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A Question of Value

It Involves the Subject Love

By IDA SPEED
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Given two men and a woman you'll most always have a romance; two women and one man are apt to produce a riot, but take two women and two men, all in love, and every one of 'em bein' a misfit, as you might say, and it's like a two ring circus—you can't possibly take in all the details.

When this here Miss Daphne Donaldson first throws in with the west it's with no notion except to forget past unpleasantness which, I learn afterward, was caused by her havin' Pullman tastes and her husband havin' a day coach pocketbook.

Course, in order to win her he puts up a bigger front than his bank account calls for, and when he can't live up to the premises she pleads nonsupport and requests her maiden name.

So when we first see her she's got both the divorce and said maiden name and has few west to 'escape the gossip and scandal ensuin' from the same.

It took a special trip to freight her trunks out to the ranch, and she had clothes that made the men set up and take notice and the women's eyes turn green with envy.

She shore has the heart broke look, and she ain't been here a week before I see plain that Johnny Duval is goin' to be first aid to the injured.

You see, the biggest part of this ranch is owned by a man back east named Stoner, who was her confidential adviser, and he tells her just to come and make herself at home here till such time as she feels like facin' the world again.

Now, Mary Talbert, whose folks have charge of this outfit, is one of them quiet, practical girls who only know one way to love—that's with a secret, consumin' passion.

Secret, that is only to the object of it, and consumin' all her time in thinkin' about it. The object of Mary's devotion was Johnny Duval.

That such is bad enough. But about three weeks after Miss Daphne arrives Mr. Talbert gets a letter from this Stoner sayin' he can't come out to look after some matters as he does once each year, but is sendin' a substitute who will make a new contract with Talbert and attend to all business for him.

I drive in to meet this duck, whose name is Smithson, and I find a tall, slim fellow dressed like them pictures in the back of the magazine where it says:

"If you want to feel at ease in any society, wear"—etc., and who can ask more questions than a jackleg lawyer?

When we reach the house Daphne and Mary are on the east gallery. I make 'em acquainted with Mr. Smithson.

Daphne is standin' foolin' with a chain she always wears around her neck with some kind of a little hoodoo on the end of it.

"How do you do?" she says, noddin' her head, indifferent. Then she turns with a rattle of silk and walks in the house.

"Glad to meet you," says Mary, holdin' out her hand. "Have you all had your dinner?"

When we say we haven't she gets up, smoothin' out her fresh gingham dress, and goes in to set dinner out.

That was the difference between 'em. In a week's time Mr. Smithson looks like he's forgot he was sent here for any purpose but to make love to Mary, who is real nice to him to keep from showin' how she hates to see Johnny and Daphne together so much.

But, listen, that's not the worst. What does the grass widow do but begin to build a stack at this here Smithson, who don't seem to notice it, he's that took up with Mary Talbert.

It was like singin' "Three Blind Mice." They all fell in with the same words to the same tune, but only produced a jumble in the end.

I watch 'em pretty close and observe more or less human nacher in all of 'em.

From the very first I know why Mary is treatin' Smithson so nice, but it takes a long time for me to guess that Johnny is playin' the same game with Daphne because he don't think Mary cares for him.

I figured that this Daphne didn't take to western ways and folks, and it wasn't so much Smithson as them back east garments of his'n that was holdin' her spellbound.

And it took this here Smithson just a month to do what Stoner usually attends to, gittin' back by return mail. Before he leaves we begin to work the cattle. The first day we rounded up the north Cross S, and course the women wanted to go on the drive.

Johnny Duval was on his fanciest cuttin' horse, Don, and he was showin' off the least mite, as cowboys will do with back east folks lookin' on.

Smithson was swell in his ridin' togs, with little race spurs, and his mount was a big, handsome bay, but he was powerful in the way.

the herd, not knowin' enough to see where the brute should go.
"Let him go," yells Johnny, and rips out four uncomplimentary words which wouldn't have sounded so bad to Smithson if the first and fourth hadn't been "you."
Daphne rides over to Smithson at once, her face plumb scarlet.
"I think," she says, dignified, "you'd better take Mary and me home."
So he takes the ladies to the ranch, and that's the last I see of 'em till that evenin', when us boys come up from the brandin' pens and the two women are on the gallery by themselves.

Johnny Duval marches right up and apologizes for losin' his patience. Daphne shrugs her shoulders and says nothin'. But Mary looks at him with sympathy.

"It's pretty hard work to have to do twice on account of somebody's ignorance," she says.

Johnny looks at Mary, grateful. Then Daphne boils over.

"You western meh can do just one thing," she says, scornful. "You can work cattle with all the ridin' and other things that appertain. But put one of you back in civilization and you'd have to drive a dray for a livin'."

"Poor people have poor ways, but ain't that a honest way to make a livin'?" says Johnny and turns on his heel, spurs jinglin', and goes 'in the house.

I could see Mary was pleased plumb through.

The rest of us boys says nothin', and directly Mary goes out to a mesquite bush a few feet from the house and picks off a leaf.

She comes back to the foot of the gallery steps and says: "Somebody name this. I'm goin' to tell Miss Daphne's fortune."

Just then Smithson saunters out, and I says, "I've named it."
"Big house, little house, pigpen, kitchen," says Mary, pluckin' off a prong and throwin' it away with each "house."

"Big house, little house, pigpen, kitchen."
"Big house, little house"—
"Mr. Smithson," I says.

"You're goin' to marry Mr. Smithson and live in a little house," says Mary, lookin' at Daphne and laughin'.

"That leaf had one too many prongs, I'm afraid," says Smithson. "How about it, Miss Donaldson?"

"Love," begins Daphne, toyin' with that chain of hers. "Love is like happiness and everything else—it has a relative value. It depends on who is in the 'little house.'" She gets up and goes to the door; then she stops.

"The 'little houses' where love exists," she says, lookin' straight at Smithson, "are more complete than the 'big houses' that are only for show and to keep pace with the bunch."

Then she walks in the house.
"I'd about as soon mine would come out 'pigpen' if it couldn't be 'big house.' I've lived in little houses and kitchens all my days," Mary says, with a sigh.

"You'll never know the relative value till you've tried both," says Smithson to Mary. When she has gone in the house, too, he turns to me.

"Women, my friend, are like the world over," he says, sorter bitter. "But just the same we can't do without 'em."

"No, sir," I replies emphatic.
The next day that blamed little pitchin' "baby" horse of mine turns over with me and breaks my ankle, and breakin' that leg done for me what one of these here Japanese screens they set in the corner of the stage does for the show business.

They put me to bed in the east room, which has windows openin' on the front gallery, and because an invalid is expected to go to sleep early I heard somethin' that night I never should have got on to otherwise.

The pain had got easy, and I was dozin' a little when voices waked me. It was not light enough to see the faces, but a woman was speakin' when I commenced to listen.

"I suppose Elmer Stoner sent you out here, too?" she says.
"Yes," says the man, "but I'll swear to you I didn't know you were here until I was within five miles of the ranch."

"And then it was too late to turn back," she says.
"Not if I had known you were flirtin' with a cowpuncher who is far beneath you every way. And so soon!" he adds in a hard voice.

"The cowpuncher and that little Talbert person are wrapped up in each other, so your flirtation won't do you any good," she retorts.

"Oh, Harry," she goes on, "you only wanted to be rid of me!" And I hear her voice catch.

"Daphne, it's so like you, dear. You get a divorce from me, run away and hide, amuse yourself with another man and then lay the blame on me. Now, I don't mind the blame," he says.

"God knows I've been lonely without it, but I wonder if we could patch them up—our lives, you know. The little Talbert is a poor substitute for you."

I propped myself up on my elbow. A big, round, red moon was just peepin' over the edge of the world, and a man was leasin' against a post of the gallery with his arms around a woman, whose head was down on his shoulder.

"Anyhow," she says, dabbin' at her eyes with a little white speck of a handkerchief, "there never was any one else and there never will be."
"We'll go home tomorrow," he says, soothin'.

The curtain ought to come down as they kiss, but there wasn't none, and that moon was so bright I just compromised by pullin' the sheet up over my head.



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