The ROMANTIC RUNAWAY

by KATHARINE HAVILAND-TAYLOR

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CHAPTER XLV

MARCIA left Pablito in a mood that was a mixture of relief and the utmost bitterness. All these years he had been suffering for a crime he had not committed. Suffering loneliness and hopelessness and the loss of the one girl in the world he loved. All these years—

Lottie came into the room. "What's the matter, honey boy?" she demanded carressingly.

"Nothing."

"You look it! Beau's gone—"

Pablito looked up quickly at that. "Decided he needed a change of air," Lottie added lightly.

"Did you listen to what we were saying?" he demanded. She answered with a nonchalant, easy, "Sure."

"I wasn't going to give Beau away," Pablito said, frowning.

"Oh, he knew that," she answered, "but that woman who was here might any time. See?"

"Yes, I see—"

He pulled himself up wearily and moved toward the doorway opening on the balcony. Everything in his life had come too late. If Marcia Treadway had told the truth a few years earlier nothing in the world could have kept him from marrying Estelle. Now—

"Let's go over and see what they're doin' on the house this afternoon," Lottie suggested.

"If you like," he agreed.

"Say, if you don't wanta go, just say so! Nobody's going to make you do it."

"I want to all right. I'm just a little tired, I guess."

"Do you love me, Pablo? Love me a little bit, uh?"

"I've asked you to marry me, Lottie."

Her face clouded.

"I know I'm not very demonstrative," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

"You ain't much good at pretendin'," she said harshly. But he thought he was a little better at pretending than she knew.

"Be a little patient with me, will you, Lottie?" he asked, not quite steadily.

But even her love for him could not teach her patience. Soon Lottie was crying and he was obliged to comfort her and pretend some more.

"You do love me, don't you?" she said, mopping her eyes and choking back the last of her sobs.

"Of course I do, Lottie," he said dully. "I'm a lucky chap and I know it."

"You'll never know how I love you, Pablo. Never!"

"You're awfully good to me, Lottie."

"Good? Kiss me, honey. Oh—not like that!"

What if he should drop his arms and say, "I can't go through with it, Lottie! I can't!" What would happen then? He had not known she would be so demanding for demonstrations of affection. He had not known that pretense could be so hard.

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Estelle wrote Pablito that evening. She had to send the letter by post because there was no chauffeur now to carry messages. She wrote:

"Dear Pablito: It is good to write your real name without fear. Marcia has told my father and me what she has told you, too. I am so glad for you. I have not for a long while been so glad about anything.

"I want to see you and wonder whether you will want to come to see me. It has been a long time since we have met but, remembering our hours together as I have so keenly since being here, I feel that—oh, I don't know. I can't express it.

"I hurt you horribly, I know. Perhaps if I had been stronger I would have seen some way to avoid doing that. But I want to tell you now that I love you as much as I can ever love anyone and I will marry you if you still want me to.—Estelle."

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Pablito re-read the note slowly, his eyes blurred by the dizziness that had swept over him as he read it the first time. Then the servant appeared at the top of the stairs and behind her Pablito saw—Norris Noyes!

For a moment Noyes paused; then he moved forward with a weak, groping "Pablito!"

Pablito clung to Noyes' hands. The two made the small meaningless comments people make when emotions are too great to be expressed by words. At length Pablito said, "I have never needed you so much as now—"

And even Noyes, in his humbleness, could believe that. Pablito was thin. His eyes were tired and his lips were set to that grim line which tells of a vast determination and an equally vast hopelessness.

"What's wrong?" the older man asked.

"It's nothing that can be changed," Pablito assured him. "I wouldn't even bother you about it but you know I've always told you everything—" For a moment he pressed the letter in his pocket, then abruptly his hand dropped. He had no right to press that letter nor feel a shaken and ecstatic warmth as he touched it. He must write Estelle and tell her he was engaged to be married. To write her that after she had told him she loved him as much as she could love anyone!

"A man named Billings sent a note to you," Noyes said, "but I forgot it. I left it on the bureau propped before the glass but I was so excited—"

"We'll get it when we get your things," Pablito said. He put an arm around Noyes' stooped shoulders and for a short moment forgot that things had a way of coming to him too late.

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Lottie was assembling her trousseau—gaudy frocks and fragile underthings of orchid, peach and sapphire chiffon. Collecting this finery, she came as close to happiness as she had been since Pablito had asked her to marry him. Sometimes in the nights Lottie woke with tears on her cheeks. Pablito was not happy, she knew. Well, she vowed in her bravest mood, she'd make him so. But at other times she realized she did not know how to make him happy.

Noyes pitied he girl deeply but was distracted at the thought of her becoming Pablito's wife.

He said one morning after Lottie had lost her temper and thrown a cup of tea at the fast disappearing servant, "Pablito, you can't marry that girl!"

"But I'm going to," Pablito said grimly. "I owe her a lot," he added more gently, "and she cares for me. Besides, I've already asked her. The thing's done."

"Things can be undone."

There was no answer to that. Presently Noyes went on. "I've heard that you cared for Jim Field's daughter."

"I still do," Pablito let himself say.

"Then you're not being fair to her—to Lottie."

"I'm sorry," Palito shook his head. "I can't talk about it. Besides, it's all settled."

(To Be Continued)

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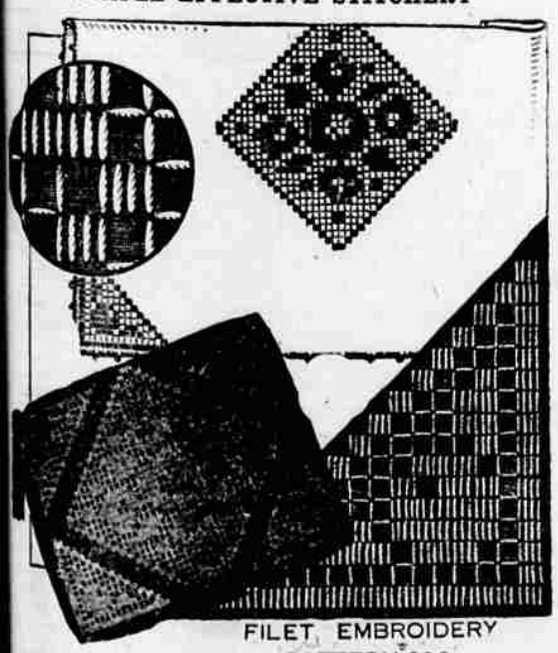

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