

**THE
HOPE OF
HAPPINESS**

**BY
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TO
FRANK SCOTT COREY WICKS

“Only themselves understand themselves, and the like of
themselves,
As Souls only understand Souls.”

THE HOPE OF HAPPINESS

CHAPTER ONE

I

Bruce Storrs stood up tall and straight on a prostrate sycamore, the sunlight gleaming upon his lithe, vigorous body, and with a quick, assured lifting of the arms plunged into the cool depths of the river. He rose and swam with long, confident strokes the length of a pool formed by the curving banks and returned to the log, climbing up with the same ease and grace that marked his swimming. He dashed the water from his eyes and pressed his deeply-tanned hands over his shapely head. It was evident that he was the fortunate inheritor of clean blood in a perfectly fashioned body; that he had used himself well in his twenty-eight years and that he found satisfaction and pride in his health and strength. He surveyed the narrow valley through which the river idled and eddied before rushing into the broader channel beyond—surveyed it with something of the air of a discoverer who has found and appropriated to his own uses a new corner of the world.

It was a good place to be at the end of a day that was typical of late August in the corn belt, a day of intense dry heat with faint intimations on the horizon of the approach of autumn. With a contented sigh he sat down on the log, his feet drawn up, his shoulders bent, and aimlessly tore bits of bark from the log and tossed them into the water. Lulled by the lazy ripple, he yielded himself to reverie and his eyes filled with dreams as he stared unseeingly across the stream. Suddenly he raised his head resolutely as if his thoughts had returned to the world of the actual and he had reached a conclusion of high importance. He plunged

again and now his short, rapid strokes threshed the water into foam. One might have thought that in the assertion of his physical strength he was testing and reassuring himself of his complete self-mastery.

Refreshed and invigorated, he clambered up the bank and sought a great beech by whose pillar-like trunk he had left his belongings, and proceeded to dress. From a flat canvas bag he produced a towel and a variety of toilet articles. He combed his thick curly hair, donned a flannel shirt and knotted a blue scarf under its soft collar. His shoes of brogan type bore the imprint of a metropolitan maker and his gray knickerbockers and jacket indicated a capable tailor.

He took from the bag a package of letters addressed in a woman's hand to Bruce Storrs, and making himself comfortable with his back to the tree, he began to read. The letters had been subjected to many readings, as their worn appearance testified, but selecting the bulkiest, he perused it carefully, as though wishing to make sure that its phrases were firmly fixed in his memory.

"... Since my talk with you," he read, "I have had less pain, but the improvement is only temporary—the doctors do not deceive me as to that. I may go quickly—any day, any hour. You heard my story the other night—generously, with a fine tolerance, as I knew you would. If I had not been so satisfied of your sense of justice and so sure of your love, I could never have told you. But from the hour I knew that my life was nearing its end I felt more and more that you must know. One or two things I'm afraid I didn't make clear ... that I loved the man who is your father. Love alone could be my justification—without that I could never have lived through these years.

“The man you have called father never suspected the truth. He trusted me. It has been part of my punishment that through all these years I have had to endure the constant manifestations of his love and confidence. But for that one lapse in the second year of my marriage, I was absolutely faithful in all my obligations to him. And he was kind to you and proud of you. He did all for you that a father could, never dreaming that you were not his own. It was one of my sorrows that I couldn’t give him a child of his own. Things went badly with him in his last years, as you know, and what I leave to you—it will be about fifty thousand dollars—I inherited from my father, and it will help you find your place in the world.

“Your father has no idea of your existence.... Ours was a midsummer madness, at a time when we were both young. I only knew him a little while, and I have never heard from him. My love for him never wholly died. Please, dear, don’t think harshly of me, but there have been times when I would have given my life for a sight of him. After all you are his—his as much as mine. You came to me from him—strangely dear and beautiful. In my mind you have always been his, and I loved you the dearer. I loved him, but I could not bring myself to leave the man you have called father for him. He was not the kind of man women run away with....

“When I’m gone I want you to put yourself near him—learn to know him, if that should be possible. I am trusting you. You would never, I know, do him an injury. Some day he may need you. Remember, he does not know—it may be he need never know. But oh, be kind to him....”

He stared at the words. Had it been one of those unaccountable affairs—he had heard of such—where a gently reared woman falls prey to a coarse-fibered man in every way her inferior? The man

might be common, low, ignorant and cruel. Bruce had been proud of his ancestry. The Storrs were of old American stock, and his mother's family, the Bruces, had been the foremost people in their county for nearly a century. He had taken a pardonable pride in his background.... That night when he had stumbled out of the house after hearing his mother's confession he had felt the old friendly world recede. The letters, sealed and entrusted to the family physician for delivery at her death, merely repeated what she had told him.

In his constant rereadings he had hoped that one day he would find that he had misinterpreted the message. He might dismiss his mother's story as the fabrication of a sick woman's mind. But today he knew the folly of this; the disclosure took its place in his mind among the unalterable facts of his life. At first he had thought of destroying himself; but he was too sane and the hope of life was too strong for such a solution of his problem. And there had been offers—flattering ones—to go to New York and Boston. He convinced himself that his mother could not seriously have meant to limit the range of his opportunities by sending him to the city where his unknown father lived. But he was resolved not to shirk; he would do her bidding. There was a strain of superstition in him: he might invite misfortune by disregarding her plea; and moreover he had the pride and courage of youth. No one knew, no one need ever know! He had escaped from the feeling, at first poignant, that shame attached to him; that he must slink through life under the eyes of a scornful world. No; he had mastered that; his pride rallied; he felt equal to any demand fate might make upon him; he was resolved to set his goal high....

Life had been very pleasant in Laconia, the Ohio town where John Storrs had been a lawyer of average attainments—in no way

brilliant, but highly respected for his probity and enjoying for years a fair practice. Bruce had cousins of his own age, cheery, wholesome contemporaries with whom he had chummed from childhood. The Storrs, like the Bruces, his mother's people, were of a type familiar in Mid-western county seats, kindly, optimistic, well-to-do folk, not too contented or self-satisfied to be unaware of the stir and movement of the larger world.

The old house, built in the forties by John Storrs's grandfather, had become suddenly to Bruce a strange and alien place that denied his right of occupancy. The elms in the yard seemed to mock him, whispering, "You don't belong here!" and as quickly as possible he had closed the house, made excuses to his relatives, given a power of attorney to the president of the local bank, an old friend, to act for him in all matters, and announced that he'd look about a bit and take a vacation before settling down to his profession.

This was all past now and he had arrived, it seemed inevitably, at the threshold of the city where his father lived.

The beauty of the declining day stirred longings and aspirations, definite and clear, in his mind and heart. His debt to his mother was enormous. He remembered now her happiness at the first manifestation of his interest in form, color and harmony; her hand guiding his when he first began to draw; her delight in his first experiment with a box of colors, given him on one of his birthdays. Yes; he should be a painter; that came first; then his aptitude in modeling made it plain that sculpture was to be his true vocation. To be a creator of beautiful things!—here, she had urged, lay the surest hope of happiness.

Very precious were all these memories; they brought a wistful smile to his face. She had always seemed to him curiously innocent, with the innocence of light-hearted childhood. To think of her as carrying a stain through her life was abhorrent. Hers was the blithest, cheeriest spirit he had known. The things she had taught him to reverence were a testimony to her innate fineness; she had denied herself for him, jealously guarding her patrimony that it might pass to him intact. The manly part for him was to live in the light of the ideals she had set for him. Pity and love for one who had been so sensitive to beauty in all its forms touched him now; brought a sob to his throat. He found a comfort in the thought that her confession might be attributable to a hope that in his life her sin might be expiated....

He took up the letters and turned them over for the last time, his eyes caught and held now and then by some phrase. He held the sheets against his face for a moment, then slowly tore them into strips, added the worn envelopes and burned them. Not content with this, he trampled the charred fragments into the sandy turf.

II

The sun, a huge brazen ball, was low in the west when he set off along the river with confident, springy step. He stopped at a farmhouse and asked for supper. The evening meal was over, the farmer's wife explained; but when he assured her that his needs were few and that he expected to pay for his entertainment, she produced a pitcher of milk and a plate of corn bread. She brought a bowl of yellow glaze crockery and he made himself comfortable on a bench by the kitchen door. He crumbled the bread into the creamy milk and ate with satisfaction.

Her husband appeared, and instantly prejudiced by Bruce's knickerbockers, doggedly quizzed him as to the nature and direction of his journey. Bruce was a new species, not to be confused with the ordinary tramp who demands food at farmhouses, and suddenly contrite that the repast she was providing was so meager, the woman rose and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a huge piece of spice cake and a dish of sliced peaches. She was taken aback when he rose deferentially to accept the offering, but her tired face relaxed in a smile at his cordial expressions of gratitude. She joined her husband on the stoop, finding the handsome pilgrim's visit a welcome break in the monotonous day. As he ate he answered their questions unhurriedly.

"I guess the war left a lot o' you boys restless," she suggested.

"Oh, it wasn't the war that made a rover of me!" he replied with a smile. "It was this way with me. When I got home I found I had something to think out—something I had to get used to"—he frowned and became silent for a moment—"so I decided I could do it better by tramping. But I've settled things in my own mind pretty well now," he ended, half to himself, and smiled, hardly aware of their presence.

"Yes?" The woman's tone was almost eager. She was curious as to the real reason for his wanderings and what it was that he had settled. In the luminous afterglow her dull imagination quickened to a sense of something romantic in this stranger, and she was disappointed when he told of an experience as a laborer in a great steel mill, just to see what it was like, he said—of loitering along the Susquehanna, and of a more recent tramp through the Valley of Virginia.

“I reckon you don’t have to work?” the farmer asked, baffled in his attempts to account for a young man who strolled over the country so aimlessly, wearing what struck him as an outlandish garb.

“Oh, but I do! I’ve done considerable work as I’ve sauntered around. I’m an architect—or hope to be! I’ve earned my keep as I’ve traveled by getting jobs as a draughtsman.”

“Going to stop in the city?” the woman inquired. “I guess there’s lots of architects over there.”

“Yes,” Bruce replied, following the direction of her glance.

“You know folks there?” she persisted. “I guess it’s hard getting started if you ain’t got friends.”

“There’s a chap living there I knew in college; that’s all. But when you strike a strange town where you don’t know anyone the only thing to do is to buckle in and make them want to know you!”

“I guess you can do that,” she remarked with shy admiration.

The farmer shuffled his feet on the brick walk. For all he knew the young stranger might be a burglar. He resented his wife’s tone of friendliness and resolved to deny the request if the young man asked the privilege of sleeping in the barn; but the stranger not only failed to ask for lodging, but produced a dollar bill and insisted that the woman accept it. This transaction served instantly to dispel the farmer’s suspicions. He answered with unnecessary detail Bruce’s questions as to the shortest way to town, and walked with him to a lane that ran along the edge of a cornfield and afforded a short cut to the highway.

Bruce had expected to reach the city before nightfall, but already the twilight was deepening and the first stars glimmered in the pale sky. Now that he was near the end of his self-imposed wanderings, he experienced a sense of elation. The unhappy thoughts with which he had left his Ohio home a little more than a year earlier had gradually become dim in his memory. The letters he had burned at the riverside really marked in his consciousness a dispersion of doubts and questions that left his spirit free. His mother's revelation had greatly shaken him; but she need never have told him; and it spoke for her courage and her faith in him that she had confessed the truth. They had been companions in an unusual sense. From his earliest youth she had interested him in the things that had been her delight—books, music, pictures. She was herself an accomplished musician, and strains of old melodies she had taught him recurred to him now, and as he swung along the country road he whistled them, happy for the first time in the awakening of old memories.

With the cool breeze blowing upon him from fields of tall ripening corn, there was no bitterness in his soul. He had beaten down the bitter thoughts that had assailed him in the early days of his journeying—the sense that a stigma attached to him, not the less hateful because he alone had knowledge of it; and the feeling that there was something fantastic in the idea that he should put himself where, in any need, he could serve the father he had never known.

This had now all the sanctity of a commission from the dead. Again he speculated as to what manner of man this could be who had awakened so deep a love in the heart of the good woman he knew his mother to have been—a love which she had carried in her heart to her last hours. In his long ponderings he had, he felt, come to understand her better than he ever had in her lifetime—her

imaginative and romantic side, her swiftly changing moods, her innumerable small talents that had now a charm and a pathos in the retrospect. Age had never, to his eyes, laid hands upon her. Even through the last long illness she had retained the look and the spirit of youth.

Rounding a bend in the river, the flare of an amusement park apprised him that he was close upon the city—a city he had heretofore never visited and knew of only from his newspaper reading as a prosperous industrial center. Here, for the strangest reason in the world, he was to make his home, perhaps spend the remainder of his days! He crossed a stone bridge with a sense that the act marked an important transition in his life, and quickly passing through the park, boarded a trolley car and rode into town.

He had formed a very clear idea of what he meant to do, and arriving at the business center he went directly to the Hotel Fordham, to which he had expressed his trunk from Cincinnati.

III

He spent an hour unpacking and overhauling his belongings, wrote notes to his banker friend in Laconia and to the cousin there with whom he had maintained a correspondence since he first went away to school.

The pencil with which he idly scribbled on a sheet of hotel paper traced his name unconsciously. *Bruce Storrs.*

It was not his name; he had no honest right to it. He had speculated many times in his wanderings as to whether he shouldn't change it, but this would lead to endless embarrassments. Now, with his thoughts crystalized by the knowledge that this other man who had

been his mother's lover was within reach, he experienced a strong sense of loyalty to the memory of the man he had called father. It would be a contemptible thing to abandon the name of one who had shown him so tender an affection and understood so perfectly his needs and aims.

Somewhere among the several hundred thousand people of the city about him was the man his mother had described. In the quiet room he experienced suddenly a feeling of loneliness. Usually in his wanderings he had stopped at cheap lodging houses, and the very comfort of his surroundings now added to his feeling of strangeness in having at last arrived at a goal which marked not merely the end of his physical wandering, but the termination of a struggle with his own spirit.

He sent down for the evening papers and found himself scanning carefully the local news, thinking that he might find some clue to the activities of Franklin Mills.

His attention was immediately caught by the caption, "Franklin Mills Sells Site of Old Homestead to Trust Company." The name fell like a blow upon his consciousness. He seized the telephone book and hurriedly turned the pages.

Mills Franklin—r 5800 Jefferson Ave...King 1322

Mills Franklin—1821 First Ntl Bnk....Main 2222

He stared at the two lines till they were a blur before his eyes. There was but one man of the name in the directory; there could be no mistake as to his identity.

It was a disconcerting thought that by calling these numbers he might at any time hear Franklin Mills's voice. The idea both

fascinated and repelled him. What, after all, had he to do with Franklin Mills?

He turned to the newspaper and reread the report of the real estate transaction, then opened to the personal and society page, where he found this item:

Miss Leila Mills of Jefferson Avenue gave a luncheon yesterday at the Faraway Country Club for her house guest, Miss Helene Ridgeway of Cincinnati. The decorations were purple asters and pink roses.

Helene Ridgeway he knew; she had been the college chum of one of his Laconia cousins. He had not realized the strain he had undergone in the past year till he saw the familiar name. The nightmare pictures of his year-long speculations faded; whatever else Mills might be he was at least a reputable citizen, and this was something to be thankful for; and obviously he was not poor and helpless.

The Leila referred to must be Mills's daughter, and the same blood ran in her veins as in his own. Bruce flung the paper away; touched his forehead, found it covered with perspiration. He paced the floor till he had quieted himself, paused at the window, finding relief in the lights and sounds of the street, the bells and whistles of trains at the railway station somewhere in the distance. The world surged round him, indifferent to his hopes and aims and fears. He must keep tight hold of himself...

His mother had urged him to think kindly of Franklin Mills; and yet, now that the man was within reach, a contempt that bordered upon hatred filled his heart. For his mother his love turned for the moment to pity. He recalled the look she had bent upon him at

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