

MAN MADE THE TOWN

by RUBY M. AYRES

FINAL INSTALMENT

He slipped an arm beneath her head and held something to her lips. He had done this before too, only that time it had been tea—tea which Jenny had brought upstairs. This time it was horrid stuff. Perhaps the kettle hadn't boiled properly. Nothing annoyed the Creature more than to be given tea when the water hadn't boiled properly.

The nice Creature! Diana hoped the sea wasn't always rough in Britany like it had been on the picture post-card she sent.

"Diana."
It was wonderful how real voices sometimes sounded in a dream; she found herself listening with strained attention to hear it once more, but everything was silent, and a sigh of bitter disappointment escaped her.

The other half of her senses was waking up now: the half that told her that she was only dreaming, and Diana knew only too well what that meant. It meant that presently she would hear Anna drawing the curtains, their rings always made such a nasty little rattle, and she would have to yawn elaborately and pretend she had slept well before she opened her eyes to the world of emptiness.

"Diana."
She turned again to where in her dream Rathbone had sat beside her. He was still there, leaning a little towards her, his dark eye on her face.

Diana kept very still. Perhaps she might manage to fall asleep again and go on dreaming if she was very careful.

She wished he would hold her hand, but you couldn't do that in dreams. It would be like the dream you had sometimes that you were falling down a great hill. A dream in which you knew that any moment you might reach the bottom and be killed, only you never did.

She began to whimper faintly:
"Let me go... let me go..."

"Diana."
She knew that she was sinking away, but she did not mind. There was no bed under her any more, but just clouds—soft, fleecy clouds that were letting her down with infinite gentleness into oblivion.

But a voice called her. She forced her heavy eyes to open and to look into eyes that were bent above her, compelling, almost praying to her, it seemed.

"Diana... listen... listen to me... Oh, my beloved, try to understand... I will never leave you again... Can you hear me?... I will never leave you again... Diana!"

It was Donald's voice, though she had never before heard it with that note of agony; something must be the matter: he was in trouble—unhappy, and that was not like him; he was always so ready to bear other people's troubles and forget his own.

But she could not help him now—she was too tired to try any more to make him smile. If he would just let her alone—she was quite happy...
"Never leave you again... never leave you again..."

She turned her face fretfully from him; she didn't believe him, it was just another... ruse... to keep her from going to sleep: the sleep she had longed for so wearily and tried so hard to capture—he might leave her alone now she had so nearly won through at last.

"Diana..."
It was as if he were fighting her for every step of the ground over which she was slowly slipping away, and at first she knew contentedly that he was losing, that in spite of her weakness and his strength he would not be able to hold her back.

Funny, that seemed—for a great big man to be conquered by a little girl. She began to be faintly interested, to wonder why it should be. Life was full of things impossible to explain. She only knew that she was utterly weary and that she wanted to sleep.

She said so presently, half crying, feebly, but he was relentless, he would not let her go.

For a moment she fought him with the last remnants of her strength; then suddenly she gave in, with a little sigh and a half smile... "You've got your own way, then..."

She had said that to him once before—long ago—and he had answered, "I generally do in the long run."
"She wanted now to hear him say it again, he dream wasn't coming right, somehow..."

She opened her eyes with a last effort, trying to see his face, but now she couldn't... he was hiding it from her, against her hands, as he had done that night in the train...

He was unhappy—and she hated

him to be unhappy; she knew so well how it felt.

She gave a little sigh of weary capitulation.

"You always get your own way," she whispered.

The last word was lost as she fell asleep.

It was nearly five o'clock in the morning when Anna, who had steadily refused to take any rest, slipped again into Diana's room.

Rathbone was still there, standing at the foot of the bed, his eyes on Diana's quiet face.

Anna crept up to him.

"Is she—better?"

Rathbone nodded silently.

"Is she—will she—live?"

"Please God."

Anna closed her eyes for a moment; then she asked:

"Can you leave her for a moment, sir; I'll stay."

He shook his head, but she said urgently:

"There's someone downstairs who wants to see you—a man named Hobson—he says he must see you—that he's been looking for you all night."

"Hobson." Rathbone seemed to wake with a little start. "Oh, yes—tell him to give you a message."

"He won't, sir—he says he must see you—if it's only for a moment."

Anna hesitated. Rathbone looked so worn out, but after a moment she said reluctantly, "I'm afraid it's something very urgent, sir."

"Very well. I'll come..."

He bent over Diana, his fingers on her wrist for a moment; then he turned and walked out of the room.

Anna took his place at the foot of the bed. Physically she was half asleep, but her brain had never been more active and awake. She was thinking how queer it was that some women got all the love, while others, more worthy and hard working, were passed by.

She knew how near Diana had been to death; she knew that there had been one moment at least during the long, terrible night, when even Rathbone himself had given up hope... or hadn't he? She could not be quite sure, but she knew that if ever a man had fought for a woman's life he had fought for Diana's.

It was as if by sheer will power he had kept her from slipping away...

Of course, he was in love with her. Anna found an odd satisfaction in a discovery of which she was certain that everybody else was as yet ignorant.

Mrs. Gladwyn had refused to come into the room at all; she had taken cowardly refuge in a fit of hysteria when she was told that by mistake Diana had taken an overdose of morphine and might die.

It had given Anna some satisfaction, also, to be free to smack her face with a wet towel and tell her to behave; Anna had never liked Mrs. Gladwyn, and this seemed a heavenly opportunity to repay the many little indignities she had suffered at that lady's hands.

She was half dozing, holding firmly to the bed rail, when Rathbone came back, it might have been five minutes or half an hour later; at five o'clock in the morning it is difficult to keep track of time.

Anna started awake, smiling in nervous apology, a smile which quickly faded as she saw Rathbone's face.

"Why—sir!" she stammered.

He waved her away impatiently.

"It's all right. You can go. You had better go to bed. I shall stay till the morning."

"If you would like me to stay..."

Anna ventured timidly.

"No. Markham's up if I want anything."

Anna crept away, closing the door behind her.

Rathbone went back to his old place beside Diana.

There was a curious gray look in his face, and he sat for a long time, his hands clenched between his knees, his eyes staring blankly before him. He kept seeing nightmare pictures of a river, of a woman and of a boy—a boy who had given his life in an unavailing attempt to save her.

Hobson had broken down and sobbed as he told how they had at last found them:

"Clasped in each other's arms they were—as if she'd clung to him and dragged him down. I'd have given my life, sir, rather than anything should have happened to her..."

Diana stirred a little in her sleep, and Rathbone turned his head slowly and looked at her. Better Rosalie's life than this child's, if one of them had

to go.

If it had been Diana... the last six weeks rose before him, a nightmare panorama.

He had tried to do the best thing for her, and he had done the worst. He had meant to be kind, and he had only succeeded in being brutally cruel.

In an aching imagination he saw her again sitting at that long dining table in her white frock—so far away from him and so brave. He had not guessed that it had been as great a torment to her as it had been to him.

Supposing he had still been away? He knew that the chances were that Diana would have died. This night had settled all question of the future: not again would he let her go away from him... He would have to find some way... Then suddenly he remembered—the river—and Hobson's broken story.

He was free, but at what a cost. The life of the woman whom he had cared for and sheltered for so many years, and the life of a boy who as yet had known nothing of life. Perhaps in that Jonas was fortunate: he was a dreamer, and dreamers suffer.

Rathbone knew that now the story of his marriage would have to be made known: something fresh for the claws of gossiping vultures to tear to pieces. Not that he cared for himself, but it hurt him inexpressibly for Diana's sake, and in a lesser degree for Rosalie's. She had meant nothing in his life, and yet he knew he would never forget her, the pitiful, unreal thing that had lived for so long in his shadow.

"Rosalie, wife of Donald Rathbone."

That was what the vultures would expect him to write on her tombstone; there seemed something of sardonic humour in it as he sat there, his eyes on Diana's face.

She was his wife—the one love of his life; even if he had never seen her again, nobody would ever have drawn near to her place in his heart.

Half child, half woman, spoilt, willful—intolerant of life when it went the way she did not wish—he yet loved her with every impulse of his manhood.

And she loved him; for a moment he lost himself in the wonder of that thought—and of her sleeping face.

Somewhere in the house a clock chimed six, and he stood up, stretching his arms, feeling wearied to death, and yet, amidst all the tragedy surrounding him, conscious of a quiet, perfect happiness which nothing could spoil.

Diana stirred a little, as if conscious of his movement, fearing that he was leaving her.

Rathbone stood still, and she turned her head, looking at him with half-conscious eyes, whispering his name.

"Donald..."

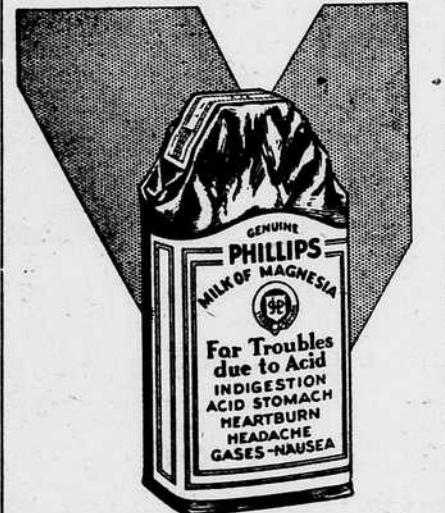
"Yes, my heart."

Her hand fluttered a little towards him, and he took it in his, quiet and strongly, as if with it he took her also, body and soul.

He saw a little doubt flicker across her eyes and vanish.

"It— isn't a dream?" she asked.

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"No, Diana."
"And you'll never send me away again?"
"Never again."
She gave a sigh of contentment.
"I don't... know... what's going to happen to us," she said drowsily, half asleep once more.
"But... I know... it will be all right, always... if we're together."
Rathbone bent and just touched her lips with his own.
"Yes, my heart—it will be all right—always—if we're together."
THE END

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