The Cortlandts of Washington Square

By Janet A. Fairbank

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He laughed, with sudden harshness. "Care? That's a soft word. I'm ambitious, I suppose; I'm determined to get out of the kind of life I've lived. I'm going to work hard enough to earn the right to have other men work for me, and then I'll do something big. . . . If this war had come ten years later, do you think I'd have been a private? No—I'd have outfitted a company and gone in a captain, like your Renneslyer. . . . In the ranks! . . . I'm going to get out of the ranks, do you hear me—clear out, in front of 'em."

"Well, don't shout so. It's too hot." Ann's voice was cool, but her gray eyes rested softly on him. She liked the fine sweep of his ambition. "I wonder," she said, "what I'll be doing, while you're getting rich and powerful."

Peter broke off in mid-flight; his look of inspiration suddenly drooped, and his eyes were hungry as they searched her face. "Oh," he said, "you'll be marrying some lucky man."

"I suppose so." Her voice was indifferent; the prospect seemed remote.

Peter talked no more that afternoon; instead, he lay very still, watching Ann with somber eyes.

When the invalid began to get about, Fanny and Ann drove with him around the city, showing him the places of interest, and listening to his disparagement of them, in comparison with the extraordinary frontier phenomena of Chicago. Fanny, innately a New Yorker, remained tranquil under these disclosures, and turned a pitying smile upon the provincial young man, but Ann, who, it must be confessed, did her best to follow her friend's lead, was unable to stifle a faint suspicion that there might possibly be something in what Peter said. She knew, however, that the thought was unworthy of her.

"It is a pity there is no opera in the summer-time," Fanny said one day. "It would be nice if you could have an opportunity to hear one, now that you are in New York."

"Oh, I've heard opera in Chicago," Peter assured her. "The year before the war, we had four different companies, a couple of weeks each one. I went once, to 'La Somnambula.' I didn't like it, though; I'll have to admit that. It was at Metropolitan hall. You've nothing finer than that in New York—at least, not much finer."

But it made no difference what he said, Fanny was impervious.

One afternoon just before he left Washington square, Ann and Peter drove alone; the day was sultry, so they decided to go to Battery park in search of a sea breeze. They were both a trifle uplifted at getting rid of Fanny's determined loquaciousness, but without her they were rather silent as they drove through the miles of arid streets, lined with conservative houses. Now and then the girl pointed out the dwelling of a friend, but for the most part they lay languidly back against the cushions; under her wide hat brim Ann's eyes were dark-shadowed, and Peter's face was white, above his close brown beard. It was really very hot.

At the park entrance Peter insisted that they get out and walk over to the shore. Ann protested a little, smilingly, but finally she lifted her flounced and flowered muslin clear of the wheels, climbed down the precarious folding steps of the barouche, and allowed him to lead her across the strip of lawn to where the river flowed magnificently past them to the near-by sea. A faint breeze from the ocean drifted tentatively over to them, now and then, and Ann sniffed it delightedly.

"Delicious," she said. "Let's sit here for a while." Peter found her an iron chair, and he sprawled at her feet, looking up at her intently. She took off her hat with the raking brim, and sat smoothing the ends of a lace barbe that trimmed it; her eyes were intent on her caressing fingers, her chignon shone in the sunlight. In the opening of her collar her throat was very white—as white as her forehead, under her parted hair.

They sat there for some time; Ann watched the shadows of the trees in the park grow longer, while the late afternoon colors stole into the sky, and Peter watched Ann. Afterward she could not have told what they had talked about, but she remembered that steady disconcerting look. Much of the time they said nothing at all, but a realization that she should miss Peter was borne in on her. She felt very miserable, and she wondered if this time, too, it would be many years before she saw him again; she wished that she might keep him near her always, a comfortable companion. "Life," she said at length, "is horrid."

"Yes." Peter sat suddenly upright and clasped his hands around his sound knee. He turned his gaze, with something of an effort, from the girl's face to the rolling river. "No matter how carefully he plans, a man is always a fool."

She nodded. "Yes—just like a woman."

Peter remained somber. "I had it all planned out. I was going to let all this alone, you know, until I was about forty-five, and had time for it."

"Time for what?"

"Love."

Ann's eyes widened and she straightened in her iron chair. It was the first time the word had been spoken by either of them, and now it lay like a gage beteween them. "We'd better be going home," she murmured. "It must be supper time." She didn't want Peter to make love to her; she didn't want anything to spoil the perfect companionship of the past four weeks.

He made no effort to detain her. It was not until they were going up the steps of the Washington square house that he spoke again. "I'm about twenty years ahead of my schedule," he said cryptically.

Ann did not ask him to explain.

CHAPTER XV

A Proposal.

Peter's departure made an enormous gap in Ann's life, and she turned confidently to Fanny to fill it. She wanted a good gossip about Hendricks, but to her surprise, she found her friend singularly elusive. Mrs. William gave her to understand that the cousins had been together almost constantly while Hendricks was at home, but beyond that Fanny's mother was for once uncommunicative. She turned a ready purple with resentment at the upstart's treatment of her nephew, but at the same time the culprit fancied that she rejoiced in it. At any rate, Ann thought, Mrs. William's opinion made no difference, it was her uncle's judgment of the matter which she awaited with impatience.

By the time it came she had grown accustomed to the monotony of a life shorn of emotion. She liked the long unpunctuated days of late summer. The sight of the foreign envelope filled her with a strange dread; subconsciously she feared a reawakening.

"Paris, August 29th, 1863.

"My Dear Ann:

"I have received three letters in my last week's mail and I may say that their contents astonish me. I feel an old man and a sad one, after reading them. My sister's-in-law I will not dwell on. She wrote me at length of your trip to Gettysburg, and while, at this distance, it seems an unnecessary thing to have undertaken, I feel that I am too far away for judgment. I can only be glad you are safe at home again and thankful that Hendricks is spared to us.

"Your letter told me of your final resolution to break with my nephew. I cannot say that I am surprised, particularly in the light of later events."

"What events?" Ann murmured, at a loss to understand.

"I will not conceal from you the fact that I am disappointed. I had hoped that, as time and the war went on, you might become attached to him; if, however, you cannot care for him, you are right in refusing to marry. I have written him, and should tell you that I told him he will share equally with you in my property. It seems to me but fair to reward in this way, his fine accomplishments as a soldier, and you will, please God, have enough with but half.

"And now, to the more serious matter of the other letter. You have never, in your letters, mentioned knowing a Count Avezzana, and yet he writes me for permission to ask your hand in marriage."

Ann gasped, and hastily reread this amazing statement, plainly written in her guardian's fine legible hand.

"He writes me for permission to ask your hand in marriage and, what is more, he states his belief that you will

"What Events?" Ann Murmured, at a Loss to Understand.

not prove indifferent to his suit. This I cannot tell, but as he begs me—reasonably enough, owing to the fact that his mission necessitates his expeditious return to Italy—to allow him to approach you at once, you may confirm or deny it in person.

"I have, at his suggestion, made inquiries in regard to him at the Italian embassy here. I find him to be a member of an important Italian family, and personally a favorite of the king. He should, I am told, go far. He has a palazzo in Rome, at present untenable for a supporter of Victor Emmanuel, a more modest establishment in Milan, and an ancient country place in Piedmont, where he was born.

"I can hear only good things of him, but you must remember that he is a native of Europe, where the customs and the ideals differ greatly from those you have known. However, if your feelings for him are of a sufficiently affectionate nature, these differences may be overcome. There are examples of such happy marriages. I am greatly hampered by not being able to talk with you, and by your lack of frankness when writing me. All depends on your feelings toward this young man. I am prepared to receive him as your husband if that is your wish, and I must tell you that you would be making what the world calls a brilliant marriage.

"I will not dwell on what your permanent residence in Italy would mean to me. I am, you must remember, an old man, with my life behind me. You must not consider me in making your decision, except, I beg of you, to this extent. Count Avezzana must soon return to Italy, and he asks, if you accede to his proposal, that you will marry him before he leaves America and accompany him to Europe. I have his letter here—'In the present deplorably disturbed conditions in my country it may well be years before I can again return to North America. Until Italy is united my place is there.' It seems, therefore, my dear Ann, that, if you are to marry this young man, it must be done speedily, and in that case it will be impossible for me to be present. I find it difficult to believe that the ceremony would be legal without my presence, but such are the sad necessities of war. My work here is incomplete, and I have advices from the President begging me to remain indefinitely, as he is kind enough to believe me to be somewhat successful in my efforts to make public opinion for the Northern states. Therefore, if I may not take part in your wedding ceremony, I may, at least, share a day or two of your honeymoon. I shall await you in Paris with the liveliest anticipations.

"My dear Ann, be sure to act with deliberation and foresight to the end that your best happiness may be preserved. I am writing to the Count Avezzana, giving him my permission to pay you his attentions.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"HENDRICKS CORTLANDT."

For a time after reading her letter Ann sat, stunned, without movement and almost without thought. The whole thing was too preposterous to grasp all at once, and her first feeling toward Avezzana was indignation at his having so needlessly disturbed her guardian.

"Marriage!" she exclaimed, aloud—"A stranger like that!" She went to the window to cool her flushed face, and standing there, overloking the familiar square, she summoned back her dimming memories of the Italian. Indubitably, he was a romantic figure, more darkly beautiful than any other man she had seen, and with something unknown and alien about him. . . . He had been very good to her; she recalled her awakening in the cottage, with Avezzana's eyes upon her, and the subsequent scene which had so filled her with unreasoning panic. . . . He had asked for her guardian's address. Now she knew why. . . . How fantastic it all was! . . . He had been brave, too, there in the midst of the fighting. . . . And Italy was a most lovely place—Densley had said it was a paradise for lovers. . . . It was strange how remote her association with Densley seemed; only an irradicable impression of his sophisticated viewpoint remained, and a gentle regret. . . . It might have been years ago that he had died. . . . Life was a queer business. . . . How could any one want to marry her without knowing more of her? . . . Still, it was nice of him. . . . A countess, too. Glamor stole over her senses, and yet she was sad; she did not know why. . . . Her guardian's acceptance of the idea of her leaving him depressed her. . . . It made her feel homeless and miserable. . . . To her amazement, tears suddenly brimmed in her eyes. She welcomed them in a luxury of emotionalism, and flung herself face down across her bed. . . . Sobs shook her, powerfully.

She was interrupted by a sharp knock on her door, and Mrs. Cortland's flurried voice inquiring, "Ann, who in the world is a Count Guido Mario Avezzana inquiring for me—and for you?"

Ann stayed her sobs, and called tremulously, "Count Avezzana? Downstairs?"

"Yes, in the library. Who is he?"

"He was at Gettysburg, Aunt Emily."

"You must come down at once."

"I can't. It will take me a long time! You go down and see him, Aunt Emily, do."

"He asked for me, Ann. Naturally I shall go down. But hurry."

Ann found it impossible to obey this command. She wanted very much to see Avezzana—she was breathless at the thought of him below, waiting. She was all on fire with curiosity as to what he would do next, but at the same time she wanted to look her best when she confronted him, lest he should regret his amazing overtures. She ran to the glass and scrutinized her face; although she had only just begun to cry, her eyes were undoubtedly rather red. "I look even worse than I did in the train," she murmured discontentedly, as she poured water into her wash basin. The cold was delicious to her flushed face; no one would ever know she had been crying, she decided, when she looked in the mirror again, after prolonged applications. She lingered over her dresses, unable to decide which one she should put on; but she was determined that it should not be black, and finally she selected an apricot green tissue, which she had worn in the spring before she put on her mourning. In it she had a young and vernal look that was undoubtedly charming. She had a heartening conviction of it, herself.

As she stole down the stairs she could hear alternately Mrs. Cortlandt's high voice and Avezzana's lower, more emotional tones. "What are they talking about?" Ann wondered, pausing midway on the steps. She thought that they seemed to be getting on very well without her, so when she went down the long library to greet the young Italian officer she assumed a little air of indifference. Avezzana sprang to his feet at her coming and regarded her with intent eyes. He was more beautiful than ever, and his uniform was more splendid than the one he had worn on the field. Under his look she was inclined to be somewhat uncomfortable, and when he bent to kiss her hand she flinched visibly. It was impossible for her to accept this salutation casually, and she felt self-consciously that Mrs. Cortlandt's massive presence was not the place for an amorous interlude. She sent her a lightning glance under her eyelashes, but even before Avezzana's head was lifted Ann could see that Mrs. Cortlandt had preserved an air of worldly complacence.

"Well," she thought unbidden, "I'll have to get used to it, if I am going to live in Italy."

After that they conversed. The three of them sat very upright in their chairs and went politely through the topics of the day. Ann was amazed at herself; she had not dreamed she had such reserves of conventionalities. It seemed to her that hours passed before Avezzana rose smartly to his feet, bowed, planted a kiss first on the exact diametrical back of Mrs. Cortlandt's hand, and then on hers, and prepared to take his departure. On his way to the door he paused, as though struck with a sudden thought.

"The ambassador from my country will be in this city on Wednesday. Would it, perhaps, prove amusing to you, Signora, to meet him? If so I will arrange a little dinner at the Fifth Avenue hotel, where I am stopping for, it is possible, a fortnight."

"A fortnight," thought Ann, with a flashing grin. "He doesn't think it will take very long." However, an ambassador; that was something!

She rejoined the conversation to hear Mrs. Cortlandt accepting effusively for herself, Ann and Fanny. "You are stopping at the hotel?" she continued. "You are, I have no doubt, comfortable there. We are very proud of the Fifth Avenue, but after all—a hotel!" She shrugged her plump shoulders scornfully. "It would give me great pleasure if you would take dinner with us on Sunday. I am only sorry that Mr. Cortlandt is not here to make you welcome." Avezzana accepted with every symptom of decorous delight, and took his departure without more than a glance at Ann.

It was all entirely incomprehensible; had anyone except her guardian been involved, she would have thought the whole thing a gigantic hoax. Mrs. Cortlandt, however, was decidedly impressed.

"Whatever he sees in you, Ann, I cannot imagine," she confided to the girl. "He is a charming young man. Such beautiful manners! Such delightful breeding!" Without going into it further, Ann understood that Mrs. Cortlandt had been informed of Avezzana's intentions.

Fanny was greatly excited at the prospect of meeting a genuine Italian count, for, in the 'sixties, titles were a novelty in New York. She asked Ann a great many questions about him, to which that young woman replied, dryly, "Oh, he is just a man, Fanny, like other men—blacker, perhaps."

The Theodore Renneslyers came to the ceremonious mid-Sunday dinner, miraculously reconciled to Ann. Mrs. Renneslyer had not spoken to her

"Oh, He Is Just a Man, Fanny, Like Other Men; Blacker, Perhaps."

since she had jilted Hendricks, and his father, on the one or two occasions when the girl had seen him, had been so filled with kindly embarrassment in her company, that she had minded it more than his wife's icy displeasure. She wondered what sort of a meal they would have, all together with Avezzana, and wished nervously that she might be excluded from it, as she had been in the rebellious days of her childhood. To her amazement, when Mrs. Renneslyer came in, just on the heels of the young Italian, she was full of a pleasing, if shallow, affection toward her; and her husband had returned gaily to his old lively comradeship. It was as though nothing had happened to discredit her with them.

Mrs. Renneslyer had bought herself new dresses on abandoning her mourning, and she seemed, on this bright September afternoon, to have returned miraculously to her youth. She wore a filmy mauve frock, covered with frothy little ruffles of white lace, and a purple bonnet with pansies on the wide brim, which poked forward over her vivacious face. Her waist was perhaps a little thicker and her cheeks a trifle pinker than they had been on the day, so long ago, when Ann had first seen her, and if one were disagreeable enough to look for them, one might possibly find, in the shadow of her hat brim, a network of fine wrinkles about the corners of her pretty eyes, but her throat and her hands were as white as ever, while the glossy ringlets that clustered under the wreath of pansies on her hat were extraordinarily veracious.

Mrs. Cortlandt had asked no one else to dinner. "Only the family," she said archly to Avezzana, and he had responded with a grave courtesy which Ann thought made Mrs. William seem bourgeois. The talk at the dinner, however, was quite brilliant.

Mrs. Renneslyer had been to Italy before her marriage. "How can you bear to leave so beautiful a place?" she demanded oratorically. "It was in the spring when I was there, and there were roses everywhere—everywhere, I assure you, Ann—and purple flowers, great masses of them, I forget their name—"

"Bogumvelia," Avezzana affirmed, smiling.

"Yes, that's it. So sweet! Of course, I was there long before any one had heard of Garibaldi. I am quite an old woman, you see! I went down to Rome and was presented to the pope. I had to wear a black veil on my head, Fanny; it was really quite becoming, and the pope was very sweet to me—very. Oh, yes, I loved Rome! I was a great success there, too. I often wonder, Theodore, that I ever came back to New York to marry you. There was such an attractive man I met there! I wonder, Count Avezzana, if by chance you knew him? Of course, by this time, he is probably a grandfather!" And then began a long cataloguing of possible acquaintances, in which Avezzana engaged himself vivaciously.

Ann wondered if the Italian were really amused by it. It was impossible to tell, when watching him from across the table. Now and then he glanced up, and his black eyes clashed with her gray ones, but there was nothing personal, nothing demanding, in his look; the man she had known in the little house at Gettysburg had vanished so completely that she thought her memory must have tricked her in regard to him. As for her guardian's letter—she could only believe that Avezzana had, by this time, changed his mind in regard to her, for he had made no effort to arrange for a glimpse of her between the Thursday of his call and Sunday. In the drawing room after dinner, however, he asked her, choosing a moment when she was protected by the presence of both the aunts, if it would be a proper thing for him to ask her to ride with him one afternoon.

"Quite, I should think," Ann said, dryly.

Mrs. Renneslyer added, smoothly, "In New York, of course, we are not so rigid as you are in Europe; young girls do many things I would prefer a daughter of mine didn't. But you have my permission, Ann, to ride with Count Avezzana."

Ann grinned a little at that; then she recalled her last ride with the Italian, and a slow flush burned up in her cheeks, for the elaborate secrecy with which he surrounded that episode was making her self-conscious. It was arranged that they would go on the afternoon before the count's dinner for the Italian ambassador, but at noon of that day the heat broke in a sharp thunder squall and a flood of rain, so that riding was out of the question; Ann had an odd sense of relief at postponing the tete-a-tete.

In the evening they all wore their best clothes; when Mrs. William, Fanny and Ann drove through the rain in the big Cortlandt carriage, it could scarcely accommodate their flamboyant skirts. Ann was in white, Fanny in pink, and Mrs. Cortlandt in plum color. The older woman talked all the way of the charms of their young host; his good looks, his brilliancy and his fine manners. Ann wondered what she would be saying if she knew of the night in the little cottage at Gettysburg.

To Be Continued

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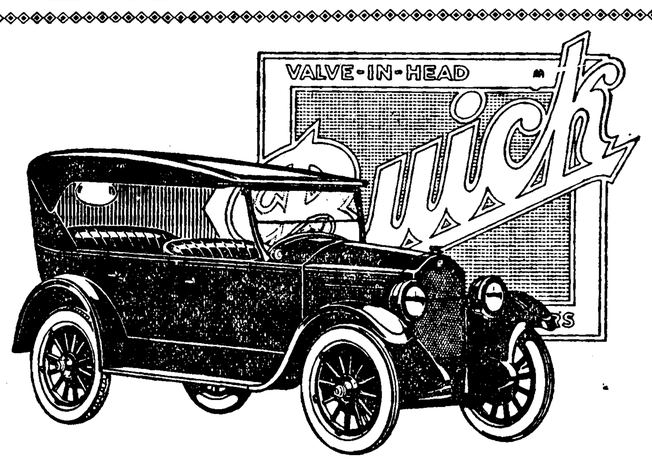

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