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TONY THE FLORIST

By DOROTHY DOUGLAS

(© 1919, by McClure Newspaper Syndicate.)

Tony stood in his little florist shop and gazed longingly at the window across the avenue. His dark eyes, that held the tragedy and beauty of Italy in their brown depths, gazed during all idle moments in that same direction.

But the girl in the shop behind that window was not aware of Tony's gaze nor in any way conscious of the florist's existence.

Had both the tiny fragments of shop been rolled into one there would not even have been a space worth calling a shop—not a real Broadway shop. But within the heart of Ruby Vale was an ambition and sense of the artistic quite big enough to fill far greater space than her slim means could measure in actual possession. Ruby was not exactly one of the great herd of interior decorators that were filling all available basements with oddments of antiques and orange candlesticks, but she carried an assortment of accessories to the home.

As Tony gazed across the avenue each morning when he opened his own fragrant shop he knew that some new exquisite color scheme would greet him in Ruby's window. Try as he might to rise early, the girl opposite always managed to be down earlier and to have arranged her display for the day before he could get there.

He would then arrange his own beautiful flowers and was beginning to take his color effects, as far as was possible with seasonable blossoms, from the window opposite.

Only the day before there had been an exquisite twisted silver candlestick with an amethyst chignon shade, and lying carelessly beside it a cushion of amethyst taffeta with great silver tassels. Tony had sighed rapturously. Asters were in season and within ten minutes after seeing Ruby's window Tony had a display of lavender asters, with here and there a touch of silver birch.

Today the color was softest maze, and Tony had gloried in the palest of chrysanthemums, with a few nasturtiums for character.

Had the two shops been side by side they would have lured the most indifferent passer-by and drawn many a customer, first to buy a dainty lamp shade and then into Tony's shop for a cluster of flowers to match it.

How Tony longed to go across the street with just a flower or two and thereby add the necessary finishing touch to Ruby's window display no one but himself knew. And perhaps had Ruby been other than an amber-eyed, golden-haired girl to make one dream of, Tony would have found courage to make his small contribution. But the heart of the florist beat thunderously at the very sight of Ruby and he feared to seem foolish in her eyes.

Had Tony been a scheming lover he could easily have gone boldly into the shop opposite and purchased any amount of lovely things for the little apartment that was perched high up on Riverside drive, with its windows turned toward the broad Hudson. He could have had endless trips to the shop, first for hangings for those windows, then for candle shades and finally for cushions, and in the end he might have carried Ruby herself out of the shop and into his heart. But Tony was not wise in the art of wooing. He was far wiser in the art of making and investing money, and braver at fighting, as a medal or two pinned on his old uniform could vouch, than he was at winning a girl.

Modesty forbade Tony even supposing that Ruby had cast eyes in his direction.

But modesty was greatly in error, for Ruby had not only cast many admiring glances at young, good-looking Tony, but she sent many a longing eye at the wonderful flowers that so often matched the color of her own window decoration.

Ruby had put all her small hoardings into a very lovely stock and could not afford to have had daily to adorn her window. She, with Tony, realized that the few living blossoms would add a touch to her color scheme that would attract even the most elusive eyes. But flowers in the city were too expensive for struggling decorators to buy, so Ruby contented herself by planning for the day when she should not only have all she wanted but a full garden of her very own.

The morning that gave Tony a time advantage over Ruby was a record day. He arrived at his shop before the blinds opposite were even drawn or the color scheme there for him to copy. Tony wondered whether he

should wait, but decided to develop a window effect of his own and was not without a faint hope that Ruby would see it and take his lead as he had so often taken hers.

Chrysanthemums were in from the market—great shaggy wonders of the flower kingdom, and Tony, unable to resist the warmth of pink, threw himself with characteristic swiftness into the arrangement of a window that sent its glow along the entire block. Certainly it cheered the early business hums as they dashed into the subway's yawning maw.

Had Tony been anywhere but in the extreme back of his shop he would have seen Ruby emerging hurriedly from that same subway, stand for a moment entirely absorbing the exquisite color of his flowers, then fit across and insert the key in her own door and pass within.

When he next looked across the street his heart jumped joyfully.

In Ruby's window, with its soft background, was a luster ware lamp of exquisite pink with a chiffon shade that fairly took one's breath away by the chiffony softness of it. A pink wastebasket and billowy cushion completed the dainty picture.

Tony was no longer shy. With swift fingers he selected the most wonderful of chrysanthemums—pink and shaggy and exhaling that strange fascinating odor that was neither sweet nor bitter, but just fresh and pure.

He faced the little door opposite now with the same feeling of a conqueror that had been his when facing the enemy guns. Boldly he crossed the street with his huge pink blossom, a splash of color amid the Broadway traffic.

Ruby flushed brilliantly when she saw Tony in her doorway, but her smile went deep into the florist's heart.

"Oh-h!" she breathed softly, "what a wonderful, wonderful flower!"

"I wanted you to have it in your window," Tony told her simply.

"It will bring me in clients by the dozen," Ruby accepted the flower so graciously that Tony chided himself for not having come over weeks before. "Let's put it in this pink vase."

Together they stepped outside to get the full effect and both marvelled at the artistic whole.

"I will bring you flowers each day," said Tony, "and as I am supplying many hotels and restaurants with flowers I know I can get you orders for candle shades for the same places—that is—if you want me to." Tony's habitual modesty rushed to his rescue.

"Perhaps you don't."

A swift tremor of emotion seized Ruby. She had a desire to cry, but decided to laugh instead. The idea of her not wanting orders was amusing, but Tony was so innocent in his doubts. She knew that the coming of the florist into her life meant great big work and something even bigger than work. The quiet expression in Tony's eyes as they looked into hers told Ruby many things.

"Of course I want them," she told him, "and in return I shall send every client I get straight over to you to get flowers to match every color scheme."

Tony laughed. "I see people swarming to my shop now, so good-by for the time being." He was out before Ruby quite realized that he had been there. Only the pink chrysanthemum reminded her throughout the day of Tony. She carried it home to her small room at night rather than to leave it alone in the shop, and as the evenings wore on a different flower was added to the collection, having served its duty during the day. And each morning that Tony came over with his flowers and his orders found Ruby curiously ready to receive him.

A scant three weeks had passed, busy weeks, however, before he told her about the apartment with the windows looking far up the Hudson.

"Whenever you design anything especially artistic," he said, "just smuggle it away for me. There are just five rooms, but I'll say there won't be five more wonderful rooms in the world when they are decorated with some of these chifony things."

"And many flowers," Ruby suggested.

"One wonderful flower," said Tony.

Planting the Cultivated Crops.

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