The Daily Novelette

Second-Hand

By A. W. PEACH

HER vivacious little friend chattered on as she busied herself with the chafing dish, and with every word she was tumbling the bright castles that Esther Henley had been building through the months.

"And you know," the eager voice went on, "the reason for your transfer, Esther, from the head office was that Raines said you reminded him of a girl he used to know. Lansing, who is Raines' special pal, told me so, you know—said that Raines was ready to marry this girl—even told me where she lived and what her name is; then they quarreled, and Raines never married and she never did. Quite a romance, eh?"

Esther agreed with a second reply, but there was a tornado within her. She held a responsible position with the great importing firm, and then suddenly she had been moved to Raines' department. Her salary was equal to his, but he was the senior member of the executives in charge of the department work. Then his quiet, strong personality had begun to win her, and she had been conscious more than once that his brown, kindly eyes were following her with pleasure; and a bit of longing; and, in spite of herself, she had begun to hope dimly that he cared for her.

Now that hope and that dream went with the careless words of her friend. After all, his interest in her had been for another's sake; when his eyes rested upon her they were seeing another—a vanished love of other years. There could be no doubt of it. Lansing was not in the habit of gossiping—what he said was usually founded upon truth.

Esther smiled the evening away, but after her friend had gone she sat long in thought. "How foolish it is to let a dream get the best of you," she thought to herself; "but I could be happy with him, I know. How foolish for him and her to waste these years—the best they have."

She went to her work the next morning with different emotions stirring her heart. His eyes brightened as he saw her with the quick light so welcome in the eyes of those we love and he seemed to make it a point to stop to chat with her. Knowing what she did, she could look at him bravely enough now, and even as she recalled that his regard for her was second-hand in a way she could be just a little aloof. He in turn seemed to sense the distance that was growing between them.

Esther came to her final decision that night, then the decision in many ways was a rash one. First, she went to her little friend's room and using diplomatic tactics managed to get the address of the girl that Raines had loved—a little village in the northern part of the State.

"There is no use in three of us being unhappy—and I might as well fix the missionary's scheme as any one," she argued with herself.

So a letter went out, carefully written, with emphasis upon the responsibility that Raines carried so splendidly; upon the regard that all had for him. Esther built up word by word an eloquent and moving picture of the man she frankly confessed that she loved; and at the end she gave the reason for the letter: he had seen to it that she was kept in his department because of the girl of whom she reminded him.

"It is rash of me and foolish, perhaps, but missionaries sometimes do rash things, I've heard, for sake of a good cause," was her final comment.

Two days went by—days fraught with some anxiety for Esther, for she did not know just what the effect would be upon the absent girl or what the latter might write to Raines. If she came, the explanation would certainly come out; if she wrote, it would also; and, for the first time, Esther realized the tactical mistake she made in confessing to the unknown girl that she herself loved the tall, broad-shouldered manager whose quiet power was evident through all the days of business endeavor.

Destiny, however, takes care of all human hopes and fears in some appointed hour. At the end of the week Esther, going to Raines' office on a business errand, found him chatting with a golden-haired girl, whose blue-gray eyes brightened with recognition, but who said nothing.

"Just a moment, Miss Arnold. I can see you," Raines said, an odd note in his voice; and it suddenly dawned upon Esther that here was the unknown girl who resembled her.

A bit dazed by the shock of the realization, Esther, hesitating, said: "I can wait——"

"No, I must go," the fair-haired girl said; "I have been violating the rule prohibiting visitors, anyway. Good-by!"

With a smile that included both Esther and Raines she departed.

Esther turned—and her heart slowed its rhythmic beat of excitement. He had turned from the door and was looking at her with eyes that seemed a deeper brown than they had ever appeared to her before. Something in them frightened her a bit.

"I really must not linger——" she began.

"Esther, for better or for worse, I am going to tell you something——"

"Please don't scold me. I was foolish in what I did. You see, I have guessed who she is—and I am sorry, but it—it seemed the best way——" she said brokenly.

"Your letter brought her here, but, my dear girl, she is not the one I love; in fact, I used to love her and she's married now, besides. You"—he stepped closer to her until his tall form towered above her—"you are the one I love."

"But you seemed to be growing a bit colder these days," his tender voice went on.

"I—I thought you liked me because I reminded you of her?" she said with difficulty.

She felt a strong arm draw her close to him. A firm, but gentle finger tilted her chin, and she looked up into eyes whose glowing depth held her fascinated. Then his lips were upon hers—and her dream castles once more stood, fair and bright, in the Land of the Heart's Desire.

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