CHAPTER X—Continued

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And Doctor Greeding had, where the others were concerned, even more personal reasons for gratitude. The accident to Dan was, after all, his fault; and Nancy, and Dan too—since they were familiar with firearms—must know this. Yet neither reproached him, or offered him blame.

He welcomed Professor Carlisle's coming as an opportunity for confession, hoping by an open admission of his culpability to ease his own heart; and he took the first convenient occasion. He and Jerrell were in the big living-room; Mary Ann and Nancy and Professor Carlisle were with Dan in the dining-room, the length of the house away. Then Professor Carlisle came back from Dan's side; and he asked Doctor Greeding:

"You think he has a chance, Doctor? Mary Ann says that is your opinion."

"I believe so, yes," Doctor Greeding assented. And he said, to Jerrell as well as to Professor Carlisle: "I hope so. Because, Professor, this was not Jerrell's fault; it was mine."

Jerrell protested generously: "Hardly, Ned. It was my clumsiness."

But Professor Carlisle waited, watching Doctor Greeding; and the surgeon said explicitly:

"No, Ira." He spoke to Dan's father. "You see, Professor Carlisle, I had just fired the pistol. I removed the empty clip, thinking I had fired the last cartridge. Most accidents with automatics occur through just such carelessness as mine. I should have worked the action to be sure that the barrel was empty. I neglected to do this. I should have made sure the gun was empty before giving it to Jerrell."

He smiled frankly. "No one has blamed me," he confessed. "They've all been mighty kind and generous. But it was my fault, just the same."

Both were silent for a time. Then Doctor Greeding spoke

"As a matter of fact, this was worse than carelessness. With that particular pistol, if the barrel is empty, the action stays half-open. The fact that it was closed should have warned me that there was still a cartridge in the barrel. I was incredibly stupid!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Jerrell said uncomfortably:

"Decent of you to say that, Ned. But after all, if I hadn't pointed the gun at Dan—"

He added, in an incredulous recollection: "I didn't mean to, tried not to. I can't understand it, even now. It was exactly as if some one's hand, on mine, swung the pistol toward Dan—"

"If it had been empty, you could have done no harm," Doctor Greeding insisted.

Professor Carlisle looked keenly at the Doctor. "No one is—blamable for an accident," he remarked. "This of course was an accident. Let it rest so."

And he repeated his question of a moment before. "You think he will recover?"

"Yes."

"Why?" the older man inquired. "On what signs do you rely?"

Doctor Greeding hesitated, shook his head, smiled. "I don't know," he said. "Instinct. A guess, perhaps." He chuckled. "Or it may be that I'm relying on my luck. I was born under a caul, Professor. The old women say that's a sign of luck, you know; and I've always been lucky, certainly."

Professor Carlisle sat down, almost suddenly, as though he were tired. His eyes still on Doctor Greeding's face, he filled his pipe and lighted it. So presently he spoke.

"Born under a caul, were you, Doctor?" he repeated thoughtfully. And he said: "I remember you once told me some strange experiences of a friend of yours, who was also born under a caul."

Doctor Greeding felt his cheek flame; then the blood drained away, and he cursed his folly, his own loose tongue. There was no accusation in the Professor's tone; yet Doctor Greeding felt himself accused.

"Yes, so I did," he confessed lamely.

Professor Carlisle puffed at his pipe, his old eyes stern and still. "Strange things do happen," he said gravely, "—some things too dark for the human mind to contemplate." He met Doctor Greeding's glance. "I perceive," he said, "that Dan and Nancy—"

"Yes. I am much pleased," Doctor Greeding said hurriedly.

"You do not—object?" the Professor asked.

"No," the other man assured him. "No!" And he said: "Strange things, yes. Dan's recovery—I think he will recover—is almost like a miracle, for instance." Something like an appeal for mercy was in his tone.

The old man said inflexibly: "Yes. If he does recover."

And at that, abruptly, Doctor Greeding turned away and went out through the billiard-room to where Dan lay. He questioned Mary Ann with a glance.

"He's fine," she said. "Not much pain, and no temperature. Doctor, you mustn't—doubt. He'll get better." She smiled hearteningly. "He's bound to. This is one of your miracles, you know."

"It's already twenty-four hours," he reflected. "Wound draining?"

"Perfectly."

"I'll stay with him for a while," he suggested. "If you want to—rest."

And he did in fact stay close to Dan's side during the days that followed. This was not all solicitude for Dan. It was in part defensive; since so long as he stayed near Dan—who was conscious and rational now—he need not be alone with Professor Carlisle.

There was in Doctor Greeding a passionate desire to avoid that wise bold man, whose shrewd eyes saw so much, who might be keen enough to suspect, and even to credit, the incredible. He perceived that questions multiplied in the other's mind; but so long as he himself stayed near Dan, who must overhear any catechism that might be attempted, Professor Carlisle could not interrogate him.

And—Doctor Greeding had no answers ready for the old man's unasked questions; so he clung to Dan as a buckler and a shield.

He and Mary Ann and Nancy shared that vigil; but he bore the greater burden. It was as though he poured his own life and strength into the hurt man. He seemed in fact visibly to fail while Dan grew stronger. For Dan's strength did begin to return, his color to improve; and his spirits were brave and unsubdued.

Doctor Greeding, by contrast, began to look like an ill man. Nancy paid him a heavenly tenderness. And Mary Ann entered with her into this conspiracy of gentleness toward the man who so visibly grew weary and drawn before their eyes. She said to him, once, at dawn:

"You mustn't—wear yourself out, Doctor." And she added, understandingly: "Father told me you blame yourself for Dan's being hurt. But that's wrong. You mustn't worry. Grief and worry can make you ill, and Dan doesn't blame you. None of us do."

He said: "I wonder if that's why Dan's getting better. Because he's not blaming me, not—hating me. Hate and anger are poisonous things, Mary Ann. They can destroy a man, if he harbor them."

She protested smilingly: "Nobody hates anybody here!"

He said gently: "You're a very fine woman, Mary Ann." There was a question in his mind, but he did not ask it. There was no need. To any discerning eye, it was clear enough that between Mary Ann and Jerrell there was a bond which grew stronger in these days under the same roof together. Jerrell seemed younger each day; and Mary Ann wore radiance like a garment, and a happy certainty and pride.

The second day after Dan's hurt, there was a change in the weather. It grew warmer, and a hot haze obscured the sky, diffusing the rays

"It's the Way the World Is, Though, Isn't It, Father?"

of the sun. Dan suffered from the heat, as they all did; yet the day passed somehow. After dinner, Nancy and Doctor Greeding went out on the open terrace in front of the house, where a faint breeze stirred. The stars were obscured by the haze across the sky; and Nancy said:

"We need a shower, Father, to clear the air."

He nodded. "Tomorrow, probably," he said. "It's never uncomfortably hot here for very long."

They stood side by side, her arm through his. "But I don't think I shall ever like it here again," she confessed.

He was shaken. "No? Why, Nancy?"

"I think partly because Dan was—hurt here," she decided. "And—it can't ever be the same without Mother. When Dan can be moved, let's go back to Cambridge, Father. Sell the island."

"I wish you'd stay here with me," he suggested. "For a while, for this last time—"

She said, with the blind cruelty of youth: "I hate leaving you, Father. But—I want to be with Dan, always. Life's so short! I know that now. We've so little time. I don't want to miss a single day I might have with him!"

"I shall be lonely without you Nancy," he confessed.

"I know," she nodded. "And I'm sorry. It's the way the world is, though, isn't it, Father? No matter how much I love you, I must go to Dan."

He assented gravely. "Yes. And I sha'n't try to keep you from him."

She laughed, clinging to his arm, her voice deep and warm. "You couldn't, ever," she whispered ardently. "No matter how you tried. Nothing ever can."

He nodded, humbly, accepting this; and a little later they returned indoors.

Doctor Greeding that night was unable to sleep, but lay with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Dawn found him with burning eyes. He went to swim, and found in the water peace and contentment for a while. But later, after he had dressed again, the sultry heat settled down once more, smothering and stifling him. He relieved Mary Ann's vigil by Dan's side, and saw that Dan was better. Infection must almost certainly have set in before now, if it were to be feared at all; and Mary Ann pointed this out.

"His temperature's normal," she whispered. Dan was still asleep.

"I think the danger is past."

Doctor Greeding nodded. "I think so," he agreed. "It's only a matter of nursing now, of avoiding complications."

"I'll see to that," she promised, and left him. He recognized the fact that his task was done, that Dan would live.

But with this miracle accomplished, his life was left completely empty now; and at the thought, great weariness oppressed him. He who all night had been unable to sleep, suddenly surrendered to deep slumber. He went to the couch in the billiard-room and lay down; and when presently Nancy came and found him there, she covered him over tenderly. He slept till almost noon, while the others moved quietly so that he might not be disturbed.

And he woke to peace, a content and ordered mind . . .

Dan was fretful that afternoon. The heat irked him, and returning strength gave him sufficient energy to resent it. Nancy was distressed by his mood, till Mary Ann jubilantly reassured her.

"It's the best possible sign," she said. "When a sick man begins to be sulky and bad-tempered, you may know he's getting well."

So Nancy was amused. The early afternoon she spent with Dan—Doctor Greeding was in his room, and she and Dan found themselves involved in one of those arguments without either a beginning or an end, which may arise between two people who are close to one another. He was flushed with something like anger when Mary Ann returned and found them so, and Nancy said laughingly:

"Mary Ann, you stay with him for a while. He's unbearable! I'm going swimming." She spoke to Dan. "Don't you wish you could? It will be so beautifully cool."

Dan growled, half angrily: "That's right, make it tough for me. Go on, get out of here!"

She kissed him on the forehead. "I'm going!"

"Kiss me right," he demanded. "Don't peck like that."

"You don't deserve it," she protested. "But—there." And she left him with Mary Ann.

She swam, then lay on the wharf, half-asleep. The afternoon was stifling hot; but to the northwest, clouds were banking, and she heard a far roll of thunder, and thought a shower was near, and was grateful for the approach of this relief. After a while she saw her father come down to the beach and go into the water, and she called ironically: "Beautifully cool, isn't it?"

"Great," he agreed. He said: "Shower coming!"

She nodded, and watched him lazily, through half-closed eyes. He swam slowly, strongly, out into the lake. He often did this; often swam from the island to the mainland half a mile away. That he should do so now was not remarkable; but she called: "Going across?"

He did not answer, probably did not hear her. She thought of joining him for the long swim, but was too much at ease.

The clouds yonder came racing toward them, a dark wall streaked now and then by lightning's flame. She watched these flashes, thrilling to the beauty of them, waiting ardently for the slashing of rain across her body.

Doctor Greeding swam straight away from shore, yet not with any purpose in his mind save to commit himself to the embrace of the cool water. Once or twice he paused, floating on his back, utterly relaxed, resting. The island, the world, was far away. Floating thus, he thought, suddenly, that Myra was here beside him; and this was absurd, because Myra had never been a strong swimmer, never ventured far from shore. Yet it seemed to him that she was here, smiling tenderly, her eyes full of the sublime and forgiving love of which only women are capable.

It was treacherously beautiful and comforting to think of her close to him; he turned on his side to face her, to speak to her . . . But she was not here.

He heard Nancy's halloo: "Are you all right, Father?"

He shouted: "Yes, of course."

"I thought I heard you call."

"No. I'm all right."

He could see Nancy standing by the springboard, looking toward him; his eyes devoured her for a moment more. Then he swam on, toward the other shore.

Nancy watched him, his head a dark dot on the lake's mirror surface, and she watched the approaching shower. A veil of rain obscured the farther hills and swept down to the lake and darkened the water and raced toward her. It was a deluge, hiding everything. She saw it reach her father and conceal him from her eyes; and she stayed awhile there on the wharf, welcoming the cool downpour on her body, holding up her face to the sweet rain, opening her arms as though to a lover.

The shower continued for half an hour; but long before it ended, she was almost chilled; and she went up to the house to dress. She was in her room when the rain ceased, suddenly; the shower moved away down the lake withdrawing like a curtain, like a wall.

It had swept away the hot, stale, stifling air which had oppressed them for so long. Then suddenly the sun shone, wetly, smilingly; the world was washed bright and clean and beautiful. Nancy had a great sense of well-being, of security. She came downstairs.

Mary Ann and Jerrell were with Dan. She saw Professor Carlisle on the veranda, and went out to him.

"This is better, isn't it?" she said happily.

"Sunshine after rain," he assented. "Nothing more beautiful." Then he asked slowly: "Where is your father?"

She looked out across the lake. "He swam over to the other shore, I expect," she replied.

He said, in mild surprise: "That's a long swim."

"Oh, he often does it," she assured him.

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You're not — concerned about him?" he inquired.

She smiled, shook her head. "Not in the least. He'll swim back when he's ready. I'm sure he's perfectly all right!" And she went into the house to be with Dan.

Professor Carlisle stayed there on the veranda for a while alone, looking out across the water; but Doctor Greeding did not reappear. So presently the Professor nodded, as though in assent to some remark, as though accepting the explanation of some matter which for a while had puzzled and disturbed him, and his brow cleared, and trouble left his eyes.

It was in fact impossible, in the bright radiance of the sunshine, to believe that in this world so newly washed and cleansed, any dark blemish could remain . . .

No trace of Doctor Greeding ever was found. He had vanished as if withdrawn by some superior power after he had served his purpose.

(THE END)