

THE PRUNING OF YOUNG HAL

by Beth Slater Whitson

The whole of the office bunch was on hand when young Hal got back from his ten days' prospecting for new ore beds--to see' him get his first glimpse of Kate O'Guinn. For all of them knew young Hal's weakness for pretty women. His aunt, Mrs. Grey—wife of the Iron Company's president—was always inviting good-looking girls down to Progress for the weekend, hoping—so it was rumored—to wed her harum-scarum nephew off to one of the wealthy set before he had the chance to marry a pretty face without a bank-roll accompaniment.

He was a handsome young devil—young Hal—and 'twas whispered that he went all the gaits when he got in the glare of the bright lights. But, however that may have been, there wasn't a man about the furnace town who wouldn't have gone greatly out of his way to do the boy a favor, and not one who ever asked assistance of him failed to get it.

The Greys were in Europe at that time —for these were the days when the war dogs over there were merely growling in their throats at each other—and young Hal was virtually head of affairs. So, when he heard of some ore-beds which he thought might be useful to the company later on, he went right off to investigate, for the youngster had a level head on him in spite of his dare-devil ways.

It was while he was away that Mary Bennett, the stenographer, announced at closing time, after a gloomy day, that she was dead tired of living in a place where there were no street cars, nor moving picture shows—for Progress, you know, was hardly bigger than one of our new Panama postage stamps—and she was going back to God's country on the early morning train. She went, too; and little Fanning, the bookkeeper, flew about for a couple of days like a chicken with its head off, but on the third day he got in long distance communication with the Greenville Employment Agency.

"We have only one available stenographer," they told him, "and she can't or won't furnish any references."

"Damn the references," little Fanning shouted right over the telephone, "Send it on."

And the next day Kate O'Guinn came to Progress and set the whole place raving about her before the train that brought her made its return trip. For the tale of her beauty spread about the place like wildfire and every man who found it possible to leave his post for a few minutes trumped up an excuse of some kind for dropping into the office that first day to get a look at her.

She was a beauty, too—the Lord Almighty must have been proud of his handiwork. As a rule, folks' tastes don't ran to colorless individuals, and all the color there was to Kate O'Guinn was in her lips and iris-blue eyes, for her hair was black as a starless midnight—but the male populatii of Progress decided to a man that Kate O'Guinn's style of beauty had every other kind beaten to a frazzle—color or no color. She was not the little cuddling kind, either, for the top of her queenly head could easily touch a man's chin who stood six feet two.

That first night at the boarding-house—Mother Evans openly asserted that such a thing had never before happened during her reign there—every man boarder was in his place when the

supper-bell rang—even grouchy Bill Griffith, who had always come late and ate alone because, as he explained, he liked good company—came sheepishly in with the others. Kate O'Guinn was not there, and a look of disappointment went round the table. But she came when the meal was half through, and they rose as one man and stood until she was seated. Just as if she had been royalty! And she could have passed for a princess, too, with the royal, gracious bearing of her! Looking at her, so thoroughbred and all, it was some time before you began to see there was something kind o' wistful and sorrowful about her—something you couldn't just lay your finger on—but you felt a little ache in your throat, and when she gave you one of her rare smiles, you had an odd feeling that there were tears just back of it in spite of its brightness.

Some of the younger set, wanting to show her they were of the big world worldly, got up at the table and toasted her arrival in Mother Evans' good sweet milk, and for a moment a little stain of color showed in her cheeks and her eyes had the wide, strained look of one having an unpleasant mental vision. Then she responded with a dignity quite in keeping with her beauty.

"To my new friends," she said clearly—"I have no old ones."

A little ripple of surprise went around the bunch, but they drank her toast, and she began to live in their hearts from that night.

"Mr. Fanning," she said next day at noon, in that clear, soft, convincing way she had. "Let's take a half holiday and make a few changes: about the office."

And the way little Fanning tumbled to the suggestion made the others sit back and stare open-mouthed. Not one of them would have dared to suggest any such thing to Fanning, for he was cock of the walk about the office. Yet, within twenty minutes Kate O'Guinn had him on a step-ladder wiping off dust which had been accumulating for years, while "Shine," the good-for-nothing office boy, was scrubbing the floor as if his life depended upon it.

When it was all clean, the girl stood and looked it over with a critical, calculating eye.

"It needs just one thing more," she said as if to herself.

"What is it, Miss O'Guinn?" Tom Allen asked quickly, getting ahead of little Fanning.

"A rug of some kind," she answered musingly, "but—I suppose that is out of question."

"Of course it isn't out of question," Fanning broke in. "We'll send for one."

But while they were discussing it, Tom disappeared, and was back in a moment, dragging one of those pretty grass rugs - Creux, I think they call them—and Kate O'Guinn gave a little exclamation of such pure delight that Tom's mouth was in danger of being stretched seriously from, grinning.

"Knox keeps 'em in the store," he explained.

It was a dull green and brown thing, and when it was on the floor and the chairs all cleaned with something Kate called oil polish, the place was downright pretty.

The boys got just a bunch of thanks for their work, but they all looked as if they considered themselves well paid. And some time during the night a couple of foot-mats made their appearance outside the office door and just above them a conspicuous sign which read: "Clean your feet here. We have cleaned inside," showing they had taken to the new order of things.

By the time young Hal was scheduled to return those boys were the new stenographer's most devoted subjects. Yet, oddly enough, not one of them but had given her to the young boss in their secret thoughts.

Old number four on which young Hal was due came in just as Kate O'Guinn was closing her desk for the night, and by the time the boy had gotten his traps together, stopped for a moment's chat with Smeedie, the operator, and reached the office door, Kate had set her desk tidy, put on her hat and was on her way out. So they met—the arc-light above the door shining full on the face of each as they stood for a moment looking steadily into each other's eyes.

"Holy Jupiter!" Young Hal said at last, in a slow, astonished way, blocking the door and letting his bold gaze rove from the girl to the transformed office and back to her. "I must have blown into the wrong place," he went on, addressing the office bunch which sat like dumb in sheer amusement—but looking steadily at the loveliest face he had ever seen—"and it would please me"—with a wave of the A., hand which included the girl and the office—"to have all this explained."

"It would please me," returned Kate O'Guinn in that low, convincing way of hers, "to pass out."

And young Hal, reddening to his shiny, blond hair, swept off his hat, and moving aside with a word of apology, watched her go, then turned to the boys with the look of a man who has been stirred deeply: "The future Mrs. Carney, boys." And that was his greeting after a ten days' absence.

That was the beginning of the oddest love affair Progress had ever known. It was one-sided so far as appearances went. But little Fanning and Mother Evans, who saw Kate O'Guinn at close range day by day, knew it to be a battle of hearts—7 young Hal fighting to win and the girl to resist.

From the first night of their meeting, young Hal was a changed boy so far as Isis wild, reckless ways were concerned. The Saturday night "big time," when the boys drank a little and went about the town singing and carousing until early in the morning, he immediately foreswore—and when the boys openly reproached him one morning at the office for the desertion, he looked his astonishment.

"It's all right for you youngsters," he said at last, in a paternal manner, "but a man who is fixing to get married—"But who's fixing to get married!" they shouted hilariously.

"Myself, to be sure," retorted young Hal and Kate O'Guinn looked up quickly from her typewriter, her iris-blue eyes showing the grip of fear about her heart, for she had refused him only the week before.

Seeing young Hal's eyes upon her, she set to work again hastily, but her fingers trembled and faltered over the keys, making a jumble of letters that spelled nothing while the boys went on jollyng their one-time pal.

"We haven't read any announcement in the papers," they laughed.

"You'll be doing so soon," returned young Hal placidly, and leaving his desk, he 'went and stood looking over Kate O'Guinn's shoulder at the foolish writing.

"Don't spoil your letters like that, my dear," he said tenderly, "there isn't anyone else, I was just coasting on you saying 'yes' next time."

This girl lost her pallor in a burning blush and she turned toward young Hal, a sharp retort trembling on her lips, but it died short at the look of the face bending over her, and after a moment her own was hidden in her hands with a little sob, which sent the boys scurrying, aghast at what they had done, yet hoping the two, left alone, would come to an understanding.

But next day showed clearly no change in the relationship. Young Hal went about with the look of a hurt dog and the girl stuck to her work with tenacity, only speaking when she was spoken to, and that was not often, for the boys wished to show their disapproval of the manner in which she treated their idol.

Matters stood like this for several days, then, growing ashamed, they brought her a peace-offering of roses which they had ordered down from Greenville to mates those young Hal brought every other day from the Grey conservatory. None of them ever forgot the sweet, sorrowful smile with which she received their offering. It was as if she were saying: "Boys, be kind, I am suffering too, in making your friend unhappy"

"A strange gurrel," Mother Evans would sometimes remark, "who would turn down a fine lad like young Hal."

"A queer, girl," little Fanning said to himself, coming noiselessly into the office one day and finding the girl with her face hidden in the folds of young Hal's old shooting-coat, which he had left there in his careless way—patting it softly as a mother caresses a baby. "A queer girl," he repeated, slipping stealthily out again.

Spring slipped languidly into summer and the summer days drifted one by one into the great crucible of time—and autumn came to Progress, and still there was no appreciable change in Kate O'Guinn's manner toward young Hal. And no change in his dogged determination to win what he wanted.

To most of the other boys Kate had become a second mother. She mended and sewed on buttons, pressed ties and tied them, and did the things for those boys their own mothers would have done. Reminded by leer, they took to writing home weekly; and there were fewer drinks taken in Progress after she was heard to remark that it seemed a pity fine brains were so often dulled by drink. Yet there was a certain aloofness about her that kept them all worshipping, at a distance—all but young Hal. With all her dignity, she seemed unable to erect a barrier that would shut her away from the love of him—the tender thoughtfulness of him. The struggle to resist him was beginning to tell on her, when Jimmy Cole fell sick. And after nursing him at nights—he wouldn't rest unless she, was within call of him—she would come to the office so white and weary-looking, and when young Hal would gently remonstrate with leer 'for not getting; any rest, it would seem sometimes as if she were about to give up the fight and surrender herself to young Hal's strong arms as she had been waiting for her to do so long. It was when Jimmy was convalescing that she came nearest to doing this. On the night following the day on which the doctor had pronounced him out of danger, worn out with so many nights of watching, she fell asleep on the front steps, and little Fanning, coming in late, found her there

with a light rain blowing in upon her. He roused her, railing at her carelessness, and sent her off shivering in her rain-wet clothes, for a hot bath.

But the mischief was done and the next Morning her chair at else office was empty and young Hal was raging up and down the boarding-house hall, waiting to hear what the doctor had to say. It was little enough—God knows!—only "a very bad cold from exposure"—but all the week that. Kate's chair remained vacant, he went about the office as if someone were dead close about. And when, at the end of the week, she came back, bringing a hacking cough and a bright spot on either cheek, it seemed the boy couldn't rest for worrying about her.

At last, one morning when just he and little Fanning were there when the girl came, he went over to where she stood unfastening her coat.

"Sweetheart," he said just as if they were all alone, "aren't you tired of fighting yet? Don't you love me enough to let me take care of you?" And little Fanning, who tried to look away and couldn't, saw the slow tears steal down her cheeks as she faced young Hal, and heard her say in such a broken voice:

"O, Hal – Hal, if I only could!" And then Little Fanning slipped out to keep watch on the steps so that no one should disturb the two within.

But he might as well have spared his efforts, for presently young Hal came out and went by without a word, his lips set in grins lines, and back in the office he found Kate O'Guinn groping among papers on her desk with shaking hands, and looking with wide, anguished eyes through them and beyond them.

That morning seemed to end, young Hal's courtship. He stayed away from the office a few days and then came back laughing and joking as if he had never had a bad half hour because a girl had turned him down.

The Greys sent a telegram about the first of October that they, were back in New York and would be home the next Week, bringing guests. And at that young Hal laughed more than ever.

"There'll be some big doings at the house," he said to little Fanning, but looking straight at Kate O'Guinn, "some swell skirts in Aunt Mame's crowd, I'll bet, and just to think of playing a week or two with a lot of pretty women." It was something like this every time he came in the office and always he looked at. Kate instead of little Fanning. If he saw how her hands sometimes trembled it was balm to his wounded, lacerated feelings.

If his cheerfulness was an imitation, it was nevertheless a good brand and hard to tell from genuine. Whether Kate O'Guinn knew which fit was, is only a matter of conjecture. She merely leaned a-bit closer to her typewriter those days, and through those immediately following the return of the company's president and his wife and their guests. For young Hal became the ring leader of the merriest bunch of youngsters that had ever been in Progress. And Kate could bear them passing through the office yard, going down to greet the train, young Hal's, voice the gayest of all. Sometimes her head would 'droop a bit lower over her work—the only sign she gave of having heard, and little Fanning, seeing, would get a lump in his throat. For his eyes told him, even while he denied it vehemently, that while the boy was playing, and deliberately keeping away from the office, the girl was getting thinner and whiter every day, only the bit of color' in her cheeks

burned on brighter than ever, it seemed, and she was more beautiful ven than when she came to Progress.

Sometimes such far-reaching results hinge on such small, insignificant actions, Little Fanning, puzzled over a trivial account, sent for young Hal. It was Saturday afternoon; and if Kate O'Guinn had, - like the others excepting little Fanning; taken advantage of the quarter holiday which the company allowed the office force on Saturdays, she would have been well out, of the place before young Hal came. But she had fallen behind in her work and was glad of the extra hours in which to catch up. And so it happened that when young Hal came, bringing with him a strikingly handsome man, whom he introduced to little Fanning as "Mr. Hadley, one of Mr. Grey's guests," Kate was still there arid deeply absorbed in her work—so much so, in fact, that she failed to look up when they entered.

It was when young Hal, having unraveled the tangle for little Fanning, instead of going as she expected, came over and stood by her desk, that she first lifted her face – and before either had spoken, Hadley was standing by the side of young Hal, his gaze riveted on the girl, his lips twitching oddly.

"Kate Dulaney!" he exclaimed in a thick, astonished voice.

"Kate O'Guinn!" the girl corrected him coldly, composedly.

Young Hal stood looking in a bewildered way, and Fanning had risen.

"I am often mistook for the Dulaney girl." Kate went on in a dangerously calm voice, "and I have lost many of my best positions on account of her – Mr.Hadley, you know," – leaning towards him, her eyes like blue points of flame – "her reputation is not the best, and one hardly feels flattered to be called by that name."

Hadley's face blanched. "I don't want to quarrel with you," he said unsteadily, "I want to marry you, Kate."

"Marry me!" mocked the girl. "It is Kate Dulaney you should find and marry – if she will have you."

Young Hal's hand fell heavily on her arm.

"What is there between you two?" he demanded sternly.

"Nothing," returned Kate promptly – but her eyes never left Hadley's face, and her voice rang hard as steel.

"What is it to you, Carney?" retorted the other.

"I want to know whatever concerns the woman I love." Young Hal moved closer to the girl, and he noted that she was trembling from head to foot.

Hadley gave a little groan and gripped the back of a chair as if for support.

"Tell him!" Kate repeated – "how you came into her life and brought scandal and disgrace upon her in the end. Tell him how you persuaded her, an orphan, away for the only home she had ever known,

then told her brutally that you had no thought of marrying her. Tell him how she ran away from you and walked the streets night and day until, half starved, she attempted to end her misery in the river, only to be rescued and disbelieved when she told her story. Tell him how she went back to the place where she had lived and was stoned until she crept away half dead and without the courage to finish the job – and how her story followed wherever she went until she changed her name and by accident found a place where no one knew –“

“God in Heaven!” young Hal turned upon the man who still sat in dumb misery. “He isn’t worth killing, girl,” he said after a moment’s contemplation. “Is this why you would have none of my love?”

Kate nodded dumbly.

Little Fanning groped blindly for the door, and the three were left alone. “How soon can you get ready to leave, Hadley?” young Hal asked sternly, and the other answered as if with a great effort.

“Don’t be too hard on me, Carney, he said wearily, “I’ve paid doubly every moment since that – that hour I lost her. I’ve been consumed with a fierce longing for her.” And the girl and young Hal, looking upon his haggard, suffering face, knew in some way that he was speaking the truth, and for a moment the girl forgot her own agony.

“The future is open to you for atonement.”

“The marry me, Kate,” he returned quickly, a look of something like hope in his eyes

“No! No!” The girl’s answer was a little vehement cry – and young Hal, turning, held out his arms.

“I want you, too – more than ever, sweetheart,” he said humbly. But she shrank back, her hands out in protest – “Not only a woman with a past, Hal,” she said brokenly.

“I hold you harmless, dear.”

“But the stain – Hal – men hold women lightly who have trailed their garments in the dust – however innocent – and a brand remains, whether deserved or not.” Her voice was piteous.

“This is one man chops off the branches and gives himself a chance to grow bigger.”

Young Hal drew her into his arms and kissed her solemnly.

“I’m sorry for you, Hadley,” he said a moment later, as the other stumbled toward the door like a drunken man.

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