A Slip of the Pen

by Mabel McElliott

Love, for the Spinster Lady, Flares Up, Grows Dim Again, Then Burns with a Steady Flame.

The Spinster Lady yearned anew for shining linen.

THE Spinster Lady leaned back obligingly to permit the sleazy waitress to mop off the glazed table. For she was sleazy, in spite of trim uniform and apron. She wore it all untidily, and her hair was rampant. The Spinster Lady sighed, and being slim and 30, yearned anew for shining linen and the benediction of shaded lights. But her sigh means more than just that. She was tired—of life in general, and in particular of her job.

It was a nice job, as they go: she had an office bright with daylight, and there were exotic, orchidlike blossoms on the air plant that thrived in her east window. On ordinary days the bare sight of these comforted her immeasurably, but this was a day out of the ordinary, gray and somber. It began badly—with that letter from Sebastiano!

You will be wondering where the Spinster Lady (very proper and cool) picked up a person of that astounding name. You see, he was a relic of the unforgetable bright holiday she and Alicia Ramsay had spent in Italy the year before the great war came on the land. It was a vacation that had meant scraping and striving on the part of the Spinster Lady: meager luncheons, shabby frocks, and mended gloves. O, but it had all been worth it, she told herself, if only—well, if only because she had known him.

Last autumn he had come to America, much against the wishes of his father, a coral merchant in Naples, who wished him to take up the business; but wanderlust claimed him, and the Spinster Lady, knowing Sebastiano's charming manner of persuasion, could well understand how Raffaelo Vincenza had been brought over to his son's way of thinking. And when the boy had written her on his arrival in New York she had speedily replied, telling him how glad she would be to see him on his journey west.

But instead of going on to the coast, Sebastiano remained in Chicago; he had brought some of the famous Neapolitan cameos with him and had interested a great jeweler on the boulevard. So the Spinster Lady saw a great deal of him that winter. Often, when the day's work was over, they would dine together at the quaint places Sebastiano loved, and afterward walk along the gray lake wall, talking of many things. And while she helped him with his queer, charmingly stilted English, he taught her some of the liquid notes of his own tongue. Or they would go to the opera and, seated far above the stage and the jeweled boxes of the chosen ones, enjoy to the fullest the music.

On Christmas morning she had gone with him to early service in the cathedral; for although the Spinster Lady was not of Sebastiano's faith, the colorful ceremony of the mass delighted her. The lights and incense, the green festoons in the golden sanctuary, the music—full, mellow choruses of song, and thin flutelike solos that stretched from organ loft to nave like threads of invisible sweetness—all these uplifted and upheld her. She looked back with an infinite tenderness on that morning, for it was so very soon after that the boy had gone away.

It all came about from his mother's letters, and those of Carolina, his sister. It was pitiful to see the workings of the mother's heart through those long, quaintly worded epistles. For, you see, although Sebastiano was not the eldest son (Tobia the elder being in the seminary at Rome), he had served as a soldier in his brother's stead. And so, when his class was called to the front his mother wrote; she did not want her son (poverino!) to be a deserter; neither did she want him to go among these red dogs of war. Could he not obtain work in some ammunition factory in America, and in that way be excused by the consul from service? And if he must come, could he not learn to drive a motor and thus be kept away from greater danger at the front? Of course, he went back, like the gallant boy he was, and the last glimpse the Spinster Lady had of him was of a very curly head bobbing fantastically until the train passed out of sight in the yards.

She had given him a letter to Vittoria Sianoni, who was with the Red Cross in Switzerland, and the Spinster Lady had thought it great fun to introduce the two young Italians in this manner, and she knew that Sebastiano was more than a little interested in the description she had given him of her friend, and the microscopic photograph in her journal.

Since then she had had letters from Vittoria, who spoke in gentle, restrained manner of this "friend of yours, Vincenza," and an occasional card from Sebastiano, invariably stamped by the "censura," whom she obstinately pictured to herself as a brigandish sort of person, with bristling mustache and top boots. Sebastiano was evidently forgetting all the English she had so painstakingly taught him. One of the gay postal cards said: "Often I think from you and the boulevard walks with the wind in our faces. This also when in trenches. Having my mother so far away, this Miss Vittoria, your friend, becomes as to me a little mother, sending me often chocolat."

But it was his last letter that had caused the Spinster Lady to sigh and trace filmy nothings on the damp glazed table. He had been in hospital, he wrote. It was a nothing—a shattered hand—and now he was going home. But Vittoria had been exceedingly kind to him. It was the last sentence that struck the blow. "And it is at Easter this little mother to me will be married."

Why, it had taken all the color and life out of the day! Sebastiano and Vittoria! She might have guessed it would end this way, although she was a little surprised. Sebastiano's family was only of the middle classes, he had told her quite frankly, and Vittoria's aunt, with whom she lived, had rank and money. Well, they were saying that war changed everything, and perhaps this was one of the changes.

So it was settled! She wondered if they would live in the villa high above Capri, photographs of which Vittoria had sent her. There was a beautiful old garden there, with olive trees and a fountain. What a charming setting for an altogether charming romance! She supposed Vittoria would write her about it. And, still pondering, she sipped languidly the dregs of her sadly cooled tea and trailed away absentmindedly, forgetting her gloves, which the sleazy waitress accommodatingly picked up and restored to her.

The week that followed was a gray and dreary one. Even the print of Vesuvio that hung above her drawing board, with its gorgeous glare of crimson and orange and vermilion, failed to lighten the gloom that had descended upon her. She found nothing worth while. It was a bore to have to go out for luncheon; it was still further a bore to drag weary feet homeward to the little quiet room in a second class boarding house. She began to look her slender 30 years. Her soft fair hair actually began to lose its silken luster. She looked, as her kindly landlady said, "dead beat."

It was on Sunday, two weeks after the arrival of the letter, that she began to brighten up a trifle. She had read the Sunday paper three times over, so that she could have repeated the news items backward, and having nothing in the world to do, began the ancient and honorable game of "let's pretend."

The Spinster Lady had never outgrown the days when it was great fun to "dress up in mother's things." "I am going to pretend some one terribly important is coming to call," she told the mirror, with an air confidential. "Some one is coming at 5, I shall say, and it is almost 4 now. I must hurry."

She had only one pretty frock to her name (a shimmering thing of dull blue silk, of which she was inordinately fond), but she made great show of picking and choosing from a supposedly extensive wardrobe, and in the end hooked herself with small difficulty into the becoming thing, fastened the cameo pendant Sebastiano had pressed upon her when he went away as "a so very slight token of friendliness," and waited—for what?

"I am Cinderella," she told herself derisively. "Now, why—why couldn't I be a contessa—or at least the niece of a contessa!"

She laughed just a little at her own fancy, and the little maid who knocked at the door a moment later wondered audibly what she "could been doin' up here all alone to look so happy." And went on to remark that some one was waiting to see her in the parlor. No, she didn't know who 'twas. Mis' Ahern had sent her up with the message.

The Spinster Lady congratulated herself on being eminently presentable, as she descended. Possibly it was Alicia with tickets for the evening concert. But she was hardly prepared for the tall young man who lifted himself awkwardly out of the biggest chair and held out his hand. "It wasn't—no, it couldn't be." Sebastiano had been quick and lithe; she had been wont to tell him he moved like a cat. It was so dark in the shabby room. Why weren't the lights on? And then in half a moment he was greeting her, and she was trembling all over for sheer joy at the beloved voice.

When she found the switch she was shocked at the pallor of his face. His left hand was utterly gone, she saw, and he moved with a painful, dragging limp.

"You"—she managed to say after a bit, glad of her holiday attire and the pains she had taken with her bright braids. "I scarcely expected to see you over so soon. It is only a little over a fortnight since I had your letter."

"Ah!" The pale face glowed in the manner she so well knew. "I quickly followed it. I was the next day released from hospital, and unfit to return; it was the hearing from you that kept me living in those time. The Signora Vittoria read always your letters over to me again, until they were broken in the places to fold."

The Spinster Lady was Cinderella again at the mention of Vittoria's name. She said, striving to be natural:

"I have been trying to get around to it to write and congratulate you on your news. But of course it is much better to be able to tell it to you."

Sebastiano was a very poor dissembler. He wrinkled his brow in a manner truly painful, as though he were trying to recall something.

"Is it that I do not comprehend?" he asked humbly. "You are giving me good wishes—you must pardon that I am so stupid."

The Spinster Lady looked at a china dog on the mantlepiece, and said stiffly, "I was offering felicitations on your betrothal to Vittoria, of which you wrote me."

Sebastiano's tongue was loosed. He was amazed, astounded. Where had he written that? Ah, yes, he knew his English was poor, very poor, but surely he had not so stated. The contessa's niece was to marry Don Hugo, the hospital physician. It was of that he had written.

"You said—you said," remarked the Spinster Lady, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or to cry, "it is at Easter this little mother to me will be married."

"But, of course, I said that," cried Sebastiano. "It is as you always told me—placing the horse before the cart, was it not that? You see, she was a mother to so many of us there." And the Spinster Lady agreed with him, smilingly, glad of a chance to beam on this rose colored world.

Sebastiano said cheerfully, "You see, I shall be unable to be any longer a soldier," holding up the pitiful sleeve. "I have brought with me a great many corals from my father. There is a shop on the boulevard I wish to take, if I remain."

"O, you're going to stay," cried the Spinster Lady gladly. A look, half proud, half fearful, came over the thin face.

"I should so like to," he said simply. "Last year, and when I first saw you in Capri, I had these great wild dreams and plans—but now——"

The Spinster Lady found no voice to tell him to go on, but her look was eloquent enough.

"Now I can no longer ask you what I had hoped to, when I went away," he continued. "I have loved you very long, Polly." (How quaint the little Hoosier nickname sounded!) "But who would care for this poor invalid I am?"

The Spinster Lady's dearest friends would have been amazed to hear her say, quite boldly, "Why not? We can work together, you and I"—and then softly—"Carissimo mio."