



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, he is heir to it from his Uncle John, Gay's godfather. Gay is high handed with him, and he states 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.

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"I didn't heed the ads," he said mock-tragically. "I failed to do my Christmas shopping early."

"Poor Robert!" Gay smiled. Though to her father's family it was a mystery, she understood very well why her mother had married Robert. He had, as her mother had, an ingenious zest for living. He was no longer the handsome figure of a man-about-town he had been when he became her step-father. He was getting stout and somewhat florid and his blond hair was receding at the temples, but his spirit was buoyant, his nature restfully uncomplicated and his enjoyment of good food, good sport and gay company remained undiminished. He was kind, and fond of her. His expression, now, as he looked at her across the lace and silver and crystal flowers which splintered the light into glittering sparkles, was admiring and interested.

"Go to it, kid," he said. "I'm all for romance myself. If you need moral support you can count on Uncle Robert."

He was a dear or maybe in her blissful state she felt tender toward all the world. She blew him a kiss and went on along the hall.

In the drawing-room Suki was hanging wreaths made of silvered leaves and bunches of blue glass berries. She knew it was Suki because Togo's province was the kitchen.

en. It occurred to her that it was a little incongruous that small heathen Suki with his flat lemon colored face and black bead eyes should be decorating the apartment for a Christmas festival.

What would John make of it all, of Suki and Togo who had been with Robert for years, of Mathilde whom her mother had brought back from France, of her mother, of Robert, of Christmas Eve at the apartment? What would he make of the Victorian elegance of "Dunedin" when they went tomorrow? Could he, as she did, ignore Aunt Flora's disapproval, the curious but premeditated coolness of the relatives who would be there? Panic seized her again. Her spirits sank with the descent of the elevator. She regretted, for an instant, that John was coming. Now, at this moment, while their meeting was still in the future, the feeling they had for each other was secure. Now—

But that was absurd. She shook off frightening fancies. Her spirits lifted when the Negro doorman opened the door for her.

"Merry Christmas, William." "White Christmas, Miss Graham." "It's nice, isn't it?" "Luck for certain." The Negro's face was lit by an ivory grin. "Good times comin' pretty soon."

The train from Boston, unless it was late, was already in. Gay made her way through the concourse of the station toward the gate where John would be waiting. Expectancy gave wings to her feet. She hurried on, jostling and being jostled, heedless of admiring glances cast at her, impatient of any delay. Then through people passing, she saw him and reluctance checked her eagerness. Her flying pace slackened. She advanced slowly, caught in panic again, walking mechanically, all feeling suspended.

He did not see her. He stood beside the gate, his eyes searching through the groups that eddied past him. But was that John? She hadn't remembered—it was the overcoat he wore which made him look so tall. She'd never seen him in the winter before. The new hat he wore was not becoming. She didn't know him. It wasn't that tall young man, obviously ill at ease, whom she had come to meet. She couldn't move or speak to him. She felt paralyzed, frozen inside.

He saw her and smiled. She started toward him as he started toward her.

"Hello." He removed his hat, smiling diffidently.

"Hello." Her voice sounded thin and unnatural. She felt her mouth stretch in a mechanical smile.

He bent to kiss her. She lifted her face. A redcap, carrying luggage,

her vision. "Oh why are we always such idiots?"

"I didn't know you. You looked—I was terrified."

"So was I. Darling, that hat—"

"Don't you like it either?" He turned to open the window. "We'll throw it out."

"Idiot!" She pressed close to him, her face against the rough cloth of his coat. "It's all right, isn't it?"

"The hat? You change your mind so—"

"Us, I mean—Your being here—We're going to have fun."

"Of course we are. Breakfast first, though. I wasn't hungry when you asked me, but I'm starving now."

"Are you?" She laughed. "So am I. Let's send your luggage out to Mother's apartment and stay down town all day. We'll have breakfast at Child's and walk in the snow and drop quarters in all the Santa Claus kettles and sing carols on street corners and—"

"You darling! I'm so happy, so glad to be here."

"Are you? Darling! John!"

John got up as Gay's mother rose from the love-seat on which they sat.

"So I suppose I'll have to forgive you," she said, smiling up at him with Gay's smile and Gay's trick of crinkling her eyes. "I was prepared to dislike you intensely."

"Now, Kitty," her husband said with indulgent fondness, "you've never disliked anybody. It's your all-inclusive love for your fellow-men which keeps getting you into trouble."

"That's unkind of you, Robert." She linked her arm through her husband's. "What will John think of me?"

"I think you are very kind," he said, realizing that the reply was inadequate, seeing and resenting the amusement in her deep blue eyes, so like Gay's.

"Kindness is an endearing trait in a mother-in-law," Robert Cameron said cheerfully. He consulted his watch. "My dear, we must be on our way."

"We're going to the theater with the Davenports," she said in the way she had of seeming to share an intimate confidence. "They've just become grandparents and need cheering."

The Japanese house-boy came into the room. She spoke to him about calling for the car. John watched her pleasant manner with the servant. She was prettier than Gay, he thought, but less beautiful, smaller, softer, more rounded. Her hair which had been dark was, prematurely, turning white. Cut short and curled, it looked like a wig for fancy dress rather than a symbol of age.

Her skin, in the diffused light which filled the long high-ceilinged room, had a honey-colored tint and her small pretty mouth was painted the exact shade of the coral azalea against her shoulder. She didn't look like anybody's mother. It was difficult to realize, in spite of certain points of resemblance, that she bore so close a relationship to Gay.

She turned to him as the house-boy slid noiselessly out of the room. "We must get acquainted tomorrow," she said, laying a small jeweled hand on his arm. "But no—! You and Gay will be leaving for 'Dunedin' fairly early. Christmas dinner, there, is always at two." She glanced up at her husband, smiling through narrowed eyes.

"If we're to see any of the first act at all—" her husband said a trifle hastily.

"Yes, darling." She turned again to John. "Perhaps we'll see you later. If not, good-night. Suki will take care of you. You are very welcome here. We want you to feel at home."

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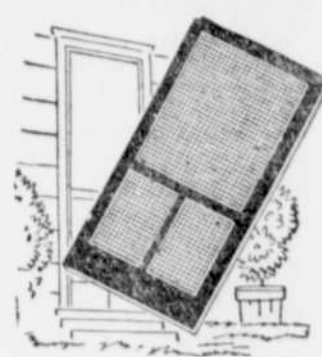
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She felt paralyzed, frozen inside.

bumped into them so that his lips, glancingly, touched her cheek.

"We must find a taxi." She did not look at him. "I didn't bring a car."

His hand cupped her elbow but she led the way. A porter followed with his luggage. "Did you have a good trip?" she asked after an interval of silence.

"Not bad. We were on time." "I'm sorry I was delayed. I left the apartment in time but traffic was heavy."

"That's all right. I haven't waited long."

They stood waiting for the porter to call a taxi.

"How are you?" he asked.

She glanced up at him, then quickly away.

"Splendid, thank you. Isn't it nice to have snow?"

"If it keeps on like this the trains won't be coming in on time."

"No, probably not. Have you had breakfast?"

"No. It doesn't matter, though. I'm not hungry."

A taxi slid in beside them. The porter opened the door. John put her in, supervised the stowing of his luggage, sat beside her. The cab moved out into traffic. She glanced up at him. He was looking at her. The hurt bewilderment in his eyes, the difficult smile that moved across his lips, restored warmth and a feeling of tenderness.

"Hello!" she said softly.

"Hello!" His arms went around her. Their lips met and held. Presently she drew away.

"Is this scandalous behavior for New York?" His voice sounded happy, relieved.

"Who cares?" She winked to clear



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