

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

She opened the medicine cabinet. Her hands rattled on the glass shelves. She picked up the first tube and poured the contents into her palm. There were only four tablets.

She filled a glass with water. She put the tablets in her mouth and drank the water. She kept watching her drawn face in the mirror. She felt no different. Her brain was still crawling with thoughts.

"I have to have some rest," she whispered.

She picked up the other tube. It was over half full. She emptied it jerkily into her mouth and drank more water. She had a terrible time swallowing. She kept drinking water till all the tablets were gone.

Berenice went back into the living room and lay down on the couch. She closed her eyes. She thought, in a few moments I'll go off to sleep. Only she did not feel sleepy. Her head began to swell. It felt giddy as if it were floating away from her body.

Somewhat she was going down the street. She did not remember how she got there. After a while she was standing at the bottom of the back stairs at the flat. She sat down on the lower landing. She could scarcely get up. She was drowsy at last, terribly drowsy. She had reached the point where she could sleep anywhere and she had forgotten why she had ever thought it necessary to climb the stairs, but

her sick brain clung to its fixed idea.

"Got to get to Mother," she whispered and pulled herself step by step up the stairs.

The screen door at the back was latched. Berenice's body was numb from feet to waist. She glanced longingly at a porch chair. Nobody would disturb her there before morning. No one ever came out on the back porch late at night.

"I'm—so—tired," she whispered and slumped to her knees and then forward on her face.

"What's that?" exclaimed Tony Ryan.

He and Janet and her mother and Stephen Hill were playing Monopoly in the living room. The others stared at Tony. "I heard a noise out back," he explained.

"Think I'll have a look." Anne followed him. Janet and Steve after a moment's hesitation trailed along. Tony opened the screen door at the back. He stooped swiftly and gathered up what Anne had taken for a shadow on the porch.

"Berenice!" she cried.

Tony stood Berenice on her feet. "It's—all—right, Mother," she said in a slow thick voice. "I haven't been sleeping lately. I'm—so—tired. I want to sleep in my old bed."

"Dearest!" cried Anne. "You're ill."

"Bill's left her, mother," faltered Janet. "Two weeks ago. She

made me promise not to tell you."

Anne flinched as if she had been struck and Berenice shook her head. "Didn't want to worry you. Nobody's fault but mine. Can I go to bed now, Mother? I'm—so—sleepy."

Tears were running down Anne's cheeks. "Of course, dearest. Mother will tuck you in."

"Wait," said Tony Ryan.

Anne glanced at him. Her face blanched at the look in his eyes. "What is it?" she gasped. "Why do you look like that?"

"I'm sorry," he said. He turned to Steve. "Call a doctor. Call Dr. Reynolds."

"Oh, what is it?" whispered Anne.

"She—" Tony drew a long breath and shook his head. He took Berenice's arm. He began to walk her up and down the kitchen. He slapped her wrists, her hands.

"Make some strong black coffee," he said to Anne. "Hurry. Take her other arm, Janet. Help me keep her moving. We mustn't let her go to sleep. She's taken something, some kind of poison."

They pried Berenice's rigid jaws apart. Anne's hands did not flinch. She refilled the coffee cup. She forced another cupful between her child's colorless lips.

"Let—me—rest," panted Berenice.

"No," said Anne.

Berenice moaned pitifully. Tony and Janet took up their dreadful march again, half carrying, half dragging Berenice's slack body between them. Steve came back into the kitchen.

"The doctor will be here in ten minutes," he said.

"She isn't coming out of it," said Tony. "Get ice and towels, somebody. Whip her face and neck with them."

"I'll do it," said Anne.

"Bill," whispered Berenice.

Tony glanced at Steve. "Here are the keys to my car. Take it and go after him. The name's Carter. He's the one I told you about, sells radio-advertising."

"Any idea where he is?" asked Steve hoarsely.

"He came to see me last week. Said he was staying down in a cheap rooming house across the branch. He's very dark, big chap, looks as if he'd been ill."

"I'll find him," said Steve.

He wanted to do something,

anything. He did not believe he could stand it if he had to go on helplessly watching the agony in Anne's drawn face.

"There's the doctor," said Tony. Anne ran to open the door. She brought the doctor back to the kitchen. He took one glance at Berenice and opened his medicine case.

"What did she take?" he asked Tony.

"Some kind of narcotic, not an acid, thank God!"

The doctor nodded. "Take her into a bedroom, get her clothes off."

Tony picked Berenice up and carried her down the hall. Janet ran ahead to turn down the bed. Between them they undressed Berenice. No one spoke. The only sound was Berenice's laboring breathing.

After a long while the doctor stood up. Still no one spoke, but Anne's eyes were fixed on his in anguish entreaty.

"It depends on the patient's resistance," said the doctor gravely, "on whether she wants to live."

"Bill, Bill," moaned Berenice.

Anne held her close. "We've sent for Bill, dearest," she said tenderly.

"Steve will bring him," said Tony.

Steve did bring Bill, a Bill whose clothes hung on him, whose face was gaunt. Berenice's eyes were closed. She did not open them when he came in. Bill dropped on his knees beside her. His lips worked, but he could not speak.

Berenice stirred feverishly. "Bill," she whispered.

He took her thin, limp hand and laid it against his cheek.

"I'm here, Berenice."

With a tired sigh Berenice rested her head on his shoulder.

"You'll be here when—when I wake?"

"I'll always be with you, sweet."

Like an exhausted child she fell asleep in his arms.

Berenice had not been back to her apartment since her illness. She said she never wanted to see it again or anyone connected with her life there, anyone except Bill.

It was pathetic how Berenice clung to Bill, how she could scarcely bear to let him out of her sight, or he, her.

Tony first interested Steve Hill in Bill. Steve's word carried weight in the radio world. He had Bill promoted to the script department on the local station.

Steve said Bill had ideas, ideas that were needed on scenarios and advertising programs.

"The boy's no salesman," he explained, "but he'll rise and shine in the writing field if I know creative talent when I see it."

In the meanwhile, although his promotion carried a modest rise in salary, Bill and Berenice were going back to three housekeeping rooms in an old brick house.

Janet had imagined it would take them all afternoon to get settled in the new place. Both she and Bill were determined that Berenice should do nothing except lie on the couch in the living room and direct proceedings.

However, everything was finished by four o'clock. Janet decided while she had Jim's flivver to run an errand for Anne. Old Mrs. Givens who lived on a back road behind the Country Club earned her living by making patchwork quilts. Anne saved samples of materials for her. Janet stopped at the flat for the bundle and delivered it. It was after five, the hottest time in the afternoon, when she started back to town and until it joined the highway the road was unpaved.

"Thank heaven, there's only a mile of this," she muttered, choking on the cloud of red dust she had kicked up.

She felt apprehensive about the tires on the car. They were badly worn. Jim was dickering for new ones.

"I knew it," she exclaimed when with a slap, bang, whoosh the left rear tire went flat.

"As I live and breathe," cried Janet. "A rescue!"

When the roadster slowed down beside her, her exultation took wings. "No," she muttered morosely, "there are days when you can't get a break."

"Having trouble?" inquired Gordon Key nervously.

"Oh, no," replied Janet with elaborate sarcasm. "I rip tires to pieces for the sheer girlish fun of it."

"We can telephone Jim after we get to town and have him send out for the car," he suggested timidly. "That is, if you don't mind riding in with me."

"There doesn't seem to be any help for it," snapped Janet.

She locked the flivver and climbed in beside Gordon, ostentatiously ignoring his offer of assistance.

He started and turned very pink. "You mean, they'll think we—er—planned it."

It was not Gordon's fault that just as they turned in off the dirt road, Priscilla Leigh should drive out of the Country Club grounds in her white and scarlet roadster. But it was Gordon's fault when he became excited and stalled his engine right across the highway so that neither machine could move.

Gordon shivered and would have embarked upon a voyage of explanation if Janet had not kicked him in the shin. "Have we taken root or what?" she demanded fiercely. "Let's go."

The car began slowly to move away. "So nice to have seen you," Priscilla called after them with a silvery mocking laugh.

Anne had asked Cathy and Danny to supper that night. Anne also insisted that Berenice and Bill come back to the flat too.

Bill bent anxiously over Berenice. "Tired, sweet?" he asked tenderly.

Berenice laid her cheek against his hand. "A little."

"Run on, you two," said Anne with a smile. "I shan't be alone. Steve Hill is coming."

The doorbell rang and Janet, coloring painfully, started to her feet. "There's Tony," she exclaimed and added hurriedly. "I'll be seeing you."

She did not ask Tony in. She merely nodded and turned toward the stair. Neither of them spoke until they were in the car.

"I hear you had a flat this afternoon," he drawled.

That Priscilla had supplied him with a lurid account of the incident Janet did not doubt, but neither his tone nor his expression betrayed what he was thinking.

She stared at him defiantly. "Yes," she said. "I did."

"Too bad," murmured Tony and let it go at that.

Most of their crowd were having dinner at the club prior to the dance. They had arranged to sit together at one long table. Having retired to the dressing room to remove her short evening cape, Janet came upon Norma Poole in the process of powdering her nose. Apparently Priscilla had spread her story broadcast. At least Norma had heard a highly spiced version of the affair.

"Whatever possessed you, Janet?" she demanded. "You're too splendid to be left in the lurch a second time."

(Concluded Next Week)

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