

The Back Number.

By TEMPLE BAILEY.

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When the boys came back to college, Catherine Newlands displayed rejuvenated charms. The enforced quiet of the summer season in the dull old town had rested her, had brightened her eye and given a tinge of color to her cheeks.

As she crossed the campus that first morning in a scarlet sweater and white linen skirt, with her tawny hair in a big knot low on her neck, a half dozen of the freshmen turned to look after her.

Catherine felt their admiration with a thrill of gratification. For ten years she had basked in the delight of making that first impression on the new boys, and it was like a draft of old wine to a tippler.

Now and then in her triumphant progress a junior or a senior stopped her and greeted her with frank friendliness. That was one of the advantages of an affair with Catherine Newlands. She knew how to shade a love affair off into a good comradeship, and the boys, who in their freshman years had been her adorers, came for advice in their later love affairs.

For Catherine would have none of them. She liked to bask in the sunlight of their admiration, she liked to be the queen of the junior promenade, she liked the violets and the blue pennants and the crowd of eager boys surrounding her at the football game. She liked to sing "Down the Field" for them and to have them cheer her at the end. She liked to lead in their college yell, and the roar of their young voices was music in her ears. But that was all!

"You are too young," she would say frankly as some stricken youth would plead, "and, besides, if I married you, what would the other boys do?"

A lot of her old friends crowded around her as she reached the library steps, and there was a fringe of unconquered freshmen in the background. But when she presently detached herself from the group it was one of the faculty, Oswald Ware, who accompanied her.

"Dear old boy," she said as they walked toward the great gate that led out into the city street, "it's so good to have you back."

"Don't call me old boy," he flung out, with a touch of irritation. "Heaven

for ears were sharpened to hear the comments of the new boys. "Who is she?" came an eager question.

"Catherine Newlands." "She's a beauty!" "My dear boy, she is a back number. She is twenty-eight if she's a day."

It was the first note of disloyalty to her queenly position, and the man who had said it for her to hear was sore over a rebuff, but the light seemed to go out of the morning. The old buildings frowned grim and gray above the low square, and, to add to it all, it through the big gate came another girl—a little thing with a fluff of fair hair. Tip-toed on her high heels, with her pink ruffles floating about her, she was like a wild rose.

The boys on the campus fence bent eagerly to watch the new arrival, and the freshmen, debarred from the fence, but hanging in groups about the big gate, asked the question that had so often thrilled Catherine Newlands: "Who is she?"

Laughing and all a-flutter with the joy of the attention she was exciting, the other girl came toward Catherine.

"Oh, Miss Newlands," she gurgled, "don't you remember me?" "It's Gracie Allendale!" Catherine said brightly. "Why, Gracie, when did you grow up?"

The other girl laughed delightedly. "Yesterday, I think," she said, "when mother told me that I needn't go back to school. I am going to be here all winter and have the time of my life."

Her lips answered the older girl, but her eyes were on the boys. And suddenly she was swept away, with a dozen laughing lads in her train, and Catherine was left alone.

One youngster ran back. "You won't mind," he said boyishly. "We want to show her things."

Catherine shook her head. "No," she said slowly; "I don't mind."

But when he had gone she went out of the big gate with lagging steps and drooping head.

Late that afternoon Oswald Ware, bending over a pile of papers in the dusty, musty study, saw a vision of light as Catherine in a filmy flowered gown came in.

She sat down on the other side of his desk.

"Oswald," she said, "the queen is dead. Long live the queen!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I am a back number," she said wistfully. "I heard a boy say it. And Gracie Allendale has developed into a little beauty, and they are flocking to her."

"She will never be as beautiful as you," he said indignantly.

"Ah, but she has youth." The girl was silent for a moment; then, "Just think of it," she said, "I am twenty-eight."

"You are a mere child," he stormed.

"Why, I—I am almost forty. You are a mere child."

A smile broke the corners of her mouth.

"How nice it sounds to hear you say it. You are such a comfort, Oswald."

"I wish you would let me show you what there is in life for you, dear heart; such big things as compared to the little life of the campus."

"Ah, but youth is there." And her eyes wandered out to the sunlit space under the elms.

"And love is here," he said. Then her eyes came back to him.

"That is why I came," she said tremulously—"that is why I came to you, Oswald."

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