

HIS SMILE¹

By SUSAN GLASPELL

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L AURA stood across the street waiting for the people to come out from the picture-show. She couldn't have said just why she was waiting, unless it was that she was waiting because she could not go away. She was not wearing her black; she had a reason for not wearing it when she came on these trips, and the simple lines of her dark-blue suit and the smart little hat Howie had always liked on her, somehow suggested young and happy things. Two soldiers came by; one of them said, "Hello, there, kiddo," and the other, noting the anxiety with which she waited, assured her, "*You* should worry." She looked at them, and when he saw her face the one who had said, "You should worry," said, in sheepish fashion, "Well, *I* should worry," as if to get out of the apology he didn't know how to make. She was glad they had gone by. It hurt so to be near the soldiers.

The man behind her kept saying, "Pop-corn! Pop-corn right *here*." It seemed she must buy pop-corn if she stood there. She bought some. She tried to do the thing she was expected to do — so she wouldn't be noticed.

Then the people came pushing out from the theater. They did it just as they did it in the other towns. A new town was only the same town in a different place; and all of it was a world she was as out of as if it were passing before her in a picture. All of it except that one thing that was all she had left! She had come so far to have it tonight. She *wouldn't* be cheated. She crossed the street, and as the last people were coming out of the theater she went in.

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A man, yawning, was doing something to a light. He must belong to the place. His back was to her, and she stood there trying to get brave enough to speak. It had never been easy for her to open conversations with strangers. For so many years it was Howie who had seemed to connect her with the world. And suddenly she thought of how sorry Howie would be to see her waiting around in this dismal place after every one else had gone, trying to speak to a strange man about a thing that man wouldn't at all understand. How well Howie would understand it! He would say, "Go on home, Laura." "Don't do this, sweetheart." Almost as if he had said it, she turned away. But she turned back. This was her wedding anniversary.

She went up to the man. "You didn't give all of the picture tonight, did you?" Her voice was sharp; it mustn't tremble.

He looked round at her in astonishment. He kept looking her up and down as if to make her out. Her trembling hands clutched the bag of pop-corn and some of it spilled. She let it all fall and put one hand to her mouth.

A man came down from upstairs. "Lady here says you didn't give the whole show tonight," said the first man.

The young man on the stairs paused in astonishment. He, too, looked Laura up and down. She took a step backward.

"What was left out wasn't of any importance, lady," said the man, looking at her, not unkindly, but puzzled.

"I think it was!" she contended in a high, sharp voice. They both stared at her. As she realized that this could happen, saw how slight was her hold on the one thing she had, she went on, desperately, "You haven't any right to do this! It's — it's *cheating*."

They looked then, not at her, but at each other — as the sane counsel together in the presence of what is outside their world. Oh, she knew that look! She had seen her brother and his wife doing it when first she knew about Howie.

"Now I'll tell you, lady," said the man to whom she

had first spoken, in the voice that deals with what has to be dealt with carefully, "you just let me give you your money back, then you won't have the feeling that you've been cheated." He put his hand in his pocket.

"I don't want my money back!" cried Laura. "I— want to see what you left out!"

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," proposed the young man, taking his cue from the older one. "I'll tell you just exactly what happened in the part that was left out."

"I know exactly what happened," cut in Laura. "I— I want to *see* — what happened."

It was a cry from so deep that they didn't know what to do.

"Won't you do it for me?" she begged of the young man, going up to him. "What you left out — won't you show it for me — *now?*"

He just stood there staring at her.

"It means — ! It ——" But how could she tell them what it meant? She looked from one to the other, as if to see what chance there was of their doing it without knowing what it meant. When she couldn't keep sobs back, she turned away.

Even in her room at the hotel she had to try to keep from crying. She could hear the man moving around in the next room — so he, of course, could hear her, too. It was all as it was in the pictures — people crowded together, and all of it something that seemed life and really wasn't. Even *that* — the one thing, the one moment — really wasn't life. But it was all she had! If she let herself think of how little that all was — it was an emptiness she was afraid of.

The people who had tried to comfort her used to talk of how much she had had. She would wonder sometimes why they were talking on her side instead of their own. For if you have had much — does that make it easy to get along with nothing? Why couldn't they *see* it? That because of what Howie had been to her — and for ten years! — she just didn't know any way of going on living without Howie!

Tonight made fresh all her wedding anniversaries — brought happiness to life again. It almost took her in.

And because she had been so near the dear, warm things in which she had lived, when morning came she couldn't get on the train that would take her back to that house to which Howie would never come again. Once more it all seemed slipping from her. There must be *something*. As a frightened child runs for home, she turned to that place where — for at least a moment — it was as if Howie were there.

She went to the telegraph office and wired the company that sent out "The Cross of Diamonds," asking where that film could be seen. She had learned that this was the way to do it. She had known nothing about such things at first; it had been hard to find out the ways of doing. It was a world she didn't know the ways of.

When she got her answer, and found that the place where "The Cross of Diamonds" would be shown that night was more than a hundred miles away — that it meant going that much farther away from home — she told herself this was a thing she couldn't do. She told herself this must stop — that her brother was right in the things he said against it. It wouldn't do. He hadn't said it was crazy, but that was what he meant — or feared. She had told him she would try to stop. Now was the time to do it — now when she would have to go so much farther away. But — *it* was going farther away — this glimpse of Howie — all that was left of Howie was moving away from her! And after the disappointment of the night before — She must see him once more! Then — yes, then she would stop.

She was excited when she had decided to do this. It lifted her out of the nothingness. From this meager thing her great need could in a way create the feeling that she was going to meet Howie. Once more she would see him do that thing which was so like him as to bring him back into life. *Why* should she turn from it? What were all the other things compared with this thing? This was one little flash of life in a world that had ceased to be alive.

So again that night, in the clothes he had most liked, she went for that poor little meeting with her husband — so pitifully little, and yet so tremendous because it was all she would ever have. Again she sat in a big,

noisy place with many jostling, laughing people — and waited to see Howie. She forgot that the place had ugly red walls and sickly green lights; she could somehow separate herself from harsh voices and smells — for she was here to meet Howie!

She knew just the part of the house to sit in. Once she had sat where she couldn't see him as he passed from sight! After that she had always come very early. So she had to sit there while other people were coming in. But she didn't much mind that; it was like sitting in a crowded railway station when the person you love is coming soon.

But suddenly something reached over that gulf between other people and her. A word. A terrible word. Behind her some one said "munitions." She put her hand to her eyes and pressed tight. Not to *see*. That was why she had to keep coming for this look at Howie. She had to see *him* — that she might shut out *that* — the picture of Howie — *blown into pieces*.

She *hated* people. They were always doing something like this to her. She hated all these people in the theater. It seemed they were all, somehow, against her. And Howie had been so good to them! He was so good to people like the people in this theater. It was because he was so good and kind to them that he was — that he was not Howie now. He was always thinking of people's comfort — the comfort of people who had to work hard. From the time he went into his father's factory he had always been thinking up ways of making people more comfortable in their work. To see girls working in uncomfortable chairs, or standing hour after hour at tables too low or too high for them — he couldn't pass those things by as others passed them by. He had a certain inventive faculty, and his kindness was always making use of that. His father used to tell him he would break them all up in business if his mind went on working in that direction. He would tell him if he was going to be an inventor he had better think up some money-making inventions. Howie would laugh and reply that he'd make it all up some day. And at last one of the things he had thought out to make it better for people was really going to make it better for Howie. It was a certain kind of shade for

the eyes. It had been a relief to the girls in their little factory, and it was being tried out elsewhere. It was even being used a little in one of the big munition plants. Howie was there seeing about it. And while he was there — He went in there Howie. There wasn't even anything to carry out.

The picture had begun. She had to wait until almost half of it had passed before her moment came. The story was a tawdry, meaningless thing about the adventures of two men who had stolen a diamond cross — a strange world into which to come to find Howie. Chance had caught him into it—he was one of the people passing along a street which was being taken for the picture. His moment was prolonged by his stopping to do the kind of thing Howie would do, and now it was as if that one moment was the only thing saved out of Howie's life. They who made the picture had apparently seen that the moment was worth keeping — they left it as a part of the stream of life that was going by while the detective of their story waited for the men for whom he had laid a trap. The story itself had little relation to real things — yet chance made it this vehicle for keeping something of the reality that had been Howie — a disclosing moment captured unawares.

She was thinking of the strangeness of all this when again the people seated back of her said a thing that came right to her. They were saying "scrap-heap." She knew — before she knew why — that this had something to do with her. Then she found that they were talking about this film. It was ready for the scrap-heap. It was on its last legs. They laughed and said perhaps they were seeing its "last appearance."

She tried to understand what it meant. Then even this would cease to be in the world. She had known she ought to stop following the picture around, she had even told herself this would be the last time she would come to see it — but to feel it wouldn't any longer be there to be seen — that even this glimpse of Howie would go out — go out as life goes out—scrap-heap! She sat up straight and cleared her throat. She would have to leave. She must get air. But she looked to see where they were. Not far

now. She might miss Howie! With both hands she took hold of the sides of the seat. She was *not* going to fall forward! *Not* suffocating. *Not* until after she had seen him.

Now. The detective has left the hotel — he is walking along the street. He comes to the cigar-store door, and there steps in to watch. And there comes the dog! Then it was not going to be cut out tonight! Along comes the little dog — pawing at his muzzle. He stops in distress in front of the cigar-store. People pass and pay no attention to the dog — there on the sidewalk. And then — in the darkened theater her hands go out, for the door has opened — and she sees her husband! *Howie. There.* Moving as he always moved! She fights back the tears that would blur him. That dear familiar way he moves! It is almost as if she could step up and meet him, and they could walk away together.

He starts to go the other way. Then he sees the dog. He goes up to him; he is speaking to him, wanting to know what is the matter. She can fairly hear the warmth and kindness of his voice as he speaks to the little dog. He feels of the muzzle — finds it too tight; he lets it out a notch. *Dear Howie.* Of *course* he would do that. No one else had cared, but he would care. Then he speaks to the dog — pats him — tells him he is all right now. Then Howie turns away.

But the dog thinks he will go with this nice person! Howie laughs and tells him he can't come. A little girl has come across the street. Howie tells her to keep the dog from following him. Then again he turns to go. But just before he passes from sight the child calls something to him, and he looks back over his shoulder and smiles. She sees again the smile that has been the heart of her life. Then he passes from sight.

And he always leaves friends behind him — just as he always did leave friends behind him. There will be little murmurs of approval; sometimes there is applause. Tonight a woman near Laura said, "Say, I bet that's an awful nice fellow."

She never left her seat at once, as if moving would break a spell. For a little while after she had seen it, his

smile would stay with her. Then it would fade, as things fade in the motion pictures. Somehow she didn't really *have* it. That was why she had to keep coming — constantly reaching out for something that was not hers to keep.

When her moment had gone, she rose and walked down the aisle. It was very hard to go away tonight. There had been all the time the fear that what happened the night before would happen again — that she would not see Howie, after all. That made her so tense that she was exhausted now. And then "munitions" — and "scrap-heap." Perhaps it was because of all this that tonight her moment had been so brief. Only for an instant Howie's smile had brought her into life. It was gone now. It had passed.

She was so worn that when, at the door, her brother Tom stepped up to her she was not much surprised or even angry. Tom had no business to be following her about. She had told him that she would have to manage it her own way — that he would have to let her alone. Now here he was again — to trouble her, to talk to her about being brave and sane — when he didn't *know* — when he didn't have any idea what he was talking about! But it didn't matter — not tonight. Let him do things — get the tickets — and all that. Even let him talk to her. That didn't matter either.

But he talked very little. He seemed to think there was something wrong with her. He looked at her and said, "O, Laura!" reproachfully, but distressed.

"I thought you weren't going to do this any more, Laura," he said gently, after they had walked a little way.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked listlessly.

"They sent me word you had left home. I traced you."

"I don't see why you should trace me," she said, but not as if it mattered.

"O, Laura!" he said again. "Well, I must say I don't think Mrs. Edmunds was much of a friend!"

It was Mrs. Edmunds who had told Laura that there was this glimpse of her husband in "The Cross of Dia-

monds." She had hesitated about telling her, but had finally said it was so characteristic and beautiful a moment she felt Laura should see it.

From the first Tom had opposed her seeing it, saying it would be nothing but torture to her. Torture it was, but it was as if that torture were all there was left of life.

Tonight everything was as a world of shadows. She knew that her brother was taking her to his home instead of back to her own. He had wanted to do this before, but she had refused. There was nothing in her now that could refuse. She went with him as if she were merely moving in a picture and had no power of her own to get out of it.

And that was the way it was through the next few weeks. Tom and his wife would talk to her about trying to interest herself in life. She made no resistance, she had no argument against this; but she had no power to do it. They didn't know—they didn't know how it had been with her and Howie.

She herself had never been outgoing. It was perhaps a habit of reserve built out of timidity, but she had been a girl whose life did not have a real contact with other lives. Perhaps there were many people like that—perhaps not; she did not know. She only knew that before Howie came the life in her was more as a thing unto itself than a part of the life of the world.

Then Howie came! Howie, who could get on with any one, who found something to like in every one; and in the warmth and strength of his feeling for people he drew her into that main body of life where she had not been before. It had been like coming into the sunshine!

Now he was gone; and they asked her to be alone what she had been through him. It was like telling one to go into the sunshine when the sun is not shining.

And the more these others tried to reach her, the more alone she felt, for it only made her know they could not reach her. When you have lived in the sunshine, days of cold mist may become more than you can bear. After a long struggle not to do so, she again went to the long-distance telephone to find out where that picture

was being shown — that picture into which was caught one moment of Howie's life as he moved through the world.

Worn by the struggle not to do what she was doing, and tormented by the fear that she had waited too long, that this one thing which was left to her might no longer *be*, she had to put every bit of her strength into establishing this connection with the people who could tell her what she must know. Establishing the connection with living was like this. She was far off and connected only by a tenuous thing which might any moment go into confusion and stop.

At the other end some one was making fun of her. They doubted if "The Cross of Diamonds" could be seen anywhere at all. "The Cross of Diamonds" had been double-crossed. Wasn't it too much of a cross, anyway, to see "The Cross of Diamonds"?

Finally another man came to the phone. "The Cross of Diamonds" could be seen at a certain town in Indiana. But she'd better hurry! And she'd better look her last look. Why did she want to see it — might he ask? But Laura hung up the receiver. She must hurry!

All the rest of it was a blur and a hurry. Through the unreal confusion drove the one idea — she must get there in time! And that whole life of the world seemed pitted against her — it was as if the whole of that main body of life was thrown in between her and Howie. The train was late. It was almost the hour for pictures to begin when she got down at that lonely, far-away station. And the town, it seemed, was a mile from the station! There was a bus she must take. Every nerve of her being was hurrying that bus on — until that very anxiety made it seem it was Howie himself she would see if only she could get there in time.

And being late, the downstairs at the theater was full. "Balcony only," said a man as she came in. "Oh, *won't* you find me a good seat?" Laura besought him. "Like to know how I'll find you a seat when there ain't no seat," was the answer — the whole big life of the world in between her and Howie!

Upstairs, too, it was hard to find a place. And all

those people seated there — for them it meant only a few hours' silly entertainment!

But after a moment a man directed her to a seat. There was another place beside it, and just as Laura was being seated a woman came along with two children. "We can't all sit together," she was saying, "so you just sit in here, Mamie. You sit right in here — beside the nice lady."

The mother looked at Laura, as if expecting her to welcome her child. Laura did nothing. She must be alone. She was there to be with Howie.

She was not as late as she had feared. There would be time for getting ready — getting ready for Howie! She knew this would be the last time she would see Howie as he had moved through the world. For the last time she would see his face light to a smile. If she did not reach him tonight, she would never reach him. She had a feeling that she could reach him, if only something in her — if only something in her —

She could not finish that; it brought her to a place into which she could not reach, but as never before she had a feeling that he could be reached. And so when the little girl beside her twisted in her seat and she knew that the child was looking up at her she tried not to know this little girl was there — tried not to know that any of those people were there. If only she could get them all out of the way — she could reach into the shadow and feel Howie near!

But there was one thing she kept knowing — try her best not to know it! The little girl beside her, too young to be there, was going to sleep. When it came right up to the moment for her to see Howie, she was knowing that that little girl had fallen asleep in an uncomfortable position. Her head had been resting on the side of the seat — the side next Laura — and as she fell asleep it slipped from its support in a way that — Could *she* help it if this child was not comfortable? Angry, she tried to brush this from her consciousness as we brush dust from our eyes. This was her moment with *Howie* — her *chance*.

But when her moment came, a cruel thing happened,

Something was wrong with the machine that was showing the picture. At just *that* moment — of all the moments! — the worn-out film seemed to be going to pieces before her eyes. After the little dog came along, and just as Howie should come out from the cigar-store, there was a flash — a blur — a jumble of movements. It was like an earthquake — it looked like life ceasing to be life. “*No!*” she gasped under her breath. “*No!*” The people around her were saying things of a different sort. “Cut it!” “What you givin’ us?” “Whoa, boy!” They laughed. *They* didn’t care. It got a little better; she could make out Howie bending down to fix the dog’s muzzle — but it was all dancing crazily — and people were laughing. And then — then the miracle! It was on Howie’s smile the picture steadied — that smile back over his shoulder after he had turned to go. And, as if to bring to rights what had been wrong, the smile was held, and it was as if Howie lingered, as if in leaving life he looked back over his shoulder and waited — waited for his smile to reach Laura. Out of the jumble and blur — out of the wrong and meaningless — Howie’s beautiful steady smile *making it all right*.

She could not have told how it happened. As Howie passed, she turned to the little girl beside her whose head was without support and, not waking her, supported the child’s head against her own arm. And after she had done this — it was after she had done it that she began to know, as if doing it let down bars.

Now she was knowing. She had wanted to push people aside and reach into the shadows for Howie. She began to see that it was not so she would reach him. It was in being as he had been — kind, caring — that she could have a sense of him near. Here was her chance — among the people she had thought stood between her and her chance. Howie had always cared for these people. On his way through the world with them he had always stopped to do the kind thing — as he stopped to make it right for the badly muzzled dog. Then there *was* something for her to do in the world. She could do the kind things Howie would be doing if he were there! It would somehow — keep him. It would — fulfill him. Yes,

fulfill him. Howie had made her more alive — warmer and kinder. If she became as she had been before — Howie would have failed. She moved so that the little girl who rested against her could rest the better. And as she did this — it was as if Howie had smiled. The one thing the picture had never given her — the sense that it was hers to keep — that stole through her now as the things come which we know we can never lose. For the first moment since she lost him, she had him. And all the people in that theater, and all the people in the world — *here* was the truth! It cleared and righted as Howie's smile had righted the picture. In so far as she could come close to others she would come closer to him.