

LEAP YEAR BRIDE

CHAPTER XXVII

The single lamp was still burning in the big room. Cherry hurried to the bedside. She was clutching a note about her mother.

"You wanted me?" "The woman on the pillow raised her eyes. They were brown eyes, as much like Cherry's. They looked dark now against the pale face.

"My little girl," Mrs. Dixon said. "Cherry—come here beside me."

The girl knelt at the side of the bed. "What is it, Mother?" she asked. "I'll do anything—"

The sick woman smiled. She raised one slim hand to touch the girl's hair. "Cherry, you've come back. You're glad you've come back. You're glad you've come back. You're glad you've come back.

"Of course I don't misjudge him, Mother. I know how he feels. But everything's going to be all right again. He said so."

For an instant happiness seemed to light the pallid cheeks. "He said—that?" she repeated. "Oh, I'm so glad."

Cherry knelt there for a long while. Mrs. Dixon slept as peacefully as a child. Presently the nurse put a hand on the girl's arm and motioned for her to rise. Cherry realized for the first time that she was shivering. The night air had grown colder and her dressing gown had slipped down from her shoulder.

She went down the corridor to her own room and got into bed. Within five minutes she was asleep. Despite Dr. Knowles' cheerful predictions three days passed before she gave the definite word that Mrs. Dixon had passed the crisis in her illness. Little by little her strength returned. There were times during those three days when the doctor's calls stretched out over several hours. There were times of anxiety for everyone in the household. Walter Dixon did not go to his office. He remained in his own room or downstairs in the study. Cherry and her father met for meals that were almost silent, the food set before them and taken away scarcely tasted. Father and daughter waited nervously outside the door of the upstairs bedroom for the brief bulletins the nurse could bring.

Each day Cherry telephoned to Dan. She stared on at her mother's home, making one hasty trip to the apartment for clothing. Pinky, the kitten, had been quartered upstairs with Dixie Shannon. The bird seemed to have stopped in its regular orbit. Everything centered about the battle being waged in the upstairs bedroom.

Then on the morning of the fourth day Dr. Knowles greeted the father and daughter with a cheerful smile. "If this improvement continues," he announced, "Mrs. Dixon is going to be herself in a few days or two. Remarkable how she's rallied in the last 24 hours. It's remarkable! Of course there's a long road ahead to health but I'm confident she'll make it. I've increased her diet."

He went on in a maze of professional terms. Cherry's heart was too full to listen. Another day another passed. Mrs. Dixon was able to sit propped up with pillows while Cherry read to her. A touch of color appeared in the pale cheeks. Dr. Knowles congratulated her at the present rate she might get out of bed and sit in a chair for a few minutes on Sunday.

Eight days had passed since Cherry had seen her husband. It was time for her to return to the apartment, yet she hesitated to suggest it. She still felt the sense of guilt that her departure had caused her mother's breakdown.

It was Mrs. Dixon herself who solved the problem. Cherry was sitting with her, relieving the duties who had gone out for fresh air. "Cherry," her mother said thoughtfully, "isn't it time you were going home?"

"Why, Mother—?" "Your father and I were talking about it last night," Mrs. Dixon went on. "We've been glad to have you here, of course. It's meant everything to me. You see, I felt I'd lost my daughter, and I knew that underneath Walter's bitterness she was suffering just as I was. This illness—well, I don't really mind it now. It's brought me back to me. I should never have gone away."

Cherry said fervently, "It was wrong of me, but oh, Mother, I've paid for that. But you love your husband, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But I should have made Father understand. I shouldn't have lost my temper. I can't undo the past," Mrs. Dixon said.

Dixon said quietly, "It's the future we must think about. Your father and I agree that if you love this young man you should go back to your home. That's your duty now, Cherry."

"And I can come to see you? And you'll come to see me?" "I hope you'll come. Yes, when I'm able I'll come to see you. I'm anxious to know your Dan—"

Cherry departed that afternoon. She telephoned Dan and agreed to meet him at 5:30. Martin drove her down town in the big car. It was arranged that he was to call for Cherry each afternoon and take her to her parents' home for an hour or two.

Cherry leaned back against the thick upholstery and smiled as the limousine rolled along. She was tired yet very happy. The past week had been a tremendous strain but out of so much suffering the world seemed to be righting itself. Her mother was on the road to recovery. Her father for the first time seemed to have lost his aloof, indolent pose. Walter Dixon had found something he could not bulldoze and terrify—life. Both of her parents were at last reconciled to her marriage.

"Poor Dan," the girl thought. "I wonder how he's been managing about meals and clean shirts and if he's been at work on time. The apartment must be a sight!"

Cherry snapped open her purse and drew out a vanity case. She surveyed herself in the mirror, added another touch of lipstick and then rubbed away most of it. She was wishing she had started earlier and had time to stop at Louise's shop for a facial treatment. Cherry had never had such a treatment, but Dixie Shannon had assured her they were marvelous for removing tired lines.

Suddenly Cherry smiled again. Facial treatments—the idea. She must remember that she was a poor man's wife now. No more breakfasts served to her in bed. No more turning to Sarah or Martha for everything she wanted done. "And I'm glad of it!" Cherry told herself earnestly. "It's going to be good to be home. Oh, it's going to be wonderful!"

She thought that she meant it. Martin let her out of the car before the library steps. It was the place where Cherry and Dan had met so often in the days when they were living at the hotel. The chauffeur closed the door after her, touched his cap and drove away.

Dan was nowhere in sight but Cherry was not disturbed. She had learned to expect him to be late. A boy in knee trousers was selling flowers from a basket further down the street. Cherry strolled toward him, selected a rose to fasten to her blouse and gave him a quarter for it.

"Here's your change, lady," the boy began as Cherry moved away. She smiled, told him to keep the coin.

"Why, it's summer!" Cherry thought with surprise. She thought it must be Cherry had not the slightest idea what the day of the month was. To satisfy herself she bought a newspaper, saw that it was the 20th. The 20th of June. The headlines were not interesting. A clash over local politics. Smugglers arrested in San Francisco. A woman demanding a divorce because of lipstick on her husband's shirt.

There was no story on page one signed "By Daniel Phillips." Cherry scanned the columns wondering which he had written. It made her thrill with pride to see Dan's name in type. Somehow it seemed to look bigger than the other by-lines. Cherry had told him that once and Dan laughed at her.

"I wonder what's keeping him," the girl thought restlessly. There was a big clock in the window of a jewelry store across the street. Its hands pointed to a quarter of six. She scanned the street in both directions. There was no Dan in sight.

Just he doesn't come in five minutes," she decided, "I'd better call the office. Of course if anything's happened he knows he hasn't any way to reach me."

"Around. No, Dan was not in sight yet. Then she saw him. He was crossing the street, coming toward her and at his side was a girl in white. She wore a white hat and white shoes. Her head was thrown back and she was looking up at Dan and laughing.

Jealousy, white hot and scorching, flamed up in Cherry's heart. Who was this girl and what right had she to be laughing like that and swinging along beside Dan? With sudden and unreasoning anger Cherry recognized the other girl.

(To Be Continued)

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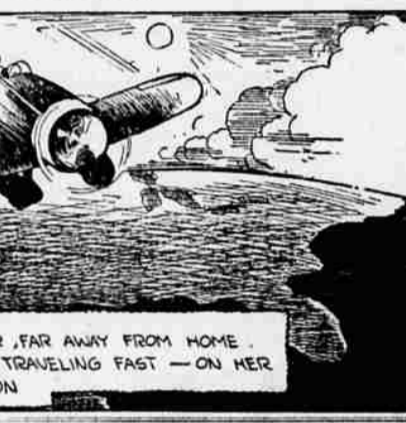
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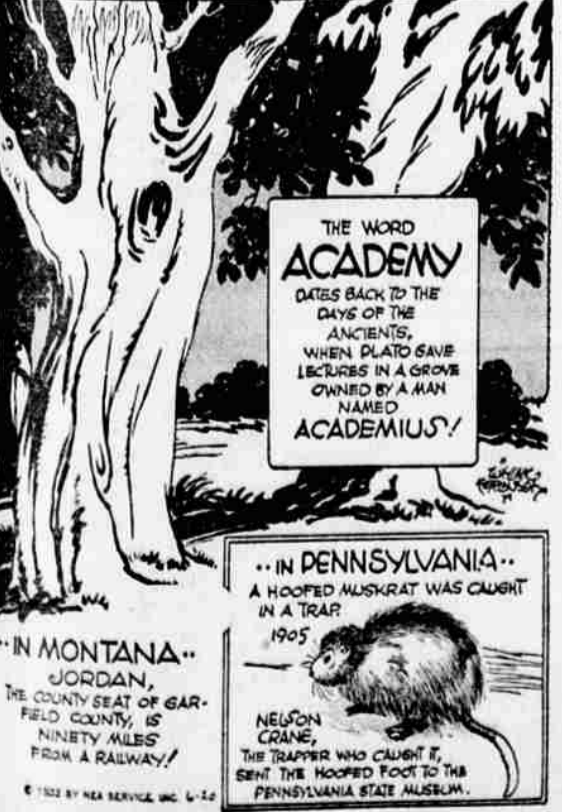
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