

# Make-Believe Bride

BY RUTH HARLEY

## NINTH INSTALLMENT

That was soon after she'd met Rod, and he was perfect in her eyes. How she had wished then that one day he'd ask her to marry him, for then she thought surely it would be heaven to have a husband like him. She smiled in the dark. Now Rod had asked her to marry him, and she had refused. Had she made a fatal mistake? Was it better to marry within your own class and rise or sink together? But, worn out with all the strain, she fell asleep, a smile on her lips as though she were still at one with Rod, loving him with all the fervor of her youth.

"Say, Maris, I guess you made a tremendous hit last night. Look what the papers say about you." Maris was entering the correspondence room, and Milly dashed to her side with the morning papers.

Maris' cheeks were rosy as the different salesmen came up and told her what they thought of her presentation. But all their words of praise meant nothing to her, for she felt that what Stan might say to her would make a big difference in her life.

Presently Miss Riggs hurried down the aisle. "Mr. Stanley wants you in his office right away," she said breathlessly.

"All right," answered Maris nonchalantly, but, beneath her apparent calm, her heart was beating like a sledge hammer. What would he say to her? Had those girls aired their opinions to him, or did they despise him and blame him as they blamed her?

She opened the door of his office, and he rose up quickly, and, taking her hand in his, shook it enthusiastically. "Well, Maris, you put it over big, and I'm mighty proud of you. But whose ad you vanish to

last night? Didn't you know I was going to take you home?" the caressing note in his voice seemed to blot out all the harsh accusations that the girls had made against her.

"Oh, I never thought of that. It's very kind of you to have thought of such a thing, but I'm sure you'd prefer to see to, and I got home all right."

"Well, there was quite a lot to see to, but I did think after the affair was over I might have a chance to tell you how splendidly you'd done. But maybe you'll let me show my appreciation tonight? How about having dinner with me and then dancing afterwards?"

The color dyed Maris' cheeks and she could not keep the sparkle out of her eyes as she said, "You don't have to feel you must reward me for what I did. I had a good time wearing that lovely gown. I enjoyed the affair immensely," she added as though she would convince herself she was really speaking the truth.

"But surely you won't deny me the pleasure of having you as my guest tonight? There's something else I want to talk over with you, and, well, there never seems to be time for anything but conferences and so forth in the office. Tell me I may call for you tonight. His eyes seemed to burn into hers, and quickly banished all Patsy's words of warning and her own new antagonism against his set, she said, "Very well, I'll be glad to go with you."

"That's right," he said, but something seemed to jar her. Had she been too ready to acquiesce to his wishes?

As she returned to her desk, she had a strange sort of disturbed feeling. She'd never noticed his lips before. Were they smiling at her? But she shook herself. She was getting

fanciful. That surely showed she wasn't accustomed to late nights! Well, she must change all that.

As arias opened the door of her apartment, she heard the murmur of voices, and when she crossed the threshold Patsy called out, "Is that you, Maris? Come on in!"

"Oh, Hello, Rod!" she said as he rose. "What's new?" A little shadow darkened her eyes.

"Gosh, Maris, aren't you going to kiss your boy friend, and congratulate him?" He's put his gadget over and soon he'll be rolling in wealth."

"That's fine," she said, but she remained standing at the other side of the table, while the light that had leaped to Rod's eyes as he heard her enter, seemed to be extinguished.

"Well, you're sure a queer pair. I was just telling him what a hit you made last night. But there, I guess I'm in the way. I'll go in the kitchen so you lovebirds can have a chance to make things up."

Quickly Rod took a step toward Maris. "Oh, sweetheart, I know you refused to marry me, and maybe there's someone else, but now that I'm going to be well fixed financially, won't you change your mind? Won't you marry me, dearest?" And he held out his hands to her.

For a moment, looking at him, Maris wished that she might rush to the security of his arms, might pillow her head on his breast and tell him all the bitterness she had endured, but no, it would never do. She could not meet his ardent gaze. Her glance dropped to the tablecloth and she nervously plicated and unpleated the snowy surface. Why had Rod to come here this night of all nights?

She loved him and yet something seemed to be urging her on to this adventure with Stan. Surely there was no harm to it. Anyway she would never want Rod to think that she had changed her mind and was ready to marry him just because he had made some money.

Then as he ceased his pleading, she glanced casually at him. "Oh, Rod, why talk about marrying all the time? If only we could be friends like we used to."

"You know that's impossible. I love you with every inch of my being. I want you for my wife, but—well, I guess I've made a big mistake. I thought you loved me just as I love you. I suppose there's no use saying any more. I'm sorry I intruded." Picking up his hat, he

started for the door.

"There's no need to go away like that. Stay to supper with us," she urged although she was feverishly hoping he would go before Patsy could add her voice to her rather half-hearted invitation.

"No thank you, Maris, I'll be going," and before she realized it he had opened the door and vanished.

Once more Maris felt disturbed by something in the expression of his lips. Then she shook herself. She was getting horribly critical. Stan was a good fellow. He'd show her a good time.

As he handed her into his smart limousine, she wished that Milly or some of the other girls might see her, and listen to the line she was giving her young boss.

He hadn't a great deal to say, a few stock phrases, a few snappy come-backs, that, had Maris known it, had done duty many times before. At last, however, they swung into Park avenue and Maris was thrilled at the speed at which they went.

"Say," Stan said, "you've got to pose in the wedding dress for I don't want to send out cuts of Rowena's picture to all our customers, and they're all writing in raving about it. You didn't know you were in the movies, in the newsreel, did you?"

"Why no, how exciting!" cried Maris.

"Oh, you don't know what you've started. But say, here we are! We'll have dinner here, and then take in a night club or two. You'd like that?"

"Sure I would."

"Well, little girl, there isn't a thing I wouldn't do for you after you were such a peach helping me out the way you did."

"Oh, it was nothing, Mr. Feyson."

"Say, how do you get that way? I'm Stan to you now and always, and don't you forget it, you little bit of sugar."

"You mean I should call you Stan?" asked Maris.

"Sure, I don't want any 'misters' around here, and just remember that," he announced as they entered a hotel together.

"Now," he said, after they were seated at a rather inconspicuous table, "what do you like, Maris? Anything you want is yours for the asking?"

"Oh, why don't you order for me?" she answered, amazed at the magnificence of the jewels and dress of the women around them.

"Well, if you'd like me to, I will. I rather pride myself on knowing how to order a swell dinner."

"All right, I love surprises," Maris answered, relieved that she had escaped that ordeal, for never in all her life had she dined at such a sumptuous hotel.

"Well, that little thing's attended to. What brand do you smoke?" Maris named a popular brand.

"Here they are," replied Stan, taking a jewel-studded cigarette case from his pocket.

"That's one thing we have in common," and he laughed rather vacuously as though he had got off a clever crack.

"Like to dance now?" he asked as the crooning call of the orchestra was luring people from their tables.

"No, not yet," answered Maris, realizing all too well how out of place her simple little frock would look amongst the gorgeously dressed women who were on the floor.

"All right, little one. Well, here comes the cats," and Maris suppressed an almost wolfish-hungry look in Stan's eyes as the waitress put the food before him. Somehow the picture of Rod rose before her, but quickly she banished it.

The very novelty of her experience intrigued Maris as the dinner proceeded from course to course, but she was glad when, about ten o'clock, they decided to seek amusement elsewhere.

"This whole street's full of speak-easies," Stan said as he cruised on. "I wonder which you'd like best," and he turned to her with a rather foolish grin on his face.

"Oh, the one with the best orchestra," she answered quickly. "I love to dance!"

"You do? Well, here's the place," and, drawing the car to the curb, he stepped out and helped her onto the street.

When they entered the "speak," Maris had a strange feeling that she had left herself outside and that it was another person who crossed the threshold in her clothes.

Immediately Stan secured a table, then ordered some drinks. For a moment Maris hesitated as she glanced at the cocktail before her. She had rarely tasted liquor.

As she hesitated, Stan said, "Better try some of mine," and asking the waiter for a glass, he poured out a generous drink from his monogrammed silver flask. "It's the Grand MacNeish. How'd you like it?"

Maris raised the glass to her lips, and took a sip. "I guess it's okay," she said uncertainly.

"Sure it is," he answered, filling his own glass again and drinking the liquor at one swallow.

At last, when they left, Maris wondered how he could drive after all he'd drunk, but the night air seemed to have a sobering effect on him. When they neared home, he seemed to be perfectly level-headed, as he quickly broached a new plan he had for stressing the style end

of the business.

"How'd you like to work with the stylist?"

"I'd love it."

"Better than typing?"

"A thousand times better," she declared, glancing at him with sparkling eyes.

"Then we'll have to see about that tomorrow—or, I guess today."

"I've had a wonderful evening, Stan. I've enjoyed every minute," she said as he walked with her to the door of the apartment house.

"Well, we'll have another, sweetness," and before she realized what he was doing, she felt his lips on hers.

"Oh, Stan," she said, the color dy-

ing in her cheeks.

Quickly he took her in his arms and raised her face to his. "You're not angry with me, are you, love-liest?"

She shook her head slowly.

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