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3

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Orchid

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THIS HAS HAPPENED

Ashtoreth and Hollis Hart are newlyweds, honeymooning in Paris. Ashtoreth is rarely beautiful. And Hollis is extraordinarily rich. But happiness seems, somehow, to have eluded them. Before their marriage, Ashtoreth was a stenographer in her husband's employ. She is years and years younger than he, and he idolizes her youth and beauty.

In Paris she meets an old sweetheart, Monty English, over there selling radios. Monty is young, and Monty is handsome. But he was distressingly poor, and Ashtoreth couldn't see him at all.

He treats her rather coldly, but it is apparent that he is still in love with her. Hollis devotes himself to tennis and the collection of antiquities. Both pursuits bore Ashtoreth to tears. When he is not at the courts, or browsing about the old shops, he makes tender and ardent love to his little bride. And that also bores her. Annoys might be a better word. She has discovered that his two front teeth come out on little swivels, and that spells the end of romance.

On their last day in Paris, she has luncheon with Monty. And meets him, by accident, at Maxim's, at dinner time, where they dine together. Hollis has disappeared. Ashtoreth is not worried, but annoyed. She begs Monty to wait with her until her husband returns, but he declines rather curtly. She leaves him angrily, at the Ritz, where she is staying. And Monty returns to his pension on the Left Bank.

At midnight he is roused by the sound of small stones being thrown against the window. It is Ashtoreth. He takes her to his room, and presently there is a great noise at the door. Her husband has arrived.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XLVII

The Victory was three days out, and Ashtoreth had not left her stateroom. Most of the time she cried.

Hollis, from mid-day until midnight, devoted himself to consistent drinking. After the bar closed, he roamed about the deck.

Liquor had little effect on him, except that his eyes became blazingly blue. And his speech a trifle studied.

He was very tender and courteous with Ashtoreth. From the gay shops abroad, he sent her trifling gifts. She knew that he went himself to interview the chief steward about her trays. Mogg had been left in Paris, but to replace her, he engaged a stewardess to serve as lady's maid.

During the day he called to inquire distantly for his wife's health and to express the polite hope that she would venture soon on deck. At night she could hear him tossing in bed, in the adjoining cabin. The second morning she discovered that he was taking veronal.

It was then she scribbled a hysterical little note, and pinned it to his pillow:

"Dearest Holly:

"I had rather you would beat me than be so kind. Your courtesy is more cruel than physical torment. I swear everything was all right with Monty. You said yourself that you believed us. Then what is the matter, darling? I shall go crazy before we reach the States, unless you let me talk to you.

"Tonight I am going to send the stewardess away. Please come to me.

"Your heartbroken Orchid."

* * *

It was dinner time before he returned to his cabin, and found the letter. Ashtoreth heard him when he opened the door from the corridor. The stewardess at the time was bustling about the room, pretending to be very busy and indispensible.

"That will be all, thank you, Mrs. Saunders." She dismissed the woman shortly. "Please don't come back until I send for you."

Discreetly Mrs. Saunders withdrew. She had also heard sounds in the cabin beyond.

Ashtoreth sprang from the couch to her feet. She was wearing a tan jersey. Smart, but hardly seductive. It was over her head in one swift motion. She dashed cold water against her smarting eyes, and dusted her flushed face with powder. Rather heavily, because it was well to look pale and pathetic. She sprayed her hair with Narcissus. And touched her eyelids with a blue paste, that made her eyes seem large and sad. Then she slipped into a green negligee for which Hollis had expressed a particular preference.

When he knocked, she was lying face down on the bed, with her knees drawn up, and her humming bird mules peeking from the hem of her sea-foam robe. Hollis had told her that she slept adorably, like a little child. As a matter of fact, she slept on her back, with her mouth open. That is she did when the lights were out. It was just as well, of course, to snuggle prettily upon occasions.

"Come in," she called in a piteous, smothered way, her face in the pillows.

He opened the door that joined their cabins, and stood looking at her. She jumped, as though she were startled at the intrusion, and, sitting up, put her hand to her throat in a pretty, fluttering fashion.

He spoke gravely.

"Ashtoreth, you shouldn't have left a note like this lying about. The bedroom steward might have seen it, you know. It was most indiscreet, child."

She passed her hand wearily across her forehead.

"But, Holly, I had to talk to you!"

"Why?" he asked, standing there, and tearing her note into small pieces.

"The way you're treating me!" she cried. "And you ask why! Oh, Holly, what can I say to make you believe me!"

* * *

"But I do believe you, Ashtoreth."

"Then why—why are you treating me this way?"

She threw out her hands appealingly. Once they had reminded him of calla lilies. Mrs. Saunders had manicured them, and Ashtoreth had recently applied Violette's marvelous creme, to keep them soft and fair.

"You told Monty everything was all right. You said that you knew we . . . we . . ."

"Why, surely, my dear." He interrupted gently. "There is no doubt in my mind about you and Mr. English."

"Then why," she cried again, fluttering her pale hands entreatingly—"why are you acting like this?"

Hollis leaned against the door, and looked very tired, and a little old.

"What is the use," he asked reasonably, "of going over this again and again? You're overwrought, Ashtoreth. You . . ."

"You don't call me 'Orchid' any more!" she cried, and her voice broke on a wild little sob.

"No," he said. His voice was very gentle.

"That's because you think I'm n-n-not good," she sobbed.

"Please," he beseought wearily.

She dried her eyes, and controlled her voice.

"I won't make a scene, Holly," she promised. "I won't act like Sadie Morton when she was trying to get you back. . ."

"You couldn't," he interrupted gallantly.

She continued dispassionately. "Oh I've no doubt you think that I'm just as common and cheap as Sadie. You are sure now that you married beneath you. You don't believe any more that I am a thoroughbred."

* * *

She raised her hand to silence him when he tried to speak. "Oh, I know, Holly, . . . You've had your doubts for a long time. But, when you held me in your arms, you could forget them. . . . I hadn't background. I hadn't culture, I hadn't even principle.

"But I could make you forget all that, my lover . . . couldn't I? You held me in your arms, and you didn't care if I hadn't a fine thing about me.

"You believed me to be innocent. And you thought that no man before had tasted such kisses from my lips. You talked about my 'adorable untouchedness.' And you called me 'Orchid,' because you said I was chaste, and cool, and remote.

"You bought me gifts, and dressed me in beautiful clothes. And believed that you were creating a setting for a jewel to gleam for you alone.

"Then you found me in another man's room . . ."

"Ashtoreth!" he stopped her harshly.

"But you did!" she cried. "We won't mince words, Holly. You are not used to plain talking. And I'm not either. But let us understand each other now. . . . You found me there. And that, my poor dear, was the end of a dream. The end of the beautiful myth you had builded all around me. You couldn't talk any more about my 'adorable untouchedness.' You couldn't believe me chaste, and cool and remote . . ."

"Ashtoreth, I won't have you talking this way!"

He came into the room, and stood near her. But he did not touch her, nor capture her hand when she laid it on his arm.

"You know," she said, "that Monty and I told you the truth. You know that I was worried when you did not come back, and that I went to him because he was the only friend I had. You believe that, as I believe you spent the day and half the night negotiating for the purchase of a French plane for me.

"If I were a suspicious woman, I might not credit that story. But suspicion is the jealousy of dull, mean minds. I know that you went to Monty, not because you suspected my virtue, but because he was my friend and might have word of me. You were frightened when you returned, and found me gone, and it was natural that you should go to him.

"We have not lied to each other, Hollis. And you must believe me when I swear that I have not been unfaithful to you."

* * *

He shuddered. "No, No," he said, "I believe you, Ashtoreth."

"Then," she said, "it is because I have shattered an ideal that you have closed your heart to me. . . . You were dreaming, my dear, a beautiful dream. And you cannot forgive me, because I woke you."

She looked at him through her tears, and felt a great pity for his sorrow.

"Poor darling," she murmured. "I am so sorry. So sorry."

He raised his head and looked at her searchingly.

"You say you have told me the truth, Ashtoreth. Have you always told me the truth?"

"In the big things," she told him. "I'm a dreadful liar about little things, Holly. You must have noticed that. I pretend such a lot . . ."

He shook his head impatiently.

"I didn't mean that. Not pretenses, nor evasions. From the beginning, I told myself you were a darling fraud. I loved you for it. No, I didn't mean that."

"What then?" she asked him.

He was silent for a minute, staring beyond her, at the row of crystal bottles on her dressing table. Staring with unseeing eyes. His shoulders jerked convulsively.

"You told me," he said dully measuring his words, "that you loved me. Was that true, Ashtoreth?"

She buried her face in her hands, and he saw that she was trembling violently. He stood up then, and took her in his arms, and felt her body throbbing as if it held sobs buried alive.

"Oh, Holly, Holly!" She was crying softly. "I don't know, dear. Truly, I don't know. It was all so wonderful, I thought it was love. I wanted to marry you more than any man in the world. You . . . you thrilled me. And you made me happy. And . . . it was all so exciting. Oh, Holly—how could I know, my darling?"

He held her from him, and lifted her chin between his fingers. Seeking her eyes with his.

"Then—whatever it was before—you do not love me now, Ashtoreth?"

She clung to him, sobbing.

"You said you would not lie to me, Ashtoreth."

"I—I'm not lying."

"Tell me, Ashtoreth, I am waiting to hear."

"But, Holly . . ."

"Tell me, Ashtoreth."

"I—I—I'm trying to. . . . Oh, Holly, there are so many kinds of love. How is a woman to know?"

* * *

He hushed her explanations with his lips—kissing her gently. When she continued to cry, he carried her to bed, and wrung a cold towel for her eyes.

"It is all right," he told her gently. "Quite all right, my dear. You mustn't feel bad. It isn't your fault. A woman cannot love a man solely because he desires it. It is not enough that you should love me, because I learned to worship you."

She brought his hand to her lips, and kissed it gratefully.

"There isn't anyone else," she whispered.

"No? Not Monty?"

"Monty?" she cried. "Oh, he simply despises me, Holly! He sent the most insulting letter to the boat. . . . I'll tell you about it some time. . . . Listen, dear. . . . Wait for me in your room. I'll bathe my eyes . . . and he in soon."

He shook his head. "No, Ashtoreth."

"But, Holly, you don't mean . . ." She wound her arms about his neck.

He drew her clinging arms away, and kissed her forehead. . . . In a moment he had gone. . . . And the door between their rooms was closed.

(To Be Concluded)

Tragedy in the next chapter, and "Orchid" comes to a dramatic conclusion.

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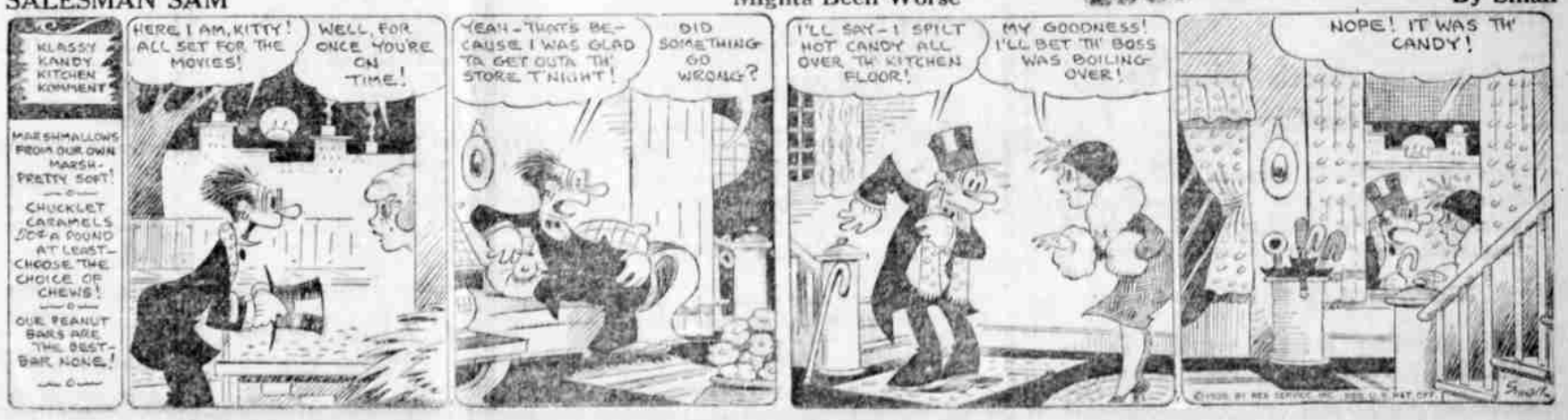
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