

The Unknown Quantity

Here is a Tender, yet Exciting Story With a Climax That Holds You Breathless,—a Truthful Account of One Girl's Dangerous Attempt to Revolt Against Out-worn Conventions.

SHE MEETS A STRANGER



His next words were like an answer to a prayer, it seemed to me. "Do you ever go to the city alone? I would like to have you meet some of my friends who would vouch for my — intentions. You see, I realize, that you must be careful. All young girls must be careful of strangers." "Ah, I knew he was a gentleman," I thought to myself. Photograph by Paul Henderson

UAVE and genteel with skin like golden sunshine and hair of ebony blackness that lay in soft waves above a forehead as smooth as a woman's, that was Walter as I saw him first. I was crossing the park on my way home from high school. It was a warm afternoon in early May. The passion of spring was in my blood and in the air. I wanted to loiter but I knew that I dared not. Mother was adamant when it came to the matter of my getting home on time from school. Already I had used up almost all my margin of minutes out of the twenty which, to be perfectly fair about it, was amply sufficient to walk the six blocks between my home and the school.

"I beg your pardon?" A thrill ran through my whole tensed young body as the handsome stranger rose with an elaborate bow. I paused involuntarily on the narrow bridle path in front of him. He smiled at me. I thought it the most winning smile the lips of man had ever produced. Hot blood mantled my brown cheeks and coursed through my veins like lambent flame. I could not speak. My emotions held me dumb. Only a tremulous little smile quivered on my lips and in my eyes. I was so impressed by the romance of the chance meeting that I did not stop to think of the danger of what often befalls young girls at the hands of strange men.

I felt his dark eyes scanning my round young body. It was almost as if I stood naked before him. Soft though his eyes seemed, yet there was something so keenly penetrating in the quality of his gaze that they seemed to strip my flimsy garments from me as they travelled leisurely from my flushed face down through the transparency of my chiffon blouse over my young adolescent torso. The casual but thorough scrutiny over (it took only a brief instant for the whole thing though it takes many words to tell of it) he went on speaking.

"Could you direct me to a good restaurant?" his voice was soft and musical. It beat against my heart strings and set them throbbing to the tune of the sunlight and romance of spring. "I am a stranger in your little city." He paused, waiting, the intoxicating smile still on his lips.

The park was deserted but for him and me. In Oakdale there was no one to lounge in the park at three o'clock in the afternoon. Everybody was busy but the people down on the river flats and they never came up to the park. Their business was

largely nocturnal so they slept in the day. For the rest we who lived in the town proper knew very little about them and so long as they kept their nefarious business and unwholesome selves to themselves the respectable families of Oakdale paid them very little attention. So it seemed perfectly natural that this dazzling stranger should accost me for information.

"You can get meals at the hotel," I ventured timidly.

"Yes, I know," he smiled again, indulgently it seemed to me. "But I thought maybe there was a restaurant where I might get a lunch between hours. You know they only serve meals at the hotel at regular meal hours. I will have to wait almost two hours till five o'clock and I am rather hungry."

Hunger? I had never

thought of hunger in connection with such a perfect being.

"There is the bakery," I said hastily ashamed of the shortcomings of my home town. "They serve ice-cream sodas and things like that at the bakery. And you can get nice lunches from the delicatessen. They are both in the same building over there." I pointed across the park to the corner of Main and Broad streets. A very large and distinct sign boldly broadcast the name "William Bates and Son—Bakery and Delicatessen."

I passed it every day to and from school. Billy had graduated only the year before. I was two years behind Billy in school although he was four years older. He used to carry my books for me from the time I started to

grade school, the year after the measles had kept him out of school for almost a whole year, until he finished high school. Even now I saw him almost every day. Everybody in Oakdale teased us about each other. But—that was just a joke. Billy wasn't a bit good looking. He was nice enough though, and everybody liked him. However I was like the most girls I wanted a handsome prince—almost without regard for who or what he was.

"Why, that's just fine," he hesitated for a breath and his eyes flashed a quick look over my face, "Wouldn't you like to have an ice cream soda with me?"

I choked and stammered over my reply. A sudden panic of indecision gripped my confused senses. I wanted to say yes more than I had

ever wanted to say anything in my whole life, but—there was mother to think about—mother was so—so—unreasonable. Her notion of young people's behavior was terribly old and silly. Yet—I didn't dare question her authority. I wasn't exactly afraid of mother; she had always been sweet and gentle with me but also she had always been stern and her anger was not to be ruthlessly dared when once that sternness was aroused. Billy, too, he would wait on us if I went in there for a soda or anything else and Billy would be sure to tell mother if I came in with a stranger. Mother liked Billy and he would just naturally think that this god-like being was a friend of of ours. He would never understand that just meeting a man in the park was sufficient introduction for a girl to go to lunch with him.

The stranger seemed to sense my dilemma. His tones were soothingly understanding when he spoke without waiting for a reply.

"I think I understand," he said, "Your mother, probably, or your friends might not understand that our meeting was purely casual and wholly innocent. Well, some other time, after we know each other better. I hope we SHALL know each other better—soon. There was something thrillingly suggestive of the romance that I had so long yearned for in his voice on the last word.

I blushed and tried to smile back at him. But my heart sank. I knew that mother would never understand if I seemed sociable to him. Always mother said that leisure and charm and soft hands among the young men whom I might know intimately were signs of standards that were not exactly respectable. "When you see a man able to stand on the corner dressed up in the middle of the day, week in and week out, with nothing to do but look pretty and flirt with the women and girls, there's a screw loose somewhere," she would say with the utmost sincerity, when we were on our frequent shopping trips into the city to which our little town was a suburb. So I could only smile dryly and hope that Fate would take a hand in my affairs.

His next words were like an answer to prayer, it seemed to me. "Do you ever go to the city, alone? I would like to have you meet some of my friends there who would vouch for my—intentions. You see I realize that you must be careful. All young girls should be careful of strangers."

"Ah! I knew he was a gentleman," I thought to myself. No matter what mother thought of idling young sheiks this one was nice and harmless. I fancied I had at last found what every girl wishes—her ideal.

"I never have," I said, in answer to his low voiced question, "but sometimes on Saturdays parties of young folks among us go in for a show or just for sight-seeing. I might meet you and your friends at such a time."

"That would be just fine," he exclaimed. "Meanwhile"—we were almost in front of the bakery. I could see Billy's brown face and busy brown hands as he leaned across the counter to wrap some articles for a waiting customer. I drew back so that a lamp post hid me from any chance glance if he should turn his face to the window. The street was clear at the moment. Crossing the park the trees and shrubs had hid us from view of chance passers. I was not anxious to have the news of the stroll across the park coming to the ears of my mother. But I turned an eager gaze up to the handsome face

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