

CRISS CROSS

By
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"You Have No Idea How Complicated Everything Is," Said Jay.
And Even More "Complicated" It Proved Than Jay Himself Suspected....



"You let my wife alone," Jay shouted, and rolled over with the enemy.



NANCY Graeme recognized him the minute he came into the London Ritz. For three years she'd been praying that she would meet Jay Pickering.

"There he is," she told her brother Dick.

"Who you talking about, honey?"

"The man you roomed with senior year at Princeton. The famous left tackle, Jay Pickering," Nancy said impatiently.

As Jay pounded Dick's shoulder blade affectionately, his eyes were fixed on Nancy. "I've got it," he said. "You're the picture on Dick's desk. You're the little sister who was too young to come to the games."

"Not any more," Nancy protested. "And I never was too young to have your picture on my dressing table. It was a funny one out of a newspaper. She studied Jay with topaz eyes. "Even in that picture you were handsome," she said contentedly.

Jay smiled into her eyes. "You'll have my photograph—one that does me full justice—on your dressing table again," he vowed. "Shall we dance?"

"You're sweet to dance with," he said as he brought her back to Dick. "You're a sweet thing, Nancy Graeme."

That was at five. At eight they were dining in Soho, and Jay and Nancy, side by side on the red divan, were holding hands. "We're frantically in love," Jay informed Dick.

At eleven they were dancing in Mayfair, and Nancy was trying to keep her head from Jay's shoulder where it seemed to belong. "I must go back," she sighed.

"Hush," Jay breathed. So once more she forgot, as she had all evening, that she and Dick were catching an early boat train.

At one they were taxiing down the Mall. Dick had gallantly disappeared at the last dancing place. Nancy motioned toward the driver. "Tell him to take me home," she suggested insincerely.

"We were talking about the Archbishop of Canterbury," Jay murmured, pulling her back into his arms. "The dear old Archbishop, for a mere five guineas, will produce a special marriage license from his bonnet—"

Three days later Mr. and Mrs. Jay Pickering were having breakfast in their rooms at the Carlton. Dick, Nancy's legal guardian since their parents died, showered his blessings and the remains of his traveller's checks on her and caught a later boat. Jay said he would telephone his mother in New York and anyway she was coming over later. Nancy and Jay had been married without benefit of press, and they felt particularly delighted to be having a honeymoon without interference of family.

Then the boy with the radiogram knocked at the door.

When Nancy saw Jay's face, she rushed across the room to him. "Is somebody dead?" she demanded.

"Read it," Jay said finally.

LANDING SOUTHAMPTON TOMORROW WITH MELISSA GEORGETTE ABU AL HASSAN STOP ISN'T IT A GRAND SURPRISE DARLING STOP PLEASE RESERVE ROOMS CLARIDGES ARRANGING FRESH LIVER DAILY STOP BE READY LEAVE WITH ME FOR DAVOS AS USUAL STOP ALL MY LOVE MARIANNE

NANCY crumpled the message in a trembling fist. "And who," she inquired, "is Marianne?"

"Mother," said Jay.

Nancy sat tensely on the edge of the chaise longue and said, "Now decode that wireless."

"Mother's arriving long ahead of schedule. Georgetown is her maid. Melissa is my demented aunt who tears around in a racing car. Abu al Hassan is mother's red Persian. That explains the fresh liver."

"I don't mind the fresh liver," Nancy wailed, "but what's this about Davos?"

"Mother has hay fever," Jay said. "She goes to Davos every August and drags me along because it's boring."

"Well, you've escaped from all that now," Nancy said with a curious lack of confidence. She glanced at Jay's cloudy face and said bravely, "All right. You'd better tell me what's wrong with your mother."

"Nothing whatever," Jay insisted. "It's only that since father died, we've been everything to each other. If she knew I'd married somebody she's never even seen, it would just kill her, Nancy."

"Well—Nancy's eyes were big with tears. "We're sure-nuff married. Does she expect you to stay single all your life?"

"I don't know," Jay groaned. "The only time she thought there was a girl, mother was sick for two weeks. At the time, she said that either she'd pick out my girls for me or she'd saw me off close to the ground. It just happens that father didn't leave me a trust fund. Mother's got the works."

"Spinach!" Nancy cried hotly. "If your mother's such a mean, jealous old thing with a cat that must have fresh liver, and won't think of her only son's happiness," she stormed, tossing syntax hither and yon, "why, we'll just wire her—"

"Nancy Graeme, how dare you talk like that about my mother?"

Nancy recoiled. Jay wasn't really hers, he still belonged to his mother. She kissed the part in his rumpled hair and said contritely, "Honey, I'm sorry! Now you tell me what we're going to do."

Jay sighed. "We're going to be little soldiers," he said. "I'll march down to Davos with mother, and accustom her to the idea of my getting married, just in general. Then you can happen along, as dear old Dick's sister, and of course she'll fall for you like a shot—"

"And then," Nancy said, carefully blotting

A WEEK later Nancy was on her way to Davos. Jay was not expecting her. In fact, he had telephoned her not to come because his mother turned pale at the very mention of marriage. But Nancy had hung up the receiver and rushed to pack. She was not going to spend her twentieth birthday in solitude.

To Nancy the journey to Switzerland was a mass of hideous complications. But there was the delightful Mr. James Webb who helped her negotiate the change from the main line to the toy train that climbed to Davos. He and Nancy were the only passengers on that train.

"I come up to Davos every summer," he said, turning his well-made American face to Nancy. "My sister's staying there until she's sure the youngster's lungs are all right. By the way, why don't you come up for Jimmy's supper and pillow fight tonight?"

"I adore that," Nancy began, and then she remembered she was coming to Davos strictly incognito, and had better avoid everybody. "But you see," she amended her impulse, "my grandmother's here."

"Bring her along," Mr. Webb suggested. "I can't," Nancy mumbled, trying to think fast. "She sprained her ankle climbing a mountain."

Mr. Webb looked a little startled. "A romance?" he ventured. "And I thought you were just about Jimmy's age."

"I'm twenty today," Nancy said with dignity. "And you'd be surprised—"

At Davos, Mr. Webb was greeted by a woman and boy burned an enviable brown. Nancy had to fend off their invitations to come straight to the chalet and stay indefinitely. No, she couldn't ride up the mountain with them, because Granny was sending to the station for her.

"Why, there she is now!" Nancy babbled, catching sight of a tall woman, getting out of a vermilion car at the other end of the station. She called back feverish goodbyes as she ran down the platform. Mr. Webb hesitated as if he were trying to reconcile Granny's sprained ankle with the long stride of the woman, then shook his head and climbed into his sister's car.

Nancy's adopted grandmother bought a paper at the news stand and came back to her car. Nancy was standing beside it, breathless and terrified.

"Let me give you a lift," the woman suggested calmly. She saw Nancy's bags stowed in the rumble, and took the wheel. With a many-cylindrical purr the car gained speed and began whizzing around bends. Nancy glanced at the tall woman beside her, driving with the particular frozen intensity of a speed fiend and realized that she had walked straight into a trap. This was Aunt Melissa. It couldn't be anyone else.

Melissa whistled up the driveway to a big hotel and stopped. "Grandes Montagnes," she informed Nancy. "It's the only hotel open. This town is a morgue in August. I'm so bored. Come and have lunch with me."

NANCY felt helpless. With a wavering hand she wrote "Nancy Graeme, White Hill, North Carolina," in the register and turned just in time to see Jay going into the dining room with an enchantress dressed in soft yellow. Titian hair and green eyes—one of those women who twist men's hearts into loveknots.

The hotel, the Alps, the universe, crashed down on Nancy. Jay was a bigamist and this was his real wife. No wonder he'd turned pale when the radiogram came. No wonder he'd been keeping her away from Davos. This was what came of marrying a perfect stranger.

It appeared that Jay was not a bigamist. But Nancy could not quite believe the enchantress was his mother and forty-two, until Jay sneaked up to her room and turned everything into a rosy haze. Jay was coming to her birthday supper at midnight.

"But don't put your nose out of your door," he begged her. "You have no idea how complicated everything is, sweet. We're all on this floor because they're doing over the rest of the place."

Long before midnight Nancy sat ready to the last shining hair. There was the table set for two, and the champagne in its ice pail, and Nancy in her best silver pyjamas. When Jay came he rashly left the door ajar and rushed to her. Nancy slipped out of his arms and closed the door.

Jay put her in her chair and lifted the champagne bottle. "Happy birthday, Nancy-love," he said, and pulled the cork.

At the pop, Abu al Hassan came from under the bed, ponderously irritated. He stalked over to Jay and rubbed against his ankles.

"You left the door open," Nancy scolded. "He followed you in."

"He follows me everywhere. He has a fixation, like mother."

There was a knock at the door. Jay snatched up Abu and bounded into the bathroom. Nancy opened the door. There stood a maid—and Marianne.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you," Marianne said easily. "But have you by any chance seen my red Persian cat?"

"Cat?" Nancy echoed. Her brain froze, for she saw two pairs of eyes travelling to the festive table.

The maid sniffed. "Madame, it is as I have said. The waiter has arranged for mademoiselle the *supper intime*—" she emphasized the words scathingly—"and it is this room that I have with my own eyes seen enter Monsieur Abu."

"But I haven't seen your cat—"

"There was a long howl from the bathroom. "Voilà," snapped Georgetown, and stalked across the room. Nancy, in a silver flash, was behind her. "No," she cried. "No!"

But Georgetown opened the door and Abu bounced out of an empty bathroom. "Of course," Nancy sighed aloud in relief. Jay had walked out to the balcony and shut the doors behind him. She was saved, but Jay's mother had caught her lying. And there was the champagne poured for two.

Marianne said quietly, "Georgette, you will put Abu in his basket." At the door, she turned and smiled at Nancy, and said, with only a little acid in her voice, "You must forgive Abu—and me, too—for intruding at this particular moment."

She murmured "Good night," and melted down the hall. Nancy, in a daze, sat down on the edge of her bed.

"She's lovely, lovely. And I thought she was a cold, selfish—but everything's ruined now."

THE next morning Nancy found a note from Jay under her door.

"Go out of the fire exit on the back of this floor and then follow the red dahlias."

Along the path that wound up the mountain she followed the clues set for her at every turn. Finally she found the grey chalet behind a walled fence, with crimson geraniums spilling at the windows and the cleanest curtains she'd ever seen. And over the gate hung a tescoon of dahlias. She pulled the bell rope and a Swiss woman opened the gate.

"Bitte schön," she said, and led the way to the table where Jay was sampling chicken livers as if he had owned the house for years.

For a husband she had married on the spot of the moment, Jay was turning out magnificently. He had rented this bewitching chalet where, intermittently, he could be master of the house.

It took Nancy several days to realize how bored she was. Jay was afraid to come often, for his mother and aunt were peripatetic by day, and wakeful by night.

Nancy, reduced to the last resource, took to walking the pretty paths around her prison. She persevered for three days before she just happened to run into Mr. James Webb, walking all alone.

"Hello!" he cried. "How's romance?"

"Just about hopeless," she admitted, and then, with a far from random shot, she inquired, "how's yours?"

He laughed. "Just about hopeless, too. Let's sit down and weep together."

"I realized on the train," Nancy said

calmly, "that you were terrifically in love with somebody. You'd better tell me all about it. It will do you good."

"I'm tempted to tell you something that nobody in the world, not even my sister, knows," he said.

"I'm a safety deposit," Nancy assured him. "Well, three years ago, when I first came up to visit my sister, I met Grete. She's a Swiss girl, very, very blonde and she insists that she loves me. But, you see, she's a widow with a son."

"That's bad," Nancy said. "How old is the boy?"

"Grete hasn't let me see him, but I gather from what she says that's he's a youngster about Jimmy's age. Grete's all bound up in her son and she thinks it would wreck him if she deserted him and married me. It's her idea that we have to wait till he grows up."

"How dreadful!" Nancy said warmly. "People should never hesitate about getting married. Why, I—"

"You might help me," Mr. Webb mused, "and then I'll help you. I don't know where your young man is—"

"He's in Paris," Nancy said hastily. "Fine! I'd jump at any excuse for going to Paris. Let's begin operations here, since Grete's in Davos. All she needs is to see you, because you were born to make other women madly jealous. Let's dance," James Webb cried, jumping up enthusiastically. "Let's dance this very afternoon."

"Let's!" Nancy agreed. "I haven't danced for at least two weeks."

It was the sight of Marianne climbing the path far below that reminded her she couldn't go to Davos even to buy toothpaste.

"No, I forgot something," she said, drawing back from the edge of the path. "Come to tea this afternoon. I'm at Frau Schmidt's—Waldheim—"

She vanished around the turn.

JAY rushed up to Waldheim an hour after lunch. "The game's up," he told Nancy. Melissa saw you out walking yesterday and is scouring the mountains for you. Mother's scouring, too. I had to sprint and double to get here at all."

Jay swept Nancy to him. "Mother and Melissa think you're a sweet baby trying to play a shady game. The champagne supper did that. Mother knew darn well that second place was set for me, and she's worried sick. Darling, be patient. Just go up to Paris, and I'll try to get mother calmed down."

"Very well," Nancy said hotly. "I'll go to Paris and get on a boat and go home to Dick. You married me just because you happened to feel good, and you've been sorry ever since. I've heard of men," she said with deliberation, "who cared enough for their wives to leave their mothers and earn their own livings."

She ran upstairs to her bedroom. Jay talked for some time to the locked door and then went away.

Nancy had forced Jay to this show-down, and he had run back to his mother. At twenty she was already bereaved. The world was a quagmire of deception. Still, James Webb was coming to tea. He was good-looking, sympathetic—

"But he'll let me down, too," Nancy thought with a sudden understanding of the ways of men. "Just when I need a friend, he'll turn out to be a liar. There's something fishy about Mr. James Webb. I don't believe his yarn about Grete, coming to think it all over."

She had Frau Schmidt set the table out in the garden. Somehow, she felt safer outdoors, and she could always scream if Mr. Webb became ardent.

But James Webb started his tea like a gentleman. Then, without preface, he moved his chair over beside hers and put his arm around her.

Marianne was climbing the path, her eyes blazing green.

"Play up," Mr. Webb hissed in Nancy's ear. "It's the psychological moment." He lifted her cold hand and kissed it.

Nancy screamed, and slapped him on the cheek.

Jay, sprinting up the path behind his mother, vaulted the fence and with his famous flying tackle knocked the perfidious Mr. Webb flat. "You let my wife alone," he shouted, and rolled over with the enemy.

Nancy, with the single instinct of a homing pigeon, ran straight to Marianne's arms. "Jay will kill him," she boasted.

"He'd better not," Marianne said, with a glorious light in her eyes. "Jimmy Webb and I have waited three long years for Jay to pry himself loose. And now you've got him married and all steamed up about a job, and I come up here to thank you—and what do I find? First, you're flirting with Jimmy, and now Jay's murdering him."

"Oh," Nancy gasped, her arms tight around Marianne. She called with the authority of a full-fledged wife, "Jay Pickering, get off Jimmy this minute! He's going to marry your mother. Jay, honey, what was all that about the Archbishop of Canterbury?"

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