

MULBERRY SQUARE

LIDA LARRIMORE

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WNU Service

CHAPTER VII
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Celia selected a few sprays of lilies-of-the-valley from the bowl on the piano and, standing before the mirror between the front windows in the living room, fastened them to the shoulder of her dress. Her fingers moved so clumsily that the pin pricked her thumb. She gave an exclamation of impatience at the pin and at herself. It was absurd that she should feel a little frightened because Hugh had sent Stony to the station to meet her instead of going himself. It was ridiculous that her hands should be unsteady because Hugh at supper, had seemed detached, because Janie had looked at her accusingly and Uncle Charlie, who had invited himself, had grinned through the meal like a dreadful old Billikin.

She told herself that they couldn't possibly know she had seen Carter Shelby in Washington. Yet the feeling of fright persisted. Not even her own lovely reflection framed in the curlicued gilt of the mirror could reassure her entirely. She switched off the ceiling lights leaving only the amber glow of the davenport lamp. Quarter of nine. Hugh would soon be through in the office. He would come to her. It was absurd to be frightened.

She seated herself on the davenport in the circle of amber light. Across the room, in the shadowy mirror, she saw her reflection, her pale yellow dress against the dull upholstery, the flowers on her shoulder, the light glinting across her hair. This was how Hugh should see her. She folded her hands in her lap and waited with mounting impatience for him to come.

The telephone in the hall rang shrilly. She heard Mrs. Quillen coming to answer it, her heavy step, the rustle of her best black silk. To Mrs. Quillen, answering the telephone was an adventure. Celia thought that she spent her time somewhere near the hall waiting for it to ring.

"Hello . . ." boomed Mrs. Quillen. "No, the doctor, poor man, is in a sanitarium . . ." Celia knew that she was likely to give details. She did—a dozen times a day . . . "Yes, it's his house." A pause and then a snort of indignation. "Well, why didn't you say so, Tom? I'll have the flat of me hand to—It's for you, Miss Celia," she shouted into the living room. "It's that rogue of a Tom McAllister playin' his tricks on me."

If only Mrs. Quillen would learn to bring a message quietly instead of shouting like an auctioneer. That, Celia supposed, was too much to expect. She walked out into the hall, smoothing away the faint lines which had drawn her brows into something less than an angelic expression. Seating herself on the Chesterfield, she took the telephone from Mrs. Quillen. Mrs. Quillen lingered expectantly. The toe of Celia's slipper tapped against the floor. Mrs. Quillen vanished in a swishing of rusty black silk.

"Hello, Tom . . ."

"So you're home again," came the familiar voice at the other end of the line. "I saw you in Washington last night."

"Did you?" Celia's hand crept up to her throat. Then it was Tom's profile she had glimpsed in a passing taxi when she was saying good-by to Carter in front of that shabby hotel. "Aunt Lucy wasn't at home," she continued hurriedly. "I stayed over-night at the house with Maggie."

"Why did you go?" Tom asked. "I've been feeling miserable." The silver harp strings were plaintive. Had Tom told Janie or Hugh? She had to know. "Have you seen any of my family today?"

"Your secret is safe with me, pretty girl." Pretty girl! Tom was rather a dear. "Thank you for the flowers," she said. And because she was Celia she couldn't help adding, "I'm wearing some of them now."

"Consolation," he said. Consolation! She didn't quite like the sound of that. Did Tom suspect that she had gone to Washington to see Carter Shelby? There were times when she didn't like Tom at all.

"Did you know that Muriel and Carter are engaged?" she asked putting a great deal of happy enthusiasm into her voice.

"Yes . . . And I have some news." "Are you engaged, too?" It was strange that the thought of Tom being engaged made her feel a little forlorn.

"No." He laughed. "I'm going to California."

"When?"

"In a couple of weeks. Some business for Mr. Grove. That's why I was in Washington yesterday."

"Shall you be away long?"

"About three weeks," came the answer over the wire.

"I hope you will have a very nice trip."

"ber what I've often told you—you aren't clever enough."

Celia hung up the receiver with an indignant click. Decidedly, there were times when she was fond of Tom and times when she didn't like him at all. She regretted that he had seen her with Carter last night. But he hadn't told Janie or Hugh . . .

She wandered restlessly up and down the hall, paused to look at herself in the glass of a picture. Her lovely face hovered wraith-like over birch-trees and a vista of painted blue lake. The Spirit of the Forest. A lady turned by enchantment into a white birch-tree.

Janie came out from the office, Janie in a uniform with Kiltie trotting contentedly at her heels.

"Isn't Hugh almost through?" Celia asked.

"There's one more patient," Janie answered.

Celia thought that Janie was looking at her with too intent a gaze.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly.

"I was wondering if you are in a good humor."

"Why Janie-dear!" Celia's eyes were reproachful. That Janie should think she was ever anything except sweet and sympathetic.

Janie ignored the mute reproach. "Rachel's niece is going to be a bridesmaid," she said. "Do you mind if I give her your old leghorn hat?"

"Of course not," Celia pictured herself in the role of a Lady Bountiful, outfitting a Shantytown bridesmaid. "Give her that old pink dress," she added generously. "I never can wear it again."

Janie went off upstairs with the small black dog at her heels. Celia listened, for a moment, at the office door. She heard Hugh dismiss the last patient, heard him close the door and turn the key in the lock. Then she returned quickly to the living room, seated herself on the davenport, fluttered the pages of a magazine.

Hugh found her there a few moments later. His face was grave. There were no pleasant laughing crinkles around his ruddy-brown eyes.

"Celia," he asked, standing quite still in the center of the room, "why did you run away?"

"Run away?" She lifted eyes that were filled with tender reproach. "You make it sound so—so planned."

"Wasn't it?" He looked at her steadily.

"Planned!" She laughed as though the idea amused her. It wasn't an entirely successful laugh. She knew that and hurried on. "I just happened to notice the sign for the Washington express in Broad street and I thought I'd surprise Aunt Lucy. I've been feeling miserable."

The silver harp strings quivered. "You haven't been very considerate, Hugh."

He paid no attention to that. "You knew that Muriel and Mrs. Grove were not in Washington. It wasn't a question. He stated it simply as a fact. "You knew they had gone away."

"Who told you that?" It was really too bad of Hugh to treat her as though she were a prisoner on the witness stand.

"You're superb, Celia," he said. "That was a magnificent performance."

He gently detached her clinging hands, turned, walked out of the room. Celia followed him into the hall. There was a sound on the landing. Janie was coming downstairs. Celia could just see her eyes above the enormous bandbox she carried in her arms. The small black dog was frisking around her feet.

"Look out Kiltie," Celia heard Janie say. "I can't see my feet at all. Please get out of the way."

Janie must not know that anything had happened, Celia thought quickly. After all, what had happened? She slipped her arm through Hugh's, smiled up into his eyes. She would forgive him for laughing at her.

II

Something had happened. Hugh realized as the days grew longer and the locusts blossomed again that something definitely had happened. He told himself, at first, that his feeling for Celia had altered, that he saw her, now, not as a lovely image which he had created but as she really was, capricious, a little selfish, given to dramatizing herself.

He tried to make himself believe that it was better so. The chances for their happiness together would be greater if he realized and accepted her limitations, if he could think of her as a human being and not as something he had imagined. He made an attempt to adjust his emotions. He discovered, one evening, that he had no emotions left to be adjusted.

He came into the garden, on that particular evening, through the alleyway gate. The garden was fragrant with lilacs and the drifting petals of the apple blossoms. The night was mild and sparkling with stars. Hugh walked under the arbor, breathing in the fragrance of spring, wondering if Janie had gone to bed. She would be glad to know that old Mrs. Pope had finally given in, that Miss Ellie's department store clerk was, at that very

I know you haven't been happy with me. You went to Washington to see Carter Shelby."

Celia's heart thumped. A flush which she hated crept into her cheeks. She must keep cool. He was only suspecting. He didn't really know.

"Why, Hugh!" The silver harp strings were muted with reproach.

"You dropped his address from your bag," Hugh's voice was oddly impersonal. It sounded as though he was discussing a matter of no very great importance. "You had torn off the flap of an envelope. Uncle Charlie found it in the station."

Uncle Charlie! That dreadful chuckling old man!

"Carter took me out for dinner," she said lightly, "because Aunt Lucy wasn't at home. Certainly you don't mind that. You aren't medieval enough to believe that I can't have friends. That's really quaint of you, Hugh."

She saw in a flash she had said something wrong. Hugh winced slightly. But his voice was steady enough.

"That isn't the question, Celia," he continued patiently. "The thing that matters is that you haven't been happy with me."

"I wouldn't have gone if I had known you would mind." Celia's fingers pleaded the lace on her handkerchief. "But Carter is—is almost a relative. He's going to marry Muriel."

"So that's why you came back home."

There was no anger in Hugh's steady voice. Only weariness and a sort of compassion. Celia experienced a moment of utter panic. She had lost Carter. If she lost Hugh, how could she explain it in a fashion which would be flattering to herself?

"Hugh!" She crossed to him. Her hands fluttered against his coat lapels. "You're wrong, darling. You don't understand."

His arms were around her but there was no feeling in them. They were like the limp stuffed arms of a clothing store dummy.

"You loved me, Hugh," she murmured, scarcely conscious that she had used the past tense.

"I loved," he said slowly, "a Celia who was never there."

She clung to him, trembling and shaken. The silver harp strings sobbed a plaintive lament. She loved him. The dear big silly, didn't he know? She would die if he ever stopped loving her. She didn't mind living in the Square. She would always be happy with Hugh. Her breath came in broken snatches. Her lips quivered. Her eyes brimmed over with tears.

She thought that he believed her. His arms seemed to tighten. How appealing she must look all teary and shaken like this! She glanced away from Hugh, saw herself in the mirror, all her wistful loveliness framed in curlicues of gilt. The picture charmed her. She could not take her eyes away.

Suddenly Hugh laughed, not the short bitter laugh of a disillusioned lover but a tolerant teasing laugh provoked by genuine amusement. She saw that he had caught her looking past him into the mirror.

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moment, sitting beside the couch where Miss Ellie sat, pale but radiant, about to realize a happiness long deferred.

He thought he had managed that rather well. It pleased him to know that his scheme had worked. He wanted to tell Janie.

Through the foliage of the arbor he saw two figures seated beneath the catalpa tree. One of them was Celia. He heard her laugh, saw her head, a faint blur through the shadows. She was talking to Tom McAllister.

"Hello," Hugh called.

There was a stir under the catalpa tree. Celia ran across the grass to meet him.

"I was waiting for you, Hugh," she said slipping her arm through his.

"You're very much dressed up." He saw beneath her shawl the filmy ruffles of tulle.

"Tom wants us to go to the club," Celia explained.

"It's a sort of farewell party," Tom added. "I'm off to California the first of next week."

"Sorry," Hugh said. "I can't leave the house tonight. I may be called out at any time."

"Hugh!" There was a note of reproach in Celia's soft voice.

He gently pressed her hand.

"You run along with Tom," he said, "and have a very nice time."

He didn't mind Celia going with Tom. That was something to think about. He thought about it as he changed into dressing gown and slippers and switched on the reading lamp in his room. He had a new detective novel. Janie would soon return from an evening at Aunt Rhoda's. He could tell her about Miss Ellie and they would raid the ice box for something to eat. He preferred that to dancing with Celia at the club. It was astonishing but it was true. Hugh settled himself with a contented feeling, lit a cigarette, opened the book.

There was a gentle rap at the door. "Come in," he called, thinking that Janie had returned.

It was Celia.

"I couldn't go without you," she said.

Three months ago the fact that she had given up a party to stay at home with him would have made him very happy. Tonight he was conscious of nothing more stirring than a vague irritation.

"You should have gone," he said, regretfully closing the book.

"I'd rather stay here with you." She pulled at his hands. "Come down into the living room and talk to me."

They sat on the davenport in the circle of amber light. Celia's head rested against his shoulder. Her fragrance no longer stirred him. Something was gone forever. She talked about the house he must build for her at the far end of Manor street. Hugh tried to be enthusiastic. He did not succeed. He kissed her. He held her close. He felt nothing at all.

Janie came in from Aunt Rhoda's. She paused for a moment at the living room door. Celia greeted her coolly. Her manner indicated that she and Hugh preferred to be alone. Hugh was annoyed. There was no reason on earth why Celia should be rude to Janie.

"Come in, young fellow," he said, thinking how nice Janie looked in her pert little orange tam. "I want to tell you about Mrs. Ellie and old Mrs. Pope."

Celia stiffened against his arm. Janie yawned elaborately.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm going on up to bed."

He heard her walking up the stairs, calling to Kiltie in her husky charming voice. He wanted to talk to Janie. But Janie had gone. Celia was laying hardwood floors in the house at the far end of Manor street. Hugh said nothing at all.

"You aren't listening, Hugh."

"Of course I am."

But Celia did not believe him. She wept. She worked herself into a state of hysteria. He attempted to calm her. He finally carried her upstairs to bed. Janie came with comfort and aromatics. Hugh left her bathing Celia's brow, talking to her in soothing murmurs. He returned to his room and tried to think it out. He no longer loved pretty Celia. What was the honorable thing to do?

There were similar scenes in the days that followed; tears, reproaches, hints at desperate measures. Hugh tried to reason with Celia.

"You don't really care about me. You're dramatizing yourself."

wondered about it until, hearing sounds in the kitchen one night, he went downstairs to find her lurching heartily on odds and ends from the ice box. Celia did not know that he had seen her. He went back upstairs, relieved, indignant, faintly amused.

Janie would not permit him to talk to her about Celia. She seemed purposely to avoid him. She took long walks with Kiltie for company. During office hours she was amusingly professional. She spent many evenings at the rectory, at Great-uncle Charlie's, with the quarrelling Mantella.

Hugh did not know that she was trying not to interfere. He did not dream that she was alternately radiant and plunged into the depths of despair because she knew that he was no longer in love with Celia. He did not know that she was attempting to adjust herself to a new situation. He thought he had offended her. Was it because he had been so drawn to her that night on the bench in the Square? Had he fallen in love with Janie?

III

"That's a heavy load for a little girl." Hugh, standing in the lower hall watched Janie coming down the stairs with a towering armload of

books. Kiltie, as usual, was frisking around her feet.

"I've found all the ones that Father likes," she said. "It is a heavy load."

"Wait a minute," Hugh called back. "I can manage," she answered. "Kiltie, get out of my way. Call him, Hugh."

Hugh called. He whistled invitingly. The small black dog paid no attention. Janie tripped, felt herself falling amid a shower of books.

She lay quite still with her head against the edge of the lowest step. She was stunned for only a moment. Consciousness returned. Her head ached. But that was all. She was about to open her eyes.

Then something beautiful happened. Hugh was kneeling beside her, holding her close. There was a wetness on her cheeks and Janie, just then, certainly was not crying.

"Darling . . . darling . . . darling . . ."

It wasn't the Chinese nightingale and it wasn't Hugh talking to Celia in the garden. It was Hugh talking to Janie, holding her close, crying tears on her cheek. Janie kept very still. She was afraid to open her eyes for fear it was only a dream.

"Open your eyes." Hugh's voice was husky and tender. "Smile at me, sweet. I love you, Janie. I love you so much."

Hugh was telling her that he loved her, not because he was lonely and Janie happened to be there. Perhaps she was dreaming . . . unconscious . . . But the smell of Hugh's coat was real enough. Janie held her eyelids shut . . . "Oh God," she prayed, "please don't let it be a dream."

"Are you hurt, darling?" he asked. "I was just pretending."

"Pretending?" She nodded.

"I was afraid it was only a dream." "Then you do love me, Janie?" She nodded again.

"I thought you didn't." "I must be a pretty good actress." "And I must be very stupid."

"You are," she said happily. "I love you most of all because you're so very stupid."

"Imp!"

He lifted her from the pile of books. Her head ached. But she didn't mind. It was much less painful, she thought, to have an ache in your head than to have an ache in your heart.

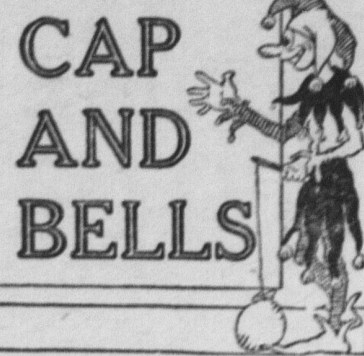
"I have a great deal to say," Hugh whispered as he carried her into the living room.

"There's only one thing I want you to say."

"What is it, darling?"

"Just call me a good little egg."

TO BE CONTINUED.



STRANGE, BUT TRUE

"Have you noticed a very odd thing about blunt people?" Freeman asked his friend.

"Can't say that I have," said the latter. "They are certainly rather embarrassing at times."

Freeman nodded pensively.

"Yes, but hasn't it ever struck you that they are the ones who generally come to the point first?" he said.

Machine Age

"The machine age is taking away a vast number of jobs," said the mechanic.

"Don't I know it?" affirmed an office man. "It cost me my job."

"How is that?" inquired the first speaker. "You have never done any mechanical labor, have you?"

"No," he admitted, "but I got my job when the Republicans were in power; and now the Democratic machine has taken it away."

Prossie Peggy

As they stood looking out of the window on Christmas eve, Peggy's sister said: "That beautiful star is your Heavenly Father wishing you a Merry Christmas. Now what should you do to show him how grateful you are?"

"Wish him the same, I s'pose," said Peggy.—Boston Transcript.

Scared

Mrs.—How do you like this hat, Henry?

Mr.—Horrible!

Mrs.—Why didn't you tell me when we were in the shop; that's the reason I took you along.

Mr.—I was going to, but I saw by her glare that the milliner was reading my mind.—Brooklyn Eagle.

ALWAYS THAT

There is something in this world besides money.

Yes, there's the poorhouse.

Napoleon of Finance

Will—There goes that man Wombat. He's a financial wizard.

Bill—How come? He don't look it.

Will—He got a \$10.14 payment on his account in a closed bank three months ago, and his wife hasn't found it out yet.

The Better Plan

Father—Johnny, come help me dig these potatoes.

Son—Aw, don't you think it would be better if you'd do it yourself? You planted 'em. You know where they are.

Good Idea

She—And when we're married, we'll have a nice little house right near mother, so she can drop in any time.

He—You bet. We'll get one right by the river.—Chelsea Record.

Not So Good

Neighbor—How is that incubator doing which you bought?

Mrs. Newbridge—I suppose it's all right, but I'm a little worried about it. It hasn't laid a single egg yet.—Pathfinder Magazine.

A Bookkeeper's Mind

Secretary—Under what head shall I put your racing losses?

Chief—Running losses?



Celia Hung Up the Receiver With an Indignant Click.



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