

The DIM LANTERN

By TEMPLE BAILEY

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CHAPTER XV—Continued**23**

Then Eloise and Edith came in, and presently the men, and Lucy and Del from a trip to the small porters, and Adelaide going out with Del to dinner was uncomfortably aware that Jane had either artlessly or artfully refused to discuss with her the women who had been loved by Frederick Towne!

The dinner was delicious. "Our farm products," Delafeld boasted. Even the fish, it seemed, he had caught that morning, motoring over to the river and bringing them back to be split and broiled and served with little new potatoes. There was chicken and asparagus, small cream cheeses with the salad, heaped-up berries in a Royal Worcester bowl, roses from the garden. "All home-grown," said the proud new husband.

Jane ate with little appetite. She had refused to discuss with Adelaide the former heart affairs of her betrothed, but the words rang in her ears, "The women that Ricky has loved."

Jane was young. And to youth, love is for the eternities. The thought of herself as one of a succession of Dulcineas was degrading. She was restless and unhappy. It was useless to assure herself that Towne had chosen her above all the rest. She was not sophisticated enough to assume that it is, perhaps, better to be a man's last love than his first. That Towne had made it possible for any woman to speak of him as Adelaide spoke, seemed to Jane to drag her own relation to him in the dust.

The strength of the wind increased. The table was sheltered by the house, but at last Delafeld decided, "We'd better go in. The rain is coming. We can have our coffee in the hall."

Their leaving had the effect of a stampede. Big drops splashed into the plates. The men servants and maids scurried to the rescue of china and linen.

The draperies of the women streamed in the wind. Adelaide's tulle was a banner of green and blue. The peacock came swiftly up the walk, crying raucously, and found a sheltered spot beneath the steps.

From the wide hall, they saw the rain in silver sheets. Then the doors were shut against the beating wind.

They drank their coffee, and bridge tables were brought in. There were enough without Jane to form two tables. And she was glad. She wandered into the living-room and curled herself up in window-seat. The window opened on the porch. Beyond the white pillars she could see the road, and the rain-drenched garden.

After a time the rain stopped, and the world showed clear as crystal against the opal brightness of the western sky. The peacock came out of his hiding-place, and dragged a long, heavy tail over the sodden lawn.

It was cool and the air was sweet. Jane lay with her head against a cushion, looking out. She was lonely and wished that Towne would come. Perhaps in his presence her doubts would vanish. It grew dark and darker. Jane shut her eyes and at last she fell asleep.

She was wakened by Towne's voice. He was on the porch. "Where is everybody?"

It was Adelaide who answered him. "They have motored into Alexandria to the movies. Eloise would have it. But I stayed—waiting for you, Ricky."

"Where's Jane?"

"She went up-stairs early. Like a sleepy child."

Jane heard his laugh. "She is a child—a darling child."

Then in the darkness Adelaide said, "Don't, Ricky."

"Why not?"

"Do you remember that once upon a time you called me—a darling child?"

"Did I? Well, perhaps you were. You are certainly a very charming woman."

Jane, listening breathlessly, assured herself that of course he was polite. He had to be.

Adelaide was speaking. "So you are going to make the announcement tomorrow?"

"Who told you?"

"Edith."

"Well, it seemed best, Adelaide. The wedding day isn't far off—and the world will have to know it."

A hushed moment, then, "Oh, Ricky, Ricky!"

"Adelaide! Don't take it like that."

"I can't help it. You are going out of my life. And you've always been so strong, and big, and brave. No other man will ever match you."

When he spoke, his voice had a new and softer note. "I didn't dream it would hurt you."

"You might have known."

The lightning flickering along the horizon showed Adelaide standing beside Towne's chair.

"Ricky"—the whispered words reached Jane—"kiss me once—to say 'good-by.'"

CHAPTER XVI

Young Baldwin Barnes, on Saturday morning, ate breakfast alone in the little house. He read his paper and drank his coffee. But the savor of things was gone. He missed Jane. Her engaging chatter, the spirited challenge, even the small irritations. "She is such a darling-dear," was his homesick meditation.

Edith

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Towne, riding like mad along the Virginia roads.

thing had almost gone out of his thoughts. He had long ceased to hope. Money did not miraculously fall into one's lap.

He tore open the envelope. Within was a closely typed letter and a pale pink check.

The check was for two thousand dollars. He had won the prize!

Breathless with the thought of it, deprived of strength, he sat down on the terrace steps. Merrymaid and the kitten came down and angled for attention, but Baldy overlooked them utterly. The letter was astounding. The magazine had not given him the prize but they wanted more of his work. They would come to New York at their expense, the art editor would like to talk it over!

Baldy, looking up from the pre-gramphates and catching Merrymaid's eye upon him, demanded, "Now, what do you think of that? Shall I resign from the office? I'll tell the world, I will."

Oh, the thing might even make it possible for him to marry Edith. He could at least pay for the honeymoon—preserve some sense of personal independence while he worked towards fame. If she must ask her to live for a time—in the little house. He'd make things easy for her—oh, well, the thing could be done—it could be done.

He flew up the steps on the wings of his delight. He would ride like the wind to Virginia—find Edith in a rose-garden, fling himself at her feet. Declare his good fortune! And he would see her eyes!

Packing his bag, he decided to stop in Washington, and perpetrate a few extravagances. Something for Edith. Something for Jane. Something for himself. There would be no harm in looking his best.

He arrived at Grass Hills in time for lunch. His little flivver came up the drive as proudly as a limousine. And Baldy descending was a gay and gallant figure. There was no one in sight but the servants who took his bag, and drove his car around to the garage. A maid in rose linen said that Mr. and Mrs. Simms were at the stables. Miss Towne was on the links with the other guests, and would return from the Country Club in time for lunch at two o'clock. Miss Barnes was up-stairs. Her head had ached, and she had had her breakfast in bed.

"Will you let her know that I am here?"

The maid went up and came down to say that Miss Barnes was in the

second gallery—and would he go right up.

The second gallery looked out over the river. Jane lay in a long chair. She was pale, and there were shadows under her eyes.

"Oh, look here, Jane!" Baldy blurted out, "is it as bad as this?"

"I'm just—lazy." She sat up and kissed him. Then buried her face in his coat and wept silently.

"For heaven's sake, Jane," he patted her shoulder, "what's the matter?"

"I want to go home."

He looked blank. "Home?"

"Yes." She stopped crying.

"Baldy, something has happened—and I've got to tell you." Tensely,

she rehearsed for him the scene between Adelaide and Frederick Towne. And when she finished she said, "I can't marry him."

"Of course not. A girl like you. You'd be miserable. And that's the end of it."

"Utterly miserable." She stared before her. Then presently she went on. "I stayed up-stairs all the morning. Lucy and Edith have been perfect dears. I think Edith lays it to the announcement of my engagement tonight. That I was dreadfully bad."

"I wonder—" Edith said, and stopped. She remembered coming in from the movies the night before and finding Adelaide and Towne out on the porch. And where was Jane?

Towne did not eat lunch. He pleaded important business, and had his car brought around. But everybody knew that he was following Jane. Mystery was in the air. Adelaide was restless. Only Edith knew the truth.

After lunch, she told Lucy, "Jane isn't going to marry Uncle Fred. I don't know why. But I am afraid that it is breaking up your house party."

"I hope it is," said Lucy, calmly.

"Delafeld is bored to death. He wants to get back to his pigs and roses. I am speaking frankly to you because I know you understand. I want our lives to be bigger and broader than they would have been if we hadn't met. And as for you—" her voice shook a little—"you'll always be a sort of goddess blessing our hearts."

Edith bent and kissed her, emotionally gripping her. "Your heart is blessed without me," she said, "but I'll always be glad to come."

Towne, riding like mad along the Virginia roads.

He stopped, sternly renouncing his dreams. "Get your things on, Jane, and I'll take you home. You can't stay here, of course. We can decide later what it is best to do."

"I don't see how I can break it off. He's done so much for us. I can't ever—pay him."

In Baldy's pocket was the pink slip. He took it out and handed it to his sister. "Jane, I got the prize. Two thousand dollars."

"Baldy!" Her tone was incredulous.

He had no joy in the announcement. The thing had ceased to mean freedom—it had ceased to mean Edith. It meant only one thing at the moment, to free Jane from bondage.

He stood up, sternly renouncing his dreams. "Get your things on, Jane, and I'll take you home. You can't stay here, of course. We can decide later what it is best to do."

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