

THE DAILY SHORT STORY

In Rainy Weather.

(By ELIZABETH SHIELDS.) (Copyright, 1916, by the McClure Newspaper Syndicate.)

It had been raining for three days without let-up. Every one at the hotel was bored stiff, actually stiff. One could scarcely move about at the end of the third day. The rain still poured down persistently.

"Great guns!" inellegantly piped Eulalie. "Here's that creature again!" The creature referred to was a forlorn little woman in cheap black who slipped into the hotel lobby and, sitting on the edge of the most uncomfortable chair in the place, timidly surveyed the bored assemblage. "She's simply weird!" Eulalie hated timidity and cheap black, so she crossed over to a chair and turned her back squarely on the woman.

Then mother fluttered over. Mother always reminds people of a terribly serious minded and busy hen, plump and white and excited, you know. "Jane, run over to father and interrupt him," she begged of me. "It's perfectly disgraceful the way he neglects his daughters."

Poor father had been having a delightful time during the whole three blessed days of rain. He smoked and smoked and smoked and talked war and finance to the—well, really, the stunnerest man I ever saw. Every woman at the hotel was furious with father. But the handsome stranger was deeply interested in him. He seemed perfectly comfortable and satisfied. "Did you ever see any one so distinguished?" gushed mother.

Just then the stranger looked about and, after giving me a mere passing glance, his eyes rested on the face of the woman in black. The kindest expression came into his eyes—the way one looks at helpless, pretty babies. His eyes wandered on to Eulalie. The little woman had flushed and her eyelids modestly covered her big brown eyes.

Not so Eulalie. She had been waiting three full days to roll her eyes in his direction. And leave it to our mother to follow up the slightest chance where her daughters are concerned. She actually pounced on the man. Father was startled and got fussed. Eulalie trailed languidly into the same armchair father had occupied and soon father disappeared. I made up the fourth in the party.

"I'll confess that although Eulalie and I did our very prettiest to say nothing of mother's amiability, every one watching knew the man simply could not keep his eyes off that shrinking figure in rusty black."

I always want to be fair, so I looked the little person over carefully. Her appearance indicated middle age, her profile was 18. I mutely signaled Eulalie just to take a peep at the creature's eyes. I don't know much about poetry, but even I could see the beautiful soul peeping out of her glorious eyes. When one got a really good look at her face the beauty of our family and all the other families at the hotel just faded. She had been there three days and no one had noticed her beauty, till father's distinguished friend looked her way.

His name, we found, was Donald Slater, and his stay at the mountain resort was uncertain. His desire to keep his eyes on the perfectly lovely profile of the little creature in black dampened even Eulalie's irrepressible vivacity.

I'd been trained to be the tactful one of our family, but the night before, remembering about it in time, gracefully approached the woman, taking a chair directly in front of her. She had forgotten to clean her pink-tipped finger nails for several days and her very, very pretty rounded neck was thickly coated with powder, beginning with the layer from the week before last. Inwardly I gloated. "That's the way with a man—imperfections must be pointed out to him. I quickly decided to make her one of the party immediately.

"Beastly weather," I began, smiling at her kindly. "Would you believe it—she opened her lips to answer and they stayed that way. Tears filled her eyes and dripped over, running down her cheeks. I moved instantly. Life's unpleasant enough without wasting a minute of it on people like that. I heartily wished I hadn't been moved by sympathy. To go to her. For it spoiled everything! He saw the tears.

The girl looked about, in the tent, as if confused way, then rushed to the veranda door. She tried to open it but couldn't. The wind held it. The rain splashed the glass of the door and the terrific wind rattled and banged the shutters. But the girl persisted in trying to wrench it open and, with the assistance of a tremendous gust, it opened, laying her flat on the floor. She acted like a wild thing trying to escape, either from the woman or the frank attention of the man.

From his seat on the big divan, surrounded by pillows and Sister Eulalie, the Slater man leaped to the middle of the lobby, stooped over the little figure and picked her up in his arms. I decided then and there I would cease activities in the way of tact. Of course, he never noticed her finger nails and neck.

"I want to go away from here," the little thing moaned. He calmed her and in the most adorably tender way he pushed back wisps of her black hair. Eulalie was furious, but she pretended to be chatting gayly with Mrs. Hopper.

"What did you say to the poor little thing?" demanded mother, accusingly, in my astonished ear. I was too indignant to reply. Mother always flops over to the enemy in good time. With Donald Slater's arm supporting her, the woman sobbed her way up the stairs.

Then for two hours every one sat about staring at her neighbors. Slater and the girl did not appear again. When I could no longer bear the accusing eyes of mother and Eulalie, I fled to my room.

I had been in the room but a few moments when I felt as if some one were standing close to me. I turned suddenly. Everything was still. The ghostly sensation had been so sharp and sudden I stepped into the hallway and looked about, expecting to see one of the maids. The hallway was clear. Feeling sleepy and wretched, the constant rain beginning to tell on my nerves, I unfastened a string of pearls from my throat, threw them on the dresser and myself on a couch.

In another second I was sitting up straight, dumb with terror! I wanted to shriek, but could not. I saw my

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string of pearls disappear, bend by head, over the side of the dresser, through the opening of the curtain. My dresser was close to the door leading into the hall. The couch I was resting on was the other side of the room near the window. No visible thing grabbed the beads, but they finally were gone. I was simply too horrified to move. It was so ghastly. No human hand had appeared through the opening of the curtain, but the beads certainly were gone. It was fully five minutes before I came to my senses. Then I rushed downstairs, through Eulalie's room. I was, I confess, too scared to leave through my door.

Father was not about. Mother and Eulalie sat with the other gloomy women, watching the hated rain as it splashed in the road, forming miniature rivers and lakes. Eulalie yawned and dragged herself to the stairs and mounted them. I whispered to mother about the necklace. Not the least flicker of an eyelash from mother. In her best manner, she said: "It was the chambermaid, that new one. I didn't like having her on our floor. Don't make a scene. Wait for father."

"But, mother dear," I implored, "we must do something."

"We'll go upstairs and look for it," replied mother, with simple confidence. "You might be mistaken, you know."

I suggested darkly, "that funny little thing in black—no one knew her."

"She left the hotel bag and baggage just before you came down," serenely assured mother. "Her eyes were still red from weeping, poor thing."

Forgetting my lost necklace for an instance, I looked over the stair rail as we ascended. "Where is the Slater man?" I wanted to know.

"He loaned her his motor. She was still nervous and crying and he hadn't the heart, I presume, to permit her to start alone for the station. He has a wonderful dull-green touring car. Eulalie is planning a picnic in it, some day soon." Mother was trying hard not to be agitated.

By that time we had reached my room. Eulalie stood in the doorway that separated her room from mine. Her eyes dilated, were framed in a white, scared face. She held out mutely her empty jewel case and her silver mesh bag minus its contents!

eyes—women guests running hither and thither holding in their hands empty pocketbooks, jewel cases and handbags. Such an uproar! Every room apparently had been entered.

"To think," breathed Eulalie, "I came up stairs intending to go to the little creature's room to make friends with her for his sake and she—she had been here before me."

"Who had been here?" demanded mother.

For answer, Eulalie silently held up a small torn piece of rusty black goods, an exact duplicate of the material the beautiful small woman had worn for three days. "It was hanging on that tiny nail between your door and mine."

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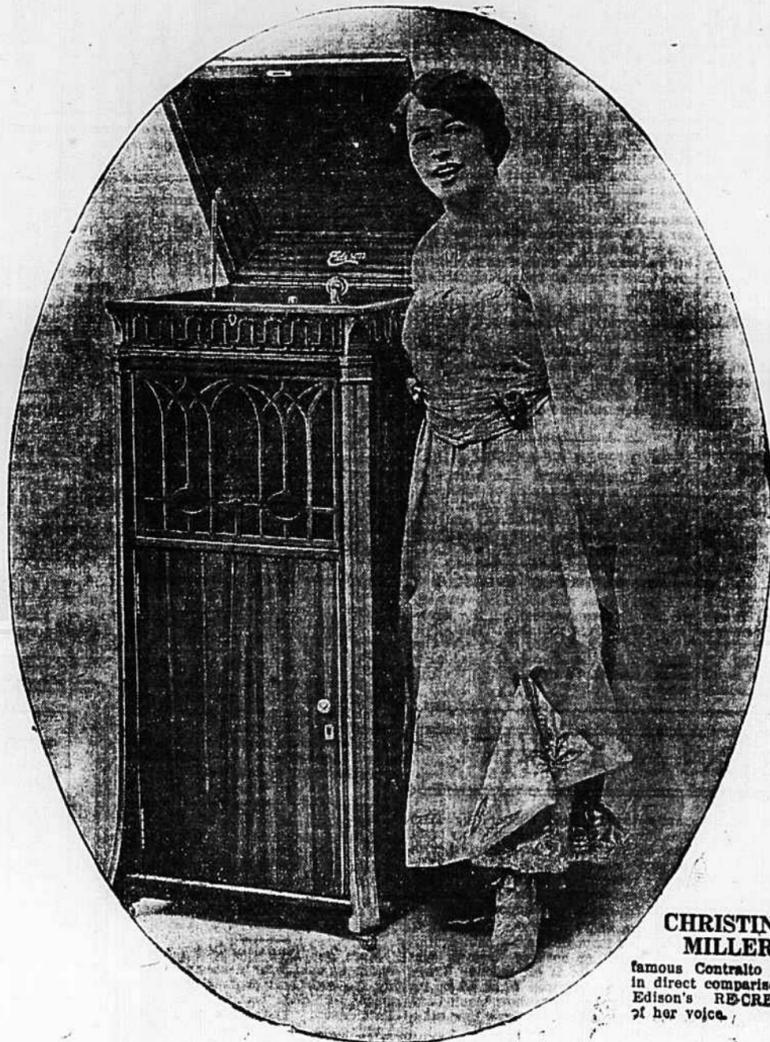
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