

The Prodigal Village

By Irving Bacheller

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CHAPTER SEVEN.

In Which High Voltage Develops in the Conversation.

It was a warm, bright May day. There was not a cloud in the sky. Roger Delane had arrived and the Bings were giving a dinner that evening. The best people of Hazelmead were coming over in motorcars. Phyllis and Roger had a long ride together that day on the new Kentucky saddle horses. Mrs. Bing had spent the morning in Hazelmead and had stayed to lunch with Mayor and Mrs. Stacy. She had returned at four and cut some flowers for the table and gone to her room for an hour's rest when the young people returned. She was not yet asleep when Phyllis came into the big bedroom. Mrs. Bing lay among the cushions on her couch. She partly rose, tumbled the cushions into a pile and leaned against them.

"Heavens! I'm tired!" she exclaimed. "These women in Hazelmead hang onto me like a lot of hungry cats. They all want money for one thing or another—Red Cross or Liberty bonds or fatherless children or tobacco for the soldiers or books for the library. My word! I'm broke and it seems as if each of my legs hung by a thread."

Phyllis smiled as she stood looking down at her mother.

"How beautiful you look!" the fond mother exclaimed. "If he didn't propose to-day, he's a chump."

"But he did," said Phyllis. "I tried to keep him from it, but he just would propose in spite of me."

The girl's face was red and serious. She sat down in a chair and began to remove her hat. Mrs. Bing rose suddenly, and stood facing Phyllis.

"I thought you loved him," she said with a look of surprise.

"So I do," the girl answered.

"What did you say?"

"I said no."

"What?"

"I refused him."

"For God's sake, Phyllis! Do you think you can afford to play with a man like that? He won't stand for it."

"Let him sit for it then and, mother, you might as well know, first as last, that I am not playing with him."

There was a calm note of firmness in the voice of the girl. She was prepared for this scene. She had known it was coming. Her mother was hot with irritating astonishment. The calmness of the girl in suddenly beginning to dig a grave for this dear ambition-rich with promise—in the very day when it had come submissively to their feet, stung like the tooth of a serpent. She stood very erect and said with an icy look in her face:

"You young upstart! What do you mean?"

There was a moment of frigid silence in which both of the women began to turn cold. Then Phyllis answered very calmly as she sat looking down at the bunch of violets in her hand:

"It means that I am married, mother."

Mrs. Bing's face turned red. There was a little convulsive movement of the muscles around her mouth. She folded her arms on her breast, lifted her chin a bit higher and asked in a polite tone, although her words fell like fragments of cracked ice:

"Married! To whom are you married?"

"To Gordon King."

Phyllis spoke casually as if he were a piece of ribbon that she had bought at a store.

Mrs. Bing sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands for half a moment. Suddenly she picked up a slipper that lay at her feet and flung it at the girl.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "What a nasty liar you are!"

It was not ladylike but, at that moment the lady was temporarily absent.

"Mother, I'm glad you say that," the girl answered still very calmly, although her fingers trembled a little as she felt the violets, and her voice



"Married! To Whom Are You Married?"

was not quite steady. "It shows that I am not so stupid at home as I am at school."

The girl rose and threw down the violets and her mild and listless manner. A look of defiance filled her face and her figure. Mrs. Bing arose, her eyes aglow with anger.

"I'd like to know what you mean," she said under her breath.

"I mean that if I am a liar, you taught me how to be it. Ever since I was knee-high, you have been teaching me to deceive my father. I am not going to do it any longer. I am going to find my father and tell him the truth. I shall not wait another minute. He will give me better advice than you have given, I hope."

The words had fallen rapidly from her lips and, as the last one was spoken, she hurried out of the room. Mrs. Bing threw herself on the couch where she lay with certain bitter memories, until the new maid came to tell her that it was time to dress.

She was like one reminded of mortality after coming out of ether.

"Oh, Lord!" she murmured wearily. "I feel like going to bed! How can I live through that dinner? Please bring me some brandy."

Phyllis learned that her father was at his office, whither she proceeded without a moment's delay. She sent in word that she must see him alone and as soon as possible. He dismissed the men with whom he had been talking and invited her into his private office.

"Well, girl, I guess I know what is on your mind," he said. "Go ahead."

Phyllis began to cry.

"All right! You do the crying and I'll do the talking," he went on. "I feel like doing the crying myself, but if you want the job, I'll resign it to you. Perhaps you can do enough of that for both of us. I began to smell a rat the other day. So I sent for Gordon King. He came this morning. I had a long talk with him. He told me the truth. Why didn't you tell me? What's the good of having a father unless you use him at times when his counsel is likely to be worth having? I would have made a good father, if I had had half a chance. I should like to have been your friend and confidant in this important enterprise. I should have been a help to you. But, somehow, I couldn't get on the board of directors. You and your mother have been running the plant all by yourselves and I guess it's pretty near bankrupt. Now, my girl, there's no use crying over spilt tears. Gordon King is not the man of my choice, but we must all take hold and try to build him up. Perhaps we can make him pay."

"I do not love him," Phyllis sobbed.

"You married him because you wanted to. You were not coerced?"

"No, sir."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to take your share of the crow with the rest of us," he went on, with a note of sternness in his tone. "My girl, when I make a contract I live up to it and I intend that you shall do the same. You'll have to learn to love and cherish this fellow, if he makes it possible. You and your mother believe in woman's rights. I don't object to that, but you mustn't think that you have the right to break your agreements unless there's a good reason for it. My girl, the marriage contract is the most binding and sacred of all contracts. I want you to do your best to make this one a success."

There was the tinkle of the telephone bell. Mr. Bing put the re-

ceiver to his ear and spoke into the instrument as follows:

"Yes, she's here! I knew all the facts before she told me. Mr. Delane? He's on his way back to New York. Left on the six-ten. Charged me to present his regrets and farewells to you and Phyllis. I thought it best for him to know and to go. Yes, we're counting right home to dress. Mr. King will take Mr. Delane's place at the table. We'll make a clean breast of the whole business. Brace up and eat your crow with a smiling face. I'll make a little speech and present Mr. and Mrs. King to our friends at the end of it. Oh, now, cut out the sobbing and leave this unfinished business to me and don't worry. We'll be home in three minutes."

(To be continued.)

NOTICE TO VIOLATORS OF CITY ORDINANCE.

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