

WITH BANNERS

By Emilie Loring

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SYNOPSIS

Brooke Reyburn visits the office of Jed Stewart, a lawyer, to discuss the terms of an estate she has inherited from Mrs. Mary Amanda Dane. Unwittingly she overhears Jed talking to Mark Trent, a nephew of Mrs. Dane who has been disinherited. Mrs. Dane had lived at Lookout House, a huge structure on the sea, built by her father and divided into two, for her and Mark's father. Brooke had been a fashion expert, and Mrs. Dane, a "shut-in," hearing her on the radio had invited her to call and developed a deep affection for her. Mark discloses that Mrs. Dane had threatened to disinherit him if he married Lola, from whom he is now divorced. He says he does not trust Henri and Clotilde Jacques, Mrs. Dane's servants. He says he is not interested in an offer of Brooke's to share the estate with him. Leaving her department store job, Brooke refuses an offer to "go stepping" with Jerry Field, a carefree young man who wants to marry her.

CHAPTER II—Continued

Silence followed her words, a silence fraught with significance. Brooke caught her sister's look at her mother before she sat up straight and tense. She knew that posture, she was preparing for a skirmish. Lucette said defiantly:

"Glad you brought up that subject, Brooke. News flash! I'm not going to the sticks with you, not if you offer me a gold tub with diamond settings. I spent one night at the home of the late Mary Amanda Dane, and, so far as I am concerned, the name means look out and not go there again. That sealed door in her living-room gave me the creeps. Sam isn't—"

She dashed to the hall as the telephone rang.

"Lucette Reyburn speaking," she answered eagerly.

"Yes—yes—he is. I'll call him." Her voice was as flat as de-bubbled champagne. She pounded on the bath-room door.

"Phone for you, Sam.—How do I know? It's the girl who always calls just as you've stepped under the shower.—All right."

She returned to the phone. "Hold the line. He'll be here in a minute."

Back in the living-room she dropped into a chair. With elbows propped on her knees, chin in her palms, she stared at the floor.

In bathrobe and slippers, Sam answered the phone.

"Can't make it—No. It's not another girl, it's a family confab. Sam Reyburn signing off. Good-by!"

He slammed down the receiver. "And I know of no reason why I should explain to you what I'm doing," he growled under his breath.

"Hi! Sammy! What's the shower-dame's name?" Lucette called.

Her brother scowled at her. "There's about as much privacy in this apartment as there is in the bandstand on the Common."

"Cheerio, darling. You'll have privacy, and how, if you live with Brooke. She's going house-owner in a big way. If there's to be a bath for every bed, of course there will be a sound-proof telephone booth with every room. What did you say the girl friend's name was?"

"It's none of your business, kiddo, who calls me." Hands deep in the pockets of his hectic bathrobe, Sam paced the living-room floor.

His mother laughed softly. She patted the couch.

"Stop walking the floor like a hungry lion and sit down, Sam. Lucette started something just before the phone rang. She should have known better than to start anything in the Reyburn family before it has been fed, but now that she has, you'd better finish it."

"What d'you mean by started, Mother?"

Brooke perched on the arm of a chair at the desk. She faced them all. Most of the time she could tell quite well what they were thinking. She answered her brother's question before her mother could.

"She means that Lucette announced that she did not intend to

live at Lookout House with me, and that you—"

"Were not going either, Sam," Lucette finished triumphantly.

"Aren't you, Sam?"

"Say listen, Brooke. Don't you see how it is? I have to be at the theater early; I'm late when I get through; rehearsing all the morning. Twenty miles is a long way to commute."

"I had planned to buy you the snappiest convertible coupe on the market."

"Don't make me feel like a brute. Don't you see—"

"Of course I see, Sammy. You want to be on your own. I do understand."

"Don't worry about his being on his own, darling," Lucette cut in bitterly. "No one can be on his own in this family. The Great Adviser intends to stay right here to look after his little sister."

Brooke's eyes met her brother's; he nodded. Lucette flamed on:

"And Mother's going to stay to look after both of us."

"Mother!" Brooke echoed the word with shocked incredulity. "But



"Handsome as Ever, Aren't You?"

I've planned the most wonderful things for Mother. Is it true?"

Celia Reyburn's eyes shone through a mist as they met her elder daughter's. Her lips curved in a lovely, tremulous smile.

"When you say Mother, Brooke, I think it the most beautiful word in the world. But I will not make my home with you—at present. First, because Lookout House is yours and you should assume the responsibility and direction of it. You will do it more easily if I am not there. Second, I want to stay in the city, not so much because of the children, but because now that your financial future is assured, I shall feel that I may use a little of the money your father left me. I want—I want to be in the heart of things. I'll have an experienced maid, I'll have the right clothes, and—and I'll go places, I'm dying to go places."

Her impassioned voice broke. "Perhaps I'm selfish, perhaps you children think I'm a silly old woman."

Sam flung his arm about his mother. "Hooray for the Spirit of '56! Sorry; I shouldn't have mentioned your age, Celia Reyburn. Don't worry that you won't get enough of your family, Brooke. I'll have to drag these two giddy girls off to the country for rest occasionally. Aren't sore at us, are you, Brooke? Don't feel that we have let you down to go on alone?"

"Of course I don't, you old dear. Why shouldn't each one of us do as we like, now that there is some money back of us? Because I feel that I must carry out Mrs. Dane's

wishes is no reason for dragging the rest of you into the country. Let's get busy planning. If you are all sold on staying in the city, we'll have a bigger apartment. I may want to spend a week-end away from the sticks myself."

CHAPTER III

Through the open transom above the office door came the hum of typewriters. Mark Trent, behind his desk, scowled in the direction of the sound. He had paid good money for those machines on the understanding that they were noiseless. Curious that he never had been annoyed by them before. Must be this confounded note in his hands. He read again:

Dear Mr. Trent—

Many times your aunt has told me of the Thanksgivings you spent with her at Lookout House. Won't you dine here on the coming holiday? My mother, sister and brother will be with me. There are many family treasures which you should have. I would like to go over them with you, and more than all, I want to thank you for pulling me out from under that car. I really wasn't so ungrateful as I sounded. This is a late invitation because I have been bolstering up my courage to ask you. Please come. Bury the hatchet, or accept the olive branch, or however peace between enemies—though I am not for a moment your enemy—is being accomplished now.

Sincerely yours,

Brooke Reyburn

Lookout House

He dropped the note and frowned at the red carnations in a crystal vase on his desk. He lived over the instant he had seen a girl go down in the street, had seen a speeding car almost upon her. How had he managed to save her? Colorless and dazed as she was, he had thought her the loveliest thing he ever had seen as she looked up at him. As for a second he had steadied her in his arms, his brain had fought against her attraction and the live warmth of her body had prompted him to growl at her. No wonder she had been angry, and no wonder—he admitted honestly—Mary Amanda Dane had been taken in by her. Well, one victim in the family was enough. She shouldn't hypnotize him.

He drew letter paper toward him and picked up a pen. He'd settle this question of friendship between them for good and all. Little schemer!

Dear Miss Reyburn, he wrote.

As he hesitated as to how to word his regrets, another picture of the girl as she had appeared between the hangings in Stewart's office flashed in his mind with startling clarity.

He must get along with that note. His frowning regard of the opening door changed to a welcoming smile as a head poked in.

"Come in, Jed. What's on the little mind now?"

Jed Stewart perched on a corner of the flat desk. He pulled one of the red carnations from the vase and drew the stem through the buttonhole of the lapel of his checked coat.

"I'm taking a lady to tea, need a posey to make me look like a million, so combined utility with business and came here. Knew you always had them."

"What's the business? If you've been sent again to ask me to take half of that—"

"Hold everything; that's a all washed up. The matter has not been mentioned to me since the day you and Brooke Reyburn met in my office. I guess you killed her interest in you by your infernal sarcasm."

"Hope you'll enjoy the house and fortune, Miss Reyburn. Happy landings! Perhaps I'd better say, safe landings," sez you."

"Oh, you think so? Read that."

Jed Stewart frowned over the note Mark Trent tossed to him. He read it through, reread it. Looked at his friend.

"Going?"

"Going! What do you think?" Mark answered a buzzer. "Who?

Mrs. Gregory. Of course I'll see her."

He explained hurriedly to Stewart. "It's an old friend of Aunt Mary Amanda's. She sailed for France a week before my aunt died. She's a martinet, one of those terrible women who don't care where the lash of their tongue falls, and a confirmed matchmaker."

"This is mighty good of you, Mrs. Gregory, and it's a clear case of thought transference; not ten minutes ago I was thinking of you."

A wave of feeling menaced the clarity of Mark's voice as he bent over the white-gloved hand of the woman who had entered the office. She had been a vital part of the life at Lookout House which now seemed so irretrievably far behind him. A smile tugged at his lips as he observed that the floppy wide-brimmed picture hat was the model she had worn since as a boy he had admired the deeply waved blonde hair it shadowed. The hair was still faultlessly marcelled, but it was snow white.

She settled into a chair with the same rustle of taffeta he remembered, and adjusted a diamond brooch of a size and brilliance to make a discriminating thief avidly flex supple fingers. She peered up at him through a jeweled lorgnette, with eyes once a brilliant blue, now the color of faded larkspur.

"Handsome as ever, aren't you, Mark, in spite of the way those two women let you down. First that wife, with a grande amoureuse complex, and then Mary Amanda. I don't wonder that your hair at the temples looks as if it had been touched by frosty fingers, if you are only thirty. Who's he?"

She waved her lorgnette toward Stewart, who, back to the room, apparently had been absorbed in a study of the calf-bound books on the shelf.

"Stewart, of the firm of Stewart and Stewart, attorneys. Jed, come here. I want to present you to Mrs. Gregory, my first love."

"Hmp! Flatterer! You always could coax my heart out of my breast with your wonderful smile and your voice, Mark." She peered through her lorgnette as Jed Stewart took the hand she extended with the air of a sovereign.

"Stewart and Stewart! You were Mary Amanda Dane's lawyer, weren't you?"

The contempt in her voice deepened the color of Jed Stewart's already sufficiently ruddy face.

"I had that honor."

"Honor! Do you call it an honor to help cheat her nephew out of his inheritance?"

"Really, Mrs. Gregory, Jed can't be held responsible—"

"Hold your tongue, Mark. I've started, and now I intend to get rid of a few things that have been boiling and sizzling inside me since the day I heard that Mary Amanda had cut you out in favor of that fashion adviser she'd gone crazy about."

"Forget it, Mrs. Gregory. I don't need the money—"

"Of course you need it. No one has money enough now because no one has a sense of financial security. Didn't you take over all the lame ducks as your share of your grandfather's property so that your aunt wouldn't be worried by them? Aren't you making that ex-wife of yours an allowance? Mary Amanda told me. What's she been doing since she left you for that French count?"

"She has married, I understand."

"Married! After she divorced the count! The third time! Getting to be a habit, isn't it? She isn't entitled to a penny. I don't wonder your aunt was furious when she found out that you were giving her money. Perhaps that's the real reason she cut you off, though I thought it was because she didn't believe in divorce; on that subject she was stuck back in the eighties. However, that wasn't what I came here to talk about. I just wanted to tell you that if I had known what was in that will I witnessed two days before I sailed for Europe—it was just a week before she died—now, Stewart, don't look at me with your jaw dropped as if I were a moron with a Medusa complex—of course, I know that a person isn't supposed to know the contents of the will she witnesses, but I still say that had I

known that your aunt was leaving her money away from you, Mark, I would have cut off my hand before I signed."

Mark Trent's heart stopped and galloped furiously on. A will witnessed a week before Mary Amanda's death! The will which had been probated was of a date two months prior. As he opened suddenly stiffened lips to reply, he met Jed Stewart's warning eyes, eyes which seemed like flames in a chalky face. Jed was as amazed as he.

Jed began to speak. "I was fond of my client Mrs. Dane, and your reference to her last will brought back a picture of the delicate woman in her wheel chair with—"

"With that disreputable parrot swearing in the cage behind her. The bird was there when I witnessed the will; I didn't know but that she would insist upon Micawber's being the other witness, but she called in Clotilde and Henri Jacques, it was her nurse-companion's day off. If I had to choose between the parrot and that French butler as my co-resident on a desert island, I'd take Mr. Micawber. After they went out, Mary Amanda and I were alone for a few moments in the firelight. It was the last time I saw her—" Mrs. Gregory dabbed her reddening eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief. She straightened, demanded angrily:

"Why am I slobbering like that? I love life! I wouldn't give up my place in this problem-logged world for all the starry halos and golden harps you could offer. Thinking of your aunt set me off. The last few times I saw her I had noticed that she seemed distraught, as if something were worrying her. I've wondered since if she would have told me what she had done if I had not had to hurry away. I called Henri before I left. As I looked back, she seemed white and exhausted. As I drove away I saw that girl driving in."

"That girl! You mean—"

"The Reyburn girl, of course, Stewart. You ought to get a position somewhere as an echo. I'd met her several times and I liked her too before I knew what she had done to Mark. She made me forget that I was old enough to be her grandmother. Charming manners. Well, I must run along."

"Thank you for your interest in me, Mrs. Gregory. I'm going down to your car with you. Wait for me, Jed."

The woman turned on the threshold. "I hope, if ever you draw another will cutting out a rightful heir, young man, you'll be swished in boiling oil."

Stewart grinned. "Not boiling oil, madam, not boiling; couldn't you reduce the temperature a degree?"

She smiled. "We'll see, we'll see. You're an engaging boy, if you are a poor lawyer. I'm to spend the winter in my country house—not far from the Dane-Trent property—everybody's doing it this year. Motor down some Sunday for lunch."

"Sure, I'll come. Meanwhile, would you mind not telling anyone that you witnessed Mrs. Dane's will?"

"You don't think I'm proud of my part in that robbery, do you? I wouldn't have mentioned it now, but I wanted to square myself with Mark."

Mark Trent's mind was in a tumult as he chatted with her in the corridor, inquired for her health on the way down in the elevator, told her that he thought of her rich fruit cake whenever he attended a wedding. She looked up at him sharply as they waited at the curb.

"Then you still attend weddings?"

"Why not? I rather like them."

"After your experience, I should think you would shun them. Ever see Lola?"

"No."

"Here's my car. That's Dominique at the wheel. Remember him, don't you? He drove my horses before I had an automobile, and the only thing I have against him is that he recommended his friends the Jacques to your aunt. She made so much of Henri that he got dictator-minded and tried to run the whole place."

(TO BE CONTINUED)