

THIS HAS HAPPENED
Helen Page feels happily in love with her guardian, Leonard Brent. A chance meeting with a dying beggar, Charles Nellin, causes Brent to change his plans for Helen's future. Soon after he tells the girl that she is the only grandchild of a millionaire, Cyril K. Cunningham.

Brent takes her to Cunningham and offers her the money which the lonely old man accepts. Hoping to make up for the injustice done her mother, Cunningham showers the girl with affection and gifts.

Among Helen's new friends are Eva Ennis and her brother Robert, who falls in love with her. Brent finds another locket like the one he had taken from Nellin to establish Helen as the heiress. He also becomes jealous of Bob and plots to secure the girl for himself quickly.

Hearing the doctor say that a sudden shock would kill the old man, Brent gets the servants out of the way and rushes into the sick room shouting wildly that Helen has been killed. His plan works and when the attendant returns Cunningham is dead. Then Brent appears as friend and former guardian of Helen and takes charge of arrangements.

Brent had amused himself by making love to Eva and now he tries to break off the affair without making Helen suspicious. Meanwhile, Bob is too proud to speak his love until a chance meeting breaks his reserve and they both acknowledge their love. But Helen tells him it is hopeless, as she is promised to another.

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The Innocent Cheat

By Ruth Dewey Groves
AUTHOR OF "RICH GIRL - POOR GIRL," ETC.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
CHAPTER XXVIII
"I can't break my engagement," Helen said stiffly. "I can only ask to be released."

Bob drew back from her, white to the lips. Her attitude was incomprehensible to him except from one angle—she did not truly love him.

Argument, his naturally logical brain told him would be useless. What could it mean to a girl who either was not very deeply in love or who was caught up in fallacies, to be told that only a fool would keep to a mere engagement when disaster threatened the outcome?

Bob wondered that Helen could think of it. Wondered that she could not see as he did, that the course she was taking was sordid rather than idealistic.

A moment of anger flared up in his heart against her—the resentment of clean youth for evil compromise. It wiped from his mind the question he wanted to ask her. The name of the man she was going to marry.

—going to marry? The words schooled in Bob's mind as a sentence to lifelong unhappiness. No man would let her go. Rot! A decent man—but not while he thought she might love him.

Bob felt himself slipping into a maze of doubt and fear. But he could not argue, could not plead his own case further.

What appeared to be uncertainty on her part drove him to cruelty. He would not recognize quirkiness as her prompter, he was too modern for that, and he knew nothing of her sense of obligation. To him she was unsure of her heart, and he had no tolerance for her.

"Then," he said quietly, coldly, "you're a bit of a rotter."

All that he knew of neediness, even criminal, self-sacrifice; all that he knew of lives wasted for false precepts of honor; all that he realized of right and wrong was behind his words. What seemed her stupidity, that denied her brain, her apparent lack of courage to change her course when to anyone but a fool, he saw she was all wrong, set against it—these too had helped to call forth his scathing remark.

He had thought of her as brave and fearless—never a juggler with the tender passion. Love, he had believed, would come to her as true and untrampled as it had come to him. How it could involve two men at the same time was an impenetrable mystery to him.

For Bob had never known puppy love. Helen's passing from love of love to love itself was beyond his understanding.

His youthful hardness, steeled by the thought that she would go through with a loveless match, was a phase of masculinity that Helen

had never encountered before. Brent had been cruel on occasion, true, but his was the suave cruelty of a hidden menace—the shabbed claw, that cut lightly on the surface but bit deep into the heart.

The frankness of Bob's generation was unknown to her.

She did not flinch before the blow. Perhaps she was too shocked to show by so much as a flicker of her eyelids that it had struck her with terrific force.

Without another word Bob turned and strode out of the room. Mrs. Wethering, uneasily waiting in the library, saw him fling himself out of the house, leaving the front door open behind him, as though he were pursued by a demon.

She hurried to the kitchen but Helen had fled, up the rear stairs to her room.

Mrs. Wethering gathered up the things that were to have gone into the preparation of their midnight supper and put them away. Later she went to Helen's door and listened. She thought she detected the sound of muffled sobs but when she tried the door and found it locked she hesitated to demand admittance.

The sounds gradually grew fainter and finally the housekeeper decided that it would be better for Helen if she left her alone.

The next morning the girl was pale and worn, with shadowed eyes in which there was an unhealed wound.

Mrs. Wethering was very gentle and remained with Helen while she breakfasted, or rather while she went through the motions of preparing her fruit and coffee. She hoped Helen would confide in her and went so far as to mention having witnessed Mr. Ennis' hasty departure the night before.

Still Helen said nothing, but there was on her face a set, cold expression that warned Mrs. Wethering that the incident, whatever it was, had a serious aspect.

Mrs. Wethering sighed over her inability to administer comfort and suggested that Helen ought to get out into the open. "You haven't driven your car very much lately," she said. "Why don't you let me fix you a picnic lunch and you can telephone for someone to go for a long drive with you? The weather is lovely."

"I'm going to New York," Helen answered quietly.

Mrs. Wethering was greatly disturbed but she did not dare offer any opposition. There was about Helen an air of determination that plainly indicated she was set upon a course from which she could not be swayed.

"Are you taking an early train?" Mrs. Wethering asked, hoping the girl did not intend to drive her car

to the city. She was much relieved when Helen told her she was going on a morning train.

In Helen's mind, too, was fear of driving her car. She knew that she was likely to become forgetful of danger on the road and she did not want to risk injury to another person.

Mrs. Wethering found an excuse to go to her room with her when Helen went up to get her hat and wrap.

"There's just a little tang in the air; won't you wear a fur?" the housekeeper urged.

Helen accepted a silver fox and threw it carelessly about her shoulders. It made her costume perfect and Mrs. Wethering wondered if she had selected the black and white tweed ensemble, with its smart black and silk blouse, with any particular care.

"What could be the object of her visit to the city? It worried the older woman almost to the point of causing her to attempt to break down Helen's reserve.

But that reserve had acted as a shield upon many occasions and it remained effective now. Helen was permitted to leave without revealing her destination.

On the train she consulted a card to make certain that she had the correct address. Two or three times she said it over to memorize the street and number, then put it away. The name that was engraved upon it was a silent reproach.

How often had she fancied it a her own! Mrs. Leonard Brent. And now—now she dared not think beyond the hour that was to elapse when she would be released from her mad promise. Surely, surely he would not hold her to it!

But the voice of fear deep in her heart answered that he would. She realized that aside from the keeping of his promise to her father, Leonard Brent had nothing outstandingly creditable to his account. On the contrary there were many things against him. His past; so many women, his strange, undeniably selfish desire to slung a young life—her life—to please himself!

Helen could see now that her school friend, Shallimar, had been right in much she had said about Leonard.

"I should always have been myself," Helen murmured. "Then this could not have happened. Leonard wouldn't have cared for me if I had been more independent."

She was wrong, of course, for youth will frequently have its hour of aberration in regard to love, when it turns to worship of an unnatural object.

But Helen felt that she was the only foolish girl in the world—the only one who had been fascinated by an older man, and she was drinking deep of regret.

The distance to New York from Yonkers seemed interminable—and yet she arrived there too soon, for the interview ahead of her promised to be extremely painful.

She had not telephoned to say that she was coming, feeling certain to find Brent in. The thought of talking with him by wire had been impossible. She wanted to see him now, tell him, and have an end to her suspense.

At Brent's apartment house she gave her name at the desk and was told to come up. The girl who announced her turned a curious look upon her but Helen missed it.

She stepped hurriedly into the elevator and gave her floor to the operator.

"Mr. Brent's apartment?" she inquired when he again opened the door for her. He too flashed her a queer glance when she named Brent. But his voice was correctly modulated when he gave the directions she asked for.

"To your right, Miss, the third door beyond the turn."

"Thank you," Helen replied and walked rapidly down the hall, quite unaware that her pale face and feverish eyes, her compressed lips and the hint of tragedy that hung about her was like a standard that she might have carried; and that the building attaches had read it to mean trouble. Particularly as they knew that a visitor had arrived ahead of her: a tall, slim, elegant visitor in fashion, a certain and unmistakable atmosphere of being at home in her surroundings.

Helen hurried on, expecting to find only Brent.

CHAPTER XXIX
Helen was admitted into the foyer of Brent's apartment by a Japanese servant. She stepped quickly over the threshold and glanced beyond to the living room that could be glimpsed through an open doorway.

"Miss Nellin," she said as though it did not matter, and moved on, paying no attention to the man's words. He was saying that Mr. Brent was out.

Someone had drawn the heavy draperies against the brilliant sunshine of the early autumn day in the living room and turned on a soft light near a divan.

Helen's eyes went to the light instinctively but instead of seeing, as she expected Leonard sitting under it, she found herself staring into the bemused countenance of "one of his women."

The phrase flashed through her mind unsummoned, perhaps as a echo of the words she had entertained on the train.

She recognized Carmel at once—as the woman she had seen with Brent when she and Shallimar had gone to the Ritz.

She did not know who she was or what she was but she felt an antagonism rise within her even before the woman spoke. Another time she'd have mistaken it for jealousy; now she believed it to be annoyance over a third person's presence when she desired a private talk with Leonard.

"I took the liberty of asking you to come up because even Tot, or

Poco or Soto, or whatever his man's name is, doesn't seem to know what has become of Leonard," Carmel said, indicating by moving over slightly that she expected Helen to sit beside her on the divan.

Helen stood, thinking swiftly. "Have you an engagement with him?" she asked pointblank, deciding that if such were the case she would go and come back later.

"My dear, one never has engagements with Leonard," Carmel answered patronizingly. "One catches him on the wing. But, of course, possibly in your case—" Her voice rang on a mockingly interjectory note.

Helen returned her glance with the steadiness of steel but inwardly she was quaking lest the irritation she felt should show in her face.

She turned and took a seat in an armchair near a reading table, and quite nonchalantly turned on a second lamp. She would not go now and appear to this insolent woman as being running away from her. "Smoke?" Carmel asked, taking out a platinum case and extending it to Helen.

The latter shook her head. With considerable ostentation Carmel put the case aside, rose and walked over to a desk and dug a long amber cigarette holder out of a drawer.

Helen perceived that Carmel wished her to know that she was familiar with the apartment, but she appeared not to notice.

They sat in silence for several minutes Carmel lazily pulling at her chocolate-papered cigarette and Helen flipping the pages of a magazine.

Secretly Carmel was studying her, weighing her youth and beauty with savage resentment of it. For though she knew that her own exotic charm had held Leonard Brent partly under a spell for many years, she knew also that he wanted her out of his life now. And she did not know why. Was this girl the answer?

She knew about Helen Page but she had never been permitted to meet her. She did not know that Helen's name was now Nellin. And when Helen had been announced Carmel had been seized with a desire to pry into Brent's affairs. For that reason she had instructed the Japanese servant, when she heard him repeat Helen's name, to say that she was to come up. He had taken orders from Carmel before, high-handed ones too, but his indifference

was so complete that he did not mind obeying her.

Helen's loveliness convinced her that here was a formidable rival. Perhaps Leonard wanted to marry, she thought sneeringly. She grew rather furious over it as the minutes went by and Helen sat calmly turning the pages of the magazine (though she was anything but calm beneath her exterior).

"The girl looks a decent sort," she told herself as the nucleus of a scheme to thwart Brent began to form in her mind. "She won't stand for much dirt."

She put down her cigarette and holder and looked at a clock on the mantel. It was very close to 12 o'clock.

Leonard invited me to lunch," she remarked offhandedly, ending in a laugh. "Were you included?" she added, compelling herself to speak graciously.

Helen saw no reason to lie to her, let her think what she would. "As you suggested," she said, evenly. "I am trying to catch Mr. Brent on the wing—on business that is very important to him."

"Of course," Carmel agreed pleasantly, "but no doubt he will wish you to stay to lunch. Generally he leaves it to me to see that there is something to eat." She reached up and took off her hat, adding carelessly, "when we don't go."

Helen began then to wonder as much about Carmel as Carmel had been wondering about her. Why should this woman take other women so casually in regard to Leonard? Had she some secret right to him that gave her security?

Helen discarded the thought as unworthy of herself and an injustice to Brent. She knew, she told herself, that the women of his acquaintance were colorful individuals, not at all concerned with conventionalities. But Leonard had professed to love only her; he could not be interested in anyone else.

However, when Carmel proceeded to take off her wrap and went into the tiny kitchen, where Helen could hear her humming and making a great deal of noise with pots and pans, she could not remain blind to the significance of the woman's conduct. Certainly she was no stranger to the place.

But what of that? Leonard was a Bohemian in many ways. And she knew—she'd heard—that many smart women got a thrill in playing around in a bachelor's kitchen

when wild horses couldn't drag them near their own.

Presently Carmel came out to the living room and opened up a small table, over which she spread a luncheon cloth that she had brought from the kitchen.

Helen recognized it as one that she herself had made for Leonard at a time when she hoped to keep house for him. She viewed it with mixed feelings as Carmel smoothed it in place and laid the napkins (Continued on Page Six)

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