

Illustrated
by
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As she walked into the light of the oil lamp, her ivory skin made a ghostly contrast against the deep black of her dress.

WALT DRINKARD dropped hook in sunless pool, lighted his pipe, and leaned against a tree in peace. He was not often so these days. He and Myra Branson were engaged to be married, but they lived at the edge of frayed emotions. Up to now they had fought deliciously, but soon or late the rules of civilized warfare would be ignored. Walt's idea of a lovely evening was a book, long silences, ideas. Myra loved music, excitement, and noisy people with herself as the center.

This morning he came to this place of dusky peace to forget last night's narrow. But he was no more than settled before he was brought up straight by a tremendous splash across the bayou from him. Rings moved widely out, and there were many bubbles where the girl had sunk. Her gurgling cry rang on in his ears: "H-h-help!" Walt did his heroics competently by leaping in and swimming to the spot.

The girl's head rose above the water. Walt caught hold of her. "Now you're okay—you're just fine." He got her to the bank and pulled her out, noting that she was slim, had curves and softness and good looks in spite of wet hair and muddy clothes. "I am Walt Drinkard, and I live at Fairfield." He smiled.

"I'm Caroline Leigh, and I live there too in the old Gatemont house."

"Ah!" Walt said. "So you're the new girl in the old house!"

"Am I?" she laughed. "Well, I'm awfully stupid and clumsy. So I—well—"

Walt wiped the mud from her, wrung out her hair, and helped as he might otherwise. "I have a flivver parked at the edge of the woods, and if you can coon this high footlog across the bayou, we'll have you home in a jiffy." He took her hand and they crossed, followed a fisherman's path to the old car in the timber road, and they drove to Fairfield. Walt had an odd feeling that this had happened before, somewhere, sometime.

"You're a young lawyer here in town?"

"Yes," he said, wondering if she might wish a high-priced divorce. He turned off the highway when near the town limits to avoid passing Myra Branson's house. At the girl's look of question Walt simply said, "I'm cutting through." After a deal of scraping through tangles and tall bushes he came to the Gatemont house.

It was a mystery-shrouded place, lonely and romantic. A long time ago Oliver Gatemont, a widely known planter, had killed himself in one of the vast high-ceilinged rooms, and so it got about that the house was haunted. It was big and dilapidated. Those who would live here were hardly checked by the town's rather exclusive social circle.

Caroline got out. "Thanks," she said.

It was just Walt's luck that Myra Branson should come along in her car and see a tall, wet, muddy young man take his leave of a wet, muddy young woman. She gave the girl one look, twinkled her fingers graciously at Walt, without seeming to observe his unconventional condition—which boded a private inquisition later—and the car passed, leaving a glint of corn-silver hair, a fair face, and very blue eyes.

Caroline, not at all confused, looked after her. Caroline was dark . . . she was nearly gypsy. She said, "She is very lovely. Now I must go. And thanks again. You saved my life. Or did you? Won't you call some time soon? It would be nicer for both of us."

"I'd love to. When?"

"This evening at 6:30? I'd mix, perhaps, a cake with my own fairy fingers."

HE DROVE into town along the shaded avenue, past the withdrawn old homes of Fairfield. The street was empty. He came to his home, once a plantation dwelling at the edge of town before it grew out into the cottonlands and acquired urban manners.

He changed clothes, groping in his boyhood memories for something that eluded him. It was 10:30 when he went to his office, with the feeling of a man who thought this was his day off. He finally got down to work, but was interrupted by the telephone. It was Myra. Her voice was bright and intimate.

"Dear, I'm picking you up for luncheon at the country club—"

"I know, darling, but I am very busy—"

"I know, sweet, but you are also hungry and I've arranged the luncheon."

"Ah—all right. Thanks. I'll be ready." He hated the country club, with its noisy young bunch, and he knew on the way out there would be a pretty session. He sat in gloomy reflection.

Walt, merely male, was always baffled by Myra. He tried to hope that after marriage she would settle down and not be like this any more. He knew better. But Walt was fair: she was a wonderful girl; she was beautiful; and the Bransons were one of the old families. She was the admitted social leader of the set in which she and Walt moved. Their engagement was the year's match. If Walt, upon any pretext, broke it, Fairfield would buzz

with gossip, Myra would be crushed with humiliation, and Walt might just about be ruined professionally.

Anyway, he was a fool. Nor was he feeling less an idiot when Myra's horn on the street below called him. He went down, got in, and Myra drove out the glimmering pavement. "Ann Carleton is having the bunch out tonight at the old swimming pavilion, with hot-dogs and toasted marshmallows; Dick's fetching his portable for the dancing; the swimming is grand these moonlight nights—so I told her we'd be with them. As, I know—previous engagement. But I promised Ann." Her voice became very casual. "And who was our new friend, so muddy, so possessed? Ah—so that's your engagement!"

"Yes," Walt said. "She's the new girl in the old house. I was fishing. She fell in—"

NEW GIRL

"Ah! So she fell in—"

"Yes, and I—well, I suppose I kind of fished her out—rescued her—"

Myra was doubling in laughter. Walt examined her in annoyance. "That would be very delightful and romantic and everything, except, so I hear, this new girl at the old house swims like a fish!"

Walt gulped. His face got red as fire. "In any case I'm having supper with her, in token of appreciation or something, so give my respects to Ann. I'll ask Bill Brown to pinch-hit for me tonight, dear old Bill—"

Myra said coldly, "Don't trouble. I'll probably not suffer terribly for lack of men." And the lunch afterward was not very successful.

WHEN WALT stooped through the broken pickets of the fence, having come to Gatemont by his boyhood secret route, sunset made tangled patterns of the dense shrubbery. Caroline stood in the deep red glow of sunset. Her smile was grave and nice. Walter went forward and quickly took her two hands. "So you are Skeeter! Well, well!" He was pleased and somehow helpless.

"I am Skeeter, and I think you should have known me this morning."

"I know, but you were only so high—" He measured with his hand. "I wasn't much higher." He put his hands on her shoulders and regarded her dimples gravely.

"Do you remember something else?" she finally asked.

"Yes. The last time I saw you, long ago, I promised when I came again I would bring along a rose, and I'd kiss you." He looked around for a rose. "I came back, all right, and I brought the rose, but you had left Gatemont, and so I stood here that day, feeling as empty as the old house was."



He took her hand. They crossed the bayou on a footlog and followed a path to the road.