

Mary glanced down at Paul, her lips quivering a little. He was still on his knees before her, his eyes looking up into hers, more steadily this time, than she could look at him.

"Because," she went on, and her voice was very low, "you feel when you love a man that it doesn't matter if he's so poor he hasn't a shirt to his back, or so bad that you've got to drag him out of the gutter, if you can only belong to him. That you'd



Mary Glanced Down at Paul, Her Lips Quivering a Little.

rather bake his bread, and sweep his room, and wash his clothes, than sit on a throne of gold, beside anyone else. That you want to share his poverty and his troubles and make them easier if you can. That you want to turn to him in your own sorrow and in your own joy. That you want to marry him—to go to sleep every night in his arms, and the first thing when you wake every morning, to feel his lips on yours, kissing you before you begin your day's work together. That you hope, in time, he'll be your children's father."

Paul rose from his knees and walked blindly over towards the bay window. When he finally came back, his fresh young face looked white and old.

"You didn't care for Gale Hamlin like that," he said, as if he were scourging himself with every word he spoke, "so you wouldn't marry him. You didn't want a man just because he was rich and famous and good. And you didn't want just the easy, pleasant things, like Blanche. You wanted the hard part, too. That's—that's the way you cared for me."

"Yes," said Mary, unsteadily.

"And you don't any more."

It was not a question. Nevertheless, Mary answered it with one.

"Do you think it likely?" she asked.

Paul bowed his head. "No," he said, "I don't think it's likely. Of course I know it's impossible. It was insane of me to think for one minute that you could marry me now, after what I did to you, when you cared like that. I ask your forgiveness from the bottom of my heart, but I know I don't deserve it and I don't expect to get it. Good-by."

Later in the spring, just before she went back to Hamstead, Mary received a limp, square letter, on coarse tan-colored paper with a red triangle in the corner.

"Dear Mary," it said—

"I won't bother you by writing you again, but I can't start across without doing it this once."

"I do love you. I know you don't believe me and if you decide to marry Mr. Hamlin after all, I'll try to be glad because I know he deserves you—as much as any man can deserve you—and I don't, but I'll make you believe me, anyway when I get home. It would be silly of me to say I'll be more worthy of you then, for of course I'll never be worthy of you. But I'll make you believe me, anyway. And if I don't ever get home, please try hard to believe me without any more telling than just this. For I do. I do, with all my heart and soul. Perhaps I didn't before, but I do now."

"God bless you."

"Yours always,"

"Paul."

CHAPTER XII

It was snowing hard, but Mrs. Elliott, bundling herself up well, closed the door of her spotless kitchen behind her and set out to go and "pass the afternoon" with her friend, Mrs. Gray. As long as the war had been a far-distant thing—another "crazy quarrel among them throat-cutting foreigners"—it had stirred feeble interest and still feebler sympathy in most of the hearts in the Connecticut valley and as it dawned gradually upon Hamstead's reluctant mind that the United States "was likely to be drawn into the horrid thing" it comforted itself with many good reasons why its own sons should not go—farmers were, of course, needed in the fields as much as soldiers in the trenches—men with families had their own responsibilities to think of first—an amazing number of cases of flat feet and weak eyes and impaired general health were discovered. But gradually, almost imperceptibly, public sentiment changed. For the first time in the history of the village, Methodists and Congregationalists and persons who professed no faith at all, the "old families" who belonged to the D. A. R. and those from "out back" who belonged to nothing more exclusive than the Foreign Missionary society, began to work together with a common interest, all petty differences forgotten.

Mrs. Elliott had seen Mrs. Gray watching her slow approach through the deep snow from the kitchen windows, and had waved a greeting.

Now, as she mounted the porch, she shook her umbrella and stamped the snow from her overshoes.

"No, I ain't a bit wet," she said, returning Mrs. Gray's hearty kiss. "I'm dressed real warm. If we're going to set in the kitchen, I guess I won't lay off my overshoes. If I keep 'em on my feet, it'll take 'em off my mind."

This point being satisfactorily settled, the two ladies sat down in rockers beside the stove and started work on their sleeveless sweaters. Mrs. Elliott, as usual, scarcely stopping for breath before she began her recital of the recent news of the neighborhood.

"Have you heard that old Mis' Hunter, up to White Water is married again? Mr. Taylor tried to reason with her, seein' he's buried four of her husbands already, but she said, as long as the Lord took 'em, she would. Shockin', ain't it?—How's the baby? I shouldn't have thought that Austin could have borne to go off and leave that little helpless creature, but it seems to be thrivin', don't it? I don't s'pose you have the least notion he'd want to marry again, not for a while, anyway. Yes, I knew he was real fond of Sylvia, but men are human. Writes you real regular, does he? And Thomas, too? I'm always real pleased to hear about your boys but I declare I steer clear of Violet Mannin' these days. You know how set she was against Paul goin' to war. But now she's got the biggest service flag in town and we are 100 per cent

subscribed' on her Liberty loan card I bet all she bought was \$50 bonds—don't you? Be that as it may, mornin', noon and night she don't open her head except to talk about 'her hero. Goes around with a letter of Paul's in her hand, and—"

"Does he write her regular?"

"Seems to. I can't make out that he's ben in any great danger yet, and I've questioned her close. Enjoyin' himself considerable, I should say. Them Mannin' children always just itched and hankered to get out of Hamstead and I shouldn't be a mite surprised if that itchin' and hankerin' didn't have somethin' to do with Paul's 'patriotism' and Blanche's 'romance.' And that brings me to my main piece of news—Phillip Starr's number's been called and he's goin' to Devens this week. Blanche's comin' home for the present and I hear she's mad clear through."

"Oh, the poor child!"

"Poor child nothin'. I don't deny Blanche is pretty and pleasant, but there ain't nothin' very deep about her. I bet she's lookin' forward to comin' here with lots of good-lookin' clothes and new ideas and puttin' on airs with her old neighbors. Mary's got her faults, but I'll say this for her, she ain't near so high and mighty as the rest of the family. Well, I must start along home. Clearin', ain't it? Well, this'll make nice sleighin' and that's one thing to be thankful for. It's lucky we got a few comforts left."

Phillip had longed to volunteer in the first days of the war and Blanche had been so bitterly opposed to it that he had given in to her wishes, trying not to let her see the bitter spiritual struggle and loss of self-esteem which it had cost him to do this. But when the draft came, there could be no question of evasion or hesitation. His little income would keep her comfortable, and there was no child. This, Blanche knew, had been a source of disappointment and grief to Phillip while she had secretly rejoiced at "not being tied down right away."

Now the fact that a baby might have kept him at home made her resentful that she did not have one.

It was out of the question for her to stay on in the little Brookline apartment alone, and there was nothing for her to do but to return, rebelliously to Hamstead. Phillip, with never-failing understanding and gentleness, saw how hard it was for her to do this and insisting that it should hereafter be called "Carte Blanche" to perpetuate his joke, urged her again to amuse herself by having the little law office renovated to suit the plans which he had made so long before. This time the suggestion was a godsend. Blanche became genuinely interested and worked harder and more happily than she ever had done before in order to have the tiny home in perfect order for his first furlough. There was a merry little housewarming, when Phillip appeared, wearing his sergeant's uniform, for all Hamstead wanted to see him.

But after the last guest had departed, he lighted a fire in the wide shallow fireplace of the big, soft-colored bedroom, and unfasted Blanche's party dress by candle-light as they stood before it. It had grown very cold outside, and the many paned windows were frosting over with delicate shapes. The man, looking toward them from the fire, suddenly shivered a little. They were so lecy and sparkling, reflecting the frozen moonlight out there, that there was something of almost unearthly loveliness about them, something ghostly—

"Blanche," he said abruptly, "when you fixed up Carte Blanche, what did you do with those old law books that were here?"

Blanche was standing before the mirror, combing her hair. She did not even turn.

"They were so musty and shabby and dry-looking, I burned them up. Why did you want them?"

"No. Did you burn them all?"

"Yes."

"Read any of them first?"

"No. I could tell by the looks that they were dull. Not what you and I wanted in our lovely home."

She walked across the room to him, her golden hair falling over her shoulders, her soft white dress glowing

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Jean—You have known your husband to flirt with only one girl? What punishment did you impose? Jo—I married him.

dowing from her bare neck and arms in an unbroken line to the floor. Deliberately, she blew out the flickering candles, one after the other, and, in the dim firelight, put her arms around his neck.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" she whispered.

Phillip bent over her. There was something in her manner that had never been there before. Was she, too, feeling the mystery and power of the night? Had these last weeks of separation been teaching her, too—teaching her the lessons that for a time, it seemed as if he, for all his love, had failed to make clear to her? Was the dread which had been slowly growing through the spring and summer that his white star was to prove only a will-o'-the-wisp, to be taken from him after all?

"Yes, sweetheart, beautiful," he answered. "But I want you to know a story that was in one of those books you burned, just the same. If you don't already, I ought to have spoken of it to you before."

As quietly as he could, he told her first of his reading of the legend and then of his talk with Mary about it afterwards.

"I can't pretend to explain it. But it seems to me the first Blanche didn't want to hurt any person, especially—that it isn't a curse in that sense—but to teach her descendants, if she could, what a terrible thing it is to be selfish. Most of all, the selfishness that calls itself love. Occasionally mothers feel that kind of love for their sons, or children for their parents, or husbands for their wives."

"You mean that is the kind that Colonel Moses felt for the countess," said Blanche slowly, "and—and it's been so, straight through the family. That's the way mother cares for Paul. That's the way—that's the way I cared for you—once. But, oh, I don't any more!"

"That isn't the way I've cared for you," said Phillip. "I'm not very strong, and I'm not very good. I don't think that for a minute. But I do love you with all my heart and soul. That—that makes more difference than anything else, I believe. That curse is never going beyond this generation, and you must tell me tonight, that you're glad—I ought to have gone to war when I first knew it was the right thing for me to do. We can't help that now. But you've got to say you're glad I'm going now."

His arms tightened around her, his lips, meeting hers, lay for a long time against them.

"If only we had a son—"

"Whenever I think of Lady Blanche farm," he went on, after a long silence. "I think of you and the brook—its freshness and fragrance and purity. It's shallow in places, it rushes into little falls, but where I found you, it widens to a deep pool, clear as crystal, a haven of refreshment and delight and—holiness. That's what you seem to me tonight—do you understand? Oh, my darling—"

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