

continued from previous page

though she had known and liked him a long time, she nodded. "If you'll give me time to pick up my bags and go to the hotel and change."

The music was lovely, and he danced very well. Susan, tingling a bit from the effect of unfamiliar champagne, was feeling very good. She had met so many people. Gabriel Wells seemed to know almost everybody. But there was something peculiarly listless in the way he greeted his friends. It was only when he turned back to her that his eyes seemed to light up. She gazed at him curiously. "I don't understand. You said you were lonely."

"I'm not now."

"Because of me? When you have all these friends?"

"You don't understand." His eyes had darkened. "It isn't loneliness for people. It's for something that's gone out of my life ... a bright glow with warmth and meaning. You have it. It has to do with being in love, I suppose."

"Were you in love?"

He nodded.

"What happened?"

He shrugged as though it didn't matter. But Susan could feel that the shrug was because it had ended so terribly. "She died when the baby came. That was four years ago. I was out on the Pacific on a destroyer. The baby was a year old before I saw her."

"Oh." Susan resisted her first impulse to change the subject. It didn't help to keep changing the subject when someone felt deeply about something. "But you can't go on feeling sad."

"I don't usually. It's only that tomorrow is Bonnie's birthday. Other little girls have their mothers around on their birthdays." His shoulders moved and he smiled. "I guess it's my own inadequacy that gets me down as much as anything ... raising little Bonnie. I'm afraid I'm doing it all wrong. That child has an almost diabolical ingenuity for making the lives of my housekeepers miserable. I've lost four of them because I won't let them discipline her. Today she emptied the goldfish bowl into the fountain because she thought the fish should have more room to swim ... falling in herself in the process. I just don't seem to know how to cope with her."

Susan laughed. "Mother says I used to insist on using our best China to feed the neighborhood cats. The breakage was awful. Bonnie sounds like fun. I'd like to meet her."

He leaned forward, almost eagerly. "Would you come to dinner tomorrow night? I'll make it sort of a birthday dinner for Bonnie."

"I'd like to."

And it was only after she was safely in bed in the hotel that she realized she should have been planning on spending the next evening with Steve. But she refused to worry about it as she curled up in her bed. Gabriel Wells was nice. She liked him. What had started so desolately had turned into a very pleasant evening.

The telephone next to her bed buzzed her awake the next morning. Her heart gave a little jump as she recognized Steve's ebullient voice. "The lackeys down here informed me of your arrival, princess. Encase the royal carcass in some befitting garments and come down for breakfast. I can hardly wait to see you."

"Oh?" Susan tried to make her voice haughty. "I noticed that you managed to control that desire very well last night."

His voice sounded pained. "You're obviously referring to the incident of my missing meeting the train. Business, my dear. Contacts important to our future. Hurry. I wish to fold you in my arms again."

"I'll hurry," Susan commented cynically. "I'm hungry also."

Steve was sun-bronzed, his hair seemed lighter, and he was handsomer than ever. His eyes lit up with approval when he saw her. She was wearing a fresh white-trimmed blue dress. It looked well on her. The turning heads in the lobby confirmed the good impression she'd made on herself in front of the mirror. He kissed her, held her away from him for a moment and commented, "Remind me not to introduce you to any of my friends."

"Why?"

"They'll immediately start promising you imaginary screen tests and taking you out to dinner to discuss your future."

"A girl has to eat."

He steered her to a table at the window, seated her and observed her severely. "Please remember, young lady, that you are bespoken."

"Oh? I was beginning to wonder about that."

He sighed. "A woman of little faith." He looked at her seriously after the waiter had taken their order. "It's wonderful to see you again, Susan. Frankly, I was surprised to get your telegram. I thought we'd decided to wait until I got set and could send for you."

"I know." She looked down at the tablecloth. "I—I had to come out, Steve. Mother kept making remarks and ... well ... I had to see you — know for sure whether you still wanted me."

His hand closed over hers on the cloth. "I think you know the answer to that. It's only that it's so hard to get started out here. For one thing, it's very hard to find a place to live."

"So I've heard. People have gotten married and lived in hotels for a while, though."

"I thought of that. It wasn't the only consideration. The contract I came out on isn't much. I've been in a couple of 'B' pictures which are just about to be released. Didn't do badly, and I'm trying to land something pretty big right now. But getting ahead out here is a matter of getting your name before the public ... and there's nothing better for that than a rumored engagement to a star. I've had two so far, and it's gotten me into the columns fairly regularly. If I were married, that whole campaign would fall flat on its face. My publicity man would tear his hair out."

"I see." Susan's voice was flat.

"And then there's the matter of contacts I make at parties ... very important." He smiled at her. "Sounds gruesome, I know, but it won't be for long. Once I land an important contract, we'll be all set."

Susan bit her lip. "Steve, I—I'm so tired of waiting."

He pressed her hand. "All I know is acting and swimming. Wouldn't you rather be the wife of a star than of a life-guard?"

Susan forced herself to snap out of it. He was right of course. It was just a matter of waiting a little longer. She smiled. "I'll have to carry a whip to keep bobby-soxers away from you."

"There is that possibility," he admitted. "But we'll

have fun while we're waiting. Tonight I'm going to take you to dinner at the Players. Then we'll go on—"

"Oh, Steve, I can't! I—I forgot to tell you. I have a dinner engagement for this evening."

His eyebrows raised. "I didn't know you knew anyone out here."

"I don't. That is, I—I didn't." Susan hesitated. "It's with a man I met at the railroad station last night. I—I was very depressed. He took me dancing."

His eyes were cloudy. "Are you trying to tell me that you went out with someone you'd never met before just out of annoyance because I didn't meet your train?"

"Oh, of course not, Steve. He was very sympathetic and helpful, and then he seemed lonely and you weren't around and ... well ... I can't see that I did anything wrong. He was very nice."

"I'm sure of that." His lips were exasperated. "I can see you need a short course of instruction on wolves, their feeding habits and how they track their game. And now he's taking you to dinner. Where?"

"Well ... he's not exactly taking me." Susan frowned. Somehow, talking about it, it didn't sound so good. "I—I'm going to his house."

Steve's jaw dropped. He stared at her in dumbfounded amazement. "Little Red Riding Hood comes to Hollywood," he muttered. "Have you gone completely crazy?"

"But it's only to meet his little girl," she explained.

"The etchings routine has many variations. You're not going."

"Oh, Steve!" Susan felt very let down. "He'll be disappointed. I'm sure he's all right. Everyone seems to know him."

"You mean he knew everybody. That's the way they act ... call you by your first name and put their hand into your pocket. What was his name?"

"Gabriel Wells."

His eyes widened slightly. He sat up straight in his chair. "No," he breathed. "No, it can't be. What a break!"

Susan was puzzled. "What is?" His voice was excited. "What did he look like?"

She described him.

"It's Wells, all right. What an opportunity! If we play this right, we're set."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Of course, since you don't want me to go, I won't, but—"

"Who said I didn't want you to go?"

"You did."

"Oh? Well, forget it. Gabriel Wells happens to be just about the top producer at my studio." He pressed her hand fervently. "A wife should be a help to her husband's career. And I sure picked a winner!"

THE slender blue-eyed little girl clung to Susan's hand as they climbed the steps. She looked up at Susan and smiled. "I like you to put me to bed. Emily's so grumpy."

Susan squeezed the small soft hand in hers. It had been fun buying presents for Bonnie and even more fun giving them. The small snub-nosed towhead had a delighted little laugh which warmed you inside. "Your daddy said he'd let me only if you were a good little girl. Aren't you always?"

"Uh-uh." Bonnie shook her head, climbed up on the bed and took off her shoes. "If I were I wouldn't get candy and cookies to be one. Are you going to give daddy advice, too?"

"What sort of advice?"

"On how to raise me. Everybody does, daddy says. Nothing works. Daddy says I just don't add up. What does that mean?"

"It means that you're an individual. It's a very nice compliment." Susan patted the sleepy head as she tucked the little girl into bed. "Did you have a nice birthday?"

"I did. I like you to be here on my birthday. I want to give you a hug."

Susan bent over. The soft little arms around her neck squeezed affectionately. Susan's lips caressed the child's forehead. "Good night, dear." She turned out the light and went back downstairs, feeling all tender and glowing inside.

Gabriel Wells was standing in front of the fireplace, an anxious furrow between his eyebrows. "How did it go? Did she kick you or bite you?"

"Bonnie?" Susan was indignant. "How can you talk that way about that darling little girl?"

His sigh was relieved. "Little you know." He offered her

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