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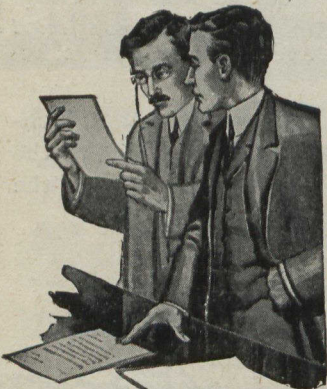
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Tubby gravely replied, "Stoney-Broke."

CHAPTER XV.

Love all—fifteen; thirty; forty—deuce! Vantage!! Game!!!

THEO, swaying herself slowly to and fro in a lawn-hammock, sang under her breath a little mournful love-song that ended with the litany: "From Love foresworn and Love forelorn, keep thou me and I thee." The brilliant tint of her cheeks, the gray sparkle of her eyes were dimmed, and the curl of her lips was changed, for upstairs, in his darkened room, Laurie lay still unconscious. At rare intervals he moved and spoke, but always relapsed again into the comatose state that so closely resembled death.

And while Laurie's tongue was tied, and the dark cloud of mystery and suspicion hung undisputed over the Chase, all the gaiety that to Theo was the breath of life, was stopped, and the leaden days dragged by heavily.

She loved her brother, and she had a girlish fondness for Fen, but the trouble that had changed her most was one that she tried to hide even from herself—her chagrin at Tubby's defection.

For days after that first terrible morning when he had to be sent away because of Laurie's disappearance, she had hoped that he would call again, and had waited about in the garden to waylay him.

But he never appeared, and once when she went for a walk in the direction of Chevening Rise, she met Sallie and learnt the truth from her. "Tubby rushed off to town days ago," said Miss Mauleverer: "horribly selfish of him, I think, leaving me down here alone with father."

"Is he away for long?" asked Theo, schooling her voice to seem unconcerned.

"Goodness knows," answered Sallie. "He said something about his plans, and I don't even know if he is stopping in St. George's square or not. Not, I should think, if he is in funds—gloomy old hole! I was out at a garden-party and Tubby was due to follow me there, but instead of turning up, he had his things packed and went off, leaving a message for me that he had gone to town. Rotten of him!"

Theo said nothing; friends as she and Sallie were supposed to be, she had an innate distrust of the handsome, spoiled, wayward girl, and did not dream of confiding in her.

"Did you and Tubby have a tiff?" asked Sallie, suspicious of this absence of comment.

"No. We are quite friends," Theo assured her.

"And Laurie is no better, you say?" "No better. The specialist does not think him in immediate danger—but we are horribly anxious."

"M'yes." Sallie reflected abstractedly for a moment, then went on. "I don't want to be inquisitive, but your brother and I are rather pals. I wonder if you would mind telling me why he did not go up to town that night. He told me his leave was up, yet the next morning he was walking about here with that governess of yours."

"He had a bad fall," Theo answered. "and it gave him concussion, so he rambled about, not quite knowing what he was doing, and Fen happened to come across him while she was out for a walk. That'll all."

"Oh—that's all!" echoed Sallie. "Then why are they saying all sorts of queer things in the village?"

"What sort? What do you mean?"

"They say he must have been running along the pineland that has been enclosed lately—and when he came to the sunk fence, he caught his face in the wire stretched along the top of the bank and fell headlong over it into the road. What was he going to Woking for?"

"Just to catch the train," answered Theo composedly.

Sallie stared at her inquisitively. "I thought," she said, "that Fleet was your nearest station, and that he always went up by the ten-fifty-three!"

"He does as a rule, but if he happens to over-stay that time, he can

get a mail train at Woking later, I believe. Good-bye!"

She escaped from Sallie's embarrassing questions, but with a sense of shame at the knowledge that she was quibbling—and also that probably Sallie knew it. Theo hurried home with burning cheeks and eyes smarting from the unshed tears she kept back from overflowing by a supreme effort. Tubby had gone away—without a word to her. She was cut to the quick, but pride made her resolve to show no sign of what she was suffering. She was perplexed and downcast. Everything was so mysterious and wretched—and she asked herself continuously the question: "Why, oh, why, did Laurie come back that night?" and why were people talking about him as if he had done something underhand or disgraceful? Was it possible that Tubby, who had always been such good friends with Laurie, had gone away to avoid being mixed up in the mystery?

WHILE she lay there in the hammock debating whether she would put pride aside and write to Tubby without telling any of her people she saw the postman cycling up the avenue, so, springing down from her perch, she ran to intercept him before he reached the house, in case he had any letters for her. He handed her only one, and she scanned the envelope with feverish impatience. It was not Tubby's writing, and her heart sank again. Then, seeing it was from Fenella, she went back to her place under the trees to read it.

Her friend wrote in furious haste: Janet and I are up to our ears in work. She has let her studio for six months, so we are setting it to rights at top speed and packing at the same time, as we start to-morrow for Liverpool, and sail in the Spartan at day-break. Now comes the best bit of news for you, my dear little chum. We met Mr. Mauleverer yesterday—quite by chance—and he came back with us to tea, just to get the opportunity of sending you a message, I'm sure. He said, 'Tell her not to forget me, and not to believe anything she may hear against me.' He has evidently been in some great trouble, and is leaving England at once. Dear Theo, I'm so sorry for you—I know how terribly hard it is to part with a great friend. But I'm quite sure he'll go back to you one of these days. I'm sorry I can't stay to write more till I'm on board, and then there'll be loads of time, and I'll tell you everything. Ever yours, Fen."

Theo was a young person who never stopped to think twice when once she had made up her mind what she wanted—and now, without further loss of time, she determined to go and see Fenella, before the latter left London. She examined the contents of the little hand-bag she carried on her arm—a ten-shilling bit and some loose silver, quite sufficient for her railway fare—and the pretty lawn dress she was wearing, and summer hat which she had tossed carelessly on the turf, would pass muster under any circumstances. For half a moment she hesitated about getting hold of the chauffeur and commandeering her father's car; then decided that would be a risky proceeding and might lead to the discovery of her intentions. Mrs. Pridham would most certainly prevent her from travelling alone to town, if she had the slightest inkling that Theo contemplated it. It was a still, warm morning, and the walk would be dull and dusty.

No matter! Theo sauntered through the gates with the air of filling up an empty hour. She stopped in Fleet, to telephone home to the butler: "Tell Mrs. Pridham I shall be out to lunch," and a few minutes later was on her way to Waterloo.

She burst in on Janet and Fenella in the final stages of preparation for departure.

Fen hugged her in an excess of joy. "You darling! I never expected this delightful surprise."

"I've come to see you off," said Theo, and then put all her energy and enthusiasm into assisting the two other girls.

"I wish you were coming with us,"



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