

Tom All-Alone
by Caroline Conrad

Mrs. Lester supposed that her husband was dead. He had gone off and left her and the babies to starve or not as they could.

Finally, five years after her desertion, news came that Fred Lester was dead—drowned while he was out fishing in a boat somewhere a long way off.

A year and a half after that Alice Lester married David Holmes.

He was a good man, and Alice was a good woman. They deserved each other. David Holmes was a plainer man than Fred Lester had been, not at all handsome, and not so accomplished or dashing as Alice's first husband. But he was a solid, good fellow, well up in his profession—he was a doctor—and would have laid down his life for Alice. The children—two of them—loved him almost as well as they did their mother, and that speaks for itself as to the kind of man Holmes was.

He had a good income from his practice, and they lived well. They kept two women in the house—a chambermaid and cook—and a man to tend the garden, take care of the doctor's horse, and do odd jobs.

The man was one the doctor had employed before he was married. He was called Jim Fetter.

One day Jim Fetter was sick, and sent another man in his place, and the doctor coming home late in the afternoon after an uncommonly hard round of visits, found the new man waiting to take his horse.

It was not like Dr. Holmes to have unreasonable prejudices, or indulge ridiculous fancies. He was a plain, straightforward, sensible fellow, with only one romance in his whole life—he was thirty-five when he married—and that was his love for his wife, Alice. But he took a violent dislike for the new man, at sight. All the time he was explaining how he came to be there Holmes watched his face with cold, unpleasant looks, not at all like himself.

“Where have I seen that face before?” he muttered, as he went into the house, “and what makes me hate it so?”

He stopped in the hall and left his overcoat and hat and his riding boots, exchanging the latter for slippers, and went on to the parlor, where his wife usually was at this hour.

The moment he saw her he remembered what was the resemblance that troubled him[.] The new man looked like Alice's first husband—Fred Lester.

Holmes had never met him, but he had seen his picture, and he could not rid himself of the fancy that the man who had come in Jim Fetter's place, looked like that picture.

Alice was in the parlor, with some sewing in her hand. She was not sewing, though—she was crying, and the sight of her tears was like a knife in David Holme's heart.

He walked in and touched her before she knew he was there. And Alice sprang up with a cry of joy, and flung her arms round his neck.

"Alice, what man is that you have got in Jim's place?" asked the doctor sternly.

Alice laughed.

"I haven't got him at all. I haven't even seen him. Jim sent him, you know. Don't you like him? Cook said he had a wooden leg, poor fellow."

"Has he? I didn't notice," said Holmes, with a start.

After awhile, he made an excuse to leave the parlor. He knew where that photograph of Fred Lester was—among some old papers that had somehow drifted from his wife's desk into his. Alice probably did not know it was in existence.

He went to his room and took the picture out. It was an old card, much defaced, but enough remained to show how handsome had been the man his wife had loved before she ever saw him.

David Holmes had one weakness, very strange in him. He was jealous of that man whom Alice had loved. He knew he was plain and awkward, or thought he knew it, and he exaggerated his own defects and that other's perfections.

Yes, the new man whom Jim Fetter had sent did certainly look like this picture of Fred Lester, and what could Alice have been crying about?

Suddenly, muttering an impatient exclamation. David Holmes thrust the photograph back in his desk, and going out of his room, stole down the back stairs kitchenward.

The new man had just come from the stable, and stood now leaning over the railing of the back porch.

For the first time Holmes noticed that he had a wooden leg.

"What a fool I am!" he thought. "The man is only some poor soldier who has given his leg for his country."

But that moment the new man looked around. In that half light the resemblance which tortured Holmes so, seemed stronger than ever. Setting his teeth a little, the doctor went out to him. The man answered his questions readily enough, but volunteered no information about himself, and his questioner fancied that he detected an attempt at disguise, both in his language and bearing. He said his name was Tom, but gave no other. The doctor asked him if he was a married man. He gave him an odd glowering look.

“Yes,” he said, “I was once. I have no wife now.”

Holmes turned at last and went into the house. At the kitchen door Ann, the cook, met him.

“I don’t like that new man of yours, Doctor. There’s something not right about him. Just now as you turned your back on him he shook his fist after you.”

“I don’t like him either,” the poor doctor muttered as he went back to the parlor, “and after tea, I’ll go and see what Jim Fetter knows about him.”

The parlor was very bright and cozy; the curtains drawn; the lamp just lit; and the fire sparkling and crackling in the open grate.

Tea was brought in there presently, and David Holmes drank it, with the wife he loved sitting opposite him, and the children of the man whose memory even he hated, on each side of him. But he loved them.

When tea was over the children climbed upon him, and prattled of various things, and Alice smiled, and he almost forgot what he was going to see Jim Fetter about.

Eddy, the youngest, was a gentle little fellow, almost like a girl, and so full of endearing ways that everybody loved him.

“Papa,” said he, “did you know Jim was sick, and there’s a new man come to do his work? Such a funny man, papa. He says his name is Tom All-Alone. Do you believe it is? And cook says I look like him. Do I?”

David Holmes started, and glanced at his wife. She was smiling.

“Yes,” added Lizzy, eagerly, “and when cook said that, he caught Eddy up in his arms, and I thought he would never stop hugging and kissing him. And after that he sat in the corner and cried.”

“Poor fellow!” sighed Alice. “I expect he has got a little boy somewhere that Eddy reminds him of.”

David Holmes said nothing. His face was bent down over the child's curly head, so that his wife could not see it, and on it was an expression of gloom and terror.

After the children had gone to bed he went and sat down beside Alice, putting his arm round her and studying anxiously the sweet face he loved so.

"Allie, dear," he said, "what were you crying about when I came in this afternoon?"

"I don't think I was crying, really, David. I was a little blue, I suppose. In fact I know I was. I don't think I really cried, though."

"You did. You wiped your eyes twice while I stood there. Were you thinking of *him*?"

"Of *him*? Of who?" Alice stammered, very pale. "Not Fred Lester? Oh! David, you know I *never* think of him when I can help it, and you promised you would never mention him to me."

"Only this once. Were you grieving for him, Alice?"

"Oh! no, no, a thousand times no."

"Then why were you crying? Don't I make you happy, darling?"

"Oh, you do—too—too happy. I don't know why I cried, David. I couldn't give a reason, if I tried. I am just nervous, I think. There has been a strange oppression on me all day. I could not shake it off. It seemed as if some danger threatened you or me. I never was so glad to see you as I was this afternoon, David. I never was so glad to have you near me, as I am tonight. You see, don't you, I am very nervous!"

And with that, Alice began to cry again, and clung to her husband almost hysterically.

He kissed her repeatedly.

"Do you love me, Alice? Do you love me as much as you did that man?" he asked, almost as excited as she was. "If he were to rise up here before us suddenly, if such a thing could be, as that he was not dead after all, what would you do?"

Alice sat up and stared at him with looks of positive horror.

"I should *die*," she said. "What do you mean, David?"

Dr. Holmes drew her into his arms again.

“I meant nothing, dear,” he said, soothingly; “only that I love you, and am jealous of every tear that you shed. I know that he was the personification of grace and beauty, and that I am dull, plain and awkward. I am worse than nervous, you see. I am jealous of so slight a thing as a memory.”

Alice lifted her head from his shoulder, and looked at him.

“You are not,” she said, vehemently; “you are neither plain nor awkward. You shall not say so. And listen to me, David, once for all. I suppose I must have loved poor Fred Lester once. But I was never so happy with him as I have been with you; and if such a thing could be as you say, as his being alive, after all, his life—because it would take me from *you*—would wring my heart more even than his cruel and heartless desertion of me did.”

As Alice uttered these words, there was a sound somewhere near like a groan. A pang of conviction smote David Holmes.

“That wretched man is listening somewhere,” he thought.

“There is some one in the back parlor, David, I am sure of it,” Alice whispered in wild affright.

“I will go and see, dear. You stay here.” Dr. Holmes said, calmly; and taking the lamp went into the next room.

As he suspected, the man who had called himself Tom All-Alone to the children stood there whiter than a ghost.

The two men remained a moment staring at each other.

Remorse and despair were in one face. Resolve and despair were in the other.

David Holmes pointed to the door which led into the hall and then laid his finger on his lips.

The other bent his head humbly, and dragged himself in painful silence through the door.

David Holmes went back to Alice.

“There is no one there,” he said, compelling his voice to a careless tone, his features to calmness.

Two minutes afterward there came a summons for Dr. Holmes to go out and see a man whose life depended on his promptness. Reluctant as he was, almost to agony, to leave Alice at this time, overwhelmed as he felt with vague forebodings of evil, he knew it was his duty to go, and went.

It was a drive of some miles, but he was in time to save the life of the man who had sent for him. He had taken poison by mistake, but Holmes succeeded in counteracting its effects before he left him.

As the doctor drove toward home, that vague anxiety which had been on him all the time increased. He had been gone only a few hours. Nothing could have happened in so short a time, he told himself, but he drove more and more rapidly. Miles away he saw the sky aglow in the direction of his home.

“It can’t be my house,” he thought. “It is not fire I am afraid of.”

But it *was* fire. The beautiful home he had so lately left was a smoking ruin when he got back to it. A crowd surrounded it.

“Alice! oh, Alice!” Holmes groaned; and the next moment saw her standing safe, with both the children.

“The children would have been burned in their beds if it had not been for the new man,” she sobbed, as he clasped her. “Go to him, David, do. He’s dreadfully hurt, and they won’t let me near him.”

With a look of deep awe and wonder, David Holmes went to where a crowd was gathered about the prostrate form of the hero of the hour.

“It ain’t a faint,” he heard some one say, as he pressed through. “He’s dead, I tell you. He had a blanket round the children, but he didn’t try to protect himself, and he’s got the fire in his lungs.”

At the first glance Holmes knew it was true.

The man concerning whom he had had such dreadful suspicion and anxiety, would never trouble him more. He had given his life to save Fred Lester’s children.

There were many there who had known Fred Lester, but no one seemed to recognize this man. His best friend indeed would never have known that blackened and seared face. David Holmes alone of all these, guessed who the dead man was, and he never uttered his suspicion.

Nothing further, or in contradiction of the report of Fred Lester’s death years before, was ever heard. The stranger with the wooden leg was buried at Dr. Holme’s expense, and the doctor and Alice were quietly married over again, on some pretense of informality in the first ceremony, which Alice, to whom her husband’s lightest word was dearest law, never questioned.

David Holmes prospered. He built him a new house, and was happy with the wife he loved so. But for years, both his dreams and his waking moments were haunted sometimes by the memory

of that unhappy man who had called himself Tom All-Alone to Fred Lester's children, and had given his life to save theirs.

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