PAGING SANTA CLAUS

A Christmas Romance of Loving Service, Intrigue and a Lasting Happiness—The Reward of Sacrifice and Suffering

I

With every slap of her powder puff resentment grew in the amber-eyed girl leaning close to the mirror. It was the color of her hair—such a dark red! Did any hair have to be so dark that it could never, even on top of a Fifth Avenue bus on a sunny day, be described as red-gold? It was the right of every redhead to have her locks referred to, on occasion, as red-gold. And if her hair had to be the darkest red in the world, did her eyes at the same time have to be the very palest brown? Yellow, she'd call them, the girl decided gloomily. Too big for her face, too, as her face was now, so thin that it was positively peaked. Maybe if she did her hair a different way—but she no time for experiment. She was late now. And Paul Harris would be quick to tell her, not for the first time, that if she didn't care enough about her job as magazine counter girl at the Devon Arms Hotel to get there on time, he, as manager, would be forced, regretfully, to accept her resignation.

But indignation at her looks and against having to hurry off to work—on Thanksgiving Day too!—were only items in a long list of resentments that Jan Payson had accumulated. There was the matter of the Thanksgiving dinner she and Dora had just finished, to the last scrap. She had set her heart on having a broiler for Dora's Thanksgiving, and to that end had smiled her prettiest every day for a week at the customers who stopped at her stall for reading matter or cigarettes. A smile, she had found, was sometimes good for a tip, but not this week—oh, no, she needed the money too badly this week to have even an extra nickel thrown her way.

Speaking of nickels—she was rummaging in her shabby handbag now—she was sure she had left one for car fare when she bought the two pork chops that had taken the place of the missing broiler. She didn't mind walking back after work—she often did that—but as she always stayed with frail, patient Dora till the last possible minute before leaving for her three to eleven shift, she usually rode down to the hotel on the subway. Of course she shouldn't have bought two chops; she could have managed perfectly well with a cheese sandwich, and they had cheese in the house. But Dora would have insisted on dividing her chop with her sister, and Dora needed all the nourishing food she could get. Jan intended, if the Thanksgiving spirit failed to move any of the customers to give her a tip today, to ask Paul Harris for an advance of a dollar on her salary. She could just imagine Paul's face as she made her request—his expression would be mixed, as if at the very moment of getting bad news he had caught a whiff of something which stirred up his easily roused disdain, like cheap perfume on the girls he employed.

A thump on the door made her jump, so that her elbow knocked against a slender vase standing on the dresser and sent it crashing against the marble. The wilted red rosebud, which Jan had filched for Dora from the hotel dining room, and which they had tried, with indifferent success, to revive with aspirin in the water, flew headlong into the still open powder box.

"Who's there?" called Jan, knowing that peremptory thump very well, but pausing to retrieve the rosebud, nuevertheless. It put off the actual moment of facing Mrs. Mallord by at least a split second.

"Who are yez expecting'?" came the sarcastic rejoinder from without, and Jan, with a sigh, opened the door gingerly. Mrs. Mallord pushed it wide the minute the knob was turned, and took a step into the room. "Well?" she said.

"Well what?" said Jan, bravely.

"Well what?" Mrs. Mallord mimicked her roomer. Then, with a brusque change of tone: "It's the rent I'm after. Give."

She held out a large, rather grimy hand at the end of a stout arm. In spit of herself, Jan's voice shook a little as she explained that, since it was Thanksgiving, she hadn't expected Mrs. Mallord to ask for the rent until—

"Until Doomsday, I suppose!" broke in the irate landlady. "Do yez know how many weeks you're behind now? Three weeks today and the third week is up, Thanksgivin' or no Thanksgiving'."

"But, Mrs. Mallord, I've had to pay for a tonic for Dora, and fresh eggs and milk—"

"Yez can have till Saturday," said Mrs. Mallord, "to pay up or get out, and I'm breakin' a lifelong rule of my house to let you stay a day over three weeks—Jackie! Stop your noise!" she interrupted herself to bellow into the stair well beyond the door.

"Aw, Mom! All the kids are goin'. Kin I go? Kin I? Kin I?"

Twelve-year-old Jack Mallord, three flights below at the foot of the stairs, having captured his mother's attention by a series of ear-splitting catcalls, pressed his advantage quickly, resuming what was plainly an argument of long standing.

"I'll skin ya alive!" roared his mother. She turned back to Jan

"It's your notice," she announced formally, and lumbered heavily toward the stairs, and the sounds with which Jackie was making the atmosphere hideous.

Good-by, darling," Jan stopped to kiss Dora's white cheek. "Here's your glass of water and the spoon for your tonic. You will take it, won't you, Honey? I hope you like the new book I brought from the library, but don't read so long that you strain your eyes."

She smiled gayly from the threshold, then closed the door softly and ran down the stairs. It was drizzling, a fact which she had no opportunity of noting in their flat, for their two windows looked out on the brick wall of the house next door, hardly three feet away. That nickel she though she had, proved to be nonexistent. Twenty blocks—a generous mile—lay between her and the Devon Arms. Not much of a walk, but quite a run, especially in the rain. And as far as she could figure it out, she would have to move at what was practically a run to reach the hotel anywhere near on time.

Keeping as close to the buildings as she could, the worn heels of her shoes slipping on the glassy-smooth iron of store trap doors, she sped away, zigzagging in the middle of the street on the narrow side blocks to catch the lights, cutting the corners as best she could. She was panting, but dared not pause to catch her breath.

There was the Devon Arms, at last, across the street. Jan headed for the employes' entrance, darting in front of a car parked at the curb. So quickly had she bounded across the glistening black road that the man behind the wheel, with his foot on the starter, had no warning of her catapulting approach. At the instant she flew into his line of vision he pressed down, and the long car shot forward.

The edge of the front fender bumped as smartly as she clipped past. It was not a hard blow, but it threw her off balance and she sprawled on the wet sidewalk. The man, with an exclamation of alarm leaped to the ground and lifted her to her feet. "You are hurt!"

Jan turned wrathful eyes on him. "Hurt!! I'm ruined!" she cried. She dabbed feebly with her handkerchief at the mud that streaked down the front of her suit.

"Allow me." The young man whisked out a huge square of fine linen and began an expert job of mopping up.

"All right, all right," said Jan impatiently after a minute. "That'll do. I'm so late now that it's better to come in a little travel-stained; her eye fell on the chauffeur's cap lying on the front seat of the car, and traveled back to the hatless young man and his desperately apologetic air.

"I don't know how you keep your job, if you can't drive any better than that," said Jan severely. "As a matter of fact, I've a good mind to complain to your employer. "Maybe," she added darkly, "I ought to sue him."

"Let me—" said the chauffeur.

"Oh, skip it! I was only trying to scare you. I won't make trouble. I know how tough it is to get a job these days. And I am late and have to rush."

"But—" began the young man.

Jan, who had the door open by this time, waved a friendly hand, grinned a friendly grin and disappeared. The young man stood for a moment, staring at the slowly closing door. Then on an impulse he bounded across the sidewalk and gently pushed it open. Jan was just entering another door at the end of a long corridor. He heard a shrill greeting from within.

"Jan!" a girl was shrieking. "Gee, Jan, your late! Paul has been having kittens all over the place!"

The young man withdrew his head and walked thoughtfully back to his car. Jan! What a name for a girl. And what a girl!

II

Molly, the telephone operator, was in full possession of the facts, and she lost no time in relaying them to Jan. There was what Paul had said when, watch in hand, he had observed that Jan was ten minutes late. There were the increasingly finent comments he had made as the minutes ticked on, as the quarter past the hour arrived and Jan didn't; there was, at twenty minutes past, his final explosion and the subsequent transactions over the telephone—of which Molly was also cognizant—which resulted in the hiring of a new magazine counter girl.

"You've done this work before, Miss Elkins?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes." The girl, with an ingratiating smile, leaned comfortably over the counter and prepared to make a conquest. "I've been in some of the best hotels in America, I guess. Of course the last job I had wasn't so good—"

"I see." Paul's curt tone cut across the girl's words and brought her to an upright position. "Well, you understand that this is a very good position and we expect our employes to observe certain standards of dress and behavior. See me in the morning at eight o'clock."

He had the satisfaction of seeing her affected manner disappear before the stinging rebuke in his voice and he knew that for a moment the girl was on the verge of walking out on him. But the next minute her glance dropped and she said sulkily, "Okay, I get it."

Paul turned, satisfied with himself, just in time to see a tall lanky figure advance on Molly, the telephone operator. In his hand he carried a chauffeur's cap and Paul without seeming to watched his progress to the switchboard and the lengthy conversation that followed. After a few minutes, however, when the man remained, Paul moved toward the raised platform where the switchboard was p'aced. Any chauffeur ought to get his instructions more quickly than that.

He was almost upon him before a certain familiarity in the arrogant tilt of the long narrow head made him walk more slowly. He changed his direction slightly, so that as he approached he could see the strongly etched profile of the man who was hanging on Molly's every word.

"Very well, then, here it is in two words: you're fired," said Paul, obviously enjoying her misery. "Stop at the cashier's window for your money."

He turned toward his desk and Jan, white now and trembling, stood a moment, wondering if there wasn't some appeal she could make some explanation that would cause him to give her another chance.

"Mr. Harris," she began.

He picked up the telephone, asked for a number, glanced over the mouthpiece as he waited. "That will be all, Miss Payson," he said, "good afternoon."

Jan went out mechanically, stopped at the cashier's cage and with shaking fingers signed the slip which released the hotel from further obligations as to wages, carefully put the meagre amount of cash in the zippered inside section of her hand bag. Jobless again! And she had looked so long before she'd found this job! But then Dora hadn't needed so many things and they had had enough for rent. Now the few dollars in her pocketbook could scarcely placate their landlady even for a day. Well, somehow she must try to keep the news from Dora a little while—perhaps something would turn up.

Paul Harris absently tapped a pencil on his glass-topped desk and gazed out at the rain that was now coming down in torrents. Holidays were always a dreary business, even at the Devon Arms. Employes disliked coming to work and they showed it—were even sometimes downright impudent, like that girl he had just fired. Pretty little thing she was. But Paul had learned long ago that there was no place for sentiment in his business.

He still remembered his first job. What a greenhorn he had been! Working till all hours. Then that last night when Helen was in the hospital and he had wanted to be with her—that night the owner had insisted that he stay on. He had stayed, too, but he had never seen Helen alive again.

If only he had had the training then that he had now, and the salary—what he could have done for Helen! But how useless it was to worry over the past! The point was that now he knew how to be more insulting than the customers on occasion, to harass and intimidate those under him, until any hotel owner counted himself lucky to have 'Paul Harris—Manager" on his stationery.

Paul threw the pencil down and rising, pulled his morning coat into its usual meticulous, creaseless fit. It was generally profitable to walk around the hotel at odd hours. Kept the help on their toes.

As he walked down the corridor the magazine stand was directly at the end of the vista. His step quickened as he caught sight of the blond Elsa talking to a dark-haired girl who was looking over the stock. He advanced swiftly and Elsa turned red as she glanced up and saw him standing before the booth.

"I was just explaining to —to Miss—"

"Fay Elkins," the girl supplied crisply.

Paul looked her over in stony silence and she returned his stare with bold black eyes. She was not the type, he decided instantly, for the Devon Arms. Needed plenty of toning down. Bad voice, for one thing, and too much lipstick on an overwide mouth. The patrons of an exclusive hotel like this were apt to be finicky about those who served them—they liked unobtrusive types. And this was not the time to risk offending the clientale. In fact. Paul had been trying to think of some way to attract more customers to the place. Now he merely nodded toward Elsa and she slipped thankfully back toward the kitchen.

"Yes—ah—yes. She did. At the magazine counter."

"Was she fired?" Deverest demanded, and his tone was so brusque that Paul tactfully evaded a direct answer.

"She was late," Paul's lips thinned to a disapproving line.

Bill Deverest grinned boyishly and ran a hand through his already far from smooth hair. "Yes, I know," he said. "I guess I was responsible for that, in a way."

The manager's eyes widened slightly, but he gave no other indication that these words had started a new train of thought in his quick brain. It was one thing for a clerk to be late, but it was another for a valued customer to admit that he had been the cause of her tardiness. Molly's expression became so open-mouthed at the young man's declaration that Paul thought it better to edge Deverest gently away from the switchboard.

"Miss Payson has been promoted—ah—that is," he said carefully, she will work during the evenings, starting tomorrow."

"Oh!" There was disappointment in Tony Deverest's monosyllable. "Say, do you promote people by making them work harder hours?"

"No," Paul said hastily, "of course not, Mr Deverest. Miss Payson will—will only work for a few hours at night. She—she's to be in the new floor show," he added with a sudden burst of inspiration. "We have a very popular roof garden you know, Mr. Deverest, and we are planning some specialties for the holiday season. You will be interested in seeing our new show, I know."

"What? Oh yes, of course."

Tony Deverest was suddenly conscious that the pale eyes looking at him so earnestly were a little too bland for comfort. He realized that his innocent intention of taking Miss Payson to dinner by way of apology for the day's mishap was being interpreted in a more serious light by her immediate employer. Panic gripped him. From early boyhood he had been trained to avoid publicity. He realized from bitter experience that even his simplest gesture could be misconstrued by the press to have a deeper meaning. He flushed now under Paul's veiled scrutiny and inwardly blamed himself for not giving his invitation, or trying to give it, in a less public manner.

"I just wanted to make sure Miss Payson was all right," he stammered. "I mean, I just wanted to see her for a moment—"

"Of course." Paul's manner was diplomacy itself. "We are always glad to see you here, Mr. Deverest. I am sorry Miss Payson is not in, but she'll be here the next time you come," he promised.

"Well—" Tony Deverest turned the chauffeur's cap in his hands as if he had never seen it before "My man's day off," he explained to Harris. "I'm chauffering myself around town. Well, see you again."

He felt that this was not a graceful exit, but it was the best he could do, and anyway it took him out of sight of the hotel manager's knowing smile. He'd never go back there again!

Paul Harris recognized opportunity when it whirled through the ornate doors of the Devon Arms and he now proceeded to seize it. He consulted the round-eyed Molly whose expert manipulation of the switchboard interfered not at all with her interest in the life around her.

"Jan Payson's telephone number? Sure, she had one somewhere. Wait a minute. One moment, Madam. I'm ringing your number, sir. Jan didn't have a telephone of her own, but—no Madam, they haven't answered yet. Here it is. It's Jan's landlady's telephone. Ring Mrs. Mallord, Butterfield—Here's your party, sir. Shall I ring the landlady and ask her to call Jan, Mr. Harris?"

"No," Paul Harris decided hastily. Let it go."

He retreated to his office to consider. A telegram? No, a note. He'd send one of the bellboys with it. With the employes' directory open before him, he observed that Jan lived fairly close by. He'd go himself!

Never one to put off the thing that needed doing, Paul noted with approval that the rain had stopped and, pausing only long enough to get his hat and overcoat, he was off down the street. It did not occur to him until he was nearing the number Molly had written on a small slip of paper that his clothes would be noticeable in the neighborhood where he was going. Paul had lived in an atmosphere of luxury so long that he had conveniently forgotten that such streets as the one he now turned into still existed. For a minute he thought of going back, but then remembering Deverest's interest in the girl and the value of his patronage, he walked firmly on.

The street had a depressing and watchful stillness about it that could be felt even when the children's shrill screams broke the silence. Because it was a holiday the dilapidated stores were closed, in most cases obviously, with a rusty padlock. The dirt incrusted windows with their shabby displays of stale bread or wilted vegetables looked even more uninviting than usual. But no number of closed doors could smother the odors that emanated from them on every side. The stench of discarded fish overwhelmed him as he passed a row of garbage cans outside of what was called a "Cape Cod" restaurant.

A group of boys on the corner were dressed in a weird conglomeration of their fathers' cast off clothes, plus feathers from their mothers' hats. Their faces were blacked with burnt cork, their noses reddened, and a few had pasted frayed twine to their chins to stimulate beards. Thanksgiving masquerade! Paul averted his eyes hastily and hoped that they would let him pass unnoticed. But at that moment the tallest boy caught sight of his smooth derby and his gleaming white crepe scarf. He was evidently too shocked for words, but the other boys waited for no command from their leader. As one they turned and raced across the street, their hands outstretched, their voices whining in supplication.

"Give us a penny, Mister."

"Don't pay no attention to him, Mister, give it to me."

"No, it's my turn. .. "They crowded in front of him. ..

"Can't you make it a nickel, Mister?"

Paul shook his head and, still not looking at the ragged urchins, he continued determinedly on his way. The disappointed mutterings behind him were, he knew, directed at his "stinginess" and were unfavorable in the extreme. But luckily the house he was looking for, with its broken brownstone steps and rusted railings, was just across the way. Paul breathed a sigh of relief and stepped off the curb. The next minute he heard a whir and something whizzed by his head and took his derby with it. The hat rolled ahead of him in drunken circles and finallly came to rest in a puddle of dirty water near the opposite curb. Paul did not need the howls of glee that came from raucous throats to tell him where the missile came from. He did not pause, but let the hat lie where it was and took the brownstone steps two at a time.

It was some satisfaction to hear one of the boys say in a hoarse voice, "Chee, Jack! He's goin' in your house. Now you'll ketch it!"

IV

Jan looked at Dora and Dora looked at Jan. The sick girl's fingers were lightly smoothing the pale blue satin of the chaise lounge on which she lay. Jan was sitting precariously on the edge of a deep wing chair beside a tiny fireplace tiled in pale blue.

"I still can't believe it," she said to Dora.

"But, darling, it was only a question of time before somebody realized how good you are. I've always told you that you have an awfully pretty voice and that you really dance very well."

"But a place in their new floor show! And right after he'd just fired me! And then moving us to this lovely, lovely suite—"

Dora, although her face was pale from the strain and emotional upheaval of the last few days, would not admit that there was anything unusual in Jan's sudden good fortune. She adored her younger sister and had often dreamed of success for her. But even she had not imagined that they could be so quickly transported from the squalid bedroom-and-kitchenette at Mrs. Mallord's to this beautiful suite at the Devon Arms.

"Mr. Harris looked so mad, too, as he came in that day," she remembered. "And those dreadful boys knocking off his hat—no wonder! But he's really the kindest person in the world, I think," she added fervently.

M-mm, yes," Jan agreed absently. All she knew of Paul Harris had not led her to second Dora's opinion, yet she could no deny that he had offered—even insisted—on her having this new position at what was surely a fabulous salary. She had been unable to believe it that day and now, two days later, it still seemed something of a dream. There must be, she knew, something more to it than Paul had told her. But with Dora's childlike enjoyment of the lovely rooms and their sunny view of the river, with the trays of orange juice and milk that came up at regular intervals, no matter whether she was rehearsing or not, with the whole glorious Arabian Nights atmosphere of it all, an could not quarrel.

She prayed that she could keep the dream a reality for a few weeks. If only she could sing or dance a little better! But they seemed to like her anyway—at least Zambrini, the orchestra leader, who had been coaching her in a cute little song, had smiled when she finished her number that morning. His round little body fairly bounced with approval as she turned to him at the end.

"Zat ees eet," he had declared in his funny high voice. "You do eet joost like that zee opening night. Remember!" His cherubic face attempted a serious expression. "Eet ees a Christmas song. You sing eet simple, like a lettle girl. Joost at the end of each verse you look up sideways—so—like you make fun. But no Broadway—nonono—or Zambrini tear zee hair out!"

A knock at the door interrupted the girl's thoughts and made Dora jump.

"I forget and think it's Mrs Mallord again," she laughed shamefacedly. Jan patted her shoulder reassuringly, as she went to the door.

"I am Mary Elizabeth Howard," a smart young woman announced. "This is my assistant, Pringle," she added, nodding toward the drab woman who stood beside her laden with a number of cardboard boxes.

Jan knew the name—a Howard "creation" was the ultimate in sportswear or evening frocks, even for the patrons of Devons Arms. But it was surprising to see Miss Howard herself. She was a thin wisp of a girl, scarcely taller than Jan herself, with sparkling dark eyes and dark hair piled high under a fantastic turban. Her suit, as she walked past Jan and into the blue and white sitting room, was startlingly simp', Jan noted, but its soft blackness clung to her figure with the grace of a perfectly cut garment. Dora was looking almost frightened as the visitor advanced with determination and motioned Pringle to put her boxes on a long refectory table.

"But—but you must have the wrong suite!" Jan protested when she could find her voice.

"Oh, no!" Miss Howard moved quickly about the room, adjusting the shades, pushing back the furniture with quick, birdlike movements. "You're Jan Payson, aren't you?" At Jan's nod she continued, "I'm to do you an evening dress and a few sports things, Mr. Harris said you are to appear in the new floor show."

"Oh!" said Jan, and for the life of her she could not think of another thing to say.

But Miss Howard was in no such predicament. She flung herself into a chair and proceeded to rap out orders that Jan did not even think of hesitating to follow. She slipped out of her well-washed kimono and proceeded to allow the silent Pringle to encase her in what Miss Howard referred to as "the correct foundation for evening"—to help her don stockings finer than Jan had ever seen in her life—and to fit her slender feet into a pair of evening sandals studded with "jewels." Dora gasped as she looked at them and Miss Howard threw in a word of explanation in her crisp hurried tones:

"The latest. Jeweled sandals. You're practically the first to wear them in New York."

Pringle, by this time, was sliding something that shimmered and rustled over Jan's head. She gazed into the mirror in astonishment as Pringle, behind her back, manipulated fastenings that tightened the brief bodice so that it outlined her slender figure in what Jan thought privately, was a very flattering manner. The white taffeta looked like frost on a window pane. It was cut on severely simple lines, dropped off the shoulders and just touched the floor all around. Here and there, all over the skirt, were shining flowers that reflected the blue of the walls. Jan touched one with her finger and discovered that it was made of tiny bits of mirror fastened, goodness knows how, to the delicate silk.

"But, Miss Howard!" she burst out, turning a perturbed face to the bright-eyed young woman who was making a note on the small pad she had taken from her hand bag Miss Howard looked up.

"It's perfect for you," she announced. "And," with a smile, "you're perfect for the dress. I seldom have a chance to say anything like that to my customers, Miss Payson. As one working girl to another, I'll let you in on a trade secret; it's usually my problem to make an overweight dowaged look like a frail eighteen, and it's some problem! But the fat ones are the girls who run to money," she sighed.

"That's just it," broke in Jan eagerdly. "This seems such an expensive dress. I don't know that I can afford. .."

"Oh, you're not paying for it yourself. Didn't Paul Harris tell you? As a matter of fact, when he gave me the order for your outfit it was a scoop for me. Two other houses wanted their names on the Christmas program.

"But is Mr. Harris paying for it?" Jan persisted.

"My name on the program is an advertisement for my house," Miss Howard explained a little wearily. "Other customers in the Devon Arms will see you and I'll get enough orders to pay me for your clothes many times over, I hope. Besides, you're an important person now—don't you know that?"

Jan turned back to the mirror to hide her expression. There it was again! That secret, knowing look that she had surprised on Paul's face more than once since that incredible moment on Thanksgiving afternon when he had told her she was to have a part in the floor show. She had seen the same look on other faces, too, as if the whole world knew some extraordinary reason why she should be pampered and petted in this way. But there was no such reason. It was all a mistake. And sooner or later the mistake would be discovered and this lovely dream would come to an abrupt end.

In the days that followed Jan found herself far too busy to follow any clues to the mystery that surrounded her. She and Dora lived in a kind of ecstasy.

"They do like my singing, Dora," Jan would report, coming home from a rehearsal. "And Zambrini, the orchestra leader, you know, says that I have 'rhythm in my feet.'"

"I told you so!"

Dora's voice was almost strong as she caroled her loyal accpetance of praise for Jan. Shining days seemed to run into one another. It was two days before "Opening Night" for the new floor show in which Jan was to appear; then it was the night before, then the big night itself.

Then the night was over, and it hadn't been such a big night after all.

V

Jan knew that Paul Harris was disappointed in the crowd that had turned out for the opening, but she had no idea of the extent of that disappointment. A week later his bitterness had grown to such proportions that he had decided to do something about it.

"Wait till that Payson girl gets downstairs—I'll have a pain talk with her," Paul Harris was saying to Mary Elizabeth Howard. She had intercepted him in the lobby just a week after the opening night, and inquired bluntly where all the business was that was coming her way in return for the outfitting of that little singer. Paul had been asking himself questions of a similar nature and the arrival of Miss Howerd simply percipitated a moment that he had began to feel was inevitable. Paul had been not quite frank with himself in regard to the Payson girls. Ever since opening night, which had been in the words of Zambrini, 'one beeg flop,' Paul had been telling himself that Jan Payson would have to go. All these days had gone by and it was obvious that if she had ever been an object of interest to William Anthony Deverest, that interest had faded. The wealthy young man had avoided the hotel as if it had been quarantined. So far Paul's path was clear.

But—and he hated to admit it—he could not bring himself to ask the fragile Dora to go back to that miserable hovel from which he had rescued her. It must be that he was getting soft-hearted ..and Paul had not been troubled that way in years. There was a flowerlike quality in Dora's white face and her pain-widened blue eyes that reminded him—yes, it did—of Helen.

The situation was complicated. It made his manner all the more brusque now that a crisis in the form of Mary Elizabeth Howard had arrived. She would have to be paid in some way for Jan's outfit.

"I didn't act hastily," he now told th dress designer, "because sometimes these things take a few days to straighten themselves out. But I've finished waiting. This is the end."

"And what about me?" Mary Elizabeth inquired smoothly.

"You won't lose by it," Paul assured her. "I'm the one who has lost. Her salary—that suite they have." He broke off as Jan, with a laughing remark to the operator, stepped out of the elevator.

"Miss Payson!" Paul called to her, reproof for her untimely laughter in every syllable.

Mary Elizabeth eyed the girl as she approached and almost forgot the annoyance the whole incident had caused her, in admiration of her own handiwork. The girl—in the mid-winter costume Mary Elizabeth Howard, Inc., had designed—was lovely. What a pity she hadn't made good!

Jan, who had been ready to dance across the lobby for delight when she first stepped out of the elevator, felt a sudden chill at Paul's tone. She had been on her way to buy a brand new kitten for Dora. The sick girl had always wanted a Persian kitten, and just yesterday Jan had seen a blue-eyed bundle of yellow fur in the pet shop around the corner. It was twenty-five dollars. She had the money in her bag this minute—the joy of being able to spend money on giving happiness to others! But Paul's sharp voice recalled her to unpleasant reality.

The uniformed man at the hotel entrance, reaching out a gloved hand at this precise moment, set the revolving door spinning, and it spun William Anthony Deverest, correctly hatted and coated, into the lobby. There he paused, glancing involuntarily toward the magazine stand. The dark girl there, who looked up with obvious interest, made him turn quickly the other way. And then he saw her!

Or was that the girl he had last seen breathless, mud-stained and reproachful? Why, she was beautiful! Seen from the side this way she seemed, standing still as she was, to be poised for flight, her face uplifted, her lips parted eagerly. Then she turned toward him so that he saw her face. She was in trouble!

Paul was saying, indeed, that he "was disappointed, greatly disappointed, Miss Payson. After all, William Anthony Deverest might have found it impossible to be present on the opening night, but a whole week had gone by and he had never even looked in at the roof garden!"

Jan, dazedly trying to figure out why she should be held accountable for Mr. Deverest's—whoever he was—absence, looked away from Paul seeking enlightenment from her surroundings. Her eyes encountered the gaze of the tall young man near the magazine counter who was staring as if he knew her. And she had certainly seen him somewhere! Oh, yes, that careless chauffeur who got her into difficulties on Thanksgiving Day!

She smiled faintly and Paul, waiting for her reply, caught the smile and followed her glance. Further caustic words died in his throat and he seized Miss Howard firmly by the elbow and propelled her rapidly toward the office.

"What—what's the matter?" Mary Elizabeth protested.

Paul put his lips close to her ear. "William Anthony Deverest," he whispered.

And Miss Howard, looking over her shoulder, departed docilely enough.

Jan didn't know why she had been spared—she only knew that they were gone, and she was grateful. She caught her breath on a deep sigh, and discovered the chauffeur beside her.

"You are Jan, aren't you?" he inquired. How tall he was! Jan raised her golden eyes for a brief instant to his interested grey ones and nodded.

"But how did you know my name?"

"It's quite a long story. I found it out when I came to ask you to dinner as sort of apology for my clumsiness, that day. Though it's a little late, I still owe you that apology. Will you...?"

"I was on my way to buy a kitten," Jan demurred, walking toward the door. "And I haven't much time for dinner I have to get ready for the show."

"I'm practically an expert on kittens," her escort announced firmly. He turned and walked with her, wondering a little at himself. Usually this invitations were promptly accepted. It was provoking to have this self-contained little person treat him so casually. Perhaps she was being difficult for a purpose? But her next question dismissed that thought.

"Didn't you have an appointment with someone?" she asked. "I really have the kitten all picked out."

She was trying to get rid of him! William Anthony Deverest grinned and took her elbow.

"Now, that's dangerous," he insisted. "Some of the nicest looking kittens are undesirables—heredity or—fleas, you know. You need me along..." But Jan had stopped and was looking at him in consternation. "What's the matter?" he interrupted himself.

"You've lost your job!" Her voice was lovely when she said it and the man had an insane impulse to let her believe it. But almost involuntarily he protested....

"Oh, no—"

"But you're not in uniform!"

"How—do you know what I do?" he inquired cautiously.

Jan laughed and he suddenly decided she looked even more irresistible than when she was sad. "You had your chauffeur's cap with you on Thanksgiving, of course. But you weren't in uniform that day, either. You must have a pretty nice boss."

"He—he's abroad." Deverest said absently. The main thing was to keep beside her. To keep her talking. She was a real person—not giggling and coquettish—but human and interesting. Maybe, he thought, wistfully, all girls were like that to chauffeurs. It was only his infernal money that made him act so silly. He led the way to the car, but Jan shook her head.

"The shop is only around the corner. My, that's a beautiful car!" she said appreciatively. "W-A-D—initials are so funny when they spell a word!"

A sudden sharp recollection of her scene with Paul flashed through her mind. She could hear again Paul's voice saying, "Of course it was impossible for William Anthony Deverest to be there the opening night..."

"William Anthony Deverest," she repeated aloud, turning a frightened face to the man beside her.

"Y-yes," he agreed hesitantly.

"You know—?" Jan gazed at him wide-eyed. "He's your boss!"

When he did not answer, she went on bitterly: "I hate him! He's wicked—and cruel—for one person to have so much money he can make everyone else unhappy fact because he's alive I hope I never meet him."

VI

Jan turned away so abruptly Deverest had to hurry to catch up. "He's not so bad," he said defensively. "If he knew you were in trouble..."

"He'll never know it!" the girl said fiercely, and walked on for a while in silence. Then as they reached the corner, "Here's the pet shop. Isn't that the most adorable kitten you ever saw? By the way what's your name?"

"My—my name?" the man stammered. "Oh! Tony—Tony Williams. Say, don't hold my boss against me. That dinner date means a lot to me."

Jan, gurgling at the kitten, missed his intent pleading glance. "You can have a sandwich with me in the cafeteria," she promised, "if you like the kitten. But if you complain about a flea or two, the party's off."

She walked ahead of him through the door, and grinning, Tony followed.

There was something awfully nice, to say the very least, about Tony Williams, Jan decided that night as she was taking off the white and silver gown after her final appearance in the floor show. Sometimes he had seemed, well—almost shy, as if he wasn't used to taking a girl out to dinner. It couldn't have been that the place overwhelmed him, either. Jan could have understood it if he had shown nervousness while dining with her in, say, the Blue Room at the De-

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