

The Rutabaga Romance by ONEY FRED SWEET

The Poets Have Ever Sung of Love Made in Gardens.

THERE was a rush on in the seed department. Anna and Angie stood side by side trying to take care of the demand for the tiny packages marked "Crimson Globe" beets and "Autumn King" cabbage and "Early Cluster" cucumbers.

Miss Anna was all too plainly very much bored. She had a way of looking out beyond questioning buyers. Her eyebrows had been thinned out and she lifted what was left of them in annoyed fashion when the shifting and impatient public showed signs of stampede. What was all this craze about garden seeds, anyhow?

"Say, Anna," asked Angie, "does it make any difference? I just sold two ounces of 'Monarch' rutabagas in a package labeled 'Perfect Gem' squash. I used the wrong package. Does it make any difference?"

Anna but slightly turned her head, permitted her eyelids to droop, and yawned.

"But if he should plant the rutabagas as though it was squash and it should never come up," sighed the black-eyed Angie, "it would be my fault, wouldn't it? And he seemed like such a nice young man."

"Such a nice young man, huh," sniffed Anna. "Well, he sure escaped me. I ain't seen nothing here since I been in the 'seeds' but fussy old women and hump-shouldered old men. I didn't use to mind it down with the song records. That was more to my temperament, and once in a while I had a chance to meet somebody. They go together, love and music do. But cabbages and cucumbers! You should lose your looks bothering about what goes on here. It's all a fad, anyhow. Of all the fool questions they ask! 'Should they wash the potatoes before they plant 'em, and which way should they point the seeds in the ground? Just as if I knew.'"

"I don't know how I came to pick out the wrong envelope," worried Angie. "I'm always careful. But he was gone before I realized what I had done. I don't think gardening was just a fad with him. He said he had a truck farm. I know he's counting on those rutabaga vines coming up and blooming."

"Forget it," advised Anna.

"I suppose his garden is like the pictures of those on the pamphlets we give away," finished Angie. "I can see him out in it now, planting those rutabaga seeds according to the directions given for squash. And there'll be a place in his garden where nothing comes up, and it'll be my fault."

"You mention rutabagas again to me—" warned Anna. And then to a customer, "I can't tell you any more than just what's on the packages, lady. Directions are printed on the back."

That night Angie's mother remarked in Italian that her daughter must be working too hard, but Angie did not try to explain. A generation back Angie's mother might have known a good deal about gardens, but since coming to Chicago she had lived above a second-hand store. Angie had six younger brothers and sisters and her father held a political job; he was a street sweeper. Angie seldom spoke about her work at home, but she did broach the subject to Anna next day when they were grabbing their lunch, cafeteria style, on the seventh floor, "employees only."

"If they'd had rutabagas cooked today I'd a tried 'em," mused Angie. "I'd a seen what they were like. Maybe they do grow about the same as squash, Anna. Maybe with the same kind of planting—"

Anna had paused in front of a pillar mirror at the time. She was engaged in the acrobatic feat of balancing her tray on one

hand and fixing her hair with the other. She had trained the front of her hair so that a wisp of it came flat clear down to her eyes.

"Are you still raving?" gasped Anna. "Your job's safe. Let him blast holes to plant those seeds for all you care. He can't come back on you. He'll think the worms ate his old garden. I'm tired of the department, I'll tell the world. They can just put me back among the phonograph records any

wooded place beside a small stream where the "Sweet William" scattered its blue among the shaded grass. Here it grew and there it grew, and over yonder. Gathering excitedly as she wandered, Angie groped into an open space. She—

He was standing in the center of a great plowed tract, his coat off and his sleeves rolled up. He was standing with a hoe in his hand, and with the blue mist beneath the



"They won't grow if you step all over 'em."

day. There'd be a chance for some bird to come along then and whirl me away in a taxi to the altar. I've got the looks, ain't I, Angie?"

"But everybody seems to be counting so much on their gardens this year," ventured Angie as they seated themselves with their hash and cream puffs.

"A lot of ordinary people—yes," Anna agreed. "I saw one of those 'no-one-under-21-admitted' films last night. It started out—"

But, for once, Angie was in no mood to listen to Anna unfold a movie plot.

Sunday came—the quiet, the leisure. Also, along came Herman Misek, a neighbor youth, who during the week drove a motor truck. The vehicle on which he cursed and fought his way through crowded streets was now loaded with a bunch of humanity, picnic bound. And Angie needed no second invitation to climb aboard.

The motor truck, under Herman Misek's guidance, had chugged beyond the streets upon streets and had reached the open country. Wherever it found an opportunity the greenness of May was spread, and there was a freshness to the air. Herman Misek had taken such trips before with his employer's motor truck, and he was familiar with a

trees beyond it seemed to Angie as if she was looking upon a wonderful painting.

He glanced up. His gaze wandered in Angie's direction.

An apple blossom, leaning down from a bough, mingled its perfume with that of the flowers in Angie's arms. To the city-sated girl was wafted up the smell of the earth—warm and moist. Suddenly thrown into a world that, like herself, was at the bloom time, Angie's eyes half-closed—half-closed. He was looking her way again, this time with added concern.

"Don't step on there," he called out. "I've got rutabagas planted—"

"But they won't grow," she quavered. "Don't you remember, I—"

"They won't grow if you step all over 'em."

She drew back, half-frightened. He was coming toward her.

"I remember," he smiled. "You're the girl I bought seeds of."

He stopped short, embarrassed. "I'm not working on Sunday," he said finally. "I was just out looking around to see what had come through."

And then, still embarrassed but with a glow of pride, he started to show her how the radishes and onions were already standing up like a regiment in the battle against want. It was wonderful. It explained why

the customers who bothered her and Anna Klump were so particular and so eager. And he seemed so much nicer out there in his garden than he had even on the fourth floor.

And as he looked at his radishes and onions he looked more than once, too, upon this other interesting species that had so suddenly bloomed in his garden. As a gardener it struck him that her cheeks needed a bit more sunshine.

"Do you know," he said finally, his gaze away from the girl and off toward where the red orb of a sun was hanging low in a clump of trees, "I was a little muddled myself that day when you waited on me. You don't know how sweet your voice sounded when you says, 'Do you wish the early fall or the winter kind?' I never expected to see you again, though."

"I worried quite a bit about that mistake."

"Because it was me you made it on?"

She was looking down at the toe of her white shoe with which she was unconsciously uprooting a tomato vine.

"Maybe," she answered.

He permitted the tomato vine to suffer until he had received his answer and then he stooped to replace it in the soil.

"When those rutabagas come up they're going to mean a lot to me," he ventured awkwardly. "They'll make me think of you."

There was a tenderness in his voice that brought a flush to the seed department clerk's cheeks.

A robin that had been hunting for a worm among the clods gave a little warble just then and fluttered to its nest in a nearby maple tree with the food on which the price never advanced.

Have not the poets always sung of love that was made in a garden? True, they never referred to vegetable gardens; but neither were cabbages and carrots kings in those old days, each lowly edible bringing well nigh its weight in gold and silver.

Midsummer droned, and the seeds doled out by Anna and Angie had sprouted in a thousand gardens.

Apples hung where the blossoms had been, and the great plowed tract was luxuriantly green with plants and vines. He was standing in the center of the tract, his coat off and his sleeves rolled up. Angie had come out from the house to tell him that it was time for supper.

"I was just wondering," she said when he drew near.

"Huh?"

"I was wondering what Anna Klump would say if I told her."

"Huh?"

"If I told her that love could sprout from rutabaga seeds."