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THE IRON MONGERS

Daughters of Midas

by Anne Austin

THIS HAS HAPPENED

T. Q. Curtis, millionaire department store owner, takes three girls from his store into his home as his wards for one year because he believes they have worthy ambitions which he wants to help them realize.

Billy Wells, ambitious to be a concert violinist, is the only one that is sincere. Nyda Lomax and Winnie Shelton lie to enjoy his generosity. Billy becomes infatuated with Dal Romaine, nephew of Mrs. Meadows, the hostess.

Her love affair causes her to lose interest in her music. T. Q.'s philanthropy first proves a boom-crash when he discovers his safe is robbed by someone on the "inside." Suspicion points to Billy, who calls on Clay Curtis, son of her benefactor, to help her out. Clay has disinherited himself and is living with the Wells family in a poor part of town, working in a factory by day and writing music at night. He is steadily winning recognition for his compositions.

Clay forces a confession from Nyda and Eddie Banning, who admit to having been married during the entire year. Winnie finds a paper showing that T. Q. intends to adopt Billy. She tricks T. Q. into a proposal of marriage. Viola, the maid, whom Winnie bribes to witness the situation, gives the ruse away.

When T. Q. tells Billy what has happened she tells him the girls have not played fairly with him, that they have known all the time he intended to adopt one of them. He begs her to accept the adoption but she refuses and leaves the house, going to the apartment of Romaine.

She begs him to marry her immediately and finally they leave together in his car. Just before they leave, a maid comes with a note to Dal from Winnie. He spurs it. When Winnie learns from the maid that Dal and Billy are leaving together, she sends for Clay and tells him Billy is in danger, that Dal has known of T. Q.'s proposed adoption all the time and he intends to marry the one who will win. She implicates Mrs. Meadows and confesses that she, Winnie, was also engaged to Dal.

She tells Clay where Dal is likely to find Billy and assures him Dal's purpose is not an honorable one.

Now go on with the story:

CHAPTER LIX

"This isn't the road to Chatham, Dal," Billy roused himself from a long doze to protest. "You should have turned back there—the right turn."

Dal Romaine drove on for a long minute without speaking. During that minute Billy stole anxious glances at his set, stern face. Now that he was so soon to become her husband, she was beginning to have a nervous fear that he was a stranger to her. Even the contour of his narrow, handsome head seemed strange to her. In the occasional glare of the headlights of a passing car his black eyes glittered, narrow and sinister. Who was this man she was eloping with? Who was Dal-hart Romaine to whom she was entrusting her life? He had killed a man, he had said. India, mysticism. He had hypnotic powers. He had cast a spell upon her. But—of course she loved him! Hadn't she given up Clay Curtis for him?

"Dal!" The familiar syllable on her lips became a cry.

"Billy, darling, we're not going to Chatham tonight," Dal said at last, without looking at her. "I realize you are in no condition to go back to the Curtis house to-night, but tomorrow you must return, say nothing of having been with me—"

Her hand clutched his sleeve, tried to shake the rigid arm whose hand was clamped so tightly upon the wheel. "What do you mean, Dal? You—you're not going to marry me?"

"Listen, darling," he said, with an attempt to make his voice soft and caressing. "We're going to wait until April to be married, as we had planned all along. I have no money—"

"But you won't have much more by April!" Billy cried in a panic of fear. "I—I don't understand, Dal! I'm not marrying you for money. You've lived well here, traveled in the best society. Surely you can support a wife—I'm used to plain living, except—except this last year—"

"That's what I want to talk with you about, dearest, if you'll try to get control of yourself," Dal interrupted her, taking his right hand from the wheel and putting his arm about her shoulders. "You must go back to Mr. Curtis, stay out the year, and—win your reward for having been a loving companion to a lonely old man."

"What do you mean, Dal?" Billy jerked out of the embrace of his arm and leaned forward to stare with horror into his face. "You know—you've known all the time—!" Her voice died away in a terrified whisper.

"That Curtis was planning to adopt one of you girls as his

daughter? Yes, I knew! My aunt told me—"

"Mrs. Meadows!" Billy shuddered away from him.

"There's nothing so horrible in my having known," Dal protested, still trying to keep his voice caressing and reasonable. "Nor in Aunt Lucia's having told me. You can't blame her if she wanted her favorite nephew to marry a girl who would be rich some day."

"This is funny!" Billy gasped on a bitter note of laughter. "You were trying to marry me for my money? A department store clerk being married for her money! And so you got yourself engaged to all three of us, to be sure you caught the right one! How faithfully busy you've been! How—how—!" she began to laugh and cry, hysterically.

"I wasn't engaged to Nyda ever," Dal barked at her roughly. "It wasn't necessary."

"So that's what you meant when you said Eddie Banning had put himself and another person in your power? So my suspicions about Winnie were right all along! You were engaged to her, too! She knew—she knew—she was laughing at me all the time, sure she would win both you and T. Q., then when she found out I'd won the contest—"

"My God!" Dal Romaine interrupted her roughly. "You left that house knowing you'd won! You ditched your chance at a fortune to run away with me?"

"He begged me to stay!" Billy laughed hysterically. "He pleaded with me to stay and be his daughter, and—I thought only of getting away from him, flying into your arms. Your arms! Oh, what a blind, gullible fool I've been!"

"Listen, Billy!" Dal swerved the car suddenly from the smooth asphalt paving, fairly with a roar. "Don't be a fool any longer! Listen to me! You love me—"

"Love you!" she raised a hand as if she meant to strike him. "Yes, you love me. You've been mad with love for a year. I do want to marry you! Not just for the money you'll have as T. Q. Curtis's daughter, but because I love you. I've been sincere about that, at least. I never loved Winnie Shelton—"

"But you spent week-ends with her, had her meet you somewhere for a week—oh, how could I have been so blind!"

"You must listen, Billy. I love you and I want to marry you. I can't marry you unless you have money. I've been living off my aunt while I've been in Colfax, except for what I could pick up here and there—"

"Dragging in customers for Madame Dubois and—oh, I see it all now. It was you who was Namiir Sadhi's accomplice! It was you who worked up a blackmail campaign against the people who had been kind to you. Oh, you're too unspeakably vile! I hate you! Don't dare touch me!" she screamed as he leaned toward her.

He drew back, and though in the dark she could not see his face clearly, she caught the evil glitter of his eyes. With a quick movement of his hand upon the dashboard he killed the engine of the roadster.

"You'd better get over your fit

of hysterics and listen to reason, Billy," he said coldly. "I'm telling you the truth. I do love you. Shut up, or I'll choke you into listening to me!" He commanded her ferociously as she tried to interrupt him. "Be practical, for once in your life! You can go back to T. Q. Curtis. Take what he wants to give you—and then marry me. You can wrap the old man around your finger. He'll accept me as a son-in-law if you make him realize that your happiness depends upon it."

"My happiness!" She flung the words at him bitterly.

"Then consider the other side of the picture," he went on relentlessly. "If you don't go back to him, and if you don't marry me, you'll have to go back to clerking in a store. You've had your chance to become a great violinist and you've frittered it away—"

"Because of you!" she reminded him, beginning to sob again.

"Because you loved me," he agreed. "You do love me. I'm not going to give you up, just because you're an idealistic little fool. I'm no worse than other men; I'm just cleverer than asses like your dear Clay Curtis—"

"Don't drag his name into this!" Billy hurled herself against him to strike him on the mouth.

Dal Romaine seized her hands, forced her back upon the seat, then, before she realized what he was doing he had the car under way again, lurching over the deeply rutted road. He drove with one hand, keeping her hands imprisoned in the iron grip of his other.

"Where are you taking me?" Billy struggled to tear her hands out of his grasp. "Let me out of this car, Dal Romaine! I'll kill myself if you don't let me out!"

"I'm taking you to that cabin you've already visited with me," he told her grimly. "I'm going to keep you there all night—and after that you'll be glad to go back to T. Q. Curtis and tell him you've decided to accept his offer."

The sinister meaning behind his words was so apparent that Billy's distracted brain took it in instantly.

"Let me go! I'd kill myself rather than stay with you!" she shrieked, heaving her body upward with such force that she reared the wheel and threw himself forward to grasp at her body crouched for the spring.

When she felt his hands grasping at her she jumped. The car, without the restraining hands of a driver upon the wheel, plunged into a rut, lurched crazily, then slithered to the deep water-filled ditch beside the road and overturned.

Billy's leap had carried her clear of the narrow road, and into the ditch on the right. She struggled out of the muddy slime and forced her shuddering limbs to carry her to the overturned car. The wheels of the cream-colored

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roadster were still revolving slowly when she stepped into the filthy water of the ditch to peer under the inverted body of the car. Dal Romaine's crumpled, still body was pinned under the wheel, his head bent at such an angle against the windshield that there could be no doubt that his neck was broken.

Billy stood there, shaking with an ache of fear and relief and nausea; then she climbed upon the road again, and was about to stagger away when she stumbled upon a suitcase, flung clear as the car had overturned. She stooped and picked it up, felt its sleek leather sides with her muddy hands, found that it was hers, and then, bending a little under its weight, she walked a short way along the dirt road. A plan seemed to come to her dazed mind. Again she plunged into the muddy water of the roadside ditch, then, her suitcase bumping against her knees, she set off across the stubble field, her back turned upon Colfax.

When a rattling flier came through the ruts of the road less than five minutes later, it was too dark for the driver to see the small figure tottering through the dead stubble of the field, swaying drunkenly under the weight of the suitcase and of a load of horror. (To be concluded.)

Billy Wells disappears and—but read for yourself the surprising conclusion of "Daughters of Midas."

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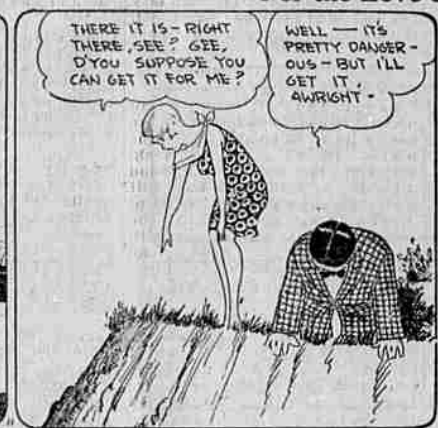
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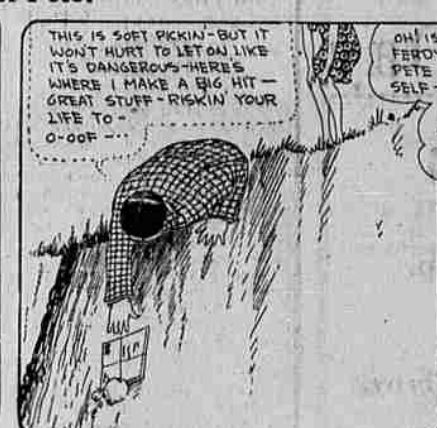
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