



Maysie Greig is an Englishwoman who came to America when one of her novels was filmed. Here she met and married Delano Ames. They are inveterate travelers and "commute" between England and the United States.

MAYSIE GREIG

# Professional Lover

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Starr Thayne knew she was going to dislike Rex Brandon even before she went to that party. She said often and emphatically that the type of man he portrayed on the screen was anathema to her: the professional-lover type. She wouldn't even admit his attraction. She asserted continually that his tall, lean figure, his slightly crooked features, his laughing, mocking eyes held no thrill for her. His style was the lovable cad who reformed gloriously before the fade-out; the great lover of women finally conquered and made repentant by one sweet woman's love. She didn't believe there were men like that. At least, if there were, she didn't believe they ever reformed. And Rex Brandon played these rôles so convincingly she couldn't disassociate them and the man himself.

Three years ago when Rex Brandon first dawned on the movie firmament he was invariably cast as the villain. He was almost too attractive to play the rôle of the good, honest hero. Directors felt that the fascinating cad was more his style. Those were the days before villains went out of date. When they did, things looked black indeed for Rex Brandon. But Stephen Desmond, most brilliant of all young English directors, had an inspiration. Why not turn this lovable rake into the hero? Not so very novel in literature, but an innovation on the talkies. Women ate it up. Rex became the rage. The wickeder he was in the early scenes the more they adored his final repentance. Women in their secret hearts have little use for the perfect hero, though it wasn't until the sensational success of Rex Brandon that talkie directors discovered this.

Starr Thayne was an exception. She repeated emphatically that she didn't like that type of man. "Lounge lizard," she scoffed. "What *can* women see in him? Besides, it's perfectly apparent to me the man is simply eaten with conceit!"

Starr wrote interviews and studio gossip for a Los Angeles newspaper. It was through the same Stephen Desmond she had procured the post. Once she had been his secretary. And she looked back on those days as the happiest in her life. What fun it had been helping him build a picture right from the very beginning. She had thought she loved the work more than anything else in the world. Then, one day, she awoke with a jolt to discover that it wasn't the work she loved, but the man.

She made this startling discovery on the day that Stephen announced his engagement to Rita Crane, the daughter of Oswald Crane, the big financier. That night Starr sat for a long time at her bedroom window, staring up at a vast dome of starless blackness, seeing nothing, her eyes bright with tears she wouldn't let herself shed.

"This," she said over and over again to herself, "has got to stop." She couldn't go on loving a man who was engaged to another woman. That wasn't in Starr's code. And it was impossible to keep seeing him and *not* love him. She'd have to give up seeing him, that was all. Which meant she would have to resign her position as his secretary.

Starr never shirked anything once she had set her mind to it. She told Stephen Desmond of her decision the very next morning. The young director was surprised and distressed. She was an excellent secretary; besides, he genuinely liked the pretty, red-haired, vivacious girl who for the past eighteen months had made herself almost indispensable to him.

"Look here, Miss Thayle," he said, 'I'm most awfully sorry. I thought we worked splendidly together. I hope nothing I've done has upset you?"

A slight annoying flush stained Starr's pale face suddenly. She turned her head sharply aside. "Oh, no, Mr. Desmond, you've been most kind to me. I'd... I'd like you to know that I appreciate you and everything you've done for me terribly."

She sounded so sincere and, at the same time, upset about it - though to Stephen's modest masculine mind he didn't see why she should be - that he felt at a loss.

"If it's a question of salary..." he began diffidently.

She shook her head quickly. Her color was hot. "No, Mr. Desmond, you've been most generous. It's... it's just that I think I'd like a change of work," she ended in a breathless rush.

"In that case-" he began stiffly. Then, suddenly, he paused. He held out his hand and smiled down at her. "Look here, Miss Thayle, we're going to part friends anyway, aren't we? We'll always remain friends, I hope."

Starr caught her breath sharply and looked up at him. Her eyes were slightly misty as she gave him her small, hot hand. "I hope you will always regard me as a friend, Mr. Desmond."

He was distinctly embarrassed. And it annoyed him that he should be. "Would you let me help you find another job?" he questioned. "If you're interested in journalism, an editor pal of mine was only saying yesterday that he had an opening for a bright young girl to write studio gossip."

"I'm sure I'd love that." She forced her enthusiasm.

He drew a deep breath, and a smile broke over his nice, good-looking face. "I'll see him about it, then. Though, I must say, I hate losing you."

"I hate going," Starr whispered, a queer choked note in her voice. The next moment she had gathered up her pad and pencil and left the room. Stephen Desmond stood beside his highly polished mahogany desk looking after her. His brow was crinkled in a frown. What *was* it all about? He knew he'd miss her. He had never had a more intelligent or conscientious secretary. Besides, she was always so quick to pick up every detail, details he himself might have overlooked. And she *was* a nice girl. No getting away from it. He was quite fond of her. Indeed, had he never met Rita, it just occurred to him that... but he *had* met Rita. That was an end to it. Marriage to Stephen Desmond was a very definite end to that sort of thing. A pity Rita Crane didn't regard marriage in the same light.

That was a year ago. Now Starr was on her way to a preview party at the West East Studios.

That morning her editor had said to her, "Going to the West East show tonight, Miss Thayle? A preview of Rex Brandon's latest picture, isn't it? See if you can't get an interview out of him. It's just occurred to me that no one knows much about his private life. He's as close as a clam in interviews, isn't he? But a pretty girl like you, Miss Thayle, ought to get him to talk. Find out whom he's in love with - he must be in love with *someone* when several million women are in love with him! Find out his views on marriage and why he hasn't already married. Is he the

professional lover in real life or is he really the most domesticated of men? Remember I'm relying upon you for a good story, so don't let me down."

That, to Starr, was the challenge direct. That evening she dressed with particular care, choosing a very pretty evening gown of pale green taffeta. She wondered, as she turned this way and that way before the long hanging mirror, if it would be difficult getting Rex Brandon to talk. "I don't suppose so," smiled slightly. "All I'll have to do is to flatter him a little. I'm sure he's that type of man!"

She also wondered - but not for long because she was very stern with herself on this matter - if Stephen Desmond would be there. She'd heard he hadn't been going about much lately. Too busy, some said. Others said it was not much fun for him to go out and watch his wife flirt with some other man. Starr was furious when she heard such gossip. "It's mean and malicious," she'd storm. "Besides, how could a woman married to Stephen Desmond help but love him? He's so darling and decent in every way."

The preview was just about to begin when Starr arrived at the West East Studios. The long, attractive reception room was gay with flowers and music and the bright hum of chatter. At one end a band was playing the latest theme songs and musical-comedy hits. Starr gazed about her with a little inward gasp of excitement. Though she'd been mixed up with the various studios for some years now, she didn't feel in the least blasé about a party such as this. Incredible that so many famous people should be crowded together in such a small space: stars whose names blazed down at you in electric lights from every picture theatre; writers whose new books were a sensation in the literary world; newspaper magnates; financiers who periodically shook world finances. And the women! As though one vied with another in the style and splendor of her gown. "I feel like someone's poor relation," Starr thought with a wry smile.

The one seat vacant was just by the entrance door. Having taken a quick glance around, Starr subsided into it. She wouldn't admit she had been definitely looking for someone. Anyhow, he wasn't there. She supposed Stephen Desmond was "too busy" again. Still, considering he had directed this picture, his absence seemed strange.

She hadn't seen Rex Brandon either. And his presence was important since she had to get that interview. She murmured to the young man next to her, "Has Rex Brandon come yet?"

The young man was an extra and slightly embittered by the fact that he had been an extra for three years now. In the beginning it had been easy to explain to his friends that he was merely marking time till his "big chance" came. But each added year of marking time was becoming increasingly difficult to explain away.

"No," he said rather crossly, "I don't believe he has. I suppose," - he couldn't resist the jibe - "if he doesn't your evening will be a complete loss?"

Starr felt called upon to defend herself. "I haven't the slightest interest in Rex Brandon - except professionally," she said coldly.

He laughed mockingly. "Then you're the first woman I've ever met who hasn't! I thought every girl was in love with him!"

"I've never met him, but from the look of him I should think he was a conceited fool who just lived on flattery," Starr said feelingly. "I wouldn't have asked you to point him out to me if I hadn't wanted to interview him for my paper."

"Oh, you write for a paper, do you?" The young man was charming immediately. No doubt but that his chance would come some day. When it did, the more of the press he was friendly

with the better. And while he talked glowingly of himself to the small red-haired girl with the pretty slight body and impudent pixyish face, a tall thin man who had, in the semidarkness, been standing immediately behind them moved away. He was very tall, very handsome, with slightly crooked features. It was too dark just then to see whether or not the expression in his eyes was mockingly cynical. But there was no doubt that, as he sat in a far corner, every now and then he emitted a slight chuckle. Something he had recently overheard must have amused him.

Starr was slightly disappointed in the picture. She tried not to be, but she had to face the fact that it wasn't half so well directed as Stephen Desmond's pictures usually were. She couldn't put her finger on just what was wrong. Rather a general looseness in the construction. Fiercely she fought against admitting this. She had always been convinced that Stephen Desmond would go on and on to greater triumphs. He *must*. It meant, somehow, a great deal to Starr. Having worked with him in the past, she felt, in a way, that his career was *her* career. She couldn't bear the thought that he might pass out of the picture as so many other young promising directors had done.

Rex Brandon's acting was excellent. Dispassionately Starr felt she must admit this. He might even, to certain women, be attractive. And his voice was certainly pleasant to listen to.

"Well," questioned the young man when the lights were bright again, "what do you think of it?" There was a distinct challenge in his voice.

Loyalty to Stephen Desmond made Starr say promptly that she thought it an excellent picture.

"I thought you *didn't* admire Rex Brandon," said the young man tartly.

He was smarting under the discovery that the scene he had been in - and it was the first time he had ever done a bit by himself, too - had been cut.

"Rex Brandon isn't the *whole* picture," she pointed out.

"He is - from a box-office standpoint," he laughed. "He's the only one connected with the picture the outside public is likely to hear about."

"That's unfair," she stormed. "After all, it's Stephen Desmond, the director, who is chiefly responsible for its failure or success."

"Do you know Stephen Desmond?" he asked curiously.

"Slightly," she said noncommittally.

"I can't say whether or not *he* will put in an appearance tonight," the young man resumed. "But I'm willing to bet Mrs. Stephen Desmond will come!"

His tone mystified Starr.

"Why should you say that?"

The young man shrugged. "Oh, it's common enough gossip around the studio. She's madly in love with Rex Brandon. Follows him everywhere. Sends him expensive presents. Is usually waiting for him when he comes off the set. Poor old Desmond must notice it. They say he's taken to drinking rather heavily lately. If he keeps it up, his work is bound to suffer. Some say it has already. Too bad - because it looked at one time as though he had a very brilliant career ahead of him."



"But - they've only been married a year," Starr gasped, when she had recovered her voice.

The man laughed. "Women - especially married women with money - are quick workers nowadays. But don't believe me if you don't want to. Just watch them together tonight." He paused and added. "Are you coming into the supper room?"

Starr shook her head and continued sitting there. She felt too stunned just then to move.

That any woman should dare treat Stephen Desmond like that! Stephen Desmond who was worth so much more than any other man in the world! Of course it *might* be mere gossip. She determined to try and think so at least. But if it weren't... Her small white hands tightened in her lap. The backs of her eyes felt hot and gritty behind, as though they had been rubbed with sandpaper. She couldn't bear to think of Stephen Desmond humiliated by any woman, even though she was his wife. And if he *was* humiliated, she told herself fiercely, she hated that wife. But even more than the wife she felt she hated the man who was responsible - Rex Brandon.

That reminded her of the interview. Springing to her feet, she made her way to the supper room. The gay noise of laughter, the bright hum of chatter flowed out to her through the open doors as a monster wave. A blue haze of cigarette smoke made the vivid scene seem strangely unreal. Much more unreal, curiously, than those scenes she had just witnessed on the silver screen. She looked about for Rex Brandon and saw him immediately. He was so much taller than those who surrounded him; so much more vital somehow; so much more handsome. A very pretty, very blonde girl was standing close to him. Much closer than she need have stood despite the crowd about them. She was gazing up into his face and talking in a way that somehow made everyone in the supper room seem prying spectators to an intimate scene. And, as Starr stood there in the doorway watching them, the voice of the young man who had sat beside her said in her ear, "There, what did I tell you? See them? Nothing like letting the whole world share your love affair, is there? That is Mrs. Stephen Desmond with him, of course!"

Suddenly Starr felt the whole atmosphere of the supper room stifling. Too, she was obsessed by a sense of outrage. As though she had been let down instead of Stephen Desmond. Which was absurd. With a murmured excuse to the young man, she pushed a long glass door open and walked out onto a moon-whitened strip of lawn. The moon was bright and full tonight, like a bride with her veils trailing the earth. The stars that clustered about it were so many eager, bright-eyed, bridesmaids.

She walked across the lawn, her small silver-shod feet crunching the dew out of the grass. But the beauty of the night was lost upon her. Her mind was full of what she had just heard. It was some moments before she realized that she wasn't alone on that sparkling strip of lawn. A man was pacing restlessly up and down. As he turned, she saw a silhouette of his profile in the white moonlight. Stephen Desmond.

Should she go back to the supper room or speak to him? Curiously she felt suddenly shy of speaking to him. As though, meeting him alone in these circumstances, she were prying into his inmost secrets. But a moment later she crushed this thought down. After all, he wasn't to know she had heard the malicious gossip which coupled his wife's name with that of Rex Brandon. And in a strange way she felt he needed someone to speak to him just then.

"I want to tell you how much I like your latest picture, Mr. Desmond," she said as she went towards him.

He paused in his restless pacing. For a moment he seemed too preoccupied to recognize her. Then with a start he said, "Oh - er - it's Miss Thayle. Thanks. But I guess I'm a little disappointed in the picture myself." He smiled suddenly, that nice friendly smile of his, and added, "What do you think of it honestly, Miss Thayle? You always were my most candid critic."

Starr was embarrassed. She hated to hurt his feelings, yet was it fair to him to pretend it was as good as the others when it wasn't?

"I see you agree with me," he murmured with a wry laugh in the pause. He shrugged and added, "Anyhow, does it matter? After all, it isn't my picture, it's Brandon's. A director is very small fry these days."

"Nonsense," Starr asserted angrily. "Mr. Brandon may have the looks and the limelight, but he's merely a puppet. Everyone knows the director is the brains of the show."

He laughed again. Somehow that laugh hurt Starr. It was so bitter. She had never heard Stephen Desmond laugh in that bitter way before.

"But the looks and limelight are all that matter to women, aren't they, Miss Thayle?"

"Not to all women," Starr asserted hotly.

He smiled twistedly. But not at Starr, rather at his own reflections.

'But all women don't count,' he said slowly. 'It's only one woman who ever counts. It's hell - to realize that only one woman counts and you can do nothing about it.'

Starr didn't say anything. There was little she could say. But an awful wave of anger swept her. It must be true, then, that gossip. Otherwise what could have happened to change Stephen Desmond so? To have made this bitter brooding man out of the enthusiastic and charming young director he had been a year ago?

"I guess," he spoke after a long silence, "one's career matters very little in the long run, don't you think?"

"Oh, Mr. Desmond, how can you talk like that?" Starr cried in despair. "Why, your career matters tremendously. It means everything, everything in the world to..." She had almost said "to me," but stopped herself in time.

"Do you think so?" His voice was disinterested.

A fierce torrent of words rose to Starr's lips, but she bit them back. All the same, at that dead note in his voice, she felt she wanted to shake him and say, "Don't be such a fool, Stephen Desmond, as to let this woman ruin your career. Yes, even though she is your wife. Why, you and your future are so much more important than she could ever be! Let her get on with her flirtation with Rex Brandon. They're probably birds of a feather, if the truth were but known!"

But she couldn't say that, and so they lapsed into silence. Presently Stephen Desmond roused himself sufficiently to ask, "Are you here tonight on business or pleasure, Miss Thayne?"

"Business," she told him. "As a matter of fact, I want to interview Rex Brandon."

Again she saw that bitter twisted smile on his lips. "Yes, I suppose everyone wants to read of Rex Brandon these days. *He* is the important one, isn't he?"

"It depends on what you mean by 'important,'" Starr said shortly. But he didn't seem to hear her. He went on, and it seemed to the girl that he was speaking his thoughts aloud: "After all, I suppose he *is* very attractive to women. You can't blame them for falling in love with him."

"I think you can blame *one woman* very much for having fallen in love with him," Starr wanted to cry hotly. But again she forced herself to keep silent.

"But it is rather ironical that *I* should have made him," Stephen Desmond went on. "Without me he would have passed out of the picture when the sun of the conventional villain set. Instead, I turned him into one of the screen's greatest lovers. That's funny, isn't it? 'The talkies' most magnetic personality! 'The man no woman can resist!' How often I've laughed over such publicity! I didn't realize then it might be true. That no woman, even though she were originally in love with her husband-" He broke off abruptly, suddenly seeming to realize that he was saying too much. He paused in confusion, running a hand back through his dark hair, whitened by the moonlight. There was something oddly boyish about the gesture that touched Starr. But there was something defeated, too, and that made her want to cry.

"You were saying you wanted to interview Rex," he resumed presently in a more normal voice. "Would you like me to introduce you?"

Starr murmured she would be grateful.

"I hope I haven't bored you, Miss Thayle," he said, as he led her back towards the supper room. 'I'm afraid I'm not a ladies' man.'

"No, thank heavens you're not," Starr said sharply. So sharply that Stephen Desmond laughed, despite himself.

"Don't you like the type of man most women admire?" he asked curiously.

"No, I despise them," she said. "I could never stand a man of that type. The professional lover!"

Stephen laughed again, mirthlessly. "Don't be too sure, young lady. You haven't met the fascinating Rex Brandon yet!"

As they wound their way between chatting, laughing couples to where Rex Brandon and Rita Desmond were standing, Starr heard Stephen's wife cry softly:

"Oh, Rex, what have you done with that platinum cigarette case I gave you the other day?"

A slight frown crossed Rex Brandon's thin, attractive face.

"I'm afraid I've mislaid it," he said quietly.

Stephen gave a short, hard laugh and muttered, half to Starr and half to himself: "A platinum cigarette case! Husbands have to be content with silver ones! Still, I suppose it's the way of the world."

Luckily Starr was saved the necessity of replying. Just then they drew up beside Rex Brandon and Rita.

"Hello, Stephen," Rex said in his low, pleasant voice, "I've been wondering what had become of you. I'm glad you've shown up at last."

His welcome sounded convincing, but Starr, full of fierce indignation against him because of Stephen Desmond, was sure it was insincere.

Stephen nodded curtly to Rex. Then, turning to his wife, he said with a certain marked irony:

"My dear, if you'll forgive my intruding, here's a lady who'd like to meet Rex Brandon."

A quick anger smoldered in Rita's lazy amber eyes. Starr found herself thinking, "She could be rotten mean to anyone who dared interfere with her. She's like a tigress... claws sharp, ever ready to spring."

Rita laughed unnaturally. But the color was very high in her cheeks. "Well, why not introduce them? After all, I'm not Rex's keeper, Stephen!"

"No," her husband replied, in a low, fierce voice; "not yet, at any rate, my dearest girl!"

Starr couldn't help overhearing. And she felt awful. No mistaking the throbbing undercurrent of hostility between them. Though, in Stephen's case she sensed it more bitter hurt than hostility. She glanced towards Rex Brandon but except for a faint look of worry in his deep blue-gray eyes his face was a mask.

In the pause Rex turned towards Starr and smiled down at her.

"You're the young lady who wants to interview me, aren't you?"

She was completely taken by surprise. "How do you know I want to interview you?" she stammered. A moment later her eyes twinkled, and she added, "Is 'press woman' written all over me?"

"No." He continued to smile down at her. But now, she felt, there was something slightly mocking in his gaze. As though, somehow, he were enjoying a great joke at her expense. "Still I happen to know. Perhaps a little bird told me. Little birds who tell people things are rather prevalent at the West East Studios, don't you think?"

This time she knew he *was* making fun of her. A hot color whipped her cheeks.

"Could you spare me a few minutes?" she returned coldly.

"Of course. If the Desmonds will excuse us, let's drift over to that table, shall we?"

He led the way to a small, white-clothed table and motioned to the waiter to bring them a bottle of champagne. Starr felt he was watching her closely, both mockery and admiration mingled in his gaze. She didn't know which she resented most. She hated being laughed at, especially by this man whom she told herself she despised. But she hated to feel he admired her even more. How *dare* he admire her, fresh from his disgraceful flirtation with Rita Desmond?

Rex held up his champagne glass and smiled at her crookedly over the rim.

"Here's to a successful interview," he said. "You won't be too hard on me? Don't expect me to give away all my secret yearnings and aspirations!" He added, his blue-gray eyes twinkling, "I guess you know I'm most domesticated in private life. Men of my type on the screen have to be!"

Starr ignored this. She had a small notebook and pencil in her green evening bag. These she whipped out and said with her most professional air: "What type of girl do you admire most, Mr. Brandon?"

He lowered his champagne glass and stroked his chin thoughtfully - perhaps to hide the secret smile that quivered at the corner of his lips.

"Now let me see. I think," - he paused impressively - "I think," he repeated, "I like *small* girls, preferably with red hair. Yes," - and now his eyes frankly laughed across the table at her - "I'm quite sure I *do* like 'em with red hair, especially if their noses are tiny and turn up slightly with the most adorable of freckles right on the very tip! I like them to have rather fierce tempers, too, and lips that turn up provocatively at the corners. I like them to wear green in the evenings and-" But he got no further. Starr closed her notebook with a snap and said in a small, cold voice that had a certain childish dignity behind it:

"You are having a great joke at my expense, aren't you, Mr. Brandon?"

His simulated astonishment was too well done to be convincing. Perhaps he didn't intend it to be.

"A joke at your expense, my dear?"

"Don't 'my dear' me," Starr retorted angrily. "And please don't deny it. You've been kidding me ever since we met."

"Bravo, my dear - er - I beg your pardon," he apologized with mock humility. "And I like girls with spirit. You might add *that* in the interview!"

"Oh!" Starr gasped. "You're insufferable, aren't you?"

He appeared to consider that. Quite seriously. "Perhaps I am," he admitted. And added, his eyes twinkling again, "Anyhow, you expected to find me so, didn't you?"

Starr flushed furiously. The very truth of his statement momentarily took all the fight out of her. At a loss what to say, she stammered: "But - why should I have?"

He raised one eyebrow, while a wry smile tightened his lips. And for once his eyes weren't smiling. "I don't know, but the fact remains that you did. How do I know? Perhaps another of those little birds we were speaking about. You thought me a conceited ass. Perhaps a cad, to boot. And, my dear, having never met me, don't you think that was rather unfair?"

She didn't reply. He had succeeded in making her feel both small and childish. This infuriated her. For after all, wasn't she justified in thinking the very worst of him? This man who, because of a sordid flirtation, was ruining a brilliant young director's career?

In the pause he leaned across the table, smiled quizzically and said, "Well, now we have met I hope you're not disappointed?"

She was sufficiently incensed to retort, "I'm not so sure that I am!"

He laughed, but there was no fun in his laughter. Incredible as it might seem, she felt she had actually hurt him. Momentarily his blue-gray eyes clouded.

"At least we know where we stand, then!"

"If my paper didn't *want* the interview..." she began coldly.

"Oh, that's quite understood," he laughed shortly. "But for the sacred call of duty you wouldn't bother about me. But," - he smiled again, and now the old mocking gleam had come back into his eyes - "supposing we turn the tables, my dear - I interview you. Will you tell me what type of man *you* admire?"

Starr was so angry she let him have it straight. He had asked her, hadn't he?

"I prefer decent, straightforward men," she said slowly. "Men who are honest in their affairs with women. Men who treat other men squarely, who don't run after other men's wives-" She paused abruptly. Astounded at what, in the heat of the moment, she had said. And in the pause, which was a miserably long pause, she saw the kindly amused light fade from Rex Brandon's eyes and the muscles of his face tighten ominously.

"Don't you think you've said rather much?" he asked at last, in a curiously stern voice. She sensed strongly that this man would brook no interference in his private affairs.

Her eyes fell before his, and she felt hot with embarrassment.

"Shall we get on with the interview?" he asked gravely. "Though, on second thoughts, I think we had better postpone it. Supposing you come around to my apartment and have tea with me tomorrow afternoon?"

"Thank you," Starr murmured. It was her duty to her paper to go, wasn't it? "It's kind of you," she forced herself to add.

"Is it?" he questioned lightly, as he rose to his feet. And once again his eyes were twinkling. "I'm not so sure. Perhaps you interest me. Oh, not in the usual way," he hastened to add. "But I find it amusing to be disliked so cordially by a woman, my dear." He bowed and left her.

Starr had difficulty in getting to sleep that night. She was so worried about Stephen. To think that a woman as worthless as his wife might be capable of wrecking his brilliant career! Somehow, such a tragedy must be averted. But how? Useless to appeal to the woman herself. Only too obvious how desperately in love she was with Rex Brandon. Besides, she wasn't the type of woman who would stop at anything. All her life she had been so pampered and spoiled that she had lost all consideration for other people's feelings. Would it be any use appealing to Rex himself? Mightn't he merely laugh at her, as he had tonight, practically tell her to mind her own business? Every time she thought of their conversation she went hot and cold with shame and annoyance. Somehow he had managed to make her feel in the wrong. Knowing what she did about him, this infuriated her. "Anyhow, I'll put him in his place tomorrow," she murmured defiantly to the night. "A man like that doesn't deserve an consideration!"

Rex Brandon felt in a particularly good humor as he sauntered homewards along Sunset Boulevard the following afternoon. His lean, attractive face, with the slightly crooked lips, was smiling.

Business was going well. The press critics had stated his new picture would be more successful than most. The West East Studios had offered to renew his contract at a higher figure.

Another thing pleased him. The prospect of a tête-a-tête with that red-headed little spitfire filled him with a queer new exhilaration. How stunning she had looked, even when she was angry! That red hair of hers seemed to blaze as though it actually had caught on fire. And he admired her spirit. "I can't stand the 'yes, yes' sort of girl," he decided with conviction. What a joke he had had at her expense, too! Overhearing her discussing him and using it to tease her. This morning he forgave her freely that nasty thrust she had had at his expense. It wasn't in Rex Brandon's nature to bear a grievance against anyone for long.

It was not yet four, so he was surprised when, upon opening the door of his apartment to him, his manservant said: "There's a lady waiting to see you in the sitting room, sir."

"A young lady from the press?"

"No, Mrs. Stephen Desmond, sir."

"Oh," said Rex. He frowned as he passed a hand back over his hair. What could Rita want with him? He was beginning to be worried about her. He liked her, but he liked her husband better. It was because he felt too intensely grateful to Stephen Desmond that he had tried to be nice to his wife. He hadn't wanted to flirt with her. He admitted they had gone about a good deal together, but that was because Stephen was always so busy. He had thought Stephen would want him to amuse his wife. Last night he realized for the first time that the situation might grow serious. He knew now that Rita was in love with him. It upset him greatly. But what was he to do? You can't tell a woman to her face that you'd rather she kept away from you. Not a woman like Rita Desmond, anyhow.

As he handed his hat to Mason, and went farther into the hall, he found himself confronted by a large pile of very feminine-looking luggage.

"Great heavens, Mason!" His dark eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Whatever is that?"

Mason looked down his nose at the luggage in distinct disapproval, a disapproval even stronger than that of his master. Surely no woman was coming upon the scene to interrupt the even tenor of their lives?

"Mrs. Stephen Desmond brought it with her, sir."



Rex didn't say anything. But his blue-gray eyes took on a puzzled, worried light, while his lips tightened. What did this mean?

Then, as he hesitated, a soft husky voice crept like a silken thread out of the drawing room.

"Is that you, Rex darling? Come in here at once. I've wonderful news for you."

He went reluctantly. He had a foretaste of disaster even then. And, as he entered the drawing room, two very soft arms encompassed him, a very blonde head came to rest on his shoulder, while two very red lips pressed his abandonedly, passionately. "Rex darling, I've done it at last," she murmured excitedly. "I couldn't stand it any longer - the strain, you know. I felt we'd both be happier directly we'd taken the decisive step. I've burned all my bridges. I've written to Stephen and explained everything-"

"What are you talking about?" Rex demanded hoarsely, as he attempted to disentangle himself from those soft clinging arms. "And what have you written to Stephen?" But even as he asked the question, his heart seemed to stand still with an awful dread.

She pressed closer to him. The faint perfume she used suddenly nauseated him. "Why, that we mean *everything* to each other," she whispered ecstatically. "I've told him I'm leaving him for you, darling. I've said that we love each other madly and are going away together this very day-"

"You've told him *that*?" The startled ejaculation was wrung from Rex's lips. "You've told him *that*?" he repeated hoarsely. "Great heavens, Rita, are you quite mad?"

She smiled slowly, the subtly mysterious smile of a woman confident in her power over all men. And she tightened her hold upon his shoulder possessively.

"Mad because I love you, darling? If you call *that* mad, why, then I'm a raving lunatic!" She laughed lightly. "Kiss me, sweetheart. Tell me how *glad* you are!"

But he didn't kiss her. Very determinedly he disentangled her arms from about his neck. He breathed a sigh of relief. Her nearness had stifled him. Now, with her a little distance from him, he felt more capable of dealing with the situation.

"Look here, Rita," he muttered. "We've got to talk this over sensibly."

She threw back her head and smiled maddeningly up at him. She had a long, slender throat and knew it. Too, it was white as alabaster. Unfortunately Rex was too preoccupied to notice it.

"Sensible? Darling man, how can you *expect* a woman to be sensible when she's as much in love as I am? You ought" - and she put her head a little to one side and regarded him archly - "to be awfully flattered, you know!"

Rex's face hardened. A tight line held his lips. "Supposing I'm not flattered? Supposing I've no intention of going through with it?" he asked bluntly.

Her face paled slightly, but the determination in her light amber eyes never wavered. "Moral scruples, Rex?"

"Perhaps."

"In this day and age? My dear man, you're archaic!"

"Stephen happens to be my best friend," he said slowly.

"Mine, too," she agreed. She took a cigarette from the small gold case that hung at her wrist and lit it leisurely. "I always think one's ex-husband should be one's best friend, don't you? It makes such a good story for the press! We might all three of us have our photo taken together some time!"

"I'm glad you agree with me that this whole thing is a *joke!*" Rex ejaculated grimly. And, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, crossed to the window and stood there angrily jingling some coins.

"A joke?" Suddenly her eyes were blazing, fiercely, accusingly. "A joke, my darling?"

"Yes," he said roughly. "It is a joke, isn't it?"

At that she laughed. She laughed in a high-pitched, unnatural way that made him long to go across the room and shake her. To shake and shake her until he had shaken some sense into that slight, sinuous, attractive little body she had. Did she really think he *would* elope with her? It was incredible. Ludicrous!

"A joke, Rex, when I've written and confessed *everything* to Stephen? Why, he's probably reading the letter by now."

"But there's been nothing between us to confess!" he cut in. Was the woman completely insane?

"No? Well, if there hasn't been already there will be soon!" And she smiled tightly, making tiny malicious crinkles fly up her cheeks. "Besides, a husband always believes the worst, you know!"

"Stephen will divorce me," she resumed presently, her light eyes challenging him. "Or perhaps he'll let me divorce him. He's the sort who *would* do the generous thing, don't you think?"

Rex raised one eyebrow quizzically, and his crooked mouth became a shade crookeder. "A quality you don't appear to appreciate, my dear."

"Oh, but I do!" she murmured. "He's the soul of generosity. Awfully noble, too. That's what makes him so dull. I'm sure if any woman asked me for a testimonial for him, I'd say he was a most pleasant husband to live with."

"And do you think I would be a pleasant husband to live with?" Rex demanded grimly.

Her red lips curved in a slow smile; her eyes gleamed softly.

"Not at all, darling, thank God! Most disagreeable, I'm sure. Still you'd be exciting. Even thrilling! And that's what really holds a woman these days. Besides, I love you."

"Didn't you love Stephen a bare twelve months ago?" he asked in the pause.

"Not really," she insisted, shaking her tiny head so that the long silver earrings jangled. "I believe I married him because I was sorry for him. He loved me so madly, you know. I couldn't bear to hurt him."

She sighed artistically. Rex wondered cynically if there was a woman living who hadn't married her husband out of pity - once she was tired of him.

"But you don't mind hurting him now?" he asked quietly, with that slight, cynical smile on his lips.

"That's different, Rex!" Her pretty face paled, then flushed. "I can't understand you at all," she added, in angry exasperation, nibbling her lower coral-colored lip. "Anyone might think from the way you talk you didn't want me! That you weren't as happy as I am about *us*. Oh, but I know you are!" she added quickly before he had a chance to reply. "It's just that you want to be *fair* to me, isn't it? You're afraid of my taking any decisive step I might regret later on? Well" - she gave a little, crooning laugh and came towards him again, arms invitingly outstretched - "you needn't worry, darling. I've thought it all out. Oh, so seriously. And I realize I can't live without you. That, without you, life is *meaningless*." She made a vague gesture with her hands. Like white birds flying, they were, against the black sheen of her dress. She had a little trick of emphasizing some words out of all proportion to others. "Just *think*, darling, after tomorrow we'll be together always, always! No more little subterfuges, no more trickery-"

"I wasn't aware we ever had resorted to subterfuge or trickery," he said quietly.

Her lips twitched slightly. "Oh, but *I* did, darling. *I had* to! Stephen is so jealous. Really, he's been quite *unreasonably* jealous lately. That's why I'm sure he'll *believe* what I wrote in that letter!" And she smiled with secret satisfaction.

"Darned if he will!" he ejaculated. And he ran a hand through his dark hair in angry exasperation.

"Darling, you look *adorable* with your hair ruffled like that!" she smiled. "Let Mama straighten it for you." Raising one slim arm, she deftly patted the disordered hair back into place.

Rex scarcely noticed what she was doing. He was too preoccupied. This was awful. The most awful thing that had ever happened to him. Quite apart from the fact that Rita had suddenly lost all attraction for him, there was Stephen to be considered. Stephen to whom he owed so much. And Stephen, he had realized last night, was still as much in love with this vain and shallow young wife of his as ever.

In the pause he caught hold of both her wrists and squeezed them tighter than he meant to in his earnestness. "Look here, Rita, this nonsense has got to stop. You must be a sensible girl and return to your husband. He's a darned good sort. One of the best." He added with a twisted smile, "Worth two of me any day."

She wriggled her wrists out of his grasp impatiently. "You are *hurting* me, Rex. And you are so *stupid*, darling. A woman doesn't care about a man's worth. She only cares whether she loves him or not. And I adore you, my sweet. I've loved you since the first moment I laid eyes upon you. On the screen, even before I met you. I knew you were my dream lover then. I knew, too, we were *made* for each other."

Rex walked the length of the room before replying. Then, propping his tall lean frame against the Victrola stand, he smiled bitterly. "But, my dear, don't you realize that's my stock in trade - to make every woman feel I'm her dream lover, as you so poetically phrase it? Why, I wouldn't be worth my hire if I didn't. That's what they pay me for. To epitomize the lover every woman secretly yearns for but whom, probably, she'd hate if she ever met him in the flesh! Besides," - slowly his face hardened. He hated to be brutal, but for both their sakes he felt he had to - "Supposing *I* don't feel we were made for each other? Supposing I were to tell you I don't love you, my dear?"

A pause. Quite tense it was, with a throbbing undercurrent of emotion. Her face paled, and her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"That's a lie, Rex!" she gasped out. "You do love me. I know you do. Ridiculous for you to pretend you don't. A woman always *does* know these things!"

He took a cigarette from the bronze smoking stand near him. His hand was unsteady as he struck the match. "Isn't it possible that, just once, a woman might be mistaken?" he asked quietly.

She recoiled slightly. As though he had struck her. And her color blazed again. Even her tiny ear lobes were burning. "I can't believe you'd be such a cad, Rex. A cad to have led me on as you've done without loving me. No, I won't believe it. I won't! It's too cruel. Too brutal. After I've ruined my reputation and all. For it *will* be ruined directly Stephen gets that letter. And if you *don't* love me, why have you gone about with me so much? Why have you caused me to be talked about? Oh, Rex dear, I know you're only doing all this for *my* sake, to make me realize the enormity of the step I'm about to take. But, darling, it's no *use*. Wild horses wouldn't drag me back to my husband. And... and we *are* going to elope. Why, I've planned everything. I've even got the tickets, Rex. We're sailing for Honolulu on the *Beutonia* this very night!"

Her voice had risen to an hysterical pitch. He saw she was beside herself. And when he didn't reply immediately, she resumed in the same excited, uncontrolled way, "So you see you can't let me down, Rex. You can't! I'd kill myself! Yes, I'd shoot myself. And I'd see that the papers had the full story. How you led me on, got me to leave my husband, then deserted me. For that's what it amounts to, isn't it? Yes, it will be a good story for the press! And *then* what will women think of their fine dream lover, Mr. Rex Brandon? How many of them do you think will flock to see your films then?" She ended in a breathless, sobbing gasp. Her whole small being seemed aflame with anger. Rex realized for the first time what a dangerous woman she was. She might easily do just what she had threatened. All the same he had no intention of eloping with her. He wondered grimly if this wretched situation was in any way his fault. He couldn't see that it was, except that perhaps he should have foreseen it more clearly.

"What's this about sailing on the *Beutonia*?" he asked to gain time.

She grew calmer immediately. She was the type of woman who can work herself up into a wild frenzy one moment and become calm again the next.

"Yes, won't it be *wonderful*, darling?" she cooed softly. "I've arranged everything. Just think - one week of glorious cruising on the blue, blue waters! One week alone together. Our honeymoon, beloved-"

"Rather a premature one, don't you think?" he murmured derisively.

"Oh, Rex!" She stamped her small foot angrily. "Don't say such things. Don't spoil it all!" She was becoming tearful again. "I'm determined on this. I tell you I am. I've never been so determined on anything in my life. And when I'm determined on *anything* I get it. Besides, I've actually *bought* our tickets. Oh, darling," she ended with a little sob, "be pleased about it, do!"

He looked at her in genuine astonishment. Could she seriously imagine that he would chuck everything at a moment's notice to go on this mad elopement with her? What about his contracts? He asked the question aloud.

"Oh, darn your old contracts," she said crossly. "They don't matter. Only our love matters."

He straightened himself and came towards her. "But, Rita, don't you realize that if I don't finish my contracts my reputation around the studios will be finished? I'll find it darned hard to land another job. And without jobs I won't have any more money, my dear."

"But I have plenty of money for both of us," she interrupted eagerly. "And I don't care what the film corporations think! It'll be enough for you to please *me* in the future."

"The professional lover in real life, eh?" He laughed softly. But there was bitterness in his laughter.

"I don't know what you're talking about. You'd be *my* lover, anyhow. Wouldn't that be enough?"

He didn't reply, and in the pause she opened an absurdly small gold compact and set about powdering her nose. Rex looked at her in amazement. But she was the type of woman who never forgets her appearance no matter under what emotional stress she may be. What a woman, he thought, and ground his teeth savagely. He paced up and down the room, feeling desperate. What was the use in arguing with her? She had been so pampered and spoiled all her life she wouldn't listen to reason. And how incredibly selfish she was! Did she seriously expect him to ruin his career for her at a moment's notice? Apparently she did, for after a moment she went on, with a little smile of inward satisfaction:

"I'm so glad you see it as I do, Rex darling. You were being rather difficult, weren't you? But then men *are* so conventional at heart, poor dears. Even sophisticated ones like you, my love! Still you've no idea how happy we are going to be. A woman always sees the future so much clearer than a man. And really, darling, we *will* be an attractive couple. Quite a distinguished couple, too. And after all the rotten mess of the divorce is over..."

Rex had ceased listening to her. He was thinking. There must be some way out of this ghastly situation. Some way that wouldn't break Stephen Desmond's heart or, incidentally, ruin his own career.

Then, suddenly, an idea came to him. A solution so final, yet so simple, he wondered he hadn't thought of it before. Why not *pretend* to agree to her plan? Even to go so far as actually to board the ship, then, just before the ship sailed, slip on shore? He wondered, momentarily, if such an action would be caddish. Yet, after all, this situation was none of his seeking. Why, he hadn't even flirted with the woman! Besides, mightn't it be a good lesson for her? Some weeks alone at sea would have a beneficial effect on her in more ways than one. It might teach her to appreciate her husband a little. And did it matter what she thought of him?

Yes, the more he thought of it the more determined he became that this was the best way out of the strange impasse. Later that night, when he returned to town, he would call on Stephen and, as tactfully as possible, explain the whole thing to him.

"Hadn't you better start packing, darling?" Her small, imperative voice broke in upon his thoughts.

He glanced at her for a moment quizzically, one eyebrow raised. "You really are determined on this, Rita?"

"Of *course*. darling!"

A queer gleam came into his deep-set blue-gray eyes. Inwardly he chuckled. "Very well, my dear. I *will* go and pack." And without looking at her again he went into the bedroom.

Starr was more excited than she cared to admit as she pressed the bell of Rex Brandon's apartment precisely at four. She couldn't account for her excitement, either. It was only another interview. She had done hundreds in her time. Perhaps it was because she disliked this Rex Brandon so much. Certain kinds of dislike can, on occasion, stimulate you as much as love.

Mason, Rex's manservant, seemed reluctant to admit her.

"I'm - er - I'm afraid Mr. Brandon is engaged," he murmured.

Starr smiled with sweet persistence. She was used to being received with suspicion, especially by servants.

"But I have an appointment," she said. "Mr. Brandon made it with me last night. I'm Miss Thayle of the *Sunday Recorder*."

Still Mason hesitated. He was in a quandary. Certainly, Mr. Brandon had said he was expecting a Miss Thayle from the *Sunday Recorder*. But what about the other lady, Mrs. Stephen Desmond, who was still closeted with him in the sitting room?

"If - er - you'll step into the hall for a moment and wait, miss," he said.

Starr stepped inside with alacrity. Any obstacle always aroused her fighting blood. And as she stepped in, the first thing her eyes fell upon was the luggage piled just inside the doorway. Impossible, by any wild stretch of the imagination, to mistake that luggage for masculine luggage. There were two red, shiny hatboxes, a slim vanity bag to match, pale gray crocodile-leather suitcases, and a trunk of the same leather with red bindings. Labels on them, too, ostensibly displayed. Starr bent down and read one of the labels. After all, a reporter is trained to take note of such things. With a distinct shock she read: "Mrs. Stephen Desmond. *Beutonia*. Los Angeles." And printed beneath in red letters: "WANTED ON THE VOYAGE."

Starr knew that the *Beutonia* sailed at midnight. She had glanced through the passenger list only yesterday. But she had not seen Mrs. Stephen Desmond's name there. Still that lady might easily be going on a health voyage and have decided at the last minute. Good thing if she were, Starr thought. It would separate her temporarily at least from Rex Brandon. Also it might set Stephen's mind at rest and allow him to get on with his work. But what was her luggage doing here in Rex Brandon's apartment?

A woman's light voice drifted out of the sitting room. "Oh, Mason, you might have my luggage taken down to Mr. Brandon's car, please. He's just phoned through for it. There'll be some trunks of his to go down later on."

Starr stood as one transfixed. She knew that voice. But Rex Brandon's luggage to go down as well as Mrs. Desmond's? What did it mean? Did it mean that these two people were eloping together? Oh, surely, it couldn't mean that! But if it did, what of Stephen? Her first thoughts were for Stephen. Stephen so kind, so generous, so *decent*.

In the wake of that voice came Mrs. Stephen Desmond herself.

"Mason," she began. "Why-" Then she stopped, staring at Starr in amazement. The pause was short, but there was something queerly tense about it. Perhaps, even then, their antagonism was so strong it was like a living presence in the hallway.

Rita's eyes narrowed. "Oh, it's Miss Thayle, isn't it? We met last night. My husband told me you used to be his secretary."

"Yes. I enjoyed working for Mr. Desmond very much."

"Really?" Rita raised her plucked eyebrows. "So nice of you to say so!"

Something in her tone heightened the color in Starr's cheeks. An insolent something. But she said nothing. She knew, at times, more can be gained by silence than anything else.

"And what are you doing here, may I ask?" Rita went on.

"I came to see Mr. Brandon - by appointment," Starr retorted coldly.

"Oh, yes, for your paper, I suppose? Well, I'm afraid Mr. Brandon won't be able to give you an interview this afternoon. He's awfully busy at the moment. In fact he'll be awfully busy for some time to come." And a queer little smile played about Rita's pretty, piquant features.

Starr felt she was dismissed. Still she had no intention of going. There was a determined streak in her. And you must remember her red hair.

"Perhaps I could see Mr. Brandon?" she asked. "I should like to make an appointment with him for tomorrow."

The queer little smile on Rita's face deepened. 'I'm afraid Mr. Brandon will be engaged all tomorrow, too. Really," - and here she laughed lightly - "I don't think you've a hope of getting in touch with him for some weeks at least."

"Is Mr. Brandon going away on a cruise?" Starr asked innocently.

Rita started. How could the girl know that? Still, did it matter? The whole world would know soon. And as far as she was concerned, the sooner the whole world knew the better. She was too proud of her conquest to keep it to herself. Rex Brandon whom half the women in the United States were in love with!

"Perhaps," she murmured. "And perhaps you will get quite a good story for your paper - when we come back!"

Faintly she stressed the "we" and she smiled mysteriously,

"Oh," said Starr. So it *was* true, then? They were going to elope! This woman had as good as admitted it.

Just then another door opened and Rex himself stepped into the hall. He stood, his tall lean frame filling the doorway, looking quizzically from one woman to the other, though mostly, it must be confessed, he looked at Starr. Quite a picture she made standing there in the sunlit hallway. She was wearing a neat green sports suit with a small shiny straw hat tilted slightly at

the back. The sunlight burnished her hair where it escaped from the sides of her hat like a flame.

"How do you do, Mr. Brandon?" Starr said coldly. "Please forgive my intruding, but, you know, you *asked* me to come."

"Oh, yes, of course." He was plainly embarrassed, and not a little upset. "But if you'll excuse me today... the - er - fact is..." He paused in confusion, running a hand boyishly through his very dark hair.

"Mrs. Desmond has already explained," Starr said pointedly. And the eyes she raised to Rex's face were cold with disdain.

A faint flush rose to Rex's temples. The contempt in her glance hurt, as though she had actually struck him. What had Rita been saying? Silently he cursed her. And yet whatever she had implied he couldn't at the moment deny.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Thayne," he said humbly. "But circumstances have arisen... I'll phone you. soon, if I may."

"That's *quite* all right, Mr. Brandon," Starr returned with an acid smile. "I understand you will be away for a time. I'll look forward to interviewing you when you come back. Good-bye, Mrs. Desmond. Good-bye, Mr. Brandon." And, opening the door quickly, she let herself out of the apartment.

She went down in the elevator, but in the big reception hall below she sank down into a couch. She felt dizzy. Unwittingly she felt she had stepped into something big, colossal, awful. Awful for Stephen Desmond who, she knew from their talk last night, still adored his worthless wife. What was he thinking about it? *Did he know?* Suddenly it seemed to her he couldn't know. What man worth his salt *could* know and calmly sit still while his wife eloped with another man? Stephen wasn't that sort. She sensed, intuitively, he'd fight tooth and nail to keep what belonged to him. And if he didn't know, wasn't it her duty to tell him? Even now he would have time to stop the elopement. The *Beutonia* didn't sail until midnight. She drew a deep breath, and her pretty face paled. But what an awful thing to have to do - to tell him his wife was eloping with another man. Everything sensitive in Starr shrank from the task.

And yet, the more she thought of it, the more she felt it her duty to tell him. After all, wasn't he her first consideration? Wouldn't she cut off her right hand for him? Do anything in her power to help him?

With a resolute movement she sprang to her feet. As she passed out onto the sidewalk she saw Rex's big sporting car drawn up by the curb. She stared at it for a moment while her lips curled scornfully. For behind were those absurd red hatboxes and with them a very masculine-looking cabin trunk.

Raising a small green-gauntleted hand, she hailed a taxi.

"The West East Studios," she said breathlessly. "And as fast as you can."

The driver nodded and the taxi slid away. It was a long drive. Throughout it Starr sat straight and tense on the edge of the seat. She couldn't relax. She was searching in her mind what to say to Stephen. An awful thing to have to tell any man - especially the man you loved! At last they were there. The drive had seemed age-long, yet now she was actually here it seemed but a moment since she had left Rex Brandon's apartment. Her hands felt cold and clammy, her heart thumped right up in her throat.



She was well known at the Studios. The gateman admitted her immediately. The reception clerk passed her on to Mr. Desmond's secretary without delay. Stephen, she gathered, was down on a set.

"Please get a message through to him," Starr urged. "It's awfully important."

The girl looked doubtful.

"Mr. Desmond said he was not to be disturbed."

Starr wrung her hands. "But I *must* see him. At once. I'll take all the responsibility. Please phone down to the set."

The girl was finally convinced. The message came back that Mr. Desmond would be up shortly if Miss Thayle would wait in his office. Starr found that waiting period an eternity. She paced the length of the big, airy office, pausing a moment by his desk to rub her fingers lightly over the shining mahogany. How often in the past she had sat there taking letters at his dictation! She sighed. Weren't those the happiest days she had ever known? Vividly she remembered that morning she had given in her notice. How dear he had been! Especially when she hadn't been able to explain just why she was leaving him. He had held out his hand and said in that pleasantly gruff voice of his: 'We'll always remain friends, I hope.'

"What did you want to see me about, Miss Thayle?" The sound of his voice startled her. Carried away by her thoughts, she hadn't heard him come in. She swung round to face him. But at the actual sight of him standing there, his nice, good-looking face puzzled, all the words she had planned to say went out of her head. She felt awful, at a loss. Yet she *had* to say something.

"I came to see you about ... about your wife. She-" She broke off in confusion. The words seemed to stick in her throat.

Stephen stiffened instantly. His brown eyes clouded.

"About my *wife*, Miss Thayle?"

"Yes," Starr went on desperately, in a small, hoarse voice. "I - I thought you ought to know. She's going to elope with Rex Brandon tonight."

Stephen Desmond said nothing, only by a quick stiffening of his body, a twitch of his lips, and a sudden blaze in his dark brown eyes did she know he had heard her. The silence held. To Starr it was agonizing. She stood by that super-shining desk, her small face deathly white, her fingers playing nervously with a paper weight, praying he would say something, anything to end this awful tension. She didn't know what she had expected, but when he did speak she was amazed at the queer calmness of his voice.

"You wouldn't have told me unless you were sure, would you?"

She shook her head. She wet her lips with her tongue, they were so dry. "No, Mr. Desmond. I - I found them together in Mr. Brandon's apartment. All her luggage was there. And... she practically told me herself what she intended doing."

He ran a hand back over his hair. His lips twitched again. He made an effort to speak but didn't speak. Then, abruptly, he crossed to the window and stood with his back towards her staring out.

"So this is the end," he said at last. And his voice was muffled.

Another pause. Then suddenly he gave a harsh laugh and added: "The end? Why shouldn't it be the end of everything? What's the use in living now?" He made a vague motion towards the windowsill. An awful presentiment came over Starr. She fled across the room. She gripped his arm. "Mr. Desmond... for God's sake...."

He tried to wrench his arm free from her grasp. His face was strange. As though, momentarily, he didn't realize who she was. "Let me go!" he cried.

"Mr. Desmond, please, *please!*" Starr's voice was desperate. "You don't know what you're doing! I'll ... I'll have to call for help if you don't stop struggling."

That seemed to bring him back to his senses. He stared at her as though he had only just become conscious of her presence. He raised one arm and brushed it across his damp forehead. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "I must have been mad."

She let him go, and he walked across the room, sinking down into the chair before his desk. He bent his face in his hands and gave a short groan. "What must you think of me, Miss Thayne? I... I, well, I haven't slept for a week now, maybe longer. And working against time all day on this new picture, too. My nerves snapped, I guess.... Please don't despise me!"

Despise him? Starr could have laughed aloud. Despise him, when she loved him so much. When, to see him like this, defeated, was such agony she could scarcely bear it. She had a sudden vision of the Stephen Desmond she had first known, had first loved. Eager, enthusiastic, laughing in the face of every adversity, fiercely ambitious, proud of his work,

living for it... And here he was a broken man, whose face was lined and bitter, whose nerves were strung to the breaking point. And that woman was responsible. The lovely blonde wife who had betrayed him. God knows why she had married him. Perhaps because a talkie director was a new sensation! Starr hated her in that moment as she never thought she could hate any woman. Vain, selfish, shallow... and this was the woman Stephen loved!

"I don't despise you, Mr. Desmond," she said quietly. "I think I understand. And... and it isn't too late yet."

But he didn't seem to hear her. He went on as though speaking his thoughts aloud, while slowly his hands clenched on the desk before him: "I knew this was coming. I've been sensing it for weeks. That's what has wrecked my nerves, waiting for the blow to fall. I knew she was in love with that man. Infatuated, rather. The great Rex Brandon! The polished lover of women - at so much a picture! I've paced the floor of my bedroom night after night trying to summon up sufficient courage to go into her room and ask her outright. Ask her what Rex meant to her and what she intended doing! But I was afraid. And now I wish I *had* asked her! Maybe it wouldn't have been too late then. Maybe I could have reasoned with her, for I know she'll never be happy with him. He doesn't understand her. He won't even try to. I've watched them together. He's not really in love with her. I know. When you love someone deeply yourself, you sense intuitively how much other people love them!"

"You love her so very much?" An odd break in Starr's voice.

He opened out his hands and clenched them again in a fierce helpless gesture. "So much!" He gave a short harsh laugh. "So much that I can't go on living without her! She's like a mad unsatisfied craving in my blood. I want her always. I could never love anyone else."

Starr winced, yet she had always felt that when Stephen fell in love it would be like this. He was made that way. And while she admired him tremendously, it was heartbreaking too. And so futile! If he got Rita back now, the situation would only be repeated with some other man. It made her feel furious suddenly. She wanted to shake Stephen and say, "Don't let this woman spoil your life. There are other women. Other women so much more worthy - please believe that!" But what would be the use of saying it? A man like Stephen didn't love a woman because she was worthy. He loved her because he couldn't help it!

"Why did you come here to tell me this?" he asked slowly.

A slight flush stained the death-like whiteness of her face.

"I thought you once said we were friends, Mr. Desmond."

He laughed again, that short harsh laugh, a wealth of bitterness behind it. "Yes, friends always do hasten with bad tidings, don't they?"

Her face flamed as though he had struck her. "Mr. Desmond, please believe it wasn't that! I thought if you knew in time you might be able to stop them... if you wanted to stop them."

"Wanted to stop them!" His voice was incredulous. He pushed back his chair from the desk with a jerk. Momentarily he was the old Stephen Desmond, purposeful, vital. "God, don't you know I'd do anything in the world to stop them? You say it isn't too late?"

She shook her head. "No... they're sailing on the *Beutonia* for Honolulu tonight."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it on her luggage. And she told me herself that Mr. Brandon was going away on a cruise."

"She seems to have told you everything!" His voice was ironic.

"Not everything..."

"Enough anyhow!" He flung it at her sarcastically.

She turned to face him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Desmond, but I didn't *want* to come here and tell you this! I'm not enjoying it, I assure you!" And her voice was bitter.

There was a pause. Miserably Starr picked her gloves and bag off his desk. There was a lump in her throat, and the back of her eyes felt hard and gritty behind, as though they had been rubbed with sandpaper. But before she reached the door he crossed the room in a few long strides and caught her by the arm. "Please, Miss Thayle, I apologize. I don't know what I'm saying, what I'm doing! I'm sure you are trying to be my friend. Won't you continue being my friend and help me?" There was a note of pleading in his voice, and a certain roughness as though he were trying to keep it from trembling. It undid her utterly. The tears that ached at the back of her eyes were very real now.

"That's all right, Mr. Desmond. I'd do anything to help you." She added, in a lower voice, "I think you know that."

His grip on her arm tightened in reply. He ran the other hand back over his hair. "I don't know why you're so decent to me." His voice was humble.

"You were awfully kind to me when I worked for you," she murmured. And added, quickly, "But if you're going to stop them sailing there's no time to be lost."

"What do you think I should do?" He spoke with a desperate eagerness.

Starr thought a moment. "I think I should drive down to the boat," she told him. "It will be too late now to stop them at his apartment. If you start right away you'll have plenty of time."

Queer how she was making all these plans for him. just as she had done when she was his secretary. She had always been more practical than he. Stephen was too much of a dreamer.

"Then when you get down there-" She resumed.

"I think I shall know what to do then!" he interrupted grimly. "I think I can deal with the man who is trying to steal my wife!"

Something in his tone frightened her. And he looked so desperate! What mightn't he do to Rex Brandon, once he found him with his wife? Of course she didn't care about Rex, she assured herself passionately. The worst fate would be too kind for him. A man who will deliberately steal his friend's wife. The very friend who has made his career, too! No, she didn't care about him. But she did care what might happen to Stephen afterwards.

"Let me come with you," she pleaded suddenly. "I don't think you should drive all that way alone."

"You think I'll drive recklessly and smash myself up?"

She seized on that eagerly. "Yes, you might. But with me there you wouldn't, would you? I - I couldn't bear anything to happen..." Her voice trailed away in a queer, half-stifled sob.

He looked at her strangely, his dark brows drawn together. "Why should you care?" he spoke almost savagely.

She turned half away from him. Her face was in shadow. "Why shouldn't I care? We - we used to work together. And - I believe in your future." But her voice was uncertain. Yet he was too full of his own thoughts to pay much attention.

"Very well," he said curtly. "Come if you want to. I guess" - his lips twisted bitterly - "I'll be grateful for any company on that drive down tonight."

Rita said, "I think this is a very nice suite, darling. You needn't look so dissatisfied. Ever since you came aboard this ship you've looked positively grim!"

Rex tried to rally. After all, there was no sense in rousing her suspicions. She'd never let him get away if he did. Perhaps she suspected something. He'd made several excuses already to try to leave her, but she'd clung to him like a leech. Still, he reflected with a certain bitter determination, nothing was going to stop him leaving this boat once the last bell rang!

"I'm sorry," he said curtly. "Perhaps I don't feel very well."

"Not seasick already?" She threw back her small blonde head and laughed merrily. "Darling, don't be seasick. It's such an unromantic complaint. And you know you are *so* romantic. Besides, I'm sure it would be rotten publicity. Just think of the myriad of women who adore you reading, 'We regret to state that Rex Brandon was seasick during the entire voyage!' What a horrible picture for them to hug to their spinsterish bosoms - metaphorically speaking, of course!"

Rex, his tall lean form looped in the doorway, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, raised one dark eyebrow quizzically. "I must say you don't seem very concerned about leaving your husband and breaking up your happy home!"

She blew him a kiss. "Sweetheart, why should I be? Parting from a husband you don't love is much less painful than parting from a tooth! Much less expensive, too. Dentists are so grasping these days!" She sighed mockingly.

She was sitting on the arm of the couch, swinging pretty, silk-clad ankles. In the vivid red-and-gold boudoir gown she had slipped into when they came aboard she looked fantastically lovely. But Rex eyed her with an indifference that bordered on actual dislike.

"I suppose a year from now parting from me would be much less painful!"

"Darling, how can you!" She jumped off the arm of the couch and fled across to him with arms outstretched. "I *love* you. I adore you. You're the most exciting thing that has ever come into my life. Only," - she put her head on one side and pouted prettily - "you're not *very* exciting right now, are you, my own?"

He smiled. That attractive crooked smile all women adored. "What do you expect me to do to be exciting? Stand on my head and twiddle my toes? Or perhaps I could oblige with a somersault!"

She threw an arm round his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"You're awfully funny, aren't you, my pet?" Then she nodded mysteriously. "*You* know what I mean by exciting!"

"I'm afraid I don't know, *my angel!*" His voice was mocking.

She stamped her small foot in sudden anger. "You're being positively hateful. You've been hateful ever since we left your apartment, for that matter! Nervous, upset-?"

"Perhaps I'm not so used to eloping as you seem to be!" he interrupted.

"You should be! You've done it often enough in your pictures, " she flung at him. "You're most romantic *then!*" And she looked at him aggrievedly.

He folded his arms across his chest and laughed mirthlessly. "Whom do you think you are eloping with, my dear? Rex Brandon, the great screen lover, or me? That's the trouble with women, they can't disassociate you from the rôle you play on the screen. If they like the character you portray, they think they're in love with you! If they detest it, they detest you equally strongly. And your own personality is probably a hundred times removed from any character you have ever portrayed! It's comic! It's pathetic! But there it is!"

Rita sighed and laid her head against his shoulder, nuzzling up to him rather as a small fluffy kitten would. "Darling, *do* be like you are on the screen, then! Like you were in *Love's Troubadour*. All cynical and passionate. I *adored* you in that!"

His smile twisted. "Don't forget I was paid many thousands of dollars for behaving like that, *my sweet!*"

She turned petulantly away from him. "Don't be so mercenary. If you talk like that I'll begin to think you don't love me. And" - she smiled up at him suddenly - her moods changed with bewildering rapidity - "I *know* you adore me. Just think! We're actually here on the ship, about to elope. Isn't it thrilling? I adore the rose-and-pink decoration of this sitting room, don't you? I feel we're going to be happy here. Too marvelously happy!"

Rex picked a cigarette off the table and glanced about him. He supposed, in its way, it was attractive, though it was too fluffy and ultra-feminine for his personal taste.

"It looks a very expensive suite," he murmured. "I hope it didn't cost you too much."

She took a cigarette, and he gave her a light. "I'm not so mercenary as you. I don't count the cost!"

"No, I'm sure you don't!" he murmured wryly. He frowned suddenly and added, "What name are we supposed to be traveling under, anyhow?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Valentine. Isn't it a romantic name? It took me an hour to think of it! But of course I confided to the shipping people *confidentially* who you really were."

Rex started. "The devil you did!"

She nodded wisely. "Yes, I had to. Passports and all that sort of thing. I confided in the purser we were eloping. I found him most sympathetic. None of the passengers need know, of course, although," - she smiled happily - "you're bound to be recognized!"

He looked at her curiously. "Wouldn't that upset you, to have the other passengers know we were traveling unchurched, as it were?"

She laughed again, and her amber eyes shone. "Why should it? No one cares these days - not much, anyhow! Besides, I've always wanted to be involved in a scandal. One should taste every one of life's experiences, I think! And this will be such a romantic scandal! Your name will do that!"

"Thanks!" His voice was coldly sarcastic.

"Now you're going horrid again!" She kicked the tail of her rest gown aside fiercely with the toe of one small golden mule. "Darling, please be sweet to me. You haven't kissed me yet! Not once! Rex, do you realize you've *never* kissed me?" Her voice was slightly shocked.

He looked down at the glowing end of his cigarette. His lips, twitched slightly. "It does seem rather extraordinary, since we're at this moment eloping together, doesn't it, *my own*?"

"Well, you can rectify that!" She came close to him again and smiled up into his face. Her lips were very close to his, very red, very inviting.

He drew a deep breath. "Perhaps I'd rather postpone that pleasure," he said quietly.

"You mean until we're out at sea together? Away from this rotten old country? Away from all our old ties?"

"Perhaps," he said noncommittally.

She looked at him strangely, with the inquisitive look of a gay, pretty bird. "I can't understand you, you know," she confessed. "I feel so happy about this, so carefree. You seem to be full of rather absurd loyalties. Why were you so touchy on the drive down every time I mentioned Stephen's name?"

A shadow fell over his lean, handsome face. "You forget I owe him a lot," he said slowly.

"So do I! Do I worry?" She threw back her pretty fair head and let a puff of blue-gray smoke glide to the ceiling. Her smooth throat gleamed whitely. "Why should you feel any more upset than I?"

"You forget you're the woman he loves and I'm just a man he befriended! It's not *very* pleasant to feel you're letting down your best friend!"

"Oh, Rex, how tiresomely moral you are. Positively suburban with your conventions. And in your pictures you're so divinely unscrupulous. Like I am. I'm gloriously indiscreet! I don't care who knows I'm eloping with you. I want all the world to know. It will - tomorrow morning!" And she laughed in sudden delight.

Rex's face hardened. His jaw protruded aggressively. "How do you know it will?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Oh, I just know."

He crossed over to her and stood looking down at her, his gray-blue eyes glowing dangerously. His voice, too, was dangerous suddenly. "How do you know, Rita?" he repeated sternly.

"What a he-man," she lisped mockingly. "And too, too compelling!"

"Look here, Rita, you've got to tell me." His hands shot out, and he gripped her shoulders. "How *is* the whole world going to know by tomorrow? It isn't likely Stephen will give it out so soon."

She wriggled petulantly in his grip. "Oh, Rex, you are so tiresome! If you really want to know, I told that little press girl this afternoon - or practically told her! If she's any sense she'll put two and two together. And I guess she has sense. Enough anyhow!"

For a moment he stared down at her incredulously. "You told Miss Thayle!" he ejaculated.

She made a little moue with her lips. "Why shouldn't I? Let me go, Rex. You're hurting my shoulders."



He released her immediately. He walked to the other side of the room and ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, God!" he muttered. And he kicked a stool savagely out of the way with his foot.

"I didn't think you cared so much about publicity," she taunted him. "And, anyhow, I'm sure the scandal won't hurt you. To run away with me is a most romantic thing! It ought to help you."

But, strangely enough, Rex hadn't been thinking how the scandal might affect his career. And this was extraordinary, as, until recently, his career had been all-important to Rex Brandon. Instead he was thinking of a slight red-haired girl; of brown eyes that had regarded him with a certain disdain, even dislike. What must *she* be thinking of him now? Undoubtedly she would imagine she had just cause to despise him!

"What on earth made you tell her?" he demanded hoarsely.

She shrugged. "She annoyed me, I think. I told her you had no time to see her, and she acted as though I hadn't the right to tell her! I wanted to convince her I had."

"Why should she have annoyed you?" he asked curiously.

She crushed out her cigarette and wriggled her shoulders impatiently.

"Oh, I don't know. I think I was sick of hearing Stephen sing her praises. She used to be his secretary. According to him she was the paragon of every virtue."

"But since you don't love him yourself, why should you care?"

She laughed. "Blessed innocent, you! No woman likes to hear *any* man sing another woman's praises. At best it's most boring. At worst it's infuriating. That's one thing I liked about you. You've never mentioned another woman's name, yet I know hundreds are in love with you."

"Perhaps I'd never met another woman whose name I cared to mention - until recently." He added the latter under his breath. She heard him and bridled. "You mean until you fell in love with me? That was recently, wasn't it?"

He laughed and said, "So recently I scarcely know it myself."

She stamped her small foot again. "Don't joke about such things, Rex. Not about things as sacred and serious as our love for each other."

He sighed. Why did a woman inevitably think you were joking when you told her the truth?

"Darling," she began in the pause, "don't you think you'd better go and start unpacking?"

"That can wait," he said curtly. There was nothing in that trunk to unpack except books.

A knock on the cabin door. Rex looked towards her inquiringly.

"It's only the old steward," she said. "Tell him to come in."

Rex called, "Come in." But it wasn't the steward. And, from the moment that door opened, the atmosphere of that room became electric, tense. Neither Rex nor Rita spoke for a moment. They just stared at the man who opened the cabin door silently and stepped inside.

"Why, Stephen... Rita faltered when the continued silence got badly on her nerves.

"Yes, I suppose this is a surprise, my dear, so I'll forgive your unenthusiastic welcome," Stephen said quietly. And there was something in the deathlike quietness of his voice that made her draw back with a tiny scream.

But Stephen was no longer looking at her, he was looking at Rex. Rex who had straightened instinctively at Stephen's entrance. A slight color had crept to his temples, and his eyes were clouded with dismay. Heavens, what a mess! This was worse than anything he could have anticipated. Now he would have no chance of explaining to Stephen just what he had intended doing. What husband would accept such an explanation, having caught the other man with his wife red-handed, like this? In that moment Rex felt more wretched than he had ever felt in his life. Not so much for himself, but for Stephen. Stephen of the deadly white face, the desperate staring eyes, Stephen who seemed quite beside himself in that moment.

And still there was silence. The cigarette burned Rex's fingers, but he didn't notice it. He didn't know what to do, what to say. He realized with an ironical sense of despair that had this been on the screen he would have known exactly how to act. In the studio he would have carried off the whole situation with his usual jaunty air, scoring off the ill-used husband in a way that made the ill-used husband seem but a poor blundering fool. And he would have got all the sympathy, particularly the feminine sympathy, for himself! So easy on the screen. So different in real life. Because now he didn't feel in the least unscrupulous or jaunty. And all his own sympathy went out to Stephen.

Rita was the first to recover. In such situations women have more self-possession than men.

"I don't know why you've come here, Stephen," she said sharply. "And I assure you it's not going to do any good!"

But he didn't seem to hear her. He was still staring at Rex.

"You know what I think of *you*?" he asked slowly.

Rex's eyes fell. His color deepened. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Stephen shouted. "You play the rôle of Judas and say you're sorry!"

"For heaven's sake don't make such a fuss, Stephen," Rita said petulantly. "It's a common enough situation. I've eloped with him. There's nothing more to be said."

"Isn't there?" Stephen said grimly. "I think I'm going to have the last word in this, my dear. I've come prepared to have it, too."

It happened in a moment. Stephen's hand fled to his hip pocket. There was a glimmer of steel in his hand, but before he had time to level the gun at Rex's head a hand gripped his arm from behind. Starr's hand. She had been standing in the passage just outside the half-closed door. All evening she had been fearing just such an occurrence.

"Stephen!" she cried, her voice sharp and agonized. "Are you mad? He isn't worth it. Don't you realize that?"

It was Rex who wrenched the revolver out of Stephen's hand. He had sprung forward at the same moment that Starr gripped Stephen's arm from behind. Still if it hadn't been for her it is doubtful if he would have got there in time. He threw the revolver onto the table, where it fell with a small clatter, and said: "For God's sake, Stephen, let's have done with dramatics! But for Miss Thayne's intervention I might be a dead man!"

"A damn good job, too!" Stephen growled savagely.

Rex shrugged. His lips twisted wryly. "Perhaps that's a matter of opinion."

Rita had been looking from one to the other with wide, startled eyes. Now the immediate danger was passed she felt distinctly thrilled. To be fought over like that! How brave Rex had been! He hadn't blinked an eyelash when the revolver had been leveled at him!

"Rex, you were too marvelous!" she murmured in an admiring gasp. "I'm very proud of you!"

He grinned down at her crookedly. "That's what you've been hoping for, isn't it, Rita? A situation as exciting as those on the screen. I hope I was sufficiently romantic, my dear!... And now you've had your little thrill I'll say good-night, if I may, and leave you to your husband."

Of the three pairs of eyes turned towards him Stephen's were by far the most startled. "You mean you'd leave her *like that*?" he shot out incredulously. Unbelievable to him that any man Rita loved would dream of giving her up. At least without a hard struggle. And here was this man calmly returning her to him without even the pretense of a fight! What a white-livered cad he must be, he decided grimly.

Rex knew very well what Stephen was thinking, and his face hardened. Still he saw no other way out of this ghastly situation than to act the part of a cad. A cowardly one at that! He had no intention of fighting Stephen for Rita. Too awful to think he might win the fight! Besides, if he behaved really badly mightn't that disgust Rita with him? Send her back repentant and disillusioned into the arms of her husband? It was worth trying, anyhow. For the moment, he felt, it didn't matter about him.

"What else is there for me to do, old man, than to give her up, since you've caught us like this?" he asked quietly.

"Don't call me 'old man,' " Stephen thundered savagely.

"I apologize." Rex smiled faintly. He selected a cigarette from his case and lit it with elaborate care. But his hand shook slightly as he held the match to it. "I understood we were friends."

"Friends!" Stephen laughed harshly. "You speak of *friendship* when you've betrayed me like this?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep shouting, Stephen," Rita put in aggrievedly. "Someone may hear you. Then Rex's reputation and mine will be ruined before we even start on this trip!"

"You don't think you're going *now*?" Stephen swung towards her.

She shrugged slightly. "Why not? I don't really see it makes any difference, you and that girl have arrived. Rex and I love each other. We're going to elope." She sighed and added, "I'm afraid that's final."

"Pardon me, my dear." Rex raised one eyebrow and glanced towards her quizzically. "I think I have something to say about that!"

She threw him a beautiful smile. "Of course you have, darling. Only do say it quickly and make them go. My nerves aren't what they were. Scenes seem to upset me." And she sank down into the low square-shaped couch.

"That's a pity, because I'm afraid you're in for another." Rex smiled slightly and looked down at the glowing end of his cigarette. A moment later he straightened himself and said with a mockingly heroic gesture, "I feel I can't take you from your husband, Rita. He's proved himself the better man!"

"Don't talk such sentimental twaddle," she chided impatiently. "You sound like something out of the worst type of film. Besides, he hasn't proved himself anything of the sort. And what do I care who is the better man, for that matter? I love you. It's ridiculous for you to try and behave in this quixotic fashion!"

He walked towards her. His face was grim.

"I'm sorry," he said curtly. "I thought you'd prefer it that way. But since you'd rather have the truth, here it is. Since the appearance of your husband I'd like to back out, if you don't mind, my dear. I don't care for dramatics, except on the screen. And, despite your insistence on it, I'm not really romantic. In fact I'm horribly practical; and your husband, as you know, is my most important director. So I think, all things considered, we'd better call this elopement off."

"Oh!" It was a strangled cry of protest. For the moment she was too dumbfounded to continue. "Oh," she cried again, "You *couldn't* behave so meanly, Rex!"

He smiled with faint irony. "It seems I'm not only capable of it but I intend to, my dear Rita."

She sprang to her feet. "Oh, I hate you, Rex. How dare you! How dare you - humiliating me like this! Of all the cads... After you'd persuaded me to elope with you, too! *Begged* me to do it. But" - her voice cracked in a sob - "you don't mean it, do you? Tell me you don't mean it. Oh, I can't believe..." And she tried to fling herself into his arms.

He evaded her. "I'm afraid I do mean it," he said determinedly.

Her pretty face crimsoned. "Oh, you - you brute! You utter, utter bounder! I'd like... I'd like..." Suddenly raising her small hand, she struck him as hard as she could across the face. It left an ugly red mark. He started back slightly. And, for a moment, a dangerous light blazed out of his blue-gray eyes. But, a moment later, he recovered himself. He even smiled crookedly. "Thanks, my dear. That settles it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that settles it!" she cried in a fury. "I feel ashamed of myself for ever having listened to you, ever having loved you. I loathe you. I hope I never see you again.... Stephen, take me home. Take me home at once, do you hear?"

Stephen stepped forward and put an arm about her. She was quite hysterical.

"Of course, dearest," he said soothingly, as one speaks to a tired, irascible child. Suddenly she saw Starr, Starr standing uncomfortably just inside the room. For the past minutes she hadn't even noticed the girl's presence. Now it infuriated her that another woman should have witnessed her humiliations. And she had hated this girl from the first.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded tersely.

"I - I drove down in the car with Mr. Desmond," Starr stammered, taken aback for a moment by the fury of her attack.

"I suppose it was *you* who told him Rex and I were going to elope?" Rita went on savagely. "He wouldn't have come back from the studio in time to get my letter, otherwise. And what business is it of yours, I'd like to know? Interfering in my personal affairs!" She was like a little tiger-cat in that moment, her fur all ruffled, her claws sharp, ready to spring.

"Please, Rita, be sensible," Stephen begged hoarsely, tightening his arm about her slim, trembling body. "Miss Thayne was only acting as she thought for the best. I'm eternally grateful to her."

"Interfering busybody!" Rita hissed.

"Be quiet, Rita," he spoke almost sharply. Then he turned to Starr. "You'll let us drive you home, Miss Thayne?"

"I'm not coming with you if that girl's coming too," Rita cried in childish, unreasonable temper. But she *was* a child, really. A spoiled child who had never grown up.

"Thank you, Mr. Desmond, but I can easily get home by myself," Starr said quietly, "Please don't trouble about me."

Stephen hesitated. He looked from her to his wife.

"If you're sure...?" he began hesitantly.

She nodded, and he threw her a grateful glance. A minute later, when Rita had gone into the adjoining cabin to pack her things, he crossed over and gripped her hand. "I am grateful to you," he said, in a voice too low for the others to hear. "Grateful for *everything*." And with a little shiver he glanced towards the revolver which still lay on the table.

"That's all right, Mr. Desmond," Starr said quickly. "If I've helped you I'm glad."

"You've done more for me than I can ever express," he went on in the same low, earnest voice. "I shall never forget it."

"Please don't say any more," she pleaded. There was an odd catch in her voice, and her eyes had misted.

"When you two have finished this touching little scene I'd like to go home," Rita said sharply from the doorway.

Starr's face flamed suddenly. She was furious with herself, but she could do nothing about it. How much did Stephen's wife know of her feelings towards him - or did she only suspect?

Rita had put on a coat over her bizarre boudoir gown. She carried her hat in her hand. She looked more lovely than ever with her hot, angry face and her amber eyes flashing. "Please get my dressing case out of the cabin," she said to Stephen. "We'll take that with us. You can tell them to bring the rest of my luggage off as you leave the ship."

She started towards the door, but just before passing through she stood and glowered at Rex. For some time past he had been leaning against the arm of the couch, his arms folded, staring down rather intently at his shoes.

"I hope you're proud of yourself," she flung at him.

He gave her a little mocking bow. "Passably, my dear Rita!"

"Oh!" she fumed. She appeared to hesitate. Then, for a moment, she came quite close to him. "Don't think this is the end, for it isn't," she murmured. "You can't get out of this so easily as you think!" With that she turned and swept through the doorway. She didn't so much as glance at Starr.

A moment later Stephen appeared with the dressing case. A shiny red one that looked most absurdly out of place in his hand.

"Thank you again, Miss Thayle, and good-bye," he said quietly.

"Good-bye," Starr echoed.

Still he hesitated in the doorway. His eyes, brown eyes full of contempt, rested upon Rex.

"I should have respected you more had you fought for her decently," he said cuttingly. "To persuade her to elope with you, then to desert her like that at the first sign of danger! Really, I didn't think a *man* could! Still" - his lips twisted derisively - "I suppose it's in your nature to behave that way. You started your film career by playing cad's parts. You've never stepped out of the category, have you?" And with a curt nod he left.

A dull red crept slowly to Rex's temples. Apparently that last thrust of Stephen's had hit him on the raw. He ran a hand through his dark hair and gave a short, sharp laugh.

"All this must be very illuminating for you, Miss Thayle!"

Starr said quietly, "Well, you brought it upon yourself, didn't you?"

His lips twisted grimly. "Did I? Perhaps you're right." He hesitated; then he did a curious thing. He straightened slowly and came towards her. He stood looking down at her, his hands thrust deep in pockets, an expression in his blue-gray eyes she couldn't fathom. "Do you despise me very much, Miss Thayle?" he asked at last. And there was a note of humility in his voice which, to the girl, didn't seem in keeping with his character at all.

"Does it matter whether I despise you or not?" she asked presently.

He nodded slowly. "I think it does." His lips twisted, and he added, "That's queer, isn't it? That it should."

She hesitated a moment. "You can scarcely expect me to admire your conduct, can you?"

His lips tightened, but, queerly, his eyes were hurt.

"Is that my answer?"

She bent her head. "I'm afraid it must be."

"Well!" He shrugged slightly. He was silent a moment. He crossed to the table and fingered the gun. "At least I have to thank you for saving my life," he said at last with a low, queer laugh. "Though you *did* make it clear at the time it wasn't for I sake you intervened!"

She didn't say anything to that. Instead she crossed towards the door. "We'd both better get off this ship, hadn't we?" she said. "It will be sailing in half an hour. Haven't you got to pack?"

"Oh, yes." But a curious smile she didn't understand flittered over his lean, handsome face. He walked into the adjoining cabin, and as he lifted the lid of his trunk he wondered, momentarily, if he should show her the contents. Nothing but books! But a second later he had slammed the lid down.

"I'm damned if I will!" he muttered savagely. His face hardened, and his chin protruded aggressively. If she wanted to think the worst of him, let her! For the moment he even persuaded himself he didn't care.

When he returned to the sitting room, she was on the point of leaving. "How are you going to get back?" he demanded.

"I'll get a train."

He raised one eyebrow quizzically. "At this hour of night? My car's here. Let me drive you back."

She shook her head. "I'd rather you didn't."

"My dear child, you're surely not going to let your dislike of me cause you to sit for hours on a drafty railroad platform! Isn't that carrying it a bit too far?"

She flushed slightly. There had been a certain mocking note in his raillery. "Thanks all the same, but I don't want you to drive me back," she said coldly.

He looked at her curiously. "I wonder why you hate me so much," he mused. "I may have kidded you the first time we met, but I can't think of anything else I've done that might annoy you."

"*Nothing else?*" She gasped it aloud in quick, sudden anger. "It's nothing to you, I suppose, that you've almost ruined Stephen Desmond's career, his very life, even. Why..." She shuddered a moment, thinking what Stephen might have done had she not grasped his arm that time he had been about to jump onto the windowsill. But she couldn't tell Rex that. She wouldn't give Stephen's weakness away. "Why," she repeated, "you dared to elope with his wife even though you weren't really in love with her. For you *couldn't* have loved her and handed her back to him the way you did. I suppose it was just vanity on your part. Seeing if you couldn't take her from him! Yet you wonder what I have against you!"

"But all these things you've enumerated I've done against Stephen Desmond," he pointed out quietly. He hesitated a moment and drew his dark brows together. "You're not in love with him by any chance, are you?"

Now her face *was* hot. It flamed like her hair. "How dare you!" she stammered.

"It was merely a suggestion." He grinned down at her crookedly. But for all that there was an anxious look in his blue-gray eyes.

She swung away from him abruptly. "Good-bye, Mr. Brandon. I'm going now." Her voice was tight with anger.

"Please be sensible," he begged. He added, smiling, "No need for you to take everyone's troubles on your own shoulders, my dear."

But she didn't reply. She merely held her head very high and marched out of the room.

"We'll meet again," he promised lightly.

"Not if I can help it!" she flung back at him.

"But you mayn't be able to," his laughing voice called after her. "It takes two to *avoid* a meeting, and you're only one!"

But after she had gone, the crooked smile faded. His blue-gray eyes clouded. "Isn't that the very devil!" he thought, ruefully. "Half the women in the United States in love with me, curse 'em, and the one girl I want turns up her tiny, adorably freckled nose at me. More than that, she despises me. She wouldn't touch me with a barge pole... sweet darling that she is!"

Starr's fury against Rex mounted as she made her way to the railroad station. The rain probably helped. It came down and enveloped her like a depressing wet blanket. There wasn't a taxi in sight. Her green cloth coat was soaked through. Her smart shiny straw hat fell about



her face like a floppy straw basket. Of course in all fairness she knew she couldn't blame Rex for the weather. She would have liked to, though!

She felt he had behaved in the worst way a man *could* behave. An out-and-out bounder. Not content with having wrecked Stephen's home, tried to seduce his wife, he had even tried to start a flirtation with *her!* As though he imagined he had but to smile on a woman and she would fall into his lap like an overripe apple! And when she had showed him she wasn't like that, he had dared to presume she was in love with Stephen. That there was truth in his presumption only made Starr the more furious. After all, nothing is more infuriating than to be told the truth!

She had to wait almost an hour for a train. She sat cold and shivering in the ladies' waiting room. And, occasionally, she couldn't *help* thinking of Rex Brandon traveling comfortably back in his luxurious car. It was human nature to think of it. It was also human nature to resent it. After all, wasn't Rex Brandon the cause of this whole miserable mess-up? Certainly the cause of her sitting here shivering in damp, uncomfortable clothes.

"I wish I could take him down a peg," she thought angrily. "I wish I could show him up as he really is! The great lover, indeed! A vain, selfish man who thinks every woman is after him. If only I could! Anything, anything I had to pay would be worth it!"

When at 2 a. m. Starr returned to her small one-room apartment she found a message from her newspaper thrust under the door.

"What about that stuff on Rex Brandon?" her editor had scribbled. "We could use it tomorrow. An article I was going to use in the film page has fallen through. If you've got the dope rush it through and hand it in by four this morning. I won't have time to look it over, but I know I can rely on you. Flatter him. These film stars like that!"

"*Flatter him!*" Starr exclaimed in a fierce, indignant voice. "*Flatter him!* Yes, I'll flatter you all right, Mr. Rex Brandon!"

She wasn't quite sane that night, remember. She had developed a bad cold in her head, and she ached in every limb. Besides, she was tired out from the strain of the afternoon and evening. She made herself a cup of strong black coffee and set to work. Occasionally she had to stop to sneeze violently. All of which didn't make her feel any more kindly disposed towards Mr. Rex Brandon.

It was more an article than an interview. There was so much more of Starr Thayne in it than of Rex Brandon. Her opinions, at least. She stated, in no uncertain terms, that she thought the sudden rise to fame of Mr. Rex Brandon was a black mark against the mentality of American womanhood. What self-respecting girl *could* like this actor whose only rôle seemed to be the obvious bounder very thinly coated by the veneer of a gentleman? And they passed him off as the hero, too! The great lover! The lounge-lizard professional lover, rather! Wasn't his present eminence a direct insult to every intelligent woman?

She said a lot more. At three in the morning you can get rather worked up on a subject on which you feel strongly. Then, before she had time to repent, or to read it through even, she rushed it down to her newspaper.

"I shouldn't be surprised if this gets me the sack!" she thought with a tight wry smile as she handed it in. "Still, it's been worth it!" And she sneezed again violently.

She was quite right about one thing. That article did get her the sack. It was libelous. She even admitted to herself, when she read it in cold print, that she must have been mad to write it.

She knew you must never use your paper to air a personal spite. The one unpardonable sin of journalism. And she had committed it!

In film circles that article created quite a furore. The first time the great Rex Brandon had ever been directly attacked. Some were hotly indignant; others secretly pleased. In his own studios, where Rex was a great favorite from office boy to director, indignation ran riot. Women from all over the country wrote furious letters to the paper and sweet letters of condolence and undying adoration to Rex. They assured him passionately that he was their ideal lover and always would remain their ideal lover.

Stephen Desmond read it at lunch on Sunday and threw the paper across to Rita. "There, what do you think of your great lover now? Rather unmasks him, doesn't it?" He couldn't keep a distinctly pleased note out of his voice.

Rita read it through without comment. This morning she wasn't so furious with Rex as she had been last night. She was too much in love with him to remain furious with him for long. Already she had begun to find excuses for his conduct. Almost she had persuaded herself that his curious behavior had been but a blind to shield her. He had felt it would be best for her to go back with Stephen and so avoid a scandal. So he had chosen the only method that would ever have made her go back. He had pretended he didn't love her! So beautifully altruistic of him! Saying he didn't love her while his heart was breaking. The more she thought about it the surer she became that his heart *had* been breaking. She seemed to remember all sorts of little things to substantiate this belief.

"Well, what do you think about it?" Stephen asked gruffly.

"I think the girl's jealous," was Rita's comment.

Stephen raised his thick dark eyebrows. "*Jealous?*"

Rita smiled the annoying smile of a woman who understands all but is not going to explain. "Yes, jealous."

"Why on earth should Miss Thayle be jealous of Rex Brandon?"

She looked at him in sweet exasperation. "Jealous of *me*, stupid!"

"Jealous of you?"

"Yes," impatiently, "she was probably in love with Rex Brandon herself. I see it all now. That's why she seemed so upset when she found me in his flat. Why she rushed down to the West East Studios to tell you, so that you could stop us. And she's used this means of being revenged."

"I'm sure Miss Thayle isn't in the least in love with Rex," Stephen cut in sharply. He didn't know why the idea annoyed him so much. He supposed because Rex was his enemy and Starr was his friend. Still there was no sense in feeling so personally upset.

Rita shrugged. "If half the women in America are in love with him, I don't see why *she* shouldn't be!"

"Miss Thayle is much too sensible!" he said angrily.

Rita flung the paper down and stamped upon it. "Which means I'm not, I suppose! How dare you say that, Stephen? Why, last night you seemed to understand. You swore you did. You promised you'd never throw it in my face, never so much as mention it."

"But I didn't mention it," he said, in man-like bewilderment.

"Yes, you did, you did, you did..." She was on the verge of hysteria again.

Stephen did his best to comfort her. But, somehow, he couldn't put the same zest into it. He kept turning over in his mind the idea that Starr, too, might be in love with Rex. And the more he thought about it the less it pleased him.

As often happens, the person most concerned is the last to hear about a thing. Rex didn't see that article until the following evening. Then his publicity agent showed it to him.

"Rather bad business, this article, eh, Mr. Brandon?" he said, as he entered Rex's attractively furnished sitting room.

"What article?" Rex demanded as he strode forward to meet him.

"Why, the one in the *Sunday Recorder*, of course. You must have seen it, Mr. Brandon?"

Rex shook his head. "Have you got it there?"

The man produced it from a portfolio of clippings he carried under his arm.

Rex took it over to the light. It was a signed article. There could be no doubt who had written it. A slight flush rose to his temples as he read it through. Once or twice he passed a hand back over his dark hair, and a sharp little exclamation escaped him. Mr. Meecher, the publicity agent, grew exceedingly apprehensive and not a little uncomfortable.

"Of course I got in touch at once with the editor and protested," he murmured. "He apologized. He assured me that the article had been put in without his sanction. He also said the person responsible had already been dismissed!"

"What?" Rex swung towards him suddenly. "Did you say *dismissed*?"

"Certainly, Mr. Brandon. Naturally I pointed out that was small consolation to us. All the same..."

But Rex wasn't listening. "You mean she was dismissed because she wrote this article about me?"

"Apparently the tone of the article was in direct disobedience to the editor's instructions.... I hope you're not very annoyed, Mr. Brandon."

Suddenly, much to Mr. Meecher's surprise, Rex flung his head back and gave a short, sharp laugh. "Annoyed, Meecher? I'm delighted. Now I come to think of it, I really *am* delighted. You see, it means she isn't indifferent. Hate you can turn to love; contempt, too, you can overcome; but indifference, that's fatal. There's nothing at all to be done about indifference. But she isn't indifferent. You *do* see that, Meecher?"

But Mr. Meecher didn't see it at all. In fact he was wondering if the great Rex Brandon hadn't suddenly gone a little insane.

Starr had never felt more miserable in her life than she was feeling at that moment. The fact that she knew she had brought most of the misery upon herself didn't help matters. If anything it aggravated it. To begin with, she had lost her job. That hurt intolerably. It spelt failure. And failure to anyone as ambitious as Starr was very bitter. Besides, there was the financial aspect. She had saved no money and, owing to the depression, jobs, *any* jobs, were few and far between. This apartment was expensive, and she had several sizable bills overdue. And to make matters worse, she was in bed with a mild attack of grippe. That, also, was her fault. If she had pocketed her pride and driven back with Rex Brandon that night she wouldn't have had grippe. Incidentally she might have felt more kindly disposed towards him and not written that article. And then she wouldn't have lost her job. Somehow, after two days, she couldn't even feel very proud of that article. In fact whenever she thought of it she felt both hot and cold, with a queer stinging humiliation. It had been mean and malicious without even wit to recommend it. She kept wondering what Rex himself had thought about it. "Though I don't care," she told herself angrily. "I only hope he *is* furious!"

It was queer how, despite her dislike of him, the thought of Rex Brandon obsessed her. "But that's because I've never met a man I loathe so much," she assured herself repeatedly.

She hadn't heard from Stephen since that night. And this hurt, though she wouldn't admit it. He *might* have sent her a line telling her that everything was all right. She supposed now he had got his wife back he had no thoughts to spare for her. Oh, well, she had expected that. But just one little line of appreciation...

She sniffed audibly and turned over on the narrow divan bed. It served as a couch during the daytime, with a black cover and multicolored satin cushions. Now they lay all about her on the floor, vivid splotches of color on the plain gray carpet.

She wished she had enough energy to get up and make herself a cup of tea. She had been dying for one for the past hour. But there was that rotten pain in her back. If only the janitor's wife would come! She had promised to look in this afternoon. But it seemed, when you were sick and couldn't do anything for yourself, no one else had time to do anything for you. And when you were up and about, everyone fell over themselves to do things you could just as easily have done for yourself!

A knock on the door at last. Mrs. Green had come, after all. A little late, but invalids mustn't grumble.

"Do come in, Mrs. Green," she called without looking round. "I'm longing for that cup of tea. You will make me one, won't you?"

"Of course, only too delighted to make you a cup of tea," came a man's laughing voice. "It doesn't matter that I'm not Mrs. Green, does it?"

Starr almost fell out of bed with astonishment. She knew that voice! How well she knew it! That deep, slightly humorous voice that hundreds of microphones throughout the whole world were reproducing at that very moment.

"Why have you come here?" she managed to stammer.

"Intuition, my dear," that deep husky voice went on. "I must have known you needed me!"

"Oh..." Starr gasped. She turned fiercely around. The man half the women in the world adored stood looking down at her from the doorway with a crooked, slightly quizzical smile on his lean, attractive face.

"What are you doing here?" Starr demanded tersely.

"Doing?" He cocked one eyebrow at her quizzically. "Nothing at the moment, though I'm hoping to be permitted to make you a cup of tea. The great Rex Brandon in his leisure moments! His chief hobby tea-making for pretty, bed-ridden admirers... oh, I beg your pardon, you're scarcely an admirer, are you?"

Starr ignored his banter and repeated, "Why have you come?"

He lit a cigarette leisurely and continued to smile down at her in that irritating, maddening way he could adopt on occasion. "Remember I promised myself the pleasure of this reunion. Besides, I have a proposition to put to you. Quite an honorable proposition, you'll be surprised to hear! But that can wait. Tea's indicated, isn't it? I gather I boil up this kettle and find the tea in the boot cupboard, behind the bookcase, or in some equally unlikely place, eh?"

"For *the great* Rex Brandon you seem to know quite a lot about living in one room," she couldn't resist remarking.

"Of course," he smiled easily. "Before Rex Brandon became *the great* he lived for some years in a small one-room apartment not unsimilar to this. That was when I first went on the stage. I acted for an Art Theater movement. Distinctly not commercial, you understand, and it certainly wasn't! The producer carefully selected those plays most unlikely to appeal to the public. Sometimes I received a salary at the end of the week, sometimes I didn't. Still one tightens one's belt and concentrates on ART, spelled with capitals, please. One is fortunate to be able to assist a GREAT MOVEMENT, also spelled with capitals. One feels one is making a protest against the spirit of big business which has invaded the theater.... But after appealing to people's higher instincts for a couple of years I was darned glad to get a small part in a play which appealed decidedly to their lower ones! I was fairly successful in appealing to their lower instincts."

"You've been doing that ever since, haven't you?" Starr laughed back at him.

His blue-gray eyes twinkled.

"Since you say so. My chief regret is that you appear to have no lower instincts to appeal to. What about tea?"

It is hard to be cold and standoffish with a man who seats himself on the end of your divan bed and proceeds to drink very strong tea and eat large quantities of very sticky buns with a child's enthusiastic appetite. Especially when you're enjoying the same tea and you have him to thank for it!

"What is this proposition you want to put to me?" she asked curiously.

"I've come to ask you to be my secretary," he replied. "You see," he went on quickly, "I hear you got the push from your paper. You don't mind my knowing that, do you?"

A hot color rushed to Starr's cheeks. She minded very much his knowing that. Especially since he knew the cause of her dismissal!

"Your secretary?" she stammered in the pause.

"Yes, since that article you wrote I've had so much extra fan mail that I find I *do* need a permanent secretary. And who more eligible for the task than she who made the post necessary?" he laughed. "By the way, I have to thank you for that article. So many women are writing indignant protests to me! You couldn't have thought out a better stunt to wedge me more firmly into their affections! Just let one person fling abuse at you, and suddenly you discover how many admirers you really have! I tell you it was a revelation. Besides, it was most flattering."

"I'm glad it hasn't ... harmed you." Starr brought it out with difficulty.

He put his cup on the floor and turned towards her. Momentarily his blue-gray eyes were grave. "My dear child, did you mean it to?"

Starr gulped suddenly. It infuriated her that she should, but she did.

"Yes, I did," she admitted.

There was a pause. She felt his eyes rest on her face with a strange, probing intensity. "At least, I'm glad you're honest," he said quietly. "Now what about my proposition?"

"You mean you *still* want me to be your secretary?" she asked in amazement.

He got up off the bed and stood looking down at her, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, that twinkle showing again in his blue-gray eyes. "Yes, I do, though I'm darned if I know why I should! Can you enlighten me? But, of course, you can't, any more than I can enlighten myself. That's the devil of it. All the same I should like you to be my secretary, and I'm prepared to pay you three thousand dollars a year. How about it?"

"That is a very generous salary," Starr said slowly. "When I was Mr. Desmond's secretary I received just half that amount."

"Ah, but the extra salary is because you'll be working under very exceptional circumstances. Employers have to pay highly for that, you know."

She looked up at him inquiringly. "What exceptional circumstances?"

He grinned crookedly and shifted his weight from his left to his right foot. "Working under an employer you despise, dislike, and distrust.... If *those* aren't exceptional circumstances, I don't know what are!"

She sat straight up in bed. "You realize all that and *yet* you offer me this job?"

"Why not? It should be an amusing experiment. Besides, I don't really mind being disliked, I get so much of the other thing."

"Oh, conceited, insufferably conceited," Starr thought fiercely. Yet she couldn't quite convince herself. There was that twinkle in his blue-gray eyes. And then, suddenly, the twinkle was gone. He lowered his voice and said with genuine sympathy, "I am sorry you lost your job on the paper. That must have hurt."

For no accountable reason Starr suddenly found tears were stinging the back of her eyeballs. She hated to admit even to herself how much losing her job on the paper hurt. But to be forced into admitting it to this man was intolerable.

"What's one job?" She forced a light laugh. "There are always plenty of others."

He shook his head slowly, and a rather tender smile played about his slightly crooked lips. "You don't think that really. To lose any job spells failure, and we're all sufficiently conceited to hate admitting failure. In love as well as business, you know."

But Starr hadn't heard the last part of his remark. An idea had suddenly occurred to her. An idea that made her burn with an intense mortification.

"You're not offering me this job because... you're sorry for me?" she gasped out with difficulty.

He looked surprised. "Sorry for you? Why should I be sorry for you?"

"Well, because I lost my job over that article," she stammered in confusion.

He shook his head slowly. "No, Starr. I'm not so altruistic, I'm afraid. I should have wanted you as my secretary whether you'd lost your job or not. Only - I don't suppose I could have persuaded you if you hadn't, could I?"

"You think you can persuade me now?"

"I believe I can."

"Even though, as you say, I - I dislike you?"

His smile twisted. "Isn't 'hate' nearer the mark Starr?" There was a faintly wistful note in his voice, but he tried to crush it down.

The color flooded her face again. She turned her head aside swiftly.

"Perhaps it is." But her voice was tremulous.

"That's better," he said.

She turned towards him again, her eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Why *better*?"

He was smiling again, the attractive lopsided smile the women adored. "So much more flattering to be hated by a pretty girl, don't you think? 'Dislike' is such a cold term. Like a clammy rainy day, but 'hate' has the fire and vivid sunshine of the south in it. By the way, we *will* be going south soon. To Agua Caliente. They're shooting some of the scenes for my new picture down there. We leave on Sunday - that will give you three days in which to recover. I have your ticket, by the way."

"You were so sure I'd accept?" she gasped in amazement.

"So sure!" He grinned and added, "There's an affinity between love and hate, my dear. In both cases you invariably crave to keep close to the person involved. Both are diseases. I don't know which is the least dangerous!" And bending down swiftly, he took her thin white hand off the coverlet and kissed it.

Starr's cheeks flamed. Insolence in the gesture. Yet there was tenderness, too. And a queer humility that touched her. Because of this she forced a laugh. "I'm honored... *the great* Rex Brandon!"

He bowed mockingly. "The great Rex Brandon at your service." Then, ceasing to smile, he added two words, "always, dear."

The hot spring sunshine was like molten gold poured upon everything. The flowers were riotous, vivid splotches of color against plain creamy walls. The sea was a curve of purest blue and purple; gold when at evening the sun dipped into it.

Starr stood on the balcony of the hotel and thought, "This is paradise, surely!"

She had never been out of the States before. Here she felt anything could happen. Surely in this exotic atmosphere you could do the mad exciting things you only dream about in the States? And down here it didn't seem so strange she should be the secretary of the one man in the world she most hated and despised.

She had a bedroom and office adjoining. But she found there wasn't much to do. A morning's hard work would clean up the mail. Besides, Rex was too busy on the new picture to do much dictating. All day long the company worked on the improvised sets which had been hastily constructed. Nights he would spend memorizing his lines. Sometimes he would ask Starr to hear him. This excursion was scarcely in the nature of a holiday for him.

Stephen Desmond was here, too, directing the picture. Both men tried to keep the hostility between them out of their business relationship. While they were working on the lot they pulled together. But, apart from that, they rarely spoke. Rex knew Stephen thought him a cad. And while this distressed him considerably, it was impossible to offer any explanation that might satisfy Stephen without giving Rita away. Rita was in Hollywood. That, at least, Rex was grateful for.

It was some days after they were down here that Stephen and Starr actually met. She was standing on the balcony of the hotel when she saw him coming up the broad stone steps; steps banked by a trellis of deep mauve wisteria with painted tubs of roses dispersed at regular intervals up the balustrade. They made the air heady with perfume. She caught her breath sharply and thought, "How well he looks. Better than I've seen him looking for months." As though the old Stephen Desmond had come to life again. He walked with bold, eager strides; his nice, good-looking face was bronzed. There were eagerness, enthusiasm in his deep-set brown eyes. How glad she was! And yet a tiny ache crept into her heart. Surely it was having Rita back that had wrought this transformation? The sure knowledge that her affair with Rex Brandon was a thing of the past?

Would he be surprised to see her down here? Starr wondered. What would he say when he knew she was Rex's secretary?

He *was* surprised. Also he was delighted.

"Why, Starr, what are you doing here?" he exclaimed. He held out both his hands to her, grasping hers in a firm, friendly grip.



"I'm here on a job, Mr. Desmond," she told him. But a thrill of pleasure shot through her, and she laughed to hide her embarrassment. He had called her Starr!

"Stephen, *please*," he corrected, and added with that nice, friendly smile of his, "Remember we're friends. More, we're allies. But it's swell seeing you here. You're not connected with the new picture by any chance?"

"In a way," she told him. She paused a moment, and a tiny embarrassed flush crept to her cheeks. "I'm Mr. Brandon's secretary."

He started, obviously. And despite himself his face clouded.

"Rex's secretary! You, Starr! I - I can't understand it. You don't mean to tell me..." - he laughed, but his laugh didn't quite come off - "You've gone over to the enemy, too?"

Her flush deepened; her voice was unsteady. "It isn't a question of that. I - I was out of a job and Mr. Brandon offered me this one. It was really too good an offer to refuse."

"But if you were out of a job why didn't you come to me?"

"I didn't think you'd want me again," she said hesitantly. "Not after I left you as I did a year ago."

"Not want you again!" His deep, pleasant voice sounded shocked. "But, Starr, I've never ceased wanting you ever since you left me." His face colored, and he added hastily, "As my secretary, I mean."

"Oh, yes, as your secretary," Starr echoed. But her voice which had been so *alive* was suddenly dead.

"I've been needing you badly," he went on presently. "No one has been such a help to me as you were. I never realized how much of my success I owed to you until you left me. And to think I might have had you back! Especially at this time when I'm at my wit's end for intelligent help. This picture is going to be the very devil, I'm afraid."

"Couldn't I help you in the evenings?" she suggested tentatively. "I'm quite free then."

His grip on her hands tightened. Queerly neither seemed to realize that he was still holding her hands. "That's awfully nice of you, but I couldn't think of monopolizing your free time. It wouldn't be fair."

"But I'd like you to," she insisted, and added quickly, "I don't know any way in which I could enjoy myself more."

He laughed. A light laugh in which happiness and satisfaction mingled. "How can you expect me to protest further? When a thirsting man is offered a draft of water he doesn't refuse it. I *do* need your cooperation, Starr. More than I ever did. You see," - he let go of her hands suddenly, and his lips tightened grimly - "I haven't been doing such good work lately, I'm afraid. The critics have been noticing it. I've *got* to come back in this picture. Show 'em what I can really do. You were right in what you said to me that night at the West East Studio party. My career *does* matter. I mustn't let down now. Not when I'm so near the top of the ladder. I want to make this my finest picture. Will you help me, Starr?"

"Help you, Stephen?" She laughed, a queer, strangled laugh that had tears mixed up in it. "Why, I'd do anything in the world to help you!"

"Thank you." His voice was low, but suddenly there leaped to his eyes a look she had never seen there before. It startled her. But a moment later she persuaded herself it must have been

her imagination. He was smiling again. That kind, friendly smile she had always associated with him.

"Tonight, then," he said. "Come to my hotel and have dinner. We'll work afterwards."

All afternoon Starr felt as though she were walking on air. To know she was actually going to help Stephen again; that he *wanted* her help! She visualized having dinner with him, sitting out at a little table on a balcony; shaded table lamp throwing a circle of soft rose light upon them. Away in the main dining room would be Mexican music faint and bewitching. The sky would be a blue-black tent with stars as spangles. And deep in her heart a dear impossible dream was born. Was she mad to dream such a dream? Perhaps down here she was a little mad!

All afternoon she felt restless. So hard to concentrate on the pile of fan mail she was answering for Rex. Such stupid women, she thought, to lose their heads over a man like Rex Brandon. Hadn't they any sense? Couldn't they see he had none of the stabler virtues that make a man worth while?

But at last she could conscientiously close her typewriter. Just time to dress to meet Stephen. She was putting the unanswered letters away in a drawer when the door opened and Rex came in. He strode across the room eagerly, his thin, attractive face smiling.

"Hello, Starr! Put on your glad rags, we're going to the Gala Ball tonight. I've reserved a table. This will besome thrill for you, child. There's to be a battle of flowers, I believe. Besides," - he cocked one eyebrow at her and his blue-gray eyes twinkled - "you'll be there with *the great* Rex Brandon, the pivot of every feminine eye! Male, too, worse luck!" And he winked down at her slyly.

Starr said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Brandon, but I'm engaged for this evening."

Momentarily he frowned his annoyance, but a moment later he was smiling again. "Nonsense! And if you are you can put it off." He looped his tall form in the doorway and added, "I'm a determined man, Starr. I'm determined on taking you out tonight."

She smiled slightly. "And I'm a determined woman, Mr. Brandon-"

"Rex," he interrupted, grinning crookedly.

"Mr. Brandon," - firmly - "and I've every intention of keeping my present engagement."

Suddenly he ceased to smile. He looked really disappointed. So disappointed Starr was amazed. Why should he care so much? Already half the women down here were loading him with invitations. Easy, too easy, to find a partner for the evening's festivities amongst them!

"Whom are you going out with?" He flung it out savagely.

A tiny flush mounted to her temples. Absurd to feel guilty like that.

"Stephen Desmond," she told him. "We're - we're going to work on the new picture. Plan out the scenes."

Rex's lips twisted derisively. "Yes, that *would* be his way of entertaining a pretty girl for the evening! Why, my dear, it's an insult. Work on a picture when you've such a wonderful night to play about in! The man must be mad!"

"You forget he has a wife," Starr reminded him tartly.

Rex threw back his head and laughed bitterly. "*That* is the one thing I *can't* forget!"

"I thought he used to be your friend." Starr threw it at him angrily.

"Maybe." He smiled ruefully. "But it's hard to remain on friendly terms with a man who regards you as the world's greatest blackguard! To go on feeling sweet and charitable towards him under these circumstances is putting too great a strain on human nature, my child."

"But you brought it all upon yourself," she reminded him fiercely.

He shrugged and picked a cigarette off the desk. "Perhaps *he* brought it upon himself, too. And if his idea of an exciting evening with a lady is to work out scenes for one of his rotten old pictures, I'm not surprised."

"They're not rotten," Starr protested hotly. "And you should be the last to say so. You're the star."

His smile twisted. "Perhaps that's why I'm entitled to say so! And anyhow, you're coming with me tonight." His mouth twisted dangerously.

"I'm not." She lowered her voice. "You've no right to insist."

"Right?" He threw it out at her savagely. "What has right to do with it?"

Starr's color heightened. "I meant, as you were my employer."

"Oh, that." His tone dismissed it. He paused a minute, threw his cigarette on the floor, stamped on it and added, "Might I ask if you intend to spend *every* evening with Stephen Desmond in this thrilling fashion?"

She raised her head, and her own eyes flashed. Fiery, like her hair where the sun's dying rays stole in through the window and lighted it.

"Yes. Do you object?"

"Like hell I object!"

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to keep your objections to yourself, Mr. Brandon. You engaged me to work as your secretary in the daytime. My evenings are my own to do as I please with!"

Silence after that. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, he threw back his head and laughed. "She's a will of her own, the child, hasn't she?"

Somehow his laughter made Starr more furious than his previous objections. "Certainly I have! Besides, I'm no child!"

"Of course you are, or you wouldn't protest. Well, go and enjoy yourself with Stephen fugging away over those rotten old scenes. But you might," - he raised one eyebrow and grinned - "Phone through to that pretty little Russian girl, Princess Nazita, for me. She'll console me, I fancy!" And whistling a gay little tune he strode out of the room.

Starr stood staring after him, her breath coming quickly. "The nerve, asking me to phone that girl," she thought furiously. "I won't. He can't make me, anyhow. It's out of office hours."

She couldn't have told you why she should feel so furious about it.

Some minutes later he put his head round the door again.

"Did you phone the lovely Nazita?"

"No, I didn't," she snapped.

He laughed mockingly. "Then you *are* jealous, my dear!"

She swung round to face him. "Jealous? You think I'm jealous?"

"Of course. Otherwise you would have hastened to do what I asked you. But never mind. I've already phoned her. She's coming, of course!"

"Of course!" Starr echoed sarcastically. "Who would refuse *the great* Rex Brandon?"

"No one with any sense," he grinned derisively.

"Present company not excepted in this case, my dear!"

Starr felt called upon to give in her notice the following morning. After all, she had said the rudest things to her employer. Not that he hadn't provoked them; but she felt it better to give in her notice before he dismissed her. Yet curiously she didn't want to leave his employ in the least. She loved the hot sunshine of the daytime, the warm, flower-scented nights. She loved the lazy, carefree life. And she loved being near Stephen Desmond.

All the same her quarrel with Rex worried her. She realized, though she wouldn't admit it, that it had almost spoiled her evening with Stephen. It had been there, like an aching tooth, at the back of her mind all the time. Throughout a delightful dinner on the large, softly lit balcony, through the ensuing discussion of the picture. Called *Gentleman Pirate*, by the way. A story on the Raffles theme. A scion of a noble family turns pirate to revenge himself on society, but he preys only on the private yachts of multimillionaires. During one of his raids he captures the daughter of one of the said multimillionaires and takes her aboard his own steam yacht. Follow many heart-tearing and passionate scenes during which he maltreats the lovely heiress, and she must secretly enjoy it, for she falls in love with him in the end. Rex, of course, was cast as the Gentleman Pirate. Stephen had to admit it would probably prove his most successful rôle.

"Another version of the handsome cad! He's bound to excel in it!" He laughed bitterly.

Starr's hand touched his momentarily on the white tablecloth.

"Please, Stephen, don't say things like that!"

His lips tightened grimly. "You don't mean to say *you're* falling in love with him!"

"No, of course not. But he *is* my employer."

His hand doubled over hers suddenly, giving it a quick, tight squeeze.

"You *are* a loyal little soul. I admire you, Starr. And I'll try and remember he *is* your employer."

"Thank you, Stephen. I knew you'd understand." Her long lashes fell, casting fan-like shadows on her pale cheeks. So typical of Stephen to understand immediately!

It was past midnight when he brought her home. He was very contrite when he noticed the time. "You must be tired out, Starr. I ought to be shot for being so inconsiderate."

"But I enjoyed it so much," she protested quickly. She added in a lower voice, "So much, Stephen."

He squeezed her arm. "Yes, it has been great working together again. I feel," - he hesitated - "awfully at peace with the world at the moment."

"I'm glad," she whispered.

They were walking along beside the silver, moonwashed sea on their way back to the hotel. A perfect night. A night that cried out for romance. Starr's soul, too, cried out for romance. Romance with this beloved man by her side.

Stephen went on talking. "Yes, it's great to have a peaceful mind again after all I've been through. Rita - well, I'm pretty sure she's happy with me now. And I've got you to thank for giving her back to me. That's meant everything to me, Starr. Everything to my work, too. I *know* I can push on now. Right to the very top."

"I'm glad," Starr whispered again. But her lips were stiff. What was the use of that new-born precious dream? He would never love anyone but Rita. Still to be near him was something, to be able to help him.

All the same she felt called upon to give in her notice to Rex the next morning.

"But, my dear child, this is nonsense," Rex protested irritably. "What's it all about, anyhow?"

"Well, yesterday evening when you asked me to go out..." she stammered.

"But that discussion was out of office hours. What we do and say to each other out of office hours shouldn't interfere with your job," - he smiled slightly. "Besides, I don't want to lose you. You're a very capable secretary, if" - he raised one eyebrow - "slightly hot-tempered!"

"I'm glad I've given satisfaction," she murmured with her most business-like manner.

"Yes, you've given complete satisfaction," he mimicked her. He added, grinning, "What about tonight?"

"I'm afraid I'm engaged," - stiffly.

"Hell!" he exploded. And seizing his hat, he dashed out of the room. Which was rather peculiar behavior for the great Mr. Rex Brandon. Only Starr didn't think about it. Or if she did she wouldn't admit she was thinking about it.

It was later that same morning when a page boy came in to say that a lady had called to see Mr. Rex Brandon.

"Show her in," Starr sighed. All morning there had been a succession of ladies to see Mr. Brandon. Rich and favored ladies of fortune, all with invitations they implored Mr. Brandon to accept.

"Another of them!" Starr thought and groaned inwardly. Still it was good business to be nice to them, and so she put on her politest smile.

"Mrs. Stephen Desmond," the boy announced. And Starr's polite smile faded.

Rita here! When only last night Stephen had told her Rita was safely at home in Hollywood. What did it mean?

Rita on her part was equally surprised. "You, Miss Thayle?" she cried in a small, startled voice. Then, regaining some of her arrogant poise, she added curtly, "I came to see Mr. Brandon."

"Mr. Brandon is out on the lot. I'm his new secretary," Starr answered quietly.

"Oh!" Annoyance as well as amazement in Rita's exclamation. She added insolently, "I'm going to wait for him, anyhow. He's bound to be in to lunch. May I sit down?"

"Certainly," Starr said coldly.

Rita seated herself. She snapped open a small gold case she had taken from her handbag and helped herself to a cigarette. The sunlight fell upon her through the open balcony doors, throwing a golden halo about her. It accentuated the exquisite blonde of her hair, her very fair skin, her large, light amber eyes. Her white crêpe-de-Chine suit with the white fox fur was perfect. She looked too exquisitely dainty to be real. No wonder, thought Starr ruefully, men became infatuated with her. Infatuated, yes, but love? How *could* a man love so shallow, so brittle a creature as Rita?

"I suppose you've come down to join your husband, Mrs. Desmond?" she heard herself saying.

Rita threw back her head and expelled a blue cloud of cigarette smoke slowly to the ceiling. "Do you *really* think I've come down to join my husband?" Her eyes gleamed mockingly, and she added, "My dear Miss Thayle, I'm sure you're not so credulous as that!"

It was a direct challenge, for Rita was the type of woman who preferred to fight in the open. She concealed nothing and so got away with quite a lot! She knew Starr was her enemy. That she was now Rex's secretary made her even more formidable. There was no sense, thought Rita, in beating about the bush.

Starr put a fresh sheet in her typewriter and said coldly:

"I don't think I know what you mean, Mrs. Desmond."

"No, of course you don't," Rita mocked lightly. "You're such a naive little thing, aren't you, Miss Thayle? You didn't know what it was all about when you found Rex and me together in his apartment that day! You hadn't the least idea we were about to elope! And now you haven't the ghost of a suspicion I've come down here mainly because he is here! Oh, no! I've come to join my husband, of course. To have a second honeymoon down in Mexico. So nice and romantic!"

Starr didn't reply, but her heart sank and she knew a sense of despair. So it was about to start all over again! This woman's affair with Rex Brandon. And Stephen, what would happen to him? She remembered the words he had said when they were walking home last night. "... Rita - well, I'm pretty sure she's happy with me now. And I've got you to thank for giving her back to me. That's meant everything to me, Starr. Everything to my work, too..." Would he go to pieces again when he found he had been living in a fool's paradise? Would all his eagerness, his newfound enthusiasm for his work go? "Oh, I couldn't bear that," she thought desperately. Wasn't there anything she could do to help Stephen?

"You're very friendly, Miss Thayle," Rita laughed maliciously. "Quite communicative. I *am* enjoying this little chat!"

Starr looked up from her typewriter and said quietly, "I don't think you should have come down here, Mrs. Desmond. It isn't fair to your husband to worry him about anything when he's as busy as he is."

"Then you admit Stephen *might* be worried, Miss Thayle?" Rita's pretty lips curled slightly.

"Any *decent* man's worried when his wife plays about with other men," Starr said curtly.

"With another *man*, you mean," Rita corrected, smiling. "So much more dangerous in the singular, you know!"

Starr was sufficiently nettled to reply, "I think you'd be wise to go home as soon as possible, Mrs. Desmond. There isn't much possibility of your restarting your flirtation with Mr. Brandon down here."

"Really?" Her tone was mocking, though her amber eyes had narrowed dangerously. "And what is to prevent my re-starting my flirtation, as you are kind enough to put it, with Mr. Brandon, pray?"

Starr thought a moment while she pretended to turn over some sheets in her notebook. Her hand was trembling. An idea had occurred to her. At first it had seemed absurd, yet it mightn't be so absurd after all. Why not pit herself against this woman? Her fresh charm against Rita's more sophisticated one? Fight her in the open for the great Rex Brandon! That she didn't really want him herself would probably weigh heavily in her favor. And she was woman enough to know that Rex was attracted to her.

"There's Mr. Brandon himself," she remarked quietly. "I hardly think you'll find him as interested as he used to be, Mrs. Desmond."

Rita's lazy eyes flashed suddenly. She leaned forward slightly. "And why not, Miss Thayle?"

Starr didn't reply immediately. Instead, she picked up the neat desk telephone and asked to be connected with the improvised studio where scenes from *Gentleman Pirate* were being shot. Once through, she asked to speak to Mr. Brandon if he was not on the set. Apparently he wasn't. A few minutes later his deep laughing voice came to her over the wires.

"Is that you, Starr? What's happened? Is my fan mail so heavy that it's broken the poor mailman's back? Or has every company in Hollywood telegraphed offering me new contracts at a staggering salary? Don't keep me in suspense. Break it gently, my dear!"

"You remember asking me this morning to have dinner with you tonight, Mr. - I mean, Rex?"

"Splendid, my child. An attractive name, Rex. And how could I have forgotten? Go on, my dear, my hopes are rising like a thermometer with the sun full upon it."

"I'd very much like to accept your invitation, if I may."

"No? You surprise me! So Troy has fallen! Accept my sincere congratulations for your suddenly acquired wisdom, my child. You've put new heart and soul into me. I'll be irresistible today. Good-bye, and bless you."

Rita was standing over her, her small, pretty face flushed with anger as Starr replaced the receiver. "Just what was the meaning of that, Miss Thayle?" she rapped out sharply.

Starr smiled slowly. But in her smile was a challenge, and Rita accepted it as such. "Just that, Mrs. Desmond, I think - in fact I'm fairly certain - that recently Mr. Brandon has transferred his interests elsewhere. It would be a shame, wouldn't it, if the lady wasn't anxious to let him go in a hurry?"

Rita appeared about to say something, but she didn't say it. Instead, she crushed out her cigarette, picked up her white patent-leather pocketbook, and walked towards the door. But once there, she turned back and said over her shoulder with a slightly mocking drawl.

"It would be an equal shame if the first lady recaptured him, wouldn't it? And the first lady is slightly more experienced with men - remember that, Miss Thayle!"



"Were you surprised when I phoned you this morning?" Starr asked tentatively. She was sitting facing Rex across a little table in the dining room of the smartest hotel. Varicolored lights played about them from a huge searchlight in the balcony, like the great gleaming eye of an ogre. A band was dispensing crooning jazz music on a little raised dais; a number of smartly dressed men and women were dancing.

"Is one surprised when the heavens open and a shower of manna drops to earth?" he smiled back at her. "Yes, I'll admit I was surprised. Perhaps," - he cocked one eyebrow slightly - "I'm not as conceited as you think I am, child."

She didn't say anything to that. She said instead, "All these people looking at you. The women, particularly, blatantly staring at you. Doesn't it make you feel self-conscious, Mr. Brandon?"

"You called me Rex this morning," he reminded her softly.

"Did I?" Her eyes twinkled, and she added, "Perhaps because the circumstances were somewhat unusual!" But she wouldn't tell him what those circumstances were! She added quickly, "You haven't answered my question!"

Rex considered it, his lean, attractive face pensive as he crumbled some bread. "In the beginning I'll admit it used to embarrass me horribly. I wanted to sink into the earth, wrap a napkin round my head, hide like an ostrich, or run for dear life! But you get used to it. Surprising how many unpleasant things you do get used to, even miss if you don't have them." He grinned crookedly and added, "I'm rather missing your saying rude things to me, Starr. And though the sudden metamorphosis in your character is delightful, I'm at a loss to account for it. Perhaps you will enlighten me?"

A tiny flush stole to Starr's cheeks. She stammered, "I suppose I thought it stupid to go on quarreling with you, especially since you're my employer, Mr. Brandon."

"Rex," he corrected again. He added in mockingly business-like manner, "That's your task for tomorrow, Miss Thayle. You're to write 'Rex, Rex, Rex' five thousand times if it takes you all morning!"

Starr's flush deepened. "I'll do nothing of the sort," she said indignantly. "I've left school a few years at least, Mr. Brandon!"

He threw back his head and chuckled happily. "There! And I thought you said it was stupid to go on quarreling! My dear child, you couldn't help quarreling. Look at your hair. Too defiantly red! Never mind. I rather enjoy it. What shall we quarrel about now?" And his gray-blue eyes twinkled down at her.

"I never quarreled once with Stephen when I worked for him,' she flung out angrily.

He cocked the other eyebrow. "Oh, so it's 'Stephen' now? I suppose that's one of the weighty problems you settled last night as well as minor ones concerning the pictures! He's not so slow as I thought he was!"

"I refuse to discuss Mr. Desmond with you," Starr said in a small, tight voice.

Rex didn't reply. Instead he said, "I hear the fair Rita has arrived upon the scene."

Starr started slightly. "Yes. She called in at the office today."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"No." She hesitated. "Are you annoyed?"

He laughed outright. "Annoyed? I'm delighted! The most encouraging thing you've said all night."

She opened her eyes wide in surprise. "I don't understand."

He grinned impudently. "It means you want to keep us apart. That, well, chucking modesty to the winds, you're slightly jealous of the lovely Rita and me!"

"*Jealous of you and her!*" Starr spat it out before she had time to remember that to pretend to be jealous might be in keeping with her new rôle.

Rex was regarding her with obvious amusement. "You're a hot-tempered child - rather a dear one, though," he amended. "Now come and dance and give the poor bored-looking devils at the tables around us a little excitement."

After that the evening went better. Starr discovered that Rex could be charming and entertaining as a companion when he chose. And she couldn't help admitting that it was a thrill to feel the envious eyes of other women upon her. She heard them whispering, "That's Rex Brandon. I wonder who the girl is tonight. Never seen her here before." And the men, "Jove, she's a stunning kid, all right. The great Rex Brandon is some picker, believe me!"

Before he took her home he drove her high up into the hills. The car was a large, open, low-slung sports car, painted yellow, with a bonnet like the gigantic nose of some prehistoric monster. In the moonlight it looked like the bewitched golden chariot of some evil giant. Rex drove it himself. He was a splendid driver. Starr realized that immediately. He handled the great brute with ease and assurance. "Cars," remarked Rex, "are like women and horses. Each has a distinct personality. People who mass them together are mad. This one needs to be handled firmly, yet given a fairly free rein." He turned slightly towards her and added, smiling, "Rather like you, Starr!"

"You think you know a lot about women," she retorted.

He grinned. "To my sorrow, I do!"

"You could easily rectify *that!*" she pointed out sharply.

"Not so easily, my dear. My magnetic personality has much to answer for!"

"You're not in the least conceited, are you?"

"Not more than most men. We're a conceited race, darling. But the awful convention of the modest he-man has somehow been foisted upon us. Most poor devils think they have to live up to it. I've lived too long to think I have to live up to anything I don't want to live up to!"

"Only the illusion of *the great* Rex Brandon!" she flung back at him.

"Ah," he chuckled slightly, "perhaps I *want* to live up to that!"

She didn't reply. She merely turned her head and looked at him. His profile, in the slanting silver-gold moonlight, was clear-cut, handsome. Far handsomer than Starr was ready to admit. He was still smiling, that attractive, lopsided, slightly derisive smile so much a part of his personality. Surprisingly she found herself thinking, "If he wasn't such an obvious rotter he could be, well, rather adorable."

The admission amazed her. Also for some reason it made her furious. So furious she didn't say anything for the next ten minutes.

When they reached the top of the mountain he stopped the car. A glorious panorama of silver bays, deep purple-black sea, and splotches of gray which were houses lay at their feet. Starr stared at it, drinking in the beauty. A queer ache stirred in her heart, an ache of loneliness, perhaps.

Rex said softly, "Look up at the stars, your namesakes, child. Look at that very bright one. That's you. You dropped into my life as though that very star dropped to earth, dear. Just as surprisingly, startlingly, gloriously, dear."

Starr looked. A queerly compelling note in his voice. It carried her away despite herself. And, as she leaned back in the car, her eyes turned to the sky, she felt his kiss on her lips, on her cheeks, on her throat.... It happened so suddenly it was some seconds before she could protest. Then she turned on him fiercely, "How dare you do that!"

The smile - and it had been a peculiarly tender smile - faded from his face. In its place came the old derisive grin.

"Well, weren't you rather asking for it, my dear? When a man suggests that a pretty girl look up at the stars and she obeys him, she ought to know what will happen!"

"You're insufferable, aren't you?"

His smile twisted. "I believe you've told me that before."

"You make fun of everything!"

"Would you rather I were serious, Starr?"

"No, oh... yes... I don't know."

"Don't fight, Starr," he whispered.

"Fight?"

"Yes, against me. You've been fighting against me ever since we met. I don't know why. But you decided to hate me from the very beginning. Now it's a matter of pride to go on hating me. Don't you think it's foolish to let your pride rule you like that?"

She bit her lower lip nervously. If she were to keep him from Rita Desmond, wasn't this the time to play up?

"Perhaps," she murmured.

His arm stole around her. "That's better, child. I think we're going to have great times together. Maybe you'll learn to understand me a little. It won't be so difficult if you try, Starr."

She glanced up at him. His face was white and blurred in the moonlight.

"What about Rita?" she questioned.

He smiled slightly, as one smiles at a child who asks stupid questions. "If you're nice to me I don't think she'll count."

Starr drew a tight breath. She'd won, hadn't she? The first round, anyhow, of the fight between Rita and herself. And yet, curiously, she felt no sense of triumph. Only an odd desire to cry.

Some days later, returning to the hotel towards evening, Starr found Stephen Desmond waiting for her on the hotel veranda.

"You're quite a stranger, Starr," he smiled down at her. "Have you been purposely avoiding me? I thought you were going to come round and work over scenes with me in the evenings occasionally."

She glanced up at him in surprise. "But that was before your wife came down here."

He smiled slightly. "Is a man considered in purdah just because he's married?"

"No, of course not." She forced a light laugh. "Only..." She hesitated, at a loss how to go on.

"Only you've been rather occupied yourself, haven't you?" A faint note of bitterness in his voice surprised her. "You and Rex are getting along rather well together these days, I hear. And don't tell me it's merely because he's your employer - I've heard that from you rather often lately." He pretended to smile, as though he were teasing her, but there was an angry note in his voice that annoyed her.

"Why, Stephen... You don't care if I go about with Rex, do you?"

"Oh, so it's 'Rex' now? And I do care! Why the hell should he have all the women?" He flung it out savagely. "Rita's out there at the studio all day. You're here waiting on his pleasure in the evenings. Dining with him, dancing with him, flirting with him or I'm much mistaken!"

"Stephen!" Her genuine surprise grew to amazement. She had never heard him talk like this before. She couldn't understand it. It didn't seem in keeping with his character. Besides, it was ironical. She had only been going about with Rex in order to separate him from Rita. For Stephen's own sake. Still she couldn't very well tell him that!

"Look here, Starr, will you come and dine with me tonight? Would you care to?"

Would she care to? An evening alone with Stephen was the one thing in the whole world she hungered for most. Couldn't he see that - the dear stupid?

"But Rita?" she protested.

He straightened angrily. "To hell with Rita. I'm sick of being the tame husband. Besides, it would do her good to see me flirting with another girl for a change. That, more than anything else, should bring her to her senses."

"I see," Starr said quietly. She turned away from him and walked slowly over to the white balustrade. She stared down very hard at a gay and gaudy bank of geraniums. There was a queer stinging sensation behind her eyeballs. "I see," she repeated. "You want me to play a

part, as it were. Flirt with you in order to enhance your value in your wife's eyes. I... I don't think I can do that, Stephen."

He came over to her. He covered her hand with his. He lowered his voice. "I didn't mean it like that, Starr. Put like that, I admit it sounds rotten. But... I'd like you to come out with me. More than anything, Starr. That last evening we spent together I was happier than I've been in months.... Don't you want to make me happy?"

"Yes, Stephen." It was a whisper that somehow got lost in her throat.

He squeezed her hand gently. "Bless you, Starr. I owe much to you. I'm just beginning to realize how much."

She didn't reply. She couldn't.

"You will come, Starr? We'll dine anywhere you say. And it isn't just to pay out Rita, either. It's because I want you to come... very much... dear."

Evening had fallen like a soft gray cloak upon them. The sweet scents from the banked flowers in the garden grew more pungent. The sky was too pale yet for stars. The moon was a faint curve of silver.

"At times I think I did a very foolish thing once," he went on in low, even tones. "Sometimes I think I sacrificed something very precious for what was rather worthless."

And still she didn't speak. Both intense misery and an awed elation were struggling within her. She didn't dare try to understand what he meant.... Perhaps he didn't mean anything. Perhaps he was just carried away by the glorious blue-red evening and the scent of the flowers below.

And then, sweeping up the driveway, came the powerful headlamps of a fast racing car. A large, low-slung yellow car with a great bonnet like the nose of some prehistoric monster. Like twin searchlights its lamps picked out the still figures of Starr and Stephen standing together on the balcony.

"What did I tell you, Rex?" Rita, snuggled down beside Rex in the front seat, laughed in a high-pitched, forced manner. "I thought we'd find Stephen here when he left the studio early and we couldn't find him at the hotel."

"Why on earth should you have expected to find him here?" Rex asked irritably.

"But of course that girl's crazy about him. That Thayle girl. She's always been in love with him. Ever since she was his secretary."

"Rot!" Rex ejaculated it savagely. "Starr isn't in love with anyone."

Rita smiled. A tiny malicious smile that sent little ironic crinkles running up her pretty cheeks. "With anyone except *you*, you mean, don't you, darling?" She sighed. "All men like to believe every attractive girl is in love with them. And yet they call us the vain sex! But, seriously, my sweetest, I'm sure Miss Thayle is in love with my worthy husband. Yet I suppose one was oneself at one time. It's a lapse one tries to forget!"

Rex didn't pay any attention to her. He had jammed on the brakes so hard that the back tires skidded in the gravel path and, with scant ceremony, he hustled Rita out.

"You're taking *me* out to dine tonight, aren't you, my angel?" she asked pertly as she thrust her arm through his. "And let's have a cocktail. Don't worry about those two on the balcony. They seem to be enjoying themselves without us!"

Rex took her straight to the cocktail lounge. Then, having ordered her a Martini, he excused himself. He felt restless, irritable, savage. What Rita had told him had thrown him into the devil's own temper. He hadn't definitely arranged with Starr to dine with him tonight. Rather he had taken it for granted. Hang it all, they had dined together for the past three nights!

He didn't want to walk out onto the balcony where he had seen her and Stephen together, but all the same he presently found himself there. Not more than a few yards away from them.

He coughed with more force than discretion. "I'm sorry if I'm intruding," he said in a voice that belied his regret. "But shouldn't you be getting changed, Starr? I've ordered dinner at the usual time tonight."

They both swung towards him. Stephen stiffened angrily. In that moment his hatred and resentment towards Rex were almost uncontrollable. Perhaps Rex sensed this, for he stiffened, too. Yet there was something mocking in his attitude. And he smiled, that slightly crooked smile of his.

"Miss Thayne has promised to dine with me tonight," Stephen said coldly.

"You're going to disappoint me, Starr?" Rex ignored Stephen and addressed her directly.

She smiled faintly. "I'm afraid so, Rex." She added, "I didn't promise, you know."

"No, of course you didn't." Rex's smile twisted. He turned towards Stephen and added, "Well, my dear Stephen, since you're taking my secretary to dinner, am I to be permitted to take care of your wife?"

Stephen laughed bitterly. "I didn't think you usually bothered to get my permission for *that*, Brandon? At least you haven't in the past."

Rex's smile became a shade crooked. "But one can reform, you know," he said lightly. "No man is so bad that a good woman's influence can't help him - isn't that so, Starr?"

Her cheeks crimsoned. She could cheerfully have hit him in that moment. She knew he was making fun of her.

"I'm going to change," she said coldly. "If you'll meet me here in half an hour, I'll be ready." She ignored Rex. It didn't matter about him. She was going to have a glorious evening.

But the evening was spoiled.

There was no reason why it should be spoiled, but it was. The tête-a-tête dinner with Stephen was flat. She couldn't rise above her sense of annoyance with Rex. It dominated everything else. She only half heard all that Stephen said to her. Her replies grew so vague that he leaned across the table and covered her hand with his.

"You're worried about something, Starr? What is it, my dear? Aren't I sufficiently your friend to share it with you?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she said quickly. "Perhaps I've been doing too much work, and it *is* hot tonight."

"It's that man, isn't it?" he said abruptly. "You hate working for him? Any girl *would* hate working for a cad like that. Look at the way he behaved tonight. If you hadn't been there I would have told him what I thought of him. You've got to give in your notice, Starr."

A queer panic stirred within her. She couldn't understand it.

"Yes... but I've nothing else to do," she complained.

He paused a moment, crumbling some bread. "I've been thinking about that," he said presently. "Why don't you let us give you a camera test? If you photograph well - and there's no reason why you shouldn't - I could use you later on in this picture. I was going to bring an extra girl down from Hollywood, but if you prove suitable there would be no need for that. What do you say?"

Starr caught her breath. Like all other girls she had always dreamt of some day becoming a famous star. But that dream, she thought, was too fantastic. Like a sensible girl she had turned her back on it. But here was Stephen offering her a part of that very dream on a silver platter.

"What do I say?" She laughed breathlessly. "It would be wonderful, Stephen."

"Good!" He squeezed her hand tightly. "I'll see you get the test in the morning. And I'm sure you'll be suitable. You can give Rex your notice as soon as you please."

"Yes..." Queer she wasn't more pleased about that. Why should she *want* to remain the secretary of a man she despised? She didn't, of course, and yet Stephen's suggestion filled her with a sense of dismay.

"In the morning," he repeated. And there was a grim satisfaction in his tone. "I shouldn't leave it any later."

But, as it happened, she didn't have to wait until the morning. Rex was waiting for her when she returned to the hotel that night.

As she passed through the deserted lounge, his tall lean form rose out of a deep lounge chair.

"Hello, Starr, what's the hurry?" He barred her way and grinned down at her crookedly. "Sit down, child. I've been waiting all evening to talk to you."



Starr said, "I'm sorry. I'm awfully tired, Rex. Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"Of course it could," he smiled. "But I don't want it to wait. Look here, Starr," - he shifted his weight from one foot to the other - "why wouldn't you have dinner with me tonight? Why did you go out with Stephen instead? Are you in love with him?"

"Have I got to be in love with every man with whom I go out to dinner?" She forced a smile, but she was furious with him.

"No. All the same, something put it into my head that you might be. Are you?"

"You have no right to question me like this," she said angrily.

"Right?" He smiled mockingly. "What has right to do with it? I do a good many things I have no right to do. It makes them more interesting."

"I can well believe that!" she flung back at him.

But he continued to smile. "You haven't answered my question."

"And I've no intention of answering it."

"Then," he sighed, "I shall have to find out for myself."

"How can you?" she demanded suspiciously.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and grinned sardonically.

"Any number of ways.... For instance, I might kiss you. If you didn't respond, that might be fairly convincing proof - what do you think?"

"You're insufferable, aren't you?" She was becoming so furious she could scarcely speak to him. "Why should you think if I didn't respond to *your* kisses I was in love with anyone?"

His grin broadened. "Don't expect me to be modest, please, Starr. I've told you before, man is a conceited animal."

"Not *all* men," she challenged him.

He cocked one eyebrow. "Meaning Stephen Desmond?"

Her face flushed. "Perhaps."

He frowned. "And so I have my answer.... But I'm surprised at you, Starr." His voice grew mocking again. "I thought you, more than anyone else, respected the sacred precincts of matrimony. Look at the flurry you were in when his wife contemplated eloping with me!"

"You would put all the blame on her, wouldn't you?" Her small voice was openly sarcastic.

He threw back his head and chuckled. "Beg pardon, my dear. Man always takes all the blame, doesn't he? It's heroic and conventional. I venture to remark that few men would act heroically if it wasn't the right and conventional thing to do! Still, now you're in love with the husband perhaps you regard my affair with Rita a trifle more leniently?"

"How dare you!" she threw at him. "There is no similarity between my friendship with Stephen and your past affair with his wife!"

"Friendship!" His voice was openly skeptical.

"Yes, friendship," she repeated firmly.

He waggled an eyebrow at her. "Now, look here, Starr, will you swear to me that all you feel for Stephen is a good and ennobling friendship? Of course you won't." He answered his own question laughingly. "You couldn't do it. Really, there's no such thing as friendship between a man and a woman. And why should there be? If I want a friend I choose a man. He's usually more intelligent, and one doesn't have to play up to him."

"You haven't a very high opinion of women, have you?" she said coldly.

"That's where you're wrong, child." He smiled faintly, and despite himself an odd seriousness crept into his tones. "I adore women. Feminine women who realize they were made to be loved and don't fuss about it. But I loathe and despise your so-called 'sensible' woman. Usually she wants all the man's privileges and the attentions you'd pay a feminine woman as well! She won't openly admit she wants them, of course. But she becomes disgruntled if you don't give them to her. She wants you to admire a close-up of her brain and a long-distance shot of her body. And man, poor brute, is so constructed that he prefers it the other way round."

"I'm rather tired, I'll go to bed if you don't mind," Starr said in the pause that ensued.

He caught her hand. "Don't go to bed, Starr. Come out on the balcony with me. It's a glorious night. A pity to waste it. And we're in this world so short a time, why should we waste any of the good things of life?"

"Perhaps what you consider a good thing I don't consider so good," she reminded him.

He laughed and bent closer to her. "But I'm sufficiently vain to believe I could convince you. Come, Starr. The sea will be blue-black tonight, faintly purple, and the sky will be blue-black, faintly purple, too. And you and I, Starr, may never have another moment like this in our lives again. Other moments, of course, but never one just like this. Come along."

She went, although she knew at the time it was a weakness to go. She couldn't have told you why she went, either. But occasionally Rex's deep voice, with that slight husky note to it, could have a peculiar effect upon her. She supposed it had the same effect upon the millions of other women who contributed to his staggering fan mail. It compelled you to do things you didn't want to do. It spoke to something within you you hadn't even realized was there. Or, perhaps, you didn't want to realize it.

"I've had a wretched evening," he said abruptly. "I've felt like a small schoolboy punished for something he hadn't done. You won't treat me again like that, will you, dear?"

He moved closer to her in the soft, translucent darkness. One hand touched her bare arm. A queer shiver ran through her. She moved from him hastily. "Why, Starr?" He questioned gently. "You're unfair to me. Every time I approach you, you erect an unnatural barrier between us. You won't give me a chance... You won't give yourself a chance."

She said - and afterwards she never knew why she said it just then; perhaps because there was a strange tension inside her and she had to say something practical to get rid of it: "I'm going to leave your employ, Rex. I'm giving you notice. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" He laughed sharply. "I mind like hell. And you're doing nothing of the sort."

"But I am, Rex," she insisted. "This time I mean it. Stephen's - Stephen's offered me a part in the picture."

He didn't say anything for a long moment. He merely stood looking down at her through the blue-black, silver-shot darkness. But presently he shook his head slowly, and the expression on his face was almost sad. "Another little secretary who dreams of fame as a movie star, eh, child? Another little girl bound for disillusionment. I didn't think it of you, Starr. I thought you had too much sense."

He spoke gently. She saw he didn't mean to offend her. All the same she *was* offended. Why should he conclude, even before she had been tried out, that she would be a failure? She asked him, and he replied in the same gentle tones. "Because so many have tried and so many have failed. Because becoming a famous star is so much a matter of chance. And because I think failure might hurt you, my dear!"

"But I'm not going to fail." And, in that moment, she felt she couldn't, she mustn't. As though he had flung her a challenge and she had taken it up.

He shrugged. His lips twisted slightly. "Very well. Try it out." He added softly, "I'll be sorry to lose you as my secretary, Starr."

"I'll be sorry, too. You've been very decent to me as an employer," she said.

He smiled ruefully. "You needn't emphasize the 'employer' part of it."

"You've been decent to me in other ways," she said quietly.

He grinned. "You hate to admit that, don't you, child?"

She knew she did. But that he should know it, too, made her feel resentful.

"If Stephen should want me to start work immediately would you mind?" she said coldly.

"No," he grinned broadly. "Since you are going to leave my employ, the sooner the better, Starr. That will give me a fairer chance, won't it?"

"What do you mean?"

He laughed shortly. "I may have no morals, but at least I have a code of my own, child. So long as you remain in my employ I feel compelled to treat you with a certain restraint, a certain courtesy even."

Her eyes flashed fire. "And you wouldn't treat me normally with such courtesy, Mr. Brandon?"

He grinned mockingly. "Not the same kind of courtesy. You don't really want me to! No woman ever enjoys courtesy. The more brutal you are to her the more she loves you!"

"It seems your experience of women must have been distinctly limited," she said icily.

He threw back his head and laughed aloud. "Don't you believe it. The great lady and the little gamine are all the same under the skin. The ruder you are to them the quicker they come to heel.... Don't you agree with me?"

"I most certainly don't.... And in order that you won't overstrain yourself with courtesy, Mr. Brandon, I'll give you my notice right now."

"Good!" he said shortly. "That clears the air, doesn't it. Come here, Starr." He held out his hands to her.

Her brown eyes opened wide in surprise. "Why should I?"

"Because I want you to. I want to take you in my arms and kiss you as I've been longing to kiss you for weeks. But because you've been in my employ I haven't been able to. I must be developing a sense of honor at my late age! Come here, Starr." His voice roughened. It was almost brutal.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she shot out indignantly.

"Won't you?" He laughed again, and before she could move she was in his arms. Crushed to him so tightly that she felt the hard, strained muscles of his chest against hers. She felt his hands slide down her back and fit into the curve of her waist. She felt his kisses. Kisses that teased, demanded, confused her. And while she struggled to free herself she knew she didn't want to be free. And she hated and despised herself for the knowledge.

"Does Stephen ever kiss you like this?" he asked as he released her.

"No, no, no..." Her small voice was hoarse with fury. "He's a gentleman!"

"And gentlemen don't kiss ladies," he chuckled grimly. "That's a new one on me!"

"Not like that.... Not against their wishes."

He caught her arm again and drew her close to him. "Was it against your wishes? Would you swear to me it was *entirely* against your wishes, Starr?"

She choked with rage. All the more because she couldn't deny it.

"Let me go. Oh, I hate you," she cried.

"That's better." He smiled down at her crookedly. "A good lusty hatred is an excellent prelude to love, child."

The camera tests were a success. Starr photographed excellently.

"But I knew you would," Stephen assured her enthusiastically. "You have the right features. Fairly flat cheekbones, small nose, strong chin, large round eyes. The molding of your face is right, too. That's most important. Conventional prettiness doesn't mean a thing on the screen. Yes, I think I always knew you would film well."

"You might have let me in on that secret while I was working for you," she smiled back at him. "I wouldn't have objected exactly to entering the lists then!"

"I'll admit it was pure selfishness on my part," he laughed apologetically. "You see, it's fairly easy to find a new film actress, but a good secretary is quite a different matter!"

They were standing talking at one end of the large improvised studio that had been hastily erected for the interior shots of *Gentleman Pirate*. It was in between two of the takes. A scene aboard ship had just been shot, and now under the supervision of the carpenter they were getting the next scene ready. A busy hive of industry, the studio was. The electricians were moving their "inkys" and "kilos" into place; the property man was assisting verbally in the reconstruction of the scene; the make-up man was moving amongst the actors examining their make-ups critically; the hairdresser, a small plump woman in vivid scarlet, was patting into place the elegant waves in the leading woman's hair; the chief cameraman was getting his camera into the right focus while the sound engineer tinkered with the microphone boom.

Starr was already made up, though it was doubtful if Stephen would want her that day. All afternoon they had been taking and retaking a couple of scenes on the yacht. Rex couldn't get them to Stephen's satisfaction. Almost as though Stephen derived a grim satisfaction in making the great Rex Brandon go over and over a certain take.

Rex was stretched at full length on the sawdust floor in another corner of the studio. His head was propped on a sack of sand while he studied the script. Rita, who was seated on the script girl's desk, idly watched the various activities while she swung one pretty silk-stockinged leg. Now she glanced about hurriedly, then slipped round to the corner where Rex lay. She sank down beside him, pleased with the assurance that the piled-up sacks of sand hid her completely from Stephen's view.

"Want me to hear you your lines, darling?" she whispered.

"No, I don't," Rex said irritably. "I wish you'd go away and leave me alone."

"Poor boy!" She touched his hair lightly, a caress in her small, soft fingertips. "Stephen's been acting rottenly mean today, hasn't he?"

"He hasn't been too easy," Rex grumbled. "If we did that shot once we did it a thousand times. Darned if I think it was better in the end. I thought it was O. K. the first time."

"I know," she sympathized. "I'm sure it's just because he wants to show off before that girl." Her pretty red lips tightened, and her eyes flashed angrily. "I think he's rather sweet on her. *I'm* a back number," and she laughed bitterly.

Rex raised his head with a jerk. "Do you think so?" he asked roughly.

She shrugged. "Not much doubt about it, though it's scarcely flattering to me to admit it! Of course," she sighed, "I'm sure it's all beautifully Platonic. The dangerous affairs always are!"

The muscles of Rex's face tightened. "You don't think it's serious?"

She pouted. "How should I know? They're always together. Of course he excuses it by saying it's work. Since she undertook the part at this eleventh hour he has to coach her, etc.! Coach her? I bet he does! But not in the part, I'm sure!"

"But... I always thought Stephen was madly in love with you. After all, you're his wife," Rex said slowly.

"Oh, yes! But he seems to be growing more broad-minded lately. When *I* was going about with you he was positively bristling with old-fashioned conventions. But now he's got him a girl friend he seems to be forgetting at least one convention a day! Heaven alone knows where he will end!" And she laughed maliciously.

The set was ready, a shot on a desert island. Rex was called to take his place. The lovely heiress and he had just been shipwrecked. Rex was dressed in torn canvas trousers, a dirty white shirt, equally torn old tennis shoes. It wasn't exactly a prepossessing costume, but he managed to look extraordinarily handsome in it. Starr, standing half hidden behind one of the inkys, had to admit that. And, having admitted it, she felt rather queer. She couldn't describe the feeling, but it made her feel shaken. Suddenly he looked up and, catching her eyes, he smiled across at her with mocking impudence. Hastily she looked away. She hadn't spoken to him since that night on the balcony.

Just then the assistant director gave the order. "Light 'em up," and immediately the huge arclights and all the inkys and kilos blazed down upon Rex and Pauline Jerrold, the lovely heiress. The gigantic lights were almost blinding. So blinding, in fact, that a three-minute shot is considered quite an endurance test. The whistle for silence blew, the wooden board on which were the title of the picture and number of the set was presented and photographed, the clapper boy banged the wooden clappers which synchronized sound and action.

Pauline Jerrold, in the rôle of the perfectly marcelled, auburn-haired heiress, tossed her head and said, "You're different today. I can't understand you."

Rex, in the guise of the Gentleman Pirate, smiled his crooked smile and replied, "Perhaps I'm developing a sense of honor, my dear!"

The dialogue went on, but Starr didn't hear it. Where had she heard that phrase, and recently, too? But of course she knew. Rex had used it to her, that night on the balcony. She was conscious of a queer numb hurt she couldn't understand. An outraged sense of anger. But, she asked herself tersely, what else could she expect? The professional lover! The professional lover in real life as well as on the screen!

Starr heard two of the electricians talking.

"Desmond's been giving Rex a pretty rough break lately," one of them said.

"Yes, Mac, he doesn't seem able to do a thing right. And he's not the sort of actor who improves under such treatment. He's always at his best the first time a shot's taken."

"Desmond seems to have it in for him for something," the one addressed as Mac whispered. Then the cry of "Light'em up" came, the whistle blew, and the scene was reshot.

Starr thought angrily: "Of course they're mistaken. As if Stephen were small enough to allow a personal grudge to crop up in his work! How little they know him! Why, that's the very last thing he would do." She felt quite furious with them. She'd like to give them a good piece of her mind.

Later that afternoon Stephen shot a scene in which Starr appeared. She was one of the guests on the steam yacht from which the lovely heiress had been abducted. She had only one line: "And she hadn't any clothes with her, either!" But she felt the whole dialogue of the picture rested upon her slim shoulders.

It was a terrific and terrifying moment the first time the huge arclights blazed down upon her. Her eyes felt dazzled, her face so hot she was sure all the grease paint was running. The microphone hanging from the boom almost immediately overhead alarmed her. She was positive she couldn't even remember that one solitary line! But, queerly, the moment she actually started to speak, all her nervousness left her. She forgot where she was; she even forgot the, blaze of those awful dazzling lights. Almost before she realized it had begun, the shot was over.

Stephen Desmond touched her arm. "That was splendid, Starr."

"Swell," she whispered back. She blinked very hard. She had an absurd and almost uncontrollable desire to burst into tears. Too awful before all these people in the studio! She supposed it was the strain.... But it was nice hearing Stephen praise her.

On her way to the refreshment pavilion she ran into Rex. He blocked her way and smiled down at her in his faintly derisive manner. "Congratulations, child. The way you delivered that one line was masterly. The great Stephen was delighted. Obviously! Your scene had only to be shot once, while everything I've done today has had to be retaken about a hundred times. Your name will be in electric lights soon, if I'm not mistaken."

"You needn't be sarcastic," she flung at him bitterly.

The mocking smile died. He grinned ruefully. Rather like a bad boy who is penitent but doesn't wait to admit it. "I'm sorry, Starr. It was pretty mean. But I feel in the devil's own temper. I had to let off steam somehow. You were perfectly O. K. I was surprised, really."

"That's praise indeed from the great Rex Brandon!"

"Now who's being sarcastic?"

"I'm glad I was useful in hearing you your lines the other night!" Despite herself she couldn't keep it back, although she realized at the time it was a confession of weakness.

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Now she'd started, something forced her to go on:

"That line in the script about developing a sense of honor. I thought I'd heard it before!"

He threw back his head and gave out a great shout of laughter.

"You silly little thing! I hadn't even seen the script then!"

Vaguely she felt comforted, though she was still annoyed.

"Just shows how similar are your own and your screen character, doesn't it?"

His smile twisted. "Maybe! Though if your screen personality develops along the lines of your hair you'll be starred as the Raging Screen Beauty"

"I hope the new secretary is satisfactory," she remarked coldly in the pause.

"Which means you don't hope anything of the sort," he laughed back at her. "But she is, you'll be disappointed to hear. And so unattractive we get quite a lot of work done in the evening!"

All that evening, all night in fact, Starr was on tenterhooks to know the result of that shot. She heard it was to be run through in the projection room about seven the next morning. She didn't dare go down to the studio until it was over. Stephen had said he wouldn't be wanting her that morning anyhow.

Eight. Eight-fifteen. Eight-thirty. She couldn't swallow the coffee that was brought to her bedside. Wouldn't Stephen phone her after he had seen it? Surely, he would!

At eight thirty-eight exactly the telephone beside her bed rang. It was the studio calling her, the girl at the hotel telephone switchboard told her.

"Tell me the worst at once, please, Stephen," she laughed huskily into the receiver.

"It isn't Stephen," Rex's voice came back to her. "I hope you're not disappointed?"

She was. So disappointed she could have screamed at him. She *had* to know the result of that shot.

And then, in answer to her thoughts, "The shot's O. K., Starr. You film excellently, child. And your voice comes out splendidly. I've just come from the projection room. If our worthy director isn't pleased, he should be."

"I'm glad ... I'm glad..." And she was. So glad she wanted to sing, to shout. She wanted to put the receiver down and dance madly about the room.

"Dine with me tonight to celebrate?"

That sobered her. "I'm sorry, Rex...."

"Then I'm not to be rewarded for coming down to this filthy studio at the ungodly hour of seven just to see how your shot came through?"

"It was nice of you but..."

"To hell with your 'buts.' If you're not careful you'll lose me!" And he hung up on her.

She was still staring at the telephone with a mixture of surprise and indignation when Stephen called her.

"It's great, Starr," he said. "I'm terribly proud of my new little film actress."

"You really mean it, Stephenn?" She was still breathless with elation.

"Of course, Starr. You're headed for a great future. I've arranged a little party for tonight. Will you come?"

"How - how big a party?"



He lowered his voice. "Party of two... Are you disappointed, Starr?"

"No, I'm not disappointed." Only her voice seemed to have got lost in her throat.

"I want to talk to you, Starr. It's nothing to do with the picture. Something quite personal. I... I've been wanting to discuss it with you for several days... dear."

As Starr was dressing to dine with Stephen that night, a small square box of flowers was delivered to her. She opened the lid and saw a corsage of dainty, exquisite mauve orchids nestling in a bed of maidenhair fern.

"From Stephen," she thought. "How dear of him." And she lifted them out of the box. A card fell out with them.

"For you to wear tonight, Starr. And to congratulate you, too. Rex." There was a P. S. "Rather ironical I should send you the corsage, eh, when another man will be there to admire them! Still, I don't think he will send you orchids - he isn't that type."

"And a darned good thing he isn't," Starr muttered furiously. "He's got something more important to think about than sending women orchids."

All the same the orchids were lovely. But she was much too angry with that P. S. to wear them. Yet that didn't prevent her pinning them on herself, as, a little time later, she turned this way, that way before the long hanging mirror. What a shame she couldn't wear them - they did suit her so! But perhaps Stephen would bring her some. She told herself passionately she didn't want him to, but she knew, in her secret heart, she did, if only to give the lie to Rex's accusation.

But Stephen didn't bring her orchids. He seemed worried and harassed when he called for her. Starr, with her quick intuition, sensed it.

"Anything go wrong at the studio today?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing more than usual," he said shortly. "Except that every shot I took with Rex seemed all wrong to me. I think he's trying to queer the picture."

"Nonsense, Stephen. I'm quite sure Rex wouldn't do that. It isn't like him at all." Queer how quickly she rushed to Rex's defense. She was surprised at herself.

He raised his dark eyebrows. "I'm not so sure," he grumbled. "And instead of getting better, each time I retake a shot he seems worse."

Starr remembered what the electricians had said. "Don't you think he is rather the type of actor who puts his best foot forward the first time?" she suggested quietly.

"Are *you* siding with him against me now, Starr?" he demanded in a hurt voice.

"No, of course not," she said quickly. "It's only..."

But she never finished the sentence. Perhaps she wasn't even sure of the conclusion in her own mind.

Stephen said they would have dinner at a place he knew where it was quiet and they could talk. He said he'd ordered the meal already. When they arrived there Starr wished it had been somewhere else. Rex and she had dined there several times. Not, of course, that that mattered.

The restaurant jutted right out over the sea. As you dined you could hear the waves swishing gently to and fro beneath the floor boards. Glass casements surrounded you, through which you could watch the sun dip into the sea like a flaming orange ball; you could watch the sea take on its color, then the color gradually fade; you could watch darkness creep on like a gray-shrouded thief stealing the colors from the dying day. It was one of Starr's favorite spots. Queer she didn't feel in the right mood for it that night.

"It's because I want to celebrate tonight," she thought. "I wanted to go to a gay place and dance." And she remembered, with a gnawing hurt inside her, that Stephen had said nothing about that shot she had been in.

She said quickly, breathlessly, "It was dear of you to phone me this morning, Stephen. I'm - I'm so glad the shot was all right. You know," - she smiled a little uncertainly - "I was terribly nervous."

"You needn't have been," he assured her. "You were excellent, Starr."

She laughed excitedly. "I'm vain enough to adore hearing you say that!"

He smiled slightly, "I'm afraid you'll be vainer still before you get through with your movie career, Starr."

"You mean," - she caught her breath, and her brown eyes danced - "you think I may succeed? You think there's really a place for me in the movies?"

He nodded his head ruefully. "I wish I wasn't so certain of it, my dear."

"But"- her eyes opened wide in bewilderment - "aren't you *glad*, Stephen?"

He crumbled some bread on the white tablecloth. "I'll admit I'm not, Starr. Well, not altogether glad, shall we say? And I feel mean about confessing it to you, dear. But" - his smile twisted - "to tell you the truth, I hate like hell the thought of your becoming a great talkie star."

"But ... but why?" She was completely bewildered.

He said half angrily, his hands clenched on the tablecloth, "Can't you guess, Starr? I suppose it's the possessive male in me, but - I don't want to share you with a million admirers. Even though they be only admirers of you on the screen! I want to feel you belong to me, Starr. Every bit of you, and that I don't have to share you with anyone. I-"

"Stephen, are you mad?" she gasped. "Do you know what you're saying?"

He caught her hand and held it, pressing the fingers gently back in his. "I do, Starr, and I'm not at all mad. Rather I'm sane at last, dear. I'll admit I have been mad for the past year or so. Mad to love a worthless woman. But I've my eyes opened now, thank God. I think they have been opened ever since that night on the *Beutonia*, only I was too stubborn to admit it at first. But lately, since I've been down here, I've seen things more clearly. It's you I want, Starr, as my helpmate, my wife.... I want you to stand by me, shoulder to shoulder, and work with me. I can't do without your help, Starr. I've realized that lately. What a damn fool I was not to realize it before!"

She continued to stare at him, wide-eyed, breathless. Here he was saying all the things she had always longed to have him say to her; the dear precious things that had seemed so

impossible even in a dream. And she didn't know how she felt! That was queer, wasn't it? She supposed he had taken her so much by surprise she couldn't think clearly.

"But Rita," she managed to stammer at last. "What about her?"

"We had it out last night " he said curtly. "In the hotel. She'll - She'll give me a divorce all right. It wasn't very flattering, the alacrity with which she agreed." His lips twisted bitterly. "I don't love her any longer, but I admit it hurt. I suppose that's my vanity. Still I'm darn glad it's all settled now. I've - I've been longing to speak to you about it for days, dear, Ever since I realized I was in love with you." He squeezed her hand tighter. Still she waited for that sense of elation that would come, that *must* come. It was wonderful, wasn't it? She had loved Stephen Desmond for several years now, ever since she had been his secretary. And now, in a fairly short time, he would be free to ask her to marry him! She supposed that queer tension inside her was happiness.

"Starr," he bent towards her and whispered, "why don't you say something, my dearest? Aren't you happy? Am I a conceited fool to presume that, for some time now, you've liked me a little?"

A faint color crept to her temples. Her hand trembled in his.

"More than a little, Stephen," she whispered.

"Bless you, darling." His voice was husky. "You don't know how, ever since I realized I loved you, it's upset me to think of your working for that cad, Rex Brandon. That's why I suggested you take part in the picture, to get you out of his employ."

She smiled a little wistfully. "And I thought it was because you realized I had genius, darling!"

"I believe you have," he grumbled. "But I don't want you to develop it, sweetheart. I'd loathe to be married to a famous star. My wife must be mine, all mine."

She laughed a little shakily. "Then this picture is to be my first and last bid for movie laurels!"

"Do you mind, darling?"

She didn't answer immediately. She did mind, she knew. But surely she loved Stephen enough to conquer that feeling? She would help him in his work, as she had done while she had been his secretary. His career would be her career. And his career was ever so much more important than any she might have. Surely she was very selfish to regret it at all?

She smiled across the table at him. "No, I don't believe I shall mind so very much, Stephen."

He caught her other hand and held it tightly. "You're wonderful, my darling. I know, directly the rotten divorce is through, we'll be terribly happy. Working together, playing together, loving together..."

Her eyes fell before his. How happy she must be! What a perfect night this, with the sea orange and scarlet outside the window, the waves singing monotonously beneath them, the man she loved best in the whole world holding her hands, telling her he loved her.... What did a career matter? Why, a few weeks ago she had never even dreamt of having a movie career. Perhaps she wouldn't have minded so much now had she not flung that challenge to Rex Brandon. She had sworn she would succeed.... Well, it didn't matter, did it?

They had been so engrossed in each other they hadn't noticed two new arrivals. A coincidence? Not very much. This was Rex's favorite place, too, to take a lady out to dine.

Even though, that night, the lady had rather forced herself upon him. The food was very good. He reflected, cynically, you could even bear with the company of a lady who bored you if the food and wine were good enough.

As the head waiter led them pompously to the best table, Rita giggled, "Look, Rex darling, there's my erring husband and his little bit. Golly, they're sweet on each other, aren't they? They haven't even noticed us come in!"

The muscles of Rex's face tightened. Queer little darts of anger gleamed momentarily in his eyes. He didn't reply to Rita. Instead he asked for the wine waiter curtly.

"Do order champagne. I must celebrate my prospective freedom!" she laughed lightly.

Rex ignored her wishes and ordered a Chateau Carbonnieux. He felt in that sort of mood.

She pouted prettily as she opened her small gold compact and peered into it. "You're not very considerate of my wishes, are you? You'll make me sorry I came out with you tonight."

"I didn't ask you to," he reminded her.

"Darling, that's just why I came! I adore you when you're brutal. Besides, I had to tell you all about it."

"All about what?" He waved the hors d'oeuvres aside.

"Thinking of your figure?" she teased him. "Darling, do men film stars have to be as careful of their figures as the women? Is it in your contract? That if your girth increases the tweeniest of an inch you lose your job?"

He laughed. "Of course! A cream cake a day keeps the pay cheek away! Haven't you heard that's the motto of us male stars? But... what's so important you want to tell me?"

She sipped her drink and made a face. "I hate still wines - you know I do."

"Why in heeles name, if you *want* to tell me something, don't you get on with it?" he asked in sudden exasperation.

She pouted again. "How do you know I want to tell you something?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake haven't you been harping on it all evening?" His exasperation grew. "How like a woman. She teases your curiosity for the mere pleasure of refusing to satisfy it! Very well. Don't tell me. I'm not interested."

"But you would be if you guessed what it was," she taunted him. "It's about Stephen and that girl."

"You mean Starr?"

"You needn't snap my head off. Of course I mean Starr!"

"Well, what is it?" He spoke quietly, yet his hand was a little unsteady as he picked-up his glass.

"Stephen wants me to give him a divorce so that he can marry her."

"What?" He set the glass down on the table with a jerk. Some of the untasted wine spilled onto the cloth. He paused a moment, as though trying to control his voice. "You're not serious, surely?"

"*I am serious.* After all, it *is* a serious matter for a woman to contemplate losing her husband, even though she doesn't want him! A husband is your bank account for a rainy day.

Especially if you haven't anything else lined up. And," she sighed, "I'm beginning to be less sure of you, Rex darling, every day."

But he wasn't listening to her. He was staring across the dining room at Stephen and Starr.

"How do you know she'll have him?" he asked at last, in a voice that was totally unlike his ordinary voice.

She grimaced. "I told you the other day she was in love with him. Always has been. But it's only lately he's come to think he's in love with her. He says it's a soul attraction and that I was only a physical one! *That's* a nice thing to say to a devoted wife, isn't it?"

Again Rex didn't reply. He was still staring across at Stephen and Starr. Perhaps more at Starr than at Stephen. Those anger points still blazed in his eyes, but now there was pain in them, too. Could it be true what Rita had told him? Somehow he had to find out definitely. This suspense was awful.

And, as he stared at her, Starr glanced up suddenly and looked at him.

Her face paled, then flushed. She knew a tingling sensation all over her, and her heart seemed to do something queer she didn't understand. She supposed it was caused through annoyance at finding him staring at her in that angry, accusing, possessive way. With an effort she withdrew her eyes from him and looked at Rita. Strangely the first thing she noticed about Rita was a spray of mauve orchids pinned to the shoulder of her mauve satin evening gown. So Rex had given *her* orchids, too! Probably ordered them both at the same time! Typical of him. The professional lover! Of course, he knew all the tricks of the trade. But it was bad luck for him that both women should meet on the one evening, wasn't it? She wished she could laugh aloud.... And then she discovered with a queer inner dismay she didn't want to laugh. Tears sprang to her eyes. She didn't understand them. Why should she of all people care that he had sent Rita orchids, too?

"Look, Stephen. Rex and Rita are over there. That's funny, isn't it?" She tried to laugh, but it wasn't altogether a success.

Stephen started. He stared in the direction she indicated. He looked angry suddenly. "Darn nerve," he muttered.

"But why, Stephen? If we've a right to go out together, surely they have! And this is a public restaurant!" Her laugh was more certain now.

He didn't reply to that. He said instead: "Directly you've finished your coffee we'll go. No point in staying on here. Let's go for a drive in the car."

"But, Stephen, I thought we were going to stay and dance! They're clearing away some of the tables now."

"I don't feel like dancing. Let's get out in the air. Hurry, won't you?"

She nodded and said she would hurry. But she didn't, though she persuaded herself she was hurrying. She found herself oddly reluctant to leave that restaurant.

The dance music started. Jazz, crooning, pulsating, throbbing; jazz not so wild and barbaric any longer, more restrained, more sophisticated. No longer so suggestive of Negroes dancing in the cotton fields; suggestive instead of highly paid little girls at night clubs, perfectly trained, perfectly groomed, the wooden soles of their satin shoes tap-tap-tapping to the rhythm.

Almost with the first bar of the music Rex started to his feet. He had seen signs of imminent departure on the part of Stephen and Starr. Waiters hovering round them doing unnecessary things.

"Excuse me, Rita," he said quietly. "I'm going over to ask Starr to dance."

"But I won't excuse you," she said. "I won't have it at all."

"Pretty women should give in gracefully." He smiled crookedly. "Au revoir for the present, my dear."

Starr saw him coming. She guessed why he was coming. And she knew a queer, tight sensation inside her. Stephen didn't see him. He was checking over the items on the bill.

Rex said quietly, "May I have this dance, Starr?"

And somehow she was in his arms the very next minute.

Stephen started in surprise, then he frowned angrily. But neither noticed him.

They danced for a while in silence. Starr wondered if any other man in the world danced so well as Rex, and was furious with herself for the admission. "Oh, well," she thought, none too graciously, "I may as well concede him the few good points he has!"

"Well, aren't you going to speak to me, Starr?" he demanded suddenly.

She raised her eyes to his defiantly. "What is there for me to say?"

He smiled twistedly. "You might thank me for the orchids. Why didn't you wear them?"

Her eyes flashed. "It must have been your busy day - ordering orchids for two women at the same time!" And she glanced angrily across to where Rita sat.

He threw back his head and laughed. He hadn't sent Rita the orchids, but he didn't say so.

"Thanks for the admission."

"What admission?"

"Why, that you're annoyed about it."

She tried to look scathing. "Of course I'm not annoyed."

"Of course you are annoyed."

"Shall we cease this discussion?" - icily. "We don't appear to be getting very far with it."

He bowed mockingly. "Just as you please, Miss Thayle." But his eyes were twinkling. She could have hit him. Why did he always make her feel as though she were behaving like a silly little fool?

And again there was silence.

He danced her out onto the balcony. It was cooler, and there was more room to dance.

"I heard tonight that the Desmonds were going to get a divorce," he said abruptly. And now he was no longer smiling.

"Yes I - I believe so." Her voice was almost too casual.

"It has nothing to do with you, I suppose?" he asked sharply.

Her color heightened, but she managed to control her voice. "Why should it?"

"Only... I heard you and he were getting married when the decree was through. But I suppose that's mere gossip?"

"I don't see what it has to do with you!"

"I see, so you are!"

"Well..." - a fierce little breath - "Supposing I am?"

He frowned. There was something queer about his eyes, she thought. "You're making a hell of a mistake.... But perhaps you'll realize that before the divorce is through."

He had aroused all her fighting spirit. "I'm quite sure I shan't," she snapped back. "I've, well, I've been very fond of Stephen for years."

"Yes, *fond* is the correct term," he laughed down at her. But it wasn't very happy laughter.

She threw back her head defiantly. "I'm in love with him, if you like that better."

He drew her suddenly closer. "I don't, and you're not, Starr. You may think you are. But your love for him is dead, dead as cold mutton, though you won't admit it. There's something darned cussed about you that won't *let* you admit it."

"You seem to know an awful lot about me" - sarcastically. "What else do you know?"

"That you'd never be happy with him. Not any longer. You've outgrown him, child. He's passed into the ranks of the men you used to be in love with. You'll realize that soon. Success in your career will help you to."

"I'm not going to have a career," she told him. "I'm not going on with film work. I'm going to help Stephen."

"What?" He stopped dancing suddenly. But it didn't matter. The music had already stopped several minutes before. "You don't mean that?" As though by, mutual consent, they moved over to the railings.

"Yes, why not?"

"But you've a great future ahead of you!"

"You didn't seem to think that several weeks ago. In fact you practically told me I was a fool to try out for a screen career at all!"

"But I hadn't seen how well you filmed then," he said impatiently. "Nor had I heard how well your voice reproduced. I know something about the game, Starr. I've been in it long enough. And I could swear you are going right to the top of the tree. There's big scope for you. You'd be mad not to go on with it. Why are you thinking of giving it up?"

"Stephen wants me to. He doesn't like the idea of my being a famous star."

"Damn selfishness!"

"Not at all." Her small voice was hoarse with indignation.

Suddenly he gripped her elbows and drew her abruptly to him. "And supposing *I* say *I* want you to go on with your career, Starr?"

She tried to wriggle out of his grip. "I don't see what you have to do with it."

He held her elbows tighter. "Don't you? But of course I have something to do with it. I'm in love with you, and you're in love with me."



"I'm nothing of the sort!" But her voice was choked.

"Of course you are. It's futile to deny it, though, of course, you will go on denying it for some time to come yet. That, as I told you before tonight, is because you're so darn cussed. Still I can wait!"

"How... how dare you talk like that."

"I'll dare more than that, child. I'll dare kiss you even though you say you are going to marry Stephen Desmond." He suited his action to his words. He kissed her quickly, passionately, before she had a chance to repulse him. And then just as abruptly he released her.

"That's enough for the present. Think of that when Desmond kisses you tonight." He grinned crookedly and added, "Shall we go back and rejoin our respective partners?"

Rita waved to them gayly as they reappeared. She was sitting facing Stephen across the little white-clothed table Rex had recently vacated. A bottle of champagne stood lopsided in a silver bucket of ice.

"We're celebrating our coming freedom," she cried. "Champagne at your expense, Rex darling. That's poetic justice for you, isn't it?"

Stephen didn't look as though he had been celebrating anything. He nodded curtly to Rex and said to Starr, "Well, are you ready, dear? Shall we go?"

"Hark at him! He's calling her 'dear' already," Rita laughed. She turned to Stephen and added with a little mocking pout, "You needn't put the nails in my coffin before I'm dead, Stephen!"

Outside it was a glorious night. The moon was full and round, wise and very knowing. The air was like a soft cloak muffling them in scented warmth. They sat in the back of an open car, and a chauffeur drove them. For a little while they seemed to find nothing to say to each other. Something had intruded upon their former happiness.

"Why were you out with him on the balcony so long?" Stephen demanded abruptly. He added, "It was darned cheek on his part asking you to dance, anyhow."

"I don't see that. Why shouldn't he ask me to dance?" Starr heard herself replying.

He frowned. "I can't think why you always stick up for the bounder."

She opened her mouth to reply, but she didn't. After all, it was very stupid to quarrel about Rex. He meant nothing in her life - or did he?"

Stephen said, when presently the drive was over and they stood in the shadows of the hotel garden, "Do you know, darling, I've never kissed you yet?"

Starr laughed too, nervously. "No, you haven't, have you?"

He held out his arms and smiled. "The time has come to rectify that error."

He took her in his arms, and she let him kiss her. He kissed her gently on the mouth, then, growing bolder, he kissed her eyes and her hair that was faintly silver in the slanting moonlight. Starr lay passive in his arms and wondered why she wasn't more thrilled. She supposed she was tired. She had been through such a vortex of emotions tonight.

"It will be a long time before I'm free," he whispered. "I can scarcely wait, darling."

"But we can be together a lot in the meantime, Stephen."

"Of course, dearest.... You're happy, aren't you? As happy as I am?"

"Yes," she whispered. And she was, wasn't she? This was the wonderful thing she had always dreamt of. Stephen loved her! Some day she would be his wife. Oh, yes, she was happy... Queer that the first thing she should see when, later, she stepped into her bedroom were those orchids of Rex's. They lay on the dressing table, palely exquisite in their silver sheath.... Identical to the ones Rita had been wearing. Suddenly with a choked little cry she snatched them up and flung them far out of the window.

"Oh, I hate them," she cried. "I hate you, too, Rex!"

Strange that she should celebrate this, the happiest evening of her life, by leaning her head on the dressing table and bursting into tears.

Los Angeles again. Hot summer pavements, dust hanging like a gray cloud in the air, painting the green tree leaves gray. Los Angeles with its noise and its traffic smells; its chumminess, its bustle, its ridiculous incredible dearness to all those who have left it, even for a short time.

This morning there was to be a preview of *Gentleman Pirate* at the Gloriana Theater.

Starr realized, as she went down to the theater, that she had never been more nervous in her life.

"But that's ridiculous," she told herself. "Even if they do think I have done well, it's not going to do me any good. I promised Stephen I'd give it up, and I will." All the same she couldn't help feeling a little wistful about it. And she hoped, for her own personal satisfaction, the directors and critics would be pleased with her.

Her pass admitted her to one of the boxes. Stephen had said he would join her there. He had to go out to the studio on business first.

As she sat there waiting, her eyes swept the audience. She waved to several other members of the cast she recognized, noted the rows of critics, of exhibitors, saw several directors of the West East Studios in an opposite box. It was thrilling, wasn't it? She had been to previews before, but none had ever been as exciting as this. Possibly because never before had she been in the picture!

Her eyes continued to sweep the audience. She wouldn't consciously admit she was looking for anyone. But he wasn't there. She smiled bitterly; probably he wanted to make a spectacular last-minute entrance. She wouldn't put it past him. Some male stars are like that.

Just before the lights were lowered, Stephen slipped into the seat beside her. She saw immediately he was upset about something.

"What's the matter, Stephen?" she asked quickly.

He shrugged angrily. "I've just come back from a directors' meeting. It appears I'm not to direct the next Rex Brandon picture, even though it's to be the biggest the studio has attempted yet. The job has been given to William Taylor. I bet Rex has been lodging complaints against me. He's just the sort of man to do a low-down trick like that through personal spite."

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Stephen," Starr said quickly. "How do you know Rex had anything to do with it?"

"I'd bet a thousand dollars he had," Stephen said bitterly. "Why else should they have made such a decision? I've always directed Rex's pictures. He's their most famous star, and I'm their most important director. And this picture, *Lovable Rake*, is to be the biggest and most

spectacular thing the studio has yet attempted. Given it to William Taylor, have they? Why, he's never even been associated with Rex before. Still if they want to ruin the picture it's their own lookout. But I didn't think a sensible body of men would allow themselves to be influenced by a personal spite!"

Starr didn't reply immediately. She felt intensely miserable. All her excitement in the coming preview had gone. She felt flat, like a balloon suddenly pricked by a pin.

"But, Stephen, how can you be so positive it was Rex's doing?" she asked at last.

"Who else could have influenced them? I know he was furious with me for retaking so many of his scenes in the last picture. Too darn conceited to listen to a mere director! And then," - his voice hardened - "I shouldn't be surprised if personal jealousy hadn't something to do with it."

"What... what do you mean?" But her voice was shaken.

"I think he liked *you*, Starr... too darn well. That's why he wanted you to be his secretary in the first place. He was as mad as ten snakes when I took you out of his employ and gave you a part in the picture. And the night at the restaurant, you remember? I could see he was damnably jealous of me. Undoubtedly this is his method of revenge. I must say it isn't a very sporting one!"

Again Starr didn't reply. Could Rex have done such a thing? Stephen seemed so confident he had. And yet...

There he was now, coming down the aisle. He was smiling, that lopsided slightly derisive smile that had made him famous. Starr stiffened to nervous attention. She felt her heart do something queer inside her. And suddenly she felt furious with herself for no admitted reason.

"The airs he gives himself," Stephen said harshly. "You'd think he was President of the United States at least!"

The preview started. Starr watched the picture in a dull, listless way. What she had imagined would be one of the most exciting mornings of her life was proving the most miserable. And as she watched she was forced to the conclusion that in some ways the picture wasn't as good as many other ones Stephen had directed. Rex wasn't so good, either. In some of the scenes his manner, usually so natural, seemed curiously strained. And occasionally in a scene he seemed dead. As though all the spontaneity had been taken out of his acting. The words of those electricians rushed back to her: "Yes... he doesn't seem able to do a thing right. And he's not the sort of actor who improves under such treatment. He's always at his best the first time a shot's taken."

Were they right? Had Stephen, without meaning to, managed to flatten Rex's interpretation of the part? And yet she was convinced Stephen had only tried to do his duty. Rex must know that. But had he, because of it, refused to act under Stephen's direction in the coming picture?

She was brought out of these reflections with a start. There *she* was. A queer and uncanny sensation watching herself move and speak on the screen for the first time. She couldn't tell whether she was good or not. She wished Stephen would say something; something to reassure her. But he sat glum and silent. She had a feeling he wasn't watching the screen at all.

An excited hum of conversation followed the final fadeout. The lights were switched on, and people gathered in eager groups, chatting. She moved down with Stephen into their midst.

"May as well hear the worst and get it over," he said with a forced laugh.

As she was about to pass into the vestibule, she felt a hand on her arm. She turned with a start to find herself face to face with Albert Hammond, the "big boss" at the West East Studios.

"I want to congratulate you, Miss Thayle," he said. I think we've a real find in you." He smiled and passed on.

Starr was left pink in the face, and so excited she could have jumped to the ceiling with pure unrestrained joy. Such praise from the great Al, as he was familiarly called, was praise indeed! To have him notice you at all usually meant that your feet were securely planted on the first rung of the ladder to fame. She looked around eagerly for Stephen to tell him about it, but there was no sign of him. She was about to move into the main body of the theater when a tall familiar figure planted itself between her and the doorway.

"Well, well, so the child has been noticed by the great Al himself," his mocking voice laughed down at her. "Didn't I predict you were destined for movie laurels, my dear?"

"And I told you I didn't intend to have a film career," she returned tartly.

"Ladies have been known to change their minds, child. I've an idea something may happen in the near future that may persuade you." His blue-gray eyes twinkled down at her.

"I'm perfectly sure nothing will happen to make me change my mind."

"Dear, dear!" He clicked his tongue mockingly. "How very determined we are this morning! And rather disgruntled, if I'm not much mistaken. Didn't our breakfast agree with us?"

"Did you refuse to act in the new picture, *Lovable Rake*, if Stephen directed it?" she asked abruptly.

The smile faded from his face. His blue-gray eyes were stern, and a little cold, suddenly. Leisurely he selected a cigarette and tapped it against his silver case. "Do you want the truth or polite evasion, my dear Starr?"

"I want the truth."

He lit the cigarette. "You've no right to demand it, but I'll tell you." He smiled slightly and added, "You won't like me very much afterwards, but, of course, you'll still be in love with me."

"If you insist upon talking nonsense..." she choked indignantly.

He laughed. "Your anger, as ever, gives you away. But you want to know about Stephen? Well... I don't think he gave me a square deal in that last picture. I was damn bad, and you know it." He grinned ruefully and added, "So do all the critics, worse luck! And tomorrow, through them, the whole world will know it. I can't afford that to happen more than once, can I? I'd lose my public. I'd lose my contract. And what is all-important, I'd lose my pay check."

"So you *did* refuse to act in it if Stephen directed it?"

"Not exactly. I merely intimated I thought I might be happier working under another director. That last experience was rather painful, my dear."

"But Stephen was only doing his duty," Starr said sharply.

"Of course. But the fact remains I was rotten. Everything I did seemed to irritate him, and he, in turn, succeeded in irritating me. And it's rather hard to give your best to a picture under those conditions."

"I suppose it is," she agreed reluctantly.

Later that day she tried to explain it tactfully to Stephen.

"Damn nonsense," he said. "I was the same as I've always been. No, it was just a mean stunt on his part to try and queer me with the West East concern."

She was silent. If Stephen insisted upon taking that view of it, there was nothing more to be said. Presently she remembered she hadn't told him yet what the great Al had said to her.

"That's swell, Starr. But" - he put an arm about her shoulders and drew her towards him - "don't let it turn your head, will you, darling?"

"You think I'm conceited enough already," she laughed back at him.

"No... but you know how I feel about your continuing with a screen career. You know how dead set I am against it."

"Yes, I know, Stephen," she said quickly. All the same there was a disappointed note in her voice.

"Listen, darling, I've good news for you," he whispered. "I saw my lawyer today, and he assured me the divorce would be through in a few months now. Then we can be married. We might take a trip to England, eh, sweetheart? I'm not at all sure I mayn't find a better opening for my talents over there."

"But I thought American pictures meant so much to you, Stephen?" she said quickly. "You used to assure me that nothing would induce you to leave Hollywood."

He shrugged. "Oh, well, if you find your own country doesn't appreciate you, you can't be blamed for going over to the enemy, can you?"

She didn't reply. But she couldn't help thinking how strange it was to hear such a statement from Stephen's lips. With a queer sense of pain she remembered his talk in the old days. How confident and enthusiastic he had been. She could only suppose that what had happened at the directors' meeting today had hurt him badly. And that had been Rex Brandon's fault. Not content with first trying to rob Stephen of his wife, he was now trying to rob him of his career. Her indignation against Rex mounted.

Next morning she was startled out of her sleep by the telephone bell. She glanced at her watch. Eight-thirty. She jumped out of bed, threw on a wrapper, patted across the apartment room in her black satin mules, and picked up the receiver.

"Is that you, Miss Thayle? Mr. Albert Hammond's secretary speaking," said a girl in a quiet voice. "Mr. Hammond has just phoned from his house to say that he'd like to see you at ten at the studios this morning if you can make it."

If she could make it! Starr felt that if Al Hammond had wanted to see her at the North Pole at ten o'clock she could have made it! She was in such a whirl of excitement as she dressed that her fingers were all thumbs; she put on one stocking inside out twice and finally left with odd gloves in her hand. What could Al Hammond's hasty summons mean? It might mean anything - or nothing. Yet did men as important as Al send for girls if there was nothing to it? She thought of the wildest, absurdest possibilities. He had said he liked her work. Was he going to offer her another and a better part? She was almost at the studio before she remembered about her promise to Stephen. Suddenly she felt so dejected she could have wept. All her glamorous dreams faded like a soap bubble. She had half a mind to turn back and phone through that she couldn't make the appointment. But sheer curiosity prevented her. After all, there could be no harm in finding out what he wanted.

The studios were a hive of activity. They had been since seven-thirty that morning, when the entire cast of every picture being shot that day had assembled to start making up.

Starr was sent to Al's private office and told to wait for him.

"Better take this magazine and look over it, dear," his secretary advised kindly. "They've been having trouble with set No. 2, where they're shooting that musical show *Snowflakes*. He mayn't show up for hours yet."

But, contrary to expectations, the great Al returned on the stroke of ten.

He was a small square man with a face like a cartoon of itself. He had nervous jerky movements, and at one side of his large mouth was a perpetual cigar. He even wore his hat, a dusty felt, indoors and when ladies were present. Yet you felt this was no sign of disrespect. It's doubtful if he realized it was there.

"How do, Miss Thayle," he said. "Come into my private office."

With the actual appearance of Al Hammond, Starr's excitement had risen again. She could scarcely bear the suspense of waiting. She even begrudged the time it took to walk into his private office.

He seated himself behind a large mahogany desk, thrust a sheaf of unsigned letters aside, threw his cigar out of the window and lighted another, coughed and said: "Nice little bit you did in that picture, *Gentleman Pirate*, Miss Thayle. Think you're going to like acting for the films, eh?"

"I did enjoy it, Mr. Hammond," Starr said breathlessly. "But I don't think..."

But whatever she thought, the great Al showed he had no wish to listen to. He silenced her with a wave of a large square hand that seemed out of all proportion to his size. "Listen, young lady." He leaned forward confidentially. "What we want are new stars. Female stars. What the public craves is someone new and exciting. We want a fresh star we can plant on them as the biggest find yet. Now I was having dinner with a pal last night, and between us we got an idea. You're the idea. Do you follow me?"

Of course she didn't. She didn't dare to, in case she might be wrong. She wanted to say to him, "Go on, but pinch me first. Pinch me to make sure I'm not dreaming."

"Listen, young lady," he said again, and he leaned forward even more confidentially. "We've decided to elevate you to stardom in one fell swoop. This very day I'm going to get my publicity people onto you, and tomorrow you'll wake up to find yourself famous! It won't be difficult. We'll spread a lot of blah about how swell you were in *Gentleman Pirate*. Of course you'll have to live up to the part. It's no easy matter to be a star, believe me. When you're not actually working on the set, you'll have to spend your time between the masseurs and the dressmaker. Between the hairdresser and the voice trainer. You'll have to live on a strict diet and never go to bed later than ten-thirty. Is that understood?"

Starr nodded. She couldn't speak. She was too excited to speak. Her promise to Stephen was forgotten entirely.

"We've decided that you're to play opposite Rex Brandon in his new picture, *Lovable Rake*," he said.

"What?" Starr had found her voice at last. "Play opposite Rex Brandon?"

"Sure. You're lucky to get the chance. We're going to put all we've got into it."

"But," - Starr wet her lips with her tongue, they were so dry - "I couldn't do that."

He spat out his half-smoked cigar and reached for another.

"No need to be nervous. You'll be all right. Rex carries the lion's share of the picture."

"But - but I can't play opposite him," Starr insisted in a queer, high-pitched voice.

Al Hammond raised his head and stared at her. "And why the hell can't you?"

Starr could think of any number of reasons. Stephen would think it terribly unloyal of her even to contemplate playing opposite the man he hated so much. Besides, she had promised him not to go on with a film career. And how *could* she co-star with Rex? The thought terrified her. Because she disliked him so much? Or - queer how the thought shook her - was she afraid to?

"Did Rex suggest I play opposite him, Mr. Hammond?" she heard herself asking.

He nodded. "Sure, he suggested it. Last night when we were having dinner together. In fact," he chuckled fatly, "he was very insistent about it. Said no other leading lady would suit him. You're a very lucky girl, my dear."

Starr didn't say anything for a long minute. All the color had drained from her face. "I see," she said quietly. "In that case I can't possibly accept your kind offer, Mr. Hammond." She rose to her feet. "I do appreciate it, though. Good-morning."

"What?" His mouth gaped open. The cigar almost fell to the floor. "You don't mean to say that you're turning it down?"

Starr smiled slightly. But there was something tired about her smile.

"I'm afraid I am, Mr. Hammond. And now I won't take up any more of your time."

The great Al stared after her as though he had just seen the world's tenth wonder. And he thought he had. A girl who would turn down the chance of becoming a star. He hadn't believed such a being existed!



Stephen congratulated her on her decision over lunch that day.

"It wasn't a genuine offer, anyhow," he told her. "At least, it wasn't produced by any talent you may or may not have. Just another stunt of Rex's to get back at me. It's obvious. He got me kicked out of directing the picture, and now he's trying to get you away from me by asking you to co-star with him. Imagined you couldn't resist the temptation of playing opposite him, I guess. Thinks he's so darned attractive any girl would jump at it! Thank God, you didn't lose your head. But I bet he's feeling darned mad now." And he chuckled happily.

Yes, Starr supposed that was why Rex had got the great Al to make her that staggering offer. All the same it hurt to know that. The longer Stephen talked the more depressed she became. Finally she said sharply, "Oh, for heaven's sake stop talking about it, Stephen. I don't want to think about it any more!"

That afternoon she had a caller. She was about to make herself some tea when the knock came. She opened the door, and there stood Rex, leaning against the framework, his feet crossed, smiling down at her.

"May I come in? Only this time I'll let *you* make me the tea. Do you remember the time you were in bed and I made tea for you?"

"Yes, and it was so strong I could scarcely choke it down!" And she laughed. And felt curiously happy. Happier than she had felt for weeks.

He came inside and sat on the edge of a table, swinging one leg. His light gray felt hat rested precariously on his knee. She stood, looking at him, her hands flat on her hips.

"Well, and why am I honored by this visit from the great Rex Brandon?"

He grinned back impudently. "The great Rex Brandon wants to know why you behaved like a damn little fool this morning."

"Oh!" She flushed scarlet. She wished she didn't flush so easily. She supposed it was her red hair.

"Yes, you behaved like a raving lunatic," he went on forcefully. "Chucking away a chance like that! Instead of listening to you, old Al should have put you across his knees and spanked you. That's what you deserved, young woman. Thank heavens I've managed to persuade him that your refusal was caused by sheer fright and you didn't mean it."

She was angry now. Really angry.

"Why should you take it upon yourself to tell him I didn't mean it?" she asked icily.

He shrugged, "Someone had to! But I must say it was ungrateful of you after I'd put in all that good spadework on your behalf last night. Don't be a little idiot, Starr. It's a marvelous opportunity. I've read the script through, and I'm sure you'll make a hit in the part. The heroine's rather like you, as it happens. Quick-tempered, impulsive, rather a little fool." He grinned crookedly and added, "But a dear little fool!"

"Thanks for that!" Starr snapped back at him.

"Not at all." He bowed mockingly. "I can think of even nicer things to say when encouraged."

She wondered why they couldn't talk together for five minutes without starting to fight.

"Why did you suggest I play opposite you in that picture?" she flung at him challengingly.

He shifted his position slightly on the table and smiled down at her maddeningly. "I'll give you three guesses."

"To get back at Stephen. Because you know he wouldn't want me to co-star with you."

His smile faded. His blue-gray eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Who ever put *that* idea into your head?"

"Isn't it the truth?"

The astonishment passed to a grim look of anger. "No, it isn't the truth. No one with any decency would have suggested such a thing."

There was a pause. Strained and uncomfortable. Starr fought against an awful sense of humiliation. It was stinging and painful.

"Shall I tell you why I want you to play opposite me, Starr?" he asked quietly. He got off the table and came over to where she stood by the window.

She didn't reply. That queer sense of humiliation still held her speechless.

"For one thing, I believe in you. I think you've the right stuff in you to make a great talkie star. I'm sure you've talent. Too, I think you've got what is known as 'popular appeal.' Without that, no amount of talent would get you anywhere. You've guts, too, and I know you're not afraid of hard work. I think, once started, you'll go on and on.... I want to see you going on and on, Starr. I want you to succeed."

"Is that the only reason you want me to play opposite you in the picture?" she asked quietly, when he had paused for breath.

A slight, faintly whimsical smile broke over his face. "No, not the only reason, child. The other is, I happen to be in love with you."

And again there came a pause.

"Don't you see that's the chief reason why I can't, Rex?" she murmured.

"No, I'm damned if I do!" He shot it out in sharp exasperation.

"There's Stephen," she said.

"What right has he to you? He isn't even divorced yet!"

"But - but we're going to be married as soon as he is."

"Then he's no right to try to tie you down definitely until then. It's darned selfish. And I don't care what you say, this absurd stand he's taking about trying to stop your having a film career is pure selfishness, too!"

You're always most angry when you realize there's some justification in what the other person is saying. Starr was furious.

"How dare you criticize Stephen to me? And it isn't his wish. It's mine. I don't want to play opposite you in this or any other picture, so there!"

"Well," - he thrust his hands into his pockets, and his chin protruded aggressively - "if you're going to be stubborn, I can be stubborn, too. Unless you play opposite me in this film, I won't play in it either. I refuse to play with any other leading lady. If you won't accept Al's offer, he'll have to find some other male star for *Lovable Rake*."

For the moment her chief sensation was amazement. "You're joking, of course."

He gripped her elbows and swung her round to face him.

"Do I *look* as though I were joking?" he demanded, belligerently.

No, she was forced to admit that he didn't.

"But it's absurd," she protested breathlessly.

"No more absurd than your refusing to play the lead because of a selfish whim on Stephen's part!"

"You can't force me to play in *Lovable Rake*."

"No" - grimly - "and they can't force *me* to play in it either."

"But there's your contract, Rex. If you walk out on them it will be automatically broken."

"Well, let it be broken."

"But - but your career?"

"To hell with my career.... I can be as stubborn as you, on occasion, Starr."

"You couldn't be so mad, Rex, as to walk out on them!"

"Couldn't I?"

And she realized suddenly, with a queer, sharp anxiety, that he might be!

All the same, she wasn't going to give in to him. Nothing would induce her to give in to him. It would upset Stephen frightfully. And if Rex chose to wreck his career over this ridiculous stand, that was his own affair, wasn't it? Her first, second, and last duty was to Stephen. Stephen whom she loved, whom she was going to marry.

They continued to quarrel. It ended in Rex seizing his light gray felt hat savagely and marching out of the apartment.

"He'll think better of it in the morning," she tried to console herself. "And, of course, it's all nonsense about *his* threatening to walk out on them. Why, they'd be so mad with him at the studios it would ruin him."

She tried to think this didn't matter to her. Yet all the time she knew, in an annoying, nagging way, that it did matter. And that made her all the more determined to stand by her decision.

She didn't mention the interview to Stephen. Oddly she felt she didn't want to talk about Rex to Stephen. They dined together and went to the theater, but Starr found the whole evening curiously flat. She had continually to whip her enthusiasm. And when Stephen kissed her good-night she felt queerly stifled. As though she wanted to push him away from her.

The next day when she met him for lunch he seemed in abnormally good spirits. "There's a hell of a row going on at the West East Studios," he told her, chuckling. "I think Rex has certainly queered his pitch this time. Old Al won't get over it in a hurry, believe me!"

"Why, what's happened?" Starr asked sharply. Strange how tense she felt suddenly. And there was a cold sense of fear gripping her heart.

"Rex has got too big for his boots, obviously. But then I told you so the other day, didn't I? That's the worst of these stars. Directly they've got any fame at all, they think they can rule the whole roost. Why, Rex calmly announced this morning that he wasn't going to play in *Lovable Rake!* After it had all been arranged that he should, too! I tell you, I've never seen old Al so mad. He stormed about that studio as though forty demons were perched on his shoulder. Swore that unless Rex came off his high horse and played in the picture he'd tear up his contract. Yes, and he'd see the story got around so that he didn't get a contract from any other studio either." Stephen laughed with grim satisfaction. "He'll stick to his word, too; I know the old boy. He's given Rex until this afternoon to decide. And I'm willing to bet a thousand dollars that unless Rex capitulates, his career as a famous star is as good as over. In this country at least!"

Starr was sitting stiff and straight in her chair.

"You mean that?" she muttered. "You really think it *would* ruin him?"

"Not a doubt about it," Stephen grinned. "In a couple of years no one would even remember the name of Rex Brandon."

There was a longish pause. Starr was staring down at her plate, but she didn't see anything that was on it. Her hands were clenched tightly about the sides of her chair.

"You say he's got until this afternoon to decide?" she whispered at last.

Stephen nodded absent-mindedly. He consulted his wrist watch.

"We'd better look sharp, Starr. You know we're going to that preview of the Camedon picture. It starts at two-thirty."

"I'm - I'm afraid I won't be able to go with you, Stephen," Starr said breathlessly. "I've got an important appointment elsewhere. I'm awfully sorry. But I must rush."

And, before Stephen's startled and amazed eyes, she seized her bag and gloves and literally ran out of the restaurant.

When Starr left the restaurant she had no clear idea what she intended doing. Perhaps she merely wanted to get away from Stephen for a time. Perhaps, too, it was pure coincidence that led her to Rex's apartment. But whatever motive guided her steps, she arrived in a curiously breathless state. But Mr. Brandon hadn't returned for lunch. His servant believed him to be still out at the studios.

Still with no definite course of action admitted even to herself, Starr hailed a taxi and was driven out to the West East Studios. She knew, as she drew near the studios, that she had to see Rex. But just what she would say to him she hadn't the least idea. For, of course, she had no intention of backing down. But perhaps she could make him see the whole situation more sensibly.

But Rex wasn't at the studios. Urged on by Starr, the messenger boy searched and searched. Later she gleaned that he had driven away in his big yellow sporting car shortly before lunch. No one seemed to know whether or not he intended returning.

But, of course, he would return. Starr was convinced of that at three o'clock. Less convinced at four. In a state of awful doubt and uncertainty at five. Somehow she had passed the intervening hours. She had a vague notion that she had wandered from one set to another. Only two pictures were being filmed in the studios just then, the main set being held in reserve for the commencement of *Lovable Rake*.

At five-thirty, somehow, she found herself in the anteroom of Al Hammond's office demanding to see him.

"Have you an appointment?" the girl asked doubtfully.

"No, but tell him I must see him. It's - it's about Mr. Brandon."

The girl looked surprised, but retired into the great Al's sanctum.

She returned with the message that Mr. Hammond had heard a hell of a lot too much both from and about Mr. Brandon that day. If Mr. Brandon wished to see him himself he could do so. But he'd better look sharp, because only half an hour remained till six o'clock. And after six o'clock there would be nothing at all Mr. Hammond would wish to hear from Mr. Brandon.

"Why, they're squabbling just like a lot of stupid women!" Starr cried in despair. "I didn't think men could be so petty!"

"Gosh! And you were once a secretary yourself!" the girl murmured incredulously.

Starr said very determinedly, "I *must* see Mr. Hammond. I shall sit out here and wait for him, that's all."

The girl threw her a film magazine. "Please yourself," she said.

Starr didn't read it. She didn't even open it. She sat on the edge of the seat and watched the private door that led from Al's office more intently than any wild beast ever watched its prey. There was a curious taut suggestion about her body, too, as though she were waiting to spring.

And she did, the moment Al appeared.

She rushed towards him and literally clutched him.

"Oh, Mr. Hammond," she cried, "I must talk to you. Please let me talk to you. I know you're busy, but -"

"But it seems you are talking to me, doesn't it?" Al smiled slightly. Not overcordially, but that he did smile helped.

"Can't I come back with you into your office just for a minute?"

"A woman's minute is usually an hour," he grumbled.

"But I swear mine won't be."

His smile broadened. "I don't believe you, but come along."

He lighted a fresh cigar, stood by his big mahogany desk, and said:

"Well?"

And, suddenly Starr couldn't think what she had come to say to him.

"Well?" he repeated. This time more sharply.

"It's - it's about Rex Brandon," she stammered.

"Sent you as a little peacemaker, did he? Too darn proud to give in gracefully himself." There was something faintly approaching a sneer on the little man's face.

"Oh, no," Starr cried hastily. "He doesn't know anything about my being here."

"In that case what's the sense in wasting-my time?" he asked gruffly.

"But - but I feel sure I could persuade him to be reasonable. If you'd only give me time!"

"Why the hell should anyone have to *persuade* Rex Brandon to act in one of my pictures?" he asked roughly.

"It isn't that," she said hastily. "It's all so involved, Mr. Hammond."

He sat down with a sigh. He saw he was in for it.

"Seems to me it is involved," he said with a grim laugh. "A queer business. First I make you an offer to play opposite Rex - an amazing offer, considering your inexperience - and you turn it down! No reason given, either. Next Rex calmly declares *he* isn't going to play in the picture. Still no reason given! And he's under contract. Of course, that cancels his contract, but I'm fond of the damn fellow, so I stooped to argue with him. Even offered him until this afternoon to think it over. And, far from being grateful, he dashes away from the studios and doesn't return. And now you come here - though I haven't a ghost of a notion what you have come for."

Starr repeated what she had said before. If only he'd give Rex more time to reach a decision.

"And why should you think *you* can persuade him?" he demanded irritably. "He's not in love with you, is he?" He raised gray bushy eyebrows and shot out the question.

Starr colored. She stammered. "I don't know... he..."

"Is he or isn't he?" the little man demanded. "You're a girl. You should know."

"Well, perhaps he is," Starr admitted. Al sighed and relaxed. "That alters the situation. You must expect a man in love to behave like a damned lunatic!"

Starr, too, breathed more freely. That is, until Al asked his next question.

"Are you in love with him?"

"No... oh, no."

Al breathed something under his breath. It sounded suspiciously like "liar."

Aloud he, said, "Is that why you refused to play opposite him?"

"Yes... well, not altogether. You see, I promised Stephen, Stephen Desmond..."

An oath escaped him. "And how the hell does Stephen Desmond come into all this? As if it wasn't complicated enough already."

"Stephen doesn't want me to have a film career."

"Oh, he doesn't, does he?" His voice was almost a snarl.

Suddenly Starr felt she had to know something.

"Mr. Hammond," - her voice was tentative - "why isn't Stephen directing your new big picture, *Lovable Rake*?"

"My in heaven's name should he?"

"But - but he's directed most of Rex's pictures."

"Yes, and nearly made a flop of the last two. If it hadn't been for Rex's genius they would have flopped. I wanted to take the last one, *Gentleman Pirate*, away from him, but Rex wouldn't hear of it. Begged me to give Stephen another chance. Well, I gave it to him, and look at the mess he's made of things. Complaints from the entire cast."

"Did Rex complain?"

"He was the only one who didn't! But he should have! Stephen managed to queer his acting in almost every scene. You see," he explained a moment later as he lit a fresh cigar, "for the past year or so Stephen's been simply swollen with conceit. His early successes must have gone to his head. Lately he hasn't been able to take a hint or a suggestion from anyone. It's about as much as *my* life is worth to put an idea to him. I thought if I put him on two-reelers for a time he might get his sense back. Because I believe he has talent. Only talent and conceit don't mix, you know."

Starr didn't say anything for a minute. She was staring out of the window. There was a far-away look in her eyes. Curiously she found she couldn't resent what Al had just said to her. Perhaps for some time past in her secret heart she had known it. Only that strong streak of stubbornness in her had refused to let her admit it. No, instead of feeling enraged she only felt tired. And strangely detached. As though she stood watching something that had been very precious pass out of her life. She might have tried to recapture it. But she hadn't the strength. Neither did she feel she wanted to very much.

"The point is," said Al, "leaving Rex out of it entirely, are *you* prepared to reconsider your decision not to play in the picture? Luckily you've still time. I've got some girls lined up for tests tomorrow, but" - he winked broadly - "the tests needn't come out so good, if you say the word."

"May I tell you tomorrow morning?" Starr asked quietly.

"Hell, no!" he ejaculated irritably. "I've been put off enough today as it is. You tell me now, young lady, and look sharp about it."

Starr drew a deep breath. She felt curiously as though she were on the end of a diving board, her arms and head pointed downwards, ready to take the plunge. Should she? A curious dizziness crept over her. On one hand was Stephen, her promise to him, her... but she knew now that for some time past she had ceased to love him. On the other hand was a career, possible fame and... but her mind closed down abruptly. A career, fame... *that was all.*

She drew a deep breath. "Yes, Mr. Hammond, if you still want me to..."

"*That's* a sensible girl!" He chuckled and bit off an end of a fresh cigar.

"And Rex?" she asked quickly. "You will give him more time to reconsider?"

Having gained a victory, Al was inclined to be magnanimous.

"He can have until midnight," he told her. He banged his desk sharply and added, "But not another moment, and that's final. Either he telephones me or comes round to my house before twelve or else he can go to Timbuctoo as far as I'm concerned. Understand me?"

Starr said that she did.

Starr felt an entirely different being as, some little time later, she was driven away from the studios. She knew she was on the threshold of a new life. She felt that, within the last half-hour, she had been shorn of a lot of worn-out beliefs and ideas. Funny how your beliefs and ideas did get worn out, but it needed a sharp shock to make you realize it. And your affections? A little shiver ran through her. It hurt to realize that those, too, could become worn out. It made her feel sad and a little desperate. She had always thought that once she fell in love she would never change. Was it her fault entirely? Could any of the blame be with Stephen?

She thought, "I've got to have it out with him this afternoon." It wasn't in Starr's nature to evade or put things off.

Stephen was at home. He opened the door to her himself. She looked at him, almost as though seeing him for the first time. And when he tried to kiss her she moved sharply away from him.

He led her into the sitting room. "Awfully sorry I won't be able to go out tonight, Starr," he said. "But I'm expecting a cable from England. Some time ago a big film corporation there made me an excellent offer. I didn't accept then, but I didn't definitely turn it down, either. Well, after lunch, I cabled that I'd accept if they still wanted me. I've got to wait in for a reply."

"Then you've definitely decided to go to England if their offer still holds good?" she asked quietly. She was sitting on the arm of a chair, staring down into the empty fireplace. She hadn't taken off her hat, and she still held her gloves, rolled up into a tight clammy ball, in her hands.

He nodded. "You bet I have! I'm sick of conditions over here. They haven't enough sense to appreciate a man who has genius. Besides, you're up against such petty jealousies and backbiting. I'll be glad to shake the dust of this country off my feet.... And you, Starr," he added a moment later, "you'll enjoy it over there. Be a swell adventure for you. You can come and join me directly the divorce is granted and we can be married."



She shook her head. Her lips felt very dry suddenly. She wet them with the point of her tongue.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Stephen. You see," - she paused and gave a faint, forced smile - "I think I'll be very busy over here for some time to come."

He started and stared down at her. Perhaps for the first time since she had come into the room he noticed some change in her.

"Busy over here, Starr? What do you mean?"

"I've just been seeing Al Hammond," she said, a little breathlessly. "I *am* going to take that part he offered me. I told him I would."

"What?" He seemed completely stunned. He ran a hand back through his hair and continued to stare down at her. As though he didn't quite know what to say. "You mean you're going to play opposite Rex Brandon?" he said at last.

"If he's still to be in the picture."

He laughed harshly. "Oh, he will be in it right enough! I see it all now. That's why he threatened to walk out on them. So as to get them to bring influence to bear on you. And" - his voice sharpened with anger - "you've been such a fool as to fall for an obvious trick like that!"

Her own color mounted, but she managed to control her voice. "Don't let's quarrel about it, Stephen. I've - I've been thinking it over. I *do* want to go in for film work. I do want to have my own career."

He raised his thick eyebrows. "In direct opposition to my wishes?" he asked harshly.

"Why should one person try to control another person's actions?" she demurred. "Why shouldn't we all be free agents to do what we want to do? I loved playing in that last picture. I don't want to give it up."

"Your small success has turned your head, I see," he said bitterly.

"Then you don't think I have real talent?" she asked.

He strode the length of the room before replying. He kicked a footstool out of his way irritably. "Oh, I don't know, Starr. You were good enough," he grumbled. "But I don't want you to go on with it. I want you to help me. As you used to. You can help me, dear, an awful lot. You might do well yourself, but, after all, don't you think it's more important?"

"You mean don't you think you're more important?" she asked quietly. "You want me to sink my career in yours? That's it, isn't it?"

He swung towards her. "Well, supposing it is? Once we're married, my career will be your career, and mine's a definitely established thing. After all, a man's work *is* more important. You can't deny that."

Again that faint smile touched her lips. "You may be right, Stephen, but... I *am* going to play in that picture."

He drew his dark brows together. "And supposing I say I won't let you? I won't have my future wife playing opposite a notorious bouncer like Brandon. Directly he hears you're in the picture he'll come scuttling back into it, curse him!"

"I thought you said you hated petty jealousies and backbiting," she said coldly.

His face turned slowly red. "Petty jealousy you call it, eh? Petty jealousy when that man's done everything in his power to wreck both my life and my career? He wanted Al Hammond to take that last picture away from me. But for his rotten lies I'm sure I'd be directing *Lovable Rake*."

"That isn't true," Starr said quietly. "Rex didn't influence Al Hammond's decision in any way."

Stephen laughed sharply. "You expect me to believe that?"

"But it's true," she insisted. "Al Hammond told me so himself."

"Oh, so you've been discussing me with Al Hammond, have you?" he threw at her angrily.

Her face aled slightly. "Well, yes, in a way. I wanted to know if Rex had really done all the mean things you accused him of." She drew a tight breath and added, "I'm glad he hasn't."

The angry color in Stephen's face deepened. "You won't take my word, I see!" His lips twisted sarcastically. "It's nice to feel your future wife has such confidence in you that she has to question a third party about the truth of your statements!"

There was a pause. Starr said slowly, "But I don't think I am going to be your future wife, Stephen."

They looked at each other. Starr's eyes were sad. She wanted to say, "Don't let's hurt each other any more than we have to, Stephen. Don't let us say unkind things we won't want to look back on. There's been something beautiful about our relationship in the past. Let us, at least, keep the memory of that beauty."

But Stephen was too angry to respond to the plea in her eyes.

"I see," he said shortly. And added, with something which very nearly approached a snarl, "It's Rex, of course!"

"Why should you presume it's Rex?" she asked quickly.

"But it is, isn't it?" he insisted. "You've fallen for his cunning just as Rita did. I thought you had more sense, Starr. I didn't think you'd be taken in by someone so obviously cheap-"

"How dare you, Stephen!"

"I am right then!" He laughed bitterly. "We directors put a poor sawdust figure up before the public gaze. We dangle him attractively before the women's eyes, and instead of having the sense to see it's all *us*, they swallow him hook, line, and sinker. They actually believe in him! Why, Rex Brandon was nothing but a poor actor when I found him. I started him, and if it hadn't been for me-"

"Won't you give Rex credit for anything?" she cut in quietly.

"Why should I give credit where there's no credit due?" he demanded, hoarsely. "What is he except a few cheap tricks, a knack of smiling, a way of lifting one eyebrow, that appeals to a lot of silly women? I never thought I should have to class *you* in that category, Starr!" he ended bitterly.

She thought with a faint smile, "Perhaps that's what I am. Just one of a myriad of silly women.... But it's rather nice to be a silly woman for a change."

There was a ring on the telephone. Stephen almost ran across the room to answer it. "Yes, yes, this is Stephen Desmond," she heard him say into the transmitter. "Yes, yes, read it out to

me.... What's that? Will you repeat it, please? Thank you. Yes, you can post a copy of the cable, please."

When he turned towards her again there could be no disguising his satisfaction. 'It's all right. They're taking me on my own terms. That ought to show old Al, oughtn't it? The trouble with our movies is that they don't recognize a good man when they've got one. Oh, well," he shrugged, "it's their own funeral. But they'll be sorry."

Starr said generously, "I'm awfully glad it's turned out so well for you, Stephen. I think you will do big things over there."

He misunderstood her. "You feel differently now? Now you see I'm not the abject failure Rex has painted me?"

"But Rex has said nothing about you." Her voice was tired.

"As if I'd believe that.... How has he got you away from me, then?"

"He didn't get me away from you, Stephen." She smiled faintly and added, "I think you did it yourself!"

He laughed hollowly. 'Women always try to put the blame on the man they're tired of!"

She stood up. "I'm going now, Stephen. I - I suppose it sounds awfully trite, but can't we part friends?"

"Do you care enough to want to?" His voice was bitter. Perhaps more hurt than bitter. And because Starr sensed this, she answered impulsively, "Of course I care, Stephen! You've meant so much to me for so long. I can't cut you altogether out of my life, even though I might wish to. I'll always be interested in your career, tremendously interested, and wish for your success. I'm sure you're going to be successful, too, Stephen."

The warmth of her tones mollified him. "Starr, can't - can't we still go on together?" His voice softened. "I think I'm going to miss you very much, my dear."

She turned her face aside sharply. The tears were stinging the backs of her eyes. She had wanted them to part without bitterness, but now she felt she would even have welcomed that bitterness. At least it wouldn't have hurt like this.

"I'll miss you, too, Stephen..."

"Starr, I am going to do big things." There was the old eager, enthusiastic ring in his voice. "I want to do big things and give all my success to you, dear."

"But, Stephen, I wouldn't have enough to give you in exchange," she said quietly. "And unless you give just as much as you receive, no marriage is ever a success."

She left shortly afterwards. But she cried softly to herself all the way down the stairs. She felt that something big had gone out of her life, and as yet there was nothing to take its place. At least nothing she would allow herself to recognize. She thought, "I wish your feelings always stayed the same towards people. They don't, and you can't help it. But it always hurts. And, somehow, I think it hurts more if you're the first to change."

She was still dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief when she got out into the street and hailed a taxi. She told the driver to take her to Rex's apartment. She had to see him. She had to see him at once and persuade him to get in touch with Al Hammond before midnight.

Mason, Rex's servant, told her that he hadn't seen his master since early that morning. He expected him in to dinner, however. Starr said she would come in and wait.

The late-afternoon sunlight filtered into the sitting room, giving it a pleasant, faintly amber appearance. Starr sank down into a deep armchair, but she couldn't relax. Just what would she say to Rex when he arrived? How explain her sudden capitulation and change of front? She felt that if he laughed at her she would never forgive him. She didn't mind his laughing at a lot of things about her, but she couldn't bear him to laugh about this.

She heard the front door bell. She stiffened to a strained attention. She glanced about hurriedly, almost as though seeking some means of escape. But it was a woman's voice in the hallway. A minute later the same woman stood in the doorway.

"Dear, dear," Rita Desmond murmured and laughed. "Rex's sitting room becomes more like the waiting room of a fashionable physician every day. Just what is your complaint, Miss Thayne?"

Starr smiled back at her. "The same as yours, I should fancy, Mrs. Desmond. I want to see Rex Brandon."

"So do most women, my dear! You're quite unoriginal! And what have you done with my strong stalwart husband in the meantime, if it's not indelicate to ask?" She seated herself on the arm of a chair. "By the way," she murmured after a slight pause, "I suppose you know we'll be divorced quite soon now?"

Starr colored painfully. "Yes, I believe so," she murmured.

Rita snapped open her cigarette case and handed it across to Starr. "Have one? And are you waiting with bells on for the decree nisi, my dear?"

Starr took the cigarette and lighted it. She was glad of something to do with her hands. "No, I'm - I'm not going to marry your husband, Mrs. Desmond."

"Dear, dear," Rita murmured again and laughed. "That sounds like a line from a modern play. 'I'm not going to marry your husband.' Well, I don't suppose I can blame you. I found him rather dull myself."

Another pause. Rita threw back her head and let a thin spiral of blue-gray smoke glide slowly to the ceiling.

"I feel in a confidential mood," she said at last. "Besides, I'm rather thrilled about it. I'm going to be married myself immediately I'm free."

Queer, the effect that had upon Starr. She felt as though someone had suddenly given her a knockout blow in the pit of her stomach.

"To - to Rex Brandon, I suppose?" she managed to say at last.

"Oh, dear, no," Rita laughed. "*This* is serious!"

"Your affair with Rex Brandon was serious enough for you to start to elope with him once," Starr retorted tartly.

Rita smiled mysteriously and shook her head. "No, it was never serious. I know that now. Now that I'm really in love. I realize it was just playing at love, my affair with Rex. Rather lukewarm playing at that. I'm afraid I rushed him rather. The poor darling was quite horrified when I made him elope with me. And he hadn't even kissed me! You wouldn't believe it, would you?"

"I certainly find it rather hard to believe," Starr said in a voice that was curiously stifled. Yet it was eager, too.

Rita nodded her pretty blonde head twice. Her long silver earrings jangled pleasantly. "Just shows how much stranger life is than fiction, doesn't it? That was certainly an insane affair! Rex and I often laugh about it. We're great pals now that I'm engaged to Harry. Funny" - she smiled slightly - "how much more some men appreciate your friendship once they know you're definitely fixed up with some other man!"

Starr didn't comment on that. She was too full of what Rita was telling her. *Could* it be the truth?

"But - but you *did* try to elope," she heard herself stammer.

Rita threw her a searching look. Her eyes narrowed curiously.

"But even then it wasn't serious. Rex knew I wasn't really in love with him. That's why he had no intention of going through with it. He told me the other day that his trunk was full only of books and that he intended to leave the ship before it sailed. I admit I would have been *furious* at the time, but, as he said, much better for me to be furious than to have him go through with it, then discover I didn't really love him. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I suppose it would be," Starr said unsteadily. She was conscious of an odd sense of elation. A sense that she had never been quite so happy in all her life before.

"Now Harry's quite different," Rita was saying. "We adore each other passionately. He's awfully intense, you know. I'm supposed to be meeting him here. Rex asked us both to drop in for a cocktail. But I suppose he's been kept at the office again."

Just then they heard the front door open, and Rex's voice sounded in the hallway. Starr was seized again by that insane desire to escape. Now it was even more urgent. She felt she could scarcely bear to face Rex.

But she had to, of course. There he stood, tall and lean, smiling slightly, in the doorway. Rita laughed and waved to him gayly. "Here we all are, Rex. Like Old Home Town Week, isn't it?"

But Rex didn't answer her. He had just seen Starr.

Rita tried again. "I think I'll buzz off if you two don't mind. I'll drive by the office and pick up Harry in the car. He must be there still. We were going out this evening, anyhow, so we haven't much time. You don't *mind*, do you?" Her eyes twinkled, and she answered her own question. "No, of course you don't."

Rex came to with a start. With an effort he withdrew his eyes from Starr. "Oh - er - I'm awfully sorry, Rita. But you'll have a cocktail before you go?"

"Couldn't think of it, darling. Alcohol is so fattening. I've sworn off it for a whole week. Thank heavens this is the seventh day! But you might see me out, Rex."

"Yes, of course, Rita." He spoke jerkily. As though, despite a strenuous effort, he couldn't keep his mind on what she was saying. Not for two minutes.

He turned formally to Starr. "You'll excuse me?"

"Yes, of course." She found her voice with an effort.

Rita waved two gloved fingers in Starr's direction. "Good-bye, my dear. I'm sure you'll feel better for our little chat. Queer," she mused, "how magnanimous one can be to one's rival - once one is safely in love with someone else!"

"I'm sorry Harry couldn't get here," Rex said, in the hallway. "You must bring him in some other time."

Rita opened her amber eyes very wide. "Oh, but he *could* get here. He may be here any moment. Send him on after me, won't you?"

"Then why...?" he began, puzzled.

She squeezed his arm affectionately. "This is my good deed for the day! Or rather it's my second." She laughed and added, "You may find out about the first one later on." She blew him a kiss and disappeared into the elevator.

Rex closed the door and walked back into the sitting room. Curiously he found his hands were shaking. He thrust them deep into his pockets.

But, once inside the doorway, he didn't appear in the least nervous. He crossed his feet and leaned indolently against the Victrola stand. He even contrived a faintly derisive grin.

"Well, Starr, dropped in to have a cocktail, eh?"

She shook her head. She *couldn't* be casual just then. "It's - it's about your playing lead in that picture, *Lovable Rake*," she began in a rush.

His smile faded. "But I'm not going to play lead in it."

She knotted her hands together tightly.

"Yes, you are, Rex. You must."

He raised one eyebrow. "Must, Starr? And where do you come in - since you're not playing in the picture yourself?"

"But I am, Rex." She swallowed some obstruction in her throat. "I agreed to do it this afternoon."

"Oh." He raised the other eyebrow. "I thought your boy friend objected!"

She turned her face aside sharply. "I *am* going to play in it," she repeated in a strained voice.

"Wise girl! I thought the lure of stardom would prove too much for you," he smiled slowly. "Pity I'm not going to play in it myself now."

"But you must," she insisted.

He shrugged slightly. "Too late, child. Al gave me until six to capitulate, and I didn't capitulate. I bet he's as mad as ten snakes. My contract is probably in little bits in the wastepaper basket by now."

She leaned a little forward. She said hurriedly, "But I saw him, Rex. He's promised to give you until midnight to decide."

He was staring at her. "*You* saw him on my behalf?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, I" - she swallowed again - "I couldn't bear you to sacrifice your contract, Rex."

"You seem very concerned about me all of a sudden," he said lightly. He shook a finger at her and added mockingly, "Better be careful, my dear. Your future husband mightn't like it!"

"I haven't got a future husband, and... and you needn't be beastly to me." Her voice suddenly broke. She turned her face aside. She sniffed hard twice.

Rex straightened. The mocking light died out of his eyes. He crossed over to her in two quick strides. He sat down on the arm of her chair and put two fingers under her chin. He forced her to look up at him.

"What *is* all this about, child?"

"Nothing... nothing." She sniffed harder. "Only I didn't want you to sacrifice your contract and..."

He laughed softly. He put an arm about her shoulders and drew her a little to him. "So you didn't want me to sacrifice my contract? I should have thought that was the one thing in the world that would please you most."

She said in a small, choked voice, "I - I hate you, Rex Brandon."

He laughed again gently and drew her more closely to him.

"That's better, child. More up to old form, eh? Let's have it again. Only louder this time - and with more conviction: 'I hate you, hate you, hate you, Rex Brandon.' "

But she didn't say it. So he kissed her. And after he had kissed her for quite a long while he said, "How's the hating now?"

She laughed shakily. "It's died down for the moment, Rex." She hid her face against his shoulder. He put his lips against her ear and whispered, "And how's the loving, darling?"

She gulped a little. "It's coming on finely, thanks very much."

They both laughed, and he said, "Blest if I know how you could ever had been such a stubborn little fool, Starr!"

But she didn't seem to mind even that. Perhaps it's hard to make an insult sound convincing when you're holding the girl you're insulting in your arms at the time.

Al Hammond almost choked over his morning coffee. There it was in headlines. "Rex Brandon to co-star with Fiancée in Next Picture... A wonderful screen romance..." he began reading. But before he was halfway through the column he was on the telephone to his publicity man.

"Say, George, this is great," he enthused. "Just the stuff the public will eat up. It will put the new girl across big, too. You're a genius, lad. But are you sure it won't make Rex mad?"

"Mad? Hell, no!" George laughed easily. "This is the first good publicity story I've ever written that happens to be true!"