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CHAPTER ONE

ON TO THE MISTY FLATS

To every man there openeth
A way, and ways, and a way.
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low.
*And in between on the misty flats
The rest drift to and fro.*
But to every man there openeth
A high way and a low—
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go
—JOHN OKENHAM

OF COURSE no one in this enlightened age believes any more in the myths of Genesis and—” But here Dr. Sedgewick paused in his lecture as if a second thought had occurred. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “Well, maybe I had better test it out, before being so dogmatic.” Facing the large freshman class, who were hanging on his words, and pulling his face into gravity, he asked: “Is there anyone here who believes there is a Heaven and a Hell? Who believes that the story of Genesis is true? Please raise your hand.” He waited for a response.

Up went my hand as bravely as I could muster courage. I also looked around to see if I had a comrade in my stand. Only one other hand was up, in

all that big group of perhaps a hundred students. Dr. Sedgewick smiled, then, as if sympathetic with our embarrassment, he conceded: "Oh, you just believe that because your papa and mama told you so." He then proceeded with his lecture, assuming once and for all that no thinking human being believed the Bible any more.

Brought up in an earnest Presbyterian home (my grandfather was a Presbyterian minister and my father an ardent lay preacher) I had been carefully coached in the refutations of modernism before my parents had allowed me to enter the university. If it had been a case of arguing the claims of modernism versus fundamentalism, I do not think I would have been shattered in my faith. But there was no argument. There was just the pitying sneer, "Oh, you just believe that because your papa and your mama told you so," and then the confident assumption that no persons nowadays who thought for themselves, who were scientific in their approach to life, believed that old story any more.

On the way home from class I faced the charge honestly. *Why* did I believe the Bible? The Genesis explanation of life's origin? Why did I believe in Heaven and Hell?

It was because I had been taught it by my parents and church from the hour I could understand anything. Was that reason enough for accepting it? No, I agreed with Dr. Sedgewick that it was not a sufficient basis to build my life upon. We had experienced remarkable answers to prayer in our family life—didn't that prove the existence of God? But my psychology course taught that mind had a powerful effect over matter. If I had not been so gullible, maybe I could have seen a natural explanation. Our

twentieth century believed only when there was a test and a proof. We were scientific in our investigations; we did not swallow the superstitions of our ancestors just because they were handed to us.

Dr. Sedgewick, Professor of the English Department in our university, was an ardent follower of Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light" philosophy, and of Thomas Hardy's materialism. Yet he was so apparently patient and kind toward us whom he felt were still bound by our parents' old-fashioned thinking that he won our affection and respect.

At the end of my walk home, I came to the conclusion that I would henceforth accept no theories of life which I had not proved personally. And, quite ignorant of where that attitude would lead me, I had unconsciously stepped off the High Way where man walks with his face lifted Godward and the pure, piney scents of the Heights call him upward, on to The Misty Flats. The in-between level place of easy-going—nothing very good attempted, yet nothing bad either—where men walk in the mist, telling each other that no one can see these things clearly. The Misty Flats where the in-betweeners drift to and fro—life has no end but amusement and no purpose—where the herd drift with the strongest pull and there is no reason for opposing anything. Therefore they had a kind of peace and a mutual link which they call tolerance.

I did not know that I had stepped down to The Misty Flats. I was just conscious of a sudden pleasant freedom from old duties. If there was no God, why bother to go to church on Sunday, for instance? Why not use Sunday to catch up on sleep, so that one could dance half the night away several times during the week?

Again, if the Bible was but a record of myths and old-fashioned ideas, why read it every morning? That took time and it was much easier to sleep until the very last moment, getting up just in time for the first class at college. Prayer, too, became silly—talking to someone who maybe did not exist.

I would not call myself an atheist because, well, there were those childhood answers to prayer still to be accounted for. But I called myself an agnostic—I frankly did not know if there was a God or not. It was a popular thing to be on The Misty Flats: you had plenty of company. And one was respected as being modern and intelligent to question the old faiths. Life drifted along so pleasantly—*for a while*.

My home training still had an effect upon me. Jesus Christ, now seen blurred in the mists which denied His Godhead, is an acknowledged historical character. And His name was still an ointment poured forth to me. He was like a perfume which haunts and calls so that one stops, lifts one's head and drinks it in wistfully. His name was the sweetest melody I knew and it never failed to stir my heart, even though I had ceased to seek Him. His purity and holiness made me hate besmirching things.

And all this because my father and my mother had taught me so.

So when I broke with the old religious habits and frankly went into the world, I was still choosy in what I did. I never smoked. The tainted breath and stained fingers or teeth of the smoker revolted me. I told myself I was too dainty for such doings.

Neither did I drink. My father, brokenhearted at my callous turning-of-the-back on all my home training, still warned me as a medical man what drink could do to a girl.

"Drink affects men and women biologically, and under its influence girls can be led into sin that they could never consent to when in possession of their senses. Dr. Hall and I have such come to us for consultation all the time. They never meant to, but there they are. Keep away from liquor and you can keep yourself pure, perhaps." So I did not drink. Also I had *signed the pledge* when twelve years old, and a certain whimsical loyalty to my childhood self kept me from breaking it.

So amidst the gay group at the university I was considered a *good girl*, and even a Christian! But I myself knew that I wasn't.

In my studies I took the honors course in English Language and Literature which brought me much under the influence of Dr. Sedgewick. But in my extracurricular activities I was mostly interested in the Players Club, the amateur theatrical club of the university. Apparently I had a gift for acting comedy parts, and in my freshman year I won life-membership in the Players Club, not usually attained by a first-year student. The staff patron of our theatricals was Professor H. G. C. Wood, also a member of the English Faculty. He was a believer in God and Christ, and not an atheist like Dr. Sedgewick, and his friendship helped to keep me from extremes. But the theater was his hobby and soon became mine. Urgently my mother pleaded with me to attend the Young Women's Christian Association. I went several times, but was frankly bored, so dropped it. I loved the theater and I liked to dance and these activities occupied my spare time. In fact, our Varsity 1922 yearbook has, as comment opposite my picture: "And oh the tilt of her heels when she dances!" No shadow of the missionary there.

In my second year I was elected to be Secretary of the Student Council, at that time the highest position to which a woman student could be elected. I met the leading young people of the university and became secretly engaged to Ben, one of the star Rugby and basketball players.

Ben was a returned soldier from World War I, several years older than I, not handsome, but six feet two or three in height. He came of a good Baptist family and my mother encouraged our friendship. He even took me to his church on Sunday nights! It made a nice inexpensive date, for Ben did not have much money and when he asked me to marry him he said that our engagement must be kept secret lest his "old man" be angry with him for getting involved before he graduated. I insisted that my parents be told, but his never were. We went together for nearly two years, and my path was perceptibly downgrade.

CHAPTER TWO

SLIPPERY WAYS IN DARKNESS

Wherefore their way shall be unto them as slippery ways in the darkness: they shall be driven on, and fall therein: for I will bring evil upon them, even the year of their visitation, saith the Lord.

Jer. 23:12

AFTER THE STRETCHED MUSCLES of climbing, to find oneself on the level is very relaxing and pleasant. Therefore The Misty Flats are attractive to foot, eye, and palate *at the beginning*. There is no hint that the pretty mist will gradually close in and bring darkness. There is no suggestion amid the gay chatter of the populous throng that there are slippery places, which are going to bring hurt. In the boasted freedom of drifting whither you will, there is certainly no sign that one is being *driven on*, as Jeremiah so shrewdly perceived was the reality. And above all, there is never a hint that the end of The Flats is the visitation of the Lord and the judgment of sin. Yet all that is the real truth.

In my senior year there came a day when my college chum, Cora, shook me to the foundations with a sentence or so. "Isobel," she said, "I think I should tell you something, even though it may hurt. Every-

body but you knows that Ben is not loyal to you. He is taking Reba out behind your back."

I turned a stunned face upon her, and her eyes filled with tears of sympathy, but with true friendship she went on: "You remember when you were ill and could not go to his fraternity dance?"

"Yes," I replied, "he took Reba in my place that night. He asked me if I would mind, and I said no."

"Well, that was the beginning of it, I guess. They've been seen together a lot. People are talking and I can't bear that you should not know. I don't think he's worth breaking your heart over, Isobel," she said earnestly.

But it did break my heart. It was difficult to believe and yet I knew he had not been so attentive of late. My father had spoken to me about it. "You have let Ben get too sure of you, Baby," he had said, using his tender pet name for me, the youngest in the family. "Show a man all the love you have *after you are married*, but keep it in reserve while you are just engaged. The elemental male *likes* to fight for a mate. What is the use of chasing a streetcar after you've caught it?"

So it was not all Ben's fault. I had been inexperienced—I was still only in my teens. With the promise to be his wife I had truly given my heart to Ben and love struggled hard with "maybe if I . . ." and "perhaps I could still win him back." But it was Ben himself who made it hopeless.

I met him one morning at the entrance of the university. No one else was around, so I charged him with taking Reba out behind my back. I wanted to hear from his own lips that it was true, for love rebelled at believing it. He drew himself up to the full stature of his six feet two inches, and I never forgot

the curl of his lip as he said, "Isobel, you're a softy. You don't suppose, do you, that after we are married, I'm not going to take other women out sometimes?"

"Then we part," I had whispered hoarsely, dazed as if stricken. I was on my way home from a class and have never forgotten the dull agony of that walk. I knew I could never marry a man with such standards. That was the trouble. They were just the standards of The Misty Flats. But I had known the Christ and I could not be satisfied with less than the ideals He had set before me.

So I found myself in the slippery places of darkness. Pride wounded me, love wounded me, and sleep departed from me. The English course I was taking entailed more work than a mere passing degree, and I needed rest during sleep hours, but could not sleep.

My mother was distressed that I should break with Ben and kept saying, "If you would only take my advice." But I could not bear to discuss it with anyone. I discussed it with myself night and day. My father was my greatest comfort. He knew enough to be silent and just love me. He even sensed that I was not sleeping. One night when all the house had been asleep for hours and I was still tossing, I heard him come softly into my room. He knelt down beside my bed and prayed God to help me, but it only irritated me. "Thanks, Dad," I said wearily. "I know you mean it well, but praying doesn't go beyond the ceiling, you know." I never forgot the groan with which he turned away from my agnosticism, and left the room.

The climax came just before Christmas. My birthday is December 17 and I was to be twenty years

old, but I do not remember if it was before or after that date. The post office clock on Main Street had just struck two, and I was still tense and tossing. I was desperate. I knew I'd be ill in the morning if I did not get to sleep. Then came the Tempter.

"Of what use is life?" he whispered. "Ben is only an average fellow. Probably all men are just like him. You'll never find anyone to love you like you want to be loved—your ideal is too high. And you'd never be happy with a lower ideal of marriage. Why go on with life? It has no purpose, only suffering. This would be a good time to slip out. There is that bottle in the bathroom marked *Poison*. A good long drink and your troubles are over." A good idea. The only sensible solution. I jumped out of bed and started for the bathroom. *Slippery ways in the darkness: they shall be driven on and fall therein.*

My hand was on the door knob when a deep groan, twice repeated, broke the silence of the dark. It was my father, moaning in his sleep in the next room. I was not afraid, for I recognized Father's tones, but I was startled into remembrance of him. I stood with my hand on the knob debating. If I committed suicide, Daddy would think I had gone to Hell. Of course, that would not make a place called Hell, but how terrible for Daddy to think so. He had been such a dear, kind father to me all my life. Dare I make him such a dastardly return? No, I couldn't be so mean and selfish. In agony I turned and sat down on the edge of my bed and faced the darkest moment of my life. I didn't want to live and I couldn't die! Oh the black despair of The Misty Flats! How little did I know of the golden sunshine pouring on the High Way above them! What a lot of heartache I might have been saved if I had only been told that

God had already laid His hand on one who was to be a dear husband to me with the same ideals and the same passion for God's highest purposes! But it was necessary that first I drink to the dregs the emptiness of the promises held out by The Misty Flats: only then could I be freed from their lure and subtle call.

And now a strange thing happened. That day I had been studying Matthew Arnold's essay on *The Study of Poetry*. (You remember, it was Sedgewick, a disciple of Arnold, who had first pushed me off the High Way?) In that essay he gives various quotations from the classics as touchstones of perfect poetry. One such was from Dante and ran: *In la sua volontade ē nostra pace*. From my knowledge of Latin I had guessed the meaning: *In His will is our peace*. Now that sentence wrote itself across the dark of my bedroom. Dante believed in God. What if there were a God, after all? If so, I certainly had not been in His will. Maybe that was why I had no peace? An idea struck me. No one was watching to see if I were a fool or not. Sitting there on my bed's edge, I raised both hands heavenward. "God, if there be a God," I whispered, for I was not going to believe in what did not exist just to get a mental opiate, "if You will prove to me that You are, and if You will give me peace, I will give You my whole life. I'll do anything You ask me to do, go where You send me, obey You all my days." Then I climbed into bed and pulled the blankets over me.