

Lovable

CHAPTER XXXII

"Imagine!" He came over to her, lifted her hand and slipped a ring on her slender finger. Ann stared down at the magnificent stone and then raised her eyes to his. There were tears in her eyes.

Peter said, moved, "You funny kid. You knew I planned to give you a ring, didn't you?"

"It's the most beautiful ring I ever saw in my life." But there was no happiness in Ann's voice. Suddenly she turned away and went into her room.

Ann was thinking, "He keeps loading me down with gorgeous things but he doesn't love me. He's fond of me and this is his way of showing it. But he doesn't love me."

She looked down at the glowing stone. Yes, it was the most beautiful ring she had ever seen. But it didn't mean anything. Only that Peter was richly rich and generous.

He waited but she did not return for a long time. When she did, her face looked pale. Then he remembered that Ann had not explained why she had stayed out so late, long past the usual dinner hour. He hated the ugly path his thoughts were traveling.

Ann was not the kind to meet men—to meet a man she loved.

He couldn't bear doubting Ann. "Did you go to Sarah's," he asked as she set down near him.

"No."

Peter knew that he might continue this catechism indefinitely, and the answer would be the same. He felt cheapened by questioning Ann at all. She probably thought he had no right to ask her where she had been. And probably he hadn't.

"How is the plan to increase wages at the factory working out?" Ann asked.

"It hasn't worked out yet. But it's going to," Peter answered. "Ann, I want grandfather to take the men into the business on a profit-sharing system with an increase in profits based on length of service. When a man gives all his time and effort to a job he's entitled to be building some security for himself and family, isn't it?"

Ann agreed. "Are you talking socialism, Peter?"

"I'm talking common sense and common humanity. I hope I can make grandfather see it."

"What does he say?"

"He calls me a radical. Says I'm as bad as Eric. He says college did nothing for me but give me a muddled philosophy and he's afraid to leave me his money for fear I'll give it all away."

Peter grinned.

"I think it would be nice to give money away," Ann said. "I'd love being a lady bountiful—not the basket kind but doing something really concrete and constructive to help people."

Peter caught her hands in his and squeezed them hard. "I knew you'd feel that way."

And then the ugly thought leaped into his mind. He had asked Ann whether she'd seen Tony this afternoon would he answer her?

"We've an invitation for the week-end," Peter said to Ann next morning.

"Where?"

"The Merriweathers. They have summer place in the Connecticut hills. Boating, swimming, riding. It's always great sport to go there."

Ann had a vision of boating, swimming and riding with Peter. "Are you going?" she asked.

"I told Merle I'd ask about it. I'd be thrilled to death."

"I thought you would. It's time you were having a little fun."

"You are going, too?"

"I wouldn't miss," Peter sounded enthusiastic.

Ann felt herself blushing. Peter was being sweet. During the last few weeks he had left nothing undone to make her happy. Launching together, dining at night, dancing, shows.

"Millie and Jerry and some of our bunch are going. There'll be eight or ten couples in all."

Ann wondered if Valeria would be "the bunch." She didn't ask Peter. "When do we start?"

"The others will leave tomorrow morning about 10. I'll go down to the office for a while and then come back for you. Evans will get my bags ready."

Ann was dressed before 10 next morning. She sat down with a magazine in the living room to wait for Peter. The phone rang. Carol's voice, nervous and troubled, came over the wire: "Ann will you come? Larry's ill. I'm frightened."

"Have you had a doctor?"

"He's on the way. You'll come?"

"Right away."

Twenty minutes later Ann was mounting the stairs and hurrying to Carol's room.

"Ann, you angel!" Carol greeted her. "I've been worried to death. The doctor came right after I called you. He said Larry has had a hard chill and would be all right in a week or so. His fever is going down now."

"Keep him in bed and he'll be all right," Ann said.

"That's the trouble. He says he can't afford to be sick. He's found a temporary place—"

"You can't afford to get up," Ann said. "Be sensible, Larry. And don't tell me not to do what I am going to do. Somebody has to take care of you children until you stop being foolish and go home."

"Well, all right. I'll accept it. Ann, and feel indebted to you forever. Now Larry can be perfectly happy over it."

They all laughed together.

"I'll be up in a week," Larry declared. "I could have worked off this fever but that stubborn, hard-headed, spoiled, determined—"

"Go right ahead and call me names," Carol was sitting on the bed, one hand rumpiling his blond hair. "If you think I'm going to run any risk with my perfectly brand-new and very handsome husband!"

Ann told them about the week-end trip. "I hate terribly to go away with Larry ill."

"He'll be all right now. If he should get really ill, I'll have to call mother, of course. But I hate to while we're in such a jam. Please, Ann, don't tell Peter yet. You won't?"

"No."

If she rushed back Ann might get home before Peter arrived. She might be lucky. Something could have detained him.

But Peter was waiting when she came in—more than an hour late. He looked sober.

"The directors have called a meeting for tonight. I talked to Millie and she waited for you. I'll be out tomorrow or Sunday, anyway." His voice sounded doubtful.

"But Peter—"

"I'll try to make it Saturday—tomorrow," Peter said. "I'll run along now. Hope you'll have a good time, Ann."

All the joy had gone out of the week-end plans for Ann.

On Sunday Peter arrived at the Merriweathers. He had tried sticking it out in town, but had given it up. It was simply unendurable, going over the same ground, deciding one moment Ann was seeing Tony and deciding the next that she was incapable of deceit. If she wanted to see Tony, she would tell him so. Some women had clandestine affairs. But not Ann.

There must be some explanation, a legitimate one, behind her sudden flights from home. Plunged in gloom, raging against the silence that met his questioning, he packed and drove to the Merriweathers' country place.

Merle came to meet him. "Peter! you did come. We had about given you up."

"What could have lured you from the city?" Millie mocked, from the depths of a brightly cushioned chair. "Hello, everybody. Where's Ann?"

Everyone laughed. Merle said, "Peter, you're certainly the possessive husband. No, I take that back. Hands don't ask where their wives are these days. They want to know where somebody else's wife is."

(To Be Continued)

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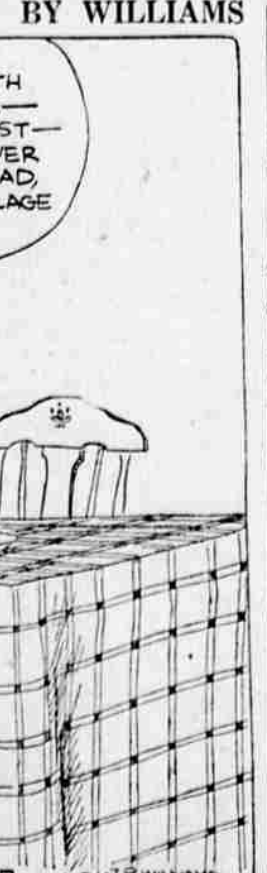
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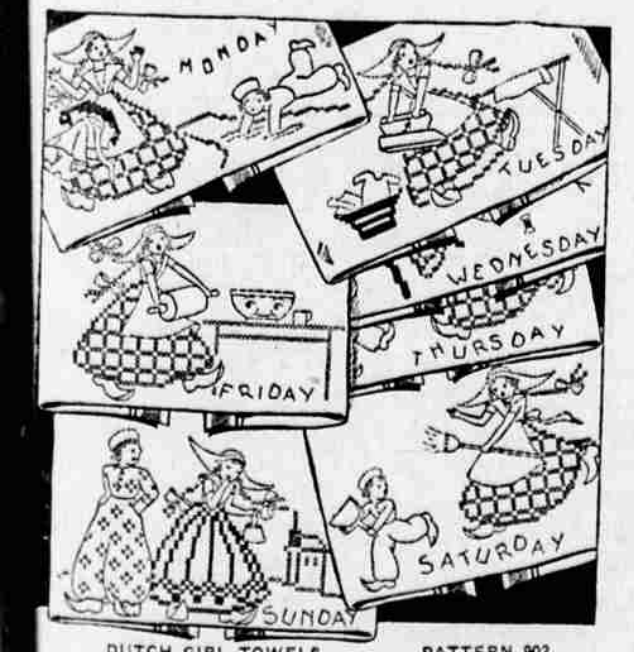
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