

SISTER STUFF

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

ILLUSTRATED BY C. J. MCCARTHY

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Maidie Knowles could never quite make out Delphine. If she had, friendship might not have been on such an entirely satisfactory basis. Delphine shared a room: worked in the same departmental store book section: received insufficient nourishment often at the same eating houses, and yet—

“Like the time I went with Harry to fetch his weekly from the Chink’s, and his best soup-and-fish underwear was missin’, and about a dozen yellow men started to jabber away together: that’s about how much I understand that kid sometimes. Look at her now!”

Miss Cora Jones, to whom the admonition was directed, turned an impeccable coiffure towards Maidie and a powdered face toward Delphine, who was enthusing over a volume to a prospective customer.

“She means it, too,” sighed Maidie. “To me, Cora, a book’s so many pages and a cover, with a paper jacket outside, and it’s the jacket that counts. You know how it is—if a flashily-dressed dame comes in and spars for air, and says she wants something classy for a friend who reads, why pick out one of them plain jackets, but if she wants it for herself, why shove over one of them spicy-lookin’ ones. Or, if a woman comes in and asts have you got somethin’ nice and happy, and she looks like if she has any rings on her left she had to rustle them herself, why grab one of those jackets with a fellow and a girl lampin’ each other considerable in the moonlight, and you can start enterin’ up a sale at once. That’s how I sell books, Cora, but Delphine—say, she really means that stuff, you know! If it was silks, or linens or hosiery now I might act a bit enthused but—”

Maidie shrugged her shoulders, but the glance that rested on Delphine’s lithe figure, glossy black hair and piquant features, was a proprietary one.

“Is it true,” asked Miss Jones, with an air, “that she has no fellows?”

“Fellows!” echoed Maidie, sniffing challenge. “Say, that kid has only to raise her third finger left and signal and she’d look like a Friday bargain

counter. Well, I don't say I'd like her to raffle herself off that way, but there's reason in all things."

Miss Jones regarded her own left hand with its pre-matrimonial decoration sparkling ostentatiously in platinum. She said:

"I'm suspicious of people who could—and don't!"

"You needn't be," retorted Maidie indignantly. "I put it to her plain, and since you ast me, there's a gink in her past who she thought was the real goods, and it turned out like he shrunk in the wash, and the dye ran. It's set her against men."

"I wouldn't let the sex get away with that!" declared Miss Jones. "I'd grab the next most likely fellow and take it out on him!"

"Me, too!" agreed Maidie. "Yes, ma'am, we have 'The Chief of the Desert' in the reprints. Yes, ma'am. I can recommend it strong. Right on that table over there . . . Of course, Cora, it's different with me havin' a real guy like Harry. Him and me's going to put one across that young lady yet, though. There's a guy down in Harry's department that joined up a while back. He's sniffing round learning the business, it seems, and he can talk books and things to a fadeaway. Harry says he's not awfully good-lookin' or anything so he figures she ought to fall for him, seein' she's given the razoo to all the swell-lookers this side of Hollywood."

"When's he going to see her?"

"To-night. Harry's takin' us all to a show . . . What's that, ma'am? Cora, is 'The Chief of the Desert' by the same bird that wrote 'Through Desert Sands'? . . . Yes, ma'am, the very same author. You'll take it? Thank you, madam. Eighty-five cents, please! One dollar. Fifteen cents change there, Moira! Parcel, there, parcel!"

Owen Deering arrived that evening at eight, under the triumphant chaperonage of Harry Smith. He conveyed the impression of having been inveigled into an escapade little to his liking, but the social duties of which he would perform punctiliously.

Harry had, self-sacrificingly, secured orchestra seats at the New Court.

"You told me to get high-brow stuff!" he retorted when Maidie protested.

"Well," she sighed, "I suppose I'll survive."

The curtain went up, after an atmospheric overture, upon a stage set with no appeal to the spectacular. The play itself was an elusive thing, flirting with beauty always and winning it often, whimsical in phrasing and thought.

“Gosh,” said Harry, after the first act. “Here’s half-time, and nothin’s happened! And them two’s hardly passed a word, being about as friendly as a couple of icicles in February.” For himself and Maidie the act had been enlivened by intimate whisperings and a frank holding of hands. “Fancy all these birds payin’ real money to see stuff like that!”

“So did you, Harry!”

“You’re darn right I did!”

Gloom settled upon them. The play proceeded into depths in which Harry floundered more hopelessly than ever.

They made a subdued exit at last, and the four walked the homeward way in silence.

“You boys come on in, and we’ll rustle a bite to eat,” invited Maidie at the door of the boarding-house. “Eh, Delphine?”

“Why—yes!”

“Thanks,” said Owen Deering, “but I think not to-night. Don’t let me hurry you away, Smith!”

“Time little Harry was in bed too,” said that gentleman, glowering.

The girls went on in alone. Up in the room Maidie launched her attack, aggrievedly.

“I—I don’t understand, Maidie,” said Delphine, pausing in the act of removing her hat.

“Understand? Say you might at least of been decent to Harry’s friend when we get up a little party for you. I’ve never seen you hand a man a frostier line, Del. I’ll bet next week’s pay to a plugged nickel you never said two words on the way home!”

“Well, we didn’t talk—much. I think we both felt the same about it—the play, you know. Didn’t you?”

“The play?”

“Yes—it was rather wonderful, wasn’t it? It made you just want to go away quietly and think it through. He felt that way about it, too—Mr.

Deering did. On Saturday when we're going for a walk"—Delphine smiled up at her companion—"we'll be able to exchange opinions better."

Maidie's mouth opened, fixedly; she sat down suddenly on the bed. Then she jumped up and seized Delphine about the waist ecstatically.

"Del," she cried, "I could shake you and hug you in the same breath! I'm awful glad you like him! I've always wanted—havin' Harry, you know—that you should have someone, too. Aren't you glad, kiddo?"

"Glad? Why—I don't know—I—"

Maidie slumped down on the bed again.

"Say, kid, if you pull that frosty fadeaway line again, I'll bash you with the curling tongs." Maidie had "fallen for" Harry at first sight, and measured all such affairs by her own experimental plumb-line. And incomprehensible things worried her.

They undressed in silence. Maidie, having recourse to a variety of aids to beauty, climbed in last, and shut off the light. Through the open window they could see the silver beauty of the harvest moon.

"Maidie!"

"Um?"

"Don't think I don't appreciate what you and Harry tried to do for me tonight."

Silence.

"And, Maidie"—shyly—"I think I really—am glad!"

"Yes, ma'am," mumbled Maidie, turning in her sleep, "same author as 'Through Desert Sands.' Par-c-e-l!"

Delphine smiled. After all, the Man in the Moon was a much safer *confidante*.

The "Bon Ton Store" knew all about it soon, just the same. Maidie whispered news of her triumph in the ear of Cora Jones, in strict confidence, and a wave of confidence spread through four departments, and eventually landed in the general offices on the mezzanine floor, and interfered with business there, for Owen Deering was known to be an appointee of Radwick, the manager's. A rumor floated up from Mr. Wicklow, who headed the linen department and was known for his opinions on all subjects,

that Deering was an embryonic misogynist. The words challenged general curiosity, and, having had recourse to the dictionary, the “Bon Ton” gave it as its verdict that it was a pity he wasn’t better looking, but he had a something about him. A woman-hater is always interesting—to women.

And now he had fallen—had fallen—like Babylon before the hosts of Cyrus, King of Persia, and apparently with as little fighting.

“I’m glad for her,” Maidie assured Cora Jones. “She was headin’ right square for membership in the Ancient and Honorable Order of Spinsters!”

“You did say,” insinuated Miss Jones, “that she had some former affair?”

“Same old story, Cora. Mr. Man gets romantic some fine moonlight night, and there’s a hurry-up call for rings and weddin’ bells. Trouble was, though, they’d known each other since they played post-office as kids, and you know *that* don’t do. Too familiar and all that—no spice to it—brother and sister stuff, only like the real kind. Anyway, the license and the minister and everything was at the starting post, or almost, when Mr. Man gets cold feet. Drops her a note that he’s found the lifelines in their hands didn’t just sort up right, or he was afraid he snored too much or sumpin’, and beat it. She left town next week to get away from old lady Gossip, and come to the city, and give everything in pants and vests the go-by until now.”

Delphine herself was unaware that so much interest focused on her. She went her way in growing happiness. Delphine was made for romance: there was in her blood a strain marking the influence of an ancestor of southern European birth. But it was romance married to poise, hot blood to Anglo-Saxon phlegm, even as the blood of south and north had mingled in a bygone day.

For Delphine, love of beauty had, for a time, taken the place of men in her life: but beauty is not always cold, and its wistfulness requires that it be shared with an understanding soul. Maidie had sympathy, a tenderness undreamt of by those who knew her only by her speech, but she had no reaching out for beauty. Life, for her, was bounded on the east by the alarm clock, on the west by the ready slumber of the healthy animal, on the north by the stepping-off place marking the line beyond which one would traverse dreary and undiscovered mental wastes, on the south by a native purity and good sense that forbade both license and prudery. Within these bounds she was content to take life as it came. Delphine, for a time, found it comfortable to remain in these narrow but comfortable boundaries. But one who had travelled far afield knows the lure of travel as one who has sailed

the seven seas grows tired of coastal trade, and longs for far ports and broad horizons. The advent of Owen Deering changed things. She hailed his coming without fictitious reserve, and paid the first instalment of the passage money in coin of understanding friendship.

She found, though, that she must rebuke her heart, at times, telling it this was but friendship—a walking, talking, reading comradeship. No word of love had passed between them with the flying days and weeks; no outward evidence that would be understood in Maidie’s circle as denoting progress!

“Gee,” grumbled Maidie to Harry one night, “I left them alone in the parlor yesterday evenin’, and lured Mrs. Fenniwell upstairs out of the way, and when I tiptoed downstairs and peeked in a while later, there they was settin’ on two chairs with all of three yards between them, and a perfectly good sofa occupied by the cat. That kid makes me mad sometimes!”

They agreed that something should be done about it, what with spring coming on and all! A familiar saying repeated itself in Maidie’s mind, bringing a measure of hope:

“In the spring a young man’s fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of love. . . .”

Maidie did not know that it was to be found between the covers of any of the books under her daily charge. She had seen it in a sub-title at the movies, and thought the man who wrote the movie made it up himself, and wasn’t he clever to think of it?

By one of those curious twists that seem so perverse in a reasonably logical universe, it was about this time that Maidie received a summons to the Manager’s office, and responded in a mental flutter that comprehended all the notable misdeeds of a month or more past.

Radwick set her at ease with an agreeable greeting, leaving her composed enough to confirm, in her mental register, the impression she had always had that he resembled closely a rhinoceros, whose pachydermatous form decorated the cover of a popular children’s volume she had often sold.

“I am informed,” said Radwick, “that you and Miss West—Delphine West—room together. May I rely on your discretion if I tell you something important that concerns her rather directly?”

“Why—sure, Mr. Radwick!”

“It seems that Owen Deering, in whom I am personally interested, is showing quite—considerable interest in your room-mate, Miss Knowles. Perhaps this letter will explain why I have sent for you.”

Maidie took the letter. It was a rather gushing thing. It was so kind of dear Mr. Radwick to take an interest in Owen. By so doing he had won a mother’s gratitude. Would he undertake a further—and more delicate—mission? It seemed that Owen had picked up—that was the expression used—with one of the shopgirls. His mother’s heart interpreted his loneliness in a strange city, but was it fair to himself—or the girl? Owen was so headstrong that only harm could come from writing him direct.

“You know,” said the letter, “that Owen is engaged to a local girl, and has been for quite a time. I know, of course, that Owen is just seeking companionship—but does this shopgirl? Owen is attractive, and girls are so susceptible. If you could contrive, dear Mr. Radwick, to discreetly hint to her that nothing can come of it, you will save broken hearts, and lift a burden from myself.” Maidie turned the page, and caught the sentence: “My husband says to tell you it will be quite satisfactory about deferring payment on those land syndicate shares—”

“That’s all that concerns the matter,” interposed the manager, hastily. “Miss Knowles—I want you to carry out this delicate mission for me.”

“Me? Oh, I couldn’t!”

Maidie never could explain just what she meant when, persuaded, she agreed to “do something.” More than anything, perhaps it was a desire to stand between Delphine and any sudden breaking of the news.

“If I can make things more pleasant for you at any time,” Radwick hinted, accompanying her ponderously to the door, “why, let me know. If you’d like to change your department, or anything—”

Maidie turned, and regarded his heavy body teetering after a manner he had, and was unafraid.

“Say,” she retorted, “if you was to take me from the book department it’d be back to the attic for some of these hicks who write stories!”

She left with the impression of a startled rhinoceros staring ridiculously after her.

Maidie carried her burden alone for some days. Knowing Delphine as she did, she knew that ordinary arguments would not do for her. If she knew all, there would be an end to that which was now so nicely in its beginnings.

She lay awake at nights, when the soft moonlight flooded in and touched the piquant features of a girl smiling in her dreams, and rebellion broke out.

“It ain’t fair!” declared Maidie, in fierce self-communion. “It ain’t fair to take it from her!”

After that she simply had to confide in Harry. A vague fear possessed her that some such fate might overtake her—if men were like that. She demanded proofs of loyalty from him, citing the case of Delphine. Harry responded nobly, comforting her with the highest-class vaudeville in the district, two marshmallow sundaes, and more personal ministrations, while as for Delphine—

“Take it from me,” said Harry, “when a man’s a woman-hater like he was when he first come, he’s been hounded to it by someone or more. Either the girl, or the ma—or both. Look at me,” advised Harry, waving an eloquent hand, “the old lady had one all hand-picked for me, and if you hadn’t of happened across the trail, little Harry might right now of been side-kick to a second Queen of Sheba!”

“Well, why didn’t you take this—queen, if you think she was? I’m sure I—I—”

“Forget it, sweetie! I’ll bet next week’s pay to a stale doughnut fifty percent of her looks come off every night between the hours of one and eleven a.m. Thanks, I like mine genuine, dyed-in-the-wool.”

Maidie traced a finger over her nose, speculatively.

“Harry, have I—have I too much powder on?”

“We-e-l, maybe just in one or two places it lies in drifts, cuteness!”

“Oh, where, Harry?”

“Just there—and there—and there!” They were quite alone at the time.

“Anywhere—else, Harry?”

“Well, perhaps just—there!”

“Silly, I don’t powder my mouth!”

Harry was very, very comforting.

He left her with a feeling of burdens lifted, and a superstructure of hope concerning Delphine for which she could have pointed out no foundation.

Spring, having flirted coquettishly for some weeks, suddenly declared itself boldly, and drew the earth to itself from the very arms of winter. Sunshine, flooding golden sunshine, dappled the land. The snow retreated into little nooks and crevices beyond its direct reach—grimy little piles, inevitably doomed. Others, caught by its power and subdued, lay in little pools, mirroring the blue of April skies and the gold of April sunsets; tranquil in submission, waiting to water and refresh the softening earth, knowing, like the soul passing from time to eternity, no loss but merely change.

Clear, clean sidewalks and pavements at last! The feel of them under one's rubberless boots, inviting long walks after the months of snow and slush.

Said Maidie: "I'll bet that was a mere man wrote that thing we saw in the movies, Harry. You know—'In the spring a young man's fancy, lightly turns to thoughts of love.' You'd think you men had a first mortgage, gilt-edged, on that feeling!"

She was not thinking of herself alone. Delphine sang little snatches in the mornings now as she dressed. She had unsuspected vocal powers. To hear her was to feel a renewed sense of burden, for Maidie's promise to the manager was as yet unfulfilled. More than a fortnight had passed since the interview, and she daily expected a summons from the managerial rhinoceros on the mezzanine floor.

"We've simply got to do something," she told Harry.

The next day it was that Owen Deering received word from home, and the evening of the same day—as they walked homewards in the soft spring darkness from an early show—that he told Delphine. His father was not well, and the doctor had ordered a complete and immediate rest. They had wired for Owen to return at once and take charge of his father's business. The doctor said it might be many months. . . .

Delphine said quietly, with a little catch in her breath: "When would you go, Owen?"

"There's a train at eight-thirty Saturday night. He'll be worried until I get there, and he can turn things over to me. I saw Radwick; he said just to finish out the week."

"But—to-day is Thursday, Owen. Thursday already!"

"I know, Delphine!"

They walked in silence then. There came to Delphine in those moments, as a very definite thing, the knowledge that her heart was no longer in her own power, that no longer would it suffer to be rebuked for hoping; as surely as spring had drawn the earth from the grip of winter, so surely had Owen drawn her from the cold loneliness and resignation of her winter of experience. And yet how did she dare, when he had never spoken of love; when he had been so free in his comradeship, and dubbed her often his “little sister?” He broke in upon her thoughts.

“On Saturday afternoon it’s your turn off duty, isn’t it? Fine. We’re going to have it all for ourselves.” They were at Mrs. Fenniwell’s steps now; he said, impulsively: “You’ve been more to me since I met you, Delphine, than I can ever tell—but there’s something I want to tell you before I go. Not now, Delphine—on Saturday when we can get away from—people and things!”

He looked very flushed and boyish then. He said “Good-night,” and turned to go, for he had work to finish up. He swung back again with boyish impulsiveness. She was in the shadow, the deep shadow of the step, but the light shone upon him and she saw his eyes, and for all the sorrow of his near departure, the song was restored to her heart. Almost before she knew it, he was beside her in the shadow; his arms were about her with tenderness; his lips meeting hers—just once. She swayed, faint with the sweetness of the moment, and the fearfulness of it.

“You’re not angry, Delphine. I—I—” He tried to laugh. “I suppose a fellow may kiss his—little sister—good-night!”

She could not find her voice.

He repeated, anxiously: “You’re not terribly angry, Delphine?”

“No, Owen!”

He had the good sense to leave her then. Delphine stood, statuesque, in the shadowed niche, watching his familiar stride as he hurried up the street. Then she went slowly into the house, and to her room. Maidie had not yet arrived. Delphine threw herself upon the bed in a sudden uncontrollable fit of sobbing, but whether the tears were born of hope or joy or fear she did not know.



Maidie, arriving presently, with real insight first aided Delphine to remove her outer wraps, then sat down with her arm around the girl.

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“What’s the matter, kiddo?”

“I’m just—silly,” said Delphine, smiling through her tears. “I thought I’d graduated from the cry-baby class, Maidie, but—oh, Maidie, Owen’s going away—back home—for always, likely, and it hurts to have to say ‘good-bye’ to friends.”

“Friends?” cried Maidie, sitting up stiffly, arms akimbo. “Say, that guy’s no speed model, is he? I figured by this time you’d have him better in hand than that. Great grief!” Maidie’s eyes were lighted by real indignation. She rendered a now almost unnecessary first-aid with a sponge and towel, because action was demanded by her feelings, and stood twisting the towel in her hands as if wringing a certain gentleman’s neck.

Delphine, brisked by the water, managed to laugh a little.

“What a baby you make of me, Maidie!”

“Well, what of it?” retorted Maidie, encouraged. “What’s more, you’re going to sit by Auntie Maidie until she hands you some honest-to-goodness advice. Look, you’ve two days before that Mr. Man of yours goes home.

Well, if you can't make him come across in that time if you set your mind to it, may I never open my yap again! Are you goin' to let him head off home to be vamped by some young creature on the spot? You take it from me, there's someone waitin' home there with a contract from Cupe himself, and if you don't get in first she'll nab him sure as I'm not a—rhinoceros. Men are like that. No good playin' 'em too long or they'll wriggle off the hook, and the next fisherlady out with rod and line gets 'em."

"Maidie," said Delphine, laughing outright now, "you're a regular spring tonic." She added, after a time: "But, Maidie, suppose he just looks on me as a sort of—sister? He's often called me that."

"Forget this sister stuff, Del," advised Maidie. "I've seen it pulled in my day, and you can bet your best hat to a yesterday's transfer that it's just because one of the parties or both is stallin' for time or courage. Hem, maybe now this—brother of yours hasn't so much as kissed you! Eh?"

"Maidie!"

"Don't blush so. Look me in the eyes, has he?"

"Never, Maidie—never until—"

"Oh? Until when?"

"T—to-night. Just now!"

"What? For the—the first time?"

Delphine, inveigled thus into revelation of a tender and wonderful secret, buried her face in a pillow.

"Ye Gods and little fishes!" groaned Maidie. "It's just happened and she doesn't know it! Kiddo, when they kiss at the start look out for 'em, but when they kiss *at last* it's all over but the weddin' bells. What you want to weep for beats your Auntie Maidie!"

"Maidie, do you think so?"

"Dead certain."

They lay awake, talking of Harry, of Owen, of things that make for happiness and content. Sleep took them at last: Delphine to dream of monstrous trains and of ardent protestations: Maidie to find a somewhat troubled-conscience stage, directing a troupe of menagerie animals, amongst which was a huge rhinoceros, whose half-terrifying, half-reproachful glance haunted her not a little.

O n the morrow, as if the dream had not been without prophetic elements, the long expected summons to the mezzanine floor came to Maidie.

“What have you done about that little matter?” asked Radwick, his pudgy finger tapping a letter in familiar handwriting on his desk.

She said, in dull defiance: “I told her—more or less.”

“When?”

“Just lately.”

“Told her what?”

“Told her that—oh, heck, Mr. Radwick, I’m not goin’ to lie about it. I told her she better close up the deal and be done with it in case some girl back home should nab him, see? They love each other, that’s the main thing. I don’t think it’s up to me or you to bust things up. I wouldn’t hurt that kid for anything—not if it cost me my job!”

The pudgy forefinger tapped impatiently again, as if telegraphing for aid.

“How about the other girl—the one back home?”

“Is she worth hurting Delphine for?” said Maidie quickly.

He coughed deprecatingly, his heavy jowls moved as if he were swallowing a bitter pill.

“Do you think I would have asked your aid, Miss Knowles, if—” he spread his hands.

The memory of that sentence concerning the land syndicate sprang to her mind. Maidie was not without wits. And, with it, her anger spilled over.

“I don’t believe it!” she snapped. “Now I suppose you’ll fire me! I don’t care! I won’t play that kind of a game!”

He rose, not uncourteously, and showed her out, his heavy features purpling. She fled down the stairs as if the creature of her dreams were after her.

“Where were you, Maidie?” asked Delphine.

“Your Auntie Maidie has just been payin’ a flyin’ visit to the menagerie, darlie,” she said, and refused to interpret the cryptic answer, laughingly.

So Delphine went again to the New Court that night, and revived the memory of those earliest moments of acquaintance with Owen, and did not mind that he should fail to repeat the impulsive kiss of the previous night,

because again he said that on the morrow he would have something to say he long had wished to tell her.

It was midnight when she fell asleep. She heard the chiming of the hour from a neighboring church tower, and welcomed, in silent rapture mingled with pain at thought of separation, the last Saturday together.

Owen met her, by pre-arrangement, before eight, and they had time for a brisk walk to the store through the golden streets of spring. He insisted, when the lure of a specially fine display in a florist's window attracted them—daffodils, violets, roses—in delaying long enough to purchase for her a great bunch of the violets, which she set carefully away in water at the store, lest they might wilt in business hours and not be fresh for one o'clock.

"Miss West," said Freckles, the messenger, in her ear. "The Big Chief wants to see you right away!"

Maidie called the boy over after Delphine had hurried off and inquired, peremptorily, what he wanted.

"Miss West, not you, cutie! There—leggo me—I'll be good! He said to tell her he wanted her advice on some library stuff."

"Oh!" said Maidie, and bade her imagination not run away with her so easily.

It was then about ten-thirty.

Radwick greeted Delphine cheerfully, with: "They tell me, Miss West, that you are quite a connoisseur in books. You're just the person I'm looking for. I've had new shelving installed in my library and the volumes are in the deuce of a mess. Come up this afternoon, like a good girl, and lend a hand. If I let my wife and the maid loose in there alone they'll go by size and color instead of by authors and subjects, and I'll never be able to lay hands on anything again."

"I'd be very glad to help, but wouldn't it do next week?"

He shook his head ruefully.

"My wife says this afternoon—and if you knew my wife—" He laughed ponderously and pressed a pudgy thumb down firmly on the desk.

Delphine stammered: "But I'm afraid I have an important engagement for this afternoon, and—" She stopped. Radwick turned away towards the

window, through which one could look across sunlit roofs to the harbor and the funnels of lake and river steamers wintering in port. Then he faced her.

“This important engagement is with Owen Deering, isn’t it, Miss West? Don’t think I’m a mere busybody. I know Owen well, and am concerned for his own and his family’s interests.”

Delphine listened in silence to the story of Owen’s engagement, of the girl who waited until he should “make a go” of things in the city.

“Perhaps,” said Radwick, “you don’t think a man—a decent man—could do this kind of thing with her back there. Some men are very susceptible, and at least”—he smiled—“at least Owen had good reason.”

Her eyes lifted, but her gaze was not for him, nor for the distant shipping soon to be freed from winter inactivity. She was picturing the time when she, too, had trusted a man, one she had known for years, for whose home and comfort she had industriously plied her needle for months; picturing those later days when the house was full of friendly enthusiastic girls, inspecting and approving her trousseau, delighting in plans for the wedding-to-be. And then—disillusion! She did not know until afterwards that there was—another girl. He had met her on a summer motor tour. Delphine often wondered about that other girl: what she possessed that Delphine herself lacked, what subtle attraction. Tears and anger had both had their day, and merged into a disbelief in men—and men’s protestations of affection. Then, after a time, Owen, and the rebirth of faith; and now—now she knew they were all alike—men were! She might have known. She would not err again.

“What time shall I come this afternoon?” she asked.

“Eh?” He had not expected so sudden and complete a victory. “Suppose we say three?”

He saw the wisdom of it when she suggested a hasty lunch and two thirty.

Delphine’s hot blood had its way for a time, sustaining her so that she smiled and nodded at Maidie’s questioning look.

Intolerable hours, with not enough customers to distract the mind! Eleven o’clock—twelve—one!

And with one o’clock, Owen.

He waited while she went to the dressing room, and returned ready for the street.

“Aren’t you going to wear—my violets, Delphine?”

She had not meant to slight him. She pinned them on with unsteady hands. Essence of spring, these violets, of a spring morning, of streets as golden as any this side the better land! She must steel herself against the uprush of memories they provoked.

There was a tea-room near at hand, a cosy and convenient place, where not too much time would be lost from a golden afternoon. That was how he put it. She tried to tell him then, but the words refused to join themselves in sentences. At the table she managed better, telling him that the afternoon plans could not be. He thought at first she was joking; then dawning comprehension came.

“But, Delphine—our very last afternoon!”

“Our very last, Owen!” She smiled though her heart seemed suffocating. “It’s not easy, Owen, to sever a friendship like ours. It’s easier to say good-bye now.” Was it a touch of that southern blood that made her add: “Sometimes, perhaps, *she* won’t mind if you write just a note to your—sister—up in the city.”

He stared. Then he leaned forward on his elbows and faced her soberly.

“Delphine—who told you about—her?”

She said gently: “Don’t you think, Owen, it would have been nicer if I had heard it from you?”

“Who’s been telling you?” he said, in quick anger, though not at her. “I didn’t mention it, Delphine, because I feared it might spoil everything. It seems I was right.” He jabbed the tablecloth with the prongs of a fork. “Delphine, you don’t think I meant any harm, do you? I was going to tell you—everything this afternoon.” His fingers fumbled in his pockets. “Look!” He unwrapped and opened a tiny box in which a diamond ring sparkled. “I was going to tell you the history of this ring, Delphine. I admit I had it made for—her. That’s all past now, Delphine; so far past since I met you I wonder if it could ever have been. I didn’t know the world held any girls—like you, Delphine!”

He spoke very quietly, but his eyes supported the thing he said.

With the fragrance of the violets taunting her, she thought of the girl who waited, and contrived to say. “Am I to understand this is a proposal? Isn’t it rather an odd one, Owen?”

She knew, by some sure instinct, that if she was to kill memories that would warp his loyalty to the girl who waited she must do it through this last memory of all. She heard him saying:

“I don’t see anything—very odd—about it, when there’s to be no other time, Delphine.”

It seemed impossible, with the fragrance of the morning violets to quicken remembrance, that they should be sitting here so soon with the gulf widening between them. Her eyes were on the little box with its sparkling treasure, discreetly shaded from curious glances with the menu card.

“Oh,” he said slowly, “I see! It’s the ring, isn’t it? I put that rather clumsily perhaps.”

She said, deliberately; “It’s a rather secondhand thing—isn’t it?”

“Delphine—you don’t mean that!”

He was partly puzzled now; partly angry. Every resolution failed her in the face of it. The coming of a waiter saved the situation. Food was no longer a consideration. When the man had left the check, and gone, Owen said: “Will you tell me plainly just what you mean, Delphine?”

Her moment of weakness had passed. She rose and motioned for her coat. He aided her mechanically.

“I mean,” said Delphine, looking up at him with a friendly little smile born of struggle. “I mean that when you’re away I want you to forget all about—this—and remember a girl up in the city who was just a comrade, a sister, to you—nothing more.”

They found their way out. The streets were thronged with people, for the April half-holiday invited.

“Is that final, Delphine?”

“Yes, Owen. I’m sorry. . . . Good-bye, Owen! I can get my car at the corner here!”

“That won’t take you home.”

“I’m not going home yet.”

She gave him her hand for a brief moment. He aided her to climb aboard a crowded street-car, and when the crush behind her had cleared, she looked for him but he had vanished.

Spring sunset came to the library of Radwick, the manager, touching the leaded glass of windows and shelves. The others had wearied of their task, but Delphine kept on. They would have had her join them in the evening meal, but she preferred, she said, a cup of tea in the library. She was interested, and would like to finish. It was rather a feverish desire to escape from thought.

She sat down to take the cup of tea, and found herself fatigued beyond words. The shaded lights, the lingering sunset, the cosy comfort of the place brought to mind intimate conversations with Owen, when they had talked—as young folk will do—of such a home as this, in generalities of course, that were none the less delicious intimacies. Dreams! Dreams—and disillusion! Was that all life held for her? Her eyes, regarding the appointments of the room, fell upon the violets again. The maid had set them in a little cut-glass bowl for her. They were within reach of where she sat. She drew them to her, and suddenly buried her face in their fragrance, kissing them . . . kissing them. . . .

As she had known that night just how it was with her heart, so now came a conviction that his love was genuine, the most genuine thing that life had offered, and she had sent him from her. Surely the other girl could not care as she did, with all the passion of her being. She set the violets on the table, and leaned forward, pillowing her head on her arms.

“Tired, Miss West?”

She had not heard Radwick’s heavy tread on the rugs.

“Better call it a day. I’m ever so grateful!”

He did not raise her head; she dare not. He approached and understood. She heard his peculiar elephantine tread as he went to the window again, and stood staring out into the twilight, whistling a peculiar strain in a minor key. Presently he came near again, said repetitiously: “I guess you’re tired. Miss West. Better call it a day. I’ll have my man run you home in the car.”

He seemed terribly uneasy, his big body teetering back and forth. She rose mechanically. He was still whistling in that plaintive minor key.

Something within her seemed to snap.

“Stop that!” she cried. “Do you want me to go crazy?”

They stood facing each other, the one who had sacrificed and the one who had invoked the sacrifice; employer and employed.

Upon this strange impasse came the announcement of a soft-voiced maid:

“Someone to see Miss West, sir. Shall I send her in!”

And immediately afterwards a presence within this room of books and art as alien as the proverbial bull in a china shop, and quite as upsetting to the owner!

“Say, look here you!” demanded Maidie, aggressively confronting the managerial rhinoceros, “what kind of a game are you tryin’ to play anyway—between him and her—eh?”

Radwick retreated a step; Maidie advanced.

“Do you know,” continued Maidie, “that this poor little kid’s best fellow’s leavin’ on the Limited at eight-thirty, and if we don’t lasso him at once we’re done for?”

“Really, Miss Knowles—”



"Don't talk!" admonished Maidie. "Just listen! You, too, kid. Here's the straight dope on the whole affair."

"Don't talk!" admonished Maidie. "Just listen! You, too, kid. Here's the straight dope on the whole affair. My day on to-day, you know. Owen Deering comes in about five. Wants to say good-bye and all that. I sat him where you was, Del, and he began pawing the air verbal. Well, I'm not much on books, but I can read *men*, and I began to quote verse and chapter until I got the story out of him. I remembered you being up in the menagerie, Del—I mean the office—and it didn't take much figuring out.

"Funny how he took it—Owen, I mean.

"Does she think I'm that kind of a man?" he says.

"Stop the cars, Mr. Man!" I told him. 'Remember she's been through this kinda thing before, and even Auntie Maidie's lookin' out right now for an alibi. If you have one,' I says, 'spring it quick!'

Then he tells me all about this girl. Seems like his stepmother—his own's been dead this long while—fancied the girl for him. So did his pa. You know how those things work. Besides they was brought up together from kids with that idea, side by side, and expected to fall for each other later on. Well, bein' dutiful kids, they did, in a way, and not knowin' much how love

works. Then she began to get about a bit more, and went around with other boys a lot. Owen wasn't that kind, and it got him ruffled. His maw saw trouble coming, and worked it that the engagement was announced, and Owen up and got the ring. When he went to give it to the girl she stalled, like it was a halter he was handin' her. She says: 'You've always wanted to try out the city; go ahead now and we'll test what it's like bein' apart a while. If you meet anybody you like better, all right. Same with me.' It took him in the wind. I guess. Was a bit of a woman-hater when he hit town. Then he met up with Del here, and fell hard, and his maw got wind of it and told the girl, who got green-eyed, and did a flip-flap back from the rabble she'd been queenin' over to Owen again.

"That's the yarn—Owen was afraid if he mentioned it to Del it might queer things at first, and afterwards it grew harder to do, and he thought he'd wait until the time was right to tell the kid here how he felt about *her*."

"Of course he didn't know that his folks was pullin' him back through Mr. Radwick here. When I told him that, he says: 'The guv'nor had quite a bit of pull with the big chief. They're mixed up in some land deal together, and I guess Radwick's in a bit deep!'"

Maidie paused.

Radwick began his uneasy teetering again.

For Delphine, the world was opening up to her vision as a most amazing world, one that swept about in cycles of alternate joy and despair.

"You'll have to move quick!" said Maidie.

"What can I do?" asked Delphine dazedly, "I've sent him away."

The other girl stamped her foot.

"You do make me mad sometimes, Del," she cried. "Sent him away, indeed! Then get after him, and bring him back. He's got it into his silly head that you don't care for him that way, and that you won't even respect him if he don't go back to this person at home. Do you want him to waste himself on a cat-in-the-manger who's got about as much love for him as I have for a—rhinoceros?"

"But I couldn't run after—"

"No, of course, you couldn't! It ain't ladylike maybe? Look, do you love the man or don't you? Then get on your things. Harry's outside waitin', and we'll hop a car to the station. Twenty minutes to get there with luck, and

you'll have ten to spare. It's just eight now." She glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece.

"That clock's fifteen minutes slow," said Radwick's voice.

Delphine raised suddenly to the starry heights, sank again. She looked at Maidie, but for once the girl was helpless in a crisis.

"Get on your things," said the managerial rhinoceros, curtly. "My car's outside. I've made the station in eleven minutes before!"

Radwick drove himself. He mumbled something about his man being new and cautious. The speed was breakneck. A traffic policeman signalled frantically at one corner, but Radwick grinned like a boy unexpectedly released from school, and went ahead. Maidie, sitting beside him, forgot herself, and pounded him ecstatically on the knee.

Delphine had a confused impression of crowds; lights; the grey station-building; the last crawl up to the entrance; hurrying crowds; the sound of a bell; Radwick's voice bellowing authoritatively; the clanging of a gate in their faces. Beyond the gate a train steamed, with maddening slowness, out into the darkness, its tail lights winking maliciously.

Radwick, Maidie and Harry remained in altercation with the guard at the gate. Delphine stood alone, knowing only that he had gone—that she had come too late. An official asked her:

"Did you miss your train? Where did you wish to go?"

She shook her head.

"It was just a—somebody I wanted to see—to meet."

"Next gate for incoming trains," he told her, and passed on. She saw then a stream of people issuing from the platform into the rotunda, and it flashed across her, as she watched the interchange of greetings, that for some at least it was true that "Journeys end in lovers' meetings." Perhaps the—the other girl would be there to meet Owen. Delphine wondered if she were very pretty.

Then, as she looked, she saw him coming, boyishly radiant at sight of her, bag in hand as if just arriving by the inward train.

"Owen!"

"Delphine, dear!"

She said, breathlessly: “Then you saw us come in?”

“Saw nothing!”

“Then—”

“I just couldn’t leave the city *you* live in, dear, until—” He glanced around. “It’s quite customary here,” he said, and kissed her. “They’ll probably think you’re my sister—but they’ll guess wrong, sweetheart!”

The ruffled group at the gate retired worsted in the verbal altercation with the gateman. Maidie found herself being subjected to ferocious nudges by the manager, followed by such a wink as a sportive rhinoceros might give.

“Look!” he said.

Maidie obeyed. She would have rushed forward joyfully, but Radwick touched her arm.

“This way out!” he said. “I’ll drive you people anywhere you say, but I fancy those children can find their way home without outside aid!”

At twelve that night, Delphine came in radiant, and woke Maidie up to admire the ring.

“It’s made from his own mother’s wedding ring,” she said. “Oh, Maidie dear!”

“You’re shivering, kid!”

“With happiness, Maidie!” She leaned over and kissed Maidie, and a big tear plopped down on the girl’s cheek. “Oh, Maidie dear,” she whispered, “if it hadn’t been for you! Owen sent his thanks, too. He’s off home on the milk train, so he’ll not be very late getting there.”

Maidie covered her embarrassment at tearful thanks by simulating sleep. Delphine shut off the light at last.

It must have been fully two o’clock when Maidie whispered:

“Asleep, Del?”

“No!”—drowsily.

“Tell me,” demanded Maidie, presently “do you think if you was to prick right through the hide of a rhinoceros you’d find he had feelings like other animals?”

Delphine did not answer. She had drifted away on the magic carpet of sleep into a land of romance much more interestingly peopled, into which pleasant land some waking influence carried a prophetic element of reality.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Sister Stuff* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]