

SOPHIE KERR'S SENSATIONAL NOVEL OF AN HONEST GIRL AND A SELFISH GIRL IN LOVE WITH THE SAME MAN

"STAY OUT OF MY LIFE!"

By Sophie Kerr

CHAPTER I

"No, I'm not going with you and you know you don't mind," Jane, very slim and pink and defiant, hung over the banister at the top of the stairs and threw the words down at her waiting aunt.

"They invited you and you accepted. What will I say?" Miss Rosa Terry offered this question mildly, meanwhile fitting new white gloves on her plump white hands.

"Soy, I've got lots of pleasant things to do than go to their old tea."

"What, for instance?"

"Tell Mrs. March that I'm right in the middle of 'Ann Veronica' and can't bear to stop. She won't let Louise read it."

"I'm to tell Mrs. March that although you said you'd come to her tea you are reading a book she disapproves of and couldn't bear to stop."

The gloves were on now and Miss Rosa was turning in front of the long hall mirror. She was elegant in dark violet tulle and a violet tulle with a white dotted veil. Her purple and white striped parasol with an ivory handle waited on the table with her shiny dark purple leather handbag.

She annoyed Jane. She was so comfortably stout, so inexorably serene. "I don't care what you tell Mrs. March," Jane said angrily. "She's an old cat, and I won't go there to be looked at the way she look at me and then picked over afterward. Who is she to make rules for the young people of this town anyway? If she'd keep better tab on her angel darling Louise, she'd have plenty to do instead of watching the rest of us."

"You're peevish because she told me you went off with Henry Berwyn at that last beach picnic and stayed from nine to eleven-thirty and were pert to the chaperons when they spoke to you about it. It was silly. You knew perfectly well you'd be talked about."

"I don't care if I am. I don't care what anybody says about me in this dump."

Miss Rosa picked up her bag and parasol, gave herself one last approving glance.

"If you don't care what people say about you, Jane, you can be very sure that people won't care what they say. And in a little city like Marburg where social circles are small and intimate everybody's always under observation. It can't be helped. The only places where you can be conspicuous things and not be conspicuous are desert islands or big cosmopolitan cities."

"You're said that before."

"I'll probably say it again. Don't think that I mind if you talk to Henry Berwyn for two hours and a half steadily, though it must have been a chore. He's such a dumb boy. I know perfectly well you wouldn't have done and bother the chaperons. You're too smart to enjoy being with Henry but you're not smart enough to see what a losing game it is to do some thing you don't enjoy for the sake of appearing odd and different and making people notice you and disapprove of you. It's just a for mod vanity, my dear. With the last work Miss Rosa opened the front door and was on the other side of it before an answer could catch her."

Jane came dashing furiously downstairs but Miss Rosa had walked fast and as she reached the pavement she was fortunate enough to meet two ladies whom she knew, she dressed up and on their way to the March tea, so she proceeded on with them triumphantly, having managed to read Jane a lecture on the beach affair and escape without a scene. Miss Rosa Terry detested scenes, just as she detested a hard bed, a badly cooked dinner, a poor partner at whist, and scratches on her furniture; but in the 15 years since she had taken her brother's orphaned daughter to live with her—Jane, who was a lovely, dimpled, willful five-year-old—she had never, not once, tried to correct or admonish Jane without drama. Today Miss Rosa smiled to herself at her success in dodging all but the prelude. They had not reached the big eat where Jane always threw up her hands and stormed and sobbed that she was the most unhappy girl in the world, that no one cared what she did or how she felt.

Through the old-fashioned ruby glass side panel of the door Jane watched Miss Rosa out of sight angrily. "Old people are horrible," she thought confusedly. "They don't want anybody young to be happy. She had expected that her aunt would urge her to go to the tea and really she wanted to go and show off her new organdy, a startling black and scarlet which she'd insisted on having though Miss Rosa and the dressmaker had begged her to choose either pale yellow or Nile green. Of course, she could skip into the dress and appear late at the March tea, but then Aunt Rosa would say, 'Oh, I knew you'd come,' and that would be unbearable. She picked up her book and read on with a sense of being tantalized and cheated, not only about the March tea but about her whole life.

Marburg wasn't even a county seat, just a nice old sprawling college town with a few factories at the west end to give a faint flavor of commerce.

And Marburg College was just a nice old sprawling college with only one claim to distinction, that great geologist Professor Benjamin Elliott, whose name and work were known wherever civilized man considered the earth's bones. Elliott Geological museum was small but authentic and complete and scholars from all over the world came to see it.

Two lines of thought went on side by side in Jane's head as she read, both slight but distinct. The first was regret that she couldn't do something exciting and the second that there was so many she had ever met at all like Ann Veronica's ruddy blond Capes. Presently Jane dropped her book and hunted in the bottom bureau drawer for the pack of cigarettes she had hidden there. At least she could smoke and Aunt Rosa disapproved of girls' smoking. So she did some in Marburg. Even Jane didn't have the daring to buy cigarettes for herself in the local tobacco shops. Henry Berwyn

had given her these and that was Henry's greatest attraction, though he didn't know it.

Jane smoked gloomily and choked when she tried to inhale. If there were only something exciting to do! She stared around the room, hating the dark, tall dresser, the massive high bed, the large roses on carpet and wallpaper, the knotted spread, the pair of alabaster vases on the mantel.

"Looks as if General Grant chose it," she announced aloud, "with his whiskers!" Aunt Rosa might be liberal-minded on the subject of Henry Berwyn, but when it came to changes in her house she was rock. The room had the solidity of her will.

When the cigarette was at last finished, somewhat to Jane's relief, she wrapped the ashes and butt in a wad of crumpled paper, put it into the wastebasket and went down to telephone to her dearest friend, Amy. Amy Lowe had probably gone to the Marches, but she'd be sure.

No, Amy was at home. "What are you doing?" asked Jane. "Let's have some tennis. The courts ought to be dry enough by now."

Amy hesitated. "Why don't we just go for a walk?"

Immediately Jane was bent on tennis. "I want to do something with some action in it. Walking bores me to death."

"All right," said Amy, resignedly. "I'll come by for you as soon as I change my shoes."

They would play on the college courts, though those were not open to the townspeople during vacation. Amy's father was professor of history, and faculty families were privileged to use courts, library and the enclosed gardens of the administration building. By the time Jane had put on her own tennis shoes and taken her racket from its case Amy had arrived.

"Why didn't you go to the Marches party?" asked Jane as they started.

"Mother wanted to go so I stayed with Grandpa. He isn't so well today. I did nearly an hour's extra practice. Lucky thing Grandpa likes it, poor old lamb! Father came in just when you phoned. That's why I could leave."

"What do you think you'll ever do with your music? You slave away at it and you play people's accompaniments and now then you play the organ in church, but I don't see what it gets you!"

"I love doing it. I enjoy it. What more could I get than that?"

Jane frowned. "That's very philosophic, I suppose. Oh, I do wish there was something I liked doing, something I could devote myself to, something big and grand and thrilling! This town's as dead as ditchwater. There's nothing here."

"Well, you're awfully clever, Jane. Anything you wanted to do you'd make go." Amy offered this in all sincerity.

"I know I could," Jane sighed. "Aunt Rosa called me down about the beach picnic."

"Did Momma March tell her? You might have known she would. So that's why you didn't go to the tea? What did Miss Rosa say?"

"She said I was too smart really to enjoy talking to Henry but not smart enough to see what a fool I am to do something thing I don't enjoy for the sake of shocking people. She said it was vanity."

"There's one nice thing about your Aunt Rosa," said Amy, considering this. "She always talks like a human being. She doesn't lay down the law, but sort of puts the subject before you and you're free to use your own judgment."

"You ought to be her niece instead of me!" Jane began to talk dark and tragic.

Amy quickly changed the subject. "I'm thankful that commencement's over and all the boys gone. Father's Sunday night student suppers bored me terribly last year."

"That boy, like them, though. Everybody else doesn't lay down the law, but sort of puts the subject before you and you're free to use your own judgment."

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"It isn't that I want more men," said Jane. "It's the whole town. It's dull."

Jane looked on. That was Jane's way. When everything was ready she took the shade side of the court and the game began.

Jane was by far the better player, but if she missed a stroke it fussed her and made her miss the next. Amy played steadily, evenly, and as if she enjoyed it. As soon as the score mounted against Jane she was frantic, smashed her racket, tried to kill every return, declared balls out that were in and turned the game into a fight. Her voice went high and her cheeks scarlet. It made Amy ashamed for her. "It's always like this," thought Amy, "I'll have to let her win."

"Very well, if you want to," said Jane, assuming indifference but rising instantly.

They were equally tall, slender and straight, but Amy, though a year younger, had the more mature, more quiet bearing. Jane was restless, self-conscious, always adjusting her belt, her hair, holding her hands and elbows stiff, watching to see if she was observed. Amy was thinking of Jane's manner as they walked along, wishing that she wouldn't take games so hard and be so tense and so unhappy and yet, with it all, so superior. She knew that with a sheer notion that if Jane were more popular she would be much happier. None of the other girls would bother with Henry Berwyn and, though Jane might say it was because he supplied her with cigarettes, Amy felt that it was more probably an effort on Jane's part to have as much attention as anyone else.

"And yet she's so beautiful," thought Amy. "When she's having a good time she's so beautiful she puts out the rest of us. And she dances well, and she's clever. But in the only one who really is fond of her, I think she's down to her heels in an orphan."

She thought of her on easy, close-knit family with warm tinge of appreciation. Yet honestly reminded her that it was most unlikely, even if Jane had a mother and father, that she'd be much more attached to them than she was to Miss Rosa.

"Where'd he go?" Amy asked aloud. She had been thinking so hard that she had forgotten to watch the stranger. "Why he vanished away like a boogym. Isn't that queer?"

"He must have gone down Auburn street. That would be toward the hotel if he's staying at the Reeder," said Jane in an odd, stifled way.

"He might have called in somewhere, let's see. The Dowlings, the Gates, the Pardys, the Morelands—well, there's no sign of him and we can't very well do house-to-house search. He is lost and gone forever, Clementine. Jane, do you think Miss Rosa would let me have her 'Songs of Three Centuries'?" There's a poem in it about dancing a saraband and I'd like to compare the meter with an old dance I dug out from Mother's music. It would be fun if he's the room and the dance were the same rhythm."

"I'll ask her when she comes home," said Jane, hurrying on.

to be so stingy with his visitors, but to remember that this town is full of beautiful, bored young women thirsting for new experiences. I wonder what he'd say?"

"He'd go pop-eyed. And your father would call you down." She was still watching the young man who stood hesitating at the corner of Jane's street. Amy followed her glance.

"Let's go along and take a look at the handsome stranger," she said. "Maybe he's a pug-nosed and cross-eyed close to, and then I'll resign us to not meeting him." As she spoke she knew that she was voicing the wish in Jane's mind.

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"I'll ask her when she comes home," said Jane, hurrying on.

"Maybe she's home now. I'll just stop and see."

"She couldn't be home yet. She was going calling after the tea. I'll call you up this evening or I'll bring the book over."

It was a dismissal. For some reason Amy could not fathom Jane was trying to get rid of her. Amy was used to Jane's odd ways but this was too much. "I'll call up this evening and ask Miss Rosa myself," she said. "And the next time you don't want me to come in with you just say so, and don't make excuses that a child could see through. I'd much rather you'd be rude than tricky."

Jane was just starting to dash into the house but she stopped, startled by Amy's sharpness. Then she flung her arms around her friend and gave her a hard, excited hug. "Don't be cross," she said breathlessly. "I'll call you up this evening. I must find out—it's so queer!" and she ran up the steps before Amy could answer.

Amy went on, swinging her racket and smiling in spite of her feelings. No use being offended with Jane's childish mysteries and changeableness and jumping about. Besides, if she hurried she would be able to practice a little while before dinner. She turned her racket and strummed it like a banjo, humming under her breath. Presently some one came running after her and she glanced around to see Edgar Moreland.

"What's the rush? Who've you been tennis with?"

Edgar shrugged. "I was just going to say that I'd like to have been along, but not with Jane. The last time I got roped into a doubles with her was the last time. What I mean is it was the last time! Never again."

"You mean, it was the last time?" she mocked him.

"Don't be picky. Though she was tall, Edgar was tall enough to grin down at her. "Lord, but you look lovely today. There's something about you, woman, that's unique and priceless. And yet behind that peerless countenance there lurks no modicum of common sense. Otherwise you wouldn't be so thick with Jane Terry. And, speaking of Jane, who's the new young man who's calling on her?"

"I don't know. Calling on her when?"

"Right now. I came home just when he went up the steps and it wasn't five minutes later when I saw you going down the street and I called out after you."

"What did he look like?"

"He was tall and fair and very handsome. Not so handsome as I am, of course."

"Did he have on a brown suit?"

"He did. And a straw hat. I can offer you no data on his shirt, socks, or tie, as I was not close enough to get the details."

It all clicked together, the man, the place.

"I don't know who he is," said Amy. "I saw him coming out of the Museum and walking toward the Terry's. It must be the same man. So that's where he went."

Jane, of course, had seen him enter.

"That was why she hurried so and wouldn't let me come in," thought Amy. It was typically Janeish.

"That's where he went, and little do I think of his taste. But maybe he was calling on Miss Rosa and, if so, okay," said Edgar. "Listen, am I coming to see you tonight or is Vanny or Bill Hobart or who?"

"I'll think it over and send out a bulletin," said Amy and went on into her own home. That silly Jane! The man was probably a book agent.

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CHAPTER II

JANE had known the stranger was ANE had known the stranger was like Capes, even at a distance, and it gave her the feeling of long acquaintance with him. She almost called him Mr. Capes, though Miss Rosa had introduced him as Howard Jackson, son of a distant and practically forgotten relative.

"Hardly a relation, nothing more than a connection," added Miss Rosa, who liked exactness. Miss Rosa said, "You're not going out anywhere, are you, Jane? Neither am I. It won't be a bit of trouble."

"I should like to very much," said Howard Jackson, "if it really isn't a bother to you."

"It isn't a bother to Aunt Rosa," said Jane, quietly. "She loves having guests."

"I'm not quite so open-hearted as that," said Miss Rosa, "but when I do give an invitation, it's genuine. I'd like to have you stay."

"Then I will, and thank you very much." He had an engaging frank smile, and Miss Rosa warmed to it. "You go change your dress, Jane," she said, "and take Howard—I can't call you Mister, you are really too young—for a walk around the campus before dinner. It looks its best along about sunset."

Jane flew to obey, thinking as she ran upstairs: "I'll put on my new black and red. No, that won't do. My white with the orange sash, my white coral beads—"

She dropped her tennis things anywhere, left the shower dripping, dressed in a shorter time than she had believed possible. But she came down lightly, leisurely, one hand on the banister, made an effective entrance as the perfect income.

"I hope she keeps that up," thought Miss Rosa, watching them walk off together. Then her mind went back to the dinner.

Meanwhile Jane was asking Howard Jackson friendly, girlish little questions. It was something of a shock when she discovered that he wasn't anything very grand, a mere instructor in geology in a western university, for she didn't know that this university had a renowned School of Mines and that geology was distinguished there. Nor did Howard Jackson mention that fact. Presently, however, he said that he was going to study all

summer with Professor Elliott for a thesis he had to do.

She hesitated between a frank statement that she didn't care a whoop about trees—her contradictions might interest him—or an unobtrusive retreat, and yet last tried the latter. "Oh, they give me ideas, now and then," she said, waving an unobtrusive hand. "Do you play tennis? You'll have the privilege of the college courts."

Yes, he played tennis, but his concern of the moment was not sports for the summer, but somewhere to live. "Perhaps you or your aunt would make some suggestion. I'd like a small apartment, if possible, not a boarding house or a hotel."

She wished it was not so late. More people would see them walking together—the tall handsome new man and the slim white-froked girl in the green dusk of the campus. They would wonder who he was. "I'm sure we can find something for you," she said, shrugging. "The summer wasn't going to be dull after all. But you must work all the time. There's a good beach at the lake and we go there to swim, and there are lots of parties—there was one this afternoon, but I didn't go."

Howard Jackson was thinking that he was lucky to find Miss Rosa and her niece so pleasant. He had gone to the Terry's only because his mother had insisted on it, but he had liked Miss Rosa at once and the girl was stunning. He was a little shy with girls, he never quite understood them—this girl, for instance, with her eyes about the elm trees when she didn't seem at all the nature-loving sort. But there was no use hoping that girls should be consistent and it occurred to him, looking appreciatively at Jane, that if they were very pretty it didn't matter whether they were consistent or not.

At dinner Jane sat listening to Howard confer with Miss Rosa on apartments, with a nice deference to her aunt and a charming wistful smile for Howard when she looked at him. It was very family and friendly in the big dining room. Miss Rosa had put pink roses on the table and brought out her pink silk candle-shades, and filled a pair of silver shells with the pink mints left over from her last card club lunch. Evidently had also risen to the occasion adequately, with pink icing on the hastily made cup cakes and aprils of lemon verbena in the finger bowls. They had reached coffee—in the Meissen cups—when the telephone rang. Jane started to go, but Miss Rosa stopped her.

"It's Mrs. Hobart," she said. "I left a message for her to call me."

Jane smiled over at Howard again, sharing the secret of youth's indulgence to fussy middle age. "Could we go somewhere tonight—a motion picture, maybe?"

He had intended to go back to the hotel as soon as he decently could leave after dinner and get the rest he had lost on the sleeper the night before. But somehow . . . this girl's eyes and the way she smiled.

"Oh, I'd love a motion picture," said Jane. "There's one in Rivera's Hall."

Miss Rosa came back, clucking: "It wasn't Mrs. Hobart, it was Amy Lowe. She wants to borrow one of my books and I told her you'd bring it around later. Jane, you can take Howard with you."

Jane turned sick. Trust Aunt Rosa to ruin things!

"Did you tell Amy we'd bring the book?" asked Jane, before Howard could speak.

"I'd go to a motion picture," added Howard, hesitating over the use of Jane's first name.

"You could leave it as you go by then," said Miss Rosa, "but I think you might enjoy stopping there for a little while anyway."

Jane's thoughts had been racing and her first dismay had gone. It might be fun to take Howard in to Amy's and show him off.

To walk with him down the dark streets and through the squares of light at the crosswalks was intimate, familiar. She caught her heel in a cracked pavement and he snatched her bare arm, their bodies touching for an instant, his face against her hair. They were both breathless from the sudden contact and as they went on Jane was glad she had dashed a drop of jasmine behind each ear. She wanted to say something startling. "I brought out that on purpose," she brought out at last.

"You're a funny girl," he replied. "Why should you do it on purpose?"

Jane couldn't think of any smart answer and anyway they had reached the Lower's house, one of half a dozen set back from the street on a golden crescent. "Wait," said Howard Jackson, "someone's playing Debussy—awfully well, too." He stopped, intent.

"It's Amy Lowe, where were we going?" Jane rang the bell. "We'll say hello and leave the book and run along."

Edgar Moreland and Vanny Hough were both there, listening. Jane made her introductions very casually, but she felt important and triumphant when she saw Amy's face of surprise. "And here's the book you wanted—we can't stay," said Jane.

"We must stay to hear the end of that Debussy," said Howard. Jane didn't mind showing off Howard a little longer. He was Edgar and Vanny look simple kids, he was much older, better dressed. And Amy's skimpy old blue voile didn't

compare with Jane's orange and effect. The fragile music filled the room with its iridescent poetry. Jane made her complacent good-byes and at its last note she turned rose and took Howard away with her.

"Well, well!" said Edgar to Amy and Howard disappeared. "One was certainly the grand lady coming to the rift-raft tonight, a slumping party, my dear."

On their way to the movie house Jane was saying: "Your friend played remarkably well—is she going to be a professional?"

"Amy'd never think of such a thing. She's perfectly contented in her commonplace sphere—you can see it in the good daughter, the air of a small town girl with several husbands and you saw that they were. Presently she'll marry one of them and settle down to be a good wife and mother."

"You don't approve?"

Jane shrugged. "If she likes it, let it be. But it's a pity, don't you think? Miss Amy Lowe didn't look like a stodgy person to me," said Howard.

Something in her tone warned Jane that she was making a mistake. "Isn't a bit stodgy herself, that's what I'm sorry to see her so sort of faded out for a stodgy life," she explained. She thought they'd better be talking about Amy. "I do hope you're not going to spend all your time in while you're here." At that moment a cautious thought came to her. Perhaps Howard Jackson was married! Capes was married, that was what made his love for Ann Veronica so glorious and frightening. Jane at first Ann Veronica hadn't known hadn't even suspected, but Jane didn't intend to copy her heroine in that.

"By the way," she asked, "are you going to bring your wife?"

"My wife? I'm not married. What do you think so?"

"Why, I understood, when we were talking to Aunt Rosa, that the apartment . . . there's no reason why you shouldn't be married, you know. It's not a crime."

"No, not exactly. But I don't know. I'm not even engaged—your made me jump when you said like that."

Jane laughed at this. "I was you said something to Aunt Rosa. Please tell her I didn't want to get home." He felt her small hand was stiff and annoyed. Suddenly, overwhelmingly, it was urgent, it was necessary to Jane