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WHITE GOODS

By FANNIE HURST

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CHAPTER I.

On a slope a white sprinkling of wood anemones lay ahead like a patch of linen bleaching in the sun. From a valley a lark cut a swift diagonal upward with a coloratura burst of song. A stream slipped its ice and took up its murmur where it had left off. A trout squelched his toes in the warm mud and let it ooze over and between them.

A mole stirred in its hole, and because spring will find a way, even down in the bargain basement of the Titanic store, which is far below the level of the mole, Sadie Barnett, who had never seen a wood anemone and never sniffed of thaw or the wet wild smell of violets, felt the blood rise in her veins like sap, and across the aisle behind the white-goods counter Max Meltzer writhed in his woollens, and Sadie Barnett, presiding over a bin of specially priced mill-ends in mid-aisle between the white goods and the muslin underwear, leaned toward him, and her smile was as vivid as her lips.

"Say, Max, guess why I think you're like a rubber band."

Classic Delphi was never more ready with ambiguous retort.

Behind a stack of Joy-of-the-Loom bed-sheets, Max Meltzer groped for arcular divination, and his heartbeats fluttered in his voice.

"Like a rubber band?"

"Yeh."

"Give up."

"Aw, give a guess."

"Well, I don't know, Miss Sadie, unless—unless it's because I'm stuck on you."

Do not, ascetic reader, gag at the unscrupulous plane. True, Max Meltzer had neither the brain nor the leisure of a sophist, a capacity for tenets or an appreciation of Kant. He had never built a bridge, led a Bible class, or attempted the first inch of the five-foot book-shelf. But on a two-figure salary he subscribed an annual donation to a skin-and-cancer hospital, wore non-reversible collars, and maintained a smile that turned upward like the corners of a cycle moon. Remember, then, ascetic reader, that a rich man once kicked a leper; Kant's own heart, that it might turn the world's heart outward, burst of pain; and in the granite canon of Wall Street, one smile in every three-score and ten turns upward.

Sadie Barnett met Max Meltzer's cycle-moon smile with the blazing eyes of scorn, and her lips, quivering to a smile, met in a straight line that almost ironed out the curves.

"Cause you're stuck on me! Huh!" Max Meltzer leaned across a counter display of fringed breakfast napkins.

"Ain't that a good reason, Miss Sadie? It's a true one."

"You're one swell little guesser, you are not. You couldn't get inside a riddle with a can-opener. Cause you're stuck on me! Gee!"

"Well, I am."

"I didn't ask you why you was like a



"I Didn't Ask You Why You Was Like a Bottle of Glue. I Asked You Why You Was Like a Rubber Band."

bottle of glue, I asked you why you was like a rubber band."

"Aw, I give it up, Miss Sadie."

"Cause you're so stretchy, see?"

'Cause you're so stretchy you'll yawn your arm off if you don't watch it."

Across the specially priced mill-ends

that she was your aunt and that her eyes was bad. I just thought she was some old girl up in the ribbons you was living with for company. Honest, I didn't know she had bad eyes. Gee!"

"No, they ain't bad. Only she's so blind she reads her paper upside down and gets sore if you tell her about it."

"And me thinking she was nothing but a near-sighted old grouch with a name like a sparrow."

Miss Barnett laughed with an upward trill.

"Dee Dee ain't her real name. When I was a kid and she took me to raise, that's the way I used to pronounce Aunt Edith. Gee! you don't think Dee Dee was the name they sprinkled on her when they christened her, did you?"

Max Meltzer leaned to the breath of her laughter as if he would fill his lungs with it.

"Gee! but you're a cute little lady when you laugh like that."

"Say, and ain't you a freshie! Just because you're going to be promoted to buyer for your department won't get your picture in the Sunday supplement. No white-goods buyer I know of ever had to build white marble libraries or present a bread-line to the city to get rid of his pin-money."

"Say, ain't it hot? With the Opening on Monday, they better get the fans working. Last year three girls keeled. Honest, sometimes I think I'd rather spend the summer under the daisies out on the hill than down here in this basement."

"Don't I wish I had an auto to take you spinning in tonight!"

"You ought to see the flyer a friend of mine has got. A Mercury Six with a limousine top like a grand-opera box."

"Your—your—friend? I—I guess if you got swell friends like that, a boat excursion down the river ain't got much of a sound for you."

"He says he's got a launch in summer—"

"Honest, Miss Sadie, I—I just been trying for the better part of two weeks to ask permission if I could come and call on you some evening, Miss Sadie, but—"

"Whoops! ain't he the daredevil!"

"The first boat of the season, Miss Sadie, a swell new one they call the White Gull, goes down to Coney tonight, and, it being real springtime, and you feeling kind of full of it, I thought maybe, it being the first boat of the season, maybe you would take a river ride this grand April night, Miss Sadie."

Her glance slanted toward him, full of quirks.

"My Aunt Dee Dee, Mr. Meltzer, she's right strict with me. She don't think I ought to keep company with any boys that don't come to see me first at my house."

"I know it, Miss Sadie; that's the right way to do it, but I think I can get around her all right. Wasn't she down here in the basement the first day I heard about my promotion, and didn't she give me the glad hand and seem right friendly to me?"

"Anyways, if her eyes ain't too bad, Mr. Meltzer, I got a date with my friend if his car is out of the shop from having the limousine top taken off. We—we're going for a little spin."

A quick red belled her insouciance and she made a little foray into the bin of mill-ends.

"Gee! if I've made three sales this livelong day I don't know nothing about two of them."

Max Meltzer met her dancing gaze, pinioning it with his own quiet eyes.

"You're right to pick out the lucky fellow who can buy a good time. A little girl like you ought to have every enjoyment there is. If I could give it to you, do you think I would let the other fellows beat me to it? The best ain't none too good for a little lady like you."

"Aw, Mr. Meltzer!" Her bosom filled and waned. "Aw, Mr. Meltzer!"

"I mean it."

An electric bell gelled through his words. Miss Barnett sprang reflexly from the harness of an eight-hour day.

"Aw, looka, and I wanted to sneak up before closing and get Dee Dee to snip me two yards of red satin, and she won't cut an inch after the bell. Ain't that luck for you? Ain't that luck?"

Her lips drew to a pout.

"Lemme get it for you, Miss Sadie. I know a girl up in the Ribbons—"

"No, no, Mr. Meltzer. I—I got to charge it to Dee Dee and, anyways, she gets mad like anything if I keep her waiting. I gotta go. 'Night, Mr. Meltzer! 'Night!"

She was off through the maze of the emptying store, in the very act of pinning on her little hat with its jaunty imitation fur pompon, and he breathed in as she passed, as if of the perfume of her personality.

At the ribbon counter on the main floor the last of a streamlet of outgoing women detached herself from the file as Miss Barnett ascended the staircase.

"Hurry up, Sadie."

"Dee Dee! How'd you girls up here get on your duds so soon? I thought maybe if I'd hurry upstairs you—"

He found time to cut me a two-yard piece of three-inch red satin for my hat, Dee Dee—tomorrow being Sunday. Two yards, Dee Dee, and that'll make two-sixty-nine I owe you. Aw, Dee Dee, it won't take a minute, tomorrow Sunday and all! Aw, Dee Dee!"

Miss Barnett slid ingratiating fingers into the curve of the older woman's arm; her voice was smooth as salve.

"Aw, Dee Dee, who ever heard of wearing fur on a hat in April? I gotta stick a red bow on my last summer's sailor, Dee Dee."

Miss Edith Worte stiffened so that the muscles sprang out in the crook of her arm and the cords in her long, yellowing neck. Years had dried on her face, leaving ravages, and through her high-power spectacles her pale eyes might have been staring through film and straining to see.

"Please, Dee Dee!"

Miss Barnett held backward, a little singsong note of appeal running through her voice.

Miss Worte jerked forward toward the open door. April dusk, the color of cold dish-water, showed through it. Dark in the city comes sadly, crowding into narrow streets and riddled with an immediate quick-shot of electric bulbs.

"Ain't you got no sense a-tall? Ain't got no sense in that curly head of yours but ruination notions?"

"Aw, Dee Dee!"

"They were in the flood tide which burrs through the dam at six o'clock like a human torrent flooding the streets, then spreading, thinning, and finally seeping into homes, hall bedrooms and Harlem flats."

Miss Edith Worte turned her sparse face toward the downtown tide and against the light wind that tasted of rain, and flapped her skirts around her thin legs.

"Watch out, Dee Dee! Step down; there's a curb."

"I don't need you. It's lots you care if I go blind on the spot."

"Dee Dee!"

"God! if I didn't have nothing to worry me but red ribbons! I told the doctor today, while he was putting the drops in my eyes, that if he'd let me go blind I—I—"

"I forgot, Dee Dee, today was your eye-doctor day. He's always scarin' you up. Just don't pay no attention. I forgot it was your day."

"Sure you forgot. But you won't forget if I wake up alone in the dark some day."

"Dee Dee!"

"You won't forget then. You won't forget to nag me even then for duds to go automobile with fly men that can't bring you no good."

"Dee Dee, I ain't been but one night this week. I been saving up all my nights for—"

"Tonight. Say, if I can't keep you from going to the devil on skates if—"

"It's only the second time this week, Dee Dee, and I—I promised. He'll have the limousine top off tonight—and feel, it's just like summer. A girl's gotta have a little something once in a while."

"What do I gotta have? What do I gotta have but slave and work?"

CHAPTER II.

"It's different with you Dee Dee. You're older even than my mama was, and didn't you say when you and her was girls together there wasn't a livelier two sisters? Now, didn't you, Dee Dee?"

"In a respectable way, yes. But there wasn't the oily-mouthed, bald-headed divorced man alive, with little rat eyes and ugly lips, who could have took me or your mama out auto-riding before or after dark."

"Aw!"

"Yes, 'aw!' You keep running around with the kind of men that don't look at a girl unless she's served up with rum-sauce and see where it lands you. Just keep running if you want to, but my money don't buy you no red ribbons to help to drive you to the 'evil!'"

"The way you keep fussing at me, when I don't even go to dances like the other girls! I—sometimes I just wish I was dead. It's the limit. Even Max Meltzer gimme the laugh today."

"You'd never hear me say watch the clock if you keep company with a boy like Max Meltzer. A straight, clean boy with honest intentions by a girl lookin' right out of his face. You let a boy like Max Meltzer begin to keep steady with you and see what I say. You don't see no yellow streak in his face; he's as white as the goods he sells."

"I know, I know. You think now because he's going to be made buyer for the white goods in September he's the whole show. Gee! Nowadays that ain't so much much for a fellow to be."

"No, I think that the kind of fellows that fresh Mamie Grant gets you acquainted with are much much. I'm strong for the old rat-eyed sports like Jerry Beck, that ain't got a honest thought in his head. I bet he gives you the creeps, too, only you're the kind of a girl, God help you, that's so crazy for luxury you could forget the devil had horns if he hid 'em under a automobile cap."

"Sure I am. I ain't seen nothing but slaving and drudging and pinching all my life, while other girls are strutting the Avenue in their furs, and sleeping mornings as long as they want under eider-down quilts. Sure, when a man like Jerry Beck comes along with a carriage-check instead of a subway ticket I can thaw up to him like a water-ice, and I ain't ashamed of it, nether."

Miss Worte withdrew her arm sharply and plunged ahead, her lips wry and on the verge of trembling.

"When a girl gets twenty, like you, it ain't none of my put-in no more. Only I hope to God your mother up there is witness that if ever a woman slaved to keep a girl straight and done her duty by her it was me. That man ain't got no good intentions by—"

"Oh, ain't you—ain't you a mean-thinking thing, ain't you? What kind of a girl do you think I am? If he didn't have the right intentions by me do you think—"

"Oh, I guess he'll marry you if he can't get you no other way. A divorced old guy like him, with a couple of kids and his mean little eyes knows he's got to pay up if he wants a young girl like you. Oh, I—Ouch—oh—oh!"

"Dee Dee, take my arm. That was only an ash-can you bumped into. Go on, take my arm, Dee Dee. Here we

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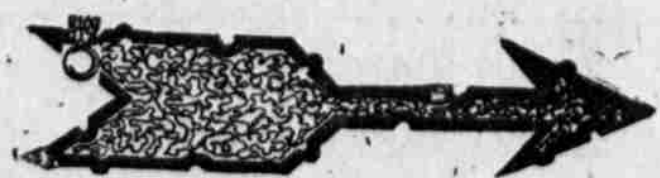
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