

The Innocent Cheat

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CHAPTER XLV

Helen was found sitting beside the lake, chilled but indifferent to her discomfort. In the darkness she seemed a part of the rustic bench on which she sat, so still was she.

Ashe spoke to her in a low-pitched voice, impressed with a sense of tragic unhappiness in her attitude.

She answered quietly that she would not have dinner—they need not keep it waiting for her. "But I might suggest, miss, that the air is growing chilly?" Ashe said unsmilingly.

Helen stirred and looked about her, noticing for the first time that daylight had completely gone and a mist was hanging over the shore of the lake. She shivered slightly, got up and walked up the path to the house.

She went to her room and refused Mrs. Wethering's frequently repeated offer to bring her a tray. Presently she locked her door, but a little later the housekeeper was obliged to disturb her again.

"Mr. Ennis is here," she announced, raising her voice to make certain that Helen could hear her. "He insists upon knowing how you are. I have told him that you are indisposed, but he begs to see you if you aren't too ill to come downstairs."

For a while no answer came, then a voice that Mrs. Wethering scarcely recognized as Helen's told her to send Bob away. "I can't see him," Helen added with a note of fierceness.

Mrs. Wethering concluded that they had quarreled, and she was not at all averse to carrying Helen's decision to the young man who waited below in a fever of impatience to be with his sweetheart.

"But I must know that she isn't seriously ill," he protested. "She is tired," Mrs. Wethering answered stiffly, "and does not wish to be disturbed."

She did not mean to be rude, but Bob sensed the rebuff behind her words, and it brought the first doubt of Helen's reason for not seeing him. Perhaps she wasn't ill, after all, and her housekeeper knew she was making excuses.

"Will you carry up a written message to her?" he asked humbly.

Mrs. Wethering could not refuse.

Bob took a notebook from his pocket, wrote a few words hurriedly on a leaf, tore it out and gave it to the woman, folded over.

A moment later Helen took it from her through a crack in the door. She read it through tears. "Unless you are too ill to come down, Helen, please see me," it said.

Helen gazed at the door, closing it, and Mrs. Wethering heard her cry: "Oh, I can't, I can't, I can't!"

"Miss Nellie, what is it? What is wrong?"

"Tell him to go away! Tell him I can't come down!"

Mrs. Wethering repeated this message to Bob in no uncertain terms, and he was obliged to accept it as final. He left the house in a bewildered state of mind. What could have happened? Had Helen repented their reconciliation so soon after vowing that nothing ever could part them again? It was unbelievable! But illness needed not have prevented her from sending him word telling him when to return—unless her condition was far more serious than Mrs. Wethering had admitted.

The thought drove him to beg his mother, when he reached home, to telephone Bramblewood inquiring about Helen.

Word came back that she was sleeping. No, there was nothing to worry over—just a slight indisposition.

Crossly the housekeeper hung up the receiver, and hoped the Ennis family would not disturb her again until morning at least.

The next day Helen came down as usual to breakfast, her eyes purple-rimmed in a tense, white face. She went through the motions of eating, but what food passed her lips was tasteless and unwanted.

Mrs. Wethering hovered in the background, watching over her, genuinely concerned in her health.

"Why, she looks as if she had a dead spirit in her body," the woman ejaculated to herself when she first glimpsed Helen that morning.

She was not far wrong. Helen felt as though her soul were dying within her. It was all so hopeless, whichever way she turned.

She did not doubt Bob's love and faith, but she could not bear the thought of letting him sacrifice everything in the world to prove his loyalty.

And she dared not tell him of Brent's cruel alternative. He would never let her marry Brent. She knew that. He'd believe in her and want to fight to save her. And there was no hope of victory.

Her night of torture had convinced her that Brent was right in saying the world would believe her guilty with him in the plot to gain possession of the Cunningham millions.

She had no defense. She saw now how easily she had been convinced that she was the Nellie girl. She had been so secretive at school. Who would accept her story that she had not known who her parents were? Would they not all think that she had been concealing the fact that her father was a nationally known crook?

A crook! She, the daughter of a crook—a man of crime! The iron of infamy went deep into her heart with every thought of him.

But Brent hadn't proved it! He hadn't proved that she was Helen Pace!

With this declaration she sought to encourage herself—to feed the only hope she had. But she knew Brent too well to believe that he would have done this thing without the proof he claimed to have. It was a false hope, and she knew it.

What would Mrs. Ennis say? What would any mother say if her son wanted to marry a girl who was stigmatized with crime?

Brent's cruelty had warped Helen's judgment, caused her to view all aspects of her situation with doubt and despair. All but Bob's love. It was the one thing she believed in unquestionably.

All that day she lived in a panic lest he come to her and demand an explanation of her refusal to see him the night before. How horrible to have him think she was so fickle she could change toward him overnight!

And he must believe it. What else was there for him to believe? Oh why hadn't she instructed Mrs. Wethering and Ashe to say she was not at home? That would have given her time to find a way to treat Bob less callously. Too late to think of it now... but surely there was something she could do... something besides cringing with fear and helplessness here at Bramblewood while Brent waited for her to make up her mind.

"She must see him! He must show her his proof! She couldn't stand another moment of suspense. It would be less frightful to be without hope entirely than knowing herself to be clinging to a doubtful one."

She decided soon after breakfast to go to New York. Mrs. Wethering persuaded her against going by train or driving her car herself. Helen agreed to let the gardener drive for her, as she had not yet filled the place of the chauffeur she had discharged for drunkenness.

"You don't look fit to go at all," the housekeeper remarked earnestly, but Helen was deaf to her interference.

"Drive as fast as you dare," she directed the man at the wheel when she was ready to start.

"Yes'm." But a word from Mrs. Wethering that Helen had not heard, frustrated her wish for speed.

He drove at a pace that brought a command to "go faster," as frequently as traffic regulations compelled him to idle the motor. Helen grew exasperated with him, but decided that he was timid, and ceased to urge him on.

She was fearful that Brent might have breakfasted and gone before she could reach his apartment, and it was with tremendous relief that she at last arrived there.

The temptation to stop on the way and telephone him had come to her. She felt it as a temptation because it was something she did not want to do, believing, as she did, that it would put Brent on his guard.

Though just what she expected to gain by surprising him was not quite clear to her. Perhaps, had she analyzed it, she might have found that it was a desire to attack, to maneuver for a crisis that would end her unendurable suspense.

She did not have herself announced on this occasion. If Brent was in she would see him—if he had gone out she would wait until he returned, even though it might not be for hours, night, perhaps.

At Brent's door she rang the bell with a firm pressure on the button.

Inside there was a startled movement on the part of an occupant of the colorful divan, a sudden half-rising and a sinking that was almost a collapse, back again.

Eyes fastened upon the door as the Japanese servant went to answer the summons that had sounded the second time. There was a smothered exclamation as Helen stepped into the foyer of the apartment and asked for Mr. Brent.

The Japanese said that he was not in. Helen's expression revealed her disappointment, but she moved toward the living room, saying distinctly that she would wait.

The servant bowed low and disappeared soundlessly, a faint smile over his lips, and threatening to wreck his Oriental calm. His master's affairs often proved amusing to him. He considered certain episodes stupid, the result of inept handling.

For a moment after Helen entered the living room she did not see the figure that had shrunk back on the divan. Then, as her eyes grew accustomed to the change of light, she saw the girl's face.

(To Be Continued)

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SIDE GLANCES

By George Clark



"Oh, that type school wastes so much time teaching police and such things."

Freckles and His Friends



OSSIE FOOLS THEM



Mom'n Pop

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