

The MELODY GIRL

by RUTH DEWEY GROVES

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AUTHOR OF "The Husband Hunter," etc.

(Continued from Page 1)

en are supposed to have, but she's a throwback when it comes to tackling a modern girl's problems. "That's a nice way to talk about your sister."

"She's only my half-sister, but I don't enjoy knocking her. I'm just trying to stop you, Tommy, from making a mess of our life. Irene wouldn't help you."

"A lot you know about it. She's going to get a job until I'm through college; then she won't have to work."

Beryl felt like swearing, but she didn't because, as she said, only mule drivers were original enough to make it interesting. She'd never heard any mule drivers cuss, but she'd heard about it.

"I suppose you believe that," she sighed instead, "but you're wrong. Tommy, you're terribly wrong. Irene's had a lot of jobs, but something's been wrong with every one of them."

"She's only been out of high a couple of years," Tommy protested.

"I know," Beryl agreed, "but that was long enough for Irene to find out that she and work didn't spring from the same genealogical tree. They're not even remotely related."

"She never had a chance," Tommy maintained. "She's too attractive. Men get fresh with her."

"Is that so?" Beryl said, though she was deeply impressed with the angle of the situation. "My goodness."

"Cut out the scoffing and take me back home," Tommy demanded.

"Not just yet, little boy. If you can't be appealed to for your aunt's sake, you're going to be talked to for your own. And here it is. You marry Irene and you'll be back in the theater before the summer is over. Your uncle will pay you enough to induce Irene to coax you into giving up college. You won't go back next fall."

"Well, say," Tommy drawled. "You're so sure of everything—hasn't it occurred to you that Aunt Em will be all right when the damage is done? She's no hard-hearted tyrant."

"I should say not," Beryl broke in, "the way she treats you, she's a Lady Bountiful. You don't deserve it—an allowance and a chance for a real education."

"She'll forgive us," Tommy said complacently. "I know she will."

Beryl shook her head. "I don't think you know her," she said soberly. "She's got her heart set on a future for you, Tommy, and she knows as well as I do that Irene never will see it through on your allowance—not while your fund dangles a good salary under your nose. Irene's never had any money, you know."

"SHE'll have plenty some day," Tommy declared. "With that voice of hers."

"Yeah, I've heard about that voice," Beryl cut in. "Then she mimicked: 'Irene will become famous if she ever gets a chance.' If only we could do something to put Irene before the public! It's such a pity that opportunity doesn't come to Irene; with a voice like hers."

"It makes me sick."

"You're jealous because you can't sing."

"Who wants to sing?" There was disdain in the question, but deep in her heart.

"I guess your mother's right," Tommy remarked; "you must be like your father."

"Don't you say anything about my father!"

"Well, you're not like your mother, and he was a queer chap, wasn't he?"

"If you mean he was not like Daddy Everett, you're right. Poor Daddy Everett. But you can't blame him for Irene, she's like mother."

"You oughtn't to talk about your mother."

"I wouldn't, if you didn't make me. But I can't help it if I have brains enough to see what people are like, can I? It makes me wild that mother can't see what kind of wife Irene would make for you."

"And I can't see that it's any of your business," Tommy retorted.

"You look out," Beryl warned him, "or I'll let her have you."

"Please, kind lady," Tommy begged.

"You're like a brother to me, Tommy," she declared and though she said it firmly somehow her voice did not ring quite true. Not, at least, to her own ears. She hoped that Tommy did not notice. Anything but having him think she was acting through jealousy.

"We've grown up together," she went on hurriedly; "we played robber and Indian and you let me keep the tooth we pulled out with the barn door. Remember? Irene wouldn't touch it, and she cried when your mouth got full of blood."

"She was always more refined than you," Tommy said brutally.

"You see; you talk to me just like a brother," Beryl said good-naturedly, but inwardly she winced. "That gives me the right to talk to you like a sister. But all I want to say is just this: Won't you wait until you're through college before you get married?"

"Oh, sister, sister, you're breaking my heart," Tommy exclaimed with mock sorrow. Then he became serious. "Let me out of this."

"No you won't, mister," came in unison from all of Beryl's gang: "not while we're here."

"You little devils," Tommy muttered.

"No swearing in a lady's presence," he was warned.

Beryl turned and looked at him. "Well," she said, "do you promise?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Tommy replied.

"Then I can't take you back," Beryl told him. "And I hate to keep these kids up. Every one of them slipped out of bed to help me on this job. Really, Tommy, haven't you any sense?" Her voice was impatient now.

"This means everything to you. Can't you see? Irene has her own way with every one. She's made mother think it's all right for you to deceive your aunt—it was easier than stealing out as you were doing."

"She could get the right things packed, you know. And I think she took some of mine, too," Beryl added with what to Tommy was uncalled-for warmth.

"If she's so good at handling people maybe she can get the old runaway blessing from Aunt Em," he suggested.

"Do you really want to go back to managing the theater?" Beryl countered. "You know Mr. Hoffman doesn't care what becomes of you eventually. All he wants is to have your best years, then, when his old building falls down, he'll retire and you can go job hunting—with no profession, and no training."

"I could always manage a theater, if I'm so good at it."

"Yes, but you'd always be working for some one else. Irene never would help you save enough to buy a theater of your own."

"I guess my aunt will leave me some money some day."

"That's what you think, and Irene would think it, and she'd tell you it wasn't necessary to save any money. And then maybe your aunt wouldn't leave you any money. A maybe's a maybe, you know."

"Besides, Tommy, haven't you any pride? Don't you want to go on at college, now that you've had two years? If you had to quit it would be different, but you planned it for years. You used to talk about it a lot when you were in high. You

gan in a beggar's whine, but Beryl stopped him.

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seemed to have your heart set on it. And now, just because you've become infatuated with a pretty face, you're ready to give it up."

"It sounds dastardly, doesn't it?" Tommy mocked; "but don't take it so hard, fair lady. It's my funeral. However, you can wait a while to hold the wake. The pretty face may have more behind it than you think, and the old aunt may turn out to have a heart of gold."

"And you've turned out to be a bigger sap than I thought you," Beryl snapped back at him.

"Thanks," Tommy said tartly.

SHE bit her lip, thought a moment, then looked worriedly at the wrist watch her gang had presented to her the Christmas before. It was big and clumsy, but it was dear to her heart, and it kept fairly accurate time—if she set it two days ahead, as she had once told Tommy.

"Well, kids," she said, "I guess we'd better take him back and let him keep his rendezvous."

"Gee no, Miss Beryl," the boy called Pigmy protested. "Let's take it away from him. I want one of those things for my dog Snooks."

"You guessed it," Beryl informed him. "It's a chain all right, only in this case there's a ball attached to it. And it's sure going to give you a pain in the leg, Tommy boy," she added to their captive.

"Well, it's my . . ."

"Yes, I know; it's your leg and it's your funeral. And we're going to take you to it. I'm thoroughly disgusted with you."

"Regusted, you mean, Miss Beryl."

"Thanks Mike, that's right—regusted. Hang on everybody. Over she goes!"

With a chatter and a bang Beryl turned the old car about much as she would the old boat she had traded for it.

"The night air is bad for our Watersprite," she remarked as the car wheezed and stuttered when she gave it gas for first speed.

"What'd you call that for?" one of the youngsters wanted to know.

"Because it's not a boat, honey," Beryl answered sweetly. "Now do you understand?"

"Yep," he said. "That's why I call my dog Rover; he never stays home."

"That's right, Buddy," Tommy encouraged. "Don't you let her make a fool out of you."

"Aw, you shut up. You don't count—you're going to get married—and my Dad says that's the end of a man."

"Ah, a little group of sophisticates," Tommy murmured awfully.

"You father didn't mean that, Angie," Beryl said gently. "He loves to joke. Everyone knows it's fine to marry the right person. And your mother is awfully sweet."

"Yep, I guess she is," Angie admitted. "She likes you too, Miss Beryl. I heard her say that if it wasn't for you your family . . ."

"Perhaps you heard her say that in confidence," Beryl hastily interrupted. "I don't think I'd repeat it, Angie."

It would be just like Tommy, she thought, to imagine she had coached Angie.

"Oh, all right," Angie subsided.

Beryl fell silent, and so did Tommy. The children, too, were quieter than usual, depressed by a sense of failure. Their leader had not told them what this kidnapping was for, but her conversation with

Tommy had enlightened them somewhat.

It was plain that she had wanted to stop him from running away with her sister, and now she was going to let him do it.

Pigmy especially was downcast. He liked Tommy, but Irene was anathema to him. Ever since she had intercepted and read, with much public glee, one of his love notes to Agnes, of their neighbor-hood, he had "hated the ground she walked on."

Beryl's voice cheered them a bit, however, when they neared her home and she said briskly: "Well, here we are, men. Bring forth the captive and escort him to your fair damsel, who waits with trembling heart and suitcase packed (some of my things, too)."

The car came to a noisy stop. "I guess she wouldn't talk like that if all was lost," one of the band whispered to another, as they hauled Tommy out and gave him a push that sent him stumbling across the sidewalk.

"Gently, gently," cautioned Beryl. "Wouldn't damage the bridegroom and send him frowsy to his doom?"

The boys desired to know the violence upon the person of the belated bridegroom and turned to Beryl. "Is that all?" they chorused.

"That's all, my lads. Your reward will be forthcoming on the morrow. Picnic rations for all hands round and the end of the island if old Wind in the Face can make it. Bathing suits and iodine. And sound the tocsin at daybreak. Away with you now. Early to bed, or we won't get back tomorrow night."

They scampered off, calling back good-night. Beryl watched them go with a look of pride. Noble little rascals—her gang. It was not their fault if she had failed. But had she?

She did not drive on at once to the ramshackle garage the boys had built for her in the back yard—a garage just big enough for the old car to hop into. She sat, in-

stead, behind the wheel and watched her stepfather's house.

A half smile of satisfaction curved her lips—beautifully modeled lips, but much larger than Irene's rosebud mouth. The smile did not extend to her eyes; in them was a look of doubt.

THE shades of the house were down. They usually were down at night. Beryl liked it so, and Mrs. Everett insisted upon it. The family life, she said, was not to be put on exhibition.

Beryl had remarked that it couldn't afford to be—one of her nail-on-the-head statements that always so irritated her mother and Irene. They preferred to call things by euphemisms.

What was occurring behind the shades now Beryl thought she could guess. Irene's poise must have been shaken to its foundation, for she never could abide to be kept waiting—and on her wedding night of all times!

Beryl could hear her saying it, even if the walls of the house did shut out the sound. But what would Tommy say? That was the question that troubled her. Well, she'd better go in and find out, she decided.

for apparently they were not going to come outside to settle it.

Maybe the elopement was off! Beryl's heart skipped a beat as her mind actually framed in words the hope she'd been desperately holding to all evening. She hardly expected Tommy would listen to her.

Her reliance had been placed upon Irene's quick temper. She couldn't wait any longer to learn how her plan to arouse that temper had turned out.

Leaving the old car at the curb she hurried up to the house and softly opened the front door. Instantly voices came to her from the living room in the rear of the hall.

That living room had once been a bleak dining room. Beryl had transformed it—the house being so planned that the old living room could become the new dining room—into a place with privacy and character.

Mr. Everett had aided and abetted her in making the change, but Irene and Mrs. Everett had just as much to do with it. Great came to view it pronounced it great.

Beryl hastened toward it now with quickening pulsebeats. If Tommy had told Irene of her part in the night's event she knew what

to expect. But Irene's fury held no terror for her—poor Tommy who was about to make a big mistake on the very threshold of his life.

Why, she'd have had to make an attempt to save him even if . . . even if . . .

Beryl didn't like to say, even to herself, that she loved Tommy Wilson. He wasn't at all the man for her, she told herself at times when the thought would intrude in spite of the barrier of worldly-mindedness that she had built up to protect herself against her family.

He was weak, Tommy was, she'd argue scornfully when she couldn't get him out of her thoughts. He was weak, or he couldn't have fallen for Irene—baby-faced Irene. An

inner voice would agree with her.

Yes, Tommy was weak—but he was Tommy just the same, you know, the voice invariably added. Tommy, whom she'd licked to a finish more than once (only half suspecting that he wasn't exerting his strength to the fullest). Tommy, who had smashed his lunch pail on a boy's head for hitting her with a rock, and bought Irene a penny stick of candy because the fight made her cry.

Tommy who had—but it was endless—she could think of a thousand events and adventures that had drawn them together in their childhood.

(To Be Continued)

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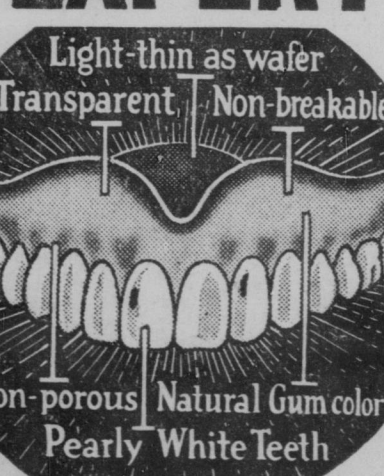
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