

# HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

## CHAPTER I

"It was the smoothest Formal the Sorority ever gave, I mean it really was," insisted Norma Poole. "Far be it from me to doubt it," murmured Janet.

"Did I tell you about the favors?" inquired Norma eagerly. Janet nodded, "Yes, you told me."

She might have added that she heard the sorority dance discussed until she was weary of the subject, but Norma meant to be kind and after all it was not her fault that Janet Phillips had not been able to go away to an exclusive finishing school along with the other girls in her crowd.

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"Want to dance, Norma?" asked Dicky Allen, "or are you afraid?"

Norma was wearing Ted Hughes' frat pin, and she adored being teased about it. "Certainly not!" she cried, displaying all her dimples. "Ted and I are terribly brominded."

Norma's departure left Janet conspicuously stranded on a large pink damask sofa. At the tea table Priscilla Leigh was expatiating on the plans for her debut party in the fall.

"All alone, Janet," asked Ted Hughes, dropping down beside her.

"Yes, said Janet with a little grimace.

"I was sorry you couldn't come to the June prom," he said. "You're the only girl in the crowd who didn't show up. We missed you."

"I missed being there," "Gordon was lost without you," Janet carefully made her face expressionless. "Was he?" she asked.

She did not glance toward Gordon Key who was dancing with Priscilla Leigh.

Until nine months before it had not mattered that Janet Phillips did not have a car of her own and a well-to-do father and a large house in which to entertain her friends. Nor until recently had it made any social difference because her mother worked in a department store. Before her marriage Anne Phillips had been a Radcliffe. The Radcliffes were one of the town's old aristocratic families. Janet's grandfather had been governor of the state at one time. When it had become necessary at her husband's death for Mrs. Phillips to go out and make a living for her three children, her friends applauded her courage.

Bay City was a conservative southern town of twenty thousand inhabitants. Everyone of any social pretensions lived on the right side of the town branch and went first to the old frame school on Lucas Avenue and later to the new brick High at Dawes and State.

As a matter of course Janet grew up right along with the daughters of her mother's old

friends. She had not realized a break was inevitable when she and her girl friends graduated from high school.

The boys in the crowd had been going off to colleges and universities for several years, but the girls themselves departed for finishing schools the preceding September. Janet had counted the days until their return for the summer. Yet it was now only the third week in June and she had definitely discovered that she no longer belonged.

It was no one's fault. Nobody again with the notable exception of Priscilla, wanted Janet to feel left out. Her path had diverged too sharply from the others. She was studying interior decorating in the Normal at home. When she finished her course she was going to work, and she seemed no longer to have a lot in common with her friends.

"I'm for another slice of cake," said Ted when the radio paused for station identification.

He led the way to the tea table toward which Gordon was moving with Priscilla. Janet's cheeks burned.

"Hullo, Janet," he murmured.

"How are you?"

"I was never better," said Janet with her most brilliant smile.

Priscilla laughed unpleasantly. "Excuse it, darling, if I seem to have monopolized your boy friend this afternoon."

"I don't mind," said Janet.

The irritating point was that when she said things like that, nobody believed her. The crowd was convinced that Gordon was breaking Janet's heart.

"Run on and dance with Janet, Gordon," said Priscilla. "Didn't you always use to say she could dance rings around the rest of us?"

Janet had had a surfeit of that sort of innuendo since her friends came home. Someone was forever pairing her off with Gordon because that was how it used to be. She and Gordon had never been formally engaged, but for several years it had been understood in the crowd that she was exclusively Gordon's girl.

"Sorry," said Janet, and to save her life she could not keep the acid out of her voice. "I don't believe I care to dance just now."

Priscilla gave a trill of malicious laughter. "Don't tell me love's young dream has curdled!"

Gordon looked miserable and guilty and confused. "I didn't realize I was neglecting you, Janet," he stammered.

"It's quite all right," said Janet stiffly. "It may seem incredible, but there are compensations for being neglected."

Priscilla giggled. "That sounds like the well-known sour grapes, darling."

Janet could see herself in the mirror above the gate, a tall, slender black-haired girl in a crisp blue linen dress with a white leather belt and glass buttons down the front.

"My teeth are on edge," she told Priscilla, "but believe it or not, it has nothing to do with sour grapes."

Priscilla shrugged her shoulders in a cynical manner and Gordon looked more conscience-stricken than ever.

"I guess you'll carry off the swimming cup as usual tomorrow, Janet," he said.

Janet shook her head. "You forget I have classes in the morning."

"But it's the club opening." "Country clubs may come and go," said Janet lightly, "but summer school is something you don't cut even once, or you're dropped."

"Whatever made you enroll?" protested Priscilla. "It's dumb enough to go to a poky local college when everybody's away and there's nothing else to do."

Janet shrugged her shoulders. "The Normal has no social standing, Priscilla. You probably can't comprehend it, but people go there because they want to learn. It fits you for a paying job."

Janet pointed out. "At least when I get my diploma in August I'm promised a place at Tracy's."

There was another awkward pause. "You're going into the store?" faltered Ted in a second feeble effort to retrieve the conversation.

"The store where your mother works?" Priscilla added with disagreeable emphasis.

"Yes," said Janet, her lips tightening.

Gordon Key was his widowed mother's adored and only child. They were impoverished gentlefolk. By the exercise of every economy and subterfuge Dora Key managed, however, to keep up a front.

"I'm afraid your mother thinks I'm committing social suicide," Janet said to Gordon with a laugh that was like a gauntlet flung down between them.

He flushed. "The matter has certain bred-in-the-bone prejudices."

Priscilla laughed. "You sound as if you inherited them."

"I don't believe any woman can buck the world without coarsening herself," he admitted doggedly.

He's quoting his mother, thought Janet.

It was then she became aware of the man standing in the doorway. She did not know how long he had been there, or how much he had overheard. He had a lean, controlled face and eyes which were not easily read. His heavy black eyebrows nearly met above

his nose, which was a little hooked as if it had been broken. His skin was swarthy and he was tall and unusually broad across the shoulders, but his waist and hips were narrow. He had a small white scar at the side of his mouth, and was dark enough to be an Italian, but his eyes were Irish blue.

"You asked me to look you up if I came down this way," he said to Priscilla.

"Tony Ryan!" Priscilla gave a little squeal of delight and ran across the room. She took both his hands in hers and drew him over the threshold.

"It's Tony Ryan, everybody!" exclaimed Priscilla as if she expected the news to overcome them.

"What are we expected to do?" Janet asked Ted. "Fall down and roll over, or kiss his hand?"

Ted did not answer. He and the others were crowding in a body about the great Tony Ryan who at eighteen had been lightweight champion of America, and a twenty-two had realized that the big money in the sporting world is in the promotion end, and who at twenty-seven was said to be ready to retire with something over a half million dollars.

"You said if you ever came off down here, you'd look me up," cried Priscilla delightedly. "but I simply didn't believe you'd come. I mean I couldn't imagine that anything so perfectly gorgeous might happen."

"Why shouldn't I drop into Bay City and look the old town over?" he demanded lazily.

"After all," he went on softly, "my mother used to take in washing for all the best families in Bay City. When I delivered clothes at back doors I promised myself I wouldn't be poor white trash from the wrong side of the branch forever," he said. "Funny, isn't it? As a ragged little tyke in Shanty Town I made up my mind that some day I'd walk in at the front door of a house like this and be treated as visiting royalty."

The corners of his wide mouth curled, the mockery in his Irish eyes deepened. As if he were sneering at them, thought Janet.

"Darling, cried Priscilla, giving him a languishing glance, "it's too romantic, from rags to riches practically overnight!"

Tony Ryan grinned. "All in

the good old American tradition." Janet turned away abruptly. A great many things she had been taught to believe apparently were not true. She had not known, for instance, how decisive money is in the adult world. For lack of it she was being penalized, but a Tony Ryan could stride roughshod into society because he had the admission price.

"Going so soon, Janet?" asked Priscilla carelessly.

"Yes," said Janet. "I'm using Jim's car and I must pick him up. He's over at the club subbing for Jock McCall, you know."

She was surprised when she reached the battered flyver which her brother Jim had bought of a used car dealer, to find that Gordon had followed her outside.

"I'm awfully sorry," he stammered.

"I told you it's quite all right," said Janet. "I wouldn't have embarrassed you by coming over this afternoon if I had known you had a tea engagement with Priscilla. I didn't mean to come."

Only I met Norma and she said the whole crowd was here. She wouldn't let me off."

Gordon was perspiring. "It's not that," he said. "It's tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Mother didn't know I was taking you to the dance. She couldn't have known, or she wouldn't have accepted Priscilla's dinner bid."

Janet sat very still for a moment. "You mean you have to take Priscilla to the dance?"

"I'll ask Jim to bring you, Janet."

"Please don't," she requested sharply.

"Yes?" murmured Janet and drove away.

That same afternoon Jim Phillips looked up from the tournament schedule he was making out for the next day to discover Ruth Hetchcote smiling at him from the doorway of the caddy room at the Country Club.

"I haven't a partner, Jim. It looks as if you'll have to go around with me," she said ruefully.

Jim laughed. "I can't think of any way I'd rather spend a balmy June afternoon than golfing with a Hatchcote."

Ruth smiled. "But then you've always been right partial to Dad and me."

(To be continued)



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