DARLING FOOL

by MABEL McELLIOTT

CHAPTER XLVIII

It wasn't many mothers, Monnie reflected, who would ask so few questions as hers. Mrs. O'Dare appeared satisfied with the vague explanation though no doubt she was thinking her own thoughts.

"We've got a pick-up supper," she worried. "Nothing like what I would have had if I'd known you were coming."

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The girl laughed joyously. This was getting home—having mother worry about what you ate and how you looked. She had missed it—oh, how she had missed it! The shabby little house, warm and cozy, the deep chairs, the books under the lamp. How familiar and yet how strange it all looked after the salons and cafes! Monnie wondered fleetingly what Arthur Macbeanie would have thought of her home. Then she tossed her head!

"Kay will be here soon," Mrs. O'Dare told her. "Mark's working at the Boston store. I told you that when I wrote, didn't I? He runs errands after school. He's saving his money for Christmas."

"And Bill?" Monnie was almost afraid to ask about Bill. Maybe he had gone off and married Angie while she'd been away.

"Bill is like a different person these days," said Monnie's mother. Her face lightened. "He's—Monnie, I must tell you! It's all off between him and Angie."

"Not really?" Monnie was incredulous. The mother nodded.

"Yes. Angie went back to her husband two weeks ago. She'd been acting rather queerly lately. When Bill called her she was never in. Do you know, Monnie, I really think she cared about Bill and that she decided this was the best way out for them all? She knows Stan — that's her husband's name—has a vicious temper and that he'd make trouble for her. He never wanted to let her go, really, and had threatened Bill. You don't know how relieved I am about it all, although I'm sorry for the poor little thing! Angie really has some fine qualities."

"So that's one more mountain turned into a molehill," Monnie murmured, fluffing her hair before the hall mirror. "How I worried about that situation all summer, thinking Bill's life would be spoiled by such a marriage! You say he's taking it all right?"

"Yes, I think he's really relieved, deep down," the mother explained. "He was infatuated with Angie at first. She is pretty! And then the excitement of knowing she was forbidden fruit, another man's wife, kept up the feeling. You know how Bill is! Stubborn as a mule. He got the idea Angie was being mistreated and that he was her champion. When we accepted her—what else could we do?—the thrill wore off. He wasn't really in love with her and seeing her all the time quite casually rubbed off the bloom."

"You're a wise women," Monnie marveled. "You see through all of us."

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Kay burst in, interrupting this colloquoy, Kay in a brown suit with a green baret set saucily on the side of her bright curls. How pretty she was! Prettier than anyone Monnie had seen since she's been away.

"You wretch!" Kay was exclaiming. "Barging in like this without letting us know!"

"I thought you liked surprises," Monnie avoided Kay's penetrating glance.

Kay's eyes flew to her mother's. "Has she heard!"

Monnie saw the quick frown and shake of the head her mother gave in return. Curiosity rose in a tide. "Heard what? What have you been keeping from me."

"It's nothing." Her mother spoke almost apologetically. "Nothing you ought to be greeted with on your arrival home at any rate."

"Bad news?" Monnie's heart began to beat fast.

"She might as well know," Kay informed her mother gravely. Then she turned to Monnie. "Dan Cardigan was hurt in a motor accident last night," she said. "He's in the hospital."

Monnie got to her feet a bit unsteadily. "I—there must be something I can do! Can I see him?"

"I don't think so," Kay said, slowly. "It's serious. Internal injuries—and they're afraid of concussion. This morning when I talked to someone in the office there was a report they might operate."

Monnie clenched her hands at her sides. "I've got to see him," she said slowly, painfully. "He wrote me—I got the letter in London, Mother, you may as well know it. Dan is the only one I have ever loved. I came home to marry him."

"Marry—?" Mrs. O'Dare flashed again that signal glance to Kay. "Tell her," she said quietly.

Kay looked away compassionately. "Dan and Sandra Lawrence were married by a justice of the peace last night," she said tonelessly. "Half an hour before the accident."

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THERE was no room in Monnie's heart just then for anything but the terrible, aching fear. Dan hurt—perhaps dying! Why, it wasn't possible! Only last week—seven days ago—she had received his letter. He had written that he loved her. He had said that and Monnie, believing him, had rushed half across the world to prove it. Now this! What was she to do? Where to turn?

Mrs. O'Dare and Kay stared at her with stricken faces. The younger girl, usually so nonchalant, so cool, was shaken.

"You won't go to him, Monnie?" Kay half-whispered. "You couldn't—now that—"

Monnie passed her hand across her eyes. What had someone said a minute ago? The world still rocked around her. Ah, yes, she knew. "Sandra and Dan were married by a justice of the peace last night," a voice had said. Was it true—could it have been? Nonsense! Ridiculous! Just one of the stupid lies people told sometimes.

She wouldn't faint, she told herself resolutely. You didn't do things like that—frighten people when there was no need. You were strong and brave as long as you could bear things. But she was in a sort of fog now. Things, voices, came to her only dimly. Kind eyes looked at her sorrowfully, compassionately. There was a new face in the room. Who was that? Oh, Charles. How good he was—how strong! She went to him slowly across the room. She clung to him. Somehow it seemed so right!

"Charles," she said faintly. "He's—he's—"

"I know," he soothed. "I know." Then, in the tone one might use to an ailing child, "It's all right." He repeated it quietly. "It's all right."

She answered Kay's last words, Charles holding her hand.

"No, I won't go to him." Monnie said brokenly. "Don't be afraid." Of a sudden her voice took on a note of harshness, strange to her. "Don't be afraid I'll do anything to get talked about. We'll all so terribly afraid of that, aren't we? As if it mattered when someone's dying. But I won't. My place isn't there. Hers is."

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There was a blackness in her mind now. It was, she imagined, what you felt when you were drowning. Only she wasn't drowning. She had Charles to cling to. He would save her from utter darkness and desolation. She felt he understood.

"Don't talk like that," Kay said, eyes wide with fright. "You know that isn't what we feel. We're just so worried about you—how you're taking it."

Monnie laughed, and the sound wasn't pleasant. "Sandra will be there," she said without stirring. "Sandra will hold his hand and smooth his pillow. Won't she?"

Kay shook her head. "She can't," she said faintly. "She's badly hurt, too."

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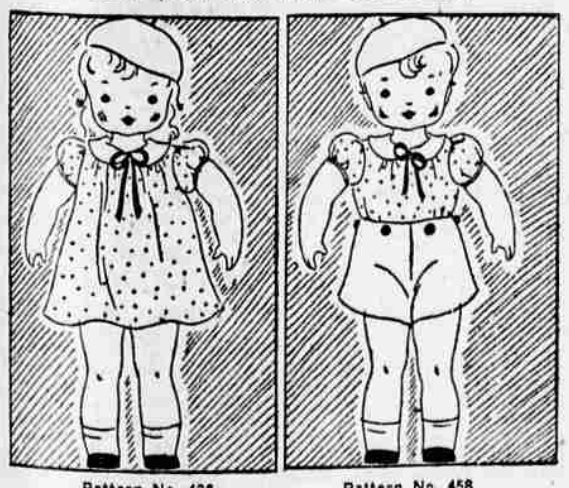

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