

as if nothing had ever happened. She helped with the preparations for Paul's departure for New York, with energy and interest. Austin had decided to go by way of Boston and they were therefore leaving on the morning train instead of the midnight. And when Paul came downstairs ready to start, he found Mary, and not Seth, waiting for him in the little old sleigh, to take him to the station.

She had, as Violet often remarked, "no style to her," and this morning she had even less than usual. It was bitterly cold, and she had on an old fur coat of her mother's, worn and shabby and out-of-date, a knitted hood of red wool, and red wool mittens. But Paul thought he had never seen her look half so lovely. She had seemed, since Christmas, so much less tired than for a long time, so much like his old playmate, his old sweet-heart.

Mary drove, and they rode along, talking of trivial things, laughing often, until they had almost reached the village. Then Paul put his arm around her and laid his hand over hers.

"You promised me," he said softly.

Mary turned her face to his exactly as she might have done ten years before. Paul had meant above everything else, that this embrace should be gentle, reverent even, and he did not for one minute forget this. But he had not reckoned on its proving so utterly impossible to keep all traces of the passion that was surging through him from his lips, and when he felt the cold, soft cheek growing suddenly warm beneath them, involuntarily he sought her mouth. Instead of drawing away from him, as he instantly feared she might do, she returned his kiss. For one heavenly moment they clung to each other. Then he bent over and kissed the little red mittens holding the reins.

"You dear girl," he murmured. "My own dear Mary—" and suddenly seeing tears in her eyes, he exclaimed, "I didn't hurt you, did I, darling? I wouldn't have, for the world!"

"No—Oh, no!"

"What is it then, sweetheart?"

"Hush! You mustn't call me that," she whispered. "I didn't realize, when I promised, that you wanted that kind of a kiss. I thought it was just for a proof that we were friends again—for always."

"We are friends again for always. And that's all I did expect. But of course this was the kind I wanted, even if—"

"It wasn't fair."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, on my word of honor. But you kissed back!" he ended exultantly.

"I know I did. That's what wasn't fair. I—couldn't seem to help it. You were so—so—you meant it so!"

"I'm glad you see that now," he said quietly. But his heart was singing.

New York, to Paul, was not the glittering wonder that it is to most boys, seeing it at his age for the first time. Nothing thrilled him at all. The vivid memory of the touch of Mary's lips, the thrill of that frosty kiss, still obliterated every other emotion. He finally went to the department store where he knew Rosalie King worked and sought her out. She was not very cordial to him. Girls, Paul reflected, had inconvenient long memories for a fellow's shortcomings. But when he gave voice to his loneliness and depression, she warmed to him at once. Paul was by no means the only person whom Sylvia had sized up correctly.

Business was a little dull that morning. Paul leaned over the counter and told his story, with the conspicuous omission of some of the most important parts. He told enough, however, for Rosalie to guess a good deal more and what she guessed moved her not a little. When he finished, she needed to repowder her nose.

"Why don't you pick out something swell to take home to her?" she asked. "She likes blue, don't she? I got a bracelet here, with sapphires in it that's classy down to the ground."

Paul bought the bracelet, but he reflected. The houses at Lady Blanche farm, like most of those in Hamstead during the last decade, had been equipped with bathrooms and furnaces and when at the time of Blanche's wedding, Violet had put electric lights in hers, Seth and Jane had done the same. But they had no set-tubs, no electrical labor-saving de-



He Told Enough, However, for Rosalie to Guess a Good Deal More.

vices, no elaborate short-cuts to comfort and leisure. Paul began to wonder if he would not have done better to buy an electric washing machine and a vacuum cleaner than a sapphire bracelet. He asked Rosalie what she thought.

"Don't you get her both?"

"I'm afraid not, just now," he said regretfully.

The next day Austin sailed, and Paul was free to go home again.

It was late in the evening when, after a long, cold journey, he reached the Hamstead station. Seth was waiting for him in the sleigh, and they were soon jingling along through heavy snow down the road to Lady Blanche farm.

How still it was, how cold and white! How clean and open and friendly! Paul wondered that he had ever, for one single instant, imagined that he would prefer to live in a city, in that dreadful strangeness, that hurry and dirt and noise! Not that seeing New York hadn't been a wonderful experience, of course. But it was much more wonderful getting home after it, and it was going to be most wonderful of all telling Mary what he had seen, what he had felt, what he had divined—watching the light in the steady gray eyes, the expression on the changing mouth. And perhaps now—of course it wouldn't do to force the issue, even now, but perhaps—

"Is it too late to see Mary tonight?" he asked suddenly, feeling in his pocket to see if the sapphire bracelet was surely safe.

"Geddap, King," said Seth, addressing the wholly unregal creature that was taking them on their way. "What ails you, Paul, ain't you ben listenin' to what I ben sayin' to you these last five minutes?"

"No," said Paul breathlessly. "I—was thinking. She—she isn't sick, is she?"

"Well," said Seth slowly, "I guess she's ben sick—ain't, anyway—for some time, longer'n we realized. She's worked real hard ever since her mother died. Mary ain't one to shirk, of course, and not ben' experienced, it made it harder for her. Then she was considerable upset over that trouble you and she had in the summer. And she took Sylvia's death a good deal to heart. Mary don't say much, and I never saw her cry or git 'nervous' like your ma. But you remember she fainted dead away one time just after Algy begun to get better—sorter dropped in her tracks? She seemed to perk up again 'round Christmas, but danged if she didn't keel right over again the day after you left for New York. Now she's gone."

"Gone!" echoed Paul, an icy terror clutching at his heart. "You mean she's dead?"

"No, she ain't dead! Land, Paul, you must be gettin' nervous yourself. Geddap, King. She's gone to Boston, to visit that friend of hers, Hannah Adams, that's been teasin' her to come for so long. Moses and Algy and I hev moved over to Jane's to stay until she gets back. I kinder think that's what we oughter hev done in the first place, after Laura died, until Mary had finished her schoolin' and got her growth and strength. Jane says she don't see how Mary ever done so much work. We've had to get in Myra's niece from out back, to help her, and send the wash up to the steam laundry in Wallacetown besides, and buy bread once or twice, and still she's ben on the jump every minute. I guess Mary put a good deal of vitality into her job. Well, I give her Laura's money before she went, without any strings tied to it. It ain't much, but it's somethin'."

"Do you think," asked Paul, choking a little, "that there was any other reason, that anything happened just before I left, that made Mary want to go away—besides just because she was tired?" and as he asked the question, the boy seemed to feel her face pressed against his, the ecstasy of that swift, passionate kiss that she returned, and to see the sudden tears in her eyes afterwards.

Seth considered this question carefully before he answered it. "Well," he said at length, "women's queer. I don't pretend to understand 'em. But Mary thought a lot of you, and you jilted her. That's the plain English of it, ain't it? I guess it hurt her a good deal, and it was a long while, as I don't need to tell you, before she could bring herself to speak to you again. But since that night that Algy took sick, and you helped her out so good, she gradually got to be friends with you again. She was real grateful to you, and I guess she still likes you some, in spite of everything. Mary's like that. She don't change easy. And she could see that you was tryin' to do better. I want to give you credit for that myself, Paul. Mary ain't barbarin' what you done against you any more, but she ain't forgot that you done it, and she ain't certain you wouldn't do it again. . . . Wal, of course I don't want to pry, and I ain't askin' you no questions. . . ."

"I—I—had begun to hope that some time—"

"Then," said Seth decidedly, "you're a bigger fool'n even I took you for, and that's sayin' a good deal. Mary made a mistake to let you get her easy before and to let you treat her neglectful after you did get her. She wouldn't make a mistake like that again, even if she wanted you, and I don't believe she does. Anyway, she don't trust you, and I'm dummed if I blame her. I look to see her be gone from here some time. And that ain't all."

Paul waited, his heart sinking lower than ever.

"I got a letter from Mr. Hamlin, the architect," said Seth, "that was a considerable surprise to me. He says he asked Mary to marry him three years ago, when her mother died. And she turned him down because she thought Moses and Algy and me needed her, and because she was comin' home—to you. It shows she didn't have as much sense as she might hev, or she never would hev refused a man like

that to stick to a boy like you. But I hope she's acquired a little sense. Anyway, he says he's glad to understand that conditions hev changed somewhat now and he wanted I should give my consent to try his luck again. Consent! Great Godfrey! I writ by return mail! Geddap, King!"

Late that night, when everyone else had gone to bed, Paul went outdoors and stood for a long time, looking towards the unlighted windows of the house across the road. Adam, facing the angel with the flaming sword which barred the gate into Eden, could have felt no surer that he had lost Paradise through his own wrongdoing than did this humbled and heartsick boy.

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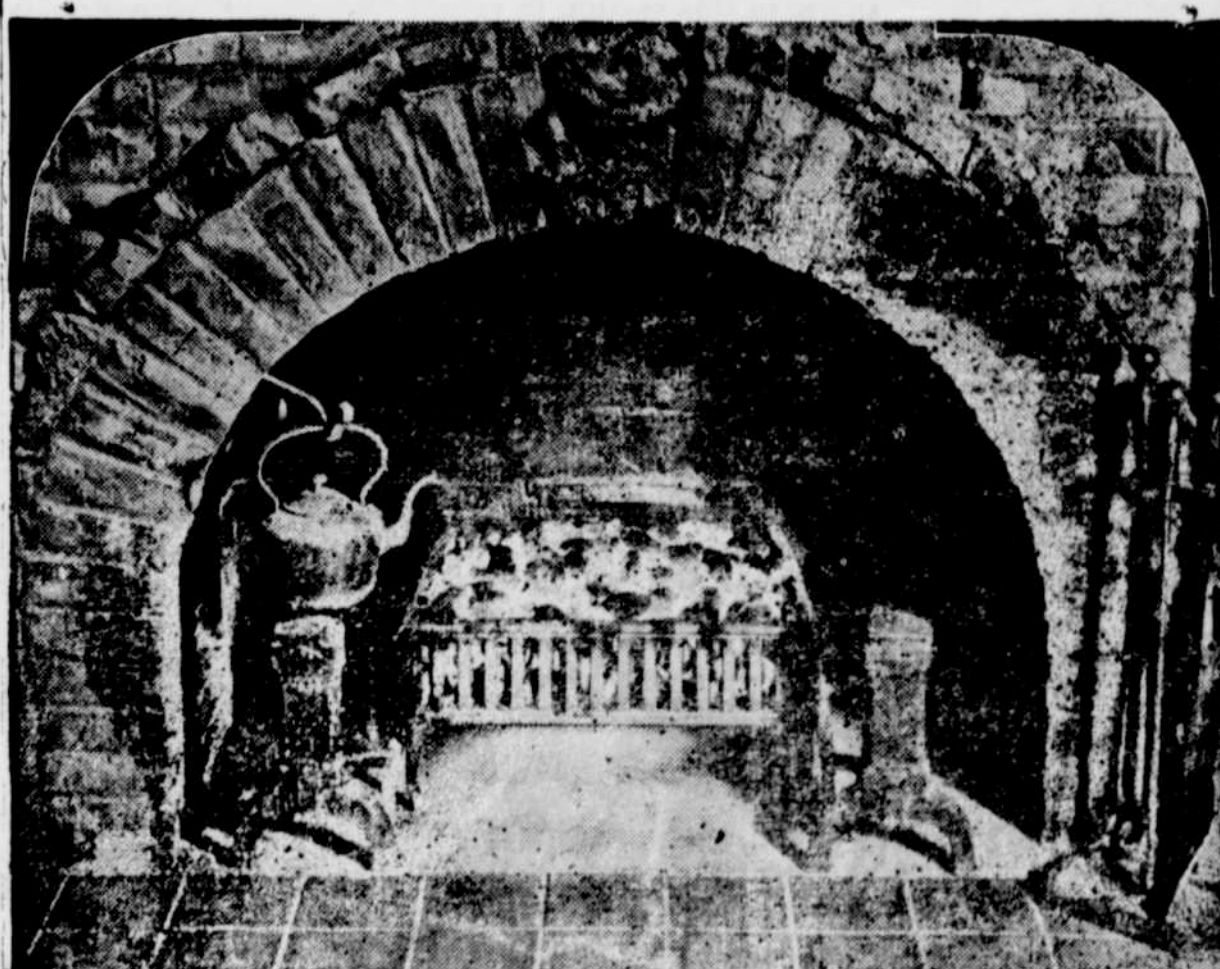
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