

Honours Easy

(Continued from page 8.)

knowledge that misled ordinary people into overestimating him enormously.

The man never spoke of his business in Della Triuna; but he had many long and private conversations with an old man whose name was registered as Mr. Ephraim Hardy. Hardly anyone else in the hotel was on speaking terms with this gruff, scraggy, autocratic old infidel with the worried looking eyes and unsociable habits. But most people thought his name was anything but Hardy. Some of the hotel folk wrote him down a diplomatist, and imagined Dermer—who stoutly refused to become autobiographical in conversation—to be some sort of attache under him, or in negotiation with him. But after many futile surmises people gave up even trying to guess the pair.

It was when Mr. Dermer had been there a fortnight that Eileen—possibly helped by Inez—made the intensely annoying discovery that she was in love with him. Naturally she was in no hurry to admit this to herself, and she never admitted it to Inez, who first prompted the suggestion before Eileen had really thought of it. But the fact became at last indisputable. This regrettable circumstance of course made Eileen hate Dermer more than ever.

In the meantime he still appeared to be quietly amused at her; but he obviously enjoyed their tete-a-tetes, which did not become less frequent. Eileen had at first made up her mind to give them up, but finally she fell back on the old excuse that it would look "more pointed" to avoid him than not to.

One evening they were sitting on the terrace after dinner. It was a dull warm night with thunder in the air. Eileen was feeling oddly nervous, though thunder did not usually affect her.

There had been a rather strained silence.

"Well, Miss Arthur," said Dermer at last, "this may be our last interview—I'm leaving this little paradise to-morrow morning."

For a moment Eileen felt the shock; then she pulled herself sharply together; and, as she did so, another kind of devil possessed her. She never knew afterwards how she had the nerve to say it, but she said, in her most languid tones—even as she was wont to use to the more unscrupulous brand of bounder—

"Really, Mr. Dermer. And are you going to propose to me? Or are you going away in strong silence to shoot great big game?"

Dermer looked at her hard. Eileen looked hard at the sea. For some fractions of a second he was genuinely taken aback. Then he too recovered, and laughed easily.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm afraid my remark was rather in the cheap fiction style. No, I'm not having anything more to say to great big game for a while. I've been out after it here all right, and I've earned a good rest. I'll get one too, soon. Do you like being proposed to?"

"It depends," said Eileen. She found some difficulty in making her voice behave itself as she wanted; she even felt that perhaps she had given herself away, and she qualified the remark hastily.

"I used to, you know," she said, "when I was younger; but I think one gets past that kind of vanity rather soon; besides, it's a very embarrassing form of flattery, isn't it?"

"I should think so," said Dermer, "but to tell you the whole truth no one ever proposed to me, so I can't really say."

"Really?" said Eileen. "Now I should have thought there must be hundreds turned away every twenty-ninth of February."

But both felt that the conversation was becoming flippant in the wrong place. Dermer switched it off abruptly.

"Miss Arthur," he said, "wouldn't you just love me to propose to you?"

"Why?" asked Eileen. (It seemed the only thing to be said.)



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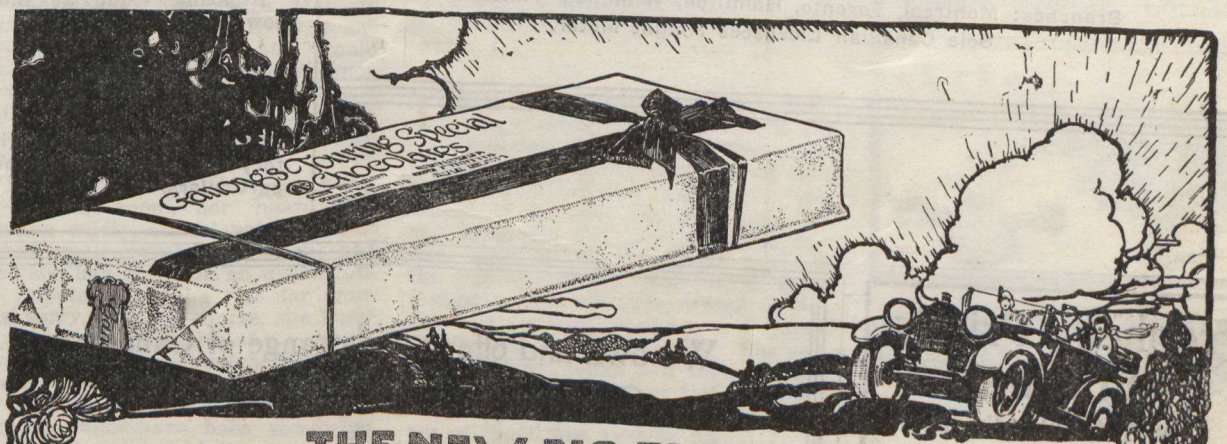
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