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War-Time Speed

By CATHERINE PARSONS

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Gardner Lane was busy with the delightful task of painting Amy Roland's portrait. If you had seen Amy you would have really envied him, for she was truly lovely.

On this particular day Amy left the studio somewhat later than usual for the picture was just at an interesting stage and Gardner could not bear to stop work till the last bit of daylight had vanished. Mrs. Roland, who always came with her daughter, had left early to keep an appointment and Amy had promised to meet her at five.

Gardner had kept her till the last possible moment and she was hurrying toward the front door, when she ran directly into a young man who was coming in the opposite direction.

"I beg pardon," exclaimed Amy, as she bounced back in surprise. "Why, Billy Lane," she added, as she recognized him. "Where in the world did you come from? I haven't laid eyes on you for over two years."

"Just got here, Amy. I've been out in Colorado working hard. But even an obscure farmer has a right to a vacation now and then, so I'm taking two weeks this time. Maybe it isn't good to see you again—you haven't changed much except to grow up more. I suppose you'd forgotten all about me, though."

Amy blushed slightly, but it was too dark to see.

"I hadn't, really; but of course two years is a long time. In another one I might forget whether your hair was red or brown. It's hard to remember much when you're kept pretty busy."

Billy laughed ruefully.

Amy held out her hand with a frank and engaging smile. In another moment she was gone.

"For heaven's sake," cried Gardner, spying his brother from the floor above. "When did you get here? Well, maybe it isn't good to see you again, too! Is this a pleasure trip?"

"Not exactly. The truth of the matter is I'm enlisting in about two weeks and I wanted to see the old town before I went over."

"Great Scott, you don't say so! I would myself but I'm beyond the draft age and I hate to leave my work—I'm really needed here. Could they spare you all right?"

"Well, you see, I'm my own boss, so I just sold out and came along. I couldn't stay out of it any longer and I'd nothing to hold me back, either."

"I'm single, too, but I may not be long—that's one reason why I don't want to enlist."

"Who is it—Louise?"

Gardner laughed. "I should say not! I've had a dozen since Louise. It's Amy this time. I haven't told her yet, but I'm going to marry her."

Two days later Amy went for another sitting for her portrait and again she found Billy in the hall on her way home.

"Hello, Mr. Hermit," she scoffed. "You're not wasting time on your old friends this trip, are you?"

"Most of them seem to be pretty busy themselves."

"Well, I'm not for one, and to prove it I'll invite you to go for a walk with me now."

"Isn't it lovely out today?" cried Amy enthusiastically.

"Yes, but you'd never call this beautiful if you could see it out where I live. Mountains and hills and valleys everywhere you look. And the sunsets—you'd love those sunsets, Amy. They just make the whole world a blaze of glory and put peace into your soul. I can't explain how it is out there—it's too big for that. But I can tell you it impresses me. Maybe I'm daffy on the subject, but it's simply life out there to me. I feel like our poet friend who said: 'I want to go back, and I will!' You'd love it out there, Amy."

"Oh, I would love it!" she agreed, and almost surprised herself by her own fervor.

"Will you visit me some day then—you and your husband?"

"We'll be delighted—provided I have one by that time."

"In the meantime will you consider an invitation to dine with me this evening?"

"I'm sorry, Billy, but I'm going to dinner at the Seatons' with Gardner—they asked me ages ago. But I've had a lovely walk with you."

"So have I, too. Good night."

"Billy!"

"What can I do for you?"

"Don't you ever want to walk home with me again? I have three more sittings."

"Of course I want to. But a man doesn't do all the things he wants to—worse luck! I'll see you before long, though. Good-by."

"I think you're the limit, and you make me cross," flared Amy, and refused to notice his proffered hand.

Whereupon Billy pondered long on the vagaries of women and kept out of Amy's way for the next two days. But on the day that she came for her last sitting she found him standing before her picture in the studio, with a strange look on his face.

"Don't look so sad, Billy—I'm not dead yet."

"Hello, Amy; I didn't expect you today. Gardner went to New York, but he sent you a message at the last minute—you must have left before the

messenger arrived at your home.

"I did. You don't seem overjoyed to see me yourself—don't let me keep you. What have I done to you, Billy, that you should be so horrid to me? Don't you dare say you're not—you are!"

"I'm sorry, Amy—I told you I wasn't cut out for society in the first place, and I always make a mess of things."

Gardner came back from New York the next morning and in the afternoon he took Amy to tea at the most fashionable hotel in town. Gardner liked to be seen at smart places—especially in company with a good-looking girl.

"Billy's sailing tomorrow," he said, casually, in the course of conversation.

"Where to?" asked Amy, with apparent indifference.

"France. He's going in aviation over there. That's really why he came east, you know. I've got to go down town and fix up some things for him as soon as we leave here—you won't mind if I send you home in the car alone, will you?"

"Of course not, Gardner." Amy was trying hard not to choke on the delicious piece of French pastry which she was doing her best to swallow. Then she received another shock. Gardner leaned over the table and began to speak in a lowered voice.

"Amy—will you marry me?"

"Is this a surprise party?" gasped Amy.

"I shouldn't think you would be surprised—I made up my mind some time ago."

"But I didn't know that, and as much as I've seen of you lately, I never entered my head that you loved me. I like you, but I don't love you any more than you honestly love me. And I want to be friends—you're a better friend than you would be a husband—don't you truly think, Gardner?"

Gardner smiled in spite of himself. "Where did you learn so much about being in love, little Amy?"

"I learned the little I know from a very poor teacher who didn't even want me for a pupil. I'm sorry, Gardner, but I do care for someone else. He doesn't even know I exist—hardly. Forgive me, but it's the truth. And you'll still be my friend, won't you?"

"You can be perfectly sure about that," returned the rejected suitor promptly.

Amy waved her hand to him and then turned and walked rapidly in the opposite direction from her own house. Her head was dizzy and her feet seemed to travel too slowly. She dragged herself wearily up the steps of a familiar house and rang the bell.

"Is Mr. William Lane in?" she asked the man who answered her ring.

"In the library, miss."

"Don't announce me, then—I'll go right in."

Billy was sitting with his back to the door writing. Amy walked across the room before he saw her. Then he dropped his pen and sprang to his feet in amazement.

"Amy!" he cried. "Has something happened? You want Gardner?"

"No, I don't want Gardner—I've just refused to marry him. I just want to know why you are going away without saying good-by to me. It's unbelievable."

"Do you mean to tell me you're not going to marry Gardner? Why not?"

"It's really none of your business, but I'll tell you. For the simple reason that I don't happen to care for him—not in the marrying way of caring, I mean."

"What way is that?"

"I didn't come here to talk to you about marriage, Mr. William Lane. I only came to tell you how horrid I think you are—I think I almost hate you."

Billy covered the distance between them in less time than it takes to mention it. Then he caught Amy in his arms and held her till she had ceased to struggle.

"And I love you, love you, love you," he told her for about fifty times in as many different ways. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you hate me."

But Amy was too comfortable to look up, so she didn't even answer him.

After a little while Billy looked at his watch and found it was a quarter to eight.

"Will you go to dinner with me this time, Amy darling?" he asked her.

"It looks as if I'd have to. You don't know how much I wanted to go with you that day, Billy. Let's get out of the house before Gardner comes. I think it would be better to break it to him after you've been gone a few days, even though he didn't really love me at all. Oh, I wish you didn't have to go, Billy—I can't bear to think of it."

"Would you marry me tomorrow if I could get a special license?"

"Yes, any time at all."

"Then we'll go and see about it—will you come with me?"

"Anywhere. You won't be able to lose me now. And Billy, my husband and I will be glad to come and visit you on your wild and woolly farm as soon as you come back to us."

"Then, I'll have something worth fighting for now—that's what helps a man to do his duty even if it is hard work, too. I'm the luckiest person in the world today, Amy dearest."

"With the exception of one other," corrected Amy, and was immediately deprived of the power of speech again.

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