

Harlem Magic

By Reginald Vance Coghlan



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TEDDY BLAINE found Harlem a distinct revelation. Every hotspot she had visited with Stevie Franklin had seemed to click with her moods, and her moods were variable. Harlem had justified its "Hooray Today—Damn Tomorrow" boast; life was worth the living in Harlem every minute of the day and night!

It was two-thirty in the morning when Teddy

and Stevie finally drifted into *Peter's Black Eye*—the hottest gin palace north of Columbus Circle. Stevie had reserved Peter's for last; it was his favorite cafe, and he wanted to prepare Teddy for its wonders by slow degrees.

"It's glorious, Stevie!" Teddy admitted, beaming on him from across their tiny sheltered table. "If I'd have known what I was missing, I'd

never have lived through those five years on the road!”

Stevie grinned boyishly. “And if you wouldn’t have played the game like a trouper during those five years of tank-town triumphs, you’d still be a twenty-per ‘lady of the ensemble!’”

comedy, *Ding Dang Dong!* she was literally stealing the show night after night.

Teddy was a cute kid, with her soft brown hair and eyes to match, and her delightfully uptilted nose and red, red lips. She warbled adorably, and her voice registered sincerity. Her sentimental



Teddy remained close at his heels as he darted through the doorway.

Teddy nodded. Stevie was right; if she hadn’t put her heart and soul into the small parts she had played in Mid-Western road companies, she would never have earned the opportunity to crash Broadway and the Biggest Time of all. Those five years of bucking the boards had served to season her for more sophisticated audiences; in her present capacity of ingenue of the successful musical

numbers went straight to the heart, and made even hardened critics sit up and take notice. *Ding Dang Dong!* might have “made” Teddy—but it was a lead-pipe cinch that Teddy had made *Ding Dang Dong!*

“We’re just in time for the final floor-show,” Stevie advised, staring through the haze of tobacco smoke at the expectant orchestra. “Watch Peter’s

lively ‘high-browns’ and lend ear to tunes as you’ve never heard them before!”

Teddy watched the ensuing events with fascination. Peter’s entertainers were of the wild and woolly variety, and their abbreviated costumes were far more suggestive than nudity; but their voices rang with an irresistible strain of savagery. And when Peter’s “Melodians” drew from their instruments the weirdest of moans and shrieks she had ever heard, Teddy felt maddened almost to the point of yielding to their appeal and joining the impassioned chorus. It was the insidious voice of Harlem—a voice far more sensuously appealing than the Song of the Sirens—the Call of the Flesh raised in volume a million times!

“Remarkable!” Teddy murmured, after the last strains of the music had faded away and a deafening roar of applause rocked the building. “It’s all so different, Stevie!—How do they do it?”

Stevie’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “It’s beyond me to solve the mysteries of Harlem,” he admitted. “Besides, I’m too busily engaged in solving a far more important mystery of my own!”

“Your own?” Teddy’s intuition had already supplied the answer, but she preferred to feign ignorance.

“My own,” he repeated softly. “Kiddie, I’m lost in a maze of dreams, trying to find the key-path to a happy ending! For the first time in my life I’m so much in love that I can’t even think coherently!”

That drew a laugh, accompanied by a blush. “Can’t you put it off a little longer?” she asked. “Maybe at the end of our Broadway run I’ll be willing to listen to almost any dream-story; right now, I’m too busy digesting each new phase of life as it’s being absorbed into my system!”

“The devil with waiting!” Stevie swore softly. “Marriage won’t prevent you from continuing your Baghdad-on-the-Subway education; rather, it will enhance it. We’ll be able to go places and do things in a more unbridled fashion! How can I get into the swing of things, wanting you as I do, and feeling that awful sense of frustration at the bottom of it all?”

“Don’t be foolish, Stevie.” Teddy placed a cool white hand over his. “You know I’m awfully fond of you, don’t you?—Why hurry me into an arrangement that will knock all the romance in the head? Marriage is prosaic, isn’t it?”

His fingers closed over hers. “Marriage to you could never be prosaic!” he insisted. “Sweetheart,

I’ve been wild about you from the very moment when I first took you into my arms for a scene rehearsal! Is it any wonder our love scenes go over so well? It’s hard to let go of you—even before the eyes of a lascivious matinee audience!”

“But how long would it last?” Teddy begged. “I—I’m afraid to risk it yet, dear!”

“It’s no gamble, sweet!” he urged. “A wedding ring will only serve to draw us closer to each other—”

A SUDDEN hubbub near the inner doorway of *Peter’s Black Eye* cut short his plea. A genuine, born-and-bred-in-Harlem free-for-all was in progress!

Numerous long-necked bottles were hurled through the air, and that air was already filled with the roar of angry shouts and curses. Waiters were felled by swinging fists, and swinging fists of waiters felled other participants. Tables were pushed over and chairs were lifted high above heads, only to be crashed down with terrific force on yielding bodies.

At the sound of the first police whistle from without the establishment, Stevie leapt to his feet.

“We’re in for it!” he ejaculated. “I should never have taken you here!”

“What does it matter?” Teddy demanded, rising and joining him. “The police will soon be here—”

“And we’ll be hailed into Night Court as material witnesses, or worse!” Stevie cut in. “The rags will play us up in headlines tomorrow—and tabloid notoriety is not the sort of publicity we need!”

Teddy shrugged her shoulders. “Well, there’s no evading the issue, is there?” she asked.

“There is!” He moved toward a curtained doorway a little to their left. “Follow me!”

Teddy complied with his instructions, remaining close at his heels as he darted through the doorway and up a steep flight of stairs. Turning at the first landing, he led her down a darkened corridor, trying the door of each room as he passed it, and hesitating only when he had found one that yielded to his touch.

“Get in, quick!” he directed, helping her over the threshold into the blackness of the room. “These are private bed-chambers, maintained for the exclusive benefit of Peter’s amorous clientele!”

He slammed the door into position. Teddy clung tightly to his hand as he crossed the room to a

window and lifted the shade.

"You were right," Teddy acknowledged, surveying the apartment in the dim reflection of the street lamps. "This is an orderly bedroom, with all accessories!"



"Hurry where?" Teddy demanded.
 "Into bed!" he unhesitatingly replied.

"Quite." Stevie paused; the shrill whine of approaching police sirens gained in volume every second. "The riot squad's almost here!—We've got to hurry!"

"Hurry where?" Teddy demanded.

"Into bed!" he unhesitatingly replied. "Peel off your upper garments just as fast as you can, and tuck yourself under the covers. I'll join you in short order."

Teddy moved away from him. "You're crazy!" she protested sullenly. "You must think that I . . .!"

"I'll think you're a damned fool if you wait any longer!" he interrupted, kicking off his shoes. "If we're discovered up here in complete attire, the cops are sure to guess that we sneaked away from the scene of the commotion; but if we're found in a state of partial *dishabille*—and in the bed—we won't be bothered in the least. This isn't the Vice Squad, you know!"

Teddy saw the light. Grateful to the darkness that concealed her blushes, she removed the greater portion of her apparel and leapt into the bed. A moment later, Stevie, reduced to his underclothing, crept in beside her. She wondered if his customary grin covered his features; this would be just the type of situation to intrigue a fun-loving boy of Stevie's type!

The sound of heavy footfalls in the corridor without came to their ears, as well as of the banging of doors.

"We just made it!" Stevie whispered. "I left the door open, purposely—so you can expect company in a minute!"

As he concluded, he slipped his arm beneath her shoulders and drew her to him. Teddy's blush deepened; the touch of his bare flesh to hers occasioned the birth of certain strange sensations, the like of which she had never before known!

With terrible abruptness, the door of their chamber was flung open, and the bright glare of a flashlight, held in a hand that never wavered, swept the room.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The dark figure with the flash could not restrain the oath of amazement. "A love-nest fulla boids!"

Stevie lifted himself to a sitting position in the bed. "What's the idea?" he growled. "My wife and I engaged this room for the night . . ."

"Which one of your wives?" cut in the policeman; but his tone was friendly. "Go right on honeymooning, folks; I just stepped in to introduce myself."

Still chuckling, he stepped back into the corridor and drew the door into place behind him. Some flats have hearts as big as their tummies!

"What did I tell you?" Stevie whispered

triumphantly. "I'm wise to every raiding-squad trick known to man!"

Teddy endeavored to sit up in the bed, but he drew her down. "Let's get out of here!" she snapped, a little tartly. "We just can't—can't stay—in this position!"

"Don't be foolish!" Stevie was in no mood for trifling. "They may look in on us again before they leave, and it would be damnably embarrassing if they learned that we were only kidding in the first place!"

"I—I suppose so," Teddy admitted, relaxing on the pillow.

Stevie slipped his arm beneath her shoulders again and drew her to him. A tremor ran through him; she was so magnificently soft to his touch—soft all over!

"Kiss me, dearest!" he begged. "Let's while the time away in a more pleasant manner than just staring up at a darkened ceiling!"

"No-o-o-o-o!" Teddy was obviously afraid to yield to so great an extent; afraid of Stevie's ultimate losing of control—or of losing her own! But it would be so pleasant to lay quietly in his arms and feel his warm lips as they closed over hers!

Stevie refused to accept an answer in the negative. With a little reassuring murmur, he drew her even closer. His lips found hers for a tiny kiss; a boyishly tender kiss that thrilled far more than one of excessive ardor.

Teddy felt thrilled from her head to her toes.

Conscious only of the rapture of his arms about her, she enfolded him in her embrace and lifted her lips again. Her whole body seemed to tremble with expectancy.

Stevie's flesh tingled as if with fire. He pillowed her in the hollow of his arms and lavished kisses upon her until she was limp and trembling. With no regrets or fears, she responded happily to his lovemaking.

"Stevie, darling!" she whispered.

"Yes, my sweet?" His heart beat madly as he gave back the reply.

"You're nice!" She snuggled endearingly in his arms. "I—I couldn't live without you any longer, dear!"

"Sweetheart!" Stevie felt happier than he had ever been in his whole life. "Then you'll marry me—soon?"

"In the morning," she whispered; "at the 'Little Church Around the Corner.' Now, love me, Stevie, precious, and show me what a foolish little girl I've been to think that I could get along without love!"

"Sugar girl!" Stevie cried, swooping down for a kiss that he resolved would last until she melted in his embrace.

Her arms were like a chain about his neck, and she shivered deliciously. Her hungry lips were fusing with his; her eyes closed softly—and their souls merged in a maelstrom of caresses.

The magic of Harlem resolved itself into the magic of love