

HEARTS WALKING

Mrs. Harry Pugh Smith

Synopsis

Life grows complicated for the children of plucky Anne Phillips who has supported them since her husband's death. Her married daughter, Berenice, quarrels with her husband, Jim, Anne's son, is infatuated with the rich Helen Sanders. Anne suspects that Cathy, widowed little dancer, is in love with Jim. Janet, Anne's younger daughter, is unhappy because her well-to-do friends neglect her. She is commissioned by Tony Ryan to help him restore the old Phillips estate which he has bought. She meets Stephen Hill there and invites him to dinner.

which Anne had covered with flowered chintz, at the ivory bookshelves which Jim had built in between the windows, at the glass basket of zinnias on the drop-leaf table by the easy-chair, at the colorful hooked rugs which Janet had made for the painted floors.

"Anybody home?" called Anne from the front door.

"Mother, this is Mr. Ryan's friend, Stephen Hill," stammered Janet.

Anne smiled.

"How do you do?" she said, putting out her hand.

It was not the words, it was her warm, gracious tone which removed all strain from the situation.

"How's your eating?" demanded Jim, banging the front door behind him.

"My brother, Mr. Hill," said Janet.

Jim started forward with outstretched hand and tripped over a lamp cord. "Sorry," he said with a grin. "I'm the blunder-buss of the family."

Janet's remaining qualms were dissipated by the unobtrusive manner in which her guest fitted in at their table. They sat for two hours after they finished eating. Janet's eyes glowing, Jim looking more relaxed than he had in weeks, Anne leaning forward, her cheeks bright, all of them waited out of themselves on the Magic Carpet of Stephen Hill's fascinating drawl to the far and strange places of the earth, to the Peacock Throne and the lacy minaret of the Taj Mahal, to crocodile-infested tropic jungles, to Piccadilly on a balmy May

afternoon, to the boulevards of Paris on a fantastic moonlit night.

"Isn't he wonderful?" cried Janet when he had gone. "I don't care if he is just another one of what the Earl of Jersey calls a bit of flossam on the beach of fate, Steve's precious."

Jim began to laugh. He laughed immoderately. "I can't help it," he pleaded. "It's just that when I think of you two determined to feed the crumbs of your divine charity to Stephen Hill, I get the giggles. He put an arm about each of them. 'Dear sweet innocents,' he explained, 'don't you ever read the bylines in the newspapers, haven't you ever listened to the radio, did you ever see a travel book?'"

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" cried Janet weakly. "He isn't the Stephen Decatur Hill!"

Jim nodded and Anne clutched his arm. "The famous war correspondent!"

"The guy," said Jim, "who knows more celebrities intimately than any man in the world, the guy who's covered every important news event for twenty years."

"And we set him down at a patched tablecloth," mourned Janet.

"I don't believe he minded," said Anne with that odd breathless note in her voice.

Gordon on the shoulder and waited off with Janet.

"I'm breaking the unwritten law taking you away from that bird, or so I've been given to understand," he said with a grin.

"I can stand it if you can make your peace with your fiancée," she stammered.

Tony glanced at Priscilla who was glowering at them. "Do you believe everything you hear?" he asked lazily. "I've never got around yet to asking any woman to be my wife."

Janet had an infuriated conviction that he was amusing himself at her expense. "I don't believe Priscilla would take anything for granted unless she had something pretty definite to go on," she said hotly.

"Don't you?" drawled Tony Ryan as if he did not care at all what she believed.

The bridge game of the older guests broke up at eleven when Mr. Henry Leigh announced with a bleak smile that it was time for all good people to be in bed. Norma protested that it was barely the shank of the evening and Priscilla, preparing to dance again with Tony, agreed with her.

"Naturally the young folks aren't ready to go," murmured Mrs. Leigh and smiled poisonously at Anne. "That's our penalty for getting on."

Anne smiled. "I must admit we're not so skittish as we were."

She rose and Myra clutched Jim's arm. "You can't run off and leave me odd man."

"I've got to take my mother home," said Jim firmly and added under his breath, "thank the Lord!"

"I'm taking Mrs. Phillips home," observed Steve Hill pleasantly.

"But—" protested Jim, looking blank and crestfallen.

To his surprise Tony Ryan without a change of expression kicked Jim violently in the shin and tossed a bunch of keys at Steve Hill. "Use my car," he said.

"Thanks," said Steve and reached for Anne's short silver-brocaded evening wrap.

She was laughing softly when he tucked her into Tony's elongated black and silver machine. "I'm afraid you've made an enemy of Jennie Leigh," she said. "She doesn't approve of middle-aged widows who can still wear a size sixteen dress."

Steve smiled and put the big coupe in motion. "From the way you look now you were a mere child when your husband died."

"I was twenty-nine."

"And you never remarried."

"No. There were several men who tried to be nice to me after I'd been widowed a couple of years," explained Anne.

"Jim wasn't quite thirteen at the time. He began to act strangely. He's always thought me perfect, but he took to staying away from home as much as possible. Berenice on the other hand shunned her play-mates. Janet

was crying when I came home from the store one night. She told me that all the kids at school were making fun of her and Jim and Berenice. The other children had invented a song, you know how children do, and they chanted it at my children every time they got a chance. Something to the effect: Your mother's got a beau! Jim and Berenice's mother has got a beau-o!"

Steve Hill smothered an expletive. "Little savages!"

"Yes," said Anne, "but it wasn't worth it. The candy and flowers and theater tickets, I mean."

Steve Hill chuckled and then his face sobered. "You're warning me that your children come first with you."

"Yes."

"But you can't keep them always. Have you never realized how lost you'll feel when they're left you?"

"I've been staring that in the face for quite a while," said Anne in a low voice.

He had stopped the car outside the flat building, but he sat there motionless gazing straight before him, a crease like a wound between his eyes. "There's no emptiness so ghastly," he said, "as having nobody to go on for. I had a son, Anne."

"Yes?"

"His mother died soon after he was born. I banked everything on the boy. I was a struggling young reporter in those days, having the devil of a time to get by. I had a dream of being able to retire some day. In the meantime I boarded him with a fam-

ily, good people, only he wanted to be with me.

"When the war broke out and the paper sent me to the front I couldn't see him at all, of course. After the war I had my passage engaged to return to New York when the office cabled me to

cover a flare-up in the Far East. Then before I knew it I was in Australia interviewing the Aussies. It was four years before I saw the boy again, and I had lost him."

(Continued Next Week)



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"Please make yourself comfortable," Janet said, smiling, as she took his hat. "I shall have to do something about food. We have no maid."

Steve Hill was staring around the living room, at the couch

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"You must wear your new ivory lace," Janet was saying. "It's perfectly luscious on you."

Anne made a grimace. "If I can get my mind off how many coats we moved today and the minimum number of sales we have to make by the end of the week, and remember that a lady at a dinner party is expected to be a font of inconsequential conversation, I'll be lucky."

There were sixteen around the Poole dinner table—a table that glittered with thin crystal and fine silver and gleaming damask. The centerpiece of exquisite pink asters completely screened Jim from Janet's view, but she did not need to see her brother's face. She knew exactly how furious he was, wedged in between the opulent and extremely decollete figure of Mrs. Henry Leigh on one side and the gurgling Myra West on the other.

"Where have you been keeping yourself lately, Janet?" murmured Gordon Key.

Anne was having a marvelous time. She did not believe anyone could fail to be plucked out of the doldrums if Stephen Hill took a notion to dispel them.

Down the table Priscilla was leaning a little forward in order to transfix Janet with a peculiarly brilliant smile. "Darling," she said in a high, carrying voice, "I do hope you are doing right by our house."

Janet's hand had tightened on her glass. So they are engaged, Priscilla and Tony, she really is going to marry him and live in my house, Janet was thinking. All around the table there was one of those ghastly silences that happen even in the best society.

"I wouldn't know of course," said Janet at last in a slow painful voice, "exactly what you'd expect of your dream house, Priscilla."

Priscilla looked up into Tony Ryan's inscrutable blue eyes. "I suspect it's all right," she said. "I mean I could go for anything that includes Tony."

"Sure," he murmured with an ironical grin.

Janet turned a little blindly to Gordon. "You asked me if I'd save you every other dance," she said quite loudly, "I'd love to."

"Thanks," murmured Gordon in a startled voice. They danced to the radio. Janet wondered miserably why she had promised Gordon so many dances. He had asked her for them and she had refused. That was why he looked startled when she changed her mind, but she was certain that everyone present believed she had invented the request in order to clamp Gordon to her side.

Janet went on dancing with Gordon, wretchedly self-conscious because her friends beamed every time they looked at her in his embrace. Not one of them would have cut in for the world, but Tony Ryan did without even a by-your-leave. He merely tapped

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