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Make-Believe Bride

by Ruth Harley

FINAL CHAPTER

"What do you mean—committed a crime?" There was a terrified look in her dark eyes.

"Well, they've just discovered he's been at the head of a bunch of racketeers who were systematically robbing his father."

"How could he do that?" asked Maris, suddenly remembering something Jimmy had once hinted at.

"Well, he tipped them off when truck loads would be leaving the mills. Then the bandits would hold them up, knock out the drivers and turn the stuff over to another bunch of men who would dispose of it and hand Stanley his share."

"But surely they won't do anything to him?" asked Maris, remembering Stan's haughty mother.

"I don't know. Those thugs who made you ride with them were some of the ringleaders and because Stan tried to cheat them out of more than his share they've told on him and now there's a nasty front page scandal about it all."

"Oh, Patsy; surely they can't say anything about me?"

"What could they say, Maris dear? Not a thing. Of course I wouldn't wonder if Stan's scared stiff if he ever gives a thought to what may have happened to you. But there—that's all past. Of course, though, you will have to resign from Fayson's."

"But, Milly—Oh Pats, you know I got kind of sore at you not having sympathy with my attempts to step up on the social ladder, and sometimes I used to talk things over with Milly. I wonder what she'll say now?"

"Don't bother about her or anyone else; they'll all be so busy talking about Stan's crookedness that you'll be forgotten. There, I don't mean that exactly, but after all they'll realize you were just one of them and when a show-down came you knew which side of the line you were on."

"You're a dear, Pat. I'll never forget this."

There was a knock at the bedroom door. "Come in," called Pat.

"I was wondering if Miss Maris would be ready for a bite of supper. I thought I'd bring it up before we sat down." It was the farmer's wife.

"I'm afraid I'm making a awful lot of trouble for you, Mrs. Dawson," said Maris. "I'm sure I can get up now."

"You'd better not. A bite of supper and then a good night's rest and you'll be ready to start off in the morning. Not that I want you to leave in such a rush, but the gentleman insists he's got to get to the city."

"Yes, that's so," said Pat. "Well, I'll come down with you and then I can bring Maris' supper up to her."

By seven o'clock next morning Maris was headed for the city, but this time she had no fear that any moment might be her last. Jimmy Doyle, while a good driver, never took chances, especially when Patsy was riding with him.

Already Maris had shaken off the terror that seemed to possess her, and as she told Patsy little incidents of her hectic love affair, she was almost able to jest about them. The Dawsons had treated her as a sort of heroine because of her part in trapping the criminals. Taking it altogether, in spite of all the discouraging things that she had gone through, Maris knew that life still lay before her, and that there would be other opportunities for her to show Patsy that she wasn't altogether the fool she insisted on calling herself.

But when they reached home and entered the little flat once more, Maris began to realize what her escapade had cost her. She'd lost her good position and the chance to get a better one, and now with conditions still none too rosy she realized that it wouldn't be such an easy thing to pick up a job.

"But you don't need to worry about that. You need a holiday anyway, so why don't you make up your mind to stay home and keep house?"

"Keep house?" asked Maris. "Since when could we afford to have one of us do that?"

"Well, honey, it's like this. Jim-

have for an intimate friend, and now that she had cut herself off from Fayson's she decided it would be better to let things stay as they were.

As she sat alone in the evenings her thought turned often to Rod. Had he a steady nowadays, she wondered. Was she that stunning looking girl she had seen him meet? Her eyes filled with tears. She realized that she had deliberately cut herself off from happiness.

Patsy had never mentioned Rod since Maris had come back. Somehow she'd been expecting her to say something about him, maybe to suggest that she should call him up or ask him to come to see her. Her tears fell fast. Maybe Patsy realized she had had about enough to stand; that the knowledge—if it really were so—that he had transferred his affections elsewhere would hurt her so much. Pat probably thought that it would be kinder never to mention his name.

And yet as she laid her sewing down and wiped her tear-filled eyes, she felt a desperate longing to know about Rod, even if he were going to marry some other girl. At least her heart would be at rest, and she would try to build up her broken life, to fill it with other interests. She knew now that she would never really love anyone as she had loved Rod, and felt there could be no one else.

The bell rang. It was only the mailman with a card from Jimmy and Patsy. "We are having a lovely time," they wrote. "Wish you were with us." She laughed as she read the message written in Jimmy's careless handwriting. That would be a nice idea—to be their chaperone on their honeymoon.

But somehow when she found she could laugh, her fit of the blues seemed suddenly to dissolve. Even if she might never again know the sweetness of Rod's love, she must try to keep from getting soured.

Then she thought of the Dawsons in their comfortable home in the Connecticut Valley. She'd

some caramels. Like some?" she asked.

"You know I would. I haven't tasted a decent bit of candy since —" He hesitated abruptly, and Maris wondered what he had intended to say.

But, leading the way into the kitchen, she said, "Help yourself, while I put all this trash away," and quickly she gathered up her materials.

"They're great, Maris, the finest ever. What are you going to do now?"

"Oh, finish sewing Patsy's curtains, I suppose."

"Wouldn't you like to go to a show?"

"Maybe," said Maris, as she bent over her sewing. Did Rod still love her, she wondered. Surely if he was going with that other girl he would not invite her to go out with him. Still, maybe he'd expected to see Jimmy and Patsy; maybe he was just being polite. If only she knew where she stood with him!

Then she remembered, she had suggested they should just be friends. Had he taken her at her word? The color dyed her cheeks as she wondered if he knew anything about her adventure. Of course she'd never said anything to Patsy about keeping quiet about it. But Patsy was so loyal, she didn't need to do that.

There was silence in the little room for a long minute. Then Rod put his hand on her slender arm. "Don't you want to put that stuff away, Maris? It's a long, long time since I've had a talk with you."

"Yes," murmured Maris, but she did not raise her eyes. Would she ever feel gay and light-hearted again as she used to when Rod and she were friends? Carefully, she folded up her sewing and laid it on the table. Then as she turned and faced him again, he caught her in his arms and drew her to him.

Raising her face to his, he looked long into her dark eyes. "Maris, my sweet, I've been trying to forget you, but it's no good. I can't, dear heart. Don't you think you could love me just a little? I've missed you so, my dear."

Her arms tightened about his neck and as she nestled against his heart, she murmured, "No, Rod, I can't love you just a little, for all this time I've been loving you with my whole heart—just you."

"Darling," he whispered, "you really mean that?" and again she raised her face to his. But when he saw her glowing eyes he knew she spoke the truth and as their lips met, Maris knew that this was indeed the man for her.

And she knew that her most thrilling day was still to come, when she went to the altar as Rod's bride—a real bride this time, with a real man, who would love and cherish her, for her bridegroom.

THE END.

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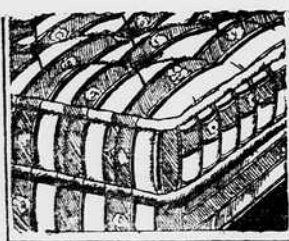
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Maris knew that Rod was the man for her.

my's got his raise and we've decided we may as well get married. Then, as there's a chance he may be transferred to some other city in a few months, we were thinking we might stay here till we see what happens."

"Oh, but this will be no place for me!" cried Maris.

Of course it will. If we get married next Saturday, then we're going away for a two weeks' trip, and could stay here and look after things."

"That would be lovely, but it doesn't seem fair that I should be living off you."

"Living off me! Nonsense. There are a lot of things I want done and if you'll do them for me, that will more than pay back anything it will cost for your keep. And then, who knows, something may turn up for you by that time. Anyway, you don't need to worry, for Jimmy will be perfectly happy to have you here."

And so, on Saturday evening Patsy and Jimmy were quietly married, and started for their wedding trip in Jimmy's car. The house seemed strangely desolate to Maris, as she fixed up the things Patsy had asked her to—making curtains and things for Patsy's home.

She hadn't tried to get a job. The least she could do was help Patsy out after all she had done for her. Once she'd thought of calling up Milly, but then, Milly

promised Tillie she'd send her some candy.

So, slipping on an apron, she went into the kitchen and started to make her preparations.

Setting her scales on the table, measuring out the sugar, and taking down her box of flavoring, Maris started her candy-making. It was a nice cool afternoon and her caramels turned out beautifully. She was just debating whether to make another batch when suddenly the door bell rang.

Pulling off her apron, and smoothing her hair, she hurried to the door. But when she opened it, her heart almost turned over. Rod O'Rourke was standing on the threshold!

"Well, Maris, aren't you going to ask me in?" he questioned as he held out his hand.

"Of course," she whispered, while her cheeks grew rosy, and a sudden sparkle leaped into her eyes. "But Jimmy and Patsy are still away."

"That's fine. I guess they're having a good time. It's wonderful weather for an auto trip," he said. He stepped inside and hung his hat on the hall rack just as he used to do.

"Yes, I had a post card from them today. They're somewhere in the Berkshires," said Maris.

"And you're running the show alone?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded, wondering what had brought him around to the apartment. "I've been making