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'Fresh from the gardens'

The Affair at Flower Acres

by CAROLYN WELLS

BEGIN HERE TODAY

Malcolm Finley, returning from Japan, is invited to Flower Acres, the Long Island home of Douglas Raynor, husband of Nancy, who is a former sweetheart of Finley's. Finley discovers that Raynor is tyrannizing over Nancy and is incensed. Finley goes to Flower Acres in the company of a friend, Ezra Goddard. At Flower Acres he sees Nancy, Nancy's brother, Orville Kent; Raynor; Raynor's sister, Miss Mattie, and others. Finley notices that his conversations with Nancy are listened to intently by Raynor and Miss Mattie. Miss Mattie vows to herself that she will find out the true state of affairs between Finley and Nancy; Nancy decides that she will cease being friendly to Raynor in order to lift them above suspicion; and Finley, angry, decides to "settle Raynor's hash" if he continues to mistreat Nancy. Now Finley strolls into the gardens.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Doubtless she was in some greenhouse, or behind some sheltering trees, but he couldn't find her. Wandering aimlessly, he came upon a small house—a very small house.

It was built near a shiny, ripply brook, and was both picturesque and comfortable in its effects.

On its absurdly small porch sat an absurdly large man. Finley had a fleeting thought of Big Bruin in Tiny Cub's chair.

"Good day," he said, pleasantly, and the man on the porch nodded indifferently.

"Belong to the Raynor estate?" Finley's glance took in the house.

"Yep. Any o' your business?"

"Not the least. Good day."

"Hey, wait a minute. Don't be so awful swift in your proceedjer. You a friend of the f mily?"

"Yep. Any o' your business?"

The man apparently appreciated the good-natured mockery, and laughed.

"C'mon up on the porch," he invited.

"Just for a minute then," and Finley took a proffered seat. "Wonderful gardens these."

"That's right. My work's more wonderful, though. So's Orville Kent's."

"His is astronomy, I know. What's yours?"

"Bugology. Entomology, you know. And I had this shack right here by the water so's I c'd study water-beetles and the fifty-'leven other insects round about. Like that sort o' thing?"

"I think I should if I knew more about it. Are you—er—in Mr. Raynor's emuploy?"

"No; I ain't in nobody's employ. I'm my own master. But I make my reports."

What he did with the reports he made Finley didn't wait to hear, for he caught a glimpse of Nan's blue garden smock, and he strode off.

Again, however, the quarry eluded him.

He stood a minute, reconnoitering, when what seemed to be a young whirlwind bore down upon him.

"Oh, sir, how do you do? Who are you? A fairy prince? Mine—come to claim my hand?"

The speaker was a girl of about fourteen, her bobbed hair flying, her little frock of knitted wool open at the throat and brief at the knees, her Tam perched on one side of her tousled head, and her round, bonny young face laughing with glee.

"I'm Dolly Fay," she announced, "I'm a neighbor of the Raynors and I live just across that brook."

"There's a man lives almost in the brook," Finley informed her.

"Yes, I know. Old Grimes Gannon, the bug man. He collects beetles and spiders and grasshoppers and—"

"And their ilk," Finley finished for her.

"Does that mean their young? Yes, he gets eggs and cocoons and, oh—and lovely butterflies! Where you going?"

"To look for Mrs. Raynor. Can't you help me find her?"

"Cert. I'll take you right to her. You're a real nice man. Do you like me?"

"Very much."

"So do I you. Come on."

She ran ahead and it took Finley's longest strides to keep up with her. At last, sure enough, she brought him to a sunken garden, whose depth had hidden Nan from view.

"Good morning," she said, with a little constraint in her tone but an irrepressible smile of welcome in her eyes. "Hello, Dolly" she went on, "have you scraped acquaintance with Mr. Finley?"

"Yes, he thinks me adorable! And I think he's enchanting. But, Nan, I see you want to be alone with him—so tra la la—" and she danced away, laughing.

"Stop, Dolly! Come back here!" but the girl-child's ringing laughter was the only reply.

There was silence.

Wistful, pathetic, Nan's eyes rose to meet the ones that looked down on her with infinite kindness.

"What can I do for you?" Finley said.

"Nothing," she returned, blankly. "There's nothing to be done. You see how things are."

"I see. Why did you marry him, Nan?"

Though the voice was gentle, the inflection almost caressing, Nancy Raynor straightened up and turned a cold glance on him.

"Because I chose to, Mal. I do not regret it."

"You don't! Well, by heaven, I do! The mere thought of you, you, Nan, linked to that clod, that beast—"

"Stop! My husband is neither a clod nor a beast. He is a great man and a great scholar."

"Great man be blowed. Great scholar be hanged! Is he a great husband to you? Is he even a decent husband? Is he good to you? Answer me, Nan—answer me!"

Finley had grasped her two hands in his own, and stood eagerly gazing down into her frightened face.

"Don't oh, don't!" she cried. "He will come—he's always on watch—and he will see you—and he will kill me!"

"I shall kill him—if he has you in this state of abject fear, this condition of utter subjection!"

"But he has—both those things are true. I can't help it—and—you can't help me."

"I will help you, Nan—I must. I'm a fixer, a straightener-out of wrong conditions. You shall be freed from that brute—"

"Stop, Malcolm." Her voice was quiet now, and icily calm. "I don't want you to say those things. They mean nothing and they hurt me."

"Nan," Finley took her by the shoulders and looked deep into her dark eyes. "Nan, do you love him?"

"How could I, Malcolm?" she said, simply.

"Then why did you marry him?"

"That I cannot tell you—"

"Why, Nan? Why, Nan, dear?" Finley's voice was tender, his gaze was compelling, but she shrank away from him, saying:

"Don't be kind to me—oh, Malcolm, don't! I can't bear it."

"I don't understand, dear, but—I'm going to. You know I love you, Nan—oh, don't be afraid, I'm not going to tell you so, but I have always loved you, and even though you threw me over for Raynor, I'm still going to keep watch and ward that no harm comes to you."

"Please, Malcolm, don't!"

"Ah, so my little plan worked, did it? I followed you down here, Mr. Finley." These opening words were followed by the appearance of Miss Mattie from around the corner of the group of eve greens, "because I felt sure that you would be making love to my brother's wife. Ah, ha!"

Her thin old face took on a diabolical look of glee, and she peered into the face of each with a triumphant leer.

"Why, Miss Mattie, you here?" said Finley, quickly. "That's good. And you will have your little joke. Now, own up, you heard me asking Mrs. Raynor to have more burglar protection down here. More trained men to keep watch and ward over her valuables. Don't you agree with me?"

"Is that what you were talking about?" Miss Mattie said, thoughtfully, and with a shade of disappointment on her face.

"Yes," said Finley, delighted that he had at least partly convinced her. "There should be a small corps of night watchmen, and more house protection besides."

"Why does it interest you so deeply, Mr. Finley?"

"Oh, I'm not in the business—don't think I'm a burglar-alarm agent, but I see the necessity for better protection. I'm surprised that so able a man as Raynor doesn't see it that way himself."

"Yes, my brother is an able man, but he's the sort whose mind is above domestic details. He leaves all such to Nan."

"That's why I'm trying to persuade Mrs. Raynor to attend to it or to let me do it for her. I'll take up the matter with your husband, if you say so, Mrs. Raynor."

"You were calling her Nan when I came up," Miss Mattie spoke suspiciously.

"Oh, we were old friends, and I believe we did use to use first names. But it's a more formal situation now. Shall we go to the house, it's almost luncheon time?"

The three strolled along the flower-bordered walks, and, as they reached the terrace, Dolly Fay flew to greet them.

"Got your spooning done, you two?" she asked, shaking a merry forefinger at Nan and Finley.

Miss Mattie's lulled suspicions suddenly awoke again.

(To be continued.)

"AH, SO MY LITTLE PLAN WORKED, DID IT? I FOLLOWED YOU DOWN HERE."

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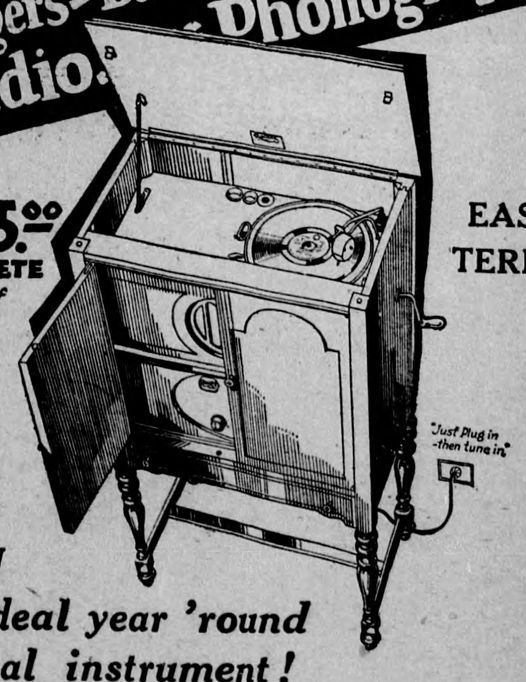

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