

Lovable

CHAPTER XII

she sobbed. "If you could only see how it happened! I wasn't to blame, and I could explain if you would only try to understand, Peter."

He stood up, looking down at her. He said tensely, "You can't explain anything. We're through."

Valeria slipped the ring that looked like a drop of white fire from her finger. As Peter made no move to take it, she laid it on the table. She was trembling. "You're breaking with me."

"I'd have to be able to trust my wife."

Valeria's voice rose shrilly. "What you want is an angel for a wife. All right, go out and see if you can find her."

Her bitter taunt rang in his ears as he left the house. He was glad to get away, to feel the cold, clean air whip against him. Christmas! Merry Christmas! A merry, merry Christmas!

Tony and Ann had dined. They had gone to a musical comedy, but the feeling of depression had not lifted. The big box with its gay wrappings was in Tony's car, still unopened. Tony had looked embarrassed when Sarah had walked out of the bedroom with it, saying, "Ann, after all your trouble you've forgotten to give Tony his Christmas present."

But Tony did not dive down into his pocket after Sarah had left, saying, "And here's your present, Ann."

Ann decided that he was waiting for the constraint between them to lift. But, try as she would, she could not be natural. Even the thought of the small, twinkling ring which was probably in his pocket right now did not bring happiness.

It was while they were driving home, darkness gathering about them, that Tony said, "I've a little something for you at my place, Ann. I'll drop by and pick it up."

He parked the car in front and stepped out. Ann said, on impulse, "It's cold out here. Mind if I come in with you?"

Tony said slowly, "Why, of course not."

Ann had never been inside Tony's apartment, though she had waited outside for him many times while he went in for a quick change. He lived in a small apartment building, ate out, and shared the services of a maid.

He opened the door and they stepped into the gloomy, box-like living room. Fumbling for the switch at the door, he said, "Not much to see. Just a lot of furniture thrown together."

The light flashed on, revealing a scene of wild disorder. Chairs in every position, cigarette trays filled with ashes, cigar stubs on the floor, a table covered with glasses. And bottles, bottles, everywhere.

The light fell upon a couch in the corner. Flung carelessly there, where Tony's nice new robe should have been, was a bright green negligee, glowing with lace.

There was no alibi away that negligee. And over in one chair, a very large and expensive box of candy, tied with a huge red ribbon—a box without seals or holiday wrappings.

Ann scarcely heard Tony's furious, "Damn that girl!"

Even in that moment of bewilderment it was perfectly clear that he was not talking of his feminine visitor but of the maid who had failed to clean the room.

Ann heard herself saying clearly, "Please don't say anything at all to me. I couldn't possibly bear it. And nothing you would say could make any difference."

Tony had stared at her, had seen something in Ann's eyes that had sobered him completely and thoroughly. He said harshly, "The trouble with you, Ann, is that you have a monogamous mind."

The words did not register. Ann was walking out of Tony's place, closing the door. She was walking quickly, down through the snow.

Putting distance between her and something that was hateful and burning.

How far she walked, she did not know. A long way, she was sure, because her hands and feet were chilled, and she was in the center of town. In the center of all the lights and glitter.

(To Be Continued)

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