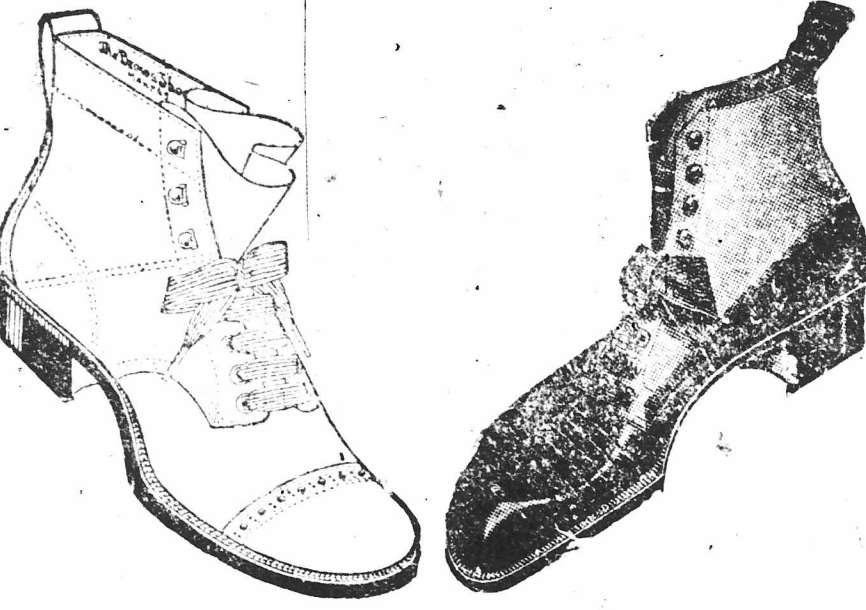


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CHAPTER XVI
Rankine's Plans

Rankine kept asking himself, as he paced the moonlit deck under the shimmer of the stars, whether he was fulfilling or thwarting destiny. He was coming to prove himself, but the removal of land from all his life's travails and shams, where truth walks stark and unmasked, appealed to him mightily. He felt within him the stir of elemental passions.

His meeting with Affery was strangely on a par with his meeting with Carlotta. He had sought neither, yet how mightily both had affected his destiny!

Yet the same, more practical with him, assured him that, in declining Affery's offer of adventure, he had done some well. The short cut to fortune is not always the best, nor even the safest if the long run.

When he got down to his stateroom an hour or more later he found every sound asleep in his bunk. A small, red-tinted book he had been reading had fallen from his hand, to the floor. When Rankine stooped to pick it up he observed, with a thrill, that it was a copy of the "New Testaments." He replaced it tenderly under Affery's pillow, without disturbing the deep and childlike slumbers of its possessor.

CHAPTER XVII
The First-aiders

"If there is nothing to keep you in London, why not come down to Cambridge and stay beside me for a few days?" said Judy in the train.

Carlotta shook her head, her eyes fixed on the dirty window-pane which the driving rain had blurred.

"But I'm not sure that it isn't your duty," persisted Judy. "They can't send you to the front as I do. They are doing without you quite well there, I am sure! That is the dearest thing about me, my dear, every one of us can be done without, and the more indispensable we imagine ourselves the less it matters."

The singular note of bitterness in Judy's usually cheerful voice arrested Carlotta's attention somewhat anxiously.

Judy undoubtedly had given up her hope more than any of them, and had said least about it. Perhaps it was all that there were other people in the carriage, and that their conversation had, of necessity, to be conducted in detached and somewhat obscure whispers, such as would hardly be understood by any interested listeners. It effectually prevented, also, any display or overflow of emotional feeling to which both were naturally a prey at the moment.

There are few things more dismal than speeding the parting friend or kinsman at the ship's side with the full knowledge that the dividing seas will soon roll between.

"Don't say that, my dear," whispered Carlotta, permitting her eyes to express much that her voice dared not utter. "You, or all people! Why just think how many are depending upon you now! Me, for instance! I have only just found you. You are going to mean everything in my life."

Judy momentarily brightened. She was neither dull nor unreasonable, and already she had bestowed a romantic worship on the beautiful creature her brother had won. She leaned forward coaxingly.

"Listen, dear. You won't go home to-morrow?"

"Oh, no!" answered Carlotta, with an enthusiasm in her voice. "I have no intention of going home to-morrow. I can't possibly."

"Then we'll do a theatre to-night! Shall we?"

"Not possible," Carlotta reminded her. "We should be in until after nine o'clock."

"Well, a music-hall, then; for something desperate I must do!"

"I'll go to the hotel with you. We will have a cosy supper together, and you'll go to bed early. Then I shall trot round to my boarding-house and so ditto," said Carlotta cheerfully.

"Then to-morrow we shall go down quite early to Cambridge. It is lovely there in spring. And we shall spend our Sunday making a claim to the honors of his Alma Mater," suggested Judy.

Carlotta neither assented nor dissented, and they went back to their books and papers again, to which, however, they were inclined to give rather a detached attention.

"The train, a non-stop one, ran then into Euston on the stroke of nine, and they drove by taxi—Carlotta's extravagance, against which Judy protested, because they had no luggage, she said, and it was wholly unnecessary.

As they sat at supper Carlotta and Judy suddenly, "Judy, you won't go home to Cambridge to-morrow?"

"I want you to write to Claud instead and ask him to come up quite early, so that he gets here in the afternoon, some time."

"Why?" asked Judy, her eyes round with excitement. "I don't believe he could get away. You know he can't not to-day."

"But Saturday is an off-day. I think he could manage it. Make it urgent."

"And what reason am I to give?"

Carlotta's colour was high, her eye dangerously bright.

"I've got a box for the first night at the theatre. The play begins at 8.15. I am sure he could get up in time."

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And if necessary, he can be down by the Sunday train."

"A first night at a theatre! How delightfully interesting! Where did you get it, Carlotta? I suppose you know people in the theatrical world."

"Not many, only this one man, Graham Malloy."

"Do you know Graham Malloy? Actually know him, Carlotta? Why I saw him once in 'Macbeth' at 'Glasgow'! I thought him the finest actor I had ever seen, but then at coming my experience has been limited to provincial companies, and very disadvantageous in town."

"I know him quite well. I have known him a long time. He was a student at Cambridge when we lived there, and papa brought him to the house."

"How interesting! Is he a single man?" asked Judy, and then laughed consciously at her futile and apparently unsuitable remark.

"Yes, but what has that got to do with it?"

"It might have a lot if he happened to be in love with you, Carlotta," observed Judy at last. "I shall have to watch you, my dear, and look after you for Alan, poor chap—poor, poor old chap!"

Judy's voice suddenly faltered, and Carlotta's hand went up to her own breast and seemed to be there, with a quick, caressing touch.

"Don't be silly, Judy. If all the men in the world were in love with me—which heaven forbid!—it would make no difference. They are but shadows to me. Well, if you have eaten enough, come to the reading room and write that note to Claud and I'll post it as I go out."

"You are very wonderful!—and if 'Claude doesn't come'?"

"I think he will if you make it urgent enough. Tell him it's a very important play—the chance of a lifetime, if you like," added Carlotta, with a little catching laugh.

"All right, I'm not saying I shall like it. I've never been at a first

night. It must be rather exciting; but I suppose with a great actor like Malloy, there couldn't be much chance of a failure."

"Oh, yes, there might be a good deal!" answered Carlotta reflectively. "I don't see it; for, of course, he makes very sure both of his play and his company."

"Ah, but both have been known to fail," said Carlotta as she rose.

"I haven't much in the way of evening clothes, Carlotta. Only a black frock," was Judy's next deliverance.

"It's a box if it doesn't matter. You can sit far back if you dislike," answered Carlotta carelessly. "Though I am quite sure you have the right thing."

"You will come out in something respectful, I suppose," observed Judy as she linked her hand through Carlotta's arm to walk up the long corridor used as a lounge by the hotel guests.

"I shan't be with you, dear. I've got something else to do," said Carlotta guardedly.

"Oh, how disappointing! How very disappointing! It won't be the same at all! I don't believe I will write after all! I'd much rather go down to Cambridge in the morning."

"Afterwards, dear. But it is very important to me that you should see this play. I'm interested in it. I want your opinion—yours and Claud's—so come. Don't let us leave any more fuss about it."

Judy did as she was bid; for the disappointed, there seemed to be no particular reason why she should not do so.

Carlotta carried the letter out with her, and posted it at the nearest pillar box, and then walked home to Brunswick Square through the gaily lit streets.

There was no rehearsal on the mor-

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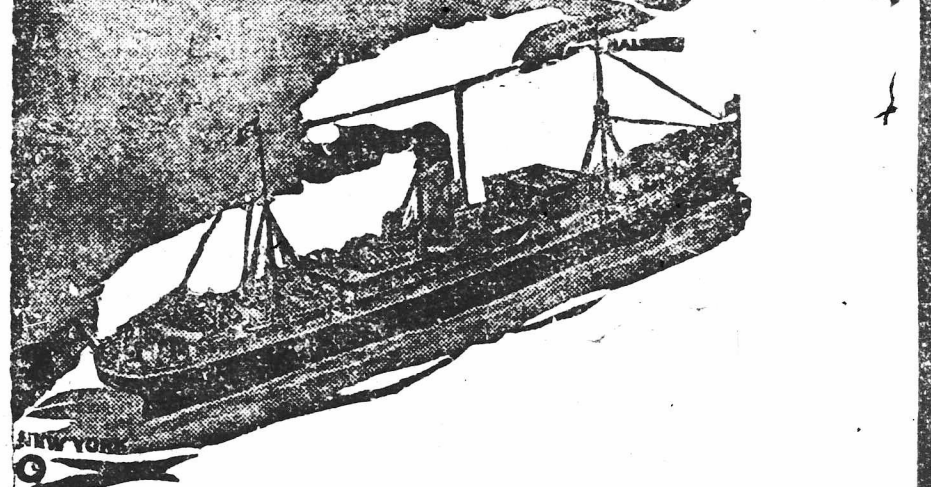
Over and over again she had been on the point of telling him that she feared that he would disappoint her, that it would come him to have any inquiries or asks about her in his exile-restrained here.

But now Judy must know! And of all the crowded rooms assembled, the witness Graham Malloy's face, though of defeat since the one might best as easily intervene him as the other, there were only two for whom Carlotta played.

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