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ORANGE PEKOE BLEND

'Fresh from the gardens'

The Affair at Flower Acres

By CAROLYN WELLS

CHAPTER I.

FINLEY'S RETURN.

Dusk is in itself sinister. Bright noonday or black midnight are definite, positive, even tangible, but dusk is uncertain, mysterious, eerie. And once it begins its creeping, insidious progress, it comes faster and more inexorably with every moment until its first gray, wavering shadows turn to dense and menacing shapes.

At Flower Acres, the beautiful Long Island home of the Raynors, a September dusk was stretching shadow across the terraces and massed flower beds.

Through the falling darkness rang out a single shot.

In the wide doorway between the house and the sun parlor the glimmer of a white-clad figure pierced the gloom, and a door facing east and a door facing west, both swung on their hinges.

And on the floor, crumpled into an ungainly heap, lay the inert form of Douglas Raynor, its outline indistinguishable in the sudden complete darkness, till a click of a switch button sounded and the bright lights flashed out.

* * * * *

Three days before, Malcolm Finley had returned from Japan.

The quickly successive sensations incident to landing and reaching a hotel all pleased him, and in sheer delight he noted or missed old landmarks until alone in his room at the Waldorf, he began to feel a longing for human companionship.

Accordingly he reached for the telephone and confided his wishes to Ezra Goddard.

During dinner, Finley learned all that he wanted to know about business, politics and friends. Goddard was a storehouse of information on these points, and guided by an occasional question, he placidly poured forth his torrents of news.

"All right, Goddard, I'm fed up with Wall Street details. So now—what about—Nancy?"

Ezra Goddard looked at his host thoughtfully.

"You went away when she married, didn't you?"

"Yes—when she married that unspeakable man!"

"Because she married him?"

"Partly. What about the girl? Do you ever see her?"

"Oh, often. They live out on Long Island—fine, big estate, magnificent, really."

"Then he has done her well?"

"As to setting—yes."

"Is she—is she happy? Is he good to her?"

"Can't answer either question. You know Nancy—if she weren't happy she'd never let anybody know it. As to his being good to her—he is and he isn't."

"How—isn't?"

"Hard to put it into words. But, he's—oh, he's impossible!"

"A bounder?"

"No—not that. But he's a tyrant, a despot—an overseer!"

"My God! Does he tyrannize over Nan?"

"Does he? It makes my blood boil—but what can one do when she resents the slightest comment on his actions, or even allusions to them?"

"Then she loves him?"

"She can't. No woman could. But—oh, there are so many sides to it all—so many complications—"

"Tell me all about it. If that man is unkind to little Nan—"

"You can't do anything. The best thing you can do, Mal, is to keep away. Raynor's always been a bit jealous of you—"

"Of me? What nonsense! Why, Nan and I were the merest friends—so far as anyone knew—"

"Including Nan herself?"

"Why, yes—I should say so. There was nothing between us—"

"But you loved her?"

"And do still. But I'm man enough to realize she's the wife of another—only—if that other—"

"Why did she marry him? Why, Malcolm?"

"I don't know, Goddard. But never mind conjecture—give me facts. What does that brute do to her?"

"Nothing tangible—nothing you could lay your hand on. But he teases her, irritates her, criticizes her unjustly, and in a mean way—until sometimes I should think she would kill him!"

"Not Nancy—she's the gentlest of girls—"

"Was. But of late she seems to be getting to the end of her rope, the limit of her patience. If it weren't for Orry—I almost think she might rebel openly—"

"Why Orry?"

"His influence is good over her. They adore each other—I never knew a more devoted brother and sister—and when Raynor stirs Nan up beyond endurance, Orry is the one who pours oil on the troubled waters."

"He never seemed to me to have much go—"

"No, he hasn't. Orville Kent is a dreamer, an artist. But he has a fine nature, and he also has a good sense of proportion—a real knowledge of relative values. And so he quiets Nan now and then—but truly it's seldom necessary, for the girl is so well poised herself. If she ever regrets her marriage, no one is allowed to guess it from her words or actions."

"Bless her heart! Perhaps it isn't so very bad. Raynor had big qualities—"

"Yes, but also some mighty small ones! He can jab the iron into his wife's soul, and then twist it around in the wound with a diabolical cleverness."

"Is she alone with him, except for Orville?"

"Lord, no. There's quite a household. Raynor's sister, Miss Mattie, is there—also a nurse."

"A nurse?"

"Not exactly—that is, she's what they call a dietician—you see, Raynor has developed a hippy concern as to his health, and he lives on callories or carbohydrates or something—anyway, they have to be weighed and counted by a trained dietary person, hence, the nurse."

"H'm—an old man, apprehensive about his health, is a fine mate for lovely Nancy Kent!"

"Exactly. Why did she marry him?"

"I'd like to go down there, Goddard. Would it be taking my life in my hands?"

"Unless Raynor invites you, yes."

"Won't he? Can't you make him? You seem to be on an intimate footing down there."

"I'll ask him, gladly."

"Do it now."

Goddard stared at the determined face before him.

Tall, strong and thirty, Malcolm Finley was the sort of man who gives instructions in the full expectation of their being carried out.

His rather fair hair was thick, and showed a suspicion of waviness as it tossed back from his wide brow. His eyes were gray and deep set and his mouth showed sweetness as well as firmness in its sensitive curves.

A most casual glance at him gave the impression of capability and efficiency with indomitable determination and persistence. Moreover, he usually spoke with a decision that cut off possilbe objections.

Wherefore Goddard obediently went to a telephone and returned not much later with a mystified expression on his face.

"I don't quite understand it," he said, resuming his seat at the table and lighting a fresh cigar, "but old Raynor says he will be charmed to see you. Suffering you to come, I could have understood—but charmed! Looks tricky to me."

"Meaning?"

"That he expects to get some fun out of your visit, somehow. I told him you were home, and that I was dining with you, and that you wanted to run down to his place with me and renew old acquaintance, and he fell for it so quickly and so cordially that I can't see through it. I thought he'd have conscientious objections of some sort. But he was positively urgent. Said for you to come with me on Friday for the week-end, and as much longer as you could content yourself there. It's an enormous place, you know—big as a hotel, full of servants and guests and neighbors—"

"Neighbors? Thought it was country."

"Oh, big adjoining estates—almost like an English countryside. Now, look here, Mal, you must be careful. I'm sure the old brute has something up his sleeve, and it's most likely to be a wicked hope of catching you making love to his wife, which will give him a chance for deviltry of some sort. So carry yourself with great circumspection—"

'Circumspection be hanged! I'll adopt whatever attitude toward Nancy I see fit! Old friend, for choice—but if he gets funny—"

"He won't get funny—but—he'll take it out of her."

"Oh, will he! If he does, he'll have to settle with me. Look here, Goddard, that's why I want to go up there, to see what that girl is up against. I'm not going to please myself—Lord knows it's a dangerous matter, anyway. For when I see Nan—dear little Nan, again—I shall have all I can do to hold myself in leash. But—if that man is bothering her—"

(To be continued.)

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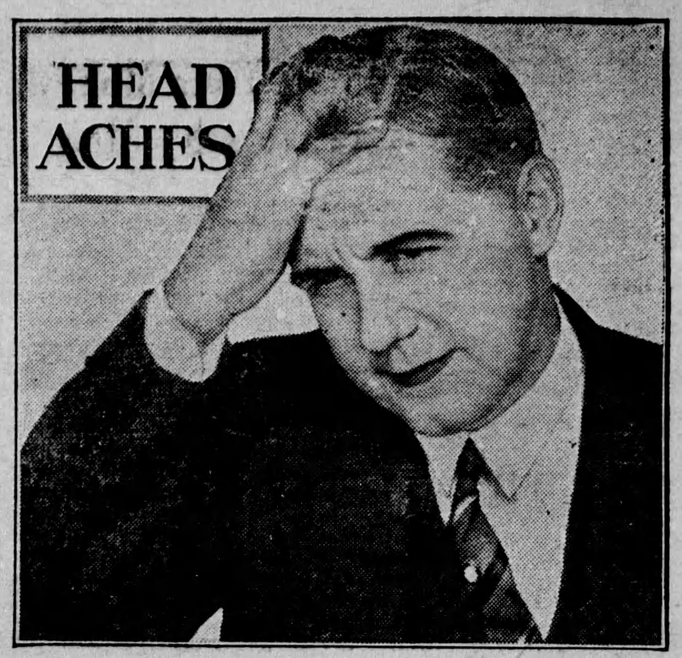

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