

"Chained"

(Continued from page 48.)

She gazed around the room. "It's beautiful," she said.

Richard took her shoulders and turned her about. "And still not enough."

"Richard—I wish you were coming with—" She put her hand to her mouth as if to force the words back. "No. I don't."

"There are those thoughts again." He lifted her face gently. "Don't, Diane. When you say we can't go on—I've a sudden panic that perhaps you won't come back." He was beset by a feeling of odd anxiousness. "You will come back, won't you?"

"I promise, Richard," Diane replied earnestly.

"I need you always, Diane. I think I'd crack up without you—now—" Her kiss stopped him. Greedily snatching their last few seconds together, his arms refused to let her go, when suddenly the ship's whistle startled them both.

Diane looked up. "Richard, my dear—we won't have time for our cocktail."

Richard spoke to her hurriedly. "The minute the ship leaves you go to the bar and order one—and only a sherry flip, remember."

"Always a sherry flip—every day at six o'clock."

"And I'll have one ashore."

"I'll think of you, Richard."

Tears clung to her eyes wetly as Diane left the rail and made her way to the bar. Slipping on to a vacant stool next a youngish round-faced fellow-passenger, already quite tight, she ordered her sherry flip, her thoughts on Richard. A half-smile curved her lips, as the dear memory of his face rose before her. His kindness, his whole-souled love, comforted her in spite of the prospect of dreary weeks without him.

"A sherry flip—twice." She started. It was the young man beside her who had ordered. He was beaming at her broadly. "The name's John Smith—honest—John L. Smith—not much in the social register—but it's kicked around in the hotels. Just call me Johnnie. How are you and who are you?"

Diane shook her head. "No—really." "Yes—please."

"Please—no." Diane was pleasant, but firm.

"Pretty, please, with sugar on it."

Diane turned to him, a little exasperated. "Didn't you ever want to be left alone and not bothered by anyone?"

"But don't you ever get hot and bothered and can't help it?"

For answer, Diane slowly moved until just her back was visible. Johnnie drew up his collar and drank the cocktail with a gulp. "It looks like I'll have to go tell the master," he informed the bartender owlishly, as he lurched off the stool and out the door.

Diane turned back and continued to sip her cocktail. Her momentary annoyance at the encounter was gone. She glanced around casually at the roomful of people. Strange, she thought, how remote she felt from all of them, although they were almost touching elbows.

Then, involuntarily, in response to a relentless gaze, she glanced at the bar entrance. Her friend of the moment before stood there in earnest confabulation with another man; the latter was tall and broad-shouldered, with an even tanned skin and black hair that threatened to curl at a moment's notice. He had an easy bearing of manner that could almost have been taken for insolence if it were not for the friendly grin.

Johnny poked him. "Mike—over there."

Mike stared at Diane. Unmindful of them, she was twirling her glass on the table. Mike looked again, then took a deep breath. His temples throbbed and life pulsed for him with a new meaning. Awestruck, he touched Johnny on the shoulder. "Sometimes I actually have faith in you again."

Johnny sighed. "There's a look in your eyes that careful mothers fear."

"Not at all." There was a curious note of suppressed excitement in his voice. "I'm going to prove I'm a friend with some good advice. You should go over and apologise," he said in prodding tones.

"You think so? It'd make me look awfully weak—" Johnny's face clouded with doubt, but he put one foot forward uncertainly.

"Why, you're not a tactician," Mike declared. "It clears the deck for future action. Go ahead," he urged with a friendly little push.

"Maybe you're right." Johnny nodded gravely. "Bow from the hips, huh?"

"Sure. But don't look as though you had a gas pain—"

They had moved forward until now Johnny stood just before Diane, Mike a little behind him. Diane looked up.

Exactly as he had rehearsed it, Johnnie bowed low "Charming lady—after contemplating my rudeness—I've come to—" He faltered as he raised his eyes to meet Diane's cold, uncompromising stare. Then he wiggled a little with embarrassment, shifting from one foot to the other. And Mike was offering no assistance.

But as Diane watched him with a scornful curl to her lips, a sudden astounding Dr. Jekyll—Mr. Hyde change came over Johnnie. His face twisted into a savage snarl as if her icy disdain had been the last straw, and with a sound like the cry of a wolf he lunged forward to force her into his violent embrace.

(To be continued.)

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