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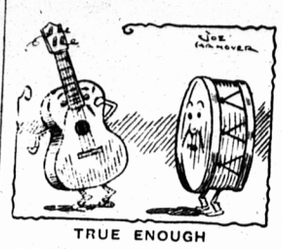

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I know just who he is dear."
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"These Women"

BY MALCOLM DUART

CHAPTER XLVIII

They left Abe, still jubilating, at his own apartments. Then, at Morton's direction, the taxi driver turned toward the park.

Nona lay back languidly, and watched as the first rays of the sun lit the treetops.

"Happy?" asked Morton.

"Yes—and no." She rested her head upon his shoulder.

"Why aren't you?"

She breathed a sigh.

"Success isn't everything." She dreamily held up her hand before her. "My rings and pin and necklace are gone. They don't mean anything. That doesn't worry I suppose I've become a star. That's nice—but it isn't so much.

"Oh Harry!" She threw her arm around his neck. "What I want is happiness—contentment!"

"How are you going to find it?" he asked, absently. "How are any of us going to find it?"

He brooded a little time, the girl still holding to him.

"I've hunted happiness, too," he said, his voice so low that she scarcely could catch his words." And it seems the best I can do was to run away from happiness."

She twisted her head, so she could see his eyes.

"Can't I give you happiness, Harry?" she asked.

He took her hand from his shoulder, and thoughtfully moved her fingers, twining them together.

"Old wounds are deep ones, Nona, and they do not always heal. But your friendship has meant a great deal to me, Nona dear."

She drew herself erect, her arms rigidly outstretched before her.

"Friendship! Friendship!" she cried. "Maybe it's only friendship with you, Harry. But don't you understand—I LOVE you!"

Suddenly she drooped, and bowing her head, she began to cry.

"There, there!" he said, soothingly. "You're tired out. We'll drive you home, now. Don't talk any more."

He drew her to him, and with the girl sobbing on his shoulder, he rapped on the glass and motioned to the driver to turn.

At her apartment he helped her to alight.

"Pleasant dreams!" he called, as he drove away.

• • •

Morton did not go to bed. Returning to his rooms, he bathed, shaved, changed his linen, and set forth for his office early, long before Audrey was astir.

There was no trace of fatigue in his eyes or face as he settled to the heap of papers that he drew from his desk. He was still busy when Parrish entered, an hour later.

"Mr. Morton," said the young man, without preliminaries, "I'm going to quit again. And this time I'm really going to do it."

Morton waited.

"Did Miss Morton tell you what happened last night?" Parrish pursued.

The older man nodded

"I shouldn't have left her, of course." Parrish was twisting his soft hat in his hands. "But I just can't stand it here. I'm going back to New York and start all over again. I'm a failure, as things are."

"Sit down," Morton told him. The young man obeyed.

"I'll give you a note for the money I owe you," continued Parrish, "and I'll send you fifteen a week, regularly. I've tried to do all right, but I'm always blundering. I simply got started on the wrong foot."

"Sometimes that happens," admitted his employer. "But what is it that worries you?"

"It's just this." Parrish rested his arms upon the table and looked earnestly at Morton. "You know I love Miss Morton, don't you?"

"Yes," said the other.

"Well, I started out by making her angry—telling her what she ought to do. Then, because my feelings—" he laughed, mirthlessly—"my precious feelings were hurt, I started running around, and drinking. And that was worse than ever."

"Then, when I quit making an ass of myself that way, I started in making myself a bore to her. I don't know why I started to lecture about dancers and singers last night. I didn't mean to do it. I'm just a fool."

He groaned, and put his forehead on his hands.

Morton drew forth a pipe, and lighted it.

"Son," he said, "when miners dig up a precious stone from the ground, it isn't a pretty thing to look at. It is dull, and has rough edges, and its shape is lumpy. It doesn't shine until it has been pressed hard against a wheel, with abrasives on it. It is cut—cut deep. But when the stonecutter is through, it is brilliant, and sells for a lot of money.

"Do you get what I'm driving at?"

Parrish looked at him dully.

Morton went on. "A young man needs polishing. It is contact with life that polishes him. Sometimes the abrasives hurt. Sometimes they develop flaws that make him worthless. But if he's the right stuff, he comes out, faceted and glittering, like the diamond, or sapphire, or aquamarine."

"I've been hurt," Parrish said.

Morton walked around the table, and laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Go ahead and find a new job, if you want to."

Parrish arose, and slowly moved toward the door.

"Say goodbye to Miss Morton for me," he said. His lip was quivering.

"Surely." Morton extended his hand, in farewell. "Good luck, John."

The young man retreated. Morton lit his pipe again, and stood, smoking contemplatively, a full minute. Then he leisurely turned, and resumed inspection of the papers on his desk.

That night he went again with Audrey, to the theatre where Nona danced.

The company had been in rehearsal all afternoon. The producer and his director had been busy with the pruning knife. Some of the numbers were missing from the second evening's performance. Two or three of the performers had been released.

The production was shorter, and went with even greater snap and fire.

As before, Nona gathered the most enthusiastic plaudits of the crowd, and bowed again after she had exhausted the encores to her dances.

"Did you notice?" Audrey asked. "Her name is in the lights outside, tonight."

'It will be in lights a long time, I think," he replied.

He was shuffling the leaves of his program.

"Maybe," Audrey said, "it would have been better if we had invited Mr. Parrish to come. I'm sure he's sorry for the way he acted."

"Parrish," said Morton, "has quit. He's on the train now, on his way back to New York.

Audrey looked up in concern.

"Did he go away because he was rude to me? Poor Mr. Parrish!"

"He said he was a fool," Morton told her.

The orchestra was playing, and he leaned closer to her ear.

"He said he loved you, and was always making blunders."

She considered this, her eyebrows drawn together in thought.

"Isn't love funny?" she said. "Here I love you, and Nona loves you, and neither of us gets any place with it. And Mr. Parrish loves me, he says—and all he can do is to make himself miserable."

There was the sound of a snicker from the row behind them. Audrey turned, and saw a girl and man laughing at her.

"They heard us!" she whispered to Morton.

"Doubtless," he responded, cheerfully. "And we shan't worry over that. But we'd better talk about something else."

The lights flashed before the musical director. He brought down his arms with a swoop, and the orchestra glided into the opening number of the second act. The curtain ran up, and Nona danced into view, followed by the chorus.

Her lithe body turned and swayed and bent. She floated about the stage as lightly as a bit of thistledown. As she finished her dance, she sank into a heap in the center of the stage, her arms outstretched, her face buried upon her knees.

The thunder of applause that arose drowned the orchestra, as it began the movement for the encore.

"She is positively fairylike," Audrey exclaimed, as Nona bowed her way into the wings. She moved, so she could whisper into Morton's ear. "How can she be so strong and supple, after—after the sort of life she led?"

Morton placed his hand on her's. "Nona wasn't as bad as you think, Audrey."

"I didn't know." She still was whispering. "I got the idea, somehow, that she was awfully bad. But she did stay up late, nights, didn't she?"

Morton laughed, and assented.

"Also, she got up late, afternoons," he said.

Audrey continued the discussion, as they waited for Nona behind the scenes, after the performance.

"How did she happen to be the sort of girl she was?" she asked, as they sat on a property bench, at the rear of the stage.

"She told me, one time," he answered. "Her mother and father quarreled, and the father went away. She took her mother, and went to New York. They had enough money to scrape by, until she got a place in a chorus. She was only fifteen or sixteen, then. She studied, and went out on the road with a minor company, as a dancer.

"There were times when there was no work. They got by—some way. I never wanted to ask her how."

He paused to greet a passing singer.

"There's one thing sure," he resumed. "There's a shrewd brain behind those black eyes of Nona's, and she never would steer herself into any shipwreck."

"Where's her mother?" Audrey asked.

"Married again—four or five years ago."

Nona was coming toward them now, and they arose to greet her.

"I want you to come to my apartment," she said. "I've ordered supper to be brought there. Abe and Lois are coming."

Audrey looked at Morton, and he nodded.

"I'd like to come," Audrey said.

The three took Morton's car, and in a few minutes were in Nona's small drawing room. Mr. Sunshine and Lois entered a few minutes later.

"I've been busted so flat, this is the first time I've entertained anybody in weeks," Nona said. "An old friend of mine sent me a check, or I couldn't have paid for this banquet."

She indicated the food and drink that had been spread upon her center table.

Morton was looking amusedly at Audrey.

"Audrey wants to know who the friend was—the one who sent the money," he said.

Nona seated herself, and motioned to the others to join her.

"Oh, it wasn't Harry," said the hostess. "Will you open that wine, Abe?"

Audrey(still stared at her. Nona caught her glance.

"It was a man I know—butter-and-egg man!" she explained.

The younger girl was pushing her chair back from the table.

"I'm tired—I want to go home," she said, faintly.

Nona arose, and took her by the arm.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "Please sit down."

She turned to the others. "Audrey thinks it's a scandal that I got a check from a man. "There was a hint of indignation in her voice, but her eyes were kind as she turned to the younger girl.

"Listen—it isn't always a dark secret when a girl in my profession receives money from a man. He's in business. Customers come from out of town. They want to be entertained. So, once in a while, I've had dinner with a party of them, and danced with them, and kept them happy. He paid me for it. He sent this check because he's a good egg. That's all."

Her voice raised a little.

"Why, I never even kissed him!"

Morton was helping himself to a sandwich.

"I'm glad the subject came up," he said. "I wanted Audrey to know that we can't always judge people by our own standards."

"I should think not!" Lois intervened. "Why, there have been lots and lots of men who gave me money. Haven't there, Abe?"

"Hush!" said her intended husband, fondly." Don't think about them any more."

He kissed Lois's plump cheek.

"Well, I'd like to hear anybody say I wasn't a good girl because I had to live!" retorted Lois. "There never was anybody that lived straighter than I have."

Audrey timidly interposed. "I didn't mean to say that you were bad, Nona and Lois. But I always thought it was terrible for girls to take money from men."

"It's according to the girl," said Nona, wisely. "Most of the men aren't dangerous."

"Just sappy," agreed Lois.

"Anyhow," Nona went on, "I'd have been a lot happier if there hadn't been any men in my life—except Harry."

Mr. Sunshine looked up with an injured air. "What's the matter with me?" he enquired.

Nona laughed, and held out her glass to him. "And you, Abe—what could I do without you?"

After they had eaten, Audrey played on the small upright piano, and Nona sang in a clear, sweet soprano. Morton joined her in a duet, himself taking Audrey's place at the keyboard. Then Mr. Sunshine sang.

"I'm all through singing and dancing," announced Lois, as they turned and asked her to join the impromptu musicale, "I'm going to REST—and get fat!"

"Absolutely," concurred Mr. Sunshine. "It's going to be just one big holiday for Lois, from now on."

They lingered until four o'clock. Audrey subsided in the corner of Morton's car, with a tired sigh, as they set forth for home.

"I never was made for midnight suppers," she said.

She was silent for a while, with her eyes closed. Morton was quietly smoking, beside her.

"Life is awfully confusing, isn't it?" she said, at length.

"Why?" He eyed her affectionately.

"Oh, the folks I thought were bad people turn out to be good people. At least, they're kind, good-hearted people. And the things that look black to me look white to them. They're perfectly sincere about it, too."

She twisted the big tourmaline ring that adorned her right hand.

"You remember those women who came to see me in New York, to tell me how bad you were?"

"Quite well," he answered.

"They're good women, aren't they? Yet they deliberately tried to make me miserable. You hadn't hurt them, and neither had I. So they are bad women!"

He shook his head and laughed. "No, they're not bad, either," he said. "They are just looking at life as they see it."

He stopped to relight his cigar.

"Audrey, there are so many sides to life, that none of us ever can see them all, nor understand them. If we do right by our own standards, that's as much as can be expected."

She nodded, slowly. "And it may be wickedness by the next person's standards!"

They had arrived at their home. The chauffeur, drowsy at his wheel, did not alight to open the door. Morton turned the knob, and alighting, helped Audrey to the sidewalk.

"Poor chap!" he said, indicating the man in the machine. "He stays up all night, and has no fun, just so we can take two short trips!"

He added, as they passed into the lower hall. "But there are long stretches when he doesn't have to do anything at all. The job has its compensations."

It was noon when they awakened. Audrey still was tired as they discussed the news in the papers that lay on the breakfast table.

"Go back to bed, child," Morton said, as they finished their meal. "You're dead to the world."

"I didn't sleep very well," she said.

"Worrying about something?"

"Yes. Me." Absent-mindedly she made marks on the cloth with her spoon. "Nona is going ahead with her career, and Lois is marrying Mr. Sunshine, and I—there just isn't anything for me to do."

He folded his newspaper and laid it aside.

"But I thought you were going to be my housekeeper, and fire the servants and hire them, and order eggs, and everything."

She continued marking the cloth.

"But you don't really need me to do that. It is just something you are giving me to play with."

"Well," he said, "how about going ahead and rescuing young men from the slough of despond?"

She looked up at him, her eyes heavy.

"You mean Mr. Parrish?"

"Yes, or some other deluded youngster. Most of them are in about the same boat, at that age."

She pushed the dishes back toward the center of the table, and crossed her arms before her.

"I've thought of being a settlement worker," she told him.

"Why not try politics?" he suggested. His tone was light, but the gaze he turned to her downcast head was an anxious one.

She did not heed the suggestion. Instead, she reached her hand across to his.

"Why wouldn't I make you a good wife, daddy?"

(To Be Continued)

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Suzanne Lenglen is not popular in the United States. I remember well an exhibition doubles match she played in at Forest Hill the year she played Mrs. Mallory. The match was staged after the doubles of the Davis Cup match. The match had hardly proceeded a few games when a good portion of the audience got up and left, and when the game finished half the people had left. Of course in that year the American public were rather sore at Suzanne Lenglen on account of her default to Mrs. Mallory. Time has, however, healed this feeling and she will doubtless draw good crowds, but I miss my guess if Mlle. Lenglen does not apply for reinstatement after a year in the professional ranks.

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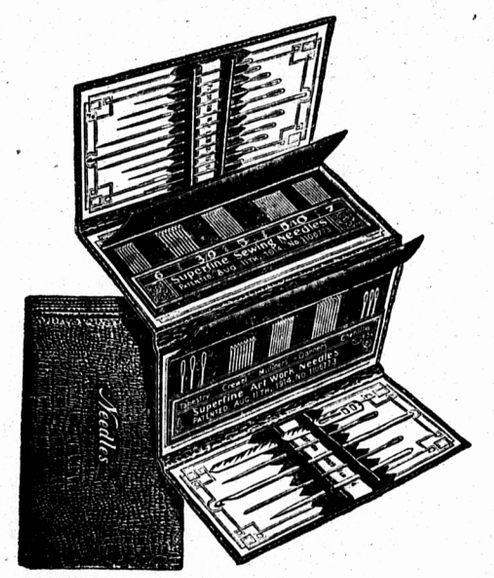

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