



Doris smiled fondly at herself in the mirror, then the smile froze.

This Fair Child of Mine...

by Betty Francis

ABRUPTLY, THE APRIL SUN withdrew its warming glaze from Doris Healy's thin-bloused back. She shivered involuntarily and raised her head from the narrow herb border to which she had devoted an afternoon of loving care.

Enough for now, she decided regretfully. She stood up, slipping carefully manicured hands out of heavy canvas gardening gloves. She stretched tall, reaching toward the sky, sulkily darkening now as night-fall came on.

As Doris slipped through the utility room, pausing only to put her tools away, she heard the giddy singsong of young feminine voices in the kitchen. Her appearance put no damper on the bubbling spirits of her daughter, Cathy, and her two friends.

Cathy's friend Robin was casually dissecting a luckless week-end date. Her voice dispensed acid as she described their dance-floor excursion.

"Oh, Robby, you're awful. Hi, Mom! Where you been?"

Doris stepped out of her loafers, padded over to the refrigerator on bare feet. She

said, "Out in the yard. Feels wonderful to get started on the garden again. Good exercise, too. Wouldn't do you any harm, Cathy Healy! Look at you—stuffing yourself again."

"Oh, Mom!" Cathy groaned, looking guiltily down at the wedge of cake in her hand. She turned to Robin and the other girl, a soft, rosy girl named Donna Meers, to explain despairingly:

"Honest, Mom is the world's worst when it comes to eating and exercise and stuff like that. You'd think food was the devil's own invention! Just look at that." She pointed an accusing finger at the carrot in Doris' hand as she turned back to them from the refrigerator.

Robin said, "Oh, I think that's terrific! My mother thinks I'm sick if I don't fight for seconds. Everything rich and gooey—and fattening. Besides," her dark eyes raked relentlessly over Cathy, "your mother has a better figure than you do!"

"Oh, come now, Robby!" Doris stepped lightly away from the compliment. How many times, she mused, nibbling daintily at the cold, crisp carrot, had people exclaimed to her as they looked at Cathy: "That big girl can't be your daughter, Mrs. Healy! Why, you're too young!"

Of late, Doris had heard this oftener; especially now that Cathy was 16 and stood almost head to head with her. Thank goodness, thought Doris gratefully, she is going to be a pretty girl! There had been times during the listless early teen years when she had held her breath in fear that Cathy might turn into one of these pudding-figured, plain-faced girls.

But now she knew Cathy would be lovely and blooming, after all. Such a comfort. It reinforced Doris' belief that, for a female at least, the race is not to the swift but to the svelte.

Where would *she* be today, she reminded herself, if she had not made good use of her looks while she was young? She had grown up in a grimy gray neighborhood of Chicago, but through sheer determination, a row of gleaming teeth, and an air of moody elegance, she had managed to carve out a moderately successful career as a photographer's model.

Her career as Martin Healy's wife had been *more* than moderately successful; it had been an unqualified triumph from its beginning 17 years ago. Even today, he often would look admiringly down at her silky blonde hair, her clear, soft skin, her hyacinth eyes, and breathe almost prayerfully: "You are the prettiest thing."

WITH A START, Doris jolted back to the present as Cathy snapped impatient fingers at her and asked, "Well, are we, Mom? Say something!"

"Hmmm? What, honey? Gee, girls, I'm sorry. Day dreaming, I'm afraid. Tell me again, Cathy."

Cathy smiled a tolerant smile and explained gently: "It's the Mother-Daughter dinner dance—you know, for the juniors and seniors. It's really going to be a super affair this year."