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## Wisdom's Gate

By Margaret Ayer Barnes

Her cigarette glowing, she sank back upon her pillows. "And now," she said calmly, "what about Baines?"

He paused for an instant to light his own cigarette, and then he sat down beside her on the sofa. His voice, when he spoke, was detached yet sympathetic. "I suppose his condition is pretty pathological. He's brooding over Gertrude for a good many years. After they separated, I dare say you won't remember, you'd just gone to China—it was generally said that they were living together. She was barely back from Reno before there was gossip. Of course, he's besotted. Drunk, as you saw, at four in the afternoon, and obviously a prey to alcoholic delusions."

"But where," asked Cicily, "do I come into this story of a mis-spent life?"

That question awoke in him his former, reluctant, Baines is insanely jealous. Of Gertrude, I mean. He has always been afraid she would marry again. And now, you see, he thinks—"

Cicily's gaze shifted suddenly to the fire. "Never mind what he thinks. What about me?"

"He thinks," said Avery, "that you're going to divorce Albert. That of course might have what's known as consequences. At least Baines seemed to think so."

"But why would I divorce him?" she asked.

"Because he thinks, Cicily, that you want to marry me. And then, you were discovered meeting me on the four o'clock—so the poor devil thought."

She heard as he spoke, a slight sound at the door. The Jap was patting in with a tray and tall glasses. He brought them to the sofa, his eyes discreetly veiled.

"It's Planter's Punch," said Avery, handing a glass to Cicily. The Jap had trotted over to pull the curtains at a window.

Later, putting down his half finished drink, Avery moved nearer on the sofa. "Cicily," he said, "if Albert should come to you and ask you to divorce him—"

"I would," she interrupted, "but he wouldn't."

She started a little when his hand touched her arm. "My dear, you're worth ten of him—twenty—a hundred. Why don't you leave him before he asks you to go? Tell him—"

"Yes—what?" asked Cicily despondently.

"That I love you," he said simply.

She hadn't expected it. His fingers clasped her hand as it lay on her lap and raised it to his lips very tenderly, almost lamely.

"You don't, I think, love me," said Avery. "But you will."

With the pain of one hand she was rubbing the knuckles that had been brushed by the mustache. "I don't want to love anyone," she assured him hastily.

"My dear, you're a child. A child that's been abused. I want to make up to you for all that has happened—"

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

His eyes widened at the question. "Cicily—of course."

"Well—I just wondered."

**CHAPTER XXVIII**

"I can solemnly promise that I'll make you happy—" Avery told Cicily.

"I'm not so sure, Avery. We've both failed before. You've failed one woman and I've failed two men. I'd rather go on just the way I'm going—"

"If that's possible," said Avery. The three curt words reminded her of her precarious position.

"You're not a woman to be happy alone."

Those words reminded her of something that she was ashamed to have forgotten. "I have my children. And they'll stand by me, whatever happens."

"Then they'll stand by you if you marry me."

Until he said that, it really hadn't occurred to her to think of Avery Caldwell in the light of a stepfather. Or of herzell presenting him to sis, John and Robin and explaining to Bertie his entrance in their lives.

"I'm sorry," she said gravely, holding out her hand to him.

He took it and held it and drew her a little nearer, looking down at her strangely with compassion in his gaze. "Cicily," he said, "Baines said something else. I think I'd better tell you. He said that Gertrude told him she was going to marry Albert."

The words, which had been spoken with gentle deliberation, seemed to reverberate in the empty air. She felt his hands clasp her.

"Cicily!" he cried.

"It's a lie," she said hoarsely. "For he would have told me."

"Come," very tenderly "Sit down. You nearly fainted."

"No, I'm all right. I must go home."

"Please stay here with me." His voice and eyes pleaded with her.

"Oh, no. That's impossible." For home had become a retreat to take refuge in, a hole to crawl back to. As she turned toward the door, she



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felt his arm around her shoulders and leaned against it gratefully. Suddenly Avery bent his head and kissed her. "Now I'll take you home," he said.

She protested this indulgence with the vaguest murmur. Avery helped her into her car. He took his seat at the wheel and she sank back in her corner, silent, indifferent to his presence at her side.

(To Be Continued)



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