

"Oh, it will be all right in a day or two," he said, casually. "I wouldn't mind, only I've been doing such rotten work of late that it's about time for Caton to get his innings and fire me. You know there never were many demonstrations of affection between the old man and me, and he'd be glad enough of the excuse." Although he spoke in an offhand manner, Terese could see that he was really worried. "Oh, Danny," she cried, with a catch in her voice, "it's not nearly as bad as that, is it?"

"I'm afraid so, little girl," Traylor's cough broke into his words, and Terese's eyes filled with tears as she noted the way it shook his big frame. "One more failure and I'm a goner. But don't you worry about that."

The two walked on in silence, oblivious of the crowds pushing by on either hand. Above, across an intensely blue October sky, a few ragged, wind-driven clouds scurried like frightened sheep. In the park an occasional leaf, already crinkling to a dull brown, shook loose from a tree and whirled across the crowded streets. Traylor, turning to free one from the curling brown of Terese's hair, caught her furtively wiping away a tear.

"See here, this won't do," he exclaimed in cheerful tones, which, however, failed to deceive Terese. "It's too fine a day for rain. Cheer up, and we'll have a little dinner together. We'll go to that place where they have the odd little fireplace. We ought to be early enough to get that room, don't you think?"

Terese nodded acquiescence. "Almost too early. I ought to go back to the office and hand in my story," she hesitated. "I got my stuff in less time than I expected, though, so I think I have earned the right to stay with you a little while. But it can't be for very long, you know."

Seated opposite each other in the tiny room made cozy and cheerful by the dancing flames in the quaint little stone fireplace Traylor and Terese looked at one another contentedly.

"Dear old place," Terese looked around the familiar walls with a sigh of satisfaction. "And it's so good to be here again with you. You've no idea how I've missed you. Every day at this hour I've gone past the corner in the hope that you might have come back sooner than you expected. Why didn't you write?"

"I couldn't, Tess," Traylor replied. "I didn't even get in on the hanging. They had to send Colby up to take my place."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"I was down and out. I got foolish—this cough, you know—and they put me to bed, and a beetle-eyed old country pill builder held me down and made me stay there," explained Traylor, disgustedly. "Bartlett—he's the *Gazette* man, you know, a fine fellow—Bartlett telegraphed to the office for me, and the next thing I knew Billy Colby was telling me that he'd got up just in time to get the story."

"Oh, Danny, how dreadful!" Terese wailed.

"Yes, wasn't it the beastly luck?" agreed Dan. "Hangings aren't pretty sights, but Lord, it's hard lines to fall down on a story like that."

"You know that isn't what I mean, though I understand just how you feel about that. The dreadful thing is your being so awfully ill away off in that wretched little country place, and I not even knowing it."

"But, dear, you'd simply have worried if you had. You couldn't have done anything."

"Yes, I could. I'd have come up and nursed you. You've no idea how miserable it makes me to think of it," she gulped tearfully.

"Isn't that like a woman—when it's all over?" Traylor laughed.

"You ought to have some one to look after you. You're careless. You think you're all right unless you're so ill you can't get up," Terese reproached him.

"The boys looked out for me," he said in extenuation.

"The boys," with great scorn. "What do they know about it? They're just as foolhardy as you are."

She leaned across the table and spoke

coaxingly. "Danny, you do want to marry me, don't you?"

"Haven't I said so often enough to convince you?" he grinned.

"Then I want you to marry me *now*, and let me go on writing. We could get on finely that way, and then I could take care—" Tess began, but brought up short at sight of his darkly flushed face and the hard, straight line of his mouth.

"Oh, don't look at me that way, Danny," she cried. "I'll never—"

"Don't ever," he interrupted, with brutal abruptness. Then more gently, "Surely you know how I feel about that, Tess. What I want to do is to take you out of this work, to care for you as a woman ought to be cared for, and to make life easier for you—not to have you support me."

"It's not that, Danny. Of course, I knew that. But since I must work now, anyway, we could be so much happier together than we are this way," she said wistfully. "And I wouldn't have to worry so—"

"That sounds plausible, Terese," Traylor began, loftily.

"Call me 'Tess,'" pleaded the girl; but Traylor, ignoring her, went on with his speech.

"That sounds plausible to you, no doubt, but you know that if I allowed it you would have only contempt for me."

Terese shook her head in denial. "I never could," she broke in, softly. Before this whole-souled admiration Traylor's wrath could not stand.

"I'll never mention it again," Terese knew how to capitulate. "In a little while, anyway, I know your book will be published, and then—"

"You don't mean to say you got anything?" Traylor exclaimed.

"I had an awful time," Terese laughed. "I'll tell you the story of my adventures some day. But I got it."

The man leaned back in his chair with a laugh that had in it a touch of irony.

"You are clever," he said. "I didn't suppose anyone could get it. You've scooped me. Here's congratulations, Tess."

The girl did not even notice his outstretched hand as she stared across the table with widening eyes.

"Don't say that," she begged, in a strained voice. "I can't bear it. Don't say that I beat you out on a story *now*. I didn't know you were on it. I didn't see you there."

"I went early, but I couldn't get anything. Wouldn't even let me in. An ugly-tempered lot, didn't you think?" he tried to put her off.

Terese buried her face in her hands. "Oh! Oh!" she moaned. "What a dreadful thing. That I should gain through your failure!" Traylor winced, but she did not see him. "What shall I do?"

"Do?" encouraged the man. "Why, just sit up like a good girl and finish your dinner. You mustn't feel that way about it. Of course, you must expect them to be miffed up at the office when they find we've been scooped, but these things happen every once in awhile. It's part of the game. It's not likely they'll fire me for this," he lied.

At this voicing of her fears Terese broke down again.

"To think I have in my hand what would save you."

"Yes," said Traylor, steadily, "you have."

"I couldn't give you my notes—"

"No."

Terese wondered dully. Was the monosyllable merely a negative, or was it half a question? How could such a cruel situation have arisen? She knew what was honorable—what was right; it wasn't the question of that that troubled her now. The man she loved was ill and needed her help, but he would surely agree the only thing was to keep in her own hands the story entrusted to her. She hesitated. Of course the question of honor as settled, but were there not perhaps other things more important than that?

Traylor's cough broke the silence.

Where, she questioned herself, was that integrity on which she had prided herself? She had denied so often the impeachment that women have no sense of honor that she could not, at first, understand even hesitancy in the face of duty. But of what importance were the

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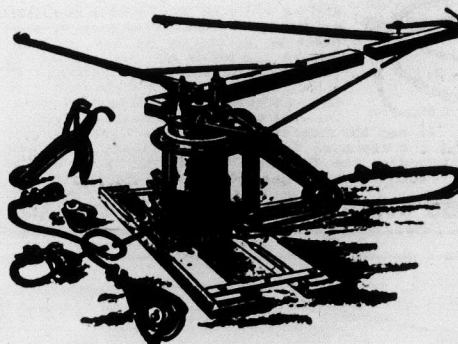
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