

Forgetting

By

Harriett Perkins

Mr. Koss closed the door and walked away slowly. Every movement expressed weariness; complete exhaustion. He knew he could not make them understand how he felt. They simply would not, could not, understand. He had been in there two hours talking to them. At least he had pleaded his case the first hour. After that he had given up; agreed to their every word; bowed mutely in doglike submission to every order dictated with pointing finger at him; had agreed because it was foolish not to, and finally broke down and cried like a school-boy. Queer it had been—crying in Mr. Hornston's office. Of all places: Mr. Hornston's office! It had velvet curtains at the ceiling-high windows that afforded such a fine view of skyscrapers, distant towers, and broad stretches of clear, springtime sky. It had heavy polished furniture, he remembered; so brightly polished that he could see Mr. Hornston's face reflected, square and rosy in the desk; and Mr. Alison's slim figure stretch itself the length of the cabinet as he moved with such soft steps back and forth across the room from desk to file

God, the silence of the room! And how his voice had sounded, weak and trembling!

They didn't understand—that was all. He had told them how he felt. At first Mr. Hornston had patted him on the back, and said it was too bad. But then, gradually he had changed; his jaw had set hard, and his words had come out sharply. Certainly, he had said, it was too bad, but things like that will happen: it's life, you know, and people must learn to face it. If you are to be a success, you've got to work for it. You've got to fight. You can't let things get the better of you.

You've got to be strong. That's what he had said. Success? Why, what was that? If it was what Mr. Hornston had, he didn't want it. Fight? Well, maybe he didn't have any fight in him any more. It had all left him, somehow. He felt weak and tired and sick. He wanted to crawl away somewhere. Perhaps he had let it get the better of him, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't get the thing out of his mind. Of course he shouldn't brood over it. Good old Molly. So good and gentle. She had understood. She hadn't become upset and agitated, or cried and carried on the way some women would. She had spoken quietly and soothingly. "Oh, my dear, how sad for you! Things like that will happen—we can't help them. It's not your fault. Everything is for the best. You'll see."

But she couldn't help him, really. He must help himself. He knew that. He must find himself. He must not brood. He must not brood. It was such a desperate feeling. The world, somehow, pressed close against his heart; he couldn't breathe sometimes. If only he could stop breathing altogether! But no, there was Molly; and there was little Patsy and Harry. He couldn't leave them. What in Heaven's name would become of them in these hard times? Oh, no, he must go on—with it haunting him night and day. Why couldn't he get rid of it: this stifling fear—the depression; and that awful sound always in his ears. It had never been a pleasant job at all, Lord knows. Blistering heat in the summer, terrific cold in the winter, long hours, little pay. But it was hell, now, driving that same car over that same route day after day. Mr. Hornston couldn't understand when he said it was driving him mad. Mr. Hornston couldn't understand how he felt. No one understood—really. He alone knew the anguish, the dread, the weight of it. That place—that miserable place—where he had clanged on the brakes and stopped, thinking he had run over a cat. Of course he'd get

out and put it in the grass. What if he was late—he hated hitting anything. Then he had heard a sound. He could not forget it: a groan. He had stiffened, grown cold and weak. Then he had had seen it. He saw it before him always now: lying there on the cold street, its little leg flattened out like an ironed stocking, its little arm outstretched across the rail, its tangled curls heavy and thick with blood. He couldn't bear the thought of it. It tortured him. How had he been able to get into the house and call the ambulance station? The passengers had just stood there and stared. He had to do something. Of course it hadn't been his fault. He knew that. Everybody told the police it wasn't his fault. No one blamed him. The little thing had run out from behind parked cars, they said. It wasn't his fault. No—no—. He had helped the police carry her into the house; shuffled with them up the steps and into that dismal room: the wallpaper was a sickly yellow—faded. They didn't have electric lights, only a lamp. They were awfully poor. The front window was broken; they had stuffed it with paper. There weren't any curtains. A rug was on the floor, threadbare, though, and completely gone in some parts. They had laid her on the sofa. The big, black leather sofa that had only one arm left; the stuffings were falling out one end of it. A picture hung over it. A picture of Jesus with a verse from the Bible printed in big letters under it. They had laid her down gently. The shadows of the police were big upon the wall. The mother kept walking up and down out front and crying: "My little girl! My little girl! She wouldn't come inside. . . ."

That was a week ago. It seemed eternity. He couldn't sleep now, nor eat. He had gone to Mr. Hornston and asked him for a few weeks off, just to get calmed down a bit—to get his mind on something else. Mr. Hornston had said if he left his job wouldn't be there when he came back. Too bad,

he had said, but life is hard, and one must face it. Mr. Hornston had faced it. But Mr. Hornston had never run down a little child and crippled it for life. Mr. Hornston didn't have to drive old "502" by the same place every day, and see the little gray house with the little rocker on the porch. Why couldn't they take that inside? Bright yellow, it was, with swans for handles. He could see it a whole block down the street—the one bright thing there. The little house was dirty. The little fence leaned crooked. The maple tree in the front was dead; just like his spirit. Why couldn't Mr. Hornston see? Why couldn't he understand?

He tried to shut his eyes as he went by, but he couldn't. He must look. Somehow he must go slowly, and stare, and think. "I ruined a life. I ruined a life." Then shudder as though a cold wind blew in upon him. What were sunlight and budding trees now? What were blue skies and clear brooks? He hated them. They mocked him. And little Patsy's voice, and Harry's at their play? Could he help crying? Hearing them laugh. Seeing them running free and happy. And the nights, the long, long nights. If he slept it was only to waken in the dark, harrassed by horrid dreams. Fears, nameless fears, pursued him, would not let him rest. He would dream he was trying to cross rivers of blood, struggling in rapid currents; dream of pale women who walked before him, denouncing him as a murderer of little children; dream he was rocking in a huge rocker painted yellow with swans for handles—live swans who groaned horribly as he rocked

Why, he asked, did this have to happen to him? Of all the motormen in the city, why must he be the one who must suffer? Hadn't he been a good husband and father? Hadn't he always attended conscientiously to his work? Had he ever purposely harmed anything in his whole life? Yet he must suffer.

He could not walk along the street

any more with light, carefree step. The noise and confusion of the city—it got on his nerves. He wanted to scream. He desired quiet and rest: that was all. He wanted to go some place where he would forget. To get away: that was his wish—to get away from it all. To find peace somewhere. To rest. To forget. To grow strong again. It was weak to give way to his emotions—he must not let go. He must not let go. He must not let go!

People walking up and down the street, didn't it bother them; this confusion? Didn't they feel their heads would split with the noise? How could they walk along so calmly, chatting, laughing so unconcernedly? Didn't they know that life is tragic, solemn, cruel? Didn't they feel its pressure? But they hadn't had their hand on the controller that night. No horrid sound of groaning was in their ears. No vision of mangled flesh haunted them. He must not let go. He must not let go. He must be calm. He must not think about it any more. He would think about the sunlight on the budding trees. How pretty it was. Golden . . . Golden . . . The budding trees. The maple tree in front was not in bud. It would never bud again. It would never throw shadows over the little gray house; never shut the glaring summer sun from it. She would never run in the sunshine again . . . But he must not think of that. He must not brood. He must have pleasant thoughts. It didn't do any good to worry. It only made it worse. The bells in the Christ church were ringing—how sweetly! He paused to listen. Was there any evil in the world, any sorrow? They seemed to sing out no—no—no! Was the world then, happy, and he simply unhappy within himself?

He walked on slowly. He must get somewhere quiet and peaceful. The park. He would go to the park. Perhaps there under the shady trees, along the quiet paths . . . oh, how lovely here! The city seemed miles away.

He must breathe deeply. He must be calm. He must forget. How clear the water was in the lagoon. How white the swans and graceful. He walked to the edge and watched them. They moved slowly about in the cool, blue water like stately sail boats propelled by gentle winds. They made a beautiful design with the cup-shaped, deep red water lilies. Blood red, they were. Blood! Blood! The little rocker—it had swans for handles . . .

Vacations

By

Barbara Oakes

Willis Dean stood glaring down at the dirty, rain-streaked roofs below his window. An early April sun had just set, and the city was settling down into its cold, gloominess. Everyone else had left the office and gone home to waiting dinners and to cozy, curtained living-rooms, and to pipes and papers that could be strewn about, and to wives that were interested, but not solicitous. And there was Jerry Pock, lucky devil, just leaving for a month's vacation. There must be quite an advantage in being a bachelor, and in being able to leave on your own quiet vacation by yourself.

To be able to do anything just by yourself would be a blessing. He thought back to the conversation at breakfast that morning. "Willis, a slice of toast and a cup of coffee really aren't enough breakfast for a hard-working man."

"I've existed on that for a good many years, my dear."

"Well, I'm sure I don't see how you can. I do wish you would come home for lunch, too. Drug stores never offer you a balanced meal. And they aren't clean. I could fix you up a lovely little lunch every noon. And perhaps you could lie down afterwards, to break the strain of the day."