

# A Game of Romance

ELLA COATES BISHOP in SOUTHERN WOMAN'S MAGAZINE

Her name was Margaret, but in her soul, she felt convinced, lay the germ of a Daphne or a Phyllis or a Gwendoline. Her outward life had always been the epitome of the commonplace. Her soul had rebelled, but circumstance had ruled her day. Circumstances—so like those soft, gentle characters whose surface is never ruffled and whose will is never opposed violently to others, yet whose desires are invariably fulfilled with a tranquility that is maddening to those whose own wishes have been gently but firmly set aside, regardless of wounded feelings or impotent struggles.

Margaret lived in one of those little country towns where, unless one takes the bit in one's teeth and deliberately departs from the beaten track of life, one is apt to get into an endless monotonous round of little excitements, narrowing to mind and soul.

Margaret had no talent that would have been a motive for leaping the fence into other pastures. And she had not been selfish enough to try to get out of the rut of her life by going to the city, as one of her friends had done, and living as a "bachelor-maid" in a tiny set of apartments—even if there had been money enough to spare from the family purse. She had given her youth freely to life just as it came to her, enjoying the small delights that came her way unsought and performing an unflinching cheerfulness. But in her soul she rebelled. She longed fervently for something to come into her life that was what she called "romantic"—that was unusual—that was different from the suffocating round of dances and tennis, sewing and preserving. She dreamed dreams while waiting for her turn on the tennis court, and she used to lie awake at night inventing romantic situations where she and a fascinating unknown would meet and perhaps love.

All the men in town she had grown up with, and most of them by now were married. If an occasional visitor did come, he always had either a perfectly hideous nose or his ears stuck out too much, or the back of his head was not modelled to suit her taste. If, by any chance, the stranger passed muster in all these respects, then he invariably was uninteresting, or painfully bashful, or had some other perfectly hopeless handicap to romance. So Margaret had given up really looking for such a one. Only the eyes of her twenty-seven on the watch, and her dreams still. Possibly that seems ridiculous, but age is not necessarily marked by years, and such a life as Margaret had led may keep both face and heart young.

One day Margaret betook herself, when the household tasks were over, to a spot she knew of where a little brook rippled its way through the wooded part of a nearby property that had been standing idle for years. She wandered there to her heart's content, and today she settled herself with pillow and book on the little foot-bridge that crossed the stream. She curled up with her back to one of the posts supporting the railing and dreamily watched the brown ripples, her ears filled with that murmur, that is almost hypnotic in its power. There was all the romance in the world beneath those flowing particles of water—sudden meetings, brave deeds, great sacrifices and tender words and looks. At least she could have it all in imagination. But why could she not have one little bit in her real life? No matter how fleet-

I am for a little while. Then you will go away and the romance will be over; but I can remember it always. You know you can get such a lot out of remembering things. I suppose I seem terribly silly to you, but it would be such fun, just for once, to have a clandestine meeting. So please do not spoil it by telling me anything about yourself, for it really does not enter the situation at all."

He took her hand and raised it lightly to his lips.

"I bow to your superior wisdom, my lady," he laughed. "You know more about romance than I—you and Mrs. Forrester!"

Margaret pulled her hand away. She blushed, and the stranger saw it.

"How pretty you are!" he remarked.

"Oh!" said Margaret. She felt that it was an idiotic response to make, but no man had ever spoken so to her before, and she could not think of a suitable reply. And this man, who seemed perfectly self-possessed, just stood and looked at her, evidently enjoying her embarrassment. She felt dreadfully uncomfortable, and was getting redder and redder every moment.

At last, in desperation, she raised her head and caught a tiny glint of a smile fading from his face. Her own cooled instantly, and her self-possession returned.

"Perhaps you know more of the game than you give yourself credit for," she said calmly. "Do you know why I pulled my hand away so quickly just then?"

"No, I can't imagine. Why did you?"

"The cook left this morning, and I have been making cherry pies," she flung at him defiantly. "My fingers are fearfully stained from stoning the cherries." She held her hands up in justification.

"Cherry pies? Oh, my soul! Do you mean to say you can make those juicy, flaky delights of my boyhood?"

"Yes, of course I can. Would you like me to make one for you?"

"Would I! You don't know how I would adore those little hands if you did—stains and all."

"All right, then, you shall have it to-morrow. That will give me an excuse for coming here again."

"How can you?" he said reproachfully. "True romance would need no excuse."

Margaret laughed, picked up her cushion and went home through the fields with a backward glance.

The "bad-taste-in-the-mouth" feeling returned the next day when she was on her way to the trusting place, guarding the cherry pie carefully from the underbrush and tall weeds as she went. She rather wished romance had never been thought of. But at sight of the white flannelled form already waiting on the bridge and the cordial smile of greeting that he gave her, she decided that, after all, it was her own chance, and she would "play it for all it was worth," as the boys would say. And the man was really very nice and decidedly good-looking!

He sat with his feet dangling over the edge of the bridge and ate the juicy pie from his fingers with a very unromantic enjoyment, and she sat and watched him with that pleasure a woman feels when her cooking is appreciated.

"Ah," he sighed, as the last morsel of crust disappeared, "that was heaven!"

"I'm glad you like it," replied Margaret prosaically, as he clambered down the bank to rinse his fingers in the creek. She threw him the napkin in which the pie had been wrapped to wipe them on, and he came back and seated himself beside her.

"How about the stains on your fingers?" he asked.

"Oh," she said. "I used lemon juice this time. Yesterday it didn't matter; nobody cared how my hands looked."

"And today you know that I care, don't you?" he said, with a smile.

"I hope you do—a little," replied Margaret, with heightened color. Then she looked at him quickly. "You know I don't really mean that don't you?"

Her companion laughed.

"I understand," he said. "It's all in the game, isn't it?"

"Yes; of course I had to say something like that. It came next."

"And the next thing to that is this, isn't it?" he said, reaching over and taking her hand in his.

Furious blushes covered Margaret's face, but this time she did not draw her hand away. It was part of the game. It was part of what she had meant by "romance," she supposed, and having as good as asked him to do it, what would he think of her if she were afraid to play her part? And yet what did he even now think of her for playing it? And she felt so silly, sitting there letting him hold her hand, every now and then giving it a gentle squeeze. She did not believe really nice girls ever did such things. And the silence was becoming dreadful. She did not dare take her gaze from the tips of her pumps, but she felt that this perfectly strange man was watching her face curiously, and she just knew he had that little quizzical, mocking smile in his eyes. Why didn't he say something? For the life of her, she herself could not think of anything to say; but something must be done soon.

"Do you like chocolate layer cake?" she at last blurted out in desperation.

He released her hand with a short laugh.

"You're the funniest girl I ever saw!" he exclaimed. "I was wondering what you were thinking about."

"What did you suppose I was thinking?"

"Oh, something romantic, of course. Why weren't you?"

Margaret laughed.

"I don't know," she replied, "I don't believe I like that kind of romance, after all. Please don't do it again."

"Then I suppose you wouldn't let me—kiss you?" he ventured.

"Oh, no!" she gasped, in dismay.

"But it's part of the game."

"Well, if it has to be, I don't believe I'll play any more."

"Oh, you can't back out that way," he protested. "You've got me interested in this, too. I've never had a

for that fact. The cheese-cake pie was eaten, so were large slices of bread and jam. One day the unknown sighed contentment over a delectable bit of fried chicken, and one day it was a sparkling pitcher of home-brewed ginger ale, accompanied by little crumbly Scotch cakes. That suggested ginger-bread, which he ate buttered and hot. Somehow that made Margaret think of flap-jacks, and maple syrup, and the next day she appeared with a bowl of batter and a frying pan.

Flap-jacks at five o'clock of a summer's afternoon may not sound enticing, but the "hero of romance" ate nineteen and mumbled as he scraped the last drop of batter into the sizzling pan.

"You are entirely too good to me," he sighed, as he put the cork back in the syrup bottle, and then took it to the frying pan to the creek to wash it.

"Don't do that," remarked Margaret. "Cold water won't take the grease off. I'll wash it when I go back."

"I wish this could go on forever," he murmured, throwing himself on the bank near her.

Margaret scattered a little water over the embers of the fire.

"Yes," she assented, "so do I."

"But it can't," he said.

"No," she sighed. "I know. There are only a few days more."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, it is just perfect as it is. Perhaps more of it would spoil everything."

"It wouldn't spoil it for me," he said seriously. "As it happens I must go home next week, but I thought—"

"What?" asked Margaret, as he paused.

"Well, there are letters, and Philadelphia isn't so—"

Margaret raised her hands to her ears.

"Oh, don't please. I don't want to know. Remember our bargain—we are incognito."

"As long as the game lasted."

"But don't you see it would spoil what we have had, if we went on and began a conventional, everyday friendship? Please don't do that. I've had plenty of that sort. I want my one poor little bit of romance—even if it is only make-believe—to be a beautiful remembrance that I can carry with me always. It is just right now—all rounded out and finished—now—let's spoil it by dragging it into the light of everyday affairs. Can't you see what I mean?—how I look at it?" She smiled at him half at it.

"Whimsically and half seriously, and for a moment he made no reply, but gazed into her eyes so searchingly that she turned them away.

"All right," he finally said. "Let us keep our romance—you know it is as well as yours—and perhaps mine as well as yours—until it would be best to let today wind up. After all I really ought to go home tomorrow. I was stretching a point by waiting until next week. What do you think?"

Margaret's eyes had widened a little, but she answered resolutely.

"I think you are right." Then she suddenly held out her hand. "Good-bye," she said, a little falteringly, "you have been very good to me."

"Tell me one thing," he said, holding her hand close. "I don't know a thing about you, not even your name. And how can I think of you without something to call you by?"

The rebellious blood surged into Margaret's face.

"Do you know what I call you?" she asked.

"No. What?"

"My Hero!"

"Oh!" he began blankly. Then "Oh!" he repeated, starting forward eagerly, but she had fled. And after a step or two he did not follow, only called softly:

"Good-bye, my Heroine!"

So the game was over and done—played to its artistic finish. It could now become the blessed bit of memory that Margaret intended it should be. But when at five o'clock next afternoon a masculine form came quietly through the trees to the little foot-bridge, she was already there.

"I had to come," she explained hastily. "I forgot the frying pan."

"I know you did," he answered.

"That's the reason I came, too."

"I thought you were going home this morning," she remarked, hoping that he would not perceive that she was glad he had not.

"I couldn't," he replied. "Yesterday I did what you asked and we played our little game out, but today I want to tell you—"

"You needn't!" blurted out Margaret, furiously red of face and moist of hand. "I know already. Your name is Thomas Bailey; you are thirty-two years old, and you live in Philadelphia—or rather out in Germantown, on School Lane. I think—with your mother and two sisters. One has

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She quoted Browning in her thoughts:

"How sad and mad and bad it was, But oh, how it was sweet!"

Only the "sad" and "mad" and "bad" parts seemed to predominate, and it really was not so very "sweet" after all. She felt all the time as if she were doing something wrong, though, having seized her moment, she had no thought of losing her grasp. She would go through with it, even if she did feel like a fool!

But after awhile she forgot to be self-conscious and began to enjoy the conversation. The stranger was attentive and sympathetic, and when, in the distance, the town clock struck six, Margaret rose reluctantly.

"I must go," she said; "good-bye; we have dinner at half past."

"But we shall meet here again to-morrow," her companion asserted.

"Oh, no; I couldn't!" cried Margaret.

"Why not? The romance is just beginning. Surely you won't end the game so soon?"

There was a tantalizing mockery in his voice that sounded to Margaret like a "dare." Her plunge into unconventional life had given her courage. She took the dare:

"I'd simply love to play it a little longer," she replied, looking him straight in the eyes. "It would be so satisfying."

"I ought to tell you what my name is, I expect," he began, not daring to laugh at her seriousness. But she cut him short.

"I don't want to know," she said. "Don't tell me. Don't tell me who you are, or where you come from—I know you don't live around here—or any of your affairs. That would spoil it. I can see you are a gentleman, and I know you are—interesting," she added, with a daring that inwardly amazed her. "And that is enough for romance."

The stranger regarded her quizzically for a moment.

"You are quite sure you don't want to know?" he asked, "I might be the villain in disguise, you know!"

"You might be, but I am confident you are not and, even if you were, you know I'm not really the ingenue of the story—I'd just like to pretend

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