

ORCHIDS for Mother

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by PEGGY DERN

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Martin said curtly, "If you're ready, Paul."

Paul saluted smartly and said, "Quite, sir."

But the swift glance that passed between him and Greg was touched with humor, as he swung open the door and stood at attention.

Lissa turned back for a parting word with Gail.

"Do let me hear from you, darling," she said quickly, and her eyes barely flicked Greg.

"And when you and this absurd young man patch up your silly quarrel, I shall see to it that you have a suitable trousseau."

Gail caught her breath and her face burned. Greg looked straight at Lissa and his eyes were cold and inimical.

"Don't be silly, Lissa," said Gail hurriedly, carefully avoiding Greg. "The only trousseau I shall ever need is smart dark clothes, practical enough for the office. I may even start wearing white linen uniforms—the patients would probably trust me more."

"Nonsense, you're much too pretty to wear uniforms. In a uniform you would be dangerously devastating," said Lissa. She kissed Gail lightly and let Martin help her into the car.

With a final exchange of goodbyes, the big car slid down the drive and the others watched as until it was hidden by the trees.

It was Norah who broke the silence.

"Gosh!" she breathed youthfully. "She's quite a person, isn't she?"

Charles said, "She's relinquishing the trust fund, Norah, returning it to me."

"What?" Norah was the only one who had not been present at that session, though Gail had not realized it until now. "Uncle Charles—honestly?"

Charles nodded and put his arm about Kate, who drew near to him.

"It was her own idea, and Knaid seemed to approve," he said. "And since the money means so little to her now—"

Wide-eyed, Norah breathed, "Why—we're rich! Gosh!"

Her awe was so honest, so unassuming, that Gail felt a little wrenched at her heart. Nothing had so sharply marked the contrast between her old pre-Twin Oaks life and this—that the money that had seemed so inadequate to Lissa was obviously a vast sum to these whom she, Gail, held so dear.

"All the things we can do," Norah breathed. She turned about and eyed the old house with gleaming eyes, and then she laughed and confessed, "But now that we can tear it down or turn it around or upside down, I'm not sure I want to. After all, it has sheltered us."

"And like the faithful old friend it is, it deserves to be

pretied up a bit," said Charles firmly.

They were so happily absorbed that they did not notice when Gail slipped away. Her heart was heavy as lead in her breast; she would so have enjoyed being a partner in all the activities of remodeling the old house, bringing out its latent beauty and making it comfortable and attractive. But she had lost her right to any partnership in the place; they would be glad to have her if she wanted to stay, but she knew forlornly that Greg didn't want her, and she could not bear to do anything that might make Greg uncomfortable or dissatisfied. Now that Paul was coming back, now that there would be money for farm machinery, Greg and Paul could run the place with all ease in the world. And she, herself, must go back to her independence—which suddenly seemed nothing less than desolate loneliness and heart hunger.

Her feet had carried her without her being aware of any intention, to the little house, and for a moment she looked at it through a shining mist of tears. She was lost in bitter sweet dreams when, like a continuation of her dream, the door opened and Greg came out on the flat steps.

For a moment, so sure was she that she was merely imagining all this, that she smiled at him tremulously, and even put out her hand to him in a little, lovely gesture of surrender. But when he took a step toward her and the mist cleared from her eyes and she saw that he was real, she was instantly on guard.

"Oh—hello," she said lamely, hurrying to say the first words that came to her mind. "I was—taking a walk."

"So was I," said Greg, and his mouth was tight and his eyes bitter. "I haven't liked myself much these last few days. Thought I'd try to come to terms with myself, even though I can never hope to make peace with you, after the way I've treated you."

Gail had the startled feeling that she had taken a step in the dark and plunged into space. The solid earth seemed to have been whipped from under her feet and she could only stare at him, her eyes wide in the drained pallor of her face.

"I don't blame you," said Greg grimly, misinterpreting her bewildered astonishment. "I deserve nothing but to have you turn your back on me and refuse ever to speak to me again. I have been lower than a duck's belly, going around heaving nasty words at you and trying to kid myself they didn't hurt me more than you. I'd like, though, just to tell you that I'll never get over being ashamed and feeling that I should be shot, because I didn't have sense enough to know that a girl with eyes like yours couldn't possibly be anything but the finest, sweetest, most honest creature alive."

Her whisper came, small, broken, a mere breath.

"Greg!"

He took a step closer to her a look of dawning wonder in his eyes. But before he could touch her, he thrust his hands deep in his pockets and turned sharply away.

"Don't cry, darling," he said huskily. "I don't deserve it. But I loved you, Gail. I love you now. I'll always love you."

Gail said unsteadily, "Then—then that's all that matters, Greg."

For a stunned moment he stood stock-still and then he turned on her sharply, his face quite white behind his sun-bronze.

"What did you say?" he asked,

as though he could not believe his ears.

The tears were slipping down her face, but she brushed them away childishly with the back of her hand and her smile was tremulous.

"I said I've always loved you, too, Greg. I adore you. I—can't ever stop."

Long before she had finished she was in his arms, held close and hard against him, her head wet face hidden against his shoulder, her arms holding him tightly, as though she would never again let him go.

He held her for a long moment, and then he tilted her face, his fingers beneath her chin. His voice shook with a very passion of tenderness as he said, "Sweetheart! Darling!—Darling. Oh, my sweet, I can't believe it—that you could forgive me."

"Who talks about forgiveness when two people are in love?" she said with a soft, eager rush of words. "You had perfect right to think me a heel, darling—and other unpleasant things. After all, you'd spent so much time despising me before ever we met."

He kissed her, his mouth eager and ardent, and cradled her in his arms and said softly, "Heart's treasure—we've wasted so much time and it's all my fault. Dearest, I do love you so terribly."

There was a long, lovely interval of blessed quiet, when it was enough just to be here like this, close in each other's arms, the bright and shining garment of their love wrapping them securely, always and forever, against any fear or danger or loss.

And then he said huskily, "Darling, I can have the house finished, ready for occupancy, in another week. Will you marry me then?"

She was flushed and radiant, the marks of tears still on her

cheeks, her mouth a soft scarlet flower kissed into exquisite perfection as she looked up at him.

"Well, I've never believed in long engagements," she said with sweet audacity. "But if that's the best you can do, I guess I'll have to wait."

His arms tightened about her and his eyes were shining as he bent his head and set his mouth on hers in a kiss of ineffable tenderness and joy.

(The End)

CARPENTER DRAWS SUSPENDED SENTENCE FOR WIFE BEATING

A Wilmington carpenter, Fred W. Joy, 2821 Adams street, paid the court costs and drew a suspended road sentence of 12 months in Recorder's court Monday on a charge of beating his wife.

"That man is a sneaking rattlesnake," shouted Mrs. J. R. Sellers, wife of a local policeman and sister of Mrs. Joy. "When he got through with her, (his wife)

Judge Carr Grants 7 Divorces Here

Ten uncontested divorces were granted by Judge Leo Carr Monday at the opening session of New Hanover Superior Court for the trial of civil cases.

Divorces were granted in the following cases:

Willie K. King vs. Sadie Elizabeth King, Howard E. Shroupe vs. Mildred Virginia R. Shroupe, Mary L. Smith vs. William M. Smith, Aline B. Fowler vs. L.

Gurley Fowler, Bonnie P. Baysden vs. Hubert J. Baysden, Betty Harper Hurd vs. David M. Hurd,

Margaret B. Mcee vs. Phillip F. McKee.
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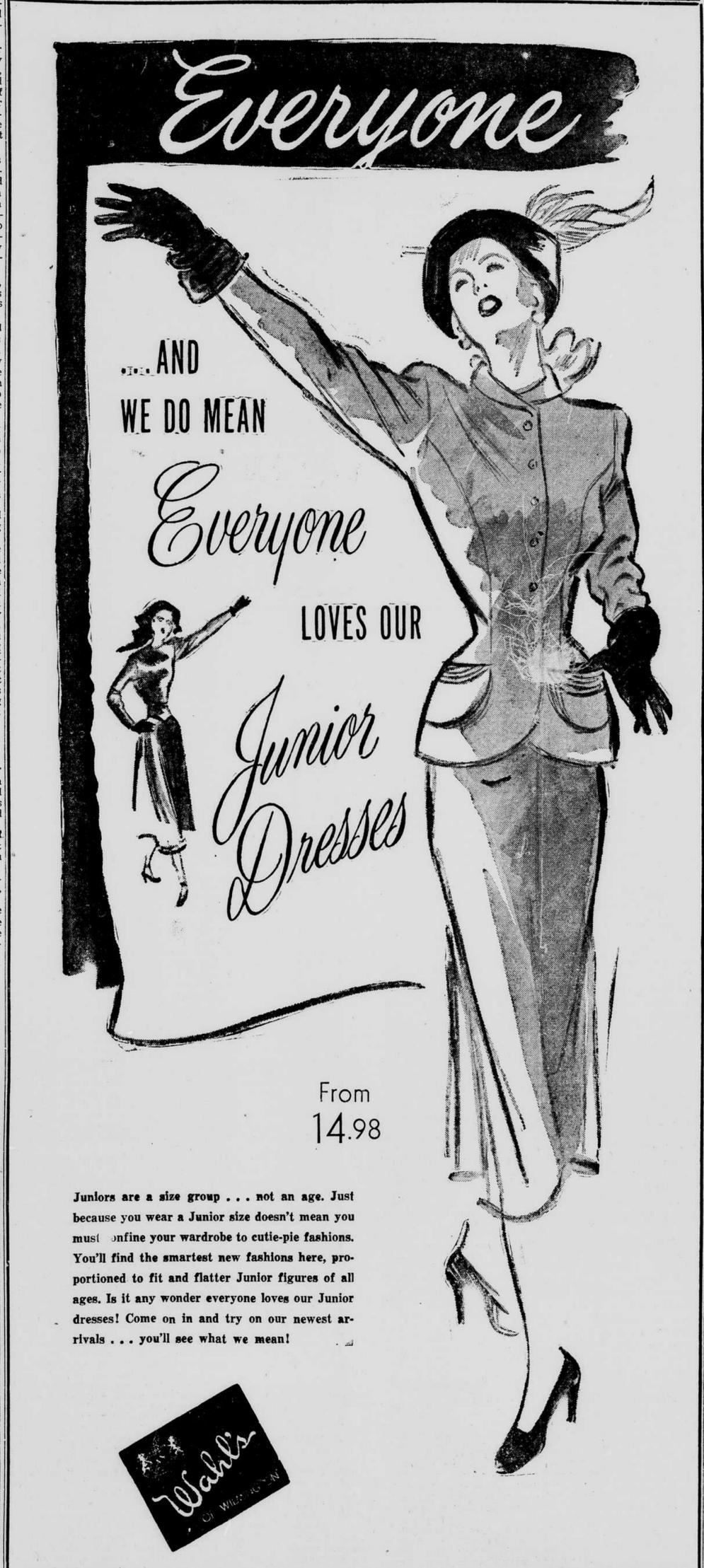
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