



IT TAKES ALL KINDS

By
Louis Bromfield



Harper & Brothers Publishers

NEW YORK and LONDON

1939

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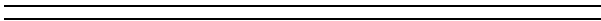
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FIRST EDITION

H-O

The story BETTER THAN LIFE was originally published serially under the title of AND IT ALL CAME TRUE and is published in England under the title of IT HAD TO HAPPEN. The story MCLEOD'S FOLLY was originally published serially under the title of YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE.

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The individual stories contained in this volume are presented
as separate eBooks.

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IX

Aunt Flora

FROM her bedroom window Margaret could see the two boys seated on a big wood packing case near the stable door. They sat side by side, Dejection and Boredom, kicking their heels against the box and listening to the hollow sounds they made. As she watched them she thought, "That's exactly how I feel. Poor kids!" Sitting listlessly in the damp midsummer heat, she watched them for a long time, all thought suspended, like one hypnotized by the steady monotonous rhythmical thumping sound made by the heels of her small sons, and presently the thought came to her vaguely that they ought not to be making that dreadful noise with Uncle Hughie's body in the house waiting for Mr. Prescott to come and read the service and bury it. But she had not the energy to rise and walk the whole length of the garden to bid them stop the racket. After all, what were they to do, poor kids, with their holiday postponed for three days in this awful heat because Uncle Hughie whom they had never seen or heard of had died?

Then from the far end of the house she heard a voice, irritated and disagreeable, saying, "No, and when I say no I mean no." Margaret knew the voice and the accent. It was unmistakable. It issued from the fat throat of Mrs. Svenson, the cook, and the sound of it made Margaret feel faintly ill. It was silly, of course, to let quarreling and ill nature among

other people upset you. She knew that she should have gone down and told Mrs. Svenson that she must not shout in that fashion so that she could be heard all over the house. She knew that if she had any character that is what she would have done, but she could not do it. She told herself that it was much too hot to trouble and she even made excuses to herself for Mrs. Svenson, telling herself that a fat woman like Mrs. Svenson must suffer terribly working over a hot stove on a day like this. But she knew that the reasons for her failure were far more simple and direct. She was merely weak. A woman who was a good housekeeper would have descended it for no other reason than to preserve her prestige. That was what the women she knew always did, but the other women were always losing their servants and Mrs. Svenson had been with her for ten years.

It was silly to be afraid of emotional scenes. Her dread of them, she reflected, probably came of being brought up in a large family which loved drama and allowed its emotions to run wild. In stories and in books, families like that could be entertaining but in life they were quite another matter. Perhaps it was better to be brought up as Tom had been in a family where everything was ordered and calm, where servants were put in their places and no one ever raised his voice in anger. Perhaps there was something to be said for the cold self-containedness of the Landons.

Presently she rose and with a sigh drew the black broadcloth skirt over her head. She did it without haste and when she had hooked it, she sat down once more before the window. She tried to find excuses for herself, knowing all the time why she dawdled with her dressing. It was not really on account of the heat, but because she could not bear to face the

boredom of going downstairs and talking to Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry until the rector arrived and the funeral service began. “Why,” she thought, “do people have to wear black because somebody died—especially somebody like Uncle Hughie?”

Black was hot and ugly and stuffy, especially on a day like this when one ought to be in a bathing suit diving off a pier into cool salt water. That was where they all would be if Uncle Hughie had not died.

Through her thoughts she became drearily aware of a new sound, new, metallic and dreadful. Looking toward the stables whence she knew that it must come, she saw that the boys had abandoned kicking the packing case for a new amusement. They had found an empty gasoline tin and were beating it with sticks. “Now,” she thought, “I shall have to go down. Tom will never notice the noise but Aunt Kate will say that they are disrespectful and horribly brought up.”

She did not see why she should care what Aunt Kate or any of Tom’s relatives thought, but the fact remained that she did care, perhaps because she was expected to care and perhaps because she disliked giving Aunt Kate the pleasure of an opportunity for criticism. As she fastened her blouse she reflected that she herself really was a ridiculous person. She was always planning revolts and setting up ideals of independence and common sense, but in the end she always degenerated into the kind of conventional hypocritical person which the Landons expected her to be. Regarding herself in the mirror she thought, “How red and hot I look. But some day I’ll show them. I’ll revolt.”

She did not really care what the boys did—they could even burn down the house—so long as they were healthy and full

of vitality.

Turning toward the window again, she saw that Tom was showing Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry the garden. He seemed utterly unaware of the awful din his sons were making, but Aunt Kate lost no time in speaking of it. Margaret saw her saying something to Tom and then heard him calling to the boys. They stopped beating the gasoline drum and disappeared into the stable. Margaret viewed their disappearance with alarm. It was better to have them in sight beating the tin than out of sight, occupied with heaven knew what mischief.

From the window she regarded Aunt Kate coldly. She was a thin woman with transparent hands, dressed now in the blackest of mourning which she always appeared to wear with satisfaction and even triumph as if she said, "Well, one more gone and I'm still here as vigorous as ever." Margaret reflected that Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry had never missed a funeral which they had even the faintest excuse for attending. Certainly neither of them would have missed Uncle Hughie's burial. But you could not much blame her. If you had not seen your brother in forty years, you would probably come any distance, even if it was only to see what he looked like as he lay in his coffin.

Then suddenly Margaret laughed aloud, remembering Aunt Kate's remark when she left the coffin just before they closed it. "He still has the Landon ears." As if that were the finest thing she could think of him, as if she had expected him to lose them because for forty-four years he had been the black sheep of the family. Perhaps Aunt Kate thought that considering the way he had behaved, Uncle Hughie no longer had any right to the ears.

Fascinated, she watched Tom taking Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry from flower to flower, and shrub to shrub. She wondered what he was saying because he knew nothing whatever about gardens. He did not know a rose from a petunia. He must have been desperate with boredom to have suggested a tour of the garden. She could see Aunt Kate speaking from time to time and guessed what she was saying—that the verbenas did not seem to be flourishing (which alas was true) and that the zinnias hadn't much color and the delphiniums seemed to have suffered from the heat.

But the sight of Tom, so big and good-natured and patient, made her forget Aunt Kate and filled her with a tumult of affection, so that all at once she was ashamed of herself and afraid. She was ashamed that she was irritated by the heat and because she hated Aunt Kate and because she was angry that Uncle Hughie's death had upset all the plans of Tom and herself and the boys. And she was afraid lest God, impatient with the pettiness of one to whom He had given everything in the world, might punish her by taking something from her.

Then she saw that the other relatives, Cousin Herbert and Aunt Carrie and Cousin Mabel, had come out of the house and were wandering about the garden. She knew they were saying, "Why doesn't Margaret come down? It never took any woman as long as that to dress." Which, again, was true.

The boys did not reappear from the stable and she knew that they would not come out so long as the menace of relatives hovered upon the horizon. They were terribly quiet, so quiet that she tried not to think of all the things which they might be doing.

She heard a motor arriving and thought, "It must be Banks bringing Aunt Flora. Now I shall have to go down." But

when she looked out she saw that it was only Tom's sister Ethel arriving. The motor like everything else belonging to Ethel looked smart, hard and expensive. It glittered with chromium plate. No tiny scratch marred the beauty of its mulberry enamel. From the shelter of the chintz curtains she watched Ethel descend and swoop into the house. "Smart, hard, expensive and empty," thought Margaret. "She's empty because she's always been rich and doesn't know the value of anything."

She wondered why Ethel had troubled to come to the funeral. It was extraordinary how close were the ties of Tom's family. Ethel had never seen Uncle Hughie alive and she would never see him dead now that the coffin was closed. But she was being respectable and doing her duty.

The sound of Ethel's motor brought back to her all the horror of the problem of Aunt Flora whom none of them had ever seen although she had been Uncle Hughie's wife for thirty years; Aunt Flora who had kept a boardinghouse in Capetown. She could not picture the meeting of Aunt Flora with the others, neither with the solid ones like Aunt Kate nor the fashionable ones like Ethel. She knew what would happen. She could feel the chill of ice which would mark Aunt Flora's reception. They would treat her as if she had no right to be there, as if she should have known better than to force herself into the circle of the Landons simply because their black sheep had married her. Only Tom would be polite—Tom on whom all the family troubles had been dumped ever since he was a man.

Not even Tom had ever seen Aunt Flora. He had letters from her often enough, and sometimes amused he brought the letters home to show to Margaret. From them they had

formed their opinion of Aunt Flora. Of all Uncle Hughie's brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews, it was only to Tom that Aunt Flora wrote because Uncle Hughie had made Tom his heir and because when Tom's grandfather and Uncle Hughie's father lay dying the old man sent for Tom and asked him to look after the affairs of his black sheep son. The family always wished its disagreeable tasks upon Tom.

2

The story of Uncle Hughie's disgrace and exile began before Tom was born. It was known vaguely to the rest of the family but only Tom knew it all for Tom had heard it all, because he had heard Uncle Hughie's side as well. Twice Uncle Hughie had reappeared in New York—a little gray man, with a head too big for his body, dressed flashily in the style of a touring actor. He never saw any of his relatives but Tom.

"I know them," he used to say. "They don't want to see me. They've always been ashamed of me—Kate and all the others. Anyway, what would be the good of seeing them? It's been years and years since Pa sent me away and we're strangers now. I won't annoy them." And after a pause he had added wistfully, "But I'd like to come and see you when I'm in town if it doesn't trouble you."

The visits, separated by eleven years, were brief enough. Without any warning he appeared to lunch with Tom and asked what members of the family had died since he last heard from them. With the politeness of a day long gone by he would sit on the edge of his chair holding his gray derby on his knees with his gray cotton gloves laid politely inside, and talk half the morning and all through lunch. Sometimes

he took to reciting scenes from dramas in which he had played small parts—that of a butler or merely of a “walk-on.” But he always knew the roles of the principal actors and recited speeches in a high falsetto voice in the most melodramatic fashion. He was a bore. That was the only thing Tom had against him. For otherwise he was harmless enough and not at all what you would expect a black sheep to be. But after all, two visits in forty years was not much to put up with.

When he had tired of reciting, he would talk about Tom being his heir and executor as if he had a great fortune which would benefit Tom and Tom’s children, but Tom knew that the income left Uncle Hughie by his father had dwindled and dwindled until at length it had disappeared. Tom knew because for eight years he had been supporting Uncle Hughie out of his own pocket. He had even sent him extra sums over what the income was supposed to be, when Uncle Hughie had been ill or had gotten into trouble of some sort.

Tom knew there was nothing very wrong with Uncle Hughie. It was simply that for forty years he had been regarded as the family black sheep until in the end he had come to think of himself as a ne’er-do-well and a disgrace. It was impossible to convince the rest of the family that he was really a harmless fellow, a little eccentric and not solid and conventional like the rest of the Landons. And sometimes Tom wondered at the harshness of a generation which had sent Hughie off to South Africa as a boy of twenty because he had been “fast” and liked women and gambling. From Uncle Hughie himself he knew the story of that scene which had taken place forty years ago when a woman came one

Sunday morning as Hughie's father was setting out for church to demand that his son make her an honest woman.

"A blackmailer!" said Uncle Hughie, telling the story. "Ruined her! She was a girl about town when I was in kilts."

But the old man never forgave Hughie for the shame which had been brought one Sunday morning to his respectable Washington Square doorstep, and that was the end of Hughie. He was simply dumped on the world and paid a hundred and fifty dollars a month so long as he kept out of sight of the rest of the Landons.

There were moments on those two visits when Uncle Hughie was not a bore, and that was when he talked about the life he had led. Some of the stories, like the one of the shipwreck on the coral reef in the South Seas and his marriage to a native belle, were so steep that Tom did not believe them, but they fascinated him none the less. Uncle Hughie had been a shepherd and a barman, an actor and at one time, when he was overtaken by one of his periodical seizures of remorse he had been a revivalist preacher in a small way, lecturing at a mission in the slums of Melbourne on the evils of loose living. Tom, respectable and dutiful, sitting in his office high above the North River, had listened, fascinated, with a slow envy in his heart.

And then, on both occasions, Uncle Hughie, after lunch was finished, had said, "Well, my boy, I'll drop in tomorrow," and the first time he had not dropped in again until eleven years had passed. The second time he did not reappear until his body arrived in a coffin from Montreal.

Through both visits and through all Uncle Hughie's letters there had run the saga of Flora. There were times when, judging from the letters, Flora and Uncle Hughie appeared to

be living together in peace and amity. At such times, Uncle Hughie merely wrote, "Your Aunt Flora is with me again." He always called her "your Aunt Flora" as if gently he sought to gain a position for her in the gallery of Landon women and a respect which clearly she did not deserve. But try as he would, Tom could never see Aunt Flora among the others, either those who were well-off and respectable, or those who were rich and fashionable. Alas, Aunt Flora's letters would have betrayed her even if Uncle Hughie, in off moments, had not written of her as "that damned virago your Aunt Flora," "that she-devil," and "that vulgar woman who has been a millstone around my neck."

For Aunt Flora's letters were masterpieces of illiteracy and vituperation and she only wrote at the times when Uncle Hughie had escaped from her and she wanted money. Her life for thirty years, it seemed, had been spent in losing and recapturing Uncle Hughie. Tom, receiving her letters, was convinced at last that she must be a despicable woman to have pursued the old man for half a lifetime simply for the sake of that pitiful pension of a hundred and fifty dollars a month. She had pursued him from South Africa to Melbourne and from Melbourne to San Francisco, and then for the last four years both Uncle Hughie and Aunt Flora had kept silent. Tom did not even know where they were until he had received the telegram from Montreal saying "Your Uncle Hughie is dead. Please wire funds." So he knew then that Aunt Flora was in possession at the end.

3

And now she was on her way to the funeral. She would arrive now any moment, driven up from the station by Banks,

the chauffeur.

While Tom went around the garden, trying to explain about the flowers and shrubs to Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry one part of his distracted mind was occupied with the problem of Aunt Flora. Phrases from those old abusive letters kept running through his head, “That old reprobate, your uncle”—“That drunken scoundrel”—“That good for nothing waster”—“The day I met him was the most evil day of my life.” He saw again the illiterate handwriting and the misspelled words of abuse. She would be awful. Try as he would, he could not see her among all the others. Aunt Kate and Cousin Henry and Ethel. She would probably cry and scream and throw herself on the coffin.

He was no snob, but he hated scenes and emotion, and he liked life to be kept in well-ordered layers. In life some elements mixed and others did not. No good could come of mixing Aunt Flora with all the others.

And then he saw Margaret coming toward them across the lawn and at sight of her he experienced a feeling of relief. Margaret he could count upon. Margaret would understand and take Aunt Flora under her wing and keep her in order and protect her from the hostile looks and awful silence of Uncle Hughie’s brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces.

Margaret said, “We’d better go in. Mr. Prescott is here.”

Aunt Kate’s expression changed mechanically from one of rapture over the flowers to one appropriate to funerals and the arrival of the rector, and together they started toward the house. Cleverly Margaret managed to fall behind a little, drawing Tom with her and when they were at a safe distance, she said, “We’ll have to wait for Aunt Flora.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t see what’s happened to her.”

“The train is probably late.”

“You’re sure Banks understood about meeting her?”

“Of course. She wrote that she’d be wearing a crepe veil.”

Margaret began to worry. “There might be another woman with a crepe veil.”

Tom laughed, “Well, Banks could eliminate. There couldn’t be ten or a dozen.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Then before they had reached the house Margaret had found another cause to worry. “Don’t you think you’d better see what the boys are doing?”

“They’re all right. What could they possibly do? Do you want me to fetch them?”

“No. There isn’t any reason why they should have to go to the funeral.”

The hour of the funeral was set for eleven and already it was half past and there was still no sign of Aunt Flora. Margaret went to the window where she had a view of the avenue and part of the road leading to the village, but she saw no sign of Banks or Uncle Hughie’s widow. Aunt Kate was talking to Ethel, who was very smart in black. Margaret saw them pretending to be cordial as if Aunt Kate did not think Ethel extravagant, frivolous and a little vulgar and as if Ethel did not consider Aunt Kate a dowdy bore. They were being *too* polite and *too* animated. Margaret knew that they never met save at funerals or weddings in the family. Uncle Henry and Cousin Herbert and Aunt Carrie, fat and perspiring, stood talking to Mr. Prescott, the rector. All about were relatives disliking and mistrusting each other, separated by a thousand

elements, by wealth, by taste, by character, by morality. Here they were all brought together by the corpse of Uncle Hughie whom some of them had not seen for more than forty years and some had not seen at all. Margaret, still watching the window, experienced a sudden feeling of suffocation. Who were these strangers who had been imposed upon her by the simple act of her marriage to Tom? Why were they here in her house? She would not have chosen them for friends, not one of them. She did not think that even Tom would have chosen them. Yet here they were, all collected about the coffin of the little man whom they had exiled and ignored. They respected death, perhaps because they were all afraid of death.

Then all at once it seemed to her that the little man in the closed coffin had had a better life than any of them, for at least he had been free.

She heard a motor and saw her own well-worn car approaching up the long drive. "Now for it," she thought. She would have to be kind to Aunt Flora no matter how horrible she was—she and Tom—for nobody else would be kind to her. The Landons had no patience with people who were poor and common and in hard luck.

As she walked out of the room into the hall to welcome Uncle Hughie's widow she had in her mind a very clear picture of her. It was created out of what Tom had told her at night when they lay in the darkness side by side, and out of the letters which Tom had shown her now and then with a twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes, never dreaming that one day Aunt Flora would turn up thus in their lives. As she closed the screen door a new horror came to her. What was to become of Aunt Flora now that Uncle Hughie was dead?

Someone would have to look out for her. Someone would have to support her. In her heart she knew it would be Tom, because no one else in the family would do anything about it.

The motor drove up to the steps. The picture in Margaret's mind was of a big coarse woman, overdressed and swathed in ostentatious crepe, purchased with Tom's money, a woman with a dreadful voice and an offensive, tactless, overcordial manner. But the door opened and out of the motor stepped a woman who was not at all what she had expected.

She was small and as she threw the crepe veil back over her hat, Margaret saw that her hair was gray and that she must be about sixty. She wore gold-rimmed spectacles and behind them her eyes were swollen with weeping. It was rather a kind, amiable face and it wore a look of humbleness and apology as if she were saying, "I'm sorry you've had all this trouble." In spite of the heat she wore a long coat which came to her ankles. It was not black but of some checked material. Beneath it Margaret caught a glimpse of a navy-blue dress and suddenly she knew that Aunt Flora had put on the awful coat because the dress underneath was shabby. She wore black cotton gloves and carried a black leather handbag which was worn gray at the edges.

"I'm Mrs. Landon," said Margaret with an unnatural brightness, "Tom's wife. I meant to come to meet you but at the last minute there were too many things that had to be done. I hope you didn't have trouble finding the chauffeur." It was a lie she had prepared because she could not face the horror of the trip alone with Aunt Flora all the way from the station, and now when she came to utter it, she was ashamed. For some reason she was more ashamed than she had ever been in all her life.

“No,” said Aunt Flora, “he found me right away. I’m afraid I’m late and have made you a lot of trouble. But it wasn’t my fault. The train was held up.” It was not the voice of a shrew which Margaret heard.

In the hall, she found herself faced with a new problem. Should she ask Aunt Flora if she wanted to take off the awful checked coat and expose the shabbiness of the blue dress underneath? Then she knew that she must ask her as if she had noticed nothing at all strange about the costume, and she shuddered at the thought of Aunt Flora entering the living room to face all the Landons in that awful checked coat.

“Would you like to take off your coat?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve had a bad cold,” she answered with quiet dignity that bewildered Margaret, thinking of the abusive letters.

4

In the living room they were all waiting with an air of impatience and when Margaret came in with Aunt Flora she saw a shudder pass through Aunt Kate and a look of astonishment on the face of the fashionable Ethel. She knew that they had found Aunt Flora even worse than they had feared.

But Aunt Flora seemed unaware of their astonishment or their displeasure. She held out the hand covered with the black cotton glove, simply, murmuring a “Pleased to meet you,” and, “It’s a pleasure, I’m sure.”

They did not make it any easier for her. They did not say that they were pleased to meet Hughie’s wife after so many years. There was no grace in the Landons. Margaret saw

them suddenly with a blinding light. They were smug with the inevitable smugness of people who had always been rich, dull with that dullness in which the prosperous are inevitably embalmed. They were bores, all of them, in the way that only the rich can be boring.

Then she heard Aunt Kate saying, "I suppose we might as well get on with the service."

Margaret slipped her arm through Aunt Flora's and led her into the long room where Uncle Hughie lay in his closed coffin. She knew that taking Aunt Flora's arm was an ostentatious gesture, but she was aware that Aunt Flora was becoming an issue, a cause, a crusade. She meant to protect Aunt Flora from the others. The awful letters did not matter now, nor her lifelong hounding of Uncle Hughie. She led the old lady to a chair and sat beside her, and Mr. Prescott, the rector, stood up. There was a hush broken only by the little sighs and stirrings which were the sign of the family boredom at having to go through this last service for the one of them who had never kept their rules.

Then Tom came and sat on the other side of Aunt Flora and turning a little, smiled at the old lady, and Margaret felt suddenly that she could not survive the love she felt for him. She felt tears coming to her eyes, not for Uncle Hughie but for the honesty and simplicity which were in Tom's blue eyes.

" 'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' " said Mr. Prescott, " 'and whosoever believeth in me shall not perish but have eternal life.' "

The black veil covered Aunt Flora's spectacles once more, but through it Margaret saw that tears were running down the old lady's face.

“ ‘For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday, seeing that the past is as a watch in the night ...’ ”

Suddenly Margaret too began to cry. She had not expected to cry at the funeral. She had pictured herself as going through it briskly and cheerfully. She did not know why she was crying unless it was on account of Aunt Flora’s old checked coat. There was something about it ...

“ ‘So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.’ ”

5

The little white church stood beside a lake and in the hot sunlight the old tombstones shone white against the willows and lilacs. Here the Landons had all been buried for generations and here Uncle Hughie had come at last after all his wanderings to take his place beside the mother who had died when he was born, near the father who had sent him away long ago to die without ever seeing his son again.

The heat hovered over the white road distorting the outline of the white phlox in bloom by the edge of the lake and the outline of Ethel’s smart motor upon which the white dust lay as a sacrilege. Margaret stood close by the old lady in the checked coat, holding tight to the thin hand in the black cotton glove. When they lowered the coffin into the grave she felt the thin hand contract suddenly and heard Aunt Flora murmur, “My poor little man! My poor little man!”

Then suddenly it was over and they were making their way back once more to the motors. Aunt Kate was blowing her nose loudly and Ethel was brushing angrily at the white dust on her immaculate black skirt.

But for Margaret it was not over. There was still the dreadful lunch to be gone through with Aunt Flora, nervous and timid at her side and all the others making conversation, stupid and forced; Aunt Kate trying to find out just how rich Ethel was and Cousin Henry trying to discover what Tom had paid for the land he had just bought behind the stables.

All the way back from the churchyard they rode in silence—Tom and Margaret and Aunt Flora. Margaret stared out of the window with a feeling of dullness, as if the whole occasion had worked itself up to a climax which had failed to arrive.

When they reached the house she said to Aunt Flora, “Would you like to go up to my room before lunch?” and the old lady followed her upstairs. At the top she asked Margaret suddenly about the trains.

“There is one at two-fifteen,” said Margaret, “but you won’t be able to make it. And another at three-twenty. I hope you’re not going to rush away just when we’ve come to know each other.”

“No ... no,” said Aunt Flora, “I don’t aim to be impolite, but I think I’d better get back as soon as possible. I’m afraid I’ve made so much trouble already.”

“No. You must rest after lunch. You must be very tired.”

Aunt Flora did not oppose her. She stood, hesitant in the doorway and Margaret knew suddenly that again it was a question of the checked coat. She did not want to take it off until Margaret had left the room.

“I’ll go down and see about the others,” said Margaret. “Just come down when you’re ready.”

A look of gratitude came into the old lady's blue eyes. The hand in the black cotton glove reached out and touched Margaret. "You've been very kind to me," she said quietly. And then Margaret put one arm about her and kissed her gently and went quickly out of the room, filled with an odd shame at the sight of the shabby old lady standing in the middle of her luxurious bedroom.

7

She had kissed Aunt Flora! As she descended the stairs it seemed that she must have lost her mind. Aunt Kate would say that she had simply been unbalanced and hysterical and it occurred to her that Aunt Kate would have been right. The whole day seemed unreal and strange. The burden of the whole thing was on her shoulders. But she had kissed Aunt Flora—the woman who wrote those horrible, abusive, threatening letters in illiterate handwriting. "Perhaps," she thought wildly, "really wicked women are like that—gentle and quiet and timid and disarming." She wondered when Aunt Flora would show her evil side and whether she would go away without ever betraying herself. Margaret remembered having read that female poisoners always had a dovelike air.

She told the others to go into lunch and then went to see the boys who were finishing their meal under the awning on the terrace. She found them in the midst of eating their ice cream and beneath the table they were having a kicking contest, each trying to kick the shins of the other.

"Stop it at once," said Margaret.

"Tommy began it," said John.

“I did not,” said Tommy.

“I don’t care who started it. I want you both to stop.”

“I’m glad there’s a funeral,” said Tommy. “I’ve had two helpings of ice cream.”

“You mustn’t talk like that,” said Margaret.

“Well, it’s true,” said John, “after it spoiled our going away.”

“You’re going away tonight.”

“Yes, but we missed three days.”

“You’re not to talk like that. Have you been good boys?”

“Yes,” said John.

“Yes,” said Tommy, but the tone of his voice did not seem too certain. It was Tommy who could never carry off a lie. John was good at it. He was more a Landon and a little like Aunt Kate.

“When you’ve finished I want you both to go upstairs and take a shower and get into bed until everybody’s gone.”

“Then we don’t have to say good-by?”

“No, I’ll tell them you’re asleep.”

“That’s swell,” said Tommy.

“You can each take a book to bed with you.”

Then she left them, ashamed that she was always weak with them when Miss Baines wasn’t there. No matter how naughty they were she always wanted to laugh at the moment she should have been giving a fine show of firmness.

In the dining room the seventeen relatives sat at the table. Lunch had already begun but the place which Margaret had kept by her side for Aunt Flora was still empty.

“Hughie’s wife hasn’t come down yet,” said Aunt Kate, as if Margaret were blind.

“I suppose she’s not feeling too well,” said Margaret.

There was a long silence and then Aunt Kate sighed heavily, “Poor Hughie, what he must have gone through,” and then quietly they began to talk again, always about Landon affairs and Landon connections. Aunt Kate kept sobbing and blowing her nose although Margaret could not imagine why, since in forty years she had never even troubled to write to Uncle Hughie.

She waited for a long time before going to discover why Aunt Flora had not come down. Perhaps, she thought, the old lady wanted to be alone. The cold fish was finished and the chicken was begun but still Aunt Flora did not appear, and presently Margaret began to think, “Perhaps she has fainted or something awful has happened.” What if she died here in the house to upset all their plans once more, and keep the children from the beach, when she had promised them that they should go by the night train?

When she could bear it no longer, she rose and said, “I’m going up to see if anything has happened to her.”

To her horror she saw Aunt Kate rising with that look of bright anticipation which came into her eyes at the prospect of disaster. She heard Aunt Kate saying, “I’ll go with you.”

“No, no. Go on with your lunch.”

“Maybe you’ll need me,” said Aunt Kate with determination.

Then Margaret lost all control of her nerves. She knew only one thing—that Aunt Kate must not go up to her bedroom to torment Aunt Flora and pry into her life and ask

her questions about Hughie and perhaps see that shabby blue dress. She knew too that only violence could stop Aunt Kate. She heard herself saying, “Will you please listen to me? This is my house. I don’t want you.”

She saw the look of triumphant malice on Aunt Kate’s face and then ran from the room to escape the dreadful silence. She had put herself in the wrong and delivered herself into the hands of Aunt Kate forever. But somehow, she did not care. Wildly, as she hurried up the stairs, she wished that she had stayed to say more than she said—to say all the things which she had cherished in silence for Tom’s sake for so many years. Wildly, she opened the door of her bedroom without knocking.

There on a stiff chair in the middle of the room sat Aunt Flora, still in the checked coat, her small body limp with fatigue, the cotton gloved hands resting in her lap. She had been crying.

Margaret put her arm about her, “Why didn’t you lie on the bed or on the chaise longue?”

“I didn’t want to rumple the bed,” said Aunt Flora, “and the sofa looked so pretty with all the pillows, I didn’t think that it was meant to lie on.”

“But you haven’t had any lunch.”

Aunt Flora looked away from her and was silent.

“Do come down and eat something.”

There was a little silence and the old lady said, “No, I don’t think they’d like me sitting at the table with them.”

“That’s nonsense. They’ve been waiting for you. Of course they want you.”

“Not if they knew the truth.”

“They know the truth.”

Aunt Flora drew away from her a little. “No,” she said, “they don’t know that I’m not Aunt Flora. They don’t know that I was never married to Hughie.”

For a moment Margaret could think of nothing to say. She thought wildly, “The old lady is tired. She is out of her mind.” Finally she said, “It’s all right. I’m sure you’re mistaken, Aunt Flora. You’re upset.”

“No. It’s true. I don’t know what happened to Hughie’s wife. She must have died. We haven’t heard from her for nearly ten years. I’m just an impostor.” She began to cry again. “I’ve deceived you all. I couldn’t help it. I had to come to Hughie’s funeral. It was the only way I could come. That’s why I signed the telegram with her name.”

She was trembling and Margaret helped her to the chaise longue where she forced her to lie down.

“And you’ve been so good to me,” she said. “I’ll never forgive myself for the way I’ve imposed on you. I haven’t any right here at all.”

Margaret felt an odd sense of relief, because in spite of this strange old lady’s confession of deception, she had not deceived her at all. She had known all along that she could not have been the Aunt Flora who wrote those awful letters.

“I’ll fetch you some port,” she said, “and then we’ll have some lunch here all alone where you won’t need to see the others.”

When she returned the old lady was crying again. She gave her the port and then remembering Aunt Kate, locked the door and took a chair and sat down beside her.

“When you feel better,” she said, “talk to me about it. Tell me everything. You’d like to talk about it, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” she murmured, “yes. My poor little man! My poor little man!”

8

It was a simple story. The old lady told it, leaning back among all the lace and satin of Margaret’s chaise longue, looking away from Margaret all the while as if she were living it all over again while she talked.

It began nearly ten years before Uncle Hughie died. “It was in Seattle we met each other,” she said. “He was acting a small bit and I was the wardrobe woman. He had an attack of bronchitis and I sort of looked after him. We used to have a bite after the theater together at a lunch wagon or some place like that. I guess his wife wasn’t much good. You could see he was the kind of man who’d never had anybody to look after him. I was a widow. My husband died thirty years ago. He was an actor too. So Hughie and I grew fond of each other and the next season we got a job together again. And after that he said it would be easier if I called myself Mrs. Landon. We couldn’t get married because he didn’t know if Flora was alive or dead—and anyway at our age I guess it didn’t matter much.” She fell silent for a moment, regarding her hands. “You see there really wasn’t ever anything like that between us. We were both old. We were both just kind of lonely and tired, I guess. He was awful tired, Hughie. I guess he was tired of wandering all his life—and lonely. Both of us were old and lonely.” She sighed and said again, “My poor little man.”

So for eight years they had lived thus. Sometimes they had work and when they did not they lived in one room in a cheap boardinghouse. She taught him to save and make tiny economies. They traveled all one summer with companies that played in tents and at county fairs. Sometimes she played mother parts and then they had more money. “Hughie was used to counting on the money your husband sent him, but I thought it would be better if he was independent. That’s why you didn’t hear from him. I’ve had kind of a hard life but I’ve always been independent and that’s a great thing, I guess. Hughie got like that too, toward the end.”

They were always happy together. They were even happy the last year when everything went wrong. “I guess Hughie liked having somebody to look after him.” But that last year Hughie had a lump in his throat and for a long time he wouldn’t go to the doctor about it because doctors cost money and when it began to hurt him he went to the doctor and the doctor said it was a cancer. But it was too late to do anything about it. He hadn’t been able to get a job on account of the way he looked, so there wasn’t anything for them to do but live on their savings. But boardinghouse proprietors didn’t want them because they looked old and poor and because they thought if the other boarders saw Hughie they’d leave. They were in Montreal then and they went from boardinghouse to boardinghouse trying to find some one who would take them in. They must have tried twenty or thirty and at last they found one kept by a woman who had been in the show business like themselves. She had been an acrobat in a circus. She took them in.

“We stayed there until Hughie died,” she said. “It was all right. She was a kind woman and the doctor let us have lots

of morphine so Hughie didn't suffer much. I think it was all right. I think he was happy." Again she began to cry and again she murmured, "My poor little man!"

When she had finished Margaret could think of nothing to say, and anyway she felt that whatever she could have said would have been stupid and dull. She patted the old lady's hand and she stopped crying and took out a cotton handkerchief and dried her swollen eyes. When she had put her handkerchief back into the pocket of the checked coat she drew out an envelope.

"Here's what was left after the undertaker was paid," she said. "I brought it back to your husband. There's seventy-eight dollars and eighty-five cents."

She laid the envelope in Margaret's lap and Margaret thought, "She could have bought a new dress and coat with that."

She picked up the envelope and pressed it into the old lady's hands, "No, keep that, please. Please keep it."

"No, I couldn't, thank you. I have a little money. It wouldn't be honest. I've always been independent like. I feel better that way. Don't think I don't appreciate it."

"My husband can take it out of Uncle Hughie's estate. He's Uncle Hughie's heir."

"There isn't any estate—anyway nothing but debts. Hughie only learned about money when it was too late. I guess he never knew what it was worth—always having it sent to him all his life."

Margaret thought, "I mustn't argue with her. Later on we can help her some way or another. I won't talk to her about money now."

It seemed to her that all the Landons, all that pompous respectable family were forever in the debt of this woman who was not Aunt Flora at all. She rose to pour another glass of port and as she turned again toward the chaise longue she saw through the open window that smoke was rising from the end of the stable. It rose in a thick white cloud and near the eaves there were little ribbons of flame. For a moment it seemed to her that what she saw was not real at all but only a part of the long nightmare which had begun on rising this morning. With the glass still in her hand, she stood staring as if fascinated. Then in a calm voice she said, "The stables are on fire. I must go and tell them. Stay here and sleep a little if you can. I'll be back at once."

She hurried to the door forgetting that she had locked it against Aunt Kate. Her hands were clumsy and it took her a precious moment to open it. Then she ran down the stairs and called to the parlormaid who was in the hall and burst into the dining room where the men sat smoking. It was all mad and insane.

Then she remembered the horses and followed Tom out of the house into the garden. The horses had to be saved and the children's pony. Everyone was running from the house—all the Landon relatives and the servants, crossing the garden toward the fire. Tom and the groom pulled down the hose and turned on the water, and she herself led out the pony. Then all at once the garden was filled with the village fire apparatus and men running back and forth with lines of hose.

9

In half an hour the fire was out and then Margaret remembered Aunt Flora, who was not Aunt Flora. She had

not come out. She was not among the others. She must still be in the bedroom.

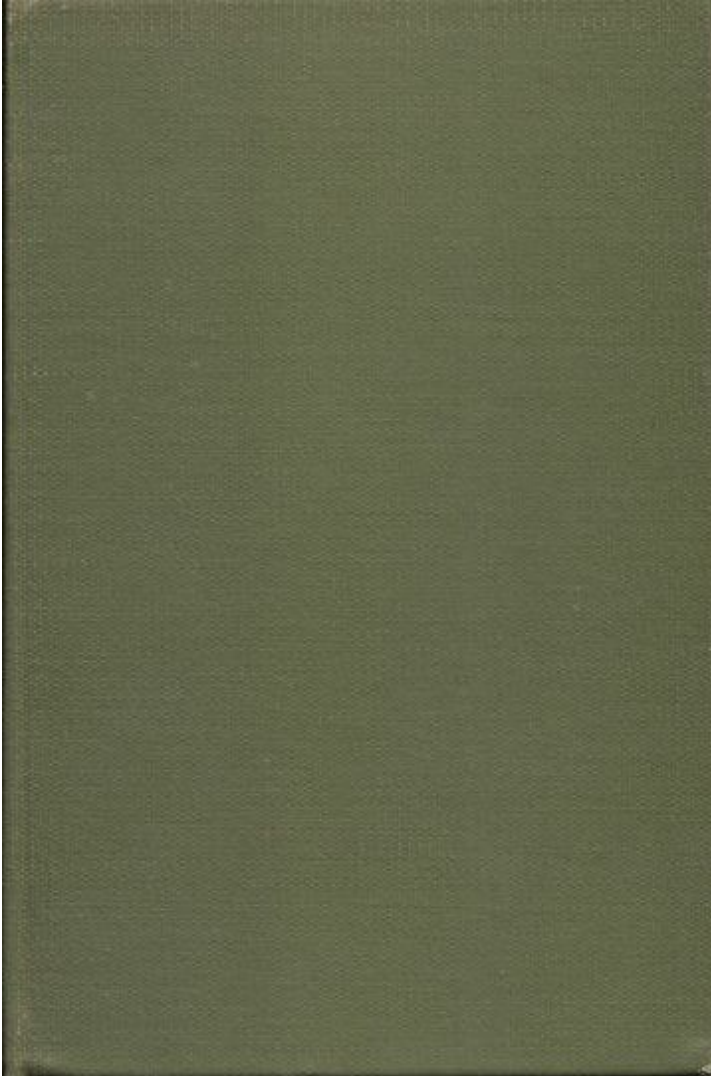
But when she arrived all damp and disheveled in her bedroom, the old lady was not there. She looked into the dressing room and ran along the corridor calling “Aunt Flora! Aunt Flora!” because she knew no other name for her. But she was nowhere to be found. Neither upstairs nor down nor in the garden. She called Tom and together they searched, and then the fantastic idea occurred to her that the old lady might have tried to walk to the station and she sent Banks to look for her. But he too returned with no clue. He had not met her and there was no train at that hour by which she could have left.

At dark they had still found no trace of her. Tom telephoned to the police and they abandoned the plan of leaving that night in the hope of finding some clue regarding her strange disappearance. In the end the police said she must have walked to the road and asked for a ride in a passing motor. Tom said that they would find her somewhere but when the police asked her name they had no name to give them, save Aunt Flora, because that was the only name they knew.

Late that night Tommy, who could never hide his own guilt, confessed. While all the family were at the funeral he and John decided to play Indian and John took the feedbin as a blockhouse. It was Tommy who attacked the stronghold and rendered desperate at last by the resistance of the besieged, he had built a fire to smoke his brother out, the way Indians did in books. It was a plan which succeeded and when the game was over, they had hidden their guilt by pushing the

remnants of the fire under the bin. “We had to do something,” said Tommy, “when we were kept home for three days.”

They never heard of Aunt Flora again nor found any trace of her. But that night when Margaret went to bed exhausted, she found beneath her pillow an envelope containing seventy-eight dollars and eighty-five cents and on it was written, “Thank you for being so kind to me.”



[The end of *Aunt Flora* by Louis Bromfield]