

The Girl With a Past

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complimentary, but it was a wretched failure. He was only unpleasant and I saw that she resented it. Her answers were chill and her manner had lost all its debonair froth. I was well aware that she was conscious of my attention and was trying by some telepathic signal to ask me to relieve her of the presence of Thurzo. I rose and advanced to him with a dollar bill signifying my desire to pay my account, and my glance told him that I realized what had been going on.

He got up rather hectically and went into the kitchen to get the change. Bowing to the Girl with the Past, I took the chair he had vacated and she looked at me gratefully. I realized tonight that she seemed to be the person I had fancied she might become under proper influence. My eyes may have expressed this, for she flushed a little.

"Thank you," she said.

I got my change from Thurzo, took my stick and hat, and going back I assumed her escort without saying anything; for I remembered her prohibitive practice of going home alone. But I could see that she wished me to leave the place with her.

AS Fate would have it the storm had grown to a fury. The streets were ice-coated and before we had taken five steps she was hanging to my arm, the wind having taken our two umbrellas like feathers off into the darkness. She said she got her car at the corner.

When we reached there after many stumbles, we found in the shelter of my own door way a sleet encrusted officer who said no cars had been running for an hour or more. It was bitterly cold and uncomfortable and I asked her to wait in my place until we could get some conveyance to take her home. She consented quite simply, almost eagerly, without the slightest prudery, although the hall-boy looked with some astonishment at the drenched feminine person I ushered into my rooms with such unaccustomed warmth.

I am, as I have stated, a quiet man and such apparitions are not familiar ones on my floor. There was a good coal fire in the old-fashioned grate, and we sat down before it in quite a Darby and Joan manner. I made her put her feet on the nickel bar to dry, and it was exactly as if we had known each other all our lives. Her comradeship returned, she grew happy again and taking out a silver case she passed it to me.

I took a cigarette, the first in thirty years. I am now forty-six, and my father had broken me of the pernicious habit, I thought permanently; but at the first puff the intervening years fell from me. I was a cub again and was being admitted to her court. I belonged. No longer need I pine in the outerdark at Thurzo's.

We chatted of him and delicately I brought the talk round to her odd liking for the restaurant. I spoke of quieter, better places that I knew of. She clasped her hands at the back of her head, leaning against them cushioned on my big lounging chair.

"I can't stand quiet!" she shivered. "I must have gaiety, talk, smoke. I want a place where women can go alone and meet people. I don't want to think! Give me the open road!"

"You'll get awfully tired of it!" I suggested. "It isn't really gay, you know, or vicious. It's dreadfully commonplace, and by and by you'll long for the excitement of respectability. If it were Paris now—"

"Ah!" A tender smile broke in her eyes and she waved an imaginary kiss into the air.

"You have been there, then?" I asked.

She nodded a bit sadly. "Paris—Vienna—Buda-Pesth—all of them!" She sighed and then she gave a little laugh—that foreign little laugh of hers.

"You will go again, maybe?"

"Hardly?" Her lips curled inscrutably.

"Why?"

"I dare not!"

"Tell me?"

"But why? You would hate me! I am that melodramatic person—a Woman with a Past."

"But the present is all right. You are happy—you have, pardon me, many admirers—"

She broke into a delicious laugh. "Those boys!" she exclaimed with faint derision; "but I've known real MEN!"

I gulped somewhat. I come of a staid old Quaker family. I looked at her in a confused questioning way as she crossed one knee over the other, showing an inch of stocking over the muddy boot, and she flipped some ashes into the grate with her little finger. Again that suggestion of the stage came and rapped upon my brain.

"I think that I have seen you in some play," I said slowly. "You are on the stage?"

"I was for awhile," she admitted with a frown; "but it's a dreadful bore. Real life is more exciting."

"You have few illusions, I judge?" I remarked.

"None!" She snapped her fingers in the air. "Oh, once I believed in things! All girls do at some time. Truth, honor, even love. Yes, I believed in love—honest love! The man jilted me and since then—" she brought her closed fist down on the table so that the magazines rattled—"since then, I've LIVED!"

She looked me so steadily in the eyes that I winced. Surely she didn't call Thurzo's living? No it must be that Past of hers. I began gently to picture another idea of life to her—while she sent smoke rings up to the chandelier. I felt the woman had good in her. She was one of those drifting barks that needed harbor.

She spoke so freely of what she believed women should do if they pleased that I grew warm behind the ears. In the meantime she seemed to be having the time of her life. I had telephoned to two places for cabs, but owing to the storm there was none to be had, and I live in an old-fashioned out of the way neighborhood. There did not seem to be anything to do but wait. And it caused her not the slightest annoyance, evidently. She had an odd, boyish way about her that precluded any suggestion that it was not quite all right for her to be sitting there at my fire very near to midnight.

BUT according to her talk she was the most un-moral person I had ever met. She said she had always done as she pleased and always would do so; that she hated conventions and rules, but that she was not a sneak and preferred me to know her just as she was.

In spite of all this, before the cab finally came, to my great relief and to her seeming chagrin, I had asked her earnestly to marry me and begin life all over again on a new basis. She refused flatly, but her eyes grew soft with tears.

"You would—" she cried amazed, "in spite of everything?"

"I don't believe in one law for a woman and one for a man," I spouted somewhat weakly; "I like your frankness. But I don't want you to go to that rowdy place for dinner."

She laughed. "You go there," she said.

"But I am a man."

She grew thoughtful for a minute. Then she smiled and gave me her hand exactly as a boy might do. "Yes, that's so," she said, "you are."

The elevator boy came to say the cab from my club was waiting, and I told him to have it charged to me. I wished to learn of her living place, and yet I was a bit afraid—then too, I knew I could get it next day from the cab starter. (Continued on Page 18)



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