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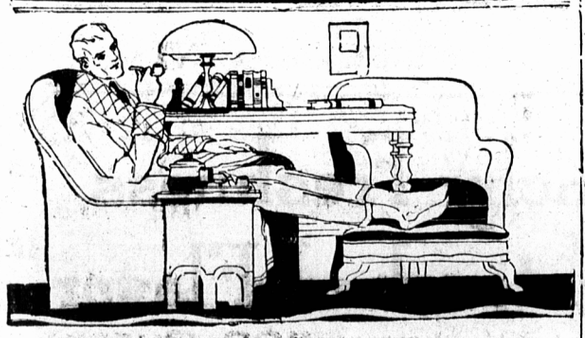

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JUST A GIRL

BY JANE PHELPS

ZENA ANSWERS TONY'S LETTER

Chapter 114

I waited until I knew when the next mail boat sailed, then I wrote Tony. I felt that I owed it to him to let him know as quickly as possible that there was nothing to hope from me. I liked Tony very much, but I never could have married him—not even in the old days.

So I wrote:

"Dear Tony.—I was surprised to get your letter. I did not expect you would have time to write before you sailed. You foolish boy to keep urging me to marry you; I am extremely fond of you—you are a part of my happy past. But I have no desire to marry—you or anyone. And as I told you, I shall remain with Mrs. Fagin until Mary is ready for me. It will almost break her dear old heart as it is—to lose us both at once. They have taken a nice little apartment near the shop. It is going to be furnished very prettily, so forget that dingy apartment at Mrs. Fagin's when you think of me.

"My work keeps me very busy, Tony I wouldn't dare do often as I did when you were here. I haven't strength enough to play so hard, and to work, too. And my work is congenial. So I am happy to an extent. Happiness is a matter of comparison at best, isn't it? Then I am so busy I haven't time to think. You work hard yourself, Tony, so you know I am right.

With sincere wishes for your success and happiness,

Zena Stewart."

Some way after I had mailed the letter, I felt as if another link between myself and my old life had been broken. Would I ever regret what I had done? Ever be sorry I had not made Mother comfortable, and myself also, by marrying Tony Deland? I knew that many clever girls would have jumped at the chance. He was kind, of good character, and immensely wealthy. It seemed as if he had everything a girl would require in the man she would want to marry—yet I had deliberately put him out of my life.

But I had little time for regretting. We were very busy at the office, and more work than usual devolved upon me, and more responsibility.

Then, too, I once more perceived a change in the attitude of the manager toward me. He smiled and smirked at me, and went out of his way to do me favors. Naturally I could say nothing, but I far preferred his moody aloofness. Miss Wilcox also acted differently. She watched me closely, almost as if she thought I was trying to do something I shouldn't, and she wanted to detect me in the act.

But I tried not to notice—at least, not to let them know I did. Often Mr. Betts and Miss Wilcox would be talking together in the outer office. If I went through, the suddenness with which their conversation ceased, as wel as the glances cast in my direction, left no doubt that I was the subject of their discussion.

Then because of some extra I had shown I could do in the bond department, Mr. Claxton raised my salary $5. I was now going to have $30 a week. It was a fortune! Only a short year before I had collapsed from overwork at the shop, had been depressed, discouraged. I hurried home to share my good news with Mary.

"I knew you'd get a big salary there. He's the right kind of a boss. Don't let you work yourself to death without paying any attention. Then he ought to pay something extra for having such a smart, pretty, educated girl in his office. He knows not many real ladies like you ever make good if they has to work. He's all to the merry."

"Now that I am so rich, Mary, I am going to give Tom a surprise; you will have to help me, you and Mrs. Fagin."

"What—"

"You know you decided to be married in your own flat. Well, I am going to give you a wedding supper. I'll have a cake, and do things in style! Won't that be great fun?"

"Why, Zena. Tom will think he is marrying a real lady instead of a poor girl like me."

"You are a real lady, Mary. And you don't get married every day, you know."

"I should hope not! I ain't no Mormon," she replied between smiles and tears.

In just two weeks they were to be married—a short time to do al I had planned.

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Diamond FAST FADELESS Dyes

Chapter 121

I used to wonder if I remained in New York, if I had been near my old friends, if because of Claudia Shepard I would have seen Kenneth Lawrence again. Altho they were cousins I never remembered his having visited them but that once, but I had often heard Claudia talk of him.

Some way, when I was settled in my own new home with Mary and Tom, I thought more often of Kenneth. It might have been because I saw how happy and contented they were, altho they worked hard. Tom was so kind and thoughtful, Mary so loving, that at times a lonely feeling clutched my heart, and I felt as if I, alone of all the world, had no one to care for me.

My work was going well. I tried in every way to familiarize myself with all the details of the bond department, and had succeded to the extent that now I had practically been made assistant to the manager. Naturally I was pleased and a little proud.

"No girl who wasn't educated could do what you've done," Mary said when we talked about my rapid advancement.

"No girl could have done it even if she was educated if she didn't work hard," said practical Tom "Miss Zena has worked very hard and deserves all the good luck that can come to her. But if you won't mind I want to say something, can I?"

"Of course you may Tom! anything you like," I replied heartily. I liked Thomas Cllancy. I also respected him and his opinions.

"I hardly know how to say it Miss Zena, but don't think that business, working in an office, is everything there is. Mary and I are so happy together—so different from what we were when we were working alone, I—we—want you to be happy too, in the same way. You ought to get married Miss Zena. You ain't the kind to go on working all your life. You ought to have a home of your own"

"My what a long speech for you Tom," I laughed. "I sometimes am a bit jealous of you and Mary," I added more seriously, "but not for long. I have to care for mother you know. I am thinking constantly that in another year I may have her with me. Then I will have a home of my own. Altho to tell the truth I am very contented here with you and Mary."

"That ain't the idea, Miss Zena. It ain't right that you shouldn't make some nice man happy, and be happy with him. I guess I'm old fashoned, but I think all nice girls like you and Mary, are sort of wasted unless you get married. There's so many of the other kind that marry the kind that don't know how to be wives, or how to a man be a good husband and a successful man, that it seems a pity not to have all your kind marr."

I was surprised to hear Tom talk like this. He was usually quiet, and said what he had to say in a few words.

"I don't say I sha'n't marry, Tom. But I have yet to meet the man"—I stopped, and felt the hot blood rush to my face. I had met a man—he was still enshrined in my heart altho I had no way of knowing that he cared for me any longer. And I also knew that it was this feeling for Kenneth Lawrence that had made me refuse to listen to Tony Deland when everything within me cried out for the comfort and ease from work and responsibility he could give me; for what I could do for mother as his wife.

"If you haven't, you'll meet him some day, Miss Zena. Don't have your mind so full of your work that you won't realize he is the right man."

"Oh, Zena won't be Miss Stewart always!" Mary broke in. "You two are too serious. I heard a little bird say that she could get married any time she wanted to—and to a fine man too."

"Little birds sometimes gossip when they have no reason to, Mary. Don't listen to them," I replied laughingly. Then: "If you two say anything more about my getting married I shall think you are tired of me; that you want to get rid of me."

"Oh, Miss Zena!" and "Oh, Zena!" they exclaimed in chorus, and the subject was dropped. But I often thought of Tom's homely advice; his odd way of putting his thoughts of matrimony into words: "All nice girls like you and Mary are sort of wasted unless they get married." Was he right?

A PROPOSAL

Chapter 122

"Miss Stewart, Zena, will you marry me?"

I fairly gasped with astonishment. It was Mr. Betts, the general manager, who had asked the question. He had gone out of his way for some time to efface the impression I had of him when I first went into the office. But that he had any such idea in his mind as marriage I had not even dreamed.

"Why—no—Mr. Betts!" I stammered.

"Perhaps I was too sudden," he said with a smirk, "but I wanted you to know that is the way I feel toward you. If you will let me, I will make you care for me; and I'll say nothing more about marriage until you do. But I was afraid you'd think I didn't mean to be square by you, so I asked you to marry me! first; then I can do my courting knowing that you understand I mean to be honest with you.'

Did any girl ever have so queer a proposal. In a way his words were almost an insult, although I knew he did not intend them to be so.

"I am not afraid that any man will not be square with me, Mr. Betts. I am fully capable of taking care of myself. I thank you for the honor you would pay me, but I must say no, and also ask you never to speak of this again."

I knew I spoke stiltedly. That, I could not help. I disliked the man intensely, and he knew it—at least I felt that he did. I also felt he had on right to approach me as he had; yet, what could I do? I had not encouraged him in any way; in fact I had ignored him whenever possible, and been coldly polite at other times.

"Am I intruding?" a sneering voice asked as Miss Wilcox appeared in the doorway.

'Not all!'" I replied cordially, for the first time really glad of her company.

"I'll come in then."

It was the noon hour, and because of a frightful thunder storm the office boy had brought us some sandwiches and so saved us the necessity of going out.

"I ain't the kind that but in," Jennie remarked as she sat down. "You sure you weren't talking private matters?"

"Quite sure!" I answered, "I have nothing of a private nature to discuss with Mr. Betts." Jennie looked relieved at my reply, but I felt sure she more than half guessed what had happened. And as by this time I realized perfectly that she looked upon Mr. Betts as her own individual conquest, I did all I could to let her see I was pleased to have her come in.

After a bit he left us alone.

"He's struck on you!" Jennie said, motioning toward his retreating figure.

"As long as I am not fond of him I don't see that it makes any difference how he feels—any real difference."

"You're a funny girl. I don't see how you can help liking him. Don't you think he is handsome? And he has to be smart to have his position and get the salary he does. I can't understand how you can turn him down." The last was said a bit wistfully.

"He is handsome, and as you say must be smart,—at least in his line. But isn't it a good thing we don't all admire the same sort of people? What a hair-pulling time we girls would have if we all were in love with the same man."

Jennie laughed rather sheepishly.

"I guess I haven't been very nice to you," she said slowly, as if the words came with an effort, but I thought you was setting your cap for him, and—well—until you came—he liked me. He said he did anyway!" the last defiantly.

"He probably did, and does. So don't fret about him. As far as I am concerned I would rather have your friendship than anything he could do for me.'

"Is that honest, Zena?"

"Yes, Jennie."

I was surprised at her action. The tears rushed to her eyes, and she said:

"I have been so unhappy! You see—he promised to marry me." Then: "now that I know you are my friend, and if he knows it too, perhaps he will keep his promise."

His return to the room with work for Jennie saved me the necessity of replying.

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JENNIE AND ZENA HAVE A TALK

Chapter 123

I had gained a friend in Jennie Wilcox. That she was in love with Mr. Betts I had long been aware; but that she was jealous of me I scarcely could believe. It seemed so absolutely without reason.

"Since you won't go and have lunch where I do, may I come with you?" Jennie asked the following day.

"Certainly! I shall be glad to have you," I returned.

I was surprised and must have shown it because Jennie said in an apologetic tone:

"I want to talk to you, and we don't have much time in the office."

After we ordered our luncheon I waited for Jennie to start the conversation. She fussed with her knife and fork, and took two or three sips of water before she commenced in an embarrassed manner.

"You see, Miss Stewart—or may I call you Zena?" I nodded, and with a smile she went on: "I came to Mr. Claxton's office three years ago. Mr. Betts wasn't manager then he was only an assistant manager. From the first he seemed to like me, and I liked him—too much for my own comfort. He's bound to flirt with every good-looking girl, as I sooon found out. I never said anything until he began coming to see me and taking me out. He's just as jealous as I am, and wouldn't let me look at another fellow. I was keeping company in a way with a boy from my own home when I went to Mr. Claxton's office. But just as soon as Carl Betts found out about him he made me give him up. For quite a while he was lovely to me. Brought me flowers and candy, and seemed o want to be with me all the time. That's when I commenced to—care. But it semmed almost as if when he found I did care for him that he stopped caring so much for me.'

"Perhaps you imagined that he did not care," I said Jennie had talked very fast in a low tone, and when she stopped, I thought she was waiting for an answer, although I scarcely knew what to say.

"I tried to think that way," she replied after a moment.

"But he went with other girls oftener, so I didn't see him so much. I was awfully unhappy. Then he changed again. I earned more, and I spent every cent on my clothes so to be attractive to him. He's got good taste; always notices what a girl has on. It worked, and he was even more loving than before. Then he was made manager, and several times he hinted that when he saved enough he was going to ask me to maryr him. I was so happy I didn't know what to do; and tried so hard to please him. Then you came. Since then he hasn't hardly looked at me, except at first when you made him angry by refusing to go to lunch with him. I know he was making love to you yesterday. I saw his face. I can't help it, Zena, I love him." She wiped her eyes.

A question trembled on my lips; one I could not ask. He had prefaced his proposal to me by declaring he meant to be square. Had he been square with Jennie?

Jennie saw, and understood.

"You see, Zena, Carl, Mr. Betts ain't no, isn't—I get awfully careless about my speech,—any better educated, nor from any better family than I am. But now that he is boss in the office he puts on airs with me sometimes. Then we quarrel something fierce. But I ain't never done anything I am ashamed of—yet. Though it has been hard to keep good sometimes. I guess you know that! all working girls do." I thought of Mary, and what he had told me of some of the girls she knew. But much as I cared I made him keep his distance. Perhaps if I hadn't been so—."

"Oh, no! Jennie! never think of that! he respects you now, he must. Never let him lose that respect. And Jennie, than you for telling me. I know it must be hard for a girl when she cares very much for a man to refuse him anything. But better lose his love, everything in the world, than his respect. Don't think I am preaching. Jennie, I am only repeating what my dear dad told me before he left us. He was a man of the world, he knew!" I waited a moment, then added: "I don't believe Mr. Betts cares for me in the least, or ever has. He was perhaps piqued a little because I refused to go out with him, and man-like, wanted to have his own way with me. Don't feel badly over me, or his attentions, they mean absolutely nothing to me.' I couldn't tell the girl who loved him how repugnant they were; how I disliked the man himself.

"I am happier than I have been in months," Jennie said as arm in arm we returned to the ocice.

ZENA QUESTIONS HERSELF.

Chapter 124

In the days and weeks which followed my talk with Jennie Wilcox I avoided Mr. Betts in every way possible. And I also never

Continued On Page Nine.

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