

"TO LET, FURNISHED"

(By Anne O'Hagan.)

It stood in a mean region of unfinished streets, of low-built, garish brick cottages like itself and of encroaching barrens which the city had not yet won from the prairie.

The agent consulted his book. "Um—um, um, yes," he mumbled. "666 South Funston avenue—four rooms and bath, cellar, gas, one-story, detached cottage. Oh, to be sure! I have it now. The model workman's cottages on the new street. To be sure, to be sure."

"We don't know three souls in Denver," interrupted Louis, "except boarding-house keepers and acquaintances, and those we hope never—"

"Exactly what we want," chimed in, not confiding to him that his trousseau was barely two months old, being of the mid-summer crop, and that it had been designed for metropolitan wear before this sudden commission had befallen Louis.

"Well then," he said, "I'll send a clerk out with you to show you the place. Mrs. Ellen Whitty is the owner. How long are you to be in Denver, Mr. Lounsbury? Three months. Not for health, I hope. Oh, business. Well, you'll find us a fine people to do business with. I hope you'll like the house. If you don't I have some places on Capitol Hill—"

"That night drawing the shades behind the sweeping Nottingham curtains, Louis embraced me with an affection that had been growing less demonstrative under our boarding-house experiences.

"Peggy," he said, "we'll have Christmas in our own house. Do you realize that?"

"Yes!" I answered jubilantly. "And O Louis, let us be thankful that we are delivered from the bondage of landladies!"

"For I had not yet seen Mrs. Whitty. Mrs. Whitty came the next morning. Louis had improvised a desk on the small, double-tiered table in the parlor which had formerly held on its upper shelf one blue plush mat, one Bible and one small photograph in a large frame, while on its lower a large vase of many crumptions had reposed. She looked toward it, with its blotter and its pads above, and its wire basket of jumbled manuscript below, and her blue eyes widened with timid horror.

"I brought you an extra key," she faltered, her gaze still upon the desecration.

"It was very kind of you," I answered, glad that Louis was not at home. He had taken such satisfaction in the isolated life we were to lead for awhile, and I, too, had been rejoicing in the prospect of active doll's housekeeping in our little toy house. An interruption on the first day argued ill for us.

"Is everything as you would wish it, ma'am?" Mrs. Whitty's voice was as wistful as her wide, blue eyes and the drooping, patient lines of her figure.

"Most people thought it was real pretty. You ain't stopped usin' it because you're afraid of hurtin' it?"

"No," I said brutally. "Because we did not care for it. The chief trouble with brutality is that it entails so great an expenditure of tenderness afterwards. When I saw a hurt flush spring into Mrs. Whitty's thin cheeks like a banner suddenly unfurled, when I saw her irresolute lips quiver and her eyes darken with wounded feeling, I was stricken with voluble remorse. I begged her to sit down; I said I would make a cup of tea for her—I had already learned that the hospitality of the neighborhood permitted, nay, required, tea at all hours. I talked much and loudly on the comfort of her kitchen as I bustled about in it.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," said Mrs. Whitty gratefully. "I'll not deny, tea out of my own cups would seem good to me again."

"Such lovely china," I murmured, enthusiastically!

"I gave her tea in a delicate, rose-powdered cup that deserved the encomiums I passed upon it. As she stared down at it and stirred its contents, I saw a tear fall and threaten to curdle the cream. And I waved Louis frantically away from the passage way where he suddenly appeared, inquired and protest written all over him.

"It's hard," said Ellen Whitty, straining sobs in the hot beverage, "that a woman like me, with her own, pretty, fine things, should have to drink out of iron ware you can scarce get your lips over." I nodded sympathetically. I feared that a more active expression of sympathy would bring her eyes again.

"An' there'll still be a few things in the bit of garden," she went on, looking out to the narrow back yard, planted in aisles.

"I picked some pansies this morning," I told her. "There are still some by the fence on the right-hand side. Take some as you go out."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you kindly, ma'am. What kind of silver polish are you usin' on the spoons, if I might make so bold as to ask?"

There had been an abrupt change from fearful gratitude to housewife anxiety in Mrs. Whitty's voice. Some-what exasperated, I told her.

"Are you sure it's a good one?" Some of them that's most cried up is awful for wearin' off the platin'."

"I use it on my own silver," I retorted, with as much finality as I could infuse into my tones. "And now, Mrs. Whitty, I have my market- ing to do, so I shall have to ask you to excuse me. If we want anything else, I'll write to you or the agent. I don't want to bother you like this."

Mrs. Whitty sighed, rose, placed the cup upon the dish-shelf over the sink with tender care, and took her melancholy, halting leave of me. Her slight figure trailed limply down the yard in the blaze of sunshine, stooping over the pansy bed. And when she reached the alley gate it was to pause and caress with her faded eyes the garish little cottage that held all her treasure.

"Did he—was he—was there—?" I floundered with the ugly thought in my mind. "It was t—und—"

"No'm, he belongs to the temperance."

"Then, why on earth—I began in somewhat unparadiseable heat, for Ellen's standards made those of my own circle seem suddenly depraved—"

"I was this." She included the kitchen and pantry in the vague sweep of her arm and her wandering glance.

"I—I just seemed to love it all, Mrs. Lounsbury—an' Joe, he didn't care much. Once he broke a pink bowl I had, pink with a gold border, old-fashioned it was—Miss Mary, where I lived before I was married, give it to me. An' he didn't care much! An' glasses—I couldn't count them. Scemed his fingers would just crush them. He's got big hands, Joe, an' I doubt he knows his strength."

"You see," she went on after a brief, musing spell, "I was a girl green from the bog when Mrs. Carter took me, off the dock in New York, as you might say. And when the family comes West for Miss Mary's health, they brought me to Denver. Well, I'd never seen such things as yer—had—such china an' such silver as the feel the linen napkins an' the shine of the table-cloths my! It was lovely! That was my work—the care of the dinin'-room—an' I just loved it. I'd no more be rough with one of them little cups with their bits of handles than with a baby or a fairy. An' I took pride in havin' everything nice to tend to them—lots of dish-cloths and towels an' all. I didn't so much care about the rest of the house—too dark it was. Colonial, they called it, but to me it looked cold an' slippery. But the china an' the linen!"

"When I met Joe an' there came talk of marryin', I couldn't bear to think of leavin' my china. I told him so, an' he, but he was mad!"

Ellen's earnestness was interrupted by a simper. "He couldn't seem to see but he was more account than plates an' forks. An' Miss Mary, she talked to me about the love of an honest man—they say she's been disappointed herself, poor thing—an' said she'd help me fix my dinin'-room an' kitchen, an' I'd care for it more than ever, bein' mine an' Joe's. So we was married. An' at first, he tried to pretend that he cared for it too, an' he put up shelves an' things. But he didn't really care, Mrs. Lounsbury, he didn't really care. I was to excuse me. If we want anything else, I'll write to you or the agent. I don't want to bother you like this."

"Mrs. Whitty sighed, rose, placed the cup upon the dish-shelf over the sink with tender care, and took her melancholy, halting leave of me. Her slight figure trailed limply down the yard in the blaze of sunshine, stooping over the pansy bed. And when she reached the alley gate it was to pause and caress with her faded eyes the garish little cottage that held all her treasure."

"Of course, it's all very pathetic, Margaret," said Louis, crossly. "But we can't have it. I can hear her snivelling in the other room and I can feel her lackadaisical eyes boring reproaches into my back through the passage. I won't have it. If she comes again I shall tell her plainly that we'll leave the house unless we can be allowed to occupy it in peace."

Consequently I was pleased, coming in from market two days later, to find Louis sitting opposite Mrs. Whitty in the transformed parlor, a large fruit dish poised on his knees, an expression of anguished interest on his face.

"I came in with the fruit dish, Mrs. Lounsbury," said our guest vivaciously. "It was real mean of me, what I did. When the house was to be rented, I just took it out. But I've been feelin' in the wrong about it ever since, seein' you're all so pleasant an' careful an' so I brought it back."

"Yes," said Louis idiotically. "Mrs. Whitty brought it back, Peggy. It's one that Joe gave her—I think you said Joe, Mrs. Whitty. An' she said, 'Yes, sir.' Mrs. Whitty snuffled ominously and Louis's eyes snatched me to take her away. So I mentioned tea and we trailed out together. There was desperation in my heart. Was the owner of the house to be our daily visitant for three enduring months?"

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