

LOVE IS A BRIDGE

Charles Bracelen Flood



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

The Riverside Press Cambridge

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COLONEL PEMMERTON sat in his favorite armchair, a fairly stiff, dark red armchair. His eyes dutifully ran down the lines of the book in his hand and his strong fingers turned the pages, but today he wasn't seeing the words.

The clock chimed, a quarter to four. The Colonel never heard it when he was reading, but now he looked up. The light from the autumn afternoon was fading, and the sky above Marlborough Street was going from blue to grey in the windows of his library. He put the book down on the little table beside his chair and stood up. Then he walked over to the desk and turned the desk lamp on with one hand while his other hand picked up a pipe; absent-mindedly picked up the right pipe for Saturday afternoon.

There was a knock on the door, and the Colonel turned his head. Not yet. He can't possibly be here yet.

"Yes?" The door at the far end of the library opened, and his daughter Susan came out of the shadows into the room. The Colonel walked to the window and looked at the autumn street below. His fingers drummed viciously on the sill. "Look here, Susan." He spoke without moving his head, but the drumming had stopped. "Are you sure you want to see him?"

"Yes."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite sure," she said, and he turned around, outlined against the light of the window. His daughter smiled at him, a brief little effort of a smile. He stood there and thought about it for a minute; the divorce fourteen years ago. Fourteen years. And this afternoon we leap across fourteen years and then leap back again.

"What the devil do you suppose he wants, Susan?"

"I don't know. He has the right to come and see us, don't you think?"

"He has very few rights, Susan." The Colonel sat down again and picked up his book. Susan took a cigarette out of the silver box on the dark leather top of the desk and lit it. She smiled.

"You never really felt sorry for him, did you?"

The Colonel snapped the book shut.

"Susan —" He stopped for a moment. "I am seeing Henry because he wrote me and you told me to let him come. I'll be perfectly civil."

"Will you?" There was a little smile on her face.

"Susan —" The book passed from one hand to the other several times, quickly. Then he smiled, too. "Yes, dammit, I'll be civil."

Susan nodded, and started out of the room; she stopped at the walnut door.

"He ought to be here soon. I'll let you two talk for a while and then I'll come down."

The Colonel stood up. He walked over to the bookshelf and filled a little dark gash in it with the book in his hand.

"Yes. We'll have a fine chat, and then you can come down and we'll all talk about the good old times we used to have together."

Susan looked down at the carpet, her hand on the brass handle of the door. Then she nodded and slipped through the door, shutting it behind her. Colonel Pemmerton turned from the shelf and walked back to the window, and there was Henry Cobb below him, tipping a taxi driver. It was fourteen years and the man's back was in a trench coat; there was a khaki cap on his head where there had been a hat; but it was Henry Cobb. The Colonel straightened back from the window and watched the soldier coming up the steps, and there was something wrong about Henry coming up the steps without straightening his tie or looking down at his shoes; there was something there from Henry as he had first been, at the very beginning, and the Colonel frowned at the blur in the focus. The bell rang down in the house, and the Colonel stood there, waiting. Knock.

"Come in." The maid.

"Major Cobb to see you, sir." A major, eh?

"Show him in, please, Elizabeth." Henry Cobb walked into the room. Colonel Pemmerton stood there, watching the door close, and then he noticed, almost with a start, that Henry was standing in front of him, looking him in the eye. He realized that his hands were still in his pockets, and he pulled them out rather awkwardly; somehow their right hands met and hit and fumbled; he heard himself saying, "Nice to see you."

"Sit down, Henry."

"Thanks." They sat there for a moment in the darkening library and then the moment was a minute, and how do you start a conversation after fourteen years?

"I was sorry to hear about your father."

"Thank you."

"Where were you, Henry?"

"England. Air Force."

"I see."

"Yes." Henry stood up and walked over to the desk. He leaned against it with his legs, his back very straight in the officer's blouse, his head slightly inclined.

"How long, Henry?"

"Two and a half years. I was at Wright Field for a while first."

"I see. Aren't you a bit old for flying?"

Henry looked around, and when he spoke it seemed like a collection of polite phrases.

"Yes. Quite a bit too old. I did go on a few missions. I was in mathematics, you know. How to bomb properly."

"Oh, yes. I should think you'd be quite good at it."

"It was very interesting. Very." He looked around again, almost as if he were realizing for the first time that he was there.

"Look, Colonel. I know you don't want to see me. I came up here to ask your permission to see Hilliard. He's at school now, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"St. Paul's."

"Good." They both looked at each other for a second. The Colonel pursed his lips, and then it came out.

"A little late to begin taking an interest in the boy, isn't it?"

Henry Cobb turned his head away as fast as if his cheek had been slapped. They don't hit often, he was thinking, but when they hit they really hit hard. He breathed deeply for a second.

"Yes. It is. But I want to see him now."

"Tell me, Henry, if you were in my position would you just —"

"I'm not in your position, Colonel. I thought I was going to die once or twice over there, and I want to see my son." He looked down for a second and then he jerked himself upright. "I'm going to see him," he said in a preoccupied tone, and walked to the door. He turned for a second at the door, but the Colonel was walking away, towards the window, stopping to put on another light. Henry opened the door and stepped into the hall and there was Susan, coming down the steps, on the last step, on the landing.

"Hank."

"Susan."

She stepped behind him and closed the door on the library with the Colonel looking out the window, and then they were on the landing alone.

"You want to see the boy, don't you, Hank? No, I didn't hear anything. I just know." She looked at him, at the uniform, the ribbons. "See him, Hank. I think a boy should be proud of his father —" His hand moved out and took her wrist, raised it an inch and held it.

"Susan. Don't say anything. Not for a minute, please."

She saw tears in his eyes and then she felt the tears in her eyes too and she didn't know how many seconds it was, she looking at the floor and he looking at her. She knew he was looking at her nose — he had always kissed her nose, bit her nose, loved her nose — and then he spoke. "Don't worry, Susan. I can wait to see the boy. Tell the C. I'm sorry. I'll be in touch." And the hand put her wrist back to her side, and she was standing motionless, looking at the floor, when she heard the front door close on fourteen years that were suddenly terribly empty.

IT WAS 1927, the fall of 1927. Henry Cobb was a senior at Harvard, brilliant at mathematics and physics, a little embarrassed about having "Labs" while his friends took literature appreciation courses. But he was Henry Cobb, and he was one of those people who are clubbed over the head by success. The funny thing was that he didn't care. For four years Henry didn't care about anything; he didn't care about the A.D., and they elected him. He didn't care about Hasty Pudding, and they elected him in the first fifteen. He came from New York and he didn't care about Boston, but he came from New York by way of St. Mark's, and he was invited to all the Boston parties. He couldn't have cared less about Phi Beta Kappa and he was in the senior sixteen — Henry Cobb was a great success, and he was happy — but he really didn't care.

There was a reason why these things made little difference to him, and it was because he lived very largely in his own mind. He offered only one tenth of himself to other people, and yet that one tenth was sufficient to convince people that he was a basically gregarious and outgoing person. They were wrong. Even as he lifted a glass and talked to a friend his mind was light-years away. He could sit in a grey suit, with a martini in his hand, and be galloping across the steppes, or be on a ship on the ocean, or dealing with the probabilities of eclipses and collisions of planets. He was that potentially most volatile of all human beings, a romantic scientist. Henry was Lord Mayor of a wonderful city that existed only in his mind.

He was about six feet tall, fairly stocky; he held himself erect. He

didn't spill out the first thing that came into his mind when it came into his mind, as a Harvard senior at twenty-one years old is likely to do. People liked Henry, and he never said anything that diminished that liking; he never talked against anybody, he never talked for anybody; he smiled and laughed; girls liked him. But they never fell in love with him. Henry Cobb lived on the top of the wave.

One afternoon in the fall of 1927 he was walking back from having watched Harvard beat Indiana; he was striding along in the happy, shouted-out, little-cold-let's-have-a-drink crowd on the Larz Anderson Bridge when Harris Fay shouted,

"Hank! Hank! C'mere."

Henry turned and cut sidewise through the little knots of couples and the big knots of boys moving together and took a step up onto the curb. He pushed through some more people and walked over to the two couples standing by the brick and concrete wall of the bridge. There was excited talk about the game,

"That last touchdown!"

"Did you see Potter intercept that pass!"
and then,

"Oh, this is Mr. Cobb — Miss Jennings and Miss Pemmerton," and there were smiles and nods and feet shifting in the cold. Henry Cobb looked at Susan Pemmerton in the cold pink beginnings of the autumn sunset, looked at the rosy cheeks and the sparkling eyes and the happy, rather shy smile.

"Come on, Hank, we're going to Briggsy's rooms for a drink."

"I wish I could, Harris, but I told Pete I'd meet him — we might get over later." He nodded, and there were "nice to see you's," and he moved into the crowd. Henry went up Boylston, turning right on Mount Auburn Street. That was a nice-looking girl. What's her name? Pemmerton. That's it. He walked up the street, with the flags hanging out of the Lampoon and the Iroquois and the Phoenix, as the evening closed in with the blue still, blue but getting grey.

Henry's last winter in college passed in a rather dreamlike fashion. His four years of mathematics spun around inside his brain; at the moment he was taken with aerodynamics, and he wrote his thesis on the work of Kutta and Joukowski and Prandtl—he even drove down to Langley Field, Virginia, and studied the wind tunnel that had been built there the year before. Finally, in late March, Henry turned in his thesis, and began to dream of his other love, Europe.

For Henry Cobb, Europe was a never-never land. He had first gone the summer after his freshman year, gone with three of his friends, not thinking about what was waiting for him. But Europe had fed his imagination; it had cut deep into Henry and left him dreaming about it all his sophomore year, for there was something about getting behind the wheel of a rented car and driving through France and trying his prep-school French that was the most exciting thing that he had ever known.

And he had gone back. The next summer he had gone back, alone this time, and taken the boat train to Paris and a taxi to the little hotel off the rue de Rivoli, and he had walked out through the Tuileries in the sunset, past the opening wings of the Louvre, and stood looking at the vista up to the Arc de Triomphe, with the Eiffel Tower standing up off to the left. Then he had walked on down towards Notre Dame by the quais, and it had been almost a religious experience for Henry; he felt like a pilgrim at the end of the quest. The next day he had taken the train down to Chartres and stood in the cool dim beauty, and then he had climbed the tower for the most intimate greeting of all. At the base of the Old Tower there was a little gargoyle on a pedestal of its own, a little gargoyle looking like a bulldog of some oriental breed, and Henry stood there, staring across at the Old Tower from the New Tower, experiencing the same delight that he had felt the first time that he had seen this almost incredible, proud little figure standing up looking out over the plains before Chartres. And then, a week later, he had taken a car and gone south again, to stand on the walls of Carcassonne at night and to lie naked on the sand at St. Tropez, letting the Mediterranean wash away Harvard, wash away St. Mark's, wash away New York.

And so now Henry was no longer sure; the first year that he had gone back Europe seemed a dream almost immediately; but now, after three summers, he was no longer sure which was the dream and which was the reality—all he knew was that he was aching to go back, aching for the wine of France and the mountains of Switzerland and the music of Italy.

One day in April there was a letter for Henry. The letter was from a Dr. Groemke, a professor at M.I.T. He had heard of Henry's work, he said, and his friends at Harvard had been kind enough to show him Henry's thesis. Would Henry be willing to come over, the slanted German script said, and discuss the possibility of his studying and working with them over at M.I.T. Henry, a little staggered, wrote back that he would be delighted.

And so, late in April, it was decided that Henry was to work at M.I.T. on aerodynamics, providing that he did not have to start until the fall. After all, he must go to Europe for the summer.

III

There were men directing traffic with flashlights at the gate, and Henry said, thinking out loud, "Well, I guess this is it." His roommate Peter nodded and swung the car to the right. They moved up the drive, and for a few moments there was darkness in the May night. The drive turned, and there was the house with the lights streaming orange through the trees; a few seconds more brought the faint sounds of music. Henry spoke to Peter without looking, his head silhouetted in the light from the house. "What's their name?"

"Hitchcock, I think."

"Hitchcock. That's right."

Peter stopped the car in front of the door, and they watched the girls, caught in the beams of the headlights, getting out of the car in front of them, the short skirts of their dresses hanging bright from below their short, dark wraps. Then the car ahead had pulled away, and they were opening the doors. Henry stepped out onto the gravel driveway and turned down the collar of his coat. A man drove the car away; Peter took the check for it and put it in his pocket. They

walked towards the front door, the music a little louder, the lights much brighter.

There were names to be taken at the door, and some stag already red-faced and laughing and unsteady, with his friends, a little red-faced themselves, moving up and down the green-carpeted steps, trying to keep him quiet until he was through the gate. But the red-faced stag was gloriously happy already; whether he got into the party or not was a vague concept, a little beyond his grasp.

"Listen," he said, laughing, catching on to the arm of one of his good friends, "listen, that was a good dinner, wasn't it?" His friend, who was feeling more sick than drunk, patted his shoulder in a pre-occupied fashion.

"Certainly was, Mike. Good dinner."

"Lotsa martinis, uh?" Then he looked at his friend. "You know, you look drunker'n me."

"Don't be silly."

"No, I mean it. You look drunker'n me." He stopped for a second. "An' boy, that's drunk." He looked at the brightly lit hall leading in from beyond the steps. "They got martinis in there?"

"No. Champagne."

"That's all right. I drink that too."

Henry smiled, and gave his name at the little desk. The red-faced stag's voice could be heard in the hall, following him in. Coats over here, in the men's room and my God somebody's passed out already. And a look in the mirror and once with the comb.

Henry walked out past the young men waiting for the girls to come downstairs. There was the line of people extending into the library; the library was decked with flowers, with the débutante and her mother receiving before the fireplace, and a butler to take the name. He looked rather idly at the bookshelf as the line moved forward, and then, on an impulse, he leaned down to look at the brown leather books nearest him, brushing aside a trail of ivy. I wonder what they read. Longfellow. Isn't that nice. Very nice for a Boston house. I'll bet Whittier isn't so very far away. No, by God, here he is. But these don't look read. Here's one that looks used. Tocqueville. I'll be damned. The line moved forward again. Tonight the butler got the name right.

"Henry Cobb."

"Mister Cobb," and it wasn't Robb or Hobb, and how do you do, step left to *débutante*, nice to see you, and then he was through a french window and standing on a little brick terrace with an awning over it. Henry looked around, nodded to one or two people, and walked down towards the music through a little satin tunnel; then he was inside the marquee, with all the music loud, and all the lights bright. He walked over to the champagne bar and took one of the filled glasses; he turned and looked at the dance floor. The orchestra was playing "Thou Swell." And then, as he had a habit of doing, he stood there and thought for a moment, stopped and realized, for the first time that evening, where he was and what he was doing. These parties are great, he thought, I've been going to them for four years and they're still great, there's something about them that catches me up in them, no matter what kind of mood I'm in when I come. He thought about the girls he'd talked to — I really don't like parties, Mother makes me come, I'd much rather be off riding, or fishing. And the same girls that said this would be at every party, dancing every dance. The hell they'd rather be fishing, he thought, watching an attractive blond girl whirl by. He thought about a girl who had yelled at him once, across the music as they danced, "I could die dancing!" And they could, he thought, and why not?

And then the thought was over, and he lifted the glass to his mouth. There were people to say hello to, and girls that one nodded at; girls that one smiled at; a few girls that one went over and spoke to; and one or two with whom one danced. Within half an hour he was sitting down, talking to Doug Winters. Doug was a good man; he should see Doug more often. Henry had a glass in his hand, and he was beginning to get a bit talkative; "well, I agree with you, but if you can get one of these deals as an assistant purser — I've never done it, but —" and then Doug was talking about France the summer before and Henry knew there was going to be a woman in the story in a minute; you couldn't see her yet, but you could hear her heels coming towards the door. Henry had heard a lot of stories about girls in France, women in France, men in France, and his responses became automatic, with "yes," "uh-huh," "must have been something," and "I've felt that way too," as he kept looking around.

Just then a girl walked past, and stopped a few feet away, her back towards him, and he felt a recognition; not the "there's Joe," and a wave of the hand, but something when you've seen that girl before, and everything about it was pleasant; something in the back and in the neck, and you don't wave your hand or even open your mouth, but your mind just closes in on the moment. Doug was still talking. What is that girl's name? Pemmerton. He remembered asking Harris Fay her first name. Susan Pemmerton. That's it. And Doug was still talking. Henry pulled himself back into the conversation, and finally he was even contributing something to it, but he barely heard himself speaking. Susan Pemmerton was sitting down at a white-covered little table with a young man and another couple; the other couple left them to go and dance, and Susan and the young man were left there talking. Susan would look down at the empty glass in her hands, rolling it back and forth, gently, and every now and then she would look sidewise at her companion and laugh, or say something that would make him laugh. Then he leaned forward and said something and she smiled; they got up to dance. Henry was fairly absorbed back into the conversation by this time, but when he looked up and saw she was gone the moment closed in for good this time, and

"Excuse me, will you, Doug?"

"Sure, you bet, Hank. Nice to see you."

Henry walked through the maze of little white-covered tables and into the next tent. He stood for a moment by the edge of the dance floor, and then turned his head and pursed his lips; he went to the champagne bar and had another glass. There was a little cold down his back, the same little cold that he felt when it was the deciding point in squash, or when he stood back on a ten-foot diving board and felt himself start taking the quick steps towards the air. He put down his glass and started out towards her. A stag came across from the other side of the floor and cut in ahead of him, and Henry changed his direction and moved off to the side of the floor again. He went back to the long white table with the glasses on it and had another glass of champagne as he looked out at the dance floor. He couldn't find her for a moment and then there she was, over there. He walked over and cut in.

"Hello."

"Hello."

"You don't remember me, but my name's Hank Cobb. I met you with Harris Fay after a game once — on the bridge."

"Oh, yes. It's nice to see you again." She didn't remember. He was hurt. They smiled rather vacantly at each other and looked around, still dancing. "It looks like a good party, doesn't it?" she said, and then he realized that she was trying to be nice, and that she was embarrassed, and a shy person. He felt almost a shock, because he knew he understood her. He knew he understood her; the details were unimportant.

"Tell me," he said after a minute, "people don't call you Susan, do they?" She looked at him.

"Yes. They do." She gave a polite little smile. Oh, God, boy, he thought to himself, how you make the wrong moves. There was a tap on his shoulder, and

"Thank you, Susan."

"It was nice to see you again." The hell it was, he said to himself, and then he was back at the champagne bar. He drank half a glass and went out to dance with Ellen Saunders; they talked automatically as they danced; Ellen looked at the stag line and Henry looked for Susan Pemmerton, and every now and then he caught a glimpse of her, smiling, laughing, talking. He saw her go off to the other tent and then he was cut in on and

"Thanks, Ellen. See you later," and he collided with somebody; it was Peter Read.

"Having a few drinks, eh, Hank?" He thought about that for a moment. Yes, I am having a few drinks. And it's just possible that I'll have a few more. He picked up another glass from the marshalled little golden ranks. Doug Winters was telling a story, and it was funny. Then Henry was talking to Larry what's-his-name about the trip Larry had taken to Cuba at Easter and that's quite a tan, Larry — finally he got rid of Larry. The glass was empty, and that meant that it was time for another glass. He walked around the dance floor, slowly. Guess I'll dance with Susan. He looked; couples sliding back and forth, now-you-see-who-you're-looking-for, now-you-don't; and no Susan. He walked into the other tent, a little faster,

his head turning a little more quickly. No Susan. He put down the glass that was in his hand and marched back into the house, through the library with the flowers already wilting, into the hall. No Susan. Back through the buffet tent, turn around, look around, back onto the dance floor. No Susan. Susan has gone home. Eighty other girls seven feet away but they're no damned good because Susan has gone home. Peter came up to him.

"I'm getting tired, Hank. Ready to check out?"

"Sure."

Henry looked out of the window as they drove home, and when he spoke he kept looking out the window.

"Ever notice how girls are different at parties?"

"Different from when?"

"Different from when they're by themselves."

"No, I hadn't noticed."

"Well, they are."

"All right. They are."

And the car rolled on and Henry kept looking out the window. There was a moon in the sky that night.

DEAR SUSAN, he had written to her at Vassar a week later, I hope that you will remember me. And she had remembered, and asked Henry to take her to a tea dance in New York on the twenty-ninth of May if he was going to be in New York on the twenty-ninth. It was just before final exams and Henry had no more thought of going to New York that week end than flying to the moon. Dear Susan, he wrote back, as it happens, I am going to be in New York on the twenty-ninth; and at great inconvenience he made the trip down.

And now the tea dance was over. Henry and Susan stood on the corner of Fifth Avenue in the May evening; there had been a shower of rain a few minutes before, and now the evening air was cool and the darkening sky was very clear. Henry looked at Susan.

"Would you like to eat?"

"No, not with all those canapés; I'm stuffed. Would you?"

"No." They looked at each other, standing on the corner of Fifth Avenue at dinnertime and no appetite, and then they both started laughing. Henry shook his head.

"Well, this is a little silly, isn't it?" he said, still smiling.

"A little. I don't mind."

"Well, neither do I, but we ought to do something."

"Let's walk." They walked up Fifth Avenue, with the Park opening up in front of them as they came towards the Plaza, with the fountain shining white in the growing evening, and the dull burished glow of the Plaza behind.

"It looks a little like Paris here," he said. They stopped for a