

SINNERS IN HEAVEN

By CLIVE ARDEN

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PART FOUR

Broken Harmony

I

Miss Davies, Mrs. Stockley's only remaining sister, placed a marker in her book; then laid it down upon a small table. Her face assumed the complacent expression of one about to perform a pleasant duty in accordance with her conscience.

"I think," she observed decisively, "Hugh should be warned."

Mrs. Stockley glanced up from the stole she was embroidering. "About what?" she asked.

"Barbara."

Her sister made a gesture of annoyance, which caused her to prick her finger; this increased her irritation.

"I wish you would for once be explicit, Mary! You have thrown out dark hints about Barbara ever since we heard of her rescue. Why should Hugh be warned?"

"Are you so stupidly dense as you appear, Alice? Or are you willfully blinding yourself?"

"I am no more stupid than the rest of my family, I hope!" snapped Mrs. Stockley, with much meaning.

"Well, then," continued her sister, ignoring this improbability, "you must realize that Barbara will most likely return—very changed. Indeed, from her one letter there seems no doubt about it. That was queer—very queer!"

Mrs. Stockley impatiently hunted among bundles of colored silks. "Of course she will be changed. She is two years older and has suffered ghastly experiences. She was very ill at Singapore; you couldn't expect long chatty letters!"

She spoke with unusual asperity. Two years of her sister's unaltered companionship had increased an inherent instinct toward contradiction, while developing a self-defensive alertness. Both were necessary in the radius of two sharp eyes ever quizzing through their lorgnettes, two ears which seemingly reached all over the house, and a caustic tongue ready to reduce other people's follies or few ideas to shreds. Such gifts used at the expense of common acquaintances are a different matter, of course.

"Ah!" Miss Davies returned to the promptings of conscience with renewed relish. "You are as blind as Hugh, Alice. I saw him this afternoon, quite excited over meeting her tomorrow. He wants to have the wedding after Christmas—of course it was not my business to say anything!"

Whether this self-discipline could have been maintained had not other people been present, is open to question.

"You don't understand Bab as well as Hugh and I do, you see," returned her sister complacently.

"No," she agreed, "but I understand Man!" Her lips closed with a snap, to give effect to the world of meaning in her words. "Don't you realize, Alice, that Barbara was attractive? And she has been flung, unchaperoned, for two years, into the society of a man who well—had extremely loose ideas, and Bohemian ways—a man whose influence would be most questionable for any young girl."

Mrs. Stockley flushed. "Are you insinuating that Bab would be weak enough to allow him to influence her? After her careful upbringing, too? Why—looseness of any sort would be abhorrent to her! Her surroundings have always been strictly moral."

"I don't insinuate anything; but I wouldn't trust that man far, in such circumstances! We have yet to learn how he behaved."

"She did not allude to him in her letter."

"No. But—she did her utmost to get taken back to search for his body! Surely her chief desire should have been to hurry home to Hugh?"

Mrs. Stockley smiled impatiently. "You are making mountains from molehills, Mary! She did that purely from humanitarian motives; it was only right and natural, Hugh thought so. He liked Captain Croft."

"Hugh is too trustful; that's why I am sorry for him. Frankly, Alice, I do not believe a man and woman could live in such isolation without coming to grief. I have seen too much of human nature."

"My dear Mary! what do you mean? You don't!"

Her sister held up a dignified hand to stop all interruption. "You must face it, Alice! Everybody is talking and wondering. Of course, it depends entirely upon the man. I don't imply that all men are beasts—as some women would have seen as much of the world as I have. If he had a strong spiritual nature—a clergyman, perhaps. But that man!" She pursed her lips.

Mrs. Stockley gazed at her, her own face paling, her finger twitching the forgotten stole.

"Coming to grief!" she repeated, horrified. "Do you dare suggest my daughter would so disgrace her name and family as to allow—My dear Mary! it is preposterous! I would disown such a child. But Barbara! Why, I would trust her alone with any man, for forty years! She wouldn't dream of such things. Besides, Captain Croft was Mrs. Field's cousin, of good family himself—"

Martha, the old servant, hustled in at this moment with bedroom candles. She plumped them down upon the table, and her old face beamed at an excuse for garrulity over Barbara's departure. When, snubbed, she departed, Mrs. Stockley faced her sister, candle in hand, with an air of outraged dignity.

"Mary!" she said, "your conversation tonight has shocked me! Inexpressibly! I insist on your never breathing a word of your suspicions—either to Hugh or Barbara. If she has any painful memories—she will confide in me. Of course, I did not know Captain Croft well, nor like him; but—poor child! Her sufferings may have been worse than I ever imagined. Good night!"

With unusual decision she opened

the drawing room door, and went to bed. But she lay long awake thinking over her sister's remarks. One alone stood out clearly, gathering force with every minute: "Everybody is talking and wondering."

Everybody eagerly devoured all scraps of news; but the supply was scanty. After being brought to Singapore, the heroine remained there, ill, unable to be moved for a time. . . . A certain reticence surrounded this illness, prostration being given as the natural cause. No trace of a white man's body was found by the expedition sent, post-haste, to search the island. Only the charred remains of a hut, and a few dead natives, were discovered in the north. In the south, a small tribe of furious, armed savages offered a wildly hostile reception, making approach difficult, refusing any information other than a poisoned arrow.

Baboo had presumably recovered and wreaked his vengeance upon the body of his late antagonist.

When well enough, the girl had implored frantically, as one distraught, for facilities to return, herself, to search. This awakened a new interest, adding pliancy to the situation. But such quixotic madness could not be indulged by level-headed authorities. What could a girl accomplish, whose hosts of men had failed? No! The island had been thoroughly explored. The hostile faction of the natives was in possession; her return would be mere suicide, or worse. She was sent to England as soon as practicable.

But the De Bourcours brothers, ever thirsting for adventure, understanding perhaps more of her sufferings and the true facts than they chose to publish, carried out to the end their oath to Croft. Only on the boat did they bid her farewell—then they returned to their charts and their seaplane. Nothing save death, so they vowed to her, in their exuberant French fashion, should deter them from learning the news of the man whose personality had won their generous admiration.

The key to more intimate, romantic drama was not forthcoming. Speculation flourished. What would be likely to happen in such circumstances? Would proximity bring love in its train? And, if so—This entailed endless discussion, heated arguments.

When he had nearly reached the barrier, a sudden tension became apparent everywhere: conversations ceased, heads all turned one way, a flutter of expectancy passed over the scattered groups.

Hugh turned quickly. The huge engine, approaching, glided slowly alongside the platform, followed by the train which brought far travelers home again from distant lands.

Within a few minutes all was bustle and hurry. The platform swarmed with excited passengers, harassed porters, barrows, luggage.

He searched hither and thither for the figure he sought, anxiety slowly rising within him. As the crowd thinned, he took up his position just inside the barrier, where she was bound to come. Peering through the murky light, he hastily scanned each face that passed, without success. When at last but a few stragglers remained, he made his way further down the platform a dull feeling of disappointment adding to his anxiety.

Casually his glance traveled over a thin figure in a dark coat and hat, seated upon a bench, a kindly, gray-haired porter standing near, suitcase in hand. . . . As he passed by, a voice he had once thought never to hear again caused him to turn sharply, with a leap of the heart.

"I shall be better in a minute. . . . Thank you, porter."

"Bab!" With probably the quickest movement of his life, Hugh reached the seat and seized the girl's trembling hands in his own.

Then all other words of greeting faded upon his lips: he was conscious of a sense of shock, a nameless apprehension. The general features of the face quickly raised were those he knew; but that was all. This woman with the heavy, haunted-looking eyes, the strained set lips, the curious rigidity of expression, bore no resemblance to the sweet-faced, impulsive girl who had clung round his neck at parting, in the cabin of the airplane. He felt checked, curiously embarrassed, as if with a stranger. Still clasping her hands, he gazed at her silently, noting with alarm the ashen hue spreading over to her lips.

Several times she essayed to speak, and failed. The porter, scenting romance, discreetly moved a few steps away. . . . At last Hugh heard his name uttered, again and again, in a voice so charged with misery that his apprehensions deepened, and a sudden mistiness enveloped the surrounding scene. For she was clinging to his hands like one in deep torment who, for the first time amid a storm of suffering, finds the anchor of an old friend. . . . And yet he received the impression of fear in her manner; she seemed loath to meet his gaze, unable to talk to him. . . . He was frankly puzzled; but an Englishman, with his horror of scenes, can be trusted to bridge over any threatening chasm.

Sending the porter for a taxi, he sat down by her side, still holding her hands, and took refuge in the prosaic. "Come and have some tea—or brandy—or something, Bab," he suggested. "There's just time."

She shook her head.

"But—you—you—dash it all! You don't look fit to travel. What is it, dear?"

"I—shall be all right," she breathed. "We had a bad crossing. I—caught cold. That's all, Hugh."

He watched her with puckered brow. "What made you leave the boat at Marseilles and come overland?"

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platform at Charing Cross chatting together; or promenaded slowly, eying their fellows with furtive interest, or absorbed in their own reflections.

Hugh became convinced that both the station clock and his wrist-watch had stopped; yet the watch appeared to be ticking when, every few moments, he exclaimed it. He sighed, turned on his heel, and for the twentieth time started to walk the length of the platform and back. Impatience was a novelty, also the state of excitement in which he found himself; he hardly knew how to cope with such sensations.

Two years in his usual comfortable groove had changed Hugh very little. He managed his father's property, hunted, shot, played games, as of yore. If the tragic loss of Barbara had taken the keen edge from his enjoyment of life, making him a little older and graver, it had not destroyed his interests in the wholesome occupations which came his way. After the first shock had abated, he found himself a forlorn hero among his many friends, who took him to their hearts and filled his days so that brooding became impossible. Perhaps more than mere sympathy lurked within the minds of mothers with marriageable daughters; but that suspicion never penetrated his brain. The girl who was part of his very life had gone: to none other did he give a moment's thought.

And now this Twentieth century miracle had happened! After what seemed a dull dream he awoke just where he was, when, so to speak, he fell asleep. His feelings were absolutely unchanged, except, perhaps, that they were intensified by loss. The possibility of any alteration in their relationship never occurred to him. As has been mentioned before, he was not blessed—or cursed—with imagination.

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"I hated it!" she cried huskily, feeling her hands. "It was all—unbearable—day after day—the monotony, the people—oh! I hated it all!" Her eyes roved wildly over the platform, then she abruptly turned toward him. "I want Mrs. Field. Is she in London, or at Darbury?"

"Neither. She's in Russia."

The girl's hands twined convulsively together, and she said no more. It was a relief to both when the porter appeared to lead them to the waiting taxi. By this sudden act of traveling overland, she had successfully thwarted publicity. No curiosity was evinced in her arrival. She sank back in a corner, with throbbing head, bewildered by the noise around. It all seemed part of the nightmare which had been going on for so long, in which various parts of her anatomy moved, spoke, ate and slept, while she herself was numbed or dead. The movements around appeared as unreal and detached as the life of a gay city to one lying, blind and pain-stricken, in a darkened room.

Hugh turned to put his arms about her, as they drove away—but again something intangible checked him; instead, he took her hand once more, almost shyly, and leaned toward her. "Bab," he asked diffidently, "won't you—aren't you going to kiss me? After all this time?"

She drew away quickly, sharply. For a moment she laid her hand upon the door, with the mad instinct to escape which some trapped animal might feel on its way to the zoo, its heart ever alive in the wilds with its lost mate. . . . Then, drawing a long quivering breath, she leaped back and looked up at him. In the light from passing vehicles, she saw the hurt wonder on his face. . . .

All at once the cold rigidity encompassing her heart relaxed. With trembling lips, and eyes swimming in sudden tears, she laid her free hand on his.

"Hugh!" she muttered brokenly, "you must bear with me. So much has happened. I have to tell you. . . . I—I'm not—I don't—" The words quavered away into silence. How was it possible, at this first moment of meeting, to blurt out the bald statements which would shatter his pathetic happiness and trust? She could not bear, yet, to allude to what had become a sacred memory full of poignant, exquisite pain. "I can't tell you everything—here," she continued. "Oh! I can't speak of it all—yet, Hugh! Don't ask me. It—it is so—unbearable—" Again her voice died away.

Hugh pressed the hands in his, and laid them against his cheek.

"Darling old girl! Has it been as bad as all that?"

He had, she knew, entirely misunderstood; but she made no comment. Explanations were impossible, just then. This meeting, fraught with such irony and tragedy, had bewildered her. Hugh's presence, with its present strangeness and odd sense of familiarity, brought with it a sense of shock, reducing her preconceived ideas of it to chaos.

When they reached Waterloo, she nerved herself to put the question she scarcely dared to frame—that which was her only interest in life at present.

"Has any news reached England—yet—from De Bourcours?"

Hugh looked grave and shook his head.

"Of—Croft, you mean? No. Poor fellow. . . . I suppose—I say—Bab—"

"Yes?"

"I suppose—I've sometimes wondered—was Croft quite—decent to you, all the time?"

A harsh caricature of a laugh jarred on his ears.

"Yes. Oh! Quite—decent!"

Hugh knitted his brow at her tone. "You are sure? He—looked after you, I mean, and did all he could?"

"Oh, yes, yes! He—did all he possibly could."

"It was a beastly position for you both. Especially as you didn't like him—"

"Here's the station!" she exclaimed, with a quick breath of relief. The taxi drew up at the pavement, and a porter opened the door.

The train was rather full; but the presence of others in their carriage was a boon to Barbara. Hugh sank so far into the background that, in her recent anguish, the consideration of their position had held no place. Robbed with such cruel suddenness of both Alan and her future motherhood, there had been no room, in the bitterness of her heart, for thoughts of the empty years ahead. Every throb of the engines bringing her away increased the passionate craving to return—to search every nook and corner of the island for remains of the man who meant more than life to her; then to lie down beside them and die, herself.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Wonderful Baby

"Now, then, ladies and gents," shouted the rosy-faced showman, "walk up an' see the most wonderful baby on earth! The charge for admission is only sixpence. Walk up! Walk up!"

A good many people responded to the invitation, and when the place was full the showman brought forward a very ordinary baby indeed in all respects.

"What is there wonderful about it?" asked one of the disgusted audience of the showman. "I've seen thousands of babies like it."

"Well," said the showman, getting near an aperture in the booth, "all I can say is that its mother says it's the most wonderful baby on earth, an' if she doesn't know who does you'll have to take the lady's word for it!" he yelled as he dodged an empty bottle and disappeared from view.—London Tit-Bits.

Freak Indian Ocean Island

Midway between Africa and Australia and about 1,500 miles north of the Antarctic circle, Kerguelen Island or Desolation land, as it is called, presents one of the most perplexing mysteries of the Indian ocean. It is covered with strange vegetation unlike that found in any other part of the world. There are also millions of cabbages which bear large heads of leaves 18 to 20 inches across.—Popular Mechanics Magazine.

The Specialist

"So you're a specialist?"

"Yes. I've discovered that is the way to get fancy prices for doing what the family doctor is supposed to do as a part of the day's work."

SICK WOMEN SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED

Letters Like This Prove the Reliability of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound

Turtle Lake, Wisconsin.—"I took Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound for weakness, backache and nervousness. I had these troubles for years and had taken other medicines for them, but I have found no medicine so good as the Vegetable Compound and I recommend it to my friends who have troubles similar to mine. I saw it advertised and thought I would try it and it has helped me in all my troubles. I have had six children and I have taken the Lydia E. Pinkham Vegetable Compound before each one was born, for weakness, vomiting, poor appetite and backache, and again after childbirth because of dizzy headaches. It is a good medicine for it always helps me. I have also taken Lydia E. Pinkham's Liver Pills for the last eight years for constipation."—Mrs. MABEL LA POINTE, R. F. D. No. 1, Turtle Lake, Wisconsin.

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