

CHAPTER IV

When Old Friends Meet

Mrs. Clara Forrest was very circumspect - out of force of habit - when she neared Dr. Capen's office. At this late hour the street was deserted even on Saturday night, but the unusualness of the hour made her presence more conspicuous. She was satisfied that the few stragglers in the hot night had paid her scant attention.

She was amazed and a little frightened at the doctor's insistence that she come to his office tonight. Had he discovered something she should worry about? She had been to see him a few months before - two or three days after the fire, to be exact - and he had told her everything was all right and not come for a year!

But the hour! It wasn't... it couldn't be... ^{that the doctor....!} What's come over you, Clara! Still, everything is possible between the sexes. She had had enough experience.... And Bob Black.... Now Bob the hobb. Bob the hobo! How she loved the sound of the words on her tongue. As if she could taste it. She was fond of the name as well as the man behind it. She remembers it all, as if it happened today - tonight! Tonight? That last year or two at high school. The quick looks he threw her from the other side of the classroom. And the smile of compact between them. The walks in the fields and the woods.... And then she hadn't seen him for months. Then he'd come to her house after a lapse of ^{more} months, but it was more out of delicacy - a token - as if he hadn't wanted her to feel the deserted scapgoate, than a desire to see her. Was it that she had been to free with him? Then one day she knew. She was crossing the bridge to South Portgrave, and there he was, bicycling with Lena. She remembered looking long after them, envying Lena's expertness on the bicycle, how she ^{had} kept abreast of Bob. But more it

was that it was she, Lena, pure and clean; and Bob was with her, on a bicycle, and not in the woods.

Then it was that Lena had married the Forrest fellow, and Bob had come back to her - when he had come home from college on vacation. Then sometime in his third year in college he had vanished. Rumors were strong in town, and people looked down on her. As if she... and she had to leave town. But if she had sinned god forgive her. And if she was the cause she was not entirely to blame. He had started her on the road.... Maybe it all was a revenge in her heart. But she only hurt herself, and maybe she ruined the only one she ^{had} ever loved.

He had turned hobo, and she had gone from bad to worse. Even after she had married Old Forrest. Maybe that caused her to come more alive, desire burgeoning in her, and guiding her to the sordidness of the incubus, in the image of the sailor. His image swept before her like the umbrage of a full moon. And in that shadow a face leered at her. And that face was a familiar one. And the sailor acted the puppet under instructions from that face. To degrade her! Like a horrible dream.

Should she be afraid of what was coming? She was heartened by a light glimmering under the drawn blind. A lighted tomb, she smiled bitterly to herself. How stupidly ridiculous - Dr. Capen's office a tomb! That delightful man, his easy and charming manner, his fetching smile! She could....

She knocke^d lightly on the door. She had been instructed not to ring the bell; too shrill that time of night. Why so mysterious? But she didn't mind since it was Dr. Capen who was the mystery.

The door opened wide^{enough} to admit her. There in the beam of light stood Bob, tall as a mountain and as threatening. She shouldn't have recognized him instantly, she hadn't seen him so long, but she did. Her first impulse was to withdraw, but she remained standing. Her heart was throbbing painfully under her breast; it was exotic and frightening at the same time. The room swept round in a circle, she felt faint and swayed in the dim-

ming light. A strong arm held her up.

"You!" she gasped as she leaned against him.

"An old friend. Remember?" He stood over her smiling. It was a smile neither of triumph nor malice. A bland conventional smile - of two friends finding one another after a long absence; even though under compulsion of the necessity of the moment.

"How can I forget," she smiled weakly, "but -----"

"I know. You didn't expect to see me."

"Well, that's putting it mildly," she said, a trace of anger crossing her face. "Well, don't look at me like an ogre..."

"There is no evil in my smile, ^{Clara's} nor is it a devil's grin. What's gone before is water under..."

"But the water under the dam was very filthy," she caught him up, "it's still burbling with mud." Sighing with fatigue: "I see you found your way back from the wilderness. I hope it's a good way." Moving abruptly away from him, "but I didn't come here to see you."

"Now the scene changes and the mood," he mocked lightly.

"Perhaps I am a bit out of sorts, finding you here," she relented.

"I understand. It smacks of conspiracy. Dr. Capen asks you to come ~~here~~ and you find me. But don't blame the good doctor, I put him up to it."

"Your persuasive power? Well I remember ^m it." There was sarcasm in her voice. She looked up to him and smiled, as if to make up for her bitterness, for she was still fond of him. "What cudgel do you hold over the doctor's head? It isn't quite in character."

"Common interest," Bob fairly snapped. "Yours too."

"Don't bring up old scores," she said curtly, "this is hardly the moment for it. Besides, there is ^{nothing} left between us - now."

"Perhaps not, except for Lena," he said brutally, "which neither of us can wipe out of our memory."

~~Clara's~~ Clara's lips went bloodless in a straight grey line, and her face

went pale, but she remained silent.

"Surely you remember Lena," he went on ruthlessly, as if to extort penance from both of them, "Lena Dreen now, but once Mrs. Foster Forrest." Was there a jeer of contempt in his face? Clara wasn't sure. "I once went for her in those charmingly magic school days, and you made a try for the same Foster. We both lost. We didn't make out so well. And now fate has thrown us together."

"Old stuff now," with a wave of her hand.

"Not quite," he replied bluntly, "something new added. You must have heard of the feud between your husband and Solomon Dreen. It's hardly a feud between two people, it's Forrest who does all the feuding. He is out to destroy Solomon Dreen for the reason he had married Lena, who was brazen enough to be the mother of his grandson."

"Yes, I am quite familiar.... But where do I come in?"

"Forrest is trying to curb George in his next installment on Dreen, by threatening not to renew the lease on his uncle's store, ^{Octo-} ~~Septem-~~ber. He owns the building."

"Would that stop George?"

"It would not. But it'd break his spirit."

"Suppose you tell me where I can be of help?"

"By prevailling upon him to renew the lease."

"And if he refuses?" she said stubbornly.

"We can't afford such a luxury,"

"We? You are not threatening?" she snapped, facing him.

"Come, come, my dear," he smiled, "it's all of us. He has to be shown he can't control this village. Besides, Solomon Dreen is good for this town."

Clara sat down at a low table and riffled the pages of a magazine.

"You want me to play the wily woman," she said.

"You are still pretty enough for the rôle," he riled her.

She gave him a sideway glance through fluttering lids, her face flushing as old memories came crowding her mind. "Oh, Bob," she said softly, "how our lives could have been different!"

"Why think of the old days that could never be," he said earnestly.

"Rivers in their courses meet....!"

"But not the streams of fate, once their courses are set."

"You are a fatalist," she said scowling, "I am not. Fate is largely what we make of it. A clay that can be rolled over and over."

"Clara!"

"Oh, I am not proposing. It's, it's...." She looked away.

"No, it's just that I don't recognize the flippant Clara of...."

"We ripen with age," she said with a new gleam in her eyes. She looked up to him. "Not the golden age of the sunset, but the age of the burning full midday. The age when the mind is the equal of the turbulence and rush of the full ripened body. It needs the old-new channels....!"

"The words, the words, is it the same Clara I once knew?"

"The red grapes ripen on the old vine...."

"And the wine rejoiceth the heart of man. Mine!"

"An anachronism, my hobo, I have sinned!"

"I have sinned twice more - against you. I have found dispensation in your presence. Clara, I... I...." Taking her in his arms, "Clara, my Clara, this is good for both of us."

"I am clean again," she murmured, as she snuggled closer in his arms.

"A new birth. Oh, Bob!"