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Man Magic, That Worked

Irene wanted Billy, but he regarded her as so much common clay. Then she looked at Jerry and — Read it for yourself.

By TED HAVILAND

Irene Hayes looked down with eyes brooding and strangely appraising at Billy Bryant, who sat, chair tilted back, hands thrust deeply into his pockets, gazing in frowning dissatisfaction out of the window of his dressing room. Hints of anger flashed across the girl's face now and then, while Billy was plainly disconsolate. Jerry Dudley, third member of the trio known far and wide as the Three Harlem Steppers, stood helpless in the doorway for a moment, then disappeared down the winding backstage staircase.

"What's the trouble with you, Big Boy?" the girl asked finally. "You've been acting like a spoiled child for the last two months. I don't see where you've got anything to worry about. Ain't we got our name in lights out in front? Ain't we booked solid for a year and maybe more? Ain't we bringing down the house wherever we play? Come on, snap out of it. We're all going to a night club somewhere. Ain't you coming?"

"Go ahead," said Billy, stirring restlessly in his chair. "Don't wait around for me, I'm not feeling right tonight. I haven't been feeling right for a long time. It's something about this spring air. I don't know. I guess I'd better go home and get a little rest. We got a matinee tomorrow."

The girl turned to go, then paused and came back.

"I know what's the matter with you, Billy," she said suddenly. "I've known for a long time."

Billy's frown deepened a little at her accusing tone. "Well," he said with a touch of ill-humor, "suppose that since you know all my business, you give me the dope."

"It's just an idea..." Irene ventured timidly. "Maybe it's all wrong."

"Well, for heaven's sake," he interrupted impatiently, "What is it? What?"

The girl's mouth twitched suspiciously, but her tone remained even. "Don't laugh," she said, "but I'm telling you: the thing that's got you all tied in knots is that you want to get married, and you don't know where to find a girl good enough to marry."

Billy looked at the girl, mingled disgust and puzzlement clouding his brow. She was a pretty girl, tall and olive-skinned, with dark eyes and raven-black hair. Rumor had had it more than once that Irene Hayes and Billy Bryant were going into a partnership of their own. But rumor can never be relied upon.

"Not exactly good enough," she went on quietly. "That isn't just what I mean. But the right one. You don't know where to look for the right one."

"What on earth are you talking about?" he demanded suddenly. "And I thought you were going to a night club with the others."

"They've gone," she explained simply. "I told them that if we felt like it, we'd come along later."

"You didn't have to say just because I did," he muttered.

"Oh, of course not. But I wanted to talk to you, Billy."

"About what?"

"About yourself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You see, Billy, you've been pretty successful these last twelve years. You made a name for yourself on the stage, and then you got us together as the Three Harlem Steppers and took us up into the big time. You've worked mighty hard, and you've made a go of everything you've tried."

"And now that you're just about at the top of the ladder, you're just beginning to look around and to see what your friends have been doing all these years. You're just discovering that while you were spending twenty-four hours a day working out song-and-dance routines for yourself and for us, the boys you grew up with are all married and have families."

Billy Bryant leaned back in his chair, annoyance written on his face. "What on earth was this woman trying to talk him into?"

"Now what's worrying you, Irene's?" she went on, "is how to catch up with them in comfort and contentment, now that you've made your little pile of dough. So your problem is to find out how to go about it to get the right girl. Like everybody says, it's a dickens of a mess if you get the wrong one."

For a long time Billy was silent. The fact was, Irene was more than half right about it. He had come up the ladder of success pretty fast, but in the meantime he had missed a great deal of life in the process. And that was what was troubling him now—what he had missed.

He regarded Irene speculatively.

"Well," he said finally, his first anger having toned down a bit, "it doesn't sound very good out loud, but you know—there might be something to what you say."

"Of course there is."

"But supposing there is, what then?"

Irene walked over to the dressing table and sat on its edge, nervously lighting a cigarette and toying with it for a moment. It was plain that she didn't know just what to say next.

Billy broke the silence.

"It does make me feel sort of out of step with things to see all the fellows married and settled down with homes of their own," he confessed candidly. "It isn't so much that I want to get married, but it's just those cozy-looking living rooms and comfortable apartments that get my goat. Living on the road all the time, you don't get much comfort. I guess I'm about ready to settle down. All that stuff about troupers sticking to the stage until their dying days doesn't go with me. I'm tired of this life, and I guess that's what's got me feeling so funny these last few months."

Something in those words seemed to give Irene an idea. A whimsical look overspread her dark eyes. Then it grew daring.

"Hm-m-m!" she sighed. "I know just how you feel."

Billy paid no attention to her.

"It's kind of hard for a girl—being on the road all the time," she went on. "Except for a few parties now and then and an occasional week's layoff, I've just about had to drop out of feminine society altogether."

"I know how that is."

"So you see, Billy, I'm just about in the same boat."

"What!" he demanded, not catching her meaning for an instant.

"Yep," she said soberly. "I made the same mistake you did."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I've wasted those years, too. I met Jerry Dudley and you when I was sixteen, and we formed this song-and-dance team. Since then, I've done practically nothing but work on one routine after another, trying to make myself as good as you two. I worked awfully hard those years, and I didn't do so badly. But I'm just thinking—I overlooked one thing."

"What was that?"

"That's—the man. You see, I never dreamed he wouldn't find me. I sort of thought that romance would come along some day, and after that everything would be all right. But it hasn't worked out that way yet."

Billy Bryant was, for a moment, too surprised for speech.

"Is — is there any particular man?" he asked finally.

"No-o," she said. "It's just a crazy notion I had. The truth is, I can't recall right now a single man I would think twice of when he was out of sight."

"Oh!" It was Billy's turn to be surprised.

"But," she went on, "I've about decided now that instead of waiting any longer for the man to come along and propose, I'm going after him. This," she added with a sly twinkle in her eye, "is leap year, you know."

She stood up and looked down at Billy amusedly. "I think I'll start right now," she said. "I'm driving out to the Casino—that's where Jerry and the rest of the bunch said they were going. Coming along?"

Billy nodded his refusal wearily and turned to his dressing table, while a saucy wave of good-bye told him that Irene was losing no time in her quest.

"That crazy girl!" was his only exclamation.

He didn't see her again until the next afternoon, when she arrived at the stage door two minutes before matinee time in Jerry Dudley's roadster. Billy had been waiting anxiously for them for the past fifteen minutes, and as he cautioned them to hurry up, he could not help but notice the unusual gleam in Irene's dark eyes.

"What on earth's the matter with her, anyway?" he asked himself. Irene had never paid any attention to Jerry Dudley before. He had always been just one of the team, accepted, taken for granted, like the rest of them. Why all the sudden interest?

But then the lights flashed and

the subject was lost in a score of things as the show got under way.

That night the three were invited to an after-midnight party, and Billy, feeling that he ought to get a little more fun out of life, and incidentally thinking that he had better keep a closer eye on Irene, finally consented to go. His first amusement at Irene's actions turned into amazement as she, after taking the first dance with him, let Jerry Dudley lead her off for a waltz and then danced with him all the rest of the evening. Long before the affair was over Billy had returned, somewhat wearily, to his hotel room.

He wasn't angry with Irene, not at all. He was just disgusted with all women. He smoked four cigars in quick succession and paced the floor for an hour before he could go to sleep. Something was wrong, radically wrong.

When he saw her again the next day she greeted him with the insouciance of a man pal. "Hope you're feeling better," she said. "It's about time you stopped moping around here."

The frown he had worn the day before returned, and deepened. His long friendship with Irene had always been a very matter-of-fact, dyed-in-the-wool sort of an affair. But to have her suddenly carry that matter-of-fact attitude as far as she had, gave him a decidedly uncomfortable feeling.

The show went on, however, as though nothing at all had happened. The Three Harlem Steppers brought the house down with every performance, an absolute riot. The show closed on Friday night with a contract to open Monday in a new theatre downtown. All of the women in the cast were in a high state of excitement, trying to think of something new and different to do during their two-day layoff.

"You can count me out," Irene told them. "Jerry and I are running up to Boston over the weekend. We'll be back Monday morning."

There was nothing at all threatening about that statement, but it settled like a shower of sleet over the merriment of the backstage crowd.

"Jerry!" someone whispered under her breath.

For the first time, Billy Bryant really looked troubled.

Irene caught him regarding her seriously a couple of times, but she hurried away to dress and there was no time then to talk the matter over. A few moments later she joined Jerry and they sped away in his roadster.

He did not have a chance to speak to her again until after the downtown premiere of the show on Monday night. He caught her as soon as their act was over and promptly asked her to come into his dressing room for a talk. Her

eyes sparkled as he led her up the narrow, winding iron stairs and into the room which smelled of grease, aint and fair perfume. But with the first word, the sparkle fled and the stern, cool look of calculation came back, alert and oddly willful.

"You've got to be more careful in the future, Irene," he said. "People are apt to misunderstand you, you know. Of course, I realize that you're just havin' a good time, but all the others—they'll probably get the idea that you're infatuated with Jerry."

A gleam of anger flashed across the girl's countenance.

"Well, who cares what the others think?" she said furiously. "Personally, it doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

Billy remained silent, thinking hard. Then, with a flash of real inspiration he tried another tack. "I know," he said. "Let's go uptown to the Jungle Club. There's no matinee or for tomorrow. About what we can talk there."

"All right," the girl acquiesced, but the anger had not yet completely died out of her voice.

Gazing at Irene a few minutes later across one of the tables of the Jungle Club in Harlem, Billy felt a queer, indescribable sensation slowly creeping over him. What it was he did not know, but the warm, sweet air of the place, the haunting, tom-tom melodies of the orchestra, the swaying couples on the dance floor—all seemed to cast a spell over him. For the first time in his twenty-nine years he displayed a trace of sentiment.

"Let's get up early tomorrow," he said between one of the dances "and drive out on Long Island for dinner, all by ourselves." There was almost a touch of hunger in his voice. Irene grasped the table and sat down suddenly to hide her surprise; but the idea once presented, grew more attractive. For a dozen seconds, she hesitated. From the toes of her tiny shoes to the top of her permanently marcelled head she would have liked to have accepted that invitation. It was plain that her mind was debating the matter, but a shrewd intuition seemed to get the better of the argument. Her decision was evident in her face before she spoke.

"I can't. I promised to ride over to Newark with Jerry tomorrow morning," she said.

A fierce jab at his coffee cup with his spoon was Billy's only answer. The movement delighted Irene. The determined look came back into her eyes, and she grew cor-identical.

"Billy," she said, "I ought to tell you this because I know it'll make you glad—I think I've found my man!"

"Your man?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Don't you remember what I said to you the other night?"

"You're not still entertaining that crazy notion, are you?"

"I'm not only entertaining it, but it's working," she nodded with elaborate sweetness. Then she grew anxious all at once. "Hahn't we better be getting back home? I wouldn't want to miss Jerry tomorrow morning."

Savagely, Billy finished his coffee and then, without a word, he helped her into his car and drove her home. Irene watched him as he drove away with eyes that were filled with anxiety, but back of that anxiety stood a stubbornness now thoroughly aroused.

The next day, Jerry and Irene did not return to the theatre until it was nearly time for the night's performance, and then she raced upstairs with merely a wave of her



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Continued on Page 4