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When Money Talks

By BERTHA R. McDONALD

The little music teacher ran up the steps of the boarding house with a fluttering heart, for she had seen the gray coat of the postman disappearing around the corner. The fluttering quickened into a brisk tattoo like the beating of tiny hammers, and by the time she reached the hall table where the letters were always laid it was like the pulsation of a mighty engine.

Yes, there was a letter, but the writing was not familiar. When she reached the sacred precincts of her own room she read it and had just cast it aside with a most contemptuous sniff when there came a timid knock at the door. When she called "Come in" the maid brought another letter which in her haste she had overlooked. Again her hope beat high, but this was a more bitter disappointment than the first.

"Sickening—both of them!" she muttered. "Why must I be made the target for such piffle?"

Angrily she thrust them inside her desk, closed it with a bang and went down to dinner. That evening, after a brisk walk through a little park nearby, the keen October air having soothed her ruffled spirits, she donned a comfortable dressing gown and wrote to her old friend, Mrs. De Voss:

"Dear Mollykins: It rests me just to write your name. It carries me back to the days when you were my sympathetic mother confessor, and, Mollykins, I've got to talk to you now, for you are the only one who will understand. I've worked so hard this past year to build up my class and you've heard how I've succeeded even beyond my wildest dreams. But success isn't everything. Even here I seem destined to be nauseated with impossible things. I've just had two of the most sickening proposals by letter that any girl ever received. Possibly I might have read one or the other a second time had I not been sure that each man is counting on my income to help support him. Peace to the ashes of their unsolicited adoration! I tell you, dear, I shall marry for money. I've seen the folly of not preparing for a rainy day and it has colored everything in the world for me. When I put my head into the matrimonial noose it will be when the future Mr. Bess Courtland is ready to hand me a checkbook on a nice, fat bank account. As it is, epistolary efforts such as reached me today only serve to frazzle my disposition. 'Buckets of slush,' Billy would call them. It is needless for me to tell you where my heart lies, and he has never written me a line in all this long year. I thought, of course, when our crash came and father died that Billy would be the first to come to me, and when he left for Colorado without so much as a good-by I was broken-hearted. Now I've joined the ranks of those who believe that money talks. I can hear you call me flinty of heart, but so will you be, Molly, if ever you come to feel the dull, sickening thud of the fall from the lap of luxury to the cold, stone floor of poverty. I hope you never may. Write me soon—your letters are such comforts. Lovingly,
"BESS."

That night the little music teacher cried herself to sleep and the next morning she said to herself, as she surveyed the pale face which looked at her with weary eyes from her mirror: "Don't you let me catch you weeping again over Billy Dempster. He doesn't care a fig about you and he wouldn't weep over anybody."

By the time she reached the studio she had fully made up her mind that she should ever see fit to write her a letter she would return it to him unopened. It was several days later that a special delivery letter, bearing a Colorado postmark, reached Miss Courtland, and, after the messenger had gone, she stood gazing at the envelope, scarcely able to believe her eyes, while the waiting pupil at the piano wondered what was about to be disclosed.

"Billy's writing!" gasped the teacher. "No—no—I'm getting foolish, of course—it can't be—he doesn't know my address, and yet I—"

"Why don't you open it?" suggested her pupil, and forgetting her late determination to put Billy Dempster out of her life forever, Bess tore open his letter with fingers that trembled as though she might have the palsy.

"Dear Bess," she read. "I wrote to Molly De Voss two weeks ago for your address and just got it today. How are you, anyway? It seems a lifetime since I saw you. What are you doing and how do you like living in Chicago? Molly didn't answer a single question I asked, so I shall wait anxiously to hear direct from you about

your work, your earnings—if you have one; in fact, tell me all about everything. As ever, yours,
"BILLY."

Miss Courtland's black eyes snapped and she crushed the letter in her hand. "To write me a letter like that," she gasped, "after waiting a whole year to even ask for my address!"

During the following week she wrote six replies to Dempster's letter and tore each one to bits almost as soon as it was finished. The seventh she thought somewhat tart, but concluding it was better than he deserved anyway, she finally sent it.

"Dear Billy (it ran): I probably need not tell you that your letter was a surprise. When an old friend leaves you at a time of a great crisis in your life, without even a good-by, and for a whole year forgets that you ever existed, a letter from such a one is apt to come as a surprise; don't you think so? Since you are alive and are good enough to feel an interest in knowing that I am too, I don't mind telling you that I am teaching music here in Chicago and like my work very much. I have no husband in sight, and if I ever acquire such a possession, it will be because his pockets are so well lined with gold that it would be folly for me to let him slip through my fingers. At present I am very well and contented. Sincerely,
"BESS COURTLAND."

If Bess could have seen Dempster when he read this letter all idea that he regarded her carelessly or that he was deceived as to her own feeling for him would have vanished as a June frost. As it was, she never knew how she managed to live through the next week until an answer to her letter arrived. Then, one morning, as she was leaving the boarding house for the studio, the postman handed her another envelope bearing the familiar writing, and she almost ran to the little park, where she sat down on a bench to open it.

"Dearest girl," she read. "I am the man you are after—the possession you really ought to acquire. My pockets are so well lined with filthy lucre that I'm bent with the weight of it. It would be worse than folly to let me slip through your fingers and nothing could possibly suit me so well as to lodge in those same fingers forever. Seriously, Bess, don't you still care a little? I'm in a position now to ask you to marry me—will you? You'll never know how I suffered because I was not able to ask this when your father died and left you so little; but a peculiar round of circumstances overtook me just then and left me no alternative. My little sister, who was out here visiting, met with a terrible accident, which necessitated a very difficult operation, and my resources were so taxed to take care of this situation I did not dare assume another obligation. I left without seeing you, and I've remained silent because I did not wish to stand in the way of your comfort elsewhere. Perhaps I did wrong, dear; but my heart was right and I ask to be forgiven. I have never ceased to want you, Bess, and now, the remnant of my savings, happily invested, has brought me returns which permit me to ask you with a clear conscience to share my lot. I'm coming East for my answer and shall probably be with you almost as soon as you read this. Always your lover,
"BILLY."

When she had finished reading, tears blinded her and little shivers of shame chased themselves up and down her spine at the thought of her own sordidness; but through the tumult within her, her heart kept singing, "Billy is coming—Billy is coming!" She had only just removed her wraps at the studio when Billy came, and there, from the safe shelter of his arms, she said to him:

"Billy, dear, I'd have jumped at the chance to share your lot any time and any place, if you hadn't had a thing in all this world but a penny with a hole in it!"

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