

THERE IS TODAY

By JOSEPHINE LAWRENCE

CHAPTER I

Sarah Daffodil liked the couple as soon as she saw them, though she had never considered renting an apartment to young people before. Her other tenants were middle-aged or older and dreaded noise. But there was something so oddly settled about this young pair, a certain quiet serenity, a shining confidence, that caught at her sympathy and for her accented their youthful charm.

"We read your advertisement," the girl said and her voice was lovely, clear as Sarah's cherished crystal ball, but with a golden warmth denied to tinkling glass.

The young fellow felt his responsibility, his dark, steadfast gaze beforeshadowed a steady purpose. "It's a three-room, to sub-let? We want three rooms by March first." Involuntarily he exchanged a sparkling glance with the girl.

From her desk chair Sarah could see the fireplace and the few pieces of her mother's furniture which transformed the other half into a comfortable, practical living room. Built-in bookcases replaced the office cabinets, the clawfoot sofa and drumhead table balanced the break-front with its treasure load of old china and glass. Chintz draperies for all the windows and two large oval braided rugs laid on the floor tied the divergent sections into an amazing harmonious whole.

Tenants sometimes said that Sarah Daffodil possessed two personalities as distinct as this room she loved. Undoubtedly she puzzled this boy and girl who had come in response to her advertisement.

"The rooms are on the top floor," Sarah explained pleasantly.

"But there is a fireplace?" The girl held her tiny knitted pillbox in her lap and her gleaming hair, molasses-brown with gold streaks, swirled in a beautiful, long, thick bob to her shoulders. She wore it parted in the center so that two soft rolls, like wings, framed her small face.

Her eyebrows and her eyes matched her hair perfectly, Sarah Daffodil thought appreciatively. "There is a fireplace in each of my apartments," she said.

The boy spoke confidently, "We'd like to go up and look, if we may. But we ought to ask the rent first."

"It's a sublet, you know. The tenants in 3-A were anxious to move to the coast. They were obligated to pay forty-five dollars a month until October, but were willing to dispose of their lease for forty a month."

"Could we go up now—while we're here?" The girl's exquisitely clear voice remained unharmed.

Sarah Daffodil rose and they stood, too, staring a little more intently, perhaps than they realized. The woman behind the desk had not appeared unusually tall, but now that she was standing they could see that she was at least six feet in height. Although she wore gray flannel slacks and a tailored gray and white long-sleeved shirt, she did not create a masculine effect. For one thing, she wore her abundant black and silver hair, which, waved tightly, coiled softly at the back of her head.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't run up and see the apartment now—" her firm, long mouth parted in a smile. "Mrs. Merding

will show it to anyone before five o'clock. Tell her I sent you."

"You'll be here when we come down?" They both looked at her as if she were a kindly monument. "I'll be right here."

The desk phone buzzed and Sarah lifted the handset. "Mrs. Daffodil? This is Mrs. Merding. That couple you sent up are on their way down to your office. They like the rooms a lot."

"Well, of course they're terribly young," Mrs. Merding conceded wistfully, "but I never saw anyone so quiet in all my life. You just can't imagine them having large, loud parties—I'd take a chance, if I were you."

"Before you commit yourselves to leasing, there are some things about the setup here you should know," Sarah drew forward her small card file.

"And some things about us you'll want to know." The boy's dark face glowed with swift light when he smiled.

Sarah Daffodil admitted that the rule worked both ways. "I think I must tell you that my other tenants are all well into middle age. You may prefer to be where your immediate neighbors will be more likely to have interests similar to yours."

"No, that doesn't matter. We'll be so busy—both of us work."

Then there was the yard, Sarah continued levelly. "I'll show it to you before you go. It's large—seventy-five feet wide by one hundred and fifty feet deep."

Experience had taught her, Sarah said, that beyond a certain point community ownership retrogressed. Four sets of tenants could not enjoy the garden as one big family. "They used to bicker incessantly over their washings and there were times when I could cheerfully have wrapped their sheets around their necks and pinned them all on a good high line." After several years of complaints and warfare she had developed the present plan.

"Each apartment is entitled to the full use of the garden and lawn for drying and bleaching clothes, one day a week. This includes the laundry room and equipment in the basement. Of course if it should happen to rain torrents on Thursday, you'd be out of luck for that week. You have to expect such a performance now and then."

"Why, that's wonderful!" The young people manifestly regarded the originator of this program as a genius.

It had worked out fairly well, Sarah admitted modestly, barring an occasional controversy when someone wished to trade his day and could find no one willing to exchange. "With the first four days going to the tenants, I'm left with Friday for my own washing. Saturdays I cut the grass and tidy up the garden generally and Sundays are for the community spirit, if it wants to develop. Mostly it's riding out in the country, except for a few hot days in midsummer."

Yes, she cut the grass herself, she said in answer to the question mirrored in the two pair of dark eyes. She cut the grass, washed windows, did the small repairs and all the carpenter work. "I'm the

superintendent and the janitor, the fireman (I have my license) and the handy man. I've always liked to work with my hands, in fact I helped my husband build this house. Mrs. Merding probably told you that I'm the renting agent and landlord, since Mr. Daffodil's death ten years ago."

"She said there isn't anything you can't do." Enormous respect made the girl's lovely face grave.

Sarah laughed and picked up her memorandum pad. "Stuff and nonsense! Now, if you really wish to take the apartment—"

Their names, they held her, were Andrew Thane and Candace Moore. They planned to be married early the following week and would like to move in that week-end.

Sarah's pencil wrote the word "Lease," hesitated. "You're taking over the Merding lease, you know—it runs until October."

"Yes, they knew that."

"If you care to stay beyond September thirtieth, a new lease will be necessary, of course." From force of habit she glanced at her desk calendar—Tuesday, February 25th, 1941. The something that had been knocking at the back door of her mind vague, annoying, because she resented distractions, suddenly found its place. She said quickly, "Aren't you likely to be called?"

Andrew Thane's quiet, dark face did not quicken. "I'm registered."

"But—" Sarah looked from him to the girl. "Aren't you two taking a chance by marrying at this time? Do you mind telling me how old you are?"

He was twenty-three, he told her soberly, his fiancée twenty-one. "We have talked it over carefully and we think we're doing the right thing."

"The Merdings were very lucky to be able to sublet so late in the season." The little silver crochet hook in Mrs. Waters' expert lean brown fingers flashed brightly in and out of the intricate meshes that formed in its wake.

Sarah Daffodil had never seen anyone whose crochet work equaled Mrs. Walters' in variety and design. Her closest shelves and closets of drawers were stuffed with boxes in which she had stored bedspreads, table sets, edgings for bed linens and towels, medallions, even several sets of curtains, all exquisitely made, never used. "I had just a glimpse of the new tenants—they're awfully young," Emma Waters remarked hopefully.

King Waters sat at the knee-hole desk, his back to his wife and to Sarah Daffodil. He was making out the rent check for March. In the hope of garnering a little gossip, Emma Walters always managed to arrange so that the check must be called for in person.

Over his shoulder Kin Waters said casually, "That young chap's probably headed straight for training camp. I'm surprised they married before his number's called. Kids haven't a grain of sense when it comes to realities."

"I suppose they'll be having late parties," his wife sighed. "I know young people—liquor and everything. They're right over our heads, too."

"I don't think you'll be troubled by noise overhead," Sarah spoke with authority. "Both Mr. and Mrs. Thane go to business, they can't afford to keep late hours."

From the desk Mr. Waters said, his tone muffled, his pen scratching, "I suppose she's keeping her job because she expects him to be called for training."

And from the corner Emma Waters sniffled. "I've always said that no woman can do justice to two jobs—one of them has to be neglected. Usually it's the housekeeping."

"Is that a new spread, Mrs. Waters?" It was, of course. Sarah recognized the significance of a single crocheted wheel—all the wonderful, elaborate patterns Mrs. Waters turned out in such profusion began with a single crocheted wheel. What on earth could the woman do with another bedspread!

"There!" King Waters swung around and his chair creaked. "About that young fellow upstairs," he said, as if the topic had recently been tabled. "A year of training in the army would be the finest thing that could happen to a young fellow like that. Put him right on his feet."

"Far as I know he's on them now." The check fluttered feebly in Mr. Waters' blunt-tipped fingers. He chewed on his unlighted cigar with vigor. "Do this present generation good to taste a little army discipline. Why, I wouldn't take anything for the lessons I learned while I was in the service."

"I could stand it if you were a little less active right now in post work," Mrs. Waters observed querulously. "Now it's another raffle and would you believe it, Mrs. Daffodil, they're after me to contribute one of my spreads. They say they



Mrs. Marry King of Reading, Pa., with part of her collection of 183 crosses of various religious denominations which range in size from one-quarter inch to 14 1/4 inches tall. She is holding her favorite, which has an inlaid mother-of-pearl holy water font.

11-11-2p

shared. The young fellow looked up courteously. "All war news." "Yep. Most of it sounds pretty familiar to me. I was in the last fracas. Don't suppose you know anything about that?" The dark, quiet young man said composedly. "Only what I've heard." He dexterously folded his paper to bring the sporting page uppermost. (To Be Continued)

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