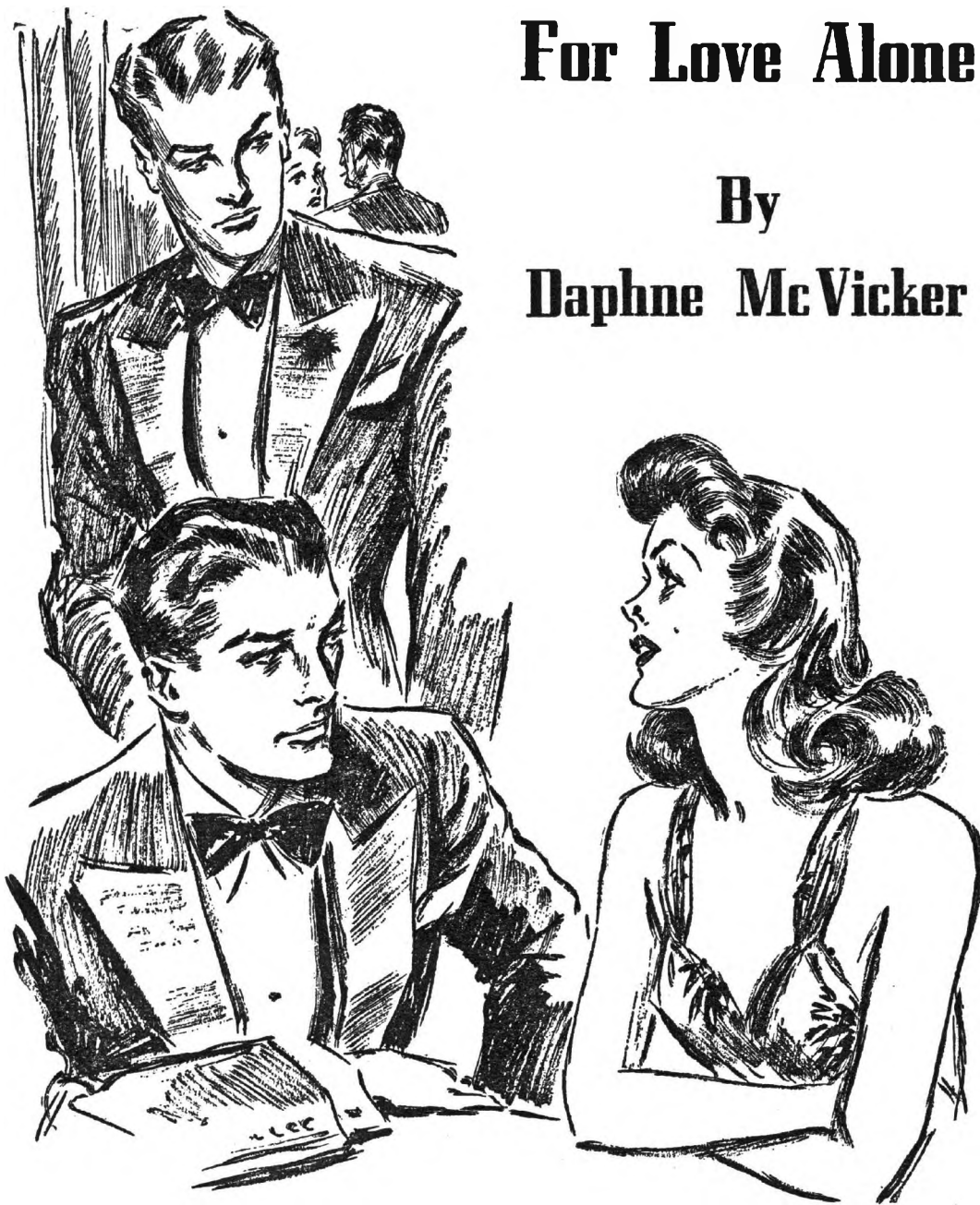
Hugh answered her in the only way possible. He kissed her. If that other kiss in the garden had been promise, this was both promise and fulfillment.

And it was a wonderful way of forgetting, so they kissed again.

For Love Alone

By

Daphne McVicker



"Science is working on a new material for bridegrooms to reduce the shortage due to military priorities," Anice said hysterically.

AM I too happy? Anice wondered. An odd little chill ran over her, making her pull her plaid reversible together again for a moment around her shoulders. She had come swinging into the office and paused on the threshold smiling and blushing. Because everybody in the office began tapping out "Here comes the bride". Pencils, typewriters, Mary Wayne singing, the office boy playing a hastily

produced bazooka. "That's me," Anice said gayly, reaching to unfasten her coat. And then had come the chill.

Could you be too happy? Too conscious that you looked pretty in a slouched green hat and green gauntlet gloves that echoed one of the colors of your plaid coat? Too sure that your brown curls were exactly right tumbled across your shoulders, and that big brown eyes with black lashes were

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very effective above a green blouse? Too certain that everybody loved and admired you and was delighted that you were going to be married right away to the most wonderful man in the world?

Not everybody, Anice corrected, pulling out her chair with careful attention to its pet splinter that clawed for her nylon stockings. Lisa Graham was bending close over her drawing board paying no attention at all to the wedding march. And Dick Baird was tilted back scowling, with his hat low over his eyes.

Dick liked to look like a movie newspaperman, but it was Johnny who acted like one. Johnny, Anice's heart thumped at the mere mention of his name. Oh, no wonder poor Lisa hated Anice. Lisa had been a friend of Johnny's ailing mother, and had been in and out of Johnny's apartment as though she lived there. Lisa had expected to marry Johnny herself.

As if she could! From the first morning that Anice had established herself at the fashion-copy-writer's desk in the newsroom, something electric and blazing had flashed straight from her to the gay blond boy who had strolled into the room, hatless and grinning, and said, "Are they installing those at all the desks? I'll have one at mine." When the city editor introduced them, Johnny said, "I'm the star reporter and if you want to hitch your wagon to me, it will be all right. In fact we'll make it a lunch wagon."

SO THEY had lunch that first day and every day after that that one or the other of them didn't have a business date. Or Johnny's mother didn't have to see him.

Anice sighed, biting her pencil while she hunted for a phrase to describe fashions without using the word "priorities." Johnny's mother was—well, better not think about it. She wasn't well, and she'd had all of Johnny's time and thoughts for nearly all of his twenty-eight years, Anice gathered. She was one of these dainty, Dresden china women, spoiled by her family, and then a doting husband, and then, as a widowed mother, fussed over by a stalwart son. But you had to have

one flaw in your happiness Anice decided again, and this might as well be it.

As for Lisa who loved Johnny, and Dick who had planned to love Anice, well it was too bad about them, but they'd just have to get over it. Because Anice and Johnny were getting married at a great, bang-up church affair, complete with trimmings, exactly a week from tomorrow.

Anice's Aunt Lou had mailed out huge, square engraved invitations on a sinfully lavish array of paper. Aunt Lou was the only family Anice had had since the plane accident had taken her father and mother. And Aunt Lou liked things fancy. But in this particular, Anice agreed with her.

"Do you mind, Lover?" Anice had asked Johnny anxiously, curled up into a big squashy chair with him in Aunt Lou's dark library. "Do you mind a fency-schmensy wedding with all the embroidery? Because I sort of want one."

"Who, me?" he inquired indignantly. "Why should I mind? Has there ever been seen a more beautiful thing than I'll be in my cut-away and pearl grey pants? Would it be right for me to deprive the world of such a treat?"

She snuggled closer. Neither she nor Johnny were going to mention the fact that Anice had a memory to erase. But she knew that he understood. That other marriage—that ugly little hole-and-corner business, with a shivering little young girl and a scowling black-browed boy, whispering answers to a mustached justice-of-the-peace in a dirty little office. That had to be forgotten, blotted out.

Of course she'd told Johnny, the first time he kissed her. "Wait, dear—maybe you won't like me. Maybe I'll all spoiled." But he'd laughed at her for that. "So you had a school girl crush and eloped, and your family had it annulled before you'd spent a night together. Honey, did you think I'd order you out of my sight for a past like that? It was a nasty break for a kid, and I'm sorry you had it to go through with. So let's not ever mention it again, hey?"

So they hadn't. Nobody mentioned why her bridal clothes were to be pastel pink

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instead of white. Most people thought it was a fashion-writer's whim. But Anice was deeply, secretly stirred at the thought of a church fragrant with blossoms, of a wedding march booming out from a resonant organ, of a bridal veil and a carpeted aisle.

Where is Johnny? Anice wondered suddenly. She felt a need to see him, if only at his typewriter pounding out copy. If only to watch his long brown hands flashing, and to see the piece of blond hair that stuck straight up from the crown of his head. Anice looked around and Dick Baird's grey eyes caught hers and held them for a long unhappy moment.

It really was too bad about Dick. When Anice came here to Morland, she'd been an orphan, alone, frightened, miserable. Aunt Lou's huge old house was grim. She missed the gay friendliness of the little town where she'd been society editor and fashion writer and half of the other things on the little paper. She terribly missed her father and mother. Richard Baird was a friend, she'd met him once when he visited in her home town. She telephoned him and in two weeks he had got her a job on his own paper, and was taking her to the night spots around town and introducing her to other young people.

AND FALLING in love with her, Anice was afraid. It hadn't got said in words, fortunately. But Dick's bleak eyes said it, and the hard line of his mouth.

I want Johnny, Anice thought again. It was queer about today. Every other day for so long had been a singing one, rich with happiness. But there'd been an odd weight on her mind this morning. It needed Johnny to make it go away.

Dick came over and stood by her desk.

"Looking for something?" he asked her.

"A substitute word for 'substitute'?" Anice told him airily. "Know any?"

"I'm not in favor of substitutes." Dick's voice was harsh and again a queer, long shiver went over Anice. Oh, what a queer, painful sort of day. Where *was* Johnny?

"Better tell the fair-haired boy to keep daylight-saving-time," Dick's voice echoed

her thoughts. "Star reporter and all, the Old Man doesn't like having to hunt his men. He's asked for Johnny a dozen times this morning. Must have been quite a binge you had last night. Lisa has black rings around her eyes, and when I met her with Johnny at the Greek's last night, it was only midnight then."

Why, how very odd! Anice's eyes flashed across to Lisa's drawing board and got back a look so bitter, so black and dangerous and hating, that she closed her own lids for a moment in frightened surprise. But—last night? Johnny had left her early, saying that he had to write a chapter of the great American novel and get to bed. He'd held her for a long, long kiss, and started off and then come back for another one.

He couldn't have been at the Greek's with Lisa, because he'd left her at ten-thirty and gone home. Gone home? She squared the shoulders of her silk jersey blouse and tossed back her hair. Certainly he'd gone home. Dick was trying to make her believe things. And nothing on earth could make her suspect Johnny of being anything but straight-forward.

The telephone rang and Tom Harvey answered it. She listened idly, at first, then with tightening attention. Harvey said, "Johnny? Where the dev— Say— He *what*? He tried what? You're cuckoo, you're batty— He shot— Oh, for the love of Lady Esther! Sure we'll be over. Right away!"

He rose, jerking his bald head toward Dick, and Dick went to him. They whispered together and then they disappeared into the editor's room. And suddenly that door swung open, and Harvey, Dick, and the Chief himself, Royce Carter, emerged.

THE OUTER door closed on them and a great clatter of footsteps sounded down the rickety stairs outside. And while Anice sat there stunned, her throat a dull ache and her heart pounding with panic, Betty Tait, the editor's secretary, came out into the city room.

She passed Anice and went over to Lisa, her eyes round blobs of wonder.

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"Lisa, did you hear that? Has everybody gone nuts? They said that Johnny Peyton is at the Mansion House, and that he tried to commit suicide. That he's shot himself. The chief and the other fellows are rushing over to get him. What is it all about?"

Lisa's drawing board toppled. She came to her feet, one long, slithering motion of her richly curved body. Her great black eyes were glinting and her face was a white mask.

"I'm not surprised," Lisa said softly. "I'm not surprised. I'll have to go; he'll want me."

It was like some terrible movie, turned suddenly from gay drawing room comedy to tragedy. It couldn't be happening but it was. The clotted little groups whispering, the awed glances toward Anice, the telephone ringing and ringing.

And then the door opened again and the three men came in. One glance from Royce Carter arranged the room as though he'd tilted a board and rolled little balls into their sockets. The whispering died. Typewriters began to click.

But Anice got up, forcing her legs that were heavy and dragging as in a dream and went over to Dick Baird.

"Dick, what was it? What's it all about?"

His grey eyes lingered on her a moment, thoughtful. Then he looked past her to Lisa.

"Lisa, could you go over to Johnny's apartment for a little while? He asked me to send you."

Anice would long remember the glory in Lisa's eyes.

What did you do now, Anice herself wondered, typing briskly away and refraining from reading the gibberish that her runaway typewriter was composing. What was the proper etiquette when your fiance tried to kill himself and then sent for another girl to comfort him? Mary Wayne did the answers to questions, perhaps Mary could tell her. "Dear Lovelorn, you say that your intended husband has sent for his former sweetheart—" Oh, this was idiotic! It's a couple of other people, Anice

thought desperately. I'm going to get out of here!

She rose and reached for the reversible.

"Got to get over and interview March's buyer about skirt length freezing," she announced to the office in a voice far too high and gay. It wasn't a surprise to find Dick beside her, she'd rather expected him to come.

They walked along the street in silence. Lots of men in uniform now, Anice found herself thinking. Johnny would be getting into uniform some day—he'd registered all over again now that men past twenty-eight were being taken. He was trying to storm past the mild eye disproportion that had kept him out of the air service when he'd tried for it. There was nothing really wrong with Johnny's gay blue eyes—there was nothing wrong with Johnny. Anice said it aloud. "There's nothing wrong with Johnny."

Dick's hand came under her arm, steering her into the small soft drink shop that they all patronized, boosting her up onto a stool.

"There's a lot!" Dick said grimly. "Snap out of all this pink wool dream, Anice—get your thoughts into khaki. You're a big girl now. Get this through your head—Johnny's supposed to be marrying you next week. And yet, this morning, he tried to shoot himself over at the Mansion House. I saw the gun there, with powder marks around it. I saw the hole in the wall."

Anice choked on a foaming swallow of coke, and tried to speak.

"But why, Dick? And why didn't they call me?"

"BECAUSE he sent for Lisa. He was like a crazy man—he wouldn't talk, or answer us. The chief squared the hotel and explained that Johnny had been trying out a new service gun, and it had gone off by mistake. And while that went on, Johnny said this to me—these are his words. 'Get Lisa Graham for me, Dick, ask her to meet me at my apartment right away, will you? I need her.' And that's all he'd say to any of us."

Anice pushed back a curl nervously.

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"He must have had some reason for that."

"Sure he did. Anice, get wise to things. You're a new toy. Johnny and Lisa have been that way for years. I've seen her cover up for him when he was at home with hangovers. She waits on that whining mother of his like a nursemaid with a whimpery baby. You came into the picture, and you were new and gorgeous, and Johnny isn't stable. He swung over. But he couldn't take it when it came to wedding lines. He'd see bars, Johnny would. So he tried to kill himself, and then he sent for Lisa, and by now he's weeping out the whole thing on her shoulder."

It sounded plausible. Only it just wasn't true. Anice knew it wasn't, through the fog of terror that was throttling her. If Johnny had been like that she couldn't have loved him. Wild, he was, he'd said so. Wary of cages, yes. But her love wouldn't be a cage, he knew that.

"I don't believe any of it," Anice said steadily. "I'm going over to March's, Dick. And do my column afterwards. And then I'm going home and wait for Johnny to call."

That was what she did. She was in Aunt Lou's dark house at eight o'clock that night, waiting.

She had bathed in the giant mahogany-rimmed tub, sousing in clouds of verbena bath salts. And then she had dressed in frilly, foamy underthings, and finally in a brand new, swinging, short dinner frock, a white marquissette printed with huge crimson roses. Anice was a tailored girl—she looked like the covers on collegiate fashion magazines, of long legged girls with sport coats hanging open over baggy sweaters. But somehow tonight she felt uneasy and wrong. Lisa had the curves, and the dripping looks that went with sultry black chiffons and gleaming furs. Maybe Johnny really liked that better. Maybe Johnny found her hard, after all, and angular. Maybe he wanted to be—lured.

Scarlet dipped into Anice's cheeks at the thought, but she tilted her chin bravely. If he wanted allure, he'd get it from her.

She wasn't one to hold back. And if he came—*when* he came, tonight—she was going to make him know what she felt for him.

"I THINK I'll go to the Red Cross meeting," Aunt Lou said, poking an iron grey marcel through the double doors. "Want to come with me, Anice or—oh, you're dressed. Is Johnny coming?"

"Yes, he is," Anice said bravely.

Because he must! She went over to the big grand piano and brushed the yellow keys, tinkling out a cruel, hurting little blues melody. "Since you went away—" No, not that. Something brave and gay. "From the Halls of Montezuma—" That was the music for Johnny, who was trying to get a pilot's job in the Marines.

By eleven o'clock, she was curled in a forlorn heap on one corner of the slippery, upholstered divan. It was raining outside—thin, sharp pencil spatters of rain, clattering against the window.

Aunt Lou had come in and tiptoed up to bed, not disturbing the closed double doors to the parlor where she thought Anice and Johnny were close together. Nobody else had come in. The telephone had not rung.

Anice got up slowly, stretching her aching limbs.

I'll call him, she decided. I've got to. His mother will wonder, but I can't help it. I've got to hear his voice.

Her heart throbbed wildly while she listened for the answer. What would she say to Mrs. Peyton if Johnny wasn't there? The sound of a woman's voice sent her spirits sagging, but then her lips parted in horrified wonder. That wasn't Mrs. Peyton's plaintive voice. It was low, throbbing, vital.

"Yes? Peyton's residence."

"Mr. John Peyton, please."

"Mr. Peyton is busy," the voice told Anice.

"But, may I speak to him?"

"Mr. Peyton cannot be disturbed," the voice said again. "He is very busy. And Mrs. Peyton is out of town. This is Miss Graham speaking, could I take a message and have Mr. Peyton call you?"

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Lisa! Of course it was Lisa, with her Southern-mansion voice, her deep, ringing, bell-like words. It was Lisa, and she was answering Johnny Peyton's telephone at midnight! And refusing to let him speak to the girl he was to marry! And she wasn't, as she often did, visiting Mrs. Peyton because Mrs. Peyton was out of town. But that was crazy—she had called Anice yesterday to ask to have a large pile of the engraved announcements sent over as she had suddenly remembered a whole other line of relatives who must be remembered.

"I've asked my niece to visit me," Mrs. Peyton had told Anice. "She can help with all these details. It means John must sleep on the sofa, but he's in so rarely these evenings!"

There was a plaintive reproach in the words that objected to the fact that Johnny was out almost every evening with Anice. And that was only yesterday. How in the world could Mrs. Peyton be out of town tonight?

With Lisa installed in Johnny's very room—Lisa with her plunging neck-line blouses that let her deep, inviting line of bosom be very clearly seen; Lisa with her long, clinging white fingers, and her deep voice and cuddly ways!

A shaking, violent anger began to bang at Anice. Whatever all this mystery was, it wasn't any fun. Whatever it was, it was infuriating and she couldn't see why she should take it. Was she going to go up to her dismal room with the rain beating against the windows, and lie awake pondering all night?

"I'm not!" Anice announced to the rain spattering on the window.

Dick Baird would be covering the basketball tournament tonight. He'd be finishing his story and getting ready to leave. She could reach him—

"**D**ICK," she was saying, a few moments later, "I'm all dressed up with no place to go. Do you have any ideas?"

Dick's ideas were good ones. They included a cab that arrived in fifteen minutes. They included a roof where a name band was throbbing out lovely dance

music. They included supper with something sizzling and steaming, in a glass bell dish over a cheery little fire, and a waiter with keys dangling around his neck, pouring something bubbling and fiery into tall, hollow stemmed glasses. The rain was far away and Dick's eyes were burning and devoted, and the dance music pulled them close.

"This," Anice told Dick recklessly, "is nice."

His arms tightened, and his cheekbones flushed.

"This," Dick said, "is heaven."

It wasn't Dick's fault, of course, that the music stopped at the instant that he spoke leaving his statement resounding through a silent room. It certainly wasn't Dick's fault that the couple nearest them turned out to be Bobby Wilton and Jennifer Crewe and that Jennifer was the gossip writer for the town tabloid, run by the rival newspaper ownership of Morland.

Jennifer giggled, pushing up close to Dick and laying a cat's claw hand on his shoulder. Jennifer was little and red-headed and thin.

"How lovely," Jennifer whispered. "And you two getting married so soon! A week from tonight, isn't it?"

Anice could see Jennifer forming sentences in her head. "What soon-to-be ailing couple were whispering sweet nothings at the Belmont roof last night—"

Bobby Wilton whistled, his malicious young face questioning.

"You've got the wrong guy, Jen. This isn't the happy bridegroom. This is Dick Baird. Two-stepping or two-timing, Baird?"

He peered back to locate their table. Of course, he thought there must be four of them and that Dick and Anice were dancing while Johnny danced with someone else.

And then, while the music lifted again, wrapping the group in its soft rhythm, the maddest thing of all happened. Johnny Peyton came toward them, the lock of hair standing upright on his head, his blue eyes miserable and his mouth a hard line.

"I just found out where you were, An,"

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he said. "Bink heard Dick making the date over the phone. I came to ask you something. We've got to put off our marriage. We can't be married next week."

"**W**HEN BIGGER scandals are made," Anice told Dick Baird gaily later, "Johnny and I will make them."

The scene at the Belmont roof was over. It had been a honey while it lasted. Dick and Anice and Johnny had gone over and sat down at a table, conscious that eyes were fastened on them as thickly as decorations on a peacock's tail. They had drunk absently from glasses that the waiter kept re-filling, and their voices had got thick and furious, and the words hadn't meant what they seemed to be saying.

"Look here!" Dick had said furiously, and Johnny had answered, "You keep out of this, pal!" and Anice had laughed hysterically and said, "Why, go right on, all of you. Decide when I'm to be married and when I'm not. Help yourselves to my life! Pass the pieces around!"

Then there was a cool moment when Johnny's blue eyes caught Anice's gaze and held it steadily.

"Anice, listen to me. There are reasons which I do not wish to discuss, why we can't be married in a week. Will you accept that statement and my sincere apologies? And then will you let me take you home?"

Maybe she would have done that, but a waiter brought a portable telephone over to the next table and the telephone reminded her of something.

A deep, resonant voice over a telephone, big black eyes full of hatred. Lisa. Lisa answering Johnny's telephone.

"That's asking a great deal, don't you think, Johnny?" she answered.

And Dick was in the picture again, his voice throbbing.

"It's asking a darned lot!" he rasped. "This happens to be my date, Johnny, and I'm taking Anice home. And if she'll do it, I'm marrying her a week from tomorrow."

Anice giggled wildly.

"A substitute for a substitute," she gurgled. "Science is working on a new material

for bridegrooms which will reduce the current shortage due to military priorities!"

And then Johnny was standing, tall and harsh and cruel and so very, very dear. Looking at her with eyes that did not see her. Leaving her.

So she danced several more times with Dick Baird and he took her home, and outside her house he put his arms around her hard and furiously.

Dick's kiss was a blazing fire against her lips. It gave her no comfort. She tried to struggle, but she was limp with exhaustion and grief, and Dick had been waiting a long time. He kissed her over and over. She could only push feebly at him, and it was not her fault that to the eyes of a smouldering, hurt man standing across the street smoking a cigarette, it appeared that she was holding him even more tightly.

After she was in her room, the revulsion came. Pouring over her in waves, shaking her body and soul. Why, Johnny had come to her asking for understanding, and she had turned him away! Johnny had asked her for unquestioning loyalty. The sort he had given her when she'd asked it—when she'd told him about that horrible child marriage.

She'd go down, now, and telephone Johnny and tell him that she'd marry him or not as he chose. She'd wipe that last misery out of his eyes, and she'd feel his arms around her and things would be all right.

She went to the telephone and dialled Johnny's number.

Lisa Graham's voice answered! Slowly, tears pouring down her face, Anice hung up the receiver.

IT WAS a different Anice who went into the office the next morning. A quiet, still girl, unsmiling, pale. She saw heads bent down over desks and realized that everybody was talking. Everybody knew about it. Lisa gave her one deep glance, and Anice met it proudly, her chin up. She looked around automatically for Johnny, but his desk was empty. Dick's look was intimate and eager, and Anice shuddered at it.

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Dick's look was filled with the consciousness of their kisses. His eyes, moving over Anice's pale yellow sweater and plaid skirt, were possessive and intimate.

Johnny was out of town on a plane, somebody told an inquirer who asked for him a few minutes later. Typing out, "Wide hems will vanish and circular skirts must take in sail," Anice listened fervidly to the voice that was mentioning Johnny's name. "Peyton went to Florida by plane this morning. Yes, we expect him back tomorrow or next day. What was that name again?"

To Florida by plane! They'd planned their honeymoon there. Even though it would be warm weather, they were going to spend the three weeks the office was allowing them, swimming in the blue water and looking at pink stucco castles above white sand. Anice had memories to erase. Alan Murray, that weak-mouthed violently passionate boy husband of hers, was from Florida, and he'd made Anice see that playground as a gingerbread heaven. She wanted to be able to think of places without thinking of Alan. Just as she'd wanted her wedding to be traditional. So that there wouldn't be any sore, aching thoughts ever again in her life. Johnny had understood that, too, but he'd said, "The exchequer won't stand much. And honey. We may have to hitch-hike down. Could you love me in a day coach?" And she'd said, "Darling, I could love you in rags, begging from door to door."

So where had Johnny got the money to fly to Florida now?

If he'd just tell me, Anice thought in a frenzy. I wouldn't mind his being in trouble, or messed up with someone—even Lisa. But it's so awful for him to shut me out when our whole lives are involved. Nobody could expect me to take that!

She looked at her typed copy and found, to her horror, that she had written her thoughts there. "Woollens will vanish from the scene but rayon still reigns—I wouldn't mind anything if you'd tell me, Johnny—"

Heavens, she'd probably sent down some such stuff to the printers already! She must shake all this off, everything in her

life depended on it. And there was apparently only one way to do it. Cut Johnny out of her existence. She drew off the shining drop of firelight in silver that was her engagement ring, and she slid it into the box inside her desk drawer. Send it back to him now, today, before she could change her mind. Make dates with Dick for all of her spare time. And forget that ever a boy had stood grinning down at her, one lock of fair hair militantly upright on his high-held head, his lips tender and eager, moving toward hers.

DICK was pretty awful about it. He kissed her all the time. In taxis, pulling her toward him, his mouth frantically taking hers. She would struggle away and he would relent, only to drag her back into a doorway when they were out and started to the bar or dance place where they were going. He would kiss her there, his hands rumpling her dress.

"Dick," she complained, "I haven't said I'd marry you. I've just said I couldn't marry Johnny. Please give me time, please let me think! I can't go from one man to another like a tennis ball over a net. Please, Dick, don't—"

But that offended him and left her with a blank, lonely night, in Aunt Lou's big dim house. Anice couldn't bear it. After one long evening there alone, she was desperate. She accepted Dick's suggestion of a ride over to a nearby town, and a theater there. When the car sagged down on a failing tire, she turned white and forlorn. Because they had to wait for a repair truck twelve miles away, and she was alone, with Dick Baird, on the side road that he'd determinedly taken.

She saw the light begin to burn in his eyes and she moved away from him.

"Dick—please—I'm tired."

He laughed. His voice was thick and blurred, and Anice remembered that he had had several drinks that the waiter had brought, one after another, in the little cocktail place where they had stopped after the theater. Suddenly she realized that she was more than just displeased. She was afraid — horribly afraid. Dick was a

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stranger, and not a pleasant one. His hands, closing down on her shoulders, were harsh and grasping, and his face, too near her own, was triumphant.

"I'll make you happy, Anice," he said, in that thick, uncertain tone. "I'll make you see what love is. We'll be married day after tomorrow, Anice. But first, I'll make sure of you. I'll make you know that you belong to me."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Anice cried out in desperation, deep inside her. This couldn't be Anice, the cool, assured fashion writer, this couldn't be she struggling out on a country road—she thought of all the ugly terms used for it—how had she ever got into this, how could it have happened?

Dick's hands at the neck of her dress, fumbling, Dick's breath hot against her—She'd walked into it because she couldn't trust her own beliefs!

"Johnny—" She screamed it, a long, desperate, pleading cry, rocking her.

"Coming," a voice said coolly.

Somebody reached over the side of the car, yanked Dick's hands away, hauling him over the door, standing him up almost lovingly as a child might stand up a rag doll. Standing him there for a long moment, before a fist smashed against his jaw, tossing him clear to the side of the road. Dick stood there for a long second, upright, glassy-eyed, staring. And then he fell forward, his face in the dust.

"Hit him again," Anice heard herself saying.

JOHNNY PEYTON laughed. He put his arms around Anice and held her against him, hard. His hair was all on end now, and his eyes were dancing. His mouth was sweet and tender and gay, and Anice felt fire blazing in her with the yearning to feel his lips.

"You little vixen," Johnny said. "Didn't you like him after you got him? And what am I supposed to do with you—a mused-up wench, off parked on a country road. What sort of a fiancée do you think you are?"

"I'm not a wench!" Anice said indignantly. "I haven't touched anything but

gingerale. I almost never do. And we weren't parking, we have a flat tire! There it is, look at it. And oh, Johnny, I've been so homesick—so heartsick! I've wanted you so frightfully."

Johnny looked thoughtfully at the tire. It was very flat—pancake flat—and the car leaned on it wearily, like a beggar on a crutch.

He was scooping Dick up now, like a sack of rags, tucking him into the car again. And then looking at Anice.

She realized what the question in his eyes meant.

Did she expect him to believe her? Believe that she was the victim of accidental circumstances?

Oh, I do, Anice thought, I expect him to believe me and I know he will. And that's love. And I wasn't big enough when he asked it of me. I didn't come through—

"Johnny," she whispered, "won't you please kiss me?"

He shook his head tantalizingly. His lips were so close and she remembered kisses—kisses entirely different from Dick's—that lighted flames of response in her while they assured and consoled and comforted her.

Her whole body ached for Johnny's touch, but he would not stir nearer. He stood leaning against the car, lighting a cigarette now with the long brown fingers, his eyes cryptic.

"I've got a car," he said finally. "I've been tailing you, as a matter of fact. I got back to town tonight—and although you do not deserve my devotion—I wanted to see you, kid. So I went to find you and was informed that you'd gone over to see a show with Baird. So I went over to the show, and found you just leaving. Like a detective in a story book, I rode around after you. Because you're *my* girl. But I lost you when Dick drove up this road—I'm not familiar with the hiding places around here."

His voice was suddenly steely with contempt and Anice shivered. He wouldn't be—oh, Johnny wouldn't hide on side roads. She'd always known that.

"So I got here apparently just in time

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to save you from the customary fate worse than death," he finished. "And now, An, I've got something to say. We can be married after all on the appointed day. That's if I want to."

"Do you, Johnny?" Anice asked him softly.

There was a maddening interlude. The repair car had arrived, complete with a tow rope, a tire repair set, a gangling lad with a front tooth missing and an excited interest in the prostrate driver of Dick's car.

Johnny dealt with him swiftly, pointing out his objective and adding instructions. "You tow the car and the guy back with you," he said. "He isn't dead—he's tight and somebody's conked him besides, but he's breathing, unfortunately, quite a breath. Take him along with you."

Money changed hands, and then Anice and Johnny were in Johnny's small car driving swiftly along the highway.

They drove down the street where the apartment building where Johnny lived reared its four story front. Johnny's fingers barely brushed Anice's arm, guiding her. They went in and up to the third floor, and Anice shuddered. She'd have to face Mrs. Peyton's eagle eyes, and she was rumped and mussed, and probably her face was dirty.

BUT it was not Johnny's mother who opened the door. It was Lisa Graham. Lisa in a flowing housecoat, all chiffon tags and flutter, Lisa with her black hair floating and her black eyes yearning, and all her excited eagerness pouring out toward Johnny before it chilled at the sight of Anice, beside him.

"Hello, Lisa," Johnny said briskly. "Thanks for keeping the home fires sizzling. May we come in?"

Anger burned brightly through Anice's pumping heart. And then, all at once, it was gone. Johnny was testing her. Once before she had not met the test. This thing that lived between them, was real. Vital and forever. If it were not, nothing mattered. It wasn't fun to find Lisa in negligee in Johnny's rooms, but if that was the way he wanted it, it would have to be that way.

It hadn't been fun for him to find his girl being mauled by Dick and she'd got herself into that.

She smiled brightly.

"Hello, Lisa," she said. "Would you show me the way to a comb and brush?"

Lisa stared at her for a long, furious moment. And then she put her hands up over her face. She pushed past them blindly, and Johnny, seeing her go, half started toward her.

"I haven't thanked her for helping me out," he muttered.

"Where," Anice asked, "is she going?"

Johnny's eyes on Anice's, were puzzled.

"To her apartment, of course. She's got the end one down the hall. Didn't you know that? What did you suppose she was doing in here in her kimona or whatever that thing was? Living here?"

Anice had gone ahead of him into the room. She sank down now on a cushioned sofa, staring up at him in amazement.

"She has an apartment in your building? No, I didn't know that."

"She sure has. She and mother are buddies—always have been. Mother sends for her at the drop of a hat, and she keeps a lot of her stuff in here. Our place is bigger and has some storage room. She has a spare key."

That still didn't explain lots of things. Johnny and Lisa at the Greek's the night he had left her early. Dick saying, "Lisa, could you go to Johnny? He wants you." The suicide, and the plane trip, and the postponed wedding—

Johnny was leaning against the mantel now, his legs crossed, his hands in his pockets, staring at her. He knew what she was thinking Anice realized and he was waiting. Her eyes moved past him to a framed picture of a little boy with a lock of hair waving militantly on a round bullet head, a little boy with a cross frown and an eager mouth. Oh, no wonder Johnny's mother wanted to keep him—no wonder she had to hate Anice.

She'd trust him now no matter how things looked, but she had to hear the truth.

"Johnny, where's your mother?"

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“OUT OF town. Visiting her sister. I bundled her up and sent her—told her to take along those wedding announcements and all that stuff, and do her working over there. I had to get her out of here in a hurry. I sent for Lisa to coax her to go. Lisa could always do more with Mother than anybody else. Just the night before all this happened, Mother threw a tantrum and Lisa got her out of it and all tucked in bed.”

So you took her down and gave her coffee at the Greek's for a reward, Anice thought.

Johnny's breath came suddenly hard.

“Look, kid, we'd better get you home. You sit there all mussed and your hair blowing—and your lips red—and your thoughts in your big brown eyes. I've got you here alone in my place like a villain with the heroine in his clutches. And I'm no hero!”

“You're my hero, Johnny.”

Light poured over his face.

“Then—things are straightening up. You're ready to take me on faith?”

“Forever.”

His grin flashed.

“Then for a good girl—I got a hurry call last week to come over to the Mansion House. When I got upstairs, there was a guy there who didn't seem to like me at all. In fact he pointed a very nasty gun at me and informed me that he was going to kill me.”

Anice loosened her wrists. She moved back a little, her face paling.

“Johnny—who? Why?”

“Well—he *said* he was married to the girl I was planning to make my bride.”

“Alan! Oh, Johnny, Johnny—it was Alan? He came here to make trouble—”

“Department of understatement,” Johnny laughed. “He *made* trouble. In the first place, he pointed his lethal weapon at me. I grabbed for it and it went off. It went off and a bullet went through your ex-spouse leaving me in an exceedingly uncomfortable spot. I hauled him into the bathroom and locked him in just as the hotel people arrived hot and bothered. I pretended to make with the gun, and they took it away from me and called the office.

I'm pretty well know there, you see, and they thought I was on a bender. When the fellows arrived, I let them go on thinking that. The chief got me out of it, and squared the hotel. So from then on, I acted like a gangster in a movie. I got your fellow down the back elevator by pretending he was a drunken friend of mine. I've gone down that elevator before, from all night poker games. Louie, the operator, knows me. I got him into my car, and then I asked Lisa to go get Mother out of the way before I had to get home. Lisa, thinking I was shooting myself for some unnamed reason, cooperated nobly. So then I took your friend husband up to the apartment and pried a bullet out of him and fixed him up.”

“Alan! And you didn't want me to know? You didn't want me hurt?”

“I did not. You're my girl, you know. And when he came to, he said he'd pretend the annulment hadn't taken—like a vaccination. He said he'd claim your people hadn't pushed it through legally. He'd say he was still married to you. I didn't want you to have a mess tied up to *this* wedding, An. This was to be our pink-clouds and pearl grey heaven.”

His lips shook a little and Anice went to stand close to him, shivering.

“So I got a doctor on the q.t. and for a while we thought maybe he was going to conk out. Then he picked up, and I wired his people, and took him home by plane—costing a large hunk of our honeymoon. His mother scooped him up and thanked me. She said he'd married another girl and that he was neurotic and a heavy drinker and a problem child in general. Said she'd look after him. Baby, you do pick a fine lot of guys to marry!”

“And I didn't have faith in you,” Anice was whispering. “I went off with Dick. I let you down. Oh, Johnny—you'll never want to marry me now.”

She lifted tear-wet eyes and saw the look on his face.

“Do you?” she asked him.

“Darling, I just want to prove your taste in husbands isn't all bad,” Johnny teased. And he started to prove it at once.

Lockout of Love

By Julie Paine



Deliberately, Sally doused her glass of water in Gordon's face. "None of the men on Third Street would insult a lady!"

SALLY'S green eyes threw storm warnings across the breakfast table at Pop, whose Irish temper was up, too. She shook a slender finger at him, but there was a treasure of warm affection buried in her angry words. "I'll tell you what's wrong with Tom Fogarty!" she said. "He's a dose of medicine that you've crammed down my throat every day for years!"

Pop's big hand hit the table, but not very hard, and he thundered back, "You're a foolish, day-dreaming little idiot, Sally O'Meara! Tom's the kind of red-blooded Irishman a high-handed girl like you needs

for a husband." He was going to add that young Gordon Parmeley the Third would never ask to marry the daughter of a town cop anyway, but his face broke into a wide smile instead because Sally was coming around the table toward him, and he could see her anger was dissolving with each step.

She wound her soft arms around his neck and her voice purred in his ear, "Let's not argue, Pop darlin'. Tom has been a wonderful friend and I promise I'll be nice to him while he's here on furlough. You know it always make me boil over when you try to sell Tom to me. He just isn't what I

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want for a husband and Gordon Parmeley is. Now scat. You'll be late for Tom's bus unless you run."

Sally watched Pop stride off down the street. Then she cleared the table, wondering why Pop always got so mad when she talked about wanting to have money and lots of nice things some day. Ever since she was a little girl, she had sworn to herself, and told Pop, that some day she would marry a man with money—at least enough for a pretty home in the best district of town, a maid, two big, sleek automobiles and a membership in the Faraway Club. A two-by-four niche with overstuffed furniture and a stove the size of the bottom of a coffee pot wouldn't do. It was just as easy to fall in love with a man who had money.

Gordon Parmeley was that man. Sally had known it since she was a sophomore in high school, only it hadn't been so easy making Gordon fall in love with her. Gordon belonged to the world of people who lived in the extravagantly big houses on the Bluffwalk, facing the broad ocean. And Sally O'Meara lived on the wrong side of town. He had gone to prep school and college, and Sally had had to worship him from afar, only getting an occasional glimpse of him on vacation afternoons when he drove his shining roadster down Main street toward the soda bar.

And now just when I've met him at last, and he's showing interest in me, Tom Fogarty has to come home! she thought, and banged a stack of plates in the sink. Why couldn't Tom have come home on his furlough last weekend?

A dreamy look softened her clear eyes. It hardly seemed possible that last weekend she hadn't really known Gordon. Only forty-eight hours of really knowing how wonderful he was, only two dates and the goodnight kiss at the door last night. Remembering the kiss washed high color into her cheeks. No one had ever kissed her like that before, so hard that she lay awake, unable to sleep for the burning of her lips and cheeks, for remembering how close Gordon had held her.

After a kiss like that, it was queer Gor-

don hadn't asked for another date. Surely he was almost in love with her! A man wouldn't kiss a girl that way unless he was serious.

SHE threw a resigned glance at the kitchen clock as the telephone bell shrilled. It would be Tom. Trust Tom to get to a phone in a hurry when he wanted to claim an evening or two with a girl.

"Hello, Tom. How's the big, bold marine?"

"Wonderful. How's your arm, Sally?"

She frowned and looked down, first at one slender arm, then the other, and demanded, "What are you driving at, Tom Fogarty?"

His big laugh rang out. "Well, you promised to write and you haven't, so I thought maybe you've been reaching too high for the moon and thrown an arm out of joint."

Anger glinted in her eyes. Tom was as full of poor jokes as ever. Probably Pop had told him about her dates with Gordon. Pop and Tom were regular conspirators against her and it wasn't fair. Hadn't they always told her she wasted time wishing for the moon?

She said, "I don't have to reach, thank you. I'm practically standing on the moon right now."

He was silent a long moment. "They say it's cold up there," he finally said and then added, "Look, Sally, I'm only going to be here two days, so let's not fall out until tomorrow night."

She sighed resignedly. "All right, only don't start things. You're coming over for supper, aren't you? I told Pop I'd broil a thick steak for you."

After a moment she hung up and ran upstairs to change her apron for the linen dress that matched the green of her eyes. She drew the little ivory handled brush along red gold strands of hair and pushed them into a shining cluster of feather edged curls which clung babyishly to her smooth white forehead. She daubed crimson on her generous soft mouth and moistened a finger against her tongue to smooth her arched brows and the thick lashes which

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curled away from her eyes. As she surveyed herself in the mirror, her chin lifted proudly and a satisfied glint displaced the anger in her eyes. "I'm not a raving beauty," she said aloud to her reflection, "but I have glamor, and that's what the future Mrs. Gordon Parmeley ought to have."

Her high heels clicked buoyantly along the shaded walk as she hurried toward the public library. Mrs. Gordon Parmeley the Third, they seemed to be saying. She drew a long breath of utter happiness. It would be really living to be Mrs. Gordon Parmeley the Third, to belong to the right people. No more Polly Paris \$5.95 dresses or cheap hats and shoes, no more living on the wrong side of town.

NO MATTER what Pop thought, a girl from Third Street could live happily ever after in the world that belonged to people like the Parmeleys. Especially if that girl had studied books on music, art and literature during spare moments at the library, to prepare herself for a place in that world. For two years, since she had been assistant to Miss Wilkins at the public library, Sally had studied hard. Learning to be a true sophisticate had been a driving, relentless urge within her since the day, many years before, when Aunt Ellen from Boston had swished her silken skirts down the cracked sidewalk and cried to Pop from the door of her black sedan, "Sally will grow up like this miserable neighborhood, Michael O'Meara! She'll be run down at the heels and shabby and ordinary, and she'll stay that way until she dies of overwork and worry like her mother!"

That was the one and only time Aunt Ellen had been to San Raphael, and she had stayed only the day of Mom's funeral. Aunt Ellen hated Michael O'Meara for running off with her youngest sister and wanted to take Sally back to Boston with her. But Pop had yelled, "No!" and Sally had sought the shelter of his kind, big arms because Aunt Ellen's face was cold and stony and her hands felt dead.

Sally wanted to stay with Pop, but she had never been able to forget that Mom

had looked too old and overworked for a woman not past her thirties. Pop had been a good husband and provided the best he could afford, but Mom hadn't had the things she needed. "Just like people need air to breathe," Sally said underneath her breath now, "Mom needed beauty and I need it, too. It's something I can't explain to Pop, but I have to have it or I won't be really living."

ALL DAY Sally watched the door from her desk, hoping that Gordon's lithe frame would appear like a genie from nowhere as it had day before yesterday. The big reading room had been noiseless, empty except for a few tip-toeing people overloaded with books, and then suddenly there was Gordon, tall and indescribably handsome in his sport tweeds. He bent low over her, whispering in thrilling intimacy, "Where have you been hiding all my life, Red?"

The look in his eyes knocked the world of Third Street right out from under her and set her feet firmly on the path of her dreams. Sally remembered every second, every word he had spoken to her the last two evenings, and the memory was something tangible which could be picked up and looked at and hugged close.

But Gordon didn't appear, and at five-thirty Sally said goodnight to Miss Wilkins and walked out feeling depressed in spirit, fear nagging in her heart. Maybe Gordon might not want to see her again, maybe he wouldn't ask her for another date.

Halfway to the corner she recognized the familiar toot of Tom Fogarty's old car. She turned and waved, and waited on the curb while he turned around in the middle of the street. A ride home wasn't anything to be scorned after a tiresome workday even if Tom went with it.

Tom looked well in his blue and scarlet uniform, and she told him so. There was nothing wrong with Tom's lean, rangy figure or tanned young face. His big hands were warm and eager on hers and the expression deep in his bright blue eyes disturbed her a little. Tom always looked as if he was too glad to see her but pretending

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he wasn't. After all, she told herself, Tom's a good friend and I ought to be decent to him.

"You're not hard to look at yourself, Sally," he said and his wide, firm mouth was earnest.

Her shining red-gold head dropped back. She felt pleased. Tom wasn't half bad when he was in this kind of mood. He was really sort of sweet.

He began talking about life at the marine base then, and she listened half heartedly, her mind straying back to Gordon. She hoped he would telephone tonight. When Tom stopped in front of her house, she was so lost in her thoughts, she didn't move until Tom said quietly, "Don't you live here any more, Miss O'Meara?"

She roused herself with a jerk and shook her head in disgust. "Tom, I forgot to ask you to stop at the store for the steak;"

He grinned. "Asleep at the switch, but it's all right because I'm going to buy you a steak already cooked. Pop said to tell you there's a picket line forming at the Yard and he won't be home until late anyway."

Her eyes darkened with apprehension. "Does Pop think there's apt to be trouble?"

Pop had been fearing trouble ever since old Mr. Gordon Parmeley the Second retired because of ill health. Pop said the old man and his father before him had been trusted and respected by the men and there never had been a walkout. Now the men didn't like the new board of directors and there were signs of growing unrest and dissatisfaction.

"Trouble?" Tom's snort mocked her. His voice was tinged with sarcasm. "Plenty, unless Gordon the Third comes down off his polo ponies and treats the men as if they're human instead of machines. There's no coöperation at the Yard any more."

Her slender body stiffened with resentment. Tom had a nerve criticizing Gordon! What did Tom Fogarty, who had been an ordinary worker in the Yard before joining the Marines, know of how Gordon Parmeley should run his business? Her chin lifted and stubborn defiance glinted in her eyes.

"I imagine Gordon Parmeley knows more about running the Yard than you do!" she said coldly.

THEY glared at each other and then Tom's mouth widened in a genial grin. He sank down on the top porch step and picked up the evening paper. "Okay, honey. You're entitled to an opinion. I'll glance at this while you get ready. No steam table hash joint tonight. I've got dough. We're going up the shore to Cove Inn for a fancy meal and some dancing."

Upstairs, while she bathed and dressed, she thought Tom certainly had changed. He'd always been keen for an argument, never letting a chance for a rousing good one slip through his fingers, yet a few minutes ago he had given up without a struggle.

It was rather disappointing. A good argument with Tom was invigorating, like stepping under an icy shower. Tom looked different, too. The flashy ties and socks and loud shirts he wore when he was working at the Yard had been one of her main objections to him. Pop, who thought the sun rose and set on Tom, said that Tom dressed like a basketful of Easter eggs just to show her she couldn't tell him what to wear.

If Tom just wouldn't have that wistful, hurt expression in his eyes! It made her feel ashamed somehow. "And still," she told her reflection in the mirror, "I've played fair with him. I've never encouraged him. At least a hundred times I've told him I can't ever love him."

Her nose wrinkled distastefully at the white tailored Polly Paris frock in the closet when she yanked it off the hanger. She would have to wear it again tonight, even though she was sick of the sight of it. The new dress, bought out of last week's salary, was special for her next date with Gordon.

A last glance in the mirror brought a satisfied gleam into her long green eyes. At least the dress was becoming, the way it hugged her waist and perked out full above smooth knees and slender curving lines of legs and ankles, and the dead white dramatized her red curls and creamy skin.

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The telephone rang as she went downstairs and she flushed warmly, knowing intuitively that it would be Gordon. She spoke softly, so Tom wouldn't overhear.

"TOMORROW night?" she repeated after Gordon, happiness surging upward from her toes in a great tide because, after all, he hadn't let the day slip past without calling her. "The Faraway Club? Oh, Gordon, I'd love to! I've never been there. Will it be formal?"

"No, only stuffy. One of these charity affairs." His voice lowered to an intimacy that thrilled her. "I'm pretty crazy about you, Redhead. Couldn't be anything but, after last night. You haven't forgotten?"

"No." The word was breathless with her happiness.

"Good. I'd see you tonight but I'm entertaining a friend of the family. Tomorrow, then, about eight?" Suddenly he was so matter-of-fact that when she replaced the receiver she felt confused, hanging in mid-air. One minute Gordon was the lover, the next he wasn't. She had noticed both times she had been with him that he could be two entirely different persons. For instance, last night when he asked her to tell him about her family and then after she talked for a half hour, telling about how Pop had been both mother and father to her since she was ten, Gordon had asked if her mother was the Mrs. O'Meara who did catering! He simply hadn't been listening to her.

She dismissed this with a shrug of chic, padded shoulders. Why should she worry about Gordon's moods when he was taking her to Faraway Club! It was a dream coming true. She closed her eyelids an instant, seeing that beautiful place of many terraces and swimming pools and gardens alight at night with myriad colored lights which twinkled like a fairy city. The very name Faraway spelled magic to a girl who had only driven past the high iron gates and glimpsed the beauty within. Gordon Parmeley might be changeable, but he wouldn't take a girl from Third Street to Faraway Club unless he was proud of her and willing to introduce her to his friends.

"Ready to go?" Tom was at the screen door, looking at her. Suddenly she remembered what Tom had said over the phone that morning about not falling out until tomorrow night. Tom was expecting her to go somewhere with him and she had made a date with Gordon!

It worried her all through the expensive dinner at Cove Inn. "But I didn't promise Tom," she told herself a hundred times. She would have to explain to Tom the best she could and hope he would understand. There was nothing else she could do.

Tom had learned to dance since he'd been in the Marines.

"Who taught you?" she asked. "Some pretty girl in San Diego? You're really smooth, Tom!"

He smiled. "Thanks. A very nice girl taught me. Her old man could buy and sell everything in this town, but she's got lots more than money. She has character. She organizes camp affairs; sees that we have a good time. Every fellow at the base would let her walk all over him, but unfortunately she's carrying a torch for the wrong guy."

The tone of his voice caught her interest and she glanced up quickly to study his face. Tom sounded as if he was in love with the girl! But he couldn't be. Tom wasn't the kind who could transfer his affections from one girl to another! It certainly would seem queer if Tom Fogarty were in love with somebody else.

POOR Pop, she thought a little wistfully, he's planned on Tom and me ever since Tom pulled me out of the ocean when I was six. Aloud, she asked, "Is she pretty, Tom?" Her curiosity was growing by leaps and bounds.

He didn't look at her. "Not pretty, beautiful's the word. Something shines in her face. Her name's Gracia Porter. Maybe you've seen her. She used to come up here to San Raphael lots to visit friends on the Bluffwalk."

Sally just shook her head negatively, intent on watching Tom's face. Tom was in love with this Gracia Porter! The expression in his eyes was for her, not for

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Sally O'Meara, and this was why he seemed changed.

"She isn't a girl to flash herself around or get her picture in the society news," he went on. "She's lived with all that bunk so long she knows how little it matters. She's steady and real, the kind a man could fight for."

Sally repeated this silently. Somehow it hurt a little, hearing Tom say this about another girl. Tom had always said Sally O'Meara had personality—never character and beauty.

She didn't mean her words the way they sounded. "I wouldn't recognize anybody with character, Tom. I'm just one of the personality girls."

There was a tightness around Tom's mouth and the hard muscles in his long arms contracted against her waist. She could feel them and she tried to laugh the minute off. "It's just a surprise, Tom, to know you're in love with a wealthy girl. Here I've been worrying about telling you I have a date with Gordon Parmeley tomorrow night and all the time you've been thinking about your Gracia."

He stopped dancing with an abruptness that startled her, and there was none of the old Tom Fogarty in his intense young face. He said slowly, "You made the date after—" and broke off with a sharp laugh. "Well, a fellow can't be kicked around like an old football all his life. Let's go, Sally. We'll ride around the cliff by Faraway and then I'll take you home."

Tom paid the check and went for the car, and it was while she was waiting for him that she looked in the door of the red and white leather upholstered bar and saw Gordon and the lovely brunette. They sat in a far corner at a small table, intent in deep conversation. Sally couldn't see the girl's face, but she didn't have to know the girl was somebody. There was good breeding in the very way she sat and the movement of her graceful hands, and there was dignity to the lift of her dark head.

Tom drove up to the door then and Sally got in beside him hurriedly, not wanting Gordon to see her. Her heart dragged on the ground because he hadn't been exactly

truthful over the phone. A friend of the family, he had said!

SALLY put her head back and watched the road unwind like a silver ribbon under the headlights. Way off in the distance, high up on the promontory that tumbled into the sea, were the lights of Faraway. Perhaps she would never belong up there now. Perhaps tonight Gordon would kiss the brunette girl exactly as he had kissed Sally O'Meara last night. The brunette obviously belonged to his world.

Tom drove along in silence. Sally wished he would talk so she could forget the brunette and Gordon, who might be laughing up his sleeve at Sally O'Meara from Third Street.

She stood the silence as long as she could, then demanded, "What's wrong with you, Tom Fogarty? I don't see why we have to be mad with each other. I'm glad you're in love, only you didn't have to rub all that character business in. Maybe your Gracia wouldn't have so much character if she'd had to live on Third Street and wear Polly Paris dresses and cheap hats and shoes. I've been honest, not even pretending to like it!"

His answer cut swiftly through the darkness. "You're afraid of life, Sally. You don't trust it. Loving someone more than anything on earth gives you that trust. You've let yourself worship a silly fear of being poor and growing old."

"I'm not afraid! I just want to live!" It was a cry from her heart.

They reached the parking space at the end of the road where a lone sturdy fence post separated them from the sheer drop to the rocks and pounding surf below. Tom pulled on the emergency and even in the darkness she could see the flame in his eyes as he faced her.

His fingers were warm and hard on her arms. "You're dead wrong, Sally. You don't live unless you love and are loved. I've tried to make you see that money and material things don't count."

She tried to pull away from him. "You're in love with a girl who has money! I've always told you it's as easy to fall in love

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with a wealthy person as a poor one. Gordon Parmeley has everything I want in the world. Everything. And I love him."

"Do you love him like this?" Tom's arms were bands of steel that crushed her to him, and suddenly her head was thrown back and his mouth was closing on hers in a way that sent rapture through her veins and caused a wild abandonment in her heart. For a moment she felt reborn, a person so gloriously happy as to be entirely removed and detached from the Sally O'Meara who worked at the public library and dreamed great dreams. Her lips clung to his kiss and there was nothing at all she wanted to do about it except to keep them there.

He released her as suddenly as he had taken her in his arms and started the little old coupe. He muttered, "I'm sorry, Sally, it won't ever happen again." At the screen door at last, after an uncomfortably silent ride home, he said goodnight in an utterly detached voice and turned and went down off the porch.

All night she couldn't sleep for thinking about what had happened, remembering the thrill of Tom's kiss. The light was sifting in through the windows when she finally dropped off to a confusion of dreams about Tom and Gordon.

HER DRESS that Saturday night was silk jersey splashed with gold hibiscus blossoms that accentuated the gleam of her hair. Gordon called for her at eight, immaculate, suave in white dinner jacket. Just looking at him made her feel better, because he was so exactly right, the identical man of her dreams. She wondered why she had allowed thoughts of Tom to upset her.

Gordon's eyes were boldly possessive on her and once he stopped the car and pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "After last night, you're a relief," he said vaguely. Sally didn't answer, hoping he would tell her about last night, about the brunette.

"You're the kind of girl a man could show off to his friends, a sort of trademark of his own success," he continued. "You

wouldn't try to run his life, and you wouldn't get in his hair."

She watched him, noticing for the first time the petulant, resentful look about his mouth. Something had upset Gordon too. The lovely brunette, perhaps.

He went on as though he was obliged to get something off his chest: "I'm fed up with being dictated to and reformed, Sally. My old man's been marrying me off to a female reformist for years and I'm going to show both of them!"

She stared at him. He was talking about the brunette girl and he wasn't in love with her at all. The brunette was to him what Tom Fogarty was to her—father's choice.

Gordon's next words exploded bomb-like in her ears. "Let's get married tonight, Redhead!" His face came nearer and she could read resentment and anger in his eyes, not any love at all for Sally O'Meara.

His voice was hoarse and insistent: "We can hop the late plane to Agua Caliente—"

She faced him, surprising herself because she wasn't jumping at the chance to be Mrs. Gordon Parmeley the Third. It was what she had wanted with all her heart, but now that the proposal was here she wasn't sure that her answer should be yes. Gordon sounded too much as though he were seeking an escape from something.

—
"We can't," she heard herself say. "Marriage is too serious and sacred—"

"Not for people like us, sweet. We'd have fun, and when we were tired of having fun, we'd shake hands and be good sports about the goodbyes."

They were turning in the gates of Faraway, those beautiful gates, but she didn't feel happy at all. In fact she felt unhappy and miserable and alone, and she wanted to tell Gordon not to say any more.

But he went right on. "I knew the first instant I spotted you that you wanted to live fast and furiously and squeeze each moment dry as an old bone. I do, too." He laughed scornfully. "Imagine me a family man, going to church on Sundays and setting a good example for a bunch of kids! No thanks! I want a glamor queen like you to make like a gay merry-go-round!"

Sally's legs felt stiff when she got out of

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the car. Gordon had painted a pretty picture of a vain Sally O'Meara who didn't want a family or a respectable existence—a glamor queen who could make life whirl like a merry-go-round for a while and then turn it into an insufferable thing of boredom and discontent that would end in a divorce court.

GORDON took her through the big rooms of the club and out onto the terrace. Faraway Club, Sally thought. I'm here at last, and now it doesn't look any different from Cove Inn or the San Raphael hotel.

A waiter showed them to their table. Gordon's eyes were too bright as he downed his first cocktail and there was stubborn insistence in his voice when he said, "Drink up, Redhead! A toast to our pursuit of pleasure!"

Sally saw Tom Fogarty and the brunette first. They came out onto the terrace, Tom's fine head towering above the girl in the beautifully simple white dress. Gordon followed the direction of Sally's gaze and commented in ringing sarcasm, "Well, if Gracia hasn't got herself one of those uniforms! I forgot to tell you, Red, this shebang's being thrown for the marines from the base."

His voice trailed on, but Sally wasn't listening. Gracia—Gracia Porter! The girl who had character, and who carried a torch for the wrong man! It all added up now. Gracia was in love with Gordon, and his father had tried to cram Gracia down his throat, just as Pop had tried to cram Tom down Sally's throat. Tom was in love with Gracia's character, and Gordon and Sally O'Meara were in love with their own selfishness.

An awful lump came up from Sally's heart and lodged in her throat, choking her. She saw everything plainly now, what Pop and Tom had meant about her having no sense of values. The beautiful things of life were sincerity and honor and real love for the right person, whether he was rich or poor. In Gracia's face were all the things Tom had said, sweetness and loyalty and all the good human qualities which

would make a girl important and successful even though she lived in the world that was Third Street. Gracia Porter was no foolish, vain, glamor queen who would throw herself away on a wild pursuit of idle pleasure.

Sally never knew how she lived through the next hour. Gordon was intent on drinking too much and talking too loud, and the young, sophisticated people who came to the table didn't talk about art and music and good literature at all. They gossiped about everyone they knew, and what they said was more malicious than anything the Irish tongues on Third Street passed over the back fences.

She saw Tom dancing with Gracia and lowered her eyes so Gordon wouldn't notice the flood of tears blinding her. Tom had never looked so dear, nobody ever had. He was part of her heart, the very best part, and now, when it was too late, she realized it. He was so big and dependable and sweet—like Pop. A sob tore at her throat with the realization of how wrong she had been about Mom. Mom had looked old and worn because she had been sick a long time. Mom wouldn't have traded Pop's love for all the money on earth!

"Gordon, could I speak with you a minute?" a girl's voice asked softly, and Sally knew before she looked up that it was Gracia Porter.

Gracia's eyes smiled into Sally's. "You don't have to go. Gordon, your father phoned. The men are holding a meeting and they're clamoring for you. If you would talk with them, they wouldn't walk out. They'll work their fingers to the bone for a Parmeley, Gordon, if they know you're with them. Tom Fogarty has gone to try to talk to them. He knows the men and they may listen to him until you get there."

Gordon's mouth twisted in an arrogant, contemptuous smile. "So Dad has you carrying messages again! Gracia, let me introduce you to a girl who doesn't interfere in other people's business—"

For just an instant Gracia's lovely face paled under the sting of his words. Then she said quietly, "Your father needs you,

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Gordon. He isn't well enough to stand trouble and worry, and he's counting on you."

Gordon's black eyes glinted and he swayed a little unsteadily on his feet. "Meet Sally O'Meara, Gracia. Sally is a pretty little red kitten that doesn't rake a man with her claws. She's completely happy with a bowl of cream."

THE GIRL'S lips parted stiffly. "All right, Gordon. I'm very sorry I've bothered you." She started away, and then turned back to Sally. "I'm very glad to have met you," she said.

Sally stared blankly at Gracia's slender, retreating figure and then her eyes moved on to Gordon. There were angry yellow flecks in them, and a look of utter contempt was about her tight mouth. Very deliberately she picked up a glass of water and doused it into his face. Her voice was cold with fury as she said, "You're drunk, Gordon Parmeley! Or have I been wrong thinking the kind of world you live in breeds nice people? None of the men on Third Street would stoop to insulting a lady! Now take me home, please!"

She turned away from him and walked proudly across the terrace, away from the shocked stares of the members of Faraway Club, not caring at all that she was leaving their world behind her forever.

In the car, Gordon was sullen and very sober, and she talked to him as if he were a spoiled child.

"Even a girl from Third Street wants to marry a decent man," she said. "If I were you, I'd get down on my knees to Gracia Porter and beg her forgiveness. She's a thousand times too good for you, but she's your only hope if you want to grow up and be a man."

She felt a little sorry for Gordon as she sank down on the porch step at home and watched the rear lights of his roadster wink at the corner. After all, he had resented his father's and Gracia's interference, and if he hadn't drunk so much, he probably wouldn't have behaved so ungentlemanly. Perhaps being doused with cold water and

told off was the very thing he had needed to wake him up to himself.

She saw then that he was turning left, toward the shipyard. A desperate hope that he would make it up with Gracia, and that Tom wouldn't be too hurt, buried in Sally's heart.

SALLY buried her head in her arms and sobbed. Tom was the dearest man on earth and maybe when he came back after the war, she could make him love her again.

Remorse made her cry out brokenly, "Oh, Tom—darling, darling! I thought I knew what living was, but I didn't at all. Living is loving someone so terribly that a shabby little apartment would be a shining castle if you were there, darling. Love is all the beauty there is. I know now Mom wouldn't have traded Pop's little finger for the Garden of Eden and a billion dollars!"

It was almost an echo in her ears, the voice was so gentle and soft. "Do you mean that, Sally girl? If you do, say it again." Tom stood by the flowering bushes at the corner of the porch.

"Tom, darling, I couldn't have stood it if I hadn't seen you again to tell you!" she cried and her lashes glinted with tears. "Now that it's too late, I love you, Tom Fogarty. With all my heart I love you. I always have, only Pop wouldn't let me make up my own mind."

His breath was warm and sweet on her cheek. "It isn't too late. I've never stopped loving you for a second. You jumped to conclusions about my feelings for Gracia. She's a fine girl whom I respect, but you're the girl I love." His straight, white teeth flashed against his tan. "Everything's wonderful! Gordon and Gracia are down at the yard making up for lost time. He isn't a bad guy, after all. He told the men he was joining the Army so he could learn how to be a good boss, and in the meantime he'd see that their petitions were granted by the Board. They liked that; everybody cheered and went home happy."

She lifted tremulous lips to meet his.

"This is the only life I ever want, my dearest," she said, and she knew it always had been.

Officers Prefer Blondes

By Cherry Lane



"You're the right girl and that's all that matters," Gary said.

STILL seething from that quarrel with Flight Lieutenant Russ Merrick in San Antone's swank officers' club, Honey Hamilton flashed by the machine-gunned emplacement of Randolph, sky

rocketted recklessly on towards Officer's Row, driving her red roadster hell-for-leather.

She was too busy thinking up the things she should have said to Russ, to see the tall

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pilot, still in harness, striding across the street, until he loomed big as life in her windshield.

"Hey, Lady, look out!"

His yell pulled her back to earth. She swerved, jerked at the emergency, stalled. "Whew!" She relaxed, limp with relief. Then her fright turned to fury.

"Why didn't you look out, yourself? Try to get out of my way? You—you just stood there and dared me to hit you!"

A slow grin slid up to meet dancing blue devils deep in his eyes. "Can't rub me out, Lady. A lot of lousy Japs have been banging away at me for months and months—and here I am, Captain Gary Bond, at your service."

Captain Gary Bond! Over his helmeted head Honey spotted the wicked P-40 Curtiss fighter in which he must have just swooped in. Cadets swarmed about the ship, touching it reverently, openly admiring its bullet scarred fuselage, its business-like guns, two each edge of the wings. It was an A.V.G. Tomahawk, all right. The yawning shark's mouth, sure insignia of the A.V.G., Chiang Kai-shek's order of the Fei Hui, fighting tigers, leered at her.

Honey's long lashes swept up and down. She frowned at this man who somehow matched his ship. Rakish, nonchalant, coldly competent. From his helmeted head to his booted feet he was different from the strictly regimented men she was used to.

On his brown leather jacket was painted a rollicking red-headed and winged damsel sans sarong. Intrigued, she asked, "Sally Rand?" wondering about the wings.

"Sally Rand, my eye!" He jerked off his helmet. His hair was crisp and red. Touching the little figure tenderly, he said, "This is Aurora, Goddess of the dawn. She flies with me everywhere I go. She asks no questions. Demands no explanations. Never needs new clothes. And"—his teeth flashed white against his bronze face—"incidentally, Beautiful, she's the only lady I know who rates wings!"

He *was* different! Honey wasn't sure she liked that difference. As the commanding officer's daughter she was used to a little more deference—even from Russ.

She introduced herself a little coldly. "I'm your one woman welcoming committee, Captain. Where could I drop you off? Officers' quarters?"

"Officers' quarters." He slid into the seat beside her, broad shoulders brushing hers, "And don't hurry on my account."

SHE meshed the gears and the car lunged. Gary braced himself, both feet jammed hard against the base boards. As they rounded a corner on two wheels, he cracked:

"I see you're saving on rubber! But what about our lives? Every American counts now, you know."

Honey shook out her bright hair, slanted a scornful sideways glance, "For an A.V.G. Tiger man who bagged six Jap bombers single-handed aren't you awfully timid?"

"Fighting Japs—that's routine," he told her. "But bouncing about Randolph with an incendiary blond at the controls— Say, do you drive like this all the time or just when you're sore?"

She was sore, all right. Sparks fairly flew as she turned the glare she meant for Russ on Gary Bond. After all, it was partly Gary Bond's fault she had quarreled with Russ.

"You're not a woman," Russ had grumbled. "You're a military institution! Instead of finishing out our date like a normal girl, you leave me stranded in San Antone on pay day while you drive back to the Field to glad hand this big A.V.G. glamor guy."

Russ had quite a lot to say about the A.V.G.

"I'm sick of hearing about those A.V.G. Super-Tiger Men! They get paid plenty to pull down medals and cut themselves a hunk of front page publicity, don't they?"

"Signed up with Chiang Kai-shek for the hell of it and all the mazuma they could get, didn't they? Six hundred a month and an extra five hundred for every other bomber downed—is that chicken feed? And what do Uncle Sam's men get? Huh!"

"But Gary Bond is back in Federal service now," Honey had pointed out. "And the A.V.G. can fight. Always against heavy

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odds they knocked down more than two hundred Jap planes, lost only sixteen pilots—”

“They can’t fight a darned bit better than we can!” Russ snorted. “They just got the opportunity.” He added brutally, “Your Dad’s plain cracked to bring that Bond guy back here to wise us up to the wily Japs! We’re hep to them already. No A.V.G. man can tell us anything about fighting we don’t know!”

“Dad knows his business!” Honey snapped. “It’s good sound military sense to have this A.V.G. man train pilots to bring down Japs. They must have learned something up there over Burma!”

“Yeah,” Russ grinned. “They learned that when Burma fell their little private Eden went *pfft!* No more excitement. No more big pay checks. Just nasty old routine. This guy won’t stick Randolph. He’ll find it too dull for him. Too dull”—Russ raised an eyebrow significantly—“or too exciting!”

It looked as if maybe the men were going to ice Gary, she thought.

“How do you like Randolph, Captain? I expect you’ll find us dull after the exciting life you’ve left,” she asked with a smile.

“I love Randolph. As for excitement—I like it quiet. Anyway, they tell me excitement’s where you find it, and least expect it.”

Honey still worried about what Russ had said. “Run along,” he said sulkily. “Go pick up your Tiger Man. Me, I’ll dig into my telephone book and find someone to paint this cow-town red, white, and blue.”

Someone—that must mean Rita. Rita and Russ? Her hands clenched the wheel, knuckle white. Rita was dynamite. Russ didn’t treat her like a sister!

THEY were whizzing past Administration. A group of cadets recognized Honey, waved, yelled, “Yoo hoo!”

“Yoo Hoo, Honey!” she said bitterly, in an aside to Gary, “That’s my name on this Feld. Cadets take me as a course of instruction!” She was sick of being a dream

girl to ten thousand men and a flesh and blood sweetheart to none. Darn it, the time had come to specialize. And she was specializing on Russ until Rita cut in.

“Lucky dodos,” Gary said softly, his eyes caressing her loveliness. “They get to look at you every day. I trained over at Kelly. Don’t ask me why, now.”

She was too busy worrying about Rita to hear him. Unless she meant to hand Russ over to Rita, the time had come for direct action. Rita had to be removed. But how?

Suddenly, an idea flashed through her mind. Jelled. “Captain Bond,” she asked abruptly, “do you like brunettes? Beautiful brunettes? In fact, ravishing brunettes?”

Startled, Gary was still stubborn, “No, I don’t. With me it’s blonds. Beautiful, ravishing blonds. I can’t help it.” Gravely he explained, “Officers and gentlemen prefer blonds.”

Honey could be stubborn, too. She braked before Officers’ quarters. “You’re having dinner with us tonight.” Lowering her voice confidentially, she added, “Come early, won’t you? There’s something sort of special I want to talk to you about.”

Gary was looking at her as if he thought she was sort of special herself. “Sure,” he said. “Of course. Fine!”

With a gay smile and a wave of her hand, she drove on. A bunch of cadets barracks bound yelled, “Yoo hoo!” Honey gritted her teeth, the smile vanishing. She was fed to her eyes on being yoo-hooed! It had to stop. Maybe, tonight Gary could stop it forever.

Soon Russ would be flying out of Randolph to fight on the Allied front. Honey, not Rita, would be the bride he left behind to keep the home fires burning until he flew back, again. It was Mrs. Russ Merrick, for Honey, or bust! And the fighting Hamiltons of Texas never busted!

Honey dressed for dinner in a blue gown the color of Texas bluebonnets—and Gary Bond’s eyes. By ignoring brass hat tradition, she had wangled Russ into bringing Rita to dinner. Tiger Man Gary Bond would meet Tiger Woman Rita, and per-

SWEETHEART STORIES

haps—who could tell—it would take! Anyway, it was worth a try.

WHEN the bell rang, she raced downstairs and greeted Gary enthusiastically.

"Well," he said, a little dazed by his welcome, "You seem mighty glad to see me."

"I am mighty glad to see you," she dimpled. "Only—" her eyes travelled over him. His careless attire of the morning had given way to the usual spick-and-span Khaki uniform. "You look just like everyone else! What happened to Aurora?"

"I tucked her into the top bureau drawer," he told her gravely. "When I call on blonds, I leave the little lady home. Jealousy, you know."

She took his cap, lead him into the living room empty except for a cheerful fire beginning to crackle. "Take that chair," she fairly shoved him into the Colonel's favorite deep leather chair. "A whiskey and soda? A cigar? A cigarette?"

"Whiskey." He sank into the chair, sighed luxuriously, stretching out long legs to the fire. "No place like home." Taking the whiskey she offered he sipped it, "Y'know, Beautiful, in China we A.V.G.'ers blew in fifty bucks a bottle for fire water like this!"

Honey perched on the opposite chair. "You had a pretty high time over there, didn't you?" she said. "Revelry by night in the hostels of Kunming. Squadron parties given by your Major and presided over by his fabulously beautiful White Russian wife. You see, rumors ride the wind back here to us at Randolph."

All at once she found herself wondering about the Major's Russian wife. Was she really so beautiful? Or was it just because she was the only white woman there?

"We had a few low times, too," he said drily. "So low we wondered if we'd ever be able to come back home again."

Suddenly, he set down his whiskey glass, "Look. You didn't ask me over to prime me with questions about my fascinating past?"

"N-no." Honey felt her face grow hot.

Broaching Rita wouldn't be as easy as she thought. Still, she had to tell him what he was in for. You didn't just throw a woman like Rita at even a Tiger man without first giving him fair warning.

"I asked you to come early tonight because—that is—" Darn him! Why didn't he stop looking at her so admiringly? As if there were something between them!

"Because," she took the bit in her teeth, "I wanted you to help me!"

"Swell," he smiled lazily. "All A.V.G.'s are handy. Cocktails to mix? Sandwiches to spread? Or a picture of your great-grandfather who lead the charge at Bull Run you want taken up to the attic?"

"I wanted to make you a proposition," she blurted.

"Go ahead. Proposition me. You'll never find a more willing victim."

Stammering, she explained. Gary heard her through to the end. Slowly, his smile faded. When she finished he stood up, towering tall above her.

She stood up, too. But she had to tilt back her head to peer up into his eyes. They were blue ice. And his face, a bronzed mask.

Her heart died. She had to remind herself she was a Hamilton of Texas and the Hamiltons never retreated—to keep from bolting.

"You're angry?"

“WHY should I be?" He laughed shortly. "I meet you, you give me the old come-on. And I find all the time you were scheming to use me as a sort of—uh—exterminator!"

"Nothing of the kind!" she cried, stung. "Rita's lovely in a lush way. You'll like her. What's so terrible about that?" She added, honestly, "Anyway, you never had a chance with me. I'm going to marry Russ."

"Provided I remove Rita!" he reminded her. "Look here, you designing woman, what makes you so sure your gorgeous Rita will go for me? After all, there are ten thousand other men here."

"But you're Gary Bond. You're A.V.G. You're a hero!"

OFFICERS PREFER BLONDES

He snorted, "Hero, my eye! I only did what any other man here would do if he got the chance."

"That's what Russ said," Honey blurted. "He said you got all the money, the medals, and the publicity and—" Her voice trailed off as she realized this wasn't tact.

"Russ said that, eh?" he asked softly. "So that's the kind he is."

"Russ is all right!" she flared, "He just doesn't happen to like you!"

Gary chuckled. Slowly he sat down, picked up his whiskey, "I just don't happen to like Russ, and we've never even met. Bring him on. Bring 'em all on! I'm ready!"

After that the Colonel came downstairs, the other guests arrived, Russ and Rita were last—and late as usual. When Gary was introduced to Russ, antagonism, saber keen and twice as dangerous, flashed between them.

"So you're the A.V.G. fellow who's going to teach us how to fight!" Russ scoffed, his eyes scornfully taking Gary's measure.

"Sure am," Gary drawled. "Do you mind?"

Russ shrugged. "We can take it." He grinned meaningly, "Can you?"

After dinner, over coffee in the living room, Rita, whose reaction to Gary was even more than Honey had planned, pleaded to hear his amazing Six-Jap-Bombers-Single-Handed stunt. Reluctantly, Gary gave in.

"Being the only fighter up when the Japs attacked by surprise, I had to shoot it out while the rest of our squadron got their Tomahawks off the ground.

"I'd start firing at, say, one hundred yards, get in about fifty rounds, swing off, and fall away for the next one. That way I got six bombers. Then, the rest of our squadron came to my aid, broke up the remainder of the enemy's formation.

"The whole thing was routine." With a slow smile in the direction of Russ, he added softly, "Lieutenant Merrick, here, will tell you any flier would do the same under the same circumstances. Eh, Lieutenant?"



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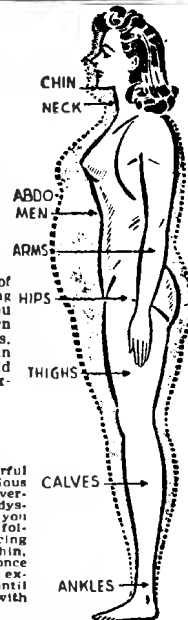
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BEFORE Russ could answer, the Colonel put in, "Your modesty is highly commendable, Captain, but shooting down six bombers single-handed, and thus enabling your squadron to get off the ground, is hardly routine. Your feat stands unparalleled in the annals of modern warfare."

Silkily, Russ added, "Now that you're back in Federal service, Captain, there won't be any more excitement. Aren't you afraid we'll bore you here?"

"No," Gary answered. "I rather look forward to polishing off your combat flying tactics. Incidentally, I rather look forward to training you, Lieutenant. I feel there are a few things an old A.V.G. man might teach you, even yet."

After that the party broke up. Rita, dialing a hot rhumba orchestra from San Antonio, dragged Gary to his feet and cuddled up under the thin guise of teaching him new rhumba steps. Watching Rita mold her lithe body in its brazen red sheath to Gary, sent ice splintering along Honey's spine. Her hands on the silver handle of the coffee pot were suddenly awkward.

Russ snorted in disgust. "Looks like Rita's changed partners. Well, I'm checking out!"

Honey closed the door behind them and faced Russ outside on the steps, the staccato rhythms of the orchestra and Rita's laughter were shut out.

"So Rita's fallen for that big A.V.G. bowl of alphabet soup!" Russ laughed shortly. "Up to her hips in hero worship! I'm glad you've got too much sense to go into a burn over that phony medal-man."

A guilty little twinge bothered her. "He's really rather nice, Russ," she protested. "You can't run out on Rita like this. Who'll take her home?"

"Let our hero squire her." He added, "Drive down to the field early tomorrow morning and watch Randolph take this Tiger man to pieces! Boy! When we get through razzing him he'll pile back into his Tomahawk and head her back to Burma."

He mimicked Gary's "I rather look forward to polishing off your combat flying

OFFICERS PREFER BLONDES

tactics.' " Adding viciously, "We'll polish him off, but pronto!"

"Russ!" Honey protested. "You'd better be careful—sicking the others on him. Maybe, the A.V.G. can fight. Maybe, it isn't all publicity!"

Russ chuckled, scooped her up, her sandalled feet off the ground, "Is there a law against kissing the Colonel's daughter goodnight? There is?" His lips were upon hers, carelessly. For the first time she didn't respond to Russ's embrace but wriggled free.

RUSS strode whistling towards barracks, and she slipped back into the living room to resume her role of hostess with a heart strangely heavy. Rita's throaty laugh and easy conquest of Gary irritated her. For a gentleman who preferred blondes, she thought, he could switch his color preferences mighty fast!

When Gary asked her to dance, she snapped, "Sorry! My rhumba has housemaid's knee!" and went back to murmuring polite monosyllable to her father's friends.

Rita wangled Gary into taking her home. Seventeen moonlight-drenched miles into San Antone, Honey thought viciously. What a lot of ground work a sharp worker like Rita could get in during those seventeen miles!

"I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this evening," Gary said suavely, bending over her hand, while Rita put on a new face.

"You needn't bother telling me!" Honey flashed, jerking free her hand. "I can see!"

He smiled quizzically down at her, "That's a blond for you! Unreasonable. Didn't you want me to intercept her passes? Did I do something wrong?"

Baffled, Honey was glad when Rita swept by, collected Gary, and left. Tears of frustration sparkled in her eyes. Only by exercising rigid military discipline did she resist banging the door after them.

I loathe Gary Bond! she fumed. I don't care what they do to him tomorrow! I hope they do polish him off!

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STILL, next morning, after a sleepless night, she was up bright and early, dressed in her American Woman Volunteer uniform to drive her Dad down to his office in Administration.

The Colonel was pleased, but suspicious. "Daughterly, aren't you? What got you out of bed so early?"

"Conscience trouble," she answered with forced lightness. "Dad, you may not realize it but your A.V.G. find is going to face more opposition on the line this morning than he ever did in Burma. And it's all my fault, sort of."

"Oh, so you admit something's your fault?" the Colonel grunted. "Don't worry about Bond. If ever there's a flier who can protect himself, that red-headed Texan is it."

Dropping the Colonel off, she parked before Officers' Mess, and regardless of regulations, grabbed Gary's elbow as he swung out.

"You?" he paused, startled. "Last night you gave me the cold shoulder and sub-zero stare. Yet, here you are, beautiful and blond as ever!"

"Personally," Honey snapped, "I feel just the same way about you this morning as I did last night. Still, I have a kind heart!" Squaring back her shoulders, she said, "Before you let the Brass Hats throw you to the wolves, Captain, I think you ought to know that the men are stacking it up against you."

As she explained, his grin vanished. "Thumbs down on the instructor, eh? So, that's it!"

About Russ's attitude, she felt on the defensive, "Russ is popular. He's not used to having someone fly in with a lot of medals and lift his girl—"

"Lift both his girls," he corrected her, chucking her under her chin. Eyes blazing, tingling at his touch, she jerked away. "Don't be silly! I love Russ! This whole thing is my fault," she admitted honestly. "I thought I was so smart and had everything all figured out. It never occurred to me Russ would go into a burn and take this way of getting even."

"He's jealous," Gary shrugged. "Jealous

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of me. That's swell. It means he regards me as opposition. That's the first real encouragement I've had."

"You'll never be opposition to Russ as far as I'm concerned!" she cried. "I don't know what you base your optimism on."

"The A.V.G.," he pointed out gently, "are always optimistic. They always win. I'll make you a sporting proposition—much fairer than that proposition you popped at me last night. If I make Russ eat his words, will you stop throwing yourself at him long enough to make a few passes at me?" Before she could answer, he said smoothly, "After all, you love me, you know. You've loved me a long time. You're the reason I flew back here."

"But I never saw you before yesterday!" she cried.

"That's strange. I've seen you all my life. Just as I'm looking at you now."

DAZED, she let him lead her over to the flying field where his first class of pilots waited. "Stick around," he said. "Watch me treat these soft-cheeked, dewy-

eyed lads to a stiff dose of what the A.V.G. gave the Japs. When I get through with 'em they'll all be calling me 'Uncle'!"

Russ, lined up along the hangar wall, winked significantly at Honey. As Gary addressed the men, Russ's grin grew to Cheshire cat proportions. It won't be long now, his whole attitude promised.

"I'm no good at making speeches," Gary was saying tersely. "Suppose we get right down to brass tacks. I'm here to wise you fellows on the ins and outs of actual combat flying against the enemy—give you the easy way, the information the A.V.G. picked up the hard way. However, I can't teach you anything as long as you figure I'm a stuffed uniform and you know it all. Who's your hottest pilot?"

Eyes shifted to Russ who squared back his shoulders, saluted, "Yes, sir?"

Gary looked grim. "Okay, Lieutenant Merrick. It seems to be unanimous. Climb into that little pursuit ship over there. You and I are going upstairs for a practice dog fight. The idea is to see who can kill whom first."

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And to the other men, "I want to show you Randolph riots that an A.V.G. man can knock your hottest pilot out of the sky in nothing flat. Then maybe I can convince you I've got something on the ball."

Russ adjusted his helmet, "Let me get this straight, Captain. You're going to out-fight me up there? Aren't you being awfully optimistic? This is Randolph Field, not Tokyo."

"Let's go, Lieutenant!" Gary answered. "Uncle Sam says 'Every minute counts!'"

Honey stood by, hands jammed nervously into her uniform pockets, face tilted to the sky, eyes wide against the sun, as Russ in his pursuit and Gary at the controls of his shark-mouthed Tomahawk roared up.

The other pilots stood in groups, faces raised, eyes fixed on the dog fight above them. The Tomahawk climbed to ten thousand feet. Gary stuck to Russ like a leech.

Honey held her breath. Her nails cut into her palms, as she watched the wildest brand of flying this side of Burma. From the way

Russ flew, she gauged his thoughts. A first, cocky. Then, careful. At last, desperate, he tried to shake off Gary.

Quietly, relentlessly, the Tomahawk stuck to Russ's tail, refusing to be shaken off. The men about Honey began to murmur in admiration of Gary's technique.

"Man! That A.V.G. can hand it out!"

"Watch him take Merrick to pieces!"

"Maybe those six Jap bombers he banged out of the sky weren't coincidental, after all. He's got Merrick sweating."

Gary finally signalled for Russ to reverse the order, to get on his tail and stay there. Russ tried to obey. Around and around they roared, Russ striving vainly to get Gary in his sights.

HONEY felt dizzy. And strangely jubilant. When, at last, Gary, for the second time, found Russ's pursuit in his sights and the men said, "That ends it! Merrick's dead! Bond's turned the tables on him, all right. His guns are in position to shoot Merrick down," it was all she could do to keep from cheering.

The two planes roared down. Russ, hag-

OFFICERS PREFER BLONDES

gard and spent, stepped out of the pursuit. Gary, controlled and smiling, leaped lightly out of the Tomahawk.

"Well, Merrick, you didn't do so badly for a novice. But if that dog fight had been the real McCoy, you'd rate two funerals."

Turning to the men, Gary said, "Now, who else wants to try his luck up there with me?" A nervous silence settled. "No volunteers? Okay. I'll take you alphabetically. Anderson—"

Honey turned and made her way back to her car, but Russ caught up with her. "Going my way?" he asked.

She looked up, her eyes strangely troubled. Somehow, up there in the sky Gary had deglamourized Russ. He was just another man among ten thousand. "I—I guess I'm not going your way," she said. "I'm waiting for someone. Someone else."

Russ's hand dropped. "Okay," he said, shrugging, "If that's how it is. Only don't let that someone else make a sap out of you. Tiger men are exciting to look at, but they might be hard to live with. Anyway, you're just another blond to him."

Lips trembling, tears blurring the blazing landscape, she still managed to say, "I can take care of myself, Russ. After all, I've been up to my eyes in men all my life!"

She stood still, shivering, in spite of the warm wind moving in off the desert, and watched Russ stride away. For a moment she almost ran after him. Not because she loved him. But because he was Russ and she was used to him. He was safe.

All day she drove dutifully, carrying out her job as a member of the Motor Transport, her eyes lifted to the sky and the streak that was Gary's Tomahawk.

At last, her day's work done, she parked by the ramp, walked over to where the Tomahawk rested.

"**L**OOK who's here!" Gary's deep-timbered voice sent thrills chasing themselves up and down her spine. "Climb into the cockpit. That's one place we can be alone."

Before she could protest, he lifted her, his arms hard-muscled yet tender.

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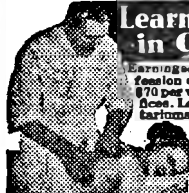
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"Nice of you to warn me about the big freeze this morning," he said, climbing into the cockpit beside her. "You ran off before I could thank you. So, I guess I'll thank you now. Like this."

His arms reached out, but she held him off. What was it Russ had said? "You're just another blond."

"I love you," Gary said. "I've loved you since I first saw you back in Burma—in my dreams. Maybe this isn't the time nor place for a proposal, but it's the best I can do. Anyway, you're the right girl, and I'm the right guy and that's what matters."

His voice deepened. "Y'know, it's a funny feeling when life begins to stack it up on a fellow who figured he had lots of time to meet the right girl, and marry."

"Then all at once he's up in the air with a few rounds of ammunition and a couple of minutes between him and eternity. Two minutes to go before he wins his last wings. The time he thought was ahead of him,

waiting, is behind him, spent. The girl he should have met— Where is she? Will he be just a notice in the paper?"

He grinned a little wryly. "When that Jap squadron caught me alone up there and closed in on me, I said, 'Gary, my boy, this is it!' And I wondered what my girl looked like. The girl I'd never met."

Suddenly Honey was in his arms, held close to his fast beating heart. "Look, you're my girl, Beautiful! I knew it the minute I flew in here and froze in my tracks in front of your little red buggy!"

Gosh! Honey thought, what I felt for Russ wasn't love. It wasn't even a reasonable facsimile. But this was different! This was real! In fact, as Gary would say, "The real McCoy."

"I love you so much, darling," she said.

"Sure," he agreed, holding her off, little devils dancing in the deep blue of his eyes. "Sure! What'd I tell you? The A.V.G. always wins!"

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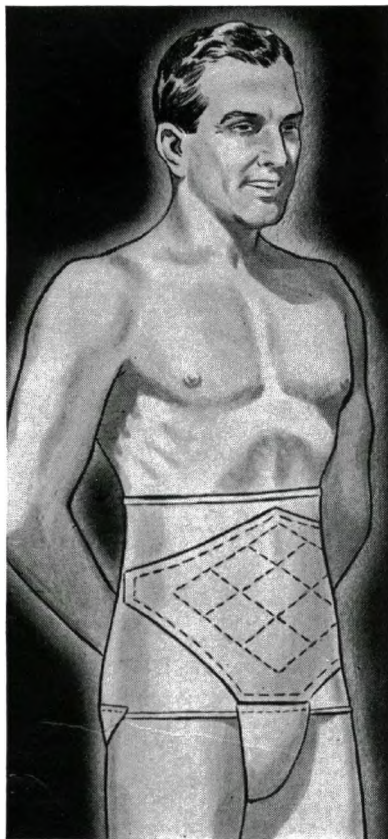
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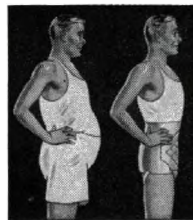
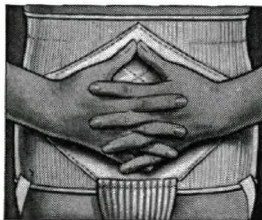
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