

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

CHAPTER XIV

Janet murmured something unintelligible and fled. Her cheeks were scarlet and it did not improve her state of mind when she walked into the lounge and confronted Priscilla in the act of caressing a small red rosebud in the lapel of Tony Ryan's coat.

"So sorry," said Janet. "Didn't mean to intrude."

She fled for the second time, walked blindly out upon the screened veranda which ran across the side of the clubhouse. The sun had set in a riot of violent colors. Janet advanced unsteadily to the end of the porch. Not until she bumped into him did she realize that she had cornered Gordon.

"Yes," she said sadly, "it would be you. Life's like that."

"You aren't in love with Tony Ryan, are you, Janet?"

Janet could feel her heart flinch. "Certainly I'm not in love with Tony Ryan!" she cried. "Love's something we've never discussed."

Gordon made a distracted little gesture, and Janet turned abruptly. Tony stood at her elbow, his lips parted in a lazy grin.

"So sorry," he murmured, imitating the tone which Janet had employed upon him a short while before. "Don't mean to intrude, but everybody's going in to dinner and," he gave Gordon a glance that made him squirm, "I've a yen to be with my fiancée. I'm funny that way."

Priscilla had managed to seat herself beside him. She completely ignored Gordon who was her escort and monopolized Tony.

The orchestra had not arrived, somebody turned on the radio. Priscilla wriggled her shoulders and snapped her fingers. "That music's too smooth to waste," she announced. "How's for dancing, Tony?"

She held out her arms. Tony did not appear to notice. "Want to dance, Janet?" he asked.

He did dance beautifully. Janet had never denied him that compliment. You felt safe in his arms, she thought. She sighed and glanced up into his face to find him smiling down at her.

A thrill began at Janet's head and went to her toes as if she were a harp on which a hand was playing an intoxicating refrain. It was like being snatched back from some strange delightful new country, when the music ended.

Priscilla skated across the floor. "Tony, show me how to do the rumba. You promised."

She stood it for two dances and then she knew she could not watch Priscilla's determined pursuit of Tony Ryan another minute. Biting her lips Janet made for the wide open spaces.

There was no moon. The swimming pool was edged with a concrete walk, not very wide. Janet set her teeth and marched around and around it, trying to bring some order out of the chaos of her thoughts.

Her eyes were stormy with tears. She neither then nor later saw the wet bathing suit which had been left on the edge of the pool. Something wet and clammy wrapped itself about her ankle. She thought of snakes, screamed wildly, missed her footing and plunged straight toward the water.

"Janet!"

A hand closed about her wrist and jerked her back to the concrete walk. Still off balance Janet clutched frantically at her rescuer. His arms went about her and clung.

"Janet, darling!" cried Gordon. He was trembling. "You can't have got over loving me, Janet! Please say you haven't." Gordon, swept out of himself at last, was kissing her with an abandon which Janet found peculiarly revolting.

"If you have no objections, Key," murmured a cool, self-contained voice behind them, "I'll do all the kissing my fiancée requires."

Gordon with a violent start dropped his arms. "Janet was mine before we ever heard of you, you big stiff!" he stammered.

Tony Ryan turned and looked at him. "Scat!" he remarked pleasantly.

Gordon hesitated, eyed the set of Tony's jaw and then suddenly and ignominiously scattered. Tony looked at Janet. There was a gleam in his blue eyes which terrified her.

"As you reminded me, I haven't made love to you," he said. "This to correct the oversight."

He swept her into his arms. He held her as if she were a small

helpless kitten. He kissed her not once, but three times, as thoroughly as he did everything else, and Janet realized that she knew nothing in the world about being kissed.

"I trust that's satisfactory," he murmured.

I hate him, thought Janet, and I love him. She had just strength enough to run away. In the dressing room she cried furiously for ten minutes, then she washed her face, repowdered her nose, painted a fresh smile on her lips and came down the stairs, the light of battle in her eyes.

Then for a moment she could not move or speak, she could only go on staring at Tony Ryan's back. Over his shoulder Priscilla's eyes met Janet's. Priscilla's arms were tightly wound about Tony's neck.

Janet could no more have helped what she did next than she could have stopped breathing. Drawing the glittering diamond off her finger she flung it in Tony's general direction.

"Catch!" she said. "You bought it for her anyway."

And then she turned and walking out the front door. She was past connected thinking, but she had no intention of remaining anywhere in the vicinity of Priscilla Leigh and Tony Ryan. It was six blocks from the Country Club entrance to the nearest trolley through a subdivision which had never been developed.

Janet realized abruptly that she was running, running with tears streaming down her cheeks. It seemed to her that she had been stumbling along for years, choking down her sobs, when she heard a car caroming down the graveled road behind her. The glaring headlights of Tony Ryan's powerful black and silver roadster impaled her like a bedraggled butterfly on a pin.

"Nice night for a walk," Tony remarked, bringing the machine to an abrupt halt six feet away.

He rummaged in his pocket, found a cigarette, lit it and lowered himself lazily to the ground.

"You know," he observed idly, "I believed your explanation about this afternoon and I didn't hold you responsible for being caught in the boy friend's arms tonight."

"No?"

"It would take somebody more naive than I to imagine a swell girl like you in love with that plump rabbit. All the evidence of your friends to the contrary, you never were in love with him, were you?"

"N-no."

"You called me a realist once. I am in a way. I've had to be. But I have my dreams." He smiled wryly. "If you'd bother to pry under surfaces you'd probably discover that I am a realist with idealistic trimmings. In any case you're the only woman I ever asked to be my wife."

"How can you expect me to believe that when you've been pursuing Priscilla Leigh all summer?" cried Janet, burning with indignation.

"At the risk of sounding insufferably egoistic I shall have to tell you that I've never pursued Priscilla. I simply allowed her to pursue me as long as it suited my purpose." He laughed. "Priscilla made an effective smoke screen, you'll admit. I made up my mind to marry you the first time I saw you."

"Oh!" gasped Janet.

"You were defending your mother, remember? You said you never had been able to be flippant about her. My mother worked too, Janet. She worked herself into an early grave taking care of me. I've never been able to feel flippant about that either. When I stood there in the doorway and looked at you, something in my heart clicked. I knew then you were what I'd been looking for."

"Don't you think I have my pride?" she blazed.

It was then the owl screamed in a bush about a foot from Janet's ear. She did not know it was a screech owl calling to its mate. She heard something ghastly, shrieked and tumbled into Tony's arms.

"Precious!" whispered Tony, holding her very close, so close she could hear the wild pounding of his heart against her cheek.

"Oh, Tony!" whispered Janet. He kissed her, so tenderly she trembled, and then so fiercely she could not get her breath.

"I adore you!" she cried.

"Sure," said Tony Ryan in a husky voice and kissed her again.

Anne and Stephen Hill had returned from the movie. They were on her front porch. The light from within the living room faintly illuminated Anne's sensitive face.

"You worry about your babies," she said slowly. "From the day they are born you're never free from responsibility for them. You waken in the dead of night and you can't go back to sleep. The dark's peopled with all the dire things which might happen to your offspring. Even in broad daylight sometimes you can't forget the bugaboos. After all, other women's children go wrong."

"Yours won't, Anne," said Steve Hill. "You put your own steel into the sword of their spirit. While the tempered blade may bend under pressure, it springs back to form."

"And I feel," sighed Anne, "for

let yourself, you could love me, too."

"Not as I loved him."

"We love no two people alike, Anne. The spring is not the autumn, though each is a beautiful season."

"Yes."

"You will let me teach you that for you and me life can begin all over again after forty, Anne?"

"Yes."

Her smile was a little tremulous, but very lovely. "Yes, Steve—dear," whispered Anne, blushing exquisitely as he stooped and kissed her.

THE END

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