



FIRST INSTALLMENT

Life was not real. It was a castle of lovely brittle glass, and it was cracking and splintering all around her.

The girl in the cream-colored roadster tried to realize it in all its ugly implications, tried to see her way through the bristling wreckage which had closed in on her.

Things didn't happen like that; they simply didn't. To some, perhaps, to the reckless and hardboiled who did things that invited disaster; lived on excitement and wild parties. Not to girls who led normal, healthy lives and did the usual pleasant, agreeable things, and were thrilled to pieces over their work and the glorious chance of success in it. It could not happen.

But it had. What was she going to do about it?

The girl kept haunted young eyes on the road ahead, mechanically efficient while her thoughts darted and turned, hunting frantically for a way out. The speedometer needle trembled at sixty, and slid back to forty-five. She must not drive too fast, and risk being stopped for speeding. Of all times, not now.

What was she going to do? For the first time the firm little hands on the wheel slackened and shook, but she steadied them again resolutely. The roadster hummed softly on. The wind that rushed by her face was sharp with the night chill and damp with the smell of the Pacific. Long fingers of light reached out for her and were dimmed; a nondescript car rattled past, its driver sending a curious glance at the smart roadster with the pretty girl at the wheel, alone.

The air on her cheek was noticeably wet, bringing its own message. A thin fog was creeping in from the sea. Presently it would be thicker, a fleecy white blanket. She saw its woolly whiteness closing silently around a dark beach bungalow, miles back of her, shrouding it, hiding it, smothering sight and sound.

There were no lights in that bungalow, to beat through in a golden haze. She saw it as she had

last seen it, blank-windowed, dark and furtive on its strip of sheltered beach. A silhouette against the pale rectangle of a door. A man's silhouette.

Memories came like black wings, swooping down on her. Other things . . . things that were said. She didn't want to think of them.

The road curved again. She saw a single light ahead, and her own headlights picked up a motorcycle drawn to one side of the highway, and a man in uniform bending over it. A motorcycle policeman. He looked up, with a professional eye on the oncoming car.

She wanted to step on the gas and go roaring past him, but she didn't. Somehow she stopped. Somehow she kept her voice cool and natural.

"Any trouble, officer? Can I call up a garage for you—or anything?"

"Why no, lady. Much obliged."

The man in uniform was disillusioned and hardboiled, but he grinned appreciatively at the small creature competently offering help. Drivers of speedy cars didn't usually waste much grief over a motor cop stalled by the roadside. And this was a pretty girl, pretty even for this favored strip of the coast, where pretty girls flocked from all parts of the country. A little thing with big soft eyes and a red beret pulled at a gallant angle over a small, dark head. Looked like a nice kid, for all she was tearing around the country alone at this hour of the night. A swell car too; it must have cost a hatful of money. Later he was to remember that car, and the girl who had driven it.

He swung a sturdy leg over his saddle.

"Better detour inland if you're going far. The fog's getting thick back there. Driving's going to be bad before long."

"Thanks, I'll remember."

She smiled, and the cream-colored roadster slid past him. Fog, and dangerous driving along the coast road. It was so very simple.

She had been up and down this road a score of times since the new roadster had been hers. She knew

its curves, its grades, its ragged coast line. She knew, now, where she was going. The speedometer needle crept a little higher.

A road appeared, branching obliquely from the main highway. Tall trees marched along each side of it, and a denser planting showed ahead. In the darkness beneath the trees she brought the roadster to a standstill and let her hands drop from the wheel.

It was lucky that she had remembered this place. So accessible and yet so secluded, with no curious eye to see the queer preparations that she had to make . . . Funny how wobbly she felt, now that she could just drop back and let go . . . It wouldn't do. She must get herself in hand, keep her head clear and her nerve steady.

It was not so easy. She seemed to be two people, and one of them was a sly, persistent imp which hovered close to her ear, fleeing and wheedling.

"You're running away. Running away. You've never been a quitter before."

"But I've never," she found herself arguing, "been in such a ghastly jam before."

"If you go now, you can't come back. You'll be giving up everything. All this that you've worked for. You can't ever go back to that."

"I know. That's all finished . . ." She shook herself impatiently and swung the door open with a vigorous jab.

The pocket of her light sports coat bumped clumsily against her as she stepped down. She stood very still for a moment, with an odd, arrested look on her face. Then she thrust her hand into the overloaded pocket and drew out the thing which had weighed it down.

Starlight had all but vanished before the stealing mist, but even in that obscurity it was a bright and lovely trifle, a woman's jeweled bag, extraordinarily full. The strained catch must have been too hastily snapped shut, for it yawned open at a touch, and the bulging contents oozed into view. Bills. The bag was fairly stuffed with them, high denomination bills, tightly crammed in.

The girl in the red beret stared at it soberly. It seemed to give her no pleasure, not even any particular sense of the risk she ran in carrying such a sum with her through lonely roads and at all hours of the night. She just let the bag lie there on her open hand, looking at it.

There was a faint aversion in that look. The palm tilted slowly as though she meant deliberately to let that opulent roll slide to the dust at her feet. Then with a brief grimace of distaste she righted her hand and again, thrust the bag deep into the coat pocket and turned, a little blindly, back to the car.

The girl looked very small beside the big car, very young and troubled, yet somehow determined and every move now was brisk and efficient. A vigorous tug, and a smart traveling case came out of the car—was hidden behind a mass of shrubbery.

"Lucky," she reflected, "that I was all set to stay . . . If there is any luck in such a miserable snarl as this."

She slipped quickly into her seat again, and the engine's heavy purr cut abruptly into the stillness. The roadster swung smoothly out of the shadowed drive and down toward the highway. The fog had thickened perceptibly and the road was dark, but she drove without lights. Time enough to switch those on. There must be no one who could remember, later, a distant glimpse of flaring lights.

On the last turn she had a good view of the main road in both directions. No dazzle of oncoming lights showed either way, blurring through the fog. She swept out into the highway, and her own came on.

There was no placid strips of beach here; only rough ground and dark rocky headland, now fairly close, now farther away, dropping sheer. About an eighth of a mile beyond there should be a place where it jutted boldly into the sea.

There it was. A queer little tingle went skipping over her as she caught sight of it, vaguely outlined. How much distance would she need? Ten—no, twenty feet before striking the incline. It would be too dangerous beyond that. She brought the car slowly to a standstill. Shut off the engine.

For a moment she sat listening, every nerve alert. There was not a sound except for the heavy murmur of the sea below. Even though fog might muffle distant sounds, it was not dense enough yet to matter. She started the engine again.

Her heart was beating fast as she stepped down. The roadster was pointing at a strange angle. It looked so sleek and beautiful, and she let a hand rest on it softly. This was a shabby trick to play on a good friend

but it had to be done. She would miss it, too.

There was no time to be wasted. She stepped up and leaned in, and her hands moved swiftly and competently. She gave a last tug and a hasty glance toward the naked ledge beyond.

The car lurched and started, and left the smooth road with a protesting heave. It was gathering speed, bumping over the uneven ground. She jumped, staggered for a few steps and fell.

Huddled there on hands and knees, panting but unhurt, she saw the big car strike the slope and go hurtling down. Lurching with lights flaring toward the empty sea. On the brink it seemed almost to rear back, hung for a split second and flashed down. She saw it turning, and pressed her hands to her ears against the grinding crash of its fall.

The silence that followed was blank and empty. She pulled her hands down shamefacedly and found the palms moist.

"That's done!" she muttered shakily, and got to her feet. Her face was a white patch against the darkness.

She knew that she must hurry away, before some belated motorist came by and saw her. A girl in a red beret had ceased to exist, and her flitting ghost must not be seen. How queer it seemed . . . there wasn't any such girl any more.

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