

Chapter One

IF YOU DON'T STOP TRYING to tear that handkerchief into shreds, Miss Matthews, I will be forced to believe that *you* are the patient who needs a psychiatric test."

Joyce Matthews gave an embarrassed laugh and tucked the wrinkled handkerchief into her purse. Then with a catch in her voice, she answered the doctor.

"Excuse me, please. I know I'm jittery, but I can't help it. I think anyone would be, were he in a similar situation. Can't you tell me at once, Dr. Bruce? It means so much, and—"

Her voice broke as she began to twist and weave her fingers as she waited tensely for the verdict.

"Don't get so flustered," said the doctor quietly. "Everything is all right. Gene passed every test. Physically he is astonishingly well for what he has been through. The mental tests gave him a clean slate. He is as mentally alert as you or I. In everything he showed up as a normal young man should."

She looked at him as she suspected that this statement were given merely to assuage her concern rather than because of its truth. Then she asked in a tone of complete bafflement, "Why does he act like a psychopathic case if he is normal? *That's* what I'd like to know."

“And that is what no one can tell. Something is bothering him, and eventually he will out with it. Maybe he has just waked up to the fact that the world isn’t his oyster, and the knowledge is disappointing. Modern youth is a mystery even to itself. It is so cocksure of its own knowledge and abilities that it must come as a shock to awaken to one’s insufficiency. This is just a phase out of which he will come eventually. Don’t try to hurry him. Let him alone.”

“I’ve done that for several weeks at a time. Result—just the same old gloom and silence.”

“Try something livelier then. Have some friends in, get him to go places with them or with you. Talk of anything and everything except military service or European affairs. Get him interested in the business. That—”

“That is just what can’t be done. Before he went into service he loved it all. Now he won’t go near the office or have Uncle Henry near. He just *sits* all day long watching the traffic flow past the window. He is there when I leave for the office in the morning, and he is there when I get back.”

“But what has he done in the meantime?”

“Nothing. The housekeeper says he doesn’t read, never listens to the radio nor watches television, isn’t interested in a thing but food. If I ask a direct question, he answers civilly, usually saying ‘I don’t know.’ His tone of voice implies that neither does he care.”

“He told us that he goes to a gymnasium several times a week. He is evidently anxious to keep in physical trim. That is a good sign. Suppose you try to quit worrying about him. In spite of his unpleasant experience he is still healthy and young. Some morning he will wake up and forget that he has a grouch. He will be the young dynamo we used to worry about because he wouldn’t be quiet.”

“I wish I could believe that. Sometimes I think he will

never be my Gene again." Her voice broke. "Why, it just seems that he can't—"

The doctor chuckled. "That's where you are wrong, and that's where I'm getting my belief. It isn't a case of *can't*. It is a plain, ordinary case of *won't*. He stood up to those three doctors last week and talked as well as anyone could."

"But why, doctor, why?"

"Probably because he realized that we meant business, and he didn't want to wind up in a padded cell. He has had all he wants of being confined. So he gave it to us straight. Now let's forget the whys for awhile. I do not know the answers. Perhaps he doesn't know them all himself. He may be still somewhat under the shadow of his experience, but he isn't deranged. Give him time and he will be O.K."

But as Joyce left the doctor's office and turned her steps toward the tall building two blocks away where the Matthews Importing Company had its offices, she reflected that time was the factor she did not have. It was March. Gene had already missed two years of college. He *must* be ready to return in the fall, for after college there must be the two years of special study in commerce and law that Daddy had planned, and after that the trips to the various branches in foreign countries before Gene would be ready to go into the office to understudy Uncle Henry. How much easier it all would have been if Daddy had lived to personally carry out those carefully made plans. He could have managed everything easily, she was sure, and all these anxious times could have been avoided.

"I surely don't want to doubt the rightness of God's ways," she mused. "But why parents are taken when they are so badly needed is a thing I can never understand. I've tried so hard for fifteen years, and today I feel a complete failure. Gene doesn't even seem to like me any more."

She had thought, during the weeks and months that fol-

lowed the announcement that Gene and two other American soldiers had ventured into East Berlin and had not been seen since, that nothing could be worse than the anguish she was enduring. Had he been killed she would have faced the finality of it and learned, as time passed, to accept it and adjust her life to the loss. But to waken every morning and wonder where he was and what tortures he might be enduring that day, to think every time she sat down to a meal that perhaps he was suffering from hunger, to lie under warm blankets on winter nights and realize that he might be shivering in the bitter cold of Siberia—all this had been torture.

She had comforted herself at times by imagining his homecoming, if it should be that he might return alive. She had thought of the long talks they would have as he recounted to her the hardships of his imprisonment. They had been unusually close as brother and sister, sharing experiences and emotions, problems and pleasures for all the long years of their orphanage. It had seemed almost more than she could bear to see him go into military service; his departure for Europe was almost as sad an event for her as her father's funeral had been. In both cases life had seemed unbearably hard. She knew her father could never return to her, but she clung to the hope that Gene might. Other Americans had come back from behind that sinister curtain. She would believe that some day Gene would. The news that he had escaped and made his way back to American territory had seemed like a message directly from Heaven. The following period, those weeks when he had lain in the hospital in Germany, had been a time of anxiety mixed with happy anticipation of his return to her. Her letters had been filled with plans for their lives when he should be at home again.

Then had come the day when she had stood at the airport gate and watched the line of people unloading from the

great plane. She would never forget that first glimpse of him before his searching eyes found her. He was not changed! In spite of all he had endured (and if the papers were correct in their reports, it had been a year of extreme hardship) he was her own brother, the little brother who had no memory of his mother and whose father had left him to her care when he was too small even to comb his hair or get his coat buttoned properly. He was hers, her dear, dear brother and nothing should separate them again!

His searching eyes had found her at last, and a moment later, drawn aside from the crowd, they were frankly sobbing as they clung to each other.

"He hasn't changed at all," she thought. "He is still my Buddy. After he has rested up a bit we will pick up life where we left it and go on as before. All this terrible time will be like a dream that daytime drives away."

But it had not turned out that way. During the weeks of rest that the doctors had ordered, he had changed. His joy at being home after his months of hardship had apparently dimmed. The lighthearted, almost incessant chatter which had seemed an outlet for the pent-up emotions, had given place to morose withdrawal into himself. She had met this at first with sympathy, chatting casually about the events of the day, the friends who were wanting to call, and most of all, of the plans for his return to school in the fall and his eventual entry into the business that had been the pride of the Matthews' family for six generations. She had told him how she had gone into the office herself when Uncle Henry had been overburdened and how enthusiastic she was over the fascinating world of business and commerce that had unfolded before her.

To all this he had listened with increasing disinterest, even when she had spoken of the long view that showed him in control in some far-off day when Uncle Henry should have retired. That picture had been one that had been a

favorite in the days before he went away. They had figuratively decked out that president's chair in all sorts of emblems of success and glory, and had talked in quiet tones of how glad Daddy would have been to see it. But now he only shrugged his shoulders and sank deeper into the big chair which had become his retreat. His attitude said plainly that, as far as he was concerned, they could appoint Clyde Ferris, a distant cousin of undeniably questionable integrity, to the position.

As the days passed, his lack of interest in life had deepened until conversation with him was almost impossible. He gave monosyllabic answers to her questions and ignored all other remarks. A complete physical and mental checkup, consent to which had taken several weeks and the connivance of Uncle Henry, Dr. Bruce, and herself to obtain, had been the last attempt to arouse him. There seemed nothing left and she wondered dully what the future held for them.

Her heart was heavy as she entered the building where the Matthews Importing Company's offices occupied two high floors overlooking the lake. Uncle Henry, looking bowed and frail since a bout with the flu a few weeks ago, met her in the hall and, noticing her disturbed face, drew her into his office and closed the door.

"What is it, Joyce? Were the reports of the doctors bad enough to make you so sick at heart?"

"No!" she burst out. "They aren't bad at all. He's all right, mentally and physically."

"All right? Then what's your trouble? Wasn't that what you wanted? You—"

"Of course I want him to be all right," she said impatiently. "But that's what makes it all so hopeless. If there's nothing wrong with him, he's just acting stubborn. That's what makes the situation impossible!"

"I still don't get it, honey. Gene's not just putting on an act. He's not as stubborn as that. He's always been—"

“‘Always been’ doesn’t mean ‘is now.’ Anyway, you don’t know as much as I do about his stubbornness. You’ve only seen him when he came here to the office or visited you and Aunt Myra in your home. And on those occasions he had nothing to be stubborn about. But don’t forget I reared him. Even when Daddy was alive I was the one who was responsible for him all day long. I know just how stubborn he can be. I thought he had come out of it after he went to college, but this is the worst yet.”

“But what’s it all about, Joyce? What started him?”

“He’s a self-starter, I guess. I’m sure I didn’t do anything to start him! He seemed all right when he came home. But for the last few weeks he has been getting worse every day. The only normal reactions he has are toward eating and sleeping. Mrs. Baker says he eats five meals a day, and he sleeps like a—a dope!”

“Get him to come down here. Maybe that will interest him.”

“Do you think I haven’t tried? He looked at me as if I had suggested a trip to the city dump!”

“Maybe Myra and I had better come over this evening.”

“Oh, don’t, *please*. It would only make matters worse, and you’d feel bad. He wouldn’t talk, I know. The other evening Dr. Hayden and his wife called. I thought he would be at least polite to his pastor. He used to love him. But before ten minutes were up he just walked out of the room and *stayed* out. After they had gone, I went into his room and he was sound asleep. Now do you see why I say it’s hopeless?”

“I can see why you are discouraged, but let’s not say it’s hopeless. Let’s give him a bit more time. He has only been home for two months. Before that he had six weeks in the hospital, and only the Lord knows what the year before that brought to him. We can’t hurry him.”

“But some of the Board members are getting impatient.

When you were out the other day, Mr. Sperry and Mr. Choate came in and asked all sorts of questions and hinted not a bit subtly that perhaps Clyde Ferris should be in here helping you. Mr. Sperry said he had heard that Gene would never be quite right again and that we should be thinking of someone else to understudy you."

"Sounds like Clyde had put them up to that. I don't think we will take any such steps for awhile. And when I feel the need of an understudy Gene will be ready. Or if he isn't you can do it. Nobody could have done better than you have this past year, and as long as you and Gene and I hold the majority of the stock, we will see that Clyde Ferris doesn't get in. It will be either Gene or you."

"But I don't want to *ever* be president. I couldn't do it! It's been lots of fun helping you, and I love the business. But I don't want to be a business woman, at least not *that* kind. I couldn't head up the Board or—do anything a president should. It's a man's job!"

"Yes, it is. But you could do it if you had to. For the present let's not worry. We will let it be known that the doctors have said that Gene is all right. Then we will just go on in faith that he will come out of this strange state of mind—or heart—in time to start to school this fall. By this time next month he will be O.K. Don't bother your pretty head about it."

"I don't believe he will be all right any more than I believe you when you talk about 'my pretty head.' It isn't, and you know it!"

Uncle Henry laughed. "That's more like my spunky gail I *do* so think you're pretty. You just suit me. I always liked a tall, willowy blonde, especially if her name happened to be Joyce Matthews."

In spite of herself Joyce felt better. She laughed ruefully. "I guess I am too pessimistic. But living in that big apartment with a brother who doesn't average a dozen words a

day, and not even a smile in two weeks, has put me in the dumps."

"Expressive, if inelegant. I've an idea that has just hit me. Someone should go down and straighten out that mess about the shipment to the Bloomingdale store. Why don't you drive down tomorrow. You handled all the correspondence and know more about it than anyone else. Take Gene with you. If my calendar is right, it will be the first day of spring. Maybe the weather will soften him up a bit."

"It won't hurt to try," she admitted reluctantly. "My guess, however, is that I will make the trip alone. If so, I'll take the bus so I'll have company. In the mood I am now I might bite myself if I went alone."

"Go along with you. Get the papers you'll need and go home early. Try to get Gene interested in something, even if it's nothing but tiddlywinks."

"I'd play anything from paper dolls to chess with him if he'd play. But he just says, 'No soap.' I've quit asking. I'll go home and wash my hair and then put on a campaign to get him to go with me. If he does, I'll take it as a good omen. If he doesn't I'll probably fall for that department head who has been putting those fresh hints in the letters we've had. I could marry him and let him take over the presidency. Or else I'll lose my mind and whack Gene Matthews over the head with a—a shoestring!"

She gathered up the papers and left. Long after the door had closed behind her, Uncle Henry sat staring soberly out of the window. But he was not seeing the lake although it was a scene of unusual beauty that afternoon. He was seeing, instead, a thin, anxious little nine-year-old girl trying to control a boisterous baby boy who could not comprehend the loss of the young mother he would never remember. Or a burdened fifteen-year-old worrying over the tantrums of a little boy who refused to accept the fact that his beloved Daddy would never again return from his day at the office.

Or a lonely young woman battling against hysteria when she learned that her brother had been reported missing behind the iron curtain.

"Poor child," he whispered. "She has always had it too hard. She must have passed up a half-dozen chances to marry just because she felt her responsibility for Gene. And now the young pup is acting like a complete neurotic fool! Is he or isn't he crazy? The doctors say no, I say yes. He's the kind of crazy kid that needs a good old-fashioned tanning like I used to get fifty years ago. And in spite of my sixty years I'd like to be the one to give it to him!"

As Joyce rode home the burden of her problems pressed heavily upon her. If she could just let go of the load that weighed on her spirit, if she could forget it all and relax, what bliss it would be! But the issue was too big, the urgency too great to allow any relaxation in her efforts. She *had* to arouse Gene to action or he would continue to sink deeper and deeper into this slough of despond until the time might come when even his own desire might not avail to lift him. But how could she do it? Through all the years when they had been so close together she had been able to direct and control him by her persistence and determination. Now she seemed to have no power whatsoever to help him.

"I feel as if I were trying to drive a car with the steering wheel disconnected," she thought. "I need help from someone much stronger than myself. Oh, if Daddy were only alive!"

Then she had to admit to herself that even when her father was with them the responsibility for Gene's training had fallen on her. During the periods of absence, while the father had been away on trips to the branches of the firm which were located in foreign countries, it had been necessary that she have authority over the boy. And she had tried to be worthy of the trust put upon her. She had been

proud of the results of her training. Now all her pride and assurance had been swept away. She needed help, and there was no one to help.

The bus was crowded, and she had been unable to find a seat. She was standing hemmed in by workers going home from an early-closing factory. She felt oppressed by the heavy fumes of tobacco on the coat of the short man in front of her and lifted her head to avoid them. Then she saw it. It was only a cardboard sign, the same style and size of all the other advertising cards in the frames along the top of the bus. But it was different from the others. Instead of a garish cartoon, a beautiful scantily clad young woman or a glass of foamy beer, she saw only a pair of clasped hands. They were not white or dainty or jeweled. They were rather large and showed the marks of labor. But to the troubled soul of this lonely young woman they had a message of trust that spoke peace to her even before she read the accompanying verse. For several minutes she studied those hands, then turned her eyes to read:

All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

She was sure the verse came from the Bible but could not remember ever having read it. It seemed such a *big* promise to make that she felt almost stunned by it. She believed in prayer. She had prayed lots of times in her life—as a little girl when she learned that her mother was very ill; as a schoolgirl when Daddy had gone so suddenly from her; and, during the months they had not known Gene's fate, she had prayed frantically and almost constantly. But she had only prayed when in trouble. This sign implied that one could pray for *anything* and get it if you only believed you would. If that were true, she could even pray that Gene would come out of his grouch and resume a normal life. She had never

heard of anyone praying about such a thing, but it was worth trying. She would pray, and she would believe. She was going to test that verse!

She walked the block from the bus to the apartment with a lighter heart and step than she had known for weeks. All was going to be right. She would pray and she would believe, and God would answer. He had said so.