

THOSE CRAZY BARTLETTS

By Peggy Dern

CHAPTER VII

Young Celia Bartlette has come home to Lathamtown and a family she hardly knows. "Those Crazy Bartletts," people always called them. Her parents, called Ma Sue and Buzz by all of their children, had led an unusual life. Celia had been adopted by her aunt when a baby because the Bartletts were trouping in vaudeville and that was no place for a baby. When they had retired to the Lambert home, other children came along—Pete, Honey and all the crazy Bartletts, and she feels unwanted and terrible here. Then there is young, red-headed Rusty Randolph, a house guest, whom she doesn't seem to like. She doesn't know why. Rusty tells Celia why he intends to fight shy of the love bug and she also confides in him.

the emotion which they had experienced together had become unbearable.

Celia tried desperately hard to laugh. "Oh, I'm immune now, she told him, with an effort at lightness that tried to match his own.

"You little idiot!" he protested almost violently. "Don't you know that's when you're most apt to get hurt? You've heard about the rebound thing, haven't you?"

Now she managed the laugh, but it wasn't very convincing.

"Oh, after Martin, any other man seem tame and dull and uninteresting?" she said.

Rusty eyed her ruefully. "Don't ever say that to any other man. It's a challenge, puts his back up, sets him to work, and first thing you know you're off to the races again!" He warned her. "With me you're perfectly safe, of course."

"Meaning that I'm not your type?" she flashed in resentment.

Bugs Donovan and Doc Harter

arrived the following afternoon in the station wagon with Honey. And Honey, smudged and grumpy in her work-stained clothes, was weak with laughter when she stopped the car and the two men got out. Bugs was five feet five and skinny. His thin, narrow face was newly brown and wore a forlorn look; his mouth was big and, beneath his small, slightly crooked nose, looked enormous.

Doc Harper, on the other hand, was tall and heavily built, though not yet fat. He was still a handsome man, with a thick shock of white hair, eyes that were coldly blue, a mouth that was thin tipped, and a voice that was a little querulous. His clothes were well cut, well brushed and neat, but far from new.

Bugs welcomed them with frank delight; Mary Sue was glad to see them.

Rusty was introduced and Bugs looked at him sharply.

"Old Randy's son? Well, I'm dam—er—darned," he checked himself elaborately. "How's the

old boy?"

"My father died nine years ago," said Rusty.

"Hell—er—gosh, I'm sorry," said Bugs quite sincerely.

Dinner that night was completely hilarious. Bugs proved to be what Buzz called "a natural." He had a seemingly inexhaustible fund of stories, some of them frankly ribald, a few even bordering faintly on the blue; but the fact that he would embark on one of these stories, and be well into the middle of it before he realized where he was going, and then his frantic attempts to "clean up the gag" without spoiling the story, only added to the amusement of the others.

Doc turned to Rusty and asked quietly, "Have you been, on—er—er—you just going?"

Rusty smiled. "Thanks, I've been!" he answered.

"I thought so," said Doc quite frankly. "I saw a bunch of fellows in Florida that had been—around the big hospitals and the AAA Redistribution Center. I got to the point where I could tell, almost as much from a fellows look as from his ribbons, whether he'd been over, or not. I imagine it's quite a war."

"Quite," said Rusty, and now his face was set and hard. "A bit ragged, but—you've got to take it."

Doc nodded. "Bugs and I did a bit of entertaining for the fellows down there," he said quietly. "Bugs can still hoof a bit—"

"And of course, Doc did 'Mandalay' for some of the fellows that hadn't been there," said Bugs sweetly.

"Only by request," damn you," blazed Doc, stung to the quick.

"Boys, boys," said Mary Sue, as though they had been about five years old. "Bugs, I won't have you teasing Doc—and Doc, you're going to sing for us after dinner, aren't you?"

"My dear lady, nothing would make me happier," said Doc, beaming.

"Oh, migawd," moaned Bugs. "Now you went and done it! 'Mandalay' again?"

"And you're going to dance for us, aren't you, Bugs?" coaxed Mary Sue gently.

Bugs beamed as warmly as Doc, and Celia, under cover of the light talk and the laughter, studied Mary Sue with eyes that had grown brighter and sharper since last night. She could see, too, the ghost of pain behind the blue eyes and the faint, almost imperceptible lines about the determinedly smiling mouth. Once, as dinner progressed, Celia saw Mary Sue's hand clutch the corner of the table and saw her sit very still, scarcely seeming to breathe. Celia's eyes fled to Buzz at the foot of the table, and saw him watching Mary Sue unobtrusively, but with such an agony of apprehension and love in his eyes that her own were filled.

Rusty, beside Celia, dropped his napkin and as he bent to pick it up, he whispered sternly, "Watch it! Careful, there!"

"I'm sorry," she said under her breath to Rusty, and Rusty's hand dropped from sight beneath the table and touched her own in silent understanding and comfort.

After dinner, in the shabby, comfortable old living room, the rugs were kicked back, and Doc seated himself at the piano and sang. His voice was still good, though not as certain as in the old days; once or twice he went flat on a note and the scarlet that flowed into his plump, handsome face was painful to note.

He sang song after song that Buzz and Mary Sue requested, and then, with the rugs already pushed back, Bugs danced, danced until he was flushed and his breath came hard. He was just in the midst of demonstrating one of his famous "legmania" steps when Celia looked up toward the open doorway and saw Win Mallory standing there.

Win Mallory stood framed in the doorway, amused, and for the moment forgetful he was an unwinvited guest.

Celia rose swiftly, her face scarlet, and crossed the room to him.

"Hello!" said Win eagerly, as she came closer. "I'm sorry to intrude, but the door was open and nobody heard my knock. There was music and laughter and it sounded like a good party, so I'm afraid I just came on in."

"Of course," said Celia, and knew that she sounded stiff and almost rude. "We're delighted—do come in and meet everybody."

Win had accepted the chair someone had offered and had urged Bugs to go on dancing, but Bugs had said briefly, "Am I got the wind for it like I useta have."

Win accepted the curt refusal with good grace and turned to Doc and said amiably, "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to break up the entertainment. Did I hear somebody singing?"

"What did it sound like?" Doc snapped.

Bugs chuckled and said dryly, "Boy you left yourself wide open for a comeback on that one!"

He turned suddenly to Win and asked blandly, "You don't want to hear 'The Road to Mandalay,' do you?"

Win looked startled. "Good heavens, no! Does anybody—ever?"

Win laughed, said good night to the others and, obviously very pleased, walked with her out of the house and across the lawn. His car stood at the driveway and he swung open the door and helped her into it. For a moment he stood beside her, looking down at her, and at last he said quietly, "I've been pretty worried about you."

"Have you?" Celia asked.

"I have!" said Win firmly. "I was afraid that maybe you'd—well, that you had blacklisted us like everybody else around here has done."

"Oh, but that's silly! Why should I? I mean, after all—well, I'm not doing anything for the war myself, so why should I blame you?"

Win looked at her curiously.

"And then all of a sudden you woke up and realized you'd been slacking and looked around you for some activity that would help promote the war?" he asked, a tone almost of railery in his voice.

Celia looked up at him and said quietly, "Now that you mention it, I think I have!"

Win smiled. It was the warm, affectionate smile an indulgent parent gives to a small and beloved child gravely intent on its own matters of importance.

"Such as what, for instance?"

"The Wacs, the—the lady Marine," he said lightly.

She shook her head. "No—the shipyard, with Honey tomorrow," and was as much surprised at the decision as Win was. She had had no more idea of making that decision than she had had of flying to the moon. It just didn't make sense. She had not read a stirring book, or seen a dramatic movie, or listened to an emotional response; nobody had tried to point out the folly and the selfishness of her refusal to take a hand in the war.

Suddenly the decision was there, and where it came from she had no idea.

Win said roughly startled out

of his light mood. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Celia—use your head! Be sensible! What in the world ever gave you that crazy idea?"

"I—don't know," she admitted, a little confused and bewildered.

"Nobody is responsible, Win. I don't want to work in the shipyard, and I'll probably hate the work and maybe I won't even be any good at it, but—well I'm so completely useless! All I do is kill time, and that's murder of a kind."

Win bent over her and said very gently, "Look Celia—if what you want to do is occupy your time, how about marrying me? I'll guarantee to keep you busy!"

Celia was very still for a moment, and then she laughed a little and said, "Very funny—if you care for that kind of joke."

Win caught her by the shoulders and shook her, not too gently. "Who's joking, you little idiot? Do you suppose I wanted to fall in love with you? If so, you're very much mistaken. I liked being heart-whole and fancy-free and playing the field! And then, damn it, you came along and I knew I was sunk! I'm crazy about you! I'm perfectly miserable when you're not around, and it would be an act of charity if you'd make up your mind to marry me—"

Celia said shakily, "This is crazy. You're not in love with me."

"Want to bet?"

His arms were about her now, lifting her, holding her close against him. One hand cupped her chin and tilted it upward and he bent his handsome head and set his mouth against hers in a kiss that left her breathless. When at last he lifted his head, his eyes were gleaming and his face was white in the moonlight.

"You felt that too, Celia. Don't try to deny it, because I know! And you kissed me, too. It wasn't all on my side, Celia! You care, too," he told her swiftly, his voice shaken, very low, and rough with emotion.

Celia was trembling, and if it had not been for his arms about her, holding her, she could not have stood erect.

"Yes," she told him unsteadily and with something very like panic in her heart. "Yes—I care, too!"

Celia awoke in the morning with the startled feeling that something very wonderful had happened to her. At first she could not quite remember what it was. And then it came back to her. Last night Win Mallory had held her close in his arms and asked her to marry him. And she had promised—not in so many words, of course, but at least she had given him to understand that she would.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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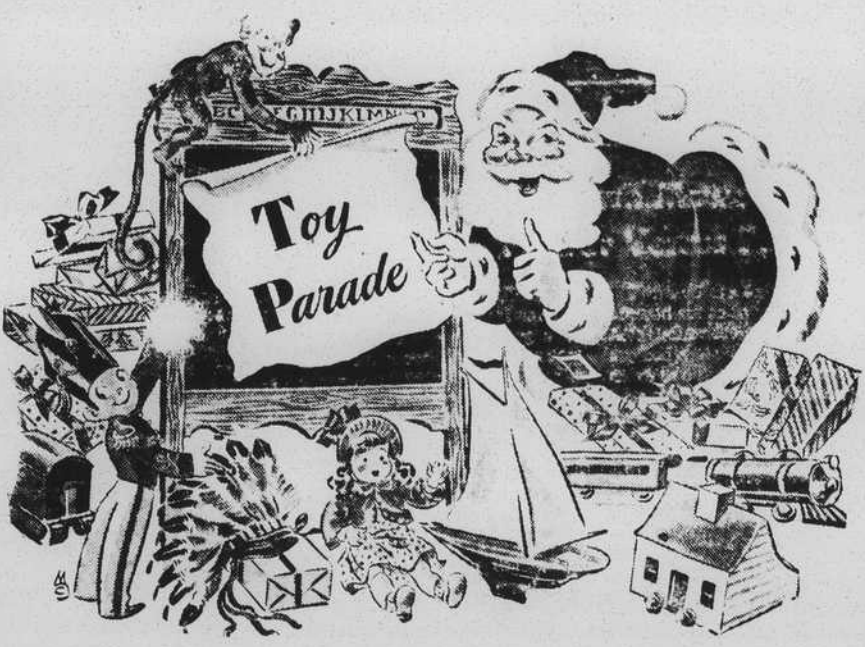
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