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"HER FLING"

By Elenore Meherin
Author of "Chickie," "Sandy" and
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CHAPTER 65

Never had a week swept in with such full tide of joy and out in such gray ebb of depression. I stood on the shore of the passing days in a perpetual throbbing of expectation, waiting for the tide to come surging mountain high again. But it stole in and out with still monotonous ripple. It was Friday evening. There was a letter on the rack for me from Marian.

This was the first word from her in almost six months. She had spent a considerable part of the winter at Oyster Bay. Her message touched me, as Marian always could, just as though a child had reached up a white, soft little hand and asked a favor.

"Gail, dear—
"Oh, I am longing to see you. I have wanted to see you so much, but I thought you would write to me because of the things I said when we last met. I couldn't have felt as I did, Gail, only mother was so outraged."

"But won't you forget that, Gail, and come to see me? I am not going out very much now, as I haven't been so well. Dai is away. I thought we would have a quiet dinner together tomorrow night if you will just please come. You don't know how I miss you, Gail. We used to be so happy, weren't we?"

"If you aren't going to come, will you phone and say so? Otherwise I shall expect you."
"Marian!"

Marian's neglect was like a treason. She was the one thing I had loved. She knew it, yet she could go away and never even ask if I were in want; if I were happy. Even so, I would have dashed to her that very minute, so great was the wish to see her.

And the moment I saw her—if there was any trace of resentment it melted in an aching tenderness. She was thinner and paler, the pretty odd-angled brown eyes ringed, their look of child-like inquiry bewildered, a little terrified.

"Oh, how lovely of you to come, Gail!" She was in the roof garden when I arrived, half reclining on a wicker chaise longue. She stood up hurriedly. "I didn't expect you till half-past six."

She sat down and folded her hands in an attitude of pathetic resignation that was really tragic. It was so quiet and so hopeless. "Where you very ill, Marian? What was the matter?"

That little gesture of her hand and her lips parted in a scarcely audible whisper. "Didn't any one happen to tell you, Gail?"

"No."
"Well, not so many knew."
"But when, Marian?"

"About a month ago. It was born much too soon, so it died. Oh, I wish—The trembling of her lips ended the sentence. "You don't know how terrible it is, Gail, to wait and long and then have nothing. Some women wouldn't care!"

I went over and sat beside her. "Why didn't you send for me then, Marian?"

"I know what you think, Gail. She raised her brows, trying valiantly to keep back the tears. "You think it's what I deserve, because I wasn't brave, like you."

"Don't say that, Marian, because it isn't true. And some of the bravest women in the world have the same cross to bear. It's hard, but you're so young."

that day. It was the only time he ever turned on me. Truly it was. He's not to blame, because his parents let him do just as he pleased. "No, that's so, he isn't." "It would have been a son, Gail." "You will have other children, Mimi." "Oh, you don't know, Gail. The doctors say I never can—never." "They don't always know."

"I have nothing to live for, Gail." Strange that I should notice at that moment the white orchids she was wearing. Dai loved to see them on her, because they were so delicate and pure as she was.

All night, I dreamed of Marian. I dreamed, too, of the little white coffin the man had taken away from the magnificent library—the night mother and I had returned from Santa Barbara.

It was late Sunday morning when I awakened. The house was filled with the odor of frying bacon, new baked muffins. From the bath came the splashing of the shower. The nurses were up. Lena Waters was rushing for church. A holiday bustled stirred up from the kitchen to our attic.

I was scarcely dressed when someone knocked at the door. It was Mrs. Buckley. "Good morning, dear. I have a note for you." She handed me a bit of paper with a scrawl of illegible writing.

"I'm downstairs now. Hurry up if you've nothing better to do, and we'll have breakfast together." "GRANT."

He was standing in the hall. "Are you coming with me, Gail?" he asked, impetuously. "Of course, I am, now, that I've waited since last Wednesday to hear from you."

We went to the Concourse Plaza for breakfast. Dr. Benders explained. "I couldn't get away. Last night was the first night I've had since Tuesday. I waited about an hour or so at the boarding house for you."

"Then I'm sorry I wasn't there." "Yes, you know I don't go out much, Gail, and since I saw you on Tuesday I've been busy. You know, Dr. Otis has gone West and I'm taking over his practice." "Our Dr. Otis?"

"Yes." "Isn't that strange? You may visit my mother, is she?" "She's not ill, is she?"

"No, but she often has nervous headaches. Dr. Otis calls quite frequently. Wouldn't it be singular, though?" "I wouldn't enjoy it," he said, impulsively. "I can't understand them at all."

"My family?" "Well—yes. How could they presume to dictate to you and then to ignore you? You don't even hear from your sister."

"I was with her last night. She was me and I went there for dinner. My sister isn't really to blame for anything, but I think my father and mother have a lot to answer for."

"Isn't your sister happy?" I told him about Marian and the things she had said to me. "My mother forced her into the marriage. Now she has all this money, yet she would be glad to tell."

"She'll get over that. Most likely she'll have other children." "She says so." "What's a thing to say. Does she blame them for it?"

"No, she's too sweet for that. She's not a bit like me." "Marian's warmth kindled in his face, touched his eyes as they met mine. "You aren't sorry, for that, are you, Gail?"

"Yes, I am. I'd much rather be soft and gentle than critical and hard as I am. Marian is unselfish."

ish and I'm not, and yet she thinks her life is doomed." "How is her life doomed? That's a terrible thing to say." "She feels that it is. You can't imagine the change that has come over. I never heard her complain before. She used to insist that her money and her beautiful home made her happy, and she didn't regret her choice. Now her compensations are nothing but ashes to her. Oh, it's really a tragedy."

"You think she would never have realized this if the child had lived?" "She would have been satisfied."

"Oh, well, there are plenty of children in the world." "You mean it doesn't matter if hers dies?"

"You must think I am a nice, heartless brute! I mean she could adopt one."

"She'd never dream of such a thing." "Why not? She might pick off the greatest singer or poet or artist the world ever produced."

"It wouldn't be the same as her own." "It would if she caught it young enough."

"Yes, can't you just picture Dai Warren taking a fountling into his home to be his heir?" Yet the idea captivated me as new and startling suggestions always did.

We were driving through the park. "Did you mean that about adopting a child?"

"It's been done. If your sister really wants one, why shouldn't she give a good home and satisfy herself at the same time?" "It sounds reasonable, but she'd think I had gone mad if I suggested it."

"They've thought you mad before." "But isn't here a terrible risk in taking a baby like this?"

"There's risk in having a child of your own. If the parentage is good, there's not such a chance." How preposterous for the two of us to be disposing of Marian's problem in this cool fashion!

Yet, I was already excited, saw myself walking across her roof-garden carrying a beautiful child, saying to her: "Here, isn't it fine? You can have it for nothing."

I laughed aloud. "I believe I'd do it, if I ran across a nice fat fountling!" "There's about twenty-eight of them out at the 'Babies' Aid.' Let's go there," I begged, and he laughingly assented.

When we arrived a tall, dark-haired woman with bright gray eyes and a brisk smile pushed open a screen door. "Are you coming in, Dr. Benders?"

"Yes, if we may." We followed her into a great room, with about thirty ugly white iron cribs. In each one was a tiny form; and all we could see, thought we heard plenty, were the diminutive faces half swallowed up in red, furious protest.

Another nurse, fair rather plump, with a large, easy face and a very winning smile, was just placing an infant on its pillow with a humorous: "Now shush, Martin Fielding, though you are the flower of the flock. What do you think of him?" she asked me.

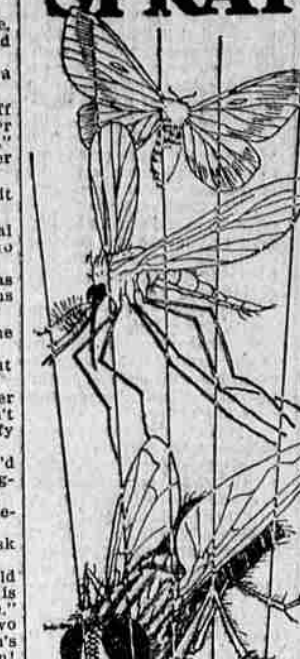
"I was in the last crib in the row. I saw a mass of white gold ringlets, a tiny hand on a bottle. As I stooped down the baby suddenly opened a pair of blue eyes and smiled. An odd trembling went through me, but we kept it. You know, sometimes women come here and take a fancy for a child, especially a fine one like Martin."

I wasn't listening to her. An idea had leaped into my brain. Grant Benders was standing next to me. "Can we take it out on a visit?"

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