

BEING A GRANDMOTHER AT THIRTY-FIVE

By ERIC A. DARLING

Illustrated by ESTELLE M. KERR

THE woman, staring into interminable darkness, stirred restlessly. She had slept little through the long night. Finally a bare, rounded arm groped for the light switch and found it.

As the beams flooded the room, she sat erect, pushing back, with an irritable little gesture, the dark cloud of hair from the smooth, white brow. Blue eyes gazed questioningly about her, a tiny frown growing as they seemed to seek for that which escaped their vision.

She slipped from the covers and crossed to the open window, breathing deeply of the crisp morning air. A faint tint of rose in the east heralded the approaching dawn. She closed the window and slowly crossed to her dresser—dainty, exquisitely fashioned with the round slimness of youth enhanced by filmy negligée. She might have been nineteen.

Had you seen her in street costume a few hours later, you would have judged her twenty-five. Contact with the world of business had lent her an assurance that crowned her with added years. Womanhood, in the glory of full bloom, had replaced the slip of a girl who could not sleep. You would have judged her twenty-five. In reality she was ten years older.

Thirty-five milestones passed! To her it seemed incredible. She felt not one whit older than she had eighteen years ago—in truth, not so old. For at sixteen she had married the minister in their little town. It had been one of those unions brought about by gentle parental persuasion. Her parents had been poor, the honour one not lightly to be thrust aside, and the young clergyman very much in love. Of course, the urging had been gentle, but it had been none the less forcible. And at seventeen maternity had come to her. At nineteen she was widowed. In the sixteen years succeeding she had become a business woman in a business world.

An uncle of her husband had found her a position in a mammoth department store in one of our larger Canadian cities. Application, a steady hand, and a special aptitude in a certain line had placed the name of Margaret Sterling among the firm's list of high-salaried employees. Time brought to her the responsibility of buyer for three departments, necessitating semi-annual trips abroad in that capacity.

And now she was on the eve of another of those trips. Or rather, not the eve, for the day was already here, though darkness still shadowed the land. Her trunks had gone. In ten hours she would follow.

Standing before her dresser, she picked from among the silver articles thereon a yellow slip. It had come the night before. She knew the contents of that telegram by heart, yet, as she read it, there came again a quaint little smile of commiseration, flitting over her face as she caught her eye's reflection in the mirror.

The message contained naught but joyful tidings. Even the operator must have caught their spirit when he punctuated it so carefully.

"A boy, Grandmother! Hip! Hip! Nancy splendid, and so happy!"

"A grandmother!" She thrust her piquant countenance close to the mirror.

"A grandmother!" she repeated, and wondered at the sudden clutch in the throat that gave her voice that tragic tremour.

"A grandmother!" she reiterated, and addressed her mirrored visage.

"You don't look it!" After a prolonged survey she asked of the empty air: "Now would you believe it? Would any one believe it? What a perfectly scandalous way for a girl to treat her mother, her still young and giddy mother. Positively fiendish!" Then her humour varied.

"The darling—how I wish—I could just see her and—and him. I wonder—if he has a downy fringe of black hair, like Nancy—or whether he's like Jack. There! What's the use of wishing, when there's half of this glorious Dominion between us, and I sail for Europe in a few hours? Why on earth didn't they tell—" and she dropped sobbing into a chair.

Later she emerged, twinkling and merry, her usual happy self.

"That will do, Grandmother," she laughed. "Tears are a luxury you must forego. 'The Road to Age is dampened with the Tears of Youth.' Now I wonder who it was said that! Anyway, it's true; that would mark the final finish to my youthful appearance. 'Brace up and be a Man!' Somebody else said that. I must sit down and write Nancy a nice letter, though she did treat me dreadfully. I wonder what was in that telegram I sent in reply—I don't remember a word—I was so amazed." A sympathetic smile hovered about her lips. "Why, I never dreamed of such a thing! She's only a baby herself. And yet—she isn't; why, she's a year older than I was!"

Unconsciously, a minor note had mingled with her musing. But twinkling eyes and dimples soon returned. She laughed softly in contemplation of the exploding of this bomb when she and The Man met. For there was a man,

though as yet the woman had not acknowledged the fact even to herself. Indeed, she would have taken care to arm herself against him had she suspected such behaviour from her carefully guarded affections. In her years of business she had met many pleasant men, with them spent happy hours in a congenial companionship. But she had always veered sharply away from anything approaching sentiment. Marriage held no illusions, and personal liberty was dear.

"I shall tell him after we have lunched." She smiled as she put the finishing touches to her toilet.

THE Man called for her just before twelve. The hands of the café's big clock pointed to the hour as they seated themselves. She had kept the secret a full fifteen minutes, and might have kept it longer if the man's glance had not contained such obvious admiration. When he leaned toward her across the table, and in his usual gruff way, said, "You are getting more beautiful every day, and that new suit sets your beauty off perfectly," she could contain herself no longer.

"I've just received very wonderful news—that is, last night. In consequence I failed to sleep a wink, so don't tell me I'm beautiful. I probably look worse than I feel. Besides, you'll call our lunch fine; our ride to the dock grand; and, no doubt, the ship that carries me away—a beauty. You sprinkle adjectives everywhere," she laughed, handing him the yellow slip.

The Man took possession of the telegram. "My goodness, how you do twinkle! Quite as though you were the wizard's evening star. This must be splendid news," and he lowered his eyes to the paper.



With a sigh of infinite happiness, she sank into the outspread rug.

Shamelessly and appreciatively she studied his face as he read. Bewilderment, amazement was writ across it. She gave delighted little chuckles.

He raised his eyes quickly. "Heavens! Not you—a grandmother!" He almost gasped.

She nodded, smiling consciously.

"A grandmother!" he repeated, slowly. Then in his eyes also came a twinkle, a devilish little twinkle. "Well, in that case, it's time you made some definite provisions for yourself, before—ah, the further advance of old age. Rollins told me in strict confidence that you've refused him three times. Now, you have only refused me once. That cheers me. I take heart. So—Margaret, will you marry me?" His voice and manner were above suspicion, but from his eyes scintillated little mocking lights.

"Thank you, no, Mr. Weston," she replied, as airily mocking. "I am still too young and inconsequential for married responsibilities. I adore my single blessedness. At thirty-five fate has thrust grandmotherhood upon me. But I defy the Oracle. I positively refuse to grow old."

The meal proceeded merrily. To the woman there was something infinitely satisfactory in teasing this man. His attempts at love-making were so direct, so elephantine, without any subtleties—the man-and-woman game was so entirely new to this lion of finance. Railroads and stocks, mines and corporations, had always been the vortex upon which his mind had centered. He had never before cared for a woman, never before wished to marry. And frankly he told her so. For

a year now she had been chaffing him in her smiling, provocative way. And all the while she remained so self-reliant, so well-poised, even at times when her eyes were blue wells of appealing dependence.

By some intuition, he read her aright. There might be ways and means of bending a woman to submission, but lack of experience made these unknown to him. Only in his abrupt way was he her most ardent and deferential suitor—ever dependable; one with whom she might enact all the audaciously flirtatious things in woman's category. And he, with a mind that could calculate to a nicety the amount of expenditure required to put a run-down railroad on a paying basis, argued simply that if she cared for him, eventually she would marry him. The only flaw in his theory, an unfortunate one, was that she didn't. Still, he hoped in a ponderous way, and in the meantime flushed beneath her little pleasantries, and rated them at their face value.

But on the steamer, as the last call, "Gang-plank going," sounded, he turned suddenly, crushing her hands in his.

"This is twice since I've known you—this putting the ocean between us." The words came hard. "You will be back in June?"

She nodded, averting her gaze from his.

"Well, I can't stand it again," he went on harshly. "Do you hear?"

For answer she gazed serenely before her over the deck rail.

"What was it you said, last time?" She spoke musingly. "You said something about hugging the ticker while I was gone. It rather shocked me; so ambiguous. Almost as though you had—er—used me for that purpose." Little devils of mischief leaped in her eyes.

"So I did." His growl grew subdued. "I whipped a certain railroad into shape. Took me night and day to do it."

"Well," she laughed, "haven't you another railroad handy, that needs attention, or perhaps some other substitute—"

Authority, in the person of an obdurate ship's officer, thrust between them. "We'll be away in three minutes, sir," he announced unfeelingly.

"You'll write me?" If her hands had been merely crushed before, she felt them now a shapeless jelly.

"Oh, every day," she whispered sweetly. And when she saw him amongst the crowd on the pier, she blew him a tiny kiss. It was a foolish thing to do, and it affected him that way. He tossed his hat in the air, like a boy of twenty, and not like a staid juggler of finance, aged some forty odd.

THE trip over was most unpleasant, the stormiest of ten she had previously made. The only sunshine was that she made herself, with her cheery disposition. But April showers frequently crept into her moods, when she would muse on that far-away baby, and ever through her musings the queerest thoughts would run. Almost she felt as though that boy were hers, and she his mother. As for the real mother—a little well of pity had sunk into the woman's heart, drilled there by her child's youthfulness. How well she remembered those days when little Nancy's red face had nestled in the hollow of her arm. She had loved her then—oh, yes! But she loved her infinitely more as the years went by. For at sixteen or eighteen the heart is neither large nor broad enough for the seeds of motherhood. And now an ache grew and swelled in her hungry mother-heart. As she had failed in the measure of love accorded her own

baby, she now felt brimming over, crushed down and utterly possessed with it, for her grandchild. And all the while leagues and leagues of water were being placed between them. Months must elapse before she could see them with her own eyes. How could she wait!

But, once arrived, she became again the keen woman of business. In the background of her thoughts might lurk vivid pictures of a "little grey home in the West," but on her tongue's tip was only the siren song of the dollar.

With a rapidity she had never equalled on trips previous, she flitted from city to city. No time now to relieve the monotony of business with idle sightseeing. At the completion of her buying was a wonderful goal. And when all was accomplished, she found herself a month ahead of scheduled time.

To the man, as she had promised, she sent many letters, but said nothing of an early return. Some time in June, he expected her, but not on the first. So when she arrived in the big Canadian port and called his office, she was told that he had left the city for a (Continued on page 34.)