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A GIRL OF THE PEOPLE

By Mrs. C. N. Williamson

His name, I also knew from Totsey, was Welcome, his business was a mystery, his money plentiful; and my own experience on the two Sundays I had spent in Peckham had proved him of a friendly disposition.

In our street, when a young man wished to make the acquaintance of a young woman, he helped himself to it, so to speak; no introduction was necessary. And Mr. Welcome—inspired named—tried to attempt to force his claims upon my notice. Both times I had eluded him by hurrying home, and raising a shout of laughter from Totsey, who had observed the manoeuvres from the window. But to-day I could not bear to go back. I was vexed that I had glanced over my shoulder, lest the man should think I intended to encourage him, and I hastened on, as if I did not know of his existence.

He could walk faster than I could, however, and in two or three minutes he was at my side.

"Look 'ere," said he, breathing fast, and suggesting lately imbibed spirit, "you needn't be in such a dashed hurry."

"I don't know you, sir," I said, with dignity. "Be good enough—"

"Then it's your own fault," Mr. Welcome broke in with a cackle. "I want to know you bad enough," he went on, keeping pace with me. "And I'm in earnest—this time. Anybody in the street can tell you you've made a dead mash of me. In two weeks you've done what your sister's bin trying to do for twelve months. Sive, don't look as if I was dirt under your feet 'know! I mean business. Honest, I do!"

"You can have no business with me," I said, icily. "Please leave me. If you don't you will force me to go home. I wouldn't stand much of that kind o' rotting from any other gill I know," returned my companion. "But you're different. You can chaff me all you like. It makes me see you're worth 'avin'." I sive, it's just the dye, Richmond. Was you ever there? Wouldn't you like t' go?"

I turned round abruptly and began walking back towards Easel street. "I wouldn't not like to go to Richmond, thank you," I said. "Perhaps you mean well; but if you wish me to think so, you will leave me at once."

"That ain't my idea of making a gill think well o' me—to leave 'er alone," chuckled Mr. Welcome. "And what's more, things 'ave gone too far with me fur that, I can tell you. Were you go, I go—and that sort o' thing, it's Scripture, ain't it?" and he laughed again.

I thought that he would leave me on the threshold; but, availing himself, no doubt, of his acquaintance with my family, he strode into the passage, knocking loudly on the door of the front room before I could disappear into my own. The knock was instantly answered, the door thrown open, and the face of the man I had passed on leaving the house appeared in the aperture.

It seemed an odd coincidence, but the man who had stared at me with such a meaning, sinister gaze, and the man who posed as Fan's lover, were one and the same.

Mr. Tom Stephens and Mr. Welcome looked hard at each other, but I did not wait to see or hear what should follow. After the first moment of indecision, I darted into the room which I shared with Totsey, and locked the door.

Somewhat—I could scarcely have defined why—after this Sunday, things began to be different with me, and even less pleasant, if possible, than before. Though Fan no longer coveted the eligible Mr. Welcome for herself, she resented the fact that he chose to advertise himself as a conquest of mine. She was sarcastic, often insulting, taunting me because, with all my boasted accomplishments and my fine lady airs, I could find no work, while she was "earning good money." Then, worse than all, Mr. Stephens, who now came to the house every evening to take Fan for a walk, or to some entertainment, expressed a desire for me to turn the dust into a trio.

Meanwhile, poor Swift's money was fast disappearing. I paid my mother twelve shillings each week for board and lodging, which sum Fan sharply hinted was insufficient, as my wages were so much more extravagant than those of the others. Pennies for omnibuses and trams soon mounted into shillings; I was considered by the family to be criminally reckless in the matter of washing bills, and my purchase of a cheap bath-tub was almost the reason of a quarrel. Several times Fan and Totsey asked for a trifling loan, and I could not bear to refuse, but at last came a day when, with work as far off as ever, I found myself penniless.

My heart sank at the thought of parting with the simple jewelry given me in happier days, each ornament a memory; but there was no other way. I could not be a burden on my relatives or on society at large. So I went to the box where my most valuable possessions were stored.

I had not unlocked it since the night of my wretched home-coming, when, after the family inspection, I had returned my possessions to their place; but I remembered well in which tray the jewel-case had been laid. I lifted the pretty dresses, still folded with sachets of orris-root and violets, but the case was not to be seen. With my heart beating quickly, I took out the tray, and searched through another, and another, then going over all again for the second time. The jewel-case was gone!

Still I would not believe in my loss. It was impossible that anyone should have stolen it, I told myself. I must, after all, have put it away in one of the other boxes. Trembling, my hands growing cold, I ransacked each trunk, but in the end I had to acknowledge defeat. I had been robbed; and I dared not let my mind dwell on the hateful solution of the mystery which would come up before it.

Fan had indulged in a great deal of new finery of late, and, when questioned by her mother, had flushed, saying it was nobody's business how she had saved up the money. She had, and that was enough. It was a pity if a girl who worked as hard as she did

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enough to have something a little decent, especially now that she had a "young man" of her own. She had bought two new dresses and as many hats, to say nothing of a huge feather boa like a variegated snake; and she had even a little gaudy jewelry which might have been bestowed by Mr. Stephens or might not.

Sometimes I had left my keys where Fan might have taken them for her own purposes. I could not help remembering this, but I tried not to think of it, and I would not for all the world have accused her. I spoke hesitatingly to my mother of what had happened, suggesting no explanation, but she never again saw my jewels unless a thing should happen which I would give more than their value to prevent.

The only hope I had left lay in self—or pawing some of my pretty clothes and books, for—I presently discovered—all the silver toilet things not in use had vanished with the jewelry-case.

That evening my mother and I went out with large parcels under our arms. I was hot, and tingling with self-consciousness, feeling as if everyone we met must know that we were going to the pawnbroker's. It was easy enough to say to one's self: "What does it matter? Who thinks anything about you? or, if anyone should, of what importance is that in your life?" But it was not so easy to do.

The pawnbroker would not have my things. If they had been men's clothing it would have been different, or if he would take that. But he had no call for ladies' dresses, and could give so little advance that it would not be worth while to part with my possessions.

I went home and cried bitterly, with my face turned to the wall in the little hard bed where Totsey and I lay (I can hardly say slept) together.

Next morning, for the first time since my arrival in Easel street, there was a letter for me. Fan had gone to the pawnbroker, and had brought back a letter, and Totsey, who was not yet strong enough to go back to work, watched me excitedly as I broke the envelope. What they expected, I did not know.

Perhaps they expected to see me told myself, but the envelope was of thick, creamy paper, sealed with a crest, and it must have been evident to them that my correspondent was not of their world, but of that remote and

dazzling one which I had set.

I knew the instant my eyes fell upon the clear, precise handwriting, with the affected Greek "e's," that the letter was from Roger; and I felt my color rise as I broke it open.

Often I had thought it strange, since he had professed such a passionate regard for me, that he had never come or written. But, as I read on, I began to fancy I understood the reason. For the letter renewed the old offer.

He had waited, it said, controlling his great longing for a sign from me or a word from me, until I should have plenty of time to be sure whether or not I could make up my mind to reconsider my decision. Every moment he had thought of me. Nothing that was now his was of the slightest value to him, since I was not there to share it. Would I not give him something to live for by scrapping one word; that word only of four letters, "Come?"

In a few hours after he would be with me. I need commit myself to nothing; I need make no decision. He would come if I would let him, and we would talk together. What a talk it would be! And then, if I were tired of the new life I had chosen for the sake of avoiding the one who loved me best, I had but to put my hand in his. He would be my servant until I was ready to call him "lover." But he would be married, and we would see many lands together, if I wished. In a week it might all be arranged, and I could choose where I would travel. Should it be Switzerland, the Engadine, or the Black Forest? Or should we dream away the days on a yacht? He would hardly expect me to answer, but I must at least give him credit for patience in the past.

I gave him credit for policy; and I thought that I could read his thoughts between the lines, almost as if I had seen a skeleton through flesh by aid of the Roentgen rays.

He had waited until he imagined that I must be sick to death of my intolerable environment. For years he had kept my mother always in sight, and had finally given me her address with exactly this contingency in his mind. Everything had worked out according to his plans, except that the bribe of food he offered to me when I was starving was not, after all, tempting enough. He was very clever, but he was not sufficiently clever to understand that all the money and all the luxuries and pleasures which might be mine through him would lose their value because they could not be separated from him. It would be like offering to a thirsty man a glass of exquisite champagne with the black, crumpled body of a great spider at the bottom. I could not conceive being thirsty enough to drink that champagne, and my heart was bitter against Roger.

I would have liked not to answer the letter; but fearing lest, in that case, he might come to Easel street, I sent a few words written on the common, blue-lined paper with which I wrote almost daily, offering my services to various advertisers in the newspapers.

When the envelope was addressed to Arrish Mill Court, where it seemed that Roger was living now, I remembered that I had no more stamps, and not a penny to buy one. I must go out and try to sell the things refused by the pawnbroker, to a second-hand clothes dealer.

I had expected to obtain at least twenty pounds for what I had taken, for I knew that the things must originally have cost fully three times that sum, and they had been scarcely worn before I went into mourning. But I escaped at last, brow-beaten, tongue-tied, and thankful to have wrested four pounds from the second-hand clothes dealer. Her husband had been called in to her assistance, and I was assured by both that I had been cheated by my dressmakers, that fashions had suddenly changed, the season was almost over, and it was a favor to take my things at all.

Still, I had something to show for my journey; I was at least able to post my letter, and to go back in a tram which would take me three-quarters of the way to Easel street. I rested after the battle, and shut my eyes, only to open them again with a start when the conductor came to demand the fare. I slipped my hand into my pocket for the purse lately replenished. But the purse was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

Which Tells of Roger's Allies.

My face told the story of my misfortune. In an instant everyone in the tram seemed to know what had happened.

"Lost your money, miss?" enquired the conductor.

I could hardly answer. It might have been worse, for I might have been suspected of trying to "steal a ride" on false pretenses; but I did not think of that at the time, and my cup of despair seemed full to overflowing.

To be Continued.

Singsong.

The wireless telegram has been the subject of much song, of late. To greet the pingsong pong.

—Judge.

Defined by an Authority.

"Why do they call them Brooklyns?"

"Because that is the only time they are in Brooklyn."

As They See Themselves.

There never was a looking glass in country or in city That ever could convince a lass That she was aught but pretty.

—Philadelphia Press.

When We Notice Them.

"Yes," said the philosophical person, "wealth brings its disappointments."

"After we lose it," puts in the materialistic man.—Judge.

The Sleepy Fisherman.

Drowsin' on a river bank; That is all my wishin'.

Wake me up when evenin' comes; Life's too short for dreamin'!

—Atlanta Constitution.

Without Effort.

"Is he a hard driver?"

"Indeed not! It's the easiest thing goes."—Philadelphia Bulletin.

The Fisher.

The tired fisherman now thinks, As home he slowly winds, "I have no fish to string, but I will surely string my friends."

—Choice (Mass.) Gazette.

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