

# A Question of Temptation

Baroness Orczy

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# A Question of Temptation

HOW SIR ROGER HERING'S WIFE SPENT THE MOST  
MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS EVE IN HER LIFE

By the Baroness Orczy

After Roger had gone, Marion Hering stayed on for awhile in the smoking room, curled up in a comfortable chair, just enjoying life. How happy she was! How wonderfully, wonderfully happy! There was a delicious feeling of warmth in her heart—of gratitude to Providence, which had given her everything that a woman could wish for.

With her pretty round chin resting in her hand, Marion stared into the fire and thought and thought how happy she was. She had a lovely home, plenty of money, and Roger—dear, darling Roger, the kindest husband that any woman

ever had. Her twenty-three years of married life had been nothing but bliss. Now Roger had come into the title, and Tom was engaged to Kate Culford, the only daughter of a millionaire father, and the prettiest debutante of last season.

Marion's heart felt warmer still when she thought of her boy, so handsome, so attractive, and so popular. He had passed out of Sandhurst quite creditably, and had got his commission in the Guards. Such a dear, lovable creature he was! The only trouble was that he was rather hot-headed, and inclined to be quarrelsome. Sometimes his father was angry with him because of that, but he was very young, and time would sober him quickly enough; and in the meanwhile what a dear boy he was!

Yes, God had been good, very good, to Marion Hering. All Roger's people were so nice—such perfect dears! Old Lady Hering was a delightful mother-in-law, though rather inclined to think that the Herings were on a higher earthly plane than the rest of humanity. Then there was Lucy Furniss, Roger's sister, whose boy Denver had just passed brilliantly for the diplomatic service—a nice, clever boy!

It was a pity that Denver and Tom got on so badly together. Even as children they were like two cats; and then Tom went to Eton and Denver to Harrow, and that settled it. After that the two boys couldn't meet without quarreling. It was a great pity, when they were first cousins, each of them the only child of idolizing parents.

Of course, Tom was by far the more attractive of the two. Denver was rather bookish, and quiet. He wore glasses, and

didn't dance. Girls didn't take much to him, but they all adored Tom.

By the way, Tom wasn't in yet. He and Kate Culford had gone to tea with old Lady Hering. Denver Furniss would be there, too. Marion and Roger had been asked, of course, but Roger preferred to go to his club, and Marion had a big Christmas Eve dinner party to-night, to celebrate Tom's engagement; so she had elected to stay at home, as she had still a lot to do.

Now everything was done. She had given a last look to her dinner table and to the drawing-room decorations, and then she settled down for a lazy half hour, curled up in a big chair and warming her toes.

She was very tired, and must presently have dozed off. What woke her was Richardson's voice in the hall, saying in his firm, dignified manner:

"I will see, madam, if her ladyship will see you. What name shall I say?"

Then a voice that was only too familiar broke in peremptorily:

"Oh, I know Lady Hering will see me. Is she in there?"

The next moment the door was thrown open, and Edith came in. Edith! Great Heavens, how dared she come here, unasked and unwelcome? And on Christmas Eve! Marion had sworn to herself that she would never have Edith Ottley inside her house again.

The visitor dismissed Richardson with a smile, and closed the door, while Marion remained almost paralyzed, sitting straight up in her chair and staring at her sister as if she were an apparition.

Edith came forward rather diffidently. She took off her gloves and dropped them, with her hand bag, on the nearest table. Then she sat down by the fire and held her hands to the blaze for a moment or two; after which she said meekly:

"Won't you say anything to me, Marion?"

This brought Marion back to consciousness of the situation.

"You had no right to come here, Edith," she said harshly. "You know Roger wouldn't like it, and Tom might be in at any moment."

"Would they think I had polluted this house by walking into it?" the other woman returned, looking up at her sister with eyes that had obviously cried their fill. "It is Christmas Eve, you know," she added softly.

"I know all that," Lady Hering said coldly. "What has Christmas Eve to do with your coming here?"

"Only the idea of peace and good will, Marion. We used to be such chums! I thought that perhaps—"

"Did you think that I had forgotten?"

"Not forgotten," Edith Ottley rejoined meekly; "but I thought that you might have forgiven."

Lady Hering gave a harsh laugh.

"Forgive!" she exclaimed with a shrug. "Forgive the disgrace that you brought on us all! On poor mother, who has gone to live abroad, because she could no longer bear to meet people who knew about that miserable business! On me, who have had to put a brave face on it, and to endure the sympathy of friends and the sneers of those who envied me my position and my happy life! Forgive, when Tom's engagement to Kate Culford was so bitterly opposed by her parents, just because his mother was the sister of the Mrs. Ottley who got six months' hard for stealing her friend's pearl necklace! Forgive, indeed!"

Marion Hering did not scream this out at her sister. She spoke in a low tone, but her voice, though scarcely above a whisper, was hard and trenchant like a lash striking the other woman in the face. Edith Ottley did not wince. Perhaps she was used to taunts, objurgations, and reproaches. Nor did she weep, for probably the well of her tears had run dry by now. She only said very gently:

"I know, dear! I know all that! Don't you suppose I have thought about all that miserable business until my brain has begun to reel, and I have wondered if I was going mad? But what's the use," she went on, with a weary little sigh, "of telling you all this? You can't understand. You have never known what temptation means—"

"The temptation to steal?" Marion broke in dryly. "No, thank God I never could know that! I would sooner starve!"

"I dare say you would, dear—on principle. We were both of us brought up on high principles, but you were beautiful, and I was not. You attracted a rich man who worshiped you; I, a poor man who deserted me. You were able to give your boy Tom the finest education in the world; I had to send Jim to a cheap school abroad, where he made undesirable acquaintances. For you the path of life was made of soft green lawns and roses; for me it was all thorns and stony—oh, so stony!"

Marion had listened in silence, scarcely moving, a frown on her face, and a scarcely perceptible curl of contempt around her pretty mouth.

"That's all very well, my dear," she said; "but you were not so poor as all that. You had your five hundred a year from uncle's will, the same as I had."

"Five hundred a year!" cried Edith, with a shrug. "Five hundred, with Jim to educate and to start in the world!"

"Enough, anyhow, to keep you from stealing," the other retorted roughly.

"Yes, enough!" the poor woman mused, staring into the fire, in which perhaps she saw visions of herself in the past—a merry child playing with her sister, her debut in society, her wedding, and then—

"Yes!" she reiterated dreamily. "Enough until temptation came—real temptation. I was staying with the Waldrons, in Buckinghamshire, for Christmas. Jim came down for three or four days. He was living with a friend in a small flat in London, you know, and was doing quite well as cashier at a small branch of the London and Putney Bank. The friend was false and cruel and dishonest, and Jim was weak. We can't all of us be strong. They got into bad company. There was gambling, they had payments to meet, and there was bank money lying there ready to hand. Just before that terrible Christmas, Jim found his accounts short by three thousand pounds, and settling day close at hand. He came down to the Waldrons' more mad than sane. At first he would say nothing, but of course I could see that there was something terribly wrong. Then, at last, the day after Christmas, he confessed everything to me, and implored me to find the money. Within the next three days his defalcations were bound to come to light, and there would be nothing for him but suicide. Find the money? Heavens above, how could I? All I had in the world was my annuity, and no hope that the trustees would think of advancing me a penny on it. Three thousand pounds, and Jim talking of suicide! I wired to you, do you remember? You sent me two hundred pounds—which was very kind, but quite inadequate. You said that you couldn't ask Roger for any more, unless I told him exactly what I wanted the money for. How could I tell him that Jim was a thief? My God, what an evening it was! The Waldrons had a big dinner party, and I had to smirk and smile, to jabber and pretend, and all the while I could see Jim's white, set face, at one time looking so haggard that Janet Waldron asked him if he was ill. After dinner, when the ladies filed through into the drawing-room, I had such a splitting

headache that I went up to my room to get some aspirin. You know the Waldrons' house—it has a long corridor on the first floor, at the top of the stairs, with the bedrooms opening out to right and left. Janet's own room was at the end of the corridor, and mine quite close to it. I could not find my bottle of aspirin, so, as I had seen a light through the half open door of Janet's room, I went to see if her maid was there and would give me what I wanted. The light was full on in the room, but the maid was not there—neither in the bedroom, nor in Lord Waldron's dressing room, nor in the bathroom. A careless girl, apparently! I went up to the dressing table to look for the aspirin, for I knew Janet wouldn't mind; and there, lying on the tray, was her pearl necklace—one that Lord Waldron had given her for her birthday a month or two before. It had cost six thousand pounds, so he told me at the time. How terribly, desperately careless of the maid, I thought! In fact, I made up my mind that I would speak to Janet about her. It was really putting a premium on robbery. A necklace, so easily picked up, so easily converted into money! Why did some women have such things, I reflected, trifles worth six thousand pounds, when a fine boy like my Jim would perhaps put an end to his life for want of half that sum?"

Edith Ottley paused for a moment, but her sister did not speak, and presently she resumed her pitiful story.

"All of a sudden the horrible temptation came upon me to slip the necklace into my pocket—the necklace which would mean salvation for Jim. I would be doing no one any great wrong, I thought, for Janet had so much jewelry that she would never miss these pearls, and Lord Waldron was so rich

that he could easily buy her more. It was awful, horrible, mean, and contemptible, I know; but framed in by the string of pearls I could see Jim's haggard face, and his hand holding a revolver, already raised for the fatal shot. There was no one about, no one had seen me come up. I sneaked back into my room with the necklace in my pocket. Chance favored me all through. Janet did not discover the loss of her necklace until about a week later, when she wanted to put it on. Then there was a hue and cry after it, of course; but in the meanwhile I had slipped across to Paris and sold the pearls there for three thousand pounds. I gave Jim the money, and his defalcations were never discovered. I thought myself safe. It would be useless, I suppose, to tell you that I never knew a moment's peace after that awful night. Probably you wouldn't believe me; but it is true that my life became a hell. I don't know whether it was remorse, or conscience, or shame. All I know is that even Jim's affection and gratitude were positive torture. Of course, he did not know what I had done. Like most young people, he just took things for granted. He was saved, that's all he knew, and I will do him the justice to say that from the day after that awful Christmas he became steadier than I had ever known him. He cut himself away from bad acquaintances. He stuck to his work and earned praise from his employers, and, incidentally, a rise in his salary."

Again Edith paused, breathless with the emotion which memory of that terrible time had brought forth. Marion had scarcely moved. She sat opposite her sister, with lips tightly pressed together, her head resting against her hand, staring into the fire. Her face expressed neither sympathy nor impatience. She listened, and that was all.

After a minute or two Edith went on speaking, in a voice veiled with suppressed tears:

"And then discovery came. The Waldrons had employed a very clever detective, who traced the pearls to the jeweler in Paris, and he in turn remembered me. Lord Waldron was pitiless. Men are like that, sometimes, when they don't understand. You were pitiless, too, Marion, though you are my sister and might have understood. I wonder now how it is that shame didn't kill me. It very nearly did, and I spent the best part of the six months in a prison hospital. The nurses were very sorry for me. You were not sorry, Marion—only bitterly resentful; but in my heart I always forgave your harshness. You had never known trouble, and how could you understand?"

## II

Edith Ottley had long ceased speaking. She was leaning back in her chair, with her head against the cushions, but her eyes were dry. They had long since shed their last tear.

Lady Hering gave the fire a poke. Then she, too, leaned back in her chair, her shapely hands toying with the beautiful jade necklace that Roger had given her for her last birthday. After awhile she said:

"I don't know, Edith, why you should think me so hard. What could I do? When that awful disgrace came on us all, I

had to take mother abroad. Then Roger joined us, and wouldn't let me come back to England until you—you were out of prison. You talk so much about your Jim; what about Tom? It did make a difference to him, you know. At one time we thought that it would be useless for him to get into the Guards, for his life there would be made a misery to him, because of you. The Culfords were very unpleasant, too. It was all horribly difficult, and very hard on Tom, you must admit. Fortunately Colonel St. Laurie is an old friend of Roger's, and has been wonderfully kind about Tom; and Kate Culford is so deeply in love that she simply talked her people over. Tom is engaged to her now, and he got his commission; but when I think how near the brink we were, how near to seeing all Tom's future prospects in life dashed because of you, you cannot wonder that I don't feel very kindly toward you."

"Not even at Christmas time, Marion?" the sister pleaded gently.

"Oh, that's all cant, Edith!" Lady Hering returned coldly. "You didn't think of Christmas when you stole Janet Waldron's necklace."

"No!" Edith murmured. "I only thought of Jim."

"But Jim is all right, surely? Nothing about him came out in your affair."

"No—I was too careful for that. I never gave them the slightest chance of probing into my motives. To all intents

and purposes I stole the necklace for my own personal gain, and Jim has been able to retain his position in the bank."

There was silence again between the two sisters. Edith, with hands clasped, was staring into the fire. Lady Hering tapped her exquisitely shod foot on the floor with obvious impatience. She hoped that Edith would go away before Roger and Tom came home, and she was cudgeling her brain for a phrase that would not sound too harsh.

"Well, Edith!" she said at last, with a weary sigh, and moved as if to rise from her chair.

Mrs. Ottley looked up at her, but did not respond immediately to the obvious hint.

"Well," she said dully, "I suppose you have been wondering why I came to-day, after keeping away from you all this while."

"I confess," replied Marion, "that I didn't imagine you had come here just to wish me a merry Christmas."

Oh, why didn't Edith go? There was the sound of Roger's latchkey in the door, and a moment or two later his voice asking Richardson whether her ladyship had gone up to dress. Richardson replied that her ladyship was engaged in the smoking room with a visitor. It was too annoying! Roger might come into the room at any moment.

"I wish you would tell me what you do want," she said, unable to control her nerves any longer.

"Only this," Edith replied resolutely. "Jim finds his position at the bank rather unpleasant at times—because of me, of course. He and I want to go away from England—to start a new life where no one knows our history—"

"Well?"

"Roger has those rubber estates still, hasn't he?"

"He has; but if you are going to ask him—"

"I can't ask him, Marion, but if you would put in a word for Jim—"

"No, I can't put in a word for Jim," Marion interrupted almost roughly, "and I won't. Roger and I never mention your name now, and I don't want to begin. When I married a rich man, I made up my mind that my family should never be a drag on him."

"But, Marion dear—"

"No, I won't, Edith, and that's flat! All I want is to let the whole of my family sink into oblivion, so far as Roger or Tom or any of the Herings are concerned. It isn't as if you hadn't enough money to live on. You still have your five hundred a year—"

"I am paying Janet Waldron three hundred a year out of my income, until I have paid off the price of that necklace."

"Well!" said Lady Hering, with an indifferent shrug. "That's only fair, of course, though it seems rather mean of

Janet to take the money; and even so, you have enough to live on, and Jim has his job. Let him stick to it!"

"If you knew how Jim and I long to be out of England—"

"I dare say you do. Then why don't you go out to Australia, or Canada, or somewhere? You couldn't starve with your regular income, and Jim would find some sort of a job presently."

"That would be taking a terrible risk, Marion. It would be throwing up a certainty for what is only problematical; but if Roger would give Jim a chance—"

"You can ask him, if you like," Marion said decisively. "I won't."

"Marion dear! For the sake of old times! Think of your Tom—"

"I forbid you," Marion broke in harshly, "to drag Tom's name into your miserable affairs. Thank God, Tom is an upright and honorable gentleman. I won't have him mixed up with your Jim in any way."

"I am not trying to do that, dear," Edith rejoined meekly. "I only meant—"

"Never mind what you meant. I'm not going to revive all those unpleasant memories by talking about you or Jim to Roger. Besides—"

She paused, frowning and biting her lip. Even her selfish heart was smitten with compunction for what she had been about to say; but Mrs. Ottley apparently guessed. She raised horror-filled eyes to her sister.

"You mean," she said, "that you think Jim might—"

Then she gave a moan and buried her face in her hands.

"All right, Edith," Marion murmured. "I didn't really mean that."

But already the unfortunate woman had regained control of her nerves. Rising resolutely from her chair, with quick, spasmodic gestures she readjusted her hat and picked up her gloves and her hand bag.

"I am sorry I troubled you, Marion," she said coldly. "I won't do it again, I promise you."

She walked firmly to the door. Lady Hering mechanically touched the bell. She did not attempt to detain her sister, or to bid her a warmer adieu. She was only conscious of a feeling of intense relief that this unpleasant interview was over at last. In her mind she was rehearsing the phrase with which she would warn Richardson never to introduce this particular visitor if she called again.

Edith did not say another word. She walked out of the room with as much dignity as she could command. In truth, she was humiliated beyond endurance. Mother love had fought a desperate battle against pride, before this interview

had come about. Pride had been vanquished, and lay in the dust, smirched beyond relief.

### III

When the front door had finally closed on the unwelcome visitor, Marion Hering felt as if she had awakened from a bad dream. She could scarcely realize that Edith had actually had the impertinence to call, that she had sat there, by the fire, warming her hands, and had asked her—Marion—to speak to Roger about that young blackguard Jim Ottley—a boy who according to his mother's own showing had robbed his employers to the tune of three thousand pounds.

They were a pair of them, those two. Edith's story was all very well. She might have stolen Janet Waldron's necklace in order to save Jim from prison, but Marion put no trust in her. If she would steal, she would lie about it to excuse herself. What impertinence, to enter her sister's house after spending six months in prison like a common thief! Indeed, Edith actually was a common thief—just as bad as some wretched charwoman who stole half a crown to buy her man an extra good dinner for Christmas.

Horrible!

Well, thank goodness, that was over! Edith Ottley would surely never darken these doors again; and now it was time to dress. Roger must be wondering who the tiresome visitor

was; and Tom—Tom was very late! He would hardly have time to dress.

Suddenly Marion heard Tom's voice in the hall, saying to Richardson:

"Has mother gone up to dress yet?"

It was Tom's voice, but it sounded so strange that Marion

---

But she had no time to reflect on this, for the next moment the door was thrown open, and Tom came in. He came in and immediately closed the door behind him, and then stood with his back to it, staring at his mother.

"Tom!" Marion exclaimed. "What in the world has happened? What is it?"

Tom looked almost as if he had gone out of his mind. His hair was disheveled, his face haggard, his eyes staring before him as if into something appalling. His lips were quivering. He couldn't speak.

Lady Hering went up to him, took him by the shoulders, and shook him.

"Tom, in Heaven's name, aren't you going to speak? What is it? What is it?"

After awhile she caught a murmur that came through his trembling lips:

"Denver! Denver! Oh, my God!"

Lady Hering frowned, anxious, puzzled, vaguely terrified.

"Denver?" she asked. "What about Denver?"

With a groan, Tom staggered to the nearest chair, and, burying his face in his hands, murmured hoarsely:

"I've killed him!"

"Tom!"

Marion, wide-eyed, dry-lipped, stared at the boy, not because she believed what he had just told her, but because she thought that something had unhinged his brain. She knelt down beside him.

"Tom," she said as quietly as she could, stroking his hair and cooing softly, as only a mother can, "pull yourself together. Something has upset you. What is it? Shall I get you something to drink? No? Well, then, just try to tell me quietly what has upset you."

He raised his head and looked at his mother. His eyes were sane enough. It was not that—not that, that sent an icy shiver down Marion Bering's spine, and made her heart feel as if it had been turned to stone. No, it was not fear for Tom's sanity that gave her that sudden sense of nameless horror—it was the conviction that the boy was speaking the truth, and that something awful, stupendous, devastating, had really, really happened.

She rose from her knees, went to the door, and opened it, to see if any one was in the hall—some one might be listening! Then she went back to Tom and drew a low chair close beside his. He was sitting all huddled up, with his two hands hanging over the arm of the chair. His hair was disheveled, and in his eyes there was nothing but dull despair.

Lady Hering took hold of his hands, and gently stroked them up and down. She couldn't speak for a moment or two, because her mouth felt dry and gritty, but after awhile she contrived to murmur:

"Tell me, Tom!"

He did not reply at once, so she had to help him out with questions.

"Tell me what happened. You quarreled with Denver? Where?"

Tom nodded, and his voice came to her ears like a hoarse, broken whisper:

"I walked with him after tea to his flat—he said he had something very important to say to me—it was about Kate. He said that she—she had cared for him until I came—that she had promised him—sworn—and then—"

"Never mind what Denver said," Marion broke in firmly. "You were angry with him for something he said about Kate. Then what happened?"

"I knocked him down."

"Well? And?"

"He went down all of a heap—I think his foot slipped—he fell down—oh, my God!"

Tom would have buried his face in his hands, only that his mother clung to his hands. She saw the look of horror that dwelt so persistently in his eyes. She felt the shuddering and shrinking in his body; but she still had to learn what it was that Tom saw again now, in retrospect—what it was that had filled his soul with horror.

"He fell down?" she questioned peremptorily. "Did you notice at once that he was badly hurt?"

"Not at first," the boy replied with a shiver. "I was too angry, at first, to look at him; but suddenly the room seemed so still, so—so silent! Then I looked at Denver. He lay full length on the floor, with his head against the fender. One arm was outstretched, and his fingers were all outspread. They looked—they looked—awful! I called to him, but he didn't move. His face slowly became a sort of gray color, just like ashes in a grate, and blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth; and then his jaw dropped. I can't tell you how terrible he looked—and so still! Everything in the room was so still, and so dreadfully, dreadfully cold! I knelt down beside him, and with my handkerchief I wiped the blood from his mouth. Then I got some water and sprinkled it over his face. I took hold of his hand. It was cold—cold as ice—and not a breath came through his lips. Suddenly I

understood that he was dead. Something seemed to whisper it to me:

"He is dead! You have killed him!"

"I felt just like Cain, mother. I had killed Denver, who was almost my brother. I felt horribly, horribly afraid—afraid of that silent, motionless body—afraid of the shadows—of the draft that blew one of the blinds out and in. I was afraid, mother darling, and, like a coward, I just ran out of the room—all the way—like a coward—oh, my God!"

For a long, long while Lady Hering didn't speak. She just sat beside the boy on the arm of his chair, took hold of his head, and pillowed it against her breast. With gentle hands she smoothed his hair, and stroked his cheeks, while great, dry sobs shook the athletic youth's frame. She was thinking—thinking hard.

"Listen, Tom!" she said, after awhile. "Listen!" she repeated more peremptorily, and forced him to look up at her. "You are not sure—you cannot be sure that he—that Denver is dead. He may have hit his head against the fender, and just lost consciousness."

Tom shook his head vigorously.

"If you had seen him, mother!" he murmured. "His jaw dropping—his hands—oh, God, it is I who killed him!"

"Be quiet, Tom!" she commanded. "Be quiet! Let me think a moment. Did you call any one after—after it happened?"

"No—I was too big a coward even for that. There was no one in the flat. I ought to have called, but there was no one about."

"No one? You are sure?"

"Quite sure. I saw no one, or I should have told them. You know Denver's flat—there's never any one about—there's no hall porter—"

"Did any one see you come to the flat with Denver?"

"No—no one saw us. The front door was open, and Denver's flat is on the ground floor. He let himself in with his latchkey. I remember thinking how lonely the place looked, and the streets were so dark and deserted. Every one was holiday making, I suppose."

"Did you tell any one at Lady Bering's that you were going to walk with Denver to his flat?"

"No. He hadn't been to Lady Hering's. I met him just outside the park, when I was walking home."

"Where was Kate?"

"I had just put her in a taxi. She wanted to get home to dress."

"Then no one saw you go to the flat?"

"No one."

"Or knew you were going?"

"Or knew I was going."

"You met no one coming out?"

"Not a soul."

Lady Hering said nothing more for the moment. She sat beating her hands together and thinking—thinking hard.

There was Denver, of course. He might not be dead, but merely unconscious, and in need of help—of immediate help. A doctor, quickly called, might save him, if he were only badly hurt.

On the other hand, if Denver was dead, there was Tom! A doctor, hastily summoned, would ask questions—would want to know. A quarrel! An accident! A fall! Would people believe in an accident? Every one knew that Tom and Denver were bad friends. Every one knew that Tom was hot-headed.

And this business about Kate Culford. People knew that she had flirted a good deal with Denver. When that miserable scandal about Edith occurred, many thought that she would throw Tom over and marry Denver. Her parents urged it—they didn't like the idea of Tom's connection with that Mrs. Ottley, who had been in prison for stealing Lady Waldron's pearls. People knew about all that. Would they believe in an accident, or even in a quarrel ending with—with manslaughter? Oh, the horrible word!

If Denver was dead, it would mean all that and more. Whereas, if one just kept quiet—

"Listen, Tom," she said at last. "You must pull yourself together. We can't help the dead, but we've got to think of ourselves—of you, of me, of father—"

Tom gave a heart-rending groan.

"Heavens, mother," he cried, "I hadn't thought of that!"

"But you must, dear! You must! And you must understand that the one thing you and I have got to do is to keep quiet about the whole thing. You understand?"

Tom looked at her. For the first time since he had come into the room, Marion Hering saw a glimmer of hope creeping into the boy's eyes.

"You understand?" she reiterated.

Tom nodded.

"I think I do," he said.

His voice sounded clearer now, and eager. He was only a boy, after all; and trouble has a way of falling away from the shoulders of young people, especially if a mother is there to help bear the burden. There was no sense of guilt in Tom—of horror, yes, but not of guilt. Denver had said what he shouldn't about Kate, and Tom had knocked him down. It was horrible that he should have killed him; but it was a horrible accident, not a crime.

Anyway, Lady Hering thought that the best thing to do was to keep quiet about it all, and Tom was not likely to talk—no fear! All unconscious that keeping quiet might mean death to his cousin, if Denver was only badly hurt, he was only too ready to fall in with his mother's plans.

First of all there was Richardson. Had Richardson appeared astonished to see Tom looking so disheveled? No—the hall was rather dark. Tom didn't think that Richardson had noticed anything. He was probably thinking about the table for the dinner party.

Well, then, it was just a question of seeing the thing through, of not allowing any one to guess that anything was wrong—not even father, or Kate—least of all, Kate! Oh, Tom thought he could go through with it all right. He felt so much better—so very much better—already. Mother was such a dear, and so wise! Tom kissed her more tenderly than he had done for years.

"You don't know how I felt, mother darling," he said, "until I told you all about it!"

Then, just shamefacedly, he drew his stained handkerchief from his pocket.

"I had better burn this, hadn't I?" he said.

Together, they watched the handkerchief till it was burned to a cinder. Then they decided that it was time to go up and dress.

"Don't be afraid, mother," was the last thing that Tom said, before they parted outside his bedroom door. "I'll see the thing through, all right!"

## IV

Whenever Lady Hering looked back on that Christmas Eve dinner party—and she did so very often—she always wondered that something did not snap inside her brain during that evening. The amazing thing was that no one seemed to notice that anything was amiss—not even Roger.

When she went up to dress, he remarked casually that she was late, and just before she went downstairs he said in his usual kind, gentle fashion:

"You look worried, darling. Is there anything wrong?"

When she told him that she had had an altercation with the cook, he smiled and appeared satisfied.

Denver Furniss, of course, was to have been of the party, and Lady Hering made pretense to wait for him for five minutes after all her guests had assembled and the dinner hour had struck. Sir Roger, however, declared laughingly that young men must learn to be punctual, and that perhaps the F.O. had sent Denver off on some secret mission that involved the welfare of the British Empire. Anyway, he, for

one, was hungry, and he didn't want to see a good dinner spoiled for any young diplomat in embryo.

It was just after that that the most terrible moment of this awful evening occurred. Lady Hering rang the bell and told Richardson that she wouldn't wait for Mr. Furniss. There was a general din of laughter and chattering in the room—Tom being as gay as any one, full of fun, and seemingly absolutely care-free. What a wonderful thing youth was, thought Marion Hering!

She herself was in such an agony of mind and body that she felt as if she could not endure the strain any longer, as if she had wandered into the farthest recesses of hell, and, having come back to a hideous earth, must suddenly scream, or rave, or fall dying on the floor—like Denver—like that poor boy Denver!

Suddenly, with half an ear, she heard Kate Culford say something about a hat. Kate had bought a new hat, or something—anyhow, she mentioned a hat. From those recesses of hell into which poor Marion Hering was ceaselessly wandering tonight, an unseen voice whispered:

"When Tom came in, he had no hat."

Had he left his hat in Denver's flat? If so, that hat would be a damning witness against him—all the more damning because she and he had kept quiet about the whole thing.

Marion looked across the room to where Tom was laughing and teasing Kate, and joking with two or three other

young people as merry and irresponsible as himself. Heavens above! That hat! At all costs, Marion had to make sure.

How she walked across the room she never knew. It had ceased to be her drawing-room—it was a court of law. Her guests were not in evening dress—they were all in black, and had come there to watch Tom, who stood in the dock; and away up there, where the judge sat, there was a hat—Tom's hat, the proof that he had been in Denver's flat just before Denver was killed.

But she did contrive to go across the room; and, when Roger spoke to her, she gave him quite a merry smile. In the morning room, downstairs, there was a cupboard where Roger and Tom kept their hats and coats. Tom's hat—the one he had worn this afternoon when he went to old Lady Bering's—was not there.

Perhaps Richardson had taken it upstairs. Richardson, at this moment, was in the dining room, giving a last look at the table before serving dinner. Lady Hering wondered if she would have the strength to call to him—to speak at all. Her throat felt as if it was in a grip that choked her. Her whole body shook as with ague, and yet her head and hands felt on fire. Hell? Indeed it was a worse hell than Dante ever dreamed of!

Then, suddenly, the telephone bell rang. The instrument stood on the desk in the morning room. As the bell continued to ring, Lady Hering stared at it as she would at a snake that fascinated her before devouring her. Her eyes dilated, her lips

parted, but no cry came from her throat. She almost ceased to live.

Richardson's brisk step dragged her out of this trance. He looked comically astonished when he saw her ladyship standing there, near the cupboard door.

"That's all right, Richardson," she contrived to say, quite naturally. "I expect it's from Mr. Furniss. I hope he isn't ill."

Richardson withdrew. With a firm step Marion went up to the telephone. Her hand was quite steady when she took the receiver down and held it to her ear.

"Lady Hering?" said a brisk, pleasant voice.

"Speaking," she replied firmly.

"Oh, Lady Hering!" the brisk voice went on. "I am Dr. Hudson. I am speaking from Mr. Furniss's flat."

"Yes?"

"He has had a nasty fall—struck his head against a fender, and there is a slight concussion. Lucky his man came in when he did—found him lying on the floor unconscious, and telephoned for me—yes, very lucky—if he had been left lying there much longer, I don't know what—no, no—no cause for alarm now—he will be all right—but it will take a little time, and what we must have is absolute quiet. No, no—don't think of coming here—he wouldn't know you, and I am sending in a competent nurse for the night. His man can do all that is necessary in the daytime. Yes, that will be best

—I'll be with him at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and if you will come round then—good night, Lady Hering—I thought it best to telephone to you, as Mr. and Mrs. Furniss are abroad. That's quite all right—so glad I was in time. Yes, very lucky—good night!"

The brisk voice said nothing more, and Marion Hering hung up the receiver. From the drawing-room upstairs came the buzz of conversation and laughter, and Tom's voice, gayer and louder than any.

Then it was that Marion felt as if something in her brain would snap. Life came back to her, but with such a rush that she felt giddy and sick and frightened by this sudden burst of hope and joy after her immeasurable despair. What she longed to do was to kneel down and thank God for this heaven-born relief. She longed to fall down on her knees and cry, or laugh, or scream. The reaction was well-nigh as unendurable as the strain had been.

"Shall I serve dinner now, my lady?"

It was Richardson's matter-of-fact appearance, his voice, his manner, that recalled her to herself, to the necessities and conventions of life, and helped her to master the hysterical outburst that threatened her. She gave the necessary orders, and then went, calmly smiling, back to the drawing-room. All through the evening she smiled and chatted, and no one noticed that anything was amiss. This was Christmas Eve, and Tom's engagement to Kate Culford was being celebrated, and nothing happened to mar the harmony, the merriment of the evening.

"Good old Denver! I am glad he's all right! What a fright the beggar gave us, eh, mother?"

That was what Tom said when Marion told him about the telephone message. She had done it tentatively, afraid that in the excess of his emotion at this sudden relief he might betray himself, just as she very nearly betrayed herself before Richardson; but two minutes later Tom was as gay and lively as ever. What a wonderful thing youth was! Irresponsible—unthinking—wonderful!

When everybody had gone, and before she turned in for the night, Marion Hering sat down at her desk and wrote to her sister Edith:

The young people will be out all the afternoon, and Roger and I will be alone. Will you come to tea and bring Jim along? We'll talk over old times and Jim's prospects for the future. I am sure Roger will find him a good appointment in the East Indies or Australia. Anyway, we'll talk it all over. I feel sure that there are happy times in store for you yet. Don't worry, dear, and don't be angry with me. I did seem hard this afternoon, I know; but somehow—now—I understand many things which I did not understand before. You shall have a happy Christmas, dear—I promise you that.

She would send the note over by hand in the morning. Oh, yes—she understood many things now! She understood what temptation meant to a woman when her boy's life and honor were at stake. Poor Edith had only stolen a few pearls, but she, Marion, had been willing to let poor Denver Furniss die, untended and alone, rather than that Tom should suffer for his actions.

It was Christmas morning, and the message had gone forth to the people of this earth to love, to forgive, and to understand.

[The end of *A Question of Temptation* by Baroness Emmuska Orczy]