

Heliotrope

by

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

Ralph Pallen Coleman

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The incidents in themselves were completely separate; it was only afterwards that Julian realized the entirety of it, that he saw it as a whole and in some measure understood. If he did not know how it had been accomplished, he at least knew that by some curious chance, the effect was as it had been intended.

If the first time the warning passed unrecognized as such, at least it fulfilled its purpose. When it came again there could be no doubt in Julian's mind that it was the warning which was intended, the sign which had been promised. What could have been chosen better? Heliotrope! The flower which he had always associated with his mother, the flower which they had piled about her at the last.

The misery of her death had been a bewildering agony, unbearable of being borne. It was as though someone had plucked the sun out of the sky, leaving a desolate cold world. Night after night he had lain exhausted from sobbing, watching the moonlight stencilling the nursery wall, while the smell of heliotrope had come in at the windows. And yet, even in the white still agony of those nights, his loneliness had been lightened, ever so little, by that promise, so sincerely, if fantastically given. If ever he should be in danger . . . she would send him a warning . . . a warning that he might understand.

In the first days after her death he had openly courted danger, in the hope of proving the promise that had been given. Later, even the memory of her grew clouded, became vague as any dream. Everything in fact

concerning her became only a dim memory, while life flowed about him, strong with reality.

It was with a disembodied sensation that Julian sat between his great aunt and his great uncle Dennison, in the square dining room which had remained so much the same ever since he could remember. He was only quite vaguely aware of the dark shine of the mahogany table, of the soft bloom of the fruit in the low dishes, of the graved glass, like bubbles of iridescent colour. He was even only dimly aware of his great aunt with her plastered curls, and of his great uncle, with the thin hands on which the veins stood out, and which shook ever so slightly as he lifted his glass of port to his lips.

Julian was even only vaguely conscious of the excellence of the port that was poured for him. It was really not the port that was making his blood run so fast in his veins, that was giving him that curious uplifted sensation, as though he were floating miles above the earth. No, it was not the port that was doing it . . . it was something altogether different.

Where had he seen lately a line about love and the stars out, and a bit of wind blowing among the heather? It had stuck in his mind like the fragment of a tune. Well, to-night the stars were out, they would be blazing in the quiet sky, and she would be down there by the bridge, following their reflections in the still water, while she waited for him. Maisie!

He moved restlessly in his chair. Dinner was such a ceremony in his uncle's house. In all decency he could not rush away before he had had his coffee. It would have to be brought to them in the tiny egg shell cups, while they sat in the flowered chintz drawing-room with its Dresden china shepherdesses on the mantelpiece. No doubt his uncle would commence some prolonged dissertation which he would be unable to interrupt, and which would take up so much time, time which was flowing by as swiftly as the water down at the mill. And in a few more days he would be back at college, back at the same old grind, which he regarded with a strong disfavor, born of the last few days.

It was his great aunt who was speaking, in her curious old voice, that had yet kept such silvery tones. Her voice had still little running notes in it, and it made him remember that she had once been young; oh, young and slim as a willow tree, with a firm white throat, and a skin that had the texture of apple blossoms.

“I’m afraid that it is very dull for you here, Julian. No young people about. We must seem a little dull to you at times. I wish there were some young people for you to be with.”

A warmth flowed beneath his skin. He felt a curious sense of shame because he was deceiving them.

“It’s just nice to be with you and Uncle John,” he replied uneasily, “I don’t want anyone else.”

Neither did he, but then it was because there was someone else. He was so glad now that he had not brought Fowler down with him as his great aunt had suggested. Fowler would have been quite hideously in the way. In all probability Fowler would have thought that she was quite an ordinary girl, simply because she waited on the table at the village inn. But he knew that she was nothing of the sort. Fowler had all sorts of prejudices. He was beginning to think, in the light of this new experience that perhaps his friend was a snob. Perhaps he had been one himself, but a lot of old ideas had been abolished in the last few days.

After this he was going to be more tolerantly inclined. He felt that he had been an impossible young prig. Now life had opened out to him like a bud on a June morning. He was intoxicated with its colour and its perfume. Love, and the stars out . . . and a bit of wind blowing among the heather. Why, after all, that was the whole of life in a few words. What else was there, what else that really counted in the long run? And of all of this side of life, until now, he had known nothing at all.

It was almost nine o’clock before he was able to slip out of one of the long French windows, down across the lawns sparkling already with dew, steal through a gap in the hedge, out beyond to the open fields. Here the crickets were singing shrilly to the stars; the air was soft and warm and full of the smell of wild growing things. Night was mysterious, as mysterious as she was herself, with her soft dark eyes, and her honey colored hair. He loved to stare down into her eyes, and bring up the secrets out of her soul.

He was running without knowing that he was running, his feet light on the wet grass, his pulses beating a rhythm to his feet. Heavens! It was good to be young! Those two back there, listening to the tick of the clock, sleepy with old age . . . they knew nothing of this . . . of the sweet, aching longing, of the delicious uncertainty of young love. Did one love when one grew old, he wondered, with the egotism of youth strong upon him. He supposed that they had once known love, but they had long since forgotten. They could

never feel again what he was feeling. He was sure of that. Oh, but it was good to be young under the stars.

His feet in his light pumps padded on the roadway, now that he had left the fields behind. The elms arched clear across here, shutting out all but the diamond clear sparkle of the stars between the leaves. The shadows were thick as velvet. Julian stopped up short as he came to the bridge, a sudden pang going through him, fear that she had not come. And then he went forward with a boyish rush, as he made out her slight figure, almost enveloped with shadow. He felt as though he must shout his relief, his joy, because she was there.

“Thought you hadn’t come after all . . . couldn’t get away a second sooner,” he gasped, hot and breathless “Was simply grudging every second.”

He could see the flash of her teeth as she smiled at him. She was quiet as a little mouse. She rarely had much to say. He was glad of it, for vaguely he was aware that they spoke different languages, that they would never understand one another.

“Dear old things . . . my great aunt and uncle,” he said, “but so early Victorian. I mean,” he said for her better understanding, “they like everything done just as it has always been done. They don’t like new ways, they don’t know what it’s like to be in a hurry.”

She was leaning her arms along the railing of the bridge, and he could feel the soft warm flesh through her thin muslin blouse. His fingers tightened on her arm. He forgot what she was saying. A delicious warmth poured over him.

“What will they say about me?” she asked suddenly, with a little embarrassment, “about our getting married, I mean.”

“Oh,” he said, and paused for an imperceptible moment. Then he spoke with an easy assurance. “I don’t suppose that they will say much. They must have been in love themselves, oh, ever so long ago. But perhaps they haven’t forgotten altogether what it’s like. But why talk about them? I came out here to talk to you.”



He was absolutely content just to stand there, without words, holding her hands, looking down into her face.

She was just as sweet and soft and yielding as he had remembered her all that day, all the age long twenty-four hours since he had last seen her.

She was the embodiment of all young and lovely things, he thought, as he stared down into her face, pale in the dusk of the trees. A sweet confusion of thought filled his mind. She was like the first buds that appeared on the bare branches of early spring; like the warm perfume of apple orchards; like the frail mystery of dusk; like everything that was young and sweet and tender.

He was absolutely content just to stand there, without words, holding her hands, looking down into her face but to-night she was apparently pursued with one idea. It recurred to her lips whenever he left them free for a moment.

“Perhaps they won’t be wanting you to marry me for a while . . . a long while.”

He wished that she would not refer to the subject of marriage. It was so very far from his own thoughts. Love was a wild sweet thing born under the stars . . . but marriage . . . why, marriage was something stuff and dull, something altogether different. He had no idea of getting married. No idea whatever. That was to be something for the future. Perhaps, in years to come, he might consider it. But he was not going to mess up his life by marrying before he was even through college, before he even had so much as tasted of life. Later, he supposed, in the natural course of events, he would marry like everyone else, have children, and be interested in his dinner and in the flavor of his wines. It all came in time, but the time was not yet. At present he wanted to live each hour to the full, suck up all the sweet, as the bee sucks the flower. Marriage . . . oh, it had nothing whatever to do with this wild, sweet thing that was flooding through him. Love was as old as the ages; where it was leading him he did not question . . . did not even care to know.

Why talk of such tiresome things?” he asked, “it has nothing to do with this.”

“But it has everything to do with it,” she assured him, not willing to be so easily put off. “You’ll be going away, and then . . .”

“And then, my dear, and then, when we’re quite old and dull and full of sleep, and want to drowse beside the fireplace, instead of kissing under the stars . . . I’ll come back and marry you . . . and we’ll be stuffy and tiresome, and think about what we are going to have for dinner. Oh, don’t let’s be old till we are old. Are you too young to know how glorious it is to be young?”

But she looked at him in bewilderment.

“I don’t want to wait until I’m old to be married,” she pouted against his sleeve. “I want to marry while I’m young. When you fall in love, you marry, don’t you?”

“Not if you’re wise. Oh, marriage and love,” he said with young and blatant cynicism, “have nothing whatever to do with one another.”

“You talk foolish,” she said, still unreconciled to his point of view, while dimly he wished that her voice lacked certain inflections, “weren’t you ever taught different?”

“Oh,” he said, laughing down into her serious face, “I was taught a lot of dull things . . . and now I’m busy forgetting them. I’m teaching myself, and it’s a whole lot better. I’m learning so much that by the time I am quite old, I expect I shall have learned how to live. That’s the pity of it . . . it takes so long to learn . . . and by the time we are wise there’s so little time left in which to live. Seems wrong somehow, doesn’t it? If we could only be born wise.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m sure. I never knew anyone talk so much rubbish before,” she said in slightly sulky tones.

“All right, then,” he said, while a flood of sweet fire swept over him, “we won’t talk at all. That’s ever so much better, isn’t it?” he whispered. His arms trembled. He could feel the warm length of her body pressed close against him.

“God . . . but you are sweet!” he muttered against her lips. Her arms snatched at him . . . held him closer . . . closer . . . until with a tremendous effort he thrust her a step away from him, laughing awkwardly. His voice shook when he tried to speak, and his heart seemed to be beating in his throat.

“You’re a little witch,” he said, “a dangerous little witch. You make a man forget to be sane . . . sensible.”

“Don’t you love me, then?” she asked, seeming to resent his movement away from her.

“Love you!” He gave a low laugh. “I love you too much I’m afraid. Too much altogether. Come on,” he said abruptly, “it’s getting late. It’s time I took you home, you know.”

She hung back just a little, but he turned resolutely towards the road. It was too dangerous there in the close thick shadows of the bridge. In the clear white moonshine of the fields, it was easier for a man to keep his head.

He wondered if life could ever be quite so magical again. He almost doubted that the nights could ever again be quite as deep and soft, or splashed with such bright silver from their core. Would the dawns ever be quite as tender, would he ever again feel the same thrill, the same sweet

ecstasy of loving? He liked to open his eyes these mornings, and stretch himself luxuriously between the cool sheets, smelling of lavender; watch the sunlight drip through the shutters, and spread in thin layers of gold across the floor.

There was a note that ran through each day, like the melody of a tune. It was all so new, so curiously delightful. Yes, he hated the idea of going back to college just now. Perhaps in another month it would be different. Even the fullest moon must wane and drop out of the sky. He was cynic enough to know this to be so, even while he hungered and thirsted for the sight of her. Far back in his mind he knew too, that this was the kind of thing that did not, could not last.

It was a curious mixture of sensations that were his the last evening before he was to go back. He was to go up to town by the early train in the morning, so that that evening was to be the last time that he would see her for an entire term. And then that was only supposing that he came back for the Christmas holidays. He had half promised Fowler that he would take a trip with him then, but now he was undecided as to what he should do. He would not allow her to suspect at any rate, that there was the slightest chance of his not returning. For himself, he did not know what he would choose to do when the time came.

She had been very soft and yielding and just a bit tearful these last nights. He supposed that it would always be so. A man could take the joy out of each moment as it passed, without a thought of what the future might bring; a woman was always looking ahead, peering into a nebulous future, putting down foundations upon which to build. Poor things, he supposed that they could not help it. In the very nature of things it was intended so. They were only fulfilling their destiny. Maisie must weep a little and plan for the future, while he was content without a thought for to-morrow.

But for all his philosophy he was nervously excited as he sat at dinner this last evening. It was all that he could do to respond sensibly to the conversation. Dinner seemed to drag on so slowly, the wait between the courses was an age. And then when he had thought that he was free to go at last, his great uncle had suggested a game of cribbage.

“Sorry, uncle,” he said with dismay, groping about in his mind for some excuse, “but I have a letter to post. I think the office will be closed unless I hurry.”

He cut short his uncle's ready response that someone could be sent to mail it, by being already halfway through the door and down the path, before his uncle had time to finish his sentence. He was late as it was. And to-night . . . oh, to-night he had flung caution to the winds . . . to-night . . . he was not going to be afraid to . . . live. To-night was to be different . . . different from all that had been before.

The stars were out and the garden was curiously quiet. He ran across the path, making a short cut of the lawns that dipped in a gradual slope down the hill to the road. He had reached the end of the garden, by the old summerhouse, when he stumbled into a flower bed. He stopped up short, the wet soil clinging to his feet. The smell of bruised flowers was poignant and sweet.

Heliotrope! It was a bed filled with heliotrope. The scent seemed to run through him, it flooded his senses, it enveloped him, it flowed through his veins . . . burning . . . burning . . . torturing.

He stood motionless . . . his hands clenched to his sides . . . every nerve stabbing . . . every sense alert . . . alive to a new sensation that was rendering him curiously incapable of movement . . . a sensation that he had not known for years, oh years . . . of a sudden, swift and overwhelming grief.

It went through him like a sword, piercingly sharp, intolerable of being borne. Once more he was a child again, sobbing and alone, for the immeasurable loneliness of a desolate cold world. The smell of the heliotrope rose around him, drowning out all other scents. He closed his eyes, and felt his body swaying, his heart contracting, and his throat felt tight and aching. He put out his hands and stumbled forward like someone blind, to a bench a foot or so away.

How he remembered, so intensely, that old grief. He was torn and bruised and aching with that same old misery of childhood, now, after all these years. He was back again in his white nursery, with the moonlight making fantastic figures upon the walls, cowering beneath the sheets, a small huddled figure, sobbing out his grief, his loneliness, his despair. And through the open windows, blowing on the silver breeze, the smell of heliotrope . . . heliotrope.

He dropped his head in his hands, while it was as though a sharp sword was thrusting at him, probing into an old wound which had never healed. Like a child again he could have cried aloud in the heaviness of his pain, and

his longing. And above, and all about him, rose the smell of the heliotrope, strong above all other scents, insistent, intense.

The moon had fallen behind the trees, dropped like a fire balloon out of the sky, before he rose from the bench and walked slowly back up the path, through the dew wet garden drowned in shadow, back through an unbolted door, into the house.

It was not until the next morning, waking tired and listless from a troubled sleep, that he remembered Maisie, waiting perhaps until a late hour, for him to come.

Julian, at thirty, knew himself to be just a shade disillusioned, a trifle bored with life. He had been married for five years, and they had been placid years, peaceful years. Joan was all that any reasonable man could desire in a wife; but then, perhaps he was not quite reasonable. Perhaps he wanted more than he had any right to want. Life was flowing by so fast, and he could never feel that he was extracting the very utmost . . . living out each precious moment to the full.

The artist in him yearned for something deeper, something intangible, something more intense. Joan could not understand his moods of restlessness, his dissatisfactions, that curious uneasiness that pursued him into the very midst of what should have been peace and satisfaction. He wondered sometimes, if all women were just like that, if they had no yearnings for the intangible something, which forever escaped you. They seemed to be content just to allow habit and circumstance to rule and control their lives. He could not make Joan understand how he felt at times. He had tried to explain for his own inner satisfaction, for the sake of putting the thing into words, but it had sounded rather idiotic, even to himself, when he began to speak of it. There were some things that could only be expressed by broken sentences . . . pauses . . . a receptive mind could receive the impression . . . but Joan was not receptive to these things. She would only smile and perhaps remark:

“Julian . . . go for a walk. You’ve been sitting around the house too much altogether.”

No, Joan was not receptive. Sometimes he thought that she was wholly lacking in imagination. It was useless to try and make her understand any thing much of how he felt about things. She had no comprehension of subtleties of thought, she had no desires apparently that could not be quite easily supplied and fulfilled. Life for her was a joyous gathering of days.

She was continually laughing over humorous occurrences in life. She accepted, and did not inquire into things which she did not understand. She even laughed at him, and treated his moods as a form of ill health, to be combated by fresh air and exercise.

He had, in the beginning, adored her for her simplicity. He had told her that she was as clear and as beautiful as a crystal stream . . . and now he wished that she were more complex. He cavilled continually at that simplicity.

He had no desire whatever to stifle his yearnings. What he did desire was to find understanding and sympathy. But these things were far to seek.

As soon as he had met Thelma Oliver he knew instinctively that he had found these rare possessions. At least he had found a semblance of them, for he could not believe as yet that he could ever find completeness of understanding.

She had taken a house in the same street, and a mutual friend had asked Joan to call. Joan had returned from the call, interested in a fashion but more in the house than in the young widow.

“It’s a fascinating house,” she said thoughtfully, “the room I was in had silver cushions and gray draperies. It was like being out in a mist. She’s curious looking . . . coal black hair and a very white face. Not a bit pretty. She writes poetry I believe. I didn’t ask her about it. I was afraid that she might begin to read it to me. They always do if you give them a chance. She’s coming in to dinner to-morrow night. She said she’d rather come alone. She is only just beginning to go out again. I did like the house. But it must be lonely for her. I’m always so sorry for widows.”

Julian could not understand, after meeting her the following evening, how anyone could have so briefly disposed of the subject of Thelma Oliver. He found Joan’s description mournfully inadequate. But then that was only natural. She was not Joan’s kind. They would have very little to say to one another.

He could have laughed aloud at the very absurdity of saying that she was not pretty. He found her rarely beautiful, with a dead white skin that made him think of water lily petals. But it was her mind which delighted him. He had always found women to be either an echo or a void, and she was neither of these. He found that out when, after dinner, he led her away from the

candle-lighted drawing-room, to the sacred dimness of his library, where he showed her his collection of modern poets.



“You are the only woman I have ever cared about,” he said, sitting in the gray and silver room.

She knew them all better than he knew them himself; had strangely individual things to say of them, criticisms to make which delighted him for their certainty of understanding. An hour passed before he even realized that they had left Joan in the other room. He noticed Joan’s curious smile as she looked up from a book on their return. Joan always seemed to have rather an absurd attitude of appearing pleased, when he had found someone who interested him, as though he were a child being given a new toy.

Perhaps it was just as well, he thought, during the succeeding weeks, that Joan did take that attitude; just as well that she was never jealous of his absorptions. Sometimes he vaguely surmised that it was because she had seen so many come and go. But this was different. Still, Joan made no objections to his frequent visits to the tall narrow house across the street. Rather, she seemed pleased that his late mood of restlessness had passed. And then, for a while, he forgot all about Joan.

“You are the only woman I have ever cared about,” he said, sitting in the gray and silver room, while he thought that he was speaking the truth. For this was surely different to anything that he had ever known before. This was of the mind, the spirit, the soul . . . before it seemed to him that it had been always something crass and physical.

All his dissatisfaction had fled. Every moment had meaning, every instant was a throb of joy. So he told Thelma Oliver, while the mist of her gray draperies, seemed to blot out a commonplace world.

“Why shouldn’t we take our happiness?” he asked, “since all we know for certain is this life . . . why not? Why shouldn’t we take the joy that is offered to us?”

And at first, if she put things in the way of it, dreary things like duty and conscience and thought for others, soon he felt that she was being melted to his will by the fire of his desire.

He brought out her persuasion ideas that he had absorbed at one time upon the need of duty to oneself, the right of the individual, the need of happiness for the growth of the soul. And she would listen to him with thoughtful eyes from which thought would suddenly be drowned by feeling. And if she blocked such ideas as these, with the old stereotyped forms and beliefs, she grew voiceless before the blaze of his passion, to which she utterly surrendered.

They were to sail for Italy, and from there matters could be arranged. He had decided not to tell Joan before he left . . . he could not bear to ruin the perfection of this time with scenes of any kind. Although, somehow, he did not believe that if he did tell Joan, that there would be any scene. He could imagine her accepting the situation with her usual smile. In some ways, he was forced to concede, Joan was quite extraordinary. But . . . he preferred to arrange a thing of this sort by letter.

He had planned to meet Thelma at the station and from there they were to take the boat train. Julian spent the intervening time until the moment of departure, in a glamorous golden haze. Standing at the station, waiting for Thelma, he felt that he was on the very threshold of happiness, of joy unutterable.

Thelma . . . Italy . . . Italy . . . Thelma . . .

He kept repeating the words over and over to himself as though they were the refrain of a tune. They seemed to him to represent the very sum of things. Life could not hold more than this.

“ ’eliotrope . . . ’eliotrope . . . buy some of my nice fresh ’eliotrope. Only a nickel a bunch.”

A tall thin boy was offering tightly-tied bunches of heliotrope from a basket that he was carrying. A curious sensation swept through Julian. He closed his eyes and the perfume seemed to pour through him, wave upon wave of it, drowning the thrill that was in his heart, weighing him down heavily, oh, so heavily . . . wave after wave of perfume . . . sickeningly sweet.

Heliotrope! Once more he was a child again . . . a child in the night . . . sobbing out the bitterness of an intolerable grief, once more he was a child seeking comfort, and finding it in a remembered promise.

Suddenly . . . as though his mind had cleared of a thin fine mist, that had obscured his vision, he remembered a night in summer . . . a run across the lawn . . . and heliotrope at his feet . . . heliotrope sending up that peculiar fragrance, staying his feet, making him turn back from an ignoble pursuit.

Heliotrope! This then was the promise, this was the actual fulfillment, the positive warning. Oh, absurd . . . impossible! Incongruous thing.

But he could not push the thought of it away from him. For the second time . . . the second time . . . at the moment of temptation . . . her second warning. The flower that she had loved . . . the flower that they had piled about her at the last. It was the scent of it that had followed him for days after her death . . . that had hung about his quiet nursery in those nights when he had sobbed out his loneliness and his grief.

How . . . possible? How in any way possible? He opened his eyes but he felt sick and giddy. His reason told him that it was too fantastic for belief . . . too unreal . . . but it was there . . . denying his thought.

“ ’eliotrope . . . ’eliotrope . . . buy my nice fresh ’eliotrope. Only a nickel a bunch.”

Thelma . . . Italy . . . Italy . . . Thelma!

“Nice fresh ’eliotrope!”

Thelma . . . Thelma . . . oh, unreal . . . only a vague and curious dream. But the smell of the heliotrope was real, poignant, stabbing him back into reality with its sharp smell . . . stabbing him until he could have crumpled with the old, old pain tearing at his heart.

He shut his eyes and could see the moonlight shadowing so delicately his white nursery wall; he could hear the slow tick of the tall grandfather’s clock beyond the door; he could smell the scent of the heliotrope coming in at the windows . . . he could see dim shadowy figure of someone bending above him, and feel again the comfort of that nearness. And then pain . . . and shock . . . and grief intolerable . . . yet lightened ever so little by a promise, so sincerely, if fantastically given.

He scarcely knew that he had left the station. He felt the need to do something quickly to escape from himself. The smell of the heliotrope now was faint and illusive as a lost dream. He looked up at the sky, faintly sprinkled with stars. Heliotrope . . . her sign . . . her warning. He hoped . . . oh, desperately he hoped . . . that somehow she knew that he had received the warning . . . and that he had understood.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Heliotrope* by Beatrice Redpath]