

FOUR ON AN ISLAND.

[By Dorothy Allen.]

"It's a little bit of an island, you know, not large at all. Sometimes when there's a storm the sea comes clear up to the garden, but it's lovely there in the summer. I'm glad you could both run down to see Lawrence."

Gwen smiled at the two in the opposite seat. Smiled deliberately and with malice aforethought and most delightful impartiality. Flick Habbeton and Dolf Cramer returned the smile each in his own way. Dolf's was broad and melting and fatuous. It bespoke adoration and utter helplessness. Flick's was full of a strange, cynical misery, as of one who would have said to the world, "Lo, she has landed me. Behold me pant and die."

"How's Larry bearing up?" asked Dolf.

"Well, of course, he's not really fully recovered. It was awfully nice of you boys to come way out from the city to cheer him up. Aunt Helen and I do our best, but we're not like men, you know, and his own crowd. I'm glad we just happened to catch the same train."

Flick grinned out at New Rochelle fleeing by. He had waited for hours, it seemed, beside the grilled gateway back in the Grand Central to beat Dolf, and had wakened to find Dolf with the captured prize sauntering over from the ticket windows. He wondered how they could still even preserve the semblance of friendship. Was it not he who had worshipped Gwen Marquis from afar for two years? Hadn't he put up with Larry's general pugnaciousness and loquacity solely because he had a sister with a face like an apple blossom? Hadn't he monitored Larry all through his last year, pushing him along by sheer force, just to win the confidence and affection of Gwen? All this, while Dolf Cramer reigned in his own special field of endeavor, and took no more notice of Larry than if he had been a midget in the adjacent blue.

Then there had come the accident. It had been voted a pleasant and advisable thing by the junior class to place a goat of mature years and lively sense of justice in the private consulting room of the seniors, a goat dyed a deep, rich red, with black horns, and it was done. All juniors had been warned to go far from the scene of action, but Larry had lingered, being interested as the person who had assumed responsibility with the goat's owner. And he had been caught, a felony in junior eyes, caught and taken into the private room and imprisoned with the goat in the inner closet until the quality of mercy, strained to the minimum, released both.

Gwen had come after the remains. Larry was not injured vitally, but the goat had not chosen kindly and he was bruised, much bruised. Thereupon, Dolf Cramer had assumed command on seeing the patient's family. It was he who devised the pretty tale that made Larry a hero and hid the goat from the family history. It was he who conveyed Gwen around the campus and showed her its beauties.

Nobody had ever suspected Dolf of esthetic tastes. He had been bluff and hearty through the long, same winter. His class name had been appropriated and, seemingly, a name suited to his general temperament and manly proportions, for he was dubbed the "Porpoise." Flick loathed deception in any form. He could not see that by the alchemy of love the soul of the "Porpoise" had bloomed like some mystic rose of gold. He could not see any of this, nor even grant him a partial right of way, for love did not give him any blooming roses. It only made him silent and suffering, and he took to leaning against corners of buildings, with a face like Dante's death mask.

Yet he had not retreated. When the invitation had been given for him to visit Larry in his convalescent state, he had accepted, even while he knew that Dolf likewise was inclined. Shall a man drop from the firing line for a wound here and there?

"You'll both love Aunt Helen," said Gwen. "She came down on an earlier train with Joan. We just met Joan over at the Pennys this noon. It seems as if you boys ought to know her. She's from Richmond, too, Joan Carruthers."

Then Flick turned his head and smiled at the "Porpoise." Did they know Miss Carruthers? The smile on Dolf's rotund face became fixed like Buddha's. It lacked spontaneity and innate joy. And Flick's humor rose.

"I have never met Miss Carruthers," he said, "but I have often heard her spoken of. She was very popular at Richmond, very popular."

At Sound Beach they took the car that wound along the shore line. Gwen said it wasn't very far, and then just the little walk across the sand dunes and beach.

"Larry had a boat that he used to cross over to the island in," she smiled up at Dolf. Dolf's stock was rising steadily. She kept near to him, and permitted his assistance over infinitesimal pools of water left by the tide. Yet Flick smiled at the far Long Island shore line and Dolf was pale. "It isn't far from shore."

It wasn't. Larry saw them from the distance, and sent forth a long hall of welcome. Though still wearing sundry bandages and plasters, he

could navigate and wield oars, and he came after them jubilantly. Flick did not pretend to disguise Dolf's pre-eminence in the lists of love. He gave him freely the right of way now. He absorbed the conversation with Larry, and left the two to gaze into each other's eyes, only Dolf's gaze persistently wandered to the nearing island with a look of strange abstraction.

And when they had beached the boat and strolled up the little sandy path to the bungalow, Gwen walked beside him slowly, confidingly, yet Flick smiled behind them and laughed at Larry's jokes without regret.

It appeared when they reached the board veranda that Joan had met Dolf before, oh, long ago, down in dear old Richmond. Dolf stared at her as if fascinated. He perched up beside her on the railing and dallied with her mess of wet, clammy starfish that she was trying to straighten out to dry in the sun. And when she had fretted him awhile, she took Flick away from Gwen with one long sidelong glance from her hazel eyes, and went for a beach tramp.

"I didn't know you had met Joan before, Dolf," Gwen said impersonally. "Larry thinks the world of her."

"Joan is an epidemic," Dolf answered morosely. "She swept through our whole team when we went South to play the Virginias. They set her in front of us to dazzle our eyes, and I pitched grounders for three days. A fellow never exactly forgets a girl like that, you know, any more than he does a good big bump in the road that he hits and tumbles over. It's what you'd call infatuation, I suppose." He stumbled on, regardless of the steady, measuring glance of Gwen's eyes. "But it isn't real love. I tell you, when a fellow does find the real thing he knows the imitation."

Yet Gwen gazed musingly at the two figures circling the island shore. They kept very near to each other, bending over to search for shells among the driftwood and seaweed at the high tide mark. Then, as if he had caught her wireless, Flick raised himself and looked back at her to wave his hand.

"What a really resolute, manly sort of a boy Mr. Habbeton is," she said. "Larry was telling me how good he was to him all the year. He's very unselfish, I think. You can almost see by his face what sort of a man he is, can't you?"

"Flick has a very open face," replied Dolf guardedly. "He seems to be catching the epidemic all right."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think he would be just satisfied with a flirtation somehow. He seems deeper than that. He told me that girls just seemed to represent certain abstract qualities to him. He thinks that accounts for the momentary attraction, don't you know?"

"Wait till Joan finishes with him," Dolf hinted darkly. "You can see it starting up now."

It was the end of the week's visit, a gorgeous night when the whole sea seemed gun-metal tint, and a big orange-colored moon came up to turn it golden. Gwen sat pensively watching a ship full rigged pass in silhouette across the path of gold. It was dark on the veranda. She sat in the shadow of the vines and saw Joan and Flick—no, it wasn't Flick, it was too short and chunky for Flick; it was Dolf himself. They came out of the living room, and it looked as if Joan were being pursued. At the railing she stopped and backed against it.

"Dolf Cramer, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Let me alone."

"I won't," said Dolf, doggedly. "I've stood this as long as I'm going to. Am I to stand around helpless and let a cub like Flick Habbeton walk off with the only girl I ever loved right under my nose?"

"Flick doesn't care for me that way," Joan replied softly. "He's simply wild over Gwen."

Gwen started to move, but a hand closed over hers from behind, and she felt Flick's presence. The ship had passed out of the golden path now, but every uncurling ripple on the beach was gilded.

"You do care, don't you, Joan?" begged Dolf, desperately. "Remember the old times back at Richmond? How many times did I propose to you then?"

"Every hour," laughed Joan. "If Flick had one hundredth part of your courage, Dolf, Gwen would never have wavered."

Around Gwen's shoulders stole Flick's disengaged arm, and she did not draw her hand away when he found it.

"He hasn't talked of anything else ever since I came," Joan went on. "It's been deliciously funny. He's been practicing on me, and he's scared to death of Gwen. She's rather well—noncommittal, you know, isn't she, Dolf?"

"I don't want to talk of anybody but you," murmured Dolf tenderly. "Gwen hasn't treated me to anything but descriptions of Flick's noble expression and splendid depths. Joan, have I got a noble expression, too?"

"You're awfully cheerful looking after a week of poor old Flick," Joan said, thankfully. "Did I give you back your ring the last time, dear?"

Dolf's answer was inarticulate. The two shadows had merged as one. Flick said nothing. All his wooing had been done for him by his rival. He bent low over her, leaning his head against her soft, fragrant hair, and kissed the finger tips he held.

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