

A TRICK OF FATE

BY INEZ HAYNES GILLMORE.

THE hurrying workaday crowd made Broadway seem sober, alien. Everybody in the car looked pinched and tired and cold.

For her, at least, it meant getting up at an uncanny hour in the morning. It meant standing in a crowded, foul-smelling car. It meant taking letters all day at the alternate dictation of two stodgy, middle-aged business men.

It was a face that she had not seen more than half a dozen times all told. It was a face that she had not seen once in the last two years.

Lawrence Crane had arisen and was coming toward her. She made a place at her side. In another instant her hand was in his.

What a way he had! How his gaze seemed to drink her down! It seemed to assure her that there never had been, never could be, any other woman.

"You're the last person in the world I expected to see," she managed to say. She tried to meet his eyes, but she could not sustain his gaze.

But her glance had shown her that he was quite as "bonny"—that was her word for him—as she remembered him. Tall, broad-shouldered, and with something of the glory of the college athlete lingering about him, he had an array of charms.

"It's providential," he announced. She felt his amused gaze beating through her eyelashes. "I've only been here a day or two and I've had it on my mind to look you up my first free evening."

There was the old fascination in his voice—she noted them one by one—well-remembered tricks of inflection; it was distinctly a "magnetic" voice.

How wonderful he was! How handsome! It made her dizzy to meet his eyes in that long-ago visit to Helen. Undeveloped, silent, awkward as she was, every word that he gave her seemed a caress.

Was she dreaming? Had the skies fallen? She tried to find something to hold to. "Everything comes to him who waits," came uppermost in her mind in stupid reiteration.

Was life worth living? It was joy to get up at the uncanny hour in the morning. It was bliss to stand in a crowded, foul smelling car.

She ran from the car to the office. She raced up the four flights of stairs—no elevator could hold her spirits that morning.

"My hands are up," he said without further parley. "My money's in my inner coat-pocket."

She laughed and drew back. "But what are you doing here?" she demanded in the next instant.

"I'm Merriam, the new partner. You've got me roped, thrown and tied—but don't mind me—"

Olive hung up her hat and jacket, and her hands played carelessly back and forth over her hair.

"I don't suppose you know a cow-boy from a tax collector," he said, his eyes following the fitting hands.

Her spirits bubbled over him. "I'd like to know how anybody can escape knowing what a cowboy is," she said, "when the magazines are full of them, and I know every one of the fifty-seven varieties by heart."

"I could, without straining a muscle," he asserted, "if it were little and dark and had brown eyes?"

She sighed elaborately. "I'm sorry my eyes are blue."

"Did I make such a mistake as that?" He leaped forward with an alacrity that impelled her a few steps backward, but he examined her eyes interestedly, and took so long that she accused him of being blind.

"No, only dazzled,"—he was almost mournful about it.

"You must get used to being dazzled," she replied with spirit. "I'm a fixture about this office."

He was meek. "It's smoked glasses for me hereafter."

"I'm ready to take any letters,"—she was beginning when the door opened and the senior partner came in.

The elder man went out after a while, and she never talked to any man in her life as she talked to him. But while she was chattering her swiftest, laughing her merriest and coquetting with him in the way that seemed to be natural effervescence of her mood, her heart was beating to the single refrain—"He is coming to-night!"

Her companion was very conscious of her presence all day long, and submitted her to unobtrusive banter that she soon grew to distinguish by his own term "joking," but he was careful not to interfere with her work.

That night on her way home, she perpetrated the unheard-of extravagance of buying a bunch of violets, and later of ordering a fire in the parlor.

The firelight flamed and sparkled and glowed as he

lazily heaped it with wood or allowed it to flicker out. "Gracious! you are doing the thing up brown!" he said irrelevantly once, gazing about the queer room with its faded magnificence.

"Of course, I am," she said. "Fancy—I'm the only boarder in this wonderful old mausoleum! They were simply driven to it—it's the 'Last of the Knickerbockers' business again."

He did a great deal of the talking, for still the strangling, thrillingly sweet shyness that his proximity meant enveloped her in a blinding mist. It was torture to meet his eyes. Always it meant the sudden sweep downward of her lashes and the immediate answering quiver of her lips.

Fortunately they had much to say at first about the people in Worcester who, Crane acknowledged, had given him the time of his life in that pleasant week two years ago.

corn and we're going to make some pop-corn." Before she could catch her breath, the door closed again.

Her mirth at the thought of trying to buy a corn-popper on Broadway was still dying away in little incorrigible smiles, when the maid let him in again. He related his adventures to her while he opened his bundles. They included a pound of butter, because, as he explained, he "simply could not eat pop-corn without melted butter," and a huge basket containing fruit.

She was delighted that he had come, for she was too excited to go to bed. He popped the corn and she, curiously enough, did all the talking.

Merriam could not seem to get enough of her. His eyes did not follow and compel her gaze as Crane's had. They dwelt on her with the same half-wondering, half-wistful, wholly tender expression that she had surprised in them this morning.

In the next two weeks she saw little of Merriam, for he was sent on a business trip into the middle of the State. But Crane came two nights later, skipped

Then an awful certainty zigzagged through the crystal of her happiness, shattering it to a million fragments.

"A little dark thing," he went on. "she was staying with you. What is the matter?"

Olive was staring, stricken. "Will you tell me what my name is?" she asked stupidly.

He laughed. "Helen Hastings, of course."

She pulled herself together. The new laugh that he had helped her to find in herself rippled out bravely. "Now I've got it," she said in triumph. "From the first I wondered how you happened to remember me so well when you saw me so few times. And you made a mistake; I'm not Helen Hastings. I'm the little dark cousin that you speak of. My father died soon after I met you, and I became a stenographer."

"You're not Helen Hastings?" he said stupidly.

The air was so full of things that neither could say, that they choked breathing them in.

He laughed at last and with a fair degree of naturalness. "Of course, I see it all now. You've grown to look surprisingly like your cousin. They told me that Helen was doing Settlement work."

"Is Helen in town?" Olive asked dully. "I did not know it, but it's not strange, as we have not corresponded for a long time."

They tried to talk down the constraint in the atmosphere, but it made long pauses between their remarks. It intensified the ticking of the clock that, as if to save the situation, seemed to be going at double speed.

Olive lost all her sparkle; she kept thinking that she had spent with wide-flung, generous hands a gold that was not hers. Remarks that she heard whispered of him kept coming into her head. "Lawrence Crane will never marry anybody but a rich girl," was one of them. They dulled the last remnant of her vivacity.

When he left, it was with a formal handshake and a still more formal word of farewell.

He came again, after a long interval, once more. But his calls were silent, joyless on her part,—a little too vivacious on his. Then for a long time she did not see him.

The Sunday after his last call Merriam appeared, back from a successful trip. He came into the room like a sea-breeze, stinging her into a recrudescence of her lost hilarity with an impetuous onslaught of narrative.

He insisted on taking her away for the day. When he left her, she had regained all her lately lost self-confidence.

She had little chance to lose it again, for in the next month he was constantly with her. Evenings he took her out to dinner, to the theatre, or for long walks in the park. When he was not with her, the vision of his tall figure and his fresh-colored, gray-eyed face remained. It came gradually to oust a more splendid presence from her thoughts. Perhaps the fact that she saw Crane at the theatre once or twice with her cousin Helen helped this process.

One Sunday, two months later, she was surprised by a visit from Crane. She was at her very best with him that day, for his eyes had no more effect upon her than a pair of pebbles. It was she who did the talking, he the listening. Before he went, he startled her by an offer of marriage. In the moment in which she hunted for words in which to refuse it, she wondered if Helen also had rejected him. He refused to accept her "no" and left almost elated. She felt now she might be in possession of data that would assure him of what her own words evidently could not.

As a matter of fact she had the evidence that very night, for Merriam, sitting on the rug and holding the corn-popper over the flames, announced that the firm had decided on sending him to Goldfields the next week. Then he abruptly asked her to marry him.

She accepted. "But there are some things I want to tell you," she said, eying him curiously. "In the first place I didn't get you quite honestly. There was another man once—and I thought he cared for me—and so, on the strength of his admiration—"

"Go on," he said promptly. "Well, I feel it can my conscience to tell you that you're getting an article that isn't much in demand. In all my experience I never had but one proposal and—"

"What do the dandar-log of this town know about a real woman?" he interpolated contemptuously. "Go on."

"And I've never been kissed in my life."

The corn-popper fell to ruin among the flames. "You're going to be kissed now," he said.

"I'm glad I waited," she admitted after an interval.



"You're going to be kissed now."

recent estrangement, Helen had kept her well-informed. Faithful to her resolution, however, she did not mention Helen's name. Nor did he. When he left at half-past nine it was with more than one admiring, farewell glance at Olive's flushed and sparkling face.

She stood for a moment dreaming over the wonder of it all, when the bell rang and suddenly, to her great surprise, Mr. Merriam appeared in the doorway. He stopped and stared. For the second time that evening, a pair of masculine eyes told her that she was fair.

"I was just going by," he announced breezily, as if his coming was the most natural thing in the world. "and I thought I'd look in on you. Do you know what I'm going to do," he went on with a rapidity that forestalled any comment of hers, "we can't waste a fire like that. I'm going out and get a popper and some

a night, then three in succession, skipped a night, then constantly.

Olive was beginning to get over her shyness. Now, occasionally, she dared to meet his eyes in a psychological, soul-to-soul conflict, which he often tacitly admitted to be a draw by shifting his gaze.

For the most part, however, he still did the talking. But even there she was beginning to assert herself. And the dullness of her point of view, the swiftness of her retorts often left him beggared of words. Once or twice she carried joking warfare into his very camp. That last night their intimacy had reached the point where it allowed them to meditate an instant in silent wonder over a subtle coincidence in taste. He interrupted it to say carelessly. "Oh, what's become of that little cousin of yours that I met in Worcester?"

Olive knitted her brows for a considering second.



She felt his amused gaze.

As for her, all the blood in her body was surging back in waves into her heart, and this inner commotion betrayed itself in the color coming in and out of her pale cheeks. She tried to lift her eyelids, she tried to speak; both feats were impossible. She looked straight ahead. To her blurred vision, Broadway streamed by like a pennant.

"You're not going to have another engagement," he urged; "where do you live?"

With a tremendous effort she gave him her address. Somehow she added desperately: "You know about my work, I suppose." Her voice was hoarse and her throat parched.

"Of course I know all about it. Will you be home to-night?" He was rising.

She tried to stay the quiver of her lips. But she had to hold the lower one still with her teeth after she had said, "Yes, I'll be at home."