The GIRL From The DOUBLE

BY BETTY BLOCKLINGER

CHAPTER VIII

(Continued from last week)

As Rusty finished reading Ralph's letter Mrs. Rowland came in from the garden.

"Ralph thinks I should go in to Doctor Westmore's," Rusty offered, "to take up that course in animal first aid."

"So do I."

"But I've waited so long, and I wasn't very nice."

"You never are, dear," Mrs. Rowland interposed placidly. "Your generation seems to believe gratitude outmoded. I'll call Miss Westmore."

"Will you?"

"Will you?"

Rusty, riding out to find Piney, felt as if Red Star were riding the wind. She was actually going—and not because she had been so foolishly eager to go, but because Ralph had so ordered.

"Piney—"

Piney wheeled and rode up. "Land sake. Miss Rusty, you look sorta excited about something."

Rusty felt a flush growing. "Oh, it was a letter from Ralph that brought on the joy. Piney—"

And she launched into a resume of Low Valley's possibilities.

"Sure sounds like a cowherder's dream," muttered Piney. "Say, how about choosin' those two new men? They ain't the kind that has to go to town, come Sunday. Responsible sort, too. You could plant them in the valley and they'd stay put."

"But, Piney, we need them on the outside range."

"Meant to tell you. Your uncle all but signed up three men that rid in. He's just waitin' for you to okay them."

"Three?" questioned Rusty. "Goodness, such a wealth of manpower! What did you think of them?"

"R u n-o'-the-mill, Miss Rusty; 'bout the usual we get at roundup time."

"How did they hear about us?"

"Decker sent them over."

"Oh well, then—"

Rusty saw the three men when she rode back to the corral. She signaled her uncle to take them on then she went on to the ranch house.

"Rusty, I've no time to fool. I'm on my way to an important meeting Do we or don't we announce our engagement?"

"Why, Ladue, I've never even thought of marriage in connection with you. Westmore had night, and you could ride in with him. I told Conchita to press your city clothes. You'll want some of your shirtwaist frocks and one nice dress and that—"

"Mums, I'm not going to a house party," Rusty protested. "One shirtwaist dress and plenty of clean shirts. I'm going as is."

She relented only enough to choose a dress for the drive in, to prepare for the dress by shampooing her hair, to condescend to use a little powder and lipstick, then shamelessly touch the lobes of her ears with perfume.

"Fatso," she informed the watchful kitten, "all woman are fools. Listen, there is his car."

She'd made an entrance. She'd move down the stairway with a nonchalance which would deceive him if he thought she was waiting for him.

Decker was standing in the living room beside a window, tapping restless fingers on the darkened pane.

He turned as Rusty entered the room.

"Rusty"—he crossed to her, both hands out—"remember I'm the man who proposed to you a few weeks ago? You've made up your mind now? I'd like to announce our engagement at once. I've reasons."

Quickly she drew away from him "You mean you would like to use an engagement announcement for some purpose?" she flashed.

"Oh, Rusty, why be difficult? You know as well as I do that our marriage is inevitable. Why put it off? Let's get the roundup off our shoulders and start out together."

"Do you always make love the way you brand cattle?" she asked. "Hog-tie and throw them, burn your brand, then go off and leave them? Or don't you consider love necessary?"

"Rusty, I've been telling you in a thousand ways ever since you were a kid. Do you want me to go down on my knees?"

A tiny dimple dented Rusty's mouth. "No," she answered, "not with Manny on the ranch. He does pop up in the most unexpected—"

"Rusty, I've no time to fool. I'm on my way to an important meeting Do we or don't we announce our engagement?"

"Why, Ladue, I've never even thought of marriage in connection with you. Westmore had lights flashing through the window for a brief instant.

"Who's that?" Decker demanded.

"Probably Doctor Westmore. He is driving me into the city tonight."

"You mean you are taking him up on that fool proposal of his? You intend to live in the same house with that—"

"Remember," Rusty countered sweetly, "you told me that he and Adelaide were probably married. I'll be well chaperoned."

"You wouldn't do this if Ralph were here. Rusty, I forbid—"

"You what?"

"Mrs. Rowland"—Decker sprang to the doorway, where Mrs. Rowland had appeared en route to the front door—"you can't let this girl of yours go into the city to a stranger's. Mrs. Rowland, if I could tell you—"

"Now, now, Ladue," she sought to pacify him, "you're making a mountain out of a molhill."

And she brushed past him to open the door to Doctor Westmore.

"Good evening." Her greeting was warm. "You've met Mr. Decker?"

"We've met," Westmore remarked evenly, and turned away "Is Miss Rowland ready?"

"Westmore," Decker's voice came out with abrupt sharpness, "I am asking you to forget you intended taking Miss Rowland to the city with you. I believe you understand my reasons."

Westmore turned to look at him. "Perfectly, but they are your reasons, not mine. And I question your authority—"

"I've the authority of any man who wishes to protect his future wife from—"

"Deck!" warned Rusty.

She was unprepared for his next move. With an appealing gesture he turned to her.

"We can't keep our engagement a secret until Ralph comes home," he insisted. "You can't defer love for the duration."

"Ladue," Mrs. Rowland said soothingly, "as I said before, you are making too much of this. If Doctor Westmore is kind enough to give of his time and knowledge to Rusty, and if you've no better reason for wanting her to remain here than the [illegible] of marriage [illegible] Westmore had picked up Rusty's bags and was heading out toward his car. Rusty, pausing to kiss her mother, looked at Decker.

As the Westmore car moved off, Rusty was haunted by the expression on Decker's face, an expression she couldn't define.

For many miles nothing was said Rusty sat with hands gripped together. Then, gradually, as the night air brushed in, she relaxed.

He drove along until they reached the Big Sandy, and then, as though the narrow stream had reminded him of something, spoke again.

"I'd like to ask you a question. I've no right to expect an answer. Are you or are you not going to marry Ladue Decker?

Rusty considered this a moment. "I can't answer that because I don't know. I'm much too busy trying to keep the ranch operating without loss, to consider anything else."

"But Decker said you were secretly engaged."

Rusty laughed. "Oh, Deck assumes that any girl would have him if she were to be asked. We've known each other always. I believe he looks upon me as he does—well, on the Nopocos, as part of his horizon."

Ahead of the car, the lights of the city could now be seen, looking like a mirage against the blue darkness. For a while, Rusty stared at them in silence and considered Westmore's evasive answers to her questions.

Finally, she burst out passionately. "I'm tired of half-truths! Do you think I don't konw what happened at your hospital the night Decker's ranch was raided? Do you think I don't know someone was listening in on the hospital extension while your sister talked to me about fungi poisoning? He left the receiver off so that I heard part of what went on when you came into the hospital."

Westmore stopped the car suddenly.

"You say someone was listening in on the extension? This is important. Tell me—" He broke off. "I believe you're right. That hand backing to my desk, handling something behind his back. The telephone was there. Rusty, tell me everything you heard."

"When you tell me what was going on," she countered.

But now she knew how Decker had known of the fungi poisoning. It was Decker who had listened [illegible] extension. But why [illegible] Westmore stopped the car a[illegible] look place.

"Really," burst from Rusty, "Why you weren't a lawyer instead of a veterinarian, I don't understand."

When they went into the hospital they found Miss Westmore there. Worried owners of pets were waiting to see the doctor. Miss Westmore had already handled some of the injured or ailing animals, but there were still many to be taken care of.

Here was a huge German shepherd dog with a cut in his leg; here a mother cat, feverish and miserable. As Westmore attended to each animal, Rusty watched and listened.

Finally, all had been treated and the last owner had departed.

Then, Miss Westmore said, "Herb, I—I had to do a Caesthian tonight. That was the emergency I called you about. It couldn't wait

"What—"

"A little dachshund. Some fool kicked her as a symbol of things German."

They made the rounds of the hospital, bringing a fresh hot water bottle to a pneumonia case, administering a sedative to a pup who had both hind legs in casts, beating raw eggs into lukewarm milk for a Persian with five hungry kittens to feed.

"There—. Miss Westmore made a gesture of weariness — that should hold them. Not a very nice greeting to you, Miss Rowland, this—"

"The name is Rusty," corrected the girl, "and I'd rather have the least of these made comfortable than have a carpet and awning thrown out to greet me."

They all went to the house, where they sank wearily into chairs in the living room. After a short silence, Miss Westmore turned to the doctor.

"Herb, I think we might as well tell Miss Rowland how things stand." Then, to Rusty, "You are probably questioning my right to perform a Caesarian, as you saw no veterinarian's certificate bearing my name on the hospital walls. There is one in the surgery—it is covered by a calendar. But the name is not Westmore — it is Byington. And I am not Herb's sister."

Rusty, taken by surprise by the abrupt revelation, stammered, "You—you needn't tell me this."

Westmore remained silent, watching the woman he had called his sister.

"[illegible] must [illegible] the [illegible] to have [illegible] Herb, [illegible] knew [illegible] you wouldn't tell unless it were necessary."

"Sis" — Westmore stood up abruptly—"I'm a little weary, and I think I'll turn in. I'll leave you two to talk this out by yourselves."

When Westmore had gone, Adelaide Byington began her story to Rusty. It wasn't a pleasant tale that she told.

(To be continued)

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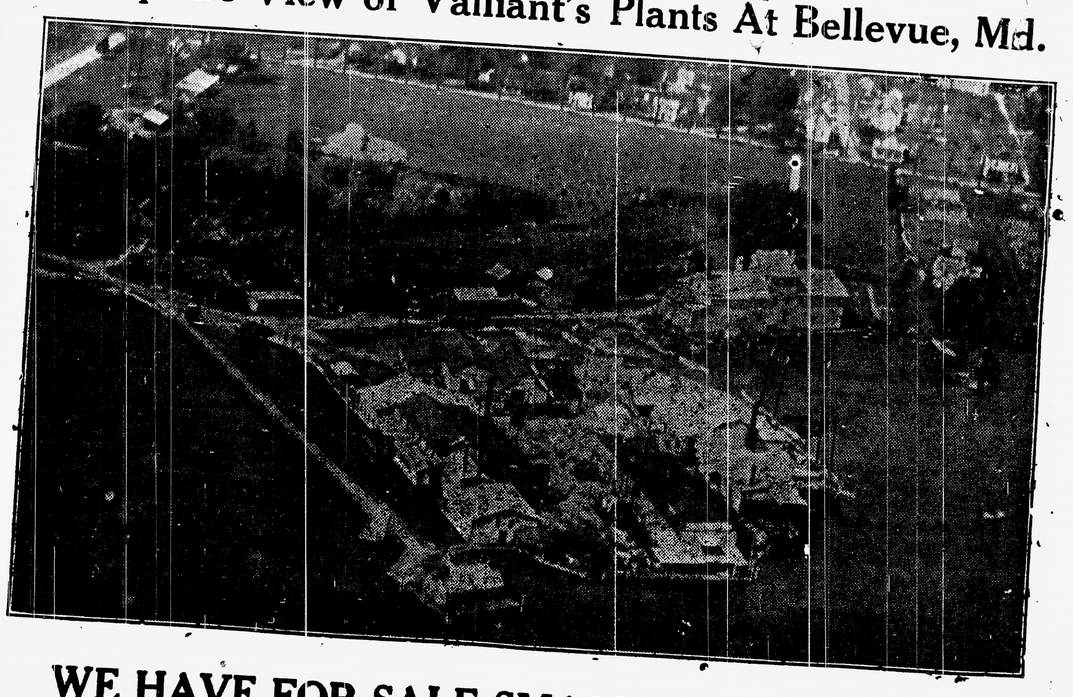

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