Happy Go Lucky

by MRS. HARRY PUCH SMITH

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CHAPTER V

Continued from last week

He was waiting that day when Barbara came out of the Clarion Building, his face shining, his eyes very bright as he caught her arm. Barbara thought she had never seen him look handsomer or gayer. He squeezed her arm as they walked across to the restaurant. "You'd better hang on," he whispered. "It's all I can do to keep my feet on the ground. Am I happy!"

"Oh, Tony!" cried Barbara. "Aren't we lucky?"

"I'll say" he exclaimed.

Barbara was glad to be alone when she attempted their first meal at the flat. She had bought a cook book the week before and surreptitiously studied it. It sounded quite simple. She stopped at the market when she left the office and bought lamb chops, green peas, lettuce and asparagus for salad, as well as staples like flour and coffee and sugar. She was astonished at the size of the bill. She had imagined that when one cooked one's own meals they cost practically nothing.

She put the chops in the broiler exactly as the cook book directed. She began to shell the peas. She had not dreamed it would take so long. Finally she had them on, but by that time the chops were beginning to burn around the edges. She turned the flame down. According to the cook book muffins could be dashed together in a jiffy. By the time she had them ready, she discovered that the oven was cold and the chops had stopped cooking. She turned the flame up to the full and popped the muffins in. At that moment the peas boiled over. She poured some of the water off and started to set the table and fix the salad. She smelled the peas before they boiled quite dry, although they had a scorched look, and then the chops burned.

She hadthe door open to the service porch to clear away the smoke from the chops when Tony walked in. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "what are you trying to do, kid? Asphyxiate us?"

Barbara burst into tears. "Every thing's gone wrong. Every single thing!"

Tony chuckled. "For heaven's sake, sugar, don't cry. We'll go out to eat."

"I wanted to eat at home," wailed Barbara.

Tony pulled her apron off and used it to dry her eyes. "I'm game if you are," he said.

"But the chops are burned and the peas are scorched and the muffins look like shiveled bricks."

"Shucks," said Tony, biting into one, "they taste larruping."

"You're just saying that," Barbara accused bitterly. "They're awful."

"Not on your life," iled Tony. "I always did like chops well done."

"That's why you tell the waiter you want them rare."

Tony pinched her cheek. "Anyway, the salad's elegant."

"Because even a moron can wash lettuce and spread asparagus out of a can on it," said Barbara with a sniffle.

Barbara was dead tired when everyone was put away. She could scarcely keep her eyes open till they finished in the kitchen, although it was only nine o'clock. "Want to go to a picture?" asked Tony.

Barbara hesitated. "I—I thought you might like to—to—" she choked down a yawn, "—work on the play."

Tony laughed. "Dead on your feet, aren't you?"

"A little," she confessed. "It's been a long day."

"What you need is to sleep the clock around, Mrs. Blake," said Toney. He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. He got her pajamas for her. He knelt down and took off her shoes. Barbara had never felt so cherished in her life. Long after Tony had gone to sleep she lay awake, counting the beads of her happiness. Cuddled cdose inside Tony's muscular arm, she could only think how fortunate she was because he loved her and she belonged to him and nothing could come between them—nothing!

Life settled down into a routine fast enough for the Tony Blakes. By the first of July Barbara could hardly remember when she had not been married. Everything that went before seemed both vague and insignificant beside being Tony's wife. Nothing seemed important but Tony. However, common sense was Barbara's strong point. There was the matter of their financial condition. It worried Barbara from the first.

"What the heck?" Tony said. "I never got in a pinch in my life that something didn't turn up."

"I know, Tony," she protested, "but if one has a stake ahead, he is independent. I mean, wouldn't it be wonderful if you could quit your job entirely and devote your time to finishing your play?"

Tony was struck with the idea. "Say, that's the stuff! Why did I never think of it? Have you got a head on your shoulders, Mrs. Blake, or have you? Believe me, from now on I'm going to pinch pennies till they squeal."

Barbara was delighted. She went to bed that night thrilingly happy. She felt a little smug about how tactful she had been and what a good influence she was proving on her husband, but the very next day Tony bought a new car. "You were going to save your money," protested Barbara.

"That's why," explained Tony. "Old Liz was getting to where she was eating her head off with repairs. It's really economy, sugar, to trade in your old flivver before it falls to pieces. I'll save enough on oil and flat tires for the monthly payments."

Barbara felt a little desperate. However, the new car was nice and Tony was delighted withit.

Barbara had made up her mind on her honeymoon to like Tony's gang, but they frittered away his time. She had been so excited about Tony's play. She had thought he would go right ahead and finish it. He appeared to be as eager to do so as she was to have him work on it. Nevertheless, after that first night when they dined alone, she and Tony never seemed to find an evening when he was free to write. Barbara never knew when she fixed dinner how many to expect. Tony was just as likely to bring a couple of his cronies home with him as not.

Tony was inordinately vain of how well she was learning to cook. He was forever bragging to his friends about what a swell little housekeeper Barbara was turning into. She had taken the money out of her savings and fixed up the flat. She and Tony together painted the woodwork a pale yellow and retinted the walls a delicate buff shade. It looked like a different place and she kept it shining.

The gang carefully talked down to her, as if they were trying to put her at hear ease in anatmosphere a little too rarefied for her mentality. "They're always talking about the books they are going to write and the pictures they are going to paint," Barbara told Hank Woods once, "but that's as far as they ever go, just talking."

Her hands were cold and her voice shook a little. "How long, that you know of, has Tony been going to do a play when he got around to it?" she asked.

Hank shook his head. "I believe we were in the eighth grade at grammar school the first time he mentioned it."

Barbara winced. "Has he ever got past the opening scene?"

"Never got past the firstpage, so far as I can figure," said Hank.

That night Barbara could not sleep. After a while Tony woke. "What's thematter, sugar?" he asked drowsily. "Got a pain somewhere?"

Barbara put her head on his shoulder. "Just restless," she said.

"What bothers my gal?" he asked. "Tell me and I'll give it the works."

Barbara did not want to let him know that shewas afraid he might go on and on like the rest of his friends, talking big about what he was going to do, but never accomplishing anything. Finally, stammering a lot and pausing occasionally to hunt for a better word, she got it all out.

Tony laughed ruefully. "Good Lord, sugar, I was afraid you were going to say you didn't love me any more."

"I'll always love you, Tony," said Barbara with a sob. "That's why I can't bear to think of your wasting your talents. You—you're worth giving your best to."

Tony cleared his throat. "You're right about everything. Barbara I've been a chump. Spreading myself all over the earth and never getting anywhere. Thank God, you've opened my eyes. It's going to be different from now on. Beginning tomorrow night I'll try to behave like an adult. Will that satisfy you, Mrs. Blake?"

Barbara flinched. "I don't want you to think I'm finding fault, Toby. It's just that—that—"

"Sure," he interrupted, giving her a kiss. "I understand. It's just that I need to get down to brass tacks and I will, so help me! I'll be at the old typewriter tomorrow night ten minutes after we wash the supper dishes — you'll see."

Before they left for the office the next morning he cleaned and oiled his machine and asked Barbara to meet him at lunch to get some new ribbons and a ream of white paper. "I've been kidding myself for years about going to do the darned thing," he confessed with a wry grin. "I guess if I hadn't insulted you, I'd have gone on for the rest of my life kidding myself about being a great dramatist some day. By George, if I put it over, I know who'll deserve the credit."

Barbar's heart soared. "You'll put it over!" she cried, her eyes shining. "You couldn't fail at anything you honestly tried to do."

When she came down that afternoon, Tony was waiting for her in the car. "Hurry up, kid. We're going down to Mother's for the night She thinks we've been neglecting her."

Barbara stared at him. "But you were going to work on the play tonight!"

"Sure only we can't let Mum get her feelings hurt. I'll start tomorrow, cross my heart. You believe me, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, of course," she stammered. It seemed dreadful, but somehow she was slowly and painfully relinquishing her faith in Tony's facile promises. He meant them when he made them, but he forgot as easily as he promised.

"Cat got your tongue, sugar?" asked Tony when they had driven fifteen minutes in silence.

"No," said Barbara, sounding cool and distant and aloof in spite of herself, sounding, although she hated it, a little superior.

It was not Barbara's fault that in the six weeks during which she and Tony had been married they had seen very little of his family. It was because Tony got sidetracked about that as he was likely to do about everything. But Barbara was blamed, as she discovered as soon as she arrived at his mother's.

Mrs. Blake was very sweet. Nevertheless, she managed to look pathetic and abused and meek and long-suffering, and it was perfectly apparent to Barbara that his womenfolks were prepared to believe that she was trying to wean him away from them.

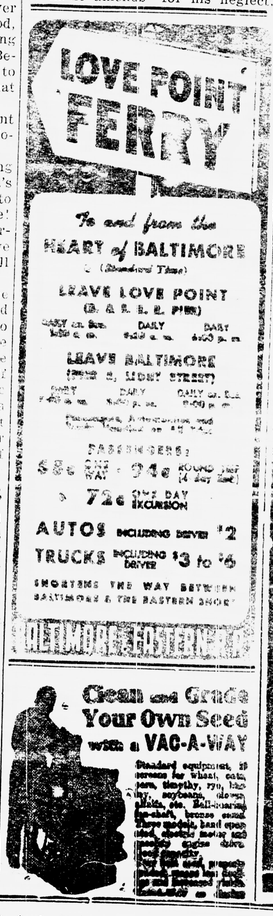
Tony, in his extravagant efforts to make amends for his neglect, exerted all his charm upon his mother and sisters. He raved about the special dishes they prepared for him, he insisted he hadn't sat down to such a swell dinner since the last time he was there.

"That's not flattering to dear Barbara," murmured Mrs. Blake. "It seems queer to me how you modern wives live, rushing off to an office every morning and rushing back at night to open a tin can."

Barbara's lips tightened. "It isn't quite that bad" she said.

"Naturally," pursued her mother in-law, "after you've been used to your own money it is hard to give it up. Modern women are cleverer than my generation, putting all our eggs in one basket as we did. I dare say it is a good thing that the self-sacrificing wife has gone out, only it seems odd to an old-fashioned woman like me."

(To be continued)



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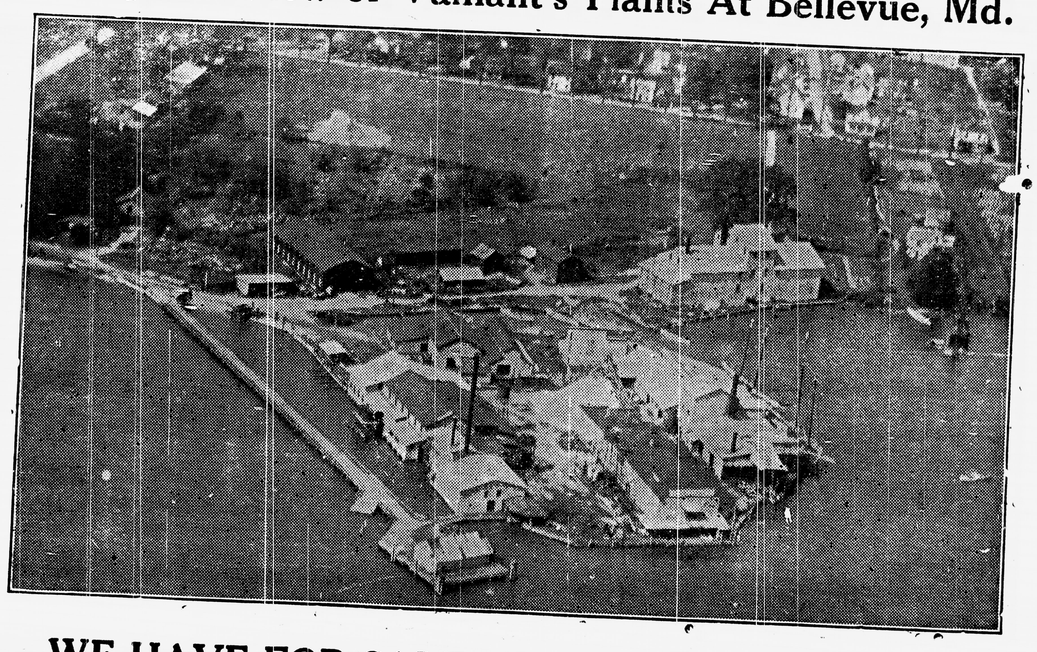

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