This Dark Adventure

By Ellen Hogue

How Love Pitted a Pretty Stenographer Against a Debutante Heiress, and Brought the Former Face to Face with Death. Beginning a Stirring New Serial

INSTALMENT I.

THE story of Ann Robinson is so bizarre that it is difficult to know exactly how to begin it. (The end, of course, is clear enough, and the body of the tale is there. But the beginning . . .) How to prove in a few words that she was the sort of person to whom things happen? (Her life was so commonplace! She was not a woman flyer, or an actress, or a female hunter of big game.) She was an underpaid stenographer in a Wall street office, and you would have said, looking at her, that her destiny lay very clear and very placid before her. Work for a few years—she had to work in order to eat. Then marriage. (Marriage and Junior's teething, his penchant for breaking windows for excitement.) And rent and grocery bills and a plain man coming home nights.

Easy enough to imagine coming home nights to Ann—she was sweet. But certainly she was not at all spectacular. Yet she was to face violent death.

Ordinary mortals meet danger every day. They cross streets in the rush hour; there are epidemics. Still, it would never have occurred to anybody, least of all to herself, that a heartache, a letter, a coincidence, could have taken her to the island. The mere mention of the island is absurd and melodramatic in connection with her name. Rocky and bleak, it lies off the New England coast; horror stalked it. Who could guess that the road a girl trod would lead to that wind-swept spit of sand, to the pines, to a lost cave and a fire that burned while one man did murder and another wept?

The letter began it; it came on a rainy afternoon. (Her mother and her sister rejoiced over it and put it on the hall table so she'd see it the moment she came in.) Afterward Ann was to date everything beautiful and terrible and dangerous that happened to her from the letter.

Ann had deep eyes, smoke color under black lashes; her hair was black and short and curly and unruly. Her mouth, according to her admirers, was generous; the indifferent said it was too big. She was more than slender—she was thin; the lovely strong lines of jaw and cheek bone and wrist were strongly marked.

She had a temper—who hasn't? She paid in twelve dollars a week at home and helped out on extra bills so that her young sister, Diana, could stay in school.

At seventeen she went to work. After that she was eighteen, she was nineteen, she was twenty, she was twenty-one . . .

At twenty-two Joe Marsh walked into her office and into her life. He was blond, bland, and desirable, and he was decidedly out of the Robinson class. He saw Ann, absorbed and neat at her typewriter.

After that everything was different. There were theater tickets fifth row center downstairs instead of back of the sixth in the balcony. There was Joe's car, big and shiny, parked in front of the shabby brownstone where Ann lived. There were purple, long-stemmed violets in wet, square cardboard boxes, and a wrist watch at Christmas, the loveliest thing she had ever owned. And orchids for Valentine's day—not one of the Robinson family had ever seen orchids close up before.

IN MARCH Joe went to Boston on business; letters and telegrams came thick at first. Then they ceased. There was beginning, though she did not know it, the first of the series of coincidences which were to complicate and change all her life. There is such a thing as coincidence, after all; small events make all the difference. Open a door and behind it you find love. Miss an appointment and spend the rest of your days regretting it. A stone thrown into a runlet alters all the course of the stream.

It was queer, Joe meeting Marcia at a big formal Boston party. Not queer in one way, of course; Joe was used to parties, he was invited to them by the dozen, he was used to dancing with beautiful debutantes. But it was queer that Ann knew Marcia, too.

Long, long ago, when she was a little girl and the daughter of a poverty-stricken carpenter in a small Massachusetts town, Ann had played with the daughter of the richest man in the state. Or at least one of the richest men.

Children are democratic; Marcia, who had her expensive toys and her governess and her fat, elderly pony, had chosen Ann to be her best friend. Two little girls housekeeping under a horse-chestnut tree, weeping when life separated them.

"I'll never forget you. I'll have you be my bridesmaid when I grow up and get married to a man."

"Darling Ann," Joe wrote. He always began his letters with "Darling Ann."

"Feature your knowing Marcia! Feature her remembering you! I told her about you, of course—she's writing you, too. She says you were cute in pigtails—I'll bet you were. Lord knows you're cute enough without them!"

Ann, minus pigtails—and not too cute, for she was white to the lips—lay on the bed she shared with her sister and read Joe's scrawl over and over again. How long, for heaven's sake, had she been waiting for just that boyish, careless, bold handwriting on thick gray paper? Two weeks, three weeks, four? Could all her world change in so short a time?

The bedroom was a dark little cubicle with a narrow, high window opening on a court; there was only one other in the Robinson flat—young Matt slept on the sofa in the living room. The parlor got all the noise of the city and the kitchen was an inferno in summer. Mrs. Robinson had signed the lease because of a forlorn, blossomless lilac bush in the hard, bare back yard. Every spring she tried to make a garden, seeding and watering and planting hopefully. Ann, looking at pale sprouts that would presently die in heat and dust, always said, "Well, mom that's New York for you!"

SHE no more than her mother had ever forgotten hollyhocks blooming triumphant against blue sea. New England. New England, scarlet and gold in autumn, enchanted, and purple and green and white in spring. New England and Marcia and Joe . . .

Diana sat at the old-fashioned, cheap, veneered bureau doing her nails; she was sixteen and small and pretty in a mild way, like Ann at her age, but minus Ann's fire. To her, as to the rest of the family, Ann was the most interesting and beloved person in the world. She was watching that white face and those distraught gray eyes now in the mirror. "What's the matter, sis?" she asked in a frightened voice; she turned, buffer in hand.

"You're white as a sheet—your letter's from Joe, isn't it? Mom and I were sure it was. What's he got to say?"

Ann said in a queer voice, "Yes, the letter's from Joe."

Her heart thumped, her lips were suddenly dry; she had had a rather dreadful shock.

"It'll be a fine marriage for you," her mother, Di, even pop and Matt had prophesied firmly. She had tried to keep her feet on the ground.

"He hasn't asked me yet, mom."

"He will," Mrs. Robinson had declared. "That boy's in earnest. You can tell."

Could you? Evidently not.

Ann spoke clearly and thinly; there was no use waiting, she had to break the news, it would never be any easier to tell than now.

"Marcia Emmett," she said; "do you remember her, Di? Or were you too little? Joe met her a week or so back home. He . . . he fell for her, evidently. He's going to marry her right away."

"You're joking, Ann," she whispered. "You're crazy. He's not."

"But he is," Ann reiterated. He says so. I believe him; why shouldn't you?"

"He can't do that to you," Diana said in immediate, hot protest. "He's been making a terrible fuss over you. It's . . . why, he's in love with you!"

"I was pretty sure of that myself," Ann said quickly. She sat up, pushing the dark, rumpled hair back from her white forehead; her whole body was weak; not in all her hard-working, difficult young life had she known such a sensation of humiliation and despair.

Both of them were silent for a moment, tasting the bitter truth. "I liked Joe so much," Ann faltered wonderingly. "I liked him so . . . so much! He was everything any girl could want, could dream of. I can't believe he's done this thing."

"He hasn't. He doesn't mean what he says. You'll find out in a day or two," Diana assured her, alarmed. Ann swung her feet over the side of the bed and sat hunched over, looking, somehow, small and beaten in spite of her long body.

"You can read his letter," she said. "Here . . . here's Marcia's, too. It seems so crazy, it seems so *crazy* to me, now that I counted on him," she went on.

"I hadn't a thing to go on. Do you suppose I'm the sort of fool girl that thinks every man who looks at her is in love with her?"

"Wait," Diana said. "I'm trying to take this in."

Marcia had written graciously and charmingly:

"Ann, you're as pretty as ever—I'd have known you anywhere!"

". . . do you remember my saying long ago that you should be one of my bridesmaids? Doesn't that seem far off? But really, Ann, I haven't needed one up to now. Do come for the big event. It will be a thrill seeing you after all these years.

"I'll have your dress all ready for you—that's going to be my present to all the girls. You take your vacation now, simply demand it, my dear. Joe's told me how hard you work . . ."

"I never read anything to equal this in all my born days," Diana declared simply and fiercely; she kept her voice down in spite of her wrath—the family was on just the other side of a thin wall.

"I'd like to kill Joe. Joe could be sued for breach of promise for this . . ."

She was frightened by the storm that was shaking her sister; Ann was weeping desperately, wildly now.

"I've got to quit crying," she was whispering over and over, as if she did not know she was not alone in the room.

"I've got to quit it. I don't want mom all stirred up. I don't want pop having a fit. I can't bear to face that——"

She got up and went to the window—spring rain was sweeping the city, the smell of wet cement came up from the court below.

Diana spoke almost timidly:

"You loved him, didn't you, Ann?"

"I guess I loved him," Ann admitted. "I've certainly got to . . . I've certainly got to get over it now."

SHE turned, tragic and young, leaning against the window sill, her hands clenched on it, her whole thin body filled with a sort of desperate power that moved her sister to an obscure, un-understanding admiration. This was Ann, was it? Cool, sensible Ann, on whom all of them depended, this passionate, suffering woman, capable of knowing the very depths of pain?

"I can't stand this!" Ann said. "I can't go out there and face the family——"

"You should worry how they feel," Diana said healthily. She put her arms about Ann's shaking figure.

"Don't. Don't, sis! You'll make yourself sick!"

"I know," Ann said, mopping her eyes. "I'll pull myself together pretty soon—I'll pretend I'm all right! But what is it, Di?" she asked wildly and suddenly.

"What is it that she's got and I haven't? Why should a girl like Marcia . . . a girl like Marcia . . .

"Why, she's always been happy!" Ann faltered. "She doesn't need Joe. She used to wear the cutest dresses when we were little—I remember thinking I'd die of joy if I could have clothes like hers and a pony and everything . . .

"And she wasn't any prettier than I was. She wasn't any nicer—she couldn't be any nicer to Joe than I'd be if I had the chance! Why would he go up there and meet her and forget me in just two or three weeks? I suppose she always looked wonderful and gave wonderful parties—he met her just the way any girl would want to be met! I know I'm not really his kind—I'm never dressed just right, I'm tired, I can't run around every night, I have to hold on to my job. She . . . she hasn't anything to do but attract men. But I've kissed him, Di, I've let him kiss me," Ann went on, the glorious, shamed color flowing up into the roots of her hair.

"How do you think it makes me feel, knowing he's got that to remember? I'd have been a good wife to him if I'd had the chance. I could run his house as well as Marcia; I could have learned——"

The broken voice stopped; Diana was weeping, too, now. "You'd have made a better wife than she would!" she protested thickly.

"He said he loved me," Ann whispered. "He said it in words, and he said it in everything he did. The girls he used to play with before he met me—they had beautiful clothes, they had furs and pearls and cars of their own, but he never thought about them after he started going around with me. Then why have I lost him now?"

She wrung her hands; her tears had ceased, but her young face was taut with anguish.

"I counted on it," she said. "Now I . . . I suppose I'll get along. But my life is such a treadmill without him; it's so gray. I'll go on, I'll keep working day after day, year after year—working and hungering. *hungering*——"

"You won't," Diana told her. "You'll fall in love again. Somebody'll fall in love with you."

"Don't make me laugh," Ann said. "Things won't be any different. Di, what am I going to do?"

The alarm clock on the bureau ticked steadily, rain beat a tattoo against the window, against a girl's heart . . .

Somewhere one of the three gray sisters who had Ann Robinson's fate in charge laughed lightly, suddenly. She was spinning a gray and gold yarn; she paused, distaff in hand. Delicately she touched a bell. It clanged. "More thread," she said. "A different color of thread. This is an odd weave . . ."

"I know what I'd do," Diana declared. "You don't want Joe to know how you feel, do you?"

Ann cried, "I'll die if Joe knows how I feel!"

"Well, then. They think they're smart—Joe and Marcia—asking you up! All right. Go. Go and show them! They want you to be a bridesmaid. Be one. Why—you might meet someone you liked," Diana declared practically. "You might get Joe back again."

"Never!" Ann said with passion. "I wouldn't have him back."

"Well—even then—anyway, you'll get your chance to prove to them you don't care."

SO IT was that Ann's life turned sharply eastward through April dusk.

Graniteport lies on the coast; summer cottages sprawl along its shore line, and from the little clustering houses that form the town proper, men still go down to the sea in ships. It was a great trading port once; it still has some claim to definite wealth and distinction. There are a dozen stately big old mansions, built in the days of the clippers, where rich men dwell the year 'round. They would not live their placid, comfortable lives anywhere else in the world, they will tell you. Most of them have offices in Boston, and all of them have connections there.

Their wives and daughters go in and out regularly in cars or on the trains; Marcia Emmett, for instance—she had had her years in a boarding school with girls from the charmed inner circle of the Boston Back Bay set; she was at home in their homes; she had come out gloriously and extravagantly in a big Boston hotel. (Graniteport is really a suburb—part of the world of fashion, yet retaining all the charms of village life.

The thin young woman who gathered her grips together in answer to the conductor's inarticulate bellow was pale and the hands inside her gloves were icy cold.

It was homecoming, really, to Ann—this was her countryside; she had hunted sweet, pink Mayflowers in just such woods as these when she was a little girl; she had thrilled to blue water. But today she had no pleasure in beauty; at every station she had the impulse to get off and go back. It was not too late, her anxious heart told her; she needn't see Joe ever again if she didn't want to! It took everything that was girlish and proud within her to send her on; certainly she had not counted on his meeting her alone at the station. She had been sure that Marcia would come with him and would help to keep things light and impersonal. Yet there he was, astoundingly at ease, astonishingly glad to see her. He would have kissed her if she had not evaded him.

He was a tall youth. She had always thought that he wore the best looking clothes in the world, and he had told her carelessly once that he spent a young fortune on them. Now, in his English tweeds and rough cap, he looked the very picture of a young man about town thrust suddenly into very correct country life. He stood over her looking at her in just the old remembered admiring way, handsome and sturdy and keen. That was the word she had always had for him. Keen.

"You're not mad at me, are you, Ann?"

That was his first unbelievable question. He held her hands tight when she tried to draw away from him, told her at once that she was prettier than ever.

"That hat you've got on—it's new, isn't it? Most becoming thing you ever had! I'm playing hookey—the crowd is all at the club and the chauffeur was supposed to meet you. But I skinned out, and here I am."

"Here you are," Ann said breathlessly.

"I wanted to talk to you before Marcia got at you," he told her with complete simplicity. "I was kind of afraid you'd be sore. If you want to, go ahead and bawl me out! It was fine of you to come up; you're a real sport. Couldn't be married without you around; I always thought that," he added with a laugh.

ANN had an insane desire to laugh, too, wildly, until she was crying. To tell him that she had indeed expected to be present at his wedding, but in the role of bride. To tell him that he was really the most amazing person she had ever seen. He was so utterly debonair, so cool, and so assured! Here he was, the heartbreaker, inquiring as casually about the state of her feelings as if he had missed an ordinary lunch date and wanted to be sure she didn't mind.

"I'm not mad at you, Joe," she assured him. She went on a little formally and shyly: "It was nice of Marcia to ask me up. It will be nice for me, seeing her again."

"Funny, funny, funny, your knowing her!" Joe mused. "Somehow, I never featured you running around with millionaires."

"I never did run with them!" Ann told him quickly and proudly. "Only Marcia, and we were so little that money didn't count. Pops always had to work for a living——"

"Marcia told me all about your father," Joe said carelessly. "Well—you'll find her as sweet and democratic as ever. She's got a terrific crowd at the house," he went on as he helped her into the big car she had mistakenly regarded for so many months as . . . well, really almost half hers.

"They won't be expecting us back yet—they won't even be thinking about us. They may not even be home from the club. Why wouldn't you kiss me at the train, Ann? Will someone tell me why I shouldn't run this car up a side road and take you in my arms and kiss you, my dear?"

Ann said, "Don't, Joe," in a frightened voice.

His self-assurance was undaunted. He laughed.

"You're up here," he said. "We've got a week. I'm going to show you, my girl, that I can't get along without you."

They shot with a grand curve and swerve up to the door of the big white house Ann remembered so well. Half a dozen big, expensive cars were parked about the driveway and under the old-fashioned porte-cochere; the party from the club was gathered before a big fire in the living room, and cocktails and canapes were being served. When Joe and Anne came in Marcia detached herself at once from the group; she was a pretty thing, blonde and blue-eyed and gay. Ann was taken into warm young arms and kissed; Marcia was greeting her old friend and scolding Joe for going to meet her, in the same breath.

THE gracious old house was built on a low hill and isolated from both the summer cottages and the town itself. In back, green lawns sloped down to the beach and the sea, and the driveway leading up from the road in front was ablaze with lights strung on wires between the fine old trees. Within, servants moved silently and busily from room to room; in the living room, which was being kept cleared for dancing, the suddenly festive palms from the local undertaking establishment made a bower for a small orchestra—imported, like the flowers.

Marcia went with Ann up to the little room on the fourth floor that was to be hers. The house was more than a hundred years old, and the main body of it had been added to many times. There were ells, flights of steps up and down, a whole wing that was nothing but guest rooms. Ann's nest opened onto the servants' corridor, and half a dozen neat similar closed doors in a row testified to various Delias and Aggies and Marg'rets getting into clean uniforms before the strenuous duties of the evening.

"I'll like being up so high. I can . . . see things. I think you were awfully sweet to ask me to come, Marcia."

Marcia laughed.

"You're the same easily pleased little thing you always were, aren't you?" she asked amusedly. "I didn't dare put any of the other girls up here—they'd have a fit. As to my asking you to come, darling, that's nothing. It's partly because you have such black hair—I remembered it. I'm determined to be the only blonde in the wedding procession—you'll find I'm awfully spoiled; I want to be the center of everything, and I always get my own way."

Her frank smile took the sting out of her words; she glanced at her wrist watch and curled up against the pillows at the head of the bed.

"My dear, I'm absolutely amazed at getting Joe away from you."

Marcia went on after a moment. "Joe's adorable," she said thoughtfully. "He's one of the nicest men I ever met. I'm absolutely mad about him, of course."

She hesitated, lifted her hand to look idly at the new big diamond that blazed on it, spoke oddly.

"Ann," she said, "did you . . . did you particularly notice Phil Olmstead when you met that gang downstairs?"

There was such meaning in her voice that Ann looked quickly at her and with some surprise. "Phil Olmstead?" she repeated. "No, I don't believe I place him. There were so many."

It was the first time she had said his name; she was to say it again many times, and in terror and anguish and bitter loss. Two paths were about to meet, two ways were converging.

(To be continued.)