

They walked back to the drawing-room arm in arm: Margery was not to be seen.

"A sick head-ache," Mrs. Van Tromp explained to General Thornton, "so I sent her home. No, she would not allow me to call you; but it might be wise for you to drop in to-night for dinner."

"May I bring along the boy?" Thornton asked, smiling cordially at Tom.

"If Mr. Meredith is not already engaged," Mrs. Van Tromp answered, pointedly.

"I thank you," Tom said, "but it will be impossible for me to come."

Before retiring, Tom wrote his father: "Dear old dad, I've lost Margery, but I've gained a new self-respect. Your General Bob Thornton is a trump, a sure winner."

The following morning Margery slipped from the house before ten o'clock and went to Miss Elizabeth's; but the Misses Troutman would not return from their walk before eleven. Remembering that they often sat in Washington Square, Margery decided to follow.

Miss Elizabeth was sitting alone on her favorite bench, for her sister had gone to match the wool of the scarf they were crocheting. Margery ran to her with a cry of joy, and threw her arms about the little woman's waist. "Oh, I am so glad to find you," she sobbed, breaking down completely. But Miss Elizabeth's reproving "Be careful, dearie," restored in a measure her self-possession.

"No, no," Margery answered; "I won't be so silly again. But if you only knew how unhappy I am." She drew down her veil and bit her lips to keep back the tears. Miss Elizabeth did not reply, but silently caressed her hand. "I am ashamed of myself," Margery whispered. "I don't deserve the least kindness."

By this time Miss Elizabeth had begun to struggle with a lump in her throat. "Is it about Tom?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, my dear! I was afraid of it," Miss Elizabeth admitted with a solemn shake of the head.

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know," Margery answered slowly, as if reasoning it out for the first time. "I believe that I told General Thornton that I would marry him, because Tom was hateful to me the first day he was in New York. He said horrid things. He seemed to think that he could force me to marry him, and I wanted to show that I had a will of my own. Oh, how I wish I hadn't been such a fool!"

"My poor, dear Margery."

"Of course I can't go back to Tom and ask him to come back to me," she went on despairingly, "and I don't want to marry General Thornton. I'll never be anybody's wife. I wish you would let me come and live with you."

Miss Elizabeth smiled sadly. "Margery, dear, I might have been a much happier woman to-day, if years ago I had been brave. You must ask Tom to come back."

"But what will Aunt Catherine say, and General Thornton, and everybody else? No, I can't do it."

"You are wrong to say such a thing," Miss Elizabeth answered sternly, rising from the bench and drawing her cape about her. "You must not deceive General Thornton a moment longer. Be honest; be honest to him and to yourself."

"Oh, I simply can't tell him, and I won't take a step towards Tom. I can be just as proud as Tom Meredith."

"Your pride is very silly!" Without waiting for an answer, Miss Elizabeth walked impatiently away.

Tired and spiritless, Tom was placing the last things in his travelling bag, when a telegram was brought to his door. "I will say yes," it read, "if you will only ask me again."

White and trembling, he collapsed into a chair. He read the message a dozen times, then took up the pen. "Margery," he wrote, "I will not speak until General Thornton has released you from your promise." He read the lines aloud ashamed of their cold brevity, and eager to add a word of endearment; but he hurriedly sealed the letter and entrusted it to the grimy hands of a messenger boy.

At the same time, Margery was finishing a confession to Mrs. Van Tromp. "Don't be angry with me, aunt," she pleaded, "for I must act for myself. I am going to marry Tom—that is, if he doesn't refuse me."

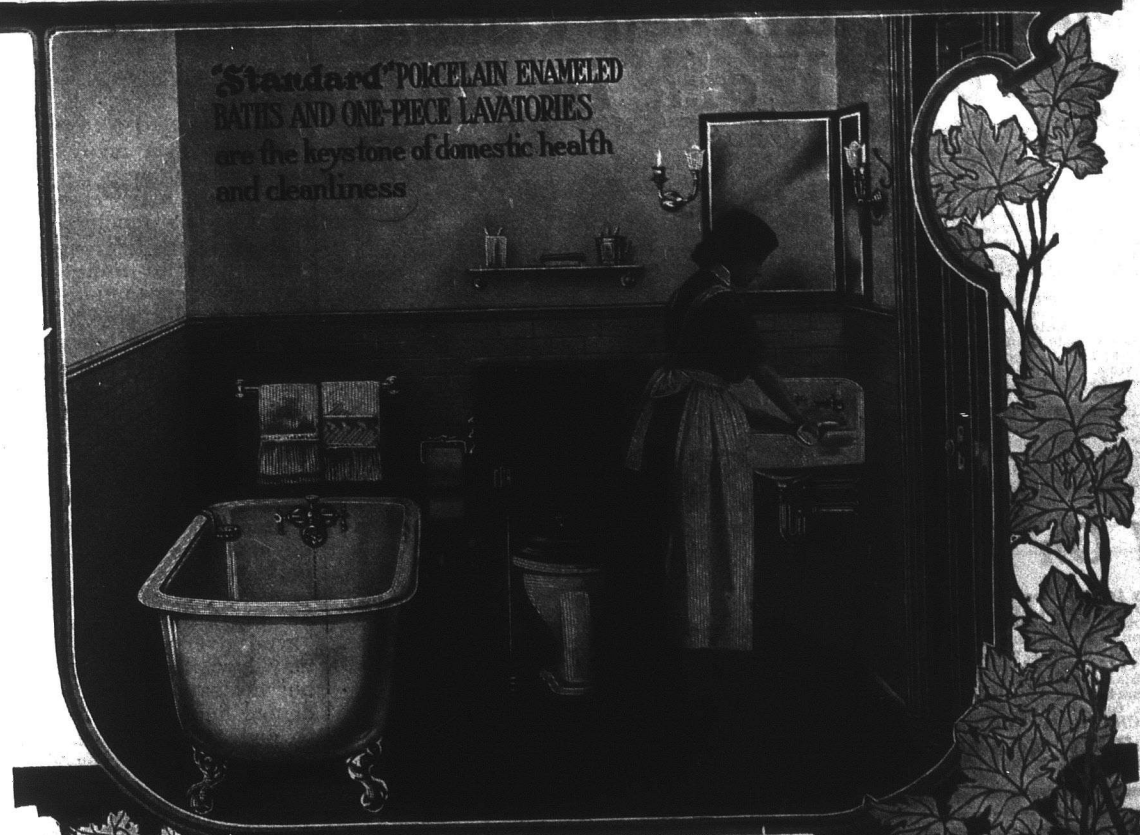
Mrs. Van Tromp was horrified. "You don't mean to say that you will—?"

"I have already, by telegram. Forgive me, auntie. It is not so awful with us Colorado people: there the women have an equal right with men."

Mrs. Van Tromp controlled an impulse to give her niece a shaking. "I wash my hands of the whole affair," she said, as calmly as was possible.

"Oh, I'm so glad," Margery cried, "for Tom can take me back to Colorado

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"OH, I AM SO GLAD TO FIND YOU"

to-night. We'll be married this afternoon if—" the tears now conquered. "If he doesn't say no."

When General Thornton, his bronzed face a shade less rosy than usual, arrived in response to a message from his betrothed, Mrs. Van Tromp sighed, but descended firmly to the drawing-room.

"What does this mean?" he asked, handing her a telegram.

"Come at once," she read, "for I have something awful to tell you. Maybe I am going to marry Tom Meredith."

Mrs. Van Tromp shrugged her shoulders. "It is true," she answered.

"And I?"

"Dear General, what can we say or do?"

"Nothing. I don't blame her. Tom is of a fine race, and a chap in whom one can feel some pride. I shan't ask to see Margery; but you tell her that I wish her all happiness, and don't for an instant let her know that it goes at all hard with me. I should have anticipated something of this sort, but love is blind, you know, whether with a passe old fellow like myself or a fine young rascal like Tom."

"To be truthful," Mrs. Van Tromp murmured apologetically, "I fancy this conclusion of Margery's visit will be more satisfactory to her parents than if—than any other. Margery hopes to return to Colorado to-night."

"So soon?"

"It won't be settled until Meredith has heard your decision. He has a certain dignity, in spite of his youth, hasn't he?"

Mrs. Van Tromp arranged everything with her customary quiet dignity, and the Misses Troutman were the only guests at the early dinner that followed the wedding.