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**The Daily Novelette**

**Fate in an Ash Can**  
 By A. W. Poesch

MARY turned her back upon him and looked out of the window into the dust-filled street. Her fingers picked at the curtain, but her mind was busy. She was almost ready to turn and fly into his arms—why did his mere presence stir her so? But she kept herself in hand and listened.

"Tomorrow I go to New York. In the morning I am sailing for London. If you love me, ask me to come back as soon as I complete my business for the firm. If you do not, I may not come back for years. I can stay as the firm's agent—I will have nothing to come back for, you know," he said, his voice ending with a light note of amusement.

She turned upon him and looked at him thoughtfully. Tall and slim, he stood before her, his dark blue eyes resting tenderly upon her. But that note in his voice—

"Stanley, I do think so much of you—much—much—something always holds me back—you are so—so inclined to take things lightly, and I don't want to be taken lightly—never, never! No—please don't touch me! There seems to be so little you regard seriously—many things that I do; and I don't want to intrust my life to you—and yet—her voice broke—"I do!"

She stayed his quick effort to fold her in his arms.

"Please give me time. I'll write you—to your hotel in New York—my final decision. I'll write if I will marry you; if I don't write, then you'll know."

He nodded. "Yes, I will know," he added easily, completing her unfinished sentence. "But, remember, if you write, the letter must go out tonight. If you do not write, my dear one, you will never be bothered by me again—though I know I shall never forget you!"

When he had gone, she went slowly to her room, face to face with the decision that meant more than any other decision she would ever make. She sat down at the desk and mused. His easy ways of disposing of matters of right and wrong, his offhand decisions, his careless attitude toward much that she thought deserved care—all had combined to make her wonder.

A knock on the door was followed by the appearance of one of the girls in the house.

"Hello, Mary. Marr, and what are you doing—being contrary? Say, I saw Stanley here. He is one bonny specimen of a man. But, honest, honey, I hope you won't marry him. I feel really sorry for introducing him to you," Bertha said soberly.

Mary looked keenly at her old friend.

"Well, I am to decide in the next half-hour—"

"No!" Bertha's face was pale.

"Yes!"

"I wish you wouldn't!"

Mary smiled. "Bertha, have you something you want to tell me and yet won't?"

The other sat in silence, the laughter gone from her eyes and face. Then, after a little, she spoke.

"He is attractive, but there is something—but I can't tell you."

Mary's hands grew cold on the desk. She knew the starchy little contrivance of years would not mention gossip. "Bertha, this is serious. I am doubtful about Stanley, but only a little, and if you know anything, tell me. I do want to be happy with him—or without him."

"I know this," Bertha answered, her face pale. "He writes letters every now and then to a girl in his old home—and I know he has gone to see her. He doesn't dictate them to me—but I happened to glance at one on his desk, and it was a loving affair."

"You see, it's that way. You're sort of a cold beauty that challenges a man like him."

Mary smiled faintly. "Perhaps—but he has a right to care for some one else. We are not engaged."

"I know," Bertha answered, "but just the same, it would be better, if he loves you so, that he leave others alone."

Mary's comment was a little cry—"It would be better—it would!"

"But, oh, honey, I can't talk about it any more—I hope—well—good-by!"

Mary turned to the desk once more. Out of the minutes of thought came the final decision. He was trusted and liked in the great importing firm; he had the respect of strong men; surely he would be true to her if he was to them.

She wrote the letter, slipped on a coat and went out to the mail box. On her way she passed a house where rumors had told of scandal and heart-break, and she paused, the cold question rising in her heart: "Suppose that might happen to me? Must I run the risk?" Her imagination loomed, she knew she could love one man and one only. The risk? No, she would not take it. Into the ashen that stood beside the post, ready for the night of letters, she slipped the letter and returned and pushed back home. She passed a belated errand boy and a tall man who stared at her curiously.

In the seclusion of her room she fought the old battle of the human heart torn between longing for happiness and fear of it. Sleep came in the end if peace did not.

The next morning dragged with weary feet. She could not picture Stanley watching for his mail and her familiar notepaper. Then, hope gone, standing in silence—perhaps—perhaps. For she suddenly realized that the letter, strong—strong in the way of men who take life lightly because they do not fear it.

At noon, sharp with climax, her world turned over. First, Bertha, with stiff tears in her eyes, explained that she had found out that Stanley's girl at home was a maiden aunt, who had cared for him in his youth, whose personal business he looked after and whom he had called in his boyhood "Dearest," as he called her so in his manhood. One of the girls in the office had taken his dictation when he was very busy and had solved the mystery.

Then came a gray messenger boy with a word that left her dazed. The letter that she had dropped in the ash-can must have reached him. Over the ocean waters the steamship's wireless had thrust his brief word of love into the air, and the silent space had winged it to the city and to her door.

Then a tall man had stopped at the house, called for her, and explained that the night before he had seen her drop something into the ash-can, which a boy ahead of him had taken and dropped into the mail box. "The unpardonable act of a mischievous boy," he called it.

Mary's reply left him mystified—her reply and the tears in her eyes. "If it rescued my happiness from that ash-can."

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