

The Leading Lady

By GERALDINE BONNER

WNU Service

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STORY FROM THE START

While despondent over the enforced hiding of her fiance, Jim Dallas, slayer in self-defense of Homer Parkinson, member of an influential family, Sybil Saunders, popular actress, is engaged to play Viola in a charity performance of "Twelfth Night" on Gull Island, on the Maine coast. After the play Hugh Bassett, Anne Tracy's fiance, tells Joe he has heard he is spying on Sybil to learn the whereabouts of Jim Dallas and earn the reward offered by the Parkinson family. The boy denies it.

CHAPTER II—Continued

He stopped. Bassett's eye was steady on him in a cold command he knew. There was the same cold quality in the director's voice:

"If the position Sybil's in has made her suspicious, that's all right. I'd like to believe it was the case. But if any of us—supposedly her friends—had inserted themselves in here to carry on police surveillance, using me to get them in—well, I'd not think that all right."

Joe leaned over the banister. His control was shaken, his voice hoarsely urgent:

"You got to be fair, Bassett, and because you're sorry for her is no reason to set her word over mine. It's not true. Don't you believe me?"

Bassett did not answer for a moment. He wanted to believe and he doubted; he thought of Joe's desire to come, of the reward:

"I guess you know, Joe, you can trust me to be fair, but I'm not going to commit myself till I know. It won't be hard to do that. I can find out when I get back to New York. And take this from me—if what Sybil says is true I'm done with you. No more help from me, no more work in any company I manage. And I fancy the whole theatrical profession will feel the same way." He drew back from the stair-foot. The disagreeable interview was over. "There's no good talking any more about it. Accusations and denials don't get us anywhere. We'll let it rest till I've made my inquiries. I'll say good-by now and hope you'll have a good time in the woods."

He turned and walked up the hall to his room in the garden front next the Stokes'. Joe gathered his luggage and went the opposite way, down the hall and into the big central apartment. At the entrance door he set down his luggage and as he bent over it a whispered stream of curses flowed from his lips. He cursed Bassett and his luck, but Sybil with a savage variety of epithet and choice of misfortune, for she had undone him. Straightening up, he looked blankly about—his inner turmoil was such he hardly knew where he was—and he retraced his steps, seeking the seclusion of his room, went up the stairs in noiseless vaulting strides like a frightened spider climbing to its web.

CHAPTER III

Anne had taken off her costume and slipped into a negligee to do her packing comfortably, and then decided she had better bid good-by to Joe first. She wanted to tell him her great secret, see an answering joy leap into his face, for he thought more of Bassett than anybody, and he'd be so surprised to hear that Anne, her charms held at a low valuation, had won such a prize.

She passed the long line of closed doors, voices coming from behind Mrs. Cornell's, and reaching Joe's knocked. A "come in," uninvitingly loud and harsh, answered her and she entered. Joe was sitting in a low armchair, bent forward, his hands holding a cane with which he was tapping the floor. He looked up to see who it was; then, without greeting or comment, drooped his head and went on lightly striking the cane on the carpet as if he were hammering in a nail and it required all his attention, then raised his head and looked at her—what have you come here for? the look said.

It was not a reception to encourage confidences and she stood uncomfortably regarding him, trying to find something to say that would dispel his somber ill humor.

"You're all ready? Where's your luggage?"

"Down by the door. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"I don't want to know, I was thinking of you. You're always late, and

it's different here with only one way to get ashore and Gabriel never willing to wait."

He made no answer, continuing his play with the cane. She knew that something was wrong and sat down on the arm of a chair, uneasy, wondering what it was:

"I'm glad you've managed this holiday. And it's jolly having Tommy Travers, he's such a sport. You'll meet him tonight at Bangor. At the Algonquin inn—wasn't that the name of it?"

"Um."

"I want to be sure, because if any important mail should come for you I could send it there to meet you on your way back. Algonquin inn—I'll remember that. Then off tomorrow morning—it'll be lovely in the woods now."

"Any place would be lovely after this beastly hole."

"Beastly hole! I thought you liked it!"

"Did you? Take another guess."

"You expected to like it. You wanted to come."

He made no answer, but slanting his body sidewise with an air of ostentatious endurance, took out his watch and looked at it. She ignored the hint—you couldn't be sensitive with Joe—and leaning toward him asked:

"What's the matter, Joe?"

"Matter—with what?"

"You! Has anything happened?"

"Oh, no, nothing's happened." His words were mincingly soft. "What could happen with such a charming lot of people and Miss Saunders playing the star role in the performance and out?"

It was Sybil then—he'd been working himself into a bad temper over



"But I Got Teeth—I Can Bite."

her treatment of him. Anne had thought it odd he had not mentioned it before:

"You're angry with Sybil, and I don't think she has been very nice to you. I've noticed it, especially the last three days and this afternoon when we were sitting out there on the rock I tried to make her tell me why."

He raised his head; the profile sharply defined against the window showed a working muscle in the cheek: "And did she tell you?"

"No, she didn't seem to want to talk about it. She changed the subject. There's no use getting annoyed about it, because I don't think she has any reason. You have to make excuses for her. She's gone through this awful experience and her nerves are all wracked to pieces. You have to be patient and take her as a sort of afflicted person—"

He dashed the cane down and jumped to his feet in a volcanic explosion of rage:

"I don't take her that way. I take her for what she is, a d-d lying hypocrite."

"Joe!" She was amazed, not so much at the words as at the suddenness of the outburst and the contorted passion of his face.

"She thinks she can treat me any way she wants and get away with it. Well, she'll find her mistake, she's taken the wrong turning this time. She takes me for a yellow dog she can kick whenever she feels like it. But I got teeth—I can bite. Patient—be patient—G-d, I'd like to wring her neck, the d-d—"

He used an epithet that brought

Anne to her feet, breathing battle: "Don't dare to say that of my friend, Joe Tracy."

He stood in front of her, hump-shouldered, with outthrust jaw, brows drawn low over eyes gleaming like a cat's. She had never seen him look like that; he seemed a stranger, a horrible stranger, and she drew away, aghast at the revelation of a being so sinisterly unfamiliar. Her look brought him back to self-control. He jerked his head up, ran a hand over his hair, and turned away to the window. Standing there he said:

"Well, I take that back. I didn't mean to say it. But she's made me mad; I think she'd make anybody."

The tone, surly still, had a placating quality; it was as near an apology as Joe could ever come. She felt immeasurably relieved, for he had frightened her. She accepted his amends without comment, but she could not resist a sisterly admonition: "If you'd only stop getting mad over small things you'd find life so much easier."

He laughed:

"Good advice from little sister! It doesn't cost anything and it's the correct ingenue pose."

He turned from the window smiling, Joe at his most amiable. If he had met her this way she would have poured out her secret. But her high mood had fallen and besides he wanted her to go—he said he had a letter to write yet. Lounging toward her he put his hands on her shoulders, gave her a light kiss on the cheek and pushed her toward the door.

On her way back along the gallery she recalled his face in that moment of rage with troubled question. She wondered if there was more disturbing him than she knew—it was an extraordinary exhibition of anger for such a cause. She heaved a sigh of relief at the thought that he was going. In his present mood there was no knowing what clashes there might be, and it was the last evening, and there would be a full moon, and she and Bassett would walk like lovers under its magic light.

When her door had closed, the gallery and living room became as quiet as though the house were unoccupied. Sybil, approaching it, heard no sound of voices, a fact that reassured her, for the long day had tired her and she had no mind for talk. She was coming in by the balcony when she saw Flora Stokes sitting there reading and deflected her course toward the path that skirted the building's front. If Flora noticed her she made no sign, her eyes glued to her book, and Sybil, stepping softly, for she dreaded the woman's resentful glances, passed along to the entrance of the living room. The place was deserted and she stopped on the threshold for a last look at the sky's fading splendors.

Across the depths of the room the door into the hall opened, but so gently that she did not hear it. Stokes made this noiseless entrance in the hope that she might be there, and now, seeing his hope fulfilled, closed the door as carefully, standing against it watching her.

Seeing that she did not turn he pronounced her name. At that she wheeled, lightning-quick, and came forward from beneath the deep jut of the gallery assuming an unconcerned manner as she could.

"Lovely evening," she said as she advanced. "It's been hard to come in."

"Evidently from the length of time you stayed out there. I've been waiting for you."

It was not a propitious beginning, especially as he still stood against the door as if intending to bar her exit.

"I'm going upstairs to dress now."

"There's plenty of time. You can give me a few minutes. I've something I want to say to you."

"Oh, Aleck!" She stopped with an air of weary expostulation. "Don't say anything more. Don't begin that dreadful subject. I'm sick of it, I loathe it and can't you see it isn't any use?"

He went on as if he hadn't heard her:

"I've been trying for days, ever since I came here. And you keep avoiding me, always having some one with you. Now we'll be going tomorrow, we may not have another chance, and I must see you and tell you"—he stopped and looked at the gallery.

"Did I hear a step up there?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Genius begins great work; labor alone finishes them.—Joubert.

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