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THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

THEIR NIGHT OFF, By Thomas E. Hinchman

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Twombly had been watching with silent satisfaction the very artistic smoke garlands he was reeling off his post luncheon cigar. Suddenly his glance fell to the figure of the girl bending over a desk by the window. Evidently she was puzzled by the letter he had given her to his father's Venezuelan representative. She shifted her position to throw a better light on the book. Incidentally it brought her profile out sharply against the early afternoon sunlight. Twombly forgot all about the smoke wreaths.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "that's a profile for the sculptor. I wonder where she sprang from and where the governor found her."

"The governor," otherwise Thomas Twombly, Sr., had been called suddenly to London, and Thomas Twombly, Jr., was spending his summer in the office instead of at Newport or on some friend's yacht, as was his usual custom. The summer nights in town were something of a revelation to the young man, who, despite his city birth, knew little of city life, so much had he traveled with his mother.

The girl swung round to her desk, and the typewriter clicked insistently. Tom hid down his cigar and bent forward, watching her curiously. It must be devilish hard to work like that when you know you were meant for better things, thought the young fellow, and the light of a strong resolution shone on his smooth, square cut face.

"I wonder how she'd like to spend an evening as I do around town?"

Then he paused uncertainly. Would she have the clothes to wear? He remembered the filmy, extravagant gowns he had seen at the casino the night before. Then he as quickly decided that she'd look well no matter what she wore. He strolled across the room to draw down the shades just a trifle.

"Beasty hot, isn't it?"

"Very warm," replied Miss Carruth without looking up from her work.

"If I owned the Stock Exchange or controlled big business interests I'd stop everything short in hot weather."

She looked up at him with a grave smile. "Then I'm afraid you couldn't own a yacht and a shooting box in the Adirondacks."

"That's so. The wheels of commerce must grind on the year around, I suppose."

"And what a lot of poor people they grind down!" The girl spoke to herself rather than to him.

"Oh, but the town's not so bad in summer," he said. "It's corking jolly if you know the right sort of people. I've had some good times the last few weeks."

She looked at him almost pityingly, but he did not notice it.

"You know, there are the roofs and the gardens, and nearly all the fellows in town have their automobiles. Oh, it's not half bad."

She did not answer, but resumed her writing. He went back to his desk, but the idea of giving her an evening out had become thoroughly imbedded in his mind. About 4 o'clock he rose with sudden determination.

"Oh, I say, Miss Carruth, let's knock off for the day."

"I don't understand."

"Let's take a trip around town."

The girl swung around in her chair and looked at him in silent amazement. Twombly looked back at her with an engaging, boyish smile, and the faint flush which had come into her face died down again.

"I think we have been working pretty faithfully since the governor went away, and we deserve a holiday. I'd be awfully much obliged to you if you'd have dinner with me tonight, and then we will go up on one of the roof gardens and see the show."

A faint smile curved the girl's lips, and he felt encouraged.

"It's awfully jolly, don't you know, and if you have never seen that sort of thing you'd like it."

"Oh, I understand," said the girl—"you're going to give me just a taste of the life you and your friends lead. But it might make me very dissatisfied with my surroundings, you know."

Twombly found himself actually blinking at her. She put it so boldly.

"Oh, I say, that's not fair. Just for tonight I think we might be jolly good pals and forget that my father pays your salary."

The girl laughed. Twombly pulled down the lid of his desk with a snap.

"What," said the girl, "you must sign these letters."

"Oh, hang it," he said, "I forgot."

While he was dispatched that work the girl was closing up her own affairs for the day, and when she took the letters from him and touched the bell for the office boy to carry them away he noticed that she had her hat on and a neat pair of gloves were caught through the handle of her purse.

"We'll have time for a spin in the park before we go to dinner," he said.

"I must go home first and change my frock."

He looked her over critically. The shirt waist suit was simple, but it had an air. He didn't feel quite so safe about the finery she might deem necessary for evening wear.

"Oh, don't bother," he said quickly. "You look very fit in that."

She shook her head. "I must go home, because mother would worry, and I have no way of telephoning to her."

Twombly saw that it was useless to argue the question.

"When and where shall I call for you?"

"All right," said Twombly cheerfully, and under his breath he added: "Ashamed of mamma and the little nat, I suppose. You can't exactly blame her when she's made something of herself."

At 8 o'clock she met him at the park entrance, and just for an instant Twombly felt actually dazzled. Her statuesque figure was draped in some soft, billowy gray stuff. He knew somehow that it took an artist to design and make such a dress. Her face was shaded by a picture hat of softest gray chiffon clouding pink roses.

Twombly hailed a hansom and they drove rapidly through the park to the casino. With a thrill of satisfaction he noticed that as they passed down the aisle between the lines of tables all eyes followed the slender gray figure and low murmurs of approval reached his ear. He wondered whether this was a twentieth century Cinderella, this graceful figure at his side, transformed by shimmering gray silk from the tailor made stenographer who had worked beside him for the past few weeks. She was perfectly self possessed, only a slight flush and a singularly bright light in her eyes showed that she was excited.

All patronage died out. Twombly's bearing. He was genuinely anxious now to please her. As for the girl, she displayed a knowledge of books, plays and pictures of the hour which astonished Twombly. Wonderfully adaptive creatures are the American girls, he decided. That must be the reason why it was so hard to tell whether a family had been born to money or born to make it. Before they re-entered the hansom to drive to the roof garden he had decided that money really didn't count after all.

The roof garden seemed stupid and cheap. He looked at the girl at his side, then at the occupants in the boxes around him; then he leaned toward her and whispered: "Let's get out of this. I know it's boring you. We'll go over to the Beaulieu for a bit of supper and hear the mandolin club play."

She rose with evident relief, and they walked through the quiet side street to an odd, foreign looking cafe on whose roof the mandolin and guitars tinkled dimly. Here no lights blazed, for the moonlight flooded the scene.

The girl leaned back restfully in her chair, and Twombly smoked in silence, studying her profile the while. Somehow his father's brownstone mansion on the avenue seemed very far away. His austere and critical mother faded into a vague background. It would not be any concession on his part, he decided. They could slip away to Italy or Japan or some other far-away place for the honeymoon, and the world would get through talking about it before they came back. A filmy cloud passed over the moon. The girl's hand, white and slender, lay on the table, temptingly close within his reach. He leaned forward impetuously.

"Hello, Twombly! What are you doing in town at this season of the year?" Twombly scowled at the intruder; then his face cleared.

"Hello, Davidson! When did you land?"

The girl had made a move as if to rise; then she sank back in the chair, her face white and set in the moonlight.

"I came in on the Lucania yesterday and thought I'd see something of little old New York before starting for—"

He had turned slightly toward Miss Carruth, and just then the moon slipped from under the cloud, and the clear light struck her face.

"Helen!"

He leaned heavily against the table. The girl's head was bent so low that he could not look into her eyes.

"You're looking so softly, but not so softly that he missed either the word or the tender accent with which she lingered over his name.

They had forgotten Twombly's existence. Now the newcomer pulled himself together.

"I beg your pardon, old man, but Miss Carruth and I were once—very—good—friends, and—"

"I see," said Twombly, rising, with an amused smile, "and if you'll look after it for Carruth for a moment I'd like to have a chat with an artist friend I see buried behind a row of steins."

Without so much as a "thank you" Davidson dropped into the vacant chair.

"Helen, I've come back to look after you for always, and dear, if you'll forgive my selfishness I'll promise you can study sociology and found working girls' clubs and endow industrial schools—anything, so you will come to me."

Twombly had forgotten all about the artist friend. He was leaning over the parapet looking down on the facing street lamps.

"And to think I patronized her and thought there was need of a secret honeymoon in Italy or Japan. Tom, my boy, you're a fool!"

He glanced across the area of tables. The gray picture hat and a stiff, white straw were close together.

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