

Her Return

It Was Long Delayed

By CLARISSA MACKIE

For three long years Genet Saville had nursed a bitter resentment against her husband. During this time there was ever before her the mental picture of their quarrel and the parting. The recollection of his white, contemptuous face always stung her to fresh hatred of him. She could hear his low spoken acrid reply to her upbraiding. The few words that had sent her fleeing from the room and later from his house with all the quick passion of her southern nature stirred to its depths.

She had sought solitude in an obscure Swiss hamlet. She, who was without kinsfolk, had cut herself loose from the only tie that bound her to her world. She had not seen a familiar face nor heard the sound of a well known voice in all those thirty-six months. She had not read a newspaper nor heard any tidings of the old life. Her private fortune, in negotiable securities, afforded her every material comfort. She had music and books, her favorite dog and bitter thoughts.

Three years, thirty-six months, a thousand days, and more, ages ago, since their parting in the library. Never had she once longed for the sound of Norman's voice, for the sight of his face, for reconciliation. She hated him for his outburst that night, hated him for his cool contempt of her "heroics," as he called it. Always she would remember him as she had last seen him, cold and stern and bitter, with no love for her. She fed her soul on these unwholesome reflections.

Then one lovely morning Genet climbed up the verdant upland pastures reclaimed from the rough mountain sides. She paused in the shadow of a dark clothed pine tree, inhaling the pure air and glorying in the panorama of mountain and valley, pine forest and distant glacier, when close beside her there sprang into view a tableau—a young dairy farmer and his sweetheart.

Genet had often watched the peasants, her fair face amusedly contemptuous of their crude lovmaking. This man might have been Norman's twin brother—handsome, clean cut, gray eyed, brown skinned. The girl was fresh and sweet and fair. She was in his arms, and his firmly molded chin was pressed against the parting of her golden hair.

Genet watched them, a strange new feeling leaping to her head, to her heart—a white flame of jealousy that seared her wounds—the bitterness, the anger, against her husband. Her pulses throbbed, and the blood flew to her cheeks. She watched the man's face wistfully, hungrily, as one who looks on a beloved forgotten picture and revels in the wonderment of rediscovery.

The face of the man was curiously like that of Norman—the finely shaped head with its closely brushed chestnut hair, the straight nose, the resolute mouth now softened into tenderness. The steadfast gray eyes, deep set and black lashed, were fixed on the girl's face, shyly lifted to his and exquisite in its virginal purity of expression.

So Norman must have looked at her when he had told Genet of his love. Genet drew back among the pine boughs and leaned her face against the rough bark of the tree. She was trembling with long controlled emotion, deliciously thrilled at the wild promptings of her wayward heart. Impetuously she had withdrawn from her husband, too hurt to render him justice. As passionately would she return to him and heap the smothered riches of her love and a lifelong devotion to his feet to repay for his suffering, his regret, his loneliness, for he would have suffered keenly, he who worshipped the ground she trod. All the world should know that she who had left him in anger without due reason acknowledged her mistake and had returned to him.

After awhile she descended to the village, singing all the way to the tiny chalet where she lived. The simple peasants among whom she had spent her exile looked after her and wondered and smilingly agreed with one another that the sad faced lady had found happiness after all.

All the nightmare of Genet's nurtured resentment which had robbed her of three years of life was banished by her preparations for immediate departure. Now that she saw herself in the wrong she chafed to be humiliated before her husband in explanation of her sin.

Arrived in New York and settled in a hotel under an assumed name, she called a cab and motored slowly past the town house. As she expected, it was closed and shuttered. She looked up at the familiar windows with dim eyes and registered a vow to live more earnestly, more worthily, if she was permitted to go back.

The next day the train carried her down to Fairfields, where she entered the ancient squire which served all transportation purposes for the casual traveler.

Leaving the sleepy village, the squire rolled lazily along the sandy, wooded roads under tall growing white oaks and chestnuts.

Genet sat with clenched hands and tense lips watching the sand drift in golden streams over the tires. Jealous of the intoxicating summer scents, acutely responsive to the pathos in the thrush's tender song. The driver humped drowsily on the front seat and slumped at the flies on the broad backed horse. It was a ride to be remembered for its suspense.

At the stone pillared entrance to Fairfields Genet dismissed the carriage and entered the winding avenue that led to the house, a half mile distant, on the very edge of the bluffs overhanging the sound.

The house must be open, for there were recent tracks of broad tires in the drive. The gate lodge was tenanted, for curious heads lurked behind the curtains. She wondered if Mrs. Lee and her lame husband still lived at the lodge. She longed to stop and talk to them and thus bring herself immediately into the swing of the old life.

Her slender, girlish figure was clad in pale blue linen coat and gown, with a veil the same tint shrouding her white hat. She stepped across the turf with eager feet, her charming face now rose red with anticipation, now lilily pale with sudden dread.

The low, rambling house lay quiet in the hot sunshine. The broad verandas, awninged and vineclad, seemed to be deserted. Her glance wandered to the launch. The party had boarded her and were lounging in wicker chairs about the deck. Norman was at the wheel. She saw his backward glance at the house. The whistle tooted impudently, and they were away, cutting the water into a thousand twinkling lights and a shower of falling spray.

When they had rounded the point she hurried across the drive and entered the veranda. There was a litter of smoking things on convenient taboretts, heaps of sporting papers and gayly covered magazines. A siphon, a decanter and a tray of empty glasses were on a round table and bespoke recent refreshment. It was very like old times when she had gone away for a few weeks and left Norman to hold bachelor revels with old cronies. She smiled at the disorder. It was all so natural that the past three years were blotted out as if they had never been. She was merely returning home from a day's shopping in the hot town.

Thus she deluded herself. The wide, cool hall was quite deserted. The polished floor gave back blurred reflections of the heavy furniture. The huge fireplace was crowded with fresh branches of fragrant bayberry. The library door was closed, but other open doorways offered cool vistas of drawing rooms, billiard and dining rooms. The stairs wound in a broad spiral to the second floor.

Genet paused, her eyes lingering on each well known object. There was no change in the arrangement of furniture. Even the hatrack bore its customary heterogeneous array of coats and caps, riding crops, golf sticks and tennis rackets. With a quick nervous gesture she threw back her veil and turned to the library. Before she sought her own apartments she would peep in here. And now the creeping fear at her heart found shape and suggestion.

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If her portrait, the one Giddy had painted, still hung over the fireplace in the library, then all would be well; Norman would be forgiving, would relent. His mother's picture had graced that space until Norman married, and then it had given place to Genet's. And now that she had forfeited her right would it be there? If not she would steal away from the house and never return. The answer to her questioning heart lay behind the closed door.

Suddenly she turned the knob and slipped inside, closing the door softly behind her. Then she leaned panting with emotion against its mahogany surface.

The long room lay in shadow save for one sunny window at the farther end. Here a high backed winged chair was placed.

She fell to trembling as she heard the flicker of a turning page behind the winged chair. In the silence it seemed as if her heart throbs would betray her presence. In her joyful imaginings of her return to her husband there were no such fearful terror and apprehension as came upon her now. Her gloved hands wrung together in a supreme effort for control. Suddenly a little sigh of relief escaped her. Perhaps no one was in the room after all!

Then, as if her sigh had been heard, a voice came from the chair, a voice of quiet inquiry, Norman's voice. "Who is there?"

Genet's lips were dumb. "Who is there?" he repeated. And after another silence the winged chair creaked with his uprising. Genet's glance flashed to the fireplace for courage and reassurance, and then a great joy came into her dark eyes.

Her portrait was there in its place and beneath it a vase of fresh violets. Norman came down the room, his eyes half blinded by the sudden change from the sunlit window to the gloom of the room. Genet saw that the smooth chestnut of his hair was flecked with silver; that his face was worn and his eyes were weary. Then the supreme moment came when he saw her and recognized her. Puzzlement gave way to surprise and something else. What was it?

He stopped abruptly, one hand resting on the table, his deep gray eyes fixed upon her face, white as snow against the dark paneling.

"I am sorry. I have come home. I love you, Norman," she whispered. Then she hung her head, not daring to look into his beloved face.

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