

The Man of Her Choice

By Wm. J. Lampton.

MARY HOWARD was the prettiest chambermaid in the hotel, and Mr. Doan was the oldest boarder. Not oldest in point of years, but in point of occupancy, although he was not as young as he was when he passed his fiftieth birthday. He roomed on the floor that Mary had the care of, and after a year's acquaintance with her he had decided in his own mind that she was a very nice girl. Mary liked Mr. Doan well enough, but that was all, for he was a bachelor, and she rather had her doubts about such old bachelors as he was. But Mr. Doan was rich and liberal, and so polite always that he gradually won favor in Mary's eyes.

One Sunday when she was fixing up his room, which was the only time she ever saw him there, he began talking to her.

"Do you know, Mary," he said, with evident sincerity, "that you are the prettiest girl in the hotel?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mary.

Mr. Doan was somewhat staggered by this unexpected frankness.

"Oh, you do, do you?" he responded, a little nettled.

"I ought to," she said; "every man I have seen in this hotel has told me so, except you, and now you have, so they can't all be telling stories."

This explanation did not quite suit Mr. Doan, but Mary was quick-witted, and he let it go as she put it.

"I presume," he said, apologetically, "I ought to have told you so before, because I have known it ever since the first day I saw you, but you seemed to me to be a lady, and I did not want you to think that I was not a gentleman."

"And I am a lady, Mr. Doan, as my mother was and still is, but I am a lady in distress, as the story-tellers have it. Two years ago my father died, leaving us nothing but a little house away out in the suburbs, where my mother and brother live. He never was rich, but he was a gentleman, and when he left us poor, somebody had to do something, and I took this place. It was the only thing I could do for wages right from the start, and we needed something to live on. My brother found a place in a store, and between us we manage to live."

"You're as good a girl as you are pretty, Mary," said Mr. Doan, "and I must go out and see that mother of yours."

So he did, too, and came back with very agreeable impressions of the sweet old lady of 60 that he had met.

"Mary," he said on the following Sunday, "how would you like me to be your father?"

"You are quite old enough to be," she said, sharply, "but you are not old enough to be my mother's husband, if that is what you are leading up to."

"I don't know about that," he laughed. "A woman's heart is always young."

But Mary did not like the subject, and went out without continuing the conversation. Half an hour later as she was carrying a roll of quilts across the hall in front of the elevator, into which Mr. Doan had just stepped, that always uncertain method of locomotion got loose and started down the shaft for the bottom, seven floors below. Mary knew what was coming, or going, rather, and with a scream she dashed the roll of quilts into the open door. The cage had only a slight start and the quilts were caught and wedged in between the floor and the elevator roof and the downward movement stopped with a noise like a wheel taking a rubber brake. Mary dropped in a faint. Mr. Doan almost had a spasm in the elevator where he was boxed up, the elevator boy came running from a room where he had gone to deliver a message, somebody turned in a fire alarm and the whole place was in an uproar. The firemen were restrained from turning the hose on Mr. Doan, and busied themselves rigging timbers in the elevator shaft below the cage to catch it, when the quilts were withdrawn, and presently Mr. Doan came down with a thump, and walked out scared almost white. The papers next morning had a whole column about it, with a large picture of Mary, the big headlines about the heroism of a chambermaid. It happened on Friday, and on Sunday Mary was at her post again. When Mr. Doan saw her he did not wait to ask her about the flowers he had sent to her house, nor about his having called to see her without seeing her.

"Mary," he said, in the matter of fact way of a man of 50, "you saved my life, and I want to do something to show my appreciation of it."

"Oh, Mr. Doan," she almost pleaded, "don't say anything more about it. I didn't do anything."

"You saved my life. Isn't that anything? It is to me if it isn't to you!"

"I would have done just the same for Tom."

Tom was the elevator boy.

"Well, I'm going to offer you something a kid like Tom couldn't offer you, and that is the heart and hand of an elderly man."

"You mean you want to marry me for saving your life?" asked Mary completely dazed.

"Not exactly, Mary. I—I—I," hesitated Mr. Doan.

"It's just the same thing, and I can't permit it," said Mary resolutely. "You are rich and I am poor, and it would be just as if I saved you for what you might give, and I didn't do that."

Mr. Doan tried his best to argue her into consent, but the harder he talked the harder grew her pretty head, and he gave up finally in despair. He went to see her mother that afternoon, and the mother promised to do what she could, for she liked Mr. Doan. Still Mary would not listen to reason. She said if she had money it might be different, for then people could not say she saved the man for his money. It was really a silly and foolish position she had taken, but young women do silly and foolish things more times than a few. Mr. Doan thought there might be a younger man, but said nothing.

One morning a week later Mary received a note asking her to call at Mr. Doan's office. Greatly puzzled, she went, and Mr. Doan and another man were waiting for her. The other man was Mr. Doan's lawyer.

"Mary," said Mr. Doan, after the usual salutations and an introduction, "can you give me a dollar?"

Mary took out her thin little purse and found three quarters, three nickels and a dime, which she handed over to Mr. Doan without a question.

"I'd like to borrow a nickel of it for car fare," she laughed nervously.

"You won't need it, Miss Howard," said the lawyer politely.

"Here are some papers, Mary," said Mr. Doan, handing her a large packet.

"You won't understand them if you look at them, so I will merely tell you that they are deeds to all the real property I own and include the certificates of all the stocks in my possession. Indeed, everything is there if you will look them over. They are yours."

Mary, in a dazed fashion, opened the packet, and the only thing she could read was: "Know All Men By These Presents, that for and in consideration of one dollar in hand to me paid," etc., etc., and she didn't do a thing but drop the papers and begin to cry. The lawyer discreetly got out of the office, and Mr. Doan stepped over to the window. The room was still except for Mary's faint sniffle, and the twittering of a couple of sparrows on the telegraph wire in front of the window. The stillness seemed to soothe the perturbed spirit, and presently she lifted her face from her wet handkerchief and glanced shyly up at Mr. Doan. He did not see her. She got up and went over to him, sobbing a little yet.

"Mr. Doan," she said, putting out her hand, only one hand, to him, "is it true that you have given me everything?"

"Everything in the world I own, Mary, and I am poor as a church mouse."

"But Mr. Doan—" she protested.

"Not a word," he broke in. "If it hadn't been for you I would have lost it all by leaving it to a lot of people I don't like, and if you have it I know it will be where it will do much good. Don't you worry, my dear. I am not so old that I can't hustle around and make a pretty good living yet. I can do it a good deal better than you can."

Mary looked at him and again the tears filled her eyes.

"Mr. Doan," she said, "if I were to tell you that there was a younger man I loved; one whom I had known since I was a little girl and who had been waiting until he could earn enough to make us comfortable, would you stand let me have this money? Aren't you giving it to me because you do not know this and hope to win me with it?"

Mr. Doan choked a little. He had not heard of this young man. Perhaps if he had he would have been less generous. He might have given him a position in his office or helped him along in some other way. It was hardly necessary to impoverish himself for the sake of letting the woman he wanted for his wife marry another man. But Mr. Doan had the right kind of stuff in his make-up.

"I don't know what you want to do with it, Mary, and I don't care," he said bravely. "What I want it to do is to make you the happiest woman in the world, and that will make me feel it is where it will do the most good. All I ask is that when I am too old to work any longer you will board and lodge me at a reduced rate and give me a fair funeral."

Mr. Doan laughed at his joke, but Mary did not. She put out both her hands to him.

"There is no younger man, Mr. Doan," she said, "and if you will have me for your wife, you may—"

Mr. Doan acted ridiculously for a man of his years. He shouted and made a wild grab for Mary.

"You bet I—" he began, when she broke away from him and warned him off.

"On one condition," she said.

"Name a dozen," he replied with crazy liberality.

"One is enough, and that one is that you give me back my dollar."

He handed her over the money and shouted for the lawyer to come in.

"Think of it," he said to that gentleman, "she will marry me on the simple condition that I give her back the dollar she gave me."

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"How the dickens did she know that?" inquired Mr. Doan, but the lawyer couldn't enlighten him, and Mr. Doan wasn't particular, seeing that everything was his anyway.—Detroit Free Press.

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