

Dangerous Days

by

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Chapter 1.....	3
Chapter 2.....	12
Chapter 3.....	18
Chapter 4.....	22
Chapter 5.....	26
Chapter 6.....	30
Chapter 7.....	36
Chapter 8.....	38
Chapter 9.....	47
Chapter 10.....	53
Chapter 11.....	62
Chapter 12.....	66
Chapter 13.....	69
Chapter 14.....	73
Chapter 15.....	77
Chapter 16.....	80
Chapter 17.....	86
Chapter 18.....	91
Chapter 19.....	94
Chapter 20.....	97
Chapter 21.....	101
Chapter 22.....	105
Chapter 23.....	112
Chapter 24.....	116
Chapter 25.....	119
Chapter 26.....	123
Chapter 27.....	130
Chapter 28.....	135
Chapter 29.....	138
Chapter 30.....	143
Chapter 31.....	147
Chapter 32.....	152
Chapter 33.....	156
Chapter 34.....	162
Chapter 35.....	166
Chapter 36.....	170
Chapter 37.....	179
Chapter 38.....	184
Chapter 39.....	191
Chapter 40.....	196
Chapter 41.....	199
Chapter 42.....	203
Chapter 43.....	210
Chapter 44.....	214
Chapter 45.....	220
Chapter 46.....	224
Chapter 47.....	232
Chapter 48.....	238
Chapter 49.....	242
Chapter 50.....	248

# Chapter 1

Natalie Spencer was giving a dinner. She was not an easy hostess. Like most women of futile lives she lacked a sense of proportion, and the small and unimportant details of the service absorbed her. Such conversation as she threw at random, to right and left, was trivial and distracted.

Yet the dinner was an unimportant one. It had been given with an eye more to the menu than to the guest list, which was characteristic of Natalie's mental processes. It was also characteristic that when the final course had been served without mishap, and she gave a sigh of relief before the gesture of withdrawal which was a signal to the other women, that she had realized no lack in it. The food had been good, the service satisfactory. She stood up, slim and beautifully dressed, and gathered up the women with a smile.

The movement found Doctor Haverford, at her left, unprepared and with his coffee cup in his hand. He put it down hastily and rose, and the small cup overturned in its saucer, sending a smudge of brown into the cloth.

"Dreadfully awkward of me!" he said. The clergyman's smile of apology was boyish, but he was suddenly aware that his hostess was annoyed. He caught his wife's amiable eyes on him, too, and they said quite plainly that one might spill coffee at home - one quite frequently did, to confess a good man's weakness - but one did not do it at Natalie Spencer's table. The rector's smile died into a sheepish grin.

For the first time since dinner began Natalie Spencer had a clear view of her husband's face. Not that that had mattered particularly, but the flowers had been too high. For a small dinner, low flowers, always. She would speak to the florist. But, having glanced at Clayton, standing tall and handsome at the head of the table, she looked again. His eyes were fixed on her with a curious intentness. He seemed to be surveying her, from the top of her burnished hair to the very gown she wore. His gaze made her vaguely uncomfortable. It was unsmiling, appraising, almost - only that was incredible in Clay - almost hostile.

Through the open door the half dozen women trailed out, Natalie in white, softly rustling as she moved, Mrs. Haverford in black velvet, a trifle tight over her ample figure, Marion Hayden, in a very brief garment she would have called a frock, perennial debutante that she was, rather negligible Mrs. Terry Mackenzie, and trailing behind the others, frankly loath to leave the men, Audrey Valentine. Clayton Spencer's eyes rested on Audrey with a smile of amused toleration, on her outrageously low green gown, that was somehow casually elegant, on her long green ear-rings and jade chain, on the cigaret between her slim fingers.

Audrey's audacity always amused him. In the doorway she turned and nonchalantly surveyed the room.

"For heaven's sake, hurry!" she apostrophized the table. "We are going to knit - I feel it. And don't give Chris anything more to drink, Clay. He's had enough."

She went on, a slim green figure, moving slowly and reluctantly toward the drawing-room, her head held high, a little smile still on her lips. But, alone for a moment, away from curious eyes, her expression changed, her smile faded, her

lovely, irregular face took on a curious intensity. What a devilish evening! Chris drinking too much, talking wildly, and always with furtive eyes on her. Chris! Oh, well, that was life, she supposed.

She stopped before a long mirror and gave a bit of careless attention to her hair. With more care she tinted her lips again with a cosmetic stick from the tiny, diamond-studded bag she carried. Then she turned and surveyed the hall and the library beyond. A new portrait of Natalie was there, hanging on the wall under a shaded light, and she wandered in, still with her cigaret, and surveyed it. Natalie had everything. The portrait showed it. It was beautiful, smug, complacent.

Mrs. Valentine's eyes narrowed slightly. She stood there, thinking about Natalie. She had not everything, after all. There was something she lacked. Charm, perhaps. She was a cold woman. But, then, Clay was cold, too. He was even a bit hard. Men said that; hard and ambitious, although he was popular. Men liked strong men. It was only the weak they deplored and loved. Poor Chris!

She lounged into the drawing-room, smiling her slow, cool smile. In the big, uncarpeted alcove, where stood Natalie's great painted piano, Marion Hayden was playing softly, carefully posed for the entrance of the men. Natalie was sitting with her hands folded, in the exact center of a peacock-blue divan. The others were knitting.

"Very pretty effect, Toots!" Audrey called. And Miss Hayden gave her the unashamed smile of one woman of the world to another.

Audrey had a malicious impulse. She sat down beside Natalie, and against the blue divan her green gown shrieked a discord. She was vastly amused when Natalie found an excuse and moved away, to dispose herself carefully in a tall, old-gold chair, which framed her like a picture.

"We were talking of men, my dear," said Mrs. Haverford, placidly knitting.

"Of course," said Audrey, flippantly.

"Of what it is that they want more than anything else in the world."

"Children-sons," put in Mrs. Mackenzie. She was a robust, big woman with kindly eyes, and she was childless.

"Women!" called Toots Hayden. She was still posed, but she had stopped playing. Mrs. Haverford's eyes rested on her a moment, disapprovingly.

"What do you say, Natalie?" Audrey asked.

"I hadn't thought about it. Money, probably."

"You are all wrong," said Audrey, and lighted a fresh cigaret. "They want different things at different ages. That's why marriage is such a rotten failure. First they want women; any woman will do, really. So they marry - any woman. Then they want money. After that they want power and place. And when they've got that they begin to want - love."

"Good gracious, Audrey, what a cynical speech!" said Mrs. Mackenzie. "If they've been married all that time - "

"Oh, tut!" said Audrey, rudely.

She had the impulse of the unhappy woman to hurt, but she was rather ashamed of herself, too. These women were her friends. Let them go on believing that life

was a thing of lasting loves, that men were true to the end, and that the relationships of life were fixed and permanent things.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just being clever! Let's talk about the war. It's the only thing worth talking about, anyhow."

In the dining-room Clayton Spencer, standing tall and erect, had watched the women go out. How typical the party was of Natalie, of her meticulous care in small things and her indifference or real ignorance as to what counted. Was it indifference, really, or was it supreme craftiness, the stupidity of her dinners, the general unattractiveness of the women she gathered around her, the ill-assortment of people who had little in themselves and nothing whatever in common?

Of all the party, only Audrey and the rector had interested him even remotely. Audrey amused him. Audrey was a curious mixture of intelligence and frivolity. She was a good fellow. Sometimes he thought she was a nice woman posing as not quite nice. He didn't know. He was not particularly analytical, but at least she had been one bit of cheer during the endless succession of courses.

The rector was the other, and he was relieved to find Doctor Haverford moving up to the vacant place at his right.

"I've been wanting to see you, Clay," he said in an undertone. "It's rather stupid to ask you how you found things over there. But I'm going to do it."

"You mean the war?"

"There's nothing else in the world, is there?"

"One wouldn't have thought so from the conversation here to-night."

Clayton Spencer glanced about the table. Rodney Page, the architect, was telling a story clearly not for the ears of the clergy, and his own son, Graham, forced in at the last moment to fill a vacancy, was sitting alone, bored and rather sulky, and sipping his third cognac.

"If you want my opinion, things are bad."

"For the Allies? Or for us?"

"Good heavens, man, it's the same thing. It is only the Allies who are standing between us and trouble now. The French are just holding their own. The British are fighting hard, but they're fighting at home too. We can't sit by for long. We're bound to be involved."

The rector lighted an excellent cigar.

"Even if we are," he said, hopefully, "I understand our part of it will be purely naval. And I believe our navy will give an excellent account of itself."

"Probably," Clay retorted. "If it had anything to fight! But with the German fleet bottled up, and the inadvisability of attempting to bombard Berlin from the sea - "

The rector made no immediate reply, and Clayton seemed to expect none. He sat back, tapping the table with long, nervous fingers, and his eyes wandered from the table around the room. He surveyed it all with much the look he had given Natalie, a few moments before, searching, appraising, vaguely hostile. Yet it was a lovely room, simple and stately. Rodney Page, who was by way of being decorator for the few, as he was architect for the many, had done the room, with its plainly paneled walls, the over-mantel with an old painting inset, its lion chairs, its two console tables with each its pair of porcelain jars. Clayton liked the dignity

of the room, but there were times when he and Natalie sat at the great table alone, with only the candles for light and the rest of the room in a darkness from which the butler emerged at stated intervals and retreated again, when he felt the oppression of it. For a dinner party, with the brilliant colors of the women's gowns, it was ideal. For Natalie and himself alone, with the long silences between them that seemed to grow longer as the years went on, it was inexpressibly dreary.

He was frequently aware that both Natalie and himself were talking for the butler's benefit.

>From the room his eyes traveled to Graham, sitting alone, uninterested, dull and somewhat flushed. And on Graham, too, he fixed that clear appraising gaze that had vaguely disconcerted Natalie. The boy had had too much to drink, and unlike the group across the table, it had made him sullen and quiet. He sat there, staring moodily at the cloth and turning his glass around in fingers that trembled somewhat.

Then he found himself involved in the conversation.

"London as dark as they say?" inquired Christopher Valentine. He was a thin young man, with a small, affectedly curled mustache. Clayton did not care for him, but Natalie found him amusing. "I haven't been over - " he really said 'ovah'- "for ages. Eight months or so."

"Very dark. Hard to get about."

"Most of the fellows I know over there are doing something. I'd like to run over, but what's the use? Nobody around, street's dark, no gayety, nothing."

"No. You'd better stay at home. They - don't particularly want visitors, anyhow."

"Unless they go for war contracts, eh?" said Valentine pleasantly, a way he had of taking the edge off the frequent impertinence of his speech. "No, I'm not going over. We're not popular over there, I understand. Keep on thinking we ought to take a hand in the dirty mess."

Graham spoke, unexpectedly.

"Well, don't you think we ought?"

"If you want my candid opinion, no. We've been waving a red flag called the Monroe Doctrine for some little time, as a signal that we won't stand for Europe coming over here and grabbing anything. If we're going to be consistent, we can't do any grabbing in Europe, can we?"

Clayton eyed him rather contemptuously.

"We might want to 'grab' as you term it, a share in putting the madmen of Europe into chains," he said. "I thought you were pro-British, Chris."

"Only as to clothes, women and filet of sole," Chris returned flippantly. Then, seeing Graham glowering at him across the table, he dropped his affectation of frivolity. "What's the use of our going in now?" he argued. "This Somme push is the biggest thing yet. They're going through the Germans like a hay cutter through a field. German losses half a million already."

"And what about the Allies? Have they lost nothing?" This was Clayton's attorney, an Irishman named Denis Nolan. There had been two n's in the Denis, originally, but although he had disposed of a part of his birthright, he was still

belligerently Irish. "What about Rumania? What about the Russians at Lemberg? What about Saloniki?"

"You Irish!" said the rector, genially. "Always fighting the world and each other. Tell me, Nolan, why is it that you always have individual humor and collective ill-humor?"

He felt that that was rather neat. But Nolan was regarding him acrimoniously, and Clayton apparently had not heard at all.

The dispute went on, Chris Valentine alternately flippant and earnest, the rector conciliatory, Graham glowering and silent. Nolan had started on the Irish question, and Rodney baited him with the prospect of conscription there. Nolan's voice, full and mellow and strangely sweet, dominated the room.

But Clayton was not listening. He had heard Nolan air his views before. He was a trifle acid, was Nolan. He needed mellowing, a woman in his life. But Nolan had loved once, and the girl had died. With the curious constancy of the Irish, he had remained determinedly celibate.

"Strange race," Clayton reflected idly, as Nolan's voice sang on. "Don't know what they want, but want it like the devil. One-woman men, too. Curious!"

It occurred to him then that his own reflection was as odd as the fidelity of the Irish. He had been faithful to his wife. He had never thought of being anything else.

He did not pursue that line of thought. He sat back and resumed his nervous tapping of the cloth, not listening, hardly thinking, but conscious of a discontent that was beyond analysis.

Clayton had been aware, since his return from the continent and England days before, of a change in himself. He had not recognized it until he reached home. And he was angry with himself for feeling it. He had gone abroad for certain Italian contracts and had obtained them. A year or two, if the war lasted so long, and he would be on his feet at last, after years of struggle to keep his organization together through the hard times that preceded the war. He would be much more than on his feet. Given three more years of war, and he would be a very rich man.

And now that the goal was within sight, he was finding that it was not money he wanted. There were some things money could not buy. He had always spent money. His anxieties had not influenced his scale of living. Money, for instance, could not buy peace for the world; or peace for a man, either. It had only one value for a man; it gave him independence of other men, made him free.

"Three things," said the rector, apropos of something or other, and rather oratorically, "are required by the normal man. Work, play, and love. Assure the crippled soldier that he has lost none of these, and - "

Work and play and love. Well, God knows he had worked. Play? He would have to take up golf again more regularly. He ought to play three times a week. Perhaps he could take a motor-tour now and then, too. Natalie would like that.

Love? He had not thought about love very much. A married man of forty-five certainly had no business thinking about love. No, he certainly did not want love. He felt rather absurd, even thinking about it. And yet, in the same flash, came a thought of the violent passions of his early twenties. There had been a time when

he had suffered horribly because Natalie had not wanted to marry him. He was glad all that was over. No, he certainly did not want love.

He drew a long breath and straightened up.

"How about those plans, Rodney?" he inquired genially. "Natalie says you have them ready to look over."

"I'll bring them round, any time you say."

"To-morrow, then. Better not lose any time. Building is going to be a slow matter, at the best."

"Slow and expensive," Page added. He smiled at his host, but Clayton Spencer remained grave.

"I've been away," he said, "and I don't know what Natalie and you have cooked up between you. But just remember this: I want a comfortable country house. I don't want a public library."

Page looked uncomfortable. The move into the drawing-room covered his uneasiness, but he found a moment later on to revert to the subject.

"I have tried to carry out Natalie's ideas, Clay," he said. "She wanted a sizeable place, you know. A wing for house-parties, and - that sort of thing."

Clayton's eyes roamed about the room, where portly Mrs. Haverford was still knitting placidly, where the Chris Valentines were quarreling under pretense of raillery, where Toots Hayden was smoking a cigaret in a corner and smiling up at Graham, and where Natalie, exquisite and precise, was supervising the laying out of a bridge table.

"She would, of course," he observed, rather curtly, and, moving through a French window, went out onto a small bakony into the night.

He was irritated with himself. What had come over him? He shook himself, and drew a long breath of the sweet night air. His tall, boyishly straight figure dominated the little place. In the half-light he looked, indeed, like an overgrown boy. He always looked like Graham's brother, anyhow; it was one of Natalie's complaints against him. But he put the thought of Natalie away, along with his new discontent. By George, it was something to feel that, if a man could not fight in this war, at least he could make shells to help end it. Oblivious to the laughter in the room behind him, the clink of glass as whiskey-and-soda was brought in, he planned there in the darkness, new organization, new expansions - and found in it a great content.

He was proud of his mills. They were his, of his making. The small iron foundry of his father's building had developed into the colossal furnaces that night after night lighted the down-town district like a great conflagration. He was proud of his mills and of his men. He liked to take men and see them work out his judgment of them. He was not often wrong. Take that room behind him: Rodney Page, dilettante, liked by women, who called him "Roddie," a trifle unscrupulous but not entirely a knave, the sort of man one trusted with everything but one's wife; Chris, too - only he let married women alone, and forgot to pay back the money he borrowed. There was only one man in the room about whom he was beginning to mistrust his judgment, and that was his own son.

Perhaps it was because he had so recently come from lands where millions of boys like Graham were pouring out their young lives like wine, that Clayton



Spencer was seeing Graham with a new vision. He turned and glanced back into the drawing-room, where Graham, in the center of that misfit group and not quite himself, was stooping over Marion Hayden. They would have to face that, of course, the woman urge in the boy. Until now his escapades had been boyish ones, a few debts frankly revealed and as frankly regretted, some college mischiefs, a rather serious gambling fever, quickly curbed. But never women, thank God.

But now the boy was through with college, and already he noticed something new in their relationship. Natalie had always spoiled him, and now there were, with increasing frequency, small consultations in her room when he was shut out, and he was beginning to notice a restraint in his relations with the boy, as though mother and son had united against him.

He was confident that Natalie was augmenting Graham's allowance from her own. His salary, rather, for he had taken the boy into the business, not as a partner - that would come later - but as the manager of a department. He never spoke to Natalie of money. Her house bills were paid at the office without question. But only that day Miss Potter, his secretary, had reported that Mrs. Spencer's bank had called up and he had made good a considerable overdraft.

He laid the cause of his discontent to Graham, finally. The boy had good stuff in him. He was not going to allow Natalie to spoil him, or to withdraw him into that little realm of detachment in which she lived. Natalie did not need him, and had not, either as a lover or a husband, for years. But the boy did.

There was a little stir in the room behind. The Haverfords were leaving, and the Hayden girl, who was plainly finding the party dull. Graham was looking down at her, a tall, handsome boy, with Natalie's blonde hair but his father's height and almost insolent good looks.

"Come around to-morrow," she was saying. "About four. There's always a crowd about five, you know."

Clayton knew, and felt a misgiving. The Hayden house was a late afternoon loafing and meeting place for the idle sons and daughters of the rich. Not the conservative old families, who had developed a sense of the responsibility of wealth, but of the second generation of easily acquired money. As she went out, with Graham at her elbow, he heard Chris, at the bridge table.

"Terrible house, the Haydens. Just one step from the Saturday night carouse in Clay's mill district."

When Graham came back, Mrs. Haverford put her hand on his arm.

"I wish you would come to see us, Graham. Delight so often speaks of you."

Graham stiffened almost imperceptibly.

"Thanks, I will." But his tone was distant. "You know she comes out this winter."

"Really?"

"And - you were great friends. I think she misses you a little."

"I wish I thought so!"

Gentle Mrs. Haverford glanced up at him quickly. "You know she doesn't approve of me."

"Why, Graham!"

"Well, ask her," he said. And there was a real bitterness under the lightness of his tone. "I'll come, of course, Mrs. Haverford. Thank you for asking me. I haven't a lot of time. I'm a sort of clerk down at the mill, you know."

Natalie overheard, and her eyes met Clayton's, with a glance of malicious triumph. She had been deeply resentful that he had not made Graham a partner at once. He remembered a conversation they had had a few months before.

"Why should he have to start at the bottom?" she had protested. "You have never been quite fair to him, Clay." His boyish diminutive had stuck to him. "You expect him to know as much about the mill now as you do, after all these years."

"Not at all. I want him to learn. That's precisely the reason why I'm not taking him in at once."

"How much salary is he to have?"

"Three thousand a year."

"Three thousand! Why, it will take all of that to buy him a car."

"There are three cars here now; I should think he could manage."

"Every boy wants his own car."

"I pay my other managers three thousand," he had said, still patient. "He will live here. His car can be kept here, without expense. Personally, I think it too much money for the service he will be able to give for the first year or two."

And, although she had let it go at that, he had felt in her a keen resentment. Graham had got a car of his own, was using it hard, if the bills the chauffeur presented were an indication, and Natalie had overdrawn her account two thousand five hundred dollars.

The evening wore on. Two tables of bridge were going, with Denis Nolan sitting in at one. Money in large amounts was being written in on the bridge scores. The air of the room was heavy with smoke, and all the men and some of the women were drinking rather too much. There were splotches of color under the tan in Graham's cheeks, and even Natalie's laughter had taken on a higher note.

Chris's words rankled in Clayton Spencer's mind. A step from the Saturday night carouse. How much better was this sort of thing? A dull party, driven to cards and drink to get through the evening. And what sort of home life were he and Natalie giving the boy? Either this, or the dreary evenings when they were alone, with Natalie sifting with folded hands, or withdrawing to her boudoir upstairs, where invariably she summoned Graham to talk to him behind closed doors.

He went into the library and shut the door. The room rested him, after the babble across. He lighted a cigar, and stood for a moment before Natalie's portrait. It had been painted while he was abroad at, he suspected, Rodney's instigation. It left him quite cold, as did Natalie herself.

He could look at it dispassionately, as he had never quite cared to regard Natalie. Between them, personally, there was always the element she never allowed him to forget, that she had given him a son. This was Natalie herself, Natalie at forty-one, girlish, beautiful, fretful and-selfish. Natalie with whom he was to live the rest of his life, who was to share his wealth and his future, and with whom he shared not a single thought in common.

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