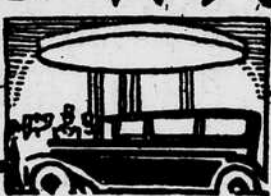


# MAN MADE THE TOWN

by RUBY M. AYRES



ELEVENTH INSTALMENT

"You—offered—then?"  
Linda nodded. "Yes, and I really wanted my freedom. At first I did not, but afterwards—well, he is not the only man in the world, and I am still fairly young and attractive. Anyway, Dennis refused. I suppose it did not suit his plans. I assure you that he refused with outraged dignity. It was a most amusing performance."  
"He—refused," Diana said again. She raised her tragic eyes to Linda's unconcerned face. "Is that really the truth?" she asked painfully.  
"Why should I trouble to lie about it?"

No, Linda would not trouble to lie about it, Diana knew.

Linda said with some feeling, "I'm sorry if I've hurt you. I'd hate to do that. I've been hurt myself so often and so much—"

She broke off, turning with swift welcome to greet a middle-aged gray-haired man who came through the swing doors, and Diana saw him take her hand, heard him say, "Well, my dear," saw the look they exchanged, and knew that she was quite forgotten.

CHAPTER XVI

They went on into the restaurant and when they had gone Diana seemed to come to life. She must get away, that was her one panic-stricken thought. She must get away before Dennis came. She could never bear to meet him any more.

She would go back to the Creature—she would be safe with her. She thought of the little cottage and of her own room with almost passionate longing; not soon enough could she get away from London.

She sat far back in a corner of the cab, terrified still lest some freak of Fate should bring her face to face with Waterman. She only breathed freely when she was safely at the railroad station.

"What time is the next train, please?"

"One due now, miss—first stop Guilford. If you run you will just catch it."

Diana ran. Her long skirts hampered her, and she caught them up anyhow, with impatient inelegance; she would die rather than miss that train.

The guard had already blown his whistle, but a friendly porter dashed forward and wrenched open a carriage door for her, assisting her with clumsy willingness.

Someone shouted peremptorily, "Stand away there; stand away."

But Diana only laughed hysterically, as a man who was already seated in the carriage sprang to his feet and caught her firmly by her shoulders as she tripped over her long frock and almost fell.

He began to say, "That was a narrow shave—" then broke off to speak her name in hoarse amazement.

"Diana!" It was Donald Rathbone.

Diana collapsed onto the seat opposite him, breathless and exhausted.

She moved her head from side to side with a dull feeling of suffocation, and Rathbone said quickly:

"How far have you been running? What is the matter, Diana?"

"Nothing," she laughed harshly.

"Oh, nothing, except that once more I've discovered that life is only a rotten, beastly sham."

He let that pass, and she went on in quick, excited tones:

"We're always wrong about people, no matter how well we think we know them. I'll never believe in anyone again as long as I live."

She had been wrong about Linda too; somehow she had always respected Dennis's wife and envied her her poise and integrity even though she had once so foolishly hated her, and now she had discovered that Linda was playing the same game as the rest of the world, meeting another man secretly, lying about it to her husband (not that that mattered!) in a fugitive chase after the elusive sham called Love which, even if you caught up with it, never gave you any real peace or satisfaction, but only turned to rend you.

"I'll never believe in anyone again as long as I live," Diana cried, passionately, and covering her face with her hands she began to sob.

Rathbone sat very still, his head averted. He could see that Diana was utterly overwrought and knew that she must have received a severe shock, but he saw it was not yet the moment for him to speak, and presently she went on, almost incoherent with her bitter sobbing:

"People don't even love you honestly. . . . It's not you they think about at all. . . . only themselves. . . . Men don't care what becomes of any

woman so long as they get what they want. . . . We're just here. . . . to be made use of. . . . It isn't love. . . . it's all a pretense. . . . just hateful. . . . damned. . . . beastliness. . . . You're all the same. . . . not one of you worth a single tear. . . . and yet we go on. . . . hoping. . . .

"We're such fools. . . . breaking our hearts. . . . wishing we could die. . . ."

"Diana—for God's sake—"

"It's true. . . . you know it's true," she challenged him fiercely. "Yourself, only yourselves. . . . that's all you care about. . . . I don't believe in you any more, ei—either. . . . You're the same as all the others. . . ." Her words were torn by her passionate sobbing.

"You know I loved you. . . . I suppose you meant me to. . . . and then you didn't want me to tell you. . . . I suppose you were afraid I should be a nuisance to you. . . . You'd got one woman on your hands. . . . already. . . . as much as you could manage. . . . I suppose. . . . So you went away. . . . didn't even say good-bye. . . . didn't care. . . . about me, or what happened to me."

"Diana!"

She went on passionately, utterly lost.

"It's true. . . . you know it's true. . . . it wouldn't have mattered to you if I—if I'd gone away and. . . . and lived with half a dozen men. . . . as long as I didn't worry you. . . . any more. . . . You think you're righteous. . . . pretended to be. . . . and all the time you were only just. . . . tired of me. . . . I suppose you—you'd had. . . . enough—"

"Diana!" Rathbone said again brokenly.

With a swift movement he leaned over and took both her wrists in his grasp, drawing her hands away from her convulsed face. He held them for a moment as if even yet he could not trust himself sufficiently to tell her the truth, and then, with a smothered exclamation he bent his face to her hands, holding them tightly there, closing his eyes against their softness, his lips pressed to their palms in passionate kisses.

"Diana. . . . Diana. . . ."

She was suddenly still, sobbing no more; her eyes were on his down-bent head, her breath coming in little gasps from between her parted lips as if each one was a separate pain. . . . till at last he looked up.

For a long moment they held on another's gaze, not speaking, just reading in each other's hearts all of their sorrow and joy and pent-up love; then Rathbone leaned over and took her in his arms. He held her to him, all crumpled up as if she had been a child, till, after a long silence, during which neither of them was conscious of anything but each other's nearness, she moved her arm a little, half furtively, as if she still feared him, and then with a swift, confident movement she clasped it round his neck.

"Oh—do you love me—after all?" she sobbed, her cheek against his.

"Didn't you know?"

She shook her head, her soft hair brushing his face. "No. . . . not after you went away. . . . like that."

"I had to go. . . . It was all I could do for you."

"And. . . . now?" she breathed.

She felt his arms tighten around her for a moment, but he did not answer her whispered question, and she repeated it, changing her position a little, trying to see his face, but he kept it hidden against her.

"My dear one. . . . you know I am not free."

She caught her breath.

"You mean. . . . Rosalie?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence. Then she asked slowly as if she dreaded the answer and yet must know:

"Who—who—is she?"

She could feel the heavy throbbing of his heart against her own.

"She's my. . . . wife. . . . Diana."

CHAPTER XVII

Diana's arm fell from Rathbone's shoulder, and for a moment she lay quite still, her mind a blank, her body limp; then with a swift movement she slipped from his arms, falling back helplessly onto the seat behind her.

His wife! Such a possibility had never crossed her mind.

She never doubted the truth of what he had just said—Rathbone would never lie to her.

His wife!

Presently Rathbone touched her hand, rousing her.

"This is our station, Diana."

She stood up obediently, folding her coat warmly around her.

Hobsop was on the platform.

Rathbone spoke to him. "I'll drive myself. Can you get a lift back?"

"Yes, sir."

Presently they were alone again, driving through the quiet roads.

Rathbone had not turned in the direction of the cottage, but Diana hardly noticed; she sat beside him, lost in a kind of stupor.

Rosalie was his wife; that meant eternal separation; she could not find room for any other thought in her bewildered mind.

Presently they were out in the country in a narrow road with trees overhead and hedges on either side; the lights of the car lamps threw each separate object into glaring relief before it swirled past; then again into blackness.

Diana had let the window down, and the cool air, sweet from its flight over fields and valleys, blew on her tired face, reviving her a little.

The quiet hum of the engine seemed to be saying the same thing to her over and over again:

"She's his wife. . . . she's his wife. . . . she's his wife," till she felt that she must cry out in protest.

Then Rathbone drew the car to the roadside, and stopped.

For a moment he sat silent at the wheel then he asked:

"Will you believe what I am going to tell you, Diana?"

She moved her head in listless assent.

"Oh, yes."

His quiet voice was a little shaken as he went on:

"First I want you to know that I love you with all my heart and soul and that I should count myself the most. . . . most blest among men if I could ask you to be my wife. . . . but I can't. . . . I—" he stopped, continuing again with increasing difficulty: "Then I want you to know about. . . . Rosalie. I have never told any living soul but you—I shall never tell anyone else. It all happened so long ago—twelve years, soon after the war. She—she was the wife of a friend of mine—a decent fellow from a man's point of view, but a man who should never have married. . . . He didn't understand women or even try to. . . . She wasn't happy with him. I was a young man then, and she—she was kind enough to like me. . . . I am not going to pretend to you that I was not attracted to her. I was."

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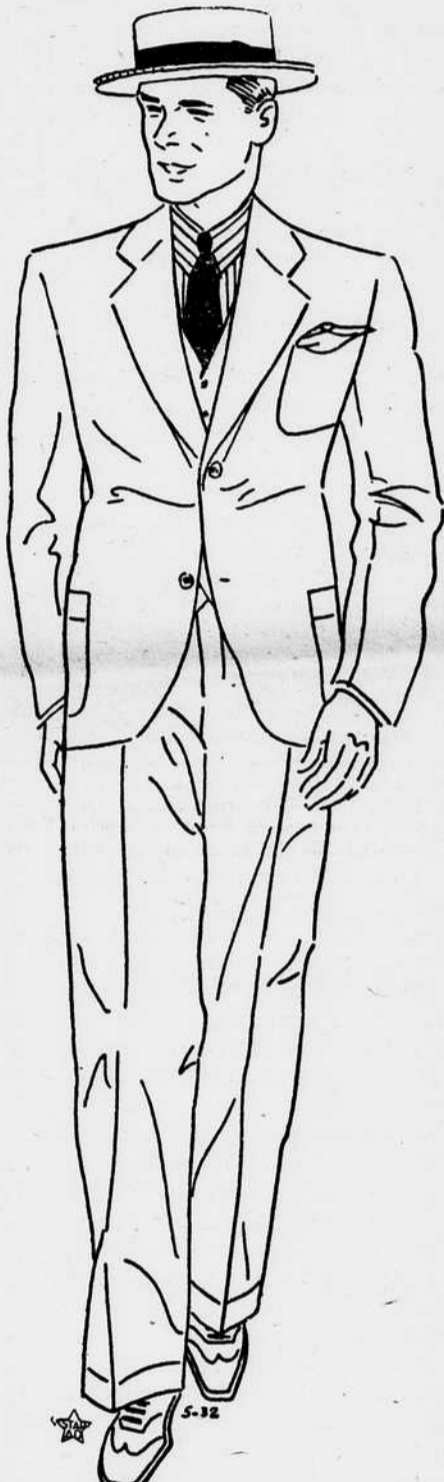
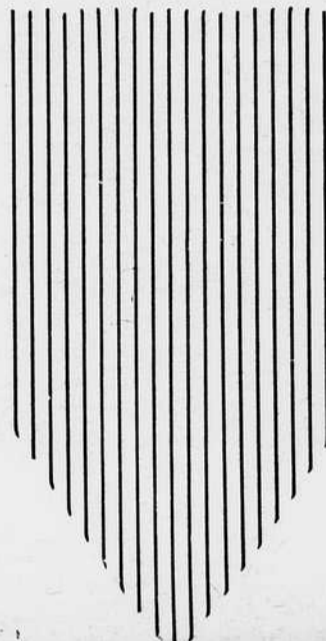
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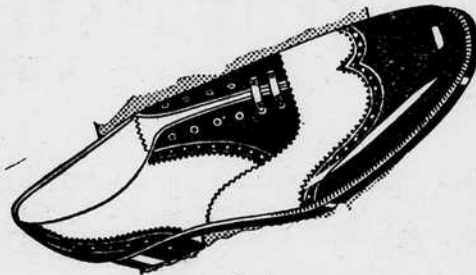
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