Summer Sweethearts

By Mabel McElliott

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CHAPTER XXXVI

"YOU must help me," she said, her voice taking on its cooing note. "I must search the hospitals—the morgues—"

"My dear young woman!" shuddered Mr. Downrigg. "Surely you don't mean—"

She was firm, but to show him how little she was affected by the thought of Michael injured or dead she wept a little, quite prettily and convincingly.

"We must," she said. "We dare not otherwise. After all," she reminded him with a liquid glance of those dark, blue eyes, "I'm his promised wife, you know."

She could see herself telling the story to newspaper reporters. Dead or alive, Michael should not escape her.

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Michael opened his eyes and stared at him. There was a square of light that marked the window. He closed his eyes again because that light hurt him and he felt sore all over—as if he had been bruised in a fall.

Yesterday . . . . yesterday . . . . There was something he wanted to remember. And could not. So he closed his eyes and lay still. Presently the rustle of crisp, starched skirts rustling close to his ears, and he opened his eyes again, just a little. There was a nurse. She had a cool, wide face with twinkling eyes. She had a thermometer in her hand and she shook it a little, looking down at him.

"Well, we're quite a lot better today, aren't we?" she said.

Michael would have frowned if frowning, like the square of light, had not hurt him. Nurses always talked this way, as if the patient were a child. Was he better? He didn't know. He isn't sure, even, that he had been really ill. It was too much trouble to be ill.

The nurse wrote something down on a chart that hung on the foot of the bed; Michael could see that much, by of the mere crack he had opened his shuttered lids. Then she went away and came back again with a cooling draught which she held to his lips.

"Oh, good!" The words came drowsily, almost involuntarily and he could feel a very vibration of triumph go through the nurse's body as she kept her professional fingers on his wrist. "Well, now, isn't that splendid! He took his medicine, does he? Well, if he is very good he shall see somebody for a bit, and that will make him better still."

Michael hadn't the remotest idea what she was talking about, and he didn't care in the least. It was far too much trouble to ask.

He drowsed again and the pain was gone. There was somebody—a girl in a dark frock—at his bedside when he awoned. He'd known her well before he had been taken sick, but just now he couldn't quite remember her name. She would come to him after a little. . . . She kissed him and wept a little and this tired Michael. The nurse took her away, making soothing noises. Funny that he slept for a long time and when he woke again there was a patter of rain against the windows and the room was cooler. It was, the nurse told him brightly, another day. Funny the way these days ran into one another, without movement or end. . . . .

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After a procession of such meaningless days, punctuated only by trays and pills and visits from a tall, melancholy doctor with a gentle voice, and white-coated internes who poked and prodded Michael and asked him questions, he was able to sit up. The dark girl (her name was Sally Moon, it seemed) came often now. And there was an Englishman named Downrigg who made them move Michael from the ward to a private room. Michael didn't quite understand why it mattered or why Mr. Downrigg cared, but there it was. He was singularly apathetic about the whole business. The nurse said he was a good patient. That meant he let everyone else do as he or she pleased, and kept silent.

One day Downrigg came and they had a long talk. Michael, dressed for the first time in his street clothes, was sitting in a comfortable chair out in the pavilion. Downrigg talked a lot about the estate (what estate? Michael wanted to ask but didn't bother) and said there was a good deal of money tied up, although not, of course, as much as one would like. Death duties and so on, he had said portentiously. And Michael had wondered again idly what it was all about.

"You'll be sailing, I suppose, as soon as you are well," Downrigg had said. "And after you're married."

After he was married. The phrase, for an instant, stirred some memory in Michael, but it passed. It had been like a breeze passing over a wheat field, bending the stalks only for a moment. After he was married—well, men married every day. This Sally-girl was solicitious. She kissed him when she came and went. It wasn't unpleasant. He ought to remember more about her, though. And couldn't.

Downrigg went on. He was leaving for England on the morrow, he said. They could find him in London. He left Michael his card. On this side, he said, the affairs were in the hands of Whitbread & Forrest in Wall street. He wrote the address down. Michael could draw on them.

"That's nice," Michael said, looking down at his oddly thin, oddly helpless hands. Once they had been brown.

It was easier after that because he was stronger. Only there was a sort of cloudiness at the back of his brain—not wholly disagreeable, but rather worrying. If that cloudiness would lift, Michael felt, he could remember a great deal. He didn't tell the doctors this. He had never been ill in his life before and, for all he knew, this dizziness, this feeling of not being quite sure of oneself might be a part of convalescence.

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He satisfied Sally by being gentle and subdued and entirely tractable. He no longer frowned and urged delay when she spoke of their coming marriage, but let her have things her way.

There was something familiar about the streets through which Sally and her father presently drove him. They expected him to smile in recognition, and so he did, because he didn't like to disappoint them. They had been so kind. And when they drew up at a shabby house under pin oak trees out on a country road he felt a flash of something that was almost like pain. A young colored boy came out and shook his hand and said he was glad to see him back. Michael was very polite all through this. When he went inside he found that, sure enough, the room with the narrow bed and the oaken chest of drawers meant something to him. He had slept in this room—long ago.

He went to the bureau almost as a sleepwalker might have gone, and opened a top drawer and looked into it. There were only a few neat, folded handkerchiefs and some worn gloves. What was it he had expected to find?

Sally cooed over him after he came out on to the veranda once more. Was he sure he'd be all right? They didn't like leaving him here. He ought to come back to their house with them, only people talked so. And, after all, the wedding was to be next week. Then she could take care of him for always—her great big, naughty boy who had been so very ill!

Michael was glad when she'd gone away. The colored boy whose name, Michael had learned, was Tips, came out and said that his father had had to go to Hartford because somebody in the family was sick. He'd be back next Thursday. Michael said, not caring at all but very politely, that he was sure everything would be all right.

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