

# Destiny Decides

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*Written for the Sunday Sun's Short Story Contest.*

IT was a day in March. There was a wintry tang in the air, a feeble and elusive hint of spring in the pale sunshine. The bow of pink ribbon pinned to Mary Emma's blouse meant the same thing, though she did not know it. The pink ribbon belonged to her Sunday finery. It had no business at the factory.

She had felt McNair's eyes on her all the morning. A subtle feminine sixth sense made her aware of his observation even while her eyes were glued upon her work, as if it engrossed every thought. And when he finally crossed the room in her direction her pulses leaped with an intoxicating certainty of power.

McNair was the foreman, big and brawny. He had a hard eye and the chin of a man accustomed to getting what he wanted. For a month the hands had smiled behind his back as he stared at Mary Emma. It was generally recognized that she had "got him going." And small wonder, either, for among the anemic girls and slatternly women she bloomed like a rose.

He stood beside her, the dominant male every inch of him. She ignored his presence with the audacious coquetry it pleases women to assume during their little day. The sound of his voice occasioned her a candid, almost convincing surprise.

"Going to speak to me?"  
"Oh, hello, Mr. McNair! I didn't notice you."  
"I guess you noticed all right." McNair's eyes dwelt upon the curve of her neck as she turned. Her pink cheek matched the Sunday ribbon.  
"What do you say to taking in a show with me tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know." Her air of indifference was misleading. Beneath her calm exterior dizzy triumph jostled vague fears. She could steady her voice, but her leaping heart defied control.

"You're afraid that if you go out with me you'll get in wrong with that white-livered?"

"I don't see there's any sense calling names, Mr. McNair. A girl's got a right to her friends."

"I haven't named anybody yet. You're mighty quick to fight Nick Bailey's battles."

She preserved a disdainful silence. Only her flaming color acknowledged her blunder.

"It's a good thing for Nick. He needs somebody to stand up for him, if it is only a woman."

"I don't see any use bringing Mr. Bailey's name into the conversation." Mary Emma had a stage heroine to thank for that phrase, and in her telling delivery she improved upon her model. McNair wilted.

"I'll be round tonight. We'll go to the Maryland and then we'll have a bite of supper. How does that strike you?"

"Well, maybe, if I'm not too tired."

The foreman moved away, snarling a rebuke at a girl who was staring. Mary Emma contrasted the savage brutality of his tones with his manner of addressing her and bit back an exulting smile. He was hers for the taking, this big, domineering man-tamer. The girls in the factory would envy her. The aunt who had brought her up would boast of her capture. They would have a six-roomed house all to themselves. And Nick Bailey——

The dream castles shivered and collapsed. A queer, tormenting pain mastered her exultation. Nick would take it hard. Some men grew angry and threatened the girl who threw them over. That was not Nick's way. When she flouted him, as she did periodically, for sheer joy in her power, he only looked at her with troubled eyes—Nick's eyes were of an incongruous, heavenly blue—and said stupidly, "Ain't mad at me, are you, Mary Emma?" Never anything but that.

"Nick's a nice boy." Mary Emma thought, going on with her work mechanically. "But he's too easy. Now, McNair—well, McNair is a man." The woman heart of her, craving a hero for her worship, swung toward the square-jawed foreman. Her thoughts went back to the two-storied house. One thing she would insist on—a sideboard in the dining-room.

Again the castle dissolved, this time with a roar suggesting the end of the world. The building

quivered like a reed in a gale. The glass fell from the windows in splintering fragments. A voice that sounded like the voice of neither man nor woman, but of fear incarnate, rose shrilly.

"The boiler! The boiler's blown up!"

The identity of Mary Emma as a conscious personality seemed to collapse. Of what happened next she had no knowledge then nor recollection thereafter. She was a thing without will or reason, swept along by a resistless current. It was like re-birth to find herself halted, looking down on the motionless figure of a woman. She recognized her immediately as a Jewish woman, a widow, with half a dozen children. There was blood upon her lips, Mary Emma saw, and with this discovery she was herself again.

She got her arms about the inert form and started toward the stairs. She had only the vaguest idea of the result of a boiler explosion, but the terror-stricken flight of her fellow-employees and the cries and clamor without urged haste. She was a vigorous girl, but the weight of her unconscious burden taxed her strength.

It was not till they had reached the stairs and begun the difficult descent that Mary Emma remembered McNair. The realization that he had abandoned her at such a time was less of a surprise because she understood perfectly the nature of her attraction for him. McNair wanted her, wanted her till he was ready to marry her, if she held to that exacting price. But that did not mean his risking his life for her's. "Men ain't built that way," thought Mary Emma.

Her heart was pounding as if to break through her ribs. She was panting, sweating, swaying. The descent of each stair was a separate achievement. With each downward step the dragging feet of her burden thumped grotesquely. She felt the fresh air from the open door below and stood for a moment tasting its exhilaration. Then a man leaped to her assistance—McNair.

"Weren't scared, were you?" He asked the question smilingly. In his heart McNair was cursing himself. He had fled, not because he was a coward but because he was a brute. In a fight he would have faced death pluckily enough, but in the presence of danger he had acted on the animal instinct of self-preservation, and so missed his chance to make himself "solid" with Mary Emma.

The girl stared at him stupidly. "Didn't the boiler blow up?"

"Boiler nothing! 'Twas the Alum Chine. Loading her with dynamite, they was, and she's blown into kingdom come."

"Lay Rachel down here," Mary Emma ordered, "and bring some water." She knelt beside the unconscious woman, finding it a relief to turn from the contemplation of a vaster tragedy. The fresh air was reviving Rachel. She shivered and moaned.

"There; nothing's going to hurt you," Mary Emma soothed her. The woman opened her eyes just as McNair came up with the water. He halted, abashed by her unmistakable terror.

"She's kind of queer yet," Mary Emma apologized for her patient. "I'm going to take her home. Was—was folks killed over there?"

The foreman nodded, his pallor significant. Mary Emma looked away. "I'm going to take Rachel home," she said again.

She spent the rest of the day in Rachel's two rooms, where fragmentary tidings of the catastrophe drifted in. Women in the building whose husbands and sons were employed in the vicinity of the ill-fated vessel had hurried off to learn the worst. One of them had come back wailing along the streets, a weird, primitive cry, unchanged since Eve. She had found her son, recognizing him by his clothing.

By 6 o'clock Rachel was able to sit up and Mary Emma rose to go. All those hours her question had waited.

"What made you look at McNair that way?"

"I didn't. What way?" Rachel's eyes had the furtive, fearful look of a long-suffering race.

"Tell me why you was scared of him, Rachel. I won't be mad."

"He hit me with his fist. I was in his way. I guess he wouldn't have done it if he'd thought."

"No," agreed Mary Emma. "He was just excited. Men get that way. Hope you'll feel all right in the morning, Rachel."

On her way home Mary Emma passed the small grocery over which the Bailey family lived. And

suddenly she discovered that the rooms of the little flat were crowded. She could see the figures of men through the windows, sitting on the sills as if for lack of chairs. Up to this time a curious pre-occupation in one little episode out of the day's calamity had kept her from realizing that perhaps it had touched her more closely still.

Mary Emma began to run. She flew up the stairs leading to the Bailey flat and burst in without knocking. Out of the people who filled the room she saw only Nick's father coming toward her.

"Hello, Mary Emma!" The elder Bailey approved his son's taste. "Come to have a look at our hero?"

She stared past him at a figure in a rocking chair. The right arm was in a sling, the head bandaged. Beneath the bandage the eyes were an incongruous, heavenly blue.

"I don't know where the hero comes in," Mrs. Bailey cried. "Why, Mary Emma, you don't mean you haven't heard!"

Nick half rose in his chair, the blood mounting to his pale cheeks. But his mother lifted her voice, pride masquerading as rebuke.

"Nick had picked up a man at the first explosion.

And then, after the big explosion, something fell on 'em. You can see what it done to Nick, and the boat was smashed, and the other man, too. But, with his arm broke and all, Nick dived for him and he got hold of his shirt with his teeth and swam ashore that way. And then," concluded Mrs. Bailey, her voice suddenly disdainful, "when they pulled 'em out at the docks the man's head was stove in just like an eggshell. He'd risked his life for a dead man."

"But how was I to know?" Nick protested. "Had to give him his chance, didn't I?"

The first that Mary Emma knew of her aunt's presence was when that scandalized woman jerked her away from Nick's only available arm.

"I guess you're out of your senses with all that's happened. Hugging and kissing right before everybody."

"I don't care," cried Mary Emma. "We're going to get married, ain't we, Nick?"

"It'll be quite a while before Nick can take care of a wife," said Nick's practical mother. "That arm of his!"

"I don't care," said Mary Emma again. "I can work for two."