Unholy Bond

CHAPTER XII

"Thank God! Now I can shave off this darned beard. It's been driving me nearly crazy!"

Mr. Prentice arrived the next day.

"I've been most distressed over this whole affair," he said. "We'd have done better to take action the first ti mewhen William disturbed the children. But now at least you're in a position to go to court."

Richard looked disturbed.

"But we want to avoid that if possible, Mr. Prentice. I can't take time off from Oakhart now—we're short-handed as it is. Besides, the shot was accidental, you know."

"An accident on William's part, but gross negligence on Mrs. Gremont's. You have witnesses and the gun, with its fingerprints.. By law, she is his guardian and responsible. Besides, he was trespassing."

"Abby thinks William would be happier in an institution."

"Well, we have the means to put him in a good one now. Mrs. Gremont has no legal objection to offer."

"She'll hate us," Richard said.

"I'm afraid she already resents you for owning Oakhart—she's there's a political campaign coming up, perhaps that will divert her. Gremont has been losing some of his backers lately."

He stared at them solemnly for a long moment, then—

"I had another reason for coming here today—about that new wing you want to build, Doctor."

Richard frowned. "Mrs. Eynon doesn't want to place a mortgage on Oakhart, and since this happened, I'm inclined to agree with her."

"It's partly because of her attitude that I'm making my offer. I'd like to advance you the money for it—a gift, not a loan."

"Give it to us!" Janet exclaimed.

He held up a thin, admonishing hand. "Wait — there are strings attached. In exchange for my gift I ask that my little boy be permitted to spend his summers here. He has been alone with me too much. After seeing your place here I understand how abnormal his life has become."

"He has rheumatic fever, hasn't he?"

Mr. Prentice nodded wordlessly. Janet had heard Jonathan Prentice's case discussed by Richard and Cliff. He was really a victim; unlike little Rodney Becker, there was no chance that his trouble might be corrected by an operation.

"But we'd love to have him, anyway," she said.

"That's not all—I also ask that if I should not live until Jonathan is twenty-one, you become his guardians until he attains his majority. I know you'll want to think it over . . . I won't press you now."

"I'm going for a walk, Abby. The children are all asleep, but look in on them occasionally, will you?"

Abby nodded, but her round, moon face was worried. "Where are you going, Janet?"

"Up on the ridge, I think. There may be some signs of spring up there."

"Certainly aren't any down here," Abby muttered, then added, "better wear rubbers, the ground's damp."

For the first time since she had been at Oakhart, Janet really wanted to get away from it. She had to divest herself of every view of the house and grounds, avoid contact with those inside them in order to think things out clearly.

Beyond Oakhart was an uncut timbered tract of spruce and alder and hickory. It rose above the surrounding valleys and formed a clay bluff above the river. It was dryer ground and the sun touched it often. Janet plodded upward, taking the rise slowly.

Richard wa salmost well . . . she must decide to leave him now.

The situation had become intolerable.

Everyone seemed aware of it but Richard. Abby had been frank about it, so had Cliff. Even Naomi though she misinterpreted Janet's love for Richard, had guessed that he did not love her.

Richard's love was medicine.

She had failed. She couldn't go on. To be aching with love for someone who didn't return that love; to be near him every waking moment, to see his every gesture, hear his every word, to long to put out a hand to him and feel his arms around her, yet forever having t oremember to keep a tight rein on her emotions, was more than anyone could take.

She would ask him for a divorce. Leave him Oakhart for it was a project that she too believed in. He was in a position to change more now, and he could afford a registered nurse.

At the top of the ridge she found a fallen log near the edge of the bluff and sat down, looking off over the patchwork of farm lands.

Below her on the trail came the slow plodding footsteps of someone taking the climb easily, pausing often to rest. A quick tremor of fear passed over her, until she recalled that William Hartigan was safe in a new haven and in reality was quite harmless.

Sun glinted on a sandy head bobbing up the path. Richard's tall rugged shape came into view. He was anxiously searching the woods his hazel eyes dark and serious. Janet stood up quickly.

"Richard, you shouldn't have come, the climb is too much for you."

His big mouth twisted in the strange lop-sided grin that Janet loved. "When the doctor deserts the patient, the patient must seek the doctor."

She stared into his eyes thinking how gentle they were—how soothingand encouraging to a sick person their expression.

"Sit down and get your breath —I thought you were reading."

"Even books aren't satisfactory companions at certain times, and when a man's wife goes running off by herself all he can do is fol low."

Her fingers clenched until the knuckles were white. She must not let herself weaken now. Richard was only being kind and polite as he was with everyone — his words meant nothing personal.

"Richard, there's something" —

"Wait, Janet. Before you say anything, I want to tell you that the day you and Bronson were in my room I heard everything you said. I was not asleep or unconscious as you semed to think."

Uncomprehensively she looked into his eyes, then when she understood the full import of his words her own eyes filled with mortification.

"Oh, Richard, Richard!" she gasped with dismay.

"My dear, don't be ashamed. You don't know how grateful I am that it happened."

Her face was burning; she bit her lips to keep them from trembling.

"There's something else you should know," Richard continued. "Bronson was perfectly aware of my condition and he deliberately encouraged the conversation."

"You mean—?"

"Yes. It was pretty damned decent of him. He's in love with you himself, but he gave me a chance to discover how things really stood."

Janet stared down at the rippling gray ribbon of Clear River. "I don't know what to say."

His eyes held a teasing glint. "It seems to me there's very little left for you to say. You did very well that afternoon."

Could he be mocking her? But Richard was above that.

"Janet, don't you know I'm in love with you and have been ever since that evening at the Maison Mourney?"

"You don't have to save me embarrassment, Richard."

"I'm not, my dear—I've wanted to tell you before, but you'd never let me."

"Why didn't you tell me before we were marrid, when we were making our plans for Oakhart?"

"Propose to you when you'd just fallen heir to an estate? Wouldn't that have been a little obvious? I didn't want you thinking that—it was bad enough over-hearing hospital gossip."

"But after that?"

"After that it was you who seemed so determined to make it a business ppartnership. Every time I wanted to tell you, you avoided me or something else interfered."

"Strange. . . I felt that way too."

"Then when I came home from town that day", Richard said "I saw you and Bronson sitting on the old rock down by the river. You were in his arms and he was kissing you. After that I didn't know what to think."

"He was just comforting me, Richard. He knew how I elt about you."

"I know that now."

"Oh, Richard, Richard, it all seems so stupid."

"Janet, you're my wife—from this moment on, in every sense of the word. We'll begin all over."

His arm slid beneath her coat, pressing her body close to his, his mouth on hers was warm and determined. She felt a slow satisfaction enfolding her—it was not just the nearness of Richard's person but the great peace of mind his words had brought.

They sat there, Richard with his arm tight around her, until the sun began to sink low on the horizon and the sky was a streak of green and coral, then they began their homeward journey.

At the entrance to Oakhart he picked her up in his arms.

Janet laughed with happiness. "What now, Richard?"

He grinned, but there was a new light in his eyes. "Something I've wanted to do for ten months—carry my bride over the threshold."

(THE END.)

BARNWELL RACES ATTRACT MANY SHORE ENTRIES

Entries from many parts of the Shore took part in the harness racing at Barnwell Track, near Easton, last Saturday afternoon. The evnets also attracted a large crowd of spectators.

A Wyoming, Del., entry, "Victory Cash", owned by Mrs. Clara Stockley, won the Class A pace event. Time: 2.16½ 2.18.

The Class A trot event was won by Guy McEloryn, owner Thomas Walter, Dover, Del. Time: 2.25½ 2.26.

Truman D. March, owned by Harvey Prettyman of Easton won the Class B pace event. Time: 2 21-2.18.

The Free-For-All was won by Cindy Girl, owner, Dora Hudson of Salisbury, Md. Time: 2.14-2.14½.

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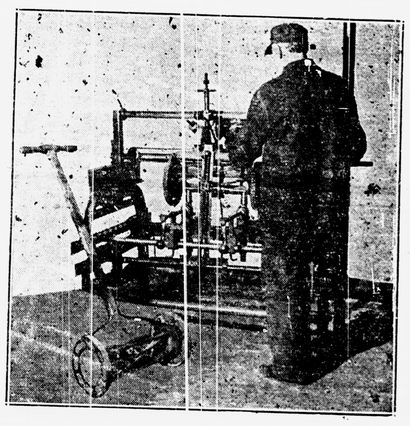

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