

Ashes of Dreams

Isabel Ecclestone
Mackay

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Ashes of Dreams

BY ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

AUTHOR OF "UP THE HILL AND OVER," ETC.

The celebrity was having her hair done. She had a secretary who could do hair, and many other things not common with secretaries. This was fortunate, since celebrities, more than most people, need to have about them lesser folk of general utility.

"Just nine o'clock," said the secretary briskly, glancing at her wristwatch. "We are half an hour early. When I have finished your hair you will have a whole hour to do as you like before you see Mrs. Ponsonby Clarke."

"Yes," agreed the celebrity absentmindedly; then, rousing to attention, "I mean, no, very much no. I am going to have the whole morning to do as I like, and one of the things I shan't like is to see that woman."

"She said she would be here at ten o'clock sharp."

"She will. Her name sounds like it. You, Marta, will have the exceeding pleasure of entertaining her. For I am going out."

The secretary patted a shining roll into place and pinned it securely. She said nothing, but her manner said a great deal, beginning with, "People in your position—"

"Yes, I know all that," the celebrity answered the manner. "But I'm going, all the same. You needn't frown, old dear. Secretary never had a more dutiful slave than I. But this is the slave's day out."

"Where is the slave going, and how long will it stay?" asked the secretary mildly. "I ask, like Rosa Dartle, for information."

"And, unlike Rosa, I'm afraid you won't get it. But I'll tell you this, the way I am going is a very long way—twenty years long."

"Then I may take it that you won't be back for lunch?"

The celebrity laughed.

“Well, I think you may take it that I shall. But why mention it? Coming back for lunch is so—so tame! Aren’t you dense this morning, Marta? Can’t you sense the fine flavour of romance? Haven’t you noticed something odd about me? Can’t you see that I am twenty years younger, and all strung up?”

“I have noticed that you are very wiggly and that your hair will be lopsided.”

The celebrity sat still at once. She knew very well the importance of hair. But though her wiggling ceased, her eyes remained restless and her hands played with hair-pins. The secretary brushed steadily, but the eyes which met the others in the mirror were keen and questioning.

“The truth is,” volunteered the other apologetically. “I simply could not do with Mrs. Ponsonby Clarke this morning. I have nerves. Mrs. P. Clarke will expect poise, and I have no poise. I am jumpy and I am shaky. Marta, don’t you remember that I lived near here once? I used to visit in this town. It has associations.”

“Jumpy ones?” said the girl.

“Y—es, very, Marta; did you ever guess that once there was a Someone?”

“Everyone,” said Marta succinctly.

“No. Everyone is no one. But once, in this very town, there was just one. I was twenty years old then. I was called Anna.”

“You are forty now,” said Marta grimly, “and you are called Ann.”

“Yes, but I don’t look it. You should always add that. I don’t look it, do I, Marta—really?”

The secretary relaxed.

“Perhaps you don’t,” she agreed. “At least not when you let me do your hair.”

“How old do I look?”

“About thirty.”

Ann Gilchrist sighed. She was glad not to look forty, but it wasn’t pleasant to look thirty either. Say what you will, thirty is getting on.

“Twenty-eight, perhaps,” ventured the secretary, who was afraid that she might not hear anything more about the Someone. But the other took no notice. Her eyes in the mirror had become dreamy.

“He lived here,” she went on. “In this town. I was visiting here when I met him. His father kept a little art store. He was rather a character, the father; knew a lot about old prints and things. He had determined that his son was to be an artist. John wanted to be an artist very much. He was crazy to go abroad to study. Marta, he was the handsomest boy! He had the most beautiful mouth, and I never saw anyone with an eye like his.”

“Wall-eye?” asked Marta concernedly.

“It was gray,” went on Ann dreamily, “the only really gray eye I ever saw. Clear and—and gray, you know. I fell in love with him almost at once. We did not meet very often. But I loved him. I adored him. I couldn’t eat or sleep. His step on the pavement turned me faint, Marta. I believe it was the real thing.”

“Sounds like it,” Marta remarked.

The celebrity sighed. “Well, whether it was or whether it wasn’t, it’s all I’ve ever had. I have never been able to feel faint over anybody since. And I’m forty—nearly.”

“Quite,” declared Marta softly, but with decision. “You are quite forty. And I should think that you should be very glad indeed to have kept your freedom and your common sense. All the same, if you were really as silly as you say at twenty, I can’t see why you didn’t—why he didn’t—”

“But that was the trouble, old dear—he didn’t. I cared for him, but he would have none of me. It was quite simple.”

“He *must* have had a wall-eye.”

Ann Gilchrist laughed.

“No, I wasn’t at all nice-looking then. I didn’t have you to do my hair, and I was terribly dowdy. He, my dear, was going to be an artist. He simply did not see me at all. My case was hopeless from the first. I went home to forget him.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes. At least the rest isn’t anything to anyone but me. It’s just that I didn’t forget him after all.”

“Fool!” exclaimed the secretary explosively. “Not you, but that fool boy, I mean. What’s the use in having gray eyes if you can’t see with them? Anyone with half an eye could see. Look at that!” she concluded, as she pinned the last soft strand in place and pointed triumphantly to the mirror.

Ann Gilchrist nodded. She knew her good points very well, and she was not displeased with what she saw.

“So on a hair our destiny depends,” she quoted. “With a head like that, Marta, I feel that I might have had a chance. But—I didn’t. You’ll see Mrs. Ponsonby Clarke for me, won’t you? I am going out.”

“I’ll see her, and you can go out, if you’ll tell me one thing more; where is that young man now?”

“What young man? Oh, that young man! I don’t know, I’m sure. And he can’t be a young man now, you know. He went away to study art. Art is long, so he is probably doing it still. Do you truly like this hat, Marta?”

Marta ignored the hat. “I just wanted to be sure he wasn’t around here anywhere,” she explained, “and you’ll not forget to be back for lunch.”

Ann drew a perfect hat over her shining hair and settled a most delectable fur about her shoulders. It would be absurd to say that she did not know how charming she looked, yet there was in her smile a touch of melancholy as if it sorrowed for that girl of twenty years ago who had learned the lesson of being beautiful too late.

Outside, the wind blew keen and cold. It was winter, and yet there was a curious something in the wind, a stirring, tingling something, instinct with new energy and awakening life. To-morrow would not bring the spring, but—spring was coming. Ann Gilchrist felt its magic in the air. And there was other magic, too, more potent, more elusive, the magic of remembrance, that wonderful spring of the heart which no winter ever kills. Before she had turned the corner of that half-familiar street its spell was upon her. A mild wonder enveloped her. Twenty years! What, after all, were twenty years? Old phrases floated back to her: “A watch in the night”, “A tale that is told”—just nothing at all, in fact, an illusion which faded with the first breath of memory.

Ordinarily, and for one bereft of magic, there are changes in twenty years. But Ann saw little change. The busy main street of the town was a little busier, the buildings a little higher, the pavements newer. But there, right across the road, was the store where Someone had taken her for hot chocolate after an evening on the ice. It was newly painted, and its window had been enlarged; but that was all. Inside there were the same little round tables with marble tops, and there, right there in that corner, was the little crescent seat where she had sat, young John beside her, sipping the nectar of the gods.

Ann walked on quickly. She seldom walked in these days. She took her exercise in other ways, because she was always too busy. At home she had her small electric; when away, as at present, she had the private cars of many at her disposal. Walking wastes time. But this morning she had twenty years of time to waste and could afford to be prodigal. And she felt so strong and young.

Main Street left behind, she turned into Hill Street, and then into Alder, where it bends toward the river. There are little shops dotted all along Alder Street, many more now than there used to be, but the general character of the street had the pleasant familiarity of a once well-known face which has grown older.

Ann walked about half its length briskly, then her step began to slacken. She was getting very near a certain corner, and just around the corner was a certain store. The years which had spared so much had probably spared it, too. The old man who had kept it would be gone, and the young man with the gray eyes would be far away. But the store might be there. It was to see the store that Ann had slighted Mrs. Ponsonby Clarke.

Slower and slower became Ann's step. The magic in the air was very strong. The twenty years were vanishing utterly. What was it, this curious feeling which caught at her throat and made her breath come hard! Inside her muff her hands clung together, icy-cold. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes down-cast and shining. Youth had stolen back.

Very near the corner now! Ann paused for a moment, apparently to observe the succulent cuts of beef displayed in the window of a small eating-house, but really because she was breathless. Delicious waves of feeling swept through her. Her heart beat loudly.

"Oh, what a fool I am," she said to herself, and then, "Oh, did it ever seem like this, was it ever really like this?"

She caught her breath with a little sob. It seemed unbearably sad that anything so exquisite could have lived in her—and died. A sense of utter loneliness and poverty made her firm lip quiver. That little lovesick, dowdy Ann of yesterday had been so much richer than the famous Ann Gilchrist of to-day.

Well, she would see the store, anyway, if it were there. She walked on, rounded the corner—and the store *was* there!

Perhaps she had not expected really to find the store. Certainly it was amazing to find it so unchanged. Why it was just exactly. . . . Ann began to

feel a desire to turn and flee, and an even stronger desire to walk right on. So had she felt in those old days when he had been there. For had it not been possible that he might look through the window and see her? Might he but even have opened the door? The magic in the air was going to her head. She smiled rather grimly and went on.

There was certainly no one looking through the windows now. The panes were blinded and blurred with frost, but there were little clear spaces through which Ann could see that the art-store was an art-store just as it used to be. Old prints still decorated the windows, an indication that someone must have bought out the picture business and kept it on; or perhaps there was true magic, and she had gone back twenty years! Smiling at this extravagant conceit, Ann came closer to one of the frost-clear spaces and pressed her nose against the glass, shading her eyes for a peep inside. The next instant she had flung up her muff to hide her face and was hurrying down the street in pure, blind panic.

There had been a man in the store, a man who stooped over a print upon a table examining it under a glass. She had seen his profile plainly—beautifully moulded mouth, straight nose, a wave of graying hair. There had been something in his pose which held Ann motionless. Then he had glanced up and she had seen that his eyes were gray, very gray—

The wind from the river caught her up and carried her along, tossing the soft ends of her furs. Her face had gone quite white, and her eyes looked frightened.

“This wind is really very cold,” she kept saying to herself. Otherwise her mind seemed incapable of thought. Her feet seemed to fly of themselves, helped by the wind. Nor did she know or care where she was going. So it was the wind which, fortunately, flung her into the arms of her indignant secretary when she was long past her hotel and headed in the opposite direction.

“Ann! wherever are you going?” demanded the secretary crossly. “There’s a man across the street taking a snap of you. For goodness sake! What’s happened to you? You look as if you had seen a ghost—and you are as cold as a ghost yourself. Let’s go in here and get something hot. It looks quite a cozy place.”

“Ah, no! Not in there.” Ann shrunk back. “That’s where—I mean I don’t want anything hot.”

Marta looked from Ann's face to the comfortable chocolate store, and her eyes were puzzled.

"It looks a perfectly nice place to me," she said, "and the card in the window says, 'Hot Chocolate'."

"Oh, I *know*—let's go home."

The secretary turned resignedly.

"Very well. Anything, so that we don't stand here to be shot to bits by the young person with the kodak. You're not looking your best, Ann. It would have been more sensible if you had stayed in."

"No doubt," said Ann, walking rapidly.

"And, of course," added Marta, as if by an after-thought, "you don't need to tell me what's the matter if you don't want to."

"I can't. I don't know myself. I—I'm upset. Don't ask questions, like an angel. You couldn't think me a greater fool than I think myself."

"That's healthy, anyway. I won't bother if you'll promise to drink the hot tea I'll send up and lie down for a while."

Ann promised, and later, when she was alone in her warm room and the hot tea had arrived, she redeemed her promise scrupulously. Hot tea, she admitted, might be good for fools. And "fool" was still the kindest word she could find for herself.

Lying on her bed with her eyes closed, she forced her mind to review the situation in plain and unattractive words.

"I go for a walk," she said, "in a place I used to know when a girl, and unexpectedly I see a man whom I used to—know. No, let me be honest, a man whom I used to love, if anyone can be properly in love at twenty, which I doubt. We will admit that a meeting like this might naturally cause a feeling of shock, a moment's embarrassment. But what do I find? I find myself acting exactly as I might have acted twenty years ago. All that I am supposed to have gained in character and self-control just counting for nothing at all. It seems incredible."

Incredible or not, it had happened. And even more incredible, it was still happening. She realized this slowly. At first she faced it down and refused to believe that a mere nervous shock could have any definite effect save the childish reaction which had made her raise the muff to her face and flee. The whole thing, she assured herself, had been an absurd episode now definitely

ended. What could it possibly amount to, this glimpse through a frosted window of the hero of her girlhood! True, she had loved the boy, but she had known very little of him. She knew nothing at all of the man. She had fled like any silly school-girl, from a perfect stranger.

And yet, it did not seem at all like that. Ann, though she did not know it, was dealing with magic, and magic will not be denied. Against its power, common sense, reason, use and circumstance beat in vain. It wasn't what she knew that mattered, it was what she felt. And lying there with her eyes closed, she felt just twenty years old and very much in love.

It took her a long time to admit this. She didn't really admit it until she had looked in the glass and saw the transformation there. The essence, the inner secret of youth, is love, and somehow Ann Gilchrist was sipping that essence. It was a young face which looked back at her from the mirror, a face softly blooming, bright-eyed, eager-lipped. The blood which ran in her veins tingled. All her clear and hard horizon had vanished in a rose-hued mist. She had seen him again! He was there waiting for her—older, wiser, stronger no doubt, but still the same. In himself the only man who had ever made her pulse beat faster and her heart tighten with delicious pain.

Absurd? Oh, painfully, incredibly absurd, but not less true, not less powerful.

After a delicious hour of dreaming, Ann roused herself once more and tried to be sensible. She tried to think of her life as she had built it up, a full useful life, of her special work which had brought her honour and the favours of many, of her friends who were near and dear. But she could not think of these things. An old dream was awake and clamouring. An old, old dream, not of many, but of one—of long walks at twilight, of happy silences, of thoughts understood without being spoken, of a strong hand, not her own, to hold to, and firm lips, not friend's lips, to kiss. There were little children in the dream, too, dear, fluffy baby heads, gray eyes—

"Oh, dear, I am a fool!" cried poor Ann. But even that could not kill the dream.

Lunch-time came and went, and Ann dreamed on. Then, when the short winter day was drawing in, she rose and put on once more her outer wraps. Very quietly she opened her door and, without a word to Marta, went out.

The flutter and indecision of the morning were gone, and she stepped into the street with definite purpose and eager heart. Things out there were even more familiar than they had been. It had snowed a little. The lights of

Main Street gleamed golden across the white. The wind had died, and the air was crisp with frost. But Ann was not cold now. Her hands in her muff felt warm and soft. She felt warm and soft all over. Her lips took in a gracious curve, her eyes shone. She felt like someone who has been away a long time, but who has come home.

A line from nowhere kept singing through her brain, "Home is where the heart is, home is where the heart is". In fact, Ann had succumbed unconditionally to magic, and all was well.

Briskly she swung along, not consciously thinking at all. It was not thought that drove her, it was instinct, an overpowering impulse to see once more the man she loved, to hear him speak, to touch his hand. There was no pausing now, no looking in windows, no trembling at street-corners. Her only fear was lest she had waited too long, that he might not be there.

Pink and glowing with unaccustomed haste, she turned the corner of the little store and saw with a great leap of delight that fate had played no tricks while she had hesitated. He was still there, waiting, at least there was a light behind the frosted windows. Ann did not pause to peer in this time. She opened the door with glorious confidence and entered.

Warmth! It was warm and light in there. A kind of welcoming, homecoming, warmth and light, although there was no one in the room. It didn't feel empty. Ann sat down and loosened her furs. She noticed, as she had not noticed in the hurried peep that morning, that the old counter was gone and the interior of the store modernized in many ways. There were small tables now, racks and easels on a polished floor. There was a handsome screen, too, hiding the back portion of the store, where the framing used to be done.

It was this screen which had made the store appear deserted, for he was behind it, talking to a customer. Ann had heard his voice as she sat down. Now she could hear another voice, a woman's, a harsh carrying voice which said:

"But, my dear man, that's far too much to ask an old customer like me. Come now, surely you can do a little better than that?"

"What a horrid voice!" said Ann, "and how ill-bred some people are. Fancy! asking for a reduction in price as a personal favour. John would know how to answer a person like that."

Ann could not catch what he said in reply, but it must have been a polite refusal, for the harsh voice broke in again.

“Nonsense, man! Keep that for people who don’t know. You’ll be making a nice profit if you take off twenty per cent. Anyway, that’s my last offer, and you can take it or leave it.”

Ann’s foot began to tap the floor impatiently. What a bore it must be to have to listen patiently to creatures like that! Why, the woman’s voice was actually patronizing. Of course, John, being a gentleman, could hardly show her the door. But what a life! Ann remembered with something like a start that in the old days John had been impatient of the store. He had not despised it, exactly, but he had felt that it was not for him. He was to be an artist. What could have happened, Ann wondered? And in her wonder, and without her being aware of it, a little corner of her dream began to crumble.

The voices behind the screen were again audible, or at least the voice of the woman was.

“Very well,” it said, “if that’s your last word. But you are making a big mistake. Where would your real trade be if it weren’t for the outside people I send you? If you depended on this city for your patronage you’d soon be down to chromos and coloured photographs. Why, there’s a woman in town to-day I was going to bring around. A woman who has made rather a fad of collecting old prints and who has more money than you could shake a stick at, besides being a celebrity. But, of course, if old customers are to receive no consideration at all—”

This would surely be the end, thought Ann. No man need be expected to stand this, John least of all. She moved her chair slightly so that the politely dismissed lady need not feel embarrassed by observation. But the lady was not yet dismissed. She made a movement to go, certainly, and then to Ann’s incredulous ears came the voice of the man, deprecatory, suave and agreeing. Flattering a little, too, and promising to send it (whatever it was) to the “old customer’s” address at once, and at the price dictated.

“Well, you shan’t lose by it,” declared the lady mollified. “I like to get things for a decent price, but I don’t let people lose by me in the end. Someone else will pay you your fancy prices if I won’t.” So saying, she laughed heartily, much pleased with her joke and her bargain and swept from behind the screen and full into Ann’s bewildered vision. She was a ruddy lady with pop-eyes and three chins. Ann had never seen her before, but she had seen her photograph and knew at once that she beheld Mrs. Ponsonby Clarke. Instantly she turned and became much interested in a picture on the wall. But she need not have bothered. The victorious lady was too much occupied with her own large personality to notice the presence of

anyone else. She sailed down the store and away without a glance in Ann's direction.

Ann continued to be absorbed in the picture. She often wondered afterwards what the picture was. Her dream was crumbling, crumbling.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked a quiet and deferential voice at her elbow.

Ann gathered herself together. She was going through with this.

"Why, yes," she said, turning to him with the slow smile which interviewers were wont to rave about, "you can shake hands. Don't you remember me, John—Ann Gilchrist?"

"I—oh, why, yes, of course! So glad to see you!"

He took her hand and shook it with nervous heartiness. From the wandering look in his eyes it was plain that he did not know her at all, but was trying very hard to remember.

"Now that is too bad," said Ann, "but I suppose I have changed a great deal in twenty years. It was most egotistical of me to expect recognition. But if we were skating you might remember. I can still do the inside curve."

A wave of enlightenment swept over his embarrassed face.

"Why, of course! For the moment I was not sure. How stupid of me! But you have changed."

The frank admiration of his look told her plainly that he thought the change a fortunate one.

"Are you staying in the city? It is really most kind of you to look me up. I thought you did not live in this part of the country any more?"

"No. It is a long time since we left. I am here for a day or two only, in the interest of my work."

"Yes. That is very pleasant." His vagueness showed that he did not know. Ann smiled again.

"I did not expect to find you here," she said. "The last time we met you were going abroad to begin your studies."

The gray eyes became faintly troubled at this.

"Oh, yes, I remember. It was my intention at the time to study art. Yes. I wished very much to develop—er—along those lines. And I did go, but—er

—not permanently. My studies were interrupted. Father died, you see, and it was necessary for me to return and take over the business. It was a great disappointment.”

“But surely, in a matter so important, one’s whole life! Couldn’t you have gone on? Mightn’t you have sold the business, you know, and gone on?”

“Y—es. But at a loss only, a considerable loss. And then there was the uncertainty. And, as you say, a matter like that affects one’s whole life. It is unwise,” he added, with slightly strained jocularly, “to leave the substance for the shadow. Yes, and this is a fairly good substance, you see, fairly good,” he continued, with something perilously like a smirk. “It is the certainties in life that really count, after all.”

Ann, who all her life had counted nothing save uncertainties, and whose gospel was the gospel of the Great Chance, murmured something inarticulate, which he took for assent.

“I had to brighten things up a bit,” he continued, “modernize a little. The place was dingy in the old days, very dingy. Too much like—like a store. I try to give the homelike atmosphere. Father was conservative, very. He would never consent to laying in the cheaper lines of stock, the kind of thing which catches the ordinary buyer. I try to have on hand something which appeals to all.”

Ann’s eyes followed his arm as it waved round the store, and saw at once that he was right. The old-time atmosphere of the place was gone. John had brightened things up. He had added a great deal.

She did not hear exactly what he was saying, and yet her eyes had a far-off, listening look. She was listening to the crumbling of her dream.

He was more at ease with her now and obviously pleased with her extremely successful appearance. It is cheering to be remembered and “looked up” by one’s old friends, especially when they are well dressed, and interested in what one says. Still talking, he drew up another chair and sat down beside her, in exactly the way he used to draw up a chair and sit down.

“He is exactly the same,” thought Ann. “He hasn’t changed at all. But he is so terribly different! I shall scream if I don’t look out.”

Desperately she plunged into the conversation. She said all the obvious things in her pleasantly casual manner, and presently felt that the ordeal was drawing to an end. In a moment or two she might say good-night and escape. But fate was not going to be satisfied so easily. She was rising to go

and John was just beginning to remark for the fourth time that it was very kind of her to look him up when, somewhere in the rear of the store, a small bell jangled. At its sound her host beamed and became even more complacent. She must not think of going yet, he declared. She had dropped in at exactly the right time. The bell was the tea-bell, and it would be so pleasant. . . .

“You see,” he explained with deprecatory pride, “the wife being English, we have got into old-country habits. Emmy simply couldn’t do without her tea, and I find that I like it myself on these winter afternoons. You will have a cup with us, of course. The wife will be delighted.”

Ann, it appeared, would be delighted also. She was in the grip of it now, and it was her custom to see things through. Her leisurely step followed him through a door in the side wall, up a stuffy stair and into another large room above the store.

There was more warmth here, more light, a faint aroma of tea and toast. By the tea-table sat a small, fair woman of about Ann’s own age, with a pleasant, homely face, dumpy figure and a dress that didn’t fit.

“This is my wife,” announced John proudly. “Emmy, this is Miss Gilchrist, an old friend of mine who is in the city for a day or two. It was very kind of her to look us up.”

Ann smiled her charming smile and shook hands with Mrs. John. Her chief feeling was one of aggrieved surprise that “Emmy” was so exceptionally plain, plainer even than Ann herself had been in her first youth. “But, of course,” she reasoned, “he had stopped wanting to be an artist before he met her, so it didn’t matter.”

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, I am sure,” the little woman was saying. “But, John, you never told me that you knew Miss Gilchrist. Fancy, knowing Miss Gilchrist and never saying a word about it. If that isn’t just like a man! Why, John, I don’t believe you know who she is yet; and that proves what I’m always telling you, you don’t keep up-to-date, John, or you’d know—”

“Your husband and I were very young when we knew each other,” said Ann. “I think he remembers me chiefly as a good skater, only not half so good as he was. I suppose you still have good skating on the river?”

“Yes, excellent!” But Mrs. John had no intention of talking about skating with a personage such as Miss Ann Gilchrist in the house actually taking tea. There were other and more important things to talk about, for if John were

not up-to-date, Mrs. John was. Then there were the children to be called in and presented—a pretty, pale-faced girl of twelve with long brown braids and soft eyes, and a plainer child of seven with the mother's round, English face.

Both the girls were shy and awkward, and Ann found some relief from her tension in setting them at ease. Long practice had made her adept at saying the right thing.

"It's easy to see that you're fond of children," beamed the proud Mrs. John. "You have the way with them that counts, and it all goes to prove what I've always said: that a woman isn't any the less a woman for doing the things you've done and doing them well. A great woman must be a true woman first of all, and not the half-and-half kind that can't be bothered with children and the like. You'd be pleased enough to have a few of your own now, I'll be bound."

"I should, indeed," said Ann, drinking her tea. As she spoke, she was looking at the older girl, but she did not see her. In her place stood a dream-child with gray eyes who, even as she gazed, grew dimmer and was gone.

"If you could only have seen John Junior," the mother was saying with deep regret. "Photos never seem to do him justice, but you can get an idea of him from this."

Ann found herself looking at an excellent photograph of a young lad in khaki.

"He'll be at the Front now." There was warm pride in the mother's voice. "We don't know just where. He sends wonderful letters, but they don't let him tell many details. You see, Miss Gilchrist, though he's so young I couldn't seem to hold him back. I can't be doing the work you're doing, but I could let my boy go and do his bit." Raising her plump hand she wiped away an unashamed tear. "John, go and look in the top drawer of my bureau and get that latest snap he sent us."

John, who in the bosom of his family had shed his social responsibilities and betaken himself to copious tea and toast, responded with cheerful and well-trained obedience. Ann kept her eyes upon the portrait.

"He is very like his father," she said politely.

Mrs. John seemed pleased, but not wholly so.

"W—ell," she agreed cautiously, "a little, yes. There's a resemblance, but John Junior's got something his father never had. Being as you're an old

friend, I don't mind saying so. If John had it he would have been an artist instead of keeping store here. I don't know just what it is. Perhaps it's imagination. John Junior's got it. He was always one to stretch out to tomorrow—if you know what I mean. He's always one to take a chance is John Junior. He's eager. It's taken him to the Front, and sometime it will take him far if—if he comes back."

The brave eyes of the lad smiled at Ann out of the picture. His mother was right. They were eager eyes. Eyes that life would find it hard to satisfy. She handed back the photograph and let her soft hand linger on the hand of Mrs. John.

"Surely he'll come back," she said. "A lad with eyes like that!"

"And now I must go." She rose and drew up her fur. "It has been so pleasant to meet you. And your tea was delicious. Thank you."

The pretty, pale girl handed her the muff. The little plain one shyly held out a sticky hand. Mrs. John regretted the impossibility of her waiting for another cup of tea. Ann shook hands all round, and John, who had returned from a futile search in the bureau-drawer, was torn yet once more from his toast and tea to escort the honoured guest downstairs.

As he was still hungry, his manner, though courteous, was somewhat hurried.

"Good-bye," he said, opening the door with polite alacrity, "it was really very kind of you to look . . ."

"Not at all," interrupted Ann hastily. "Dear me, how very cold it is! It has been delightful to see you all. Good-bye."

It *was* cold. Ann took a taxi back to her hotel and thought stubbornly of nothing but the excessive coldness.

She let herself into her room quietly, so quietly that Marta, reading on the other side of the door, did not hear her; did not, in fact, know that she had been out.

The room was in the half disorder in which she had left it. On the bed lay her pillow with the soft dent of her head still in its rumpled whiteness, yet surely it had been years since she had lain there, dreaming her dream.

She felt very tired. The face which looked back at her from the mirror was dull and lined.

“Come!” she said to the face, “this will never do.” But even as she said it the face broke up grotesquely. Ann Gilchrist found herself weeping. “This—will—never—do!” she gasped, but nevertheless she threw herself on her bed and wept until she could weep no more.

Presently her secretary, who could do hair, came in and sat beside her.

After a long while Ann sat up and, seeing Marta’s face, she smiled.

“All over, dear thing,” she said. “A spring wind, that was all.”

Marta drew the curtains at the window.

“It is freezing harder than ever to-night,” she announced. “But the sky is clear and it will be a fine day for the reception to-morrow.”

Above the art store, just off Alder Street, a little English woman sat and knitted. Her husband sat by, checking over some invoices of a shipment of art novelties which he felt would appeal to all.

“What I can’t understand, John,” said the knitter, “is why you didn’t warn me that you knew her. You’ve heard me talk about Miss Gilchrist often enough. And if I’d guessed you were old friends and her that friendly and pleasant, I’d have had some friends in to meet her. They’d have been proud. But you never told me what great friends you were.”

“But we weren’t,” said John perplexedly, “that’s just it, we weren’t. And I’m hanged if I’m quite sure yet which one of those girls she was!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Ashes of Dreams* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]