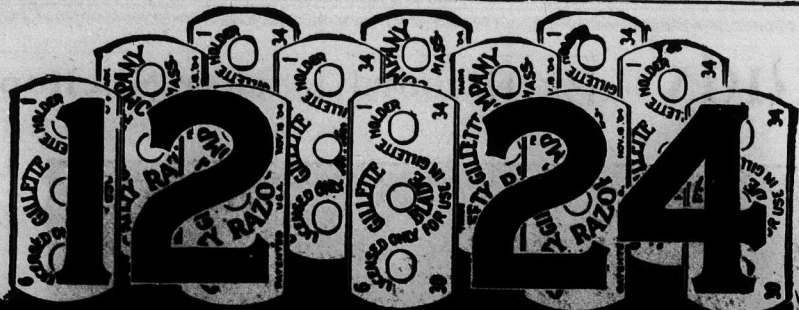




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1000 RINGS GIVEN AWAY FREE
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On a near-by chair sat Peter, blinking innocently.

I sank into the opposite chair and groaned. Peter, recognizing my evident distress, leaped over and settled himself comfortably on my knees.

"Confound you!" I exploded. Peter nosed my vest affectionately and began to purr. He was at all times a most idiotically cheerful cat!

I put Peter down and tried to think in light of my promises to Aurelia—my most emphatic and oft-repeated promises—my position in the matter was not enviable. Finally I had an illuminating inspiration. I would purchase at one of the bird stores a canary as near like Buster as possible, and some day, after Aurelia had become attached to this new bird, I would tell her the whole truth of the matter.

After quite a search through the pet-stock shops the following two days, I found a copple-crowned canary with one dark wing and one light one, which looked very like the lamented Buster. The dealer informed me that copple-crowned canaries part dark and part light were quite a rarity, and that, in consequence, he would have to charge me six dollars for it. I paid him and departed joyfully with the bird in a little wooden cage.

Arrived at home, I engineered my purchase, with much fluttering and many frightened chirps on his part, into Buster's cage. I put the cage on the table by the lamp and spent a good hour calling, "Buster! Buster!" to the bird in a vain hope that by this method I might get him to recognize his adopted name, but this he stolidly refused to do. The following morning I hung his cage by the dining-room window, where he would have the sun all day. This—if anything—I imagined would cheer him up to his normal state.

Aurelia was due to return that afternoon, and I left the office early to meet her at the station. To my surprise, though she inquired solicitously after Peter, never a word did she say about Buster. I imagined she was tactfully avoiding a subject at which I had shown impatience the morning of her departure.

When we reached the house, I carried Aurelia's suit case upstairs, and then awaited her in the dining room. I wanted the ordeal over as soon as possible. Yet when Aurelia came into the room, looking very fresh and pretty in her long tea gown, I felt my heart

jump. Almost instantly she spied the cage and quickly walked over to it.

"Tom, dear, what on earth is that bird doing here?" she asked in surprise.

Weakly I strove to ward off impending disaster. "He didn't seem—quite well this morning," said I, "so I hung him out here where he could have the sun. Does he—does he seem to recognize you, Aurelia?"

I saw her open the cage door, thrust in her hand and withdraw something.

"Recognize me!" she chuckled. "I should say not!"

"Whee-ee-t! Whee-ee-t! Buster, Buster!" I chirped inanely.

Aurelia wheeled upon me. "Don't be silly, dear," she said, quite calmly. "That isn't Buster!"

"How do you know it isn't?" I asked, half in bravado, half in curiosity.

"By this, for one thing," she said. She opened her hand. In it was a small, pale-blue egg!

I tried to smile; then I thought better and changed to a frown.

"We've been deceived, Aurelia," I gurgled.

"Somebody has been deceived," she said, pointedly. "Where and why did you get that bird?"

Evasion was futile. Abjectly I told the whole story of my attempted deception. When I had finished Aurelia fell to laughing. I silently awaited the passing of her mirth.

"You—you say you bought it at Belden's," she gasped at length. "What did you pay for it?"

"Six dollars," said I.

"Six dollars! Goodness!" said she scornfully. Then she came nearer and put both hands on my shoulders. "I think I can get your six dollars back for you, you dear old stupid!"

"I doubt if they'd give you the money back for the bird," I objected.

Aurelia chuckled softly. I fancied I detected something like apology in that chuckle.

"I begin to think there is something back of all this," I said severely.

"There is," said she. "You see, I was afraid after all you'd be careless about Buster, so I put him in a little box punched full of holes—cages are so terribly bungling to carry, you know—and I took him down to Belden's to be kept until my return. I meant to write you about it, but somehow I forgot it. Tom, dear, can you ever forgive me—if I get your money back for you?"

I have forgiven Aurelia.

The Most Beautiful Thing.

The Lord sent down to this world, one day,
An angel to bear to heaven away
The earth's most beautiful thing.
The angel came to a beauty rose.
"Tis the fairest thing," he cried, "that grows.
To my Lord the flower I'll bring."

He plucked the rose with tender hold,
Dearer to him than mines of gold,
To lay at his Master's feet.
On him, ere yet his upward flight,
A baby smiled, his eager sight
Saw naught more fair or sweet.

Beside the rose the smile he placed,
"Twere fairer than the flower it graced,
So full of trusting love.
But now he saw a glowing ray,
A mother's love shone o'er his way
All other light above.

I will take them all to my Master's bower,
The love, the smile and the beautiful flower.
"My Lord will choose," he said.
Ere the angel entered the shining door,
He looked for the baby's smile, it was gone.
The beautiful flower was dead.

He looked for the baby's smile, it was gone.
But the mother's love shone steadily on,
A gem of priceless worth.
Then the angel bore through the golden street.
The mother's love to his dear Lord's feet,
The most beautiful thing on earth.

—Ellen Newcomb.