

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

CHAPTER VIII

Synopsis
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, Anne's 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 youngest daughter, is unhappy because her well-to-do friends neglect her and insists on believing she is annoyed over her old friend Gordon Key's attentions to Priscilla Leigh. Janet is studying interior decorating and is commissioned by Tony Ryan to help him restore the old Phillips estate, which he has bought. A negro and Englishman working there tell her of Tony's kindnesses.

By the last week in July Mr. Deke was next to finished at the Radcliffe house. There were only a few loose ends to be tucked in. He began uneasily to wonder what would happen next. She had after considerable research

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decided on exactly what furnishings the old mansion required. She had the names of dealers and prices at her tongue's end, as well as neatly put down in a slender red notebook for Tony Ryan's consideration.

Deke had been engaged for several days in carefully weeding out the flower beds at the sides of the Radcliffe mansion. It was work at which he could sit down if his leg troubled him. The business of pruning the trees and cutting back the heavy shrubbery was to be left to Rufe under the supervision of the Earl of Jersey, so Deke said.

"Mr. Tony knows I can't handle no scythe," chuckled Deke, "but he promised to skin me alive if I missed any weed in these here flower beds. Mr. Tony can't stand nothing slovenly."

Janet's lips curled. "He expects you to earn your keep, does he?"

"Yas'm."
"There's nothing like being able to eat your cake and have it too," she remarked. "I mean, it isn't everyone who can make a beautiful gesture pay."

"Yas'm," agreed Deke doubtfully.
He had no idea what she was talking about, but the man who had come up behind her knew. "I've seen the skids put under too many God Time Charlies to let that happen to me," said Tony Ryan in a hard voice.

Janet turned with a little gasp. He had come in through the rear gate. Under the dark tan of his lean cheeks there was a red glow like the dusky flush on a copper vase.
"I'd like if possible to have the house ready for occupancy by the twentieth of August," he said. "Please buy what you think the house needs and have them send the bills to me," he said crisply.

She winced, and her old antagonism flared up. "The price is no object, naturally?" she asked.

He gave her a curious glance. "I want the best."
Theoretically, after she had been busy at the office for eight hours, Berenice should have been satisfied to stay quietly at home with Bill at night, only it had not worked out that way. She was generally tired by five and more and more inclined to feel sorry for herself because her friends had been doing nothing all day except play bridge or otherwise amuse themselves. She formed the habit of stopping in at one of their apartments after work. Usually The Bunch was together somewhere having cocktails. They encouraged her to join them.

When she came into the apartment that afternoon Bill was slamming things around in the kitchenette. "Hullo," he said without looking up, his face like a thundercloud.

"Hullo," said Berenice coldly, going into the dressing room to put her hat and gloves away.

The living room needed clearing of cigar butts and scattered newspapers.

"Come and get it," called Bill from the dinette.

"Have you thought any more about going to the Fair with the bunch?" she asked after awhile.

"For Pete's sake," he protested, "what is there to think about? I can't afford a jaunt like that and you know it!"

She meant to be generous, her heart was full of tenderness when she said, "I have money enough in the bank to pay our expenses to the Fair, Bill, if you'll go."

He started to his feet so violently she dropped her fork. "What are you trying to make out of me?" he cried in a tortured voice. "A gigolo?"

Berenice's cheeks flamed. "It's like you to be that unjust," she said. "Has it occurred to you that after I've pounded the typewriter from nine to five I'm not exactly in the mood to be shouted at the rest of the night?" she demanded.

Bill's mouth tightened. "Maybe you think I'm crazy about coming home to this sort of thing when I've tramped the streets all day trying to sell advertising?"

"Is that why you're not so hot at it?" she asked stinging.

He picked his hat up from where he had flung it down on the littered desk. He did not speak or glance back as he jerked the door and banged it behind him. Berenice stood very still, listening to his retreating steps. Suppose Bill did not come back?

She had a longing to run to her mother, to hide her head in Anne's lap as she had done when a child if she had had a nightmare or been frightened at something. She had stretched out her hand to take up the telephone when it rang. Berenice had meant to call Anne and ask if she could come over, but May was on the wire. "Meet us down in the lobby, kid. You and Bill are riding in our car."

"Bill isn't here," stammered Berenice, trying to conceal that she was crying. "We had one of our famous battles and he walked out on me."
"He'll be back," said May with a hearty laugh. "Surely you aren't going to give him the satisfaction of staying at home and moping. That's exactly what he'd like."
Berenice's round childish chin hardened. "All right," she said. "I'll meet you downstairs as soon as I can climb into my best bib."

When Berenice let herself back into the apartment a little after two Bill was there asleep on his side of the bed.

She closed the dressing room door cautiously before she started to undress. Her hands were not quite steady and her eyes did not focus correctly. That was how she happened to pull open Bill's drawer instead of her own in the chiffoniere. That was why she did not at once recognize the stack of neatly cut out pictures which lay on Bill's pile of handkerchiefs.

The local newspaper had been running a contest for eight weeks. Each day they published a picture puzzle. There was a grand prize of five thousand dollars and a second of a thousand and a third of five hundred and forty of five dollars each. Berenice had never dreamed Bill was working at the contest. Yet there were the pictures painstakingly puzzled out and lettered in Bill's small cramped printing. Berenice's heart ached.

He had secured duplicates of each puzzle so that the set he finally sent in should be neat and legible. These were the ones he had worked from. They were almost tattered where he had written in and then rubbed out and rewritten his answers. In spots the cheap, ragged paper had been worn through in holes from his patient eraser.

"Oh, poor Bill!" Berenice whispered to herself.

For all the pictures were torn in half and in the waste basket beside the chiffoniere lay a crumpled newspaper. Berenice picked it up with shaking hands. There were the names of the winning contestants. The winner of the grand prize headed them all in huge black letters, the second in smaller type, the third in still smaller print, and at the bottom the inconspicuous column of forty who received five dollars each.

Berenice's trembling finger ran down the list. Bill had not received a prize, not any at all. His name did not appear anywhere on the page. Berenice felt an anguish of pity. She knew why Bill had wanted five thousand dollars, why he had clutched at this forlorn hope to save his self-respect, but he had failed.

"Oh, Bill!" whispered Berenice, crawling into bed beside him and putting her arm across him.

But even in his sleep he flinched away from her.

Gradually the stately old house began again to take on a gracious and gleaming aspect. Worn floors and wainscoting developed a satin sheen. In the dining room a Sheraton table and white leather-seated chairs rested on a hand-woven blue rug. Upstairs, prim ruffled white curtains framed the windows of bedrooms in which there were mahogany four-poster beds and slipper chairs and chintz-covered chaise longue.

"Almost finished, breathed Janet one sultry afternoon toward the middle of August. "The sooner I get away from here the better. The first thing I know I'll be breaking down and sobbing on the interloper's hearth rug."

A man stood at the foot of the stairs. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

He was a slight man, thin for his height. He looked to be about forty-five and his expensively tailored gray suit was a little shiny at the seams.

"You are Miss Phillips, of course," he went on. "I'm Steve Hill, a friend of Tony's. He's done me a great service by being alive."

The next afternoon he was in the library when she arrived, sitting on the cushioned window seat, turning the leaves of an exceptionally fine copy of Tristan and Isolde.

"Allah be praised, you don't

buy books for the color of their bindings!" he said.

Janet stared at him critically as he talked on. He did not sound like a bum, but neither did the Earl of Jersey. Steve Hill had a sensitive mobile face, and he seemed to have read everything worth reading and to have seen everything worth seeing and to have known everything worth knowing.

"Sorry," he said, glancing abruptly at his watch. "I'm afraid I've bored you."

She discovered with an incredulous start that they had been sitting there for an hour while he literally charmed her with the gently satirical flow of his conversation. "No," she said, "you haven't bored me. I doubt if you ever bored anyone in your life."

To her dismay his mouth twisted with pain. "I failed lamentably with the one audience in the world which mattered to me," he said and waded quickly away as if a horde of tormenting memories had been loosed about him.

But he was back again the next afternoon. Janet was hanging pictures.

"Nothing's lacking," she told Steve Hill, "except the portrait of my great-grandmother which is in our living room at home. It belongs here, commanding the whole house," she indicated the space opposite the wide staircase and the entrance to the library. "But nothing could persuade us to part with it."

She laughed unsteadily. "There are some things you can't put on the auction block unless it's a matter of life and death. At least we've managed to eat without pawing great-grandmother." She regarded him defiantly. "A bit of maudlin sentiment, eh, what? as the Earl of Jersey would say."

Steve Hill smiled. "There was a time when I thought I'd outgrown the old gods, but that's merely a phase, you know. In the end you realize that life without sentiment is a wine without bouquet."

She caught her breath. "I'd like you to know my mother," she said, and blushed because until then she had not known she approved of him to that extent. "Would you like to go home with me tonight to dinner? It'll be informal. We live in a flat and we can't entertain on an elaborate scale, but Mother's the only person I know of in this town who could talk to you about books and philosophy and poetry and hold her own. You see, she grew up in a library like this."

"I'll be delighted," he said.

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