

Nowhere

By RUBY M. AYRES.
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Continued from Yesterday.

Slowly as Violet dressed, Florrie Jones dressed more slowly, and presently Violet realized that it was being done deliberately; that she would have to take her departure first, or stay on indefinitely, but when at last she left the dressing room and hurried down the stairs, Florrie Jones followed quickly.

She was but a few yards behind Violet when, turning the corner of the quiet street into which the side entrance led, she saw Ronald Hastings coming quickly toward her.

Violet flushed crimson, but the burning color soon died away, leaving her deadly pale. When he raised his hat, offering his hand, she felt as if she must turn and run away from him. She was horribly, painfully conscious of Florrie's shrewd eyes behind them. She thought of Ronnie with desperation; she tried to keep her thoughts fixed on him; it was for his sake she was doing this thing that was so hateful to her; she was fighting Hastings with the only weapons in her possession.

She forced herself to smile, to answer his greeting, but she felt as if she were walking in a dream, as if her knees must give way, and let her fall to the pavement.

Hastings glanced at her once or twice in a puzzled manner. The appointment was of her own making. In the brief note he had received from her, she had asked him to meet her and yet, that she was ill at ease, and miserably nervous he could plainly see.

He tried to put her at her ease, he talked away cheerfully about nothing in particular. He asked if she would come and have some tea. When she agreed, he took her into the best shop the district boasted.

He ordered toasted scones and fancy cakes. He himself poured the tea, leaving her to get over her embarrassment.

As he handed her a cup, their eyes met, and suddenly she burst out forlornly.

"Oh, what do you think of me, what must you think of me?"

He looked distressed. For a moment he did not answer; then he said very gently:

"I think nothing except what is nice and true. You said you wished to see me. I am only too pleased to come. I thought you never meant to be friends with me," he added smiling.

Violet sat in torment, she dared not tell him the truth, it would be like handing Ronnie over the map and there into his care, keeping, but it seemed impossible every minute to play the part she had set herself last night.

She forced herself to smile; she bit her lips to steady her shaken nerves, she spoke lightly, in a gay, frivolous voice that sounded horrible to her own ears.

"I dare say you think I quickly change my mind, but life has never been very exciting for me, and so I thought well, there would be no harm if you—if you—" her voice broke, her courage was dying away with a rush, she felt bitterly ashamed, she felt that she must burst into wild sobbing. To deliberately have sought out a man she despised and disliked.

to pretend to wish for his society—she felt sick with shame.

Hastings had dropped his monocle; he looked almost as unhappy as she; he glanced round quickly. They were screened from view of the other occupants of the shop. Their table was in a small alcove; he laid a hand on hers with sudden impulse.

"I don't understand you in the very least," he said, boyishly. "I've never met a woman like you in all my life, but if you think you would like to have me for a friend—well, I can promise that you shall never regret it—never, and I am only too proud to help you, or—or to be a good pal to you in any way, there," he laughed. "It's not very eloquent, I know, but it's sincere. And now, world, to have me for a friend—well, they look jolly nice—no, I mean those with the chocolate on top."

It was very late when Violet reached Mrs. Higgs'. After tea she had allowed Hastings to take her for a walk in the park. She was bound to admit to herself that she had not been so detestable after all. He had treated her with perfect courtesy and friendliness. They might have known each other for years.

He told her stories of his school-days. He spoke of his mother; he said she was the best woman in the world, when he led her on to talk of madame and her life at Violet's. Finally he asked her if she would allow him to meet her again the following evening.

Violet said yes—there was nothing else to say. She had put her hand to the plow, and she was not going to look back now, no matter how much she hated walking in the furrows it made.

Olive Hale was in her room when she opened the door. She looked rather embarrassed. She laughed rather forcedly.

"I thought you'd have been in ages ago," she said. "So I came down to see. I'm fed up with myself tonight. Can I stay for a bit?"

"Yes, do," Violet did not speak very graciously; she would have liked to be alone—alone and free to take Ronnie out of bed, and kiss and cuddle him, and assure herself that it was well worth doing what she was doing, if only she might retain him.

Olive stayed till after 11. She smoked cigarettes the whole time and sat in the most comfortable chair. She told Violet that she had definitely thrown over Mr. Green of the ribbon department, that he was too short and not sufficiently well off.

Violet said she was sorry to hear it. Mr. Green had been kind to her in his pompous way when she had been at Gattwick's; she thought Olive had behaved shabbily; she wondered who the man was that had driven him out of favor.

She was thankful when Olive took herself upstairs yawning; she locked the door, opened the windows wide

to let out the tobacco smoke, and lifted Ronnie to her arms.

He stirred a little, but was too fast asleep to wake up, and for an hour she sat in the low chair Olive had vacated, holding him in her arms, kissing his curly hair, and his flushed face, and his small, dimpled hands.

She never felt the ache in her slender arms—was not conscious of his weight. The feel of his small, warm body brought peace and rest to her heart. It was well worth while to fight for him, she thought. She fell asleep in the early morning with a contented smile on her face.

Upstairs Olive Hale threw off her skirt, let down her long hair, and drew a crumpled paper from her blouse. She had searched Violet's room for half an hour, more from curiosity than because she really believed there was anything of interest to find. She had chanced upon this paper accidentally. Violet had left the drawer unlocked.

She held it close to the light, and read the faded words again with eager eyes.

"I am the wife of Ronald Hastings. He deserted me—this is our child. If I should die, someone please be good to him."

Olive laughed, a low, triumphant laugh.

"I guess I can afford to quarrel with Green now," she said softly, as she locked the paper carefully away.

Florrie Jones was one of those peculiar women who are jealous of everybody and everything for no particular reason.

She liked to be first wherever she was. As soon as she saw that Madame evinced a liking for Violet Ingleby, she made up her mind that she could never like Violet herself. Without any actual reason for so doing, she would have gone quite a considerable distance out of her way to get Violet into disfavor.

It drove her to a kind of fury when she saw Ronald Hastings waiting for the girl. She would have given a great deal had he even cast a glance in her own direction.

As soon as she arrived at Violet's the next morning, she told everybody what had occurred the previous evening. She elaborated on the actual incident, and declared that Violet and Hastings had driven away together in his motor car. She called Violet a designing mix and Hastings a fool.

Lena Adams defended Violet hotly.

"I am quite sure it isn't true," she said. "Violet told me herself that the only time she had ever spoken to Mr. Hastings was when her hat blew away in Oxford street, and she stopped it for her. She isn't a bit that kind of girl. I like her very much."

Florrie Jones sneered—she disliked Lena excessively.

"Ask her then!" she shrilled angrily. "Ask her if she didn't meet him outside here last night; ask her before me, and then let her deny it if she dare."

"I am quite willing to ask her," said Lena quietly. "And you will just see what she will say. Here she comes."

Violet came into the dressing room quickly. She was late because she had stayed an extra five minutes to play with Ronnie. She was flushed and breathless with running.

She shut the door behind her and then stood looking round at the group of girls in surprise. Florrie was powdering her nose at the glass. She swung round, dropping the puff to the floor.

"Lena Adams says you didn't meet Mr. Hastings last night," she began shrilly. "I told her I saw you and she as good as called me a liar. Perhaps you'll just tell her—"

Lena came forward.

"Florrie always says things like this," she explained kindly. "I don't believe a word of it. Never mind what she says."

Violet grew scarlet. She drew her hand away when Lena would have taken it. She held her head high.

"I quite fail to see what possible interest Miss Jones can find in my affairs," she said coldly. She began to change her frock with fingers that trembled. She hated Florrie Jones. She was stingily conscious of her light, mocking gaze.

The other girls laughed. Nobody was glad to see her snubbed.

Lena waited behind for Violet.

"I know quite well it wasn't true," she said as they went down the stairs together. "As if it could be."

Violet stopped. She half-turned and looked at the elder girl.

"But it is true—quite true," she said faintly. "Mr. Hastings did meet me last night—and he's going to meet me again tonight."

There was a little silence. Lenas beautiful face grew pale. She stared at Violet uncomprehendingly.

"But—but you told me you didn't know him," she exclaimed. "You—you said—that—"

Violet tried stammering to explain.

"I know—I know—but—but—he wanted to—to be friends—and—oh, you couldn't understand even if I told you."

Lena drew her arm away. Her mouth grew hard.

"I thought you and I were friends," she said chillingly. "But I don't care for a friend who does not tell me the truth. Of course, it's nothing to me who you go out with, but—"

"Lena!" Violet seized her hand eagerly, but the elder girl drew it away, and walked on without another word or glance.

A fluffy-haired slip of a girl, with a dimple in her chin and a smiling face, came running along the passage. She stopped when she saw the surprised distress in Violet's face.

"Have you quarrelled with Lena?" she asked interestedly. "I'm not surprised, I saw you with Mr. Hastings last night. Lena's just mad about him, didn't you know? She knew him years ago. I rather fancy it was he who got her in here. Poor old Lena!"

She did not wait for an answer. She darted off again with clicking heels.

Violet felt cold and wretched. She had instinctively liked Lena from the first—had hoped to make a friend of her—and now this had occurred.

An eager thought filled her mind. She would go to Lena and tell her the whole story—tell her that she cared nothing for Hastings—that she was just pretending—just playing a part. She would tell her about Ronnie—tell her that Hastings was—

The warm impulse died; the thing was manifestly impossible. How could she tell Lena the sordid story of the deserted flower girl—and Lena loving Hastings herself!

(Continued in The Bee Tomorrow.)

Amsberry Prepares Ballots for Primary

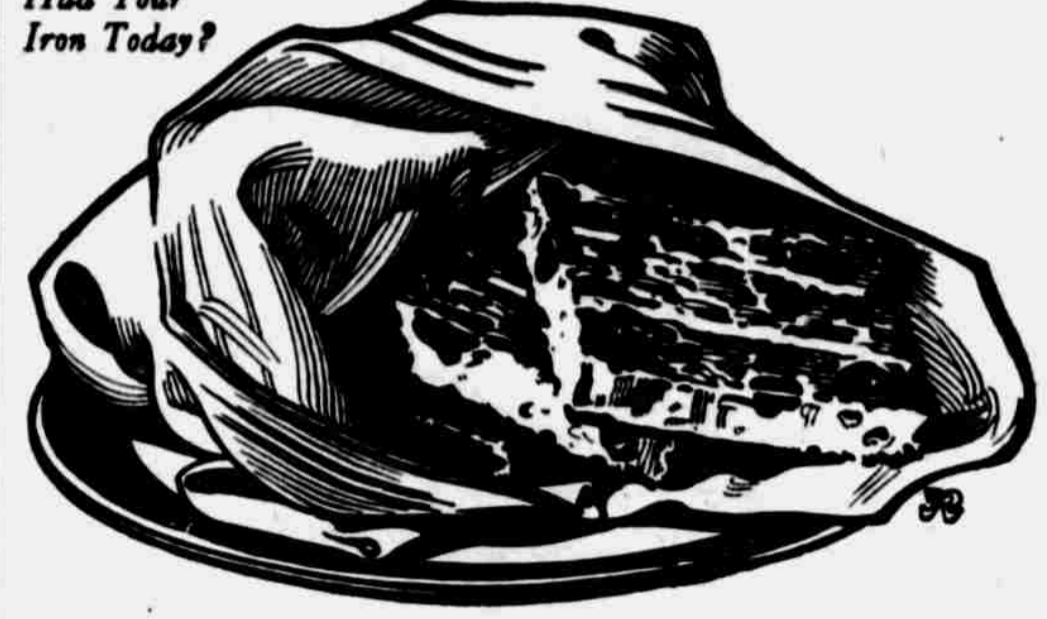
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