



Speak with the Heart

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"MERRY CHRISTMAS, Sybil! Merry Christmas, honey!"

Sybil groaned thickly.

The voice continued. "The kids are up!"

Elsie's voice was clear and happy. Elsie herself, seen through sleep-blurred eyes, was neatly robed and brushed, although it was five o'clock on a cold snowy morning and Sybil preferred sleeping until noon. "I thought you'd enjoy seeing them open their presents," Elsie called.

"Must I?"

"Why no. Of course not. I'm sorry I disturbed you. I didn't—"

Sybil heard Elsie going away and pushed herself toward the dark heater, sleep, but found the pool drained. She was awake.

She put her hands over her eyes as if to shut out memory, but memory had waked with her. She saw the way he looked: dark hair just beginning to gray; dark eyes—the bold, penetrating eyes of a reporter; handsome nose and a strong mouth. She saw his mouth smiling its rather famous smile, not at her but at Nola Emerson, and her heart squeezed itself together and hurt.

Robert James, one of the more famous foreign correspondents, who had seen the beautiful women of every country and whom no woman could interest for long—he had to be the man whom Sybil's foolish heart chose to fasten itself upon.

At that, she had held his attention for more than a month. She had been carelessly impetuous, carelessly beautiful, and Bob had been fascinated.

Sybil's friends reminded her of his reputation, and she shrugged, laughing, pretending disinterest. But, Elsie, who had known him longer than any, said, "Bob likes you, Sybil," and Sybil found herself suddenly near tears, coldly aware that for her it was Bob James or no one.

Sybil came to an abrupt halt. The tree, glorious in this moment of triumph, shed its colored lights into the room. Beside it stood Bob James.

The Christmas-morning noise forced itself upon her with a storm of running feet making soft thunder in the carpeted hall, and children shouting above the thunder.

It was a rule of the Marsden house that the first child up on Christmas morning should wake the others and that each must wait until all were dressed.

Sybil had been grateful to Elsie and Paul Marsden these last six months. She lived a busy, exciting life, but the lovely apartment of which she had dreamed all through a barren, orphaned adolescence had turned into a kind of prison, haunted by loneliness.

The Marsdens had sensed this and had let her sit for a while by the fire of their happiness. There were nights when she even chose to baby-sit for them instead of attending one of the endless parties.

SYBIL WAS GLAD when Elsie had invited her to spend the Christmas week end with them. She'd shopped carefully for the children, trying to see how their faces would light up as they tore off the wrappings, wanting to watch as they did it. A child's spoken thanks meant little, being an act dictated by his elders. The true thanks was on his face.

It was October when she bought the presents, and it was the middle of November when Bob James came home from Europe. There were weeks of happiness when loneliness became only a ghost. True, Bob had declined Elsie's invitation to Christmas dinner, having some previous plan, but he was coming to the Marsdens' Christmas Eve party and that was enough.

Snow fell early and stayed on the ground. Children pressed steamy noses against the great windows, women loaded with packages pushed against each other, the whole face of mankind looked happy. It seemed to Sybil that all the world was merry, and she herself the maddest, merriest of all.

But Nola Emerson came on Christmas Eve. Her blonde hair caressed her shoulders with a satin touch, her body was made to be molded by black velvet. Her eyes, clear and tranquil, clung to the eyes of Bob James. Her full red mouth was dimpled at the corners, which seemed slightly incongruous.