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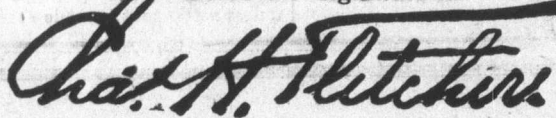
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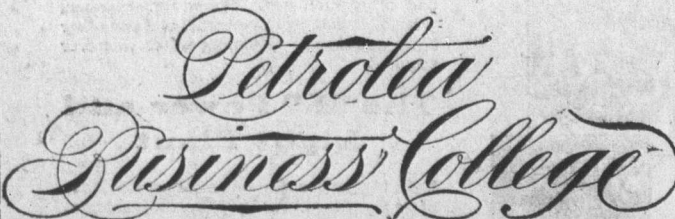
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PAULA THE POET.

By DOROTHY DOUGLAS.

(62, 1918, by McClure Newspaper Syndicate.)

Paula was curled up on the wide couch by the window, scratching oddments of inspired thought.

Beth, most understanding, capable, moodless a chum that an erratic poet ever had, was busy preparing a dainty and nourishing evening meal.

Paula was a girl of brilliant intellect, wonderful in poetic fancy but utterly and completely lacking in the domestic virtues. She could no more have cooked the little meat loaf and biscuits that were scenting the apartment than she could have put out to sea in the R-34. Her taste in clothes was simply a wish to cover herself decently, and her hair was long and natural and wound about her head in the particular way that it happened to go. And she wore ordinary boots, not sandals.

But Paula could write poetry.

Beth possessed all the artistic tastes that go to produce a perfect type of temperamental poet. Her hair was tarnished and most becomingly bobbed. Her orange and black smocks were poems of batik art and often while entertaining at tea she wore an adorable Chinese mandarin, from which her little feet peeped out from the wide trousers like captive butterflies. There was always incense burning when Beth was around.

But Beth could cook, make wonderful clothes, entertain with great success, and she was a delightful bit of the feminine world to have about the house.

Beth could not, however, have written a poem any more than she could have put together the parts of their joint flier.

"Here's another man person wanting to meet the poet, Paula," called Beth as the postman left his wares at the door. "He has been reading your verse for two years and is coming from the middle West just in the hope that you will give him the pleasure, etc., etc." Beth finished off with a laugh. "Oh—to have some great Western cowboy consumed with passion for me—just once."

Paula, too, laughed from her nest of brilliant-hued cushions that Beth had made, but her laugh was a trifle impatient.

"I just can't be bothered meeting all these perfectly strange people all the time. You've no idea what a muff I feel listening to their ravings. I have absolutely nothing to say to them, and my poor brain struggles for conversational niceties and I very nearly pass out in the attempt."

"That's what you get for being a genius," said the unfeeling Beth. "The penalty for writing brilliant, scorching love effusions which you no more feel than I do is to have to let all the strange men in the world come and gaze into your soulless eyes."

"You have all the soul and scorching emotions for both of us," laughed Paula. "If we each had temperament and moods, then, honey, we couldn't live together so happily." She jumped up and just as Beth was about to take her hot biscuits from the oven Paula swept her into an encircling arm. "You're a little duck," she said affectionately, "and I wish just for once you would meet this Western cowboy as Paula."

When Beth had rescued the biscuits she turned questioning eyes on Paula. "If you really mean it—it would be a bit of a lark. I have all the earmarks of a poet—nutshell of nuts."

So it happened that the two girls exchanged identities, and never were two more alluring personalities transferred for the mere sake of joggling the credulity of a Western cowboy.

And the heart of the Western cowboy, who went by the name of John Rylance, was most assuredly rampant when he found two delightful girls waiting to receive him at tea. The small apartment was curiously homelike. Rylance felt decidedly at home even before he was directed by Beth toward the great cushioned chair in the sunny window.

Paula had met the big ranchman with her habitual calm exterior, but within her brilliant brain there was an instant desire to write a splendid poem. She effaced herself behind a wall of concentrated thought that left Beth a free hand to weave her net about their visitor.

Rylance realized that his interest was straying from time to time from the animated Beth to the strangely magnetic personality of Paula. It was true he had come from the West to meet the poet who had set his heart to singing by the mere printed words of her "Songs in Exile," yet now as he sat looking into her piquant little face with its frame of black hair he felt

more genuinely the lure of the other girl.

And yet this girl who had been introduced as Paula Raymond was the exact duplicate in appearance of the type he had expected. There was the stamp of Greenwich village on her and the undoubted charm of character. That which was lacking, Rylance could not define. He knew that while he talked with her he was constantly longing to probe the mind of the quiet, introspective, apparently disinterested girl whom he had met as Beth Goodwin.

And the real Beth's alert senses caught the vague disappointment in the Westerner's mind. She knew that his soul and the soul of Paula the poet had found something that had made a meeting of the physical beings necessary. It had been the lure of Paula's soul that had dragged him all the long way from the West, and now he was struggling against a vague regret that he had come.

Into the mind of Rylance came a short verse of Paula's that had always more or less puzzled him as to her exact meaning. The words of the verse could be taken as the reader chose, but somehow Rylance felt a keen desire to know the poet's own meaning. He was curious to know if she would enlighten him or whether the poem had drifted from her mind with the flow of others.

"Miss Raymond," he said, looking at the girl whom he supposed to be Paula, "I wonder if you would mind very much giving me your own real interpretation of these four lines?" He took the little worn volume from his pocket and read from it one of Paula's own favorite bits. When he had finished he looked expectantly at the girl in the orange smock. Would her eyes kindle with the fire of genius—the inspiration that had flung those words from her pen—or would they remain birdlike and alert?

Rylance drew a laggard breath.

The eyes were utterly and completely blank. Then he remembered that undoubtedly poets forgot many of their own inspired words as soon as they were transferred to paper. He was, however, disappointed. More and more he regretted having risked losing the ideals he had formed of Paula Raymond through her verses. He wished he had remained in his dream of her out in the broad West.

Then some strange impelling force dragged his eyes to those of the quiet Beth and, as if she had been flung before him in painted letters, he knew the truth.

Her eyes were alight and her cheeks were soft flames while now from her lips came forth a flood of exquisite words like the rushing torrent of an impatient brook. An explanation, wonderful, deep with thought, and put forth with such brilliant understanding as to make the soul of Rylance glow within him, came from that other soul—the soul that Rylance had loved.

Beth had been making frantic efforts to stop the flow of words from Paula's lips. Her alert eyes had caught the knowing expression in the Westerner's quiet smile, and somehow she felt a keen relief.

"You are fortunate in your friendship," Rylance said with a queer look in his eyes, "there are not many chums who could so get under the mind of the other and in fact sense the poetic thought of another so truly and express it so magnificently."

Paula had the added grace to blush and Beth jumped up suddenly, bent on brewing a cup of tea. Having beaten her retreat, she wondered what method Paula would take to extricate herself from the false position they had assumed.

Paula was not troubled about having given away her identity, but she felt a bit startled at the new emotions within her that she knew were not destined to spend themselves on the mere writing of verse.

Then Beth, from the little kitchenette, heard Rylance speaking.

"You couldn't have hidden your soul long from me, Paula Raymond. I have loved it too well for it to escape me under a camouflage."

Beth couldn't hear Paula's answer, but it must have been satisfactory, for when she returned with a dainty tea tray there was an atmosphere of happiness that prompted her thoughts to stray toward strange love-making and wedding and—



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