

" Alen. "

by

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Alen leaned against the doorpost, and his eyes ran swiftly round the room. Each couple, as they passed, was recognised by him. The music was good, - very good. He turned away. Then he saw her - saw Zea: she came through the doorway: she was talking to Ivor: they laughed as over some small joke. She glanced round, her eyes met Alen's - her face slightly stiffened. Alen came forward. "What about having the next?" He felt her bridle, she half turned towards Ivor who smiled down at her. "Well, aren't we to have this?" Alen spoke quickly.

"Yes," she put her hand on his arm, and they moved forward. The music struck up -- a waltz. He put his arm round her: they danced. Silence between them. The music stopped. Being just near the door they got out quickly. But it was not until comfortably settled in the conservatory that he spoke. "What's upsetting you?"

"Nothing."

He smiled. "That's not the truth. Something is."

"You," she said, and her voice shook. "I thought we were friends."

He looked at her, and she felt the coldness of the look. "Friends! we could never be friends. There is no such thing

between a man and woman. Anyhow, we have nothing in common. Get that out of your head once and for all." The words spoken curtly fell like blows.

"Alen." The sound of pain in her voice startled him; she got up from her chair and moved away. Just as she reached the door he was beside her.

"Go easy, you have it all wrong; let's put this right."

"I don't see that there is anything to be put right." He heard the tremble in her voice; she was very angry. He felt amused; - so she cared!

"Come, we may lose our seats which would be a misfortune as they are the best to be had." There was a flippancy in his voice that nearly drove her crazy.

"I hate you. I hate you."

"Oh, no you don't: you love me but I don't love you."

"You want to put me out of your life." The words annoyed him.

"My dear girl, you were never in my life. You let your imagination run away with you."

She ~~turned~~ ^{turned} slowly and left the conservatory: this time he did not follow her. He lit a cigarette, and leaned back in his chair, a smile played on his lips. This was quite entertaining: he was glad he had come after all. At the same time, he was not without a sense of shame. He had been a bit brutal. Still - it was better to strike at once -- and finally.

There was a movement. Alen turned.

"Hello, old man." The speaker, a fair boy, came across and sat down beside Alen. "Beastly night this." No reply. "Don't you feel the same yourself?" - glancing at the man in the chair.

"No I don't. I'm enjoying myself thoroughly -- or rather I was till now."

Young Harcourt gave him a swift look. "Well, it's good that some people can get enjoyment out of a night like this. There's no accounting for tastes. Personally, I think it's the last thing. If folk give a dance they should do the thing properly. Come now, don't you agree?"

"Certainly not, and if you feel like that it would be much wiser to clear out."

"Oh I say, really, Alen. Walk up to my hostess and say, 'dear madam, I am bored stiff, so will say goodnight,'" He laughed loudly.

"If you take my advice you will quit without more ado." Alen stood up and with a curt nod left him. Crossing the hall he met his sister Lucy wrapped in her cloak. "What are you off?"

"Yes, Alen, we don't want to be late. Ivor has a long day ahead of him, but I did enjoy tonight. I must go: there's Ivor waiting."

He found Paula Watson; they had a few dances. She was a relief after Zea. A jolly girl out for a little fun. "Have you some one to see you home?" he asked.

"Oh Bob is here," she replied, "he will remember me sometime. He won't be going for a while."

"Well let's go now," Alen said, "that's if you have had enough of it."

She looked surprised. "What of Zea?" she asked. "I don't see her round."

"She is probably gone by this," he answered carelessly. He felt annoyed; so Zea was claiming him, taking it for granted that he would take her home whenever she wished. He wasn't having any. "Let me know when you are going," he said. "I will give you a little longer."

"I'll come now," she said, "I feel rather tired."

A few minutes later she joined him and having said good night to their hostess they left.

Zea, who feeling anything but happy after leaving Alen, joined Lucy whom she found sitting out with a friend. "You look tired, dear," Lucy said as the girl sat down beside her. "Have you had a good night?"

"Yes, oh yes," Zea answered quickly. "I have danced a lot, - but the music is so good that it's rather nice just to sit here and listen."

Lucy turned to her friend and they continued their conversation. Bob Watson came over and claimed Zea and they went off together.

"We will find some cosy nook, let's," said Bob when the dance ended, "where we can have a nice quiet little chat, a

heart-to-heart talk, - you know the sort of thing," and he laughed, well pleased with his joke.

Zea managed to smile. She lazed comfortably in her chair. Bob was very easy: he talked away. He only wanted some one to listen. She could follow her own thoughts. She was silly to worry over those few words with Alen. She would make it up as they walked home together. Of course, she would hold her own; he had been rather dreadful a few times lately. She would let him see that she was not going to put up with that kind of thing: still they would part friends.

Shortly after this Young Harcourt came to ask her to dance and she went. They had two. He was uninteresting, she decided, but he could dance. Having left him she went to get her cloak. Coming downstairs Zea looked anxiously for Alen. It would be a good one if she went off without telling, got some one else to see her home. Alen would not like it. No, she better not, but where was he? She looked into the ballroom: he was not among the dancers. She turned away: young Harcourt came up to her, "May I have the pleasure of taking you home?" he bowed.

She smiled, "I was expecting Alen, - Mr. Sidhurst."

"Oh, Sidhurst, - but he is gone."

"Gone!" her voice was sharp.

He gave her a swift look. "Yes I saw him leave. He had Paula Watson with him."

For a moment Zea said nothing: then, realising that Fred Harcourt was looking at her, she put her hand on his arm. "It's very kind of you to come to the rescue." She smiled at him as she said the words, but she felt like crying. "Alen must have heard that I had left," she added.

Next evening Zea knocked at Alen's door and without waiting for a reply, walked in. Alen, settled comfortably with a book, glanced round. "Hullo," his voice not encouraging.

"I came to ask an explanation of last night."

He took up his book as if about to resume reading, "Oh, is that it ?"

"Yes." She came over to the fire. "I don't understand your treatment."

"There is nothing to understand."

"I want to be friends, Alen," she spoke quickly. "Don't let's quarrel; we have known each other so long."

"Too long, and now that's over; you want more than friendship. There's nothing doing. You are wasting your time and mine. You're in love with me, and you well know it. I am finished with you; it should not be necessary for me to tell you that. You think you have a claim on me; you have none whatever. Goodnight."

Zea came nearer. "Don't speak to me like that," her voice shook. "You have been playing with me. Amusing yourself.

My feelings don't count; but you can't get away with it just because you're tired of me. I may be a fool, - I suppose I am in your eyes. You'll be sorry yet."

"I don't think so. This little episode is finished. Please realize that. Forget me and we will both be happy."

"Happy!" - pain in her voice. "You talk of happiness you who try to kill-."

"Steady, my dear girl. I don't kill anything. Happy, I am happy, or would be if you would go and allow me my evening to myself."

She moved to the door, turned, her voice now hard. "I would have made you happy if only you had not turned me down. You don't know how to play the game: you say you are happy. I am the woman; we were meant for one another. I am not coming back again. I see I have failed: goodnight." The door closed.

Alen stretched his arms over his head. He was disturbed. Unexpectedly disturbed. Returning from his office at the end of the day he had dined in company with his mother, - then had shut himself into his private sanctum.

He had but shortly settled down with a book when the disturbance came. She came into the room unannounced. She spoke almost lightly, with a queer little smile on her lips, but her eyes were serious. She left him in much the same way as she had come. He picked up his book. He tried to focus attention, but her face came in front of him, and the words she had spoken

kept ringing in his ears. He threw the book to the far end of the chesterfield, and stood up. He walked the room from end to end. "Damn! Damn the woman!" He switched on the wireless. A poor programme - a jazz-band. Switching it off in disgust he turned to his gramophone: it seldom failed him: for a little while it pleased him now, but he could not get away from that girl's words. True -- everyone of them - true! That any girl could disturb him in this way!! The last sentence, spoken as she reached the door.-

" 'I would have made you happy if only you had not turned me down. You don't know how to play the game! You say you are happy. I am the woman -- we were meant for one another. I am not coming back again. I see I have failed. Goodnight.' "

As the door closed he threw himself into a comfortable chair. No use! She might have been in the room still, so strongly did he feel her presence. ~~He got up, walked to the door, and crossing the hall looked into the drawing-room, - hat in hand.~~ "I am going out, Mother."

She looked up from the book she was reading. In that look, swift as it was, she saw that something was amiss. "You'll be late, I suppose. I won't sit up. I'll say goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mother: yes, I may be late," he came over and kissed her. The door closed. She heard him whistle for Jack: then silence.

She drew her chair nearer the fire for, though close on Easter, the evenings were chilly. She continued reading till

11 p.m., then closing her book she rang the bell. "I am going to bed, Martha," she said to the maid. "You can close up. Mr. Alen is out." Shortly after midnight still lying awake, she heard Alen softly pass her door. Breathing a little prayer for him she fell asleep.

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Madeline Danvers had married Dan Sidhurst when she was twenty-five. They had three children, Lucy, Sybel and Alen. Her husband died while their boy was still at college. Alen on leaving school had gone into a big business firm and now had a good position. He lived with his Mother. The two girls were married. Alen seemed to have no inclination to marry.

"I would like very much to see him settle down," his Mother said more than once to Lucy. "It's all very well now, but later he may be sorry. He is not like you girls; he is much more temperamental, nervy and highly strung: that makes life more difficult for him."

"For you too, dear," Lucy had replied. "You worry too much about him."

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~~Chapter II.~~

Alen woke next morning to see the sunshine filling his room. He lay there lazily half asleep, but gradually his mind began to work and he found that he was going over the previous night. He pulled himself up sharply. This would not do. He got out of bed slipping his feet into soft bedroom slippers and was conscious of a feeling of pleasure at touch of the fleecy lining. Wrapping his dressing-gown round him he left ~~his~~ room. While shaving and dressing he hummed a popular air mainly to keep his thoughts from diverting to the night before.

Finished breakfast, with a few minutes to spare, he sauntered into the garden. It was a lovely morning with a promise of a glorious summer. But one must be off. Just then Jack came quickly across, having spied his master.

"Well, old man," Alen caressed the dog fondly, and in response Jack raised himself on his hind paws and peered into his master's face. Alen was always sure that in that one look Jack took in his mood. "No use trying to hide anything from you, sir," and Alen laughed, a queer shaky little laugh. "I must be going. Don't get into any more trouble than you can help -- there's a good dog." A minute later he had closed the hall-door behind him.

That evening he suggested the theatre to his mother "I have two tickets. Will you come?"

When on his way to lunch Alen met Gerald Powel. The two men walked together as far as their ways lay. Just as they were parting Powel asked, "Have you been to the show at the Royal? It's worth a visit. I was there last night."

"I had better get two tickets so," Alen replied. And that evening he suggested the Theatre to his mother - "I have got two tickets. Will you come, - if you're free."

"Yes, I'll be delighted. I am sure I need a little brightening up," and she laughed in her delightful way. Then becoming serious, she added, "You look, dear, as if you needed something to take your mind off whatever is troubling you."

Alen shot a quick look at her. Slightly self-conscious he said, "Oh, I'm all right... Then that's settled. It starts at eight."

Just before eight o'clock Mrs. Sidhurst and Alen came into the stalls.. And as she took her seat, Mrs. Sidhurst saw that Zea and a friend were in the row in front of them.

"I see you were tempted, like ourselves," she said, leaning forward and addressing the girl.

Zea gave a slight start; she had seen Mrs. Sidhurst come in with Alen. She turned, "Yes, I believe it's a very good play." At that moment Alen who had delayed to speak to a friend Powel took his seat. Zea turned quickly away. The curtain rose.

When the curtain fell on the first act Alen sat forward

and addressing himself to the girl with Zea, discussed the play with her till the curtain rose again. ~~This was not lost on his Mother - so here the trouble lay.~~

Coming out the two girls were just ahead: at the door the crush delayed their getting out and Mrs. Sidhurst found herself beside Zea. "I enjoyed that greatly, - did you?" she said. "I thought he was very good in the last act."

"Yes," Zea answered, but without enthusiasm. She looked tired.

"Come to see me soon, dear. It's a long time since we had a chat."

"You are not off to bed already," Alen said, seeing his Mother move towards the stairs. "It's not so very late; you'd better come and enjoy the fire." And he opened the door of his sanctum.

"I am quite game," his Mother said, settling down on the couch. "What a lovely fire," and she held out her hands to the blaze.

Alen threw himself into an armchair. "There was a big crowd there tonight."

"Yes, you would feel glad of that. It's a play well worth supporting."

"I wasn't surprised to find Powel there again."

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"There were quite a number there that I knew," his Mother said. "By the way, who was the girl with Zea? I didn't know her."

"Oh that was Ethel Carr."

"Was that Ethel? I never knew her! She has changed a lot. I didn't know that she was here now... Zea struck me as being in bad form. She did not look well."

"No, - but then she never looks very robust. I fancy she takes a lot out of herself. She is rather unbalanced, isn't she?"

His Mother looked surprised. "Is she, dear? You would be a better judge. I have never thought that."

"Oh lately she has been hopeless. Letting her imagination run away with her altogether." Alen spoke quickly. He got up and moved restlessly about the room. His Mother said nothing.

"Just because she is friendly with us and comes in here whenever it suits her. She thinks that she has a claim on one." He paused.

His Mother waited, - then as he did not speak she said, "Have you and Zea quarrelled?"

"We had a bit of a rumpus the other night. She was at the dance at Morley's and you wouldn't know what the devil was in her mind. At one time she was a nice girl but lately she's awful. So full of herself; imagining one is thinking this about her, or that. Makes a fellow sick, - and you would not give her or her remarks, a second thought. She is the limit." Alen's

voice was hard, - he finished with a laugh. "She made rather an ass of herself really, - if only she realized it." He sat down. Silence.

Then his Mother spoke. "I think we always realise when we have made fools of ourselves. I think Zea is very fond of you; if you have been out of sympathy with her lately she would be well aware of it. Perhaps she was making an effort to straighten out things and you didn't help her much, - or she felt you didn't."

"Help her! I made things as difficult as possible. I told her what I thought of her. I can't help it if she's fond of me. I don't want her, - not in that way. Lot of rot about putting her out of my life. She was never in it, and I said so."

"Alen," then she stopped.

He got up. "Sorry, Mother, to treat you to all this silly stuff, - keeping you up till this hour. Let's go to bed and forget about it all."

His Mother stood up. "Goodnight, dear. Unfortunately it's not so easy to forget these things. I am glad you told me this." She moved to the door, turned. "Don't be too hard on Zea, dear. I feel a little sorry for her. Goodnight."

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A month later Alen left for Paris where he was to spend a fortnight with Powel. He went off in great form. The men were good friends, and Alen looked forward to a very enjoyable two

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 weeks' holiday. His Mother was rather worried: since his outburst, the night of the Theatre, they had never spoken of Zea again. Zea had been to see her a few times, but seemed listless, and she always came at a time when she knew Alen would not be there. Mrs. Sidhurst liked the girl and was genuinely sorry for her. Nevertheless she felt that Zea had been rather tactless. Too demanding. Well she could do nothing: matters must take their course.....

Alen returned from his holiday in good form and looking very well. He spent the evening with his Mother, entertaining her with an account of his ^{time} home.

Alen
 He persuaded himself that he had put Zea completely out of his life, - and was therefore very annoyed when going into the pictures a few nights later he came face to face with her. Their eyes met. Alen looked hard at her and was surprised to be met with an equally hard straight look. He had expected her to show embarrassment but no, Zea met his look coldly, inclined her head slightly and continued her conversation with the man she was with. She had scored one, - she knew it, and Alen knew it also. He felt at a disadvantage. But he admired her. She had some spirit.

"Good that, - didn't you think?"

Zea turned quickly, surely that was Alen's voice, - but who could he be talking to? She must know. He was close behind her, looking at her - an appeal, - she almost fancied - in his

eyes. Was her imagination running away with her ? She must be careful, but she smiled. He spoke again and now she knew that he was addressing her.

"I like that girl: she did that last bit in topping style. You always had a wish for Marsh, I remember."

Before she could reply they became separated by the crowd. Zea was happier that night than she had been for a long time. Oh, she must be careful! Go very slowly.

A week later Zea caught 'Flu. She had a very heavy attack and was most of a month in her room. One evening - when she had been up for about a week - she was sitting by the fire, and still feeling rather shaky. A knock. "Come in." Her maid came, with a card. Zea took it listlessly. "OH!! .. She controlled herself. "Please ask Mr. Sidhurst to come up." The maid withdrew. Zea stood up, her knees shook. She sat down again. The door opened. "Alen!!"

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