

Winding Paths

Gertrude Page

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Winding Paths.

By Gertrude Page.

"So many gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
And just the art of being kind
Is all the sad world needs."

WINDING PATHS

CHAPTER I

There were several interesting points about Hal Pritchard and Lorraine Vivian, but perhaps the most striking was their friendship for each other. From two wide-apart extremes they had somehow gravitated together, and commenced at boarding-school a friendship which only deepened and strengthened after their exit from the wise supervision of the Misses Walton, and their entrance as "finished" young women into the wide area of the world at large.

Lorraine went first. She was six years older than Hal, and under ordinary circumstances would hardly have been at school with her at all. As it was, she went at nineteen because she was not very strong, and sea air was considered good for her. She was a short of parlour-boarder, sent to study languages and accomplishments while she inhaled the sea air of Eastgate. Why, among all the scholars, who for the most part regarded her as a resplendent, beautifully dressed being outside their sphere, she should have quickly developed an ardent affection for Hal, the rough-and-ready tomboy, remained a mystery; but far from being a passing fancy, it ripened steadily into a deep and lasting attachment.

When Hal was fifteen, Lorraine left; and it has to be admitted that the anxious, motherly hearts of the Misses Walton drew a deep breath of relief, and hoped the friendship would now cease, unfed by daily contact and daily mutual interests. But there they under-estimated the depth of affection already in the hearts of the girls, and their natural loyalty, which scorned a mere question of separation, and entered into one another's interests just as eagerly as when they were together.

Not that they, the Misses Walton, had anything actually against Lorraine, beyond the fact that she promised a degree of beauty likely, they felt, coupled as it was with a charming wit and a fascinating personality, to open out some striking career for her, and possibly become a snare and a temptation.

On the other hand, Hal was just a homely, nondescript, untidy, riotous type of schoolgirl, with a very strong capacity for affection, and an unmanageable predilection for scrapes and adventures, that made her more likely to fall under the sway of Lorraine, should it promise any chance of excitement.

And one had only to view Lorraine among the other "young ladies" of the

seminary to fear the worst. Miss Emily Walton would never have admitted it; but even she, fondly clinging to the old tradition that the terms "girls" or "women" are less impressive than "young ladies", felt somehow that the orthodox nomenclature did not successfully fit her two most remarkable pupils. Of course they were ladies by birth and education, else they would certainly not have been admitted to so select a seminary; but whereas the rest of the pupils might be said more or less to study, and improve, and have their being in a milk and biscuit atmosphere, Hal and Lorraine were quite uncomfortably more like champagne and good, honest, frothing beer.

No amount of prunes and prism advice and surroundings seemed to dull the sparkle in Lorraine, nor daunt nor suppress fearless, outspoken, unmanageable Hal. In separate camps, with a nice little following each, to keep an even balance, they might merely have livened the free hours; but as a combination it soon became apparent they would waken up the embryo young ladies quite alarmingly, and initiate a new atmosphere of gaiety that might become beyond the restraining, select influence even of the Misses Walton.

The first scare came with the new French mistress, who had a perfect Parisian accent, but knew very little English. Of course Lorraine easily divined this, and, being something of a French scholar already, she soon won Mademoiselle's confidence by one or two charmingly expressed, lucid French explanations.

Then came the translation lesson, and choosing a fable that would specially lend itself, she started the class off translating it into an English fabrication that convulsed both pupils and mistress. Hal, of course, followed suit, and the merriment grew fast and furious after a few positively rowdy lessons.

Mademoiselle herself gave the fun away at the governesses' dinner, a very precise and formal meal, which took place at seven o'clock, to be followed at eight by the pupils' supper of bread-and-butter with occasional sardines. She related in broken English what an amusing book they had to read, repeating a few slang terms, that would certainly not, under any circumstances, have been allowed to pass the lips of the young ladies.

After that it was deemed advisable Lorraine should translate French alone, and Hal be severely admonished.

Then there was the dreadful affair of the Boys' College. It was not unusual for them to walk past the school on Sunday afternoons; but it was only after Lorraine came that a system was instituted by which, if the four front boys all blew their noses as they passed, it was a signal that a note, or possibly several, had been slipped under the loose brick at the school entrance.

Further, it was only Lorraine who could have sent the answers, because none of the other girls had an uncle often running down for a breath of sea air, when, of course, he needed his dear niece's company. He was certainly a very attentive uncle, and a very generous one too, judging by the Buszard's cakes and De Brei's chocolates, and Miss Walton could not help eyeing him a little askance.

But then, as Miss Emily said, he was such a very striking, distinguished-looking gentleman, people had already been interested to

learn he had a niece at the Misses Walton's seminary. Besides, one could not reasonably object to a relative calling, and he had seemed so devoted to Lorraine's handsome mother when they had together brought her to school.

But of course, after the disgraceful episode of the notes that blew into the road, the windows had to be dulled at once, so that no one could see the boys pass. It was a mercy the thing had been discovered so soon.

Then shortly after came the breaking-up dances, one for the governesses, when the masters from the college were invited, and one the next night for the girls, when the remains of the same supper did duty again, and with reference to which Miss Walton gently told them she had not been able to ask any of the boys from the school, as she was afraid their parents would not approve; she hoped they were not disappointed, and that the big girls would dance with the little ones, as it pleased them so.

Lorraine immediately replied sweetly that none of them cared about dancing with boys, and some of the children would be much more amusing. She made herself spokeswoman, because Miss Walton had half-unconsciously glanced at her at the mere mention of the word boys, fondly believing that the other well-brought-up pupils would prefer their room to their company, whereas Lorraine might think the party very tame. Her answer was a pleasant surprise.

But then, who was to know that the night of the governesses' dance she had bribed the three girls in the small dormitory to silence, and after some half-dozen of them had gone to bed with their night-gowns over their dresses, had given the signal to arise directly the dance was in full swing. After that they adjourned to the small dormitory and spread out a repast of sweets and cakes, to which such of the younger masters as were brave enough to risk detection slipped away up the school staircase at intervals, to be more than rewarded by Lorraine's inimitable mimicry.

"There will be no boys for you to dance with, dear girls," she told them gently, "as your parents might not approve," then added, with roguish lights in her splendid eyes: "No boys, dear girls, only a few masters to supper in the small dormitory."

Hal's misdemeanours were of a less subtle kind. Neither boys nor masters interested her particularly as yet; but there were a thousand-and-one other ways of livening things up, and she tried them all, sometimes getting off scot free, and sometimes finding herself

uncomfortably pilloried before the rest of the school, to be cross-questioned and severely admonished at great length before being "sent to Coventry" for a stated period.

But, had she only known it, there were many chicken-hearted girls who envied her even her disgrace, for the sake of the dauntless, shining spirit of her that nothing ever crushed. And as for being "sent to Coventry", well, Hal and Lorraine easily coped with that through the twopennyworth system.

If an offender was sent to Coventry, any other girl who spoke to her had to pay a fine of twopence, and if either of these two glay spirits

found themselves doomed to silence, they persuaded such of the others as were "game" enough, to have occasional "twopennyworths".

Of the two, Hal was far the greater favourite; she was in fact the popular idol; for though the girls were full of admiration for Lorraine, and not a little proud of her, they were also a little afraid of a wit that could be sharp-edged, and perhaps resentful too of that nameless something about her striking personality that made them feel their inferiority.

Hal was quite different, and her unfailing spirits, her vigorous championing of the oppressed, or scathing denunciation of anything sneaky and mean, made them all look up to her, and love her, whether she knew or not.

Even the governess felt her compelling attraction, and would often, by a timely word, save her from the consequences of some forgetful moment. At the same time, the one who warned Miss Walton against the possible ill results of the girl's growing love for Lorraine little understood the nature she had to deal with.

When Hal found herself in the private sanctum, being gently admonished concerning a friendship that was thought to be growing too strong, she was quick instantly to resent the slur on her chum. She had been sent for immediately after "evening prep.," and having, as usual, inked her fingers generously, and rubbed an ink-smudge across her face, to say nothing of really disgracefully tumbled hair, she looked a comical enough object standing before the impressive presence of the head mistress.

"Really, Hal," Miss Walton remonstrated, "can't you even keep tidy for an hour in the evening?"

"Not when it's German night," answered outspoken Hal; "where to put the verbs, and how to split them, makes my hair stand on end, and the ink squirm out of the pot."

Miss Walton tried to look severe, remarking: "Don't be frivolous here, my dear"; but, as Hal described it later, "she looked as if having so often to be sedate was beginning to make her tired."

But when she proceeded to explain to Hal that neither she nor her sister were easy in their minds about her growing devotion to Lorraine, Hal's expressive mouth began to look rather stern, and neither the ink-smudges nor the tousled hair could rob her of a certain naïve dignity as she asked, "Are you implying anything against Lorraine?"

"No, no, my dear, certainly not," Miss Walton replied, feeling slightly at a loss to express herself, "but I have never encouraged a violent friendship between two girls that is apt to make them hold aloof from the others, and be continually in one another's society. And in this instance, Lorraine being so much older than you, and of a temperament hardly likely to appeal to your brother, as a desirable one in your great friend -"

"I am not asking Dudley to make her his great friend -"

"Don't interrupt me, dear. I am only speaking of what I am perfectly aware are your brother's feeling concerning you; and seeing you have

neither father nor mother, I feel my responsibility and his the greater."

"But what is the matter with Lorraine?" Hal cried, growing a little exasperated. "She is not nearly so frivolous as I am, and works far harder."

Miss Walton hesitated a little. "We feel she is naturally rather worldly-minded and ambitious, whereas you -" She paused.

"Whereas I am a simpleton," suggested Hal, with a mischievous light in her eyes. "Well, then, dear Miss Walton, how fortunate for me that some one clever and brilliant is willing to give me her friendship and help to lift me out of my slough of simpletondom!"

Miss Walton looked up with a reproof on her lips, but it died away, and a new expression came into her eyes as she seemed to see something in this unruly pupil she had not before suspected. Hal still looked as if a smothered sense of injustice might presently explode into hot words; but in the meantime the air of dignity stood its ground in spite of smudges and untidiness.

Neither spoke for a moment, and then Miss Walton remarked: "You do not mean to be guided by me in this matter?"

"Lorraine is my friend," Hal answered. "I cannot let myself listen to anything that suggests a slur upon her."

"Not even if your brother expressed a wish on the subject?"

"I do not ask Dudley to let me choose his friends."

"That is quite a different matter. He is fifteen years your senior."

Hal was silent. She stood with her hands behind her, and her head held high, and her clear eyes very straight to the front; well-knit, well-built, with a promise of that vague something which is so much stronger a factor in the world than mere beauty.

Miss Walton, who necessarily saw much of the mediocre and commonplace in her life-work of turning growing girls into presentable young women, felt her feelings undergo a further change. She also had the tact to see an appeal would go farther than mere advice.

"I was only thinking of you, Hal," she said, a trifle tiredly. "I have nothing against Lorraine, except that she is dangerously attractive if she likes, and her love of admiration and excitement does not make her a very wise friend for a girl of your age. You are different, and your paths are likely to lead far apart in the future. It did not seem to me desirable you should grow too fond of each other."

Even as she spoke she found herself wondering what Hal would say, and in an unlooked-for way interested.

Hal answered promptly :

"I do not think our lives will lie apart. Both of us will have to be breadwinners at any rate, and that will be a bond."

Her mobile face seemed to change. "Miss Walton, I'm devoted to Lorraine. I always shall be. But you needn't be anxious. The stronger influence is not where you think. I can bend Lorraine's will, but she cannot bend mine. It will always be so. And nothing that you nor any one can say will make me change to her."

They said little more, but when she was alone the head mistress stood silently for some minutes looking into the dying embers of her fire. Then she uttered to herself an enigmatical sentence:

"Beauty will give to Lorraine the great career; but the greater woman will be Hal."

Shortly after that Lorraine departed, and about a year later embarked in the theatrical world.

No one was surprised, but very adverse opinions were expressed among the girls concerning her success or otherwise; those who were jealous, or who had felt slighted during her short reign as school beauty, condemning any possible likelihood of a hit.

Hal said very little. She was already reaching out tentacles to the wider world, where schoolgirl criticisms would be mere prattle; and it was far more serious to her to wonder what Brother Dudley would think of her having an actress for her greatest friend.

She foresaw rocks ahead, but smiled humorously to herself in spite of them.

"What a tussle there'll be!" was her thought, "and how in the world am I to convince Dudley that Lorraine does not represent a receptacle for all the deadly sins? Heigho! The mere fact of my disagreeing will persuade him I am already contaminated, and he will see us both heading, like fire-engines, for the nethermost hell."

CHAPTER II

If Dudley Pritchard's imagination did not actually picture the lurid and violent descent Hal suggested, it certainly did view with the utmost alarm his lively young sister's friendship with a fully fledged actress.

As a matter of fact, Miss Walton's prognostications concerning his attitude to Lorraine Vivian, even as a schoolgirl, had been instantly confirmed upon their first meeting.

For no particular reason he disapproved of her. That was rather typical of Dudley. He disapproved of a good many things without quite knowing why, or being at any particular pains to find out.

Not that it made him bigoted. He could in fact be fairly tolerant; but as Hal affectionately observed, Dudley was so apt to pat himself on the back for his toleration towards things that it would never have occurred to most persons needed tolerating.

She knew perfectly well that he considered himself very tolerant towards much that was to be deprecated in her, but, far from resenting his attitude, she saw chiefly the humorous side, and managed to glean a good deal of quiet amusement from it.

Considering the fifteen years' difference in their ages, and the fact that Dudley was a hard-working architect in London, seeing life on all sides, while Hal was still a hoydenish schoolgirl, it was really remarkable how thoroughly she grasped and understood his character, and a great deal concerning the world in general, while he seemed to remain at his first decisions concerning her and most things.

It was just perhaps the difference between the book-student and the life-student. Dudley had always had a passion for books and for his profession. His clever brain was a well of knowledge concerning ancient architectures and relics of antiquity. He studied them because he loved them, and, before all things else, to him they seemed worth while.

He loved his sister also - he loved her better than any one, but it would never have occurred to him that she should be studied, or that there was anything in her to study. To him she was quite an ordinary girl, rather nice-looking when she was neat, but with a most unfortunate lack of the sedate dignity and discretion that he considered essential to the typically admirable woman.

That there might be other traits in their place, equally admirable, did not occur to him. They were not at any rate the traits he most admired.

Hal, on the other hand, was different in every respect. She loathed books, and learning, and what she called "dead old bones and rubbish." But she loved human nature, and studied in in every phase she could.

Left at a very tender age to Dudley's sole care and protection, she had to grow up without the enfolding, sympathetic love of a mother, or the gay companionship of brothers and sisters. Not in the least depressed, she started off at an early age in quest of adventure to see what the world was like outside the four walls of their home.

Brought back, sometimes by a policeman, with whom she had already become on the friendliest terms, sometimes in a cab in which some one else had placed her, sometimes by a kindly stranger, she would yet slip away again on the first opportunity, into the crush of mankind. Punishment and exhortation were alike useless; Hal was just as fascinated with people as Dudley was with books, and where her nature called she fearlessly followed.

Through this roving trait she picked up an amount of commonplace, everyday knowledge that would have dumbfounded the clever young architect, had he been in the least able to comprehend it. But while he dipped enthusiastically into bygone ages, and won letters and honours in his profession, she asked questions about life in the present, and grappled with the problem of everyday existence and the peculiarities of human nature, in a way that made her largely his superior, despite his letters and honours.

And best of all was her complete understanding of him. Dudley fondly imagined he was fulfilling to the best possible endeavours his

obligations of love and guardianship to his young sister. The young sister, with her tender, quizzical understanding, regarded him as a mere child, with a deliciously humorous way of always taking himself very seriously; a brilliant brain, an irritating fund of superiority, and something altogether apart that made him dearer than heaven and earth and all things therein to her.

Hal might be dearer than all else to Dudley, without finding herself loved in any way out of the ordinary, seeing how little he cared much about except his profession; but to be the beloved of all, to an eager, passionate, intense nature like hers, meant that in her heart she had placed him upon a pedestal, and, while fondly having her little smile over his shortcomings, yet loved him with an all-embracing love. He did not suspect it, and he would not have understood it if he had; being rather of the opinion that, considering all he had tried to be to her, she might have loved him enough in return to make a greater effort to please him.

Her obdurate resistance during the first stage of his disapproval of Lorraine Vivian increased this feeling considerably. He felt that if she really cared for him she should be willing to be guided by his judgment; and while perceiving, just as Miss Walton had done, that she meant to have her own way, he had less perspicacity to perceive also that nameless trait which, for want of a better word, we sometimes call grit, and which dimly proclaimed she might be trusted to follow her own strength of character.

When, later, his attitude of displeasure increased a thousandfold.

He was not told of it just at first. Hal was then in the throes of convincing him that her particular talents lay in the direction of secretarial work and journalism, rather than governessing or idleness, and persuading him to make arrangements at once for her to learn shorthand and typewriting with a view to becoming the private secretary of a well-known editor of one of the leading newspapers.

The editor in question was a distant connection, and quite willing to take her if she proved herself capable, recognising, through his skill at reading character, that she might eventually prove invaluable in other ways than mere letter-writing.

Dudley, seeing no farther than the fact of the City office, set his face resolutely against it as long as he could; but, of course, in the end Hal carried the day. Then came the shock of the knowledge that Lorraine had gone on the stage; and if, as had been said before, he did not actually picture the lurid exit to the lower regions Hal gave him credit for, he was sufficiently upset to have wakeful nights and many anxious, worried hours.

And to make it worse, Hal would not even be serious.

"Oh, don't look like that, Dudley!" she cried; "we really are not in any immediate danger of selling our souls to the Prince of Darkness. You dear old solemnities! Just because Lorraine is going on the stage, I believe you already see me in spangles, jumping through a hoop. Or rather 'trying to', because it is a dead cert. I should miss the hoop, and do a sort of double somersault over the horse's tail."

Dudley shut his firm lips a little more tightly, and looked hard at his

boots, without vouchsafing a reply.

"As a matter of fact," continued the incorrigible, "you ought to perceive how beautifully life balances things, by giving a dangerously attractive person like Lorraine a matter-of-fact, commonplace pal like myself to restrain her, and at the same time ward of possible dangers from various unoffending humans, who might fall hurtfully under her spell."

"It is only the danger to you that I have anything to do with."

"Oh fie, Dudley! as if I mattered half as much as Humanity with a capital H."

"To me, personally, you matter far more in this particular case."

"And yet, really, the chief danger to me is that I might unconsciously catch some reflection of Lorraine's charm and become dangerously attractive myself, instead of just an outspoken hobbledehoy no one takes seriously."

"I am not afraid of that," he said, evoking a peal of laughter of which he could not even see the point; "but since you are quite determined to go into the City as a secretary, instead of procuring a nice comfortable home as a companion, or staying quietly here to improve your mind, I naturally feel you will encounter quite enough dangers without getting mixed up in a theatrical set. Though, really," in a grumbling voice, "I can't see why you don't stay at home like any sensible girl. If I am not rich, I have at least enough for two."

"But if I stayed at home, and lived on you, Dudley, I should feel I had to improve my mind by way of making you some return; and you can't think how dreadfully my mind hates the idea of being improved. And if I went to some dear old lady as companion, she would be sure to die in an apoplectic fit in a month, and I should be charged with manslaughter. And I can't teach, because I don't know anything. The only serious danger I shall run as Mr. Elliott's secretary will be putting an occasional addition of my own to his letters, in a fit of exasperation, or driving his sub-editor mad; and he seems willing to risk that."

"You are likely to run greater dangers than that if you allow yourself to be drawn into a theatrical circle."

"What sort of dangers?... Oh, my dear, saintly episcopal architect, what foundations of darkness are you building upon now, out of a little old-fashioned, out-of-date prejudice which you might have dug up from some of your studies in antiquity books? There are just as many dangers outside the theatrical world as in it, for the sort of woman dangers are attractive to; and little Sunday-school teachers have come to grief, while famous actresses have won through unscathed."

Dudley's face expressed both surprise and distaste.

"I wonder what you know about it anyway. I think you are talking at random. Certainly no dangers would come near you if you listened to my wishes and settled down quietly at home. If you don't care about living in Bloomsbury, I will take a small house in the suburbs, and you can amuse yourself with the housekeeping, and tennis, and that sort of

thing."

"And when you want to marry?"

"I shall not want to marry. I am wedded to my profession."

"O Dudley!... Dudley!..." She slipped off the table where she had been jauntily seated, and came and stood beside him, passing her arm through his. "Can't you see I'd just die of a little house in the suburbs, looking after the housekeeping: it's the most dreadful and awful thing on the face of the earth. I'm not a bit sorry for slaves, and prisoners, and shipwrecked sailors, and East-end starvelings; every bit of sympathy I've got is used up for the girls who've got to stay in hundrum homes, and be nothing, and do nothing, but just finished young ladies. Work is the finest thing in the world. It's just splendid to have something real to do, and be paid for it. Why, they can't even go to prison, or be hungry, or anything except possible wives for possible men who may or may not happen to want them."

"Of course you are talking arrant nonsense," Dudley replied frigidly. "I don't know where in the world you get all your queer ideas. Woman's sphere is most decidedly the home; you seem to -" but a small hand was clapped vigorously over his mouth, and eyes of feigned horror searching his.

"Do you know, I'm half afraid you've lived in your musty old books so long, Dudley," with mock seriousness, "that you've lost all count of time. It is about a thousand years since sane and sensible men believed all that drivel about women's only sphere being the home, and since women were content to be mere chattels, stuck in with the rest of the furniture, to look after the children. Nowadays the jolly, sensible woman that a man likes for wife or pal, is very often a busy worker."

"Let her work busily at home, then!"

"Why, you'll want me to crochet antimacassars next, or cross-stitch a sampler! Just imagine the thing if I tried! It would have dreadful results, because I should be sure to use bad language - I couldn't help it; and the article I should concoct would make people faint, or turn cross-eyed or colour-blind. I shan't do nearly so much harm in the end as a City secretary with an actress pal."

"One thing is quite certain: you mean, as usual, to have your own way, and my feelings go for nothing at all."

He turned away from her, and took up his hat to go out.

"Your protestations of affection, Hal, are apt to seem both insincere and out of place."

The tears came swiftly to her eyes, and she took a quick step towards him, but he had gone, and closed the door after him before she could speak. She watched his retreating figure, with the tears still lingering, and then suddenly she smiled.

"Anyhow, I haven't got to besweet and gentle and housekeep," was her comforting reflection. "I'm going to be a real worker, earning real money, and have Lorraine for my pal as well. Some day Dudley will see

it is all right, and I'm only about half as black as he supposes, and that I love him better than anything else at heart. In the meantime, as I'm likely to get a biggish dose of dignified disapproval over this theatre business, I'd better ask Dick to come out to tea this afternoon to buck me up for what lies ahead. Goodness! what a boon a jolly cousin is when you happen to have been mated with your great-aunt for a brother."

CHAPTER III

For a few years after that particular disagreement nothing of special note happened. Hal got quickly through her course of shorthand and typewriting and became Mr. Elliott's private secretary and general factotum, which last included an occasional flight into journalism as a reporter. Naturally, since this sometimes took her to out-of-the-way places, and brought her in contact with human oddities, she loved it beyond all things, and was ever ready for a jaunt, no matter whither it took her.

Brother Dudley was discreetly left a little in the dark about it, because nothing in the world would ever have persuaded him that a girl of Hal's age could run promiscuously about London unmolested. Hal knew better. She was perfectly well able to acquire a stony stare that baffled the most dauntless of impertinent intruders; and she had, moreover, an upright, grenadier-like carriage, and an air of business-like energy that were safeguards in themselves.

A great deal of persuasive tact was necessary, however, to win Dudley's consent to a year in America, whither Mr. Elliott had to go on business; but on Mrs. Elliott calling upon him herself to explain that she also was going, and would take care of Hal, he reluctantly consented.

Curiously enough, it was that year in a great measure that changed the current of Lorraine's life. She came to the cross-roads, and took the wrong turn.

Perhaps Miss Walton, with her knowledge of girls, could have foretold it. She might have said, in that enigmatical way of hers, "If Lorraine comes to the cross-roads, where life offers a short cut to fame, instead of a long, wearisome drudgery, she will probably take it. Hal will score off her own bat, or not at all. Lorraine will only care about gaining her end."

Anyhow the cross-roads came, and Hal, the stronger, was not there. As a matter of fact, for some little time the two had not seen much of each other. Lorraine was touring in the provinces, and rarely had time to come to London. Hal was tied by her work, and could not spare the time to go to Lorraine.

There was for a little while a cessation of intercourse. Neither was the least bit less fond, but circumstances kept them apart, and they

could only wait until opportunity brought them together again. Both were too busy for lengthy correspondence, and only wrote short letters occasionally, just to assure each other the friendship held firm, and absence made no real difference.

Then Hal went off to America, and while she was away Lorraine came to her cross-roads.

It is hardly necessary to review in detail what her life had been since she joined the theatrical profession. It is mostly hard work and disillusion and disappointment for all in the beginning, and only a very small percentage ever win through to the forefront.

But for Lorraine, on the top of all the rest, was a mercenary, unscrupulous, intriguing mother, who added tenfold to what must inevitably have been a heavy burden and strain - a mother who taxed her utmost powers of endurance, and brought her shame as well as endless worry; and yet to whom, let it be noted down now, to her everlasting credit, no matter in what other way she may have erred, she never turned a deaf ear nor treated with the smallest unkindness.

It would be impossible to gauge just what Lorraine had to go through in her first few years on the stage. She seemed to make no headway at all, and at the end of the third year she felt herself as far as ever from getting her chance.

That she was brilliantly clever and brilliantly attractive had not so far weighed the balance to her side. There were many others also clever and attractive. She felt she had practically everything except the one thing needed - influence.

Thus her spirits were at a very low ebb. She was still touring the provinces, and heartily sick of all the discomfort involved. Dingy lodgings, hurried train journeys, much bickering and jealousy in the company with which she was acting, and a great deal of domestic worry over that handsome, extravagant mother, who had once taken her, in company with the so-called uncle, to the select seminary of the Misses Walton.

How her mother managed to live and dress as if she were rich had puzzled Lorraine many times in those days; but when she left the shelter of those narrow, restricting walls, where windows were whitewashed so that even boys might not be seen passing by, she learnt many things all too quickly.

She learnt something about the uncles too. One of them was at great pains to try and teach her, but with hideous shapes and suggestions trying to crowd her mind, the thought of Hal's freshness still acted as a sort of protection and kept her untainted.

A little later, after she had commenced to earn a salary, she found that directly the family purse was empty, and creditors objectionably insistent, she herself had to come to the rescue.

There were some miserable days then. It was useless to upbraid her mother. She always posed as the injured one, and could not see that in robbing her child of a real home she was strewing her path with dangers as well, by placing her in an ambiguous, comfortless position, from which any relief seemed worth while.

Then at last came the welcome news that Mrs. Vivian had procured a post as lady-housekeeper to a rich stockbroker in Kensington, who had also a large interest in a West-end theatre.

Lorraine read the glowing terms in which her mother described her new home and employer with a deep sense of relief, seeing in the new venture a probable escape for herself from those relentless demands upon her own scanty purse. A month later came the paragraph, in a voluminous epistle:

"Mr. Raynor says you are to make his house your home whenever you are free. He insists upon giving you a floor all to yourself, like a little flat, where you can receive your friends undisturbed, and feel you have a little home of your own. I am quite certain also that he will try to help you in your career through his interest in the Greenway Theatre."

If Lorraine wondered at all concerning this unknown man's interest in her welfare she kept it to herself.

A home instead of the dingy lodgings she had grown to hate, and the prospect of influential help, were sufficiently alluring to drown all other reflections.

When the tour was over she went direct to Kensington, to make her home with her mother until her next engagement. She was already too much a woman of the world not to notice at once that her mother and her host's relations seemed scarcely those of employee and employer, and there was a little passage of arms between herself and Mrs. Vivian the next morning.

In reply to a long harangue, in which that lady set forth the advantages Lorraine was to gain from her mother's perspicacity in obtaining such a post, she asked rather shortly:

"And why in the world should Mr. Raynor do all this for me, simply because you are his housekeeper?"

A red spot burned in Mrs. Vivian's cheek as she replied: "He does it because he wants me to stay; and I have told him I cannot do so unless he makes it possible for me to give you a comfortable, happy home here."

Lorraine's lips curled with a scorn she did not attempt to conceal, but she only stood silently gazing across the Park.

She had already decided to make the best of her mother's deficiencies, seeing she was almost the only relative she possessed, but she had a natural loathing of hypocrisy, and wished she would leave facts alone instead of attempting to gloss them over. Ever since she left school she had been obliged to live in lodgings, because her mother would not take the trouble to try and provide anything more of a home.

It was a little too much, therefore, that she should now allude to her maternal solicitude because it happened to suit her purpose. She felt herself growing hard and callous and bitter under the strain of the early struggle to succeed, handicapped as she was; and because of one or two ugly experiences that came in the path of such a warfare. She was losing heart also, and feeling bitterly the stinging whip of

circumstances. As she stood gazing across the Park, some girls about her own age rode past, returning from their morning gallop, talking and laughing gaily together.

Lorraine found herself wondering what life would be like with her beauty and talent if there were no vulgarly extravagant, unprincipled mother in the background, no insistent need to earn money, no gnawing ambition for a fame she already began to feel might prove an empty joy.

She had not seen Hal for a year, and she felt an ache for her. In the shifting, unreliable, soul-numbing atmosphere of her stage career, she still looked upon Hal as a City of Refuge; and when she had not seen her for some time she felt herself drifting towards unknown shoals and quicksands.

And, unfortunately, Hal was away in America, with the editor to whom she was secretary and typist, and not very likely to be back for three months.

No; there was nothing for it but to make the best of her mother's explanation and the comfortable home at her feet.

As for Mr. Raynor himself, though he seemed to Lorraine vulgarly proud of his self-made position, vulgarly ostentatious of his wealth, and vulgarly familiar with both herself and her mother, she could not actually lay any offence to his charge. And in any case, he undoubtedly could help her, if he chose, to procure at last the coveted part in a London theatre. With this end in view, she laid herself out to please him and to make the most of her opportunity.

And in this way she came to choose cross-roads which had to decide her future.

Before she had been a week in the house, Frank Raynor deserted his housekeeper altogether, and fell in love with the housekeeper's daughter. Within a fortnight he had laid all his possessions at Lorraine's feet, promising her not only wealth and devotion, but the brilliant career she so coveted.

The man was generous, but he was no saint. Give him herself, and she would have the world at her feet if he could bring it there. Give any less, and he would have no more to say to her whatsoever.

It was the cross-roads.

Lorraine struggled manfully for a month. She hated the idea of marrying a man better suited in every way to her mother. She dreaded and hated the thought of what had perhaps been between them; yet she was afraid to ask any question that might corroborate her worst fears.

All that was best in her of delicate and refined sensitiveness surged upward, and she longed to run away to some remote island far removed from the harsh realities of life.

Yet, how could she? Without money, without influence, without rich friends, what did the world at large hold for her?

How much easier to go with the tide - seize her opportunity - and dare Fate to do her worst.

At the last there was a bitter scene between mother and daughter.

"If you refuse Frank Raynor now, you ruin the two of us," was Mrs. Vivian's angry indictment. "What can we expect from him any more? How are you ever going to get another such chance to make a hit?"

"And what if it ruins my life to marry him?" Lorraine asked.

"Such nonsense! The man can give you everything. What in the world more do you want? He is good enough looking; he could pass as a gentleman, and he is rich."

A sudden nauseous spasm at all the ugliness of life shook Lorraine. She turned on her mother swiftly, scarcely knowing what she said, and asked:

"You are anxious enough to sell me to him. What is he to you anyway? What has he ever been to you?"

Mrs. Vivian blanched before the suddenness of the attack, but she held her ground.

"You absurd child, what in the world could he be to me? It is easy enough to see he has no eyes for any one but you."

"And before I came?"

Lorraine took a step forward, and for a moment the two women faced each other squarely. The eyes of each were a little hard, the expressions a little flinty; but behind the older woman's was a scornful, unscrupulous indifference to any moral aspect; behind the younger's a hunted, rather pitiful hopelessness. The ugly things of life had caught the one in their talons and held her there for good and all, more or less a willing slave, the soul of the younger was still alive, still conscious, still capable of distinguishing the good and desiring it.

The mother turned away at last with a little harsh laugh.

"Before you came he was nothing to me. He never has been anything."

Without waiting for Lorraine to speak, she turned again, and added:

"If you weren't a fool, you would perceive he is treating you better than ninety-nine men in a hundred. He has suggested marriage. The others might not have done."

"Oh! I'm not a fool in that way," came the bitter reply, "but I've wondered once or twice what your attitude would have been, supposing - er - he had been one of the ninety-nine!"

Mrs. Vivian was saved replying by the unexpected appearance of Frank Raynor himself. Entering the room with a quick step, he suddenly stopped short and looked from one to the other. Something in their expressions told him what had transpired. He turned sharply on the mother.

"You've been speaking to Lorraine about me. I told you I wouldn't have

it. I know your bullying ways, and I said she was to be left to decide for herself."

Lorraine saw an angry retort on her mother's lips, and hurriedly left the room. She put on her hat and slipped away into the Park. What was she to do?... where, oh where was Hal!

Within three months the short cut was taken. Lorraine was engaged to play a leading part at the Greenway Theatre, and she was the wife of Frank Raynor.

CHAPTER IV

When Hal came back from America and heard about Lorraine's marriage, it was a great shock to her. At first she could hardly bring herself to believe it at all. Nothing thoroughly convinced her until she stood in the pretty Kensington house and beheld Mrs. Vivian's pronounced air of triumph, and Lorraine's somewhat forced attempts at joyousness.

It was one of the few occasions in her life when Lorraine was nervous. She did not want Hal to know the sordid facts; and she did not believe she would be able to hide them from her.

When Hal, from a mass of somewhat jerky, contradictory information, had gleaned that the new leading part at the London theatre had been gained through the middle-aged bridegroom's influence, her comment was sufficiently direct.

"Oh, that's why you did it, is it? Well, I only hope you don't hate the sight of him already."

"How absurd you are, Hal!... Of course I don't hate the sight of him. He's a dear. He gives me everything in the world I want, if he possibly can."

"How dull. It's much more fun getting a few things for oneself. And when the only thing in all the world you want is your freedom, do you imagine he'll give you that?"

Lorraine got up suddenly, thrusting her hands out before her, as if to ward off some vague fear.

"Hal, you are brutal to-day. What is the use of talking like that now?... Why did you go to America?... Perhaps if you hadn't gone _"

"Give me a cigarette," said Hal, with a little catch in her voice, "I want soothing. At the present moment you're a greater strain than Dudley talking down at me from a pyramid of worn-out prejudices. I don't know why my two Best-Belovèds should both be cast in a mould to weigh so heavily on my shoulders."

Sitting on the table as usual, she puffed vigorously at her cigarette, blowing clouds of smoke, through which Lorraine could not see that her eyes were dim with tears. For Hal's unerring instinct told her that,

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