

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

CHAPTER V

Synopsis
Janet Phillips finds herself left out of things when her wealthier friends in Bay City come home from their finishing schools and colleges. Priscilla Leigh—at the moment interested in Janet's old friend Gordon Key—is making herself disagreeable. Jim Phillips, Janet's brother, has brought her to the dance to which Gordon promised to take her. Jim

has been subbing as the golf pro for the summer and has offered to give rich, red-headed Helen Sanders lessons. She mistakes Jim for a club member at the dance and ignores his invitation to dance. She finds that Howard Leigh has falsified Jim's position and hurries to explain.

Jim was staring down into her lovely pointed face and it seemed to be wiped quite free of

sophistication and affectation. He had not until then realized that she was very young, much younger than her pose.

"You forgive me?"
"Certainly!"
Again she laid her hand on his arm and he learned that ecstasy can cut like a knife. "Will you dance the next dance with me?" she asked softly.

"I'll be delighted," he stammered, "only I warn you I'm an awful dub on the dance floor. I'm no lady's man."

"Perhaps that's why I like you so much."
Nothing in his experience had prepared him for the rapturous emotions which surged through him at the feel of her supple fragrant body. Once when he bent his head a little bronze curl brushed his cheek, thrilling him from head to foot. He had a wayward desire to press his lips to the seductive hollow in the slender ivory column of her throat.

"You dance beautifully," murmured Miss Sanders when the music ended.

He still did not trust himself to speak. Howard Leigh was coming toward them with a scowl and still Jim said nothing.

"I'll see you in the morning," she asked, "for our first lesson?"
Jim swallowed hard. "Yes," he said unsteadily, although he knew that the first lesson was behind them.

It was not apparent on the surface that Janet Phillips no longer occupied the same position in respect to her old crowd which she had once held. She did not suffer for lack of partners at the dance that night.

Gordon did not look happy. In spite of his mother's persuasions, Gordon had never liked Priscilla.

Even when it was her whim to be amiable, he never knew what minute she might turn upon him. Janet understood the distressed pucker between his eyes and why in spite of himself he glanced longingly at her from across Priscilla's sleek blond head. When someone cut in on him he could not resist the temptation to tap Janet's partner on the shoulder.

"Hello, Gordon," said Janet.

Gordon drew a breath of relief as his arms closed about her. It was as if he had escaped unpredictable perils and rediscovered security.

Involuntarily Janet's voice took on a soothing note.

"You mustn't feel conscience-stricken about me, Gordon," she said gently.

"I feel terrible about letting you down!" cried Gordon in a choked voice.

Janet still found herself in the anomalous position of defending him from herself. "It isn't as though we were ever formally engaged or as if you had jilted me at the altar," she said kindly.

"I wouldn't have hurt you for the world. My one consolation is that you're too good for me," he said with a mournful smile.

It was Janet's cue to bolster up his self-esteem by a denial of his statement, but she had a sudden vision of truth. "Yes," she said, "I am."

She wished someone would cut in, but her friends were too tactful. She muttered an excuse when the music stopped and escaped to the dressing room.

She arrived at the ballroom to find that her partner for the next dance had looked everywhere for her before retiring in dudgeon to the bar. Had Janet followed her inclination she would have hunted up Jim and asked him to take her home. She felt sure he was bored to death and eager for an excuse to go, but at that moment a couple drifted by her on the dance floor. Janet could scarcely believe her eyes. From the rapt expression on his rugged face, her brother with Miss Helen Sanders in his arms was anything but bored.

"Oh, no!" cried Janet.

She did not realize she had spoken aloud until someone who had come up behind her addressed her. "Shall we finish this dance?"

She turned sharply. Tony Ryan stood at her elbow. Evidently he had only that moment arrived. She intended to make an excuse for not dancing with him. However, he gave her no chance to do anything of the kind. He merely put out his arms and danced off with her as if he believed any girl would feel flattered to be singled out by the famous Tony Ryan.

Janet was glad when the music ended, glad when Priscilla came skating across the room to assert her prior claim to the visiting celebrity, glad when everybody crowded around Tony Ryan so that Janet was edged to the extreme rim of the group and finally extricated from it entirely by Ted Hughes with whom she had the next dance.

The last dance of the evening was the only one in which no cut-ins were allowed. Everyone was supposed to dance it with his escort, but Janet had not seen Jim for an hour. She had a notion

he was lurking outside with a cigarette. However, she made a circuit of the veranda without locating him. She was perched on the porch railing staring somberly at the setting moon, when Tony Ryan again came up behind her.

"Want to dance?" he asked.
"No," said Janet without turning her head.

There was an interval of silence which Janet found trying. In the end it was she who broke what had begun to seem a contest between their wills.

"It must be nice to return to the old home town in the role of conquering hero," she remarked in a light, disdainful voice.

He laughed. "It's a complex, I suppose. I could never convince myself that I had outgrown Shanty Town until I came back and had the seal of approval put upon me by the elite of Bay City. Queer, isn't it?"

She gave him a grudging glance. "That at least needn't worry you any longer."

"I always get what I go after," he said quietly.

"Modest, aren't you?"
"No, just sure of myself. There's a difference."

"Who am I to take exception to your pride in your accomplishments," she inquired bitterly. "You're on your way up, I am on my way out."

He stared at her curiously. "Yes?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "As you may know, a generation ago my family was prominent locally. Now my mother works in a store and so shall I when I finish my course in interior decorating."

He was studying the dead end of his cigarette. "If you're an expert on interior decorating, I might have a job for you."

"A job?"
"Perhaps you aren't interested in jobs."

"Oh, yes," said Janet with a hostile smile. "I'm interested in any chance to earn money. It's so important to make money. Nothing else matters."

"I've bought the old Radcliffe mansion."

"My grandfather's house!"
"I signed the papers a couple of hours ago."

"But," cried Janet breathlessly, "it's dreadfully run down. That's why Mother let the property go practically for back taxes. We couldn't afford to live there and no one would rent it. People don't care for those huge, old-fashioned places any more."

"I do," said Tony Ryan. "It's like this," he explained. "When I was a ragged alley rat I promised myself that some day I'd buy the best of everything. At that time the old Radcliffe mansion represented my idea of the most elegant thing of its kind."

"It broke Mother's heart to give up the place," said Janet icily. "It's one of the few times I ever saw her cry. Since then I've gone blocks out of my way not to pass the house. It isn't pleasant to be reminded that the glories of the past are past."

"If it would be painful, forget it."
"Don't be ridiculous," said Janet. "Paupers cannot afford sentiment."

"That's settled then? Shall we fix a day to go out and look things over? Tomorrow?"
"If you like."

"I'll pick you up at two at your home."
She gave him a curious glance. "Won't you rattle around like a marble, alone in that huge place?"

He shook his head. "Of course I shan't live there long alone," he said.

She stared. "You're going to be married?"
"Naturally," he said, "one can't select a wife as quickly as a house."

"You haven't selected one yet!" cried Janet in a dismayed voice.

He grinned. "All I know is that she'll have to be out of the top drawer."
Janet decided she hated him. "Locally you'll find Priscilla Leigh our highest priced article," she remarked disdainfully.

"So she's given me to understand," said Tony Ryan.

When Bill's voice quivered like that, the hard core of defiance in Berenice's heart gave way. She was never able to resist his tenderness.

"If I weren't so crazy about you I wouldn't care what you did," he said unsteadily.

"I know," whispered Berenice. "I had something to tell you when I came home," said Bill, "only you weren't in a receptive humor."

They were sitting on the edge of the bed. He still had his arm about her and Berenice's head was cuddled against his shoulder.

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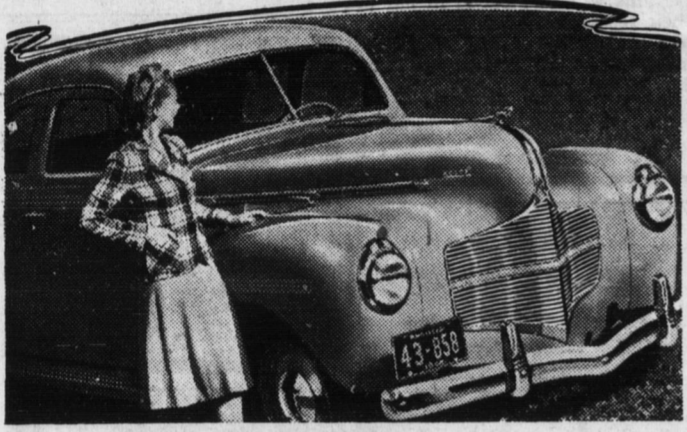
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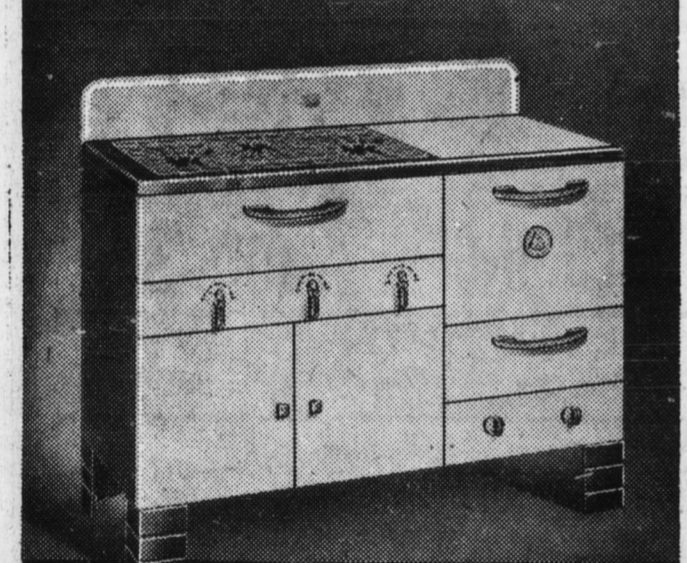
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