

She Snaps Back Into Harness

By Ruth Widén

MRS. PENDEXTER watched thousands of snowflakes a minute going down, down, down. One more doesn't make any difference, I suppose. Do they know they're going down and that it's inevitable, or are they unconscious? They look happy about it, somehow. Suppose just one of the snowflakes had feelings and consciousness and knew what was happening, and all the others didn't know; how would that be? One being able to see and feel and know what was happening, in the middle of a crowd of flakes that didn't know, couldn't see. They surround you and you can't tell them anything; they cover up everything with smooth platitudes and then you are alone and nobody understands. You are supposed not to be suffering. To be doing everything gladly. If you admitted you were doing it under protest, because it had to be done but you didn't like it, if you screamed aloud or even complained a little, it wouldn't be . . . what's the word? *What* would be wrong with it? Well anyway it would be wrong. If some stranger messes up your life you have a claim against him. If your own people, those closest to you, mess up your life . . .

Mrs. Pendexter smiled. When she gave birth to Henry he nearly killed her. That was different, somehow. If Henry had killed her she'd have forgiven him, he couldn't help it. It was part of the game, she even liked him a little better for it. When she lay in bed in the hospital, as Calvin was lying in the hospital now, hardly conscious, Calvin had bent over her with his lips pressed tight together and promised everything she wanted. Not too much money. When they got a certain amount they'd begin to use it to enjoy themselves. Travel around the world, never mind about piling up more. *That* would have been something, wouldn't it? Instead of salting all the money away in real estate, so that life was just one procession of mortgages coming due. Well, it's what all the rest of them do, it's the accepted conservative theory of what to do with your money. There was Calvin bright-eyed and cocksure, lecturing her: You see Mrs. Pendexter, I am taking care of your future; I am seeing to it that you will have an income in your old age, after I am gone, if I should go first. Well, he had the backing of accepted conservative theory so what could she say? Tie up your money where nobody can get at it (where you can't even get at it yourself). Then there's the feminine feeling that a man must be right. Should have put up a bigger fight, maybe, but what can you do?

It's too late now, said Mrs. Pendexter. Of course a man who's that hard with himself expects others to be just as ascetic as he is. He wasn't ascetic, though; he liked work and he didn't like leisure, that was the whole size of it. When he did go to Europe he made work out of it. Didn't see anything that wasn't in the guide book. It was really a great bore to him, going to Europe, he was thinking about his business all the

time. But all his life he used to go around to the auction rooms, that was his recreation, that was his hobby. Defended it on the ground that he was really investing money, but it was his hobby all the same. Then he couldn't see that other people might have different hobbies, Henry, for instance. The boy hadn't ever had any interest in working long hours in the office. Calvin thought his oldest son had to go through the same course that he did. All right if his course had worked out right for him, but you see now . . . At any rate it hadn't worked out well for Henry, even at the beginning. And yet even when the doctor had said it was a nervous breakdown, his father had insisted it wasn't. The boy just doesn't want to work, that's all. I'll show him. . . . She *did* step in there, showing she could fight for her son's rights even if not her own. Took Henry away for a year. You can do things for your children and people sympathize, but not if you're doing it for yourself. But what about these women you read about, who get jewels and dresses and squander their husbands' money? Oh well, you have to be beautiful for that, and have a shape that looks like oo-la-la, not like an old flour sack tied in the middle.

When Calvin was forty he said very loudly, we're middle-aged now. Insisted on wearing glasses. Nothing whatever wrong with his eyes, but he put the glasses on just the same and made his eyes like it. He said, well, mother, we're too old for sex now. Thought I'd beg and plead, I suppose. We're too old for such nonsense, mother. All right, it suits me, you can do as you like (I've been sleeping with a log of wood anyway for twenty-two years, in case anyone should ask you). He'd do as he liked anyway and a lot I'd have to say about it. Always that assumption that I had no sense and needed to be directed, by *him*. He knew what was best for me. Well, this is the way it's turned out. I followed the thing out to the end and this is the end, this. This.

Mrs. Pendexter, he'd say, very oracularly, you ought to be grateful you have everything so easy here. Suppose you had to go out into the world and earn your own living, what would you do? That made me mad. Why suppose *he* had to go out into the employment market and hire a cook and a nurse and a housekeeper and all the rest of it? But he was always throwing that up to me. I've earned my own living, I've earned it over and over and over again. Suppose you had to go out into the world, Mrs. Pendexter, against the competition of younger women, and make your way. . . . Oh, well.

Mrs. Pendexter turned away from the window. It was too dark now even to see the snow coming down. The room was brightly lighted and the Chinese rug on the wall cast a warm blue glow. The rug was bought in China. The scarf on the other wall in India. Wonderful how much trouble they go to when they're mak-

ing something beautiful. The chairs were Louis XV. The plate was Spode. Books of old lithographs in the bookcase. Mrs. Pendexter sank into a *chaise longue*, easing her feet. A comfortable blankness settled around her mind. If.

Must take brown dress to the cleaner's, it's a disgrace. Can't wear it again. If.

Think about something pleasant. . . . When I went to China that time I wanted to stay, wanted to look into things. Sampons. Queer houses. Smell of fried fish in the bazaars, oh, those bazaars. People and people and people. Like to know more about them, maybe they have a better way of doing things than we have, who knows? Even if they do look so poor. If.

Think about something pleasant—to live just in a hut in the woods somewhere and not have to think about anything. Could do it all right, the children are all grown up now and don't need me, nobody needs me except. . . .

Calvin. In the hospital his face was as white as his hair. He didn't know anything was the matter with him, tried to get up while I was there. Very angry at being restrained. If he got up and started for New York again he'd never get there, they say. They get that way, optimistic, think everything's fine, they're sitting on top of the world; and all the time they're—disintegrating.

He never told me about it. It must have been ten or fifteen years ago. Was it that time when he was going regularly to Dr. Galt for . . . anæmia, I think he told me? Mary was having her first baby and I didn't think very much about him at the time. He must have started in before that. Started in. He used to twit me with being jealous. I can see lots of things now. Trouble is, I wasn't jealous enough. We're too old for that nonsense now, mother. He kept on being attractive right along, his skin like a baby's even if his hair and mustache were white.

Trouble is I took the whole thing seriously, duty and all that. He was always preaching it to me. I could have . . .

Oh well. What's over is over. Mulling over the past this way won't help me to face the future. Better get a male nurse in case he might get violent, a woman wouldn't be able to handle him. Forty-five dollars a week and board for a nurse. I am taking care of your future, Mrs. Pendexter. I am seeing to it that when I pass away . . .

Think of something cheerful. Once there was a white moonlight in a garden and the younger people were dancing inside, where it was hot and sticky, but outside it was cool and there was the smell of many flowers, and then suddenly he took my face in his hands and said . . .

But I took things too seriously in those days. I told him I wouldn't stand for any such thing. I told him I was a married woman and had time only for my husband and children. And his face was white in the silver moonlight and he looked, oh, so disappointed. And I went back into the garden on another night but he wasn't there and it didn't seem the same.

Wonder if Calvin felt the same with the woman who . . .

But really it was terribly stupid of me not to smell

some kind of a rat when he wouldn't permit me to go back into my own New York apartment after spending the whole summer away. And this woman must have been there all the time. Sleeping in my bed. Using the chinaware Mary gave me for Christmas. When they asked her for the rent she said, as brazen as brass, Mr. Pendexter always paid her rent for her. Henry told her, I don't know anything about that, madam, I'm here as the representative of the Pendexter Realty Corporation and I'm here to collect a month's rent. Then she had the nerve to ask to be put into touch with him. . . .

That was after the breakdown. He went to the hospital the day after. Getting him back here was the real job, after he'd been down in New York doing all those wild and crazy things. Then it all came out. But the first I knew about it was when Henry telephoned from New York. I took the first train. . . .

Oh well, pity yourself, do. Sitting here whining like an old woman. Threescore years and ten. Nine years more. Everybody has troubles. Mrs. Johnson and her drunken husband. Calvin didn't drink. I've had good health all my lifetime. What do other people do when life up and smacks them? Nice to believe in a rosy pink heaven full of cherubs and such, where you're going when you die. Or that your sacrifices are pleasing to God, or to Jesus, or to somebody—that somebody sees them, anyway. Wonder if it's true? If there's a God around anywhere, why does he let things like this happen? Maybe he likes to see us suffer. If there's a God, he's always right—always right. And we're always in the wrong. He likes that, and says, you ought to be

Most of the good things that have been done for us grateful, Mrs. Pendexter. . .

have been done by science. Of course they can't do anything about the degeneration that's already taken place, but they put a stop to it so there won't be any more. If they couldn't do that, Calvin would hardly live a year longer. As it is, he may live ten years, even fifteen, the doctor said. Of course I was glad. When you get to be old, of course it's problematical how much longer you've got to live, but of course we must all live as long as we can. I might not live much longer than that myself. Science is very wonderful.

Nine years . . . threescore years and ten. Have to take care of all our properties so as to pass them on to the children. They're grown up—why can't they manage the properties themselves and I can just take out enough to live on? I don't need much. Forty-five dollars a week and board for a nurse. I'll take the forty-five dollars and let the board go. A little house somewhere, and peace and quiet. For nine years, or whatever. If. If Calvin. If Calvin would . . .

The doctor was a young man and when he told me about Calvin he was smiling. You'll be glad to know, Mrs. Pendexter, that we can save your husband. We can arrest the degeneration. Recent discovery. Even five years ago, we couldn't. He'd have had a year to live at the most. Nice handsome young doctor, some mother's proud of him somewhere. You'll be glad to know, Mrs. Pendexter.

Well, I *am* glad.

Mrs. Pendexter rose from the *chaise longue*, turned out the lights and went to bed.

A FEDERAL POETRY ANTHOLOGY

And Now: The Moon—

(For Lynette and Teall Messer)

Where buzzard's curve rinds the circuited earth with death,
and snag-tooth buzzard's pines stand gauntly shriven of
their worth; where buzzard's shadow was
on twilit earth and buzzards' beaks were

at the sprawling flanks of sickened deer, it is not
shadow of the night that weighs the heart;
the night is lifted by the stars, but not
the news of war that is heart's agony and thorny wreath.

Where feet step live on earth that hangs in time
leaflike in rising din of wind, the sickness of the flesh
is dying, steps mortally on mortal earth,
immortally toward death.

Now up from pines, now up above the buzzard's perch,
bear-cave, the lion's lair and news of war:

the moon!

who rises from rocks and bristling, blackened pines

as one who rises from the stone, the lash, and
martyrs' rack, for love.

Ah, moon—engentler of sleep
of gentle birds, ah moon, why risest thou?

The hot air whirs with fleshless wings.
The hot air whirs though buzzards sleep: the heart of man
swarms like a cloud of locusts toward the war.
Why heal the night with whiteness? with sleep

the lion's cave,—as since
were healed the graves of war, with fields
for other wars?

—Ah, moon: why risest thou?

RAYMOND E. F. LARSSON.

New Objectives, New Cadres

Grown for fear and fattened into groaning,
the clawed eyelid or the crushed flower stalk
or the undeviating lockstep,
the inert incurious onanist,
the rubicund practical prankster,
we wake never in this dispensation,
for them or their inchoate brethren.
We watch imaginary just men,
nude as rose petals, discussing a purer logic
in bright functionalist future gymnasia
high in the snows of Mt. Lenin
beside a collectivist ocean.
But see around the corner in the bare bulblight,
in a desquamate bedroom,
he who sits in his socks reading shockers,
skinning cigarette butts and rerolling them in toilet paper.
His red eyes never leave the blotted print and pulp paper.

He rose too late to distribute the leaflets.
In the midst of mussed bedding have mercy
upon him, this is history.
Or see the arch dialectic satyriast,
miners' wives and social workers
rapt in a bated circle about him,
drawing pointless incisive diagrams
on a blackboard, barking
ominously with a winey timbre,
clarifying constant and variable capital,
his subconscious painfully threading its way
through future slippery assignments.
We do not need his confessions.
The future is more fecund than Marian Bloom.
The problem is to control history,
We already understand it.

KENNETH REXROTH.

You

This day is radiant with light
and as clear. Listen, this day
is *you* and makes love to me.
My lips fanned by chromatic winds
released from clashing poplars;
so amorous this kiss,
my lungs are big with it.
This ardent scent of leaves
is of *your* hair and my lips on it.
And almost do I fear to tread
the ground soft as the earth
in whose deep body I am lost.
And I saw the clear love of your eyes:
the white poise of gulls
in the light of the lake,
the sky, stone blue, falling on it.
This day disturbs my blood
with subtle fury;
and all my hunger's song
is vocal; and that is *you* again.

WILLIAM PILLIN.

Multiple River

(For Hart Crane)

But span us closer, O intrusive seeker
whose course in definition floods the phrase.
Moments caressing rock foretell your passage.
The alluvial heart is gullied to your praise.

For we have been happiest creating a wide river
beyond all harbors and the seaward tomb,
bearing the spirit's traffic like a message
through time emergent from a timeless womb.

Between the stranger man, our stranger eyes,
flowing in ample love through outstretched shores,