

A Solution

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WHEN the door had closed on the last guest, Madame Verneuil bade George Harley draw his chair nearer the fire, and while they both looked into its glowing heart they recalled days that were gone, and tried to return to their former friendly intimacy. They spoke of many mutual acquaintances, she gaily responding to his often indifferent questionings, and there were long pauses, each one feeling the presence of barriers to be surmounted. George Harley's eyes wandered round the familiar room, ever familiar, for Madame Verneuil did not care to change her surroundings or her friends. Curtains or stuffs that wore or faded were gently replaced by others so closely recalling them that no one would suspect any change; and old friends who dropped away were never replaced, but always remembered.

Seven years ago he had met Madame Verneuil at the house of a mutual friend, and after a little while he had become one of her constant visitors. She was then emerging from her widow's mourning, and also from the rather bourgeois financial circle in which her marriage with a rich banker had placed her. The friends of her choice were not brought together by the accidental resemblance of their social positions or fortunes, but by the accord of ideas. When an alien to their sympathies came into this circle, as a caterpillar will sometimes crawl into a beehive, he was not stung to death and covered with a gravestone of wax, but allowed to go his way unharmed. He invariably went of his own free will and never returned.

It was here that Harley first saw Madeleine Dulac, the beautiful and brilliant daughter of a scientific man, who had followed a pet theory by bringing up his daughter precisely as he would have brought up a son. She had a gift for music, and music had always been the joy and pastime of his busy life, so Madeleine's talent was cherished and cultivated. When he died, the young girl, then only twenty-one, inherited his considerable fortune, which, true to his principles, he left to her absolutely unhampered by any restrictions and entirely at her disposal. She was promptly surrounded by friends and distant relatives—she had no near ones—offering advice in the choice of a chaperone.

Others proposed their houses for her residence. But she shook her head, and, firmly declining their assistance, continued her mode of life with only the inevitable change caused by the death of her father, her constant companion.

Her first appearance in society—the period of mourning over—was at Madame Verneuil's, and here Harley saw her in the radiant beauty of her twenty-third year. Here she held a court of faithful, if not very hopeful, admirers, for she gave them no encouragement, and Harley rather despised himself for joining the group. He had been attracted by the then very fashionable school of analytical writers, and, true to his new principles, he would carefully diagnose the state of his heart with regard to Madeleine. Was it heart or head? This point he never could settle to his satisfaction.

Madame Verneuil was asked by an old friend in the country to extend a helping hand to a young Hungarian violinist, who had been teaching in a provincial conservatoire and was anxious to make a name for himself in Paris. The kind-hearted woman, who knew how many difficulties he would have to encounter before success came, asked him to play at one of her evenings, and invited her friends to hear him. Harley will always remember that day for several reasons; but chiefly for the seemingly trivial one that Madeleine was talking to him alone at the moment of the violinist Svenhi's entrance. He had brought his violin, but no accompanist, and she was summoned from her retreat to accompany him. She rose slowly, and, pulling off her long gloves, listened with an abstracted indifference to the explanations the violinist was giving her about the music. He was of no possible interest to her, this unknown man from the provinces. Harley bitterly resented her departure, and retreated still further behind the large palm under whose shadow they had been seated, and wondered whether he dared hope that she would resume the interrupted conversation. They were only talking about the Théâtre Antoine, then a novelty, but he had felt as Dante did when Beatrice graciously returned his salutation.

By force of habit he was already beginning to analyze his feelings when the music started, and almost at once his attention was rivetted and his imagination excited. Svenhi's violin was murmuring softly, and it seemed to Harley that he was saying

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things to Madeleine that no one but they could understand. He seemed to be pursuing her, and she, wild and untamable, was eluding him dexterously, and escaping just as he seemed to reach her. The violin grew more and more insistent, even authoritative, while she grew weaker, and finally surrendered, and they floated along together on a flowing stream of melody. Then the stream became a torrent, dashing wildly past a rocky shore, till with wild crashing chords from the piano and a long-drawn note from the violin, which sounded like love's triumph, the movement ended.

Tremendous applause greeted the performers on all sides, to which Svenhi made somewhat elaborate recognition, and Madeleine none at all. She seemed entirely engrossed in him. Harley stood aside, watching them for a few minutes; he saw the lamp-light on her shining chestnut hair, as she bent towards Svenhi, who was talking low and volubly. All her previous indifference had vanished; she listened eagerly to whatever he was saying. Harley could bear the sight no longer: after the emotion of the music he felt he must go out into the fresh air, so he silently left the room and the house. That night he neglected to analyze his sensations.

Henceforth Madeleine and the violinist were never to be seen apart. Whenever she came to Madame Verneuil's he appeared shortly afterwards, and this always became the signal for music to begin. It was very evident that what they performed in public they had rehearsed in private. Madeleine's court of admirers were not at all satisfied with these proceedings, and although none of them had Harley's prophetic vision, they were very indignant at what they considered presumption on the part of the violinist. There was a great deal of spiteful gossip, but Madeleine's engagement to Svenhi fell as a bomb amongst them. All those among her friends who considered they had a right to interfere did not fail to do so, and many valiant attempts were made to rescue her; but she firmly stopped any tentative remarks made to her on the subject, and as she had no guardians or near relations, nothing could be done to prevent the marriage from taking place.

In France the formalities relating to marriage are very complex and tedious and give a vast amount of work to the notary. Madeleine's old and trusted lawyers proceeded as slowly and care-

fully as they could to seek for flaws in Svenhi's antecedents, but he produced the necessary papers, and all inquiries only resulted in the knowledge that he had a humble but respectable origin and that his life had been a hard-working one. The notaries tried to protect Madeleine's interests against one who they felt sure was an intriguer and an adventurer, and she let them do as they pleased, knowing that the day she chose to put her fortune into little paper boats and sail them down the Seine, she was at liberty to do so.

At last the final preparations for the wedding were finished and the day fixed. George Harley felt an insurmountable disgust at the whole proceeding. He was tired of the perpetual gossip on the subject and of the spiteful remarks made by the unsuccessful candidates, and not least he felt a pain at his heart as if it had been bruised, and he could not endure the thought of the day when the irremediable would happen. So he left Paris suddenly, bidding casual farewells and speaking of a speedy return. This was not to be, however, for back in London he felt strongly that the time had come when a definite future must be considered. He had decided for a career of letters, and with this object in view he settled down to a life of hard study. The bruise at his heart he still felt sorely, and this was his safeguard, for having, as he fancied, lived his emotional life, there was nothing to prevent him from cultivating his intellect to the exclusion of all else. And work he did, giving no time to society or amusement. He was rewarded with success, for though he never stirred the hearts of the many, he appealed to the few. But even they never knew that this man of austere ideals was in truth as emotional and sensitive as a boy who comes in touch with life for the first time. It was sensitiveness that prevented him from having more communication with his friends in Paris; he had a cowardly fear of hearing sordid details of Madeleine's unhappiness, for unhappiness he felt sure would be her lot. His correspondents thought he was indifferent, and the letters grew fewer and more formal. Once he met a young man he had known in Paris; a chance meeting in a restaurant caused them to dine together. It was unavoidable that Madeleine's name should come into conversation, and Harley winced when the unconscious young man told him that Svenhi had developed a passion for gambling in every form, and that her friends were very anxious about her fortune.

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"Her fortune!" said Harley, irritably; "and what about herself?"

The young man stared; evidently in his mind Madeleine without her fortune did not exist—and the subject dropped.

A severe cold, taken one spring and followed by a wet summer, during which Harley constantly neglected his health, caused him to receive a very serious warning from his doctor. So serious was the warning that he resolved to follow advice and escape from the English winter. Switzerland was decided on, and Harley regretfully left his commodious bachelor rooms to turn with distaste to the prospect of hotel life for a whole winter. But he had discovered in himself, much to his surprise, a great desire to live, and everything had to give way to this desire.

When, after a lapse of seven years, he found himself again in Paris he was astonished to note how little of a stranger he felt, and how the memories of his old life were calling him. His first intention had been merely to break his journey by one night in Paris, but now he felt a wish to clear away the fog that had gathered during those years. He no longer felt the selfish dread of hearing people speak of Madeleine; in fact Paris brought back the old thralldom, and he longed to see her or hear of her. Acting on impulse he sent a *bleu* to Madame Verneuil asking permission to call. Her answer was prompt and cordial. "Come," she said; "I have some dull people to dinner, but outstay them, and we will talk of old times."

To talk of old times sounded easy enough, but difficulties seemed to rise when the actual moment came. He felt surrounded by ghosts of his former life; some of them were ghosts of his own moods, his boyish enthusiasms. How old he felt as he stared moodily at the fire! He knew Madame Verneuil was understanding him as she took up some fancy work and appeared engrossed in it, dropping a casual remark while she waited until he should speak what was in his mind. At last he said abruptly:

"How is Madeleine Dulac?"

Madame Verneuil raised her eyebrows slightly. "Madeleine Svenhi—she married, you know."

"Yes, I know," he said, impatiently, "what of her, is she well?"

"She is gone," Madame Verneuil said very seriously, "gone

from Paris out of our lives with her husband, and no one knows where they went."

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Then, the ice being broken, she required no more encouragement, and told him the whole pitiful story he had so dreaded to hear—how Svenhi had so soon begun to lead a useless gambler's life. They had been none of them ever sounded the depths of Madeleine's unhappiness, for she soon avoided her friends and would stand no interference. They all knew that her fortune was being squandered, but no one could help it but herself, and she seemed strangely apathetic.

At last the crash came when all her possessions were sold, even her piano; and when her friends sought for her, hoping to shield her from further indignities, she had gone away with her husband, it had been ascertained, but no one knew where, and nothing further had ever been heard about them. Harley listened in silence, and in silence he rose to go. Madame Verneuil felt she was understanding him as she had never understood him before, and she did not try to detain him. Afterwards, pacing his hotel bedroom, he thought of numberless questions he would have asked about Madeleine; but who, he wondered, could ever have penetrated into the inner fastness of her mind?

The next morning he left Paris.

II

GEORGE HARLEY'S doctor had happily not judged him sufficiently ill to be sent to one of those great sanatoriums which are to be found in the highest altitudes and always seem to be the very threshold of death. He was on a cheerful, sunny half-way ledge where there were no serious invalids and no exhibition of thermometers. Enforced idleness had done him good in body and mind, and the society of young people was a new experience for him, their lightheartedness a relief after his somewhat solitary life, and they liked him after they had recovered their first alarm at his grave appearance and manner. After three months of this life he forgot he had ever been ill, and was able to take part in the usual amusements of a winter resort.

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In February the sunny hours were noticeably longer and the snow clouds less frequent. The young people, a little tired of tobogganing on the nearest hillside, proposed longer excursions higher up where the crisp snow would be white and untrodden. Harley agreed to accompany them, stipulating that he was not to be held responsible for broken bones. The chosen day was gay with sunshine as they started, a rather riotous party headed by a villager who was to show them the paths. After several hours of weary trudging they reached the snow hill which was their goal, and soon tobogganing was in full swing. Harley soon wearied of it and stood watching them as they laboriously climbed the hill, the sledges on their backs, in the pursuit of enjoyment of a few seconds' duration.

So engrossing was this pursuit of pleasure that only the guide noticed and pointed out to Harley that snow clouds were gathering ominously. It was no easy matter to collect the revelers. "One more slide" seemed their main object in life, and the snow began falling before they were ready to start, and the guide had become impatient at the delay. The snow fell more and more thickly, and the little paths they had taken on the upward journey were soon blocked, and they were obliged to forsake the short cuts for longer ways. They were feeling the cold intensely and tried to get some comfort out of the guide, who became more and more taciturn, walking on silently and stopping from time to time to consider a turning to take. At last he gave them a serious fright by telling them that he had lost his way and he was no longer looking for the way home but for a chalet he knew of where they would have to remain until the snowstorm was over. Anxiety, not for themselves, but for those waiting at home, made them all very serious in a moment, but the guide shook his head very decisively when they told him they must return home. He said they might do as they wished but that he should take shelter, and they followed him meekly.

At last he found the chalet; they were upon it, blinded by the driving snow, before any of them realized its presence. They were almost paralyzed with cold and fatigue, and thought of nothing but the joy of rest and warmth as they gathered before the door. There was no path swept in the snow, and they stood knee-deep in the drift. It was a large and imposing chalet with smaller

wooden structures about it, and dark firs, their branches now weighed down with snow, grew behind. A light in a window gave them hope, and it was with grateful hearts they saw the door opened by a peasant woman who looked amazed at their appearance. Another woman behind the peasant girl was dimly visible, and, with hardly any attempt at explanation, knocking the snow off their feet, they trooped into the chalet. Harley was the last to go in, and when he had shaken the snow from his eyelashes and looked up, thinking it was time to give some account of themselves, he found himself looking into the face of Madeleine Dulac. He could not speak. The emotion was so great that at first he thought he was delirious. Never for a moment did he think she could be any other woman closely resembling her, but he wondered if she were not a spirit. All this passed through his mind like a flash, for in an instant she had seen him and held out her hand in smiling recognition. He could say nothing; dazed, he followed her into the large cheerful kitchen, where all the frozen travellers were removing their wraps and rubbing their hands, while Madame Svenhi and her servant busied themselves with clever devices for restoring circulation.

While Madeleine was thus employed, Harley had ample leisure to observe her narrowly and to seek for the changes that must inevitably come in seven years. His memory was singularly clear in all that concerned her, but search as he might he could not find any physical alteration or any traces of the trouble she had passed through. The figure was as straight and as slim, the chestnut hair as glossy and abundant as ever, the grey eyes frank and clear as before, but here a difference could be felt which made Harley seek for other signs of a maturing mind and deeper knowledge of life. The look in her eyes was more steadfast and serene. Seeking further he noticed the same serenity expressed in the sensitive mouth, now no longer mocking but gentler, and at the same time firmer. Then all over her face there glowed a new fire: not the flickering gleam of thoughts passing, as sunlight and shadow succeed each other on the face of a landscape, but the steady light of a set purpose, the inward fire of the soul. These thoughts passed rapidly in Harley's mind. Later his impressions might not have been so vivid, but at this moment he was seeing with the eyes of a visionary, for surely never was a vision more amazing or more engross-

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Meanwhile the snow fell unceasingly, and as the daylight grew steadily less all prospect of returning that evening vanished, and it was arranged they should spend the night at the chalet. Harley looked for other inmates, but he saw none except the two women, and he dared ask no questions about Svenhi. The house seemed amazingly large for two people, and he wondered afterwards how he could have been so slow in guessing that it was a boarding-house. But Madeleine keeping a *pension*!—it was too awful to contemplate. Fires were lighted in cheerful bedrooms, smelling of pine, and there was a cosy sitting-room full of evidences of woman's occupation; yet, and Harley was amazed at this, no piano, and this struck him with a deadly chill. How complete had been the sacrifice of her life!

A stamping of feet in the porch announced other travellers, and to Harley it was another development of the vision when he saw Svenhi accompanied by a man who seemed half-cowherd and half-huntsman. Madeleine murmured some words to her husband, who came forward to him with outstretched hand which Harley took somewhat ungraciously. All the native surliness of the Englishman was in his manner, but Svenhi did not seem to notice it, and started telling how the snowstorm had spoilt his day's chamois hunting. In spite of his deep-rooted prejudice Harley could not help noticing that Svenhi had improved in appearance. He seemed stouter, broader, and his long Hungarian moustache looked less inky now that he had a healthy brown skin instead of the deathly pallor of before. His manner was frank and unaffected, and Harley saw he was making a good impression on the visitors.

During supper Madeleine, who spoke English fluently, gave all her attention to her guests, and Harley, equally bi-lingual, had to act as interpreter for Svenhi, who was relating his sporting experiences in French. Harley continued to resent him violently, and when after supper Svenhi escorted the travellers over the house to show them his hunting trophies, he contrived to escape notice and remained in the room where Madeleine, seated under the lamp, had busied herself with plain sewing, which seemingly overflowed from a large basket at her side. He stood out of the

radius of the light and looked at her silently while she sewed on, apparently unconscious of his presence. Stronger and stronger grew the necessity of hearing from her lips some account of her life: it was no concern of his, yet he had been thinking and grieving about her for so long that he almost felt she owed it to him. She sat so peacefully there, her placid face bending over her coarse needlework, that he could not believe her to be suffering, and yet—it was impossible she could be happy with the man who had used her so ill. He drew a chair close to where she was seated, and she looked up at him and smiled and went on with her work without speaking. Then he spoke:

"Tell me, I have no right to ask, but tell me if you are happy. I heard in Paris that trouble had come into your life. How have you lived through it, and have you become reconciled again—with life?" he added, fearing to offend her.

"I am very happy," she answered, looking at him with her frank eyes. "I have chosen my life, and I am far happier than I was when you knew me full of ambition and pride. That was a ready-made life, and this is one of my own making. You know of the sordid anxieties of the past: now I can tell you that they never touched my inner life, and that is where you feel suffering and joy."

She stopped; and Harley said nothing, waiting while his heart beat with expectancy. He felt himself face to face with a mystery, the deepest of all: the hidden sources of happiness. Madeleine was seeking how to tell reasonably a tale in which reason had no part, and his heart told him he could feel with her if only she would give him the clue to the enigma. She continued:

"Soon after our marriage my husband began to gamble. He was dazzled by the glamour of the gold, he was like a child—all gamblers are children—and he had always been poor. I was terribly unhappy, not for the sake of the money but because of the deterioration I saw coming over him. He was constantly in the society of men who flattered him; he believed them, and they won his money from him by fair means or foul, I never knew which. One night as I lay trying to see my way out of the darkness that surrounded us it came upon me like a flash. 'Take him away,' a voice said, 'back to the hills and valleys and streams of his childhood.' You know, perhaps, that he is the son of small farmers, and he lived in the wild and desolate country until a

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great musician heard him playing his cheap little violin and took him away to Vienna to be taught. But how to win him from this feverish life full of dreams of gold? I could do nothing; I waited, to all I appeared indifferent and apathetic. Oh, the money soon went, at last all had to be sold, and then my heart beat with an excitement I had never known: I was beginning to be happy. My husband came to me regretfully and tearfully. I held him in my arms and told him that our life was just beginning, that our day had dawned. He thought I had gone mad with grief and told me afterwards that this thought kept him from suicide, feeling suddenly his responsibility towards me. My faithful notaries had contrived to place in safety some money that had come to me from my mother, a very small amount, but it was enough to buy this house and furniture, some cows and poultry. Oh, you should see our cows grazing on the pastures high above us, the short, green, Alpine grass around, vast as the sea, and only bounded by the precipices sheer down to the infinite. My husband hunts in winter, in summer there is work for us all. This house becomes busy as a hive. Strangers come and live here; some of them return every year, and I have made many friends who only know me as Madame Svenhi who keeps a *pension*."

She stopped, voices were heard, the conversation would have to become general.

"I believe you; I admire and revere you, but I do not understand you yet," said Harley, wearily.

That night he lay wakeful and restless in spite of the fatiguing day. He turned over in his mind all Madeleine had said that evening. He was now convinced that she was happy, happy he thought in a fool's paradise of her own, and from which some day there would be a terrible awakening. The awakening would come when Svenhi tired of the rural life and returned to town and its temptations. The violin was always there with its luring voice and would some day call him away to the magic glittering city of his imagining, and this time it would be the complete shattering of Madeleine's dream, a dream which in the cold hard light of reason was wild and very insecure. Harley had not yet reached the height when we know that dreams are realities. However, to do him justice he was only anxious to be allowed to enter into this one, take part in it and understand it if he could. He judged it hard

that Svenhi the unworthy should be a feature in Madeleine's rare dream, and that he should be an outsider, merely allowed to look through the railings at the enchanted garden. As he thought of this his resentment towards Svenhi grew stronger; in fact during one feverish hour he caught himself finding satisfaction in thinking of the dangers of chamois hunting. Sleep came at last, heavy dreamless sleep.

The travellers were awakened by the dazzling light of the sun shining on the snow and making it sparkle like crystal. Long before, at the early dawn, the guide had started homewards to reassure the anxious friends. This assurance gave the young people an excuse for more tobogganing, and an hour's amusement was decided on before they all started homewards. Svenhi offered to show them a snow hill, and in a few minutes the voices were heard growing fainter as they hurried off with their sledges. Harley remained indoors with Madeleine, hardly daring to hope for a renewal of the last night's conversation, and yet anxious to begin it again should an opportunity present itself. Madeleine did not seem inclined to begin talking, but remained in the room kneeling on the window seat and looking out across the valley. Harley walked impatiently up and down the room, knowing that in an hour all chances of speaking to her would be gone, yet not knowing how to begin. Suddenly as he paced up and down he noticed a violin case piled up with some fishing rods, dusty and forgotten. This drew him up suddenly, and he realized that his opportunity had come.

"Has your husband ceased to play the violin?" he said, coming near to the window corner where Madeleine was.

"He has no need of it now," was her reply. "Music is the inarticulate speech of one who is seeking to attain—when the fulfilment is reached the need for speech ceases. Hence the perpetual restlessness of the artist who tries to express the inexpressible."

"Then he has attained fulfilment?" said Harley, hardly conscious of a sneer in his question.

"He has," Madeleine answered gravely; "he has found peace."

He turned away and looked out of the window at the snowy landscape, asking himself bitterly whether this was all madness or

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whether he was too sophisticated ever to understand elemental truths. He heard the door close as Madeleine left the room, and he remained in deep meditation until the house was noisy once more with the voices, and soon they were prepared for the homeward tramp. The farewells were very cordial, and promises were made to meet again. Harley was very quiet, but he felt less animosity towards Svenhi as he shook his hand, and his farewell to Madeleine was a silent one. Gradually her peace was spreading its quiet wings over him. The sun shone brightly on the little group as they moved down the path towards the bend of the road which was to hide the chalet completely from view. They waved their hands and passed on. Harley was the last to look back before he too passed out of sight. He saw Madeleine leaning on her husband's arm, shading her eyes from the dazzling snow with her hand. Framed in the radiant Alpine landscape they stood, he a type of manly strength and vigour and she the frail woman clinging to him. Together they seemed the perfect being, and as Harley turned his head and passed on, he felt he was leaving them in perfect harmony with their surroundings, far from disintegrating influences; and, musing, he knew he was beginning to understand.

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