

HOME

A Story of Today and of All Days

By GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

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Clem is wearing out her heart for Alan. Does he understand this? Is he keeping away from her for the sport it affords him to watch a girl's heart break? Or does he feel he is unworthy of her affection? Will she "catch" him yet?

CHAPTER XXXI

Maple House was riding the crest of a happy wave. In a body it advanced on the lake to picnic and supper by moonlight and in a body it returned; the little ones excited and wakened, the grown-ups tired and reminiscent. Days followed that were filled with laziness and nights that rang with song. The cup of life was flung to the brim with little things. Sudden peals of unreasoning laughter, shrieks of children at play, a rumble of the piano followed by a rolling college song, rosy smiles on happy faces, broke like comets into the page of life, and turned monotony into living pictures. But beneath the gayety ran the inevitable undertone. When joy paused to take breath it found Alan half aloof and Clem wistful behind her unvarying sweetness.

One evening Alan found himself alone with Nance. She had frankly cornered him, then as openly led him off down the road towards Elm House.

"Alan," she said, "you've turned into a great fool or a great coward. Which is it?"

Alan glanced at her. "What do you mean?" he stammered.

"You know what I mean, Clem. You're breaking her heart."

She felt Alan's arm stiffen. For a moment he was silent, then he said: "Don't worry, Nance. You're wrong, of course, but, anyway, no harm is going to come to Clem through me. I'm going away. I've meant to go for ever so long, but somehow I couldn't. Something seemed to hold me. I tried to think it was just the Hill, and that it would be all right for me to stay on until the general break-up. But you have wakened me up, and the proof that I'm not quite a coward yet is that I'm going to get up and run."

They came to the entrance to The Elms, but Nance led him on down the road. "Run? Why are you going to run? Alan, don't you love her?"

A tremor went through Alan's body. "I don't know," he said, "whether I love her or not. If I ever loved anyone before, then I don't love her, for the thing that has come over me is new—newer than anything that has ever happened to me. I would rather see her come down from her room in the morning than to have watched the birth of Aphrodite, and yet I would rather see myself damned, once and for all, than touch the hem of her frock."

"Why?"

"Because it is not for me. Once Alix called her glorious. I don't know whether that was a bit of hyperbole on her part or not, but to me she is just that. There is a glory about Clem—the glory of pure light. Do you think I dare walk into it? Me, with my scarred life, my blemished soul and the moral tags that only half hide the two? That would be cowardly. I'm not coward enough for that."

Nance sighed. "I'm disappointed in you. I thought that if ever man lived that knew a little about women it must be you. I won't say any of the things I was going to say. Instead, I just tell you that you don't know women."

They walked back in silence. Nance went into the house, but Alan said good night and stared thoughtfully down the road. His step quickened, and, walking rapidly, he passed over the moonlit brow of the hill and down, down into the shadows of the valley. Hard is the battle that has to be won twice, but when in the small hours of the morning Alan returned and crept noiselessly to his room, he felt that he had won, that he had put the final seal on the renunciation Nance's words had well-nigh recalled. Still wakeful, Alan started packing. He left out his riding kit.

That day awoke to clouds that lowered and hung about waiting for the fateful hour of seven when they might with all due respect to atmospheric tradition start in with an all-day rain, but long before the hour struck Alan had foraged for a biscuit and a glass of milk and was mounted and away for a last ride.

Alan rode with the ease of one born to the saddle. There was nothing of the cowboy in his set-up. He used a mere patch of a hunting saddle, fitted like a glove to his horse's back, and with a light hand.

The curb rein, that last refuge of a poor horseman, hung loose and forgotten. Alan himself was dressed in well-worn whipcord breeches, short coat, soft hat, and close-fitting boots adorned with rowelless spurs. For his health Red Hill had done wonders. His body was trim, supple and as vibrant as the young horse under it.

But Alan's thoughts were far from saddles and saddle gear as he walked the restive animal down the dipping slope of Long lane and with his riding crop steadily discouraged the early morning flies, intent on settling down to the business of life on his mount's arched neck and quivering quarters. He was thinking of Clem. Where could he go to get away from Clem? Not tomorrow, not sometime, but today. Where could he go today? Once the world had seemed to him a fenceless pasture where it was good to wander, where every undiscovered glade promised fresh morsels to an unwearying palate, but now in his mind the whole world had shrunk to the proportions of Red Hill. Where Clem was, there was the whole world. Already he felt the yearning with which his heart must henceforth turn to its sole desire.

He crossed the valley, and, as his horse breasted the opposing hill, he thought he heard an echoing hoofbeat behind him. He turned and with one hand resting on the horse's quarter gazed back through the gray light, but Long lane was veiled from view by overhanging trees. As he lifted his hand, its impress, clearly defined as an image, caught his eye. How strange! He had ridden a thousand times and he had never noted such a thing before. It was simple when reduced to physical terms. The horse was warm and moist, the hair cool and dry. His hand pressed the hair down into the moisture. But when he had reasoned out the why and wherefore and ticketed the phenomenon, the impress still stared back at him. To his mood it seemed an emblem of isolation, a thing cut off, discarded, useless. With a smile of rebuke at his fancies he touched the horse with his crop and gave him his head. The horse sprang forward, cleared the top of the hill, and the rhythmic clatter of his hoofs as he dashed along the pebble-strewn road seemed to cleave the still morning in two.

Alan did not draw rein until he reached the top of the bluff dividing the valley from West lake. Then for a moment he sat and stared down the long slope. There was a smell of moisture in the air. The valley, the whole world, was expecting, waiting for rain, and even as he stared the rain came in a fine, veil-like mist that steepled the tones of earth and sky to one even shade of endless gray. Out of the gray came the click of iron on pebble. Alan recognized the quick, springy tread of a climbing horse. He turned and faced Clem. He felt the slow color rising in his cheeks and his hands trembled.

They did not smile at each other; they were too busy with good morning. Alan licked his thin lips. They were as dry as ever they had been with fever. "Where's your hat?" he asked.

A flicker of amusement showed in Clem's eyes. She was quite calm and she could see that Alan was not, that he was biting his tongue at the feeble words he had saddled on a heavy moment. "Hats are for sunny days," she said. "I like rain on my head. Have you anything special to do? Don't let me bother you."

"No," stammered Alan, "nothing that can't be put off."

"Do you remember," Clem went on, "years ago I asked you to take me for a ride, and you said not then but sometime? I've never had my ride with you. I want it now."

Her eyes were fixed on his and held him. "I am ready," he said through dry lips.

She turned her horse and he followed. They rode in silence at a walk and then at a trot. Clem turned into a wood-road. Her horse broke into a gallop. She flicked him with her whip and his gathered limbs suddenly stretched out for a free run. The going was soft. Alan had fallen behind. Clots of mossy loam struck him in the face. Swaying branches showered drops of water on him. He lost his hat. Then his lips tightened, his eyes flashed and he began to ride. He was himself again.

He urged his horse forward, but he could not get on even terms; Clem held the middle of the narrow track. Suddenly they burst into the broad Low road. With a terrific clatter of flying stones and slipping, scrambling hoofs, they made the turn. Alan rode at last on Clem's quarter. "Clem," he cried, "stop! It isn't fair to the horse."

But Clem only laughed. Her slim body swayed to the bends of the road; her shoulders were braced; she leaned slightly back, steadying her horse with a taut rein. Alan tried to draw even, but every time he urged his horse into a spurt Clem's spurred foot. Alan grew angry. He watched Clem's whip, but it never moved. He settled into the saddle and rode blindly. His horse must catch up or he would kill him. He was gaining. A moment more at the same pace and he could reach Clem's reins below her horse's neck. Then Clem swerved again into a half-hidden wood-road and Alan's horse plunged through the brush, broke out, and followed, a poor second.

Alan's face and hands were badly scratched, but he rode on doggedly. It never occurred to him to give up the chase. In the end he would catch up; he knew that, but what puzzled him was what he should do to Clem when he caught her. Anyone else, man or woman, he would give a taste of their own riding whip for their own good, but not Clem. Alan suddenly knew that there was something in Clem that a man could not break.

The wood-road made a gradual ascent that the willing horses took at a steady, hard gallop. They left the clean and straight, married to a faithless woman and laughs. Men see a pure girl give her all to a cad, and they say, 'It's always the rotters that get the pick,' and they laugh too. But down in the bottom of our hearts we know that these things are things for tears.

"Yes, Alan," said Clem as he paused. She was no longer imperious, only attentive, with chin in hands and elbows on knees.

"You know me," went on Alan, "but there are things about me that you do not know—things below you that you have no understanding for, thank God. I don't even know how to picture them to you."

"Yes, Alan," said Clem softly. Alan picked a bit of huckleberry bush and twisted it nervously in his hands. "First of all I've got to tell you what I thought you knew, that what there is of me is yours over and over again, and then I've got to tell you why you can't have it." A light came into Clem's eyes, trembled, flickered, and then settled to a steady flame.

"You've seen people smile—everyone has a smile of sorts," went on Alan. "Did you ever think that a smile had a body and soul? To me it has. It starts out in life like a virgin with a body to keep pure and a soul to guard unstained. There are smiles that illumine a face, that shine with essential purity, that glorify. Nobody has to tell you that they have never pandered to a ribald jest or added cruelty to denial. They are live smiles and they are rare among women and rarer among men. For one such you'll find a thousand living faces with dead smiles—smiles that have scattered their essence like rain on the just and the unjust, that have rolled in filth and wasted their substance on the second best. You'll find them flickering out in the faces of young men and at the last gasp in the faces of lost women.



"Clem," He Cried, "Stop!"

tree-line of the valley below them, scurried across an ancient clearing, pushed through brush and branches, and burst out on to the long, bald back of East mountain. Then came another clear run over crisp sod dangerously interspersed with wet, slippery stones and hindering bowlders.

At the highest point in all the countryside Clem suddenly drew rein and slipped from her horse before Alan could reach her. She stood with one arm across the saddle-born and waited for him.

Alan threw himself from his horse and rushed up to her. His hands were itching to grip her shoulders and shake her, but he held them at his side. "What did you do it for?" he asked with blazing eyes.

Clem looked him over coolly. "Ever run after anyone before, Alan?"

"What?" stammered Alan. He felt foundations slipping from under him. Here was a person who could look Ten Percent Wayne at his best in the eye and never turn a mental hair.

"How do you like it?" continued Clem in an even, firm voice. Then she turned her square back to the saddle and faced him fairly. "I'll tell you what I did it for. All my life I've been running after you. Last night I heard you packing. I knew what you were doing—you were getting ready to go away. Before you went I wanted you to run after me—just once. A sort of consolation prize to pride."

Alan's face hardened. "Stop, Clem. You can't talk like that to me and you can't talk like that to yourself." He looked at Clem and the blood surged into his neck and face. At that moment Clem was beautiful to him beyond the wildest dreams of fair women.

Her right arm was still hooked over the double horn of her saddle and her left hand holding a slim riding whip hung at her side. To the velvet lapels of her coat clung little drops of rain. Her hair was bristled and firmly tied in a double fold at the back of her neck, but short strands had escaped from durance and played about her head. Her head, like the velvet lapels, was dusted with little silvery drops of water and little drops of water perched on her long, upturned lashes. Her cheeks were flushed, her bosom agitated, her lips tremulous. Only her eyes were steady.

Alan took off his coat and threw it over a rock. "Will you please sit down? I must talk to you."

Clem strode to another rock and sat down. "You are absurd. Your coat is as wet as the stones. Put it on." Alan hesitated. "Put your coat on." Alan obeyed; then he sat down before her, but turned his eyes away and gazed rather vacantly over the whole wet world. "If ever two people have known each other without words, Clem, it's you and me. Never mind the grammar. Even unshackled words are a dribbling outlet for a full heart, and my heart's as full today with things I've never said to you as the clouds are with rain."

"Nature, taken by and large, is a funny outfit, and the funniest things in it are the ones that make you want to cry. The world sees a good man,

clean and straight, married to a faithless woman and laughs. Men see a pure girl give her all to a cad, and they say, 'It's always the rotters that get the pick,' and they laugh too. But down in the bottom of our hearts we know that these things are things for tears.

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Clem stopped speaking and her eyes that had wandered came back to Alan's face. She drew a quivering breath. Her face had been pale, but now the sudden color surged up over her throat and into her cheeks. She put up her hands to her forehead. "Oh," she gasped, "you have driven me too far. I am a mean thing in my own eyes as I am in yours."

At first Alan had stood stunned by the words in which she had poured out her overburdened heart, but as she went on pitilessly laying bare her subjection a flame lit up his eyes and fired his blood. Now he sprang forward and dragged her hands from her face.

"Mean, Clem? Mean in my eyes?" Then his tongue failed him. He sank to the wet grass at her feet, took her knees in his arms and hid his hot face in her skirt. "My God, my God," he cried. "I am mean, but what there is of me has knelt to you by night and worshiped you by day. When you were little there was room there for other things, but now that you have grown up you have filled it—all of it—every nook and cranny."

A tremor went through Clem's body. She rested the fingers of one hand on Alan's head and tried to turn up his face. But he held it close to her knees.

"If you want me, Clem, if you want me, then there must be things left—things I have never—could never give—to anyone else. But I am ashamed to pour them into your lap—I must pour them at your feet."

"No," said Clem gravely. "I do not want you to pour things at my feet. It's got to be eye to eye or nothing, and if there's any man left in—"

"Clem," broke in Alan, "there is enough man left in me if you'll only give me time. Time to groom him. You can understand that, Clem? You know what grooming and a clean stable will do for a shaggy horse?"

Clem nodded. "How much time do you want?"

Alan hesitated. "A year," he said. "I'll make a year do it."

"You can have six months," replied Clem and added with a smile, "That's ten per cent under office estimates."

Then forgetful of hours and meals and the little things in life that do not count when human souls mount to the banquet of the gods, they sat side by side and hand in hand on a big rock and stared with unseeing eyes at the gray world. "With you beside me," said Alan, "all skies are blue and filled with the light of a single, steady star."

Clem did not answer, but in her eyes content and knowledge, tenderness and strength, pleasure and pain played with each other like the lights and dappled shadows under a swaying bough.

When Clem and Alan reached home long after the lunch hour they found the Hill athrill with news. Alix had received a cable and had left at once for town. She had gone alone. That could mean but one thing—Gerry was at last coming back.

It was from Barbados that Gerry had cabled. Ever since he had written his short note to Alix, through long doubting weeks at Piranhas and longer days of questioning and hesitation on board the slow freighter that was bearing him home, Gerry had been fighting himself. Only Lieber's sudden death and his burial, to which Gerry had ridden post-haste, had come in between as a solemn truce.

On the freighter he had had time enough and to spare to think. He had spent hours going over the same ground time and time again. For days he sat in his chair on the short bridge-deck, staring out to sea, making over and over the circle of his life from the time he had left home. He remembered sitting thus on the way out. He remembered the turmoil his mind had been in and the apathy that had followed, the long rest at Pernambuco, the trip down the coast and up the river, the glorious, misty morning at Piranhas, Margarita, catastrophe, awakening. What did that awakening stand for? Again he thought, if he could choose—would he wish to be back as he was before—as he was on the way out? A voice within him said "No."

Will Gerry have the courage to confess everything to Alix? Do you think Alix will forgive him for his affair with Margarita—his bigamy with an ignorant, innocent girl?

Alan started forward, but Clem held him off with a gesture. "What do you

think I love in you? The things you have spent? The things you have thrown away? Has a woman ever fallen in love with a man because he was perfect? Clem made a desponding gesture with both hands as though she sought words that would not come. "Some men clap a wife on to themselves," she went on, "as you clap a lid on to a hot fire. If the fire grows cold quick enough the lid cracks. Some just let the fire burn out and take the dress with it. A woman knows that there is always something left in the man she loves. And even if she did not know it, it would be the same. She would rather give all for nothing than never give at all."

Clem's voice fell into a lower key. "The things you know that I do not know! What a child you are among men! A half-witted woman is born with more knowledge than the wisest of you ever attains and the first thing she learns is that life laughs at knowledge."

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