

*The* STORY of  
NANCY  
MEADOWS

LOUISE  
PLATT  
HAUCK

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*The Story of  
Nancy Meadows*

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LOUISE PLATT HAUCK

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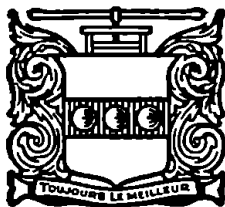
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The Story of Nancy Meadows

*To*  
*Dorothy Dix*

WHO SUGGESTED THE THEME FOR THIS BOOK AND UPON  
WHOSE EXTENSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN NATURE I HAVE  
RELIED IN THE CHARACTER DRAWING

# *The Story of Nancy Meadows*

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## Chapter One

NANCY HALE had been taught self-control from her babyhood.

“Try not to cry,” her mother would urge when the little head had come into violent contact with the arm of a chair. “Be Mother’s brave girl—don’t cry!”

When the child was older and joyous shrieks came from the little group of her playmates in the yard, Mrs. Hale would appear and put a finger to her smiling lips. Nancy’s laughter—never immoderate—would fade into silence, though she continued the game with quiet zest.

Mrs. Hale herself practised the doctrine she preached continually to her only child. Other mothers rained passionate kisses on the soft little forms of the babies they bathed. Mrs. Hale never did. Other mothers caught up their children, when they awakened flushed and dewy with sleep, in a sort of fierce ecstasy. Mrs. Hale indulged in no such demonstration. She would have gone through fire and water for her child but she kissed her with a sort of cool propriety and held her stiffly, though not without tenderness, for a brief moment when she departed on one of the many journeys she made with her husband.

Nancy never ran wildly into her parents’ arms when they returned. She held up a cool little cheek for their lips, spoke decorous words of welcome.

Such repression would have been dangerous to an impulsive child, a demonstrative child, but Nancy was neither demonstrative nor impulsive. If there were depths of emotion beneath her calm exterior they were well hidden; if there were fires which later on were to burn with a clear, bright flame, they remained unlighted in Nancy’s girlhood, in the early years of her married life. Heredity and training both contributed to the making of the serene and beautiful girl she was when at twenty-one she married Dwight Meadows.

The Hales had come to live in Staunton before Nancy was born. At the time of her marriage they were almost as much strangers to the town as they were at her birth. They went regularly to the Presbyterian church and twice a year they entertained the minister and his wife at dinner. Mrs. Hale belonged to the Ladies’ Missionary Society and in her turn was hostess to the group of forty-odd women. Beyond this she had no social life. She did not return the calls that were paid her, she discouraged neighborly “running in.” Friendly, informal Staunton shrugged its shoulders after a while and let her alone.



Donal Hale was equally reserved. His father had been born in Edinburgh, and Donal had a Scotchman's economy of speech. He was an expert accountant and being a "good mixer" was not essential to success in his business. He loved his wife and child deeply but it never occurred to him to tell them so. He played golf and chess, and his associates remarked ironically that he regretted the necessity of an opponent in the latter game.

Nancy's eyes were gray; slate gray, rain-water gray, with long black lashes that curled endearingly upward. In her childhood her silky mop of chestnut curls had been her mother's despair and even yet, despite the years of brushing and training, unruly little tendrils were likely to break their confines and twine about her forehead and small ears.

Hers would have been too prim a face save for those truant curls and the wide, beautiful mouth with its deep corners. One of the church elders, a man remarkable for his judgment of character, once said of her:

"That girl of Hale's is like a wild bird born in captivity. She doesn't know how to use her wings. She doesn't even know that she has wings. But some day somebody's hand will open the door of the cage and then off she'll go!"

Nancy did not think of her life as a cage. She went happily to grammar school dressed in the dainty pink or blue linen frocks her mother chose so carefully. She went through High School wearing smart jersey suits or plain silk crepes with sheer organdy collars and cuffs. She had two simple but expensive dresses for the occasional parties which came her way. Usually these were church parties, and the young folk sat in a silent, discouraged row about the walls while their elders cavorted jovially in the center of the room and urged their offspring to "Come on now—have a good time! This is a party, not a funeral!"

After she graduated Nancy had a decorous year of travel which included a visit to her ancestral home in Scotland. Her father and mother accompanied her, and the atmosphere of ship or hotel did not greatly differ from that she had known on Chestnut Street.

Dwight Meadows lived on Chestnut Street also; across the street and in the same block with the Hales. Dwight was four years older than Nancy and they knew each other but slightly. At eight, she had stepped quickly out of the way when his sled sped past her down the ice-covered sidewalk in front of her house. At fifteen, she had gazed with awed admiration at the uniform he wore when he came home on vacation from military school. She had been flattered, and somewhat thrilled in her quiet little way, when, a sophomore at Yale, he had smiled and nodded at her at Christmas time.

The Meadows were "in society." When Dwight was home his name figured frequently in the social columns of the newspapers. "Mr. and Mrs. S. Hamilton Wilson gave a small dinner last night in honor of their guest, Miss Clarice Bland of New York City. Those present were—" and Dwight was always present if he happened to be in Staunton.

The town loved the Meadows family in spite of, or perhaps because of, the continual gossip that attached to their names. They owned the great wholesale house of Meadows and Company, Importers. Many out-of-town visitors were attracted because of the Meadows Company. Women came from Kansas City, from Indianapolis, even from Chicago, to buy carved teakwood furniture and small glittering jade trees and ugly

Oriental gods and silky rugs and Ming bowls and beautifully embroidered linens from Meadows’.

Staunton was proud of its importers. Meadows’ good-naturedly sold its wares at wholesale prices to townspeople and scarcely a home in the city but could say carelessly: “This is a genuine Burmese gong. I picked it up at Meadows’.” Or “These book ends? My dear, I must tell you about them. Of course they weren’t intended for book ends—I don’t suppose the Tibetans worry a lot about propping their books up—but I saw these two quaint little figures at Meadows’ and I said to myself—” Or “We’ll buy Mabel’s linens at Meadows’, of course. I don’t suppose there has been a bride in Staunton for fifty years that didn’t have at least one piece of Italian cut work or a Peruvian runner from Meadows’.”

All the Meadows men traveled: Bob Meadows, president of the Company, and father of Dwight and of Madge, who was Mrs. Spencer Hammond and lived in an exquisitely furnished house on Garfield Terrace; Hulbert Meadows who married a glove counter clerk from Kansas City and tried—and failed!—to force her down the throats of Staunton society; Joe Meadows who was a frisky bachelor at fifty-eight; and after his graduation, Dwight Meadows.

The Meadows family both separately and as a whole served the town as a perennial topic of conversation; but the juicy morsels of gossip which were passed over tea tables or discussed at the Country Club golf links were those which related to the Meadows men’s “philandering.”

“Bob Meadows had dinner last night over to Bentondale with that Mrs. Homer from Chicago,” one matron would tell another, not censoriously but with avid interest. “Of course she’s here to buy for her store but that hardly accounts for three dinners and two luncheons in the same week, do you think?”

“How Mrs. Bob puts up with it is more than I can understand,” the visitor would say mildly, sipping her Orange Pekoe tea—tea that came from Meadows, put up in pretty green and silver packages.

“She’s had lots of time to get used to it! Bob Meadows and his father before him—do you remember how he used to carry on with that woman over on Polk Street—the blonde whose husband drove the chestnut horses? And Hulbert and Joe—they’re all just born flirts.”

“No real harm in them though,” the caller might remark charitably. “I expect Mrs. Bob knows that none of his affairs ever goes beyond the flirtation point.”

“If Fred Brown ever—” Mrs. Brown would begin firmly and her friend would assent: “Oh, my, yes! I say so, too. But the Meadows are different, same way. I suppose it comes from all the traveling they do. The Continental viewpoint—isn’t that what it’s called?”

“Madge is not like that,” Mrs. Brown invariably remarked at this point. “She and Spencer Hammond hardly know there’s anybody on earth but each other.”

“Yes, the Meadows women seem to be cut off another piece of cloth. They stick to their own husbands. Even Hulbert’s wife—they say she won’t look at another man since she married him. I hear Dwight’s coming home to stay; that he’s been put in charge of the advertising department. I suppose he’ll marry—and be like the rest of them!”

“I suppose so!” And both women would sigh enjoyably. Dwight’s departures from the straight and narrow path of conjugal fidelity would furnish new stories for the tea tables.

The first knowledge Nancy Hale had of Dwight’s return came late one June afternoon when she was toiling up the long hill that led to her home. The heat was untimely. It was an August rather than a June sun that burned its way slowly westward. Nancy’s hair escaped from her white hat in little rings and there was unwonted color in her cheeks. Both her slender arms were clasped about a heavy package.

“Let me carry that for you!” said a pleasant masculine voice behind her. She turned quickly and saw Dwight Meadows, tall and handsome in a cool linen suit that had a foreign air in its cut, his white teeth flashing in a well-tanned face. “What the dickens?” he questioned as he received the weight of the bundle. “Coals to Newcastle, or a hodful of bricks? Half a dozen carefully selected anchors?”

“Books,” Nancy said demurely. “Hunt’s couldn’t deliver them until tomorrow and Mother wanted them tonight, so I said I’d take them. They are heavy,” she added apologetically.

“Undoubtedly they will lame me for life,” Dwight assented. “How are you, little Nancy Hale? All grown up? Allowed to be out after dark, and everything? I hear you’re a traveled young person, going to Scotland and other foreign lands!”

Her pleasure in this meeting increased. This was the sort of banter she had heard Dwight offering other girls as he helped them into his car, or strolled with them past Nancy’s house.

“I suppose it seems nothing to you,” she answered shyly. “You’ve been everywhere, haven’t you?”

“Well, practically everywhere. I’ve covered quite a sizable patch of the globe since college. Business, you know. I’ve come back now to settle down and become a solid citizen. Ambitious young business man, good neighbor—all that sort of thing.” He sent her a sidelong glance from his merry dark eyes. “I hope you got that neighbor touch, Nancy! I’m coming to call on you. I expect to run across the street—oh, five or six times a day at least! May I?”

Amusement awoke in her own eyes. “That last was a bit belated, wasn’t it? But of course you may come—once or twice at least. I want to hear all about Singapore and Ceylon and that queer Greek island where you bought those fascinating little figures you sent home last year. I bought one,” she told him. “I keep it up on my desk.”

“Interested in those? Good!” he said eagerly. He smiled again and she thought innocently that he was a very friendly person and the handsomest man she had ever seen. “I have some others—a Niobe and a little Eros—I didn’t put them in the store. Would you like to see them?”

They had reached her door by this time and she took the package from him and thanked him, telling him with that little air of demureness which he found deliciously captivating that she would like to see the figurines.

He brought them over that same evening, wrapped in many layers of soft paper. He was on his way to a party, he explained, but there was loads of time, he didn't have to start until nine o'clock. He'd leave Niobe and Eros for her to examine at her leisure. He just wanted to tell her where he found them; about the old man who at first refused to sell them and then when his daughter came in and flamed into fiery reproach. . . . It made a gay, interesting tale.

They sat on the old-fashioned front porch with tangled masses of honeysuckle shielding them from the gaze of passersby. The honeysuckle was in bloom and the hot day had slipped into cool evening airs. Nancy's father was upstairs in his study, a green shade over his eyes, a big ledger spread flat before him. Mrs. Hale sat in the north parlor and read her new books.

Nine o'clock struck somewhere within the house and Nancy reminded Dwight of his party. He said easily that he guessed he wouldn't go after all. It was too hot to dance, he was perfectly comfortable where he was.

"You might pretend that you wanted me to stay," he reproached her. "What a cool, composed little thing you are, Nancy Hale!"

Presently Staunton was saying that Dwight Meadows was "going with that Hale girl."

"The attraction of opposites, I suppose," Mrs. Brown told the caller of the afternoon. "If ever two people in the world were different, it's those two. I've passed her house when they've been sitting on the front porch. He's usually perched on the railing, his hands swinging between his knees with that careless air all the Meadows men seem to have when they're interested, those white teeth of his showing, and talking, talking!"

"They could talk a bird off a bough, those Meadows men! I remember old Mr. Meadows—this boy's grandfather. He was just such a man. He'd convince you black was white and that the sun rises in the west, if he set out to. And smile at you all the time as though you were the one person in the world who really understood what he was talking about. If Dwight's set his heart on marrying Nancy Hale, she might as well be getting her trousseau together. She hasn't a chance against him."

It did seem, as Mrs. Brown had said, that it was the attraction of opposites which speeded Dwight Meadows' mad wooing of Nancy. Impetuous where she was coolly poised, talkative where she was apt to fall into serene little silences, blazing with excitement over trifles which won merely an amused smile from her, it appeared that their very differences drew them together.

Nancy possessed a quiet distinctiveness all her own. Essentially feminine, dressed always with the daintiest care, she followed her mother's rule of ignoring her own appearance after she had left her room. Dwight never saw her glance into a mirror, use a powder puff or touch her hair during all the weeks of his courtship.

Her reluctant little spurts of laughter delighted him, coming as they did at precisely the right time and place. Abnormally sensitive to beauty, she showed her appreciation of some lovely thing he brought her by a dilation of the pupils of her eyes which made them seem black between the long, thick lashes. He learned to know her moods, almost her thoughts, by those beautiful eyes. She could control the demure curves of her mouth, she was entire mistress of the firm little chin beneath, she rarely blushed; but her eyes gave

her away, he thought tenderly. They darkened with emotion, were calmly gray when she was unmoved.

Often he mistook for shyness her lack of response to his caresses, and loved her the more for it. That she should not be stirred as deeply as he was stirred by this wonderful experience which had come to them he never for a moment considered. Her reserve possessed its own mystery to him, tantalizing him by what it withheld as no other girl's desire to meet him half way had done.

On Nancy's side the attraction was quite as strong though in a different way. Sometimes she felt she hardly knew this charming, exuberant boy who took it for granted that his wishes must be hers. He never asked her if she had another engagement for the evening on which he planned to see her. He simply announced that he would be there at eight, or that they were going to Northburg, or told her to take a wrap along as it would be late before they came back from a drive.

Again and again she resolved to discipline him by announcing that she would be busy that evening, but she never did. Warmth and color had come into her life with Dwight Meadows' advent. She dared not trifle with the gift the gods had bestowed on her. She loved Dwight; of course she loved him! What she did not realize was that she loved equally the things Dwight stood for: laughter and youth and teasing and impromptu plans for picnics and motor trips and dances at Northburg.

And Madge!

Nancy loved Madge Hammond from the day she came to call on her brother's sweetheart until that other day when she lay, years later, with the same smile touching her lips, the same little laughing lines about her eyes, in the house on Garfield Terrace, freesia lilies all about her, a cluster of white roses on the silver knocker of the door.

Madge was five years older than Dwight, consequently nine years Nancy's senior. Madge had been a young lady going to dances, having a coming out party, having beaux when Nancy was still a little girl. Madge reminded her of the time she had stopped the decorous little school child to present her with a tiny doll which had been last night's dance favor.

"I still have that doll!" Nancy answered. "You were like a fairy princess to me then. I used to watch for the florist's wagon to stop in front of your house, and try to guess what was in the long boxes, and I'd wonder if anybody else in the world could be as happy as I was sure you must be."

"You were a darling little girl," Mrs. Hammond said, smiling. "Once—you couldn't have been more than four years old at the time!—Dwight was rushing down the street in his usual headlong fashion and he bumped into you and knocked you flat. I hurried to pick you up, and you smoothed your short skirts and said in the politest little voice: 'I'm all right, fank you!'" She leaned forward and took Nancy's hand in both of hers. "How little I thought then that I was putting my future sister-in-law on her feet!"

She laughed in her own charming fashion. Nancy was shyly silent but later when Madge rose to go, the girl did an unheard-of thing for her: she put both her arms about Madge's neck and kissed her with a sort of soft fire.

"I'm going to love being your sister-in-law," she said.

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## *Chapter Two*

MADGE HAMMOND was a modern of the moderns, forthright in speech, downright in action, taking little for granted but testing the fundamental truth of every principle she accepted, and then living up to that principle with all the consistency of a strong nature. She had none of Dwight's good looks. Her dark eyes were set in short, thick lashes, her black hair was lusterless, her skin was without bloom. But there was an odd sort of charm about her; not the recognized Meadows' charm which consisted largely of liking everybody and expecting as a matter of course to be liked in return, but a charm which was specially her own.

She possessed to perfection the art of selecting the right clothes. She would sit for an hour at a style show without comment and then suddenly rise and lay her finger on one of the paraded gowns. "That's mine," she would announce, and when it was tried on her, it would seem as though it had been designed for her in the beginning. She had a husky, throaty voice, the kind of good manners which springs from genuine kindness and consideration of others, and she loved her brother Dwight with fervor but also with clear-eyed understanding of his nature.

"That's a very sensitive little person you've gone and got engaged to," she said to him the evening after her call on Nancy. "Look out you don't hurt her, buddy!"

"Hurt her! Hurt her!" he exclaimed, outraged. "Madge, you don't know how crazy I am about that girl. She's got me roped, tied and branded. I'm so foolish about her I'd lie right down and let her trample on me if it would give her the slightest satisfaction."

"Far more to the point if you'll stand upright and keep your arm around her," she retorted. "Let me tell you something, Dwight. Nancy's not like Mother and Grandmother and Aunt Sue. She'll never stand for—well, what they've had to stand for. You want to watch your step, my lad."

"Madge!" He was genuinely aggrieved. "If you think for one minute that I—"

"No offence intended, honey! I'm just speaking a word of sisterly warning, that's all." She was silent for a moment and then said thoughtfully: "Nancy's rare. She's fine. But you must remember how she's been brought up. Black's a good solid ebony to her, and white's dazzling purity. Those eyes of hers will never see the nice shades of color which are so plain to you."

"I like that," he complained. "Anybody'd think to hear you—"

She perched on the arm of his chair and ruffled the sleek satin of the thick thatch which he subdued with a drop of brilliantine and much brushing.

“Dwight, listen! It’s time the Meadows tradition was done away with. It’s all right—or if it isn’t we can’t change it at this late day—for Dad to step out with one of his secretaries or his customers or whomever he selects as the lady of the moment. Everybody understands, Mother particularly. I honestly don’t believe she minds at all. Maybe it’s all right for Uncle Hulbert to behave as he does, too—though I have my doubts. But it’s time the thing ended. It’s up to our generation to smash the tradition to bits. I’ve done it myself . . . not that it’s any credit to me when I feel about Spencer as I do; and besides, I’m a Meadows woman and they seem to dwell in the bonds of holy wedlock a little more holily than the men do—”

“For Pete’s sake!” exclaimed the puzzled Dwight. “What’s it all about anyway? D’you think I’m planning to play around with other women after Nancy and I are married? Well, let me tell you this, Madge—get this through your head, old girl! I’m so dead crazy about Nancy—”

“Yes, you said that before,” she reminded him. “And I hope with all my heart that you’re going to turn out to be the world’s most devoted husband. No, not devoted,” she interrupted herself. “You could call Dad that. He never forgets Mother’s birthday, never forgets to send her flowers, no matter—”

“No matter who the lady of the moment is,” his son said, grinning. “Let the old boy have his pleasures, Madge. There’s no harm in them.”

“Not for Dad, perhaps. There would be for you. And it’s you we’re discussing. As I started to remark: I hope you turn out to be the world’s most faithful husband, looking neither to the right nor to the left, sticking to Nancy like the proverbial burr. In the meantime—what about Sara Curtis?” she asked abruptly.

He gave her a patient look. “Well, what about her? We trotted about a bit together before I began seeing Nancy. What about it? Did you expect her to sue me for breach of promise, or something?”

She laughed, as he had expected her to, and patted his cheek before she rose; but her eyes were still serious.

“Just so you don’t do any trotting after you are married,” she warned. “What does Mother think of your Nancy?”

He frowned with irritation. “You’ll have to talk to her, Madge! She seems to have an idea this is a King Cophetua and beggar maid sort of business. She keeps telling me that the Hales don’t know anybody in Staunton, that I’m marrying out of my class—that sort of idiotic thing. Our maternal parent, if you ask me, Madge, is a real, honest-to-goodness snob!”

“I’ll give a luncheon for Nancy,” his sister said thoughtfully. “An awfully exclusive one—the Comptons and Mary Gaines and Sylvie Wood—people like that. And I think Mother had better give a tea—a big, splashy sort of affair—”

He grinned. “I’ll leave the situation in your hands, sis. You know how to manage Mother.”

They both knew that this was true. Mrs. Meadows followed her daughter's lead in social matters. She had a deep-rooted respect for Madge's effortless supremacy. She herself had never quite recovered from the miracle of marrying Bob Meadows. She had been the daughter of a small town store-keeper and had met Bob Meadows when she was visiting in Staunton. She was still a little unsure of herself, a little inclined to wait for some one else to set the social pace—which made her proportionately quick to stamp out any pretensions on the part of people like the Hales.

Madge's word, she knew, was law, not only with her own set but with the older, more conservative women. It had been so since the girl's school days. What Madge Meadows wore, what she said, whom she invited to her home, where she went, were all matters of importance to her friends and acquaintances. The details of her wedding were still dwelt upon, reviewed for the benefit of strangers. She was the nucleus of every little group that formed on the veranda of the Country Club, or in winter before the fire in the big living room. To lunch or dine at the Hammonds' beautiful house was an event to which the guest referred repeatedly for days afterwards.

Instinctively people relied on her judgment because it was sincerely given. Spencer brought many of his business problems to her, declaring that her knowledge of human nature was of the greatest help to him. Dwight adored her, and her mother and father deferred to her in all things.

"But if only Dwight had picked out a girl we know!" Mrs. Meadows sighed when her daughter dropped in the morning after her talk with Dwight.

"Foolishness, darling! We do know her. She's lived in the same block with us since she was born!"

"You know what I mean!" The older woman spoke fretfully, knowing how futile her protests would be. "The Hales are simply nobody at all. The girl didn't even have a debut. I don't know if she dances, or would know how to behave if I did give a tea for her."

"She can dance," Madge assured her with some dryness. "And I think you'll find she won't disgrace you in public. She really is lovely, Mother," she went on gravely. "Dwight is lucky to get her. I was afraid he was going to marry Sara Curtis—"

"Ah, Sara! Sara would have made him the right kind of a wife!"

"Sara," Madge predicted briefly, "will elope with some other woman's husband six months after she has acquired one of her own. I know Sara! Now come on, Mother—come on," she coaxed. "Let's all be awfully nice to Nancy—plan some charming things for her, make her feel she's welcome in the family. Have you called on Mrs. Hale yet?"

"I have not," was the resentful reply. "I went to see that woman when she first moved here. Your father asked me to. And she never returned my call. She—"

"I know, dear, I know," Madge soothed her. "But that's more than twenty years ago. You must go to see her this very afternoon."

Mrs. Meadows obediently donned the most elaborate of her gowns, and presented herself at the Hale home at four that afternoon. She resisted an impulse to be driven the



few hundred yards in her limousine. Mrs. Hale received her politely but without enthusiasm. She was still shaken with the shock of Nancy's engagement.

"You would have thought," Dwight told Madge afterwards, "that marriage was an unknown institution to the Hales! Mrs. Hale couldn't have appeared more horrified if I'd proposed to murder Nancy instead of marry her. And her father kept clearing his throat and saying well, well, he was surprised to realize that Nancy was old enough to consider marriage, and I sat there looking at the floor and wishing to goodness Nancy and I had eloped and told them about it afterwards. Gosh, I was glad when it was over!"

Mrs. Hale still wore an air of astonishment, Dwight's mother thought resentfully. Instead of being down on her knees thanking her Maker that her daughter had the good fortune to marry a Meadows, she had the air of one who was confronted with dire calamity but had made up her mind to make the best of it. It was a relief to both women when Nancy's voice was heard outside and Nancy herself came in, dutifully glad to see Dwight's mother and genuinely grateful for the festivities which were to be given in her honor.

Staunton took its cue from Madge Hammond, and welcomed Nancy cordially. She was whirled off in a vortex of engagements. Dwight complained that he never saw her alone now.

"I'll be glad when it's October and I can have you to myself," he grumbled. "Crummy idea, though—waiting till October. Why don't we get married next month—next week? We've got the house all picked out, and you've got enough clothes already to array all of Solomon's wives in regal splendor—say, listen, Nancy!" he broke off. "Why don't we? Drive to Kansas City, I mean, and be married and then come back and surprise everybody with the news!" He sprang up eagerly as though he intended to set out that minute.

"No, sir!" Nancy shook her head with decision. "My wedding dress is going to be the prettiest this town has ever seen. I'm not going to pass up the chance to wear it."

"I believe you think more of what you're going to wear than you do of me," he said accusingly. And then suddenly his arms were around her and he was pouring a torrent of passionate words in her ear. "You do love me, don't you, darling?" he finished. "Sometimes I think you're just letting me love you instead of—"

"Sometimes you're a great goose," she scolded. She tiptoed to put a kiss on his lean cheek, gently releasing herself from his embrace as she did so. "I make it a rule never to marry a man I don't love," she told him tranquilly. "Is it likely I'll break it for you?"

All of their love scenes ended on that note. Nancy perpetually shied away from any display of emotion, always strove to keep the surface untroubled. Dwight knew some anxious, even unhappy moments before October came at last. But he told himself, as men have believed from the beginning of time, that once Nancy was his wife her delicate aloofness would disappear.

And when he stood at the altar and watched her coming down the aisle on her father's arm, her gray eyes downcast beneath the floating lace of her veil, the soft column of her throat rising from the ivory satin of her gown, his heart swelled with such love for

her that he could not stand in his place but stepped forward to meet her with a little gesture of unconscious protection and possessiveness.

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## Chapter Three

As their wedding gift to their son and his wife, the older Meadows had bought and furnished a house on Van Tyne Avenue. Dwight's mother had taken it for granted that she herself would select the furniture but Madge interfered.

"My word, Mother!" she said, wrinkling her nose at the older woman and smiling gaily. "How would you have liked it if Grandma Meadows had picked out your things? I remember you hated the oak table she gave you and you had it taken to the attic after she died. Let Nancy fit out her own home. She's the one who is going to live in it."

It was just another of the big-sisterly kindnesses which Madge was always offering her brother's wife. Nancy's gratitude toward this slender, rather homely woman was too great to be put into words. She could only flush with pleasure, stammer something which she felt was futile and school-girlish, and pray that an opportunity would arise by which she might return some of this generosity.

Madge had even given her brother a hint about the honeymoon.

"Take her to some quiet, out-of-the-way place, Dwight," she suggested. "You like big hotels—people milling about, lights, chatter, orchestras playing. Nancy may enjoy that for a day or two, but she'll grow tired of it. Didn't Pat Pitney offer to lend you his country place in Virginia?"

"That farmhouse!" he protested.

"It's not a farmhouse. It's a lovely old home that's been in his family a hundred years. Nancy will love the big fireplaces, the wide-boarded old floors, the garden. There are servants, there's a sandy beach on the river where you can swim—it's ideal for a honeymoon!"

In the end that was where they went. Dwight had his few days in a Washington hotel with elaborate meals, pretty women coming and going, the theatre, motor trips; but after that they went farther south and spent two weeks at the old Pitney place.

Nancy loved every minute of their stay there. The stately old white-columned house was, she told Dwight, the home of her dreams. Their bedroom overlooked a green meadow past which the shining river flowed. Soft-footed, mellow-voiced negro servants supplied their wants. There were plummy asters and pungent little chrysanthemums in the garden. Nancy made a pleasant little duty of gathering and arranging them every day, a frilled apron protecting her frock, her face as innocently serious as a little girl's.

At noon they donned their bathing suits and went for a dip in the river which looked deceptively warm and alluring. Nancy's demure dignity departed at the first touch of the icy water and she frolicked like a small boy as she swam and dived, raced Dwight far out toward the middle of the stream, shrieking all the time with the cold. Dwight would emerge presently with his hair dripping in a point on his forehead, seize his wife, roll her in her bathrobe and carry her across the meadow; she protesting every step of the way but clinging to him with a slender, affectionate arm. Old Clem's beaten biscuit and delicate pink ham and fluffy omelet vanished in incredible quantities before the appetites they brought back from the river.

In the afternoon they went for a long walk down one of the country lanes. Sumac burned in the hedges, the scrub oak was beginning to turn crimson. Overhead the sky was a dazzling blue. The fine weather held, with one exception, throughout the fortnight of their stay. The exception was a wild autumn storm which swept out of the night and held them prisoners all one day.

Nancy sat in a low armchair before the blazing library fire, and Dwight crouched on the floor beside her, his arms locked about his knees. Now and then he leaned his head against her and sighed.

"My girl! My very own precious darling of a girl! It seems too good to be true that you really belong to me; that we'll go back to Staunton and live in our own house—"

"We've promised to stay with your mother and father for a week," Nancy reminded him.

"How on earth did we ever come to do that?" he inquired as surprisedly as though the matter had not been discussed with him several times. "Of all the fool ideas!"

She laughed. "We haven't bought our furniture yet. You remember your mother wanted us to wait till we came back because Vaughan and Hammerstein's wouldn't have their fall stock in—"

"A table's a table and a chair's a chair," he argued. "Do we have to wait for the latest styles in tables and chairs? Gosh, Nancy!"

She made no answer. She had realized perfectly why the furniture buying had been postponed until their return. During the week or so they must spend with her while their own house was being made ready for them, Mrs. Meadows would have an excellent opportunity to study her daughter-in-law, to ascertain the weak points in her armor. If the period of her engagement had increased her love for Dwight—and it had—her affection for Madge, it had brought Nancy disillusionment concerning Dwight's parents. Bob Meadows was jolly and likable but he went his own way without regard to the feelings of others. Mrs. Meadows was enduring her son's marriage to obscure little Nancy Hale because she must, but she would never have any real affection to give to Dwight's wife. Already Nancy had learned to be on her guard where the elder Mrs. Meadows was concerned.

"Mother looks down her nose every time Nancy's name is mentioned," Madge had confided to her husband. "But just so long as she pretends to Staunton that Dwight has picked the girl of all others she would have selected for him, it doesn't matter."

“It may matter to Nancy, I should think,” Spencer offered. He kept a respectful distance between himself and his mother-in-law at all times. He disliked her fretful, complaining speech, the little frown of worry always to be seen between her eyes.

“I think Nancy will be able to look after herself,” Madge said with decision.

And indeed before the young Meadows had been under the paternal roof-tree two days, Nancy had learned a quiet little technique in managing Dwight’s mother. If at the dinner-table Mrs. Meadows remarked that dear Nancy had never heard of artichoke scalers before and it seemed so very surprising, Nancy would say serenely that Madge was amused by them, too; they were new in Staunton; and the formidable Mrs. Robert Meadows would blink rapidly and hold her peace.

Nancy shopped indefatigably all day, sometimes accompanied by Mrs. Meadows, sometimes by Madge, sometimes by her own mother; and sometimes she slipped away by herself and wandered through the big, crowded spaces of the furniture stores, pausing to lay an appreciative hand on the satiny surface of a cherrywood table, or to visualize dreamily the room in which she meant to place the table.

It was always fun when Madge went with her. The eager clerk was waved aside and the manager himself came forward to serve Mrs. Spencer Hammond.

“I’m not the customer today, it’s my new sister,” she would say with her friendly smile. “She’s looking for dining room furniture, Mr. Schmidt. Have you something that’s really out of the ordinary?”

She never offered advice or gave an opinion unless Nancy asked her for it; but when she did, she went into the matter thoroughly, giving Nancy such a clear mental picture of the background she was endeavoring to create that the young wife always afterward felt she owed the harmony of her new home to her sister-in-law.

They moved in on a Saturday afternoon, Nancy and Dwight. Theirs was a square Colonial house with a hall running through the middle and a glass door at the back which showed the bare, grassy space Nancy meant to turn into an old-fashioned garden in the spring.

A long living room occupied one entire side. Nancy had put a baby grand piano here, low bookcases, a pair of old fashioned sofas which were the pride of her heart, comfortable chairs and the cherrywood table. There was a wide fireplace in this room and Mrs. Hale had sent back to her girlhood home for the old brass fender, andirons, tongs and Cape Cod lighter which had been in storage for many years. When Mrs. Meadows saw these in place, heard the quiet pride in Mrs. Hale’s voice as she pointed them out, she presented her daughter-in-law with one of her own treasures, a cathedral chair which Bob Meadows had picked up during his travels.

Upstairs there were four sunny bedrooms, two bathrooms and a sleeping porch. Two maids’ rooms occupied the third floor and a barren, unplastered space which was to be turned into a billiard room for Dwight some day.

No bride, Nancy thought happily, ever went to housekeeping with more rare and pretty things. Meadows and Company contributed the graceful little bronzes which stood on teakwood tables on either side of the door; the eggshell china with peacocks trailing their jewelled tails on a creamy surface, no two pieces alike; the chased silver salad bowl

which Nancy kept filled with colorful fruit; a score of lovely odds and ends which gave character to the somewhat austere furnished rooms.

“Are we happy?” Dwight demanded of his wife when they had finished their tour of inspection that first evening. “Nancy darlin’, are—we—happy?” He punctuated his words with kisses: one on her forehead, one on each flushed cheek, a long, heart-shaking one on her lips.

“Dwight, so happy!”

In the days that followed she asked herself if ever a woman had been as happy before. It wasn’t the new house, nor the new dresses hanging on their padded and perfumed hangers in her big closet; it wasn’t the two well-trained maids whom Madge had found for her; it wasn’t her own smart little car, or the delicate laces and linens and the big, ruglike towels in the bathrooms, though these all had a part in framing her happiness. It wasn’t even her new dignity as Mrs. Dwight Meadows, or the joy of being so close to Madge. It was Dwight—Dwight who was the core and center of everything.

She had entered an enchanted garden to which he held the key. The glamour of marriage was personified to her by Dwight. That she was in love with Love, and with Dwight as Love’s prophet rather than Love’s god, she did not dream. The intoxicating masculinity of him thrilled her. He looked like a stern young Crusader when he was asleep, lying straight and still, his lips firmly folded. Sometimes she raised herself on her elbow to study his face, awed that her place should be beside him.

She had really known him but slightly before they were married, for all the time they had spent together. She hadn’t known, for instance, that he was the most gregarious soul alive and insisted on inviting their friends to a housewarming before the stiffness could be washed from their new napkins. She hadn’t known that he invariably paused when one side of his face was shaven, and sang through one verse of a hilarious song. Or that he would rise ceremoniously between the courses at dinner to kiss her, timing it so deftly that he was always back in his seat by the time Helga re-entered the dining room. Or that he turned the radio on when he came into the house at night and kept it going until bedtime, regardless of the program, careful only to see that its volume was reduced to a point where it would not interfere with conversation.

Her days presently settled down to a routine, but such a gay, delightful routine that the enchantment did not lessen.

It began with breakfast with Dwight at half past seven.

“The advertising department works overtime,” he would tell her darkly, digging his spoon into his grapefruit. “It’s all right for the clerks not to show up till nine; it’s all right for the shipping department and the packers to loaf around waiting for the first express; it’s all right for Dad and his secretary to make an official entry any time before noon; but the advertising department has to be on the job fifteen minutes after eight sharp—or so Dad seems to think!”

“The early mail,” she would remind him, dimpling.

“Yep, that early mail looms higher in the Company’s estimation than Mt. Everest.”

“But it’s fun, Dwight? You like the work?”

“Oh, sure I like it! And let me tell you, young woman,” he went on impressively, “business has picked up fifteen percent since I finally convinced Dad and Uncle Joe that it’s advertising that brings in the orders. They’d sort of fallen into the habit of thinking Meadows and Company are the only importers in the Middle West, and we were losing business on account of it. Now—” he pounded his chest impressively—“I’ve changed all that—me, my own little self! That three-letter idea of mine—you know: introductory, follow-up and final clincher—has (the originator of the idea murmured modestly) revolutionized things in certain territories.”

“You’re wonderful, darling,” she assured him proudly.

“I think so,” he would say with assumed shyness, fluttering his eyelids and tilting his head to one side while she laughed joyously.

She always followed him to the front door where he took a long farewell of her. A dispassionate observer might have been pardoned for thinking that Dwight was departing for China, so lingering were their embraces.

Then Nancy went upstairs to put her bedroom in order, shaking her head indulgently over the wet towels with which Dwight strewed the bathroom, picking up his pajamas, holding his housecoat to her face for the thrilling odor of tobacco and heather it gave her, shutting her eyes for a brief moment of realization that she was Mrs. Dwight Langford Meadows.

Sometimes Madge stopped by to pick her up for a morning musicale, or a Girl Guides meeting; or Mrs. Meadows, wearing a complacent air of being nice to her son’s wife, dropped in to sit, without removing her wraps, on the edge of her chair and inquire if everything was going well with “you two youngsters.” Less frequently Nancy’s own mother came, but when she did come, she settled down for a visit of an hour or two.

The afternoons, Nancy discovered somewhat regretfully, were apt to be given up to bridge. Staunton was contract crazy, and if the younger set was not playing for pleasure, it was taking lessons from some society woman who was temporarily low in funds. This woman usually charged exorbitant prices for inferior instruction, but it was the thing to have lessons, and Nancy was enrolled in a class which met twice a week.

The early winter dusk had always fallen by the time she turned her car homeward. Helga would have the low lights on in the living room, she would be going quietly back and forth between kitchen and dining room. There would be a delicious scent of roasting meat, of baking rolls. Nancy would run upstairs for a bit of freshening before Dwight arrived. A mist of perfume from the atomizer, a fluffing of the big powder puff over her face, a running of the comb through her hair, and she was ready to step staidly down the wide shallow stairs just in time to be caught to Dwight’s heart as he entered.

Evenings—well, the evenings, Nancy told herself a little ruefully, were bound to be busy just at first; just while all Dwight’s friends wanted to see the house, or invited the young couple to informal little parties or proposed a picture show with food at the Club to follow.

“We’re almost never at home in the evening,” she told Madge one day. “Either we’re going somewhere, or somebody comes in. This is a terribly social town!” She smiled at

Madge and Madge smiled back. She and Nancy were driving downtown to hear a lecture on Disarmament.

“Dwight loves it?” Madge questioned.

“Oh, yes, Dwight loves it. He’s never so happy as when he has a lot of people around him. He’s so awfully popular, Madge,” she said a little wistfully. “Everybody loves him, everybody wants him to come here, go there. Sometimes I almost feel as though he were married to the town instead of to me.”

“If his popularity is the only fault you have to find with him,” Dwight’s sister said, amused.

“Oh, I know it! And it is his only fault. Dwight is very nearly perfect.”

After six months of married life she could still say the same thing: Dwight had no faults.

This time she and Madge were on their way into the country to hunt up an old florist of whom Nancy had heard. She was making her garden now, leafing through seed catalogues, writing to floral companies about fuchias and single hollyhocks and lemon verbena—all the old-timey things she planned to grow. The night before Dwight had brought her news of an old German who grew such plants for his own enjoyment but who could be induced to part with some of them if the price was high enough.

Nancy wore a gray-blue sports suit with a fox fur slung round her shoulders. Her eyes were alert for careless farmers who turned into the highway without stopping. Her firm little gauntleted hands sent the car along steadily.

“So Dwight’s still a little tin god on wheels?” Madge had asked carelessly when Nancy had come to the end of the tale of her husband’s cleverness and kindness.

Nancy moved her head for a second to send her sister-in-law a reproachful look. “You think I idealize him, Madge! I don’t; I see him just as he is.” And then she laughed, that sudden, sweet laugh which came so seldom but which was so infectious when it did come. “Oh, of course I idealize him, and of course I don’t see him as he is! Even I realize that. The truth of the matter is that he’s just my life, my world. I can’t imagine how I ever lived so long without him. He’s the dearest, the jolliest, the kindest—” she stopped, blinking her eyes betrayingly.

Madge asked a quiet, significant question. “Nancy, do you tell Dwight this?”

There was a little pause before Nancy answered. “No,” she said, very low. “I . . . can’t, Madge. I haven’t words—as he has. You’re the only one—”

And it was true. When Dwight took her in his arms, laid his hard young face against hers, a kind of paralysis seized her, and she was mute. The shadow of her self-controlled childhood lay heavily upon her. It was Dwight who put it all into words.

“Gosh, how I love you, sweetheart! Do you hear my heart pound? Sometimes I’m afraid it’s all too good to be true—you and I in our home, you belonging to me and I to you!”

Occasionally he grew a little restive under her lack of response. “Honey, you make me do all the loving! Loosen up, darling! Put your arms around my neck! Kiss me—



don't just let me kiss you but kiss me! Tell me I mean a little something to you!"

She would flush deeply; swallow; the pupils of her eyes would darken, and Dwight would laugh triumphantly.

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## *Chapter Four*

NANCY'S garden was flourishing, and Sara Curtis developed an unsuspected interest in horticulture. She was forever asking Dwight to take her out to see the new pool, or to show her where Nancy had planted the primroses that came from England, or the tiny arbor with the rustic furniture in it.

If it seemed to Nancy that she was the logical one to exhibit the beauties of her garden, she said nothing. Sara was supposed to be engaged to Lee Chapman. Certainly he trailed about after her, discontentedly making conversation with his hostess while Sara and Dwight were in the garden for fifteen minutes, for half an hour, sometimes for the best part of the evening.

Nancy knew Dwight's exuberant pride in that collection of bravely growing things. She supposed that his enthusiasm made him lose sight of time while he was exhibiting the Shasta daisies, or the new calendulas. She was even a little sorry for the boredom she thought Sara might be enduring until her common sense reminded her that it was always Sara who proposed the withdrawal from the living room to the garden in the back.

Once she spoke very gently to Dwight about it.

"I know the garden is a place of marvels to you and me, honey, but I'm afraid we force it on to our friends a little too much sometimes."

"Meaning?" he asked casually, knotting his tie before the mirror of his chiffonier. The tie was giving him a little trouble and he frowned absently.

"You kept poor Sara out there nearly all evening," she reminded him. "I don't think Mr. Chapman liked it."

"Jealous?" he asked with a grin. "That would be something—to make old Lee jealous!"

She smiled. "No, of course he wasn't jealous, but I suppose he wanted a little of Sara's company himself."

Dwight made an airy gesture. "It was her own idea—going out to see those lotus bulbs we put in the pool."

"I know." Nancy refrained from telling him that Sara had been there that afternoon with Madge and had seen those same bulbs. She resolved that the next time Sara's passion for gardening overcame her courtesy, she would make some excuse to follow with Lee Chapman.

A few days after this Dwight was late for dinner. Nancy had come downstairs, cool and sweet in a new pink gown, to await his coming. He was always home at half past five, and they had half an hour together before it was time for Dwight to run upstairs for a bath and a change into fresh clothes for dinner. Six o'clock had struck from the old English chimes in the hall and Dwight had not come. At a quarter past, Nancy was nervous, by half past she was alarmed. She longed to telephone and ask her father-in-law when Dwight had left the office, but Dwight had a man's impatience with anything that savored of surveillance, even the most loving.

He came dashing in at ten minutes to seven, laughing and apologetic.

"Sara kept me! She was down buying a wedding present for her cousin—you know, the one who lives out in Idaho—and she wanted me to help her pick it out; and then I took her home."

"Where was her own car?" Nancy strove to keep her tone as casual as his.

"Something got the matter with it and she put it into a shop and walked to the store. I offered to take her home, of course. Gosh, I'm hungry! Got something extra good for dinner, darling?"

Nancy made no comment on the incident but she thought of it all evening. The advertising department was on the fourth floor of the Meadows building, entirely removed from the show rooms. Unless Sara had met Dwight accidentally, she must have made a deliberate errand to his office. That was all right, of course; natural for her to want his excellent taste in selecting her gift, though Mr. Meadows did not encourage an impinging of one department upon another. But if they had left at closing time—well, Sara's home was only a fifteen minute drive from the house on Van Tyne Avenue!

Of course, Nancy said to herself reasonably, Sara might have kept him talking, Lee Chapman might have been there, Sara's mother might have detained him—Mrs. Curtis was notoriously fluent of speech. It was nothing. She must not give it another thought. Of course Dwight was as sorry as she that their usual half hour in the garden had had to be foregone.

Ten days later Dwight was late again. In fact, he did not come to dinner at all. He telephoned Nancy at six o'clock from Bentondale.

"Nancy, what d'you think! The darndest thing! This Curtis woman has kidnapped me bodily! Honest to goodness, she has. Here I am miles from home and not even my own car to drive back in."

"Dwight, what do you mean?" Nancy spoke in her calmest voice.

"Just what I say, darling. Sara popped in about five o'clock and asked me if I'd do her a great favor. Of course I said I would, and the gal made me put on my hat and drive away with her in her car. It seems that she and Lee have had a spat, and she didn't want him to find her at home if he came tonight—the long and short of it is, she's abducted your husband, dear child!"

"Would you like me to take my car and drive out? We could have dinner there."

"That will be fine . . . wait a minute!" She could hear a low-toned consultation at the other end of the line. "Sara says—she thinks we'd better have a hurried meal and come

right back to Staunton. She's decided to see Lee after all and have it out with him. These engaged girls—aren't they the limit? We didn't act that foolish, did we, dear?"

"You won't be here for dinner? Oh, Dwight!"

"I'm frightfully sorry, honey, but you see how it is. You just go ahead and eat and be waiting for me in the garden, Maud! I've a date with you in the arbor at eight-thirty sharp!"

It was after nine when he joined her there.

"That was rather an odd thing for Sara to do," she said. "A little inconsiderate, don't you think?"

"Of Lee? Oh, it did him good. He's been too cocky lately, Sara says, and he—"

"Inconsiderate of me, I meant," Nancy said steadily. "I had your favorite dinner, Dwight: smothered chicken with mushrooms, tomato aspic, apricot shortcake—"

"And we had steak—the toughest steak I ever wrestled with," he answered ruefully. "I didn't think about it's being rather hard on you, darling, but I see now that it was. Sara's such a whirlwind sort of person. You find yourself caught up in her plans before you realize it. Forgive me, sweet?"

"Of course!" She drew a long breath of relief. For hours she had been thinking, wondering—and all the time it was just Sara's rudeness, her insolent disregard of the rights of others. Dwight was so good-natured he hadn't understood that she was making use of him.

During July there were no more playful kidnappings, nor was Dwight late for dinner. To be sure, he had to go to Bentondale twice on business for Meadows and Company but that was different.

"Have to see the chap who's starting that new art shop—Parsells is his name."

"But does he do business at dinner time, Dwight?"

"Sure—that's the whole idea. He's too busy all day to talk to me, but if I make a dinner engagement with him he's got to listen, see? We can practically stock his whole shop if we sell him on Meadows."

"Couldn't I go with you, Dwight?" She asked the second time. "I won't interrupt your business talk. I'd just sit there and listen. I love to hear you tell about the things in the store, where you got them, and all. Your eyes always shine so, and you rumple your hair and get excited—"

"Great Scott, do I? Thanks for the tip. Evidently I overdo the enthusiasm. No, darling, I don't think I'd better take you along. I'd be looking at you instead of Parsells, and anyway he's the sort of fellow that's perfectly dumb around women. You have your dinner on the porch—"

"I might go over to Madge's," she said brightening. "She and Spencer are always asking me."

For some reason this did not please him. "I wouldn't, dear! Madge and Spencer have so few meals alone together, and you know how they feel about each other."

“All right, then,” she assented with sweet docility. “I’ll eat here. But you’ll be home early?”

“Early as I can, sweetheart. You might offer up a pious little prayer that Parsells’ heart will be softened and he’ll give me a nice fat order for art goods and rare china!”

But as it happened, Nancy did dine with the Hammonds. Madge stopped in on her way home. Spencer was in the car, Madge having picked him up at his office.

“Here’s that Austin Dobson book you wanted, Nancy: ‘At the Sign of the Lyre.’ You’ll love it. Why, where’s Dwight?”

“With that Parsells man in Bentondale again,” she replied a little ruefully. “I’ll be glad when Dwight has got his order.”

Madge received this explanation without comment. “But you’re not going to eat dinner here alone. Come right along with Spencer and me. Yes, you must, Nancy. I want you!”

It was Spencer who inquired innocently: “Since when has the advertising department gone after sales? I thought your father was awfully strict about that, Nancy—didn’t allow one fellow to interfere with another’s business?”

Madge answered lightly, casually before Nancy could speak.

“Oh, there are always exceptions! Sometimes customers feel they want personal contact with one of the firm. I suppose this Bentondale man is like that and Dwight is the youngest, so he has to go.”

A few days later Nancy’s mother said to her directly and without pretence, that she was troubled.

“Your father says he sees Dwight driving about with Sara Curtis pretty often. I thought she was engaged to Mr. Chapman?”

“They’re having a lovers’ quarrel just now, Dwight says. He’s trying to patch it up.”

“He’d better let them attend to their own affairs,” Dwight’s mother-in-law said roundly. “It doesn’t look well, Nancy—a young married man driving about town with a girl like that.”

Nancy was genuinely amused. “Why, Mother, you don’t think that Dwight—?” she began, then stopped. Her husband needed no defence, she thought proudly. He had been more than usually loving and attentive lately. Just yesterday he had brought her a new bracelet, a band of moonstones with an opal clasp.

“It came in with a lot of stuff from Africa,” he told her eagerly. “And the moment I saw it I said: ‘That’s Nancy’s! That belongs to my girl!’ Put it on, dear. Your arm is whiter than the moonstones, do you see?” And he kissed the arm, and the bare shoulder above it. “I’m the lucky guy!” he declared solemnly.

Nancy could afford to smile at her mother and to dismiss Sara Curtis from her mind. . . . Which made the shock all the greater when she saw Sara in Dwight’s arms less than a week later.

It was the regular weekly dinner at the Country Club. All the Staunton cooks had Thursday night off and the younger set either dined at the Club, which made a specialty of this particular meal, or drove to Northburg or Bentondale, or, less frequently, combined forces in somebody's home and prepared their own dinner.

Tonight Dwight had been oddly insistent on the Club. Nancy pleaded that there was roast chicken and salad and icebox cake; they could eat at home perfectly well. Besides, it was so hot!

But Dwight said he "felt festive."

"I crave a five course dinner, with waiters and music and everything. Put on your blue dress, Nancy, and we'll go out to the Club and join the bunch and maybe dance afterwards."

"It's going to storm, I think," she said, glancing at the glowering sunset. Nevertheless she went obediently upstairs and changed from the simple handkerchief linen she had put on in anticipation of a home evening with Dwight to the blue chiffon he admired.

The big dining room was crowded tonight. Nancy was kept busy waving to fresh arrivals, answering the merry greetings that flew from table to table. Sara was there with Lee Chapman. Apparently their quarrel had reached the point where they were not speaking to each other. Lee ate in a sort of bitter silence but Sara had a good deal to say to the people nearest to her. After the meal everybody went into the ballroom and danced despite the heat. The regular Thursday night orchestra drew popular lugubrious tunes from saxophone and clarinet and violin. Dwight danced twice with Nancy, once with Sara and later disappeared from the floor altogether.

The storm which had threatened at sunset drew closer. There was a moon but its light shone only occasionally through the rapidly gathering clouds. The sultriness increased and dancers began to drift from the ballroom to the wide veranda which ran all around the club house.

Nancy and the unhappy Chapman were among these. Nancy sank into a wicker chair, the man leaned moodily against a pillar. Neither of them spoke but watched a heavy cloud which veiled the moon and cast deep shadows over the stretch of lawn outside.

Suddenly the cloud moved on and the entire grounds were illuminated. Shrubbery which had been vague dark masses in the distance now stood out clearly in the white light. And in what had been a patch of darkness Nancy saw her husband with Sara Curtis in his arms! Her head was thrown back, she was laughing, one bare white arm lay lightly across his shoulder.

The world rocked and reeled for Nancy Meadows. She strove to rise from her chair, to call out a warning, bitter upbraiding, angry reproach to the two who stood, all unconscious that they were in what was a natural spotlight; but her body was numb, she could neither move nor speak.

A strangled sound from Chapman told her that he, too, had seen the tableau. He darted down the wide steps and toward the entwined figures which drew apart instantly at the rustle of his approach.

The music began inside; a Gershwin composition that wailed and moaned with barbaric misery. Nancy knew that never again would she hear that particular tune without a plunge of the heart, a recurrence of the anguish which held her rigid on her chair, her blue dress shimmering in the moonlight, her silver slippers feet crossed decorously in front of her.

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## *Chapter Five*

“**B**UT it didn’t mean a thing, Nancy dear! Honestly!”

She was silent. They were on their way home, Nancy withdrawn and cold in the corner of the seat, Dwight argumentative, apologetic by turns.

Nancy had saved the situation at the Club. Lee Chapman’s dash across the lawn had released her from the trance which held her in the deep wicker chair. She had followed him, not too rapidly, and she had been aided by the clouds which gathered, this time to stay, and shut off that blinding brilliancy of light. Nancy doubted if anyone else had seen that significant tableau by the bushes. It had lasted only a few seconds, though they had seemed to her endless years.

She had joined them before Lee could do more than choke out the first words of his accusations against Sara, against Dwight. She had put a calming hand on his arm, she heard her own voice saying urgently: “It’s all right, Lee. It’s all right!” And then Sara had drawn him away and she and Dwight had found their car and got in in silence and started for home. It was only when they had left the short drive that led to the Club from the highway that he had burst forth with his protests.

“I tell you it was just one of those things, Nancy—I give you my word I don’t know yet how it happened! Sara was blue—she and Lee had been having it up and down all evening—and we were walking and she sort of stumbled—the next thing I knew Lee was down there, threatening to punch my head, threatening to kill himself and Sara—Gosh, it was a mess! I thought for a minute he’d have the whole bunch out there, but you seemed to settle him, I don’t know how.”

Still Nancy was silent. Her mouth was dry, her knees were shaking. She had a consuming desire to reach her bed, to sink down into its supporting softness.

“You know there’s nothing between Sara and me, darling,” Dwight said pleadingly. “You know you’re the only woman in the world for me! You’re my wife, I worship the very ground you walk on!”

When she found her voice at last it was rough and uneven.

“Sara was laughing, Dwight! She wasn’t unhappy about Lee. She had her arm over your shoulder—”

“She laughed because she had so nearly fallen, you know how one does!” There was relief in his voice. Nancy was talking, they were discussing it now instead of his



stumbling along alone with the burden of explanation. “It didn’t mean a thing,” he repeated.

“It meant . . . a good deal to me,” she said sharply. “Dwight, if it had been I? If you had seen me in Lee’s arms—in Bill Hampton’s—”

“I’d have raised the very devil,” he admitted promptly. “Nancy, I see what you mean. I know how you must have felt. You won’t have to complain again. Lee’s given Sara whatfor,” he said with a laugh. “It’ll be many a long day before she dares to speak to me again.”

He let her out in front of the house instead of driving into the garage together as they usually did. He seemed to feel that in the circumstance some formality was indicated. Helga was still up and opened the door to Nancy’s ring.

It was early—it was not yet ten—but Nancy felt she could not get to bed quickly enough. She ached with a physical weariness. Her very bones felt sore. She had a vague realization that she had passed through some crisis. She was alive, not seriously hurt, but she needed time and rest—oh, a long rest!—before she could review the calamity.

The feeling persisted the next day and she was astonished to find that already the incident was relegated to the past in Dwight’s mind. He whistled as he took his bath, paused with one side of his face shaven and sang his absurd verse entirely as usual. He commented with surprise upon her pallor, her silence.

“What the heck, Nancy! You’re not worrying yourself about that affair last night, are you? Forget it! It didn’t mean any more than—any more than—” his roving glance sought an object for comparison—“than those nasturtiums do! What d’you think of that now?” he asked her proudly. “This time last year I didn’t know a nasturtium from a jimson weed, and now I can rattle ’em all off: cornflowers, mignonette, spice pinks—the whole bloomin’ garden!” He came to put his arms around her where she stood, laid his freshly shaven cheek against hers. He smelled of cigarettes and shaving soap and talcum powder. The composite odor was associated with all the thrill and glamour Nancy had ever known. She rested her head wearily against him.

“Don’t—ever do a thing like that to me again, Dwight,” she whispered. “I can’t stand it.”

“I won’t,” he promised eagerly. “My darling, of course I won’t. I wouldn’t hurt you for the world.” And then after a long silence: “If you’d show that you love me a little more, Nancy? A fellow likes to hear his wife say it—”

“Oh, Dwight!” The cheek against his shoulder crimsoned. “I—I suppose I do seem cold—inarticulate—to you. It’s not because I don’t love you, dear. It’s just because I—don’t know how to—say it—”

“Then I’ll have to say it for both of us.” He gave a startled glance at the clock. “By golly, will you look how late it is! How about coming down to lunch with me today, Nancy? Will you?”

“I’d love it,” she assented.

So that brief cloud upon her happiness passed though it left her very thoughtful. She made shy little efforts to be more demonstrative with Dwight. He grinned at her tenderly

on these occasions, told her she was a cold little thing but he loved her anyway; he liked a woman who made a man do the wooing.

By the time the first anniversary of their marriage arrived Nancy was busy with ribbon-bound blankets and hand-embroidered little slips and tiny woolen shirts and stockings.

“Are you glad about the baby?” Madge asked, and was startled by the fervor of Nancy’s reply.

“Glad! I’m so happy I’m afraid I’ll die before I can hold it in my arms—my very own baby! Oh, Madge, if I shouldn’t live! If I’d have to go and leave it for some other woman to care for! It does happen, you know. Women do die in childbirth. It’s in the prayerbook, you know. Madge, Madge, if I should die!”

“Why, Nancy! It isn’t like you to be afraid!”

“I’m not afraid—for myself. I’m only afraid that I might not live to take care of my baby. I’ve always loved babies so, Madge, and I’ve never had a chance to hold them—care for them—” Her eyes were shining, a lovely rose glowed in her face.

“And is Dwight glad, too?”

“Terribly glad,” she said proudly. “He’s too absurd! He keeps bringing things home—a scooter, if you’ll believe me, Madge! and balls, and last night it was a jumping jack. He played with it for ten minutes and broke it. He’s nothing but a child himself in some ways.”

Madge asked a careful question. “Have you been down to the store lately? I thought there might be some things you would like to see—I remember a carved crib—” She listened a little worriedly for Nancy’s answer.

“I stopped in for a few minutes the other day but I didn’t go upstairs. They telephoned and Dwight came down. But I’m not going to buy a crib,” she went on happily. “I’m going to use my own. It was my mother’s and my grandmother’s before me. It’s been up in the attic all this time and Mother had it brought down the other day and polished—”

“She doesn’t know,” Madge told herself. “She hasn’t heard a thing about that new stenographer. Oh, buddy, buddy! How can you!”

For Staunton was justified in its prophecies. Married only a year, Dwight Meadows was carrying on an open flirtation with his pretty secretary. They lunched together several times a week at the Wellington. Dwight drove her home every evening, leaving his office half an hour early so that he could reach home at the usual time. Once Nancy caught sight of him in his car, a girl on the seat beside him.

“Is Sara still in town?” she asked that night in a troubled tone. “I thought she had gone to California.”

“Oh, she has,” was the answer, spoken in Dwight’s most casual tone. “She and Lee split up finally and she rushed off to San Diego. Some one said she married a wealthy man, old enough to be her father, out there.”

Nancy nodded contentedly. At any other time she might have noticed discrepancies in Dwight's accounts of his movements, might even have heard the rumors which were flying about town; but now she was too absorbed, too brimming with happiness, too busy with delightful plans for the spring, to catch the significance of phrases dropped inadvertently by Dwight's friends, to see the new sternness in her mother's face when Dwight's name was mentioned.

"Behold the tired business man!" Grant Atkinson might say. "Give you all three guesses what makes him tired. Too much dictating, that's what it is! They say Dwight doesn't take time to read his mail, he's so busy writing the answers."

Dwight would throw his wife an uneasy glance, Grant a warning one, but the chaffing went on.

"You ought to deduct taxi fare, old man, really you ought! If all the gallons and gallons of gasoline used to take stenographers home were placed end to end—" And then he would come to an abrupt stop as Nancy joined them. Neither man need have worried. Her charmed ears were dulled to such allusions, her starry eyes saw far beyond them.

On Christmas Eve Dwight brought home a pair of tiny pink silk socks. He hung them on the mantelpiece and he and Nancy filled them: a wee, soft hairbrush, a rattle, an eiderdown puff, a celluloid duck, went into them.

"Got 'em in a baby shop," he explained to the laughing Nancy. "I was rushing along in a hurry when I saw it. Must have passed it thousands of times before but never noticed it. It has baby things in the windows—bassinets and blankets and a lot of these socks hanging up—pink and blue and white. They looked so darned little!" He spread the mesh over two of his fingers. "Golly!" he said thoughtfully. "In a few months we'll have a kid that'll be wearing this. Does it seem real to you? I get to thinking sometimes—wondering if it's us that this is happening to."

"Dwight, so do I!"

"I've heard other fellows say they were expecting a baby at their house," he went on meditatively. "And I've—if you'll believe me, I've felt kind of sorry for them! The responsibility and the inconvenience and all. Now it simply seems to me the greatest thing that can happen to anybody." He caught his wife in his arms. "You're all right, sweetheart? Dr. Harding is satisfied with you? You rest every afternoon and take your walk, as he told you? Nancy darling, if anything should happen to you—!"

He was quite sincere in all this. He was happy over the baby's coming, he loved Nancy more dearly than he had ever done. The pretty stenographer was merely an incident in his life; a pleasurable incident, one that enlivened some dull days at the office, but still an incident. He was genuinely surprised when Madge spoke to him about it—gravely.

"Why, say, sis! How do you get that way? There's nothing between May Hegestrom and me. I take her home at night—the poor girl's tired and it's only a few blocks out of my way. Is there anything so terrible in that?"

"You lunch with her, Dwight—at the Wellington. I saw you myself yesterday. She was leaning across the table and you were smiling at her. Everybody in the room noticed it, Dwight!"

“Yesterday? Let me see!” He drew his brows together thoughtfully. “We were talking about the Dawson account. Dad’s been raising the dickens because it got away from us, and Miss Hegestrom and I were cooking up a scheme. . . . It was purely business, Madge!”

“Nobody who saw you would believe that,” she assured him. “People are talking, Dwight. It would hurt Nancy terribly if she heard it.”

He began to pace the room excitedly, an old trick of his when he was bothered.

“What had I better do?” he demanded. “Shall I let May go? It’ll be kind of hard on her, poor girl, but of course I can’t have Nancy disturbed. Yes, I’ll fire May tomorrow! Or, no—I could put her in one of the offices downstairs and take Miss Gray with me. Nobody could cook up any scandal about that old vinegar face!”

He was so penitent, so solicitous about his wife that Madge thought with relief she had misjudged him. The luncheon parties at the Wellington came to an end. Miss Hegestrom went home on the bus, or walked; it no longer concerned Dwight how she got there. He took Miss Gray into his office and the tea table gossips wondered if Mrs. Meadows had found out about pretty May Hegestrom and put her foot down.

But Nancy was wrapped in that mysterious abstraction which so often precedes maternity. She sat for long hours in her big chair by the window, looking out at the slowly waking garden; not thinking, not feeling, simply being; letting the ecstasy of her hopes possess her.

She was glad when Dwight returned at night, devotedly concerned about her day. She answered his eager questions carefully but, as he sometimes complained, almost as though she were talking in her sleep.

“I’m beginning to be a bit jealous of that son of mine,” he confessed one evening. “You think more of him already than you do of me!”

“Maybe it’ll be a girl,” she answered dreamily. “If it is, I’d like to name her for Madge. We’d call her Margaret—”

“Or Maggie!”

She paid no heed. “Margaret’s a beautiful name.” She drew out the syllables lovingly. “I hate to hear it clipped off to Margret. I’d like my daughter to have Madge’s name.”

“Your daughter? My son, you mean. All right, go ahead and name her for Madge,” he conceded. “But if it’s a boy—”

“For you,” she said with decision.

He tried to conceal his pleasure. “Or for Dad. Then there wouldn’t be any mixup over names. I won’t have a child of mine labeled ‘junior.’”

“No, not Robert. Let’s not name him Robert.”

“Why not?” he asked, puzzled.

She made no answer in words; merely pulled his cheek down to hers. She could not tell him that his father’s name stood to her for that vague danger which sometimes menaced her happy thoughts.

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## Chapter Six

WHEN his son announced his impending arrival, Dwight Meadows was distraught.

“If we could persuade Mr. Meadows to leave the hospital for a while,” the nurse said worriedly. She had been to Nancy’s door for the fifth time in twenty minutes. “He’s supposed to stay downstairs in the waiting room, but he tramps up and down the corridor and nobody can do anything with him.”

Nancy smiled wanly from the chair into which she had dropped after the last paroxysm of pain. Dwight meant little to her at this minute. If she thought of him at all it was with a faint impatience at his presence. The only person on earth who interested her now was Dr. Harding, and he had driven across the town to see another patient. She thought it inhuman, almost criminal for him to desert her at this time.

It seemed to her that she had already spent days instead of hours in this horrible room where the floor smelled faintly of disinfectant and her brushes looked frivolous and out of place on top of the austere bureau. Her nightgown was draped over the foot of the bed and the covers were folded back in a sort of sinister readiness. There seemed to her something abnormal, almost indecent about these preparations when the spring sun still shone outside and people walked briskly along the sidewalk beneath her window.

Her mother had come, but Dr. Harding banished her coolly.

“No one but the nurse till I get back,” he ordered.

It did not matter. This was a battle in which no one could help her but the doctor, and he had gone away and left her. Nancy thought resentfully that they had all been mistaken in Dr. Harding. He had always seemed kind, considerate. And now he had turned her over to this hard-faced nurse who watched her with cold calculation, and timed the spaces between the paroxysms calmly; who said “I wouldn’t, Mrs. Meadows,” and came and took her hands when she beat them on the iron railing of the bed as the pain grew intolerable.

Suddenly Nancy wanted Madge.

“Call Mrs. Hammond—Mrs. Spencer Hammond,” she commanded. “Tell her I want her to come at once! Never mind what Dr. Harding said, I have to see her!”

“Mrs. Hammond is downstairs with Mrs. Hale,” said the nurse. “But I must telephone the doctor and get his permission first.”

Presently the door opened and Madge came in.

“Nancy dear!”

“Oh, Madge, Madge!” The tears were pouring down her cheeks, the hands Madge took in her own were shaking.

“If you cry, dearest, I won’t be allowed to stay.”

“I just want to tell you, Madge . . . if anything happens to me, you’ll take my baby?”

“Of course.” She spoke sensibly, calmly. “But nothing’s going to happen to you, honey, except that pretty soon you’ll be going up to the delivery room and then before you know it you’ll be back with my namesake, and I’ll be imploring Miss Eberhart to let me hold her—” She broke off as a fresh onslaught of pain made Nancy writhe and moan. “Shall I go, dear?”

Nancy caught at her with wet hands. “No, no! It helps me—just having you here.”

So Madge stayed until Dr. Harding returned. After watching the tortured Nancy for a few minutes, he nodded significantly to the nurse. A wheeled bed was brought in, Nancy was lifted on it. She had a brief glimpse of Dwight as she was borne down the long corridor to the elevator. She thought dimly that he looked as though he were going to faint but it didn’t seem to her at all important. The important thing was to keep from disgracing herself by screaming on her way upstairs. And then it was all confusion, anguish, finally merciful oblivion.

She came out of the ether to hear voices far away.

“All right now, doctor!”

“Turn off that light. We don’t need it now.”

“Her eyelids are fluttering.”

Away off in the distance a little dog was howling; a very little dog that had a sharp, angry voice.

“I didn’t know they let dogs come in here,” she murmured.

“What is it? What did you say, Mrs. Meadows?”

“The little dog,” she answered wearily. “It’s howling.”

Some one laughed cheerfully. It seemed a cruel thing to laugh like that when she had to begin suffering again.

“Did you hear that, Dr. Harding? She says it’s a dog howling!”

“Well, Nancy Meadows!” It was Dr. Harding’s voice now, warm and reassuring. “Nice way for a young mother to start out—calling her baby a little dog!”

She didn’t believe him, of course. Not even when she was back in her room, her head on the one flat pillow they allowed her, with Dwight in the chair beside the bed, smiling at her with his eyes reddened, could she believe she had a son.

“How do you feel, sweetheart?” he asked huskily. “Fine, eh?”

“How can I be feeling fine?” she said in a weak, querulous whisper. “I’ve got to bear all that pain again!”

“No, darling. It’s all over. The baby’s here—a strapping young fellow that looks like me already.”

“I wouldn’t talk,” said Miss Eberhart. “She’s not entirely out from the ether yet.”

Dwight sent her a resentful glance and Nancy felt a throb of passionate gratitude to him because of it. They were all in league with her, Dr. Harding and Miss Eberhart and the nurses upstairs; but Dwight would take her part. He would tell her the truth.

“It isn’t going to hurt her to realize her baby’s here,” he said coolly. “It’s worrying her—don’t you see? Darling, it’s Dwight. You’ll believe Dwight, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I’ll believe you,” she said drowsily.

“Then listen, sweet! Our son is yelling his head off in the nursery at this minute. I’ve seen him.” He bent down and kissed the white, worn little face. “You’ll go to sleep now, Nancy?”

She nodded, already half drowned in the tide of sleep that swept over her. She drifted off to some quiet place which was not entire unconsciousness but yet had no reality. When she awoke it was long past sunset. There was a shaded light in the room, Miss Eberhart was moving quietly about.

She came home two weeks later in triumphant procession. First was Miss Eberhart, bearing the precious blue bundle that was the baby: Bunny, the nurses called him in spite of Dwight’s protests. Next came Mrs. Hale, her arms laden with an extra blanket, the light wrap Nancy hadn’t needed. Last of all was Nancy herself, Dwight’s arm around her to steady her on the short walk from the car to the front door.

“Right upstairs,” commanded Miss Eberhart. “I want her to settle down on a couch for the next hour.”

Everybody made a great fuss about the first Meadows grandchild. Nancy’s room was filled with flowers, she had more callers than Miss Eberhart allowed her to see. Bob Meadows came, sheepishly proud of the baby, sheepishly conscious of being a grandfather. Mrs. Meadows came and tried to tell the nurse how she had taken care of her babies, and was listened to in polite silence and disregarded.

“I’d let Miss Eberhart go at once, Nancy,” she said darkly. “Do you know that she is stripping that baby to the skin—literally to the very skin!—every day of his life and putting him on the sleeping porch where the sun strikes right on his tender little skin? He’ll be blistered, to say nothing of catching his death of cold!”

Nancy’s mother also disapproved of Miss Eberhart. For once the two mothers were in thorough accord.

“I know they don’t wrap babies up the way they used to,” she said. “I’m glad the long skirts are gone. You remember my christening dress, Nancy? It swept the floor when my father carried me up the aisle and it’s hand-tucked from yoke to hem. That was extreme, of course, but I do think a baby as young as Bunny ought to wear stockings and a flannel band. It makes me shiver to see his little bare legs under his slip.”

But Bunny thrived under Miss Eberhart’s care. His crimson faded to saffron and that to a rosy pink. The tiny flatirons of his feet no longer looked out of proportion to his thin

legs. He achieved little creases at his wrists and in his fat neck. He cooed and waved his fists in the air and dropped to sleep with the suddenness of a weary kitten.

Soon Miss Eberhart left and Wilma came. Wilma was a buxom, sandy-haired young woman who had an enormous capacity for keeping her mouth shut, as Dwight described her. She had been with the Meadows for two months before they learned that she had had a baby of her own.

“You lost him?” Nancy asked pityingly.

“No, he ain’t lost. He’s with my mother in the country,” Wilma said placidly.

“How you must miss him!”

“Sure I miss him. But it’s better for him out there. I got to work. I couldn’t take care of him.”

“His father is dead?”

“In jail,” Wilma corrected calmly. “And a good job, too.”

“Do you think we ought to keep a nurse whose husband is in jail?” Dwight asked worriedly when Nancy told him this.

“She hasn’t done anything! And she’s a good nurse. I think Bunny knows her already. She came to us with good references, you know.”

“All right. But if the boy turns out to be a forger or a holdup man—”

“Silly!” She came to sit on the arm of his chair, to slip her hand in his. “Isn’t it wonderful, Dwight, that it’s all over? I’ve been to the hospital and the baby’s come and is in my old crib upstairs, and you and I are back here in the living room just as we were before.”

“Just as we were before,” he said contentedly. “What is it, darling? What made you start like that?”

“Nothing,” she answered with her old inarticulateness. But she had had a lightning recognition that they could never again be as they had been before; that parenthood had changed them, that a gravity had crept into their joyous love, that they were responsible for the physical and mental and spiritual well being of the tiny human scrap upstairs.

Nancy felt awed at the realization. She sat quietly for a long time, her young face against her husband’s, her gray eyes dark with wonder over the great thing that had come to them.



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## Chapter Seven

WHEN the baby was four months old Nancy's new happiness was swept away in one devastating moment.

She had been going through her desk, a task she had neglected ever since Bunny's birth. There had been so many things to do, so many people to see! But now she really must pick up dropped stitches, she reminded herself, and had begun with the disordered desk, laying the monthly bills in a little pile, setting aside unanswered letters, putting Dwight's papers by themselves. Dwight had a fashion of using her possessions as his own. His brushes were more often on her dressing table than on his own chiffonier. His coats had a way of appearing on the rod in her closet. She had scolded him more than once for sitting down to her desk to make out a check and leaving the cap off her fountain pen.

So she came upon the single heavy sheet of cream-colored note paper, the letter that commenced: "Dwight, my dearest!"

It had been a little after three when she sat down to her task. The big clock downstairs chimed four and she was still in her chair, still holding the sheet of paper stiffly in front of her.

"Patty."

Who was Patty? Of course—Patience Atkinson, Grant's young wife. Nancy remembered now. Everybody called her Patty.

And Patty, it was clear from the note, had been seeing Dwight for weeks, picking him up a few blocks away from the office, going for long drives in the country, returning to drop him at the Meadows building at closing time so that he could come home in his own car. Patty was on such terms with Dwight that she could call him her dearest, and sign herself: "Forever and ever yours!"

Sitting rigidly in her chair while Bunny slept upstairs and Wilma sewed placidly in the nursery, Nancy sent her mind back over the last few months. She had been preoccupied with herself, with the baby, but surely there had been no perceptible change in Dwight. True, he had had to go out more and more frequently in the evening (Nancy remembered with a stab of pain that Grant Atkinson's business took him East for weeks at a time!). True, he had been a little absent-minded now and then; but that she had put down to the increasing work his father was putting on him in the advertising department.

That much was true, at any rate. Bob Meadows had said in Nancy's presence that he was stacking the work up pretty high on Dwight these days.

But it was Bob Meadows who said it. There had been a twinkle in his eye, she recalled. She knew now what that twinkle meant. He was protecting his son; making excuses for the longer hours at the office, the evenings he had left her alone with the servants and Bunny. He would think it a joke, this betrayal of Dwight's marriage vows. He was unfaithful to his own wife, he condoned his son's infidelity. All the old distrust of him that had lurked beneath the surface of her thoughts seized and held her now. Bob Meadows was Bob Meadows. He would go to his grave with the tarnish of unfaithfulness on his soul.

But Dwight was . . . her husband! Something cried out in protest against linking him with his father. The gay, garrulous man who rushed home to her each evening, turned on the radio, pitched his hat in the direction of the hall table, took her in his arms and kissed her, demanded to know how she and the baby had been all day!

She caught her lip under her teeth, bit it fiercely. The treachery of it! The deceit, the falsehoods, the planning; planning to go to Patty even while he laughed at her across the dinner table, praised the meal, her gown, told her some bit of news of the office!

It was that aspect of the situation that concerned her now. It was dreadful, of course, that Dwight was in love with another woman. That would have to be taken into account presently, that would have to be dealt with; but just now it was overshadowed by her realization of the deceit he had practised while she trusted him.

While she had been busy and happy all day with her baby, with her shopping, with her friends and the garden, with Madge; while she had picked up his ties, and straightened his chiffonier drawers and ordered what he liked best for dinner, and stopped for a little tender thought of him now and then, he—he had been saying to himself: "Now what shall I tell her tonight? How much will she believe? Shall I say I have to go back to the office, or shall I tell her there's a meeting of the directors—what scheme shall I make use of to get away so that I can go and see this other woman—another man's wife?"

Probably he didn't put it into words like that. Dwight wouldn't; it was too crude. He'd think instead: "I don't want to hurt Nancy. No use telling her where I'm going. She wouldn't understand. Just better say I'm going to the office"; or the directors' meeting; whatever he had decided upon. He would be planning to deceive her, to lie to her . . . her Dwight!

Her Dwight? Patty's Dwight, Sara's Dwight, God knew how many other women's Dwight!

It was true then that all the Meadows men were alike; that the man she had married was no different from his father or his uncle or even the old grandfather about whom such scandalous tales were told.

No harm in the Meadows men, though!

How many, many times she had heard that said of them! Harm—what was harm? Wasn't deceit, harm? and devoting one's self to another woman, harm? What did they mean when they said there was no harm in the Meadows men? That physically they were

faithful to their wives? She told herself scornfully that physical fidelity meant little if it was founded on spiritual treachery and deceit.

Somewhere outside a dog was barking. She became conscious that he had been barking for a long time. Woof, woof, woof! The sound nagged at her, frayed her nerves. The poor creature must be tied up, she thought, and forgot him as another wave of sick pain engulfed her. Dwight was unfaithful to her! Her husband was deceiving her, slipping away from the office in the afternoon to see Patty Atkinson, leaving his home to see her in the evenings.

Patty was—yes, Patty was pretty. Pretty Patty—it sounded foolish, like talking to a parrot. Pretty Polly! If only that dog would stop barking! Woof, woof, woof! It was making her head ache, and she must have it clear just now to think.

Patty had big baby blue eyes and lovely yellow hair. She wore daring clothes and had a way of putting her hand on a man's arm when she talked to him. Nancy could see that hand now—white, plump, with marvelously manicured fingers—lying on Dwight's coat sleeve. Then another picture blotted out the first: Sara Curtis' arm thrown over Dwight's shoulder.

And he came home from them—Sara, Patty, “the woman of the moment”—to her, his wife! Rage shook her, her eyes grew black with anger.

Bunny awoke and Wilma came down to tell her it was time for his five o'clock nursing. But ought she to nurse her baby when she was upset like this? Upset! What a word for the stormy fires within her, the pain that was like a tiger's claws at her heart!

“I don't feel well, Wilma. Do you think you could fix him a bottle—just for this once?”

“Sure,” said Wilma stolidly; that would be all right; she would fix the baby a bottle: the one they used to give him his water—She went toward the kitchen and presently Helga came in to ask if she would like a cup of tea or some aspirin. Nancy tried to arouse herself. Evidently the servants saw that she was distressed . . . she lost herself again, wondering how much they knew, how much the town knew; came back to the present with a start, refused the tea, accepted the aspirin. Perhaps it would make her head stop aching. It was that dog. Woof, woof, woof! The melancholy sound echoed in her heart, emphasized its loneliness.

And then Dwight came gaily in, called her name. He was alarmed because she was not at the front door to meet him. Her lip curled. Silly fool that she had been, running down in bridal haste to be the first to greet him while he—

She raised tortured eyes to his as he entered the room. His glance went quickly from her white face to the note in her hand. His instant change of expression told her he understood.

“Nancy—”

“Is there anything to be said, Dwight?”

He closed the door behind him, swallowed, came a step closer. “Only that—it's all over now! I haven't seen Patty for—oh, it must be more than a week, Nancy. You've got to believe me!”

She laughed out loud at that and the sound of her mirth was not pretty.

“Does it make any difference whether I do or not?” she asked with scorn. “Does it matter that this special affair is over?” She rose and stood clinging to the back of her tall chair. “What matters is that you’ve deceived me. You’ve been unfaithful to me—”

“Nancy, I haven’t!” He had the eager air of a schoolboy accused unjustly. “I swear to you I haven’t, dear! It’s only that I—well, doggone it, Patty was lonely, poor kid. Grant is gone so much. Was there any harm in my running over for a couple of hours in the evening, taking her for a drive now and then?”

She dropped her eyes to the note, read in a level voice: “Dwight, my dearest! Forever and ever yours!”

“That was—well, that was just Patty’s way,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “She’s a foolish little piece—an affectionate little soul—but there isn’t a bit of harm in her.”

No harm in the Meadows men. No harm in Patty Atkinson. Woof, woof, woof! Nancy put her hands to her throbbing head.

Dwight took a step nearer. His dark cheeks were flushed, his eyes apprehensive.

“I’m sorry, Nancy. I drifted into this thing before I realized it. I—you were busy with the baby—Patty was lonely—”

“You said that before,” she reminded him in a tone of ice.

“Well, that’s the way it is. I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Silence fell between them. The dog had stopped. That was a relief, she thought drearly.

“This can’t go on, Dwight. I’ll take Bunny and go home—”

“You’ll—good God!” He was so genuinely astounded, so horrified, that she could almost have smiled if she had not been so broken with pain, so consumed with anger. “Nancy, what do you mean?” He came to her, caught her shoulders in his hands. She shrank from his touch but he kept a firm hold on those slender arms. “Leave me? Take the baby and leave me? Just because I kissed Patty Atkinson a couple of times, took her driving—”

“No. Because you deceived me, lied to me!” She freed herself with a jerk; words came to her at last, cutting words that slashed through his defences as though they were made of paper. “You talk as if making love to another man’s wife was a trifle! You talk as though I was unreasonable to blame you for a trivial thing like that. You talk as though sneaking out of the house at night—”

“I never sneaked!” he said hotly.

“It amounted to that. You talk as though those were little offences for which you could apologize carelessly, for which I must of course forgive you. When it was Sara Curtis you told me—”

“Sara Curtis!” Again his surprise was genuine. “Great Scott, Nancy! Do we have to rake up old bones like that? I haven’t heard or thought of Sara since she left here. Do be

reasonable, darling. You mustn't get yourself all worked up like this." He was a little amused. "I never saw you angry before. You look darned pretty, did you know that?"

It was no use; she could not make him understand the heinousness of his offence. He considered she was making a mountain out of a molehill. He seemed to think that because he and Patty had quarreled and their relationship was at an end that no further blame attached to him; that Nancy should regard the incident as closed.

Finally when Nancy remained icy, remote, he grew angry himself, flung out one reproachful sentence.

"A man's got to have love, and if he doesn't find it at home—"

That cut her to the quick. She put her hands to her heart; the tears poured down her cheeks. Instantly he crossed the narrow space that lay between them and took her into his arms.

"Nancy, I didn't mean that! I was a brute to say it. I know you do love me even if you are a little cold—"

"Dwight, I'm not cold," she sobbed. "Not inside anyway. It's just that I've never learned how to show you what I feel—"

"Never mind, dear," he comforted her. "We'll forgive each other—shall we? And start over."

Everything was all topsy-turvy now between them. She was the offender, it was Dwight who was pardoning her, comforting her. In the end he put her into a big chair, brought a big, soft washcloth and bathed her hot face, murmured little endearing names, bent his head to kiss her listless hands.

Later she went to the head of the stairs to tell Helga that dinner would have to be put back fifteen minutes while Mr. Meadows had a shower.

Dwight went soberly into his bathroom. Presently she heard him singing; that meant he had finished shaving one side of his face. The singing was automatic, subdued; but still Dwight sang.

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## *Chapter Eight*

TWO weeks later he came home jubilant with news. It was necessary for him to go to England to consult with British advertisers over a proposed international campaign.

“We sail the sixteenth,” he told his wife joyously. “Won’t it be grand, Nancy?”

“We?”

“You and I, of course, darling! It’ll be another honeymoon trip.”

“But, Dwight—but, Dwight—” she was stammering in her consternation. “I can’t possibly go! Have you forgotten the baby?”

“Oh, we’ll take Bunny along,” he answered carelessly. “I’m not going without my wife, you can bet on that!”

But in the end he did go without her. Dr. Harding advised emphatically against a November crossing for Bunny; and Bunny had not yet been weaned.

“Which settles that,” Nancy said gallantly. She was bitterly disappointed. It would have been so much fun, going off like that with Dwight. It would have gone far to erase those memories which still caused her pain when she thought of them. And try as she would, she could not rid herself of apprehension about a Dwight alone in London. Never again could she rely implicitly upon his promises. She was fully aware now of the kind of man she had married. Suspicion could never again be lulled entirely to sleep.

“But the baby comes first, of course!”

Dwight didn’t think so. He said it was time Bunny was put on a bottle, that Wilma was perfectly competent to look after him for the month or six weeks they would be gone. And then when Nancy continued to shake her head, he said he wouldn’t go either; Dad could find some one to take his place.

She almost hoped it would be arranged like that. But she reproached herself for selfishness and lack of trust and when at last Dwight reluctantly agreed with his father that he must go, she tried to be glad.

No sooner was this question settled than Dwight raised another. Nancy must not stay in the house alone with the servants. It would be too abominably lonely for her, eating her meals by herself in that big dining room (“I could have them in the kitchen with Helga and Clara,” she said frivolously). Either she must have some one to stay with her in his absence, or she must go to the elder Meadows. He did not mention her own parents

and she understood why. Ever since she had made that threat of leaving him and going home, the Hales had loomed in his mind as a potential menace.

For her own part, she refused quite definitely to go to his father's. Nancy had thought a good deal about Bob Meadows since the Patty Atkinson affair. She remembered stories she had heard before she met Dwight. Phil Sampson had applied to his company for a transfer to another town because of Meadows' attentions to his wife. "Jeanette Haskin?" Nancy had heard one matron say lightly to another. "Oh, she's playing around with Bob Meadows now!"

Dwight's mother seemed to accept these gay detours from the path of matrimonial fidelity philosophically enough. Staunton society seemed to accept them in the same spirit. It was conceded that Bob Meadows was susceptible, that a pretty face wrought temporary havoc with him.

Nancy, however, viewed the matter in another light. She had not attained, had no wish to attain, the complaisant attitude of her mother-in-law. She resented Bob Meadows as the primary cause and contemporary tolerance of Dwight's own conduct. Nancy sat in stern judgment on them both. Her love for Dwight made her helpless to defend herself against this fault, but at least she would not condone it in her heart. She would never, she knew, regain the first nobility and beauty of her love for her husband, but she need not further cheapen it by watching in Dwight's father the trait she so condemned in Dwight.

Madge came to her rescue while the discussion of Nancy's plans was going on.

"You'll stay with me," she declared. "You and the baby and Wilma! Oh, Nancy, what fun! I've always wanted to have you to myself for a while. There's the west wing—Bunny can get in his fifteen minutes' crying every day without disturbing a soul. Do say you'll come, dear!"

Nancy's pleasure in this arrangement almost compensated her for the loss of the trip to England. She loved Dwight's sister with a depth and sincerity she could not explain even to herself. Sometimes she thought she was loving in Madge the qualities with which she had endowed her husband in the first days of her marriage.

Dwight revealed a new and charming side of himself in his letters to Nancy. He sent her remarkable bits of description, interesting incident, succinct historical reference; and running through it all like a bright ribbon was his thought of her. He had gone to hear Big Ben at midnight because he had heard her say she longed to. He had braved the shops of Hanover Square to buy her a frock. The wife of Sir Edgar Hamlin reminded him of Nancy, only she was not half so lovely.

Nancy began to wonder if this separation was not a wise thing for them both. Apparently his love for her was sharpened by absence, and she . . .

Living with Madge helped her to a new understanding of Dwight. Through the older woman's humorous, tolerant eyes Nancy glimpsed her own somewhat circumscribed viewpoint. "Relax, Nancy, relax!" Madge would cry to her gaily. "Things are not nearly so important as you think they are. Human beings are all imperfect just because they are human. That's what makes them so interesting, so lovable!"

"But cruelty isn't lovable, Madge, or deceit, or dishonesty!" Nancy was careful to make her summary general. She had never spoken to Madge of Dwight's dalliance with

Patty Atkinson.

“No, darling; but the cruel person probably thinks he’s only just, and the deceitful one is trying to spare somebody’s feelings, and the dishonest chap may be stealing bread for his hungry children,” Madge told her. “I don’t believe that people are ever wantonly and deliberately bad. I think they get started on the wrong track and it leads them into strange places. Besides—we all react upon one another so! The cruel person may think he’s punishing the dishonest one, and the deceitful one is made deceitful through the hardness and intolerance of some one else—”

Nancy winced at that. Dwight’s barb about her unresponsiveness had left a wound that would not heal. She had offered timid, rather touching little demonstrations of affection to him after that. She was painfully conscious that they were either lost in the lavishness of his own expression or at best provoked a sort of tender amusement in him. She writhed in a hopeless effort to break her emotional bonds. It was of no use. The more deeply she felt, the more silent she grew. If Dwight had come by his own lax standards both by environment and heredity, so had she received her curse of inhibition.

After a talk with Madge, Nancy was apt to lie awake for long hours, questioning herself with clear-cut honesty. Did her attitude react on Dwight, turning his easy geniality into temporary devotion in other quarters? If so, why had she attracted him in the beginning? Was it mere curiosity about a nature which hid itself from him? Had he tired at last of trying to probe a heart which apparently was closed to him?

It was not closed to him, that Nancy knew. The intimacy of marriage, the awe of motherhood had turned her first thrilled affection for her husband into deep love. But she was helpless to convey that to him. She was like a mute guardian of a treasure, endeavoring by signs to attract attention to riches unknown to their lawful owner.

The days of her visit went by all too swiftly. Madge had so many friends, so many interests, her life was so full! At the market in the morning her car had hardly stopped before the Italian fruit-dealers surrounded her. The women poured forth the family news: Concetta was going to marry Tony Cianciolo; there was going to be a new baby at the Simineos; Pusateri had a good job offered him in Kansas City. Cheap photographs came from pockets in voluminous skirts to be shown to her. Letters were thrust into her hand. Madge made her way slowly among them, nodding, smiling, advising, rejoicing, scolding.

“I don’t see how you keep them all straight,” Nancy said, puzzled. “That fat woman—what’s her name? Maria Something-or-other—she asked you if twelve dollars was enough and you said it was without a word about what it referred to. And the man with the scar on his neck—how did you know his little boy is sick? And the other man with the earrings—you asked after his wife in the hospital—”

“They tell me things,” Madge replied simply. “They know I’m interested. The twelve dollars a week is what Maria’s prospective son-in-law earns. I begged her, you see, not to let her daughter marry until the man could support her. Maria has a son and three grandchildren living with her already.”

“You’re kind to them, Madge!”



She shook her head, smiling. "I love hearing about all their affairs. I'd like to lift the roofs of this town, house by house, and see what is going on beneath. It's a Meadows trait, I guess. We're so awfully interested in our fellow humans."

"Dwight is like that," Nancy said carefully. "He loves having people around him, loves going to their houses. I don't believe he ever actively disliked anybody in his life."

"No," Madge assented. She kept her gaze on the street, carefully dodging the market traffic. "He was always like that, even when he was a little boy. He gets a sort of crush on people, is passionately interested in them—just the way I'm interested in my Italians, you see! And when that interest is satisfied, they pass out of his mind."

"Suppose—" Nancy said with a shaky little laugh—"suppose his interest in me were satisfied? Would I . . . pass out of his mind?"

Madge slowed down in order that she might send her sister-in-law a significant glance.

"We weren't talking about love, were we? I like my Italians, I'm fond of my friends, but when it comes to Spencer—" She did not go on, recognizing her own inability to explain her love for her husband.

The analogy, Nancy thought, would not serve. It was not with Dwight as it was with Madge. Dwight's love for her was not comparable to Madge's love for Spencer. Madge's is a human interest, she told herself, while Dwight's is—well, dress it up as you like, call it gregariousness, intellectual curiosity—it simmers down to a matter of sex. Dwight flirts with women because the masculinity in him responds to challenge. Madge likes the old man with a patch over his eye, the women with fat stomachs and shapeless legs, the dirty little children smeared with fruit juices and licorice as thoroughly, if not quite in the same way, as she does the gifted Allan twins and charming Mrs. Cairnsby and John Sowersby, the novelist.

It was the same way in the shops. Madge could not go into Wendells' to buy a sweater that the fitter did not emerge from her mysterious quarters at the back to tell Mrs. Hammond that her sister's boy was going to have the operation after all; or that the girl at the cashier's desk did not lean forward to say in a confidential undertone that it was all right now, Mom had promised to let her go to the Saddy night dances and thanks a lot, Mrs. Hammond, for calling Mom up!

There was no patronage in Madge's manner. She gave the speaker a quick, sharp look, listened attentively, said a few words of encouragement, condolence or congratulation, as the occasion might call for, and went on her way. It was as though she really formed part of the family circle of the Cianciolos or the Lukins or the Purdys.

Over her own friends she exerted an authority as unconscious as it was beneficent. Mrs. Spencer Hammond did not call on the new wife of the bank president because she knew that a broken-hearted first wife had been ousted from her place at her husband's side by youth and beauty; so Staunton did not call either. On the other hand after Madge had been seen lunching at the Wellington in the company of the gray-haired, sad-eyed first Mrs. Bank President, invitations to that defeated woman flowed in a steady stream.

Madge's home was beautiful, her clothes were the smartest money could buy, her personal allowance was more each month than Nancy's father made in half a year; yet

she lived the simplest of lives. No breakfast tray in bed for her. She was downstairs half an hour before Spencer, conferring with her cook, arranging the great hampers of flowers which arrived from the country each morning with the milk and cream. She walked through the big, beautiful rooms, alert for traces of carelessly performed work. A recreant housemaid would be called to account briefly, kindly; it seemed to be understood that one such reproof must be enough. Dismissal was pretty sure to follow the necessity for a second.

After breakfast Madge spent an hour with the young woman who came in to act as her secretary. Nancy was amazed at the work which was accomplished in this brief time. There were reports on Madge's private charities—no dry statistics but stories vivid with realistic detail—invitations to be refused or accepted, club work to be done. There was usually enough to keep Miss Cutler busy for the rest of the day when Madge had finished.

She always made time to watch the baby's bath. The three women would gather in the sunny room Madge had turned into a nursery, Wilma enjoyably conscious of her own important part in the rite, Nancy burstingly proud of her son's beautiful little body, his sturdiness, his ability to paddle the water in his small tub.

"Stand back, Madge," she would warn in a voice rich with love and pride. "He's perfectly wild this morning! This rug will be soaked by the time we're through his bath. Wilma, don't let him chew his washcloth! But isn't it smart of him, Madge, diving into the water for it like that? See him blink! Precious lamb, did his mother get water in his eyes!"

Sometimes, her heart overflowing with generous pity for the childless woman, she would thrust her son, dried and powdered and wrapped in his blue blanket, into Madge's arms.

"Did you ever feel anything so soft and sweet? Did you ever smell anything so delicious? Kiss him, Madge! Put your face right down here in his neck. Isn't he marvelous? Isn't he beyond anything you ever knew?"

Madge would look at her sparkling eyes, the flush on her cheeks, the unrestraint of her kisses and wonder sadly if Nancy were not of the maternal type instead of the conjugal. That they were separate and distinct, that they did not always occur in the same woman, she knew. Herself . . . she loved children, longed for sons and daughters of her own, but she could not imagine them superseding Spencer in her heart. Her husband would always come first with Madge. With Nancy, perhaps love found its true outlet in the offspring of itself rather than in that love.

It would be better for Nancy if it were so, she mused, Dwight being what he was. If her heart was bound up in her children, her husband would lose some of his power to hurt her. For Madge had known about Patty Atkinson, as she had known about Sara Curtis and the pretty stenographer. She despaired of Dwight's ever changing now. If Nancy could not hold him in the first rapture of their marriage what hope was there she could do so now that Bunny had come to be the small, unconscious rival of his father?

Dwight was proving himself another Meadows husband, a good provider, gay, charming, outwardly devoted to his wife; but making little sentimental forays into forbidden territory, returning, surprised that his activities had been noticed or objected to,

settling down again with the best resolutions, only to lose his head over the next pretty woman who flew signals of flirtation.

“But Nancy doesn’t love Dwight as I love Spencer,” Madge comforted herself, never dreaming that the other woman was watching the Hammonds with eyes which saw with bitter clarity the difference between them and herself and Dwight.

Spencer Hammond was deeply, almost wordlessly in love with his wife. He shared Nancy’s own inarticulateness but Madge, unlike her brother, understood. In the six weeks Nancy spent with them, she heard not a word of endearment pass between the Hammonds. Yet Spencer’s eyes as they dwelt on his wife, Madge’s unconscious and tender lowering of her voice when she spoke of Spencer, the man’s uneasiness when she was not in the house, the woman’s silent joy when he returned. . . . Nancy used to feel a knife turning in her heart as she watched them.

If Spencer returned from the office before Madge came in, he went directly to her boudoir upstairs and sat there, not reading, simply waiting in this room made sacred to him because it was his darling’s. Nancy knew he did not like to see her sit in Madge’s chair.

He might say curtly when Madge came in: “Present for you, old girl!” as he fished in his pocket and produced a slim, white-wrapped package. “Little gadget I happened to see downtown today.”

Madge would know as she unwrapped the flexible sapphire bracelet, or the short string of pink pearls, that he had been weeks, perhaps months searching for this particular thing to give her pleasure. She would thank him quietly, but Nancy’s watching eyes would see how tenderly her fingers caressed the stones and she knew that it was not their intrinsic value which made them dear to her.

“That’s how it ought to be with husband and wife,” Nancy said to herself late one night when she stood before the window of her room, watching the swirling snow pile itself into drifts on the lawn. Dwight was on the ocean now; he would soon be back with her. “I’ve seen the perfection of marriage. I know there can be perfection. I’m going to make ours like that. I’m going to be more tolerant. I’m going to be—” color dyed her face in the darkness—“I’m going to be more demonstrative, responsive to Dwight. I’m going to overcome this silly numbness that possesses me. That’s where I fail him. That’s what he finds in other women, that’s what he goes elsewhere to seek: lovingness, responsiveness.”

With the relief of a generous nature, she took all the blame for the past on her own shoulders. Dwight’s derelictions as a husband had been forced on him by the coldness of his own wife.

“But I’m going to be different, I’m going to change,” she thought. “I’m going to laugh more, enjoy his friends, go and put my arms around Dwight of my own accord, give him back his kisses as he’d like me to!”

She turned away from the window with a heart made light by high resolve. For the moment it seemed to her that the happiness of her marriage lay solely in her own hands. She assumed that her failure to measure up to Dwight’s need was the only reason for his past dalliance. She forgot that she had to reckon not only with the difference between her

husband's standards and her own, but also that between his nature, robustly emotional, unanalytical, somewhat superficial, and her own which sealed its holiest feelings in the bottom of her heart and guarded them with averted head, finger to lip.

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## Chapter Nine

“**B**UNNY, give Margaret back her doll! You’re too old to tease her like that, a big boy nearly four!”

“How much longer are we going to call the boy by that absurd name?” her mother-in-law demanded. She was sitting with Nancy in the garden this warm May afternoon. Bunny played with Madge’s namesake under Wilma’s watchful eye. Margaret was a little past two now, a sweet, sturdy chunk of babyhood, with her mother’s gray eyes and her father’s ready gift of laughter.

“I suppose we’ll have to begin calling him Dwight when he goes to kindergarten this fall,” Nancy responded. “If you once start them to school under a nickname, it sticks through life.”

“It will be hard to tell whether you mean father or son. That’s the trouble with a name you can’t abbreviate. Now if I’d named Dwight after his father I could have called him Bobby. But I wanted to give him my father’s name: Dwight Perry.” She gave a complacent little laugh. “The Perrys may not have stood quite so high socially as the Meadows or had as much money, but they’ve all been scholars. An uncle of mine wrote a book—” Her voice trailed away vaguely.

Nancy bent over her sewing. After five years of marriage she had few illusions left about her husband’s family. She knew that the Perrys had been poor, rather shiftless people whose scholarly traits existed only in Mrs. Robert Meadows’ mind. She knew that Joe Meadows had got himself so entangled with a chorus girl that it had cost him fifty thousand dollars to get back the letters he had written her. She knew that Dwight himself

A familiar little tightening of Nancy’s lips showed itself when she thought of her husband. She had agonized and despaired, rebelled and threatened, forgiven and tried desperately to forget, in the years which had followed Dwight’s return from England. He had been faithful to her “in his fashion,” which meant—technically. He had sinned against the spirit of marriage half a dozen times. There was nothing she could do about it, except to leave him, and the children made it difficult for her to do that. Dwight was a good father, interested, kind, understanding. Nothing was too much trouble for him where Bunny and Margaret were concerned. He was even a good husband—in the ways that did not matter. He was innocently convinced that his wife had nothing to complain of.

Nancy could, of course, take her babies and go home. Sometimes she thought it would eventually come to that. Donal Hale had dropped in one afternoon, a thing in itself so unusual that she was somewhat prepared for what came later. After a little desultory chat about the children, he cleared his throat and said: "Nancy, you know your old home is always open to you!"

By that she knew that Dwight's current flirtation was even more flagrant than usual. She had not pretended to misunderstand her father. Though the painful color rose in her face, she looked at him steadily and said:

"Thank you, Father! It's all right, you know. Dwight doesn't really mean anything by the silly way he acts sometimes."

"I suppose not," he said gruffly. "Though I should think a husband and father—well, you know best, of course. And there's always the children to consider. You must do what is best for them. But I wanted you to know; both your mother and I would be glad to have you return to us at any time."

She had sat a long time with her sewing in her lap after her father had gone, thinking. She was tempted to tell Dwight of that visit when he came home tonight. It would, she knew, put an abrupt stop to the affair he was carrying on with Eva Halyard. Dwight proceeded blissfully on the theory that his amours were invisible to the general public. The moment it became evident to him that they were known, he dropped them in alarmed haste.

But that would only gain for Nancy temporary respite. And it would increase Dwight's latent hostility toward her parents.

It was strange that Dwight, who disliked almost no one, whose geniality flowed out toward the veriest stranger, who had a good word for the worst outcast, frowned and was silent when the Hales were mentioned. Was it, Nancy wondered, because he must know of their carefully concealed disapproval of him? Or was it for just the reason which had brought Donal Hale there this afternoon: because he feared that some day she might take refuge, with her children, in the home of her father?

She had grown accustomed, though never resigned, to Dwight's delinquencies. She had learned to interpret the signs. He might be for months the most considerate and devoted of husbands, returning promptly in the evening in time for a romp with his children before dinner, eating the meal alone with her in their own dining room, or dutifully escorting her to an occasional formal party. He was contented, affectionate.

Then a day would come when his manner became abstracted, when he listened for the ring of the telephone, when he kissed his wife goodbye in the morning with a sort of apologetic fervor which she hated and from which she drew back coldly. She knew with deadly accuracy at just what stage of the affair he would begin to be kept downtown on business over the dinner hour; knew just when he would abandon the courtesy of telephoning and would not return until sometime after eleven, resenting even the most tactful questioning on her part.

She grew to know as well as he did how the affair progressed. If he was moody, his usual light-heartedness tempered by irritability, impatient of her claim and that of the children upon him, it meant that the lady in the case was coy; that she had queer scruples

about dining and dancing and driving about with another's woman's husband. Sometimes these scruples would prevail and the flirtation die a-borning, but not often. Dwight's charm, his apparently genuine conviction that there was no harm in what he was doing, usually won for him in the end what he wanted. His skies would clear, he would come home loaded with toys for the children, he would sing while he shaved, and stop his car on the drive to wave Nancy goodbye. On those occasions she would tell herself scornfully that he would not be at home for dinner that night, and she was rarely mistaken.

She had not achieved her present state of acquiescence without a bitter struggle—and it was an acquiescence, she thought, concerning which she had no choice. There had been tears, reproaches, anger; sad scenes on which the children's innocent eyes had looked, quarrels which husband and wife preferred to forget. Again and again she resolved to leave Dwight, but the thought of the gossip that would rage, the realization of her children's anomalous position, above all her love for Dwight, restrained her. For through it all she did love the man she had married. Perhaps some hidden spring of intuitive knowledge fed this love. Perhaps she knew that these were only ripples on the surface of Dwight's devotion to her, and as such she tolerated them: rebelliously, unresignedly tolerated them, but still tolerated.

She even could spare a wry pity for the women whose reign over Dwight's affections was so brief. When special delivery letters began to spill out of his pockets marked "Personal" and "Urgent," when agitated feminine voices began to ask cautiously for him on the telephone, when Dwight's eyes half closed in boredom as he was summoned to answer one of these voices, Nancy knew it was a matter of days, perhaps even of hours, before she would have her husband again, newly devoted, so terrifically domestic that he drove Wilma frantic with questions about the children's diet, with unnecessary offers to help them dress in the morning.

Just once Nancy had talked of Dwight to his father. Margaret—she was only a year old then—had swallowed the whistle part of the fife Dwight had given Bunny. Dr. Harding had rushed a specialist out to remove the object with a bronchoscope and Nancy was wildly telephoning to find Dwight. His stenographer informed her blandly that he was "out on business." Meadows senior, cornered by the frantic Nancy, admitted that Dwight had taken a Miss Pellitier out in his car a little after four o'clock.

When she heard that, Nancy abandoned her efforts to find him and hovered over the bed where the baby was gasping and choking and the specialist was directing a nurse how to hold the little body firmly until the brief operation was over.

Margaret was safe and asleep, with the trained nurse to watch her and Wilma eyeing the intruder with hostility, when Bob Meadows hurried in. He had not stopped to pick up his wife. He had come straight from the office, moved, Nancy thought contemptuously, more by a desire to excuse his son in her eyes than by concern over his granddaughter.

Said Robert Meadows: "Look here, Nancy! You mustn't misunderstand Dwight. He met this Miss Pellitier at a business luncheon and discovered she'd been in Spain the same year he had. Naturally they had a lot to talk about and he—"

"He could have brought her here to talk of Spain!" Nancy's cheeks were burning, her gray eyes were black. The fright she had had over her baby and the humiliating

realization that she could not find the child's father in a crisis like this loosed the guard she had long kept on her speech. "I've always welcomed Dwight's friends here. There is no reason why he should deceive me, take this girl off in secret—"

Bob Meadows' eyebrows rose. "Perhaps it's because he knew you'd raise a row, my dear! Dwight's like me; he'll do anything on God's green earth to avoid a scene with an angry woman."

Nancy's head came up. "Everything but cease to give her cause for being angry," she retorted.

Dwight's father shook his head. "Dwight's Dwight, and you can't make him over. Most women wouldn't want to. Outside of his—er—friendliness with people, you haven't much to complain of, have you? He's a good father, a good husband. He loves you—"

At that her taut nerves snapped. "Loves me! How can he love me and treat me as he does? What would he think if I behaved toward him as he does toward me? If I went off to Bentondale to dine with another man and some one telephoned him about it—"

"Some one called you?" he asked, diverted.

"Certainly, some one called me. Some one always calls me," she flashed.

"Oh, well, you must expect a certain amount of that sort of thing in this town," he said indulgently. "Dwight's mother has had a good deal of it, and she merely ignores it."

Nancy looked at him steadily. "Dwight's mother and his wife are two different persons!"

"All right, my dear, all right!" He turned hurriedly toward the door. Evidently he considered this one of those scenes which he abhorred. "So glad the baby girl is all right now. Dwight couldn't have done anything even if he'd been here, could he?"

She shrugged her shoulders, struggling to regain her self-control.

"No, of course not. Dwight is rapidly becoming superfluous in his own home."

She was sorry for that afterwards. It was malicious and it was untrue. Dwight's warmth and gaiety were very necessary to the happiness of his household. The children, the very servants, welcomed him back from one of his sentimental departures as though from an actual journey.

It was only Nancy, it seemed, who stood in the way of life as Dwight's easy ideas decreed it. It was only the insulted wifeness within her, the dignity which drew its skirts aside from the sordidness of silly intrigue, which brought about the ever-increasing number of scenes between them. If Nancy could have been content to accept Dwight as he was, to wait for the not impossible day when he would weary of his philandering and return to her for good, if her uncompromising nature could have learned to compromise, their marriage might have been, if not that perfection of union of which she had dreamed, at least a normally happy one.

She was thinking of this sadly when Dwight returned that night; a white-lipped Dwight, with hands that shook and eyes that pleaded with her for forgiveness as he heard the story of his baby's danger and his wife's unavailing efforts to find him. His abject



remorse, his fright, his grief and love and pain were poured out so sincerely that she wondered if this time he might have been frightened into keeping his promises, into changing his ways.

Out of her weariness were wrung from her words she had never thought to speak.

“Dwight, listen to me! I love you—in spite of all you’ve done to kill my love I love you dearly—more than you will ever know. But it’s not inexhaustible—my feeling for you. Some day—if you keep on as you are—you’ll kill the last spark of it.” She laid her hands on his arms, raised heavy eyes to his. “That will be a sorry day for you, my husband. You need me. You love me. You don’t have to tell me that! But I’m only human. I can’t keep on forgiving you unto seventy times seven. Only divinity, I think, could do that.” Her mouth took its sweetest, firmest curves, the weary eyes were lighted by something Dwight had never seen in them before. “Be warned!”

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## Chapter Ten

WHEN she was an older woman and a wiser one, Nancy Meadows could look back and see the mistakes she made in the next few years. The birth of the two children had kept her at home much of the time. She lost her place in that gay circle which meant so much to Dwight. She was sensitive—unduly so, she thought afterwards—to the chaffing, the sly reference to his philandering which went on among his friends. More and more often she made her fatigue, or the baby's slight feverishness, an excuse to absent herself from the informal parties which Dwight enjoyed so much.

He went without her; she wasn't selfish enough to keep him at home because she could not go. At first he went unwillingly, protesting against her not accompanying him, but finally it was taken by them both as a matter of course that unless the occasion was of real importance, Dwight would "just drop in for an hour or so" while she stayed at home.

She lost a point, too, by not being able to run off with him for a dinner or a show in Kansas City, as she had done before the children came. Dwight never planned things in advance. He said it was "such bully fun" to pick up and go on the spur of the moment. It had been one of the delightful things about him in the early days of their marriage, this boyish pleasure in the impromptu. But obviously she couldn't join him now when he dashed in at five o'clock to say:

"Jump into your glad rags, old girl! We're off to K.C. to paint the town red! I just heard an hour ago that Ethel Barrymore is playing there tonight and I telephoned for tickets and got them by the greatest good luck. Hurry, Nancy!"

"Dwight, I can't possibly go," she would begin, troubled. "Bunny has been acting like old Ned all day—Wilma simply can't do anything with him."

"I'll settle Bunny," he would promise, striding toward the stairs.

"No, no! He's eating his supper now, he's all right! Don't get him all stirred up again, Dwight, just when he's quieted down."

"But if he's all right, why can't you go?"

"The baby is cutting a tooth. If she gets to fretting and wakes Bunny up, Wilma would have her hands full. I'm awfully sorry, dear. I'd really like to go, but I can't this time."

She thought it was true. She took her motherhood hard. Even Mrs. Hale sometimes suggested that the babies would be the better for "a little wholesome neglect."

Nancy was oddly divided between trust of Wilma and suspicion of a mother who could so cheerfully abandon her own child. She asked many questions about the boy. Didn't Wilma worry about him? Didn't she miss him terribly? When did she expect to return to him? Wilma always answered placidly that her mother took good care of the little boy; that she herself saw him on her Sunday out. But this did not entirely satisfy Nancy and she never left Bunny and Margaret with her without a little feeling that was not quite distrust, not quite apprehension but which partook of both. It was the subconscious reason for the excuses—excuses which seemed to Dwight sometimes palpably absurd—she gave for staying home with the children.

There were many excuses for her, though she did not admit it in the unhappy time which was to come to her. She did not realize how hard Dwight was working, for one thing, how sorely he needed distraction now and then. Meadows and Company had entered upon a period of unusual prosperity even for that prosperous firm, and the advertising department worked steadily to keep a pace ahead of its needs. Bob Meadows, indulgent father, was an exigent employer. He asked for and got the best his managers had to give by the simple process of letting them alone and examining results and not ways and means. Dwight's responsibilities increased almost daily.

Also—and this, too, Nancy did not realize until years later—he came in contact all day and every day with interesting people. Since the company obtained its stock from practically every market in the world, it drew to its offices shrewd collectors, men of culture, women whose judgment was sufficiently trained to allow them to make their own selections instead of entrusting them to experienced dealers.

Dwight developed, expanded, in this atmosphere while Nancy herself was giving her attention to problems of strained vegetables, the washing of tiny wool sweaters so that they neither shrank nor stretched, the removal of tonsils, taking the children for their first trip to the dentist.

The initial fault was Dwight's. He had had affairs with other women even before Bunny was born; but Nancy was later to ask herself if he would not have tired of it, if fatherhood and the solid citizenship a successful man begins to feel, would not have guided him into safer, more mature paths.

To be sure, there was his father. Bob Meadows had all the things which Dwight was acquiring and they had not satisfied him. But Nancy believed Dwight to be a finer, stronger man than his father. Parental example and natural inclination had carried him into forbidden fields in the beginning. Later he simply took the path of least resistance, walking around the boulder of Nancy's occasional rebellion.

His father had encountered no such rebellion. Nancy thought that Mrs. Meadows had been too tolerant; or if not that, perhaps she had laid down her arms before the battle had really begun. "Just as I did, just as I did," her heart mourned afterwards. "If I'd helped Dwight to fight his weakness, if I'd stood by ready to be his comrade, his friend, if I'd left the children to Wilma and interested myself in what interested him, it might have all been different!"

But at the time she could not get his viewpoint and he was equally unable to see things from hers.

“How can you, Dwight, if you really love me?” she asked him when they had had one of their rare talks on the subject. “Think what I endure, knowing that you are out with another woman, that you are writing her sentimental notes, kissing her hand—that sort of thing! How can I keep any respect for you, knowing that you are fundamentally unfaithful to me with every breath you draw!”

“It isn’t that bad, Nancy,” he answered soberly. “I don’t understand myself what gets the matter with me. It’s as though I had a fever of some sort. It has to run its course before I’m sane again. When it’s over I’m amazed at my own actions, but when it’s at its height I don’t seem to care about anything. I know you and the children are at home—you’re all three in the background of my mind all the time like—like a haven.” He dropped his head into his hands, that head with its well-brushed hair that always tempted her hand. “The only excuse I can offer is that I don’t love any of these women. They just attract me for the time being, I never want to see them again after it’s over.”

“Don’t say that, Dwight!” she said sharply. “It’s only makes it worse for you to talk that way. A great love, a consuming passion I could understand, no matter how much pain it brought me. But these tawdry imitations of love, this burlesque passion, this counterfeit emotion—I feel about it as you would feel if some one offered you a piece of jade from the ten cent store!”

“I know, darling, I know!”

He did not have the words to tell her that it was because he felt his heart was securely in her keeping that he could allow himself such freedom. Bob Meadows was notoriously a philanderer, and yet he depended for his real happiness on the fretful, rather commonplace woman who was his wife. Dwight’s grandfather had loved his own wife to the day he died though the county gossiped incessantly about him. So did Dwight find in Nancy the very substance of love itself. . . . Nancy whom he periodically subjected to the humiliation of deceit.

“It’s not what Dwight ought to be, Nancy,” Madge said to her once. “It’s what he is. You can’t change him. At least you can’t do it by despairing of him, shutting yourself away from him, locking yourself up inside. If you love him . . . you do love him, Nancy?”

“Oh, yes, I love him,” she answered somberly. “Unluckily for me!”

Madge laid a quiet hand on those which were locked in the other woman’s lap. “Foolish child,” she said. “Foolish, foolish child not to realize that if you have the power to love, you have the greatest thing life can give you!”

“Not if the one you love hurts you!”

“That has nothing to do with it. You don’t love Bunny the less, do you, when he’s acted like a young fiend all day and worn you and Wilma both out?”

“Bunny is a child,” Nancy said composedly. “One looks for different behavior in a man.”

“Dwight’s a child, too, in some ways. All men are. The only adults in the world,” said Mrs. Hammond sapiently, “are women. That’s why we can go on loving and forgiving our men so often.”

“Which is all very well for Madge to say,” Nancy told herself, walking briskly homeward through the early autumn dusk. “She doesn’t have to forgive Spencer anything! There is nothing childish about her husband! And yet,” she asked herself thoughtfully, “would I change Dwight for Spencer? No, of course I wouldn’t. Dwight is perfect—except for this one thing.”

If it had been anything else but this! If he drank—that would be bad, of course, but she could have borne it, she thought. If he was lacking in ambition, if he had an irritable temper, if he was ungenerous—anything, anything but this one grave fault: these nightmarish times of letters marked “Special,” the look of alert attention on his face, the sure knowledge that when he did not come home for dinner he was sitting across the table with some pretty woman, some dewy girl whose freshness had attracted him, smiling into her eyes, speaking reassuring words about “our harmless little adventure,” leaning forward to touch her hand with his big, well-kept fingers.

Nancy’s handkerchief came out and she stumbled along, wondering how much longer she could endure it.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

SIX years, eight years, nine years of this, and then all Nancy's hard-won philosophy was swept from her, the smouldering fires of her resentment burst into flames which consumed her house of life.

Like so many other tragedies, it had been a little thing which precipitated it. Afterwards she did not even have the comfort of knowing that she had had temporary justification.

It came at the end of a particularly hard year for her. Donal Hale sickened with some ailment which, while never seeming to threaten his life, kept his family worried about him for weeks; and just when he was given permission by his doctor to sit up for an hour or so each day, he had suddenly lapsed into a coma from which he never roused. Mrs. Hale was dazed with the shock of it. Nancy spent hours with her mother, coaxing her to eat, persuading her to rest, trying after awhile to induce her to take up her customary activities again.

Donal Hale had attended to his will in the same orderly fashion he did everything else. His wife had the house and a comfortable yearly income; Nancy had twenty thousand dollars left to her without condition.

Hardly had Nancy recovered from the strain of his death before Margaret, always the unluckiest of babies, broke her right arm and there had to be hours of story telling, of building blocks into houses and churches, of dressing paper dolls, to keep her from putting a strain on the injured member.

Dwight's "woman of the moment" happened to be an exotic widow who had lately taken the house across the street from Nancy. She was a worthy opponent of Dwight's steel, could parry every move, thrust now and then aggressively herself. It was a pretty duel in flirtation but Nancy was too weary, too worried, too heartsick to appreciate the skill of the fencers.

It annoyed her to see Mrs. Seymore's white hand fluttering a goodbye to Dwight from her window in the mornings. It flicked her on the raw to see her pretty neighbor setting forth in the filmiest of summer gowns late in the afternoon, her destination, Nancy knew, the Meadows Company, and more particularly Dwight's office. She forgot the resolution of years and quarreled sharply with Dwight about it.

"A man can't get along without affection," Dwight muttered. "At least, I can't! It's like coming home to an iceberg to come home to you these days."

The gibe had no longer power to hurt her though she knew now there was truth in it. She had long given up the task of satisfying Dwight's demand for demonstration. It needed all her strength, she thought bitterly, to keep down her resentment over his "affairs."

She hadn't succeeded in keeping it down today. She had sent Dwight off, silent and frowning, and had dragged through the hours with a wretched sense of her own failure, an unconscious need to justify her anger of the morning.

And then!

That afternoon Bunny came home from school with one eye swollen shut, and a lip that was bruised and bleeding. There was mud on his shoulder, a tear in his brief knickers.

"Bunny, what on earth!"

"He c-called my d-d-daddy a b-bad man!"

"Who called—?"

"J-Jimmie Penfield. He s-said—"

"Wait a minute, Bunny! Stop crying and let Mother wash your lip. Wilma, get me the witchhazel, please, and some absorbent cotton."

"Jimmie," the boy persisted, swallowing his sobs, "said my daddy was a bad, wicked man that flirted. What's flirted, Mother?"

A little frown of pain sprang up between her eyes.

"Never mind. Jimmie was very wrong to speak so, and you were very foolish to fight. I suppose you did fight?"

"You betcha," he said proudly. "I smacked his face for him and he hit me back and I —"

"Stand still, Bunny!"

"All the other kids crowded 'round, and Miss Bailey came out, and she made us stop but I heard her say: 'Poor little boy, I don't wonder!' And Hazel—you know that girl that lives across the street next to Mrs. Seymore? Well, she said it was because my daddy flirted with her, and her mother said it was a shame and she wondered how you—"

"Never mind," she said again sharply. "Go in to Margaret now. Play with her a while, dear. She's been lonely without you all day. Wilma will bring you both some milk and cookies."

She kept her voice quiet but inwardly she was seething with rage and pain. She shut herself into her bedroom and took her hot cheeks in her hands.

"So this is what it has come to!" she thought. "The very children in school talking about Dwight, taunting his son, pitying me! And he—doesn't care!" She rose, her eyes feverishly bright, her hands icy, and began to pace to and fro in the narrow confines of the room. "This is what comes of my being patient, of my being 'tolerant' for the children's sake! I'm a byword and a laughing stock for the town. I'm humiliated by the very babes in arms." Her breast rose and fell stormily. "But it's over now. I'm through."

This is going to end right here," she said between closed teeth. "I'll take the children and go away—bless Father for leaving me that money! I'll pack—I'll begin packing now."

Her mind was racing. She knew in one blinding flash that she could bear no more. Endurance had reached the saturation point. Her patience was gone. Madge was wrong about Dwight, his parents were wrong. The more she condoned this fault of his, the more it flourished. If she'd had courage long ago—just after Bunny was born—to break with him, by this time he might have been a different man.

But she wouldn't think of him, she'd think of herself.

"It's too late to think of him now," she muttered. "Married almost ten years, the father of two children, and still he carries on a flirtation under my very eyes. The only thing I can do is to save my self-respect; to take Bunny and Margaret where they won't hear Staunton's gossip. I'll go to California—to Florida. I'll take Mother with me—"

She was emptying dresser drawers, stripping her closet of gowns and hats. Her thoughts flew furiously while her fingers methodically performed their task. Presently she summoned Helga and between them the big wardrobe trunk which she hadn't used since her honeymoon was brought down from the attic and set up in her room. Wilma looked in, round-eyed, but venturing no comment. There was a set look on Mrs. Meadows' face which discouraged questions.

In an incredibly short time, Nancy was ready. She informed Wilma briefly that she was going to her mother for a visit before leaving for a winter in the South. The children and their nurse were, of course, to accompany her. To Helga she said simply that Mr. Meadows would give her further instructions. He was dining out, Helga need prepare no dinner.

Nancy had called her mother on the telephone. Mrs. Hale said uneasily that she didn't understand. Was Nancy quite sure she was acting wisely? What had happened?

"I'll tell you all about it tonight. I just wanted to know if we may come? We won't make any extra work. I'm bringing Wilma—"

That was all right, was the apathetic reply. Mrs. Hale didn't mind the extra work. She would be glad to see her grandchildren, she would be glad to see Nancy. Only Nancy ought to be sure—

"Expect us in half an hour." Nancy replaced the receiver on its hook with a decisive click.

She left no word for Dwight. She did not know where he could be found at this hour, she could not trust herself to write him. If it embarrassed him to come home to an empty house, to the thinly veiled curiosity of the servants, it would be the merest hint of the humiliation which had been hers for years.

All the repressed anger and bitterness of her married life possessed her now. Her eyes were bright with it, her cheeks glowed. She looked years younger and vastly lovelier than the calm woman who had received her little boy with the cut lip and swollen eye he had suffered in his father's defence.

Dwight would know where to find her if he wanted to see her. Let him come to her now instead of her waiting at home for him as she had done, year after year. Madge—



well, she would go herself to Madge tomorrow and explain. It was not right that Madge should hear of her action through others.

Neither Nancy nor her mother referred to the cause of Nancy's coming until after the children had had their supper and were put to bed. Even then they did not touch on it while Mrs. Hale's waitress served their own meal. It was only after the older woman was established in her usual chair in the parlor, a light shawl over her shoulders in the room which Nancy herself felt to be suffocatingly warm, that the story of Nancy Meadows' married life was told. She began at the beginning, mentioning Sara Curtis, telling of the letter she had found when Bunny was a baby, telling of this deceit, that intrigue, the promises which were made only to be broken, the new leaves which were turned only to have the same shameful story written upon them.

She told of her father's call on her not long before he died, and his saying that Nancy must come home if she grew too unhappy. At that Mrs. Hale's patient face became convulsed and she said yes, yes, indeed—father had worried about Nancy—he would be glad that she was at home at last! She broke into bitter weeping and Nancy reproached herself for agitating her mother and rose, saying they must both get some rest before they talked further.

She was downstairs early, half expecting Dwight to rush in before breakfast. The night, she knew, had been a torture to him. She was even a little surprised that he had not rung her mother's doorbell at some time around midnight, apologizing, explaining, making earnest promises as usual.

But breakfast passed and Bunny was sent to school and Wilma took Margaret out for a walk in the crisp October air. Mrs. Hale went upstairs, ostensibly to write letters but really, as Nancy knew, to avoid her son-in-law. The doorbell rang and Nancy sat with her hands in her lap, tightening her defences against her husband.

It was not Dwight, however, but Madge who came walking into the old parlor. Nancy sprang up in dismay and ran to greet her.

“Oh, Madge dear! I wanted to tell you myself! I suppose Dwight—”

“Dwight called me early this morning.” She drew a long breath and sank into the chair Nancy pulled forward. “What started you off like this, honey? I thought—after all this time—”

Nancy, with hot cheeks and words which came in a tumultuous flood, took up the tale her mother's tears had interrupted last night. She put into words for Madge thoughts which had remained nebulous in her own mind. To this understanding listener she could explain the doubts, the difficulties, the humiliations of her marriage.

“It's not because of Mrs. Seymore I've left Dwight,” she concluded. “As a matter of fact, I think she's the one who is attracted—I don't think Dwight cares particularly for her. She happened to be the last straw, the drop that crystallized the solution. The situation has grown intolerant. Bunny's coming home like that—imagine it, Madge! a seven-year-old child fighting for his father's good name! It needed that to show me where Dwight and I stand. I've waited, I've been patient, tolerant—it is no use. Dwight will never change.”

His sister nodded sorrowfully. "I'm afraid he won't, Nancy. And as you no longer love him, I think you've done the wise thing."

Nancy bit her lip. "It's not a question of my loving him," she retorted. "It's a question of Dwight's own soul, I should think."

Madge, troubled as she was, repressed a smile at that.

"And what do you think it will do for his soul, honey—your leaving him? Are you counting on the shock of it to change him? You just said—"

"No, but I'm—well, I'm legalizing his conduct," she stammered, tears filling her eyes. "It won't be so terrible if he's not living with a wife—" She checked the words, began again. "Madge, I don't know what I'm doing! It's just that I couldn't bear it any longer!"

"Now you're being honest," her sister-in-law said approvingly. "But unless you mean to divorce Dwight—"

"Oh, no!"

"You won't be legalizing, as you call it, his flirtations, by simply living in your mother's house instead of your own."

"But I don't mean to stay here! I'll go away—to California, or Florida. I can say it's for Margaret's health—she hasn't been too strong since her arm was broken."

"A temporary expedient, dear. What will you accomplish by it?"

Nancy was grinding one soft palm into the other in an unconscious gesture of pain. "At least," she muttered, "I won't be made miserable for a time by Dwight's attentions to other women."

"Ah! now, Nancy, you've put your finger on the sore spot. It's to ease your own hurt you're going, not to help Dwight in any way. You don't love him sufficiently to endure the faults he has—"

"I love him too much to stay and watch the consequences of that fault!" she said hotly, and when Madge continued to shake her head, Nancy tacked abruptly. "You wouldn't stay—if it were Spencer!"

"Yes, I should, dear. If I knew he loved me as I know, and you know, Dwight loves you, I'd bear anything for his sake. I know it's hard," she went on, "but after all he's never really been unfaithful to you. He—"

"He's 'never crossed the barrier between honor and dishonor,'" Nancy quoted bitterly. "He's said that to me many times. As though there is no dishonor in spiritual infidelity!"

"I didn't mean that," Madge said patiently. "I agree with you that one honest smashing of his marital vow because he was madly in love with another woman would be easier to understand, easier even to pardon, than this perpetual skating on thin ice just for the excitement of it. What I meant is that these philanderings of Dwight's spring from so many causes and yet are really so unimportant. To begin with, he's had father's example always before him. He's grown up honestly believing that a man is entitled to

some latitude in matters of the heart. And then—you've failed him to a certain extent, Nancy."

"I?" she exclaimed indignantly. "I've endured, I've borne—I think I've been pretty patient about it, Madge!"

Madge leaned forward to touch her hand affectionately, a gesture that took some of the sting from her next words.

"I suppose you've behaved toward Dwight's fault as well as any woman could be expected to, dear, better than most women would behave. It's your own conduct I'm thinking of, Nancy."

She opened amazed eyes. "My conduct? I've never looked at another man since I met Dwight," she began. "I've—"

"I know. I wish you had," said Madge unexpectedly. "If you'd indulged in a good lively flirtation yourself, it might have taught you to understand Dwight a little and, better than that, to understand yourself. You're all tied and bound by ropes of repression, my dear. I've watched you with Dwight. You hold back—you keep in—you hoard—all that you ought to have poured before him in full measure. You've been a miser with your love, Nancy. That's where you've failed your husband.

"Dwight," went on Dwight's sister calmly, "is too dumb to know that it's all inside you, all that he needs, all that he's sought in vain in you. Men are dumb—most of them. They have to be told things. They never try to find them out for themselves. And so far from telling Dwight, you've gone out of your way to keep them from him. Haven't you, Nancy? Don't you know I'm telling you the truth about yourself?"

That broke her. Nancy's defences crumbled at this assault upon her weakest point.

"I haven't—meant to—keep it from him," she stammered, the tears pouring from her eyes, her face convulsed. "I can't—there's something in me that seals my lips, that shuts right up when I—when I try to talk about Dwight—and love—and marriage. I can't help it—I've tried—so many times—" She turned sidewise in her chair, burying her face against its harsh back. She was crying, her handkerchief pressed against her mouth, her slender shoulders shaking. "Madge, it's—it's all th-there j-just as you s-say—but I c-can't put it into w-words. You—you're the only one w-who understands."

Madge did not answer. Her unbeautiful little face was full of pity. This, she knew, was one of the strongest reasons for Dwight's behavior. He missed something in his wife, something he needed vitally; and sought it, always unsuccessfully, elsewhere. And the tragedy of it was that Nancy possessed it in fullest measure. With hoarded stores of treasure in her heart, she and Dwight both starved because the bars of her unresponsiveness shut it away from them both.

And yet—

Madge, understanding her brother, loving him only less than Nancy herself, could not keep down a thrill of something like contempt for the man who took a weak man's way out of it all, who had neither the control to wait until love broke down the barriers his wife's nature had set up, nor the strength to storm them on his own behalf. Underneath

the excuses she rushed to Dwight's aid, her own integrity lifted its voice and denounced her brother's weakness.

Nancy dried her eyes presently and spoke in a quieter tone. "Did Dwight send you here? What does he think—about my going?"

Madge sent her a little smile. "He's fighting mad, Nancy. Yes, truly! For almost the first time in his life, I think. Part of it is of course because his pride was touched on the raw at the idea of Bunny's fighting on his behalf—oh, yes, he knows about it! Helga of course overheard it all and told him, in her simple Swedish way! And part of it is because this time he really is innocent. It's ironical that this should be the one time—

"It seems he broke his dinner engagement with Mrs. Seymore last night on the plea that he wanted to come home and help you amuse Margaret; and then when he got there, really concerned for the child, really wanting to be with you, Nancy, he found the house empty, his wife and children gone, a servant pleasantly willing to tell him the whole humiliating story."

"Dwight—angry!" She passed over Madge's later words to dwell on that surprising fact. She could not imagine her husband in a rage. His perennial good temper had always been a source of wonder to her. Occasionally he was irritable, occasionally he was annoyed; but she had never seen him angry. She was a little frightened when she tried to think of what he might be like in an actual rage.

Madge seemed to read her thoughts.

"He isn't storming about. He's very quiet and calm, as a matter of fact. When I said he was fighting mad, it was merely a figure of speech. I've seen him only once or twice before like this. It was weeks and months, Nancy, before he got over it."

Nancy's head went up proudly. "It will be weeks and months—perhaps years—before I get over it," she said.

"Then it's just as well you and Dwight aren't going to meet for the present."

"What!" She gave the other woman a startled glance. "He doesn't insist on seeing me?"

"Insist! My dear, so far from insisting he says he won't see you! That you've treated him outrageously. I'm to act as a go-between—pleasant position! The children—he wants the children to spend their Sundays with him. He'll deposit a certain sum to your account every month. If it's not enough you're to notify him through me. He'll keep Helga, he'll live at home. If either of the children falls ill, he's to know at once."

Nancy sat looking at her in stupefaction. Dwight to be making terms! He, the recreant husband, the wrong-doer, the cause of her being here at all, to say that things should be thus and so with them!

Anger burned away her first astonishment, a white hot anger which, if she had but known it, greatly resembled Dwight's own.

"Very well," she said with deadly quiet. "Please assure Dwight that those arrangements suit me perfectly—for the present. We shall soon be leaving Staunton, of

course. As for the money, I'm thankful to say I don't need it. My father left me enough to care for my children and myself."

Madge rose to go. She looked very tired, very depressed. Whatever hurt Nancy or Dwight hurt her, too. She had an unhappy faculty of seeing both sides of every story. She realized that Dwight was suffering, that he was at fault; she knew the same thing to be true of Nancy. What the solution of their problem would be she could not see. She kissed the younger woman tenderly, and took her leave.

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## Chapter Twelve

NANCY longed to leave Staunton at once. She would not permit the trunks to be unpacked more than was necessary for the children's daily needs. The place had become intolerable to her in her present situation. Everybody, it appeared, knew of her departure from the house on Van Tyne Avenue. Tongues wagged gaily, sidelong glances were directed at her whenever she found it necessary to leave her mother's house. This was something new in Meadows' history; a Meadows wife taking the bit between her teeth like this!

But Mrs. Hale's condition made it impossible for her daughter to leave her just at present. Nancy was puzzled about her mother. She had agreed to the sale of the house, to the move to California; agreed somewhat apathetically, it is true, but nevertheless agreed. Immediately the decision was made, she fell ill. The specialist she insisted on having called shook his head over her.

"There is nothing organically wrong," he said. "At the same time there is insomnia, low blood pressure, lack of appetite. She needs rest. Keep her in bed for a while, don't let her worry or be excited."

As the days passed into weeks and Mrs. Hale kept her invalid state, Nancy began to wonder if an unconfessed objection to leaving Staunton lay beneath her mother's illness. Certainly she never mentioned the coming change, and when Nancy ventured toward the end of the second week to speak again of offering the house for sale, she closed her eyes and did not answer. Dr. Wilcox frowned when he came the next day.

"I said she wasn't to be worried. You say she didn't sleep at all last night?" He gave Nancy rather a sharp glance. He knew that Mrs. Meadows had left her husband. If she was pouring out her troubles to her mother, that accounted, he told himself, for the persistent insomnia, the general inertia of the patient. "It's important that no disturbing topics be discussed with her just now," he repeated warningly.

Nor would Mrs. Hale consent to Nancy's taking the children and going elsewhere.

"Surely it would be better," Nancy urged gently, "if you had the house to yourself while you are ill. The children's noise—"

"I like it," the invalid answered stubbornly. "Wait a while, Nancy. Surely you can wait until I'm better before you leave me!"

So, bound by this loving tyranny, chafing at the double imprisonment, Nancy spent the winter with what patience she could, in the house which was in the same block with

the older Meadows.

She never saw them. Mrs. Meadows' car took a different route when she left her home. Robert Meadows ignored his daughter-in-law's presence.

Madge came regularly to see her, dropping in as though nothing had happened to disturb their friendship. What these visits meant to Nancy, with their inference of loyalty and support, only Nancy herself knew. The deep affection she had had from the first for Dwight's sister was now one of the most precious things in her life.

They seldom mentioned Dwight. Nancy realized that if there was news of him Madge would tell her; and to Madge, it was infinitely painful to speak of the husband of one who was the brother of the other.

By Christmas time it was understood in Staunton that Nancy Meadows wished to be let alone; that she did not welcome opportunities to discuss her wrongs with sympathetic friends; that she did not profit by Madge Hammond's continued friendship to keep her place in Staunton society.

The town was divided in its opinion of her action in leaving Dwight. The story of Bunny's fight with the traducer of his father had gone the rounds with many vivid additions to its bare facts. Some women "gloried in Nancy's spunk," wondered "why she put up with things as long as she did." Others said that having overlooked Dwight's conduct so long, it seemed rather silly for her to object to it now, especially when the children suffered because of it. By deserting her husband she was bringing more harm to them, they averred, than their father's light-hearted gallantries had ever done.

The men, with sex solidarity, condemned Nancy's action.

"There's no harm in old Dwight," they pronounced. "At the bottom of his heart, he's actually crazy about his own wife. Pity she doesn't realize it!"

"Was," one of Dwight's friends amended significantly. "He's not the sort to put up with a public slight like this. Nancy'll find she has started something she'll have difficulty in finishing."

So it began to seem to Nancy herself. Punctually each month a generous check was deposited to Nancy's account. That she did not use a penny of it, that her money from her father was kept elsewhere, made no difference to Dwight.

Regularly every Sunday morning Madge drove by for the children, returning them late in the afternoon.

At first their questions, their comments, had cut Nancy to the quick.

"Aren't we ever going home, Mother?" Bunny would ask. "There's my 'lectric train in the attic with the tracks fastened down. I can't bring that to Grandmother's. And I like my own room with the dogs and the rabbits on the wall better'n I do where I sleep here."

"Let's go back to Daddy," Margaret would coax. "I like my Daddy—I miss my Daddy!" She would take her mother's face between her little hands, gray eyes would look into gray eyes. "Don't you want to see Daddy, Mother?"

"We can't leave Grandmother when she's sick, honey," Nancy would reply through stiff lips.

“Daddy could come here,” was Margaret’s logical solution. “He could sleep in your room!”

In her heart the wife marveled at Dwight’s persistent anger. If the children said such things to him—and of course they did!—how could he fail to be moved to remorse, to overtures toward a reconciliation? During nights almost as sleepless as her mother’s Nancy asked herself if she wished for that reconciliation. At first the answer was a wild negative. She was done, she was through, she had borne enough. She had tried to be patient, she had endured all that could be expected of a wife. If she were to preserve any self-respect, if she were to bring up Dwight’s children without having them learn to scorn him, it was necessary for her to get away.

If only the move to California could be made! In new scenes the children would forget, would cease to ask embarrassing questions about their father. She herself could make new friends, seek distraction in an environment that did not suggest her married life.

But as the days went wearily past, and Nancy caught glimpses of Dwight as he drove past her downtown now and then, she began to tell herself that if she had to remain in Staunton much longer it would be better to patch things up with him. There was neither dignity nor constructiveness in the present situation.

But Dwight showed no inclination to patch things up. Once they had come face to face downtown. Nancy was coming out of a store, Dwight was going in. It was a men’s furnishing store where she had bought new pajamas for Bunny. She had a brief flash of wonder as to what Dwight was doing here. He was plentifully supplied with clothes. Maybe Helga had let things be lost in the laundry—she was apt to be careless—

She stopped automatically. Her heart began to beat in slow, heavy throbs. Her lips were dry, there was a lump in her throat. She wondered if she would be able to speak. And then . . . Dwight had lifted his hat, bowed with grave courtesy, and entered the building.

Nancy found herself hurrying swiftly along the sidewalk outside. She felt as though Dwight had struck her. Her face burned, the tears blinded her so that she had to wipe her eyes, with careful carelessness, before she could go on.

But the incident had done her good, she told herself that night. It strengthened the infirmity of her purpose. It hardened her heart against her husband, gave her courage to go about her errands downtown in the future with her head high. Madge noticed the new look in the gray, black-lashed eyes, and sighed.

At Christmas time Dwight sent lavish gifts for the children. Dolls for Margaret, a wonderful sled for Bunny, roller skates for them both. “From Daddy”; “With love for Daddy’s baby girl”; “For his son from his father,” the tags read. Nancy, raging, had no choice but to allow the children to keep these gifts. The fact brought her anomalous position home to her anew. She resolved to have a talk with Dr. Wilcox the next time he came, and ask him boldly if it would harm her mother to be taken to California.

“It depends on Mrs. Hale’s own attitude toward a change,” he replied coolly. “I’ll talk to her about it myself.”



What was said in the sickroom Nancy did not know. The door was closed, her mother's voice murmured and murmured, Dr. Wilcox's self-confident bass answered it occasionally.

"Later perhaps," he announced blandly when Nancy asked for his verdict. He stood in the hall downstairs, carefully fitting on his gloves. His smug young face was triumphant. No one knew why Mrs. Hale had summoned Dr. Wilcox instead of Dr. Harding who had been for years the family physician. Nancy thought that the association with her father's death was too painful for her mother. Dr. Wilcox explained it in a manner more complimentary to himself.

"We young physicians," he said musically by more than one sickbed, "don't allow ourselves to get into the ruts the older men do. Medical science is marching forward with rapid step; too rapid for the middle-aged, the elderly, to keep up with."

Nancy disliked him. He had what she called "a bedside manner." But her mother relied upon him by now and Nancy had no choice but to accept him.

"We'll see—in the spring," he assured her kindly. "I wouldn't advise a change now. Mrs. Hale is in a highly nervous state. May I warn you again not to bring up disturbing subjects?"

Nancy looked at him steadily. "It is because I do not want to bring them up that I consulted you first about the move to California. I am sure you think my presence here is not good for my mother's health, Dr. Wilcox. You have intimated as much several times. If you can persuade her that it is better for the children and me to leave, you will be doing us both a real service."

But that even Dr. Wilcox could not do. Mrs. Hale clung as stubbornly to Nancy's remaining with her as she did to herself remaining in Staunton.

"Unless you want to go back to Dwight," she said. "I could not object to that, of course, dear. But if you won't, then your mother's house is the place for you. Your father said so, you know."

Nancy needed all her self-control during these trying days. To her sensitive nature the publicity which was being given her affairs was mental torture. The children stabbed her with innocent questions, with carelessly dropped bits of news, each time they returned from their Sunday visit with their father. Madge alone brought her relief from her own thoughts; Madge, and presently Brett Shirewood.

Nancy was returning from a shopping trip one afternoon early in March. Margaret had outgrown last year's spring coat, she must have a new one. Bunny needed socks—Bunny always needed socks. Nancy herself needed several things. Usually she drove her father's car. The one Dwight had given her remained in the garage on Van Tyne Avenue. But today something had gone wrong with the big sedan, and she left it downtown and walked home. The soft spring air was delicious after the long hours she had been in the house.

As she turned the corner which began the long hill leading to her mother's house—that hill up which Dwight Meadows had carried Nancy Hale's heavy parcel one warm June day—she saw little Margaret coming toward her on roller skates. Nancy called a

warning to the child. It was too steep here for the children to skate, she must forbid it in future.

The little girl lifted her arm to wave gaily to her mother; the skates slid out from under her and she went plunging toward the street just as a roadster, driven fairly rapidly, came up the hill. There was a scream from the child, a hideous sound of squealing brakes, Nancy's own sobbing gasp, and then the little red-coated figure disappeared and the car had come to a stop. A young man jumped out of it and dashed around to the pavement in front.

In the short time it took Nancy to cover the distance between herself and the car, she saw a thousand pictures: Margaret, taking her first toddling steps in her soft white kid shoes; Margaret, saying her prayers and adding a reflective postscript: "And please, God, don't let Wilma make me eat baked apples any more!" Margaret, as she had told her mother goodbye that afternoon, sweet little face upraised, sweet little voice asking Nancy to "bring me something, Mother de-ar." Margaret always said "dear" like that: as if it were pronounced in two syllables. And last of all, Margaret, her baby, her little girl, dead, or maimed for life, and Dwight's set, white lips reproaching the child's mother for not taking better care of her.

Her feet seemed clogged. She must be running—certainly her breath came pantingly and there was a sharp pain in her side—and yet it seemed actual hours since she had seen the child disappear beneath the wheels of the car.

As a matter of fact, the driver had barely time to catch up the little figure tenderly before Nancy was beside him, her eyes fixed imploringly on the small white face which lay against his shoulder, her voice saying hoarsely:

"Give her to me! I'm her mother—give her to me!"

At the sound of Nancy's voice Margaret opened her eyes and began to cry; loudly, with a good healthy temperish sound to her shrieks which was infinitely comforting to her mother.

The young man, however, found his wildest fears confirmed by those shrieks.

"Good heavens! She must be all broken to pieces to scream like that! A doctor—some one call a doctor at once! Call the ambulance!" He appealed to the crowd which had begun to collect almost before the car had stopped.

Nancy sat down on the curb and took Margaret in her lap.

"Where does it hurt, darling? Tell Mother!"

"It hurts—it hurts—my feelings!" cried the outraged Margaret. "I don't like to be knocked down, Mother! It was mean of that car to hit me and run right over me. I was just coming to meet you—"

Nancy lifted reassuring eyes to the frantic young man in front of them.

"I think she's all right. I don't believe she's even bruised," she told him. "The fender must have grazed her—knocked her down."

He took out his handkerchief and mopped his pale face.

“The Lord be thanked for that! It was the narrowest thing I ever saw. But we must have a doctor,” he continued anxiously. “There might be internal injuries. I have a room in the next block—just moved in this week. Couldn’t we take her there?”

Nancy explained that her own home was near and the young man, who said his name was Brett Shirewood, insisted on carrying the little girl into the house. He begged to be allowed to wait until Dr. Harding came and examined Margaret.

The victim herself sat comfortably on her mother’s lap and told Brett about her broken arm last fall, about her new doll carriage, about Daddy who lived “in our old house but we live with Grandmother now.” Nancy liked the young man for the matter-of-fact manner in which he received these confidences.

“If you ever try to come down that hill again, young lady, on roller skates,” he threatened, “I’ll—well, maybe I’ll run my car up a telegraph pole, and my hair will turn gray, and then how will you feel?”

To Nancy he confided that he was still weak with fright.

“Never had such a scare in my whole life! When I saw her plunge off of that sidewalk—” He shuddered and turned so white that Nancy’s heart went out to him.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

**B**Y midsummer it was evident to everybody but Nancy herself that the young man who lived three houses below Mrs. Hale was desperately in love with Nancy Meadows.

It had begun of course with the near-accident to Margaret. Brett stopped the next day as a matter of courtesy to inquire for the child. He stopped in more casually two or three days later; and finally he seemed to take it for granted that he was now an old friend of the family and might come and go as he liked.

Mrs. Hale took a fancy to him. That partly accounted for his frequent visits, Nancy thought. Her mother was able to be up for part of the day now and Brett was charming with her. He saved up little jokes to tell her, he talked to her with a mixture of audacity and gentleness that she loved, he took away the dry, scholarly little books she read and supplied her with blood-curdling mystery stories, or the more saccharine of romances, a change of literary diet that seemed to agree with her. In short, he gave her the filial attention that Dwight, for some reason, had always withheld.

The invalid bloomed like a girl under it, and rewarded Brett by invitations to dinner; invitations which he accepted with alacrity.

The children did their share in establishing him in an intimate place in the household. Margaret regarded him as her special property, and ordered him about imperiously. He had to make his handkerchief into a rabbit with ears the moment he came into the house. He had to keep "chocolate pep-mints" in his pockets on all occasions, even when they melted in warm weather and necessitated sending his clothes often to the cleaner.

He dealt with Bunny in a man-to-man fashion that enchanted that youngster. Brett could understand that nine years was old enough for a BB gun. Brett would drive him out into the country in his car and set up a target for Bunny to practise. Mother disapproved wholly of the gun, and Daddy discouraged it, but Brett was the sort of fellow who knew what a boy of Bunny's age required.

Shirewood was younger than Nancy. Perhaps that knowledge gave her a feeling of false security. Perhaps the thought of any man's falling in love with her, who could not hold her own husband, seemed to her too unlikely for consideration. At all events, she allowed Brett to take her and the children for drives during the long summer evenings when Mrs. Hale left the dinner table to go straight to bed. She allowed him to form the habit of dropping in on his way to his office in the morning "just to see if you all survived the night!"

He treated her with a deference which she found soothing after months of practically being sent to Coventry by the town. He listened to her opinions on the most abstruse subjects and, flatteringly, accepted them as his own. He would start to his feet when she came into the room, wearing one of the thin white gowns she liked best, and stand looking at her with such warm admiration in his young face that Nancy's spirits soared unaccountably.

"I love to see you in white," he would say; but if the next evening she wore blue, it appeared that he loved to see her in that color. Once Nancy heard him advising Margaret quite seriously.

"Do your best to copy your mother's voice," he was saying. "She has the loveliest voice I ever heard. If you begin now while you're a little girl to talk as she does, you'll be mighty glad of it, I can tell you, when you're grown up."

It became evident to the children that "your mother says" constituted absolute law with Brett.

"No, of course we won't go this afternoon if your mother says not," he would tell Bunny. "It's not manly to worry your women folks, old fellow! That's what men are for, you know—to keep 'em from worrying, to keep 'em safe and protected."

"Your mother says not a picnic today," he announced to Margaret. "Another day, honey. We have to do what Mother wants us to, don't we?"

But there were plenty of picnics. Brett roomed with a young couple who counted largely upon the board he paid to help out their expenses. They adored him, and were willing at any time to pack a picnic lunch, take one of the Meadows children in their little car so that Brett could take Nancy and the other child with him, and drive out to Overland Park or to Silver Falls and spend happy, carefree hours while the sun sank like a great yellow moon into the river and the moon came up like a great yellow sun over the hills, and Margaret went to sleep curled in her mother's arms, and Brett's lithe young body lay stretched so close to Nancy that he could put out a surreptitious hand and touch her skirts.

They went to the circus one broiling Saturday afternoon: Nancy, the children, Nina and Phil Gaines, Brett Shirewood. They had reserved seats and drank pink lemonade and ate crackerjack; and Brett bought programs and balloons and soda pop until Nancy firmly forbade further expenditure.

"You're not at all a thrifty person," she informed him. "I'm sure you didn't save ten dollars out of your salary last month."

"Not even five," he answered blithely. "What's money compared to the fun you can buy with it? Last month," he went on in a lowered tone, "was the happiest I ever spent in my life. If I'd had to go head over heels in debt for it, it would have been worth it ten times over!"

She looked at him absently. This was a nice boy, she thought. He was doing a lot for the Gaines. Nina had confessed that since Phil had lost his last job they hadn't known where the money to pay their grocery bill was to come from. Brett had learned of their difficulties in some way and proposed coming to live with them for a while; put it on the

basis of a favor to himself. Nancy believed he referred now to the satisfaction he gained through knowing of the help he had given his friends.

That there could be a personal application of his words she did not dream. She thought of herself still as so completely Dwight's wife that it never occurred to her this almost daily contact with a woman who was still young, who was undeniably lovely, might be dangerous for Brett.

Madge saw that she was oblivious to the danger, and speculated as to the advisability of warning her.

"The harm is done already as far as young Shirewood is concerned," she thought. "He can't be any more in love with her than he is. And if I speak to Nancy about it, it will make her self-conscious, perhaps drive her out of Staunton in spite of her mother needing her." And because she still cherished a hope that Dwight would recover from his anger and Nancy forgive him, she did not speak the words which might send Nancy away.

So it was that Nancy approached her awakening, unwarned.

It had been a hot day in August. Mrs. Hale felt the heat and had been unusually nervous. She had demanded Nancy's attention all day. Wilma kept the children in the shaded back yard so that their noise would not annoy their grandmother. They had eaten their lunch out there, on a card table beneath the great maple. Nancy looked at them wistfully as she passed the window on her way to the dining room where her mother awaited her. Mrs. Hale by this time had become very nearly a confirmed invalid. Backed by Dr. Wilcox and subconsciously upheld by the belief that she was acting in her daughter's behalf by remaining in Staunton, Mrs. Hale stood firm in her decision that she could not yet leave Staunton and that it was Nancy's duty to remain with her mother while she was needed.

So what Nancy characterized in her mind as "the impossible situation" held. She and her husband lived in the same town, not meeting or speaking. She was not married, not divorced, not a widow. Dwight could hold her responsible for his children's welfare but was himself freed from such responsibility.

There was nothing that could be done about it until her mother was better. She had put herself in this equivocal position and she must endure it until circumstance mended it. Her girlhood home which she had thought of as a refuge had proved a trap which held her implacably in its strong jaws.

She had thought Brett might drop in for dinner that night but the hour passed, the children were put to bed and he had not come. Nancy helped her mother to her room, filled the thermos with fresh water, made separate trips downstairs for her book, for the soda mint tablets Mrs. Hale had left on the living room table, for her reading glasses. She bent to press her lips against the thin, sallow cheek.

"Goodnight, Mother! You'll call me if you want anything in the night?"

Mrs. Hale nodded without speaking. She seldom spoke unless she needed something—except to Brett Shirewood.

Nancy went out to the porch where the honeysuckle grew, and dropped exhaustedly into a chair. There were days when she missed Dwight unbearably. This had been one of them. Little things still had power to bring back the old, ecstatic days when they were first married. This morning Nancy had watched a young husband helping his wife into the car. She remembered how carefully Dwight had always performed this little service, making sure that her skirts were not caught in the door, smiling up at her before he went around to take his own place at the wheel.

This afternoon the telephone had rung and a man's voice had said "Hello!" For one mad second she had thought it was Dwight. By the time she had ascertained that it was the wrong number, she was weak and shaking.

"And yet," she told herself fiercely, sitting there in the summer dusk with moths blundering among the honeysuckle and a cloud of gnats veiling the light on the corner, "I'd do it again, if I had it to do over! I'd leave Dwight—I wouldn't go on living with him while he carried on affairs with other women. I'll get used to this after a while. Get used to doing without him. It's because we're both in the same town. I'm always afraid I'll meet him, it keeps me thinking of him all the time. If I were in California I could pretend he was dead. I could mourn for him—and surely the man I married is dead!"

"I wonder if he has a new 'woman of the moment.' I wonder if he misses me in that big house. I wonder if Helga remembers he hates sage in the chicken dressing—I used to have to tell her every time. I wonder if he ever talks of me to Madge. I wonder if he knows I intend to go away when Mother is well.

"Mother . . . I may not be able to leave her for months longer. I must just discipline myself to ignore Dwight's being here. Other women have done it. There was Grace Hastings; she divorced her husband and took an apartment not two blocks from her old home and walked past it every time she went downtown. But . . . I haven't divorced Dwight. I don't believe in divorce—at least I don't believe in re-marriage after divorce. I think it's degrading, this going from one man to another as women are doing today."

It did not occur to her that Dwight himself might wish a divorce; that he might consider his own position uncomfortable. She was the injured person, it was for her to decide whether the separation should assume a legal aspect or not.

Some one came up the front steps, caught sight of her white dress and came to stand beside her chair.

"Brett!" She welcomed him gladly. She was weary of her own thoughts. "Too bad you didn't come before Mother went to bed. She missed you."

"I was busy," he said briefly. He pulled another chair close to hers. He was all in white from head to foot: white flannels, white buckskin shoes, white panama hat which he dropped on the floor beside him. The light filtered through the vines and showed his face, young, lean, earnest.

Without warning he dropped his lips to her bare arm that lay on the side of the chair.

"I didn't come before," he said unsteadily, "because I'd made up my mind to keep away—forever! But I couldn't stand it, Nancy. I couldn't stand it!"

"Brett!" she said in a sharp whisper.

“Nancy, let me tell you! Just once—I must speak just once. I love you so, Nancy! Don’t you know that I’ve adored you from the first moment I saw you?”

“Brett, hush! You must not.”

“Why not?” he demanded. “You’ve been away from—from Meadows—for nearly a year. Divorce him, Nancy—everybody in Staunton knows you have ample grounds. Marry me!”

“Marry you?” She was more amused than shocked. “I’m years older than you, my dear. I’m—”

“Four years, three months and twelve days older,” he said doggedly. “And that’s only by the calendar. In experience I’m years your senior.”

She shook her head. “Sometimes I feel like the oldest person on earth,” she said wearily.

“That’s because you’re lonely,” he told her with eagerness. “What sort of a life is this for a girl—”

“Girl! Don’t be ridiculous, Brett!”

“A girl,” he persisted. “You’re nothing but a darling little girl, Nancy, hardly older than Margaret. What kind of a life is this for you, waiting on your mother, taking care of the children, never going anywhere, never playing, never laughing, never loving, Nancy!”

“Loving!” She put her hand to her throat. “Brett, this talk must stop. I shall not divorce my husband—not at present, anyhow. As soon as Mother is well enough, she and I and the children will go away.”

He caught at this eagerly. “That means you’re not planning to go back to Meadows then?”

“That,” she said with a quiet little air of dignity, “need not matter to you, Brett. Now stop talking foolishly and forget all this. I’d hate to lose my friend,” she said warningly. “Mother and the children and I would miss you.”

He sat in silence beside her, his locked hands swinging between his knees. She could feel how badly she had hurt him but there was no help for it. She did not take his declaration too seriously. Young men were always thinking themselves in love with older women. It was a sort of sentimental measles they had to have. Dwight himself—her eyes darkened as she remembered the older women with whom Dwight had thought himself in love.



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## *Chapter Fourteen*

IN the beginning Dwight Meadows' anger against his wife had been beyond his own control. Literally he could not free himself from the icy rage which possessed him when he remembered the circumstances of his homecoming that October evening.

He had been, as Madge had told Nancy, genuinely concerned about Nancy's close attention to Margaret. He realized that her year had been a difficult one. There were lines of strain in her face, shadows beneath her gray eyes.

It was true also that the pretty widow across the street had made all the overtures. Dwight himself had hardly been responsive. On the day of Nancy's leaving, he had called Mrs. Seymore and begged off from the little dinner she had proposed. He told her that his little girl's broken arm kept his wife closely confined to the house and he was going home to be with her. He cared not at all that the other receiver had been snapped angrily on its hook.

He came in tired but cheerful. It had been a busy day. Perhaps Nancy would enjoy having dinner at the Wellington tonight. It would be a change for her. He pitched his hat toward the table and called:

"Nancy! Hey, sweetheart!"

No one answered. There was a curious sort of silence in the house, he realized. No sound of children's voices, no small feet scampering upstairs, no tapping of Nancy's heels as she came down to meet him.

He ran up and found the rooms empty; not only empty of people, but he could see through open doors that closets had been denuded, dresser drawers emptied. He was bewildered. What could have taken Nancy and the children away? Why hadn't she called him? What in heck did it all mean?

"Wilma!" he shouted. "Helga!"

The maid came from the dining room into the lower hall. He gave a sigh of relief. Somebody in the house, thank heaven!

"Where is Mrs. Meadows, Helga? Where are the children?"

"They go," stated Helga placidly. "All go." She picked up the hem of her white apron in hands which seemed abnormally large and red, and went serenely through with her tale, ignoring Dwight's exclamations, sudden frowns, even his quick questions until she had finished.

“Bunny come home, ban fighting. Eye all swole up. His mouth ban cut. His mama say: ‘Why you fight?’ ‘On account all peoples say my daddy flirt. I knock their block off,’” Helga improvised cheerfully. “His mama she wash blood off Bunny’s mouth and she say: ‘Helga, come help me bring trunk down from attic.’ Then she pack and she go—yes, sir, Mr. Meadows. Her eyes all so black and her face so white. She go.”

There it was, the compact little drama of the afternoon’s events. Bunny had been taunted about his father, and he had fought. Dwight’s heart swelled as he thought of his small son’s taking up the cudgels in his behalf. And Nancy had remembered Mrs. Seymore’s silly behavior, had put the worst construction on it, and had taken the children and gone to her mother. Deserted him! Made a laughing stock of him! Left him to face the questions, the explanations which must be made. All over nothing, too, by George! There had been nothing between him and that darned widow. If ever a man had a perfectly clean conscience, he had—over this particular woman. But Nancy had leaped to her own conclusions. Without even the courtesy of telling him she was going, she had gone.

Bunny gone, Margaret—his little Margaret, his baby! gone—Wilma gone. Nobody in the house but this grinning giant of a girl who mouthed the story of his wife’s desertion with such relish.

The slow, dangerous anger which he had known but three times before in his life began to rise within him.

He remembered those times; clearly, in every detail.

The first had been when he was just a small boy—five or six years old. He had been passing a yard where pansy plants had been newly set in a round bed. A terrier had found the soft earth and was digging joyously. Dwight knew all about dogs digging in gardens. His mother was constantly at war with them. So with the instinct of genial helpfulness which was strong in him even then, he dashed into the yard and began to pull the dog away. At that moment the owner of the pansy plants came around the house and seeing dog and boy apparently engaged in the ruin of her flowers, she hurried forward and grasped Dwight by his shoulders. Before he could explain she had given him the most thorough shaking of his life.

The surprise of it, the injustice of it, seared his child’s soul. He freed himself and with a look which she afterwards described to her husband as “positively murderous even if he is a child!” he walked away.

It happened that her daughter had seen the whole incident from a front window and she came running out to explain the mistake her mother had made. Mrs. Strong was a good woman, though impulsive, and she ran after Dwight and made generous apology. It was no use. He hurried home, could eat no dinner, was sick several times in the night, and even developed a slight temperature to his mother’s complete mystification. Anger ran like fever through his veins every time he allowed himself to think of Mrs. Strong. It was months before he overcame this feeling, years before he forgave her. He had not yet forgotten.

The second time there was less reason for his rage. He was a junior in High School, walking home with two boy friends. Across the street went a bevy of girls like a cluster of flowers in their bright summer dresses. Suddenly one of the boys—his name was Joe

Wenz, Dwight remembered grimly—put out a foot and sent Dwight sprawling on his face. It was sheer animal spirits, a puppylike desire to gambol on this fine day. His “Sorry, old man!” did not come quickly enough to save him from the terrific impact of Dwight’s fist against his face. They grappled and the other boys separated them; and again Dwight was physically nauseated with rage. Hurt pride, offended vanity were at the bottom of it but that he did not realize. He had a mental picture of himself prone on his face on the sidewalk with the girls across the street giggling and staring.

The third time Madge had been present, and his mother and several other women. He had managed to conceal some part of what he felt but the effects had lasted longer. It had been a woman who had offended. With perfect calmness, even with a pleasant little smile she had intimated that he had allowed another to take the unpleasant results of his own misconduct. It may have been that she did not realize the heinousness of what she hinted. In any case, the charge was so ridiculous that Madge had expected him to laugh and make some mocking reply. Instead he had turned white, given the woman one steady look and turned on his heel and left the room. The next thing he could remember he was lying on his bed, his head aching, his hands wet and cold.

Never introspective, Dwight had not troubled to trace the thread of connection which ran between these three episodes. He would have been incredulous had he been told that sheer egotism had prompted the spasms of anger. The physical indignity of the first, the mental humiliation of the second, his helplessness to avenge the third—they struck at the very heart of his vanity, and rage resulted.

Undoubtedly there would have been more opportunities for his anger had it not been for his friendliness, his charm. He proceeded on the belief that everybody was friendly, that he liked most people and they liked him. Therefore he went through the world in an atmosphere of general approval, and the rousing of his anger was a rare event.

Nancy’s action had stirred all the old fires; stirred them to a white-hot glow to which they had never before attained. She had publicly affronted him by leaving him as she had done. She had held up his fault to the public gaze. The very reason for her going was insulting—as though she gave deliberate importance to what should have been dismissed as a trivial matter. How Helga had grinned as she told of Bunny’s black eye and cut lip! Matters were bad indeed if his wife could thus expose him to the ridicule of servants.

He remembered the kindly impulse that had sent him hurrying home to help his wife. How absurd seemed the breaking of his engagement with Mrs. Seymore in the light of what he had found when he reached home! How she would laugh when the story got about!

He refused dinner and spent the night alternately pacing the floor and stretched on his bed, staring at the ceiling. In the morning he went to see his sister and gave her a curt account of what had happened; asked her to see Nancy and tell her of the plans he had made. Madge knew the uselessness of attempting to reason with him now. As well try to remonstrate with a man in delirium as with Dwight when his anger was stirred. The only comfort she could draw from the situation was that Dwight planned to keep the house just as it was, to retain Helga to care for him.

“He must have a reconciliation with Nancy in the back of his mind,” she told Spencer hopefully. “If he really meant the separation to be permanent, he would sell the house, go

to live at the club, or take a small apartment. He wouldn't keep up that big house just for himself!"

Privately Spencer hoped that Nancy would stay away long enough to make her husband bitterly regret his past conduct. Spencer was among the few who did not fall beneath the spell of Dwight's charm. But he would not hurt Madge by telling her what he hoped.

The weeks, the months passed, and still Dwight's rage burned against his wife. Everything that happened seemed to add fuel to its flames. His friends' outspoken—far too outspoken!—sympathy, his father's understanding handclasp, Mrs. Seymore's tender little notes, the meals he ate doggedly at home alone, the silence of the house which had once echoed to the children's gay voices, Nancy's laugh, were so many fagots piled upon the conflagration. Helga formed an annoying habit of referring to Nancy on every possible occasion.

"Mrs. Meadows tell me not to forget applesauce with the pork," she would announce, triumphantly putting the dish in front of Dwight.

"Mrs. Meadows forget Bunny's blue sweater. Must I send it?"

"I ban find this handkerchief when I clean behind the books. It ban Mrs. Meadows."

He considered discharging her, employing a maid who had never seen "Mrs. Meadows," but pride and a feeling of helplessness toward an untrained housekeeper prevented. He sat grimly under Helga's almost daily reminders of his wife.

The day he met Nancy coming out of the store, he went about his work with tense mouth and frowning brow. It had shaken him, that unexpected glimpse of her. He had bowed automatically and gone his way simply because he was too overcome to do otherwise. She was dressed in dark green: dark green suit with a beaver collar, dark green hat pulled down over her chestnut hair, a dark green handbag with silver initial. He wondered who had given her that handbag. He was sure she had not bought it for herself. He knew that she was living on the money her father had sent her. That would not last forever, he thought grimly, and continued to deposit the monthly check to her credit.

It had been a brisk spring day with a hint of frost in the air. Her cheeks were faintly pink, her eyes had darkened in the old way as she saw him. It astonished him afterwards to discover how much he had observed in that brief moment of their meeting. Her hand, for instance, in its creamy little loose glove. Nancy's gloves always smelled of some faint, delicious perfume. He had been aware of that elusive scent as her hand dropped from the knob of the door.

Subconsciously he had wanted her to look tired, worried, distraught; to be dressed carelessly; to look, in fact, as a woman should who was living apart from her husband, who was under the ban of his anger. But Nancy had never appeared to greater advantage, he acknowledged with discontent. Apparently the separation meant little to her. She had the children. She planned, he knew from their talk, to take them to California when her mother was better.

He thought of Nancy all day; woke from fitful sleep that night to think of her. A new note crept into his mind and would not be banished: how good it would be—how good!—to have his wife back in the house again; to see her at the breakfast table, trim in one

of the pretty dresses she wore in the morning, the little curls about her face still moist from her bath; sweetness and freshness personified. How wonderful to come home from the office and find her waiting in the hall to meet him, to see her flush faintly beneath the warmth of his kiss, to have the children tumble down the stairs to throw themselves in his arms! To have lights all over the house, to have the radio going, Nancy consulting him about the children's needs!

More and more he began to entertain the idea of making overtures to Nancy, less and less he struggled against his desire to have her back.

And then Brett Shirewood began to figure in the children's conversation.

"Brett's going to take us out to Leafy Glade tomorrow afternoon. Just as soon as he gets home from the office. He promised!"

"Dad, I showed Brett my model biplane and he says the prop's too small. He's going to help me make a new one."

"You know when it rained so hard the other night, Daddy? Bretty was helping Mother bring in the chairs and she stumbled and he picked her up and carried her into the house just like he does me! It looked so funny to see Mother being carried!"

"Mother says the only time Grandmother ever smiles is when Brett comes to dinner. You ought to hear him joke her, Dad! He says the awfulest things to her but she doesn't mind. She likes Brett."

Brett this and Brett that; Brett here and there and all over the place, apparently. Fear crept into Dwight's heart and conscience at last reared its head and accused him.

"If Nancy has found the right man, the man who can make her happy—what right have you to interfere? You didn't make her happy! You deceived her, you left her alone while you went out with other women, you laughed when she remonstrated. And when it finally came to the place where your own child was called upon to defend your good name, when Nancy left you to preserve her self-respect, what did you do? Did you go down on your knees and ask her forgiveness? Did you hurry to her side to beg her to return to you? No, you posed before the world as an injured husband and laid down terms to her who had not offended."

This volte-face did not come all at once, of course. It was only by degrees, as the madness of his anger left him, that sanity and understanding came. He applied the measure of his own unhappiness to that of Nancy, and for the first time realized the position in which he had placed her. Memory gave him back her remonstrances, pleadings, with the final comment of his own judgment. He sat for many an evening with his head in his hands listening to the merciless logic of that inner voice.

At last he forced himself to ask Madge about Brett Shirewood.

"He seems to be very kind to Nancy and the children," he said with what he vainly hoped was a careless manner. "Do you know him?"

"I've met him—at Mrs. Hale's," Madge admitted. "He's a trifle younger than Nancy, I believe; a good looking young fellow, and, as you say, very kind to her and the children."

Dwight hesitated, cleared his throat, and asked a question with stiff lips.

“Is he—in love with Nancy?”

His sister smiled. “He is, Dwight, but I doubt if he knows it yet. And most certainly Nancy does not.”

“He’s there every day—all day!” Dwight burst out. “How can she help knowing it? A young man of that age doesn’t give up his own engagements to take children to the circus without an underlying reason. Nancy must know!”

Madge shook her head. “She really knows very little of men, Dwight. Haven’t you found that out? I think it was one of the causes of . . . one of the reasons you and she were not happy together. She has no brother—her father was away much of the time during her girlhood—Nancy was almost like a child brought up in a convent when she married you. She thinks of Brett Shirewood as a boy. Also,” she added slowly, “she still thinks of herself as married to you, Dwight.”

He clutched at this eagerly. “Does she, Madge? Do you think she might consider—”

“Returning to you?” she finished for him. “I’ve always thought she would, buddy. Of course it will be harder for her now, after all this time; harder for both of you. If you’d gone to her right at first—”

“I know! But I couldn’t, Madge! I can’t even yet . . . not just now—”

She looked at him sorrowfully. “Not over your anger yet? Some day, Dwight, it will last too long—kill something you love, I fear.” She patted his shoulder. “But wait till you no longer feel any resentment toward her before you speak.”

“It’s all mixed up in my mind,” he said miserably. “One minute I feel as though I were the worst cad on earth—that nothing could be too much for me to do to square myself with Nancy. The next, it all comes back to me—that night I came home and found her gone, I mean . . . and I hope then never to see her again. And then I begin to think of this Shirewood chap—wondering if I ought to give her her freedom and let her marry him—”

“Dwight!” Her voice was sharp. “Don’t dream of suggesting such a thing! Nancy’s not in love with him. If you spoke of him she would think it was mere reprisal for your own affairs—”

“I see,” he assented, flushing. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Think of it now! Wait a little longer—wait until you’ve stopped being angry with Nancy. Then go to her—” she smiled at him, her own peculiarly sweet and touching smile. “There’s a better time coming for you both, old boy!”

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

DWIGHT might rise to noble heights of abnegation during the hours he lay sleepless, but when morning came jealousy seized him in its unyielding embrace. The very mention of Brett Shirewood's name on the lips of Bunny and Margaret caused Dwight's throat to close and his jaw tighten. He wanted to rush forth, snatch Nancy up in his arms, and bring her home; go back for his children and then confront Shirewood as man to man. He ached with a physical longing to feel his fist against the other man's jaw, to hear the sweet music of the blows he would rain on Brett's body.

And gradually his remorse for his own wrong doing became swallowed in his bitter jealousy. Always emotionally unstable, he lost sight of the fact that he himself was the cause of his wife's leaving him, and began to confuse Brett Shirewood with that calamity. All his magnanimous impulses toward Nancy's happiness were swept away as week after week his children recited the saga of Brett Shirewood and "Mother."

Bunny, sitting beside Brett in his car and being scolded—yes, actually the fellow had the insolence to rebuke Dwight's son for hanging on to an ice truck and thereby frightening Nancy; Margaret—his baby girl whose little hands on his face were so petal-soft—curling herself in the fellow's lap, patting his face; and Nancy, consulting him about Bunny's loose tooth, about allowing Margaret to go to a children's party without Wilma, about her mother—heaven only knew what else they talked of during the evenings they spent together!—these pictures made him writhe with a misery his happy-go-lucky nature had never known before.

One evening he was amazed to find himself parked in his car across the street from his mother-in-law's house. It was dark and he had turned off the dashboard light so that no one, passing, might recognize him. A car stood in front of the Hales', a businesslike roadster which he recognized as Shirewood's through Bunny's description. Dwight had a sick vision of Nancy beside Brett in the seat, of the delighted children in the rumble.

There was a glimmer of white beyond the honeysuckle vines: Nancy's dress. That meant Shirewood was there, his chair pulled close to Nancy's, his vicarious fatherliness dealing with the day's problems. Dwight's heart twisted. His wife, his children!

And yet, said that calmly cruel inner voice to which he listened less and less these days, this was what Nancy had gone through, not once, but many times since her marriage. He swallowed as he remembered the hands he had held, the lips he had kissed, the little tendernesses he had murmured into appreciative ears. If Brett Shirewood was holding Nancy's hand, kissing her—

He touched the starter, turned his car abruptly and drove away. There was a limit to what he could endure in that line of conjecture.

After that he often drove past the house which held his family; after night when dusk hid him. Once he saw Brett's car drive up and Nancy and Brett alight from it. Bunny sprang from the rumble seat but Margaret was asleep in her mother's arms and Brett lifted her tenderly and carried her into the house. The domesticity of the little scene lingered with Dwight for many a day, stabbed him relentlessly.

Often he heard a subdued sound of voices from the porch. Several times Nancy laughed, her own gay, silvery laugh. Dwight writhed at the sound of it, mingled as it was by a pleasant masculine one. One rainy evening he saw Shirewood run up the steps whistling cheerily and open the door without knocking. So that was the kind of terms he was on! Had the run of the house evidently.

He began to torture himself with thoughts of Nancy's divorcing him, of her marrying Brett. With the sadistic tendency peculiar to the optimistic nature which has undergone a terrific shock, he asked himself if it wasn't his duty to see Shirewood himself, advise him to press Nancy into a divorce.

He knew that she held—had held, at any rate!—rather rigid views on the subject of divorce. Perhaps she would not take the initiative. Perhaps she would be grateful to him if he set matters in motion himself. It could be arranged quite easily on the grounds of desertion. He worked himself at last into a state where he was convinced that Nancy was waiting for him to set her free.

He avoided Madge these days. Instinctively he feared her clear-eyed knowledge of the situation. He half realized that his mind was sick, his reactions were not normal. But when was jealousy ever normal? When was defrauded love sane?

One evening he came home more than ordinarily discouraged and unhappy. He had not been putting his heart into his work lately, and his father had called him to account rather sharply. Bob Meadows had not scrupled to refer to Nancy as the cause of his son's slowing down.

"Put that woman out of your mind," he said sharply. "Divorce her—that'll end the matter. It'll be a year this month. I've consulted my lawyers and they say there'll be no difficulty about the decree. She deserted you, didn't she? Pull yourself together, Dwight. There are plenty of women in the world—yes, in Staunton!—who are just as attractive as Nancy Hale."

The coarseness of it shocked him. For the first time he saw himself as following the path his father had trod. It sickened him. And then, coming out of the Meadows building, he had overheard a scrap of conversation between two of the clerks.

"They say she's only waiting till the year's up to apply for her divorce! Don't blame her either; that Shirewood man will never let her down like the other one!"

It was odd that these carelessly uttered words should have astonished him so. He must have known that his matrimonial affairs had been town talk for a long time. But in his unwonted sensitiveness he heard the voice of public opinion speaking from the lips of one of his own clerks. "Shirewood will never let her down like the other one!"



The year was up this month, as his father had reminded him. Today was the first of October and Nancy had left him on the twentieth. It had been cold enough today to start the furnace. He must see to it at once. Nancy had a man—who was he, where the dickens was he to be found? A wave of unfamiliarity with his own home swept over him.

The house was disagreeably chilly when he reached it. Helga had kept the oven of the gas stove going all day in her kitchen but had not had the wit to light a fire in the living room. Dwight shivered through dinner, a meal he found more than ordinarily dreary. Helga was letting herself go slack. Servants always took advantage of a man alone. Or perhaps it was because he had no appetite for the veal chops and the creamed potatoes, the dessert of gelatine which he detested.

He spoke to Helga about the furnace man; got the address and resolved to see him the first thing in the morning. In the meantime he would have a fire in the living room. He had just finished laying it and was reaching for a match to light it, when the front door opened and some one came in.

“Hello, Madge!” he said, stooping toward the logs.

“It isn’t Madge,” answered a gay voice. “It’s—suppose you turn around and see who it is, Dwight!”

For a puzzled moment he did not recognize her. Then with genuine pleasure he came forward, his hand outstretched.

“Sara Curtis! Where do you hail from? How good of you to drop in and see me! Are you back on a visit? Did you—”

She put up a white hand, laughing, to stop him.

“Wait, wait! One question at a time. First, I’m not Sara Curtis any longer. Surely you’ve heard that? I’m Sara Sevier—nice alliteration, isn’t it?”

“I did hear you were married. Happy, I hope?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Depends on what you mean by happy. I have a lot of money to spend—and you know that always meant a great deal to me. As for the rest—” she held out those marvelously white hands to the flame and putting her head on one side regarded them critically—“my husband is twenty years older than I!”

Dwight was silent, a little uncomfortable at her tone, at her presence here in his living room. She wore an ermine coat fastened only at the waist, its great collar rising behind her small golden head. A faint, elusive perfume filled the somewhat musty room.

“I’m on my way to Mrs. Hampton’s party. Not coming, Dwight?”

“I don’t go to parties any more, Sara.”

“Oh, my dear, that’s not the way to take it at all. Hold your head up, laugh, go out more than usual—that’s the way to face it. Run up and change. I’ll wait for you and we’ll go to the Hamptons together,” she proposed audaciously.

He shook his head. “No party for me! But if you’ll sit here for a minute and tell me about yourself—it’s confoundedly lonely here, Sara!”

“Poor boy, I know. I’ve heard.” She sank into a chair and threw her coat back. She was dressed in oyster white satin, the straps over her shoulders less white than her velvety skin. Long emerald earrings swung almost to her shoulders, there was a quaint necklace of emeralds and seed pearls around her neck. Her hands were bare save for one great green stone that shot its fires from the little finger of her right hand.

“When did you get back to Staunton?” Dwight asked. Suddenly he was uneasy at Sara’s presence here. He remembered that he was alone in the house save for Helga. “Did anybody see you come in?” he heard himself asking, then winced at Sara’s delighted laugh.

“No, dear, prudent benedict, no one did. I’m just around the corner from you—with Mother. I dressed for the Hamptons and then I slipped out to pay you a little call. I hear everywhere that Nancy has a beau—a charming young chap who is going to make up for all the suffering my bad, bold Dwight has caused her!” Her tone was lightly mocking, caressing at the same time. She leaned forward and laid one of those miraculously white hands on his. “Let her go, Dwight. It’s only fair. You’ve played around—give her a chance now.”

His brow darkened. “You talk as though marriage were a square dance with ‘Change partners all!’ at the end of a figure.”

“Isn’t that the way you used to think of it?” she inquired softly. “I have very vivid recollections of some of the things you used to say to me that first summer after you were married, Dwight. About liberty in marriage being the only way to preserve its intrinsic integrity. ‘Intrinsic integrity’—those were very impressive words to me, dear!”

“I was a darned fool in those days,” he told her frankly.

“Or is it that you’re being a fool now?” She leaned closer and the perfume from her hair reached him. It was pleasant to be smelling scent from a woman’s hair again. It was pleasant to be sitting here before the fire, to be warm after the cold dreariness of the dining room, to be talking instead of keeping moody silence, to see fur and satin and emeralds in a room which had so long been empty of such things.

Old habits held him, he slid unconsciously into an old technique.

“It’s nice to have you here, Sara.” He covered her white fingers for a moment with his own. “I was about ready to cut my own throat when you came.”

She smiled at him, pressed his hand lightly before she withdrew her own.

“I’m going to be here some time, Dwight. Is there any reason why we shouldn’t be friends—if we’re careful?”

“No reason at all,” he replied recklessly. “Every reason why we should.”

She gave a quick glance about her. “Who’s looking after you? You have servants, of course, but it seems to me this room hasn’t been dusted lately.”

“Helga gets careless. I’m all right. Only lonely, that’s all.”

She rose and gathered her coat about her. “I must go back now. Tomorrow—could you lunch with me—no, it had better be dinner—at Bentondale tomorrow? Like old

times, isn't it?" She reached up a fragrant arm and drew his face down to hers fleetingly. "Poor Dwight! Dear old fellow!"

Then she was gone, with a soft rustle of her satin gown, a waft of the perfume that teased his memory.

He sat for a long time before his fire, Sara's chair pulled companionably close to his own.

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

**I**N NOVEMBER, to Nancy's utter astonishment, she received a call from her mother-in-law.

It was a gloomy, overcast day and Nancy was wondering anxiously if it would rain before school was out. The children had departed without overshoes or umbrellas; it had looked at half past eight as though it would clear. Perhaps she would better send Wilma

Her mother's maid came upstairs and said that Mrs. Robert Meadows was down in the parlor and would like to see Mrs. Dwight, please.

Mrs. Dwight! The Meadows had always referred to her so, Dwight's friends had thus addressed her. She hadn't heard the name for more than a year now. It gave her a queer little pang, hearing it on a servant's lips. It recalled those gloriously happy days when she furnished the house on Van Tyne Avenue and she and Dwight entertained at housewarmings which threatened to turn into silver wedding celebrations, Dwight said, they lasted so long.

She went slowly down the stairs, a slender woman with eyes the color of rain water and lips that had kept their deep, sweet corners. Those lips were set a little firmly now as she greeted Dwight's mother. It had flashed into her mind that there could be but one reason for this call. Dwight wanted a divorce and he had sent his mother, rather than Madge who was Nancy's friend, to propose it.

This fitted in with a talk she had had with Brett Shirewood only a few days ago. They had been sitting in front of the fire, a coal fire instead of the fragrant logs she had burned in her own fireplace. Brett had asked suddenly: "Have you thought of the position you are putting your husband in, Nancy? You've told me he is a social person, he needs people about him. What's he to do with his life—not free to marry again, living in that big house by himself? If he entertains, he makes himself a target for fresh gossip. He won't ask for a divorce, Nancy—no man would. He must wait for you to make the first move. Have you considered that he might want to be free? It's been more than a year now. If he had wanted you to come back to him—"

Nancy's head had drooped. "Yes, if he had wanted me to come back to him, he would have told me so, long ago. But I never thought of his wanting a divorce, Brett. I can't think of Dwight and me divorced—legally separated."

He had left his chair, come to drop on one knee before her and take her cold hands in his.

“Isn’t it just a little cowardly, dear—the attitude you’re taking? You’re doing neither one thing nor the other. You’re not severing the frayed bonds of your marriage—cleanly, quickly—and making way for a new life for you both; and neither are you going to Meadows and proposing that you wipe out this estrangement—”

She shrank back. “Oh, I couldn’t do that!”

“Then there’s only one thing to do. See your lawyer tomorrow. Get him to apply for your divorce.” He bent his head to lay a kiss in her palm. “I won’t say anything about myself—my hopes. That can all wait until you are no longer Dwight Meadows’ wife. But —” joy shone in his eyes, lighted his young face—“Nancy, Nancy! I love you with all my heart!”

Brett had been right, she was thinking as she confronted Mrs. Meadows. Dwight had sent his mother to begin the preliminaries. That wasn’t like the Dwight she knew. He did his own skirmishing. But then, she felt, it had been a long time since she had had the key to Dwight’s actions.

“Good morning, Nancy! I hope you are well?”

Nancy took a stiff chair facing her mother-in-law.

“You’ve come about Dwight?” she asked directly. She felt she could not endure any leading up to the subject. “He wants a divorce?”

The older woman’s eyes widened.

“Dwight? Dwight wants a divorce? No, my dear. I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“Then why have you come?” Nancy was puzzled.

“It will be hard for you to understand, I suppose.” Mrs. Meadows moistened her dry lips. Nancy saw with surprise that her mother-in-law was nervous. It increased her own feeling of apprehension. “It’s just this, Nancy,” she began in a little rush. “I understand Dwight. You don’t. You expected that he’d come after you when you left him last year, didn’t you? You can’t understand why he didn’t. Well, I’ve come—”

Nancy checked her with upraised hand. “It isn’t necessary that you try to explain Dwight to me, Mrs. Meadows. This talk is painful for us both. If it isn’t because Dwight sent you, I don’t understand why you came.”

“I’m trying to tell you,” her caller said impatiently. “You’ve never seen Dwight when he’s angry, have you?”

“No.” She sighed. It was of no use to check Mrs. Meadows. She knew of old that she would have her say despite protest, interruption. “I didn’t know he could be. I’ve seen him annoyed—irritable—”

“I thought so. You haven’t the faintest idea what his rage is like. Listen, Nancy, I want to tell you.”

She told Dwight’s wife of the three times when anger had caught Dwight, shaken him out of his sanity, held him until time had released him. She began with the episode of his

childhood; described the little boy's wild revolt at the injustice he had suffered, the long weeks that had dragged by before he could bring himself even to mention Mrs. Strong's name.

"Her house lay on his way to school and months later I found out that he had been going four blocks out of his way to avoid it," she said. "I couldn't understand it in Dwight. He'd always had the sunniest disposition. Then there was that other time when he was in High School. The boy was actually sick with anger and as far as I know he never spoke to Joe Wenz again.

"It's something that is born in him, Nancy, something he can't help. I've waited a whole year for him to get over this. I thought if we were all patient and didn't do anything that couldn't be undone later, it would all come right in the end."

Nancy's astonishment overrode her other emotions.

"You wanted it to come right? You wanted me to go back? I thought—"

"You thought I disliked you," Mrs. Meadows said with a dignity that was new to Nancy. "Wait till Bunny is old enough to marry, and see how much you'll care just at first for the girl who takes him away from you! But that's all over with now. You've been a good wife to Dwight, my dear. The Meadows men—"

"Don't say that there's no harm in the Meadows men!" Nancy flashed. "There is harm! I'm here with my mother and my children—my husband and I have not spoken to each other for more than a year—because of the harm there is in Dwight."

To Nancy's further astonishment tears came into the faded eyes which looked forlornly into her own.

"You—you won't believe it, Nancy, but I went through all that myself—with Dwight's father. I cried myself to sleep night after night. I got anonymous letters telling me about other women—I used to burn with shame! I told myself a thousand times that I'd take my children and go away. But I didn't have your advantages, my dear. I had no home to go back to, no money to support myself and Madge and Dwight. I could only endure it the best way I could.

"And afterwards—oh, a long time afterwards when Madge and Dwight were nearly grown I found out the truth: that my husband loved me better than anyone else on earth; better than the children, even. After I knew that, I could afford to be tolerant with his—philandering. I knew he'd come back to me, that I was the nest that held his heart and those little flights of his meant nothing." She smiled at Nancy's frank surprise. "Pretty poetical for me, isn't it? But that's the way I've always thought about it. That's the way you'll think of Dwight some day."

She rose and stood fastening her handsome furs.

"That's all, my dear. I just wanted you to know—about that queer streak of Dwight's anger. I'm not going to ask you any questions. I just want you to think about things and try to understand what Dwight's been feeling this last year."

"But—" Nancy took a step after her—"if Dwight is over his anger now—if he wants me—why doesn't he come here—tell me so?"

A curious change came over the caller's face. Mrs. Meadows seemed to be retiring into herself, putting up barriers of reserve between herself and her daughter-in-law.

"That's just it," she said obscurely. "I thought if Dwight—didn't come to you soon, perhaps you'd—go to him?" The last words came on a questioning, almost an appealing note. She took a hurried farewell and went away, leaving a puzzled Nancy behind her.

A day or two later she had the key to this puzzle; and the little song of hope which had begun to sing itself in her heart died into sick silence.

She had been across the town for a visit to her dressmaker and had been delayed. Miss West was so sorry! She would be ready for Mrs. Meadows in just a few minutes, ten at the most. She had promised a fitting to a woman who was going out of town tomorrow. Would Mrs. Meadows wait?

Nancy waited. The ten minutes extended itself into twenty, into half an hour. She was on the point of telling Miss West she would make another appointment, when the little dressmaker came apologetically in.

"I'm so very sorry to have kept you," she said, at once busying herself with lengths of dark blue crepe and basting thread and needles. "I'll just run this up for you now. It won't take five minutes."

"You look tired, Miss West," Nancy told her sympathetically. And indeed the little woman was very pale and there was a blue line about her mouth. "Suppose we let this go till another time? There's no hurry at all."

But she refused obstinately and the fitting went on. Suddenly Miss West tumbled into a little heap at Nancy's feet.

"Fainted agin," was the stoical comment of old Mrs. West whom Nancy summoned from her bedroom in the back. "She's bin doin' that a lot lately. Here, you put this cloth on her face and I'll hold the camphire bottle to her nose. That most always brings her 'round."

"And what do you do when it doesn't?" Nancy asked, kneeling before the pathetic little figure. "It seems to me she's a long time gaining consciousness. Oughtn't we call a doctor?"

"My stars, no!" Mrs. West looked shocked at the suggestion. "We got enough expense now without adding doctors' bills. Maybe we'd better put some of the camphire on a handkerchief and hold it smack against her nose."

When even this drastic treatment failed to make Miss West open her eyes, Nancy took matters in her own hands. She called Dr. Harding and while she waited for him, she went on bathing the round little forehead with the "camphire," and rubbing the thin wrists.

It was after six before she could leave. Dr. Harding said "heart!" in a tone of decision and went on to give directions for the patient to remain in bed, with light, nourishing food and the medicine he would send out. Nancy had telephoned home that she would be late, and now she set about preparing tea and toast for both the invalid and her mother, and soothing the little dressmaker's fears about her future.

“You’re not to worry at all,” she said. “I know just the woman who will come in and finish what you have on hand. I’ll telephone her when I get home. Don’t worry about the money! She owes me and she’ll be glad to pay it back this way.”

She was thinking about Miss West’s problems as she drove home. How small a margin women like this little dressmaker had to go on! A week of illness, a few debts she could not collect meant disaster to her. How would it have been with Nancy herself if she had not had those comfortable thousands from her father, her mother’s hospitable home as a refuge? She resolved that Margaret should be fitted to earn her own living no matter what came. A woman, untrained, without money of her own, responsible for her children, was the most helpless of created things.

In her absorption she took, without realizing it, the street which led past her old home. She had not been on Van Tyne Avenue for more than a year. It gave her an odd feeling to see the familiar houses. The Bensons had built on a sleeping porch. As usual the Peak’s gardener had put too much straw about the roses. There was a new house going up in the same block with her own home.

She slowed down unconsciously as she passed it. The door opened and light streamed from the hall inside. A woman was coming out; a woman with a gorgeous silk shawl almost covering her gown, with her head bare. Sara Curtis! Nancy could see her perfectly. Sara coming out of Dwight’s house at dinner time. Sara on such familiar terms she could run in without a hat, wrapped in an embroidered shawl.

The years rolled back for Nancy. She was sitting on the Club veranda. Lightning played in the west, clouds veiled the full moon. Some one was sitting with her. Who was it? Lee—Lee Chapman who was engaged to Sara. The clouds parted and the two on the porch saw a woman in a man’s arms down on the lawn. Nancy’s heart plunged, the palms of her hands grew wet just as they had done all those years ago.

The sedan crawled along. Sara ran lightly down the walk and called back over her shoulder:

“Tomorrow then, Dwight! At one!”

The sound of that voice wakened Nancy from her trance. Her foot pressed the accelerator, the car picked up speed.

Sara’s words needed no explanation to Dwight’s wife. Sara and Dwight were having lunch together tomorrow; gazing into each other’s eyes across a small table, Dwight’s hand touching hers briefly when the waiter’s back was turned, Sara’s foot pressing his significantly beneath the table.

Dwight had gone back to his old ways. Had he ever left them? Mrs. Meadows was mistaken, Madge was mistaken, Nancy herself had been the most mistaken of all. Dwight didn’t love his wife. She wasn’t—how did that poetical figure of Mrs. Meadows go? She wasn’t the nest to which his heart returned after its little flights.

It was Brett who had been right. Brett knew. He knew more, Nancy thought miserably, than he had revealed in that talk of theirs. The hot color rose to her temples and she burned with hurt pride as she realized that he had had a very definite reason for thinking that Dwight wanted to be free. Free to marry Sara! Sara herself might not be



free, but that was a detail. In this day of easy divorce, a little thing like her being married wouldn't matter—to Sara!

Nancy drove the car into the old garage, grimly tugged the heavy door shut. She was distraught at dinner. Bunny had to ask her a question twice before she heard it.

“Couldn't we,” he was saying patiently, “Mother, couldn't we, just for once, not go to Dad's this Sunday? There's a rabbit farm that Brett knows about. It's in Northburg. He says he'll take us all to see it, if you're willing. We could have—” he bounced ecstatically in his chair—“we could have dinner in Northburg, Mother!”

She eyed him with a gaze feverishly bright.

“Yes, certainly we'll go to Northburg Sunday,” she promised. “It's very kind of Brett to ask us!”

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## Chapter Seventeen

LIFE caught Nancy up and whirled her after that; around and around until she was breathless and dizzy. Things seemed to happen so rapidly she could not adjust her mind to a condition before it had changed its character entirely.

To begin with, the house on Van Tyne Avenue burned to the ground the day before Thanksgiving. Helga had been careless and left the electric iron attached while she went to her room on the third floor for a nap. By the time the fire was discovered and reported by a neighbor, it was too late to save the house, though many of Nancy's treasures had been rescued and set out in the garden between rows of dead iris and peonies which had not been cut off in the late summer as they should have been.

There was a finality about the destruction of her home which appalled Nancy. There was no going back to it now however much she longed to. It was as if the house had said: "Look here, you! I've waited a year—and an extra month for grace—for you to return to me. Now I've lost patience with you. I've put it out of your power to return."

The children mourned the loss of various toys.

"There's my train, Mother. You've said and said I could have it when we left Grandmother's. And now it's all burned up."

"I know, darling," his mother murmured. "I'm sorry!"

"And my two indoor balls. I left them there so Daddy could play with me on Sunday and now they're gone!"

"And my dollies' buggy!" wailed Margaret. "The wheel came off and I left it so Daddy could fix it and he never, never did!"

Madge came over the morning after the fire to tell Nancy about it.

"The loss is covered by insurance, Dwight says, but a good many things you valued are lost, I'm sorry to say. Some of them, I suppose, were carried off from the garden in the confusion. Your big brocaded chair was saved, and your bronzes and the Dresden peacocks—I've got those at my house. But everything in the kitchen and pantries, of course—"

"Oh, Madge, not my Spode, my rock crystal?"

"Yes, honey, every bit of it. The fire started in the kitchen, you see, and Helga didn't even know there was a fire until the engines came. She was of no use whatever when she

did know, wringing her hands and wailing—you know how little self-control those girls have! She didn't have sense enough to telephone Dwight—”

“He came home to find the house gone?”

“No.” For some reason Madge colored. “As a matter of fact—some one did telephone him—me, too. I jumped into the car and dashed over, and there was Dwight standing in the garden with his arms folded. The roof had crashed in by then and nobody could get anything else out of the house. I slipped my hand under his arm and we stood there, watching it go together.”

“It was Sara who telephoned him,” Nancy said steadily. And when Madge did not answer she asked: “Does Dwight want to marry her, Madge?”

Madge threw up her hands in a little gesture of resignation. “How do I know what Dwight wants, Nancy. Certainly he sees Sara a good deal these days, but there may be no harm—”

“There may be no harm in it.” Nancy pushed a small foot back and forth on the rug, the curving length of her lashes almost touching her cheek. “There never is any harm in Dwight, is there? Madge, how are we going to get out of this mess, he and I? If he wants to marry Sara, why doesn't he tell me so? Or have his lawyer write me. If it had been as you thought—and I thought, too,” she added bravely, “if Dwight really had had his lesson this time, wanted me back, isn't it queer he didn't say so? I've never known him to be especially backward about revealing his feelings.

“This year has been a nightmare to me,” she went on passionately. “Every month I think: this is the last month I'll have to stay here. Next month Mother will be well enough to leave Staunton. And the next month it is just the same, and we never do go, but keep on staying here. I have no home, I have no husband, I have no real friend but you.”

“And Brett Shirewood,” Madge suggested.

“Brett's a darling,” she replied slowly. “He's been a good friend to the children and me. But he doesn't count, Nancy.”

Madge shot her a look. “That's not because he wouldn't like to, my dear!”

“Brett had some foolish ideas at one time,” the younger woman said briefly, and changed the subject. “What will Dwight do now? Where will he live? With you?”

“I want him to, of course; but he says he'll take one of those bachelor apartments at the Harpster until he can make definite plans. It'll be pretty dreary, I should think, but he says it will do for the present.”

“What are they like—those apartments?”

“Bedroom, living room and bath. Meals out or in the dining room downstairs. A radio in every room, maid service, a garage for each apartment.”

Perhaps it was because his new quarters were so cramped that Dwight began to discontinue the visits with his children on Sunday.

“Dad says not to come next week,” Bunny reported. “And I’m glad, too. I don’t like eating downstairs with all those people, and the sitting room is too little to play in, and we can’t make a noise on account of the folks that want to take a nap on Sunday afternoon. I told Brett,” he went on contentedly, “and he said he’d get Grandmother to invite him to dinner, and we’d work on my new airplane afterwards.”

The next thing Nancy had to cope with was Bunny’s suddenly developed habit of running away. The first time this happened Wilma went to his school to see if he had been kept in though it was then long after the hour for dismissal. Not finding him there, she and Nancy scoured the neighborhood in vain. Five o’clock came and with it the early winter dusk. Nancy was frantic. She had telephoned every playmate Bunny had in the hope that he might have gone home with one of them. She even called Brett to learn if he had heard Bunny mention any place he was eager to go. Shirewood drove out immediately and joined the search.

A little after six Bunny strolled in unconcernedly, tremendously surprised that anybody had missed him.

“I just went downtown to do my Christmas shopping,” he explained casually. “I didn’t tell Margaret ’cause I knew she’d want to tag along. And I didn’t tell you, Mother, ’cause I didn’t want you to know what I was going to buy. It’s a secret,” he said with a look of mysterious delight.

“Bunny, how could you?” The color was stealing back in Nancy’s pale face. “You frightened Mother so! Don’t ever, ever go away like that again!”

Bunny nodded understandingly, but less than a week later he disappeared again, turning up finally with a convincing story of having seen the fire engines pass and thinking it was Dad’s ’partment that was on fire this time.

“I missed our other fire,” he said plaintively. “You don’t want me to miss all the fires, do you, Mother?”

Nancy punished him by keeping him home from the Saturday afternoon movie to which Brett had promised to take both children. He wept, promised good behavior, apparently was touched by his mother’s appeal to his youthful chivalry; but several times during the winter he disappeared and Nancy was deeply troubled over him.

She wondered with a sick heart if it was his father in him; if Bunny wasn’t carrying out, in his little boy way, the same impulses Dwight obeyed. Certainly his promises meant as little as Dwight’s had done. Was she bringing up a third generation of “Meadows men” to disregard the sacredness of their pledged word, to wring some woman’s heart with anguish, to turn aside, lightly, casually, from the path of duty and “follow too much the devices and desires of their own hearts”?

Mrs. Hale was almost as distressed as Nancy over the boy’s habit. Nancy explained to him that it was bad for Grandmother to be so worried, and Bunny lifted innocent eyes to hers and said he was sorry, oh, so sorry, Mother, and honest he wouldn’t do it again—honest he wouldn’t! Brett talked to him seriously, even Aunt Madge, whom he adored, was displeased with him and told him so. The effect of this combined reproof, impressive enough at the time, wore off in a few weeks and Bunny ran away again.

That he always reappeared, safe and sound before bedtime, was of small comfort to Nancy. So many dangers awaited a small boy in a town the size of Staunton; and greater than any outside peril was that of the child's own disobedience, the lack of integrity that kept Nancy walking the floor until he returned and caused her a sleepless night afterwards.

One wild January evening when Bunny, after an unusually protracted interval of obedience, had failed to come home until after seven o'clock, Nancy was sitting in the old parlor with Brett. Bunny, sobbing and temporarily penitent, had been put to bed. Mrs. Hale, who had required the services of Dr. Wilcox, had been given a sedative and was now asleep. Nancy lay wearily back in her chair. She was more deeply discouraged than she had ever been before. The high pride which had sustained her all these months was ebbing from her. Bunny needed a man to control him, said the neighbors, said his grandmother, said even Wilma herself. The reproach of the child's continued disobedience cut her sharply. Was she doing her son an injustice by depriving him of his father? Whatever his faults had been, Dwight was always wonderful with the children.

She sighed, and pressed her heavy hair away from her face.

Brett had been watching her, all his loving young heart in his eyes. She looked up suddenly, met that ardent glance, and the hot color leaped to her temples.

Instantly he was at her side, had lifted her gently to her feet. He drew her arms up and laid them about his neck, dropped his cheek against her hair.

"Brett, you mustn't!" she whispered.

"Sweetheart! My poor, tired little girl! Don't think, Nancy, don't reason—just let yourself rest for a minute."

It was so long since she had rested in the shelter of a man's arms! For a moment she let herself go, allowed her head to lie on his strong young shoulder, listening dreamily to the pounding of the heart beneath her cheek. Then reason returned to her and she freed herself, gently but with decision.

"Ah, Nancy! Ah, darling! Don't," he pleaded. He took her hands in his, holding them lightly, tenderly. "Don't go away from me! I need you so, I want you so. And you—you need me, too, beloved! Think how happy we could be together. We'd take a house in the new part of town—I couldn't afford one as big as this, Nancy, but there are some nice little ones I could afford! We'd have such fun, you and the children and I. Evenings, Nancy, in our own home; and Sunday mornings, with Wilma getting Margaret ready for Sunday School and you and I sitting before the fire with the papers; summer days, with all of us planting seeds in the garden, and watering the grass before the sun was high—setting up a bird bath. So many things we could do together, my dearest! Bunny needs a father—"

"Bunny has a father!" It flashed out almost without volition. Then the blood rose in her face and her head drooped as she remembered that Dwight had not sent for the children for three successive Sundays.

"Exactly!" he said, dryly, answering that shamed look. "Bunny and I get along pretty well together?" he asked.

“You’re wonderful with him; with both the children.”

There was a little silence which he broke, hesitatingly.

“It isn’t because—I haven’t a lot of money, Nancy?”

“No, Brett,” she told him gently. “You have a splendid salary for so young a man and —”

“Not so awfully young,” he answered jealously. “And when my grandfather dies—you know I’ve told you about him? the one that’s president of the big company in Detroit? when he dies I’ll have—well, you really might call it a fortune, I suppose.”

“It’s not the money. If I loved a man I wouldn’t care a great deal whether he was rich or poor. Of course with the children, I’d like to have enough to educate them properly, care for them—”

“We could do that,” he assured her. “Nancy dear, why not? You’re young—you’re letting the best years of your life slip by you without happiness. Your husband—everybody knows that he—” he stopped.

“Don’t hesitate to say it,” she said with dry bitterness. “He’s seen everywhere these days with Sara Curtis—Sara Sevier she is now. He would marry her, I suppose—if I divorced him.”

“Then—?” he questioned gladly. “Nancy, nobody will ever love you as I do. I want to take care of you. To keep Bunny from running away, and to send that Dr. Wilcox packing, and to stay with Margaret when she has her tonsils out, and—more than all else besides!—to wrap you so closely in love that you won’t miss—Dwight Meadows!”

He drew her into his arms again and tipped back her head with a tender yet masterful hand. Nancy felt his hard young lips on hers.

Why not, she thought dazedly. She had given Dwight his chance, in marriage and out of it, and he had failed her. As Brett had reminded her, the years of her youth were passing, and she was unhappy, lonely. Brett was a dear. She loved him, and if it was the love of a friend rather than of a wife, perhaps after all that was best. The other kind of love, the kind she had given Dwight, had brought her only anguish. Brett would not hurt her as Dwight had done; more than that, he could not. There was safety in that thought. If Brett took another woman out to dinner she knew she would say calmly: “But why not? I don’t mind in the least, my dear!”

None of the heart burnings which had attended such occasions with Dwight would stir the pulses of Brett Shirewood’s wife! No hours of somber brooding, thinking of Dwight’s smooth head bent attentively across a small table, hearing his pleasant voice deepened to a murmur as he talked to “the woman of the moment.” No other hours spent staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, recalling word for word the scene just past and hating herself for the words she had flung at her husband. No special delivery letters spilling out of Brett’s pockets, or agitated feminine voices asking for him on the telephone. Instead, the serene conviction that she would always be first with Brett, that her desire would come always before his own, that her lightest word would be his law.

Brett’s strong young arms held her closely, Brett’s eager voice went on pleading. She paid little heed to what he said. It was enough, just for now, to rest in his arms, to feel for

the time at least that her affairs were in competent hands.

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

WHEN BRETT took his leave that night he was jubilant. True, Nancy had not promised to file suit for divorce from Dwight Meadows; she had not promised to marry Brett afterwards. She had said:

“Don’t let us talk any more about it tonight, Brett. I’m so tired—I don’t really know what I’m saying.”

With a wisdom beyond his years he had not pressed the matter. He had put her gently into a chair, replenished the fire, and taken his own seat beside her. He talked, amusing her much as he amused Mrs. Hale. He told her funny things that had happened at the office. He related scraps of his family history, stories of the grandfather in Detroit whose eccentricities kept the family always anxious as to what he might do next. He resolutely kept the personal note out of the conversation and when at eleven o’clock he rose to go, Nancy felt rested and relaxed. She let him kiss her goodbye and was touched by his reverent gentleness; touched and grateful and a little amused. It was so unlike Dwight’s vigorous caress that it hardly seemed to matter.

Gradually it came to be understood between them that in the spring Nancy would set Dwight free. Brett began to look at houses in the new residence district, to talk guardedly of honeymoon plans, to bring her railroad folders and furniture catalogues and tentative budgets.

Nancy was dimly aware that she was allowing herself to drift dangerously; that some day she would wake up and find herself out in the current where her strongest efforts would be needed to bring her safely ashore, if indeed she was able to save herself then from the falls of divorce, and marriage with another man.

But she could not rouse herself from the dream in which she moved these days. It was pleasant to have Brett taking charge of her, deciding this question, settling the other. He spoke to Bunny with a new tone of pleasant authority in his voice and there was no more running away. Brett came and went in Mrs. Hale’s house as if he were already a member of the family. Sometimes he dashed in in mid morning, on his way “to see a man.” Sometimes he surprised her in the afternoon, ordering her with a gleeful assumption of authority, to put her wraps on and come out with him for an hour in his car.

Brett made out her income tax report, filling in the blanks with an ease which astonished her, after her long hours of futile wrestling with it. He paid the taxes on the house, he consulted with her mother’s attorney, he interviewed Dr. Wilcox and reduced



that cocky young medico to a condition almost abject. He traded in the old sedan for a smaller car in which Nancy could drive herself and the children about with greater ease and less expense. He even accompanied Nancy and Margaret to the hospital when the dreaded day arrived to take the little girl's tonsils out, and held her hand while the ether mask was placed on her face.

He stayed all that long day in Margaret's room, indifferent to the inquiring glances of doctors and nurses. He knew how to divert her mind when her imploring requests for water wrung Nancy's heart. He held the electric pad against Margaret's aching ear, he told her countless stories, he soothed her at last into a restful sleep; and then he took Nancy out in his car for air and for a heartening cup of coffee.

"You're good to me, Brett," she said simply as they were climbing the hospital steps again.

"I want to be!" he said. "It's time some one was looking after you, I think."

His consideration was the more welcome to her because she was smarting under the knowledge that Dwight himself had not come to be with Margaret. Nancy had sent him word through Madge of the time of the operation. He had not come or sent any word. His callous indifference to his child's pain and possible danger amazed and shocked her. It was not like Dwight's love for his children to ignore this operation. Had Sara completely changed him? Was he taking this opportunity to show Nancy that neither she nor the children meant anything to him now?

She could not know that he had hurried to the hospital that morning, arriving in time to see Brett helping Nancy out of his car, carrying the slightly dubious but agreeably important Margaret up the wide steps.

Margaret's father sat in his own car, his breath coming fast, a little vein in his temple jerking angrily. His first impulse had been to stride forward, take his daughter from this young upstart, and assume his proper place at Nancy's side.

But Margaret's little arm was around Brett's neck, Nancy's face was turned upward to his. A touching little family party, Dwight sneered. He himself seemed to be entirely superfluous. He hung about the lower corridor of the hospital—that same hospital where he had waited for the announcement of Bunny's birth, of Margaret's!—until a bored young interne told him Margaret was safely out of the ether; then he drove away.

This settled everything, he told himself. Nancy would never have permitted Shirewood to accompany her on an occasion like this unless she loved him. The intimacy of that little procession up the steps spoke for itself. Nancy had been pale and anxious but she had walked by Brett's side as if acknowledging his right to be there.

But Nancy knew nothing of this. Like Dwight she decided that night that this settled everything. Dwight had long ago ceased to love his wife. Now it appeared that he did not love his children. She grew bitter toward him, harder; and in consequence kinder to Brett Shirewood.

The climax of the year was reached, she thought, when Sara Curtis Sevier paid her a visit.

Nancy came in to the parlor one afternoon in March to find a richly dressed woman rising to meet her. Nancy carried a deep jar of pussy willows Brett had sent her. She had been arranging them, touching their velvety buds with gentle fingers, when the maid came to say that a lady was waiting to see her in the parlor.

“Hello, Nancy!”

She set the jar down before she answered. Her knees were shaking and her breath coming fast. There could be but one reason for Sara’s call. And seeing her like this, face to face, brought back that old hideous time when she had had what she now knew to have been her baptism of fire, her initiation into the great sisterhood of neglected wives.

“How do you do, Sara?” she said quietly.

“How well you look!” was the other woman’s comment. “It’s a gorgeous day, isn’t it?”

Nancy sat down, lacing her fingers in her lap and looking at Sara with level eyes.

“I don’t believe you came to talk to me about the weather, Sara!”

“No, my dear, I did not. But the amenities have to be observed, do they not? For the first ten minutes of this call, I ought to be just one of your old friends come to pay a social visit, to chat on impersonal subjects, to inquire for the children—that sort of thing.”

“I think we’ll dispense with the amenities,” Nancy said with dignity. “What did you really come for, Sara?”

Her caller shrugged. “You’re such a direct person, Nancy! So we’re to get right down to business, are we? Very well! I came to ask you—since you will have it straight from the shoulder—how much longer you’re going to keep Dwight in the impossible position he now occupies?”

There was a silence before Nancy answered.

“Did Dwight send you to ask me this, Sara?”

“It amounts to that, I suppose. And I may as well admit I have a personal interest in knowing.”

Nancy inclined her head. “I suppose so.” She gave the other so scornful a glance that Sara moved a little nervously in her chair. “Well, you may tell Dwight this: that I would have respected him more—that is, I would have scorned him less, if he’d come on this errand himself. But since he has not, you may be the bearer of my message. I’ll institute proceedings of divorce at the earliest possible moment.”

Sara smiled. “And marry Brett Shirewood at the next possible moment?”

“That,” said Nancy, “concerns neither you nor Dwight. Now,” she rose, “since you’ve learned what you came for—”

“Nancy, is it necessary that we be enemies?” Sara had not risen and her voice, surprisingly, had a note of pleading in it. “I don’t see why. I always liked you and there’s no reason—”

“I beg your pardon! There is every reason.”

“You’re so old fashioned,” Sara complained. “How you ever brought yourself to anything so modern as divorce—but of course, there’s Brett. He’s awfully attractive, isn’t he?”

“Sara, will you please go?” Nancy was holding the back of her chair tightly. “This conversation is, to say the least, very distasteful to me.”

“All right.” She came to her feet slowly. “Just one thing, Nancy. Dwight didn’t—exactly—send me to you. As a matter of fact—” she colored deeply and dropped her eyes—“he wouldn’t approve of it. He has such queer ideas about honor—”

Nancy’s self-control snapped. “Honor! Dwight Meadows!”

Sara’s eyes widened. “I don’t believe you understand Dwight. I think I knew that years ago, that summer—do you remember?”

Nancy made a gesture of distaste but Sara went heedlessly on.

“You thought he was in love with me then, but he wasn’t. Dwight’s—oh, I don’t know how to make you understand! He’s—responsive—I guess that’s the word I want. He plays up when a woman smiles at him, makes it easy for him to ask her to have lunch with him, to dine. He’s like a big, friendly puppy—willing to follow the first kind lady that pats him on the head.”

“Well, you can have the puppy,” Nancy said in a hard voice.

“Nancy, that’s pretty mean of you! You know what Dwight is—better than I do after all, perhaps. I—” she swallowed and made a little grimace at her own frankness—“it’s silly of me but I’m going to tell you something—since you’ve been so unjust to Dwight. Hasn’t it occurred to you to ask if I’m free to marry him in the event you divorce him? I’m not, as it happens.”

“Not?” asked Nancy, incredulously.

“Not. If Dwight had shown the slightest indication of—wanting me as his wife, I’m perfectly willing to admit that I’d move heaven and earth to divorce Arthur Sevier. But he thinks of me as an understanding friend, as a companion who’s standing by him during a hard time in his life. That’s all. I give you my word that’s all. And I don’t know,” she said, taking out her handkerchief and touching it to her brimming eyes, “why I should tell you this. You don’t deserve that I should—going off and leaving him as you did, and then throwing him over for a younger man!”

Nancy was silent. She felt frozen inside. It was outrageous, it was insulting that Sara Sevier should come here and talk to her like this; should put the blame for her estrangement from Dwight on her instead of upon him; should defend her husband to her, admit that she would marry him gladly if he cared for her.

“Say something, Nancy!” Sara said irritably. “Don’t stand there looking at me like that!”

“I have nothing to say.” The old repressions from which Brett had freed her to some extent were strong upon her now. It was a physical impossibility for her to discuss Dwight with another woman, most of all Sara Sevier. If a sudden wild impulse bade her ask Sara to sit down again, to explain exactly what Dwight’s position was, his viewpoint,

his wants, to analyse him, in brief, from Sara's own more tolerant standards, Nancy ignored it. "I have nothing to say beyond what I have already told you."

Sara's handkerchief was tucked away in her handsome bag, Sara's shoulders lifted in a smiling little shrug.

"My word! I don't wonder Dwight couldn't stick it—living with an iceberg like you. No wonder he played around with pretty ladies when he got the chance! No wonder he did not choose to enact the role of prodigal husband when you left him! I'll bet he thanked his lucky stars, turned on the heat full blast to get the frost out of the house, and hunted up the first woman who would put her arms around him and give him a really human kiss!"

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## *Chapter Nineteen*

NANCY was dressing to go downtown to see her lawyer. The divorce petition had been drawn up and awaited her inspection today. Nancy brushed her hair with fingers that did not tremble, touched her somewhat too pale cheeks with rouge, donned the smart new black suit with the sheer white blouse and the becoming hat that she had bought for just this occasion.

Mrs. Hale sat watching her discontentedly. The matter of the divorce had been talked over with her, not once but a dozen times. She protested on each occasion that "Your father would not have liked it, Nancy! Father did not approve of divorce," and Nancy said quietly that neither did she except in extreme cases and this was an extreme case.

Neither mentioned Brett Shirewood in this connection. Nancy wondered sometimes how much her mother knew of Brett's hopes. Very little, she sometimes thought. Perhaps Mrs. Hale considered Brett to be so much younger than Nancy that she regarded their relation as purely platonic. Certainly she welcomed the young man as warmly as ever, and made no objection when he carried Nancy off for a drive, an occasional dinner downtown.

The telephone rang downstairs and Katie answered it. At once the maid's heavy footsteps were heard on the stairs and Nancy put her head out of the door inquiringly.

"It's for you, Mrs. Meadows."

Nancy remembered afterwards as she ran downstairs—Mrs. Hale would not have an extension, saying that the bell would wake her no matter how far it was placed from her room—that she had been thinking of Madge as she went. Madge had been coming as usual to see her; a Madge whose kind eyes were sorry when Nancy told her of the divorce but whose affectionate manner toward her sister-in-law was exactly as same as ever.

"Nancy?" For a moment she did not recognize the voice. "This is Spencer. I've sent the car for you. Madge is hurt. Will you come at once?"

"Madge hurt? How badly, Spencer?"

"We don't know quite yet; pretty badly, I'm afraid. She's asking for you, Nancy. Will you come at once?" he repeated.

"At once! I have my hat on now. Just as soon as the car comes—Spencer, can't you tell me more about it?"

“No. I can’t.” His voice was colorless, lifeless. “The car ought to be there in a few minutes. Griggs started some time ago. Goodbye!”

She stood with the receiver pressed against her breast for a long time, disregarding the operator’s faint “What number, please? What number, please?” as she heard it buzzing through the instrument. Madge hurt—seriously hurt, to judge by Spencer’s voice.

“Oh, God, don’t let anything happen to Madge,” she prayed. “It would kill Spencer!”

Suddenly she hung the receiver on its hook and dashed to the front door. She thought she had heard the note of the car’s horn. But the street was empty and she had time to run up and tell her mother of her destination before Griggs slid the Royce smoothly to the curb and sprang out to open the door for her.

Nancy asked him no questions. Griggs was driving rapidly and his attention must not be diverted. In less than ten minutes Nancy was hurrying up the steps that led to the Hammonds’ beautiful home.

Burton admitted her before she could ring the bell; Burton whose dignity Nancy had considered unshakable but whose eyes were frankly red and whose voice quivered now as he greeted her.

“Mr. Hammond said you were to go directly upstairs when you came, Mrs. Meadows.”

She found herself clutching Burton’s sleeve.

“What is it? What happened, Burton? I must know before—before I see Mrs. Hammond.”

“She slipped and fell, Mrs. Meadows. All the way down the stairs.” He sent a terrified glance toward the shallow-treaded, long flight of polished steps. “We don’t know exactly what happened. The doctors think her ankle may have turned and pitched her forward. The first thing I knew I heard a noise—” he swallowed, remembering that soft thud and the little moan that followed it—“There are nurses with her, Mrs. Meadows, and three doctors—and Mr. Hammond, of course. They don’t tell us how badly she is hurt.” He lowered his voice to a husky undertone. “I’m afraid—pretty bad, Mrs. Meadows!”

She waited for no more but went swiftly up the stairs. Sure-footed Madge! Madge of the light, girlish step! How could it have happened?

The upper hall seemed filled with people though in reality there were only two nurses, hurrying to and fro, two doctors consulting in low tones by the window.

Nancy hesitated before Madge’s door, and one of the doctors stepped forward.

“Mrs. Meadows? Go right in! Mrs. Hammond is asking for you.”

She turned the knob softly and stepped inside.

She had always loved Madge’s room. Two large windows gave on to the east. The delicate limbs of a birch tree were just outside. There were buds on the drooping branches, and while Nancy crossed the room a cardinal flashed its scarlet wings against

the white and green of the tree. Madge's bed was close to this window, Spencer's beside it. Madge's dressing table was almost bare. She disdained the pretty litter of crystal bottles and handsome brushes which most women love.

On Spencer's chiffonier stood a large, silver-framed photograph of his wife, taken in her bridal gown. Madge's face looked out somewhat wistfully from beneath the misty veil. It was as though, just for this occasion, she had wanted to be beautiful for her husband.

Absolute stillness reigned in the room. A nurse stood at the foot of the bed, watching the patient alertly. Another doctor—a foreign looking man with glinting dark eyes and an imperial—was in the bow window, his hands thrust in his coat pockets, his gaze fixed on the street below. Spencer sat in a low chair by Madge, her hand in his.

At the first glimpse of the woman in the bed, Nancy's heart soared with relief. Madge wasn't badly hurt after all! There were no bandages, no evidences of the accident. She lay in apparent comfort on her pillows, a smile curving her lips, her eyes on Spencer. She turned those eyes toward the door as Nancy came in, and a look of relief dawned in them.

"Hello, Nancy!" It was quite her usual voice. "I knew you'd come, dear!"

"But of course I came!" Nancy own voice was rich with gratitude; her eyes watered with reaction to the shock she had had.

Spencer rose and motioned her to the chair he had occupied.

"Sit here, Nancy. Madge wants to talk to you for a few minutes."

As though his words were a signal, the doctor and the nurse left the room, and Spencer, with a quiet, steady look at his wife, followed them.

"You're not in pain, dear?"

"No pain at all. They've given me things—hypodermics, you know. But—I haven't much time, honey. We mustn't waste any of it."

Nancy's face whitened. "Madge, you don't mean—"

"Yes, Nancy, I do. I've done something devilish to myself and they think—all these doctors and nurses and whatnot—that it's only a matter of hours. And I can't be sure of being conscious all the time. So don't interrupt, please, honey. Let me say what I have to say to you!"

The room was whirling, the dripping lace of the birch branches tangled itself crazily before Nancy's eyes. Madge . . . dying! It couldn't be . . . Oh, God, don't let it be! Don't let Madge go out of the world, don't leave Spencer alone like that, don't, don't. . . .

"Steady, old girl," said Madge's warning voice. "It won't do anybody any good for you to break down now. It's bad, of course. I'm not pretending I don't hate it like everything. It's been an interesting world, I've loved every minute of living. The worst is—Spencer. That's one of the things I want to say, Nancy. Just at first you must all leave Spencer alone. Don't try to comfort him—there won't be any comfort for him, my dear boy! Not just at first. Don't any of you offer to come and stay with him, don't try to distract him, just let him alone! Will you remember that, Nancy—and tell the others?"

“Yes,” said Nancy, fighting down the sobs that threatened to strangle her. “But where are the others, Madge? Your father and mother—Dwight?”

“All gone to St. Louis—isn’t it the worst luck? I should have liked to see them all . . . again. Spencer telephoned them—they’ve started—but they won’t get here, of course. Now, Nancy!” There was the old, heartening ring in her voice, the challenging look Nancy knew so well. “It’s about Dwight, of course. I’m not going to stage any dramatic deathbed scene—I’ve never seen a deathbed before, much less been on one!” She smiled, not wryly but quite naturally. “I’m not going to exact any promises from you, nor preach to you. I’m just going to say to you, my dear, that if you’re brave enough and big enough to wipe out all the last year and a half and tell Dwight that you want him to be finding a new house for you all to live in, I’ll stake my life—well, perhaps the stake isn’t so good, as things are—but I’ll assure you that you’ll bless me for my good advice. That’s all, Nancy!”

“M-Madge—oh, Madge!” Nancy’s chin shook, the tears poured down her cheeks.

The injured woman frowned. “Don’t do that, honey. You’ll set me off if you go on like that, and the idea is, you see, to make Spencer believe I don’t mind too much, that I’m not afraid. Let’s talk of you a bit more. What you need at this stage of the game, my child, is a sense of humor; a robust but discriminating sense of humor. You need to laugh at Dwight’s idiotic flirtations just as you need to laugh at Bunny’s silly running away. They’re both Meadows—they’re both dramatizing what they do. Bunny gets a big kick out of coming home to be wept over and scolded and received as one long lost. If you’d laugh at him once, make fun of him for being such a baby as to think he could get along without his home and you and Margaret, he’d stop it. It came to me a little while ago—that it’s that way.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and Nancy wondered if she ought not to go. But the lids lifted a little heavily and Madge went on.

“You’d find, dear, that if you could laugh at Dwight you could love him better, too. Laughter and love seem to go together somehow. . . . Now that’s really all—except that I’d like you to stay with me until—until—all day, if you can?”

There was actually an apologetic note in her voice, a hint of Madge’s own lovely consideration for the plans of others. Nancy swallowed her tears with a rush of self-contempt. This woman, this incredibly courageous woman, was making light of her own death in an effort to spare others. Nancy told herself that if she died for it, she would achieve some measure of Madge’s own beautiful calm.

“Of course I’ll stay,” she answered in a clear voice. “Shall I tell Spencer to come back now?”

“Yes, please.” She closed her eyes again but opened them when her husband bent over her.

“Still no pain, dearest?”

She smiled at him. “No pain at all, lover. Isn’t that grand?”

Nancy had moved several paces backward and she had a strange feeling that she was eavesdropping on these two; these two who never before in her hearing had said



“dearest” and “lover.”

The hours slid swiftly by; at least they seemed swift to Nancy, watching with awed eyes the hands of Madge’s little gold clock moving to four, to five, to six. How much longer would it be?

Now and then a nurse lifted the sheet from Madge’s bare arm and shot a glittering needle into its whiteness. Now and then one of the doctors came to drop sensitive fingers to Madge’s wrist, to meet the patient’s smile with one that came a little difficultly even to these men who had seen many women die.

Now and then Madge murmured something to her husband that the others could not hear. He always bent his head toward her lips when she spoke but he did not touch her beyond that close grasp of her hand. Nancy felt—and somehow she knew that the others in the room knew, too—that everything had long ago been said between this husband and wife who had loved each other so dearly, so flawlessly in their years together, that nothing remained unsaid now at the last. No forgiveness to be asked for little unkindnesses, no explanations to be made of thoughtless speech, no begging not to be forgotten, not to grieve unduly. Nothing but the steady handclasp, the message of her eyes to his.

“Mother and Father—Dwight—they haven’t come yet?” she asked in a clear, natural tone soon after six.

“Not yet, dearest. It’s hours too soon for them to get here.”

“Too bad—they’ll be sorry. Don’t let them blame themselves for going, Spencer, if you can help it. They couldn’t have known, of course.”

Nancy clenched her hands at that. If they could have known—if Madge herself could have known!

“I’ll do my best for them, dearest.”

“My birch tree—wasn’t it nice that the leaves had come out? It’s a beautiful evening, isn’t it, Spencer? I thought I heard a redbird whistle a while ago.”

“You did,” he told her. “There’s been one about the place all afternoon.”

More moments of silence; then suddenly Madge spoke.

“I should like—I should like to be alone with you—when it happens, lover!”

“You shall be, my beloved. Doctor—”

The dark-eyed physician came forward.

“Mrs. Hammond would like the room to be cleared . . .” his agonized eyes spoke the rest of the sentence.

The doctor bent above the bed, touched Madge’s wrist. He motioned Nancy and the nurse toward the door, himself turned away.

On the threshold Nancy paused for a moment, her heart thudding, her eyes almost too blinded with tears to see the beloved face on the pillows. Madge smiled at her, sketched a little gesture of farewell with her left hand; then the door closed on husband and wife, and Nancy had looked her last on Madge, alive.

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## Chapter Twenty

IT was late the same night. Nancy had lost track of time but she thought it must be somewhere around midnight.

The Meadows had arrived, distraught with anxiety and had been told the dreadful news. The house rang with Mrs. Meadows' cries of grief, with Bob Meadows' hoarse sobs. Dwight had tried to comfort him, his own eyes frankly red, his big shoulders rising now and then on a long sob.

He and Nancy greeted each other quietly. In the presence of the calamity which had befallen the world at Madge's going, their own affairs had seemed of small importance.

Dwight persuaded his parents at last to return to their own home for the night. He had spared Spencer those last arrangements which seem so unreal, so horrible to the newly bereaved. Spencer was shut up in a guest room. He had been there ever since he stepped quietly out of Madge's room and said to the little group of doctors and nurses in the hall: "You may go in now."

"Nancy!" It was Dwight's voice behind her and she wheeled abruptly. "Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you. I wanted to speak to you about Spencer. Oughtn't some one to go in and talk to him? He's been shut up in there for hours. He may have fainted, for all we know—"

"No." Nancy shook her head wearily. She had had to explain this many times before; to the doctors, to Madge's parents, now to Dwight. "That was one of the things she told me; to let Spencer alone—not to try to comfort him."

"But it seems so heartless—" Dwight began in a bewildered tone. He too was mortally weary. He had returned from a strenuous day, a long drive, to assume complete control of the disorganized household. It had taken sheer physical strength to remove his mother from Madge's room at the last. And Nancy knew what his sister had meant to him. She could measure the depth of his grief by her own.

"Have you eaten anything since noon, Dwight?" She came close to him, put her hand unconsciously on his arm. He looked down at it without emotion; almost as though he wondered why it was there. "Come out to the dining room and have some coffee—sandwiches. Burton has them all ready." And when he hesitated: "I need food, too. I'll take some if you will."

A maid, her face all blotched and swollen with tears, served them silently. The coffee was hot and strong, the sandwiches were delicious. They brought strength to the spent

watchers.

“Madge knew what was best for Spencer, Dwight. She said to let him alone, and that’s what we must do. Madge knew best.”

“Nancy, could you tell me about it?” Dwight pushed his plate aside, crumpled his napkin on the table. “It’s all so confused—Mother screaming, Dad going to pieces like that, Spencer shut away from us all. I’ve only the vaguest idea of what happened.”

She put her clasped hands on the edge of the table and told him. She began at the first—Spencer’s telephoning her that Madge was hurt. If a recollection of what her errand was to have been that afternoon assailed her, she put it from her and went resolutely on.

She did not tell him all that Madge had said to her—she could not. But she described Madge’s gallant courage, her consideration for everybody there, her regret that Dwight and his parents could not have been with her. When she came to that last scene and she told of Madge asking to be alone with her husband, told of the smile the dying woman had given her as she stood for a moment on the threshold of the room, Nancy’s composure left her and she put her head on the table and wept as if her heart would break.

“Don’t, Nancy,” Dwight said brokenly. “Don’t, dear!”

Neither heeded the little word. Both were lost in a passion of grief for the slender, sweet, loving woman who lay upstairs, a low light shining on the bridal photograph, the white roses Burton had already placed in a bowl on the dressing table.

Spencer went about the house as usual the next day. He was gentle with Madge’s mother, he let his hand be wrung by Bob Meadows. He listened sympathetically to Dwight’s stammered words. But he never mentioned Madge, and he went into her room only when he could be sure of being alone.

Flowers poured in for the next two days: sheaves of lilies, masses of roses, tall white snapdragons, the freesias Madge had so loved, from the friends of her own set; tight little bunches of carnations with stems clipped short, hideous artificial “pieces,” straw flowers in ornate baskets from the Syrians at the market, the factory girls, the clerks. A child robbed a lawn of crocuses and brought them, roots and all, to thrust into Burton’s hand. The butler took them and thanked the little red-eyed donor gravely.

Madge lay on her own bed until almost the hour of the funeral. Spencer would have it so. It was the only stipulation he made as to the arrangements. To everything else that was proposed he assented with a kind of amazement that such things should matter to anyone when the world had stopped for him.

“Are we to let him go back to that house alone?” Dwight demanded, as they turned into Garfield Terrace after the funeral. Spencer had ridden with his parents-in-law, Nancy with Dwight. Neither perceived any awkwardness in the arrangement. The great fact of Madge’s death had wiped out embarrassment for the time being. “Hadn’t I better offer to stay—just for tonight?”

“No,” said Nancy. “Let him alone—as Madge said.”

“You’ll be—going home yourself?” he asked. They had been together for most of the hours of the two days past; arranging, consulting, taking turns in soothing Mrs.

Meadows' hysterics. There had been so much to do, the atmosphere of the house had been so abnormal, that neither had stopped to remember the strangeness of their position. But now Dwight avoided her eyes and she felt the color stealing into her own cheeks. She looked very young and sorrowful in her black gown, though she did not realize that. She had loved Madge; had been with her almost to the end. Dwight's heart went out to her in a great rush of mingled gratitude and envy when he thought of that.

"Yes—I'm going home. There's nothing more I can do here. And the children need me."

"The—the children," Dwight stammered. His children, his son that looked so like himself, his baby girl. Then he remembered Margaret in Brett Shirewood's arms, being carried up the steps of the hospital, and his face hardened. "Shall I drive you to Mrs. Hale's?" he asked formally.

Nancy drew back, hurt by his tone. She told herself that he was losing no time in making her understand that this interlude had meant nothing where their own affairs were concerned. Her tone was quite as formal as his own as she replied that there was no need, that Griggs would take her home.

Brett Shirewood was waiting for her when she returned. The children were with him, and all three welcomed her with subdued joy. She had been vaguely aware of Brett's kindness during the last few days. She knew that he had constituted himself the children's guardian in her absence, coming home early to play with them, staying until they were in bed at night. In the brief time she spent at home, he was tender with Nancy; tender and unobtrusive. He was sensitive enough to realize that any intrusion of his personality just now would jar on her.

"We've been so good, Mother!" Margaret was round-eyed with awe as she reflected on her own state of grace. "I washed my teeth every time without Wilma telling me, and I put the cap back on the toothpaste and I didn't worry Grandmother once!"

"That's lovely, darling," Nancy said, smiling.

"And I came right home from school every day," Bunny contributed. "I've promised Brett I'll never, never run away again—never in all my life!"

"Bunny, how I hope you'll keep that promise!"

Wilma appeared at the parlor door. "Time to wash your hands and faces for dinner," she announced and the two reformed characters rose proudly and went upstairs dutifully, even gladly.

"Aren't they darlings?" Nancy asked.

"Darlings! They really have been good, Nancy. It's been a hard time for you, sweetheart," he said softly. "I've thought of my girl all the time, wished I could be with her. Your mother says Mr. Johnson telephoned—about the divorce petition, you know—and I called him and explained the circumstances. He says you must see him this week, if possible. He wants to get it through in this term of court, you know, and there isn't too much time."

She looked at him blankly. Mr. Johnson and the divorce petition and terms of court! To be sure—she was getting a divorce from Dwight! Dwight in whose company she had

been so constantly for the last two days. Funny to be consulting a man about music for his sister's funeral, and whether the doctor ought to be called again for his mother, when all the time you were divorcing him!

Dwight knew about the divorce. Mr. Johnson said he had seen his lawyer and he had notified Mr. Meadows. Such a roundabout method, when she and Dwight could have talked it over in some of the long hours they had spent together. They had driven down to the undertaker's to select the soft gray casket in which Madge would lie. They had gone out to the cemetery to make sure the right space in the family plot was chosen. Sad, intimate tasks which shut out thoughts of lawyers and husbands deceiving their wives and wives divorcing their husbands!

"You'll see Mr. Johnson tomorrow?" Brett was urging. "Or if not tomorrow, the next day? I can't wait to have you free, darling. As long as Meadows has a legal right to you —"

What was a legal right, she thought curiously. The right to come here, in her mother's house, and sit beside her, with a hand on her clasped ones—as Brett was doing?

Brett? Who was Brett Shirewood?

A charming young man who had been kind to her and the children, but who was younger than she was, and infinitely removed from the scenes and emotion through which she had just passed.

She lifted her eyes to his and in them he read something that made his heart go down, down, his throat tighten, his hand withdraw itself from her arm.

"Brett—dear Brett! I'm so sorry! I didn't realize . . . the wrong I was doing you. I've been like—a sleepwalker these last months, but that's no excuse. I'm terribly to blame, Brett. I ought to have thought how this would hurt you. I'm not going to divorce my husband, you see. I love him. I still love him, no matter if he no longer loves me. I don't believe he does, Brett. But that's beside the point. The point is that I'm not going down to see Mr. Johnson tomorrow or any day, and I'm going to tell him to destroy the petition and—and I mustn't see you again, Brett dear!"

He took it like the gallant young gentleman that he was. There was no disputing the finality of her tone; that he realized. Something had happened to her during these days she had spent in her sister-in-law's house. He knew she had loved Mrs. Hammond very dearly. Perhaps the shock of her death had changed all her values. Death did that sometimes, Brett believed. It still was such a tremendous thing to his inexperience that he had no way of measuring its real power.

Perhaps he had never been really sure of winning this graceful, composed, reserved woman. His love for her had been tinged with awe. She had been married, she had borne two children, she had gone through experiences which were unknown to Brett. He loved her, he would always love her. He could see with dreadful clarity the emptiness of the days and weeks to come.

He would leave Staunton; leave it at once. Phil Gaines had a job now; he and Nina didn't need to keep a boarder any longer. He would go back to Detroit and stay with his grandfather; make the old gentleman happy by showing an interest in the business, that business which would be his own some day.

“You’re not angry, Brett?” Nancy asked when the silence had lasted too long.

“Angry?” He laughed shortly. “What an odd word to use, Nancy, when my heart is broken!”

She put both hands on his shoulders, kissed him maternally.

“Oh, no, dear, it isn’t! It’s far from being broken. You wouldn’t really have wanted me, Brett, if you could have had me: a divorced woman, older than yourself, with two children—another man’s children. I must have been mad to dream of it even. I appreciate—oh, my dear, I do appreciate all you’ve done for us since we’ve known you! But it’s all over now. I seem to have regained my senses.”

He took her hands down from his shoulders, kissed them both, one after another.

“I expect this is—goodbye, Nancy, then! I think I’ll go back to Detroit almost at once. I couldn’t stand it to see you every day and not—not—”

“I know. Go then, Brett, it’s much better for you. Goodbye, my dear boy! Goodbye and God bless you!”

Just inside the door he stopped and turned, made her a formal little bow. He was taking leave, though neither of them knew it at the moment, of a boy’s first love, of youth’s idealism, of glamour, of romance.

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## *Chapter Twenty-one*

NANCY was thinking as she had never done before; relatively, calmly, logically, without superficiality. Nothing was perfect in this world: not love, not marriage. Bunny was the dearest boy on earth to her, but Bunny had faults. Margaret was the sweetest of little girls, but she had occasional temper fits, she did not always obey. Dwight had been a good husband, he had loved her dearly; but he had caused her pain and anger by his attentions to other women.

She wasn't going to put Bunny into an institution because he had faults, nor renounce Margaret because she was saucy to her grandmother. But she had deserted Dwight because he philandered.

That was what it amounted to. She had left her husband, not because she had stopped loving him or because she really doubted his love for her; but because she could not endure this fault of his.

The question now was did she love him enough, did she want her home enough to go to Dwight and tell him so? What was it Madge had said? "If you're brave enough and big enough to wipe out all the last year and a half and tell Dwight quite simply that you want him to find a new house for you all to live in—"

Was she brave enough? That was the question she had to decide, the thing she had to think out. She did not think of Sara Sevier at all; a highly significant omission if she had known it.

Other words of Madge's came back to her. "What you need at this stage of the game is a sense of humor!"

An odd prescription for a wife who had left her husband, a woman who had been pretending to herself that she was in love with another man! But Madge had a way of putting her finger on the core of any problem. Nancy believed she had done it on that last afternoon of her life.

Nancy went about the house as usual: sat with her mother, heard Bunny's lessons, made a new dress for Margaret's doll, talked to Wilma about the children's summer clothes, called Spencer now and then just to tell him that she was thinking of him, planned the meals with reference to her mother's capricious appetite and the children's more robust ones; but all the time she was thinking, thinking, thinking.

Slowly she came to her decision. She would go down to Dwight's office and ask to see him. The clerks would glance at one another significantly, her father-in-law might

come out of his own office to greet her, Dwight himself might color with surprise; but it was better than asking him to come here, to the house he disliked; or than going in the evening to the Harpster Apartments. It would be better to see him in his office, in bright daylight, with voices humming outside, typewriters clicking, telephone bells ringing; and she and Dwight talking inside the little room, she in the chair he used to call hers in the first days of their marriage.

She knew the exact moment in which she reached this decision. She had been tidying up her bureau and moved a quaint old snuffbox Dwight had given her soon after Bunny was born. It was a lovely thing of hammered silver with a tiny hand-painted medallion on its top. Nancy kept her powder in it and was so accustomed to seeing it that it had lost all significance to her.

Suddenly she remembered the evening Dwight had taken it from his pocket and handed it to her. It was not unusual for him to bring her gifts. There was nothing about that hour to mark it from scores of hours like it; but somehow it stood out, crystal clear, in her memory.

“How’s the General?” he had asked, and she had replied eagerly:

“Oh, Dwight, he put his hands out to me today! Really and truly he did—I didn’t imagine it!”

Dwight had been impressed. “You don’t say! Let’s go up and see if he’ll do it now.” And on the way upstairs he had put his hand into his overcoat pocket and brought out the snuffbox, wrapped in soft paper.

“This came in today with a lot of stuff from England. I thought you might like it to keep your powder in.”

She had kissed him and thanked him and admired the box; and they had gone on up to the nursery with his arm about her waist. That was all there was to it, but it held such poignant memories for her now that her heart constricted with the pain of them.

The house on Van Tyne Avenue had been standing then; her own house, the house she and Dwight had gone to housekeeping in. Madge had been alive, running in to reproach the baby for not having been her namesake. Spencer had been happy, had not worn the white look of endurance which marked him now. And she and Dwight—well, if there had been even then shadows on their love, at least they had never doubted the love, never tried to tear it into bits as they were doing now.

Nancy was older—many years older, she thought—than the girl who had received the pretty gift so casually. Sorrow had matured her; loneliness had taught her its lesson; the responsibility of parenthood unshared had strengthened her. Her experience with Brett Shirewood had given her, if not full understanding, at least a glimpse of the impulse which carried Dwight away from duty’s path.

“I’ll do it,” she said softly to herself. “I’ll go to him this afternoon—no, I promised Margaret to take her to see Jane Carnaby—but I’ll go tomorrow morning.”

Jane Carnaby, Margaret’s best friend, had lately broken her ankle, and as one who herself had suffered a broken bone, Margaret went faithfully to see the invalid.



All the rest of the day Nancy went about with a light heart. She was merry with the two children that afternoon, she tightened her fingers about Margaret's small hand on the way home.

"Where is Bunny?" she asked Wilma as she and the dancing Margaret entered the house. The little girl had chattered all the way home. "I'm glad I didn't break my ankle when I broke my arm! I'm glad I can hop like this—watch me hop, Mother!"

"He hasn't come home yet, Mrs. Meadows," Wilma said apprehensively. Her apprehension was not of danger to the little boy but of the punishment which was sure to follow his naughtiness. This afternoon it would take the form of being kept in the house; and Wilma would have to answer his hundred questions, tell him to pick up the toys he had got out the cupboard, explain to him over and over that children who disobeyed couldn't have any candy out of the box in Grandmother's room.

Nancy stopped, so abruptly that the hopping Margaret tumbled back against her.

"Oh, Wilma, he hasn't run away again? I thought he was over it. It's been weeks now \_\_\_"

"Maybe he was kept after school." Wilma invariably offered this excuse though Bunny had never been known to be kept in.

Nancy consulted her wristwatch. "I'm afraid not. It's five. Well, there's nothing to do but wait, I suppose. I feel badly about this—I did think he was going to keep his promise this time."

She took off her wraps, went upstairs to put them away. Margaret went to tell her grandmother about Jane's ankle and the funny thing the doctor had put on it.

Six o'clock, seven o'clock came, and Bunny was still absent.

"This is the latest he's ever been," Nancy said anxiously. "Give Margaret her supper, Wilma, and start her to bed. If Bunny doesn't come pretty soon—"

What could she do if he didn't come pretty soon? Nothing but wait. She had the consolation of knowing that he had always returned safe and sound. Something would have to be done about Bunny, though. This was really getting to be important, it was dangerous for a child to be out this late.

"Maybe we better call the police?" Wilma suggested when it was nine o'clock and there was still no Bunny.

Nancy rose suddenly, went to the telephone but it was not to notify the police.

Instead she called Dwight at the Harpster, and to her relief, got him almost at once.

"Bunny's run away, Dwight," she told him rapidly. "He's done it before but he's always been back by seven at the latest. I'm worried about him."

"I'll be right over," he responded briefly, and clicked the receiver into place.

Relief flooded Nancy's heart. It was so good—so good!—to know that Dwight was coming to share her worry; to take matters in his own masterful and efficient hands. She told herself humbly that she must be a very dependent sort of woman; one of the old-fashioned feminine type. In every emergency she seemed to need a man.

“Mr. Meadows is on his way here,” she informed Wilma with dignity. Margaret who had been hanging over the banisters came running down joyfully.

“Daddy’s coming here?” She began to prance about the hall, a gay little figure in her scarlet pajamas. “Oh, I’m glad Bunny ran away! Will he stay here, Mother? Will Daddy stay?”

Her mother banished her to bed, with Wilma to keep her company. The child’s question had set Nancy’s thoughts racing. When Bunny was found—and of course he would be found—she and Dwight would have their talk. The little boy’s naughtiness would serve as an introduction to what she had to say. “Bunny needs his father, Dwight —”

She heard his car stopping in front. He must have driven very rapidly to arrive so soon. She opened the door before he could ring.

“Tell me about it!” he urged without preliminaries. “You say he’s done this before?”

Standing there in the rough skirt and sheer white blouse she had worn to the Carnabys that afternoon, the light from the old-fashioned chandelier pouring over her, the little rings of hair clinging to her temples, her eyes dark with excitement, she told Dwight all about it: how Bunny had gone downtown that first time “to do his Christmas shopping”; how he had absented himself the next time to follow the fire wagons because he thought “Daddy’s ’partment” might be on fire.

“He always has some definite and plausible reason for staying away like this,” she finished. “But tonight—!”

“Why on earth haven’t you punished the little rascal for it?” he demanded. “Made him promise not to do it again?”

“Oh, Dwight, I have! I’ve deprived him of things, I’ve put him to bed, I’ve told him over and over how it worries me. Every time he gives me his word that he won’t do it again, but he always does!”

A slow flush rose in the man’s cheeks and the eyes which had been looking into hers dropped. He was thinking how literally the words applied to him. She had told him over and over again how his flirtations had hurt her, he had given her his word that he would not offend again, and he always had offended!

Nancy went on, unheeding. She was too concerned about Bunny now to be aware of Dwight’s change of mood.

“I’ve thought of every possible place he might go. Wilma called his playmates, I called his teacher. She said he was dismissed with the other pupils at the usual time. I suppose there is nothing for us to do now but to call the police.”

Dwight frowned. He had the usual distaste of police intervention in his private affairs. He cleared his throat.

“How about . . . Shirewood? The boy’s been seeing a good deal of him lately, hasn’t he?”

“Brett’s left Staunton,” she answered quietly.

He took a step forward. "For good?" He could not keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Yes. He's gone back to Detroit. He's going to enter his grandfather's business."

His shoulders straightened as though he had thrown off a heavy load.

"We'll—talk about that later. We must find Bunny now. Do you suppose he might have tried to follow Shirewood? He was fond of the fellow—"

"Dwight, that's just what he's tried to do!" Nancy clasped both hands about his arm in the old, confiding way. "He was terribly upset about Brett's going. I remember now he asked a lot of questions about how far Detroit is and how long it would take to get there and how much it cost—"

"Did he have any money?"

Nancy shook her head. "None that I know of. He had his weekly allowance, of course, but that's only twenty-five cents."

"Let me get at the telephone."

Oh, it was good to hear his voice interrogating the station master, the ticket seller; it was good to know that Bunny's father was in charge of the search for the little boy! In her relief Nancy did not realize the ominous significance of Dwight's failure to get any information in answer to his questions.

"I guess it's a job for the police now," he said, looking at his watch. "It's after ten—the boy can't be wandering about in the dark at this time of night. I'll go down and tell them—take one of Bunny's pictures—"

She nodded and ran upstairs to get the photograph. When she came down her face was white and she was shaking all over. Dwight put a comforting arm around her.

"Don't worry, Nancy! We'll have him safe and sound in a few hours. I haven't talked to the day ticket seller yet, you know. And we know Bunny left of his own accord—that's a tremendous comfort."

The night wore on and there was no word of the little boy. Telephone inquiries were made at stations between Staunton and Detroit but no small boy had been put off and given into the care of the traveler's aid. Bunny's description and the news of his disappearance were broadcast and police radios picked them up and cruising officers carried on the search. Bunny had vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed him.

Nancy's anguish was beyond all words. She could only wait at home, sometimes sitting in the parlor, more often wandering from hall to dining room, from dining room to library and back again to the parlor; jumping every time the telephone rang, hurrying out when the doorbell announced a caller, questioning Dwight with eyes that were absolutely black in her white face and ringed with dark circles.

Wilma took up her station on the stairs, sitting on a step half way down where she could command a view of the front door or hurry to Margaret if she awoke from the restless sleep into which she had fallen at last.

Surprisingly, Mrs. Hale neither collapsed nor grew hysterical. Nancy found time to wonder at her mother's calmness. The shock of Bunny's loss seemed to have banished the last trace of her illness. She sat in the sitting room, alert for news; now and then went out to the kitchen to superintend the making of coffee for the watchers, once bringing Dwight a cup with her own hands.

He thanked her gently and she smiled at him. Nancy thought dully that these two were closer together on this night of agony than they had been in all the years of her marriage.

"Can you give me Shirewood's address?" Dwight asked her toward morning. "By some miracle Bunny might get to Detroit and set out to find Shirewood. I think I'll wire him to be on the lookout—"

"I haven't his address," Nancy replied and was vaguely astonished at the flash of pleasure in Dwight's face. "The Gaines—they live in this block—they would know."

"No need to bother them until morning. It would be tomorrow afternoon at the earliest before the kid could reach there."

"Dwight, how can I bear it!" she burst forth. "That little boy—all alone in the night. . . . Bunny, who's just got his front teeth in again, and who has to be told every time to wash his hands before meals, and who wants the hall light on until he goes to sleep. . . . This isn't a runaway, Dwight, this can't be a runaway! It's a kidnaping. Some brute has got hold of him—you read it in the papers every day. . . . Oh, God, my little boy!"

He took her in his arms, pressed her head against his shoulder in the old protective way.

"Nancy, you've been so wonderful all night! Try to be brave a little longer, and we'll have him back in your arms, dirty and hungry and scared to death of the punishment he's going to get. He hasn't been kidnaped, darling. It's too much of a coincidence that a little chap who's made a practise lately of running away should have been kidnaped. Either he wandered about until he got sleepy and then crept into a garage somewhere and fell asleep, or in some way we don't know about, he's managed to board a train for Detroit. Don't give up yet, sweetheart. I'll find your boy for you—if I have to go to the ends of the earth to do it!"

During the terrible hours that followed Nancy clung to the knowledge that it was Bunny's father who was directing the search. Brett she remembered in a vague way as somebody who had once amused the children, been kind to her. The detectives who came and went, asking what seemed to her absurdly irrelevant questions, Spencer who put himself and his car and his money at Nancy's command, Bob Meadows, shocked and apprehensive but overflowing with comforting words for the child's mother, the neighbors who came in and out in a steady procession, asking if there was any news of the lost child, clucking their tongues with pity for "his poor mother"—all these seemed figures in a dreadful frightening dream from which she prayed to awaken soon.

Dwight was the only real person. He negatived his mother's proposal to take Margaret and Wilma to her house, "so Nancy won't have the bother of them." He knew that Margaret's mother could not bear her out of her sight at this time. He made his wife

eat, lie down. He interviewed everybody who might afford the least clue to Bunny's habits. He dismissed reporters who scented in this reconciliation of husband and wife a more dramatic story than that of the child's disappearance.

He and Mrs. Hale worked together all day. Dr. Wilcox, reading in the morning paper of Bunny's absence and officiously presenting himself at his patient's house, was dismissed by a quiet: "I'm all right, doctor. Just don't bother me!"

Nina Gaines came, her young face pale with sympathy for Nancy. Even Sara Sevier telephoned and Dwight's face was very grim as he returned curt answers to her interested inquiries.

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## *Chapter Twenty-two*

**S**HORTLY before five o'clock the day after Bunny's disappearance the telephone rang and Dwight answered it.

"Western Union calling. We have a telegram for Mrs. Dwight Meadows."

"Read it," said Dwight hoarsely. "This is Dwight Meadows speaking."

There was an official remonstrance which Dwight put down with a few curtly explanatory words. Then came the message.

BUNNY SAFE WITH ME STOP ARRIVED ON AFTERNOON TRAIN  
STOP AM BRINGING HIM BACK STARTING SEVEN-TEN TONIGHT  
STOP BUNNY IS PERFECTLY WELL

BRETT SHIREWOOD

The relief of it, the exquisite joy of knowing that Bunny was safe and well! Nancy laughed and cried, Wilma cried, Margaret screwed up eyes which were perfectly dry and howled sympathetically. Mrs. Hale sat down abruptly and said: "Well!" and again: "Well!"

Dwight—

Dwight had bounded up the stairs, three at a time, to tell Nancy. She had been sitting in Bunny's room, somber eyes on the bright spring day outside. Bunny's clean waists and multi-colored socks which had just come home from the laundry were spread on his bed—that bed which had not been slept in last night! She had tried to busy herself by putting the clothes away, but it had been too much for her.

She sank into the low chair in which she sat to tell the children their goodnight stories, to hear their prayers; and the thought of a rough little head on which the cowlick would never lie smooth no matter how often it was brushed, of a freckled little face, a grubby, imperious hand which tilted her face for a kiss exactly as his father used to do, squeezed her heart until she would only sit in wordless supplication, the sort of prayer that is wrung from desperate need.

Then Dwight had opened the door and come in, and she had known from the look on his face that the news was good.

"It's all right, darling," he said; just as he might have said it two years, ten years before. "The boy's found. He did get to Detroit and Shirewood is bringing him home."

I've told them to send the telegram out to you so that you can see it yourself."

She had broken down then and crept into his arms, crying quietly, her head buried in his shoulder, the old delicious smell of tobacco and shaving soap reaching her and bridging the gap between this day and that other day when she had left the house on Van Tyne Avenue.

"Now you're going right to bed and get some sleep," he said after a while. "Your mother—she's been wonderful, Nancy!—your mother says we'll have some kind of a meal at once and then everybody is going to turn in. I'm going to bring you your supper on a tray. There's a regular mob of people downstairs—friends, reporters, I don't know who else—and they'll pounce on you with a hundred questions if they see you. Get into bed, honey, and I'll have something hot and nourishing up here by the time you're ready."

It was heaven itself, she thought, to lie, propped with pillows, and see Dwight coming in, carrying the heavy tray as though it were a featherweight; to eat with famished appetite the broiled steak and the delicate creamed potatoes and the strawberries he had brought her; to have him sitting close beside her saying: "Gosh! I'd like to know how the kid managed it"; and "Won't I give the scamp a blowing up when I get him home!" and finally, generously: "It's mighty good of Shirewood to take all this trouble for us!"

He wouldn't allow her to talk. When she had eaten, he brought Margaret in to say goodnight. He lowered the shades and raised the windows and pinned back the blowing curtains, as she had seen him do a hundred times before; and then he leaned down and kissed her and went out and shut the door.

She fell at once into a sleep so deep and prolonged that it was nearly noon when she woke the next day. Brett's train would be in at three! Nancy must hurry with her bath and dressing, hurry with her combined breakfast and lunch; must say yes, it was all right that Margaret had stayed home from school today; and yes, she could drive to the station with Mother and Daddy to meet Bunny; and wasn't it a glorious day, and wouldn't they all be glad to see Bunny!

They went down together to meet the train, Dwight, Nancy and Margaret. Dwight was driving the car which had been new just before Nancy had left her husband's home.

"Feel in the pocket," he told her a little grimly.

She put her hand in and drew out a handkerchief and several small packages. Instantly she remembered when she had left them there. She had driven down to the office for Dwight the day before Bunny came home with his lip cut. She had stopped on the way to buy the bay leaves Helga wanted to season tomorrow's meat, to buy toothpaste and several yards of narrow elastic to put in Margaret's bloomers. She tucked the little parcels in the pocket of the car and forgot them.

"You've kept them there all this time, Dwight?"

"I've kept them there all this time," he answered, still with that trace of grimness in his manner.

Nancy was silent. When Bunny was safely home once more, she and Dwight would have their talk. Or was it necessary? Hadn't that long embrace last night said everything? Dwight loved her, needed her; what more was there to be said?

They obtained permission to go out under the long sheds where the train would stop. They were early and Margaret had to be held by her father's firm hand to keep her from darting up the shining tracks to meet "Bunny's train."

It arrived at last, and almost the first passengers to alight were Bunny and Brett Shirewood. There was no trace of the grimy little wanderer of Nancy's fancy. Brett had evidently tidied him thoroughly before starting back. Bunny's head was held high but there was a certain look of apprehension in his eyes. Apparently Brett had made good use of his time to bring home to the runaway the heinousness of his crime.

"Bunny! Oh, darling, darling, how could you do such a thing!" Nancy mourned over him. Then she remembered Madge's words: "Bunny gets a big kick out of coming home to be wept over and scolded and received as one long lost."

"Never mind!" said Nancy briskly. "You were a foolish little boy to try to go to Brett. You see you had to be brought back and everybody in Staunton is laughing at you."

Dwight glanced at her in surprise, Bunny's jaw fell. But Brett took his cue immediately.

"That's what I've been telling him. It's silly to try stunts like this. All you get for your pains is being hauled home again like a baby. How are you, Mrs. Meadows?"

She understood, liked the formal address. It told her that Brett was accepting his new status of family friend without protest. She introduced him to Dwight and was pleased with her husband's unaffected warmth of greeting.

"We owe you a lot for bringing Bunny home like this," he said, holding out his hand to the younger man.

By tacit agreement no more mention was made of the escapade until they reached home and Bunny was sent upstairs to Wilma.

"Now tell us all about it," Nancy cried. "How on earth did he get clear to Detroit without any money?"

Brett chuckled. "By the simplest process imaginable." They were all seated in the parlor now, husband and wife leaning forward eagerly to hear Shirewood's story. "He merely attached himself to a Polish woman with a large family. She spoke only broken English and the conductor appears to have interpreted her explanation of Bunny's presence as a plea to let him ride without a ticket. There were two half fares already among her flock so Bunny seems to have been accepted gratis."

"But—" Nancy protested. "His clothes, his own speech—he couldn't have looked like her children."

Brett grinned. "When he turned up in Detroit he was dirty enough to look like anything! And he had sense enough to keep his mouth shut—at least while the conductor was about."

"But how did he know when the Detroit train left?" Dwight demanded.



"I'm afraid that was my fault," Brett replied. "I took him down to the station one day when I was buying some tickets for my chief and his wife, and the boy asked innumerable questions. He knew I lived in Detroit before I came to Staunton and he wanted to know what trains went there and when—you know how he is when he gets started!"

"But all night!" Nancy mourned. "Poor, tired little boy! And what did he have to eat?"

"The Polish woman appears to have carried enough provisions for the coming summer. Bunny said that every so often she took food out of a basket and handed it around and Bunny came in for his share."

"But the radio warnings, the telegrams I sent to railroad officials?" Dwight asked.

"You described a child traveling alone, didn't you? No detective or conductor coming through the train would have looked twice at a member of a Polish family. Bunny's face was smeared with dirt and jelly, his hands were black, he'd lost his cap before he got on the train. If I hadn't been on the lookout for him I doubt if I'd recognized him when he stepped off at the Detroit station."

"How are we ever going to break him of this dreadful habit?" Nancy asked anxiously. "I'll never have a moment's peace—"

"If you'll let me suggest, Nancy," Brett began, forgetting the formal "Mrs. Meadows," "I'd handle him just as you did a few minutes ago. Laugh at him, be a little scornful of such foolish business as running away from home. All the way back I could see that he was dramatizing the thing: talking of how glad you'd be to see him, what a lot of excitement his disappearance must have created. He was thrilled at being the subject of radio and police search. He'd lost sight of the real significance of what he'd done."

"He'll have it brought home to him in no unmistakable manner," Bunny's father promised.

Brett shook his head. "You'll deepen the importance of the matter if you punish him," he said. "The only way to handle him is to put his faults on the plane of the ridiculous. Bunny loathes being laughed at. He'd rather be beaten than have his pride hurt."

Into Dwight's mind flashed the remembrance of his own childish self, smarting with the indignity put upon him by Mrs. Strong; another memory of the humiliation he suffered when a careless foot had sent him sprawling onto the side walk to the sound of girlish laughter across the street. All at once Dwight Meadows understood the little boy who was his son; realized his temptations, knew the cure for his faults.

"You're right, Shirewood," he said slowly. "You know the boy better than we have known him." He turned to Nancy. "Let me handle this matter, will you, Nancy? I guess the boy's got a good deal of his Dad in him. I think I can undertake to cure him of running away!"

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## *Chapter Twenty-three*

NANCY was puzzled, bewildered, more than a little hurt. It had been two days since Bunny's return, and Dwight had not been near her. He had telephoned—twice; the day after to inquire if everything was all right; the next day to say that he would expect the children on Sunday. But he had not come and he had said no personal word to his wife.

Everybody took it for granted that the Meadows were reunited. Mrs. Hale spoke cheerfully of Nancy and the children leaving her.

"Of course I'll miss you terribly," she said, "but it's only right that you should go back to Dwight now that everything is all straightened out."

Wilma was heard to tell Bunny that he "wouldn't be up to any more tricks when we're all back with Mr. Meadows again!"

Spencer stopped in to give Nancy a list of houses he thought suitable for them to rent. "Though I suppose you'll build on the same place."

Mrs. Robert Meadows kissed Nancy, and her husband said pleasantly that he was glad things were smooth again between her and his son. "There's no real harm in the boy," he said for the dozenth time.

Nancy's position was difficult, embarrassing. What was she to say to all these people who were so definitely sure that she would return to Dwight as soon as he found a house? Dwight had not come, he had never mentioned her joining them.

"We haven't made any plans yet," she said over and over again. Her face began to burn under the kindly curiosity of her neighbors, she wearied of parrying the children's questions.

"Where's Daddy, Mother? Isn't he coming today?"

"I wish Bunny would run away again," Margaret fretted. "It was so nice having Daddy here with us!"

What could be the matter with Dwight? She could not doubt his love for her after those two days they had spent together. Or was it—love? Was it only a shared anxiety, chivalrous pity for grief and fright?

She tried to live those hours over again from the moment of his quick answer over the telephone to the time when he had risen and with a kindly nod for Brett Shirewood, a

smile for herself, had said: "I'll be getting back and snatch a little sleep. Haven't had any to speak of since Bunny staged his disappearing act."

That had seemed perfectly natural to Nancy. His clothes were at the Harpster, it was convenient for him to return to his own apartment. Besides he probably had some feeling about wanting his own house ready before he reclaimed his wife and children. But the next day—why hadn't he come? Why wasn't he ready with eager plans for the future, questions about what they would do now?

It was not because of Brett Shirewood, Nancy knew. Dwight had understood about him even before he had announced his immediate return to Detroit. Dwight had seen their leave-taking, hers and Brett's. Brett had risen on Dwight's announcement that he must go; had taken Nancy's hand in his for a cordial pressure; had said in reply to her stammered gratitude: "Please don't thank me, Mrs. Meadows! It was a real pleasure to bring the boy back to you." No, it was not because of Shirewood that Dwight was behaving so strangely.

Several days passed. The tension tightened; the situation was becoming unbearable.

Bob Meadows stopped in one evening on his way home from the office.

"I told Dwight today that he'd better take his vacation now so you and he can go house hunting," he announced.

"What did he say?" Nancy could not restrain the question.

"He said—by George! now that I think of it, I don't believe he answered me at all!" He looked at her sharply. "You haven't turned him down, have you, Nancy?"

She shook her head, her cheeks burning. It was incredible that Dwight should put her in a position like this. His father departed, muttering discontentedly under his breath.

Bunny had run away on Monday. This was Friday. The children would visit their father day after tomorrow and surely, surely he would say something then, make some reference to his plans. Nancy could only wait; there was nothing overt she could do in the circumstances.

She questioned the children guilefully when they returned at night. Dwight had come for them in the morning but he had not entered the house. Margaret and Bunny had been waiting for him, hatted and coated, and as his car drew up in front they flung open the door and ran out. That was accident, Nancy told herself. But it was not accident that set them down outside in the evening, with their father driving away at once.

"Did you have a nice day, darlings? What did you play? What did you talk about?"

"About my speedboat," Bunny told her obligingly. "Dad says I can run it on the lake in Silver Falls Park. He says I mustn't wind the engine too hard or it'll turn over. He says he wouldn't try to paint it if he was me, that gray's a good color for a speedboat."

"We talked about me getting a bicycle," announced Margaret. "I ast Daddy if I wasn't old enough and I told him you said to wait another year and he said he thought so too but maybe I could have one next fall."

Nancy pressed her hands together in a spasm of irritation. What little egotists children were, she thought, always putting themselves and their concerns first! Why

couldn't they have asked their father some of the questions they put to her endlessly: about the new house and when they would move into it, and wouldn't Grandmother feel lonesome without them and where would Wilma sleep and could Bunny have a dog? Apparently they had avoided the subject of the future as though it had been forbidden!

Well, Nancy told herself proudly, she would avoid it, too. After all, it was Dwight's place to come to her, to talk matters over, to arrange for her and the children's return.

The days went by and beyond the weekly visit of the children to their father Nancy heard nothing of her husband. Finally, as her mother continued to be better, she laid the situation thoroughly before her.

It was the first time they had ever discussed it in detail. Nancy put aside her reluctance to discuss Dwight and told her mother frankly that she had expected to return to him, that she had believed his attitude during those two anxious days to be that of a man who loved and wanted his wife.

"But it seems that I was mistaken," she said bravely. "I've given him every opportunity to ask me to come back, and he hasn't done so. You know that he never comes here, never even telephones now. Mother, I've got to leave Staunton! You're so much better now that I can tell you my plans. I want to go to California—go far enough away that people won't know about my affairs. I want to be where I won't be afraid of meeting him if I go downtown."

To her surprise Mrs. Hale nodded thoughtfully.

"Would you prefer that I come with you, Nancy, or would you rather go alone?"

"Oh, I'd rather you'd come," she said, startled. "I'd worry about you here alone. I know you hate to leave this house, Mother, but if you could think of our trip as just a vacation for you— You could rent the house, you know, and come back to it after awhile if you were homesick."

"I'll do that," Mrs. Hale assented. "It will be quicker to rent it than to sell it, anyway. And I can see how you feel about staying here, Nancy. How soon can we get away?"

Nancy's astonishment increased. It hardly seemed to be her mother who spoke in this casual way of renting her home and leaving the town to which she had clung with such tenacity all these past months. Mrs. Hale read her thoughts and said, smiling:

"I was a sick woman, my dear, for months after your father died. I was even sicker than I knew myself. It's only since I've been well that I realize my own condition. I think a change will be good for us all." She rose briskly, reminding Nancy of the mother who had been so efficient, so busy in years past. "I'll telephone to the papers and advertise the house for rent. You might inquire about reservations and start Wilma to packing the children's clothes."

Whether Mrs. Hale herself was disturbed by the lively curiosity of her neighbors or whether, after her long period of inaction she felt she could not move quickly enough, Nancy did not ask her mother. She found herself buying thin coats for the children, another trunk for their clothes, showing prospective tenants through the house, making other final arrangements before she entirely realized that the plan she had made so long ago was to be carried out now.

When they had only three days more to be in Staunton she wrote her husband a short note.

“Dear Dwight,” it said. “Mother, the children and I are going to California for an indefinite stay. We start Thursday. If you wish to tell Margaret and Bunny goodbye, I’ll send them with Wilma to the Harpster tomorrow evening.” She signed it simply “Nancy.”

It was Monday evening when she mailed it. Tuesday morning, while she was helping Wilma with the packing, Dwight came. Nancy happened to glance out of the window and saw him drive up with reckless speed. He dashed out, slammed the car door behind him, and ran up the steps.

She came down a little breathlessly. Did this haste mean—but no, she told herself sternly, she wouldn’t make another mistake. This was to talk about the children, to ask her to use the money he had deposited to her credit, perhaps to remonstrate against her taking Margaret and Bunny so far away from him.

But Dwight mentioned none of these things when she came into the parlor and shut the door behind her. He said straightforwardly:

“Nancy, what does this mean? Why are you going to California?”

“Will you sit down, Dwight?” she asked composedly. She sank into a chair near him. “I’ve always intended to go—surely the children must have told you?—ever since I left the Van Tyne Avenue house. It’s been Mother’s illness that has kept me here all this time. She’s better now, and there is nothing to keep me.”

“Why?” he repeated.

Her head went up. “I should think you could answer that yourself, Dwight! It hasn’t been very pleasant for me—living in the same town with you . . . living apart—”

He had been frowning at her as though in an attempt at concentration. Now his expression changed. The hot blood rushed into his face, he averted his eyes, the hand from which he had stripped the glove trembled perceptibly.

“I—understand,” he muttered. “I can see that you’d rather go somewhere else. I—there’s nothing I can say, of course.”

His palpable unease gave her back her own poise. She spoke to him quietly, bravely.

“Dwight, why don’t you want the children and me to come back to you?”

Still he did not look at her. “God knows I do,” he said huskily. “God knows it would be heaven to have you with me again, have a home like other men, watch the children growing up—”

“Then, Dwight—why?”

His agitation was so evident that a suspicion of what was to come cast its cold shadow over her.

“Nancy, I—”

“Go on, Dwight! Tell me!”

“I always used to say that there was no harm in my—in what I did,” he began in so low a voice that she had to lean forward to hear him. “I used to tell you that I never passed the barrier that separated honor from dishonor. . . . Nancy, I’ve passed it now.”

There was no sound in the room when he finished his difficult speech. Outside an early lawn mower chirred and clicked, a child’s high sweet laughter floated in through the half opened window. Inside a woman sat rigid and white in her chair, and a man stared with miserable eyes at his own clenched hands.

“Dwight!” The word came in a sharp whisper.

“Yes,” he said humbly. “I know. There is nothing you can say to me about it, Nancy, that I haven’t already said to myself. But . . . that’s how it is.” He gave her a swift upward glance, so full of pleading and misery that it might have stirred her heart had it not been heavy and cold with the shock she had sustained. “You always used to say, Nancy, that you could forgive physical infidelity easier than you could—”

“Don’t!” She put her hand to her throat as though she were choking. She forgot the assertions she had made so often in those earlier years: that there was little to choose in her mind between the spiritual unfaithfulness Dwight offered her and the kind that the law could punish. Now she knew that she had spoken out of ignorance, inexperience. The jealousy she had felt when Dwight took a woman out to dine, to drive, when she knew that he was writing and receiving letters which were decidedly sentimental in tone, was a spring zephyr beside the tornado of wrath which shook her now. All the wifeness in her, buried, she had thought, for nearly two years, rose up and asserted ownership, possessiveness. She felt as outraged as though another woman had claimed Margaret or Bunny as her child. She wanted to do violent things, speak strong, terrible words which would ease the pain that consumed her. But she could only put her hand to her throat and stare at Dwight out of great, dark, horrified eyes.

He rose. “That’s why, Nancy,” he said simply, and turned toward the door.

At that the stricture in her throat gave way and she said: “But you came here, Dwight—when Bunny was lost. You . . . took me in your arms—”

His face twisted. “Don’t remind me! I was fool enough to think, then—to hope—that you might come back to me!”

Slowly the significance of his words penetrated her dazed mind. “Why then, Dwight—and not now?”

“Sara’s husband is suing her for divorce,” he answered tonelessly. “I am named in the suit. I didn’t know that until the day after Bunny was found.”

Again there was a silence in which she grappled with the dreadful truth that stood between them.

“You mean that you—you would have—let me come back to you . . . without telling \_\_\_”

Surprise flickered in his dull gaze. “Of course I would not have told you, Nancy! What use to hurt you?”

“And it’s because—everybody will know now—that you are telling me?”

“Of course,” he answered with a little impatience.

“You would have let me come back to you—bring the children—knowing all the time—”

“But I was only taking you at your own word, dear,” he said eagerly. “I never felt I had wronged you before—before you left me. I knew my playing around with other women had no real significance. I was only amusing myself and them. You were the woman I loved. And then you went away—I was lonely, Nancy—how lonely you can’t realize—”

“Don’t!” she whispered.

“I never loved her,” he went on rapidly. “And after Bunny was lost, and I had those two wonderful days with you, I went to her and told her that I was going to beg you to come back—”

“You dared!”

“You wouldn’t have known about it, darling,” he pleaded. “And you had said there was little difference in your mind between—”

“Oh!” she said in a suffocated tone. “Oh!”

“And then Sevier served papers on Sara and me and I knew that I couldn’t expect you to forgive the notoriety, the talk—”

She walked swiftly toward the door, opened it and went out into the hall. He heard her footsteps on the stairs, running, running. He gave a sigh that was almost a sob, took his hat and let himself out of the house.

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## *Chapter Twenty-four*

A TAXICAB drove along a street in the residence district of Pueblo and stopped before a rambling, brown-shingled house. The man who alighted from it looked at it with interest. So this was where Nancy and the children lived! He, who seldom felt emotion of any kind now, was a little stirred by the thought of seeing her again.

It was summer and the front door stood open. Through the screen he could see a wide hall from which doors opened on either side. A white hat lay on a table, there were tennis rackets stacked beside it, a gay chiffon scarf trailed its ends on the floor. Someone was singing upstairs, someone who stopped at the sound of the bell and came quickly down to answer it.

“Nancy!” He stood with bared head, smiling at her.

“Spencer!” She swung open the screen and held out both hands. The gray eyes had a trick of darkening, he remembered, under stress of feeling. They were dark now and the deep corners of her lips dipped, she flushed with pleasure. “The last person on earth I expected to see! What are you doing here? How long can you stay? You’ll be our guest, of course. Oh, Spencer, it’s so good to see you!”

She had changed, he saw at once, despite the slenderness of her figure, the chestnut hair which showed no thread of gray, the smooth cheeks and throat. For one thing, this rush of questions was not like the old Nancy. There was an exuberance about her, a throwing off of the restraint he remembered as marking her.

“I’ll try to give the answers in the right order,” he smiled. “What am I doing here? Looking for you, naturally. How long can I stay? Well, that depends on—several things. Will I be your guest? For dinner tonight, if I may. I’m at the hotel—”

She shook her head. “We have a guest room—big, cool. It’s yours from this minute. Mother and I would not dream of letting you—”

“Your mother is well, I hope?”

Again her smile, gay, provocative, illumined her face. “Mother is wonderful! This dry, clear air has made her over, she says. And the children—oh, I can’t wait for you to see the children, Spencer! They’re off on a hiking trip but they’ll be back by sundown. But come in and sit down, my dear! Tell me about yourself! You’re thinner, aren’t you? It seems to me that I remember you as heavier than you are now.”



“That’s part of why I am here.” He followed her into a room at the left of the hall. It was a cheerful place, full of gay cretonnes and wicker chairs and bowls of flowers and a fireplace filled this summer day with fragrant cedar boughs. “I had a bad bout with pneumonia in the spring and my doctor thought a change of climate would do me good.”

“Tuberculosis?” she asked directly.

“No—not yet. Not at all, I hope, if I take the proper care of myself. Dr. Harding—”

“Oh, do you still have Dr. Harding?” she began and then stopped, flushing. “Go on, Spencer! Tell me about yourself.”

“Dr. Harding suggested desert country for a while: Colorado or Arizona. I knew that you were in Pueblo and I had a feeling that I was going to be mighty lonesome for the next few months, so I thought I’d come out here and have a look at the place you’ve chosen to live in and—here I am!”

“And here you’ll stay,” she said joyously, “until you’ve put on at least twenty pounds and lost that city pallor of yours. Oh, I’m so glad you picked Pueblo instead of Phoenix or Tucson!”

“Are you, Nancy?” There was a touch of wistfulness in his voice. It had been a long time since anyone had welcomed him like this. “But tell me, my dear! What ever induced you to come here? The place is horrible. Flat, sandy, the mountains just visible—”

“Desert country is usually flat and sandy,” she laughed. “Wait—Pueblo will claim you as it has thousands of others. There’s something about it—its isolation, its history, the river—I defy you to resist it very long.”

“What brought you here in the first place?” he asked curiously.

“Well, we went to California first, you know, and Mother wasn’t happy there at all. She hated the fogs in San Francisco and she said the southern part was over-crowded—she simply didn’t like California, that was all. We thought of Florida and Seattle and even Salt Lake City, and while we were making up our minds, some Pueblo people with whom Mother had made friends persuaded us to visit them here. We came, and I hated it just as you are hating it now. But Mother liked it from the very first and as one place meant about the same as another to me just then—”

“I know,” he said, understandingly.

“We took this house—rented it at first—and the children started to school, and people were nice to us and I began to teach an Indian class—”

“No!”

“Oh, yes! Every day in the winter time, and special morning classes during the summer. I love it. And pretty soon I began to love this funny town dumped out here on the sand, with the Arkansas River turning and twisting at our doors, and the mountains looming in the distance and a clean wind blowing— The nights out here, Spencer! You’ll love the nights! The sky seems so near and the stars are so big and bright, and there’s always a cool breeze—”

He smiled at her enthusiasm. “Well, I’m here, at any rate; and like you, one place seems about the same as another to me. If this sun that’s beating down outside will heal

these sensitive lungs of mine—”

“It will!” she said confidently. “Now I’m going to call Mother—”

“Wait, Nancy! Don’t you want to hear the Staunton news first?”

The smile disappeared, an expression that was new to Spencer replaced it. There was patience in it, he thought, endurance, a hint of sorrow bravely borne. The beautiful lips had a look of discipline, a hardly won serenity smoothed her brow. It gave him a glimpse of a new Nancy, a woman versed in grief from which all bitterness had been expunged.

“Is there any special news, Spencer?” she asked quietly. “The children hear from their father every week, you know, and Mother has letters from her friends. Is there anything I need to know about Staunton?”

“If you put it like that, no. I didn’t know Dwight wrote to the children. I thought you might like to have news of him.”

She hesitated, then evidently made up her mind to speak frankly.

“Spencer, I hope you and I are going to see a lot of each other for the next few weeks. It will make it easier if you don’t mention Dwight. He belongs—all my Staunton life belongs—to the past. I’ve put it all behind me and begun again here.”

“In two years?” he asked incredulously. “You’ve put your husband and your old home—everything—behind you in two years?”

“You forget. My home burned down before I left Staunton. My husband—had ceased to be my husband long before that.”

“Of course you know that Sara is reconciled to her husband again—gone back to him?”

“I didn’t know it,” Nancy said indifferently.

Spencer watched her narrowly. “After the divorce of course everybody expected that you would free Dwight; but he avoided Sara, shut himself up—”

She came to him quickly, put a sisterly hand on his arm. She was quite composed, he saw, even a little stern.

“Spencer, listen to me! When the train carried me out of Staunton that day I made up my mind to leave it in my thoughts just as surely as I was leaving it behind me in reality. It’s not been easy, but I’ve done it. I don’t want my work all overthrown by your coming, Spencer dear. If you’ll just not talk of things I want to forget. . . .”

He promised, a little ashamed of his own persistence. She went upstairs to announce his arrival to Mrs. Hale and Spencer pondered the change in Nancy. She was deeply tanned, her cheeks had an apricot bloom. There had been vitality in her handclasp, a new resonance in her voice. If she had in truth begun a new life in this strange little town, she had also made a new person out of herself in the process. He found himself wondering, as he always referred questions to that dear lost intelligence, what Madge would have thought of her now.

Mrs. Hale came down almost at once, looking, so Spencer told her, ten years younger than she had done when he last saw her. She added her plea to Nancy’s that he send to

the hotel for his luggage and pay them a visit of several days, at least.

“I want you to know the children,” Nancy urged, “and you can’t really do it if you only see them on their good behavior. Bunny’s growing so, it’s hard to keep him in clothes; and as for Margaret—you remember she used to be a little delicate?—or I used to think she was,” she corrected herself. “Well, she’s a perfect tomboy now. As burned as an Indian. Yells like one, too, sometimes.”

She took him up to an airy room at the front of the house and bade him lie down on the wide couch and rest until dinner time.

“I know how to take care of people who come here for their health,” she assured him. “We get ’em by the hundreds but they’re usually a lot worse off than you. Stretch out by these windows where you can see the mountains, my dear, and let me throw this light cover over you. It’s getting close to sundown.”

Despite his interest in his new surroundings, his curiosity over this new Nancy, he dropped to sleep and was awakened at last by a knock at his door. He sat up, confused and drowsy, and called: “Come in!”

A boy of twelve or thirteen entered. He was Dwight’s very image, Spencer thought; the same eyes, the same laughing mouth, the exact set of head and shoulders.

“Uncle Spencer?” he said inquiringly. “I’m Bunny. Mother says dinner will be ready in five minutes, and don’t you want to come down?”

Spencer shook the hard young hand held out to him. “I do, indeed. Just wait till I brush my hair—”

Margaret was standing by her mother when they went down. She was a tall child, her baby prettiness gone, but with a grace, a quickness of movement that reminded one, as Nancy had said, of a lithe young Indian girl. She greeted Spencer without awkwardness and at the table both children answered his questions intelligently, courteously.

Somehow Spencer never forgot that first meal in Nancy’s Pueblo house. It was not only that the altitude had given him an unusual appetite and the broiled steak, crisp fried potatoes, hot biscuits and fragrant Colorado honey seemed to him the most delicious food he had eaten in years. It was not only that the children’s lively chatter amused him, and Mrs. Hale’s restoration to health seemed to him nothing short of miraculous. It was, as Nancy had said, as if he had entered a new life through which she moved, joyous, confident, with a new, sweet dignity.

She sat at the head of the table, Bunny at the foot. Several times that evening Spencer had occasion to realize that she was making the boy feel, with her, that he was responsible for the little family.

“What do you think, Bunny?” she asked when Margaret proposed a drive to Colorado Springs for the next day. “Do you think it’s too far for Uncle Spencer just now?”

And again: “The man’s coming next week to cement the back walk, dear. You’ll watch him—see that it’s done right?”

Spencer pondered over this, accumulated a good deal of food for thought by the time bedtime arrived and the little family separated for the night.

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## *Chapter Twenty-five*

“DOES BUNNY ever run away any more?” Spencer asked idly. He and Nancy sat on the wide porch which ran across the side of the house. The mountains were visible today, a dim blue line against the clear sky. The porch was screened and many of the household activities were carried on out here in the summertime. Nancy was running new elastic through a pile of Margaret’s bloomers, the bright bodkin flashing through the stout gingham, to be replaced by the brighter needle with which she fastened the ends together.

She gave him a look of surprise. “No, never! I’d almost forgotten that he ever did.” And then as his silence seemed to hold a question, she continued: “I suppose it’s partly because he’s had more responsibility since we left Staunton. Wilma had been with us, you remember, ever since he was a baby. We didn’t take her with us to California and Bunny had to look after Margaret, and gradually we fell into the habit of referring certain matters to him.”

“I’ve noticed that,” he answered. “I wondered if you did it purposely, or through sheer necessity.”

“Oh, purposely, Spencer! You see, I began to realize what it meant to bring up a boy without a father. I knew that either I’d have to tag about with him all the time, keeping him out of mischief, defending him against the perils that lie in wait for a boy, or I’d have to teach him to look after himself. And it seemed to me that the easiest way to do that was to start him out looking after his womenfolks. So I used to let him buy our tickets, tip the porter, and even register for us sometimes at the hotels. It was a pretty heavy responsibility to put on a child, but I was careful not to make it too heavy.

“It succeeded beautifully. Bunny—well, once Brett Shirewood told me that Bunny was a born dramatist and I’ve realized over and over again that he was right! Bunny sees himself in the role of master of the house, the only man in a household of women, and he looks after us quite capably. It doesn’t leave him much time,” she finished, smiling, “to get into mischief!”

“You’re a wise mother, Nancy!”

“I—wise?” She flushed. “No one who has made such an utter failure of marriage as I have done can be called wise, Spencer. But I hope I’ve learned a few lessons from experience. I’ve paid dearly enough for them, heaven knows. Madge—” she laid down her work and gave him a clear, direct look—“Madge taught me so many things! She told me to laugh at Bunny when he ran away . . . and that was the way to handle him. One

day,” she went on seriously, “he was really dreadfully naughty. This was in San Diego. There was an elderly man in the neighborhood where we were staying who hated boys. He actually went out of his way to annoy them. One day a group of them, headed by Bunny, rigged up an effigy of him and put it in front of his door with a placard: ‘This is mene Mister Higgins.’ The man didn’t leave his house until after noon the next day so a good many people had an opportunity to see it and laugh at it. Bunny—”

She drew her needle thoughtfully over the gathers in the sewing she held and the curve of her dark lashes swept her cheek.

“Bunny came home with his cock-o’-the-walk look—the look he always wears when he thinks he’s done something clever.”

Spencer found himself suddenly much interested in knowing the outcome of the incident. “What did you say to him, Nancy?”

“I just said: ‘Why, Bunny, I thought you were too old to do a silly thing like that!’ and dropped the subject then and there. But we were to drive to Tia Juana the next day and I’d promised Bunny he could engage a car for us. After the Higgins episode I said I thought I’d better do it myself as he seemed a little too young to have such responsibility.” She laughed a little; a low, sweet laugh that seemed to have infinite understanding in it as well as regret for Bunny’s dismay.

“You aren’t afraid it will make him—a little priggish, Nancy?”

“Does he seem priggish to you, Spencer?”

“No,” he said, “he doesn’t.”

He was remembering last night when Margaret was struggling with a book a little too advanced for her. Nancy was upstairs with her mother and the little girl several times asked Bunny the meaning of certain words. Spencer had grinned at the boyish slang in which he couched his answers.

“What does ac—acquiesce mean, Bunny?”

“It means it’s jake by me, brother!”

“What’s an—ascetic dancer?”

“Esthetic, I guess you mean. It’s a lot of dames all dolled up in a couple of scarfs and running around and doing flipflops in their bare feet,” Bunny enlightened her.

“You know a lot, don’t you, Bunny?”

“Huh!” he said in healthy scorn. “It’s nothing to know about things like that. Anybody can if they keep their eyes open. What I want to know is things like bein’ an airplane pilot, or designin’ ’em—important things like that!”

Spencer, thinking of this scrap of conversation, repeated: “No, he’s not a prig, Nancy.”

Before she could answer, a group of young girls swept around from the front, clustered about her, almost hid her from sight. They were chattering, protesting, remonstrating, too agitated to heed the presence of a stranger.

"Mrs. Meadows, it's all off—the whole thing's off! O'Reilly won't let us use the hall unless we pay twenty-five dollars for it. You know we can't pay anything—not even a dollar—and clear our hundred. We talked to him—we all talked to him. Will you go and see him, Mrs. Meadows? If he'll do it for anybody, he'll do it for you!"

"Of course I'll go," Nancy's amused voice assented. "Don't worry, girls. I'm sure he'll let us have the hall when he understands it's for the benefit of that poor family who lost everything in the fire. Did you tell him we'd clean it up—both before and after the performance? Goodness knows it needs a thorough scouring now!"

"We didn't get a chance to tell him that," a vivacious young person retorted. "He grunted—you know how he grunts when he's mad?—and he said if we wanted the hall we'd have to pay for it like anybody else."

"I'll see him. Don't worry, Bab. How are the rehearsals coming along?"

"Pretty well," said another voice somewhat doubtfully. "But Joan absolutely refuses to wear the Southern Belle costume Mrs. Sells lent us. She says her collar bones stick out too much for a low dress like that, and we're afraid Mrs. Sells will be offended if Joan doesn't wear it, and not let us use that darling old whatnot for the parlor in the second act!"

"Oh, Joan must wear the dress!" said Nancy quickly. "Lots can be done with tulle in the neck, you know. I'll talk to Joan."

"Well, and I wish you'd speak to Mother about the evening rehearsals," complained a girl whose delicate prettiness was ample excuse, it seemed to Spencer, for maternal caution. "She says I can't drive in from the ranch at night with Jim unless some one else goes, too, and there's no one who lives out our way. Besides, I can't spring a thing like that on Jim when he's known me all my life. He'd think I was insulting him, or something. You call Mother up, won't you, Mrs. Meadows, and make her understand that I've simply got to come in with Jim?"

Hardly had these tempestuous visitors departed in a flutter of gay summer frocks before a caller of quite another type appeared. This was a swollen-eyed, shabbily dressed girl who gave a cry at the sight of Nancy.

"Mrs. Meadows!"

After the first rapid glance at her, Nancy rose and laid aside her sewing, and with a murmured apology to Spencer led the newcomer inside. A door closed somewhere inside the house, but not before Spencer had heard a wild burst of sobs and the words: "My old man . . . last night again . . . buggy whip this time. . . Mrs. Meadows!"

When Nancy came out again, alone, her lips were set sternly and there was a little pucker between her eyes. She resumed her sewing in a silence which Spencer presently broke.

"Is this a fair sample of your mornings, Nancy?"

"Oh, well!" She flashed him a quick smile. "This is Saturday, you know—everybody knows I'm home on Saturday. The town is just large enough for everybody to know everybody else and yet to have city problems and difficulties. That girl who was here just now—" she frowned at her sewing—"her father drinks and sometimes he beats her—"

“Why doesn’t she have him arrested?”

“Oh, she couldn’t do that,” she replied quickly. “When he’s sober he adores her, and anyway he’s slowly dying of cancer and has no one but his daughter to take care of him.”

“What do you plan to do about it?” he asked, immensely diverted by her earnestness.

“Oh, I’ll go down and see the old man this afternoon. I always do when he’s had one of his drinking spells, and the scolding I give him lasts him for weeks. It’s all I can do,” she said innocently. “If the case came to the notice of the authorities they’d put him in the county infirmary, and that would break his heart and Mary’s, too. So I’ll just go down and show him the marks on her poor back. He’ll cry like a child when he realizes what he did; and he’ll promise not to drink another drop—ever again; and then he’ll get hold of some awful stuff somewhere, and poor Mary will have it all to go through with again.” She sighed. “It can’t last long. Mary knows that, and she’d rather have things as they are than be separated from him.”

“Nancy, you’re incredible!”

He said it again, a few days later when they went on the “desert picnic” they had been planning ever since his arrival. They drove some forty miles out from the town, arriving just at sunset on a stretch of sand which seemed to Spencer exactly like a hundred other stretches they had passed on the way. Cactus reared its spiny branches on all sides and there was the clean smell of sage brush in the wind that blew steadily from the mountains.

They weighted their tablecloth with tiny boulders Bunny collected. They built a fire and broiled bacon and put it between buttered rolls, and poured coffee for the three grownups and milk for the children, out of thermos bottles.

“Give Uncle Spencer one of the cakes, darling,” Nancy directed when that stage of the meal was reached. She was sitting, child-fashion, on the ground, though Mrs. Hale and Spencer were enjoying the luxury of cushions. “Isn’t that breeze delicious? Notice the shadows, Spencer, as the sun goes down. Did you ever realize before that a shadow could be so full of color?”

After supper Bunny insisted on taking his grandmother to see a queerly shaped rock imbedded in the sand. Nancy packed away the remains of the meal, Margaret curled up, listening drowsily to the talk of her elders, and Spencer smoked reflectively and pondered something he knew he must soon say to Nancy.

Suddenly he was startled to hear her voice, speaking low and steadily.

“Don’t move, Margaret! Stay just as you are until Mother says you may move.” And then as Spencer sat up with a jerk: “And don’t you move either, Spencer!”

His eyes followed hers as she rose so cautiously that there was not the faintest rustle of her skirts. In her hand was one of the thermos bottles, a clumsy enough weapon against the enemy toward which she advanced with a swiftness in sharp contrast to her previous movement. Spencer had just time to glimpse a coiled body, an ugly weaving head, to hear Margaret’s wild shriek, before Nancy’s arm moved downward, not once but again and again.

He was at her side in one swift leap. The sharp edge of the bottle had caught the rattler squarely behind the head and his back was broken but Nancy went on raining blows as though she feared to stop.

Margaret had obeyed her mother's command. Beyond that one scream she had not moved. Her small face was white under its tan, her eyes were dilated in the same fashion peculiar to Nancy when she was excited.

Spencer caught the flailing arm.

"The brute is dead, Nancy!" He faced her away from the writhing mass on the sand. The sight made him a little sick as he realized the short distance between it and the little girl's bare, chubby leg. With his other hand he swung Margaret away and the little group of three, entwined, moved to the parked car, and Spencer helped Nancy in.

"No need to go back there at all," he said cheerfully. "I'll bring the baskets and cushions. Don't cry, dear," he said kindly to the sobbing child. "It's all over now."

"Let her cry," Nancy answered. "It's what she needs." She laughed a little shakily. "I apologize for Pueblo! That's the first time we've ever had such an encounter and we've had scores of picnics out here. Go on, darling, howl," she encouraged her daughter. "Put your head down on Mother's shoulder and make the welkin ring if you like!"

"Nancy, you're wonderful!"

She shook her head. "I'm not—but let's not talk about it. It's a shame to cut our picnic short but I think I'll honk for Bunny and Mother."



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## *Chapter Twenty-six*

SPENCER remained as Nancy's guest for a week; then he took a pleasant room in a family hotel not far from her house, and settled down to regaining his health. Pueblo was entirely used to the presence of invalids. Many who disliked the tourist atmosphere of larger cities drifted into this dreamy little town, disliked it at first, lingered because the sun and wind brought healing in their train, grew to love the long, tree-shaded streets and pretty homes almost smothered in flowers, to enjoy the shops with their bright Indian beadwork and potteries and turquoises set in hammered silver; grew to like the hospitable citizens who went out of their way to accommodate the transient visitor; grew to watch for that elusive line of the mountains, to exult in the wonderful nights; in short, to be captured by the charm of this town which was set down on the floor of the desert with only a river and a highway to connect it with the rest of the world.

Spencer saw Nancy every day. Often he came over early in the afternoon and spent the hours in her living room, reading. He begged her not to make a guest of him and she took him at his word. Sometimes she entertained her girls' club on the porch and Spencer smiled at the babel of youthful voices, the perpetual appeal to their hostess: "Mrs. Meadows!" "Please, will you come here a minute, Mrs. Meadows?" "Will you settle this point of parliamentary law, Mrs. Meadows?"

He marveled at the number and variety of her interests. She could consult with a committee of Boy Scouts about ushering at the Flower Parade; and go from that to a telephonic discussion with the librarian over a matter of Indian history. She planned the details of a church wedding as enthusiastically as she got together a layette for a Mexican girl who had no home. She was busy all day; in demand every hour, apparently perfectly happy in this life she had made for herself.

And yet Spencer doubted if she were happy! Surely a happy woman would not shrink from any mention of the town where she had been born, had grown up, spent her married life. Nancy always fell silent when he mentioned Staunton. Mrs. Hale occasionally said mildly that she had had a letter from a Staunton friend, and infrequently one of the children said: "When we lived in Staunton!" But Nancy herself might never have heard of the place, so completely did she ignore it.

Spencer told himself that this proved she was not so invulnerable to the past as she would have him think. And one day when he had been in Pueblo a month he boldly approached the subject again, forced her to talk of it.

They were alone in the house, save for the maid in the kitchen. Mrs. Hale had gone to preside over a missionary society, Margaret and Bunny had driven to Colorado Springs with a neighbor. It was August and the day had been almost unbearably warm. Nancy came downstairs about four o'clock, cool in a thin white frock, her hair curling in little tendrils from the heat.

Spencer lay in a deck chair—it was too warm to be on the porch—and she motioned to him not to rise.

“I’ll sit right here beside you and we’ll both rest. It’s been a strenuous week for me and I’m glad to have this quiet little time with you. You’re much better, aren’t you, Spencer?”

“So much better,” he said deliberately, “that I’m thinking of going home next week.”

She started violently, turned a face of affectionate protest toward him.

“Going—going away?”

“Going back to Staunton. Nancy, shan’t we talk about—things—this afternoon? We may not have another chance like this.”

“What is there to talk of?”

“Dwight,” he said steadily.

“Spencer, I told you—”

“Yes, dear, I know you did. But I can’t leave it like that. There are things I must say to you.”

She folded her hands resignedly. “Say them then, Spencer, if you feel that you must. I don’t see why you do feel so,” she went on. “It would hurt you terribly if I insisted on talking of—Madge. Well, it hurts me to have you mention Dwight.”

“It doesn’t hurt me to talk of Madge,” he said softly. “On the contrary I love to talk of her. It keeps alive memories I cannot bear to have dimmed by time.”

“But that’s different,” she exclaimed inconsistently. “There was never anything but perfection in your marriage with Madge. Dwight and I—”

“Finish it, Nancy. You and Dwight—”

She shrugged. “Why should I put it into words? You know—everybody knew what the situation was.”

“‘Was.’ That’s the text of what I have to say to you, my dear. You’ve changed—grown. Does it never occur to you that Dwight may have done so, too?”

She grew pale, the eyes she had fixed on him darkened. “What—are you trying to tell me, Spencer?”

He turned sidewise in his chair and laid a hand on her clasped ones.

“Dwight is a different person from the man you left, Nancy. Will you let me talk about him—just for a moment?”

She nodded, without moving her eyes from his.

“After you left Staunton—” he was speaking in a dry, deliberate voice—“Sevier sued his wife for divorce and named—Dwight. You know that. You know, too, that the town talked of nothing else for weeks. I went to Dwight—asked him if you were going to divorce him and he told me that you had written you would bring suit if he wished it; otherwise you would let matters stand as they were. Why did you do that, Nancy? If you never intend to return to Dwight, why have you left the door open?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think of it as an open door. If Dwight ever wishes to be free, to remarry, I shall give him his divorce. But re-marriage is not for me and I prefer not to have the children’s lives scarred by divorce unless it is necessary.” She saw his face cloud with disappointment and went on a little sadly: “Was that what you hoped, Spencer? That after a time—after Dwight had—proved himself perhaps—I’d return to him?”

“Something of the kind. Dwight—I was going to tell you about him, wasn’t I? He’s built a new house on Van Tyne, did you know that? A bigger, more convenient house. He’s restored your garden, added things to it. He’s even—got Helga back in the kitchen.”

“Helga!” She sat musing, her hands still clasped under his. The name brought back vivid memories: of a happy young wife, consulting with her new maids, strolling through the pretty rooms of her home with an air of proprietorship, running down the shallow stairs to be caught in her husband’s arms and kissed; of Dwight singing as he shaved, turning on the radio when he came into the house, exultantly producing the white delphinium seeds for which she had written to Norway; of Bunny, a baby in a blue blanket with his young parents hanging above his crib and exchanging glances of awed wonder when he waved his tiny fists above his head; of Margaret, toddling across the hall to lisp “Da-da” when Dwight came home and being caught up and smothered by his gratified kisses. . . . It all came back to her with poignant force and she freed her hands and half rose from her chair.

“Don’t, Spencer!”

His kind, understanding eyes followed her movement. “Sit down, dear. I haven’t finished yet. Did it ever occur to you to wonder, Nancy, why I selected Pueblo for my recuperation?”

“Why, I thought—” she breathed a little quickly— “You said one place was the same as another to you, and I was here—”

“That was true as far as it went.” The color left his own face now and one slender hand tightened itself on the arm of the chair. “Nancy, Dwight is Madge’s brother. She loved him dearly. It hurt her to have any estrangement between you and him. I have—” he swallowed—“I have done certain things in memory of her: endowed a children’s hospital, put funds in trust for girls in need—that sort of thing; but if I could feel that I had given you—you and the children, Dwight’s children, Nancy!—back to him, I should feel that I had done the biggest thing for Madge that could be done.”

“Why are you telling me this—now?” she asked. “Is Dwight here?”

He nodded. “He has been here since yesterday, Nancy. I’ve written him—almost daily—since my own arrival. He doesn’t ask much, dear. Just that you will see him—talk to him—”

She rose and moved restlessly about the room.

“What good will it do, Spencer? You’ve not been a friend to me, my dear, in this. It almost makes me feel that I must leave Pueblo now. I came here to get away from—my memories. If Dwight is here—”

He shook his head. “You’re stronger than that, Nancy. I’ve watched you all these weeks, gauged your strength, before I wrote Dwight to come.” In his turn he rose and turned toward the door. “I ask you to see him, Nancy,” he said simply, and went out.

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## *Chapter Twenty-seven*

“NANCY,” said Dwight Meadows humbly.

He had come so softly into the living room that she did not hear him until he stood within a few feet of her. She turned slowly, almost unwillingly, and looked at him. Her first thought was that Dwight had been ill. There was a touch of silver at his temples, his face was thinner than she remembered it. He was dressed with his old meticulousness, she caught the old fragrance of tobacco and shaving soap. Without knowing it, her hands went up to her heart and remained there throughout the pregnant minutes that followed.

“I did not hear you come in, Dwight.”

“Is that all you have to say to me, Nancy?”

“Why have you come?” She had forgotten to ask him to sit down; she stood herself, a slender, almost girlish figure in her thin white dress, with dark eyes fixed sadly on his, with the long fringe of her lashes curling upward in the way he remembered so acutely.

“Spencer wrote me—” He cleared his throat, began again. “I’ve come to ask you to come home—to bring the children and come home to me, dear.”

“Why?” she said again.

“Because I love you, Nancy, because I need you; because I’m a different man from the one you left. Your house is ready for you, beloved, my heart is ready for you! It’s been so long—I’ve longed for you so! I’ve learned my lesson, I’ve—expiated. Can’t you forgive me, Nancy?”

“Forgive? I don’t think it is a question of forgiveness, Dwight. It goes deeper than that, somehow. I—it simply is over, that is all.”

“You mean—our marriage? No, Nancy, it’s not over. I’m still your husband, you’re still my wife. The children—the children are yours and mine—ours. Nothing can come between us but death. I’ve learned that in these last hard years.”

“Death, yes. The death of belief in each other, of faith in each other, of love for each other!”

“But is it dead—our love, my darling?” He came a step closer, smiled at her. The frozen calm which had held her gave way before that smile. It held the old charm, the old tenderness, the old gay challenge. She winced and shrank back, and seeing that he had stirred her at last he pressed his advantage. “Look at me, Nancy! Can you look in my

eyes and tell me that you no longer love me? You can't—of course you can't! You may disapprove of me—God knows I deserve it!—you may run from me, hold me in contempt—but you love me.

“I'm not going to promise you anything; I'm done with words. All I ask is a chance to show you what suffering and losing you and learning to know myself have done for me. Come home with me, sweet!” Suddenly his arms were around her, he was pressing her head against his shoulder in the old tender way. “You were never meant to live like this—alone with your children and your mother. Forgive me, Nancy, wipe out what's gone before, come back to me! You'll never be sorry!”

And again:

“Life is so short, darling. Can we afford to waste so much of it—apart? Think of Spencer. He's only a shadow without Madge. So are you and I shadows, Nancy, without each other!

“They are my children, too, dear. Would you deprive me of them all during this time of their childhood—have you a right to deprive me of them? Have you a right to deprive them of a father?

“Was I altogether to blame, my dearest? Hasn't life taught you a little of my temptations, showed you your own coldness, given you understanding?

“Spencer says you work down here with the Indians, with the poor and unfortunate; that your sympathy runs out to meet their needs, that your comprehension and tolerance are incredible. Can't you be a little tolerant of my fault, Nancy? Can't you close a door on the past?”

She did not struggle to free herself. She lay against his shoulder, with closed eyes, hardly hearing the murmur of his voice above her head. She put thought from her as a patient shrinks from consciousness after torturing pain. Just for a minute, just for a minute, a voice murmured in her heart, let her lose herself in the love of which she had been deprived so long.

“Nancy?”

She came slowly, unwillingly to herself. She pushed him away with hands which were neither gentle nor ungentle, merely obedient to her will.

“I must think, Dwight. Go away now—come again tonight; after the children have gone to bed.”

“But I want to see the children!”

She smiled at that. It was Dwight's familiar incisiveness, his blithe belief that what he wanted he must have.

“You shall see them tomorrow. But not today; not until after I have—” her glance roved over the room as if seeking the reassurance of familiar things—“until I have considered.”

“What is there to consider, sweet? You love me.”

It was a statement rather than a question but Nancy chose to answer it.

“Yes. I love you, Dwight. I’ve never stopped loving you, I think.”

“Well, then!” he said in triumph. “That’s all that matters.”

She shook her head. “There is a great deal more that matters. You spoke of my social service work a moment ago. If it’s taught me one thing it’s taught me that most of the sorrow in the world comes from love—love that isn’t worthy, selfish love, cowardly love.”

“Are you applying those terms to me, Nancy?”

“Not more to you than to myself, Dwight. If you’ve learned to know yourself so have I learned to know myself. I was to blame—oh, so greatly to blame—for what you did. I was unresponsive, I seemed cold, I didn’t know how to show you my love. I was the wrong woman for you to have married, Dwight—that was the trouble. If you had chosen Sara—”

“I had every opportunity to choose Sara and I—didn’t!”

The swift color rushed to her temples at that, and he, remembering, drew back.

“If we begin to talk of the past, I’m lost,” he said boyishly. “Don’t, Nancy, let’s don’t! It’s the future we must think of. My boy—I want to see my boy growing up, driving his first car, going to his first dance, graduating from college! I want to watch my baby girl changing from a girl into a woman. Above all, I want you, Nancy, my wife, the woman I love, the woman I shall always love!”

“Please go now, Dwight, and come back later.”

“Can’t we settle it now, Nancy? I—other men have done what I have done and other wives have forgiven them. Hundreds of women—”

It swept away all her new softness, her relenting, that threadbare excuse.

“They’ve forgiven because they had no choice,” she said, her eyes blazing, the hot color staining her cheeks. “Don’t you think I’ve thought about them, seen dozens of cases, put myself in their places, those poor wives who had no money, who could not support their children, who had to pretend not to see their husbands’ flirtations, their unfaithfulness?”

“What would I have done, Dwight, if my father had not left me money, or if my mother had not been in a position to receive me in her home? I could not have earned my living and the children’s, too. I could only have stayed on with you, suffering almost daily humiliation, knowing that you were dragging our love in the dust, gradually coming to hate you for your unfairness. For it is unfairness, Dwight, taking advantage of a woman’s helplessness as you did. I couldn’t strike back, I couldn’t make you see what pain you were causing me, I couldn’t even have left you if it hadn’t been for Father’s money!”

“But that’s all over now, Nancy!”

“It isn’t all over! The memory of it is with me yet! Even after I’d taken the children and gone, after you’d realized the seriousness of our separation, you couldn’t be true to me then! You’re pleading for the children now—did you think of them then? *I* thought of

them! Did I want my boy to grow to manhood, despising his father, or worse still, feeling for him an indulgent contempt? Did I wish Margaret to know of her father's amours—"

"Hush, Nancy!"

She swallowed. "Yes, you're right, Dwight. It gets us nowhere to delve into the past like this. As you say, it's the future we have to consider. I ask you again to go—let me think."

He bowed. "At nine tonight? May I come at nine?"

"At nine," she assented.

When the screen door had closed behind him she went swiftly up to her room and locked the door. Her mother would be returning soon, the children. She must think: calmly, swiftly, logically. She must not make a mistake now.

Her first emotion was resentment that her defences of two years had been pulled down in less than an hour by Dwight's presence. Whatever came of this visit, her hard won calm had been shattered. Spencer had meant well. He had truly believed that he was being kind. And yet he who had known flawless love, the perfection of marriage, could urge upon her the soiled and tattered thing which was all that Dwight had left to offer her!

She sank into a low chair by the window where she could see the blue line of the mountains. She had need to steady herself by the sight of their unshifting constancy.

Her heart and her head were speaking to her together, each striving for mastery. Said her heart: What does the past matter? You love your husband, he loves you. Love is the greatest thing in the world. Will you fling it away—this time forever!—because of something that is past and gone? Dwight's arms are waiting for you—go into them and rest.

Her head said: Your husband has broken every promise he's ever made you. What reason have you to believe him now? Or if you do, if he is faithful to you for the rest of your lives together, will not the shadow of that old untruth, that ancient disloyalty, fall on your happiness? Don't compromise! You have grown strong through suffering. Don't waste that strength.

Said her heart: Old age will come, your children will leave you, you will no longer have your mother. You will be lonely then, you'll long for a strong hand to hold yours fast. What right have you to sit in judgment on your husband's sin? How do you know that your own coldness was not as wrong?

Her head said: What right have you to trust your children's future to a man who is capable of deceit, of disloyalty, unfaithfulness? Better for them to have no father at all than one they can not respect.

Back and forth the battle raged and Nancy sat huddled in her big chair, cold despite the heat of the summer day, her head aching, her heart aching. Now and then a storm of weeping seized her and she could only yield to it until its force was spent. Now and then stern anger possessed her; anger that so weak a man, a man so unworthy, had such power to move her.



When her mother returned she was still sitting there. She had forgotten that her door was locked and at Mrs. Hale's surprised exclamation she rose and admitted the older woman.

"Nancy, what on earth—?"

"Dwight's been here, Mother," she said quietly. "He wants me to come back to him. He's rebuilt the house, he promises—everything."

"And—are you going, Nancy?"

"What do you think about it, Mother?"

Mrs. Hale shook her head. "It's a question you must settle for yourself, my dear. You know your own heart best."

"But, Mother—what would you do in my place?"

Mrs. Hale glanced at her speculatively. "Ten years ago—two years ago I suppose I'd have rejoiced that Dwight wanted you back, I'd have begged you to go to him. Now—I really don't know, Nancy. You're not the same woman who was Dwight's wife. You're stronger, you understand things better. You'll have to make your own decision, dear!" To Nancy's boundless surprise, she took her daughter into her arms and kissed her tenderly. It was a rare caress for her and showed Nancy, as nothing else could have done, the admiration in which her mother held her.

Dinner was a quiet meal. The children were tired from their long day, Mrs. Hale said little, Nancy was lost in thought, bringing herself back to the present with a start.

"What did you say, Margaret? Mother wasn't listening."

"You saw—what, Bunny? Oh, yes, you had luncheon at the Antlers! That was wonderful, wasn't it?"

At eight o'clock Spencer came and drew Nancy outside. Dusk had not yet fallen, they could see each other quite plainly. Spencer looked anxious and at the same time quietly happy.

"Dwight says you will see him at nine, Nancy. May I say just one word? The children—think of the children, my dear!"

"I am thinking of them."

"You've done wonders for Bunny, but the time will come when he'll need a father."

"Many widows bring up splendid sons, Spencer!"

"Ah, that's just it! You're not widowed. Bunny will always know that he has a father living. He'll want to know some day why you left that father. Are you prepared to explain to him, Nancy?"

She did not answer and Spencer's tone changed. "Madge loved you, Nancy. I can never forget that she sent for you . . . that last day . . . she talked to you about Dwight that day, didn't she, Nancy?"

"Yes, she talked to me about him," Nancy answered brokenly. She could see the white, smiling face on the pillows, hear Madge's urgent voice in her ears. Dwight was

Madge's brother as well as her own husband—she must consider that, too.

Suddenly Spencer's self-control, strained by the long and wearing day, broke. He leaned forward and grasped Nancy by her slender wrists, shook her to and fro.

"You little fool," he said between his set teeth, "you wasteful, extravagant little fool! Throwing away the years . . . oh, God, the short years you have together, you and Dwight, while Madge . . . while Madge . . ."

"Spencer!" she said in a sharp whisper.

He released her, took out his handkerchief and wiped his wet forehead.

"I beg your pardon, Nancy," he said in his natural voice. "I don't know what came over me. I beg your pardon!"

She swallowed, rubbed her bruised wrists unconsciously, leaned forward and brought one of his hands to her cheek.

"I understand, Spencer. I know it must seem to you waste—waste! But this is between Dwight and me. No one can help us, no one can decide for us."

"I know." He sighed; turned without another word and went away.

One soft light bloomed in the living room when Dwight entered. Mrs. Hale had gone upstairs with the children and Nancy was alone. He came in confidently, his eyes tender, his hands outstretched for hers.

"You've decided, Nancy?"

"I've decided, Dwight." There was no hesitation in her manner now, no indecision. "I can't go back to you. I have made a life of my own here: a useful life, I hope; anyhow, a full one. I have been a wife, I am a mother—but I'm something more than that, something which includes them both. I am a woman; with a woman's right to self-respect, and honesty, and loyalty. Perhaps I'd have those, if I went back to you, my dear, but I doubt it. We can only judge the future by the past. There was none of those qualities for me in the years I lived with you."

His astonishment kept him silent for a moment.

"I share the blame with you, Dwight, for the failure of our marriage. You've told me many times that I was cold, unresponsive; in short, the wrong wife for you. I realize that now. But there's no going back. We can't undo the past. Sara's shadow—the shadows of all those 'women of the moment' would always come between you and me."

His rare, devastating anger was rising. He had humbled himself to his wife this afternoon; he had pleaded with her; he had gone forth buoyantly sure that he had convinced her of his penitence, his reform. That she should be quietly decisive, that there should be perfect finality in the voice with which she spoke her verdict seemed to him a thing so incredible, so nearly insulting, that for the moment he could only stare at her with coldly angry eyes.

"The children—" he began with difficulty.

"I am thinking of the children," Nancy said. "Bunny has many of your own characteristics. If he is brought up in the environment in which you were reared, how can

I be sure that he will not—be as you are? I am determined,” she said calmly, firmly, “that there shall not be another generation of Meadows men who disregard their marriage vow.”

Rage had him in its grip now, shook him from head to foot. He made his way to the door and paused to say thickly: “That ends the matter then. Goodbye!”

“Dwight! Don’t go like that! Don’t you want to see the children?”

He shook his head. He dared not trust himself to speak. Actual waves of anger flowed over him, there was a taste of salt in his mouth, the palms of his hands were wet. Beneath the turmoil of his mind he had a vague consciousness that he would regret this bitterly when he came to himself; that, added to the loneliness of his life in the new home he had built for Nancy and the children, would be the self-torture of remembrance: the remembrance that he had staggered from his wife’s presence like a drunken man; without seeing the beloved Margaret, the sturdy Bunny; but just now he could only yield to the storm which bent and twisted him.

Alone in the living room Nancy sat, breathing like a spent runner. It was done! She had sent Dwight away from her forever. She had recognized in his furious eyes, in the white curve of his nostril, the rare anger which her mother-in-law had described. It had taken Dwight more than two years to overcome his rage when she left the house on Van Tyne Avenue. She doubted if he would ever forget or forgive her decision tonight.

She sighed. She had closed with her own hand the door which led to reconciliation, to a husband’s protection, to a united household, but that did not make the prospect less desolate. She tried to think of the life she had made for herself here in Pueblo: to summon those interests which had seemed to her so important, so worthwhile, before Spencer came; but the future was blank, the present dead.

“Mother!”

It was Bunny, pajama-clad, tousle-headed, who opened the door and came padding in, bare-footed.

“Has the man gone?”

“What man, Bunny?”

“Grandmother says there was a man here to see you on business and for Margaret and me not to interrupt. He’s gone?”

“Yes, he’s gone now. You ought to be asleep, Bunny.”

He crowded himself into the big chair beside her as he loved to do.

“Gee, Mom, it’s keen to have you to myself a little while. Since Uncle Spencer’s been here I never do get to see you alone.”

She put an arm about his hard young shoulders, drew his face against hers. “Anything special you wanted to see me about, Bunny?”

“Nope. Just wanted to sit with you a while.”

It was inexpressibly sweet to be there like that, relaxed against the son whose arm tightened protectively as he sensed her weariness. Tears pricked her eyes but she kept

them back resolutely. Bunny had only his mother now to strengthen in him those qualities which his father had lacked: integrity of word and deed, honor, loyalty. A sense of power flowed through her suddenly, revivifying what she had thought was dead, coloring the future which had seemed to her blank. What a glorious task for a woman: to correct those faults which by heredity and example had begun to manifest themselves in her son; to arm him against weakness as his father had not been armed; to hold in her hands, to an important extent, the measure of his future manhood!

“Tired, Mom? Why don’t you come on to bed?”

“I believe I will, Bunny.” She turned to him, smiling. “Will you lock up, dear? Empty the ice pan and turn out the lights and everything?”

“You bet!” he answered swiftly, and with that boyish assurance ringing in her ears, Nancy Meadows went unhurriedly up the stairs.

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.

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[The end of *The Story of Nancy Meadows*, by Louise Platt Hauck.]