

# A Broadway Love Song



*"Your midnight movie took a long time," he said furiously.*

***Francine Learns Where Her Heart Belongs in this Fascinating Romance of Tin Pan Alley***

*A Complete Novelette*

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## CHAPTER I GROWING PAINS

**A**CROSS the white-tiled table they faced each other, both tensed and angry. Outside the restaurant window, Broadway roared by both of them unseen and unheard.

"Now listen, baby!" The boy set his coffee cup down with unnecessary violence. His blond hair was slightly ruffled, his youthful face sullen.

"I know these fellows better than you do, and Vic Carney is nobody for you to be running around with. He never had a decent thought in his life as far as a woman is concerned."

The girl's amber eyes flashed with resentment. So much fuss about an innocent luncheon engagement and a cluster of gardenias. And what

did Johnny know beyond hearsay of Vic Carney? He was utterly unfair.

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, Johnny Allen," she said hotly. "And don't call me 'baby'."

Johnny ignored the irrelevant interpolation with which she ended her speech. "It isn't as if you were just Francine Morrow, a girl I know casually. Everybody knows you are going to be Mrs. Allen as soon as I can make enough money."

"As soon as—" Francine, still indignant, smiled a shade scornfully. "Oh, Johnny, don't you see you'll never make enough money!" Then, as she saw the hurt that leaped to his blue eyes, she softened and went on more gently:

"It's not that you're not a good song-writer, dear. You're every bit as good as Vic Carney;

better! It's only that you try so hard to be clever.

"Why won't you listen to reason and do as Manny Holtz tells you to? As it is now, he'll publish an occasional song of yours, of course, and sell one hundred and forty-six copies! And Vic will write three songs in the same time and sell more than a quarter of a million copies of each."

Johnny's boyish face flushed with chagrin, but his rather weak mouth took on a stubborn set. "Maybe so," he said. "But I wouldn't write the kind of hooley that Vic Carney puts out, not for a million dollars. I wouldn't grind out tripe—even for you!"

Francine averted her eyes and looked unseeingly out of the restaurant window to hide the tears that were trembling on her dark, gold-tipped lashes.

"I suppose not, Johnny," she said wearily, after a pause. "But such tripe is what the public wants."

**S**TILL his obstinate expression did not change. She sighed and gathered up her gloves and the little black suede handbag that matched the toque perched jauntily on her gold-brown hair.

"Will you walk me over to my hotel?" she asked. "I have to change before I go to work."

They emerged into the bustle and noise of Broadway, warm in the haze of the late September afternoon.

"Broadway's fun at this hour; more fun than at night, I think." Francine spoke idly as they turned north. She hoped to avert further quarreling, but Johnny, sulkily on the defensive, would not let the subject drop so easily. And he was determined to convince her of his genius.

"I'll be knocking them dead soon," he said. "But I can't stoop to the sort of sloppy sentimentality that Carney writes. You know how false it is. There isn't a true emotion in it. Listen!

*"At home alone,  
I dream of you.  
Oh, heart of hearts,  
If you but knew . . ."*

"Piffle!" he broke off in disgust. "I'll grant the tune is catchy, but what does it mean?"

"Are you sure," Francine asked quietly, "that it's any more meaningless than some of your attempts to rhyme Tennyson with benison, and tapioca with—oh, I don't know what?"

Before he could speak, she laid her finger on his

lips, heedless of the parsing throngs. "Johnny," she said, "you're so young! How do you know people don't feel 'those simple, common things'?"

He laughed shortly. "Tommyrot! And as for Vic Carney—"

But they had reached her hotel and she interrupted his tirade: "By, darling. I must run."

"I'll see you later?"

She shook her head and avoided meeting his pained look. "Not tonight. I think I'll take in a midnight movie with one of the girls, after the show." She was too tired to go through another battle with Johnny.

She glided swiftly through the revolving door, resisting an impulse to look back after Johnny.

**I**N her box at the hotel desk she found a telephone message awaiting her. Surprised, she found that it was from Manny Holtz, the music publisher, a request to call upon him at her earliest convenience.

Of course, it, in some way, concerned Johnny. Manny, wise in the Broadway game, with an uncanny instinct for genius and a fondness for youth, took an almost paternal interest in the youthful song-writer, in spite of the fact that Johnny's first published song had been anything but a hit.

It was too clever, Manny had said. Still he had faith in Johnny: a guarded faith, not the blind faith of those people back home who had predicted instant success for him on Broadway after he had written the words and music of the local Junior League show. They had thought the world was his oyster, and so had Francine.

Remembering, she sighed. Poor, dear Johnny! And he tried so hard. How far away were those happy days when they'd come to New York together, she to climb to musical comedy stardom, he to become a second George Gershwin.

They'd come to New York together, taken hotel rooms only a block and a half apart. And Johnny had gone to work. Just one big hit for him and they were to have been married. Now Francine began to wonder if that day would ever come, if Johnny had the makings of a Gershwin or any kind of popular composer.

**J**OHNNY was still, after a whole year, far from a success. Yet Francine had to admire the perseverance with which he had stuck to the ideals

of his art. It didn't matter that his ideals seemed to her a little callow, that her chorus job in "Blue China" contributed towards his food and lodgings as well as paid for her own. His first hit, and they'd be married, and that would straighten everything out.

Perhaps the call from Manny meant that better times were coming! Inspired by new hope, Francine fairly flew out of the lobby, and down the street to the building that housed the song-publishing firm of Holtz & Silver.

Fat and florid, good-natured as always, Manny Holtz received her in his office. He was not alone.

A tall, lean young man rose at Francine's entrance, his keen dark face lighting with pleasure. With mixed emotions she recognized Vic Carney. She liked him, but she did hope that Johnny would not hear of this unexpected meeting and start imagining things.

Vic Carney bowed formally, but the smile in his dark eyes was intimate and friendly.

"I'll leave Manny to your mercies," he said.

Francine protested politely. "Don't hurry on my account."

"We're through with our business." He moved toward the door, and stopped there to add: "However, I still want a word with Ben Silver, so I'll probably be through here about the same time you are. I'm hoping you'll let me drop you off at your hotel, Miss Morrow."

He was gone swiftly, before Francine could either accept or refuse his invitation. A little annoyed, she turned to find Manny Holtz surveying her with a thoughtful expression in his shrewd eyes.

He did not leave her long in doubt about the purpose of this interview.

"That boy of yours, Johnny—" he said suddenly, and grabbed up a music manuscript from his desk. He waved it at Francine. "Look at this!"

Francine looked at it without comprehending.

**M**ANNY went on in staccato sentences. "He can write songs, that boy. But he won't write songs. He does gymnastics with his words, with his notes. He thinks he's the smart guy.

"There's something here in this new song of his. There's something in every song he writes. He could be great, make money for himself, for me!" He paused for breath.

"I know," Francine said timidly, "but—"

"*But!* That's just it!" Manny beamed upon her as if she had just uttered a *bon mot*. "He needs to forget the smart stuff, to become human if he's going to write songs that appeal to everyday folks who go around kissing and laughing and crying."

Francine nodded, wide-eyed. It was amazing how closely Manny's judgment of Johnny approximated her own.

"But how are we going to make him understand?" she asked.

Manny leaned back in his chair and folded his pudgy hands over his bulging midsection.

"Johnny's had things too easy," he said in a didactic tone. "His first song is published. Maybe it's not a hit, but—still it's published, and he gets a few bouquets handed to him. Then, all the time he has you, patting him on the back, helping him—It's all wrong!"

**"B**UT I—what else can I do?" Francine was bewildered by the unexpected attack.

"You could hurt him! Give him the jolt he needs!" Manny sat erect abruptly and shook a finger in her face. "That's your job now."

"But how—"

"How does any pretty girl hurt her sweetie?"

"You mean—"

"Exactly! You should give him the air for a little while, find yourself a new boyfriend." Then, forestalling the question she was about to ask, "Don't ask me 'where'? I got eyes. You know him already. He's right out there now." He pointed toward his partner's office.

A quick flush stained Francine's small face. "Oh, but I couldn't! Johnny would never forgive me."

"Sure he would. That boy's plenty stuck on you. We'll give him a few growing pains, show him what it's all about. Then he'll write some real music. After that—Manny'll fix everything up." He waved one hand in an all-embracing gesture.

It was fantastic, absurd, the whole scheme, Francine thought. And yet she could not deny that Manny was clever. Furthermore, fond as he was of Johnny, he would not plan to make him suffer unless he believed it would be for his own good.

But what about Vic Carney, the unknowing accomplice in the plot?

"Would it be quite fair to Mr. Carney?" she asked.

Manny chuckled. "That guy has earned anything

he gets. The hearts that Romeo has broken!" Then, as Francine still appeared hesitant, he added:

"Don't go worrying about trifles. Just think of Johnny. This is your big chance to help him. You want to see him get to the top in his racket, don't you?"

Of course she did. Francine said at length, slowly, "If you're sure it's for the best, I'll do it."

"Good girl!" Manny grabbed her hand and shook it enthusiastically. "Go to it, and in another few months Johnny'll be hanging mink capes on your shoulders and diamond bracelets on your wrists."

Francine smiled, a wan little smile. She wasn't interested in mink capes and diamond bracelets, but she did want to see Johnny make a success. It was too heartbreaking to watch him day by day sinking deeper into despondency, fighting off the conviction of failure with futile boastings and assumed superiority.

**R**ATHER than see him stripped further of his gay, youthful confidence, she would even risk losing his love.

Rather dazedly, she left Manny Holtz's office. In her perturbation she had forgotten that Vic Carney would be waiting to drive her back to her hotel. She started visibly when he appeared before her in the reception room.

"Ready?" he asked.

Apparently he had taken it for granted that she would permit him to give her a lift.

Francine frowned at his self-assurance, then smiled.

Wasn't this what she wanted? For Johnny's sake, she must encourage Vic's attentions. Now was as good a time as any to begin. She let him take her arm.

Outside his car was waiting, a huge limousine with a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. Francine said little on the short ride to her hotel. She was thinking busily. Cars and chauffeurs and tailor-made clothes were as much Johnny's right as Vic Carney's. Yet she had to admit that Vic wore his success gracefully.

He was quiet and unassuming. For a man of his reputation with women, he was surprisingly gentle and deferential. Just his technique, Francine decided.

As he left her outside her hotel, he said almost diffidently, "This ride has been altogether too short,

just as was our luncheon day before yesterday. Couldn't I see you sometime when you don't have to run away from me in such a hurry?"

"Why not?" Francine, when she spoke, had a sensation of diving into deep uncharted waters.

Vic Carney's white teeth flashed pleasantly in his tanned face. "Tonight? Please say yes! I'll call for you after the theater and we'll have a bite of supper together, maybe dance, if you're not too tired."

"That sounds perfect." Francine thanked him breathlessly.

## CHAPTER II

### QUARREL

**T**HE breathless, panicky feeling persisted all evening while she went through the chorus routine at the theater. In vain she tried to tell herself that whatever she was doing was for Johnny's sake. She couldn't help feeling thrilled. It had been so long since Johnny was last able to take her out.

And Johnny had no real cause to complain. She was merely supping and dancing with a man who so far had shown himself to be the most courteous and most gracious of escorts.

But she couldn't shake off the guilty excitement that possessed her.

It brought an apricot flush to her smooth cheeks, brightened the golden lights that danced in her amber eyes. Red-haired Elsie Devine, who shared Francine's make-up box and most of her secrets, eyed her curiously as they dressed after the show.

"You look as if you were going out on a heavy date," she said. "Johnny showing you the hot spots tonight?"

"No, Vic Carney," Francine said, a little guiltily.

Elsie whistled and her eyebrows went up. "You're old enough to know what you're doing," she advised. "But you'd better not let Sybil Train find out that her best caviar and champagne ticket is giving you a rush. Not that she doesn't need a jolt."

**L**IKE most of the girls in "Blue China," Elsie didn't like Sybil Train, who played the second lead in the show. She was a platinum blonde, whose soft exterior was only a mask for the ice and metal beneath. Arrogant and ill-tempered, she was wont to vent her ire on the chorus, whom she considered as dust beneath her dainty, custom-shod

feet.

Francine smiled at the idea of Sybil being jealous of a mere chorine.

"It's no smiling matter," Elsie said stubbornly. "She heard that you had luncheon with her Vic the other day, and she threw a fit. The wardrobe woman told us about it. And she's got her eye on you."

"Well, she won't see much," Francine shrugged. She was not loath to disturb Sybil; and if Vic Carney were doing a two-timing job on another girl, she could dismiss her last lingering scruples about the way she was using him.

Still smiling, she busied herself with adjusting the shoulder straps of her dress. She was wearing a last year's model—a salary that must be stretched as hers was, permitted few new clothes—but it was still in good style and infinitely becoming.

Gold lace over shimmering satin, it reflected the sheen of her hair, the lights in her eyes, and turned her into a veritable golden girl.

**W**HILE Elsie looked on curiously, Francine gave a final touch of lipstick to her mouth, ran a comb through her softly waving hair, then snatched up the golden velvet wrap that matched her dress and hurried from the dressing room.

Vic Carney was waiting outside the stage door. The dimmed exit light was reflected on his white shirt front. In evening clothes, he looked taller and more keenly aristocratic than ever. For all her misgivings over the adventure, Francine felt a small tingle of pride as he took her arm, while half a dozen fellow chorus girls watched with open envy.

They moved toward his limousine, which was parked just ahead of a pale green nickel-trimmed roadster that Francine knew to be Sybil Train's. If Vic recognized either the car or its occupant, he gave no sign.

"Vic!" A voice, so shrill that no one who listened to the liquid melody that poured nightly from Sybil's throat would have known it to be hers, hailed him.

"Oh, hello, Sybil," he said casually—too casually, Francine thought. He would have gone on, but Sybil beckoned him.

Reluctantly, he moved towards the roadster, his hand still under Francine's elbow.

"Of course, you know Miss Morrow, Sybil," he said.

Sybil looked Francine up and down, and her

eyes glittered in the darkness like the eyes of a cat. She said languidly, "One of the 'ponies' in our show, aren't you?" Her tone was deliberately insulting.

Francine did not know whether to be angry or amused. Sybil was well aware of her identity. On one occasion, when Francine and Johnny had been splurging for luncheon at the Algonquin, Sybil had come in, had sat down at their table.

She had been cordial to Francine, positively effusive towards Johnny, and had several times afterwards asked Francine about her handsome boyfriend. And now, to pretend no recognition.

Vic was frowning. He bowed formally to Sybil; then without haste, yet purposefully, he led Francine to his own car. Neither he nor Francine referred to the little exchange.

"And where do we go from here?" he asked. "The Waldorf suit you?"

"Splendid!" Somehow, she had not expected him to choose a smart and well-known hotel. It would have been more in keeping with his reputation as a ladies' man, for him to have taken her to some hideaway in the Fifties.

**C**OVERTLY, Francine studied him as the car sped out of the maelstrom of Broadway; couldn't help but contrast him with Johnny. His profile, sharply etched against the light that flickered through the limousine windows, fascinated her. That he was more handsome than Johnny, she had to admit. His face was older, more sophisticated, a strong face, without any hardness. There was something attractive in the whimsicality that touched the corners of the mouth.

Without warning, he turned and met her gaze. "Do I pass muster?" he asked teasingly.

Fortunately, the car was just pulling up before the canopied entrance of the Waldorf and Francine was saved the necessity of answering.

Yes, he passed muster, she decided before the evening was over. Never had she had a more pleasant time. There were Dubonnet cocktails, mild, yet exhilarating, a delicious supper. Afterwards, they danced.

**V**IC was a beautiful dancer. No wonder he could write music! There was rhythm in his every movement. Though Francine had been tired, she was sorry when the orchestra swung into its last number.

"It's been perfect," Vic said as he led her out to the waiting car. "But then," and his smile flashed forth, "how could any evening help but be that when I'm with you?"

Francine felt a warm glow steal over her. She realized suddenly that it was good, once in a while, to go out with a man other than Johnny. They had been seeing too much of each other, getting on each other's nerves.

Not that they didn't care for each other, she told herself. It was just that both were under a strain.

Something of her thoughts must have been mirrored in her face, for Vic's eyes suddenly became serious. "You're terribly in love with young Allen, aren't you?" he said.

Francine blushed violently. "Yes," she nodded, without speaking.

"He's a nice chap. I envy him." Vic fell silent while his dark eyes held her own for a curiously tense moment.

Francine felt he was probing her very soul.

Could he have guessed that she was using him for purposes of her own? He had been unbelievably shrewd in reading her thoughts of a moment ago. Briefly, she felt uncomfortable. Then she remembered Sybil.

What did it matter, the opinion of a man who belonged to another girl? He must be Sybil's property, or how would she dare take such a possessive attitude towards him? And Elsie had said—

Francine's thoughts broke off, as she became aware that Vic was asking her some trivial question. She gave him her attention once more and presently forgot her problems. There seemed to be magic in his low-pitched voice, which talked on lightly and seemed to shut out all the world about them.

After all, why should she feel any qualms about what she was doing? It was all a game, a game for Johnny's sake, and she might as well enjoy it.

She gave him her slim hand in farewell when they reached her hotel.

"A most splendid evening," she said.

"But this isn't the end? I *must* see you again, and soon." His long, hard musician's fingers tightened around hers.

**O**F course, she would have to see him in order to carry through Manny Holtz's plan. Francine was glad to be saved any conversational

maneuvering.

"Telephone me if you would like," she said. "I—"

She stopped abruptly as a square-set figure almost catapulted through the revolving doors to their side. It was Johnny, an outraged Johnny. Suddenly, Francine felt sorry for him.

"Your midnight movie took a long time," he said furiously.

Vic Carney spoke up quickly, as if he had noticed no unpleasantness. "Good evening, Allen—and how are you?"

"Evenin'." Johnny answered the greeting curtly.

A faintly ironic, but not unkind smile touched Vic's lips. He turned to Francine. "Goodnight—and thank you. I'll call you tomorrow."

Francine's "Goodnight" was slightly choked.

Before Vic had reached his car, Johnny had seized her arm in a grip so savage that she almost cried out with pain. Poor Johnny! He was beside himself, hardly knew what he was doing.

"A swell girlfriend you turned out to be! Two-timing me the minute my back is turned."

"Johnny, I—you don't understand."

She was about to blurt out the truth in her distress when Johnny interrupted rudely.

"Oh, cut out the alibis," he snapped. "Manny Holtz was around to my place tonight and gave me an earful. I thought he was kidding me, but now that I've seen with my own eyes—" He almost flung her from him.

Mention of Manny steadied Francine. Already their plan was working. Johnny had to be made angry and hurt. So far, they had succeeded. But would music come out of his emotional upheaval?

It was hard to bear his reproaches, to see hatred for her gleaming in his eyes. Biting her lips to keep back sobs, Francine stood and watched him stride off.

### CHAPTER III BEYOND CONTROL

**F**RANCINE went to sleep that night thinking of Johnny; but in her dreams she was dancing to heavenly music at the Waldorf and Johnny's face was blurred.

The next morning she missed Johnny's morning call, but remembering her agreement with Manny, she resisted every impulse to call him. She wandered restlessly about her room. Vic's

telephone call an hour later was a welcome interruption to her loneliness.

"Can't we do last night all over again?" he asked.

She said, "Yes," quickly. Afterwards, she realized that she had been actuated as much from boredom and a real desire to see Vic again as from her desire to help Johnny. Might she not be overplaying her part?

She went to the theatre in a distinctly uncomfortable frame of mind. Elsie Devine was already making up when Francine entered. She was bubbling over with gossip.

"Gee, you've certainly got the high and mighty Sybil all bothered," she breathed. "They say she went to Vic Carney's hotel and put on a big third act about him anklng out with you."

"Why should she?" Francine asked, a shade impatiently. "Has she got him tagged and labeled 'private property'?"

**E**LSIE laughed. "No, but she thought she had until you came along, I guess. Anyhow, she'd like to, and you can't blame her. He might be good for another string of pearls."

"You mean—"

Elsie, who was adjusting artificial eyelashes, waited a second before answering, "Sure, he gave her that string she's wearing. Everybody knows that. There was even something in one of the columns about them."

Why should it annoy her to learn that Vic had given Sybil the exquisite pearls that she flaunted, Francine asked herself. Elsie was looking at her speculatively.

"Maybe he'll be giving you pearls next," she said.

Francine whirled on her. "Why, Elsie Devine—"

"Wait! Don't shoot!" Elsie made a burlesque of dodging, "I know you're not that kind of girl, but—"

It seemed that any girl who went out with Vic Carney was laying herself open to criticism, Francine thought. But he was charming and nothing could be more innocuous than the sort of evening she had spent with him, was going to spend with him again.

**T**HIS time Vic settled on the Central Park Casino as the place for their supper and dance. As before, he was deferential, almost shy, in her presence.

He noticed at once that she was in a troubled mood. On the drive up to the Park he told her, very earnestly, "There's something wrong, Francine. Is it anything I've done or am doing?"

Then, as she hesitated, uncertain and confused, he went on hurriedly: "Perhaps I shouldn't mention it, and I hardly know how to, but I'm a little worried—after what happened in front of your hotel last night. If my taking you out is going to hurt Allen, break up anything—"

Francine had thought of Johnny's actions of the previous evening and she surprised even herself by the hardness in her voice when she said, "I think he owes you an apology for his rudeness."

Vic shook his head gravely. "It isn't that, Francine. I like you far too much to want to take any chance on spoiling something that matters to you. My reputation probably isn't all that it should be.

"When I first hit Broadway I was just a kid and did foolish things, and people *will* exaggerate—" He smiled wryly. "But I just wanted you to know how I feel about you."

Francine laid an impulsive hand on his arm. Regardless of what anyone said, he was rather a darling.

Again her conscience smote her. Was she playing fair with him? A little anxious frown creased her forehead. Vic saw and gave the small hand that rested on his arm a reassuring pat.

"But how serious we're getting! Tonight's tonight and this is a party," he said.

Once more he was the gay debonair playmate and Francine's spirits rose to meet his. The Casino was at its most delightful, neither over nor under-crowded. Summer still lingered in the air, and people sat about in intimate lazy talk or danced dreamily. It was a night for romance, a night for madness. It must have been, Francine thought afterwards.

**N**OTHING else could explain why, after that insidious waltz, she had allowed Vic to take her outside under the moon—a great golden autumn moon that burnished her hair and made her face a misty white flower. For a long time Vic said nothing, just stood looking at her, his dark eyes lighted by some inner fire.

"What is it?" Francine murmured at length, growing a little breathless under his regard.

"It—it—" He seemed to have difficulty with his

voice. "It's just that you're so lovely, and you belong to someone else. Oh, Francine—"

Abruptly, as if the restraint he had put upon himself had snapped, his arms were around her and he was kissing her, hurriedly; kissing her with a vehemence so different from Johnny's matter-of-fact kisses that she was frightened. But still more alarming was the curious tingling that ran through her, relaxing her body.

For what seemed an eternity she remained passive. Dimly, she had a remembrance of Johnny, a vague feeling of disloyalty. She knew that she should be struggling to free herself from Vic, but she was powerless against his magnetism, against an imponderable inertia that had risen from nowhere.

**T**HE interruption came from an unexpected source. It came in shrill, piercing tones. "So you're up to your old tricks, Vic Carney!" There was fury and malignity in the voice.

Vic released Francine and both turned. Sybil was standing just a few feet away with a colorless, perturbed young man who was trying to tug her away. But she was not to be diverted.

She darted forward, grabbed Vic by his satin lapels.

"You didn't think you could ever put anything over on Sybil Train, did you? And you didn't think I'd let any cheap little chorus girl chisel in on my time, did you?"

She whirled on Francine. "And what about you? What are you doing to your boyfriend, Johnny?"

Francine was aghast. She drew back, looked at Vic. He freed himself from Sybil's grasping hands and faced her, a little white, very tall and straight.

"Just what could I be putting over on you, Sybil?" he asked quietly. "And what do you mean—up to my old tricks?"

"You know what I mean—" Sybil began, but something in his face must have stopped her. In a flash, she changed her tone. Her voice became dulcet, pleading.

"Vic, dear, what has happened?" she whispered. "I had to see you! That's why Eddie and I followed you up here. Have you forgotten everything that existed between us?"

"I've forgotten nothing," he said slowly. "It is evidently you who have forgotten."

He looked at her steadily, then stepped back and took Francine's arm. "Shall we go?"

Dazed and repelled by the whole ugly scene, Francine was glad enough to escape. It was her one thought at the moment.

It wasn't until they were driving home that her temper rose. First, at herself, for now she realized that she had let herself become fascinated by Vic far more than she had ever intended. She shivered with self-disgust and shame as she recalled how nearly she had come to responding to his kisses.

Up to his old tricks! And she had almost fallen for them. If it hadn't been for Sybil—

How horrible that had all been. Swiftly Francine's anger turned against Vic as she relived the recent humiliation. How dared he involve her in his sordid affairs?

He was very quiet, and Francine resented that. She wanted to sting him, to jar him from his calm self-possession. When he spoke, it only aggravated her exasperation.

"**I**'M sorry, Francine," he said. "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything. I hope you're going to be able to forget it."

Forget it! With difficulty, Francine refrained from raising her voice. But something other than her conscious mind dictated her words and she spoke coolly, mockingly.

"It really doesn't matter. You see, I went out with you only on Johnny's account. It was all Manny Holtz's idea. He thought that anything to stir Johnny up, to make him feel some of the primitive emotions about which popular songs are written, might help. So I've been playing with you to work on his jealousy."

She didn't look directly at Vic as she spoke, but she could see him in a blurred, distorted sort of way in the reflection in the glass in front of them.

He did not change his position and it was a full minute before he broke the silence that her words left between them.

"So I've been the assistant to an experiment. Most interesting. But why didn't you let me in on the game? I'd have been tremendously amused. In fact, I am even now, and expect to be more."

Francine shot him a quick glance. What did he mean? Surely this was the end. But he was smiling oddly.

Answering her unspoken question, he said: "You're not quitting now, are you? As yet, your Big Moment hasn't produced anything to startle the world."

“But—but—” Francine was at a loss to understand what was prompting him.

The smile that quirked the corners of his mouth deepened. “No one is more anxious to help budding genius than I. I insist that the game go on.”

**S**UDDENLY Francine was afraid. He was so cool, so determined. And there was some purpose behind it all. In desperation, she stammered, “What about Sybil?”

“That’s between her and me, I should say.”

“It wasn’t tonight.” Francine’s temper flared again. “And I’m through. I won’t go on with anything with you.”

“Yes, you will!” He pinioned her wrist in a grip of steel that somehow rendered her as helpless mentally as physically. Then he continued in a more quiet tone:

“After all, Francine, you started all this, without giving me a chance to accept or refuse my part as one of the actors in your little drama. It’s only fair that I be allowed to say ‘Curtain.’”

“But when?” she asked.

“The finish will come just as you planned it—when your boy friend produces a hit song.”

Weakly, helplessly, Francine said: “All right!”

At the same time she sent up a swift prayer that Johnny would come through quickly. The situation had gone beyond her control into the hands of this man beside her.

#### CHAPTER IV TWO-TIME GIRL

**O**N VIC’S insistence, Francine saw him almost every evening during the week that followed. Both made an attempt to act as if nothing had happened between them, but for all their efforts there were moments of tension, a feeling of things unsaid. Francine, of course, saw Sybil at the theatre, but the latter looked through her and beyond her.

As for Johnny, he was still incommunicado. Francine made repeated efforts to get in touch with him, but he refused to answer his telephone. Not until the week was up did she hear from him. Then it was he who called.

“You’ve been calling me?” he said, and his voice was frigid.

“Yes. I—I wanted to know how you were getting along.”

“Very well,” he told her. “In fact, more than well. Manny Holtz has just bought my latest song—”

“I’m so glad,” she said breathlessly. She *had* succeeded. All the days and nights of heartbreak, intrigue and uncertainty had not been in vain.

Johnny went on, making a poor attempt at casualness. “Oh, yes, he’s crazy about it, and he’s getting it introduced into ‘Blue China.’ Sybil Train’s going to try it out Friday night.” Francine gasped audibly, “Sybil Train?”

“Sybil Train herself.” Johnny sounded smug and satisfied. “Vic Carney’s old girlfriend, and a sweet little number, if you ask me. I had a talk with her today.”

**W**HEN he had hung up, Francine sat down and laughed feebly. Sybil Train, of all people, was going to put Johnny’s song across to the public. The irony of it!

Of course, as Francine had to admit, the whole thing was not so amazing. Manny Holtz was a close friend of the producer of “Blue China”; indeed, had secured Francine herself her chorus job. But, for Sybil Train to be the first to sing Johnny’s song!

And he was so pleased, so flattered. Was it just pride in success, or did he feel that he was managing an offhand sort of revenge on Vic Carney?

Later in the day, Manny Holtz confirmed the news. He sent for Francine to come to his office. He was excited as she had never seen him before.

“We done it!” he burst out. “We got it! We gave that boy what he needs. Look at this!”

Trembling with the contagion of his exhilaration, Francine turned the pages of the manuscript. “‘My Two-Time Girl,’ by Johnny Allen,” it said. The lyrics were simple, all about a girl from a small town who comes to New York. She throws over her childhood sweetheart, and he sings the song with a broken heart.

“Here, Hymie!” Manny bellowed. He sat a pianist at the piano in his office. “Listen to this!”

The tune was as obvious as the words. But even Francine could predict instant success for it. Somehow, it had an universal appeal, an appeal to simple folk.

“You wait!” Manny said enthusiastically. “Next month, every radio in America will be carrying that tune. Everywhere people will dance to ‘My Two-Time Girl.’ He’ll be rich, that boy of yours.”

That boy of hers? Was he still hers? It seemed to Francine that she and Johnny had drifted very far apart. Oddly, she felt only an apathetic regret. Manny looked at her sharply and saw the shadow that had fallen across her delicate face.

He said in an embarrassed, offhand tone. "It's going to be all right now with you and Johnny. This business of him and Sybil—" Francine's eyes opened widely. She had heard nothing of Johnny and Sybil, beyond that she was singing his song. What was Manny implying?

**H**E went on confusedly: "Sybil—she likes nice young boys, and now that she and Vic Carney are quits, and that Johnny's made his start— Of course, she knows that he may have a chance to write the music for next year's 'Frivols.' I forgot to tell you about that, didn't I?"

Thankfully, Manny changed the subject. Johnny's new song was only the beginning of many things. Bristow, world famous producer of the annual 'Frivols,' had heard the new number and was most enthusiastic about Johnny's work.

"Yes," Manny said in conclusion, "everything's jake for Johnny and for you, too. For you both."

But still Francine wondered if things would ever again be with them as they had been before, even though now she could explain, could finish with Vic Carney.

The last thought gave her a moment of exultation that was almost instantly succeeded by an inexplicable depression.

She told Vic that night that Johnny's hour was at hand.

"I know," he said. "Friday will tell the tale. So tonight, tomorrow night, and Thursday may be the last times I will ever see you."

**H**E looked very grave, and there was a wistful note in his voice that hurt Francine, even though she quickly tried to think of Sybil, of Johnny, of all that was past and of all that was to come.

Vic fell silent and did not return to the subject until they were on their way home. Then he said unexpectedly, "On second thought, Francine, it may be best to call tonight the end for us. So this is good-by."

Before Francine realized his intent, he had her in his arms, and once again his mouth claimed hers; not passionately this time, but tenderly. "My dear,

my dear!" he whispered. Then he released her. "Good-by," he said.

Good-by—as the meaning of the words penetrated Francine's brain, she had a wild impulse to throw her arms about him and draw him to her, never to let him go. Suddenly, devastatingly, she realized that she didn't want him to go.

Terrified, she looked into her heart and saw, written there in flaming letters, the truth to which she had been blinding herself. She loved Vic Carney, loved him as she had never loved Johnny. Hers and Johnny's had been a childish attachment, a boy and girl pledge.

But it was a pledge just the same, Francine reminded herself in the next instant, a pledge of more than love, a pledge to help Johnny to greatness. She had started him on the road to success. She couldn't take her hand away now.

When he came to her wearing his laurels, she must receive him with acclaim and a show of old-time affection. She must bury deep this wild, unwanted emotion that was blazing within her.

But it was hard to bury. A dozen times a day she found herself whispering Vic's name.

She waited impatiently for Friday night to come, the night on which Johnny's song was to be introduced into "Blue China." She would see Johnny then and perhaps his living presence would banish Vic Carney's image. She must banish it! After all, there was not only her promise to Johnny to remember, but she must think also of Sybil. Vic had never denied that he loved the singer, had never told Francine that his heart was hers.

**I**F Friday would only hasten! And yet Francine dreaded its coming also, dreaded the reunion with Johnny.

When it finally did come, she was in a state bordering hysteria. She went through her routine in the first act mechanically. Then it was time for Sybil to sing "My Two-Time Girl"!

Francine, lingering in the wings, listened, watched Sybil preen herself. The orchestra began softly—Sybil threw a smile that was not quite as sweet as a stage smile should be at someone in a box to the left, and began to sing.

But Francine didn't hear the opening lines of the song. She had followed the direction of Sybil's smile and recognized its recipient as Vic Carney. At the sight of him, Francine's knees went wobbly.

What was he doing here? she asked herself, and

as quickly realized that it was quite natural he should be in the audience. His curiosity, coupled with his interest in Sybil, would be more than enough to bring him. It was madness, Francine thought, to imagine that he was looking at Francine herself.

She forced her attention back to Sybil and the song, the song which was going across. The audience was enthralled by the melody that poured from the slim throat. A throat encircled by Vic Carney's pearls!

**H**OW the rest of the show went, Francine had no idea. The final curtain came down. The stage was being cleared. People were pouring backstage to the party Manny Holtz was giving. The orchestra had remained to furnish dance music. A huge bowl of punch had magically appeared.

Francine looked around for Johnny. She must congratulate him, must manage to avoid Vic.

He was standing beside Sybil Train. Francine did not stop her progress, however. She had a feeling that she must get close to Johnny quickly, before her resolution weakened. She brought a too-bright smile to her lips and came up, slim hands outstretched.

"Johnny, it was marvelous—your song." At the sound of her voice, Johnny turned from Sybil and his face mirrored open annoyance.

"Think so?" he asked mockingly. "And you think I'm a pretty swell guy now, I suppose!"

"Johnny!" Francine gasped. Could this insolent, sneering stranger be the boy whom she had thought she loved, to whom she had planned to be loyal? It was as if a night's success had transformed him.

He went on, still in that insulting voice, "Run and peddle your papers, baby. I've got a new girl. Haven't I, Sybil, sweet?"

But Francine waited to hear no more. After the first shock of Johnny's attitude had passed, an almost unbearable relief suffused her. She was free! Johnny himself had released her from a pledge that was obviously as irksome and outworn to him as to

her. She was free to go to—to Vic.

Only, she didn't have to go. Vic was suddenly at her elbow.

"You're all right?" he asked, and from his anxious expression Francine realized that he must have witnessed the scene between her and Johnny. But she didn't care. Everything seemed so wonderfully right. She was free, and here was Vic. She laughed softly.

**V**IC stared at her and then, as he saw her happiness was not feigned, his own face lighted. "You didn't—you don't love him!" Joy echoed in his voice, and regardless of onlookers, he pulled her to him.

"Sybil—" Francine stiffened as memory stabbed her. "What of her? You love her—you gave her pearls."

Vic corrected her gently. "I thought I loved her, until I discovered that she was only playing me for what I was worth. She had charged the pearls to me and I let her keep them as a farewell gift. I wanted to end it anyhow because"—he paused and looked deeply into Francine's amber eyes—"because I'd seen you."

And she had seen him! Swiftly, Francine knew that something deep within her had changed, from that very first meeting.

Vic was drawing her closer to him. "And I loved you from the beginning," he said.

Dared she believe him? Dared she yield to those arms that held her so tenderly?

As if recognizing her unspoken doubts, Vic laid his lips to her bronze gold hair and whispered, "I'm no angel; but Francine, whatever has happened, whatever will happen, I'll always love you. My dear, my dear." He tilted up her face and forced her to look at him, to meet his eyes, steadfast and adoring.

Francine's doubts were dispelled. With a little laugh that was half a sob of sheer happiness, she relaxed, and like a tired child who has just found the way home, she surrendered to his eager lips.