

***CORRA  
HARRIS***

***THE HOUSE  
OF HELEN***



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# **The House of Helen**

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# CHAPTER II

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It was a day in June, in the year 1902. They are much the same everywhere, only in Georgia there is more June in such a day. Farther south the withering heat hints of July; farther north there may be an edge of cold to the air; but in Georgia it is always perfectly June in June, all softness, fragrance, filled with the fearless growth and bloom of every living thing—the sort of day that seems to hum to itself with the wings of a thousand bees; adolescent weather, fragrant, soft, filled with the growth and yearning of every living thing from the frailest flower that blooms to the oldest tree and the oldest man.

On such a day this story begins, somewhere between half past three and four o'clock in the afternoon. The exact moment makes no difference because nothing that you could see with the naked eye happened when the first scene was laid. (It is only the comedies and crimes of living that catch the eye. The great dramas and the great tragedies begin within, and they end there.) The town was somnambulant—very little traffic; none at all on Wiggs Street. You could only have known by the gentle bending of the frailer-stemmed flowers before the cottages on either side that even a breeze was passing by. But over all this stillness and piercing this droning silence came the notes of a piano, sad, sweet and frequently too far apart, as if this piano waited patiently while the performer found the next note, and then found it again on the keyboard. These desiccated fragments of Narcissus, a popular instrumental

piece at that time, issued from the parlor windows of the Adams cottage. Some one, who had no ear for music, but only a conscience, was practicing inside.

Presently this conscience was satisfied, for the lid of the piano went down with a thud. There was a quick step, the whisk of white skirts in the darkened hall, the opening and closing of a door, followed by what we must infer was a sort of primping silence.

Then a voice, firm and maternal, came through the front bedroom window on that side of the house: "Helen, why are you wearing your organdie?"

"I don't know, mother," a young voice answered.

I doubt if she did know. Some of the shrewdest acts of a maiden are unintelligible to her.

"Well, it is silly, putting on your nice things to go to choir practice."

It was silly, but one frequently makes the silliest preparations for happiness. This is the wisdom of youth. Age cannot beat it.

After a pause, the same elder voice, made smoother—"Have you seen George?"

"Not in two years. Why?"

"He has been at home a week, hasn't he?"

"I don't know when he came."

The tone implied that the comings and goings of this George were matters of supreme indifference to her.

"Mrs. Cutter told me his father means for him to work this summer."

No response.

“He had three months in the University School of Finance last summer, she told me. This summer his father plans to put him through, she said.”

Still no response.

“Don’t forget to call for my pass book at the bank, Helen,” this was said in a slightly higher key, indicating that the girl had left the room. “You had better go by the bank on your way to the church. It closes at four o’clock.”

“Yes, mother;” and at the same moment this young girl came out of the house, down the steps, walking hurriedly.

When she reached the street she began to move more sedately, giving herself an air. Her ankles were slim; her black satin pumps had low French heels. She wore a white organdie. The fineness, tucks and lace of her petticoat showed through the full skirt. The bodice was plain, finished at the neck with an edge of lace, and gathered puffily in at the belt. The fineness, tucks and lace of an underbody clung daintily to her shoulders and showed through. The sleeves were short. Her arms round and very fair. A wide taffeta ribbon sash of pale blue, crushed crinklingly about her waist, was tied in a butterfly bow behind, very stiff and upstanding.

She wore a broad-brimmed, white leghorn hat, trimmed with tiny bunches of field flowers. This hat was tilted slightly to one side, as if she lacked the courage to pull it down, lest she should reveal more than she dared tell of what she was and meant. It rested, therefore, at the merest, most innocent angle of coquetry.

The girl herself was utterly and entrancingly fair. She had straight hair, of the shade called ash blond; no deeper

golden lights in it; most of it hidden beneath the encompassing hat. If you found it, you must do so by an act of the imagination. And the absurd primness with which it lay so close and smoothly above her ears teased the imagination. Her skin was white, with that underglow of pink so faint it could scarcely be called color—cheeks round, not too full. The oval chin had the softness of youth. She had a mouth made for silence; it was serious. The under lip was a straight pink line, prettily turned, which did not go very far; the upper lip was distinctly full in the center, with a sort of flute there which ended in a dainty, pointed, white scallop beneath the nose, and it closed purposefully over the lower lip. This was due to the fact that if she was not mindful, it let go, curled up and showed the only flaw she had—two lovely teeth, a trifle prominent because they lapped at the lower edge after the manner of some Anglo-Saxon ancestor from whom she must have inherited them. Her nose might amount to something later in life as an indication of character, but now it was merely a good little nose, rounded at the end where it should have been pointed, and too brief for beauty.

The eyes were this girl's distinguishing feature. They remained so long after all her loveliness and fairness had changed and failed. They were large, blue, white-lidded, heavily fringed with lashes darker than her hair. And they looked at you, at him, at all the world and the weather, calmly, from beneath long, sweeping brows, as if these brows were the slender wings of the thoughts she had when she looked at you.

This is what a girl is, and nothing more—loveliness, innocence, and the wordless sweet desire of herself. You cannot predict her. Anything may change her; one thing only is certain—she is sure to change. The woman will be profoundly different. This is why writers of mere fiction have discarded the young girl heroine. Nothing can make her interesting but a tragedy, until she develops her human perversities and attributes, which may require more years than the tale can afford.

Helen walked sedately through Wiggs Street, as if every window of every house was an eye that observed her. But when she came to the end, where this street entered the public square, her gait changed, much as your voice changes inflection according to the tune you sing. This was a livelier tune now to which she walked. She stepped along briskly, prettily. Her skirts whisked, her body swayed a little as if this might turn out to be a waltz. Every shop window she passed was a mirror, in which she caught an encouraging glimpse of herself. Once she halted long enough to draw the brim of her hat forward and sidewise. Then she went on, the published truth of herself at last. And her own mother would not have known her.

Few mothers, even in that prunes-and-prism period, relatively speaking, would have recognized their daughters abroad. But every man would. It is Nature having her way, you understand, and no harm done; because in the end these maidens must—and they will—take Nature, which after all is the very nearest relative of maidenhood, into their confidence and be guided by her.



The First National Bank of Shannon was no great institution. Still it was modestly conspicuous. What I mean is that you could tell at a glance and from a distance that this was a bank, not a doctor's office, by the tall cement columns in front, the only example of four-legged magnificence in the shakily diversified architecture surrounding this square.

But Mr. George William Cutter would never have thought of exalting himself in a private office with a ground glass door, showing the title "President," published on this door. He sat at a rolled-top desk in a space reserved for him to the left of the door, by a stout oaken banister which divided it from the lobby. The only distinction he permitted himself was to sit with his back to the window which looked on the square. What was more to the point he faced the long cage of the bank proper, and was always in a position to see, know or at least shrewdly infer what was going on inside and outside in the lobby.

But if you were a customer, seeking a loan or even planning to open an account, you must come in and face about before you could face the president. There was dignity, financial assurance, but no offensive pride, in his sitting posture to the public. He was a man with a recognized girth, not entirely bald. His hair was gray; so was his short, clipped mustache. He wore light gray clothes in summer and dark gray clothes in the winter. And he had a fine strong commercial countenance. He might almost have cashed it, his face was so well certified by a pair of shrewd gray eyes, as distinguished from the cunning of similar eyes.

On this June afternoon he sat reared back, his coat thrust clear of the wide expanse of his white shirt front, like the wings of an old gray rooster cocked up on a hot day. He was smoking a black cigar. From time to time he shot a glance into the cage of the bank; and each time the corners of his mouth went up, the fired end of the cigar also went up, his eyes narrowed to a mere gray slit of light as sharp as a lance, and his whole face crinkled into an expression of humor and satisfaction. Sometimes an experienced turfman so regards a young and mettlesome colt that is being broken to the gait, when the colt acts up to his breeding, takes the bit and goes, even if he does waste wind and sweat in the performance.

Directly in line with his vision a tall, broad-shouldered young man was standing before an adding machine in his shirt sleeves. This was George William Cutter, Junior, inducted into the rear end of the banking business a week since. He was working furiously with the halting earnestness of a man not accustomed to grind up figures in a machine and pedal them out on a long strip of paper with his foot. His hair was red and stood up like a torch on his head. His mouth was warped, his nose snarled, his face was flushed and there was an angry squint in his red brown eyes as he struck the keys, jerked the lever and slammed the pedal once in so often—forty little movements that kept the muscles of his big body in a sort of frivolous activity.

Mr. Cutter, Senior, was thinking: "He's got it in him, the go. He will make good if he can be made to stick. Ought to marry, ought'er marry right now. That would stamp him down to it."

What young George was thinking as he paused to mop his steaming brow was: "Gad! If three days in here takes it out of a fellow like this, what will thirty years do to him?"

He knew that he was being groomed to succeed his father. It might be a bright future for a young man, but as a human being it held no brighter prospect than escaping from this cage and sitting where his father sat now, fat and sedentary in all his habits. He was restless. He was red-headed. He was an athlete on the university team. There had been some question about whether he should take his final year. He would let the "old man" know that he was willing and anxious to go back to the university in the fall. He was not ready to be imprisoned for life with dollars, not yet!

At this moment the street door, that had admitted everybody all day from the leading merchants, workers, widows, all the way down to the fat woman who kept the fruit stand, opened again. A young girl came in. It was as if spring and snow and sweetness had entered. There was so much whiteness and coolness in the presence she made. A mere hint of far-off blue skies, and as if Nature had granted her the flowers she wore on this hat. She passed the teller's window, also the cashier's window. She looked neither to the right nor the left. The white scallop in the pink upper lip was pressed primly, holding it, like a word she would not say, upon the round pink under lip. She came directly to the bookkeeper's window, faced it, stared at him and waited.

When she entered he had made three steps backward, which brought him to the wall behind him. He was conscious of being without his coat. But if you are a man in a bank you

are not supposed to scamper out of sight like a lady in negligee, if some one comes to call. You stood your ground with dignity, no matter how you looked. He stood his; he did not move a muscle. He may have breathed, but if so it was no more than a secret breath merely to sustain life. Their eyes met; his filled with the fire of an amazement, hers calm and speechless. She regarded him as one regards a picture on the wall.

This was all that happened, lasting no longer than the instant of time required for the bookkeeper to look up, see her and slide himself with one step like a little, thin-necked, bald-headed, stooped-shouldered fact before the window, blotting out the vision of her.

Young Cutter heard her murmur something, saw the bookkeeper draw a pass book from a stack of these dingy records and slide it beneath the wicket of the window.

He heard her say "thank you" in a faint, soft, bell-like voice. Then she turned and went out.

He stared about him. How was this? He expected a wave of excitement to mark her passing, as people exclaim at the sight of something ineffable. Had no one seen her but himself? Apparently not. Every man in there was working with his usual air of absorption. For another instant he stood free, exalted, his eyes filled with the explosive brightness of a great emotion. Then it faded into self-consciousness, a downward look as he sneaked back to his machine, hoping that he had not been observed.

This is the only kind of modesty of which men are capable. If one of them went out with this look of neighing valor on his face he would be arrested, of course, because it

is such a perfectly scandalous expression. But if a maid walks abroad with love published in her eyes and on her very lips, you are moved to reverence, because it is a sort of piety which seems to sanctify her.

He bent lower over his task, shot the lever down with a bang, struck the pedal harshly and rhythmically—made a noise, implying that he was and had been, without interruption, wholly engrossed with this business.

“Remember her, George?” came his father’s voice like a shot out of a clear sky.

“Who?” asked George, instantly on his guard.

“The girl that came in just now.”

“I didn’t notice. Who was she?”

“Helen Adams.”

“Never should have recognized her.” This was the truth. He had recognized only loveliness, not the maiden name of it.

“Last time you saw her she was a long-legged, saucer-faced youngster, wearing her hair plaited and tied with a blue ribbon, I reckon.”

“That’s the way I remember little Helen,” George admitted, grinning.

“Two years make a lot of difference in a girl of that age. Pretty, ain’t she?”

The young man did not answer. He was suddenly and unaccountably annoyed. When your whole mind is concentrated on a girl, she becomes your religion and you do not care to enter into a doctrinal discussion of this religion with another man, not even your old, gray-haired father, because she has become the sacred silence of your

own soul, no matter what or who she was yesterday, nor even if you never had so much as a twinge of soul until this moment. You practically invent your soul then and there out of the joy and daylight of your youth, because it is the only place suitable for such a creature to occupy. Let Moses and the prophets stand aside! This is your pagan period of vestal virgins; not that you know it, but it is.

Mr. Cutter stood up, produced a heavy gold watch, studied the face of it, grinned, jerked his coat down and around, buttoned one button of it by the hardest work and reached for his hat. "Well, George, I guess you'll finish before you quit," he said.

This was a hint. The son took it. "All right, sir. I'll be along about midnight," he answered good-naturedly, at the same time making a wry face.

"Oh, you'll probably get in before suppertime. The work will come easier in a day or two," the father retorted as he stalked out.

He was scarcely out of sight before the cashier, teller and bookkeeper followed in quick procession.

George was now alone. He changed his scene instantly, as most people do when they are left alone. He straightened up, started smoking, moved directly into the current of the electric fan, folded his arms and thought profoundly, his head lifted, eyes fixed in a noble gaze, as if on no particular object; a heroic figure, blowing volumes of smoke through his nose.

What a young man thinks in this mood may be imagined, but it never can be known. And the writer does not live with

the wisdom or grace to translate his deep, singing dumbness into words.

Presently he went back to his task, working now with swiftness and concentration, as if his whole future depended upon finishing what he was doing in the shortest possible time. He finished in thirty minutes, disappeared into the rear of the bank and reappeared five minutes later through the side door. He was brushed, groomed and freshened to the last degree of elegance. His homespun fitted him with an air. He stepped with a long, prideful stride—and got no farther than the corner of the next street. Here he halted, looking all possible ways at once—nobody in sight; plenty of people, you understand, but not the girl. He had seen her pass this corner.

He waited. Wherever she had gone, she should be returning by this time. This one and that one hailed him as they went by. A fellow he knew stopped and engaged him in conversation. He was annoyed. Suppose the girl appeared, how was he to escape from this ass? The ass finally took in the situation and moved on, looking back as he turned the next corner.

George looked at his watch—after five! She certainly should be going home by this time. Everybody in sight was on his way home. Suppose he had missed her; suppose she had gone around the other way! Jumping cats, what a fool he had been, wasting time here! He started off, walking rapidly but still with that magnificent, stiff-legged strut.

Some one came alongside, caught his arm and whirled him half around. “Where you going in such a hurry, Cutter?”

This was Charley Harman, a friend, but this was no time for friends to be butting in.

“Home,” said George briefly, by way of implying that he was not inviting company home with him.

“So am I, but I never walk fast when I’m going home. Let’s get a drink in here”; halting as they came opposite a drug store.

“Take one for me,” Cutter said with a short laugh and moved on so hurriedly that Harman took the hint.

Nothing else happened until he reached the place where Wiggs Street opened on the square. He stared down the flower-blooming vista of this street. He could see men watering their front yards and the women watering their flowers. He could hear the boom of his father’s voice half a block down, talking to some one in the next yard. He saw Mrs. Adams sitting, large and amorphous, in a rocking-chair on her front porch. He supposed that she also was waiting for Helen.

Then he saw her approaching from the other end of the street, not distant, but divided from him by the eyes of all these people sitting and puttering around in their front yards. He thought she walked as if she were sad or good or something. And he had this consolation, as she finally turned in and went up the steps of the Adams’ cottage, he was sure that she had seen him. He was sure that their eyes had met. He also observed when he came down into the street to his own home that she had not stopped on the porch with her mother, but had gone directly inside.

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# CHAPTER III

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When you are in love, everything is important and everything is secret. You become a consummate actor and liar in vain, because the whole world knows your secret almost as soon as you do.

That evening at the dinner table, George was so gay, so full of himself, so ready to laugh and make a joke that Mrs. Cutter was beside herself with pride and happiness.

“He is such a good boy, so unconscious of his good looks and his intellect,” she told Mr. Cutter when they were alone together after dinner.

“Intellect!” said Mr. Cutter in that tone of voice.

“Yes; you know how smart he is; but he is not the least conceited, just light-hearted and happy as he should be at his age. I say it shows he is a good boy.”

“Where is he now?” Mr. Cutter wanted to know.

The question appeared to Mrs. Cutter to be irrelevant. She said she did not know; why?

“Nothing,” answered her husband.

She said he was around somewhere, probably in his room. She went to the bottom of the stairs. “Georgie!” she called.

No answer. Well, then he must be out front somewhere, and went to prove that he was. But she could not find him. Then she came back and wanted to know of Mr. Cutter what difference did it make, if they did not know where he was? George was no longer a child. Couldn't he trust his own son?

Oh, yes; in reason he could and did trust him. "But I'll tell you one thing, Maggie," he added, laying aside his paper and looking her squarely in the face, "George should get married."

"Married; just as he is ready to enjoy his youth and not even out of the university yet—and only twenty-one. What do you mean?" she demanded indignantly.

"That a blaze-faced horse and a red-headed man are both vain things for safety," he retorted.

"Do you know anything wrong about George?" she demanded, after a gasping pause.

"No."

"A single thing?"

"Not a single thing. I was merely stating a natural fact."

She had risen, a little, slim, fiery-eyed woman. She drew herself up. He watched her ascend. He refused to quail beneath the spark in her eye.

"Mr. Cutter," she began ominously, because she gave him this title only when she was ominous, "when you married me I had red hair. My hair is still red."

"Yes, my dear; but you were a girl. I said a man. I meant a young man with red hair. There is all the latitudes and longitudes in life between the one and the other. If you were a red-haired young man, I should think twice before I'd give a daughter of mine in marriage to you. But you will recall that I had black hair," he concluded, laughing.

A father who would traduce his own son for inheriting hair the color of his mother's and without cause—well, she could not understand such a father. Whereupon she left the room in high dudgeon, but really to go and look for this son.

Her confidence in him had not been shaken, but she was anxious without reason, which is the keenest anxiety from which women suffer.

She found him pacing back and forth in the vegetable garden, arms folded, face lifted like a yowling puppy's to the moon; not that this simile occurred to her. He appeared to her a potentially great man, breathing his thoughts in this quiet place.

He was annoyed at this interruption. Was he never to have a moment alone to think this thing out! He really thought he was thinking, you understand, when he was only visualizing a girl in a white dress, with a blue sash, blue eyes and blue cornflowers on her hat; blue was the most entrancing color in the world, and so on and so forth. He was trying to imagine what she would say if she said anything, when he saw his mother approaching. He repressed his impatience. They walked together between the bald-headed cabbage and the young, curled-up, green lettuce. She thought she was sharing his thoughts. Something had been said about his experiences in the bank. Many a mother and some fathers would leap with amazement, if they really knew the thoughts they do not share with their sons and daughters at such times.

Still this was an innocent young man, as men go, a good son, as sons are reckoned. He was well within his rights to be pursuing his love fancies. And for a long period of this time he remained in a state of legal innocence of which any man or husband might boast. Mrs. Cutter was entirely justified in despising the opinion Mr. Cutter had given that