

THE MAGPIE'S NEST

(Continued from page 47)

Then she sat up, rubbed her eyes, and gave him a stare of instinctive antagonism. She was annoyed, not embarrassed.

"Good evening," he said, and turned the key in the lock behind him.

She did not answer.

"Won't I do as well as Hardy?" he asked.

"Not for me," replied Hope, with a mixture of impudence and disdain. She meant exactly what she said—no more. "I'm going, anyway."

"Stay and talk to me a few minutes."

"It's late. Please excuse me." But she could not get to the door; he stood covering it. And as he advanced toward her, he managed to guard it still.

"Got you now," he smiled. She regarded him doubtfully, taking his measure, the repulsion she always felt for him growing upon her. An involuntary step backward placed a chair between them. If only Evan would come! But he would not; she had only herself to rely on. That was enough, of course. But it was degrading to have to parley with him at all; her impulse was to turn directly from him and quit his presence without again looking at him. What he was saying was not quite clear to her; she was going behind his words, reading his intent, which was not at all clear either, but yet disgusted her. Or it was his eyes which disgusted—or his bald shiny head—though he was a young man.

No, it was his eyes. That was certain the moment he touched her, put his hand on her shoulder. Impulse moved her instantly; if Jim Sanderson had been a psychologist, it might have interested him to know that the impact of her hand on his cheek was purely the result of a reflex action. But all he knew was that for the size of her, she was well muscled, and that the blood which flew to his face seemed to colour his vision. The sting of the blow put a sudden edge on what else he felt.

He lifted her off her feet, almost, in his grasp, and said, not loudly, "You shouldn't have done that." And his teeth showed. It was the culmination of a pursuit lasting three months; a pursuit of which she had been for the most part oblivious. It had not been very hard to avoid, ignore him; the housekeeper, a dragon at times, was sometimes seen more in the light whereby Persephone might have viewed Cerberus on her "not at home" days. But he had been conscious, all this while. That was the curse of so small a place; one was, in fact, conscious of every other inhabitant in it. There were not a thousand red herrings a day for every individual trail, as in a great city. He could not help seeing her, always vanishing down a corridor, or looking from a window, or walking on the opposite side of the street. And here he had caught her up, had her fast. He could make her listen to him. He could—but very naturally he was not reasoning.

And she was. His own words gave her the cue. She should not have done that! No, her blow was not heavy enough. One had to be either stronger, or fleetier, quite so! She was still, with the quiescence of determined enmity, until he, devouring her crimson face with his abominable eyes, felt too secure, and the flexure of his arm told her this was her opportunity. So she went out of his clutch with the instinctive downward wriggling motion of an obstinate baby. The table was between them before he knew what had happened, and he held a little strip of her muslin blouse in his fingers. Dishevelled, flushed, furious, but inwardly glacial, she backed cautiously against the dresser.

"Please go away," she said. Her hands were behind her. There was something of Evan's in the dresser drawer; she was fumbling for it blindly, not daring to take her eyes from him.

And again, if he had been a psychologist, he would have gone away. But he did not.

This time his hand did not reach her shoulder. He made a great deal of noise, falling; it sounded to Hope as though the roof had come down. Her fingers, gripping the barrel of Evan's neat .38 revolver, tingled from the force with which she had struck. Calculation had prompted her to club her gun; she knew guns, and was not inclined to use it more messily; anyway, she was not sure it was loaded. If he had guessed her purpose, of course its accomplishment would have been impossible; he could have fended the attack easily, but he did not guess. On the whole, he was obtuse, as well as disgusting. She stood still a moment, a bit shaken, but seeing him no whit less disgusting, lying on the floor at her feet, with an unpleasant red mark on his temple, than he had been standing before her. Perhaps he was dead!

Well, if he were—but first, she must get out of here. She did, turning off the light as she stood at the door.

If he were, he was properly served. In the very bottom of her heart she felt that—much the same sensation as one has after stepping on a noxious insect.

In her room, she scrubbed her face furiously with soap and water. It afforded temporary relief. She took off her torn blouse and threw it viciously in a corner, holding it by the tips of her fingers, poking it with her toe. An ineffaceable soilage seemed to be visible on it. She could have lacerated, bitten herself. A faint nausea crept over her. After awhile she grew calmer and sat on the edge of her narrow bed, thinking, trying not to think. A vague curiosity stirred her. Was he dead? And then her mind began to work freely again, and she

remembered that he had been breathing heavily all the while he lay there. Of course he was not dead! Certainly, she was ridiculous. How had it happened she could have thought him dead, while he was visibly breathing! Perhaps because he should have been dead. Her mind annihilated him, refused to admit him to the company of living things. That was it. It was the protest of her own healthy psychology against the monstrosity of his kind.

As though summoned by her thoughts, his voice came to her distantly. Her window was open; it gave on the courtyard at the back of the building. His words were not clear, but the voice was unmistakable. Some one was chaffing him. She had been sitting there for over half an hour.

It was unbearable, that sound; she shuddered again. Slipping on a wisp of a dressing jacket, she went in search of Agnes, who represented things sane and clean.

Agnes sat at her mirror, making herself dainty, aiding Nature a trifle in the matter of carmine. Hope only wanted to sit with her awhile. They exchanged casual, friendly words. The atmosphere was soothing; Agnes was so calm, so delicate, so unruffled. Agnes knew all about these things, and refused to let them come near her. She walked daintily, but surely, avoiding them. She was not clever at all, but she was herself. She refused to take colour from her surroundings. That was what one must do. But—what else? One could not always, always, live in a dull routine of work, never looking to the right nor to the left, going to one's tiny room at evening—Hope had never read Dostoevski; she did not know he had put her difficulty into words: "Do you know that a man's mind becomes paralysed in small, poky rooms?" Nevertheless, she felt it. Her mind rebelled constantly, vigorously. One had to leave the small, poky room sometimes—even at the risk of such an encounter as this. She remembered her own dictum. They ought to take their chances. With her, they should! She was not sorry. Not at all. She had done quite right. Oh, they should indeed take their chances! All the evasions she had been compelled to use these months past crowded on her suddenly, invaded her memory. At the time, she had not troubled her. The memory of them had not troubled her. The memory of Jim Sanderson's eyes was what made them intolerable. Why should she, Agnes, any girl, be hunted like that? They harmed no one; they earned their bread. Those lurking, whispering, ogling creatures needed what he had got. And she would go where she pleased, and always be careful to even the chances. After having the half a principality to run over at large when a child, she would not let maturity bar her into one little room.

But then she knew she did not want to go anywhere again, for a long, long time at least. Time to forget. She could study, to fill it. In a month more she was to leave, too.

"Oh," said Agnes suddenly, "I forgot—" She fumbled in her belt. "Your big man gave me this—at dinner. For you." It was a note.

He had had to catch the seven o'clock train. He had not known where to find her. In six weeks or so he was coming back. Would she not write?

He signed his name, but that, of course, did not impress her.

No, she would not write. She did not feel inclined to write. What was there to say? Really, she had never been inclined to talk to him; it had only interested her to hear him talk. And now her disgust was a wall between her and masculinity, making communication difficult.

There were flowers from him next day. She meant to write, to be polite. But she put it off. She never wrote. The flowers were delightful, they perfumed his memory, in a way, purified it with their innocent incense. But even so, it with their innocent incense. But even so, it writing struck her as too difficult—more, too profitless. But, as they were roses, she kept the petals and put them in a little muslin bag. The sweetness remained in them.

And in a month she did go away. It was sorrowful to leave Agnes. Every one seemed to regret her going. The dry, thin spinster housekeeper, even, gave her a linen handkerchief for a parting gift. The rotund bartender brought glasses of claret lemonade for all the girls, upstairs, Agnes, Belle, Hope and the housekeeper. She kissed Agnes affectionately at the last, a smooth, powdery, perfumed kiss. She never saw her again.

Evan had been reproachful. Why should she never come to see him again? So she did come, and sat and stared at him with meditative, solemn round eyes. And at the last she decided that he was really just what he had always seemed, and absolved him from a great many things of which he had never dreamed. And he laughed at her again, and she put her arms about his neck, standing on tiptoe, and kissed him shyly for farewell.

"Heaven be good to you," he said. "Look here, child, what did I ever do to you? Was it because I wasn't here the last time? You told me you wouldn't come."

She started. "How did you know I was here?" His reminder brought it all back so vividly, with the familiar room to aid memory. He saw her lip curl back from her small teeth, and looked at her shrewdly.

"I found your pink ribbon. Look!" He drew it out of his pocket, soiled and crumpled. "What frightened you away?" (Continued on page 51)

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