

Too Much Efficiency

By E. J. Rath

BEGIN HERE TODAY

JOHN W. BROOKE, widower and hardware magnate, before leaving the city for two months arranges with a firm of efficiency engineers to manage his home. He fails to say anything about this to his three grown children, Constance, Billy and Alice. They fail to grasp the significance of it all until.

H. HEDGE, assigned to the job, has taken over complete control of the Brooke household, occupied their father's suite and turned the library into an office. Hedge has been "monarch of all he surveyed" for about two weeks. While he refused to allow a Christmas tree in the house because "it is a useless expense" he has relented sufficiently to arrange for a New Year party.

Imagine the shock of the "children" when they find all their guests being forced to take a physical examination before admittance to the "festivities." On this, the night of the party, everything is going along as well as can be expected under the circumstances. The guests that passed the doctor's close scrutiny have danced and are now receiving sterilized sandwiches and lemonade in the dining-room.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

But of all this Constance was unconscious. She had escaped to a far corner of the conservatory, where she wept dully into a tiny square of lace. It was there that Tommy Treadwell found her, and presently she was weeping against Tommy's shoulder while he tried awkwardly to soothe her.

"I can never look anybody in the face again," she wailed. "I can't stand it. I'm going to run away!"

"Honestly, will you?" he demanded eagerly.

"I'll do anything to escape this," sobbed Constance.

"Will you run away with me?"

Tommy's voice was trembling and his eyes pleading as she looked up at him.

"I've asked you to marry me three times already," he went on. "Won't you, Connie? Please!"

Connie buried her face against his coat again and tried to think. She was fond of Tommy Treadwell, and it was true that he had asked her three times. But Constance had never taken Tommy seriously, because she did not want to. She had never felt like marrying anybody. She was still living her girl days. There would be plenty of time to marry late on. As for Tommy—well, when the time came, it might be him, or it might be somebody else. She did not love Tommy, she was quite sure; but she did like him tremendously.

It was hard think, although she wrestled with her problem heroically. A voice seemed to be crying into her ears, "Escape! Escape! It's your chance!" The idea of escape dominated her. And Tommy was offering the way to freedom.

"Please marry me, Connie," he urged softly. "I'll be awfully good to you."

She knew that she knew Tommy Treadwell for true blue, and she knew that he would walk Broadway on his hands and knees for her, if she commanded. But she did not love him.

"Escape!" urged the little voice. Tommy stroked her hair and talked pleadingly.

"Marry me, Connie, and I'll take you away from it all. You just see if I don't make you happy."

He talked with the fire confidence and sincerity of youth.

"Answer me, Connie dear. Will you marry me?"

Constance did not answer. She did not have time. The voice of a third person intervened.

"Miss Brooke will not marry you,"

Constance sprang back with a cry, and Tommy Treadwell flushed but stood his ground.

"What have you got to say about it?" he demanded.

"Everything. Kindly get your hat and coat from the butler and leave."

"You mean to tell me I haven't a right to ask Connie to marry me?"

"No; I did not say that. You have the right. You have exercised it. Very good. That settles it."

"But you—"

"I do the answering; you do the asking," said the efficiency man blandly. "You will go now."

"And suppose I don't take your answer?"

"Take it or leave it—it goes."

Constance's first emotion was one of utter humiliation, which was quickly succeeded by rage. She flashed a look of defiance at H. Hedge.

"I will marry whom I please!" she stormed. "I will—"

"You will go to your room, Miss Brooke," interrupted the efficiency man coldly.

"I won't, I'll—"

Tommy Treadwell with a sense of true delicacy, put an end to the scene.

"You're all unstrung, Connie," he said gently. "Better get some rest. Good night."

She hesitated, then buried her face in her hands and walked away slowly. As she passed Tommy he whispered swiftly:

"I'll phone tomorrow. Be ready. He did not even say good night to H. Hedge, but strode from the conservatory and a minute later left the house.

As for the party, it ended according to fixed time limit, at eleven o'clock. There were not very many left at that hour, so that no extensive hardship was done. Only the efficiency man was about downstairs when the New Year came in with a tolling of bells.

"He looks rather sound and sensible," mused H. Hedge as he turned out the desk light. "But as for marrying Constance—certainly not! I cannot permit it."

Constance arose early. It was scarcely seven o'clock, but there was a strategic reason for the unusual event. Constance was going away; she was about to quit the shel-



"Miss Brooke will not marry you."

ter of the Brooke roof-tree for that of another, and it was essential that the efficiency man should be unaware of the fact until it had been accomplished.

Constance was going to be married. Yes, to Tommy Treadwell, of course. He was her refuge in time of tribulation and despair.

"It makes no difference," mused Constance as she dressed hastily, "that I don't love Tommy. He understands. He knows I like and admire him, and he's going to be satisfied with that. I think he's almost heroic to marry a girl that he knows doesn't love him. But I can't exist here. And I must—yes, must—find a new home for Billy and Alice. Tommy has promised to take both of them until father returns. I suppose it will get into the papers, but—Oh, anything is better than this!"

The breakfast gong had not sounded when Constance made a final survey of herself, seized a big muff, picked up the grip, and moved briskly to the door of her room. At the threshold she paused long enough to look up and down the hall. She did not want to meet either Billy or Alice; she would telephone them after it was over. The hall was empty of life, so Constance stepped out and headed for the rear staircase.

One flight she descended rapidly, which carried her as far as the main floor, and then she began to follow more cautiously the second flight, which was poorly lighted and had two sharp turns. At the first turn

she paused abruptly. She heard footsteps in the semi-gloom below. Somebody was coming up the stairs.

Constance peered over the balustrade and held her breath. A servant she did not mind. But it was not a servant—it was H. Hedge. Her first impulse told her to turn and run; but the time was too short and the grip too heavy.

"Face it!" she told herself quickly. But she did not want to face the efficiency man with the grip, so she tried to hold the latter behind her skirts. It was an awkward maneuver. The grip hammered at her heels as she resumed descent of the staircase. Then it slipped from her fingers. An instant later it struck her in the hollow of a knee. Constance staggered swayed, and pitched forward, uttering a sharp cry.

She came to a halt half a dozen steps below. Tightly gripped around her waist was one arm of the efficiency man; the other was clinging desperately to the rail. Both of Constance's arms were around his neck. She could feel him struggling desperately to maintain a balance. With a gasping intake of his breath he presently achieved it. The grip shot past them, rounded a turn, and landed noisily on the floor of the basement hall.

He twisted his head to peer into her face. Their eyes were not six inches apart in the half light.

"It's Constance!" he exclaimed. Never had the efficiency man called her that before.

"Yes, it's I!"

"You're unusually early this morning."

"Possibly."

H. Hedge seemed willing to prolong the conversation.

"It's not eight yet," he remarked. "I know it."

"Didn't you drop something?"

"Of course."

"I'll go down and get it for you." But he made no move.

"Don't bother. I'll get it."

"But I insist."

"No!"

He paused and considered.

"It's a nice morning," he observed irrelevantly.

"I believe so."

"Going for a walk?"

"Yes—no!"

"Why not say 'perhaps'—you get the same idea compressed into one word."

Constance was becoming anxious. She knew that Tommy Treadwell and his blue roadster were waiting below in the court-yard.

"Go go!" she exclaimed. Up to that point she had been too bewildered to notice that there had been no change in their positions since H. Hedge interrupted her headlong plunge.

NEXT CHAPTER: Hedge frustrates an elopement.



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