

MAIDEN VOYAGE

KATHLEEN NORRIS

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CHAPTER XVII—Continued

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And then again, as darkness and peace and rest shut down upon her, the slow pictures of memory began to revolve: Larry in his office, Larry coming down to the city room for a busy moment; Larry overcoated and deep in conversation with men in the elevator; Ruth's drawing room with the wood fire and the teacups, and the photographs on the table and bookshelves, and the scent of toast, and Larry coming rosy and cold to the doorway to say, "No, no, thanks! I'm going to have a shower and change before dinner."

He always said that now, when he found Tony there, or made some excuse not to join her and Ruth. And for that reason Tony went as seldom as she could, went to Ruth's house only when Ruth's invitations were so pressing that to decline them might have been to arouse suspicion.

Once, quite unexpectedly, Ruth said:

"Tony, you like Larry?"

"I adore him," Tony said simply, with a laugh and a flush.

"You two don't see each other as much as you did."

"He's my boss now, Ruth. He's the biggest man in the office—Danielson's gone, and Arnoldson's sick half the time. I can't get gay with Larry any more."

"Oh, if that's the reason," Ruth was satisfied. Anything that aggrandized her Larry was understandable to her.

But she had a quarrel with Tony, nevertheless. With much archness and much kindly and even slightly condescending pleasure Ruth had accepted the situation between Tony and her nephew Joe Vanderwall. Joe was of the same lineage as herself; he was brilliant, successful, lovable, and he had means. All these things were extremely important to Ruth, to whom Tony was still naturally merely the clever and fascinating reporter to whom Mother had given her first handsome coat, and the tale of whose family's delightful makeshift and emergencies had opened to the helpless an unexplored section of life.

But if Joe liked Tony, and Joe made no secret of the fact that he did, then Ruth was enchanted with the idea that she and Larry would presently have this younger couple to oversee and advise and help. Her first astounded criticism of Tony had come when the changed attitude of the other three had revealed to her the unwelcome truth that somehow things were not going right between Tony and Joe.

"I think she has a good cheek, I really do!" Ruth said in amazement to Larry. "Tony surprises me. She appears to be the type that just naturally doesn't fall in love."

"She gets a great kick out of her work," Larry, scrapping his chin with a bony brown hand after shaving, answered mildly.

"Work nonsense! Where'll her work get her in a few more years? There's no real future for a girl in newspaper work, and she certainly isn't going on into writing. She says herself she has no imagination."

"She has lots of imagination."

"D'you think so, Larry?"

"Oh, yes. She hasn't got it into line, that's all. I wish to heaven I had her imagination," Larry said. "She puts something into life. I don't know what it is—glamour—something."

"Well, I think she's a dear, and I think she's most amusing sometimes, although perhaps she rather overdoes it and makes things funny at the expense of the truth," Ruth was beginning guardedly, when Larry cut in healthily.

"That's the thing exactly. She adds glamour. That's all I meant by saying she has imagination. Now, you, Ruth, if you tell me a thing today it's just as you told it ten years ago. Tony never tells a thing twice alike."

"I'm afraid perhaps I call that truth," Ruth suggested, with a prim little cough. "And I'm afraid that I'm old-fashioned enough to think it's important."

Larry had heard this tone before, had been in this little predicament before. Tying his tie, looking at his wife through the high mirror of his chest of drawers, he said:

"She hasn't got sense enough to see what at chance she has with Joe. He's so big he can afford to act like a fool now and then, and Tony's just dumb enough to think that means he is a fool."

"She is dumb in some ways," Ruth said affectionately, in a mollified voice. And then curiously: "Larry, do you think it could be some one else?"

"You mean with Tony?"

"Yes; down in the office, I mean. Do you suppose that there's some one else?"

"Ha," Larry said, in the tone of one thinking.

"I'll bet you there is. For one thing, she acts like a girl in love."

"I don't know who it could be," Larry said, arranging a handkerchief in his breast pocket. "Come out and watch me have my breakfast."

"I'm going to have some, too," Ruth said.

That same day, at three o'clock in the afternoon, Tony's desk telephone rang in all the other din of the city office, and Tony, answering it, heard Larry's voice.

"Tony? I'm glad I caught you. Could you come upstairs for a minute?"

The stars and Catharine wheels of opalescent light had settled a little, but her voice was uneven as she said: "Coming." She went into Larry's own sanctum, magnificent now in leather chairs and soft gray-brown eucalyptus walls.

Tony sat down opposite him, looked at him, smiling shakily, trembling. They were alone.

"There'll be a buzz about this downstairs," Larry said, looking at a pencilled note on his desk. "I thought I'd rather tell you. When did you see Bess Cutter last?"

"She was in a couple of days ago," Tony said, paling at some quality in his tone. "She was having sinus trouble, and she felt kind of rotten," Tony went on, speaking the less elegantly because she was uneasy and in earnest. "Why?"

"She killed herself about an hour ago. O'Brien telephoned me. She had a photograph of Frank Fitch in her hands."

"Oh, heavens!" Tony whispered, staring at him, very white. "Killed herself?"

"Poison. They rushed her to the Emergency, but they say she was gone when the police got there."

"It makes me feel a little—sick," Tony said, holding on to the arms of her chair with gripped fingers.

"We're faking a Chicago trip for Fitch," Larry presently observed drily. The girl's look came back to his instantly. "I guess she knew what she was doing when that began, Tony. Fitch wasn't the first man who had ever come into her life, poor thing!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry for her!" Tony said. "She'd given up her apartment, and she missed it so! She was living with some friend out on the Panhandle. I don't think they got along very well. She told me she and Mabel had a scrap about a brassiere or something—"

And suddenly, as Larry laughed, she was laughing and crying at once, her drenched eyes buried in

her hands. Confused and ashamed, she stood up, wiping her eyes, turning her back to him, and Larry came around the desk and braced her with his arms for a few dizzying seconds.

"I didn't want you to hear it downstairs in the office."

"I know. And I'm so grateful to you! I don't know why I'm laughing," Tony stammered.

She straightened up, and was free of his touch, and put out her hand to his. "Thanks so much, Larry; it knocked me breathless for a minute," she apologized. "But I'm all right now. I'll get out into the air and be fine!"

Fresh, sweet, her smooth brown cheek flawless, her soft dark hair tumbled in curves and rings about her face, her long dark lashes wet above the raised blue eyes, and the big white collar and plain dark frock, the slim silk-clad legs and



"She Had a Photograph of Frank Fitch in Her Hands."

square-toed shoes, all somehow expressing Tony, and no one but Tony, she stood close to him for a moment, and he felt the quick nervous pressure of her fingers on his wrist. Then she was gone, and the splendid office was quiet and empty again.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I'M FROM the Call. May I talk to you for five minutes, Miss Wallister?"

"Well, surely." The high-school assistant superintendent had been eating a box lunch at her desk.

"I'll only keep you a minute; I know this is your chance to get out into the air," Tony said, smiling. "But there was a queer little bit of business that came up, and I wanted to ask you about it. You're assistant superintendent of the Oakland schools, aren't you, Miss Wallister?"

"I am."

"Mr. Kern Opps is the superintendent, isn't he?"

"Well, yes," Miss Wallister was beginning to be a little uneasy, and Tony felt sorry for her.

"Is his brother-in-law Oliver Benedict, of the Oakland Sun?"

"You could ask Mr. Opps," Miss Wallister, definitely disturbed now, said guardedly.

"I don't have to. I know it. Let me tell you what all this is about, Miss Wallister," Tony said frankly, "and then you'll know what I'm after. Some time ago Shafts' Department Store, the biggest in Oakland, took away its advertising from us, the Call, in San Francisco, because it said it got much better response from advertising in the Oakland Sun. Now, that worried us, and we sent a man over here to Oakland to investigate, and this is what he found out. Shafts' had put a special advertisement in all the papers, inviting all high-school students to

write in to the high-school equipment department, and join a club called 'The Undergrads.' They had Saturday hikes and contests; I don't know what they didn't have. The boys camped, and the girls made cakes, all that sort of thing. Do you happen to have noticed it?"

"I don't know that I did," said Miss Wallister, "and I think you had better talk to Mr. Opps himself; my time is so limited, and I don't know what you're driving at."

"I have talked to Mr. Opps.—Just a moment more, Miss Wallister, please. That is, someone from the office talked to Mr. Opps, and he admitted that some weeks ago—"

"I don't know what he admitted, and I don't care. If you'll excuse me—"

"No, now wait just a moment," Tony said, in a persuasive, sensible tone. "He's not done anything wrong! And you haven't anything to do with it anyway."

"I certainly haven't anything to do with it," Miss Wallister agreed, with red cheeks and a rising voice, "for I neither know nor care what you're talking about!"

"Well, then will you just let me talk one moment more?" Tony asked simply. "I don't think you understand yet why I came over here to talk to you. The point is this: Did you have all your teachers give out postal cards to the students in the various classes, and have them, as a part of their business course, write into Shafts' and ask for information about the 'Undergrad Club'?"

"I don't know whether I did or not," Miss Wallister answered with a snap. "If I did, I see no reason why I shouldn't!"

"There is no reason why you shouldn't do that," Tony admitted. "It was telling them to say that they saw the advertisement in the Sun—that well, that interested us. Naturally, the Shafts people thought that the Sun was getting forty responses to the ad to every other paper's one."

"I don't know anything about it," Miss Wallister said, in the pause.

"You don't remember Mr. Opps giving you instructions that that was to be done?"

"I tell you I don't remember anything about it."

"That's funny, for he does," Tony said musingly. "Now, listen, don't get angry at me, Miss Wallister," she added disarmingly; "I'm a working woman like yourself. They give me certain assignments on my paper, and I have to follow them up. I don't know anything about this story, and I don't care anything, except to do my end honestly. All I know is that Mr. Fitch, our managing editor, called me into his office this morning and told me that he had been suspicious of the means by which the Shafts advertising had been handled over here, and that Mr. Opps—" Tony glanced at a note in her hand, "Mr. Kern Opps," she said, "had admitted that he had used the schools to further the interests of his brother-in-law's paper. Now probably you had no responsibility in the matter at all—you were merely acting upon his orders—"

"If I did that or anything else," Miss Wallister said with angry promptness, as Tony paused to look at her hopefully, "you may be very sure it was acting under orders!"

"I should suppose so," Tony conceded.

"You don't think for a moment that I'd take a step like that on my own?"

"When was this?" Tony asked, adept now at closing the net. But the shrill, harassed, anxious assistant superintendent was too quick for her.

"I don't remember the incident at all, and I'd advise you to talk to Mr. Opps."

"Someone else in the office talked to him," Tony explained patiently; "he admitted it, and said that he was quite within his rights. Maybe he was, I don't know. The point is that you are his assistant, and we want to know whether or not

you feel that that was a perfectly justifiable thing to do."

"I don't think it matters what I feel."

"It would matter in this way, Miss Wallister. Honestly," Tony said, smiling, "I am merely making this suggestion: if this got Mr. Opps into trouble—and it might—with the board of education, it might be a good thing for you to have put yourself on record as disapproving it."

"I won't put myself on record."

Tony glanced at her notes.

"This is all I have," she said. "Kern Opps admits use of stamped postcards supplied by the Sun in classrooms; says he was entirely justified. Opps may not be any too secure in his seat when this comes out. You're his subordinate, and naturally you did what he told you to do. But I should think—"

She hesitated, looking at the other woman sympathetically.

"I was merely going to say that in your place I'd tell the simple truth," Tony said. "You can't get into trouble telling the simple truth: 'Mr. Opps did this—I did that—you don't have to worry about it, because it's true.'"

"Otherwise," she went on, as the trapped woman looked at her dubiously, not knowing what to believe or to do, "otherwise I report that you didn't do it, and the other report is that Mr. Opps acknowledges that he did do it, and you'll have a buzz of reporters here asking you how it happens that you forgot the whole thing entirely, and probably several kids delighted to get their names into the paper by saying that they remember filling out the postcards and being instructed to say that they saw the advertisement in the Sun."

Miss Wallister was sitting facing Tony, her narrowed eyes speculative behind their glasses, her face red. Presently, without removing her gaze, she leaned slightly toward the left and opened the lower drawer of her desk. From it she took a postal card and tossed it to Tony.

"There!" she said. "I'd rather have spoken to him about it first, but since he's given you the whole thing, I'm not going to lie about it. Mr. Opps and I have always been friends, but I thought at the time he was taking a chance, and you can say that I was acting under his directions. I could have reported it to the board, of course; it didn't seem to me important. The children are having business courses, and we encourage them to consult the newspapers for ads and rates and everything else."

"I think that's a splendid idea," Tony murmured, her hand trembling as she put the precious postal card securely in her bag. "I wonder if the other high schools have practical courses like that."

"I don't believe they do." The assistant superintendent aired her views quite eloquently.

Tony went into the office at six o'clock to meet a sour greeting from the city editor.

"Get anything on the Oakland thing?" he asked.

"Yep."

"No, did you?" Greeny asked, impressed. "Better go right in; here, I'll go with you."

When they were in Mr. Fitch's office Greeny said: "Miss Taft is on that Oakland school superintendent story."

"Get anything on it?" Fitch asked harshly.

"I got it," Tony said simply, experiencing the most thrilling sensation the newspaper reporter ever knows.

"She talk?"

"Yes. She talked. There's one of the postal cards," Tony said, displaying it. A simple enough card printed in ink script with the words: "I am a student in the Oakland high school. Having seen your advertisement in the Sun I am very much interested in the Undergrad club, and would be glad to learn the conditions of membership."

(TO BE CONTINUED)