

The Best Cellar

By Hanish McLaurin

Love often spurs women to do surprising things—on impulse. The cases in which it gives them the courage to carry out a plan requiring time and patience and hard work are not so numerous. No one who knew Dione Carver at the time she fell in love with Hardy Irving would have said she had enough will power to do the thing she did. It was hardly to be expected of any woman, so far as that goes, for what Dione did was this: she changed the shape of her mouth. She thought Hardy disliked it, so she changed it. And she did it all by herself.

The thing at which fate must have smiled behind her veil was the fact that Hardy had no great interest in Dione's mouth, one way or the other. To him she was just one of several little girls in the old home town who seemed with each of his recurring visits, to have graduated abruptly from the roller skate stage into the stage at which their most valued possession was somebody's high school fraternity pin, and from that, in turn, to the status wherein they had attained to the undisputed ownership of gold lipsticks and jingling vanity boxes. There never seemed to be any gradual transition from one of these categories to the next above it.

Each time that Hardy laid aside his palette, turned the key in his studio door, and journeyed homeward he found the same three groups in evidence, the only difference being that the high school gigglers of his previous visit would now have become devastating debutantes, the roller skaters would be in high school, and the baby carriages or the kindergarten or something had yielded a fresh crop of squealing femininity on rollers.

He had been vaguely aware of Dione as she passed through all these stages, and she had been aware, a trifle more acutely, of him. By the time he had made the world of art reckon him as among the most promising youngsters in the field of portraiture she had been "out" two full seasons, and it was then that their acquaintance really began.

Hardy spent two months at home that summer, and, more by chance than by any intention on his part, he was paired off with Dione at most of the picnics, yachting parties and dinner dances with which the young folks amused themselves. Hardy had no idea of falling in love with Dione, nor with anyone else, and had he been able to foresee how completely he was to capture the poor girl's affections, it is quite probable that he would have taken steps to avoid doing so. There was a girl in New York in whom he was interested at the time; not to the point of distraction, but just enough to render him much less susceptible to Dione's charms than she was to his.

Dione never had any doubt about her feelings toward Hardy. She wanted him from the first, and she did everything within the bounds of maidenly self-respect to get him. To her way of thinking, he was "Edgar Charming himself, good looking, talented, ready of speech and in a fair way to be highly successful. He came from a world she longed to inhabit, and she never tired of listening to his verbal snapshots of life in the studios of New York and Paris. She was miserable beyond words when the time came for him to go east again and it became clear that her best efforts had not stirred within him the desire to be anything more to her than a friendly, entertaining companion.

The usual Saturday night dance took place at the country club on the last night previous to Hardy's departure, and it was there that Dione discovered what she thought to be the reason for her idol's indifference. One of her young admirers had persuaded her to sit out a dance with him in his roadster, which was parked in the shadow of the trees that bordered the clubhouse. The top of the roadster was up, and at a few paces distant it was quite impossible to say whether it was empty or occupied. As she sat there, abstractedly replying to her partner's chatter, she heard Hardy's voice close at hand. He was strolling along the path with Jerry Bayliss, smoking a cigaret and enjoying a brief escape from the heat of the ballroom.

"No, she doesn't interest me," he was saying, "God pity the man who marries a girl with a mouth like that."

"She has marvelous eyes," Jerry reminded him, as they reached the end of the path and paused a moment before returning. "Quite overpowering to those who aren't used to them."

"I know she has, but the mouth discounts them entirely," asserted Hardy. "Did you ever study physiognomy?"

"Nope. I've looked at the ads for

the character reading courses, but that's as far as I ever got."

"Well, one has to in my business, you know. It's part of the training," explained the painter. "And I tell you that mouth of hers is a dead give away. It spells wilfulness; it spells selfishness; it spells bitterness; and, taken with other signs on the forehead, I think it means temper, as well."

They passed out of hearing with that, but Dione had caught enough to set her thinking so furiously that she almost permitted the young man in the roadster to put both arms around her before she realized what

the magazine advertisements that I've begun to believe it might be worth while looking into."

Pleased at this commendable desire on Dione's part to add a little to her knowledge of human nature, Hardy made a note of the commission and promised to execute it as soon as he got back to work.

Dione and her hand mirror had a long and serious conference that night. Though there was something about her mouth which many people call "cute," yet the young lady was obliged to admit to herself that if she had seen those particular curves on the lips of somebody else



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he was doing. That evening, while she was dressing for the dance, she had spoken to her little sister with considerable asperity concerning some trifling mischief the child was up to, and the youngster had retaliated by calling her "an old pouty mouth." The phrase had amused her mildly at the moment, but now, under this new interpretation, it came back to her with a chill that struck deep.

She was too genuinely hurt to speak to Hardy about it, but even before it came time for him to escort her home that night a nebulous plan had begun to form in her mind.

"Didn't you tell me once that you had made quite a study of character reading?" she asked him, on the way home. She felt that she was treading on boggy ground—Hardy might have spied her in that roadster—but, no matter at what cost, she could not have resisted the temptation to remind her companion thus indirectly of his conversation with Jerry and to watch his face intently as he recalled what he had said.

She was forced to admire the complete unconcern with which he replied, "Yes. It's much more of a study than most folks imagine. I actually think that what little success I've had has been due largely to my ability to observe and to put on canvas the salient points which make the character of the sitter shine out through the face."

"How did you learn to do it, to recognize those points when you saw them, I mean?"

"My first instructor in Paris was a bug on the subject and, once having interested myself, I bought books about it and read them."

"It must be perfectly fascinating," observed his gentle cross-examiner. "Are there any books of that kind published in this country?"

"Why, certainly; some of the best."

"I'd like to read them sometime."

"Readly, would you? I'll send you two or three from New York, if you like. I'd be delighted to. It's not often I find a girl who's interested in that sort of thing."

"I never was, myself, until—until lately," Dione informed him, "but you see so much about it in

she might have attributed them to petulance. She thought she could detect the willfulness of which Hardy had spoken; of the selfishness she was not so sure. "Rather hard to judge that on one's own face," she said to herself. But when it came to the bitterness she found herself resentful. "That wasn't quite fair of him," she protested. "I'm not bitter about things. Disappointed, maybe, but not bitter."

Dione's disappointment was of the sort which comes to thousands of girls whose fathers are able to keep them on an equal footing with their childhood associates up to a certain age, but who cannot maintain thereafter the pace set by the daughters of men who have been more successful in the matter of rolling up a fortune. Her childhood had been a happy one and she had gone away to boarding school in the east without ever being conscious of the inevitable class distinctions that are brought about by wealth. It was only when she came home and began taking part in the activities of the younger social set that she realized how far her tastes had been cultivated beyond the means now at hand to gratify them.

The clearer the realization became, the more surely did the marks of discontent appear upon her face. There was a hint of it between her brows and more than a hint in the way her mouth began to turn down at the corners. She was too pretty a girl for these danger signals to make much difference to the casual observer. Some people thought they were the signs of a spirited temperament. To others they meant merely a tendency toward seriousness.

Nevertheless, when Dione balanced herself against her companions in the matter of clothes, jewelry, motor cars, and the like—finding everything in their favor and nothing in her own—she was inwardly so miserable that in her unguarded moments of facial repose the unhappiness shone through quite clearly.

When the books on physiognomy arrived from New York, Dione studied them with an attentiveness which nothing but her love for Hardy ever could have produced in her.

It was not easy reading, in the beginning, yet as she went on she became fascinated with the skill with which certain amazingly analytical observers had traced the quirks of the human countenance back to the thoughts which produce them. She found that it was not merely facial expression she was studying, but human nature itself. She learned of the qualities that lead one man to be a philanthropist and another to be a thug, and she taught herself to identify, in the faces of those she met, numerous signs which showed a tendency in the one direction or the other.

"It's all a matter of the way the brain is working," commented Hardy in one of the many letters they exchanged on the subject. "A sneering thought contracts the muscles of the lips into a sneering expression, and if the mind gets into the habit of sneering continually the lips will become set in a sneer that doesn't go away. Repetition is what does the trick. If a man finds a great deal in life that amuses him he will smile so often that the contracting of the muscles around the eyes will begin to leave marks in the skin and we will notice that he has these little 'laughing wrinkles' that make many a face prepossessing which otherwise might be only ordinary. Kindly thoughts produce kindly faces and hateful thoughts produce evil ones. You don't need any book to tell you that."

"And I seem to notice that a blank mind results simply in a blank face," observed Dione in her reply. "It's rather dreadful to think that in time one's features will publish one's thoughts to the world. Is there no escape?"

"None whatever," declared Hardy's next letter. "Our only hope is to make the public proclamation of our features as attractive as possible by living in some such fashion as will cause our thoughts to be pleasant ones."

In that last sentence Dione found the secret for which she was searching. It rather dismayed her when she first faced it. In her state of mind at the moment the only mode of living she could imagine as engendering consistently happy thoughts was one in which Hardy Irving would have an equal share, and of that there seemed to be no present hope. His letters to her had been a joy, and she blessed the impulse which had prompted her to simulate a curiosity concerning character study. None of the other girls was corresponding with Hardy, so far as she could find out, and indeed the painter seemed to be taking a keener and more serious interest in her, now that they were half a continent apart, than he ever had when they were together. In one of his letters he expressed himself as looking forward to the time when he would see her again. Dione's heart, which set up a terrible commotion in her bosom as her eyes fell upon this statement, came quickly back to normal when the next paragraph went on to tell of the writer's plans for a vacation abroad the following summer.

"That means he probably won't be out here again before summer after next," she despaired, but, on second thought, she was glad of it. "You'll need that much time," she reminded herself, "before you'll be ready to have him see that 'willful, selfish mouth' again. You'll need every bit of it," and thereupon she resolutely approached the task she had set herself.

"To live in some such fashion that our thoughts will be pleasant ones," Hardy had said. Easy enough to say, but not so easy to do. To Dione it meant the necessity for splitting off from the activities of the younger social set to a great extent and finding something more purposeful to occupy her time. Trying to vie with other girls whose means were so much greater than her own could never produce enough pleasant thoughts to bring about the result she was after. With that intense preoccupation common to young people in love, where the matter in hand concerns their relations with the loved one, she now devoted many earnest days to looking about her, seriously weighing her own talents, considering how to take advantage of her lengthy list of acquaintances, trying to discover what the town lacked that a girl of her limited training could supply.

One afternoon at the country club she heard a group of women bemoaning the difficulty of obtaining fiction of the better sort at the local bookstores.

Not many evenings thereafter Mr. Carver was agreeably surprised by having his comely daughter penetrate the seclusion of his retreat in the library, sidle gently on to his lap, and put her arms about his neck. Respecting the convention which had grown up between them upon such occasions, he made a great show of reaching for his check book, sighing proudly, and

assuming an air of weary resignation, but Dione cut the pantomime short with an earnest, "No, daddy, it isn't that," and when her father looked at her in surprise she added, "At least not until we've talked something over first."

She pressed her lips to his temple for a moment while she tried to find the words she wanted, and then she resumed with great seriousness: "Daddy, I'm sick of tease and bridge and jazz and dressing up every blessed day and all that. I want to do something a little worth while for a change."

Mr. Carver essayed to look extremely knowing. "Of course the departure from our midst of a certain well known young painter has nothing to do with this sudden attack of ennui."

"Now, if you're going to tease me I won't tell you what I came in here for," Dione warned him, "and you'd better listen, because I think you're going to like it. You may be surprised."

"If it involves no drain upon the exchequer I most certainly shall," agreed Mr. Carver. Dione suddenly noticed that he had "laughing wrinkles" around his eyes—quite an array of them. It struck her as odd that she never had observed them before. His other features also measure up quite well to the standards set by the text books, she noticed. She was pleased at this discovery, and she gave her father another preliminary hug before coming to the matter in hand.

"You know that old house on Fourth street that those Handicraft folks have taken?"

"The Saddler place? What about it?"

"Well, they don't need the big front room of the basement—hate one that faces on the street—and I could rent it for almost nothing."

Mr. Carver's expression was that of one who prays for light.

"It's right on the way to the business section, you know. Every one going downtown would have to pass it," said Dione, with an air of explaining everything quite clearly, but for some reason her father still remained unenlightened.

"The basement of the old Saddler place?" he puzzled. "Has the younger set gone in for mushroom culture or is this to be a polite bootlegging parlor, or what?"

"The 'younger set' his nothing to do with this. I want that basement for a bookshop. I've got the name all picked out and everything. I'm going to call it 'The Best Cellar.'"

Mr. Carver had no need to put his astonishment into words. He was eloquent. "But, my darling child," he began, cautiously, "what makes you think—"

"I know what you're going to say," interposed Dione. "You think I haven't sense enough to go into business for myself, but if there's one thing I do know something about, it's books. Any time a book comes up for discussion the girls always say, 'Ask Dione; she's probably read it,' and most of the time I have. There isn't an up-to-date bookshop in this town. The department stores take whatever the publishers' salesmen tell them to. The clerks in charge of the book departments make no effort to keep up on what's new in literature; they don't follow the literary magazines; half the time they don't even know what they have in stock. Old Mr. Barker has plenty of good standard stuff in his little shop, but he's so cautious about his buying that unless it's some tremendous success that he knows every one in town will want to read, you have to wait 10 days or two weeks while he orders your book from the publisher. Besides that, he's so busy selling phonograph records and kodak films and stationery and toys and typewriter supplies that he can't take the trouble to keep his bookshelves abreast of the times."

Dione was over the first hurdle now, and was taking the others with a rush.

"This isn't a village any more, you know, daddy. It's quite a city, and there are swarms of people living here who have been to college or to the state university, or some place, and they'd be tickled to bits if there was a shop here where they could buy the kind of books their education entitles them to. But do you think they can find a translation from any of the Russian writers in this town—or the Danish—or the Chinese?"

"Chinese!" gasped Mr. Carver. "Great grief! Does anybody read translations from the Chinese?"

"Certainly. There's quite a vogue for Chinese philosophy, and some of their verse is lovely. And there's all sorts of other verse that people in this town would read if they had the chance. They won't bother to send away for it, but if they picked it up in my shop they'd buy it."

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