



Two KEYS to a CABIN

LIDA LARRIMORE

THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Charming, wealthy Gabriella (Gay for short) Graham, engaged to Todd Janeway, returns to a cabin in the Maine woods accompanied by a friend, Kate Oliver. The idea of a stay at the cabin occurred to her when she received a key to it following the death of her godfather, Uncle John Lawrence. The two girls notice immediately that someone has been, and probably is, living in the cabin. Kate suspects that Gay knows the identity of the mysterious occupant.

CHAPTER II—While the girls talk the mystery man returns. Gay, surprisingly enough, introduces the man to her. He is John Houghton, a young doctor whom Gay had known in previous years. Soon after arriving at the cottage Gay discovered his identity through an old monogrammed sweater. Immediately aggressive, Gay asks him by what right he is in the cabin. His right, she finds, is greater than her own. He, too, possesses a key, but more than that, it is his to it from his Uncle John, Gay's godfather. Gay is high handed with him, and he stays courteously that he will leave. Looking at him in the doorway, her old feelings return. She knows that he is more necessary to her than is Todd Janeway, the man she is to marry.

CHAPTER III—Before he leaves, John goes for a walk. When he returns he finds Gay sitting before the fireplace. They begin talking on a more friendly basis, and she asks him to reconsider his decision to leave. The next morning brings a different feeling, and John decides to remain for his vacation—one more week.

CHAPTER IV—The night before Gay and Kate are to return home to New York John gets an urgent request to call at a nearby farm. Gay accompanies him while he cares for the patient. Returning to the cabin at a late hour, John stops the car. He tells Gay that he loves her, and she admits that he is necessary to her happiness.

"That's a pretty swell prospect," he said.

"Yes, isn't it?" she said brightly, too brightly, so that again he was aware of the passion beneath the light mocking words. "And that's only the beginning. Todd's father is giving us his place in Connecticut, too, so that we'll have an anchorage and Dad has bought an apartment house over by the East River because, of course, we'll have to spend some time in town. We're to have the top floor. The contest is on as to whether the decor is to be smartly modern or quaintly Victorian. I'm backing Mother to win. She's all for glass and chromium. Aunt Flora's what-not and ball-fringes haven't a chance."

"So you see there's no sensible reason why I should have run away. It was the whim of a spoiled little brat who hasn't sense enough to know her luck."

"Gay!" he said, louder this time, his voice gritty with effort. "Will you stop talking like an absurd little fool?"

"But I am." She was moving, now, with a rocking motion back and forth on the float. "What a gift for description you have!"

"You're trying to make me think you are," he said brusquely, "but you aren't succeeding." He bent toward her and his voice softened from a demand to an appeal. "What are you getting at? What are you trying to tell me? Please—"

She drew a long sobbing breath and the house of cards tumbled into fragments. She looked up at him, her eyes dilated by tears, then down into the water.

"I don't want to go back to New York," she said, so low that he scarcely heard her and as though the words were forced from her by some agency beyond her control.

He did not reply. The sympathy that welled from his heart in an ungrudging flood made coherent thought impossible. He sat watching her efforts to regain the control his appeal had shattered, fighting a

desire to take her in his arms, feeling in his own senses the throb of the pulse at the base of her throat, the trembling that shook her body. Presently she grew quiet. When she turned to him again, her face was composed.

"I suppose I should apologize, now," she said coolly. Her poise, her detachment, checked the rushing flood of sympathy and tender concern.

"It isn't necessary," he said stiffly, feeling that she had tricked him, humiliated because he had been so naively moved by what might very well have been feminine histrionics.

"I won't, then." She bundled her bright hair into a rubber cap. "Apologies are misleading." She sprang to her feet. "Come on. I'll race you to the landing."

She dove from the side of the float, came to the surface, set off toward the shore, swimming with an easy over-arm stroke. He followed, after a moment. His strong brown body cut through the water, caught up with her, slackened its speed to the slackening rhythm of her stroke.

"You aren't trying to win!" She smiled at him across the strip of water rippling between them.

"What's the use? I'm licked before I start."

Her face sobered. The smile, curving her lips, trembled.

"John—" she said, hesitatingly.

"Yes, Gay—"

But she ducked her head. When it emerged, water streamed over her face as though she were weeping.

The bow of the boat cut through water which shimmered with the reflected glow of the sunset. Gay lifted and dipped the paddle slowly, watching circles, rimmed with gold and flame and amethyst widen out across the still surface of the lake. The wind which had blown all day had died down but the air was growing cold. She wished she had dressed more warmly but the sun had been hot when she'd set off, alone, directly after lunch.

He'd thought she was dramatizing that afternoon. Well, hadn't she been—a little? The rebellion beneath the words she'd spoken was sincere enough but her expression of it had been theatrical. Why couldn't she have talked to him directly? He'd given her an opportunity. She'd felt very close to him, for a moment, nearer to mutual understanding than they had ever been. Then pride had gotten in the way, had checked the spontaneous response to the tenderness in his voice that she had wanted to make. It was just as well. She was leaving tomorrow to keep a promise. What John thought of her was unimportant. She would, in all probability, never see him again after tonight—

No use thinking of that. Gay, at some distance from the shore, turned the canoe in toward the landing. There was only one explanation she wanted to make. She'd been, when she talked to John this morning, very unfair to Todd. Remorse for the impression she'd probably given John of him had nibbled uneasily at her thoughts during the afternoon. She was fond of Todd. She loved him as her best and dearest friend. Strange—but that was true. He was her best and her dearest friend.

But how could she explain Todd to John? The bow of the canoe bumped

gently into the landing. Gay dropped the paddle and held on to the plank with one hand while she reached for the rope. Wouldn't anything that she might say be too much or too little? They hadn't merely drifted into an engagement. It wasn't only propinquity or the suitability of the mach which had culminated in the promise she was leaving tomorrow to keep. They'd been dearest friends since she could remember, separated for long intervals when he or she had been traveling or in school or involved in a temporary infatuation, but always coming together again, taking up their friendship where they had dropped it, never admitting but mutually conscious of the fact that they liked each other best.

John's voice called her name. She turned. He was walking down the path toward her, a dim figure in the deep twilight of the thickly crowding trees.

"I was just setting out to look for you," he said.

"Were you?" Her voice steadied. "Supper over?"

"Some time ago." He stepped back to allow her to precede him up the narrow path to the cabin. "Kate took her car to the garage in the village."

"What for?"

"To have everything checked before you start in the morning. I offered to take it for her but she seemed to prefer to go herself. Where have you been all afternoon?"

"Just drifting."

"Didn't it occur to you that I—that we might be concerned about you?" He held the screen door open for her.

"Not especially." She glanced up at him as she stepped inside. He was frowning and the set of his mouth was stern. "If you were, I'm sorry," she added.

A fire blazed and crackled in the fireplace. She went to the hearth

and held her hands to the warmth. "Are you cold?" He struck a match to light a lamp.

"A little. The air is chilly after the sun goes down."

"And you've had nothing to eat."

"I'm not hungry." The constraint in the atmosphere lay like a weight upon her spirits.

"Kate left something in the oven for you." His eyes avoided her glance. He adjusted the wick and replaced the shade on the lamp.

"I don't want anything, thank you." She stood with her back to the fire, now, printing his features upon her memory as she saw them in the light striking up from the lamp. Her throat ached. Her heart felt too big for her breast.

"You'll be making an early start in the morning?"

"Probably."

"Then I'd better fill the wood-basket tonight."

He came to the hearth and bent to lift the basket. The firelight shone on his thick dark hair, on the lean angle of his jaw. By extending her hand she could have touched him. Why not? There was only tonight—

The telephone on the wall whirred and jangled.

"What the devil—?" he exclaimed in an undertone and walked across the room to the telephone box against the wall.

She watched him place the receiver to his ear, heard his brusque "Hello! Hello! Will you get off the wire, please? HELLO! The call is for the Lawrence cabin, Mrs. Sprague. HELLO! Yes—" His voice quieted to a less aggressive tone.

"Hello, Ralph. Yes. Houghton speaking—"

The call had nothing to do with her. Gay's apprehension subsided. She waited for the end of the conversation, not gathering much information from what she heard. John said, "Yes" at intervals, asked a direction, said, "Yes. Right away. Yes. Thanks, Ralph. Good-by."

"This telephone!" He smiled in comic exasperation as he placed the receiver on the hook. "Everybody from here to Machias listens in. It's a favorite amusement in Washington County."

"That's jolly, isn't it?" His smile, her response, relieved the constraint. "I thought it might be long distance," she said.

"Long distance? Good Lord! A call from here to New York would probably take a week." He hesitat-



He was frowning and the set of his mouth was stern.

ed, then asked, "Will you be afraid to stay here alone until Kate returns?"

Her quick glance questioned him. "That was Ralph Sprague up at the store. They need a doctor at the Whittaker place. Somebody went to the store to telephone. They couldn't locate either Dr. Nelson or Dr. Branch, and Ralph thought of me. I don't like to leave you here alone—"

She thought that he was less concerned with her than with getting away. It didn't matter that this was her last night here. He was grateful for an excuse, perhaps. She lifted her chin.

"I'm not afraid to stay alone."

"You might ride out there with me," he suggested diffidently and without, Gay thought, any special enthusiasm.

"No, I'll stay here. Kate will be back before long."

"All right." He walked to the door opening into the kitchen, paused there to ask, "You're sure you don't mind, that you won't be afraid?"

"Certainly not," she said coolly, wanting to go with him more, she thought, than she had ever wanted anything in all her life before, feeling each foot-step that took him away from her fall like a blow on her heart.

His expression became more resolute. "You're probably right," he said crisply. "It might not be too comfortable. I may be detained."

He left the room without looking at her again. Standing on the hearth, she heard him moving about in the room he used for a laboratory. Moments passed slowly, dropping like water which might not be gathered up again, spilling, wasted, gone forever. Presently footsteps thudded across the kitchen floor. The back door closed.

The sound of the door closing vibrated through her senses. Gay took a step forward, stopped, then went running out through the kitchen, jerked open the door, sped down the steps and across the clearing.

"John!" she called breathlessly. "Wait for me! I'm coming!"

John opened the door of the farmhouse and looked out across a stretch of weed-grown lawn. His car was there under the willow where he had left it at the edge of the lane.

"Good-night, Ben," he said to the lanky young man in overalls who had accompanied him to the door. "Don't worry. Everything's all right."

"Thanks, Doc. Jenny and I are mighty grateful."

"That's all right. I'll run in some time tomorrow—today."

A thin high wall came out through the open door. The unshaded lamp trembled in the shaking young hands which held it. John laughed.

"Only a healthy one could make that much noise. He's going to be an opera singer."

"Not if he takes after his Dad." The boyish face traced with lines of weariness and anxiety shone, then darkened. "You sure Jenny's—all right?"

"Fine. She'll probably sleep until noon. Your mother will know what to do. You get some sleep."

"All right, Doc. We sure thank you. Good-night."

The door closed. John walked across the stretch of lawn toward the car. The full moon had dropped below the dipping hills but the farmyard was bright with radiance it had left. John drew in deep breaths of the cool damp air. He came up to the car walking quietly, shortening his long eager strides.

But she was not asleep.

"Hello, Doc," she said, and sat erect in the seat of the car.

"I thought I told you to go back to the cabin," he said, but his attempt to sound stern was not very convincing.

"You did," Gay said. "You've been telling me that at intervals all night."

"Are you frozen? Let me look at you." He leaned past her into the car and turned on the dash-board lights.

She wore his old college sweater, too large for her, the sleeves rolled back to free her hands and she had bundled herself into a cocoon of car robes and blankets.

"You should have gone back," he said as he slipped in behind the wheel. "They would have taken me or I could have stayed here all night. Do you realize that it's nearly three o'clock?" He released the brake and the car moved out into the road.

"What do you suppose Kate is thinking?"

"The worst, probably." She moved closer to him in the narrow seat.

"What is it, a boy or a girl?"

"A boy." She was unconscious of having moved toward him, he thought. Wonderful to have her here very close to him, wearing his sweater, waiting for him to ride back to the cabin. Not real, of course, a piece of a dream, a part of the strange intimacy of this night they had spent together.

"I heard it." Her voice was hushed. "It sounded like a furious kitten. I'd like to have seen it. I've never seen one so—small."

"They improve with age. He had a close shave. It's the first one and there were complications. I'd have given my soul for hospital equipment. That—" He broke off abruptly, then added with brusqueness induced by embarrassment and the fear that his enthusiasm might bore her. "I shouldn't have let you in for this. I didn't know it was a baby. Why didn't you take the car back to the cabin hours ago?"

"I wouldn't have missed it," she said, still in that hushed and won-

dering voice. "Nothing as real as this ever happened to me. I should think that doing what you did tonight would make you feel like—God."

"Good Lord!" he said, trying to conceal the pride and pleasure her comment gave him. "I didn't do anything she couldn't have done for herself. Made it a little easier, possibly. There's too much sentimentalizing over doctors," he concluded severely.

"Oh, John, don't!" she cried with soft vehemence. "Don't be ashamed of—enthusiasm."

"I'm not actually," he admitted, moved by the sincerity of her voice. "Only you're always so controlled and—detached. You've made me feel that enthusiasm is—naive."

"I know! I hate it!" she cried. "We're all that way, my friends, I mean. We think it's smart to be bored and disillusioned. We avoid any display of emotion as we would avoid a plague. Even Todd and I—"

She paused.

The roadster dipped down into a hollow where fog moved before the head-lights in wraith-like shapes. John felt his hands trembling on the wheel.

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