

DARLING FOOL

by MABEL McLELLON

CHAPTER LXIV

In an instant he was before her, dominating the small room, bigger than she remembered him, impressive in his big coat with the scent of damp wood and good Russian leather clinging to him.

"Well! Well!"

Monnie was laughing, finding she had nothing to say, a trifle shy with the great man. Was it possible she had been so casual with him in London? All that seemed ages ago and she herself at that time another girl. "But you look splendid!"

"Thank you." He made her feel small and childish.

He would not let Kay take his coat—nonsense. It could go right there on the hall tree. It was a wretched night. He had a car waiting. He was driving on to Cincinnati. He would take a plane the day following on his way west.

Monnie said shyly that she was sorry she couldn't invite him to stop with them. Without seeming to, his shrewd glance took in the little house. That was kind, he said, but he'd planned to go on. This must be the western hospitality he'd heard so much about.

Kay drifted away with a murmured excuse after a moment or two and Monnie heard the click of her mother's key in the lock. Mrs. O'Dare would slip upstairs to freshen her costume and brush her soft growing hair before presenting herself to the visitor.

They made small talk. Mackenzie seemed interested in everything. What was Monnie doing? Ah, that sounded good! Did she like her new work? And her brother—the older one? What about him? This little sister was a beauty, wasn't she?

Everyone thought so, Monnie agreed, kindling at his praise. Kay had thought of going on the stage, she added, but just now she seemed perfectly happy, working on the local newspaper. Insisted on contributing her share to the family income, too.

"She'd make a sensation in New York," Mackenzie said enthusiastically. "With the right gowns. And she should have her hair done by Antoine. She has a rare quality."

Monnie turned at the faint rustle in the doorway. "My mother," she introduced proudly. Mackenzie, springing to his feet, bowed low. One might, thought Monnie, her heart swelling, be ashamed of the scuffed chairs and threadbare carpet, but anyone in the world would be proud of a mother like that. Character was molded on the very bones of the fine face. The eyes were beautiful, although they had lost the sparkle of youth. "Mother wouldn't be one bit different, in satin," the girl reflected loyally, listening to the pleasant voice. "But I want her to have them just the same."

Soon they were alone together and the man turned toward her.

"I like them all," he told her swiftly. "They're great, your people. Just what one might expect."

"Thank you." She flushed at his instant admiration.

"Monnie, I haven't long to stop. I must settle this business quickly. Do you know what I've come for?"

That was a hard question to answer, in all simplicity, but her eyes were eloquent.

"Have you thought it over, dear? I hate to rush you but it seems to me I've been waiting a long time. What have you to say to me?"

She lifted her head. The words were trembled on the tip of her tongue but just then there was an in-

terruption in the form of a long peal at the bell. Sounds from the kitchen regions indicated Kay and the mother were busy with domestic duties and had not heard the sound.

"I'll go," Monnie said swiftly, somehow glad of the respite.

She hastened to the door, making a pretty picture in her swirling frock, her cheeks rosy, her eyes alight with excitement. To her amazement, Charles Eustace stood on the threshold.

"May I come in for a moment, Monnie?" He was looking very handsome. "I want to talk to you."

What could she say? What could she do? He had never been refused admittance at this hospitable door before. Monnie opened it wide and he followed her into the room where Mackenzie, lounging against the mantelpiece, examined some old photographs.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a guest," Charles' tone was stately, polite. But Monnie, having brought him thus far, had to go on. In a cool voice she introduced the men. "Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Eustace."

Mackenzie turned, recognition dawning in his face, his annoyance for the moment in abeyance.

"How do you do. But we've met before."

Charles acknowledged the sentence with an ironic bow.

"Whatever shall I do with them both?" the girl asked herself despairingly. "Everything is spoiled now. Charles hates me for having Arthur here—not that it matters! Tomorrow he'll know the truth!"

Charles stood, hands in pockets. His expression seemed fairly glowing. He had the air of a man determined, at all costs, to stand his ground, and outstay all comers. In spite of Monnie's vague puzzlement and the feeling of excitement in the air she was amused. She wanted desperately to laugh. Her mouth quirked at the corners.

Kay came in with a tray on which there were three glasses and almost dropped them. "Why, Charles!" she exclaimed. "Where did you come from? Through the window?"

He grinned at her, his old self for an instant. "No, they let me in. Why?"

"I don't know. Just didn't hear your soft step. Can I give you some of this grape juice? Mother's best."

They stood, chaffing each other and Mackenzie said in a low voice to Monnie, "I'd like to see you alone, May 1!"

She was confused. "I don't know how. Will you stay a bit and see?"

The party developed into a four-some. Kay, after a struggle with herself to keep down hysterical laughter, suggested bridge and Charles helped her set up the table.

"I really ought to be getting on," said the older man, glancing at his watch. He was too well-bred to show the measure and depth of his impatience but his eye sought Monnie questioningly ever and again. She was at her wit's end. Charles, forsaking his rather grim manner of earlier in the evening, now became all urbanity. Chattering smoothly with Mackenzie about people they had known and places abroad, he was his old, winning self, exerting himself to please.

In spite of this the tension grew. The little room was electric with it. (To Be Continued)

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