CRUCIBLE

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER XII—Continued

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When Phil again looked at his mother, he saw that she had dropped the telegram, had bent down to pick it up; and he saw that she seemed unable to do so. Her arm hung straight down from her shoulder; and her fingers lay with their backs on the floor, two or three inches away from the telegram, her knuckles touching the rug. Her hand was white and bloodless.

He stooped for the yellow paper; and she said, laughing uncertainly: "That's funny, Phil! I was trying to pick up the telegram and I couldn't seem to reach down far enough and then I saw my hand was touching the floor, but I couldn't feel it at all."

Her utterance was hurried; she mumbled the words as though her tongue were thick. One side of her face, Phil saw, was lifeless, sagging as though the flesh were dead upon her bones.

They could hear Dan's voice, swift and eager, up in Barbara's room.

CHAPTER XIII

When in that moment after Dan went racing to find Barbara, Mrs. Sentry stooped to pick up the telegram she had dropped, and could not do so, and saw—though she felt nothing—her own nerveless fingers lying like a dead hand on the rug, she thought: This is the beginning of the end for me. As she thought: Oh, I am glad, glad! Let it not be too long. To be with Arthur soon!

But then when Phil returned and she spoke to him, mumbling her words, feeling her tongue thick and clumsy in her mouth, she saw the terror in his eyes, and she made herself smile to reassure him; and he came toward her, urged her quickly: "Sit down, mother. Lie down. I'll call Doctor Mainton."

"I'm all right, Phil," she said. "It's nothing. My hand went to sleep, that's all." He started toward the telephone; but she checked him. "No, Phil. It's nothing, really. I'm all right now." Her tongue was normal; her hand too. Only she saw that her thumb was uncontrolled, when she tried to straighten it she could not, and she thought: It's my left side, of course. As though it were asleep. If only it would not wake. If only I could sleep, sleep, all of me. Till Arthur comes.

Dan's voice above-stairs was no longer audible. Phil said heartily, fighting his own fears: "Of course you're all right! But just the same, Doctor Mainton—"

"I'll see him tomorrow," she promised. "At his office."

Phil looked toward the hall, as though expecting his sister to appear. "How do you feel—about that?" he asked. "About Dan?"

"Barbara is the one to decide. If she is—if she loves him, then I shall be happy too." She was thinking: Since I am to die, what does it matter? Certainly not to Barbara. She is so young, such a child. Dan will love her; and she will forget . . .

Then she heard their voices, their steps on the stairs; and they were here, their eyes shining, yet with a sober gravity. Barbara came to her mother; and Mrs. Sentry waited, and Barbara asked slowly, "Dan has told you, mother?"

"Yes, Barb."

"We've been hoping and hoping he could find something!"

Mrs. Sentry smiled almost teasingly. "Oh, you had it all decided, already planned?"

"If he could—find the job he wanted, yes," Barbara confessed. "And—I hoped it would be soon."

Mrs. Sentry's eyes fell, so that Barbara might not read them. Dan said quickly, "I have to be ready to start work out there on Monday, Mrs. Sentry."

"That is—July first?"

"Yes."

Phil thought her voice was miraculously steady. "You will come back for Barbara later?"

"I thought we'd be married at once, go to Cleveland together!"

Mrs. Sentry nodded gently. "I used to think hurried weddings lacked dignity," she confessed. "But I expect they are sweeter than—dignity." Nellie came to announce dinner, and she said, "Stay, Dan?"

But he could not. "I've still a job here," he reminded them. "I'll have to run." Barbara went with him to the door; and Phil asked his mother in a low tone, "All right now?"

"Of course, Phil."

"If Barbara knew about you, she'd wait!"

She shook her head, smiling. "I won't cry-baby, spoil Barbara's happiness. She loves him, Phil. Only—it will be hard to have her go."

They heard Dan depart, heard the door close. Then Barbara, as they moved toward the dining-room, met them in the hall; and for a moment she held her mother close.

"Thank you, mother," she said. "You're wonderful to me. Dan wants to take me with him; and—I think it's terribly to be a coward and go." She looked at Phil, reading his thoughts. "He says—even if we get married this week—he can fix it so there wouldn't be anything in the papers."

Mrs. Sentry said, "I'm sure he can!" Barbara looked at her keenly; and afther a moment the girl cried:

"But—I'm not going! I'll stay with you till—till afterward, mother. I'll go to Dan then."

Mrs. Sentry spoke carefully. "It's for you to decide," she said. "But—I should be glad to have you stay."

"I shall!" Barbara promised. "Oh mother, I shall." She was suddenly mature, a woman; and yet, Phil thought at dinner, she seemed conscious of this, and faintly diffident, so that beneath the cloak of maturity which she put on he saw still the child, terrified yet brave . . . He thought with a deep affection and solicitude: I wish she could marry Dan and go. She could if mother did not need her so. But mother will need her, tomorrow, after we see the Governor . . .

Barbara was still asleep in the morning when he took Mrs. Sentry to Doctor Mainton's office. The doctor heard their story, and then with that calloused insensibility characteristic of physicians, left Phil to wait alone for two hours while he applied to Mrs. Sentry every test known to scientific medicine.

But his report in the end was reassuring. He said, to them both:

"Well, Mrs. Sentry, I've checked up in every possible way; and—there is nothing organically wrong with you. I am satisfied there has been no cerebral accident. Your nerves are worn out, and just before this happened you had your arms tight folded with your clenched fist under your left arm. That shut off the blood supply, perhaps; and the strain you have been under, and a cramped position, and fatigue did the rest. That is all, I am sure."

Phil asked, "Ought we to do anything about it?"

Doctor Mainton hesitated. "Take your mother away somewhere," he said then. "To your summer home at York Harbor, perhaps. Can you go today?"

Mrs. Sentry said, "I am to see the Governor at two this afternoon." She thought Doctor Mainton might forbid this, tell her not to go; and she prepared to resist him. But he did not.

"Then afterward?" he urged. "Later in the afternoon. Go up there and get plenty of rest and sleep. Those are the only drugs you need."

At home they found Barbara awake, and wondering where they had been, and surprised to find Phil not gone to his office; but she was too much absorbed in her own happiness to be diligent with questions, and they put her off. Then she remembered that Mr. Falkran had telephoned, to speak to Phil.

"I told him he could catch you in town," she said. "Maybe you'd better call him up."

Phil met his mother's eye, and he went into the library to phone. Falkran said, "I've bad news, Mr. Sentry."

Phil felt the blood pound in his ears against the receiver. "Yes?"

"I saw the Governor," Falkran explained. "He is willing to see Mrs. Sentry if she insists, but only as a matter of courtesy. His decision is already taken."

Phil found himself nodding, without speaking; and then Falkran's voice came in his ear. "Hello? Sentry? Did you hear?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"He says the interview would be useless, but of course he will see her if she wishes."

Phil's shoulders straightened, he assumed the responsibility of decision. "Thank you, Mr. Falkran," he said. "I should say it will not be necessary."

"She will not come?"

"She will not come," said Phil.

He waited a little before returning to the others. They had gone out into the garden together; and he saw them through the window, walking arm in arm, his mother with her head bent, Barbara talking in swift eager fashion.

When he came out to them, she was still chattering; and he asked with a wry grin, "Broadcasting, Barb?"

"Oh, what did Mr. Falkran want?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "Business." He spoke to his mother. "That meeting is off," he told her in tones which he tried to make casual. "Falkran is satisfied it would do no good."

He saw her instant understanding; but Barbara protested: "What meeting? Don't be so mysterious!"

"Why, I wanted to see Dan's boss," Phil said with mock gravity. "To see if he wouldn't meet that Cleveland offer, try to keep Dan here; but he says Dan isn't worth what they're already paying him, much less more! Says Dan can go and welcome!"

Barbara laughed. "All right, have secrets if you want to. I can't bother with you. I've too much on my mind."

"Phil, Mr. Wines Is Here."

He strolled with them around the house toward the tennis court, thinking he ought to go to town, but reluctant to leave his mother. Watching her, while Barbara's gay tongue ran, he saw that she in turn was watching Barbara, as though in wonder that the girl because she loved Dan could even in this hour be somehow happy; and he saw a change in his mother's demeanor, a slow dawning resolution in her eyes.

Till at last she spoke, interrupting Barbara's bright chatter. "I've been thinking, Barbara," she said, "about you and Dan. I suppose there's really no reason why you two shouldn't be married at once. Then you can go to Cleveland with him." Barbara's eyes were bright with sudden bliss, and Mrs. Sentry said, "After all, it would be inconvenient and — expensive, for a struggling young newspaper man—to come way back here just to marry you."

Her tone was light, affectionate, full of understanding. The girl stood very still, and her eyes filled and overflowed. She said gratefully: "You're sweet, mother! And I do want to marry Dan right away, before he goes." She hesitated. "But I'm not going to leave you yet. I'll wait with you, go to him by and by."

"There's nothing to wait for here."

The girl spoke bravely. "I think there is. I can't help thinking there will be—something. But if you don't mind our getting married first, before Dan goes—"

Mrs. Sentry smiled. "No, I don't mind."

Barbara caught her mother rapturously, kissed her hard, whirled away toward the house like a dancer. "I've got to telephone Dan this minute!" she cried, and was gone.

Mrs. Sentry looked after her; and Phil put his arm across his mother's shoulders. "That was great, mother!" he said. "You've made her so darned happy! And—I know what it meant to you to let her go."

She said, half to herself: "I've built my life, Phil, on—pride. And I've been selfish too. But we've nothing of pride left, and—I'll be happier if Barbara is happy. I'll have to start rebuilding my life on—some other foundation besides pride and selfishness now."

So Dan and Barbara were married, in the big living-room, with Phil, Linda and Mrs. Sentry as only witnesses. Mrs. Sentry during the intervening days and on that wedding day sometimes clung secretly to Phil's arm; but she managed to do nothing to alarm Barbara or distress her. They were married just after noon; then Dan took train for Cleveland and was gone.

This was Friday, the twenty-eighth of June. After Dan's departure, Phil proposed to his mother that they all drive away to York. "Just for the week-end?" he suggested.

She hesitated, asked then, "Phil, when will it be?" She added firmly: "What day? What hour?"

He spoke in a low tone. "Why, usually just after midnight," he said.

"The first day?"

"Yes. Monday."

"I—wanted to know," she explained, apologetically. "I'm—much better here than in York, till then."

He urged: "But Doctor Mainton—"

"Afterward, possibly," she said decisively. "For now, we will stay here."

So they stayed. Saturday morning, at Mrs. Sentry's insistence, Phil went to the office as usual. He and Linda drove in together, Phil at the wheel, Linda close against his side; and they spoke little. At his desk he ran through the morning mail with her; and when she had gone to her typewriter he sat idle, his hands in front of him, palms down upon the top of the desk, and he stared at his own hands as though he had never seen them before.

Then Linda came back in. He raised his eyes heavily; and she said, "Phil, Mr. Wines is here."

For a moment the name was meaningless to him.

"Mr. Wines?"

"Her father," Linda reminded him. "He—wants to see you."

Phil came tautly to his feet. "What about, Linda? Is there anything—" He could not shape the words.

But she shook her head. "No," she said. "It's about a letter he's had from Mr. Hare. Some money your father's sending him."

Phil remembered that his father had created a trust for the old man; he said miserably, "I don't want to see him, Lin." He picked up his hat. "You take care of him. I suppose he wants more. Try to satisfy him. I'm going home to mother. You can handle him, can't you?"

"Of course," she promised.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Chlorophyll as Essential to Flower Foliage as Is Blood to Human Beings

It is generally understood that growing plants require light. But few gardeners know the effect that certain colored rays have upon green stems and leaves. Dr. Earl S. Johnston, of the Smithsonian insitution in Washington, has carried out some interesting experiments with colored light to discover what hue is the most favorable for growing plants.

Sunlight is necessary for the formation of chlorophyll. Chlorophyll is as essential to flower foliage as is blood to human beings. It is the substance that gives the plant its green color. Without it, leaves turn brown, wither and die. Doctor Johnston has discovered that chlorophyll is formed better under red light than blue. Sunlight, we know, is made up of many colored rays. The plant seems to pick out the colored ray it needs for substance.

Plants require blue rays as well as red, in order to produce starch and sugar. Both red and blue rays are necessary to absorb carbon dioxide, which is part of the process involved in the manufacture of starch.

Doctor Johnston has made a rotating wheel, which varies the hues. He has found that as the mixtures of color rays closely meet the combination of rays in pure sunlight, the plants grow normally. While, on the other hand, plants appear to grow abnormally if any particular hue is accented.

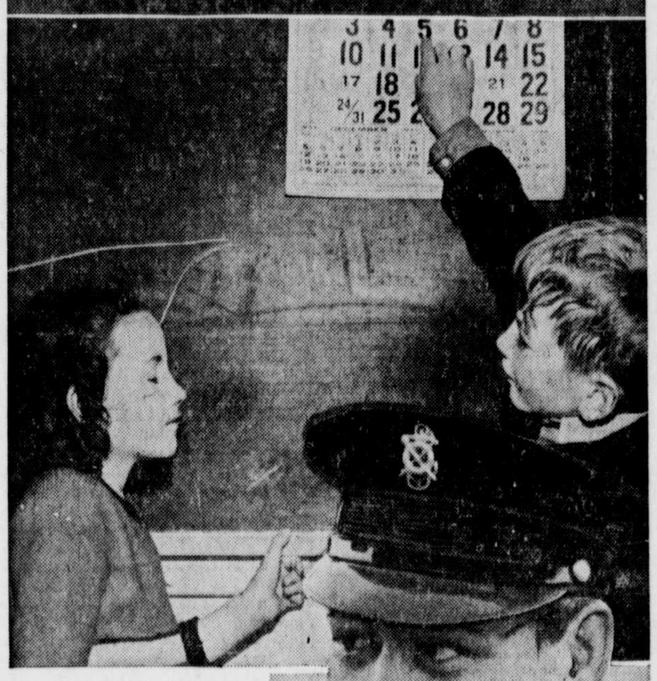
The shapes, heights, and types of plants in one part of the world seem to differ from those in another locality. This seems to prove that the sunlight in the polar regions is unlike that in tropical places.

Steamships on the Atlantic

The Savannah, built in New York, is usually considered the first ocean steamship. On May 26, 1819, she left Savannah, Ga., and reached Liverpool in 25 days, during 18 of which she used her engines. Regular steamship service across the Atlantic was started by the Great Western and Sirius. Both ships arrived in New York on April 23, 1838, the Sirius having finished the trip from London in 17 days and the Great Western from Bristol in 15 days.

Lonely North Carolina Town Marks Christmas January 5

RODANTHE, N. C., easternmost town in America, celebrates Christmas twice each year. "New" Christmas comes December 25 but just as regularly on January 5 the inhabitants of this isolated town observe "Old" Christmas, a carry-over from the days before our current calendar was generally accepted. Christmas trees must be imported, for Rodanthe has only one tree (see below), a gnarled oak. But the kids enjoy this plan, because Santa Claus visits them twice. Their parents, fishermen and coastguardsmen on an island that is little more than a shifting sand dune, participate enthusiastically in both celebrations. But around Old Christmas centers most of the tradition.



Boatswain's Mate P. A. Tillett, biggest man in the coast guard service, is Santa Claus for Rodanthe's Old Christmas party. They had to send to the mainland to get red cloth spacious enough for his suit. Each Old Christmas celebration is held in the school building where the only "furriner" is the school teacher.

To the present teacher, a girl from Virginia, Old Christmas is the world's most puzzling custom. But seasoned residents of Hatteras island don't look at it that way. To them, Old Christmas is no more unusual than the Fourth of July. On their isolated island the event has been celebrated by generation after generation, and will probably continue for generations to come.

Rodanthe children believe in "Old Buck," an ogre with hoofs and horns who comes at Old Christmas to punish the naughty boys and girls, just as St. Nicholas rewards the good youngsters. None of the islanders remember how "Old Buck" originated, but he's definitely a part of the celebration.

Old Christmas on Hatteras island, where autos must travel the beach.