

The Plastic Age

by

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CHAPTER I

When an American sets out to found a college, he hunts first for a hill. John Harvard was an Englishman and indifferent to high places. The result is that Harvard has become a university of vast proportions and no color. Yale flounders about among the New Haven shops, trying to rise above them. The Harkness Memorial tower is successful; otherwise the university smells of trade. If Yale had been built on a hill, it would probably be far less important and much more interesting.

Hezekiah Sanford was wise; he found first his hill and then founded his college, believing probably that any one ambitious enough to climb the hill was a man fit to wrestle with learning and, if need be, with Satan himself. Satan was ever before Hezekiah, and he fought him valiantly, exorcising him every morning in chapel and every evening at prayers. The first students of Sanford College learned Latin and Greek and to fear the devil. There are some who declare that their successors learn less.

Hezekiah built Sanford Hall, a fine Georgian building, performed the duties of trustees, president, dean, and faculty for thirty years, and then passed to his reward, leaving three thousand acres, his library of five hundred books, mostly sermons, Sanford Hall, and a charter that opened the gates of Sanford to all men so that they might "find the true light of God and the glory of Jesus in the halls of this most liberal college."

More than a century had passed since Hezekiah was laid to rest in Haydensville's cemetery. The college had grown miraculously and changed even more miraculously. Only the hill and its beautiful surroundings remained the same. Indian Lake, on the south of the campus, still sparkled in the sunlight; on the east the woods were as virgin as they had been a hundred and fifty years before. Haydensville, still only a village, surrounded the college on the west and north.

Hezekiah's successors had done strange things to his campus. There were dozens of buildings now surrounding Sanford Hall, and they revealed all the types of architecture popular since Hezekiah had thundered his last defiance at Satan. There were fine old colonial buildings, their windows outlined by English ivy; ponderous Romanesque buildings made of stone, grotesque and hideous; a pseudo-Gothic chapel with a tower of surpassing loveliness; and four laboratories of the purest factory design. But despite the conglomerate and sometimes absurd architecture—a Doric temple neighbored a Byzantine mosque—the campus was beautiful. Lawns, often terraced, stretched everywhere, and the great elms lent a dignity to Sanford College that no architect, however stupid, could quite efface.

This first day of the new college year was glorious in the golden haze of Indian summer. The lake was silver blue, the long reflections of the trees twisting and

bending as a soft breeze ruffled the surface into tiny waves. The hills already brilliant with color—scarlet, burnt orange, mauve, and purple—flamed up to meet the clear blue sky; the elms softly rustled their drying leaves; the white houses of the village retreated coyly behind maples and firs and elms: everywhere there was peace, the peace that comes with strength that has been stronger than time. As Hugh Carver hastened up the hill from the station, his two suit-cases banged his legs and tripped him. He could hardly wait to reach the campus. The journey had been intolerably long—Haydensville was more than three hundred miles from Merrytown, his home—and he was wild to find his room in Surrey Hall. He wondered how he would like his room-mate, Peters.... What's his name? Oh, yes, Carl.... The registrar had written that Peters had gone to Kane School.... Must be pretty fine. Ought to be first-class to room with.... Hugh hoped that Peters wouldn't think that he was too country....

Hugh was a slender lad who looked considerably less than his eighteen years. A gray cap concealed his sandy brown hair, which he parted on the side and which curled despite all his brushing. His crystalline blue eyes, his small, neatly carved nose, his sensitive mouth that hid a shy and appealing smile, were all very boyish. He seemed young, almost pathetically young.

People invariably called him a nice boy, and he didn't like it; in fact, he wanted to know how they got that way. They gave him the pip, that's what they did. He guessed that a fellow who could run the hundred in 10: 2 and out-box anybody in high school wasn't such a baby. Why, he had overheard one of the old maid teachers call him sweet. Sweet! Cripes, that old hen made him sick. She was always pawing him and sticking her skinny hands in his hair. He was darn glad to get to college where there were only men teachers.

Women always wanted to get their hands into his hair, and boys liked him on sight. Many of those who were streaming up the hill before and behind him, who passed him or whom he passed, glanced at his eager face and thought that there was a guy they'd like to know.

An experienced observer would have divided those boys into three groups: preparatory school boys, carelessly at ease, well dressed, or, as the college argot has it, "smooth"; boys from city schools, not so well dressed perhaps, certainly not so sure of themselves; and country boys, many of them miserably confused and some of them clad in Kollege Kut Klothes that they would shamefacedly discard within a week.

Hugh finally reached the top of the hill, and the campus was before him. He had visited the college once with his father and knew his way about. Eager as he was to reach Surrey Hall, he paused to admire the pseudo-Gothic chapel. He felt a little thrill of pride as he stared in awe at the magnificent building. It had been willed to the college by an alumnus who had made millions selling rotten pork.

Hugh skirted two of the factory laboratories, hurried between the Doric temple and Byzantine mosque, paused five times to direct confused classmates, passed a dull red colonial building, and finally stood before Surrey Hall, a large brick dormitory half covered by ivy.

He hurried up-stairs and down a corridor until he found a door with 19 on it. He knocked.

"What th' hell! Come in." The voice was impatiently cheerful.

Hugh pushed open the door and entered the room to meet wild confusion—and his room-mate. The room was a clutter of suit-cases, trunks, clothes, banners, unpacked furniture, pillows, pictures, golf-sticks, tennis-rackets, and photographs—dozens of photographs, all of them of girls apparently. In the middle of the room a boy was on his knees before an open trunk. He had sleek black hair, parted meticulously in the center, a slender face with rather sharp features and large black eyes that almost glittered. His lips were full and very red, almost too red, and his cheeks seemed to be colored with a hard blush.

"Hullo," he said in a clear voice as Hugh came in. "Who are you?"

Hugh flushed slightly. "I'm Carver," he answered, "Hugh Carver."

The other lad jumped to his feet, revealing, to Hugh's surprise, golf knickers. He was tall, slender, and very neatly built.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "I ought to have guessed that." He held out his hand. "I'm Carl Peters, the guy you've got to room with—and God help you."

Hugh dropped his suit-cases and shook hands. "Guess I can stand it," he said with a quick laugh to hide his embarrassment. "Maybe you'll need a little of God's help yourself." Diffident and unsure, he smiled—and Peters liked him on the spot.

"Chase yourself," Peters said easily. "I know a good guy when I see one. Sit down somewhere—er, here." He brushed a pile of clothes off a trunk to the floor with one sweep of his arm. "Rest yourself after climbing that goddamn hill. Christ! It's a bastard, that hill is. Say, your trunk's down-stairs. I saw it. I'll help you bring it up soon's you've got your wind."

Hugh was rather dazzled by the rapid, staccato talk, and, to tell the truth, he was a little shocked by the profanity. Not that he wasn't used to profanity; he had heard plenty of that in Merrytown, but he didn't expect somehow that a college man—that is, a prep-school man—would use it. He felt that he ought to make some reply to Peters's talk, but he didn't know just what would do. Peters saved him the trouble.

"I'll tell you, Carver—oh, hell, I'm going to call you Hugh—we're going to have a swell joint here. Quite the darb. Three rooms, you know; a bedroom for each of us and this big study. I've brought most of the junk that I had at Kane, and I s'pose you've got some of your own."

"Not much," Hugh replied, rather ashamed of what he thought might be considered stinginess. He hastened to explain that he didn't know what Carl would have; so he thought that he had better wait and get his stuff at college.

"That's the bean," exclaimed Carl, He had perched himself on the window-seat. He threw one well shaped leg over the other and gazed at Hugh admiringly. "You certainly used the old bean. Say, I've got a hell of a lot of truck here, and if you'd a brought much, we'd a been swamped.... Say, I'll tell you how we fix this dump." He jumped up, led Hugh on a tour of the rooms, discussed the disposal of the various pieces of furniture with enormous gusto, and finally pointed to the photographs.

"Hope you don't mind my harem," he said, making a poor attempt to hide his pride.

"It's some harem," replied Hugh in honest awe.

Again he felt ashamed. He had pictures of his father and mother, and that was all. He'd write to Helen for one right away. "Where'd you get all of 'em? You've certainly got a collection."

"Sure have. The album of hearts I've broken. When I've kissed a girl twice I make her give me her picture. I've forgotten the names of some of these janes. I collected ten at Bar Harbor this summer and three at Christmas Cove. Say, this kid—" he fished through a pile of pictures—"was the hottest little devil I ever met." He passed to Hugh a cabinet photograph of a standard flapper. "Pet? My God!" He cast his eyes ceilingward ecstatically.

Hugh's mind was a battle-field of disapproval and envy. Carl dazzled and confused him. He had often listened to the recitals of their exploits by the Merrytown Don Juans, but this good-looking, sophisticated lad evidently had a technique and breadth of experience quite unknown to Merrytown. He wanted badly to hear more, but time was flying and he hadn't even begun to unpack.

"Will you help me bring up my trunk?" he asked half shyly.

"Oh, hell, yes. I'd forgotten all about that. Come on."

They spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking, arranging and rearranging the furniture and pictures. They found a restaurant and had dinner. Then they returned to 19 Surrey and rearranged the furniture once more, pausing occasionally to chat while Carl smoked. He offered Hugh a cigarette. Hugh explained that he did not smoke, that he was a sprinter and that the coaches said that cigarettes were bad for a runner.

"Right-o," said Carl, respecting the reason thoroughly. "I can't run worth a damn myself, but I'm not bad at tennis—not very good, either. Say, if you're a runner you ought to make a fraternity easy. Got your eye on one?"

"Well," said Hugh, "my father's a Nu Delt."

"The Nu Delts. Phew! High-hat as hell." He looked at Hugh enviously. "Say, you certainly are set. Well, my old man never went to college, but I want to tell you that he left us a whale of a lot of jack when he passed out a couple of years ago."

"What!" Hugh exclaimed, staring at him in blank astonishment.

In an instant Carl was on his feet, his flashing eyes dimmed by tears. "My old man was the best scout that ever lived—the best damned old scout that ever lived." His sophistication was all gone; he was just a small boy, heartily ashamed of himself and ready to cry. "I want you to know that," he ended defiantly.

At once Hugh was all sympathy. "Sure, I know," he said softly. Then he smiled and added, "So's mine."

Carl's face lost its lugubriousness in a broad grin. "I'm a fish," he announced.

"Let's hit the hay."

"You said it!"

CHAPTER II

Hugh wrote two letters before he went to bed, one to his mother and father and the other to Helen Simpson. His letter to Helen was very brief, merely a request for her photograph.

Then, his mind in a whirl of excitement, he went to bed and lay awake dreaming, thinking of Carl, the college, and, most of all, of Helen and his walk with her the day before.

He had called on her to say good-by. They had been "going together" for a year, and she was generally considered his girl. She was a pretty child with really beautiful brown hair, which she had foolishly bobbed, lively blue eyes, and an absurdly tiny snub nose. She was little, with quick, eager hands—a shallow creature who was proud to be seen with Hugh because he had been captain of the high-school track team. But she did wish that he wasn't so slow. Why, he had kissed her only once, and that had been a silly peck on the cheek. Perhaps he was just shy, but sometimes she was almost sure that he was "plain dumb."

They had walked silently along the country road to the woods that skirted the town. An early frost had already touched the foliage with scarlet and orange. They sat down on a fallen log, and Hugh gazed at a radiant maple-tree.

Helen let her hand drop lightly on his. "Thinking of me?" she asked softly.

Hugh squeezed her hand. "Yes," he whispered, and looked at the ground while he scuffed some fallen leaves with the toe of his shoe.

"I am going to miss you, Hughie—oh, awfully. Are you going to miss me?"

He held her hand tightly and said nothing. He was aware only of her hand. His throat seemed to be stopped, choked with something.

A bird that should have been on its way south chirped from a tree near by. The sound made Hugh look up. He noticed that the shadows were lengthening. He and Helen would have to start back pretty soon or he would be late for dinner. There was still packing to do; his mother had said that his father wanted to have a talk with him—and through all his thoughts there ran like a fiery red line the desire to kiss the girl whose hand was clasped in his.

He turned slightly toward her. "Hughie," she whispered and moved close to him. His heart stopped as he loosened her hand from his and put his arm around her. With a contented sigh she rested her head on one shoulder and her hand on the other. "Hughie dear," she breathed softly.

He hesitated no longer. His heart was beating so that he could not speak, but he bent and kissed her. And there they sat for half an hour more, close in each other's embrace, speaking no words, but losing themselves in kisses that seemed to have no end.

Finally Hugh realized that darkness had fallen. He drew the yielding girl to her feet and started home, his arm around her. When they reached her gate, he

embraced her once more and kissed her as if he could never let her go. A light flashed in a window. Frightened, he tried to leave, but she clung to him.

"I must go," he whispered desperately.

"I'm going to miss you awfully." He thought that she was weeping—and kissed her again. Then as another window shot light into the yard, he forced her arms from around his neck.

"Good-by, Helen. Write to me." His voice was rough and husky.

"Oh, I will. Good-by—darling."

He walked home tingling with emotion. He wanted to shout; he felt suddenly grown up. Golly, but Helen was a little peach. He felt her arms around his neck again, her lips pressed maddeningly to his. For an instant he was dizzy....

As he lay in bed in 19 Surrey thinking of Helen, he tried to summon that glorious intoxication again. But he failed. Carl, the college, registration—a thousand thoughts intruded themselves. Already Helen seemed far away, a little nebulous. He wondered why....

CHAPTER III

For the next few days Carl and Hugh did little but wait in line. They lined up to register; they lined up to pay tuition; they lined up to shake hands with President Culver; they lined up to talk for two quite useless minutes with the freshman dean; they lined up to be assigned seats in the commons. Carl suggested that he and Hugh line up in the study before going to bed so that they would keep in practice. Then they had to attend lectures given by various members of the faculty about college customs, college manners, college honor, college everything. After the sixth of them, Hugh, thoroughly weary and utterly confused, asked Carl if he now had any idea of what college was.

"Yes," replied Carl; "it's a young ladies' school for very nice boys."

"Well," Hugh said desperately, "if I have to listen to about two more awfully noble lectures, I'm going to get drunk. I have a hunch that college isn't anything like what these old birds say it is. I hope not, anyway."

"Course it isn't. Say, why wait for two more of the damn things to kill you off?" He pulled a flask out of his desk drawer and held it out invitingly.

Hugh laughed. "You told me yourself that that stuff was catgut and that you wouldn't drink it on a bet. Besides, you know that I don't drink. If I'm going to make my letter, I've got to keep in trim."

"Right you are. Wish I knew what to do with this poison. If I leave it around here, the biddy'll get hold of it, and then God help us. I'll tell you what: after it gets dark to-night we'll take it down and poison the waters of dear old Indian Lake."

"All right. Say, I've got to pike along; I've got a date with my faculty adviser. Hope I don't have to stand in line."

He didn't have to stand in line—he was permitted to sit—but he did have to wait an hour and a half. Finally a student came out of the inner office, and a gruff voice from within called, "Next!"

"Just like a barber shop," flashed across Hugh's mind as he entered the tiny office.

An old-young man was sitting behind a desk shuffling papers. He glanced up as Hugh came in and motioned him to a chair beside him. Hugh sat down and stared at his feet.

"Um, let's see. Your name's—what?"

"Carver, sir. Hugh Carver."

The adviser, Professor Kane, glanced at some notes. "Oh, yes, from Merrytown High School, fully accredited. Are you taking an A. B. or a B. S.?"

"I—I don't know."

"You have to have one year of college Latin for a B. S. and at least two years of Greek besides for an A. B."

"Oh!" Hugh was frightened and confused. He knew that his father was an A. B., but he had heard the high-school principal say that Greek was useless

nowadays. Suddenly he remembered: the principal had advised him to take a B. S.; he had said that it was more practical.

"I guess I'd better take a B. S.," he said softly. "Very well." Professor Kane, who hadn't yet looked at Hugh, picked up a schedule card. "Any middle name?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, sir—Meredith."

Kane scribbled H. M. Carver at the top of the card and then proceeded to fill it in rapidly. He hastily explained the symbols that he was using, but he did not say anything about the courses. When he had completed the schedule, he copied it on another card, handed one to Hugh, and stuck the other into a filing-box.

"Anything else?" he asked, turning his blond, blank face toward Hugh for the first time.

Hugh stood up. There were a dozen questions that he wanted to ask. "No, sir," he replied. "Very well, then. I am your regular adviser. You will come to me when you need assistance. Good day."

"Good day, sir," and as Hugh passed out of the door, the gruff voice bawled, "Next!" The boy nearest the door rose and entered the sanctum.

Hugh sought the open air and gazed at the hieroglyphics on the card. "Guess they mean something," he mused, "but how am I going to find out?" A sudden fear made him blanch. "I bet I get into the wrong places. Oh, golly!"

Then came the upper-classmen, nearly seven hundred of them. The quiet campus became a bedlam of excitement and greetings. "Hi, Jack. Didya have a good summer?"... "Well, Tom, ol' kid, I sure am glad to see you back."... "Put her there, ol' scout; it's sure good to see you." Everywhere the same greetings: "Didya have a good summer? Glad to see you back." Every one called every one else by his first name; every one shook hands with astonishing vigor, usually clutching the other fellow by the forearm at the same time. How cockily these lads went around the campus! No confusion or fear for them; they knew what to do.

For the first time Hugh felt a pang of homesickness; for the first time he realized that he wasn't yet part of the college. He clung close to Carl and one or two other lads in Surrey with whom he picked up an acquaintance, and Carl clung close to Hugh, careful to hide the fact that he felt very small and meek. For the first time *he* realized that he was just a freshman—and he didn't like it.

Then suddenly the tension, which had been gathering for a day or so, broke. Orders went out from the upper-classmen that all freshmen put on their baby bonnets, silly little blue caps with a bright orange button. From that moment every freshman was doomed. Work was their lot, and plenty of it. "Hi, freshman, carry up my trunk. Yeah, you, freshman—you with the skinny legs. You and your fat friend carry my trunk up to the fourth floor—and if you drop it, I'll break your fool necks."... "Freshman! go down to the station and get my suit-cases. Here are the checks. Hurry back if you know what's good for you."... "Freshman! go up to Hill Twenty-eight and put the beds together."... "Freshman! come up to my room. I want you to hang pictures."

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