A LOVELESS MARRIAGE

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A striking plot—unusual situations—hate, revenge—and love. These all blend fascinatingly in

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Thursday on This Page

"IT WILL be Elsa's some day," I told him.

He glanced at me and away again.

"You have a merry little daughter," he said.

I forced myse'f to smile.

"She is like her father," I answered.

I stopped to speak to the men who were erecting a marquee on the far side of the lawn — we were to have dancing there at night. Richard waited patiently.

I wished he would go away. He seemed another man to the one I had known for those few happy hours by the sea, a stranger who looked at me with the eyes of the man I loved.

I wondered if Francis meant to carry out his threat. He so often said things when he was in a rage and forgot them; but I did not think that he could forget this.

"Are there many people coming tonight?" Richard asked me as we moved away again.

"Over a hundred," I told him. "Elsa has so many friends. There is to be a dance."

"So she told me. Will you—may I have the honor of a dance with you?"

I hesitated.

"I don't suppose I shall dance at all," I said. "I have not danced for years—it tires me."

"You mean you don't wish to dance with me?"

I tried to laugh.

"How absurd. Of course not! I shall be only too pleased."

"Thank you."

We turned back toward the house. Francis was coming down the terrace.

There was something in his gait that made my heart beat fast with apprehension. With sudden impulse I spoke to the man beside me.

"If Francis—if my husband asks you—asks you—a question that may surprise you—please—please don't believe that it is my wish. I don't wish it—I don't wish it——"

"Marjorie!"

My name seemed to escape Richard before he was aware of it; the next moment he was as composed as ever, his face calm and indifferent as he went to meet my husband.

I left them together.

From my bedroom window I watched them pacing up and down in the sunshine. I could see that Francis was talking quickly and earnestly, and Richard now and then replied.

What were they saying? I was standing there in agony, when Elsa opened the door behind me.

"What are you doing, mother?" she asked in surprise. "You look—you look as if—— What is the matter?"

I forced myself to smile.

"I was watching your father—and Mr. Tempest," I said. "What tall men they both are!"

She went nearer to the window to look. She stood in the sunshine, as dainty a figure as any man could wish for, looking down at the man who had loved her mother years before she was born.

"I think Mr. Tempest is wonderful!" she said, with a long-drawn breath; "Mother, did you ever see any one so handsome?"

What could I say?

She turned slowly.

"I don't believe you like him," she accused me. "You always seem to try to turn the subject when I speak of him. Don't you want me to marry him?"

"I want you to be happy," I told her. "And I think that a younger man——"

"Richard is not old!" she cried indignantly.

"He is old enough to be your father," I answered.

She burst into angry tears. She told me that I always tried to make her unhappy; that she did not believe I really loved her. I put my arms round her and kissed her, and tried to soothe her, but my heart felt empty.

I did not want her to cry on her birthday, so presently she wiped her eyes and kissed me; and we went down to lunch.

CHAPTER XLI

The invitations to the party were for 4 o'clock, but long before that hour Elsa was dressed in her new gown—a wonderful confection she had brought back from Paris.

It was white, with a pale blue sash, and short skirt that showed her little feet and ankles in their white shoes and stockings.

Francis and Richard and I were in the hall when she came down stairs.

"Well, my beauty!" said Francis. He put an arm round her and kissed her—he really loved Elsa.

He turned to Richard.

"What do you think of my beauty?" he asked.

Elsa blushed and laughed.

"Fine feathers make fine birds," she said. But I caught the glance she cast to Richard.

Our guests began to come soon after that, and for more than an hour I was busy receiving and introducing.

There was a band playing on the lawn—a very swell band from town—and refreshments were served at little round tables under Japanese sunshades.

Elsa was wild with excitement. She flitted here and there, always with some man in attendance; generally Richard, but once I caught sight of him sitting alone, and looking rather bored.

I spoke to him as I passed.

"I am afraid you are not enjoying yourself."

He looked up at me with the old smile in his eyes.

"I always hate a crowd," was his answer. "You look tired to death already."

"My head aches—a little," I admitted.

He made no comment; we stood side by side, watching the gay scene.

I did not know many of the people present; Elsa had so many friends apart from me. I felt a little strange and out of it. If only she had been like her brother. If only she had been to me what some daughters are to their mother, how different my life would have been.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Richard.

I started.

"I was only thinking how different things might have been," I said. "If——" I stopped helplessly; how could I complain of my own child to him?

"If what?" he asked.

But I had nothing more to say.

"What did you mean this morning about a question your—your—Furnival was going to ask me?" he inquired.

I felt myself flushing.

"He has not asked you?"

He shook his head.

"He talked about the weather, and a horse he had bought, and a few other subjects—but nothing beyond."

I was conscious of an enormous relief.

"I am very glad."

He looked at me curiously.

"Why can you not be frank with me and tell me?" he said. "Surely you can trust me after all these years."

I hesitated. I wanted to tell him.

We had begun to walk out; we left the smooth, crowded lawns behind us and turned into the rose garden.

The roses were in full bloom, the air was fragrant with their scent; the ground was scattered with pink and crimson and white petals.

"You have a beautiful home," said Richard. "This is a place where there should be much happiness."

"I hope some day Elsa will find it here," I told him.

"Elsa!" He echoed her name without interest. "She is not thinking of marrying, is she?"

My lips felt stiff.

"Do not all girls think of it as soon as they are out of the schoolroom?" I asked.

"But she is such a child," he said. He looked down at me, smiling. "It is absurd to think of your daughter with a husband, Marjorie."

"Not so absurd," I maintained. "Indeed, she has already begun to talk of what she will do when she has a house of her own."

He laughed.

"That makes me feel old," he said. "I cannot always remember that she is your daughter." He stopped and pointed to a yellow rose hanging loosely from its stem, as if the heat of the sun had wearied it. "May I have that flower?" he asked.

"Oh, do!" I said.

But he did not attempt to pick it.

"Will you give it to me?" he asked.

I looked up at him, startled.

Our eyes met and held each other, then I began to walk quickly away, afraid—not of him, but of myself.

He did not follow; and I hurried back to the lawn, and its gay crowd.

But the weight of my heart seemed to have lifted. He had said nothing, and yet he had said everything, for I knew that he did not care for Elsa, save as any man might care for a pretty child.

The afternoon went more quickly after that. Toward 6 o'clock our guests began to depart. Many of them—those that lived round about the village—were to return later for the dance in the marquee, but some were going back to London.

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" I asked Elsa as she stood beside me bidding them good-by, and she shrugged her shoulders.

"It wasn't bad," she said. "But there weren't enough ices. And the band was beastly, I thought. Didn't you?"

That was Elsa all the world over. Before I could answer she was moving away.

"Where is Mr. Tempest? I haven't seen him for ever so long," she said.

I let her go, and she danced away through the sunshine as gayly as one of the painted butterflies that were chasing each other among the roses.

"How pretty your girl has grown!" a Mrs. Lambert said to me later in the evening. "Are you not proud of her?"

"Yes," I answered readily.

And so I was. It was she who was not proud of me.

CHAPTER XLII

Some mothers and their daughters are like sisters together. Elsa only treated me as a sort of poor relation who is allowed to live in the house and is paid to make herself agreeable.

"And is it true," Mrs. Lambert went on, "that she is—well, that there is something between her and that handsome Mr. Tempest?"

I forced a smile.

"He is years older than Elsa," I said.

"Naturally, but he is a very young-looking man, and she seems immensely taken with him. My boy saw them in Oxhey Woods this morning, quite early."

"Yes, I know they went there," I answered.

When I was dressing for the dance that night something hard struck my window from the outside.

I listened for a moment wonderingly, and then the little sound was repeated.

I crossed the room and opening the window wide, leaned down into the garden.

It was not yet dark, but there were many shadows and that curious grayness that so often follows great heat.

Richard Tempest stood there on the path below.

He raised his finger as if to tell me not to speak, then he threw something up. I caught it in a trembling hand, and went back again, closing the window.

The little object I held was a note, screwed up and addressed in pencil.

I unfolded it with as much trembling eagerness as a girl who receives her first love letter; but there was nothing much in it.

"I must see you alone tonight. Where and when?"

I burned the note in a candle flame on my dressing table and threw the powdery ashes into the night; then I finished dressing and went downstairs.

The garden was lit with hundreds of tiny colored lamps; it looked like a scene from a fairy play. The big marquee was lit with electric lights and decorated with red and white flowers. We were to have supper on the lawn.

"Oh, how pretty!" I said involuntarily, as I stood at the open door.

"Pretty enough," said Francis, coming behind me. "An ideal night for lovers, eh?"

"Yes," I agreed.

He eyed me critically.

"You look as young as Elsa," he said reluctantly. He caught me around the waist. "Kiss me, Marjorie."

I turned my face away.

"Oh, please don't! You'll ruffle my hair!" I objected.

He kissed me twice, roughly, and let me go.

"I'm a fool to give you a thought," he said.

I had never conquered my dislike to his embraces. Sometimes I think he knew that, and so forced them on me.

But I had little time to think of myself. Already there were twinkling lights coming up the drive—the big headlights of motors, the smaller lamps of carriages.

By 9 o'clock the marquee was crowded and dancing in full swing.

I saw Richard dancing with Elsa. Francis was joking with a French girl whom Mrs. Lambert had brought with her. Everywhere was laughter.

Several people asked me to dance and at last I had to give in. I have always loved dancing, and that night as I twirled round I forgot that this was my daughter's coming-of-age party, and was a girl again myself—in heart, at least.

I had just finished a set of lancers with a boy friend of Elsa's—a tall, broad-shouldered lad, who no doubt paid me attention because I was her mother—when Richard Tempest came down the marquee toward us.

"May I have the pleasure of a dance?" he asked formally.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

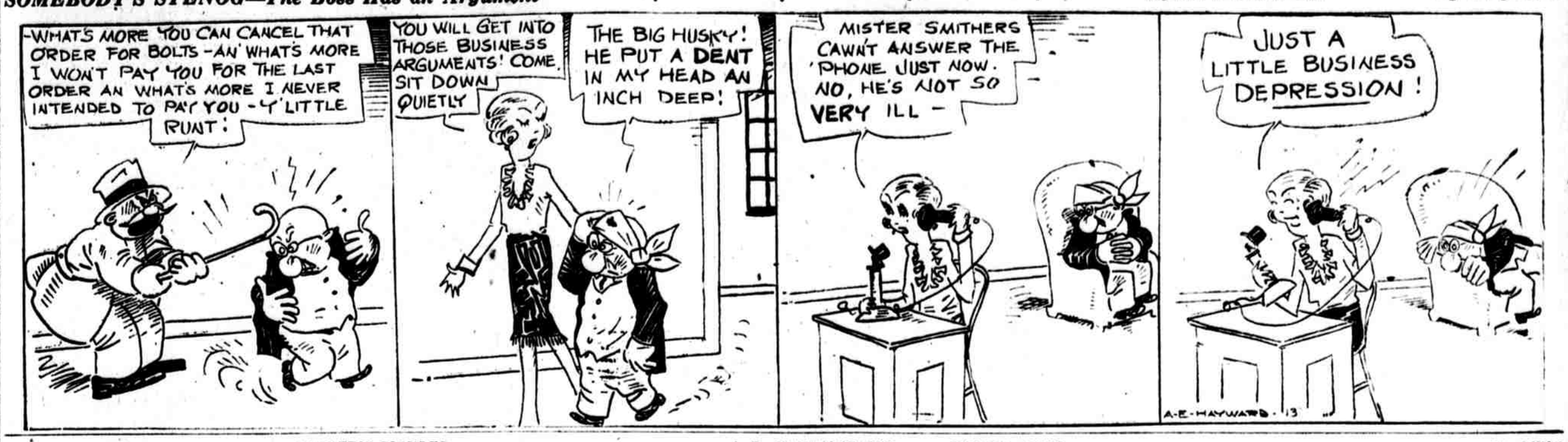
THE GUMPS—Wedding Bells

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—The Boss Has an Argument

Registered U. S. Patent Office

By Hayward

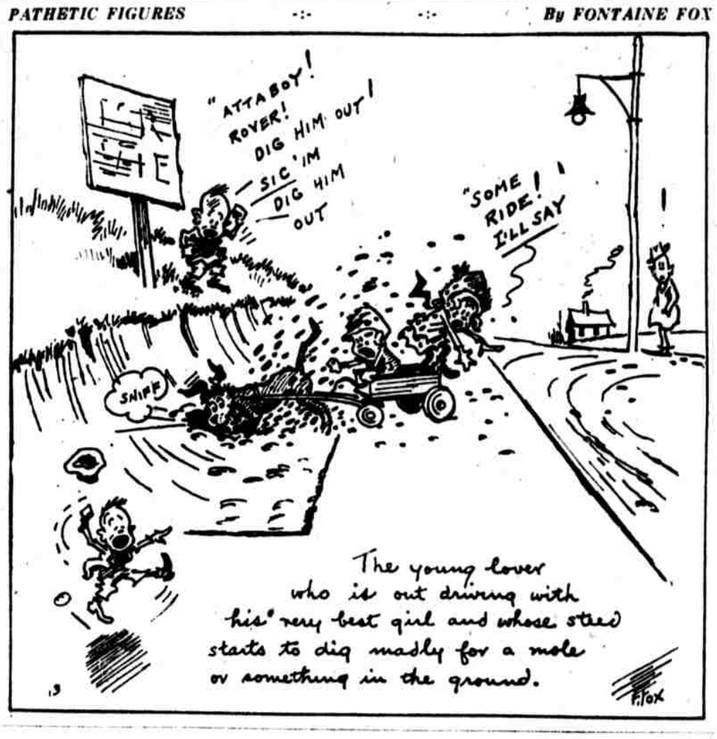


The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the price of spring wheat is pretty low but the farmer should cheer up as real spring isn't here yet and she supposes most people are still using winter wheat.

PATHETIC FIGURES

By FONTAINE FOX



SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—Still at Pinehurst

By C. A. Voight

GASOLINE ALLEY—Opportunity Knocks Some More

By King