

THE MAGPIE'S NEST

(Continued from preceding page)

a skeleton at the feast, a skeleton for every feaster. It was as though each who supped had a skeleton *beneath* the table, held firmly underfoot, and Ned had wantonly tried to drag one above-board. Hope saw Society, in a glimpse. Then she looked, openly, at Tony Yorke. There was something so frank about his smiling eyes, his fresh, tanned face and he looked good. She breathed freely again. He met her gaze, and telephoned her a quick message. The next? She nodded.

They did not dance together. Instead, moved by a common impulse toward solitude *a deux*, they found an extraordinarily little dusty stairway leading into the darkness of the roof, at the upper end of the hall, and sat there on Tony's handkerchief, peering through the half open door at the dancers, like an audience of two looking on at the pageant of life, asking no more than each other. It was draftily cool there, but they did not feel it. Hope drew the tail of her lacy gown over her shoulders; an unnecessary precaution. His mere presence warmed her; his sleeve touching her bare arm; more, the light in his brown eyes when, speaking, they bent their faces close in such a movement as preludes a kiss. They bantered each other a little; she loved to see him laugh, because he wrinkled his nose a trifle and looked as though everything were much funnier than one dared to acknowledge openly. She was so immensely lighthearted; and it seemed, absurdly, to have something to do with the way his hair grew off his temples; she loved his hair. No doubt Delilah wept when she put the shears to Samson, for every woman has a weakness for that thick, springy hair which seems to denote youth and vitality in a man. And she loved the laughter in his eyes.

Ah, she loved the gay and gallant spirit she read into him, of which these were the visible signs. But he loved only the softness of her mouth, the virginal delicacy of her low bosom, where it sloped gently under the shadowy lace, and her delicious, remote nearness. His fine senses gauged her; he knew at once that hers slept, or only stirred in sleep, while yet her spirit reached invisible, fearless tendrils toward him. He was not sensual; he was sensuous, fatally open to either appeal. There was a brief conflict in his mind, while past conclusions battled with present conviction. For she was not at all what he had thought her, but she might yet be many things. How would the die fall? That he meant to see.

THE dance was a romp. Mrs. Shane played, for it was an extra. They could see her, face averted carelessly from the keyboard, strong supple hands commanding the keys with splendid precision. She, too, was watching the dancers.

"Look," said Tony softly. "That's her husband!" He went by his wife with Mrs. Dupont on his arm. Her regal height dwarfed the little man; his stout bow legs bore him gallantly, moving with a deft precision that gave the final touch of burlesque. In his wife's eyes was a complete, impersonal appreciation of every detail of his appearance, a terrible and humorous appraisal, and a sort of mild and perpetual and, yes, wicked astonishment. He was her husband! Her fingers were little devils, casting nets for the enchanted feet of her auditors; like the children of Hamelin, they leaped to her playing, without volition. Cora Shane was a genius in her way, and her way was the playing of popular music. So she played, and her husband danced, a figure of fun to the world. Tony laughed quietly. It amused him a great deal. Such things did. Even while he was most aware of Hope beside him. She was watching, also.

"They're funny, aren't they?" she said. Yet she did not see what he saw; to her they were funny in an entirely different way, merely as human beings. But he was comparing what he saw with what he knew. She forgot them; the figures on the floor became only a pretty tapestry, of dark heads and fair, powdered shoulders, trailing satins, masses of clear black and white. She and Tony were alone, ringed about in a fairy circle. To have stayed like that forever! Even a handclasp would have been too much. It was strange, but he knew all her mind. He made her tell him about herself, a little. He even spoke of Edgerton, and of Ned, and watched for her colour to change, but it did not.

The figures on the floor wove and shifted. A couple, nearing their hiding place, swung out of the measured rhythm; the man stopped, handed a recovered handkerchief to the girl, and paused a moment, his face full to them. Hope leaned forward, suddenly tense, her upper lip lifted. "Who is that?" she asked very softly.

"Which? Oh—Jim Sanderson. Know him?" Tony turned to her, noting that her cheeks had now the distress signal he had tried to provoke earlier.

"No," she said, still softly, with a definite note that was like the closing of a door. "Do you?"

"Long time," answered Tony. "He's rather a good scout."

She did not answer, and he spoke of something else and forgot, momentarily.

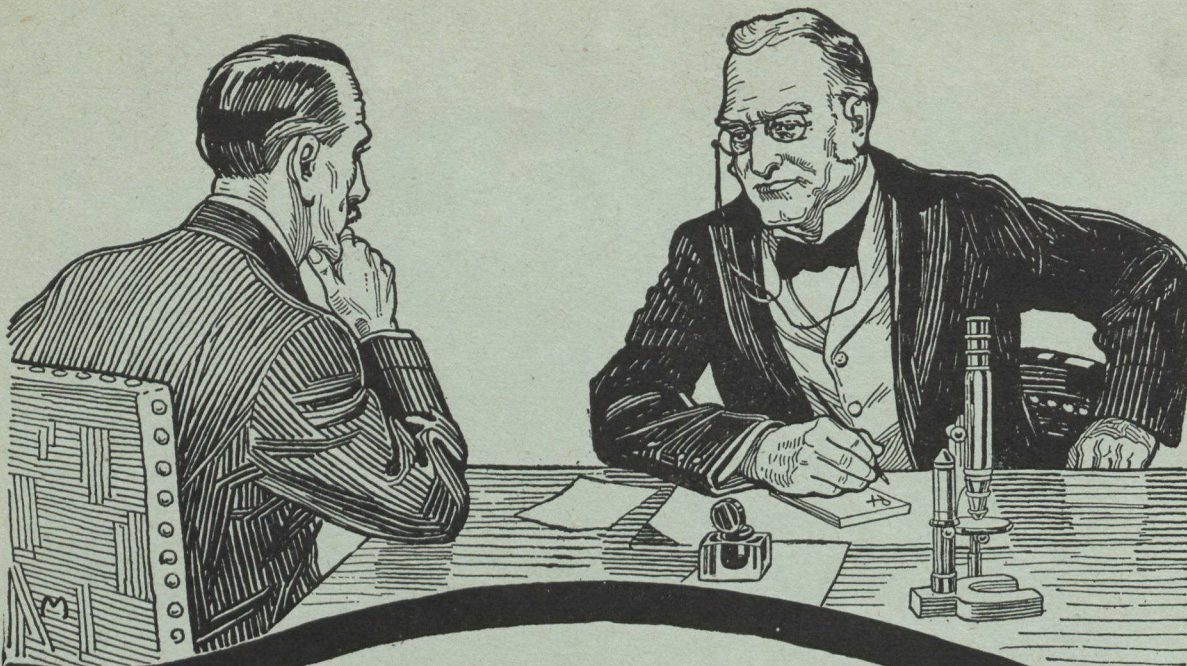
"I've cut a dance," said Hope presently. "Ned will be furious. And there's a man looking for me. I forget his name, but duty must be done!"

"You will give me one more, later," he said, not questioning, and they rose, more than half reluctantly. She turned her face up to him.

"I like you," he said, with the naivete whereby he won women.

"I like you, too," said Hope, in a breathless whisper, and stooped through the little door. A distracted looking youth came up and bore her off.

The dance was (Continued on next page)



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