

Darling Fool

By MABEL McELLIOTT

BEGIN HERE TODAY

MONNIE O'DARE loves DAN CARDIGAN, wealthy and handsome, who goes to Wyoming with a party of friends including SANDRA LAWRENCE. Sandra, pretending to be Monnie's friend, wants Dan for herself. His parents want him to marry Sandra and look down on Monnie because the O'Dares are poor. Monnie works in a drug store.

MISS ANSTICE, COOLY, long a friend of the family, asks Monnie to go to Europe with her. The girl is undecided until a letter comes from Dan in which his love seems to have cooled. Monnie, pleased, accepts Miss Cory's invitation.

Dan returns to Belvedere just after Monnie and Miss Cory depart. He is sure now that it is Monnie he loves and wants to marry. Dan goes to the O'Dare house. There Monnie's sister, KAT, breaks the news to him.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XXXI

DAN'S voice was flat and colorless. "She's gone! For—how long?"

Kay smiled. "Several months. Perhaps they'll be back by Christmas, perhaps not."

"The man stood for an instant, hands plunged deep in his overcoat pockets. 'I see,' he repeated vaguely. 'She didn't leave any message for me?'"

"Monnie!" Kay's voice tinkled. "No, indeed." Into her eyes came a sparkle of malice. "She was wearing Charles Eustace's flowers when she left. Orchids." Kay made the word vary significantly.

Dan gave her a comprehending look; then, without another word, he lifted his hat and withdrew.

"There!" Kay congratulated herself. "Guess I gave him something to think about—the concealed thing!" She felt not the slightest compunction though she remembered Monnie's voice, saying clearly that morning, "If Dan calls give him my address."

Well, Kay wouldn't. Anyhow he hadn't asked for it. He'd looked as though Monnie's departure really was a blow. That seemed queer too when he'd been at Sandra Lawrence's back and call for so long. Kay clicked her tongue against her teeth, reflecting that men were really the limit!

SHE set off for the "News" office quite gaily, feeling serene and capable and alert. It was good to have this thrilling new job, to have a place in the world. Kay wasn't at all nervous about doing Miss Anstice's work. It was simple, really, and she knew just how it should be done. You could, thought Kay coolly, do it with your eyes shut. Life was different for Kay this year. The old silliness and impatience had slipped from her like a cloak. She was engaged, thought longingly of New York, of going on the stage. She had noticed since she had been helping Miss Anstice that people were nicer to her. Even stiff people like Mrs. John Blair. Mrs. Blair had called up last week to remind Kay of the big bazaar at St. Thomas' and to hope she could drop in for lunch one of the days when the Ladies Aid was serving.

Kay hummed a little tune, stopping along at what Charles called her "race-horse" rail. Belvedere wasn't such a bad place after all. It was really nice, especially on crisp October days such as this when the maples on Denny street seemed to have turned to pure gold and the air was clear and spicy. Kay didn't envy Monnie even on route to New York and later England. She took a deep breath. The trip would be good for Monnie. She needed to be shaken out of herself. Monnie had been unhappy this past year. Kay set her lips, thinking of the Cardigans. Horrid woman, Dan's mother! It was she, of course, who had made the difficulty between Dan and Monnie. Well, Monnie would forget all about Dan. She would have a marvelous time and perhaps come home with a foreign prince in tow. You never could tell. Monnie was beautiful enough to be a princess.

Kay was half way through a day dream in which she saw herself presiding over a reception to "my sister, the Countess de B—" when she reached the dingy office of the newspaper.

Meanwhile Monnie, speeding eastward in the drawing room which Miss Anstice had insisted extravagantly upon reserving, felt herself living in a dream. The narrow glass reflected a glowing girl wrapped in brown fur, a small hat tilted over her right eyebrow.

MISS ANSTICE, 50 and bird-like, her neat gray curls escaping from a new blue velvet turban, smiled benevolently. "We'll go first to the Splendolite, my dear," she said. "We'll be there by 6. Dinner in our room—or if you'd rather, down in the restaurant. Yes, I think that would be better. You'll like that."

"Oh, so much!"

"Well then, that's settled. I thought if you weren't too tired we might go to a play. There's Katherine Cornell in that new one that's such a success," purred Miss Anstice, taking off her gloves and blowing gently into each finger to keep the shape, as she had seen her mother do.

"I'm never tired," declared the girl in the green coat, meeting it and looking as if the statement might be true.

"The boat sails at 12 tomorrow," murmured Miss Anstice, rearranging their plans for the fourth time. "I won't sleep a wink I'm afraid. It must seem silly to you, at my age, but the fact is I'm terribly excited, my dear."

"Oh, so am I!" cried Monnie. "It's the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. I still can't quite believe it."

"That's a very nice young man," Miss Anstice mused a moment later, touching her curls reflectively.

"Who? Oh, Charles?" Monica O'Dare smiled without a trace of self-consciousness. "Yes, isn't he splendid?"

"Now in my day," said Miss Anstice, "he would have been considered quite a catch."

"Oh, but he is! All of that," protested Monnie innocently. "All the mothers on the Hill are angling for him. At least that's what I hear."

"I understand none of them have been very successful," murmured the older woman with an oblique glance.

"With Charles?" Monnie considered this. "Well, I don't know. Charles is sort of—well, distant. I don't," averred Monnie, "think he cares much about girls."

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"Never mind. Only—I never heard such nonsense in my life!"

It was only, Monnie reminded herself, 12 hours since they had left Belvedere. With her eyes fixed on the stars where the deep-violet, tragic-eyed girl moved so gracefully Monnie's heart beat more swiftly. All day she had been perfectly happy, looking forward to the trip, the hotel and the excitement of the big boat. But now she was reminded of what a wrenching thing love could be. She wanted desperately to forget that she wanted to be gay, to laugh a little and play a lot.

"Isn't it beautiful, my dear?" That was Miss Anstice, wiping her eyes. "People don't love like that any more. They don't know real romance."

"I suppose they don't," Monnie knew she didn't mean that. Of course, they didn't. Of course they did! Monnie had changed and speech along with costume. But the flaming feeling—that was the same.

Coming up the aisle of the theater later behind Miss Anstice the girl was conscious of eyes watching her. She lifted her own to encounter the bold stare of a tall man in full evening attire. He held his top hat at a most elegant angle and stood negligently on the fringe of a smart party. The women, Monnie observed, were beautifully dressed and talked in shrill, assured voices.

"How extremely rude!" Miss Anstice, taking her arm, was piloting her toward a taxi.

"I think it extraordinary the way people stare in the city," observed Miss Anstice. "That man! I didn't like the way he looked at you! Oh, that one's taken, my dear, and it's raining. I'm afraid we are in for a wait. The last time my father and I were here we had a most frightful time getting a taxi when it rained."

Car after car, opulent, luxurious, gleaming with chromium, deeply upholstered, slid up and was filled. Monnie noticed that the parakeet ladies in the strange man's party and the two rather negligible males with them, had gone on without him. The crowd thinned. Miss Anstice, wrapping her plum-colored velvet about her, chirped nervously. "I don't know whatever we shall do, my dear. That's the worst of not having an escort. I always say a gentleman's so useful to have about."

A deep voice said in Monnie's ear, "I quite agree. May I offer you ladies my car to your destination?"

Monnie whirled to find the tall man with the top hat before her. Before she had time, in her confusion, to say a word Miss Anstice took the situation in hand. "That's extremely kind," she said briskly. "We shall be delighted."

The tall man flicked a hand in a gesture that was something like a Fascist salute and a greyhound of a car slid from the shadows under the porte cochere. Deftly he handed the two women in. The chauffeur touched his hat. "Where-to?"

"The Splendolite," said Miss Anstice, leaning forward. "And thank you so much—" Her voice dropped.

The tall man was climbing to her.

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