

The Magpie's Nest

Hope's Castles in the Shifting Sands That Relentless Tides Destroy

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BOOK TWO

New Readers Start Here

HOPE FIELDING was ambitious and needed money to pay her way through Normal School. She went to the city and engaged as housemaid in an hotel. Jim Sanderson—a boarder—pursued her for months until his attentions became so objectionable that she brought them to a culmination by injuring him with the butt of a revolver.

She then taught school, taking rooms with Mary Dark, and found life uninteresting. She became engaged to Tony Yorke, but the engagement was not announced. He became jealous without knowing why, and when Edgerton's daughter came home from New York, she captivated him so that he asked Hope to release him from their engagement.

Then began a life of kaleidoscopic changes for Hope. Edgerton announced his interest in her, over which she did not become enthusiastic. She went west where she unexpectedly met Ned Angell.



WHAT?" she said at last, impolitely, and turned a blank stare on him. "Good evening, Ned." If she had shouted "Go away," it could have been no plainer. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been up for the week end," he said. "Hope, you look like a ghost. You're ill; for heaven's sake let me get you something. I have some brandy in my suitcase. What are you

doing here?"

"Eloping," she retorted. It was the nearest she could come to shrieking, or hurling a brick at him. It served. He was unintelligible for several minutes, and she watched him stonily. "That is, I was eloping, but I'm not. I changed my mind. Mary changed my mind. She's gone on."

"Who?"

"Mary Dark—oh, the man? I shan't tell you, Neddy. If any of your friends happen along, they'll think it's you."

"I wish it was," he said, and the bare simplicity of his speech struck some chord in her that resolved her again into a merely pitiful girl, aware of another's hurt, and sorry for it.

"Why, Ned, not you; it isn't possible."

"But it is . . . Hope, I can't talk to you here." Again Hope was aware of people regarding them with vague curiosity; they were at the further end of the platform, a little isolated, but scarcely invisible; they regarded each other dramatically, uncertainly, with rather tense white faces and the hint of outflung hands, their eyes challenging and defensive; it was not strange if people stared. Ned knew it also, but he could not stop, he could only urge her: "You're tired; you are ill. The train won't be in for another hour or more; it's late. Have you had any supper? Come up to the hotel and rest a little."

Anywhere, she thought, to be rid of his immediate importunities. But the problem he presented she was grappling with ineffectually. It seemed she must be hopelessly imbecile. People were always surprising her now, turning to her unexpected surfaces, presenting her with new and incredible problems. Nothing was simple any more; it was all beyond her, amazing past conception. Everything that had seemed so plain and straightforward, all her everyday relations, took on a complexity that appalled her. Ned was not a harlequin, an incident; he was alive too, if one pricked him he bled . . . That much he was showing her, with all the passion of a vain and mercurial nature, as they walked slowly in the green-dark obscurity of a by-path beside the road to the hotel.

"You must have guessed it," he insisted. "No, I didn't," she sighed. "Why should I? I don't think you ever said anything, did you?" She groped in her memory. Perhaps he had spoken; she so seldom listened to him closely. Mostly she had laughed at him, or put him aside as one does a troublesome child.

"Why do you suppose I was always coming?" He was almost angry, in the heat of his new passion it seemed to him that he had always cared so much. Now that she had so nearly gone from him forever, she was all that was desirable and dear. He had for long past known her heart was turned from him, toward another man; he had guessed it to be Tony Yorke. Certainty had been impossible; she had her dignity, and had placed him unmistakably, sometimes pointedly, outside her confidence. And slowly her inaccessibility had wrought on him. To-night, with the fine unreason of a new lover, he saw the whole world of men striving to tear her from him. That was the result of her challenge.

They were both rather mad, and it was night and spring. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "After all, you

WE have appreciated "The Magpie's Nest" but not until recently were we aware of the intense interest it has been creating among our readers. Requests have been coming in recently to "give us more of it at a time," and—"why make the instalments so short?" So we have bowed to the will of the populace this month. When space permits, we will continue to do this. We particularly want to satisfy everyone. Suggestions and requests are always most welcome.

—The Editors.

were always about some other girl, too. You were always at Mrs. Patton's, for the matter of that." Her hand was on his arm, and she felt him start. "You don't really care so much, do you, Ned? Not now, anyway, when I tell you Tony jilted me, and I came so near to running away with—another man?" "Oh, Hope, I do, I do! There's only you. I don't care about whoever else it was—" She would not tell him who. "Do you care so much for Yorke?" "No," she said slowly. "I don't care for anyone. It's all gone. But I'm tired." Presently she was weeping on his shoulder. "So tired. I haven't anything to give you."

HE told her fervently that nothing was enough, if he might only hope. In some sense, his chivalry was touched. It is hardly a quality to build on, in a sentimentalist, but in the clash and chaos of old illusions fallen about her ears it seemed as solid as anything. But he only won when he put forward his own need as a plea. He wanted her! He did want her; he ached for her; she felt it dimly—she had got into his blood.

To her, who had wanted so much and whose hands were so empty, it seemed unbearable that such a plea should go unanswered. Two people wretched were too many.

She wished only to see someone else happy, to remind herself that there was such a thing as joy in the world. Out of her enormous inexperience she was assured that her life was lived. And here was a way to end it neatly. Again her early training asserted itself, disastrous as any good rule is applied at the wrong moment. He was urging her to marry him. Marriage meant the end of the old order, a beginning of new things. It was a solution to hand; and it answered Mary's requirements, it would be according to the rules of the game. And it would make Ned happy! In fact it was a sacrifice on the altar of happiness; it was neither for herself nor for Ned, but for the sake of happiness itself. She hovered fearfully on the brink, delayed putting her hand to the bond with idle questions that in themselves committed her.

They had seated themselves on a fallen log, just beyond the path, to avoid belated strollers. A long, harsh whistle pierced the night; Hope sprang to her feet.

"The train!" she cried. "We forgot it; it's gone."

"Then marry me to-night," Ned said. Now she looked over the edge of the unknown and drew back a step.

"No. Why, two hours ago. . . To-morrow you will think differently. Tell me to-morrow, if you do. I must go to the hotel, and get a room. I tell you, I know we're insane."

"To-morrow I shall think the same," he said, and urged her again, with wilder protestations, with the sheer strength of his own feeling. He was intoxicated, beyond mere earthiness. He too had found romance. If Hope had been better able to draw an analogy, she would have made the woods echo with satiric mirth.

CHAPTER XVII

THE carpet was red, and a red flowered screen stood in front of the wood-fire in the grate. A rose-colored Chinese lantern hung over the electric lamp. In the tempered light Hope looked not a day older. Perhaps she should not have; three years is no great time in the early twenties. But to Mary's quietly observant second glance it was plain she was thinner, and her sleepy eyes seemed

larger, still softly blue, but impenetrable. Inquiring eyes still, now they volunteered nothing; and her thinness brought out strongly the salient line from chin to ear.

"I never noticed the visible sign of her obstinacy before," thought Mary, saying aloud:

"You're pretty sometimes, Hope."

"What a backhander," remarked Hope. "Would you like me to tell you you must have been pretty once! I look a hag by daylight. Did you come all this way to flatter me? Tell me all the news instantly. Oh, if I could tell you how I've missed you!"

"Well, I was pretty once," remarked Mary placidly. "That's no mean consolation—at thirty. And I came all this way to beat you. You should be strong enough to stand it now; you weren't when you left."

"Maybe I'm not now," said Hope. "I nearly killed myself kicking against the pricks for a long, long time. If I look well preserved, it's because I pickled myself in brine of my own making. I had to stop when I found I was getting nerves. Extraordinary things, nerves. Have you any?"

"Enough," said Mary. "You never told me, in your letters?"

"About my teapot tempests? They weren't worth it." She rose and went across the room to pick up a fan of carved sandalwood, but merely played with it, as if her hands demanded occupation. And she no longer relaxed into her chair, cat-like, true; she had made immense drains on her reserve vitality, and she knew herself that now she lived from day to day, storing up nothing. But it did not seem a matter of moment. "But news, woman, news?" she demanded.

"I think I must have written you everything," said Mary. "That Lisbeth's gone abroad—I was so glad when the money came to her."

"Is she happy?" asked Hope softly, almost as if afraid of the word.

"There are several kinds of happiness," said Mary. "Yes, she has hers. Did you know that she hoped you would write?"

"No. But I am glad. I suppose we felt just the same! I wanted her to write. How is Con—Mr. Edgerton?"

"He's made another million," said Mary, laughing. "And—he sent you this. I saved it till you should ask." She reached into the bosom of her gown and drew out a carved gold bracelet, held on a ribbon such round arms.

"I was so afraid of losing it. He said you had such round arms."

"He does remember me," said Hope, with mirth in her eye.

"Do you remember him?"

And Hope showed herself different. "You want to know if I regret him? No, but I'm glad I knew him. What a plague he missed! I don't believe I regret anything much—what's done is done—except—"

"Except who?"

"Except Allen Kirby," and Hope laughed at the open surprise in Mary's face. "I wonder what became of him, and I'll never know. We understood each other absolutely. Now turn up your nose at me!"

"I used to envy you," said Mary indulgently. "You're very comfortable here." It was comfortable, if shabby; there was room enough, a big window for the drawing-board, large chairs, in which the mistress of the place could be pleasantly swallowed up, and the spiritual consolation of an open fire.

Hope had taken it over in toto from some migrating bachelor tenant—and, characteristically, had altered nothing in it, unless by a very few small additions.

"Yes," she said, grinning. "You can let your soul down here; there's not an atom of taste in it to live up to. Nothing to clash with my Art! And that Chinese lantern is the greatest labor saver. When I haven't time to dust, I simply drop that over the lamp. I call the whole place The Tub!"

"You pup!" remarked Mary, in her delicious well-bred tones. "Hope, does your Art progress?"

"Well, you've seen it," said Hope dubiously.

SHE drew for a colored Sunday fashion page of a city daily—large-eyed and sweetly simpering girls in meticulously up-to-date frocks, and filled in during the week with whatever might be required of her in the way of special illustrations, some of which betrayed an impish humor that struggled through her limited technique with more or less success.

"I don't think it's a topic for polite conversation. Ask me how I like Seattle; nobody has for nearly a year, and I miss the dear old question."

"How do you like Seattle?"

"Very much," said Hope promptly. "A newspaper is rather fun, isn't it?"

"It give you the key of the fields, to a certain extent," agreed Mary, in whose mind that point had special importance just then. "Have you many friends here?"