THE FOG OF ORLEANS

--:-- --:-- By HOLWORTHY HALL --:-- --:--

(Continued from Preceding Page)—

happen? And when I see you so unhappy—"

She caught her breath. "Unhappy? Who says I am?"

"Why, I say so. I know it."

"But—"

"Oh, there's no use in arguing about it. Just because you dash around to parties, and laugh, and dance, and flirt—that doesn't prove anything. I've watched you time and again. And I've wished so often—" His voice shook momentarily, and then he controlled it. "I've wished so often that I could do something about it, instead of that. I've only made it worse."

"You haven't made it worse, Stuart. You've made it better."

"I wish I could think so."

"I'm only sorry—for you."

"Oh, don't mind me!" said Stuart, and laughed, wretchedly. "Tell me how I could possibly have made things better for you."

"Just by . . . by understanding."

There was a brief pause, and then he turned his head and saw that she was crying.

"Why, Helen!" he said thickly. "Helen!"

She had no tears; she was crying in greast spasms which racked her whole body; and Stuart, rigid beside her, was nearly mad with distress, but he fought back every pulse of sympathy, save one, her fingers clutched his own.

At length she was quiet, and another long, perilous silence had come between them. Stuart, who had been scowling down at the moss, lifted his head. "If I'd taken you in my arms," he said, half to himself. "If I had taken you in my arms, the way I wanted to, and kissed you to try to comfort you—you couldn't ever have forgiven me—could you?"

For the sake of his faith in her, she could look straight into his eyes, and tell a deliberate lie. "No, Stuart, I couldn't have—ever."

Stuart got to his feet. "You see, I'll see, I'll be as good to you as I know how to be."

"I know you will, Stuart."

Her smile was a high reward for him. "All right," he said awkwardly. "I guess we understand each other, anyway. Let's go home."

He could easily imagine how the society of Orleans might have attracted and intoxicated a girl who was yet in her teens; indeed, he was frank enough to admit that a few years ago, he himself might have been deceived by all the gilt and glitter. As for Dickie Carson, the man was undeniably handsome, and when he chose, he could probably be engaging, and cut an impressive figure to a debutante. But as Stuart reviewed the basis of life on Maple Avenue, a basis of champaigned idleness, he was drenched with successive waves of contempt; he could praise Maple Avenue for only a single circumstance. The majority of these families had enjoyed their money for three generations; but selfishness and fashion had prevented the arrival of a fourth.

He had too much courage to shirk meeting Carson, but he was embarrassed, nevertheless. He was embarrassed in spite of his knowledge that Carson, for all his pride of place, was devoted to his wine cellar, and wasn't above the taking of his other pleasure where he found them. Carson wasn't particularly interested in his wife—this was another principle which had its habitat on Maple Avenue—and he didn't seem to care very much what she did, or when, or where; he was a very poor asset to his country and a worse husband to Helen, but Stuart, who had principles enough to serve them both, was restless in his company, for he allowed himself no alibi, and felt that he had been unfair to Carson.

He also told himself that he had been unfair to Helen; he told himself that he hadn't acted the part of a gentleman. A gentleman, finding himself in love with a married woman, would either conceal his love, or leave the neighborhood.

He couldn't leave the neighborhood because his mission in Orleans lacked perhaps a dozen weeks before completion. Furthermore, even though he had failed of concealment, and now was contrite about it, he couldn't avoid her entirely, unless he wished to arouse notice and comment. The wisest course was to go on with his normal schedule, but to put his own sentiments and her patient unhappiness out of his mind.

The prescription was sensible, but he found that he couldn't swallow it. He could manage his actions, but he couldn't manage his thoughts; the very best he could do was to arrange so that he was seldom alone with her. He could curb his tongue, but he couldn't keep the messages out of his eyes.

Even when they were alone, they never mentioned the afternoon by the lake side. They talked calmly, and with much restraint of the places they knew, and the books they had read, and the music they had heard; but now and then, their eyes met, and fell again—sometimes immediately, and sometimes after their world had hung both of them were more constrain- suspended for a few seconds and ed than ever.

She was eager to hold his good opinion of her, and once she tried to explain her current actions. "I don't want to flirt any more, Stuart. I don't want to, but when I'm over at the club, or anywhere, if I looked as though I'd reformed all of a sudden—"

He nodded. "Women have sharp eyes."

She blushed, and the subject wasn't mentioned again.

He had been in love, however, for only a fortnight or two, and he had been suspicious for nearly a decade. Her behavior toward other men had certainly changed but she wasn't yet by any means austere. Her explanation was sound enough, and he was willing to concede that a sudden and complete reformation is quite as noteworthy as none at all, but he was next attacked by a devastating thought. What if she had merely struck from an unexpected quarter; what if all her actions were in accord with his ancient theories, and not with his modern faith? In other words, had she made of him the most glorified fool that the world had ever seen?

He adored her, but the new conception staggered him. It couldn't be true, and yet it was always possible. When he looked into her eyes, and say the depths of them, he hated himself for his misgivings; but when he left her, he couldn't prevent them from growing in weight and volume. The more they grew, the more he was steeped in contradition; the more he cringed to think that she had made a fool of him—the more he knew that his experience had been worth the cost. It might be comedy to Helen, it might be tragedy to himself, but even if it were he knew, that he wouldn't exchange it for all his previous complacence.

If, dating at least from the afternoon on the knoll, she had been undesigning, he couldn't accuse her without insulting her; and if, before and since then, she had been playing the game as he had once believed all women played it, he couldn't implore her without increasing the importance of her victory. And although he knew that he had no right to speak to her about it—he also knew that he should be tortured by doubt and fear until she had assured him. He could go out of her life, but he should be less miserable in cherishing a futile love than in realizing that she had made him an object of ridicule.

While he was in this mood of grim uncertainty, he was summoned to the telephone one evening, and heard her voice—but a voice, which, unless he had been in love with her, he could never have recognized as hers.

"Stuart—something's happened to Dicky—out on the road somewhere—Please get a car and come up here—and—hurry!"

He bribed a chauffeur to disregard the traffic ordinances, but even then, he found her waiting for him. All that she had to tell him was that a message had come to her from a little village, twenty-five miles out, to say that Carson's runabout was lying in a ditch, and that Carson himself had been taken out from under it. Once in the car, she sank weakly against him.

When they came to the little village, they learned that Carson had tried to make a hairpin curve at forty miles an hour. There was only one reasonable explanation for it, and that explanation proved to be correct. He had been rich enough to mock the laws of prohibition, but when he dared to tamper with the laws of physics, he had made an irretrievable mistake.

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The families on Maple Avenue held the management, among them, of the local press, and the local government, and of the local banks; so that in Carson's obituary there was nothing said about the actual reason for the accident, nor about his companion, who escaped with a few slight bruises, and was kindly assisted to disappear. Maple Avenue may have had its serious defects, but it also had a strong community spirit.

There was an interlude during which Stuart had no cause to spare his sympathies, and during this time, he was far too sympathetic to think about himself. He didn't even stop to think that Dicky Carson had been useless to himself, and all his neighbors; a poor example to his city, no credit to his ancestors, and the worst possible husband to his wife. His thought was occupied entirely by Helen, and the shock she had sustained; and he showed himself to be the staunchest of her friends and, incidentally, the only bulwark that she could find in Orleans.

There came a day, however, when he inevitably went back to nature, but he found that his misgivings hadn't been decreased. On the contrary, they were now a source of even greater torment to him. Before this, he had known that his love was futile, and the only question was that of Helen's grace; but now it was a question which could rule his life for him.

He ventured to speak to her about her own future, but she was still too supine to have made her plans.

"I hardly think I'll stay in Orleans," she said, wearily. "There's nothing here for me. I think maybe I'd better go home."

He was glad that she found no solace in Orleans; it seemer to justify a part of his belief in her. "You don't have to worry about money, anyway."

Her smile puzzled him. "Oh, no," she said. "I don't have to worry about money."

Her smile had puzzled him, and when he thought about it afterward, he was convinced that there was something behind it. He took pains to hunt up one of Carson's associates, and to suggest that Carson must have left a very handsome estate.

"Yes," said the man, nodding, "yes, he did. But Dicky always had his wits about him. Know how he left it? Helen gets the income unless she marries again. If she does, it goes to some of his cousins. That's all right. I don't know that I'd want to leave anything to support any second husband, myself."

Stuart wanted to say indignantly that in view of Carson's own failures, he had practically owed her a second husband, but he restrained himself.

She craved companionship, and he was with her constantly; she didn't want to talk, but she liked to listen, and so he talked to her about his newest project.

"Yes," he said, "when I get through here, I'm going out to Western Australia. My relatives have some mining interests there, and I'm going out as assistant engineer. It's a queer sort of place; two hundred miles from a town; and there's only three white men to about million natives. They tell me there's wonderful riding and shooting, but that's about all. One of the white men's the superintendent, he's a wild Irishman; and then there's the chief engineer—he's Scotch, and the mine boss is a Swede. All of 'em married. I only hope they'll form a league of nations."

"I'm afraid you'll be lonely, won't you?"

"Well," he said, "there certainly won't be much dancing, and I understand it takes two weeks to get to the nearest tennis court, but think of the advantages. No dinner clothes, no taxi fares, and nothing to spend your money on after you get it."

Her expression was joyless. "I hope it'll be a good thing for you, Stuart."

"Oh, financially," he said, "it isn't anything wonderful. I'll have have four thousand; and then I've a little bit of my own. But it could lead to almost anything."

He had told her these things because he wanted her to have them in her mind, and to think about them carefully. There was nothing of the flirt about her now, but his memory was active, and he didn't intend to leave Orleans until he understood both the present and the past. Even if she refused to marry him, even if it developed that she had never really cared for him, yet it would be a comfort to know that she hadn't merely dangled him—and it would be better to know the opposite than always to suspect it.

She had begun, apathetically, to make arrangements for quitting Orleans, and Stuart, who was dismayed by the prospect of Orleans without her, suddenly realized that his own work was coming to an end, and that he faced not simply an emptiy Orleans, but an empty world. He felt that it was not yet proper to speak hto her of himself, but a year or two on another continent, and he knew that he could never satisfy himself by mail. But who was he to offer the exchange of a wilderness and a few dollars a year for civilization and the income of Dicky Carson's estate?

Then abruptly, his work was finished; his sailing day was set; the calendar was clutching at his throat.

She was fond of walking, and she liked best to leave the traveled highways, and to go at random through the woods and meadows, searching for new views and vistas. Until today, Stuart had shared the preference, but after the first half hour, he was cumulatively annoyed. He had a great deal to say to her, and it couldn't comfortably be said while they were clambering over frozen fields, and crackling through the underbrush.

The country was strange to both of them, but they knew that Orleans Lake was somewhere to the West, and so they went on steadily toward the sun set. Unexpectedly, they broke out of a thicket into a little clearing; and there below them was the lake, and a view which was instantly familiar.

They stoppel short, and looked at each other.

"Nobody's moved the log," said Stuart.

As they sat down, he was visited by still a fresh anxiety. Suppose that his first judgment of her, and his last hope were equally correct. Suppose that she cared for him, but that her habits of behavior were ingrained and ineradicable? In that event, could he be happy with her after the glory of possession had once worn itself away?

"Well," he said, in reverie. "This is pretty nearly the end, Helen. I've got to go in less than two weeks. What do you suppose you'll be doing all this next year?"

"I don't know." Her tone was vacant. Stuart gazed at her. "Don't you care?"

"Sometimes I don't think I care at all."

"You mustn't feel that way about it," he said, consolingly. "I'm sure that happiness is waiting for you just around the corner."

"Sometimes the corner is too far away."

Stuart wet his lips. "I want you to know that after this, I'll judge every woman by you."

"Will you? Why?"

"Because if I'm right about you, then I've been wrong all the rest of my life—about women—and vice-versa."

"Perhaps it isn't fair to the others to judge them by me, though."

"It's fair enough," he said shortly, and nevered himself to courage. "I wonder if you'll miss me at all, Helen. Do you think you will?" There was no answer. He turned to her, as once before in the same place he had turned to her and saw that there were tears in her eyes; and at that instant, he was shorn of all the inhibitions which had surrounded him since boyhood. He didn't care the snap of a finger what she was, or what she had been; his fears and his uncertainties fled out of him; she could treat him as she liked, and she could treat all other mankind as she liked—if only she were true to his one supreme illusion. "You can be so busy," he said huskily. "I don't see how you'll have time to miss anybody."

She dashed the back of her hand across her eyes. "Money can't buy your way around the corner, Stuart."

"No, but when you're home with all your old friends to flirt with, and laugh at—"

"Don't you know yet," she faltered, "that some women are just thoughtless—and some of them are just devils—and some have had their hearts broken first, Stuart?"

He bent toward her. "Could you—could you stand living in a place where there arn't any men at all? And not much to do? And—not very much money? Not a fifth of what you've got now?"

Her eyes were studiously on the ground, and her voice was all but inaudible. "Don't you know yet that one man in a desert might make it heaven—when all of Orleans wouldn't make Orleans even—livable?"

Stuart caught his breath. "Do you—do you mean that you'd be willing to come out there—after a few months? I've told you all about it. I've told you everything. Do you mean you would do that, Helen?"

"No," she said, "I—I didn't mean exactly—that."

Stuart coiled from the tremendous blow to all visionings. "Will you please tell me then," he said, and his voice was strained and heavy, "what you did mean?"

There was a silence and then she lifted her eyes to him—eyes which were misty sweet, and fearful.

"Why don't you—take me with you?"

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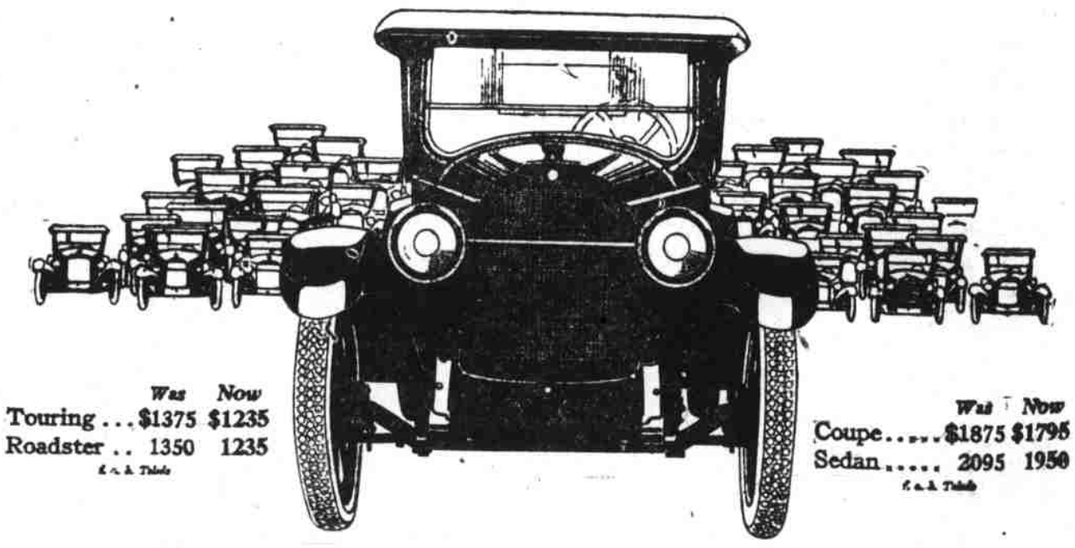

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