

# The Unknown Quantity

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ation I tried to draw my face away from what I saw in the now thoroughly animal light of that pair of shining eyes. But before I could do more than gasp I felt the burning passion mad lips crushing against my cheek and seeking my own. Then I screamed.

At the sound of my scream I sensed a sudden change in the atmosphere of the closed speeding car



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even before the gruff voice of one of the men on the front seat cut my ear with an evil oath.

"Keep her damned mouth shut, can't you!" he hissed. "We are just on the edge of town, somebody will be getting wise to us if they hear her."

Stark terror gripped me and I started to scream again. But the cry was cut off before it reached my lips. The brown eyes that a moment before had shone into my face with blinding passion became steely hard in the light inside the car as one steel fingered hand closed chokingly over my mouth. "Shut up, you little fool!" The music had died out of his voice and only sharp cruelty remained. Then as the big car sped on and on into the darkness of a country road his grasp relaxed. He took his hand away and laughed lightly.

"No need of being frightened, little one," he chided. "I'm not going to hurt you—if you'll be a good girl and do as I say." The last part of his sentence held a menace and a promise. It terrified me.

After what seemed to me years of speeding in silence through the darkness the car drew up before a dim huddle of shadowy buildings. I was so terror stricken that I could not move when with a sinister finality my companions climbed out and stretched themselves. Why had they brought me to this forlorn place?

"Come on, baby, climb out." There was nothing soothing and reassuring in the intimacy of the voice of the suave acquaintance of the afternoon, now. Oh, what would I not have given to be safe at home with mother. And Billy—why hadn't Billy followed me to the corner. If he had—if he had been in time to see me get in that car maybe there might have been some chance. But no—there was none. No one would ever think of my going off with a strange man. No one ever knew I had spoken to him. Whatever he might choose to do with me there would be no way for anyone to trace me—or him.

I was frozen with fear. "Hey, come on pile out of there, you," it was the gruff voiced driver who spoke. But I could not move; my limbs seemed paralyzed.

Rather impatiently Walter stepped into the car and lifted me in his arms, not over tenderly and yet with a suggestion of suggestive caress that sent a shudder of fear through me again.

Once on the ground I looked around me. What was my surprise to find myself in the River Flats. I had been driven miles around the river road back to the Flats outside of Oakdale. Why?

I was soon to learn. Half carrying, half dragging me, Walter Regis led me down across the sandy weed-grown debris-strewn path to the water's edge. It was not until I was almost upon it that I saw the outlines of a big house-boat out on the water. I was led across the long plank that led to the small deck and one of the men fumbled at the lock of the door a moment. The door swung open and to my surprise a well lighted interior was exposed to view. A single glance at the dark shades securely nailed across the windows told why no gleam of all this light had escaped until the door was opened. At the sight before my eyes I quailed.

The interior seemed full of men. Not a single woman was in sight but that dreadful thing in the corner there must be a woman.

Across the end of the long narrow room was a fully furnished bar. Sudden with drink, two men lolled on either side of the half nude woman who leered at me as I entered.

She laughed, a horrid yellow toothed laugh. "Hello, dearie," she croaked. "Come down to help me entertain, hey. It's hard to get 'em young and pretty like you these days. The girls all struck on me yistiddy. Good work, Walter," she turned to

my suavely smiling companion of the afternoon walk and romantic dreams. "We'll soon git her broke in. After tonight we'll hev to ship her down river till any excitement up in the town blows over. In a month or so she'll git used to things and anyhow by that time she won't wanta go back"—She laughed coarsely at her own joke. The men joined her.

My blood turned to water in my veins as a bloated faced man lurched toward me, his bloodshot eyes staring evilly, his clawlike hand reached out toward me. But Walter Regis stepped toward me snarling as he did so—"Hands off, Beachy, she's just for the rest of you to look at now." He pulled me over toward him. At this a tense silence fell over the room. Something dangerous seemed to stir in the bestial atmosphere. The driver of the car spoke. His voice was hoarse with pent anger.

"What the hell do you think you are—we helped get her here and—" He got no farther. With a low oath Walter Regis whipped out an automatic and levelled it at the speaker. "I picked her up, didn't I?" His voice was cruel like his sleek-skin face now. I shuddered in despair. And then there came to me a sudden memory of my mother's face and it seemed to me that the room and its evil aura faded out. I seemed to stand alone on some misty height and from a great distance there came a faint clear sound as of my mother's voice—"PRAY, HELEN, PRAY"—the words were insistent and clear.

I do not know to this day what was happening around me at that instant. It was as if I was actually and physically lifted out of the hell around me for that breath of time. It never occurred to me to doubt or hesitate. Except for this one time I had never willfully disobeyed my mother's command. I saw her clearly now.

I dropped upon my knees there in that filth and among the drunken scum of the world I raised my voice in supplication. I did not see the people but I felt some quality of awe and stillness as my voice arose, in the first words that occurred to me—"O Saving Victim, opening wide the gate of heaven to man below. Our foes press on from every side, Thine aid supply, thy strength bestow."

As the last word fell from my lips there broke across the silence the shrill shriek of racing winds. There was a sudden rushing and struggling and cursing, as crackling lightning seemed to break about me. I heard the police siren and faintly.

I awoke in my mother's arms. The blessed gleam of sunlight flowed in through the windows of our safely sheltered little home. Standing near the foot of the bed my eyes caught the tear-filmed gaze of the round yellow face of Maizie Burrell and beside it looking almost ludicrously funny in his blinking efforts to keep the tears back stood Billy, brown and homely but, oh, so blessedly familiar and honest in his abiding love for me.

It was days later that I learned the details. Billy HAD followed me to the corner. Why, he did not know other than the fact that his love for me led him to act instinctively. He had not believed it was I whom he saw enter the car until my mother came to his home, frantic with fear for me. It was as he came back with her that they saw Maizie on her porch. Why she

should have felt wakeful and anxious, Maizie did not know, but she could not rest so she had come to the porch. And the memory of my approach across the park through the hiding trees had disturbed her mind. The stranger had seemed to her evil—"a city fellow" as Maizie called him. So the unknown quantity had placed her where she could give the needed clue.

Then the greatest mystery of all came as the police, searching about the flats, saw nothing but darkness and were turning to depart and seek elsewhere for me, who had then been reported lost, when a sudden wind sprang up and in the blast they saw the door of what they thought was a dark, deserted houseboat, swung open and out of it poured a cursing, struggling, fear-ridden drunken group of men.

So the Unknown Quantity led them to me even as my mother knelt in prayer blocks away in our home and bade me from her heart wherever I might be in whatever danger to "Pray, Helen, Pray." And so now that I am happily and safely married to Billy and am daily blessed in his love and the love of our three wee ones, I trust that Unknown Quantity implicitly in all the affairs and problems of my life and—theirs and—IT NEVER YET HAS FAILED ME.

(The End)

## The Holden Robbery

Continued From Page Nine

well as Timothy, the cashier.

"But how about the foot and heel prints on the gravel roof?"

"That's simple, too," returned Darrington. "The penthouse door is open during the day. It was therefore a simple matter for Speed to go up there sometime during the day and make those marks. It could be done in four or five minutes."

"One-Day" Darrington  
Just then the telephone bell rang. The call was for Sanders from the chief of police. After a minute's conversation Sanders hung up and turning to Darrington with an admiring glance said: "By George, Darrington, you're a brick. The chief tells me they've just searched Speed's cellar and found the box of furs, and what should they find in his bedroom, but a small powerful pair of opera glasses?"

"Well," Darrington added quietly. "I guess that makes everything click, so I'll be getting on my way."

"No wonder they call you 'One-Day Darrington,'" the express manager exclaimed. "Is this business a pastime with you?"

"No," said Darrington. "at least not this time. How about that check, Sanders?"

THE END

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