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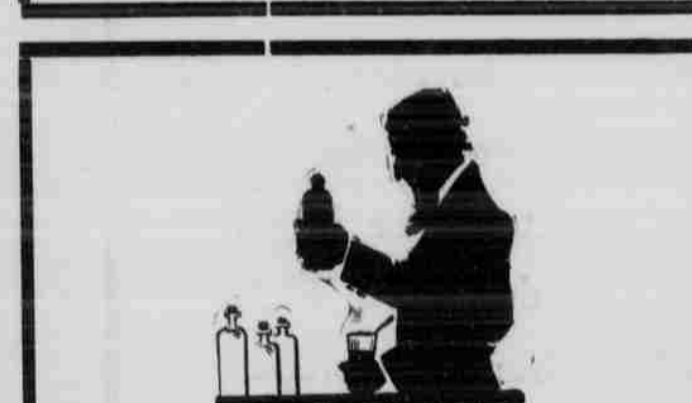
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BY REX BEACH

Here we have the tale of a young woman who is thrust by her greedy and lazy family into a world of human vultures to win a fortune with her personal charms. But she surprises them all with her fine traits of character. Her struggles and constant danger are frightening, but she brings help and happiness to men and women who need it much. This is a story with strong pulse.

CHAPTER I.

Peter Knight flung himself into the delectable armchair beside the center table and groveled:

"Isn't that just my luck? And me a Democrat for twenty years. There's nothing in politics, Jimmy."

His son James smiled crookedly, with a languid tolerance bespeaking amusement and contempt.

"Politics is all right, provided you're a good picker," he said, with all the assurance of twenty-two, "but you fell off the wrong side of the fence, and you're sore. These country towns always go in for the reform stuff every so often. If you'd listen to me and—"

His father interrupted harshly: "Now, cut that out. I don't want to go to New York and I won't." Peter Knight tried to look forceful, but the expression did not fit his weak, concupiscent features. When he had succeeded in fixing a look of determination upon his countenance the result was an artificial scowl and a paganly false pout. Wearing such a pout, he continued: "When I say 'no' I mean it and the subject is closed. I like Yale. I know everybody here, and everybody knows me."

"That's why it's time to move," said Jim, with another unpleasant curl of his lip. "As long as they didn't know you you got past. But you'll never hold another office."

"Indeed! My record's open to inspection. I made the best sheriff in—"

"Two years. Don't kid yourself, old man. You got into the mud, but you didn't go deep enough to find the frogs. Fogarty got his, didn't he?"

Mr. Knight breathed deep with indignation.

"Senator Fogarty is my good friend. I won't let you question his honor, although you do presume to question mine."

"Of course he's your friend; that's why he's fixed you for this New York job."

"Department of water supply, gas and electricity," sneered Peter. "It sounds good, but the salary is fifteen hundred a year. A clerk—at my age!"

"Say, if you suppose Tammany men live on their salaries?" Jimmie inquired. "Wake up! This is your chance to horn into the real herd. In New York politics is a vacation; up here it's a vacation—everybody tries it once, like music lessons. If you'd been hooked up with Tammany instead of the state machine you'd have been taken care of."

At this juncture Mrs. Knight, having finished the supper dishes and set her bread to rise, entered the shabby parlor. Jim turned to her, shrugging his shoulders with an air of washing

his hands of a disagreeable subject. "Pa's weakened again," he explained. "He won't go."

"Me, a clerk—at my age!" mumbled Peter.

His wife spoke with brief concisiveness. "I wrote and thanked Senator Fogarty for his offer and told him you'd accept."

"You—what?" Peter was dumfounded.

"Yes," Mrs. Knight seemed oblivious of his wrath—"we're going to make a change."

Mrs. Knight was a large woman well advanced beyond that indefinite turning point of middle age; in her unattractive face was none of the easy good nature so unmistakably stamped upon her husband's. Peter J., under easy living had grayed and fattened; what had once been a measure of good looks was hidden now behind a flabby, indolent mediocrity which an unusual carefulness in dress could not disguise. His wife was of a totally different

stamp, showing evidence of unusual force. Her thin lips, her clean-cut nose betokened purpose; a pair of alert, unpleasant eyes spoke of a mental activity that was entirely lacking in her mate, and she was generally recognized as the source of what little prominence he had attained.

"Yes, we're going to make a change," she repeated. "I'm glad, too, for I'm tired of housework."

"You don't have to do your own work. There's Lorelei to help."

"She's too pretty," said the mother. "You don't realize it; none of us do, but—she's beautiful. Where she gets her good looks from I don't know."

"What's the difference? It won't hurt her to wash dishes. She wouldn't have to keep it up forever, anyhow; she can have any fellow in the county."

Mrs. Knight began slowly, musingly: "You need some plain talk, Peter. I don't often tell you just what I think, but I'm going to now. You're past fifty; you've spent twenty years putting around at politics, and what have you got to show for it? Nothing. The reformers are in at last, and you're out for good. You had your chance and you missed it. You're little, Peter; you know it, and so does the party."

The object of this address swelled pompously; his cheeks deepened to hue and distended; but while he was summing words for a defense his wife ran on evenly:

"The party used you just as long as you could deliver something, but you're down and out now, and they've thrown you over. Fogarty offers to pay his debt, and I'm not going to refuse his help."

"I suppose you think you could have done better if you'd been in my place," Peter grumbled. He was angry, yet the undeniable truth of his wife's words struck home. "That's the woman of it. You kick because we're poor, and then want me to take a fifteen-hundred-dollar job."

"Rather the salary! It will keep us going as long as necessary."

"Eh?" Mr. Knight looked blank.

"I'm thinking of Lorelei. She's going to give us our chance."

"Lorelei?"

"Yes, you wonder why I've never let her spoil her hands—why I've scribbled to give her pretty clothes, and taught her to take care of her figure, and made her go out with young people. Well, I know what I was doing; it was part of her schooling. She's old enough now, and she has everything that any girl ever had, so far as looks go. She's going to do for us what you never have been and never will be able to do, Peter Knight. She's going to make us rich. But she can't do it in Yale."

"Ma's right," declared James. "New York's the place for pretty women; the town is full of them."

"If it's full of pretty women, what chance has she got?" queried Peter. "She can't break into society on my fifteen hundred—"

"She won't need to. She can go on the stage."

"Good Lord! What makes you think she can act?"

"Do you remember that Miss Donald who stopped at Myrtle Lodge last summer? She's an actress."

"No!" Mr. Knight was amazed.

"She told me a good deal about the show business. She said Lorelei wouldn't have the least bit of trouble getting a position. She gave me a note to a manager, too, and I sent him Lorelei's photograph. He wrote right back that he'd give her a place."

"Really?"

"Yes; he's looking for pretty girls with good figures. His name is Bergman."

Jim broke in eagerly. "You've heard of Bergman's Revues, pa. We saw one last summer, remember? Bergman's a big fellow."

"That show? Why, that was—rotten. It isn't a very decent life, either."

"Don't worry about sis," advised Jim. "She can take care of herself, and she'll grab a millionaire sure—with her looks. Other girls are doing it every day—why not her? Ma's got the right idea."

Impassively Mrs. Knight resumed her argument. "New York is where the money is—and the women that go with money. It's the market place. The stage advertises a pretty girl and gives her chances to meet rich men. Here in Vale there's nobody with money, and besides, people know us. The show girls have been nasty to Lorelei all winter, and she's never invited to the golf club dances any more."

At this intelligence Mr. Knight burst forth indignantly:

"They're putting on a lot of airs since the interurban went through; but Ben Stevens forgets who helped him get the franchise. I could tell a lot of things—"

"Bergman writes," continued Mrs. Knight, "that Lorelei wouldn't have to go on the road at all if she didn't care to. The real pretty show girls stay right in New York."

Jim added another word. "She's the best asset we've got, pa, and if we all work together we'll land her in the money, sure."

Peter Knight plucked his full, red lips into a pucker and stared speculatively at his wife. It was not often that she openly showed her hand to him.

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"A little. She'll do anything we ask. She's a good girl that way."

The three were still buried in discussion when Lorelei appeared at the door.

"I'm going over to Mabel's," she glanced a moment to say. "I'll be back

early, mother."

In Peter Knight's eyes, as he gazed at his daughter, there was something akin to shame; but Jim retorted only a



"We Were Just Talking About You," He Said.

hard, calculating appraisal. Both men inwardly acknowledged that the mother had spoken less than half the truth, for the girl was extravagantly, bewitchingly attractive. Her face and form would have been noticeable anywhere and under any circumstances; but now, in contrast with the unmodified homeliness of her parents and brother her comeliness was almost startling. The others seemed to harmonize with their drab surroundings, with the dull, unattractive house and its furnishings, but Lorelei was in violent opposition to everything about her. She wore her beauty unconsciously, too, as a princess wears the purple of her rank. Neither in speech nor in look did she show a trace of her father's fatuous commonplaceness, and she gave no sign of her mother's coldly calculating disposition. Equally the girl differed from her brother, for Jim was anemic, underdeveloped, sallow; his only mark of distinction being his bright and impudent eye, while she was full-blooded, healthy and clean. Splendidly distinctive, from her crown of warm amber hair to her shapely, slender feet, it seemed that all the hopes, all the aspirations, all the longings of bygone generations of Kulahts had flowered in her. As muddy waters purify themselves in running, so had the Knight blood, coming through unpleasant channels, finally clarified and sweetened itself in this girl.

In the doorway she hesitated an instant, favoring the group with her shadowy, impersonal smile. In her gaze there was a faint inquiry, for it was plain that she had interrupted a serious discussion. She came forward and rested a hand upon her father's thin, bald bullet head. Peter reached up and took it in his own moist palm.

"We were just talking about you," he said.

"Yes?" The smile remained as the girl's touch lingered.

"Your ma thinks I'd better accept that New York offer on your account."

"On mine? I don't understand."

Peter stroked the hand in his clasp, and his weak, upturned face was wrinkled with apprehension. "She thinks you should see the world and—make something of yourself."

"That would be nice." Lorelei's lips were still parted as she turned toward her mother in some bewilderment.

"You'd like the city, wouldn't you?" Mrs. Knight inquired.

"Why, yes; I suppose so."

"We're poor—poorer than we've ever been. Jim will have to work, and so will you."

"I'll do what I can, of course; but I don't know how to do anything. I'm afraid I won't be much help at first."

"We'll see to that. Now, run along, dearie."

When she had gone Peter gave a grunt of conviction.

"She is pretty," he acknowledged; "pretty as a picture, and you certainly dress her well. She'd ought to make a good actress."

Jim echoed him enthusiastically. "Pretty! I'll bet Bernhardt's got nothing on her for looks. She'll have a brownstone but on Fifth Avenue and an airtight limousine one of these days, see if she don't."

"When do you plan to leave?" faltered the father.

Mrs. Knight answered with some satisfaction: "Rehearsals commence in May."

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Campbell Pope was a cynic. He had cultivated a superb contempt for those beliefs which other people cherish. Most men attain success through love of their work; Mr. Pope had become an eminent critic because of his hatred for the drama and all things dramatic. Nor was he any more unmanly of journalism, being in truth by nature benevolent, but after trying many occupations and failing in all of them he had returned to his desk after each excursion into other fields. First night audiences knew him now, and had come to look for his thin, sharp features. His shapeless, wrinkled suit, that resembled a sleeping bag; his flannel shirt, always tieless and frequently collared, were considered attributes of genius; and, finding New York to be amazingly glib, he took a certain delight in accentuating his eccentricities. At especially prominent premieres he affected a sweater underneath his coat, but that was his nearest approach to formal evening dress. Further concession to fashion he made none.

Owing to the dearth of new productions this summer, Pope had undertaken a series of magazine articles derivative of the reigning theatrical

Continued on Page Four

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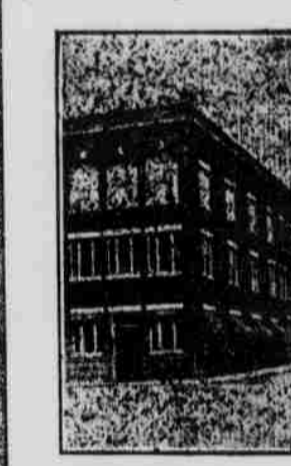
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