

The Pace



Phyllis Bottome

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THE PACE

By Phyllis Bottome

IT was all wonderfully smooth, the grass was more velvety than in London, the young trees greener, the open sky above the polo ground showed an unstained blue.

The fine expensiveness of the place expressed itself with as little insistence as the delicate manners of a well-bred woman. Hurlingham might have been somebody's park under the descent of an annual garden-party.

Everywhere you turned, broad-shouldered, straight-backed men spoke in the soft, tuneless music of the English tongue. Nobody raised his voice, nobody was excited, nobody was violent, or shrill, or in a hurry.

Many of the women were beautiful, all were smart, even the plain ones held themselves well enough to deceive the unwary, their dresses shimmered and left wakes of color in the mind like the foam of a passing ship.

In the distance the band played very lightly. Everything was very light, very smooth, very quiet.

The ponies on the other side of the field shivered a little in the excitement of suspense. Most of their masters were dressing in the pavilion, but one of them stood already dressed beside them. They were aware of him, but he was unaware of them—he was moody, inattentive, and at war with himself. His eyes were fixed on the black line across the field. He had meant not to be ready—not to come into the field till the last moment, and whatever else he did, certainly not to cross it. His mind weakened curiously under the force of his desire; it shook like shelving sand before the onrush of a tide.

He knew he had better wait till the game was played, but he couldn't wait; mercilessly and ruthlessly his passion rode him. He struck the pony nearest him on the flank, a reassuring, friendly slap, and moved quickly across the field.

Mabel Carew saw Jimmy Malvern's approach. She knew, if he came, why he would come. She thought he was silly to get upset before the game began; she knew she would upset him. Her eyes hardened a little; they were

beautifully clear gray eyes, but they could look extraordinarily like very cold water; her lips couldn't harden, they were too exquisitely soft in curve and bloom. She was one of the beautiful women of her day. Dressmakers, jewelers, and milliners studied her with delight. She paid her bills punctually, but she never forgave anybody who made mistakes in serving her. She didn't like mistakes.

Jimmy, when he reached her, felt his breath leave him; he was afraid of her eyes. Fear was a new sensation to him and he did not like it. "Look here," he said, almost roughly, "I've got to speak to you—let's get away somewhere!"

She moved a short distance from the line of chairs. People were all round them. She bent her graceful little head to listen, her eyes did not meet his.

"It is very nearly time for the game to begin," she said in her fresh, clear voice. He frowned nervously; her voice was absolutely composed and he knew that composure was a bad sign. He wasn't composed himself; he was coming to pieces; he rushed his fence desperately.

"I've got to speak," he said. "I can't help it! I'm maddeningly fond of you! Can't we get clear of these people?"

Two of them came up and spoke to her; they asked her to dine and go to the Opera on the nineteenth. She was awfully sorry, but she was afraid she was engaged for some kind of a small dance on the nineteenth; but she asked them to lunch on the fifteenth instead. They were a long time arranging it, because they hadn't got their engagement book with them. Jimmy stared straight in front of him. If Mabel had cared for him she wouldn't have arranged that lunch on the fifteenth. He saw nothing that he looked at till Lady Kitty Manners laughed too loudly a few seats off—he dimly remembered her as she glanced across at him. She bowed. Something in her eyes struck at his consciousness—he didn't know what it was, but he noticed her. She was a very noticeable woman. The next moment she slipped from his mind like a figure from a moving film. He and Mabel were alone again. "Can't you," he said, "give me any hope? For God's sake listen to me!"

Mabel considered the question with her serious eyebrows raised. She liked Jimmy Malvern, she always had, but she doubted his staying power, and she did not live in a world where emotion had the casting vote.

Other things being equal, certainly she would marry him, but were other things equal? Love or no love, was she doing the sensible thing in accepting

him?

There were rumors about Jimmy—he was intensely extravagant, he was reckless. It was no use marrying an unreliable man. Besides she needn't do it; she could, if she liked, marry almost anybody. Jimmy was hardly worth her while. She looked for half a steady moment into the man's desperate, hungry eyes. He oughtn't to look like that at Hurlingham, there were too many people about who knew them both. Then she put up her parasol.

"I'm afraid not," she said quite kindly, but with unmistakable firmness. "I don't think, Jimmy, that it would do. You wouldn't make the right kind of a husband."

He swore softly. "Try me," he urged. "I'd make anything you like! Why, Mabel, you know you could do anything with me!"

She frowned a little. Men ought to be ready-made. She wasn't fond of bothering about other people's characters. She repeated, "I'm sorry, Jimmy. It won't do."

The whistle sounded across the field. He stood doggedly before her. "Look here!" he said. "If you won't have me, I shall go to pieces. I shall go the pace. I can't help myself. It sounds damned weak, but you've made me feel damned weak. You see, you let me kiss you the other night. You oughtn't to have done it, Mabel—if you were going to pull me up like this."

She flushed slightly. "Really, Jimmy," she said, "you're quite impossible! And, as for going the pace, as you call it, you may do exactly as you like. A man who hasn't the self-respect to keep straight on his own account, isn't worth any woman's love. Do you want the game to begin without you?" Mabel was very fond of self-respect, but she didn't meet Jimmy's eyes.

He lifted his head and looked at her; it seemed to him as if his eyes must break their way through into her heart. One of the women who had spoken to her before came back. She was awfully sorry to bother dear Mabel, but Mother had just remembered that the fifteenth wouldn't do.

Jimmy made his way back across the field; his captain swore at him for being late, but Jimmy didn't swear back. He swung himself onto his pony without answering. His eyes were still fixed upon the black line of the chairs—but he was no longer looking for Mabel, he was looking for hope, and hope had gone away.

If you have quite decided that life has no joy for you and existence no horizon, polo is a singularly good game to play. There is struggle,

excitement, and danger in it, and no power can force you to think beyond the moment.

The pace began from the first rush up the field; Jimmy played as he had never played before; speed seemed the sharpest of his instincts, and with the sense of speed came a steady coolness of brain. He watched the ball, flung himself on it, swung backwards and brought it along, coaxed, nagged, scurried it up the flying field as if the fate of the universe was behind his aim and the force of it in his tingling, thrusting arm. The Irish Guards, for whom he played, always ignore the chances of war; danger exists for them after the calamity has happened and then only for the short breath that is necessary to take in a fact achieved. But Jimmy Malvern was to the rest of his team what gunpowder is to cotton wool. He rode like a creature possessed; he was struck in the shoulder and knocked half out of his saddle, only to fling himself single-handed against three oncoming ponies and drag the ball away.

At the end of the first chucker his captain cautioned him. "There's no real object in getting smashed up!" he observed. Jimmy grinned; there is every object in getting smashed up if the heart within you is burning like a thing in hell. During the second chucker Jimmy was down and the game was stopped for a moment, but he would go on. Nobody could play as he was playing and keep in the saddle. He rode for the sake of destruction.

Water Rat, his second pony, was slower than Flight, but he made terrible rushes when his blood was up. The earth tore by him, there was a merciful confusion in his brain, the ball, the waving sticks, the flying ground came between him and the pain. He was safe with them, safe and soothed by the fierceness of the struggle—safe just so long as he could keep in touch with danger. Nevertheless one impression came to him—a strange, vivid impression that had nothing to do with Mabel.

The ponies had got among the chairs and there was a moment or two when things looked rather bad. Water Rat lost his head and plunged straight for the people; there wasn't room enough for Jimmy to get him round. A little, firm hand shot out and deliberately caught Water Rat by the bridle, turning his head back towards the field. Jimmy heard a voice saying "Steady, old man," and met for a moment Lady Kitty's eyes. She seemed to be speaking to him as well as to the pony, and she wasn't in the least afraid.

He got Water Rat back into the field and the game rushed on, but there was from that moment a new element in it; something had got through to him, something that seemed stronger than the love of danger, a new kind of courage. It steadied his play; he ceased to desire extinction, he wanted, as he

hadn't in the least wanted before, to see the game through. The Irish Guards won by six goals to four.

II

JIMMY had intended to change and get off by himself, he hadn't planned quite what he was going to do with the evening, but he had a general impression that the best thing would be to get drunk. But when he was crossing the tea-lawns he changed his mind. He saw Mabel again, she was still with the lady whose mother couldn't come to lunch on the fifteenth; she didn't look at Jimmy, but as she passed Lady Kitty and heard her light high laughter, Mabel deliberately cut her.

Her temper was up, she had seen the incident of Water Rat and the chairs, she had never liked Lady Kitty. They had been to school together. Kitty had married abominably, a fine match with a drunkard twice her age. Everybody talked about her; but nothing had happened yet. Half London said it had. Mabel had hitherto belonged to the other half, but she chose this moment to change sides. Lady Kitty laughed again, then she saw Jimmy. She moved away from her little court of men and joined him.

"Ah! there you are," she said. "I'll motor you back to town. It's been a jolly game. I liked that little pony of yours."

Jimmy was prepared with thanks, with apologies and explanations, but Kitty never wanted anything explained. She took what she liked as a matter of course, and refused as succinctly what she didn't like. It appeared that she liked Jimmy. Jimmy didn't know her very well and he quite definitely disapproved of what he did know of her.

The first time they had met, he had thought her a jolly little woman, the second, rather hot stuff, and on the third occasion he remembered leaving her with some abruptness, because probably Mabel wouldn't like it. This was his present reason for remaining with her. Mabel didn't like it.

As far as he could tell, Lady Kitty had retained no memory at all of these abortive meetings. She suggested his coming home and dining with her. She announced that she was going to be alone, and would simply have to telephone to somebody if he wouldn't come. She could drop him at his club to change, and after she had dropped him she remembered with hilarity that he didn't know her address and sent her chauffeur with it after him.

Lady Kitty lived in a small, expensive bird-cage of a house, tucked away behind Curzon Street. There were good things in it, but she hadn't known what to do with them, her rooms had an air at once inviting and indiscriminating, which was not unlike the manner of Lady Kitty herself.

Her taste was that of a clever boy who has passed through different phases and kept mementos of them all, mementos that do not match.

Jimmy was a little late, and Kitty was later still. She was dressed in what appeared to be an arrangement of red and purple veils, there were grapes in her hair and at her breast. She might have taken the idea from one of the Russian dancers, but her points were entirely her own.

She had admirable points, a slim figure that had escaped the anemic flat-chestedness of its type, exquisite feet and ankles, dainty wrists and well-shaped hands. Her buoyant head was set on her shoulders with lines that suggested the Psyche in the Naples Museum. Kitty didn't know anything about the Psyche in the Naples Museum, but she knew how to carry her head. Her eyes, dark and a little narrow at the corners, filled easily with laughter. She was always provocative, even when she most wanted not to be. She was one of nature's stimulants, as light and as irrepressible as the bubbles in champagne.

You could disapprove of her as much as you liked, but she dared you to be bored. Jimmy wasn't bored; his heart was broken and he meant to drug himself beyond the feel of it. He would have liked an opportunity for some profound and thrilling wickedness, but Kitty only entertained him.

She gave him a perfect little dinner in a cool little room, then she took him up to the usual London drawing-room. There were windows at either end, awnings and the vague smell of dust, the flicker of street lamps, the dry pale look of London evenings in the summer.

It was a quiet room; they heard nothing but the distant Piccadilly and the hissing sound of taxis as they turned at the end of the tiny street.

He asked her if she really lived there—like this—all alone.

Kitty said she did generally. Of course, sometimes her husband turned up. Sometimes, of course, one's husband always did; but on the whole he preferred the country, his health was bad and town knocked him up. As for her—she couldn't stay in the country at all. It was so quiet it made you think about your sins—and so dull you simply had to have sins to think about. Jimmy couldn't remember afterwards the line their conversation followed. Probably their talk was much the same as it was upon subsequent evenings, simply a painted screen between the distincter utterance of their eyes.

He found himself wondering what Kitty was up to. She was always making him laugh, and she let him say—well, she let him say anything he liked. He was constantly asking himself when she would haul him over the

coals, but she never did. There were—as far as Kitty was concerned—no coals. She explored life without fear and without resistance—as a child hunts for treasures in a strange room.

Jimmy didn't notice that Kitty was always considerate and unselfish, he was too unhappy to notice the virtues of other people—he only profited by them, to develop in himself—the opposite qualities. He wanted his own way in everything and Kitty gave it to him. She was in when he wanted to find her in, and always available when he wanted to take her out. This he put down to the fact that she probably liked him. His own feelings remained precisely what they were. He had to have something. He had been knocked straight into an empty world, all that he'd lived for, hoped for, planned for, had been swept out of his reach. There really wasn't anything he could do except show Mabel that he didn't care. Kitty was the counter-irritant he used to divert his pain.

He went with her to all kinds of places. They met out at dinner, they danced together half the night, they spent week-ends in the same country houses.

London steadily watched them, but they didn't give London much trouble, they made no attempt to play hide and seek. It was almost as if they flaunted the salient fact of their passion in London's face. It was almost as if they hadn't any passion. There was, in fact, only the situation Jimmy wanted to impress upon Mabel. Mabel watched, too, and she was impressed, she was impressed up to the point of wondering whether she hadn't made rather a mistake in letting Jimmy go.

At the end of six weeks Jimmy heard a rumor of Mabel's engagement. The rumor cut at him like a whip. He suddenly felt as if all that he had done so far had been thrown away, there wasn't anything in it.

He went at once to Kitty. "Look here," he said, "this has got to stop—or go—further!" Kitty looked straight at him. There was a strange little frown between her brows and the light in her eyes wavered, but her eyes never wavered; they met his like the eyes of another man. "Well," she said, "let it go on then—anyway you like."

The word love had never been mentioned between them.

He never forgot Mabel for a moment, but there were things about Kitty which didn't in the least remind him of her. Kitty was so strangely, so abysmally tolerant. She seemed quite capable of forgiving anybody anything; it was probably because she wasn't very strict herself.

She had a funny little way, even when people had been (as they were beginning to be now) downright nasty to her—of saying, “Poor soul! She’s got such a temper!” or, “It must be so beastly to be over thirty,” or, “I don’t believe she’s ever had a really good time herself, poor thing!” He never heard her say a sharp or even a condemning word of any man or woman. When he blamed anyone himself, and Jimmy had a seriously rigid code, she’d look at him with her head on one side, and her little chin in the air, and say, “But, Jimmy—perhaps they couldn’t help it!” And yet she gave him, curiously enough, no sense of weakness. She never seemed to have any fears; she remained unmoved when he was driving a four-in-hand, and the leaders bolted. He didn’t have to say “Sit tight” to her as he would have had to do to any other woman. She sat beside him with her hands in her lap, and a little steady smile on her lips. He had a bad ten minutes over the job, and when he had pulled the horses up and had time to glance at her her eyes met his with their usual cheerful candour. “That was a near go, wasn’t it?” she announced without a tremor. “I quite thought we should have rolled down the hill into Eternity; wouldn’t it have been funny?”

They made a great mistake once. Jimmy urged her to go with him to a dance where it was probable Kitty would be cold-shouldered. He didn’t of course know this, but Kitty did. She agreed because he wanted it and was cut by almost every woman in the room. She stayed till four o’clock and appeared to enjoy it.

She didn’t cry on their way back, she only said, “Don’t, Jimmy, please,” when he tried to console her.

He had never seen her cry.

III

THE crash came at the end of the season.

Lord John, London, the twentieth century couldn't stand their lawlessness any longer. Jimmy received a letter from Lord John's solicitors; the damages he demanded were going to be very steep. Jimmy took a gloomy satisfaction in the thought of the divorce court; it would show Mabel; still it was unsettling to think of the damages. Paying for your fun was one thing, but Jimmy didn't consider he had had any fun.

He put the letter in his pocket and strolled across the park to Kitty.

It was astonishing that at this moment he should meet Mabel Carew; it was more extraordinary that she should stop. She was exercising three Blenheims and a white West Highlander. Her manner was perceptibly friendly. She didn't stop for long, but she made the most of their few dusty minutes under the trees. She told him it was all nonsense about her engagement. She was still free, as free as air—and she mentioned the names of one or two of the places in Scotland where she was going to stay, and Jimmy said, cursing his luck, for he saw it perversely flickering over them like a belated star, "I wish to God *I* were free!"

Mabel didn't commit herself either to the heavenly powers or to a more earthly expression of her wishes, but she gave Jimmy a look, very swift and light but very compelling, which drove him violently away from her.

Nothing was any good now, nothing at all. The sullen satisfaction he had felt earlier in the day was wholly darkened. He had been a fool, a damned fool, and Kitty—well Kitty had made him a fool. He didn't stop to ask himself what he had made Kitty.

She was in, of course, and apparently she was expecting something unusual. She was dressed as he had never seen her before, all in white with a string of pearls round her neck. Generally she wore barbaric colors which made her look older, wittier and more like the adventuress in plays. To-night her white dress was as simple as a child's, she looked curiously young, and there was a bloom and light about her that was almost like innocence.

"Hullo!" Jimmy exclaimed, "what's up?" He really wondered what was up. She sprang forward towards him, the radiance in her eyes was almost unbearable. "Oh!" she cried, "Jimmy, don't you know I'm free! I'm free!" They were the same words that Mabel had used, but how differently they

sounded! On Mabel's lips Jimmy had adored them, they had fallen like water on thirsty soil; from Kitty they were almost shameful, they were certainly menacing, and he thought she oughtn't to have appeared so glad.

For the first time in their relationship Kitty did not notice what Jimmy felt. She drew him down beside her and went on talking, her voice had a different sound, it was very soft and musical and there was no mockery in it. She still held his hand.

"I haven't been able," she said, "even to tell you—it didn't seem fair before, somehow, but it doesn't matter now, does it—I mean about poor old John! Oh, Jimmy, my dear, it was *so* horrible! So horrible! But it wasn't his fault, you know, a bit. It was a dreadful hereditary thing. They told me I could cure him before we were married. My people were awfully hard up, and I had three younger sisters. And I'd never seen anyone drunk in my life. I didn't cure him—I—I—made him worse—but we needn't talk about it, need we—poor old John! Now I shall never have to see him again. But, Jimmy—don't mind so much—I see you are minding—dear old boy—because after all, being so disgusted, hating it all so, made me keep awfully straight with other men. I liked men, awfully—I always have, but not in that way! Never anybody at all—till you! Doesn't it seem strange?"

Jimmy said nothing. He felt sickeningly certain that she was telling the truth, and he had always believed that she wasn't a good woman; it had been a part and how large a part of what had drawn him to her! He would never have gone near her if he had thought she was straight. She paused a moment, then she said, "Oh, my dear! I wonder if anyone in the world was ever half so happy."

It didn't seem to Jimmy as if he could answer this question. His brain felt astonishingly empty; what he wanted to say was, "Look here, have I *got* to marry you?"

He knew this wouldn't do. He moistened his lips and got out something; it was very nearly as bad; he said, "Aren't you pretty sick of marriage—and all that?"

She drew her hand from his and moved on to a little footstool just opposite him; her eyes were still alight, they met his now questioningly a little, but without fear. "What d'you mean, Jim?" she asked, her lips were half prepared to smile, she thought he was going to say something beautiful. At last he was free to say beautiful things. She waited, and as she waited she watched him. Slowly, very slowly the light in her eyes faded and changed,

her face hardened, the lines came back into it again, the old lines of mockery and pain.

She did not look young any more.

He saw that she was beginning to see. It was a great relief to him; he wouldn't have to say anything very bad now. When she spoke, it was quite steadily, but she used a certain economy both of tone and words; she was anxious to get to the end of what she had to say safely.

"What," she asked him, "was it for?" He hesitated a little, he hadn't expected her to ask him this particular question. He had never told her about Mabel, he had often meant to, but he couldn't quite get it out. It was not the atmosphere to mention Mabel's name. He revered Mabel. Now he had to explain. It wasn't a very easy story to tell to another woman, but he did it as well as he could; and Kitty helped him. He could count upon Kitty's helping him.

"Of course," he finished a little lamely, "I liked you awfully, naturally I had a great—" He stopped abruptly; he couldn't lie to Kitty. He couldn't say he had had a great respect for her. He hadn't had any respect for her at all.

Kitty knew what he was trying to say. "Fancy," she prompted gently, "you had a great fancy for me. Yes! I see. But Jimmy, you know—you needn't marry me."

He drew a long breath of relief. She was going to let him off; but he wasn't quite sure how she could manage it, because, of course, he couldn't behave like a cad, especially after what she had told him. If he was the first, he was really responsible, and being responsible was never compatible with being let off.

"I'm perfectly willing to marry you," he said with care. "I want you quite to understand that, Kitty. I came here on purpose to make it perfectly plain to you." She turned her head away a little; he could not see her face. There was a pause before she spoke again. Then she said, "Yes—I know what you mean—and I suppose I shall have to marry somebody. It would look so queer if I didn't, wouldn't it? But it needn't be you, you know, Jimmy. There are—two or three other men who would—really like it—I might try one of them."

Jimmy frowned. Mabel wouldn't have dreamed of such a thing. No woman of the kind he could really care for, delicate, fastidious, proud, would have entertained for a moment such an odious plan. However, it was

probably the only one that could let him out. He saw that; but he didn't like it.

"I suppose," he said, a little stiffly, "that if you can do such a thing there is no real reason against it."

"No," said Kitty thoughtfully. "I think there's no real reason against it—Jimmy." She sat quite still after she had spoken. It was as if she thought there was nothing more to say.

He rose to his feet; he was free now, but he didn't feel perfectly satisfied. "I hope," he said a little awkwardly, "that you won't do something you'll regret." Kitty rose, too. "Regretting isn't much use, is it?" she said simply. "Besides you know one always does get along somehow, doesn't one?"

He wondered how he was going to take leave of her; but she settled that question. She went out on to the balcony that overlooked the end of Little Grosvenor Street. There was only one way he could do it now, perhaps it was better; still he would have liked to have kissed her. She was a plucky little woman.

He wanted in some way to show her he was sorry. Suddenly she looked up at him. "What was I really to you?" she murmured. "I'd like to know that, Jimmy; was I—only the pace?"

He looked at her miserably; he would have denied it if he could. A little flicker of laughter came into her eyes.

"Well," she said, "if I was—I've brought you out all right, haven't I—in the right direction, I mean; that's something, isn't it?"

He was a little hurt by her laughter, but he left her, while the light of it still shone in her eyes.

The light left her when he was gone. She sank down lower and lower, till her bowed head rested on the dusty flower boxes. It would not hurt him if she cried a little now. The pace was broken, but she hadn't let him down.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Pace* by Phyllis Bottome]