

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

CHAPTER VII

Life grows complicated for the children of plucky Anne Phillips who, by working in a department store, has supported them since her husband's death. Her married daughter, Berenice, quarrels with her husband, Bill. Jim, the son, is infatuated with the rich Helen Sanders, although Anne suspects that Cathy, the widowed little dancer in the apartment across the hall, is in love with him. And Janet, Anne's young-

er daughter, is unhappy because her well-to-do friends neglect her, and insists on believing that she is annoyed over Gordon Key's interest in Priscilla Leigh. Janet is studying interior decorating at normal school summer classes and is commissioned by Tony Ryan to help him restore the old Phillips estate which he has bought.

"His name is Tony Ryan, and he was born in Shanty Town. He's employed me to help restore the old place. Incidentally he's going to marry Priscilla if he can, and I think he can."

"He's in love with her?"

"Love!" exclaimed Janet with a cynical laugh. "Now where have I heard that word before?"

Her mother flinched. "I don't like to hear you jeer at the eternal verities, Janet. If it's Gordon who has disillusioned you, he isn't worth it."

"It isn't only Gordon," said Janet, blinking her eyes to drive back the tears. "It's a combination of everything." She smiled uncertainly. "Perhaps it's good for me to have my head pulled down out of the clouds."

"No!" her mother protested. "It's a lovely head, and it was made to brush the stars."

That was before Berenice and Bill came in just as the others were sitting down to the table. "Darlings," exclaimed Anne, "how did you know I was wishing for you? You haven't eaten, I hope."

"I'm not hungry," said Bill with a dull flush.

Anne noticed that Berenice ignored his remark quite as if he had not spoken. "Are you sure you have enough to go around?" she asked her mother.

Anne laughed. She and Janet were scurrying about setting extra places.

"Bill's had another salary cut," said Berenice. "We thought we'd have to give up the apartment and I was sick, simply sick, and all my friends said it was a shame. So May Shelton called up Guy and he said he could use me as a file clerk or something in his office. The salary isn't large, but it's more than Bill's cut and after all, I had nearly finished my business course when I stopped to get married."

A dark flush crept to the roots of Bill's black hair. "I think a wife ought to be willing to make the best of her husband's earnings. I suppose that's what it meant when we went through all that for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer stuff."

Berenice glared at him. "You've always thought Mother perfect, and she works."

Anne winced. "I've been compelled to," she said.

The telephone rang and Janet

jumped up to answer. "It's for you, Jim," she said.

Jim went into the hall and picked up the receiver. "That you, Phillips?" inquired Howard Leigh. "I have a message for you from Miss Sanders."

Jim's hand tightened on the edge of the telephone stand. "All right," he said. "Fire."

"She has decided to join her father for a cruise on his yacht. Jim's heart felt like an exposed nerve. "So what?"

"We're leaving at midnight for New Orleans. I'm invited to go along."

"Think of that!" said Jim with a bleak laugh.

"It seems she owes you for a golf lesson. You can send the bill to me."

"And you can step to hell," said Jim banging up the receiver.

He was scowling when he returned to the table. Something in the set of his lips forbade questions as he jerked out his chair and sat down again.

July that year ran true to form. Torrid days with pavements sticky under the glaring sun were followed by sultry nights when the leaves on the trees hung motionless.

Jock McCall returned to his duties at the golf club and Jim went back to his regular routine in Judge Hetchcote's office. Apparently Jim was the same as he had ever been—conscientious, steady, level-headed. He worked nearly every night, studying or going over briefs. After dinner each evening he romped with Danny. Later Jim drove Cathy over to the night club. Sometimes he stayed at the office late enough to bring her home. If he had suffered a wound, he said nothing. Only his mother's eyes could have detected the faint lines that tightened about Jim's mouth and even she could not be certain of his unhappiness.

In the same fashion Anne had no adequate excuse for her anxiety in regard to Berenice. She seemed more contented after she began working in Guy Shelton's office. Her mother thought it a good thing for Berenice to have less time to play around with her idle and sophisticated women friends and Anne was positive that was why Bill had yielded the point.

To Janet also those four weeks had a sinister quality, like the dead calm preceding a hurricane. Nevertheless, the work on Tony Ryan's house was progressing apace.

Mr. Busby was a short, stocky, middle-aged man and a fine workman. She was self-conscious the first afternoon she reported to Mr. Busby at the Radcliffe house.

"As near as I can make out, you're the court of last resort," he said. "If there's any doubt in my mind about how to go ahead I'm to trust your memory."

He took it for granted that she would be on hand every afternoon from two to five.

Janet was eager to know if their employer was pleased so far as they had gone, but Mr. Busby volunteered no information and, in view of Tony Ryan's attitude toward herself, Janet was determined to betray no interest in the man. He never came near the Radcliffe place while she was there. Janet thought she understood the pointed way in which she was being ignored. Priscilla was a jealous goddess. She demanded undivided attention, and although during July Janet avoided her old crowd, she did from time to time run into one of them on the street. The absorbing topic of their conversation was Priscilla Leigh's crush on

Tony Ryan.

She was startled one afternoon on starting out the great bay window of the master bedroom, to discover a young colored man busily engaged in removing the barbed wire which for years had replaced the wide gate between the big house and the cotton fields behind it.

Janet ran down the back stairs and out the rear entrance. "Aren't you making a mistake?" she inquired.

The man paused to wipe the sweat off his brow with his sleeve and smiled, shifting his feet.

"No'm, Mr. Tony ordered me to get this wire out of the way. He say he done sick and tired snagging himself ever' time he want to go over to his farm. He done bought all de land dis way and dat."

He gestured vaguely in a circle which took in both cotton fields and woods to the east and south.

"Mr. Tony low, he going to have the finest stock farm in dis here state," announced the small darky with a broad smile, "and I ain't never knowed him to make a mess of nothing he started. I'm Deke, Miss. Maybe Mr. Tony done told you about me."

She shook her head. "I'm merely an employee here."

"I was a jockey, Miss, before I got jammed at the quarter and cracked my ankle. I grewed up in Kentucky and I don't know nothing 'cept horses, but you can't ride no races with a bum foot. I guess I'd have starved right on the sidewalks of New York if I hadn't run across Mr. Tony."

He glanced over his shoulder to the rambling farmhouse which stood on the slope of the hill where the fields met the woods. Janet frowned. A couple of men were sitting on a scaffolding at the side, lavishly applying whitewash.

"Dat's Rufe and de Earl of Jersey," volunteered Deke.

One afternoon Janet discovered more activity near the rear wall of the estate, and when she strolled down to investigate she found a large, muscular man engaged in painting the new plank gates while a small elderly man in worn tweeds directed proceedings.

"How do you do, Miss Phillips?" he murmured. He had an impeccable British accent and a monocle and one of the tireddest and most civilized faces she had ever seen.

"Evening, Miss," mumbled the man astride the gate.

"Don't mind Rufe," said the little Englishman quietly. "I remember when he was a superb physical specimen. Now he's a little blasé as to mental awareness, but quite harmless. I recall when Rufe could scarcely force his way through his admirers. Tony Ryan came across Rufe four years ago in the breadline. Since then Rufe has fared very well."

Janet was unreasonably exasperated to discover that a man in whom she was determined to see no good had, it would appear, at least one saving grace.

"Am I supposed to deduce that Tony Ryan is an incognito Santa Claus, or what?" she demanded.

The Englishman shrugged his narrow shoulders. "In spite of Tony's modest efforts to elude the allegation, wouldn't you say it takes a somewhat altruistic nature to invest in a farm and a farmhouse in order to provide a home and a decent livelihood for several fellow beings who are to a degree human wreckage?"

"Modest is one word I never connected with Mr. Ryan," was Janet's acrid comment.

The Englishman removed his monocle and then absently replaced it. "Tony has been spoofing you, eh, what?"

Janet laughed. "It was you undoubtedly to whom Deke referred as the Earl of Jersey."

"Righto! I no longer recollect who first called me the Earl of Jersey, but it was an attempt at wit I've never lived down. I've become so accustomed to the name, in fact, I answer to no other. I am, don't you know, a cook."

"A cook!" murmured the Earl of Jersey in his distinguished and imperturbable manner. "I came to this country sixteen years ago by invitation to play polo on Long Island. Unfortunately I have a regrettable habit every so often of going completely blotto. I am what is commonly called a periodical drunkard."

"Oh!"

"At intervals I am distinctly not myself. More than one of those intervals occurred when as a polo player I was expected to do the bright and shining for my side. After I had tumbled off several horses in a quite disgraceful fashion, no more American millionaires turned up who cared to ask me on house parties with free access to mounts, et cetera. At the same time and for the same reason my family decided to wash their hands of me. Finding myself cut off from the where-withal it became imperative for me to unearth some means of earning my daily bread."

"Economically my only hope was that I might be worth a salary as tutor to the children of the very rich. However, although even in my cups I can be relied upon to act the perfect English gentleman, I am not precisely an edifying model for tender youth. Consequently as a tutor I soon disappeared from the scene. I was, as it happened, quietly starving to death when I realized that a cook can always eat. For years I've been working in one or another greasy spoon restaurant, mostly in Hoboken or other New Jersey ports."

"You mean me to infer that he is running the farm as a home for human defecators, yourself included?" asked Janet slowly.

"Righto," said the Earl of Jersey.

(Continued Next Week)

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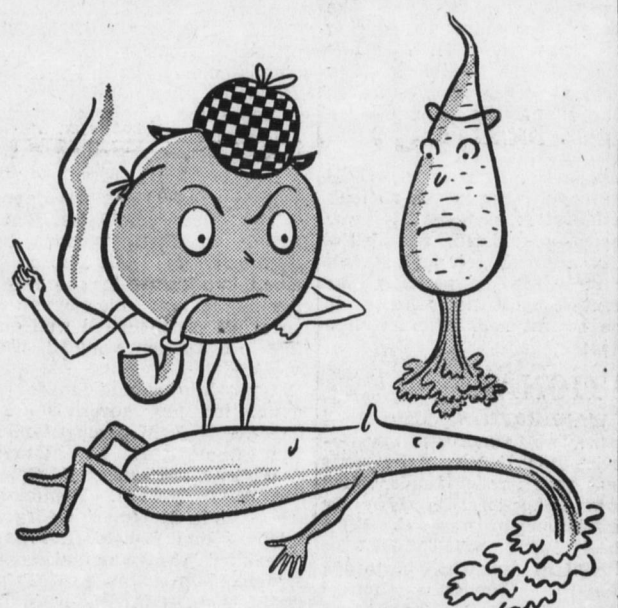
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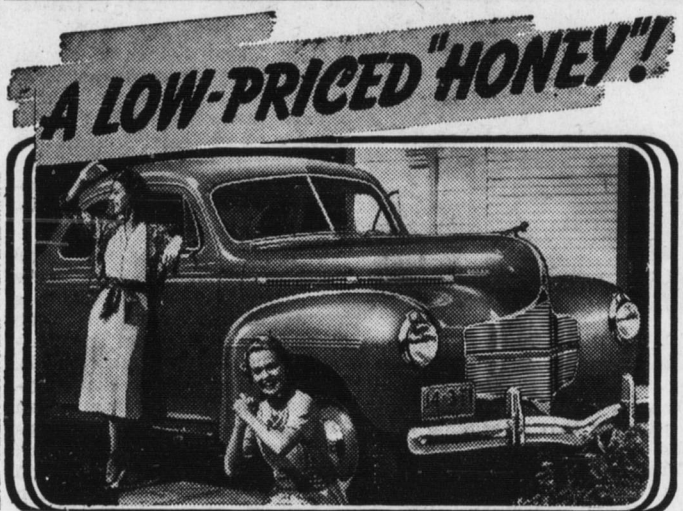
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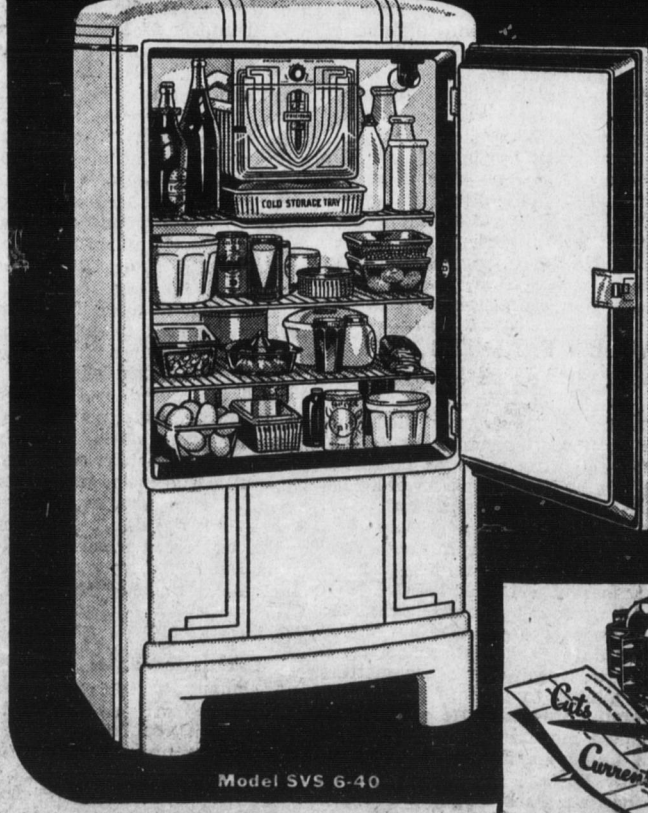
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