THE FOG OF ORLEANS

—By—
HOLWORTHY HALL

AS to girls, he had always been somewhat of a sceptic, but it was not until the summer of his eighteenth year, when a certain friend came back from boarding school, that he finally summed up his evidence and arrived at a concrete decision. This friend was a pink-and-white little butter-ball of a girl who would never inspire the opposite sex with very much sentiment, but she herself was inclined to be a heart specialist, and at school she had picked up a number of useful formulas. She was expounding these formulas to a group of breathless stay-at-homes when Stuart accidentally overheard her.

"Why," she was saying, "here is all the secret: if you want men to be crazy about you, just treat 'em like cabbages! . . . Of course they're horrid, nasty things anyway, so to please 'em you've got to be just the least tiny bit risque once in a while—only don't go too far—and then right afterward you ought to talk about something awfully intelligent, transmigration of souls or something, just to show you've got a brain. Don't ever let 'em know for a minute what you really think about 'em, even if they bore you to death; and the nicer they are, the more you ought to keep 'em dangling—act sort of bored yourself, and then awfully excited about 'em, and then sort of spiritual (you know what I mean.) But that's the main thing, keep 'em sort of mixed up, and gasping for breath and never knowing what you're going to say next—just treat 'em like cabbages—and, my dear, they'll walk right up and eat out of your hand."

She was only seventeen at the time and eventually the best she could do was to elope with a stupid mortgage broker, but her testimony had sunk to the very bottom of Stuart's mind, and for several years he never quite got it out again.

When he went away to the university he took his suspicions with him was a part of his mental luggage, but long before his graduation day they had ceased to be luggage and became solid furniture. He was good looking, slow smiling and sweet-tempered, so that most women found him attractive, but as he watched them and studied them, and dissected their motives, he was freshly convinced that he had heard the truth when he was very young. The guile of women was as clear as window-glass; and all their frankness, or their shyness, their worship or their wit, were merely different models of the same feminine weapon, forged for the same purpose. To other men, they might indeed be dangerous, but to Stuart the censor they were merely pretty and diverting.

To be sure, he had his moments in rose arbor or Gloucester hammock, but his mature judgment was ever governing his youthful emotions, and when he kissed a professor's daughter in the moonlight, he hoped that she observed the cynical aloofness with which he did it. He liked the frosting well enough, but he was positive that the cake was indigestible.

Even at twenty-four, he had not yet been in love, so that he fancied himself immune to it, and in discussing matrimony, he had learned to say some clever things which were not necessarily accurate. Love, he said, as described to him, was like a runaway team of wild horses; and marriage was the blind guaranty, made by two passengers who had never seen the road before, that there were no ditches or turnings anywhere, and no traffic in the opposite direction. As for himself, he believed that love—if any—should arise out of pure reason; and so far he had never met a girl who was Arcadian enough to appeal to him. He doubted that such a girl could now exist, and his doubt was founded upon hi sown experience.

But over confidence is a sin which, given the opportunity, would destroy the angels, and Stuart was an ordinary mortal. At twenty-seven, after all his suspicion of the innocent, and all his warliness against the genuine, he lost his theories to a girl who, he knew in advance, was neither genuine nor innocent. He knew this both as a standard proposition, and from specific data, for when she was first pointed out to him across the room, he was told that she is what is called a "mankiller"—a crusher of hearts for the sheer pleasure of accomplishment; he was on his guard, but he relied too much on his logic, and in the last extremity it overthrew him.

He met her at a country club dance in a small Eastern city. He was a stranger to the city, and he had spent a busy week of loneliness, and he hoped that tonight would put an end to it. The men, however, had shown themselves a trifle supercilious and the women had been too well supplied with partners, so that Stuart's evening had merely burdened him with disappointment until he was presented to the girl who had last come in. Then he was so interested in her type that he didn't even catch her name.

She was a demure little girl in a black lace frock; she had slumbering eyes, an exquisitely soft voice and an air of great intelligence, and he knew that the combination is supposed to be deadly. Furthermore, she received him as though the acquaintance were a distinguished honor to herself, and although he recognized the nonsense of it, yet he was pleased to emerge from the background. Finally, he say that in her unobtrusive manner she was making a keen appraisal of him, and this renewed his spirit and washed out all his previous dissatisfactions.

He was always absorbed by the beginnings of such a relationship, and his mood was that of a crafty old field marshal who reads, at his leisure, the campaigns of all the generals he has defeated. He perceived, with complacence, that she took him at once for a strategist; and after that, he was amused by her economy of ammunition. She knew already why he was in town; she knew that his business would detain him there for several months; she could afford a slow, detailed reconnaissance. When he left her, he asked for another dance, later in the evening, and the expression of her eyes, and the tone of her voice, sent him away with some exhilaration, for he liked nothing better than to hear the weapons rattle against his armor, and to know that they were being turned back, blunt.

For the next half-hour he got himself bored by a dressy dowager in plum velvet; he had a waltz with a debutante who chilled him, and presently, to throttle time until his next appointment, he wandered off into the smoking room, which he found occupied only by a youngish man he dimly remembered. The man regarded him casually, but said nothing; Stuart, with an inward comment upon the local style for hospitality, offered his cigarette case. To his astonishment, the other man, after a bland inspection of its contents, shook his head.

"No thanks," he said. "I've stuck to my own kind for eighteen years now; I'd better not change." He sat down leisurely, and leisurely tapped a bell.

"Eighteen years?" repeated Stuart. "Why, you must have begun in your cradle?"

The other man gave him an altitudious smile. "You must take me for a cub like yourself. How old do you think I am?"

Stuart gauged him carefully. "Twenty-seven or eight."

The other man preserved his smile, and also shook his head. "No," he said, "I'm thirty-six." And he said it with a sort of regal nonchalance.

Stuart lifted his eyebrows. "Well, there's only one thing that occurs to me; what kind of cold cream do you use?"

"It isn't cold cream," said the other man, with a shrug of disparagement, "it's the way we live up here. Hadn't you noticed it?"

"Why, as a matter of fact, I've been here only a week, and I've been too busy to notice much of anything." There was a mental reservation; he had noticed a degree of bumptiousness which had begun to puzzle him, because he could see no possible excuse for it.

"That's just the point, none of the rest of us are busy." By this time his own cigarettes had arrived, and through their incense he relaxed a little. "We stay in Orleans six months of the year; we go South; we go abroad; we get some entertaining and play golf; we don't have anything to worry about—and we all stay young."

"It sounds very charming—for a man with an income."

"Oh, of course." The other man became regally confidential. "Do you take the crowd that's here tonight; in practically every case the money's been in the family for three generations. No one here has made money, one couldn't do that and live as we do—there wouldn't be a perspective. Not that Orleans is a colony of millionaires, but we've got our decent incomes and we know how to spend them."

Stuart was awed by the very simplicity of the man. "They tell me the town isn't growing very fast."

"My dear fellow, we don't want it to grow. We don't want any more manufacturing here; we don't want any more people here; we try to keep them away. As things are now, we practically own the town among ourselves. Say, thirty families."

Stuart couldn't resist the temptation to egg him on. "Just a compact little group?"

"Exactly. There's only one street to live on—Maple Avenue—and we all live on it. There's only one club to belong to, and we're in it now—of course, there are outsiders in it, too, but we simply don't consider them. We simply don't pay any attention to them. We live our own life and we don't like intruders, and we care very little about what the rest of the world is doing. For instance—" He smiled indulgently. "I've never in my life read a Sunday newspaper, or eaten an ice cream cone or been to a motion picture theatre. And that isn't just myself—that's Orleans."

Stuart was gazing at him appalled, and almost convulsed. "Good heavens, man," he said slowly, "you come and spend a week-end with me, and I'll give you the time of your life."

The other man missed it. "Thanks, awfully . . . Yes, I've been pretty nearly everywhere, and I never saw a place exactly like it—or anything like it. It's quite perfect. And, as I say, we all know how to live."

The smug littleness of the man, and his colossal snobbery, reminded Stuart of nothing so much as a dogmatic freshman, who shouts to the world that his own college is the only fit refuge for a gentleman, his own class the paragon of all classes, and his own fraternity the cream of the whole. The freshman, however, has at least two virtues: he is enthusiastic, and he expects to fight for his contentions; but the man from Orleans, who had built a pedestal for himself, and clambered up to sit on it plainly held himself too precious to be challenged. He had spoken; and the rest of the world should properly be hushed.

Stuart himself was hushed; he was tongued tied. He cleared his throat, and tried to say something, but he could think of nothing appropriate which wasn't also discourteous and he had to remember that he was a guest of the club. He should have liked to pump the man indefinitely, but the hour of his appointment was too near at hand so that, warmed by equal portions of contempt and humor, he went back to the assembly room.

His late companion has aroused his curiosity, and as he looked about him he wondered ff the high society of Orleans should actually be graded according to the sample. His survey impressed him for he sorted out a dozen men who gave off the same murky atmosphere; he speculated whether they, too, were in the third generation of money, and had yet to taste an ice cream cone. He caught a transient smile from the little girl in the black lace frock, and of a sudden, he told himself that hers was the only truly intelligent face in the entire gathering. Also, she was the only person, man or woman, to whom it seemed to make a farthing's worth of difference whether Stuart himself were among those present, or not. He was sure, now, that she didn't belong to the inner circle. She couldn't.

"I had an interesting little session a little while ago," he said to her, during the final encore, with that rather British-looking man over by the fireplace. He was telling me about the philosophy of life up here."

She glanced up from under her heavy lashes. "Did he think there is any?"

"First," he said, "tell me if you're a native of this place?"

"No, indeed. I was born in Philadelphia. But did he think there's any philosophy of life at all in this funny little town?"

"Well," said Stuart, emboldened, "even a chicken coop has architecture; can't Orleans have philosophy?"

She gave him another of those instantaneous glances. "I'm not insulted yet. Go on. What made it so interesting?"

"Why, his description of the way they live. Of course, there's no accounting for tastes, but personally I should think it would be unbearable."

"Most of them don't seem to find it so. They like it."

"Do you live here yourself?"

"Yes, but I'm not blind."

He would have taken his oath that she would share his point of view. "What's your real opinion of it, then?"

"Why," she said naively, "you wouldn't expect me to make a confession like that until I know you better, would you? . . . What's your opinion?"

Her intonation deceived him, so that he blurted out his thought, exactly as it came to him. "Well, I havent seen a great deal of it yet, but if my friend over there's a fair example, there's just one thing I can say about him."

"Tell me."

Stuart borrowed a phrase from a married cousin. "He must have missed his 10 o'clock feeding."

The music stopped and as he released her, she stood back a little, and laughed straight up into his eyes. "I think I'll let you come to tea tomorrow afternoon and grovel for me," she said. "You see that gentleman happens to be my husband."

As he walked slowly down Maple Avenue, with the abodes of the blessed on either side of him, he was peculiarly crestfallen. The field marshal had suffered himself to be led on, and taken from ambush and it hurt his professional dignity. He had got himself into a weak position, and he knew that after he had apologized it would be still weaker; she had him exactly where she wanted him, humbled by his own rashness, because he had taken too much for granted. Furthermore, he hadn't yet recovered from his bewilderment that a girl like this could ever have married a man like that. To Stuart, he seemed to be a permanent apology for himself, and he marveled what on earth she could have seen in him.

He had imagined that he should find her alone in a quite room with cleverly arranged lighting, and he was prepared to go into action on these grounds. But he hadn't yet given her sufficient credit: she had asked several others to come to tea, and for an hour she kept Stuart hovering about her, but never with a suitable occasion to present himself for sacrifice.

At a venture, he said to her in an undertone: "There doesn't seem to be any liklihood of talking to you today; perhaps I'd better run along."

She answered without looking at him. "Why, I naturally supposed you'd wait until after the rest have gone."

The tactics were familiar to him and he understood them perfectly. He knew that intimacy is doubled by the contrast between the chatter of many people and the dialogue of two. But he had slurred her husband and until he had been forgiven, he could only dangle as she chose to make him he owed her an apology, and it was her set privilege to set the time and place for it.

The last of the guests was hardly across the theshold when he planted himself before her, and made a very downright statement. He didn't purpose to let the situation get a grasp on him, nor to provide her with any additional advantage; he had no excuses to give her, nothing but a flat acknowledgment of the facts.

She took it very sweetly and made him set down beside her, and say it all over again; and when he had finished, she became reflective and very wistful.

"I wanted so much to like you," she said. "I heard about you from people in town, and then last night you were just as nice to me as you could be. And then you're different from the people I see all the rest of the time."

"I'd gathered," he said, "that different people are exactly the ones Orleans doesn't want."

She made a pretty gesture of dissent. "But you see, I'm not really one of them. I'm only adopted. Their families have lived here for years and years, and had their own money, and played around, and they're quite satisfied to go along in what may look to you like a narrow sort of path. It is pleasant; it's awfully pleasant; but just the same I could be glad of a little change, couldn't I?"

He congratulated himself that he wasn't a bit susceptible. "Your home was in Philadelphia?"

She told him her father's name and title, and Stuart was again amazed, for her father had been a doctor of national reputation. He wondered how she could ever have quitted, voluntarily, a home of education and purpose, to cast her lot among the Sybarittes. He remembered then what she had said to him last night about confessions.

"Maybe it's because I was brought up in a different way," he said slowly, "but the whole tone of Orleans doesn't seem healthy. This morning I found out something else that baffled me. Most your friends do actually pretend to do something useful, don't they? I judged from what your husband said that they didn't do anything at all."

She smiled faintly. "It is an odd thing; they all have money, and yet there's a kind of community spirit and an idea that a man ought to have some definite sort of place in the community. So one of them owns the Courier; he never goes anywhere near the office, but he just likes to own a newspaper. And one or two are lawyers; their fathers made them go to law school, but all it means now is a place to get their mail and use up some grand stationery. Oh, they're officers in banks, and they're in the City Council, and all that sort of thing, but—" She shook her head. "They don't take it seriously. It's just a funny little quirk; and it lets them run the town to suit them...lves. Really they live on their incomes."

"It strikes me," said Stuart, "that if I were going to loaf for a living, I'd be consistent about it, anyway. To loaf, and then put up a sort of false front, like a country grocery store, makes it look all the worse." He rose thoughtfully. "Of course, this isn't making myself any too popular with you. And I suppose because I'm working here—" He paused, and began to grin. "Still, I've got fifteen hundred a year from my grandfather's estate, and we've got a farm that's been in the family for seven generations. Won't that let me in as a summer member?"

She had also risen, and now she held out her hand to him. "We're going to be friends, aren't we?"

"I'm a lot better friend outdoors and in sight than I am in the house. What do you do for exercise?"

"There's everything here," she said. "Golf links and riding and swimming, there's sailing and motor boating on lake Ellen—you need not be lonely." Then she laughed at him. "But sometimes, even in this paradise of Orleans, it rains. And then—"

"Tea," she said, dropping her eyes—"is always served at five o'clock."

He was strengthened in his judgment of her, where yet, but when he went away, he found that he could see a little pity into his disapproval. She was certainly intelligent, and she had come from the rarefied air of Philadelphia into the dense fog of Orleans where a lawyer's shingle didn't mean a lawyer in the office, and where people virtually boasted that a forehead didn't mean a brain to rule. He hadn't intended to be sorry for her, but he suspected now that Orleans was a trial to her, and he was sorry for whoever had married her husband.

Within a week he had repeatedly been told to beware of her, and he had also been told by the dressy dowager in plum velvet that gossip had him ballooned as another victim. At the warning he was frankly derisive, but at the rumor he was slightly indignant, and he informed the dowager that his friendships were based upon the teachings of neither Plato nor of Pluto, he was fully competent to take care of himself. As a matter of fact, although his shell had long been hardened, nature and time were quietly at work within, and to the present situation he had already contributed both penitence and pity, which were two of the least shopworn of his emotions. He knew what he knew about women, but he recognized several varying degrees of guilt, and he thought that Helen Carson was too harshly judged by her loving friends. To be sure he couldn't approve of her behavior either to himself or to other men, but when he had known her for perhaps a month he decided that her behavior was chiefly to her boredom, and that her boredom was was due to her intellectual superiority over the rest of Orleans. When once he began to find excuses for her, his grip on himself was gone, and the next thing he knew the wild horses of illusion had run away with him.

They had set out together one afternoon to walk to a wooded knoll which overlooked the lake, and from the start he was unusually preoccupied. She badgered him a little, and attempted gay finesses, but he responded with such utter lack of animation that at last she joined him in the silence. They came to the knoll, where a carpet of moss was under foot, and the sunshine was sifted down to them through the beech-trees, and there they sat on a convenient log, and gazed out over the lake, to the green hills and the browner valleys just beyond.

Very gently Stuart put out his hand and covered hers. It wasn't the first nor the hundredth time that a man had held her hand, but it gave her a new and a puzzling sensation. She turned her head to look at him, and as soon as she saw his eyes, she knew exactly what had happened.

When she turned her head, she had been smiling; but on the instant, her smile flickered out. Triumph, hard-won and long-delayed, had finally come to her, but the consciousness of triumph merely touched her in its passing, and passed on. She had known men who passionately volunteered to die for her—and went away with a dinner call unpaid; she had known older men who, when they thought they loved her, swore vigorously about it, and she had known younger men who wept, and she had known a plenty who were almost too businesslike to be interesting.

But here was a man who had first looked through and through her and hadn't the slightest hallucination about her; he was young in years, but he was old in experience, when he had walked with her, and golfed fith her and danced with her, he had always given her the same impression: that he was very glad to be a playmate, but that she would waste her time if she expected any other status. Now, in his eyes, she saw what frightened her. Men, including Dicky Carson, had offered her everything but tenderness.

When men had sworn or cried or volunteered to die for her, she had always known how to conduct herself; but when Stuart sat there, looking gravely at her, and touching her hand with such repression, she was suddenly incompetent. The color crept up into her cheeks and stayed there; she was helpless, and at the same time she was exalted, and still frightened. She wished he would speak, and yet she dreaded what he might say; she dreaded that he would spoil the moment. She wanted to avoid his gaze, and yet it held her, as though, if she lost it she would have lost it forever.

Then quite without forethought, she disengaged her hand. "You mustn't do that—now," she said, and her voice was low, and a trifle unsteady.

Stuart looked back at the lake. "I wish," he said, subdued, "I wish the train that brought me here had wrecked on the way."

"Don't say that—please!"

He nodded to confirm it. "Do you know what I've done?"

"Yes," she said, softly, "yes, I know."

He tried to laugh it off, but the sound was hollow and unnatural. "The one thing in all the world I never thought I'd get mixed up in—the infernal triangle. Well, I can't help it. It's done. I don't know how it happened, but it's done. And what am I going to do about it? I've got to stay in Orleans, and if I'm here I've got to see you, and if I see you, and if I see you I've got to tell you—and that's impossible."

The girl shivered a little. "What makes it impossible, Stuart?"

"Why, because you couldn't let me—any more than you could let me touch you—after you knew. Before that—" He shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't the same."

Her breath was coming a little faster. "Do you really, honestly, think I've as much conscience as that?"

"Why, I know you havn't." He hadn't yet looked at her again. "I used to think you were just like all the other women, and then after you told me what sort of people you had for friends before you came here, and what sort of home you lived in. I knew what Orleans must have done to you. Just what it would do to anybody half as sensitive. Made you laugh first, and then irritated, and then hysterical, and then desperate. Why wouldn't it? And so you've been stumbling through the fog, ready to reach out and grab anything that came along. But that isn't you. I don't believe there's a soul in Orleans who knows you—except myself." His voice dropped almost out of hearing. "I can't understand it! I can't understand it!"

Her glance was both defensive and appealing. "Stuart if you were only seventeen or eighteen, and hadn't had much fun, and came up here and saw everybody having so much money and such a jolly time—"

"Ten years it it would have dazzled me just as it did you."

The girl bit her lip. "I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have said anything! Please forget it—quickly. Won't you?"

"But you didn't need to say it at all. Don't you suppose I knew that was the only way it could

—(Continued on Page Seven)

She Laughed Straight Up Into His Eyes and Said, "You See, That Gentleman Happens to be My Husband."

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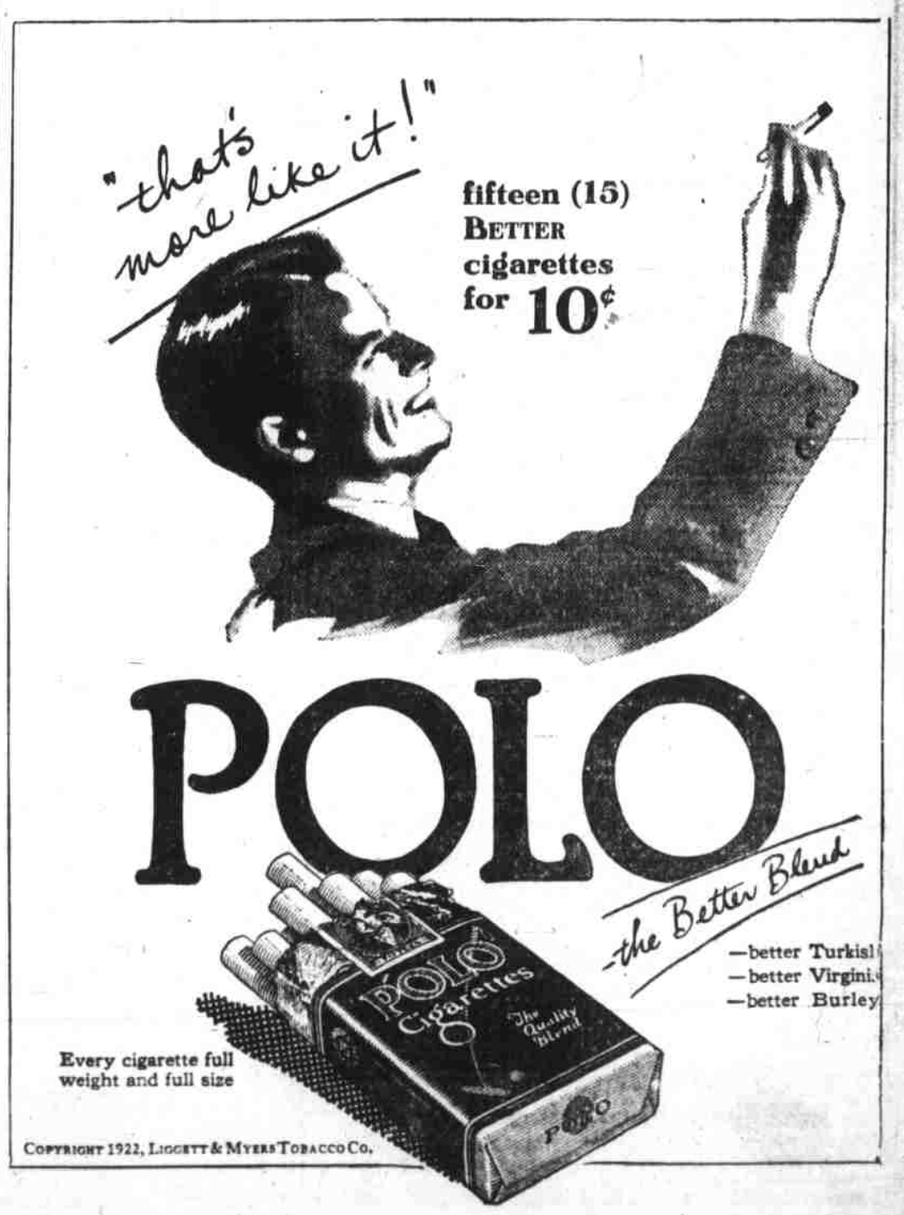
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