CRUCIBLE

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER I

—1—

Barbara, dancing with Robb Morrison and more and more distressed by his too obvious devotions, met Helen Frayne's eye as they passed on the floor; and Helen laughed at something her partner had said, in a metallic mirthless fashion, and avoided Barbara's glance. Barbara looked around for rescue; and Robb said, whispering in her ear:

"Say, Helen's got her eye on me! Let's duck, go outside."

Now this party was Helen Frayne's, at the Club in Essex; and Robb was Helen's too, as everyone knew. But tonight—he met Barbara before dinner for the first time—he had made Barbara and himself conspicuous by his attentions. So she was at once uncomfortable and unhappy—and a little afraid of what Helen might do. Helen was nice enough; yet she could be cruel too.

Barbara declined Robb's invitation to promenade; she said: "No, let's not! Robb, find Johnny, will you please? He has my compact in his pocket."

"Come on," he urged. "We'll both go hunt for him!" He took her cheerfully by the arm.

But she freed herself. "Sh-h! No!" she whispered. "You must go rescue Helen. See! She's stuck with Luke Tydings."

He laughed, shook his head. "Don't want to be a rescuer," he protested, a little thickly. "Just want to dance and dance and dance with you, forever and ever. How about a little punch?"

"No, thanks!" Barbara had accepted one cocktail before dinner, since it was easier to do so than to refuse; but she used that one as a shield, barely tasted it, so that her full glass protected her against persuasions to take another. Not everyone had been so discreet. Robb, for instance, was certainly in no need of another glass of punch. "Do run along," she insisted now, good-humored but insistent; and she turned and gave him a small thrust toward Helen yonder across the floor.

She realized, too late, that Helen was watching them, had seen her do this. Worse, Robb marched straight to Helen, saluted, and said—much too loudly, "Barbara says I must report for duty, Helen!"

So naturally, some people laughed; and Helen was red with anger. Her eyes met Barbara's across the floor.

And that was why Helen deliberately set to work to get Johnny Boyd drunk. For Barbara had come with Johnny, driving down from Boston. She liked him well enough. He was a gay youngster, still at Harvard, gentle and amusing and good fun; and he usually remembered his responsibilities. Tonight he had cut in on Robb once or twice, till Robb began to cut back so quickly that people noticed and laughed; and Johnny got a little mad.

"I'll knock him endways if he cuts back this time," he told Barbara; and she said in pleading urgency:

"No, Johnny! Don't have a row! I'll get rid of him. Here he comes now."

Johnny obeyed her; but when a little later Barbara sent Robb to Helen, Johnny had disappeared; and someone else danced with Barbara, and before she could escape, Helen captured Johnny. They went out of doors somewhere, and Barbara could only wait for them to return; and when they came back again and began to dance together, Barbara saw what had happened. Helen had done her work well. Johnny was first red, then pale, then red again; and his feet were stumbling and uncertain.

Someone cut in on them and took Helen and left Johnny tottering in the middle of the floor; and Barbara guided her partner that way, thanked him, dismissed him, turned to Johnny.

He said, "Hi, Barb!" His arm encircled her. "Where you been all evening?"

She steadied him skillfully. "I've a frightful headache, Johnny! And it's so hot in here; I'm just stifling. Would it spoil your fun if we started home?"

He looked down at her in bemused suspicion. "Wait a minute! Trying to play nursemaid, are you? I'm all right, Barb!"

"Of course you are! You're fine. I hate to drag you away, but I'm simply exhausted, Johnny."

He said elaborately: "Well, of course in that case! Always the gentleman; that's me. Damsel in distress! Women and children first. Don't spare the horses. Le's go!"

"Thanks, Johnny. I'll meet you in the hall."

They went to say good-night. Helen said mockingly, "Oh, going so early, Barb?"

"It's been a lovely party," Barbara assured her.

When they came to the car, Johnny said:

"Thanks for getting me out of that, Barb! I'm drunk. Cocked as a mink! I'm sorry as the Devil. But—do you mind driving? I don't want to hang you on a telephone pole somewhere."

She said gratefully: "Of course not. I'll drive, but you'll be all right presently. We'll open the windshield, get a lot of air."

"Sorry to make a show of myself. It hit me all of a sudden."

"I understand."

When they were under way, he slumped beside her and was presently asleep. The night was cool, in early fall. She stopped the car once to turn up his coat collar and adjust his scarf against a chill. He snored heavily; and as she drove on she considered the problem now presented. This was Johnny's car. If she took him to Cambridge, she would have to find a taxi to her home. If she went directly to her home, Johnny would have to drive to Cambridge alone—and for that he was in no condition.

She decided to try to bring him back to sobriety again, before they came to Boston; and she turned off the main highway down a short spur road that ended above the rocky shore, and stopped the car and tried to wake him up, to make him get out of the car and breathe deeply and walk up and down. But when she shook him, he only roused enough to mumble protests and go back to sleep again. She remembered hearing that you could wake a drunken man by slapping his face, and she tried this; and Johnny muttered to himself, and someone beside the car said harshly "What's going on here?"

Barbara turned and saw a policeman standing at her elbow, peering in at them. She said, "It's all right, officer."

But Johnny was awake now. "Sure's all right!" he declared; and in alcoholic belligerence demanded, "What do you want to make out of it?"

The policeman said, "All right, buddy, pipe down." He asked Barbara, "Handle him all right, can you?"

"Oh, yes. I just want to get him out of the car, get him to walk up and down."

"He's a fine one to get in this shape with a nice girl on his hands!"

"It isn't quite all his fault, officer."

"I'll help you cool him down," the policeman decided. He went to the other side of the car and opened the door and said, "Come on, buddy, a little fresh air will fix you up all right."

He half dragged Johnny Boyd out of the car, set him on his feet. Johnny promptly hit him. He flung himself at the officer so violently that the policeman was borne backward and fell, and Johnny swarmed on top of him, and Barbara tried to come at them and was tossed aside by the violence of their movements, and the officer got to his feet and dragged Johnny upright, and said urgently, "Hey, buddy, behave!"

Another car turned down the road, its lights upon them. Barbara cried, "Please, Johnny!"

But Johnny was violent; the policeman said wearily, "All right, if you want it." His blow landed with a sharp, slapping sound; and Johnny went limply down, and Barbara protested unhappily,

"Oh, did you have to do that?"

The officer was apologetic. "Best thing for him, Miss. He'll wake up in the morning with a head, that's all." He added, "But I'll have to take him in!"

"Can't I take him home, please?"

"He's tore my uniform! I'll have some explaining to do. And it might teach him something, to wake up in jail!"

"I'll go with you. I can't leave him."

Someone touched her arm, and she whirled, and a man said, "Can I help in any way?" There was a moment's silence of surprise. The newcomer explained: "I'm Professor Brace, Harvard Business School. If I can be of service?"

It was the officer who answered him. "You might take the young lady home, Professor," he suggested. "The boy here has had a drop too many. I had to slap him down. He'll sleep it off in the station; but it would be too bad to have a nice girl—"

"But I want to take care of him," Barbara insisted. "I can't run out on him."

Professor Brace said, "You seem sober."

"Of course I am!"

"Then you ought to be sensible. Come along. I'll see you safe home; and the officer will give your gallant young escort a break in court!"

The policeman added his urgencies. "Yes, ma'am, you do that. Drunk and disorderly, five dollars. That's all."

"But he can't go to court in dinner clothes!"

The professor's tone held a grudging approval. "You're a loyal young woman. Suppose we do this. You tell me where he lives. I'll take you home, then bring him some clothes in the morning before he has to go to court. There's no need of your being mixed up in this."

And Barbara in the end surrendered; and the officer approving, she and Professor Brace got into his car and drove away. After they had been some silent moments on the road past Revere toward Boston, he asked stiffly, "Now, where do you live?"

She told him. "I'm Barbara Sentry," she said. "I'll tell you where to go."

"You choose curious company," he suggested. "Why does an intelligent girl like you get herself mixed up in a mess like this?"

"Don't you ever find yourself in silly messes? You talk as if you were a thousand years old."

"I'm twenty-eight, if that matters."

She said, amused: "And already so serious? I suppose, being a professor, you think you have to be!"

He was silent, and they came to the Tunnel entrance, and he paid toll and went on. In the Tunnel, she said contritely: "I'm sorry. I was horrid to be sarcastic! And I am grateful, really. You're nice to take all this bother."

"If you picked your escorts a little more carefully, you wouldn't require rescue."

"Oh, don't keep on being a professor," she urged, smiling. "You're not in a classroom now."

They emerged from the Tunnel; and as he swung to the right, he had to check speed for a moment to allow a car coming from the left to proceed in front of them. Professor Brace caught a glimpse of the man at the wheel; and as they followed the other car, Barbara said in quick surprise:

"Why, that's father! That's our car. He must have been down at the office."

"At the office? At this time of night? It's quarter past twelve!"

"He has to go down sometimes," she explained. "Don't pass him. Let's let him get home before we do. He gives me the dickens when I'm out late."

"Not very effectively, I should say," he commented; but he did slow down, kept half a block behind the other car. And they talked now not so much of Johnny as of each other. It was his turn to make apologies.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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CRUCIBLE

by BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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* * *

Be Precautious.—If you should smell smoke in the house, don't just sit and wonder where it is—go investigate immediately. It may be only the neighbor building a fire—but then it may not.

* * *

Improving Custard.—Stale cake crumbs, sprinkled over the top of a custard before putting it into the oven to bake, gives the top a delicate brown and the custard a different flavor.

* * *

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