

With Banners

By Emilie Loring

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SYNOPSIS

Brooke Reyburn visits the office of Jed Stewart, a lawyer, to discuss the terms of an estate she has inherited from Mrs. Mary Amanda Dane. Unwittingly she overhears Jed talking to Mark Trent, a nephew of Mrs. Dane who has been disinherited. Mrs. Dane had lived at Lookout House, a huge structure on the sea, built by her father and divided into two, for her and Mark's father. Brooke had been a fashion expert, and Mrs. Dane, a "shut-in," hearing her on the radio had invited her to call and developed a deep affection for her. Mark discloses that Mrs. Dane had threatened to disinherit him if he married Lola, from whom he is now divorced. He says he does not trust Henri and Clotilde Jacques, Mrs. Dane's servants. He says he is not interested in an offer of Brooke's to share the estate with him.

CHAPTER I—Continued

Failure of breath alone stopped Brooke's tirade. There was plenty more she could say, she was apt to be good when she started. A laugh twitched at her lips. The two men facing her couldn't have looked more stunned when she made her theatrical entrance had a hold-up man with leveled gun suddenly stepped from behind the hanging. So this was Mark Trent. She had been careful never to go to Lookout House when he was there, for fear that he might think she had planned to meet him. She had not realized that he would be so bronzed nor so tall, that his dark eyes were so uncompromising, nor that the set of his mouth and chin could be so indomitable. There was a fiery, strong quality of life in him which sent prickles of excitement like red-hot slivers shooting through her veins. She knew now that she should have appeared from behind that hanging at Jed Stewart's first word.

Stewart's always ruddy face was the color of a fully grown beet. He coughed apologetically.

"Sorry, Miss Reyburn. Didn't know you'd come. I'll slit the throat of that secretary of mine for not telling me. So you two have met before? That's a coincidence."

"No coincidence about it, Jed. Apparently we were both on the way to this office to keep an appointment with you, when we 'met' in the street almost in front of this building."

Brooke's anger flared again at Mark Trent's cool explanation. She met the terrier brightness of Jed Stewart's gray-green eyes. She had liked him when she had come to his office in response to the court's amazing notification that she was residuary legatee under the will of Mary Amanda Dane. The black and white check of his suit accentuated the rotundity of his body. He puffed out his lips as he regarded her with boyish entreaty. She laughed.

"The present uncomfortable situation only goes to prove, doesn't it, Mr. Stewart, that listeners never hear any good of themselves? Though really I wasn't listening. I stepped behind the hanging to look at the marvelous view, and then—"

"You heard Jed say that your hair was like copper with the sun on it, and—"

"I stuffed my fingers in my ears for a while, but I heard a lot more, a whole lot more," Brooke cut in on Mark Trent's sarcastic reminder, "before I heard you refuse to marry me."

"But that was before I had seen you." The suavity of his voice brought hot tears of fury to her eyes. Before she could rally a caustic retort, he picked up his hat.

"That's a bully exit line. I'll be seeing you, Jed. Hope you'll enjoy the house and the fortune, Miss Reyburn. Happy landings!" He laughed. "I'd better say, 'Safe landings!' You're such a reckless person."

"Hi! Fella!"

With an impatient jerk, Mark Trent shook off the hand on his sleeve, rammed his soft hat over one eye, and closed the door smartly behind him. Stewart re-

lieved his feelings in an explosive sigh and pulled forward a chair.

"That seems to be that. Sit down, Miss Reyburn, while I tell you about the allowance which will be made you while Mrs. Dane's estate is being settled."

CHAPTER II

From the lighted stage Brooke Reyburn looked into the auditorium of the department store in which she had worked for four years. She had begun by modeling sports clothes, and because she had loved her work and had given it all the enthusiasm and drive there was in her she had been promoted steadily. The first of this last year she had been made head fashion adviser and had been sent to Paris. She had made frequent trips to New York, but never before had she been abroad. Now she was talking for the last time to a hall full of women, many of whom she had come to know by sight. She had given her last radio talk. It was the end of her business career.

As she stepped from the stage, Mme. Celeste, the autocratic head of the store's department of clothes for women, stopped her. A hint of emotion warmed the hard blue of her eyes as she caught Brooke's hands.

"Cherie," her French was slightly denatured by a down-east twang, "I shall lose my right hand when you go. Why did that meddling old party want to butt in and leave you money? You were on the way to making it here."

"I shall miss you, Mme. Celeste." Brooke's voice was none too steady.

"Perhaps you won't have to long. In this here-today-and-gone-tomorrow age, money doesn't stay in one pocket. Remember, cherie, whenever you want a job, come to me. You'll be needing one. Au revoir!"

"Cheering thought that I may lose the fortune," Brooke reflected, as she approached her office across the hall. Suddenly the black letters:

MISS REYBURN

on the ground-glass panel of the door jiggled fantastically.

She blinked moisture from her lashes—she hadn't supposed she would feel choky about leaving. She opened the door, closed it quickly behind her, and backed against it as a man slid to his feet from the corner of her desk. His black hair shone like the coat of a sleek well-brushed pony; his dark eyes were quizzically amused as they met hers; his teeth were beautifully white; he was correctly turned out in spic and span business clothes. He was likable, but there was something missing—rather curious that never before had she felt it.

"How's tricks?" he inquired gaily.

"How did you get in here, Jerry Field?"

"Easy as rolling off a log. A taxi, an elevator, a few strides on shanks mare, and here I am."

"I've told you time and again not to come to my office."

"While you were on the job, you said, sweet thing. I've stayed away and all the time the old wolf jealousy gnawed at my heart. I've imagined you here entertaining the male heads of departments and letting them, or stopping them, make love to you."

"You've been seeing too many movies. How you dramatize life. You have been miscast. Instead of being born a rich man's son and spending your days dabbling in paint and the stock market, you should be on the stage. With your flair for good theater, you'd be packing them in. Perhaps Sam can get you a chance in his company. Have you seen the play in which he is acting?" she asked with a quick change from lightness to gravity.

"Yes. Your brother's good."

"But you don't like the play?"

"I can't hand it much."

"Neither can I. It's a dummy

with not a breath of life, not a drop of red blood, just clever epigrams and stuffed-shirt characters. I wish Sam hadn't been cast in it."

"Don't worry. It won't last long. What's the next play on the stock list?"

"The Tempest." The apartment rings with, "Bestir! Bestir! Heigh my hearts! Cheerily, cheerily my hearts!"

"You're not bad yourself, Brooke. Why didn't you take to acting?"

"I ought to be good. We children were raised on dramatics and quotations. It was Father's habit to orate when he was shaving, and we could spout Shakespeare before we could spell. Besides being a publisher, he was a playwright for amateurs, but Sam is ambitious to write for the professional stage; he has one three-act comedy finished, that is, as finished as a play can be until it is put into rehearsal. That is why he is acting, that he may know all there is to know of stage technic."



"Do You Dislike Mark Trent?"

I've had theater enough in my late job. Late! I can't believe that I'm through. Come on, Jerry, before I sob on the shoulder of that display figure. I asked the girls not to come to say good-bye as if I were going away forever. They gave me a grand farewell party last night, and I have perfume, hosiery, and bags enough to last the rest of my natural life. Go ahead. I want to snap out the light myself."

As she stopped on the threshold, Jerry Field caught her arm.

"Hey, no looking back. Remember what happened to Lot's wife. I'd make a hit, wouldn't I, tugging a pillar of salt round the dance floor." He shut the door smartly behind them.

Brooke blinked and swallowed. "Okay, Jerry, from now on I go straight ahead like an army with banners, but straight ahead doesn't mean teasing and dancing with you tonight."

When they reached the already darkening street, Jerry Field demanded:

"Won't you go stepping with me now?"

"No, thanks. I am going home to plan with the family about moving, and to plot the curve of our domestic future."

"Look here, Brooke, don't persist in that silly idea of living in the house Mrs. Dane left you. It's all right for spring and summer, but what will you do marooned on a rocky point of land almost entirely surrounded by water when the days get short, in a place where the residents dig in and nothing ever happens? If you were here in the city," he urged, "I could pick you up in a minute and we could go places. To date you've handed out the excuse that you were too busy. People are planning to winter there, are they? That's an idea. You won't lose the fortune if you don't live in the old place, will you? It wasn't a condition?"

They were walking toward the crimson and jade sunset against which a huge electric clock seemed colorless.

"No. Mrs. Dane merely left a note with her lawyer, in which she wrote that she wished I would live there for two years, or at least until I had cleared the house of her belongings, that she knew that I would not laugh at her treasures, that I would understand, and that I would care for her parrot, Mr. Micawber. That parrot leaves me cold, Jerry. So you see, I must live in the house for a while—now that the lordly Mark Trent has given permission. I—"

"What has Mark Trent to say about it?"

Brooke looked up in surprise as they waited for the traffic light at the corner to change to red and yellow.

"Don't bite. Do you know him, Jerry?"

"Sure, I know him," he replied shortly.

"Do you dislike Mark Trent?"

"Don't dislike him. Just don't want to think about the man, that's all. My sister Daphne went cockeyed about him and he turned her down hard. Like a perfect gentleman, of course, but it got my goat."

"Are you sure he turned her down?"

"Sure. I'm not blaming him, I'm ashamed for her, that's all. He was probably fed up with her type. His ex-wife was never quite sober, I've heard. Daphne fell for him the minute she saw him, she had worried me by her crazy ideas of freedom for a girl, she'd picked up a post-war germ somewhere—all talk of course—and when Trent came along, she stopped drinking and staying out till morning at night clubs. I was relieved. Then he side-stepped. Forget it. I don't know why I told you. Nice street this, isn't it?"

Brooke nodded assent as they passed houses whose polished windows, violet-paned some of them, screened by laces of unbelievable fineness, regarded her with inscrutable calm. Thoroughbred dogs, proudly conscious of their gay collars and smart breast-straps, decorously escorted their young masters. Shining limousines waited before charming old doors. In the distance rose the faint, far sound of traffic, murmurous as a mighty flood which never rolled nearer.

"Here we are at your door. Sure you won't change your mind and go stepping?" The boyish quality was back in Jerry's voice. "Grand old house. Pity it was turned into apartments. Do you realize that you never have invited me to meet the family? What's wrong? Ashamed of your home—or me?"

"Neither. What a beastly suggestion, Jerry. If you must know, I haven't told them about our friendship. I have the finest family in the world, but their bump of humor is over-developed, it isn't a bump, it's a coconut."

"What is there about me that's a joke?"

"Nothing; don't be so touchy. I decided to be a little mysterious, that's all. Sam resents it if I ask him a question about his friends, thinks I am treating him like a boy when he is almost two years older than I; and since I got Lucette the chance to model and she is financially independent, she scorns my interest."

"Is your mother like that?"

"No, Mother's a dear, but she is so bound up in her children that she has no real life of her own. It's a pity because she is a comparatively young woman."

"She sounds old-fashioned and motherly to me. Grade A in mothers. I like that kind. Can't I come in and meet her? I had planned to celebrate with you. Now that you've turned me down, I haven't any place to go."

"You carry off that aggrieved, little-boy pose well, Jerry, but it leaves me cold. You, with your Crowd—capital C—, having nowhere to go! That's the funniest thing I ever heard. I intend to devote the next two hours to making plans with the family. But when we're settled, I'll invite you to Lookout House. Good night. Sorry."

The front door slammed with a force which shook the house. Sam, of course. The atmosphere tingled

when he appeared. He was whistling as usual. Good-looking boy! His horn-rimmed spectacles added a touch of distinction. She patted his sleeve as he stopped beside her.

"Had a nice day, Sammy?"

"Not too good. They're taking off the play tomorrow. Our dear public wouldn't see it."

He pulled open the elevator door. "Hop in." As it clanged shut, he asked:

"All through being a working girl?"

Brooke swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded.

"It will seem queer being a lady of leisure."

"Leisure! You don't know the first letter of the word. I can see you wondering what you'll do next. Leisure isn't your line. You'll plunge into classes and sports. There won't be hours enough in a day for you."

The elevator stopped. A voice seeped through the cracks around the apartment door. Sam Reyburn grinned.

"Say, listen! Lucette's on the air—and how."

"Oh dear, what's her grievance now?" Brooke whispered, and put her key into the lock.

She tried to appraise with the eyes of a stranger the high-ceilinged, large living-room she entered. A connoisseur of portraits would know that Grandfather Reyburn over the mantel had been painted by a great artist; that the portrait of his daughter on the opposite wall was a choice bit of work; that the duchess of Argyle in her sables, green satin, and emeralds was a masterpiece. Always she had wanted to decorate a room as a background for the picture. Now she could. The duchess was hers. The mahogany and maple was sadly in need of rubbing up, but no amount of wear and tear could disguise its period and value.

Her eyes lingered on her mother perched on the arm of a couch. She did young things like that. Her hair was a sheeny platinum; her eyes were dark; her skin was clear and smooth; her figure in the amethyst crepe frock was round without in the least suggesting fat. There was a quizzical twist to her lovely mouth as she looked at her younger daughter, who, with legs thrust straight out before her, was slumped in a chair. Her red beret, which matched the belt of her slim green plain frock, was on the floor. Her hair was black and wavy; her eyes were brilliantly dark; her painted lips drooped at the corners. Brooke recognized the symptoms. Sam had been right, Lucette was on the air. She said as she slipped out of her lapin coat:

"In the Valley of Despond again, Lucette? Had a nice day, Mother?"

Mrs. Reyburn smiled and nodded. She would make her home-coming children think she had had a nice day, if the heavens had fallen. She was like that. Lucette answered her question.

"You'd be in the Valley of Despond, if you had had the day I've had, Brooke Reyburn. I'm dead to the world. A woman came into the sports shop with three daughters, and kept me showing clothes all the afternoon. Gosh! My feet ache like teeth gone nervy."

"Did she buy much?"

"Not that baby. She bought that little blue number only. For Pete's sake, why does Sam have to whistle when he's under the shower? The walls of this apartment are regular sounding boards."

"Bear up, Lucette, you will be out of it soon. If we can't sublet this apartment, we'll shut it up."

"Spoken like a lady and a multi, Brooke darling. And after that what?"

"You won't have to model for fussy women and you'll have a dressing room of your very own. Mr. Stewart has told me that I may take possession of Lookout House as soon as I like. Mark the Magnificent has given the Jovian nod. He won't contest the will. I'm going there tomorrow with a plumber. A bath for every bed will be my battle-cry."

(TO BE CONTINUED)