

# JOANNA

## CHAPTER XXXIII The Test

When the domineering figure loomed at her table Joanna looked up curiously. When she recognized the unmasked face she started. The relieved greeting she would have given anyone close to her, who might provide intimate companionship through the rest of such an exciting adventure, trembled for an instant at her tongue. But something in Brandon's face numbed her lips.

She rose to her feet, hand up, over her breast, with a faint recoil. The fear that she had never shaken off, crashed down upon her in a tumult—the unformed, unutterable fear that came to her when he first touched her fingers at the table across from Eggleston in the bank when she had written her first check against her mysterious money.

"You here!" she breathed. "I didn't know—have you been—"

"I have only arrived," he said, his word suave but irritatingly ironic. "I am happy to find you—alone!"

Joanna knew, from his tone and his manner, that a climax purposed. A climax of some sort; something associated with the night, with her, with whatever Brandon had stood for in his relationship to her since that day in the bank.

Out on the dance floor, and at the tables near, she saw men and women looking at them curiously; at her, the golden girl whom everyone recognized and for whom many eyebrows had been raised when she came in with the bedraggled troop that had been ushered back to the club house by the brigands. Looking at her and Brandon, whom they also knew. Her chin went up a little, and she braced herself inwardly.

"I am alone only by chance," she said, coolly. "I was here, with Kenilworth. He has been—"

"I know," he broke in. "Some mountain bandits have taken charge of him and returned you here—so that everyone may know that for your relaxations you choose a society and a surrounding that are, to say the least, daring."

"That, of course, if what pleases you to know. Why have you come? I feel that you are here—because of me."

"I am," he said, shortly. "I am here to tell you, at last, that the play is over. As you have put your mask aside for the rest of the night, so your interesting little masquerade must be dropped. You came up here, I imagine, to color an amour. Instead you are about to discover—what you're made of."

She sank back into her chair. Her face blanched. Her brain ached with the knowledge of an animal that in some mysterious fashion had been caught in a trap. Before he spoke again she laughed, a short, unamused laugh, as if she were amused by the foolishness of her feeling, the utterly ridiculous about it.

The laugh died abruptly and she watched the man who still stood looking down at her unsmiling, ungracious, unconsiderate.

"I have a great deal to say to you," Brandon declared. He paused a moment, and then continued: "There is a room—a small supper room, just off the balcony. If you do not object, may we talk—in that room?"

She got to her feet silently, and when he bowed his acknowledgment of her assent, walked with him to the circular stairway that led to the mezzanine. At the door of the private banquet room he stood aside that she might enter ahead of him. A waiter met him at the door.

"We shall not be served," Brandon said to the man, "but as I shall leave the door open, perhaps you will stand near to discourage loitering on the balcony."

Joanna faced him when he stepped across the threshold.

"Don't spend your wits in skir-mishing," she challenged him. "What is it?"

He ignored her challenge for a moment while he lighted a cigaret, first offering her his platinum case. When he had evened his light to his satisfaction he went to the fireplace and dropped the burnt match into it. For another moment he puffed calmly. Then turned to face the girl, who leaned back against the table in the corner of the room.

"Would you mind," he asked, softly, deliberately, "telling me what is your general impression of me? Not an analysis of my character, please, but an expression of the quality of your regard for me?"

She replied without hesitation. "I have always distrusted you, but I have never been convinced that

I was justified. If I hadn't feared you, I'd have liked you. As it is I am afraid I despise you, at times, because I know you are dishonest—dishonest with me, and with Yvonne who loves you. Is that the answer you want?"

"Not exactly, but it will serve. Suppose I should ask you to become my wife?"

"You used to tell me that you might do that, some day. I've always had an answer ready. I'd never marry you because I could never love you. If I could love you I wouldn't marry you because, by all the laws of decency, you belong to Yvonne whom you allowed to love you before you decided to laugh at her for her pretension that she would be worthy of you."

He examined his cigaret flame, and then drew in its smoke.

"That establishes our position toward each other," he observed, and was silent for another interval. "But the situation is that you are going to marry me, nevertheless, because you will have to."

She swayed. Her slender white hand went to her throat as if she knew he was not talking idly. She had gone through one sort of battle—with Kenilworth; now, she sensed, she was at the beginning of another, and, in some unsuspected way, a more desperate one, waited for him to go on.

He threw the cigaret into the fireplace and faced her across the table.

"Be pleased to understand the import of what I am about to say," he breathed. "You have wondered where your money came from; you have wondered why it was given to you. I am about to solve for you, at least, a portion of your mysteries."

"I control the source of your money, I guard its secret and its reason and its purpose. I am the one to whom you have made your accounting, the accounting you haven't known you were making in every whim, in every spendthrift mood, in every choice of the paths you have elected to follow."

"Your accounting has been fully made. It is totalled up—by me. I give you now, the results. I demand that you marry me."

"I do not say that I love you, for I do not."

"I do not say, even that I respect you, for I despise you, as you have professed to despise me. I shudder before all that you stand for; the abortive pretenses of you, the sham of you, the deceit and cheapness of you!"

"Yet I am saying to you that I want you to be my wife."

Joanna had stood as if transfixed. Her eyes widened. The brown deepened to black. The scarlet of her lips became ashen. Her hands were hot with the scalding riot of her blood. Through her brain rang the one phrase: "I am the one!" And in its wake all those other sentences, sharp and bitter, that emerged from his lips like the crashing of cannon on a battlefield, pierced her with the precision of a deadly fusillade. She collapsed into a chair and threw her hands before her eyes as if to shut out a vision.

But Brandon, moving over to her, went on cruelly, relentlessly:

"Of your enormous gift of money you have made a farce. You have used it to enhance—not the world, not society, but the lure, the sense appeal, the woman of you. You have created nothing with your gift, but love; the kind of love that thrills but is nothing of nobility. You have shown what the kind of girl you represent shall surely become if given rein."

"But the farce is over, as I said downstairs. The mystery of your money is dispelled—or you may count it as being dispelled. The other mystery, which must exist for a little while, is that despite the frailty of you, I want you to marry me."

"And if you do not, there will be no more money. All that you have will be taken from you—even tonight! Whatever is yours now gained by fraud must be surrendered. You will be Miss Twenty-Seven of the silk again, if your old job is still open to you!"

"Are you, by any chance, still of the mind not to be my wife?"

The crumpled figure in the chair straightened a little. It tried to rise but sank down again. Its hands fluttered a bit. The girl looked up, at last.

"But I couldn't marry you! It could never be. I don't love you, I said. You wouldn't want me—without! You are playing with me."

"Not playing; very earnest, and final, and definite," he assured her. "As I said, that is the new mystery

for you to be baffled by. As my wife you shall keep your money; more money will be given you perhaps, and you shall, of course, share mine."

Now she gathered strength to stand. She made a little move as if to go up to him, but faltered. Her lips moved as if she were praying for words—words that would save her money, save her dreams, save beauty and luxury and pearls and diamonds and priceless furs—save them and, at the same time, save herself. But whatever her prayers, she heard no echoes of an answer. She turned to go out the door. Brandon, the torturing smile playing, now, about his lips, watched her silently, coolly, unmoved.

At the door she hesitated, stood for a minute leaning against the casement looking down into the ribald scene on the dance floor that blurred into a whirling black pool with monsters swimming on its surface.

Suddenly the little body stiffened. A bit of the brown came back into the eyes. Something of the scarlet returned to the quivering lips. She swung around slowly and walked firmly back into the room until she stood so close to Brandon that her body was almost against his.

"I want to keep my money, Francis," she said, her voice quivering but soft and ineffably pleading; "I couldn't do without it now. But I am very much in love with someone else. Very much in love, Francis. And it's the kind of love you would never understand. I don't understand it myself. Nor does he—the man, I mean, that I'm in love with. You'll be kind to me, won't you? You'll tell me why the money was given me? You'll tell me what I've done that's wrong, so that I shall not do it again? I'll be anything you say, if I may have my money, the money that has made life so beautiful—with money and my love!"

"Anything I say?"

Before his sudden thrusting back at her those pleading words, she shrank as if he had struck her. Dazed again she heard him saying: "You may have your love, my dear girl. I would not interfere with that. It's you I want, for reasons and purposes of my own; not your love. I know the one you mean; I know the man to whom you've given the love that neither you nor he understands. Give it. Let him have it. Take his in return if you can win it. All of that shall be the bargain—a bargain of today!"

"The morals of today, you know, and the conventions, are not what they were in the yesterday. You are not the girl of yesterday, nor your kind of love the sacrament that it used to be."

"I am asking you to be my wife—only. To give me yourself only. You may give your love where you want it to be received and take whatever pleases you in exchange. Surely you, who have played the game of lure, will not shrink before the flame your very essence kindles!"

Deep colors came and went across her face. She closed her eyes, and then opened them slowly, to quickly shut them.

"You mean," she said, "that I may marry you, but love someone else and invite him to love me? That if I do that it will be—quite all right, with you, my husband? And that if I do all this, why, I may keep my money?"

"Just that!" he answered shortly. "Your money, and your love!"

When she did not speak, at once, he went on with a merciless sneer:

"The man you are thinking of will not hesitate, I imagine, to take full advantage of such an arrangement. He has shown himself to be amenable to any kind of conditions. While we are here, tonight, he is kneeling before satin slippers that were never worn by your feet. You have not done with him as you would like to have done only because he was afraid to bind himself to you. Free him from that fear, and offer him another way; and I fancy, he will not be so elusive. Perhaps I might add that by giving me yourself, as my wife, mind you, you will not only retain your money, but you will solve the problem of retaining—him!"

She stared into his eyes for a long time, then dropped into the chair. "Would you mind," she asked, "ordering me something to drink? My throat is parched."

Then she buried her head in her arms.

Without a word Brandon went to the door and signalled the waiter, who had remained on the balcony in the vicinity of the door. The man hurried away. Brandon returned to the chair and stood by the side of the limp form of the girl. He touched her body relentlessly. She put up her hand in mute appeal for him to be silent. He hesitated and then, with a

shrug of his shoulders, went to the fireplace.

When the waiter brought in the champagne with glasses arranged on the tray, Brandon signed him to deposit it on the table, and waved him out of the room. Joanna stirred and lifted herself, by bracing against the table, to her feet.

When she looked across the Brandon the quizzical smile that so many people had never understood hovered about her lips.

Brandon went at once to the table and reached for the champagne to open it.

Then he sank, noiselessly, to the floor.

Joanna stood over him and watched the crimson trickle from his forehead, the broken, jagged neck of the champagne bottle still clutched in the deadly grip of her hand.

## CHAPTER XXXIV The Flight

Down stairs they danced, danced and shouted wittily, taunting, mocking things at each other. Long, twisting serpentine, thrown from dancer to dancer in carnival abandon, spread a rippling blanket of tawdry colors over the club house floor. And Joanna nuzzed down—down upon the prostrate form that lay at her feet, the crimson still trickling in ghostly persistence from the white forehead.

After a little while she opened her fingers and the broken wreck of the champagne bottle fell to the carpet. She closed her eyes and lifted her face, from which all the color had fled.

This was a pose Joanna had never struck before. It was one she'd never practiced. She'd never thought of anything quite like it. It was as if she wasn't posing at all—just holding her face toward heaven with her eyes closed as if afraid to contemplate the message that might be written there.

Then she went onto the balcony and closed the door behind her. She nodded to the waiter who stood nearby, flashing him an assuring smile that seemed to tell him she was enjoying herself tremendously and would be coming back in a moment.

Downstairs she skirted the dance floor and threaded her way among the tables to foyer. The red coated attendant bowed to her. "It is still black outside, mademoiselle," he said. "No one could get down now. It will lift, by morning, though."

"Just the same," she returned, "please to call for Mr. Brandon's car. I think he will have one parked in the yard."

The flunkey would have protested but Joanna silenced him with an arrogant gesture. Muttering, he went onto the veranda, Joanna following him, and called to a knot of chauffeurs who stood in the muddled glare of a powerful headlight discussing, no doubt, the affairs of their masters. None of these responded. He went then into the yard, and among the parked cars. He found the hunched shape of Antoine, wondering, agreed that Monsieur Brandon was his patron.

"Very well then," the attendant commanded, "be so good as to bring your car to the entrance. Your master seems to be remaining. Mademoiselle, his young lady, apparently brings his order for you to take her down the mountain. You can't make it of course, but that is his and her affair, not mine."

Antoine growled his doubts of such a situation. They were cut short by Joanna herself, who appeared suddenly at the side of the car in the wake of the doorman. "I do not desire to be taken down the mountain," she declared. "Your master, however, requires you, inside, at once. I am to await your return, with him perhaps, in the car. Please to go at once."

Both Antoine and the servant were puzzled, but Joanna brooked no tardiness in obeying her commands. To Antoine she repeated: "I bring your master's orders. Attend to them! The attendant here will show you the way to Mr. Brandon. He awaits you in the private room, on the balcony. Still, dubious about this sudden humor to expose him to possible identification by the maskers in the club house Antoine descended from the car and stumbled along behind the other man. Joanna climbed into the seat he had vacated. When their two forms disappeared across the veranda she felt with her tongue for the starter, found it, kicked it, and in another moment was guiding the gray car toward the gate. When she was safely through the gate she disappeared in the mist. The curious chauffeurs who had watched her horn until it, too, was absorbed by the thick, opaque atmosphere. "That's the one they call the golden girl," one of the drivers explained to his compan-

ions. "Pity, isn't it, to see a young thing like her clear gone to the devil!"

Antoine, led at his request, through kitchens and sculleries, was brought to the closed door on the balcony. The guardian waiter opened the door for him. Brandon's eyelids were beginning to quiver. The excited waiter would have lunged out of the room with a cry of alarm but Antoine clutched him by the throat and smothered the sounds in a "Quietly, my friend, quietly," he grumbled. "There's something to hide here, not to advertise. Bring the proprietor, or his assistant—quietly."

At the end of an hour's patient ministrations behind the locked door Brandon, stretched on a divan, held his eyes open and gazed around him. His first feebly uttered question was:

"Where's the girl. The mademoiselle?"

The club house director would have silenced Antoine's complaint that she had stolen his car, but the Monegasque would not be restrained. Through the bandages matted about Brandon's head something of a feeble smile escaped. "It is just as well," he murmured. "Be of cheer, my good Antoine! I failed, but I fancy you and your men will be paid double for your little practice tonight."

"But she will give the alarm below!" the other exclaimed. "Before morning! After dawn it would be futile, we contemplated an alarm by dawn when the men get down. But not before! You did not keep her here—till dawn, as you agreed!"

Again Brandon smiled weakly, and indicated the bandages. "She is to blame for that. But I do not think she will give an alarm. That will await the men you left in the barn. The police will not be concerned much, when you have returned to them the plunder you collected. When you have sent them that, you will be as I said—paid double."

The expression on the face of the club house official who had heard the cryptic conversation began to show a gleam of understanding—a curious understanding of the hold-up which had sent the group of half hysterical women back to his hospitably. Antoine noted and shifted, uneasily. Brandon, too, alert despite his pain, saw. He called the man to the couch.

"Do not be concerned by the little drama in the mist tonight," he said, between his laborious breathings. "Your patrons who were robbed will receive their valuables I have reason to believe. They will be none the worse for their experience. They may not know of it, of course, but they played their parts tonight in a great adventure."

Meanwhile, Joanna, her wrap unfastened again, her slim hands gripped to the wheel of the gray car, fought her way along the narrow road. When she rounded a turn just above the village of La Turbie little pin points of light shone up. For down, out over the sea, light house at the base of Cape Martin glowed like a far away eye of the night. The mist was lifting before the threat of dawn. Beyond La Turbie the country, although chaotic, was visible. The lamps along the sea boulevard were discernible.

The thought of Kenilworth, still captive with the other men in the hidden barn of the bandits, bothered her for a moment. An impulse came to turn around and, with the road partially clear, now, feel her way back to the hut she was certain she would recognize. She could, she considered, pick up someone at La Turbie to help her awaken the countryside. She decided against this plan however, settled back behind her wheel, and shot into high speed.

The grounds of Villa Amette were vaporized by the rising dampness of the dissipating mist. A solitary light, near the entrance gate, gleamed timidly. As she guided the car along the winding road to the house among the vague, gray shapes of the arbors and pergolias and pavilions which, in another few hours, were to be a blazing, fantastic background for her brilliant and lavish fetes—the fete of the golden girl, and also, her swan song! For Brandon had said, "I am the one!" and he has said, too, "Whatever you have is to be taken from you. There shall be no more money!"

When she drew up in front of a side entrance to the villa she saw that the house itself was also dark. She considered whether or not to summon a servant with her horn, and decided to leave the car in the roadway and go in quietly. She ached for the aloneness of her room—the room which thronged the great golden bed.

At the ponderous villa doors she was troubled by the thought that she had never found it necessary to carry any sort of key. Servants always awaited her return, but they

**Pacific Coast Review**

Thursday, March 18

KFO, 478.5 meters, San Francisco—Usual features: 1 p. m., Wagner's Patriotic hotel orchestra; 2:30 p. m., matinee program; 3:30 p. m., Palace hotel concert orchestra; 5:15 p. m., children's stories; 6:40 p. m., 7 p. m., orchestra; 8 p. m., 9 p. m., programs; 10 p. m., Cabrian's dance orchestra.

KGO, 361 meters, Oakland—Usual features: 11:30 a. m., luncheon concert; 4 p. m., St. Francis hospital concert orchestra; 5:20 p. m., Gen. W. Ludlow, "Friend to Boys"; 8:30 p. m., four one-act plays, KGO Players; 10 p. m., Paradise Gardens orchestra.

KHJ, 405.2 meters, Los Angeles—Usual features, noon, dance orchestra; 2:30 p. m., music; 6 p. m., children's program; 7:30 p. m., health talk, Dr. Philip M. Lovell; 9 p. m., program.

KFI, 457 meters, Los Angeles—Usual features: 5:30 p. m., orchestra; 7 p. m., University of Southern California program; 8 p. m., 9 p. m., 10 p. m., programs.

had to be summoned by the bell. She tried the door, however, and found that it was unfastened. She closed it softly behind her and felt her way across a flay reception room to a draped arch that opened into a seldom used drawing room. Across this room would be the grand hall from which a stairway led to the upper floors. When she was almost up to the heavy, double draper which hung in the arched door she stopped, suddenly. Between the curtains a line of light shone. She heard the murmur of voices. Convinced that it would be servants, awaiting her perhaps, she pushed the curtains aside and stepped into the room. Then she stood, fascinated.

The voices swelled as the curtains parted. One of them she recognized as Yvonne's; the other, John's. And at the far end of the room she saw them, before the gentle glow in the fireplace, the only illumination in the room. Yvonne, gorgeous and Circe-like, her sinuous body wrapped in the sense destroying hues of rich, red burgundy, her only ornaments dazzling diamonds that glistened like a myriad of consuming fires in the gentle firelight glow, leaned forward in a cushioned glided chair. And at her feet—satin slippers never worn by Joanna's feet," as Brandon had taunted her—was John!

For one brief instant the thing before her muddled, and assumed a comforted shape. Then the smolder in the fireplace burst into a flame of hell, and died again into something that flared as a grotesque mockery. Joanna's wrap fell from her shoulders. Her little hands dug into her breasts, but gave the senseless body no pain. The little figure in black stood, then, utterly lost to every thought but of what she saw—and heard.

"I have never known love until now! All else has just been a chimera. It is, you who have shown what love's glory is! Please, my wonderful dear, will you take me in—and comfort me?"

John's voice, that was: John's! Passion and pleading and humility, in it. All those nuances of adoration, submission, hope and prayer and yearning that Joanna had never heard in it.

Now, Yvonne's low, silvery cadences, infinitely sweet, and—infinitely soothing:

"Are you content—will you be content—to accept from me the love that is the only kind that I may give you? The love that has blossomed and withered so many, many times? Mine can never be a pure love, my friend. And I may never promise its constancy. It is the crown that you may wear only while you can defend, and keep it. That is what is said of me, and my love, my dear, and I must not say to you that what is said is untrue. If we love, you and I, and if I give to you the portion I may spare you, you must be content. It can never be a holy love—there must always be something wanting in it. It must be the kind we take and put aside. Will that then, satisfy you?"

He crept closer to her. She put her hands about his face, warm, mesmerizing hands. Her rich, soft, round lips—lips that were a sign of all love-madness since the world began—went down to his. Then it was John's voice again:

"There can be no other love as wonderful as you can give. In any way that I may have it, if it be pure or defiled, I want it!"

A scream, a torrent of them, a frenzy of them, surged to Joanna's lips—and halted there. It was Yvonne who rose, slowly, sinuously gracefully, Joanna saw, as if it were some strange, fantastic symbol taking form at the rim of a distorted horizon, a smile, a faintly lined, queer, and fitting smile, at Yvonne's red lips. And John saw,