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Not A Care in the World

BY LAURETTA MULLIKIN

It was long after the conventional cocktail hour, but the couple in the booth nearest the piano were still drinking daiquiris. The girl had long, dark hair which seemed a perfect frame for her young, doll-like face. Her eyes were large and serious as she looked at the boy across the table. He had an athlete's build and a juvenile pink-and-whiteness; but, despite his blond crew-cut and youthful appearance, his expression indicated a depth and maturity which seemed beyond his years. They sat in an atmosphere of intensity. Their heads were close together, and though their conversation was too low to be overheard, it was evident that they were engrossed in each other and oblivious to anyone else.

"Funny," she said, "I've been dreading this for over a year, and now that it's happened I can't believe it. Let's have another drink; I can't have a crying jag here."

"I've always said, 'They don't take guys like me out of school . . . it can't happen to me,' and it never has—until now. I go for my physical Wednesday. We've put off getting married too long, and now it's too late."

"Why can't we? Why do we have to wait for the right time when there isn't any right time? I know I said I wouldn't want to, but suppose . . . I mean . . ."

"Yeah, I know," he replied gravely, "but I couldn't do that to you; no church wedding and all that. That's what every woman wants; you wouldn't feel married without it. And I'd be leaving you in such a short time. I might be away for God knows how long; might never come back."

"Oh, please let's not think about that now! I couldn't stand that whether we were married or not. Why can't we have what we can while there's still time?"

"Look, if we did get married now I don't have a damn thing. You know that. All I have is a few hundred from cashed-in war bonds. What would you do after I'm gone?"

"I don't know. I wish you weren't so rational about some things."

"But I'm thinking only of you," he said, giving her hand a squeeze. "For my part, I'd marry you this minute."

The waiter brought two new drinks and took away their empty glasses. He eyed the girl speculatively, wondering whether he should ask her age; she certainly didn't look twenty-one. But something about her expression and the atmosphere which surrounded them prevented his intrusion. He dumped the littered ash-tray onto his tray, polished it with a damp cloth, and walked back to the bar, where he exchanged disinterested small talk with the bartender.

Business was slow tonight; only that young couple in the circular booth and the middle-aged man and women eating dinner at a table near the bar. The woman was wearing a corsage . . . a bottle of champagne decorated their table. The waiter looked at his watch. Hell, only eight-thirty; five more hours to go—five hours of taking orders and complaints, asking ages, wiping tables and maneuvering precariously balanced trays of glasses through the crowd, which would filter in about ten o'clock. And the worst part of it all—always standing. The boy in the booth signalled for two more. Must be nice to have that kind of money, he thought bitterly, and throw it away on liquor and women.

When the waiter brought their last drinks, the young couple toasted and then sat staring abstractly into their glasses. The girl gripped the stem of her glass tightly as if her whole future were contained in its depths, and suddenly drank the rest of it with a stiff, unbecoming motion. The boy looked at her sharply.

"Look, if you're game, I am. I want to do the best I can for you, but if you're serious . . . Will you marry me tonight?"

"Yes, I will," she replied decisively.

"You know what it's going to mean, and you won't be sorry?"

"No, I won't; I'd be sorry if I didn't."

"I want you to be sure you're doing the right thing."

"I was never so sure of anything else in my life."

As a door swung open admitting several newcomers to the lounge, there was a snatch of a song from a party in the banquet room of the club. ". . . tomorrow may bring sorrow, So tonight let's all be gay . . ." The door shut and the voices stopped.

"Let's go," he said quickly. "Check, please."

The waiter handed him a long column of figures; he hadn't realized there'd been so many. He fumbled in his pocket and produced a sizable wad of bills; the waiter caught sight of tens and twenties. He found the right change and a very modest tip, looked again at the figures which seemed slightly blurred, and restored the rest of the money to his pocket. "Thank you, Sir," said the waiter grudgingly as he picked up their empty glasses.

"We can go right from here," the boy said quietly. "Every cent I own is in my pocket, and we might as well spend all of it. I can't think of a better way than to spend it on you." He looked at her tenderly, giving her arm a squeeze. She smiled back at him confidently.

The waiter looked after them sullenly. "You know," he said to the bartender, "it's them spoiled, rich kind are the stingy ones; wouldn't ya know it?" The bartender pulled down one side of his mouth and nodded wisely in the manner of all bartenders who have seen too much of life to be anything but cynical.

The middle-aged woman at the table smiled benignly at the girl as the young couple passed by them thinking back on her youth. She looked at the boy and then at her husband. What a nice-looking couple, she thought. How wonderful to be young and not have a care in the world.